

Nudity and Nakedness: The Gaze of Edna Pontellier

Yang Yidi

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

Abstract: *The description of Edna Pontellier's unclothed body is a recurring metaphor in Kate Chopin's The Awakening. The correlation between nudity and nakedness implies a different status of how a person surveys himself, and is surveyed by others. Moreover, the tradition of men as the surveyor and women as the surveyed shapes the social expectation of women always striving to please the male gaze. Chopin's Creole society is a sphere where women are surveyed and disciplined. This essay aims to demonstrate how Edna achieved an extraordinary awakening of how women are appraised by men and how they perfect their manners accordingly, under the inspiration of art and the ocean. This awakening is both liberating and detrimental for Edna, for she found only the incompatibility between her quest for selfhood and society. This discordance deepens Edna Pontellier's solitude and leads to her final suicide. However, the physical destruction is not an act of surrender because, through her nudity, we witness powerful feminist awakening and rebellion.*

Keywords: *The Awakening; nudity; nakedness; male gaze; selfhood*

1. Introduction

The connotation of nudity and nakedness is one of the critical metaphors woven through Western culture. As John Hirst concludes, "From nude to naked to nude can stand for the movement from classical to medieval to modern."^[1] Strolling through any Western art gallery, one will surely notice an overwhelming number of nude figures appearing on the canvas. In the history of appreciating the human body, there is a fine line between what is called nude and what is called naked, as early as when the story of Garden of Eden took place, which dates back to humanity's very beginning.

To be naked is to be without any cloth, whereas nudity is more a culturally created concept within human society, which has a didactic overtone. This admonishment, which conveys the idea that woman is the cause of original sin, and thus shall be punished because of it, is passed on from the story of Adam and Eve, where Eve is seduced by a serpent and becomes aware of their nakedness. Ever since then, the realization of being naked is closely associated with self-awakening, but female nakedness has also been one of the most recurring taboos in many cultures.

Eve is one of the most depicted female nude figures in Western art, while the other must be Aphrodite. Aphrodite, or for the Romans, Venus, is perhaps the most welcomed goddess in the Renaissance period, for she speaks for the Humanism aspiration of an ideal form. Her undisputed representation of beauty gives much room for the artists to exhibit their admirable skills on a perfect female body and more importantly, appeal to the market with sexualized, erotic nudity. Among them, one mythical scene that receives the highest popularity is "the birth of Aphrodite/Venus from the sea," in which Aphrodite is born from the foam produced by Uranus's genitals and granted the Goddess of Love and Beauty. Many critics have channeled the image of the rebellious heroine, Edna, with the metaphor of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. For instance, Sandra Gilbert has argued that Edna embodies a "feminist and matriarchal myth of Aphrodite/Venus as an alternative to the masculinist"^[2], which is "a radiant symbol of the erotic liberation that turn-of-the-century women had begun to allow themselves to desire".

Be as it may, we shall keep in mind how the forge of Aphrodite's image accentuates a male perspective of view. Aphrodite is sometimes portrayed as a nude lady rising from the sea, while the spring breeze gently embraces her divine body, sometimes depicted as a nude lady involved in festive scenes with other men, and sometimes just reclining her porcelain-like body on a coach. In all, Aphrodite seems to appear so because she is expecting an observer in front of her, presumably a man. Indeed, the male gaze tradition executes man as the default subject of observing, and women's existence is to satisfy his pleasure. As John Berger remarks on this matter, "her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste – indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence"^[3].

Hence, there are two archetypes of an unclothed woman in the Western cultural image: the naked, shameful Eve and the nude, attractive Aphrodite, the most distinctive difference is the manner they survey their bodies, regarding the existence of a potential male observer. The treatment of nakedness or nudity, along with the metaphor of observing, has appeared in *The Awakening* as a critical clue in terms of understanding Edna's passage to selfhood. Literary, the description of nudity is mentioned twice in *The Awakening* – the one in Edna saw a solitary man by the seashore, and another one in Edna tried to kill herself. However, metaphorically, there are three scenes connected to the use of nudity, which is hidden in Chapter XXX when Edna held her dinner party. Also, most part of *The Awakening* is told from Edna's perspective, with occasionally inserted narration from a voiceover or some other characters. Readers learn that Edna did not grasp a very coherent and clear understating of her desire as well as the direction of her selfhood. As a result, Edna's awakening is rather vague, chaotic, and disturbing. Therefore, it is also valid to investigate how Edna's gaze, both inward and outward, outlines her feministic awakening.

Why did Edna Pontellier remove all of her clothes before she attempted to commit suicide? Many critics have interpreted it as a manifestation of freedom and rebellion, without much mentioning of the two most essential protagonists in evaluating an image: the surveyor and the surveyed. Therefore, this essay will try to catch the changes in Edna's way and position of gazing as evidence to support the argument of this feminist heroine as a modern Aphrodite. Moreover, recent critics have adapted the visual analysis approach to decode *The Awakening*. For example, Charles Harmon has juxtaposed *The Awakening* with the American trend-leading fashion magazine *Vogue*, demonstrating American culture during Chopin's time which communicated harmful messages to women. Likewise, this essay will take a visual approach to analyze some of the most pivotal moments in *The Awakening*.

2. Men Survey Women and Women Survey Themselves

The whole novel starts with the sight of Mr. Pontellier, as "he read... arose... he walked... he stopped, seating himself... he glanced... his glance..."^[4]. Through the path of observation taken by Mr. Pontellier, almost all of the major elements and motifs of the novel are introduced to the readers, following a masculine flow of view here. After his eyes completed browsing through the surroundings, Mr. Pontellier's eyes finally landed on his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, with another man, Robert Lebrun. However, their closeness seemed not to bother him, and what attracted his attention the foremost was Edna's skin burnt out from overexposure to sunlight. Here, by scrutinizing Edna the way one scrutinizes a lifeless object, Mr. Pontellier projected his gaze on Edna, so that he could assert his power as a male protagonist. Following her husband's gaze, Edna also took a close look at her hands and "surveyed them critically," and was reminded that she needed to wear her ring back.

In a highly-capitalized society, there is no wonder why Léonce Pontellier saw only the exchange value in Edna as if she was just a machine to ensure the effectiveness of his business. The burnt skin would depreciate Edna's value as a property. In such a capitalist world, as Foucault (1984) comments on the discipline of the human body, "the doctor becomes the great advisor and expert, if not in the art of governing, at least in that of observing, correcting, and improving the social 'body'"^[5]. Edna once naively thought: "Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him". Yet Doctor Mandelet was a physical doctor, who examines the human body and psychology alike as if any abnormal behavior of a man is related to corporal aliment and can be cured by medical treatment. When he finally discerned Edna's defiant manner, Mr. Pontellier immediately thought of consulting a doctor to determine Edna's syndrome. Not surprisingly, Doctor Mandelet diagnosed Edna's feminist awakening as a kind of clinical illness that required prescription.

There also is the classic "men act and women appear" pattern. That is to say, when Mrs. Pontellier left the dinner without pronouncing whether his wife shall expect him to come back or not, his action is merely an exhibition of his dissatisfaction. On the contrary, however, if Edna tried to crash her ring, she should first appraise the image of a woman expressing anger within herself, and then, how others see and react to this outraged woman who seemed to have lost her temper. In fact, the inclination of self-gazing is quite discernable in Edna ever since she was a child: "At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions." According to Laura Mulvey (1989), "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly"^[6]. When a woman inwardly gazes at herself, she places herself in the position of a man – the way Edna picked up to survey her body before her awakening is a masculine one, which made her unconsciously acknowledge that she shall wear the ring back and fulfill her duty as a wife and a mother.

In *The Awakening*, there are several occasions where we can witness the Creoles woman survey themselves, of which the most typical one is Grand Isle. As the voiceover pointed out, a kind of “mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle” – Grand Isle was the socio-cultural sphere assigned to women, where mothers/women colonized and achieved their role, albeit expecting little of men’s presence. Besides, in the survey for an ideal female body, there is always an element of judgment. The question concerning which woman is the most perfect in the eyes of a man has been told in the story called “The Judgment of Paris,” which the result even caused the epic Trojan War. For almost everyone around Edna, women accepted and strived for their image of mother and wife, so everyone was not expected to accomplish anything beyond the duties of perfect motherhood. In that women’s realm, Madame Ratignolle was an embodiment of a perfect socially disciplined body:

She was growing a little stout, but it did not seem to detract an iota from the grace of every step, pose gesture. One would not have wanted her white neck a mite less full or her beautiful arms more slender. Never were hands more exquisite than hers, and it was a joy to look at them when she threaded her needle or adjusted her gold thimble to her taper middle finger as she sewed away on the little night-drawers or fashioned a bodice or a bib.

Her body was a live mannequin of her husband’s wealth, and she lived up to that goal. Madame Ratignolle was such an amazing mother that she even prepared winter garments for her children in the midst of hot summer.

Women are expected to have a sense of collectivity, always accompanying each other when their husbands are not demanding any service. Wearing clothes in accordance with the dress code is a tacit principle of society. It shows the person’s sense of collectivity, that the person conforms to custom and that the person does not have any intention to rebel. Those who refused this code would be marked as rebellious, and Mlle Reisz, who “had absolutely no taste in dress”, is an example. Both men and women would acknowledge that Mlle Reisz had no seductive quality for men, and thus, did not comply with the masculine survey. She also lacked the quality of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” [7], which defined an ideal woman in Chopin’s era. The reason may be that Mlle Reisz meant to send an uninviting signal to the presumable male observer on account of her sexual orientation. A few critics have touched upon the matter of homosexuality in *The Awakening*, and there are certainly some latent lesbian motifs dropping around that hint at the tender closeness between Edna and Mlle Reisz. Nevertheless, following Elizabeth LeBlanc’s proposal, it is not hard to conclude that Edna leaned more towards a “metaphorical lesbian as opposed to the ‘actual’ lesbian Mlle Reisz” [8], resembling another primary Goddess in the story of “The Judgment of Paris” – Athena, who once fell in love with Pallas. The most lesbian discernible trait of Mlle Reisz is the ever-present “a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair.” Later, when inviting Mlle Reisz to her twenty-ninth birthday party, “Edna had sent her a fresh bunch of violets with black lace trimmings for her hair.” Violets, which are allegorically associated with lesbian or bisexual love, may imply Mlle Reisz’s unpublicized sexual orientation. Moreover, the lesbian identity of Mlle Reisz is overt through her physical language, especially with Edna Pontellier. When leaving Edna’s dinner party, Mlle Reisz decided to Edna a kiss on the shoulder, which stands for passionate emotional as well as bodily intimacy. If different, a person becomes unmarked. In a determinedly heterosexual society, Mlle Reisz was in exile because she was sexually uninterested in men after all, and was not putting any effort to try to appeal to the men.

3. The Changes in Edna’s Gaze

Mlle Reisz’s rebellious attitude towards masculine survey was undoubtedly internalized in her music, which she willingly played for Edna. Music entails unlimited passion, freedom, and imagination. Doctor Mandelot had discerned that Edna is impressionable and sensitive to the details of life and artistic influence, which easily made her under the impact of Mlle Reisz’s music and also underlined her potential to become an artist. Piano, or rather all sorts of creative and infectious things, profoundly evoked Edna’s metaphysical enlivening. In Chapter IX, when she heard Mlle Reisz playing for the first time, she immediately sensed the loneliness carried out in Mlle Reisz’s musical expression, which she named ‘Solitude,’ alongside with an illustration scene of a naked, lonely man standing hopelessly by the seashore and observing a bird flying in the distant, a picture foreshadowed but did not precisely parallel the final scene of this novel. It is worth noticing that here Edna drew the vision of a man, instead of a woman, into whom she was born. “A man’s presence,” Berger (2008) claimed, “is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies.” Perhaps at the initial stage of self-awakening, Edna still lacked the strength to break the habitual practice of associating man with the impression of power and solitude. Thus, she lacked the courage to put herself in that picture. Nevertheless, Edna had begun to make progress.

Later that night, Edna learned how to swim for the first time, which excited her like a toddler who has newly recognized the power she possesses. The sea had always had an alluring effect on Edna, who felt “the touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” the first time when she just learned to swim and the second time when she attempted to commit suicide. The seawater captivated her like the serpent in Eden, persuading Edna to admit her absent awareness of the bare “nakedness.” Meanwhile, the sea can serve as a mirror, through which people can see their impressions, but we shall also keep in mind that when in the body of water, the human body’s image will contort because of light reflection. Accordingly, Edna’s image in the ocean is also not a faithful echo of her body, but it differed from the one in an ordinary mirror and allowed her to appreciate her body in a fresh way. With the revelation she bestowed by music, we soon witness a subtle but substantial change in Edna’s way of surveying her body in relation to her husband. Edna also perceived how simple it was to swim that she could not believe “why did I not discover before that it was nothing.” That night Edna refused Léonce’s requirement to have sex. Instead, she would rather size the space and time to have some deep reflections about herself. When Edna jumped out of the male perspective of self-judgment, she realized that

She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us... But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did.

Here, Edna unconsciously broke the masculine gazing pattern, realizing that she had always acted to satisfy the needs of her husband. This reflection made her begin to rebel.

Another important factor contributing to changing Edna’s way of seeing is her new identity as an artist. Any paintings with human figures must be executed with immense observation and consideration. The painter must have an insightful observation of the object’s most prominent features he or she tries to convey through one static picture. After she discovered her passion for painting, Edna often offered to paint portraits for her friends and families, which probably made her start to observe them from the perspective of a painter, who records people with full autonomy. Through the education of arts, the formula of male-surveyor/female-surveyed is reinforced among society and fabricates into female consciousness which compels them to assess their femininity. That is perhaps why such mother/woman like Adèle Ratignolle seemed glowing with the radiance of enjoyment as they failed to observe the oppression which regulated them. That is also why when Edna reviewed her newly awakened selfhood, she found the patriarchal way of surveying lacking the proper language to describe feminist desires.

Indeed, Mlle Reisz told Edna that an artist must have a courageous soul, a soul that “dares and defies.” Thus, to improve her painting skills, Edna became more aware of and defied the old way of inspecting herself. In addition, the language of painting is different from the language of emotion, which can be declared through an abstract form of expression. Actually, art style movements like Fauvism which express passionate or intimate personal feelings of the artist in a surreal form had already made international influence by the time Edna decided to become an artist, let alone the following, more progressive styles like Expressionism were to be born in just a few years. Edna could find an outlet for her newly-found emotions through painting.

The scene of Edna’s dinner party is indisputably one of the most fate-determining chapters in *The Awakening*, to which Chopin ascribes significant volume and distinctive writing styles. The Austrian modernist architect Adolf Loos regards the interior public space, like the dining room, as a theater box of family drama, within which women’s role as the object of the gaze is guaranteed and justified. That is the case with this setting. In an environment that demonstrated great femininity, Chopin here gives a quite detailed description of the settings and every guest present, through which we learn that there were five male guests and five female guests, seated alternately with one another. Edna, sitting in an elevated position, was able to supervise her guests. However, the visual interaction between the diners is two-sided, which made Edna no more observing than observed – she was the audience as well as the performer. Edna and Mr. Gouvernail, each at one end of the table, were the only two people whom other guests could observe directly without blocking from others. While Mr. Gouvernail only made a very unnoticeable appearance at the party, the focus point of everyone else’s sight should naturally fall back on Edna.

If the banquet were painted, it would be presumably in the style of American Impressionism that prevailed in the 19th century: the canvas is filled with delicate, warm-toned brushstrokes, primarily in a muted yellow hue, with some dashes of vibrant red in the center of the table representing the colors of the fragrant roses; Edna would be at the center of the composition, the focus point of the viewer, with her

gown glowing in soft shimmer and almost blending into the environment; viewing up close, her facial and bodily expression is unrecognizable, yet if one takes few steps back, from the macroscopic perspective, he would certainly not miss the sheer solitude radiates from the central figure, with her limbs extending and making direct eye contact with viewer in a regal manner. It suggests that Edna now was concerned with the gaze of any observer, and confidently handled this issue. Moreover, there is metaphorical nudity hidden in this scene: for such a ceremonious event, Edna wore a dress “the color of her skin,” which made her almost appear nude. Such arrangements make up an allegorical plot of the “birth of Aphrodite,” which also stands for the rebirth of Edna.

Of course, the first thing people noticed about Edna is not the lightness of her cloth, but the exquisite cluster of diamonds sparkling on her hair, which was a birthday gift from Mr. Pontellier. The ring and diamond can either be a sign of the husband’s unwavering love for his spouse or a token of the husband’s perpetual possession over the wife. Much like the ring, Edna was nothing but another piece of possession in the collection which showed off his accomplishment from the perspective of Mr. Pontellier. Moreover, the diamond, a glaring stone, is often the object for attracting attention and inciting desire—both men and women. Diamond has long been the specimen to show how the consumerism society appeals to the way men see women and women see themselves, like Marilyn Monroe singing in her 1953 musical film:

The French are glad to die for love

They delight in fighting duels

But I prefer a man who lives

And gives expensive jewels diamonds are a girl's best friend— women shall always aspire to a relationship with men, and shall always carry a mark that denotes their subjection to men. When sent her the diamond piece for her birthday, Léonce was certainly picturing Edna as the cabinet for displaying his fat purse and status in front of Edna’s guests. However, Edna totally changed the narration and wore this accessory as an agent to exert her selfhood. Edna did not wear this diamond piece to appeal to anyone’s benefit, nor did she regard it as a mark of her subjectivity to Léonce – it was simply a statement of her joy, for moving into a new life and for commemorating her birthday, which crowned Edna like a true queen.

Alcée Arobin kicked off the dinner party by proposing a toast that “it might not be amiss to start by drinking the Colonel’s health in the cocktail which he composed, on the birthday of the most charming of women – the daughter whom he invented,” suggesting that he, the secret consort of Edna, saw only the sexually appealing side of Edna and apprised her charm the same way he looked at the material beauty of a cocktail. For him, they were all master creations of a man, the Colonel. If this remark did not at all irritate Edna, the reaction of her fellows certainly did: there was Mr. Marriman, who seemed to enjoy Arobin’s speech very much and genuinely take pleasure in every funny and unfunny anecdote told by the gentlemen, in order to behave properly according to social norms; and there was Miss Mayblunt, who took an even more extravagant action by begging “to be allowed to keep her cock-tail untouched before her, just to look at” for she absolutely agreed with Arobin and declared the Colonel an artist.

What’s worse, Edna was even more frustrated to see the conduct of Mrs. Highcamp, who was busy flittering with Victor Lebrun the whole dinner. Gilbert has considered this dinner scene “a fantasy, a romance, or a fairytale.” Victor Lebrun did indeed appear to be much like the mythological character Dionysus: there was some fine wine around him, and Mrs. Highcamp had put a rose garland above his curly black hair and enclosed a white scarf around his shoulder, deliberately doing so to have more physical contact with the latter. On the one hand, Edna saw how pathetic a woman could be when she keeps trying to appeal seductively to a man even at an older age. On the other hand, Edna was also attracted by the fanciful picture of a beautiful young man. In his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche borrows the concept of “das Apollinische” and “das Dionysische” to demonstrate the duality of artistic impulses inherited in human instinct. According to Nietzsche, the worship of Dionysus is bound up with the innate sexual desire of human beings. As Mr. Gouvernail whispered that “there was a graven image of Desire.” The parody awakened Edna’s sexual passion, which led to her first physical affair with Arobin that very night.

Thus, the disheartened sense which had been haunting this party the whole time suddenly grabbed her mind. According to Edna’s plan, there would be twelve people attending her celebration dinner, herself included. Twelve is a powerful, omnipresent number, as there are twelve months a year, twelve hours in the clock, twelve animals in the Chinese Zodiac, etc. In both cultural and natural contexts, the number twelve encompasses supernatural, mythical, and religious symbolism, signaling perfection and wholeness. Therefore, missing two guests rendered Edna’s dinner party an imperfection picture from the

start. Now, Victor was singing the song which Robert once sang to her, and Edna finally burst into an intense flood of emotion. Edna could escape her inner emptiness and suppress her love for Robert no more.

4. The Aftermath of the Changes

When the object of seeing becomes the subject of observing, the sudden shift in the role will almost definitely incite the resistance of the former. That is the case of Manet's *Olympia*, which immediately aroused public denunciation when it made its debut in the gallery. In his *Olympia*, Manet mocked the gentle style of the Renaissance master Raphael by recreating one of his famous *Venus of Urbino*, substituting the flawless, elegant Goddess of Love and Beauty for a humble prostitute. *Olympia*'s skin is ashy, stone-textured and her left hand is flexed on her private part, a posture which is arranged to mock the patriarchal viewer. If the defiance of the classic theme were not the front battlefield of critics' attention, the prostitute's blunt, explicit, and almost challenging gaze which seems to project itself out of the canvas and confronts the observers, irritates the established aesthetic of surveying the female body without fail. Edna's transformation has proved to be liberating, as the same is detrimental, for her.

Robert rarely called Edna by her first name. Instead, he mostly referred to her as Mrs. Pontellier, a cruel but candid title to remind Edna that she 'belonged' to another man, whom, regardless of considering any sentimental factors, she married. Compared to Robert, Edna was much ahead when conceiving about the prospects of their future. Some argue Edna's dilemma suggests "the dangers of privilege which breeds solipsism"^[9]— she obstinately wanted to revive her affair with Robert while ignoring the critical matter of her husband and children and intending to leave them unsettled. Edna even made a bold statement that she was "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both." Edna's audacious confession horrified him, so he decided to run away.

For Edna, there seemed to be a soft veil covering the image of Robert, which conditioned Robert to appear to be an ideal lover: a caring and considerate man, and also someone she felt her soul could resonate with. However, if that veil lifted, Robert was nothing more than an ordinary man from Edna's living circle. How affectionate it is to leave a note saying "I love you. Good-bye – because I love you". Robert's pragmatic fidelity to social conventions disheartened Edna, who came to realize that Robert surveyed her the same way her husband surveyed her. Leaving Léonce and being with him forever seemed to Robert no more than the handing over of lifeless objects. The acknowledgment of her ridiculous over-romanticized vision of the love she sought gave Edna a heavy, if not the final, blow to her awakening.

The artistic aspect of Edna's awakening also deepens her already painful solitude. Throughout history, especially in the more modern period, the image of being defiant and lonely starkly thrives in many of the greatest artists of all time, as if artistic development could only be kindled by severe physical or psychological suffering. It is true, that the artist often has to perform surgery to gouge out every bit of his heart and wounds and lay them straightforwardly in front of his audiences, and confronts them with his pain for artistic expression. For instance, Edvard Munch is known for the presentation of his contorted emotions toward death and woman. And there is the great Egon Schiele, who was sentenced and estranged by society because of his unflinchingly sexualized portraits which shocked and scandalized the public. Not to mention female artists like Frida Kahlo, who constantly introduces themes of the chronic pain she had to endure since childhood, tumultuous relationships with men, and female identity, which are straightforwardly derived from Kahlo's personal experience. Till these days, the tradition of associating artistic spirit with personal misfortunes continues to be included in the narration of countless artists as a way to justify the ineffable value of their works. However, while solitude allows the artist to take a break from a world full of distracting noises, it may backfire on the bearer.

Being the "other," women occupy allotted and limited space. That is most sound in Mlle Reisz's case. Through visiting Mlle Reisz's old and new residence, Edna witnessed how an independent and rebellious woman was estranged from the community and forced to move into a smaller, lonesome space. However, Edna did not translate Mlle Reisz's cornered living space into a gloomy and pathetic picture. Instead, Edna saw a strong and artistic passion in such a solitary life. Thus, it is hard to say whether Edna deliberately chose to shrink down her living space under the impression of Mlle Reisz or it is a compromise she had to make in order to make her resistance concrete. Now Edna was just moving into a smaller house nearby the Pontellier residence on Esplanade Street, which is still located in a respectable neighborhood, yet next time she might be forced to relocate to a much more peripheral community, similar to what happened to Mlle Reisz.

Either way, Edna moved into the Pigeon House, where she would not be surveyed: in the Pigeon House, Edna did not plan or intend to invite her neither children or husband to live with her in there, so she ditched her identity as a mother and a wife; she was not obliged to host any guests other than the ones she voluntarily invited, so she ditched her identity as a hostess for all kinds of social events; she no longer needed dozens of servants, so she ditched her identity as an upper-class woman raised in an established Southern family – in short, she kept a domestic space but would no longer have to be the mediator of the male gaze in the Pigeon House. As Edna, herself commented, “there was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual.” However, the embrace of solitude counteracted Edna’s identity as a member of upper-class society. Edna realized that she could be maintained socially involved while pursuing her selfhood, just like she could not keep the relationship with Robert while being responsible for her children.

When Robert expressed his intention to marry Edna by literally taking her to be his possession, Edna ran away, with the excuse of her feeling obliged to accompany Adèle Ratignolle’s delivery, which turned out even more unfavorable for her mentality. Edna did not remember much of the process of her delivery to the boys, as she was anesthetized and therefore unaware of the degree of the soul-torturing pain women have to endure in order to fulfill their ‘duty’ as a woman. Attending Madame Ratignolle’s child-birthing was appalling to Edna, which all of a sudden reminded her what a bloody experience she might have unconsciously undergone. Furthermore, Doctor Mandelet pronounced this process is the arrangement of Nature, with the capital N, suggesting to Edna a Naturalist vision that no matter how much strength she had acquired, she would never be strong enough to rebel against the force of the law of Nature, so she would always be haunted by dissatisfied solitude.

In the denouement, Edna decided to set herself free. The unexpectedness and swiftness of Edna’s suicide harshly hit the readers, who may still be lingering on the soft sentiment of “I love you. Good-bye – because I love you,” but soon they will understand the inevitability of Edna’s choice. When her body was embarrassed by the gentleness of the ocean, Edna acquired a synesthetic sensation of her childhood memory in the Kentucky grass-sea, both of which stand for unrestrained freedom and love. Hence, she determined to keep swimming till her strength was exhausted and never look back.

5. Conclusion

The awakening to the correlation between a surveyor and surveyed introduces Edna to the realm of feminist awakening. More than Woolf’s “room of one’s own,” Edna was able to possess an entire house of her own, bought with her own money and decorated according to her will, which marked a daring march into the life she envisioned from her awakening. However, it is also accompanied by a gradually restricted social space for her, and that way of life would unavoidably challenge Edna’s implicit desire to keep her identity as an upper-class, white woman. Edna had to face the truth that, as the unmarked, Edna, a woman, was subjected to a perpetual survey, and her efforts to achieve individuality would be in vain if this code remains intact. In this giant panopticon, everyone wanted to see what happened to Edna Pontellier and felt entitled to judge.

In conclusion, when she walked towards the ocean, Edna Pontellier was not naked, but nude. She removed all her garments which symbolized masculine domination inflicted on her while keeping the true, undisguised selfhood to herself. It is a blooming, balanced and courageous body. Even when she is free from worldly ornaments, the hair of her body, the surface of her skin, and the expression on her face are still covered by an undeniable spirit, as nudity is just another form of dress. In this light, what defines Edna as Edna after she both physically and metaphorically removed her material disguise? It is her brave commitment to independent selfhood.

References

- [1] Hirst, J. (2023). *The Shortest History of Europe (International Edition)*. Old Street Publishing Limited.
- [2] Gilbert, S. M. (1983). *The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire*. *Kenyon (the) Review Gambier, Ohio*, 5(3), 42-66.
- [3] Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books, 46.
- [4] Chopin, K. (1990). *The Awakening and Selected Stories* (B. H. Solomon, Ed.). Signet Classics.
- [5] Foucault, M (1984). *The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century*. In Rabinow, P. (Ed.), *The Foucault Reader*. Pantheon Books, 283–284.

[6] Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, 19.

[7] Welter, B. (1966). *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*. *American Quarterly*, 18(2), 151.

[8] LeBlanc, E. (1996). *The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in The Awakening*. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 15(2), 293.

[9] Hildebrand, M. J. (2016). *The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin's The Awakening*. *American Literary Realism*, 48(3), 190.