

Marcy Kohlbeck

Mr. Keehan

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*Edna's Identity*

Throughout history, women have had to suppress their feelings about their treatment. In the medieval times, Kings ruled while their Queens sat silently beside them as their pretty property. In the late 19th century, women were the childbearers and expected to obey their husbands. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin used the shift in Edna's identity to emphasize her want for women to be free, so as to show the reader insight as to how the women of the late nineteenth century were feeling.

Chopin introduced the protagonist as Mrs. Pontellier through the eyes of her husband, Mr. Leonce Pontellier to reveal the way in which men perceived women. In the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Pontellier attempts to be like everyone else in the Creole society. She is the property of her husband and lives to please him. By introducing the wife of Mr. Pontellier in such a manner, Chopin is showcasing the common expectation of women in the Creole society. The women were property of their husbands and were to behave as such. As Dorothy H. Jacobs states "Mrs. Pontellier, wife and mother is defined by her relationship to husband and children." The aforementioned defines not only Mrs. Pontellier's role in society but the common role of all women in society the time in which Chopin lived. Women were living dolls, their husbands having control over who they were to talk to and what they were to do. That being so, Mr. Pontellier also referred to his wife as his property. This is made prevalent when he assesses a

sunburnt Mrs. Pontellier, "...looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (2). Mr. Pontellier's view of his wife as property was Chopin describing the men of her era. The men's role was to obtain property, their wife and kids being thrown amongst their material possessions. By starting as a possession, Edna's journey to independence is lengthened.

To show the shift from Edna being owned to being an individual, Chopin begins by calling the protagonist by her married name, Mrs. Pontellier, and gradually transitioning into calling her by her first name, Edna. In the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Pontellier is a woman who tries to fit into the Creole society and do what is expected of Creole women by tending to the needs of her husband and children. As she claims her individuality and strays away from the societal expectations, she becomes known as Edna. Chopin's focus in her novel was to reveal the power that comes from Edna being independent, as well as the solitude that accompanied it. The aforementioned is validated by the original title of the novel being *A Solitary Soul*. (Toth) By focusing on the strength and power of Edna's solitude, Chopin revealed how women of her time wished to have that same power and strength. The women wished to have their own independence. The name "Edna" is used one-hundred and fifty times throughout the novel, while Mrs. Pontellier is used only fifty-eight (Chopin). Chopin used "Edna" twice as much as "Mrs. Pontellier" to show the want by women to be known as an individual. The shift from Mrs. Pontellier to Edna is further evidence of Chopin showing how much women wished to be individuals rather than property to be associated with their husband. The increased use of the name Edna was further used to show the possibility of overcoming the any label of Miss, Mrs., Madame, or Mademoiselle. By overcoming her oppression, Edna was allowed to make her own

decisions and thus challenge what traits were considered masculine and which were considered feminine.

Chopin gave Edna more masculine traits as she became more independent to show the correlation between being free and being a man. One such masculine trait was being an artist. In Chopin's time, men were the artists because the models for inspiration were typically nude women. The men would buy paintings of these women to add to their possessions. It was absurd to think that a woman would want to paint another naked woman. This was what was the truth up until the late nineteenth century. (Barker) By making Edna an artist, Chopin expanded on the changing art world and joined in challenging the belief that only men could be painters. This statement made it know that the women did not want to be defined by their womanly traits, rather that they wished to do the things that men could do. Edna enjoyed sketching other people as a hobby. The woman in which Edna was modeled after, Edma Pontillion, also had such a hobby. Emily Toth revealed that once Edma married "...she gave up her art. She became one of her husband's possessions, and her life was one of sadness and unfulfillment." This real-life parallel was included in the creation of Edna's identity for a purpose. Chopin used Edma's experience in her characterization of Edna to further define the oppression of women. Before women were married they had the freedom to choose their hobbies. Once they were married, however, their freedom to choose was taken away. As Edna became more independent, her art flourished. Her art was yet another symbol for overcoming the dictating hand of her husband. Chopin wrote the freedom of being able to choose into Edna's journey as another example proving that the women of her era wanted their freedom back. By giving Edna the freedom to choose, however, Chopin separated her protagonist from other women of her society.

Chopin strategically created a protagonist that was an outsider to even the women in her society. This highlights the oppression that Edna is feeling. Emily Toth stated that, “[t]he central character, Edna Pontellier, is a Kentucky Presbyterian and an outsider to Louisiana and the Creole culture.” Chopin included Edna’s non-Creole background to further emphasize her pariah standing in her society. Chopin emphasized the common feeling between women in her era of being outsiders in a man’s world by making Edna an outsider to her community at the three points of being a woman from another state, and originating from a different religion than the others in her society. Edna’s status outside the Creole society is noted when Madame Ratignolle refers to Edna being “...not one of us; she is not like us” (23). Madame Ratignolle’s confession shows how Edna is even an outsider among the other women in her society. Chopin emphasized the feeling of being an outsider among all women of her time by making Edna such a drastic outsider. Edna’s status within her community conveyed what the women of the nineteenth century wished to say.

Chopin’s route to displaying Edna’s identity was one with a purpose, a purpose to reveal the oppression of women of the late nineteenth century. Edna’s identity was written as such to proclaim the oppression of the women of Chopin’s era and to give them the hope that it was possible to overcome it. Chopin expressed the feelings of women through Edna’s journey in becoming an independent woman.

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