

Pinion Imagery in Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract

*This research explores the pinion imagery in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. It tries to look at how the imagery of bird's wings are used to describe the protagonist Edna Pontellier's effort to break free from the existing mental and physical state in the anticipation of individual freedom. Being a mother of two children and wife of Léonce Pontellier, Edna has confined within the four walls of her house. However, she has been longing for true contentment and happiness in life. The aim of the research is to examine Edna's struggle to achieve sexual and personal emancipation through the use of semiotics imagery of pinions. Edna's attempt to escape her husband, children, and society manifest her strong feelings of eros and spreading wings for self-liberation and awakening however, her wings are broken and landed with injured heart leading her to thanatos.*

Keywords: pinion imagery-semiotics-eros-thanatos-emancipation

Introduction

In her life Chopin, published only two novels: *At Fault* (1889) and *The Awakening* (1899) however, she stopped writing a novel after getting harsh criticism for *The Awakening*. Chopin was grown up in a chiefly female household after her father's death. After her husband Oscar Chopin's death, she turned to writing in order to support her big family and she had experiences of women's suffering and struggle for survival in the society of her time. Since the 1700s, most of the women writers had used caged birds as symbols to represent the limitations of their own domestic lives and the birds' flight represented the women's emancipation from the existing situation ("Critical Essays Wing Imagery", 2020). Chopin was not an exception, she too used imagery of birds and pinions in her writing to describe women and their condition in the patriarchal society.

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Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is the awakening of a womanhood, inner desires of 28 years old Edna Pontellier to flee from the conventional caged society and to glide over the individual sky spreading the wings of courage to attain her dreams and true love. We could guess when Chopin opens the novel *The Awakening* with the sentence "A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over..." (Chopin, 1899, p.1). The parrot can only complain as best it cannot fly even though its imprisonment becomes unacceptable to it. Chopin's parrot in cage, symbolizes in the novel helplessness of women, especially Edna who is imprisoned and cannot soar away. She is expected to be nothing other than a wife and mother of two children Raoul and Etienne and live the same entourages as other women of that time period. The unseen pressure enforced to her by the individuals and society to stay in cage. The parrot in cage, speaks "a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door" (Chopin, *ibid*, p.1). Edna does not fit well in this society because her actions are uncommon to the Creole women. No one could understand the parrot, signifies that nobody understands Edna, only the mocking-bird understands the parrot as Mademoiselle Reisz could understand Edna because she also does not follow the traditional routine like Edna. The captured bird in a cage symbolizes Edna's snare, typical reflection of Victorina women.

Edna could not fly, she is not free, she is a beautiful piece or an object. As Edna's husband, Léonce Pontellier, a wealthy New Orleans businessman of forty passes the comments- "What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat! You are burnt beyond recognition, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin, *ibid*, p.3). The statements explain how Edna is regarded as his precious possession. Léonce perception of his wife as property was common in Louisiana society and formalized by its laws. In the novel several terms are used to describe women such as "mother-women," who, "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings," desired nothing more than "to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin, *ibid*, pp.14-15) Edna protests against such ideological social rigidities, limitations and the cultural conventions because she traces patriarchal codes and conducts are the responsible factors in her life. She says that "Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was a purely an accident..." (Chopin, *ibid*, p.35). As a devoted wife she cares about her husband and children however, she thinks this comes under her duty.

At Grand Isle, women are in the confinement of patriarchal thought. Edna does not want to be. To fulfill her desires, she wants to break the social chain and she does

not hesitate to leave her husband and her children too. “Their absence was a sort of relief though she did not admit this even to herself” (Chopin, *ibid*, p.36). She wants to be alone and enjoy her individuality without anyone’s presence. As Chopin describes Edna “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother woman. The mother women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary threatened their precious brood” (Chopin, *ibid*, p. 14). Contrasting the other women on Grand Isle Edna does not “idolize” her children or “worship” her husband at the cost of her own individuality and self-respect. Thus, the research focuses on the imagery of bird’s wings how they are used to describe the Edna’s effort to break free from the existing psychological and corporal state. It tries to look at how the women are caged like a bird in the patriarchal society and what could be the consequences when they try to spread their pinions to flee from the conventional cage.

Pinion Imagery as Semiotics

Birds and wings are frequently used as symbolic imageries for women. Baker (1999) notes that “the way we identify women reflects our conception of them, and that most terms used to identify women place them as non-human or as minors” (p.37). Women are like an object and treated as second class citizen. He further says “With the exception of the hummingbird, which, like all the birds suggested, is generally thought to be diminutive and pretty, all of the birds are domesticated, usually as pets (which reminds one that “my pet” is an expression of endearment). None of the birds were predators or symbols of intelligence or nobility” (Baker, *ibid*, p. 38). It shows that women are portrayed as domestic animal without brain and weak. They are like a caged bird in the gilded cage.

In 1655, As Margaret Walters Cavendish (2008), a famous British poet and philosopher, symbolized women’s inferior position as “birds in a cage” for the first time. She stated that “We are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not suffered to fly abroad... we are shut out of all power and authority, by reason we are never employed either in civil or martial affairs, our counsels are despised and laughed at, the best of our actions are trodden down with scorn, by the overweening conceit men have of themselves and through despisement of us” (p. 21). Women are not free; they are helpless and free maid without any recognition and salary. The imageries of ‘pinions’ and ‘birds in a cage’ are used recurrently in *The Awakening* to describe Edna’s oppressions, feelings of desolation, yearning to break away, and her psychological state. Her wings of hope are clipped with the societal conventional norms.

As M.A. Carrillo and M.A. Fernández (2014) state that the pinions or wings are the semiotic symbol of spirituality, lightness and possibility to fly high to achieve freedom and victory. They are the expression of the aspiration of the soul towards a higher than human condition (p.1). Wings are the flight for human hope, independence, and the success which helps to achieve the goal in life. M.A. Carrillo and M.A. Fernández further say that “In Greece, Hermes had winged heels, symbol of the traveler and the messenger, of dreams, of impulse, of movement. The Greeks represented Love and Victory with wings” (Carrillo and Fernández, *ibid*, p.2). Wing is symbolized as the means to take messages of human desires and love. It is a passage to happiness and represents both the love and triumph of human kind.

Wing symbolism is diverse. Commonly, it signifies freedom and escape. Literally, if we had wings, we could be able to fly over mountains crossing rivers and oceans. One of the most quintessential examples of this is Icarus, a character in Greek mythology. “Icarus used his wings to escape the island of Crete. Before leaving, he was warned not to fly too close to the sun or else he will burn. This was a metaphor for hubris and a warning against it. Icarus did fly too close to the sun and the wax on his wings melted. He fell to his death and drowned” (“Symbolism of Wings”, 2021). Semiotically, wings are the passage to set free one from the problems however, freedom has a cost.

“Semiotic derives from the Greek *semesion*, meaning sign and symbol, *semainon* which means signifier and *semainomenon* meaning signified or indication” (Mohd & Totu, 2014, p.4). Semiotics is a symbol or imagery of a signifier or object that is signified or conveyed the meaning through sign. For example, ‘wing’ as an object or signifier signifies meaning as ‘freedom’. Both form the meaningful sign as the word ‘wing’ and its semiotics or symbol is ‘freedom’. “Semiotics is the study of signs, analogies, metaphors, symbolism. They are used in language to aid communication-is called semiotics” (“Semiotic,” 2021). The use of imageries in any kind of literature, communicate the meaning to readers. As cited by Mohd & Totu (2014), “Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, Charles Morris and Umberto Eco (Eco, 1979; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Panuti & Zoest, 1996; Chandler, 2002) have agreed on the simple definition” (p.5). According to Umberto Eco (1997), semiotics as a sign or symbol that can be taken as significantly to explain something else and that something else does not necessarily exist exactly. And sometimes meanings of the sign will deceive us (pp.6-7). For example, wings are symbolized as freedom, it could be different in another context.

Analysis of the Pinion Imagery in *The Awakening*

The Awakening reveals the women's condition as a caged bird with the broken pinions in the late 18th century. Women were unable to express themselves as individuals. They were caged in the societal cage as a show piece. Chopin has used wing imagery in her characterization of mother-women. In exchange for the security, mother-women willingly allow their angel wings to be clipped by their way of life and stay powerless for flight. As wives of wealthy businessmen, they are rewarded for carrying out their domesticated role with a place in upper-class society, lovely homes, fine clothes, and all of the other privileges and prestige that accompany their social position. Just like birds, women are protective of the ones they love, and would do anything for them, but they do not do for themselves. They have beautiful wings but they are restrained. The women's only duty is to sustained the roles of a wife and mother, and have their wings only to be looked and glimmered upon, but never to fly and show its wings to society. In *The Awakening* Chopin states, "...esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin, 1899, p.14). Women are confined to this existence because their only purpose in life is to uphold family tasks and responsibilities.

The Awakening mostly articulates the hardship faced by Edna who feels trapped by society and how she wants to overcome it within herself. She wants to escape from the existing situation taking a flight opening out her pinions for the freedom to fulfill her desires. However, her wings are not strong. She does not have courage to break the cage. In one occasion when her husband comes late at 11pm, Edna was asleep, husband tries to wake her, however she does not move, she is too tired. Then her husband tells her Raoul has a high fever and needs looking after. Then he lights a cigar and sits near the open door to smoke. He grumbles and reproaches Edna about neglecting their children. Edna is sure that Raoul had no fever, he had gone to bed perfectly (Chopin, *ibid*, p.10). Edna is fully awake. She begins to cry; she does not know why she is crying. "Such experience s as the forgoing were not uncommon in her married life....An incredible oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of the consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day" (Chopin, *ibid*, p.11). She is helpless her strength is gone; her wings are not strong enough to retort back to her husband's accusations.

Edna's awakening begins slowly, "A certain light beginning to dawn dimly within her-the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (Chopin, *ibid*, p.25). The dim

light that first allows her to see her own unseen dissatisfaction is described as the suddenness with which her emotions rise to the surface renders them both disturbing and exciting. The sense of freedom and self-discovery expedites inside Edna as she becomes close with Robert Lebrun, son of Madame Lebrun, fascinating young man who falls in love with Edna. Edna's wings of hope slowly get wind. Edna feels the voice of the sea is seductive and inviting, continuously whispering and murmuring, tempting her to dive into the oceans of love. "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin, *ibid*, p.26). Her impulse is stimulated based on the libido. In the course of fulfilling her desires, Edna is swept away by Robert's devotion and attention. She enjoys his company, sees in him a promise of the love and excitement that have been missing from her life since she married Léonce. Her wings get breeze and she moves towards her eros.

Robert and Edna exchange the first kiss (Chopin, *ibid*, p.205), that precipitates the sensuous awakening. She awakens Robert with a kiss. Edna murmurs to Robert "We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence. I must go to my friend; but you will wait for me? No matter how late; you will wait for me, Robert?" (Chopin, *ibid*, p. 207). Her seductive voice, together with his great love for her, has captivated Robert's senses. At this point, it seems finally Edna has got wings and victory over her love. It is a little preparation of Edna's moves of libido. Edna pursues an affair with Alcee Arobin, the seductive, charming, Don Juan of the New Orleans Creole community, to satisfy her sexual needs while Robert is in Mexico. However, she is never emotionally attached to Arobin because she is well aware the way patriarchal society treats whole female civilization. Edna does all these things because she does not want to be subservient. She wants to revolt with the then Victorian patriarchal American society.

As we could observe Arobin satisfies Edna's physical urges. Edna shares with him Mademoiselle Reisz feels about her shoulder blades. Reisz says that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (Chopin, *ibid*, p.158). That is the hint that if Edna has to achieve her individual freedom, she needs strong wings. However, it is not that easy, if she is unable to complete her flight, she might fall to her death as like a bird. As M.A. Carrillo and M.A. Fernández (2014) have stated previously, wings are the symbol of possibility to fly high to achieve one's dreams (p.1). However, one has to make an effort to fly

as bird flies high with the strong wings. Such an image evokes the legend of Icarus, who achieved flight with a set of manufactured wings but fell to his death in the sea when out of pride he flew too high, and the sun melted the wax that held the feathers to his artificial wings. According to Eco, sometimes what we see that does not actually happen and its semiotics interpretation could convey different meaning (Eco, 1997, pp.6-7). It could deceive us.

And sudden leaves of Robert, breaks Edna's heart. Edna returns to New Orleans as a changed woman and starts to spend her time painting and ignoring all of her social responsibilities. Edna moves into a house of her own and declares herself independent--the possession of no one. Edna tells Reisz, she will be moving "just two steps away" (Chopin, 1899, p.151), in her own 'The Pigeon House'. It is an escape from her former life as a mother and wife. The pigeon house is supposed to give Edna her freedom and insouciance. Reisz educates Edna that in order for her to find what she wants and needs in life; she must have the courage and strength to do so. She wants to see Edna succeed with the choices she has made, but does not want to see her become broken from them. Edna's moving to pigeon house signifies her emancipation from the preconception and a sense of control over her life and independence as an individual. She has extended her wings decisively but she later realizes that she has put herself in another cage.

Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz quite often. She loves to hear the song 'solitude' played by pianist. Hearing music, Edna's imagination comes "...the figure of man standing beside a desolate rock naked. His attitude was one of the hopeless resignations as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (Chopin, *ibid*, p.49). Edna feels the pain in her heart listening music. She imagines the lonely man with the broken pinions, withdrawal from life. The music arouses passions within her soul. She could not control her tears. Her husband is much concerned about her behavioral changes. He seeks the guidance of doctor Mandelet. During the course of checkup, doctor suspects Edna's affair and suggests Leonce to let her alone because the doctor is also guided by the then social eros and thanatos. Leonce, leaving Edna alone goes away on his business. Edna sends her children to their grandmother and wholly rejects her former lifestyle because she was not ready to wrap her head in a way the contemporary eros and thanatos determine her life.

At the end Robert's passionate plea "Don't go; don't go! Oh! Edna, stay with me" (Chopin, *ibid*, p. 208) cannot make Edna stay. When she returns to her pigeon house, Robert is already gone. Edna is truly betrayed and barren, and that makes her

final and ultimate departure. Edna walks down to the beach. “The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering circling disabled down, down to the water” (Chopin, *ibid*, p.220). The sea in front of her is inviting and tempting, and a bird with a broken wing is circling overhead. Edna strips and wades, naked, into the water swims away from the shore, determined not to let anyone including her children possess her. Feelings of thanatos own her. After a while, her limbs tire, exhaustion overtakes her, and she drowns among the waves, finally and totally release herself from the cage.

Conclusion

The Awakening by Kate Chopin is a controversial novel full of symbolism and her personal experience how women are viewed at home and in the society. The story revolves around a young married woman Edna Pontellier, the protagonist. *The Awakening* reflects her mental and physical struggle to emancipate from her existing state in search for individual freedom. From beginning to the end her gradual transformation from traditional to revolting woman is well described in the novel. Throughout *The Awakening* Chopin uses flight and descriptions of bird with its spreading pinions to express the Edna’s internal desires and her sufferings.

The bird and pinion’s imageries describe Edna's personality and her awakening leading her to strong desire of escaping from the patriarchal ideology. As like a bird she wants to soar above from the tradition and prejudice. She needs strong wings; however, her wings are broken many times and she reeled down to reality where dreams have no meaning. The committing suicide is the climax of Edna's final act of thanatos. Her decision to end her life is originated from her sense of inner emptiness not only of the failure in love. It is her desperate attempt to get free from the societal bandages. She is trapped in the conflict between her desire of freedom and her persistent yearning to achieve corporal satisfaction.

Edna’s feat of plunging into the sea symbolizes that she could not fulfill her dream in this life time her pinions are totally broken. Semiotically, her heart is broken. Robert’s flee from the scene and flirtation of Arobin, make her realized there is no substitute for true love. The totality of loss forces her in a dilemma to choose between life and death. She overcomes of both eros and thanatos. An ecstasy of pain and separation to individual existence to the hopelessness, everything becomes unreal to

her. Edna uses her wings to separate herself from her family and the conventional society. Edna's suicide symbolizes that the bird's pinions are broken in the process to take a flight. She is free from the cage and never to return back.

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