

ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) is widely praised among recent critics and readers as a canonized feminist novel. The novel's most debated and most controversial aspect is the death of the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, at the end. The debate focuses on whether her suicidal action should be considered as her "awakening" and a representation of women's triumphant resistance against the patriarchal system or as a complete failure. This thesis will explore Edna's success in her struggle against women's oppression using the framework of Kate Millet's definition of patriarchy. Patriarchy oppressed women ideologically by associating female identity, which society automatically classified as an unchangeable human "nature", with inferior qualities while the male was associated with superior ones.

Thus, the patriarchal oppression illustrated in *The Awakening* becomes a closed system that demystifies the common notion of how gender identities are naturally defined and assigned at birth. Female characters are exemplified in an inevitable ideological confinement. Even Edna's struggles depend on the patriarchal system. It is quite ironic as the harder Edna tries to resist the system by eliminating her female inferiorities the further she reinforces patriarchal domination. Hence, Edna will not accomplish her emancipation, as long as she remains in the male dominated sphere and constructed gender identity.

I would like to propose that Edna, who begins her process of emancipation by trying to revolt against patriarchy from within the system, finally achieves her victory when she is "awakened" to her symbiotic relationship with the system. I believe that it is Edna's conscious understanding of the system that supports her decision to leave the patriarchal sphere through suicide. Her suicide is not a woman's emotional impulse but a perfectly calm and contemplative resolution. Ultimately her suicide is a form of emancipation as at the moment of her death, Edna is able to simultaneously liberate herself from the patriarchal sphere and from her constructed female identity. More significantly, her death brings her the status of liberal individuality she so desires throughout the novel.