

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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**THE REPRESENTATION OF BODILY AUTONOMY IN
KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*
BA thesis**

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**TARTU
2024**

ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to analyse how autonomy and bodily autonomy are represented in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. The novel was published in 1899 and was initially criticised for its representation of marriage. It was re-evaluated in the 1950s by scholars, celebrated in the 1970s by feminists and is now acclaimed worldwide.

The introduction offers a brief summary of the plot and explains the changing reception of the novel. The literature review provides an overview of topics related to autonomy that scholars have discussed. The topics include motherhood, female archetypes, and emancipation. The empirical section analyses the representation of autonomy and focuses on the narrower subtopic of bodily autonomy. Bodily autonomy is defined in the thesis as the individual's right to make decisions regarding their body. The empirical analysis covers three topics: the oppressive nature of the marital institution, choosing one's own partner and suicide as an act of bodily autonomy. The conclusion presents the findings of the analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

The Awakening is a feminist novel published in 1899 by Kate Chopin that discusses maternity, autonomy, and female archetypes. The novel's protagonist is Edna Pontellier, and the novel depicts her efforts to gain autonomy in a patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, Edna is subjugated to her husband. This makes female freedom in marriage one of the novel's core topics. She is described to have experienced an awakening while swimming, which makes her gradually become aware of the limitations she faces in society. Her awakening is followed by attempts to gain autonomy, by trying to make a living by selling her paintings, having a relationship outside of marriage and moving out of the family home. Despite her efforts, she is unsuccessful in gaining independence. Edna concludes that she could never be truly free and commits suicide by drowning at the end of the novel, which is considered to be her ultimate act of autonomy.

Scholars generally agree that *The Awakening* did not gain immediate popularity when it was first published in 1899 (Koloski 2008: 161). Chopin was criticised for her portrayal of Edna Pontellier, particularly her suicide, and the novel was deemed "vulgar, disturbing, morbid, disagreeable" (Koloski 2008: 162). Although her previously published short stories had also dealt with controversial topics (Beer 2008: 1), those had appeared in magazines with a more liberal readership and were thus received relatively well (Koloski 2008: 161-162). Some stories remained unpublished in her lifetime due to their subject matter, but the majority were published in magazines such as *Vogue* or *Harper's* (Beer 2008: 2). Unlike Chopin's short stories, *The Awakening* was presented to a much wider audience (Koloski 2008: 162) and was forgotten for thirty years after the initial critical reception in 1899 by both readers and critics (Koloski 2008: 161). It has also been claimed that the novel was banned or removed from circulation, but these claims have not been confirmed by scholars nor Chopin's most influential biographer, Emily

Toth (Koloski 2008: 163). In fact, there is only one official record of a library refusing to loan out the novel (Koloski 2008: 163).

It took over fifty years for the novel to be printed again; the second print appeared in 1964 (Bracken 2024: para 15). The novel was re-discovered in the 1950s by scholars and was praised for its modern approach (Bracken 2024: para 15). The scholars encouraged readers to form their own opinions of the novel and disregard any previous criticism (Koloski 2008: 165). It became popular among feminists in the 1970s (Koloski 2008: 161). Today, the novel is widely acclaimed, and scholars have studied a variety of topics, for example the representation of motherhood (Koloski 2008: 170).

The aim of this thesis is to discuss the representation of autonomy and to focus on the more specific subtopic of bodily autonomy in *The Awakening*. Bodily autonomy is treated in the thesis as the individual's right to make decisions regarding their body. Examples of this right are choices concerning reproduction or the freedom of picking a partner.

The thesis will achieve the aim in two main sections. The literature review will focus on research that has already been conducted on motherhood, female archetypes, and emancipation in the novel. The empirical literary analysis will consider the ways in which bodily autonomy is depicted by analysing pivotal scenes and relevant quotes. Three topics are covered: Edna's relationship with her husband, her relationship with Robert Lebrun and her suicide. The topics are analysed by exploring the ways in which Edna's bodily autonomy is restricted by society and how she tries to reclaim her right to her body.

1. LIMITS OF WOMEN'S FREEDOM IN *THE AWAKENING*: LITERATURE REVIEW

The present literature review will cover research on three topics important for discussing autonomy: motherhood, female archetypes, and emancipation. They are connected to the narrower topic of bodily autonomy, which will be explored in the empirical analysis section of the thesis.

1.1. Motherhood and Female Archetypes

The theme of motherhood in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has been previously studied by various authors. The studies highlight Edna's attitude towards her children and motherhood in general. The articles note the children's role in Edna's life throughout the novel and analyse how they affect the protagonist.

Kearns (1991: 77) discusses the somewhat strange connection Edna seems to have to her children who remind her of her social duties. Edna feels that the children both drain and fulfil her, that they are simultaneously a source of joy and torment (Kearns 1991: 77). LeBlanc (1996: 297-298) highlights that by claiming she would not give herself for her children, Edna implies that she does not equate motherhood with her sense of self. Edna refuses to take on the role of being a dedicated mother by hardly engaging with her children (Hildebrand 2016: 205), and the feelings she does express towards them are always quickly forgotten in the narrative.

Women of Edna's social standing were expected to be homemakers and to place the needs of their husbands and children above their own (Schweitzer 1990: 169). Edna does not conform to this standard even at the beginning of the novel. The narrator claims that Edna is not a 'mother-woman', the embodiment of the standard (Schweitzer 1990: 169). The theme of choosing between selfhood and motherhood is stressed again, as Edna views the two as incompatible (Schweitzer 1990: 162). Schweitzer (1990: 163) emphasises that while the

children rarely appear in the story and do not seem to have an important part in Edna's life, she seems to give them a lot of thought at the time preceding her death. For example, she sees them as "slavedrivers" (Schweitzer 1990: 163). This indicates that she sees them as a form of social control, as something that forces her to conform to the social norms and prevents her from exercising her autonomy.

The theme of motherhood is also present in Edna's awakening and is represented by the act of giving birth to herself, through which she becomes a creature that has no gender (Schweitzer 1990: 163). The pronoun 'it' is used to describe Edna at this stage, which might indicate that in her quest for autonomy she has rejected both femininity and masculinity. Schweitzer (1990: 163) claims this to be the ultimate act of selfhood. Edna has little recollection of giving birth to her children and when she witnesses her friend Adèle's delivery, she deems the process to be something terrible (Schweitzer 1990: 164). Edna views her desire for autonomy as "a battle between the mother and children" (Schweitzer 1990: 165). This suggests that she views her children as direct obstacles in the way of obtaining autonomy. Both Edna's lack of memories regarding childbirth and the fact that her children do not seem to have much importance to her indicate that motherhood was not something she specifically desired. Instead, it was a societal expectation, which she followed habitually. Involuntary motherhood thus emerges as an example of restricted bodily autonomy.

Heilmann (2008: 95) highlights the instance in the novel that describes Edna's distaste for attending her sister's wedding and claims that this shows Edna's changing views on marriage. Heilmann (2008: 91) points out the inattentiveness of Edna's husband, as he gives little thought to her wishes and desires, which is common for the given period. Divorce was considered improper, and could have severe consequences for women, as they had very few

rights concerning possessions and their children (Heilmann 2008: 93). While Edna is certain that she wants to discard the role of being a wife and although she finds her role as a mother limiting, she has some doubts about giving it up. This means she must pick between her own needs and those of her children, as one choice excludes the other (Emmitt 1993: 323). Eventually, Edna creates a space of her own in the form of an attic studio, a place in which she can discard the roles of both wife and mother (Heilmann 2008: 93).

Different female characters are compared to Edna throughout the novel. Adèle Ratignolle is the epitome of the female archetype of the ‘mother-woman’. Women of this type “idolised their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 1899: 10, cited in Schweitzer 1990: 169). The archetype suggests that femininity requires giving up female autonomy (Schweitzer 1990: 169). LeBlanc (1996: 292) argues that the ‘mother-woman’ is “a male construction of female sexuality”. For example, Adèle is only described as an individual with her own personality through her relationship with Edna (LeBlanc 1996: 292).

The character Mademoiselle Reisz opposes this archetype, as she has chosen career over family and has reached certain levels of independence (Schweitzer 1990: 170). One author describes Reisz’ character as the ‘artist-woman’ (Gray 2004: 62). While the archetype does not conform to traditional standards of femininity, it also does not oppose the traditional relationship between men and women (Gray 2004: 62). The ‘artist-woman’ regards herself highly, yet still lives in relative solitude and is thus not entirely content with her unconventional role in society (Gray 2004: 63-64).

Jennifer B. Gray (2004: 54) discusses the roles of Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, and how Edna attempts to imitate both but ultimately fails for neither offers an escape

from the norms of male-dominated society (Gray 2004: 56). Once Edna becomes aware of her function in society, she tries to evade it (Gray 2004: 54). Gray (2004: 62) does not entirely contrast the roles of the 'mother-woman' and 'artist-woman', as it is later established that neither truly opposes the patriarchal system. This illustrates that neither role can grant Edna the autonomy she desires. One might be more limiting than the other, but both are similarly unable to offer a fulfilled life. The 'artist-woman' is not a threat to the patriarchal society, because the woman can only gain partial independence by being essentially excluded from the community (Gray 2004: 63). Edna cannot accept being deprived of companionship and love and is unwilling to take on the role of the 'artist-woman' (Gray 2004: 66). While Edna's feelings towards Mademoiselle Reisz are somewhat conflicting, she is influenced by the woman in her own pursuit for independence, for example by Reisz' music (Schweitzer 1990: 170). Kearns (1991: 80) also highlights the importance of Mademoiselle Reisz' character in Edna's life, claiming that the older woman and her music eventually become a kind of comfort to Edna.

LeBlanc (1996: 289) suggests that besides being a feminist text, *The Awakening* can also be interpreted as a lesbian text, although the topic has not been thoroughly studied. The term 'metaphorical lesbian' is used to describe Edna, as her sexuality is not made explicitly clear (LeBlanc 1996: 290). It is suggested that Edna's restricting corsets and her continual submission to her husband indicate compulsory heterosexuality (LeBlanc 1996: 291). It is also noted that once Edna unlocks her sexual desires and yearnings, they are mostly fulfilled through the sea, her art, and female friends, hence Edna's male partners are deemed secondary (LeBlanc 1996: 300). The author argues that while the male partners trigger Edna's sexual awakening, they ultimately do not bring her the gratification she desires (LeBlanc 1996: 300). As a matter of fact, the sea is indicated to be the lover that Edna feels most fulfilled by (LeBlanc 1996: 302).

In short, all the roles which Edna has or is able to take on are restrictive and do not allow her to explore her full potential. The role of a mother restricted her bodily autonomy the most, as she was limited by her husband and societal expectations. The role of the ‘mother-woman’ further emphasises that, in order to fulfil the role, she must give up her autonomy entirely and focus on her husband and children. The ‘artist-woman’ is able to gain some independence, but is not considered a full member of society, hence she is also unable to fully exert her autonomy. This leaves Edna with no realistic role model to follow in her process of self-emancipation.

1.2. Emancipation

Katherine Kearns (1991: 63) reasons that Edna’s awakening makes her understand the ways in which she is being limited in society. It is argued that Edna’s use of ‘I’ during the swimming scene, even though the pronoun has been used before, has great importance, because it depicts her disregarding the traditional feminine characteristics and values, indicating the start of the shift in her (Kearns 1991: 65).

Schweitzer (1990: 172) demonstrates that when Edna starts to rethink what kind of company to surround herself with and which activities to participate in, she falls into traditionally masculine stereotypes because they are the only way in which she understands autonomy (Schweitzer 1990: 172). Thus, she tries to reach independence by emulating traits and actions that are stereotypically considered masculine (Hildebrand 2016: 189). Kearns (1991: 73) also argues that throughout the novel, Edna expresses some dislike towards other female characters, which could be related to the way Edna sees autonomy as something inherently masculine. It is argued that while painting her friend Adèle she seeks to artistically objectify her (Hildebrand 2016: 194). She does not focus on her friend’s individuality while painting her, but rather the type of the ‘mother-woman’ (Hildebrand 2016: 195). Hildebrand

(2016: 200) suggests that the entire act of sketching or painting a subject could be understood as turning them into an object. It is important to note that Edna also sketches her father, who is a completely different model (Hildebrand 2016: 201). He represents the patriarchal society and has had an immense influence on her (Gray 2004: 65). It is argued that by reversing the roles of ‘masculine’ artist and ‘feminine’ model, Edna finally claims female artistry (Hildebrand 2016: 201). The act of sketching him gives Edna an opportunity to shape and control him in her own way (Gray 2004: 64).

Women of Edna’s social class during that period were discouraged from seeking paid work, but it is worth mentioning that all female characters of the novel have a creative outlet (Schweitzer 1990: 172). Edna eventually turns her artistic abilities into a profession (Schweitzer 1990: 172), and her works gradually become more forceful and individualistic (Schweitzer 1990: 175). While emulating the traditionally masculine actions and traits brings her some success, especially through her artistic productivity, it also results in her death (Hildebrand 2016: 189). Art can be interpreted as a language which Edna uses to express her increasing self-awareness (Hildebrand 2016: 193). However, as a person of her time Edna still believes that the two genders could not have overlapping characteristics (Hildebrand 2016: 201). This is one of the reasons why she tries to emulate masculine traits, instead of following a path of her own (Hildebrand 2016: 202).

Carolyn L. Mathews (2002: 128) discusses the importance of clothing and what disrobing symbolises in *The Awakening*. There are several theories, one of which suggests that Edna’s restricting clothes are directly related to the societal oppression she is facing (Mathews 2002: 128). Another idea proposes that discarding one’s clothes could be related to a “regression to the animality of infancy” (Mathews 2002: 129). In literature, the social identity of the

character is often expressed through clothing (Mathews 2002: 129). Dress symbolised the sense of propriety of the middle-classes, which is also reflected in Edna's character (Mathews 2002: 130). Edna's routine of getting dressed is described at length, but as the novel progresses, some inconsistencies in the routine arise, which indicate Edna's marital struggles (Mathews 2002: 131). The struggles reflect her resentment of her lack of autonomy, as her sense of dress is connected to her husband's social position (Mathews 2002: 131). The instance where Edna bares her feet to swim is also highlighted (Mathews 2002: 137). It is significant, because women of Edna's class never swam barefoot for it was something associated with servant girls (Mathews 2002: 137).

Two crucial changes are triggered once Edna learns to swim: she becomes more aware of her body and her need for self-determination (Heilmann 2008: 87). The act of Edna succeeding in swimming for the first time is compared to a child learning to walk (Heilmann 2008: 87). Edna is drawn to the sea due to its immensity. It provides an escape from her domestic life, and she sees it as her sanctuary (Heilmann 2008: 93). Edna also feels deeply connected to it (Heilmann 2008: 100). Chopin uses the seascape to include themes surrounding women's sexual desire, the feminine body and female psyche (Heilmann 2008: 99). Edna finds solace in the sea and therefore the act of drowning is regarded as secondary and is even described as comforting, as the sea is thought of as a lover Edna is drawn towards (Emmitt 1993: 324).

Previous research has considered the questions of freedom and drowning and whether Edna's suicide is an act of triumph or defeat (Bartley 2000: 719). Her death being a triumph seems more plausible, especially if one links it to autonomy. In a way, the act allows her to reach a form of independence and exert her bodily autonomy. It might be considered a defeat from the wider perspective, however, because nothing ended up changing in the world around

her. However, it was a personal victory, as it was her way of gaining control. Edna strives to gain fulfilment by becoming one with the waves and her death seems almost like something that happened by chance (Emmitt 1993: 321). It is highlighted that the aim of her swim is not death, but personal gratification, to escape those who are keeping her from the life she desires (Emmitt 1993: 324). Some scholars argue that Edna's death is left purposefully ambiguous and claim that the novel is meant to illustrate the notion of life being a sequence of emotions such as "exhilaration and despair" (Kearns 1991: 88), and that Chopin could have made Edna's death more explicitly clear, if this had been important for her (Treu 2000: 34).

Initially, Edna did try to imagine a new future for herself, in the form of taking up painting to earn money (Bartley 2000: 741) and finding her own personal space (Bartley 2000: 736). At the end of the novel, after her awakening, she becomes more aware of her actual options, and how she would never achieve what she truly wanted (Bartley 2000: 723). By committing suicide, Edna shows her unwillingness to accept a compromise, and her contempt for the oppressive society (Heilmann 2008: 89). It is suggested that by dying, she can finally achieve the solitude and privileges she had desired to claim (Hildebrand 2016: 206). Edna's suicide is described as a homecoming, as during her last moments, the sea is compared to a meadow that had delighted her during her childhood (Heilmann 2008: 101).

The literature review above demonstrates that there is already extensive scholarship on motherhood, female archetypes, and emancipation. Most scholars have focused on the behaviour and actions of the protagonist. It has been concluded that Edna's sense of self is not related to the role of a mother. Two female characters besides Edna have been discussed and it has been established that Edna did not conform to either of the two archetypes, as both adhere to the norms of patriarchal society. Edna attempted to gain autonomy by mimicking the

behaviour of men around her, revealing that she views independence as something inherently masculine. Prior scholarship has considered Edna's suicide, though the majority agree that the act was written as intentionally vague. It is concluded that Edna commits suicide to escape the limiting society. Although previous research has looked into different limitations that female characters face in the novel, the representation of bodily autonomy has not been extensively studied.

2. AUTONOMY AND BODILY AUTONOMY IN *THE AWAKENING*

The following analysis will focus on the ways in which autonomy and bodily autonomy are represented in *The Awakening*. Bodily autonomy is defined in this thesis as the right to make decisions regarding one's body. While reading the novel, key scenes related to bodily autonomy were identified. Relevant quotations are analysed in greater detail to show how Chopin presents different aspects of bodily autonomy. The first part of the analysis will focus on Edna's relationship with her husband and how her autonomy is limited by him in their marriage. The first part will also serve as a means to show Edna's lack of understanding of her own desires before her awakening. The second part will discuss choosing one's own partner as an example of bodily autonomy. The analysis will examine the relationship Edna forms with Robert Lebrun, and thus shows Edna's renewed understanding of her actual desires. The third part will consider suicide as an act of bodily autonomy, and the representation of Edna's choice of drowning herself. The notion of bodily autonomy is linked to feminist theory. It is closely connected to liberal and, to some extent, radical feminism. Liberal feminism, the main type of feminism publicly discussed at the time when Chopin wrote the novel, stresses the necessity for equal opportunities and rights, which includes the right to economic independence and the right to make decisions regarding one's own body. Radical feminism emerged later, but it can be argued

that this novel, too, at least indirectly argues that it is enough for women to gain entry into the system that is created by men and thus follows male rules. Instead, new forms of social organisation should be developed that are based on an egalitarian relationship between the genders.

Edna's body is described several times throughout the novel, and she is sometimes compared to other women. One of the first descriptions says:

The women were both of goodly height, Madame Ratignolle possessing the more feminine and matronly figure. The charm of Edna Pontellier's physique stole insensibly upon you. The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it. A casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd. (Chopin 1899: 18)

This description stresses that Edna does not have the traditional full feminine figure, but she is described as symmetrical and perhaps even athletic. It is interesting that in the quotation the person observing Edna is identified as male. This suggests that all women are observed through a culturally normative male gaze. Another account is given later: "She was not a supercilious or an overdainty woman. She was not much given to reclining in the hammock, and when she did so it was with no cat-like suggestion of voluptuous ease, but with a beneficent repose which seemed to invade her whole body" (Chopin 1899: 37-38). In other words, throughout the novel we get indirect references to Edna's physical strength and bodily control that is compared to the passivity of other women of her class. Later the family doctor even compares her to a sleek, beautiful animal (Chopin 1899: 90). The last two descriptions are somewhat opposing, the difference between them created most likely by the perceiver. The first account is given by the unidentified narrator, while the second is from the perspective of a man. Yet they both stress Edna's difference from the expected female stereotype.

When it comes to the topic of marriage in *The Awakening*, Edna's husband expects submission from his wife:

She heard him moving about the room; every sound indicating impatience and irritation. Another time she would have gone at his request. 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. (Chopin 1899: 39)

Edna, too, has long accepted submission to be the norm, but the word choice here, for example the word 'treadmill', indicates that the obedience is not pleasant for her. She knows her husband well enough to notice his moods by noises alone, which suggests that his displeasure is a somewhat regular occurrence. The quote also shows that Edna is used to doing what could be called emotional labour in the marriage, that is, making sure that other family members are satisfied. The fact that she now refuses to act on the habit is significant. Edna's bodily autonomy has been restricted and she has habitually repressed her true feelings. The quote also highlights Edna's feelings about her everyday life: she is unable to change the course of her life which has already been decided for her. The use of the term 'daily treadmill' also suggests that despite the apparent continuous movement from day to day, Edna has remained stationary throughout her life. She is essentially trapped, constantly moving but never reaching a goal. This recognition of her habitual obedience indicates the beginning of her awakening.

The novel also gives the perspective of the husband, even if with some irony: "Mr Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him" (Chopin 1899: 72). The quote stresses how submissiveness is the marital norm for the husband. The way in which his stance is described allows the reader to conclude that if the submissiveness vanished, the husband would also stop being courteous. Above all, the fact that

his wife is no longer obedient shocks the man who is used to his power. This is indicated by repeating and, in repetition intensifying, his reaction.

A similar confused reaction can be seen in her husband's conversation with the family physician. At first, he says he wishes to "consult" the doctor about Edna, but quickly corrects himself and uses the phrase "talk about" instead (Chopin 1899: 83). Despite the correction, it is still clear that he wants to consult the doctor about what he believes to be his wife's declining mental state. After all, disobedience in marriage is for him an incomprehensible act. The conversation is rather demeaning to Edna, and further stresses the fact that instead of talking to his wife himself, he seeks the counsel of another man. This indicates that, from his perspective, Edna has no say in the matters concerning her marriage and her problems are diminished: "/.../ 'Most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom' /.../" (Chopin 1899: 85). This quote illustrates the assumption that almost all women are the same, and their "passing whims" can be dealt with easily by men in authority, such as doctors.

Her supposed condition and its challenge to the marriage institution is not taken seriously by the men, although her husband says that her behaviour makes him uncomfortable (Chopin 1899: 84). This hints that he did not visit Doctor Mandelet for the benefit of his wife, but rather his own. He explains further: "'She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and – you understand – we meet in the morning at the breakfast table'" (Chopin 1899: 84). His comfort is again deemed more important, and the thought of his wife wanting to control her body and sleeping in a separate bed irritates him. He is used to seeing his wife's body as something that he can always have access to and is thus disgruntled when Edna refuses to make herself available to him. This can be seen in his ironic statement

about “eternal rights of women”. The husband’s unsympathetic attitude towards her is also mentioned by Heilmann (2008: 91), who highlights how common such behaviour was at the given period. At the end of the visit, the physician suggests how to deal with Edna. That is, men believe they are the true experts concerning women’s needs.

Consulting the doctor is not the only instance in the novel in which her husband and another man, in this case her father, discuss Edna without her own input regarding the marriage and her behaviour: “‘You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce,’ asserted the Colonel. ‘Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it’” (Chopin 1899: 92). The father’s words indicate that Edna was raised in a world in which men’s authority over women is expected and enforced, to ensure that women do not develop alternative ideas. The father thinks that the husband’s problems derive from his lenience, not his dominance. It is clear how Edna might have been influenced by her father’s firm and harsh opinions in her childhood that discouraged her from expressing her needs and emotions: “She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken affection, either in herself or in others” (Chopin 1899: 21).

The symbolism of wedding rings is used in multiple passages, for example, at the very beginning of the novel:

‘You are burnt beyond recognition,’ he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her lawn sleeves above the wrists. Looking at them reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm. (Chopin 1899: 3)

This instance is often quoted to show the obvious and blatant sense of ownership Edna’s husband expresses towards her. He does not see her as a human being who might be hurt, but rather as an object that is damaged by sunlight, thus making her look like a woman of a lower

social status and thereby also damaging her husband's reputation. However, Edna's reaction should be analysed as well. Once she gazes upon her hands, she is reminded of the absence of her rings, most likely including her wedding band. It could be assumed that as Edna looks at her hands, she does not only see herself, and is instead reminded of the fact that her body belongs to her husband in the marriage. The act of taking her ring back from him is an involuntary and habitual act in which she submits herself to the marriage institution, without any open protest.

However, later in the novel, she clearly expresses distaste towards the marriage, again symbolised by the ring: "Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet" (Chopin 1899: 67). Taking off her wedding ring and disposing of it, even momentarily, is a clear indication of her feelings about her marriage, as well as a clear expression of bodily autonomy. She removes the ring associated with her husband, which leaves her body without the indication that she belongs to another. It is also worth noting that she attempts to destroy it, but ultimately fails to do so. It is even stressed that the ring remains untouched. Edna's act of violence has no effect on the marriage institution. This might foreshadow the ending of the novel, in which Edna tries to escape the bounds of marriage but does not succeed. Edna ends up wearing the ring again (Chopin 1899: 67), and even feels foolish for having discarded it (Chopin 1899: 72). The occurrence might suggest that she has not yet come to terms with her true wishes and desires, and instead opts to view what happened as a mood that would pass.

It is important to note that the ring is not explicitly mentioned again. It could be assumed that Edna does not remove the ring, for example during her meetings with Alcée Arobin or Robert Lebrun, as it is not directly mentioned. At the end of the novel, prior to stepping into the

water for what would be her final swim, she removes her bathing suit and is said to have stood naked upon the shore (Chopin 1899: 149). The removal of the ring is not mentioned. This might suggest that she is above the symbolism of the ring and does not care for the meaning it holds any longer, as she has moved herself out of the control of her husband.

It is apparent from the very beginning of the novel that while Edna has some appreciation for her husband, she does not love him even before her awakening: “Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate” (Chopin 1899: 22). Marriage was not perhaps something Edna specifically wanted, but something that was expected of her, and something she would do out of duty: “As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (Chopin 1899: 23). It could be assumed that romance was thought to be unattainable, at least for most women, and they did not have the freedom of choosing their own partner. The dreams could also be dreams of autonomy, but they are not explicitly mentioned. Another quote from the novel clearly shows Edna’s opinion of her husband: “Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse” (Chopin 1899: 100).

However, upon meeting Robert Lebrun, the feelings she had shut out became apparent again: “For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman” (Chopin 1899: 57-58). Throughout her life, Edna’s true feelings have been suppressed:

The sentiment which she entertained for Robert in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel. She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself. (Chopin 1899: 60)

Robert creates not only romantic feelings but the general sense that she has the right to feelings and the ability to express them. He likely also makes her feel seen and heard, as it is mentioned that Robert listened to Edna with intent (Chopin 1899: 5), in contrast to her husband. Before she meets again with Robert, she has a brief affair with Alcée Arobin, an acquaintance of hers. Their relationship is significant, because Edna initiates intimacy in it: “It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin 1899: 107). The quote further indicates lack of genuine feeling in her life thus far where she has acted out of duty, not her own will or desires. She expresses bodily autonomy through the decision to engage intimately with Alcée and Robert: “/.../ I am no longer one of Mr Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. /.../” (Chopin 1899: 140). She sees herself and her body as her own, and distances herself from the will of her husband.

Edna does not seem bothered by her acts of infidelity as she has come to think of her marriage as a mistake. Robert seems far more concerned about the affair than Edna: ““Oh! I was demented, dreaming of wild impossible things, recalling men who had set their wives free, we have heard of such things”” (Chopin 1899: 139). Even though he claims to love her, and is aware that Edna loves him in turn, he values the actions and opinions of another man more than Edna’s. In doing so, he also restricts her autonomy. As much as Robert’s affection refreshed her, she still recognises that it would not make her truly happy:

There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. (Chopin 1899: 148)

The loneliness she hints at is presumably not meant in the literal sense. Edna comprehends that her needs, wishes and the level of autonomy she desires could never be

understood by her husband, children nor friends, not even Robert: “He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand” (Chopin 1899: 149). Although they might have loved each other, Robert’s life experience was cardinally different from Edna’s, meaning that he could likely never fully relate to her. Hence, he would probably not even see Edna’s problems as problems. This is highlighted in one of their earlier conversations, in which she claims Robert is selfish: ““You save yourself something—I don’t know what—but there is some selfish motive, and in sparing yourself you never consider for a moment what I think, or how I feel your neglect and indifference”” (Chopin 1899: 137). Somewhat similarly to her husband, Robert has set his feelings above hers. Edna has some hope about Doctor Mandelet (Chopin 1899: 149), though the reader has seen him to be as unaware of her needs as other men.

In *The Awakening*, a clear parallel can be drawn between the act of learning to swim, or swimming in general, and bodily autonomy. Edna’s attempts are discussed quite early in the novel:

Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim. She had received instructions from both the men and women; in some instances from the children. Robert had pursued a system of lessons almost daily; and he was nearly at the point of discouragement in realizing the futility of his efforts. A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her. (Chopin 1899: 34)

The uncertainty Edna felt in the water could be compared to what she felt in her everyday life, especially regarding her body and independence. Those surrounding her seemed to have no problem fitting into society: “Most of them walked into the water as though into a native element” (Chopin 1899: 34). Water could be seen as a parallel for society. She needed to lean upon other people, either by direct support or by objects to imitate. She is not used to taking control of her body or actions. It is also important to note that she finally learned to swim by herself and, through it, to understand the workings of her own body. Another instance of imitation is mentioned earlier: “Her most intimate friend at school had been one of rather

exceptional intellectual gifts, who wrote fine-sounding essays, which Edna admired and strove to imitate /.../” (Chopin 1899: 21). This might suggest that Edna has been imitating others since childhood. The previous scholarship also confirms this, as Edna was described to emulate the behaviour of both the ‘mother-woman’ and the ‘artist-woman’ (Gray 2004: 54). Some scholars argue that she also mimicked traditionally masculine traits and habits to gain autonomy (Schweitzer 1990: 172).

Once Edna learns to swim, she becomes aware of her own body, perhaps for the first time in her life: “A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 1899: 35). Even as she acknowledges the limitations of her body, her thoughts still highlight the newfound knowledge of what her body is capable of, perhaps also the fact that her body was her own. Swimming without the aid of others also indicates that Edna begins to trust her own body, and no longer clings to those around her. The desire to go further than any woman preceding her hints at the desire to break free of male control. It also shows the beginning of Edna’s awakening, although there is a quote that indicates Edna has questioned her position in the world even prior to her awakening: “Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin 1899: 17). The existence of an external self is also recognised later in the novel:

It sometimes entered Mr Pontellier’s mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world. (Chopin 1899: 73)

Her husband's reaction shows how little he understood her, and the extent of her true self she had kept hidden. Her husband deems her real emotions as absurd. For him the fictitious self who performs the expected social role is the norm and Edna's attempt to express the person behind the norm a deviation. A woman's desire to have her own identity outside of the social norm seems unimaginable to him and the only conclusion he can find is calling it a mental health issue.

The fact that Edna's suicide was related to water is significant because committing suicide can also be considered an act of bodily autonomy. Heilmann (2008: 93) argues that Edna views the sea as a safe haven. There are several instances in the novel describing her looking longingly at the sea: "Her glance wandered from his face away toward the Gulf, whose sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty" (Chopin 1899: 15). It further hints at her deep connection to the sea. She also uses water-related terminology when she thinks about her life: "She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her" (Chopin 1899: 121). The actions preceding her suicide are telling, and perhaps as important as the act itself. Her bathing suit is described: "Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded, upon its accustomed peg" (Chopin 1899: 148). The suit recalls the person she was before her awakening. The garment was still "hanging on", similarly to how she had been going through her daily tasks despite knowing that something was wrong. The role she had assumed in society was also habitual, in parallel to the "accustomed peg" upon which the bathing suit hung. Still, she dons it:

She put it on, leaving her clothing in the bath-house. But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. (Chopin 1899: 149)

It is almost as if she wore the skin of her old self for the last time and was reminded of how truly uncomfortable it was and how unhappy Edna had been in the position imposed on her by the society. Thus, she cast it aside, and faced her end in her awakened form. Her nakedness is truly significant, something completely foreign to her, yet liberating. It is possible that it was the first time she accepted her own body as it was and did not feel ashamed of it: “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (Chopin 1899: 149). The removal of her clothing could also be related to returning to the state of infancy (Mathews 2002: 129). The comparison of being newly born, or a child, has been used before in the novel, during the instance Edna learned to swim: “But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy” (Chopin 1899: 34-35). In both instances, Edna is exhilarated, as she has discovered something that makes her feel connected to her true self and her body. She is also, in this state, outside of social norms.

It is likely that Edna felt confident while swimming, and it was perhaps one of the few actions during which she felt connected to and in control of her body. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that she died in the water, as it both comforted and freed her. She did not think of dying explicitly, though her inner thoughts reveal her final views on the matter of her life: “She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (Chopin 1899: 149). The reference to her family not possessing her body is extremely important. The husband had considered Edna one of his possessions, as has been previously discussed. The inclusion of her children is also significant. Prior, during her conversation with Doctor Mandelet, she still understands her duties to her

children: ““Perhaps – no, I am not going. I’m not going to be forced into doing things. I don’t want to go abroad. I want to be left alone. Nobody has any right – except children, perhaps – and even then, it seems to me – or it did seem –”” (Chopin 1899: 143-144). Edna seems hesitant to claim that children might have the right to possess her. During her final moments, she views them perhaps the same way she views her husband, as people who do not allow her to be herself (Schweitzer 1990: 163).

Her suicide can be considered an act of bodily autonomy because it was her choice to take her own life, as she saw no other way by which she could possess her own body. Emmitt (1993: 324) considers the idea that Edna’s aim was personal gratification. During her conversation with Doctor Mandelet, she says: ““The years that are gone seem like dreams – if one might go on sleeping and dreaming – but to wake up and find – oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life”” (Chopin 1899: 144). Therefore, it is certain that Edna was painfully aware of her situation, though she does finally conclude that being aware of it is better than deceiving herself. Arguably, this could have also led her to taking her own life. She was calm as she faced her death, suggesting that she was sure of her decision and had made peace with it. In a sense, her suicide could be associated with radical feminism, for it indirectly critiques the society Edna lives in. It shows that she feels unable to continue her life while she is repressed by the patriarchal system. This act could also be analysed further through the notions of hydrofeminism, in which human togetherness with bodies of water is centralised (Neimanis 2016), but this goes beyond the scope of the present thesis.

In conclusion, the theme of bodily autonomy appears in different forms in *The Awakening*. There are clear instances that showcase how the protagonist’s bodily autonomy is

restricted. The husband's discussion with the family physician highlighted his belief of Edna not having a say in their marriage and of men knowing what is best for women. Edna re-possesses her body by engaging in an intimate relationship with Robert Lebrun, thus disregarding her oppressive marriage and through that the idea that the husband has the right to control the wife's body. The analysis above also demonstrated that the act of suicide is Edna's way of possessing her body, as it was her own choice. The importance of committing suicide by drowning shows Edna's connection to swimming and the sense of freedom she felt in the water.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to discuss how autonomy and bodily autonomy are represented in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Bodily autonomy was defined in this thesis as the individual's right to make decisions regarding their body. Whilst the novel was initially not received well, it was re-discovered in the 1950s. The novel came to be celebrated by feminist scholars and readers in the 1970s as an early feminist classic and is now acclaimed globally.

The literature review briefly covered some of the previous scholarship on *The Awakening*. It focused on how the protagonist viewed motherhood, the portrayal of two female archetypes and emancipation. Previous research has demonstrated that Edna did not wish to be defined by the role of a mother and felt restricted by her children, although their presence in the novel is minimal. Her children have been analysed as a reminder of what was expected of her in society. It has been established that motherhood and selfhood cannot exist simultaneously in the period discussed in the novel. The two notable female archetypes discussed were the 'mother-woman' and 'artist-woman', represented by Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna attempts to embody both archetypes throughout the novel. Previous scholarship has

established that both roles conform to the patriarchal order and hence are unfit for Edna. The literature review pointed out that she views independence as something traditionally masculine. Therefore, Edna tries to achieve autonomy by imitating traditionally masculine behaviour. While some of her attempts are successful, for example managing to earn an income from art commissions, she is still unable to gain the level of independence she wants. Eventually, this also leads to her suicide. Scholars have debated whether her death was an act of triumph or defeat. Most agree that it was left purposefully ambiguous and that by committing suicide, Edna rejected the patriarchal order.

The empirical analysis of the thesis confirmed that instances of bodily autonomy are present in the novel. The notion is illustrated mostly by displays of restrictions on Edna's bodily autonomy. The literary analysis covered three topics: Edna's relationship with her husband, her relationship with Robert Lebrun and her suicide. It showed that discarding her wedding ring, even if momentarily, emerged as an act of bodily autonomy in the novel. Analysing Edna's marriage showed how her bodily autonomy was being restricted by her husband. Edna sought bodily autonomy in her relationship with Robert Lebrun outside marriage. The act of swimming emerged as another act of bodily autonomy. Edna's deep connection to the sea and its liberating effects were also discussed. Removing her clothing for her final swim symbolises Edna accepting her body and freedom. Although previous scholarship has discussed the implications of her suicide and whether it was an act of victory or defeat, the empirical analysis supports the claim that Edna's death was an act of bodily autonomy. It was expressed in the way she used the act to possess her body and escape the oppression of the patriarchal society.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Birgit Leetjõe

**The Representation of Bodily Autonomy in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*
Kehalise autonoomia kujutamine Kate Chopini teoses „Virgumine”**

Bakalaureusetöö

2024

Lehekülgede arv: 32

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