

2024 Essay Prize Competition

Crossing Boundaries: Edna Pontellier's Creation of New Scripts of Gender
Performance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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1. Introduction

A turning point in Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" is marked when protagonist Edna Pontellier "began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream" (559). Reminiscent of its title, the novel focuses on a woman's journey of self-discovery and development in the 19th-century United States of America, ending with her tragic death. Edna's narrative has been object to various examinations with different focuses, one of them being Molly J. Hildebrand's "The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*". In her text, Hildebrand focuses especially on Edna's artistic development and argues that she seeks to embody a performance of what she calls the solitary male genius in order to enjoy certain privileges related to her art as well as her personal and family life that women of her time usually do not have access to. I argue that rather than rejecting femininity by changing from a feminine to a masculine script of gender performance, Edna Pontellier creates a new script for herself, transcending the barriers of the contemporary gender binary.

Throughout my paper, I will apply Judith Butler's theory of gender performance to the portrayal of Edna's gendered actions. Considering the story's time and setting, she is subject to strong gender stereotypes and expectations. Not only were women usually constrained to the domestic sphere, but actions and behavioural patterns themselves were often gendered. Hence, performing specific actions that are traditionally deemed male, e.g. moving out of the shared family house and into her own space, might hold more meaning than they would nowadays. Building on this, it can then be examined where Edna actively chooses to perform masculine and feminine gender roles.

In consequence, my first step will be to briefly define and explain Judith Butler's theory as presented in their essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" and its relevance to my analysis. I will then examine chosen instances in which Edna's conflicting gender performance can be seen, starting with her physical appearance and the expression of gender through her clothing. Moving on, I will take a look at her strong perceptiveness and how her conception of a dual life of outward and inward existence reflects her gender performance. In the following, it will be explored how her relationships influence and possibly change her gender performance, starting with her children and father, and

whether or not a difference can be seen when interacting with persons of different genders. These close readings of different scenes will enable me to examine under which circumstances Edna's gender performance changes and whether her way of performing gender changes due to certain settings or characters she interacts with. Taking all these scenes into consideration, I will take a closer look at how the script that Edna applies for her gender performances changes and if any general changes can be observed. This will then ultimately lead me to the question of whether or not a connection between her gender performance and her death at the end of the story can be drawn.

2. Theoretical Background: Judith Butler and Molly J. Hildebrand

Early on in their essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, Judith Butler states that, contrary to the gender binary that was largely established during the Victorian age and still influences today’s conception of it, gender is not a preexisting and stable identity from which a person’s acts and behaviours derive. Instead, gender itself is created over time through the performance of acts, including “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments” (519) that are stylized and repeated, meaning that gender is not something a person inherits at birth but something that is established again and again during their life. Butler puts special emphasis on the need for a continued performance of these gendered enactments to create the idea of an abidingly gendered persona. They compare this idea of a performed gender to a theatrical performance and note that failure to perform gender within the standards of the cultural and epochal frame often leads to a social form of punishment (522). When applying this theory to the context of Edna Pontellier in “The Awakening” it is the masculine and the feminine gender and the according enactments that can be expected and found in the novel. Butler explains how these gendered acts exist despite oneself, like a script that has to be re-enacted by the individual (526).

Considering the need for constant continuation of these gendered acts to establish one coherent gender, it is only natural that a gender transformation can take place. While Edna’s narrative is clearly centred around her breaking the female script, it is yet to be examined how and to what extent she does this, if willingly, and whether or not she ultimately finds or creates a new gender script for herself.

Hildebrand explains that the different scripts that exist not only for people of different genders but also classes provide certain privileges that are otherwise denied (190). Considering Edna Pontellier’s privileged position as a white upper-class woman, what prevents her from accessing the full width of privilege is her gender. As Hildebrand focuses mainly on Edna’s role as an artist, she states that Edna seeks to embody the paradigm of the male solitary genius who can produce great artwork without much professional training due to their gifted nature (191).

3. Edna's Physical Appearance

Throughout the novel, a contrast is established between Edna's physiological features and her clothing. From the beginning, she is described as having a rather masculine physique. Compared to other contemporary descriptions of the female body, the focus lays much more on its functionality than its aesthetic beauty. This applies to her individual body parts, e.g. her "strong, shapely hands" (Chopin 536) as well as the overall impression that Edna is "rather handsome than beautiful" (Chopin 537), implying that her physiological appeal is more masculine than feminine. This is enhanced by the comparison of her body to other women, for example Madame Ratignolle who has the "more feminine and matronly figure" (Chopin 545). Another focus is her apparent physical health and strength, which is suggested by descriptions of her "strong limbs" (Chopin 562) and her "strong, white teeth" (Chopin 563). While Edna's physique cannot be considered part of her gender performance as it is biologically determined, its straightforward and practical narration certainly plays a part in setting up the sense of a contrasting appearance.

When examining Edna's clothing, there is no clear transition from feminine to masculine garments that would mirror a transition from a feminine to masculine script. In general, she seems to enjoy wearing expensive materials and colours that suit her social class. In her essay „Fashioning the Hybrid Woman in Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening.'", Carolyn L. Mathews explains that Edna's clothing is closely connected to her journey to self-ownership (130). Considering that clothing often was a reflection of a person's status and in a woman's case mostly her husband's social position, the denying of what is deemed a socially acceptable attire also reveals a new-found agency and autonomy. This applies to Edna's sudden ignorance of the traditional reception day, which has been a programme that she had "religiously followed since her marriage, six years before" (Chopin 573) and is thus an important part of the script of a married woman she has adhered to for a long time. It is only through her casual clothing that Mr. Pontellier discovers his wife's absence on her usual reception day, resulting in an argument about her duties as his wife (Mathews 131).

Her clothing is often described in a similarly sober manner as her physique but also put into comparison with other women. While the description of Madame Ratignolle's outfit is infused with commentary on how her garments suit her as well as positively connoted adjectives like "rich" and "luxuriant" (Chopin 545), Edna's clothing is presented in a more objective way and devoid of any narrative opinion. Mathews claims that Edna "has taken control of her body" by mid-novel, focusing on a particular scene in which she is said to throw her old fictitious self away which is often assumed "like a garment (137), drawing a direct connection of Edna's emerging agency and the conventions of clothing.

However, this does not mean that she rejects feminine clothing altogether and there are instances in which she uses her fashion to attract other people's attention. The most important occurrence of this is the dinner party she hosts for her 29th birthday, where there seems to be an abundance of aesthetic beauty both in her decorations as well as her clothing and jewellery. In addition to the silver and gold crystal that is displayed in her cottage (Chopin 602), Edna wears a "magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled" in her hair (Chopin 603), signifying her family's financial wealth. The scene reaches its climax at the description of Edna's satin gown which is spread to either side of her. The extravagance of her outfit combined with her posture remind of the "regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (Chopin 604).

This scene is one of the key examples of Edna's creation of a new script of gender performance for herself. It highlights how her emancipation from traditional values does not happen exclusively through the self-identification with a masculine archetype and the resulting striving for his privileges and that she does not reject femininity per se. Considering the absence of her husband and the fact that she has just moved into her own house, it would certainly have been an opportunity to imitate the behaviour expected from a male head of the house. Instead of following this already existing script, she uses her financial resources and her ability to adjust her attitude to give off a different, feminine yet powerful impression as a regal woman. The description as a "regal woman" is a telling example of how she uses her femininity and showcases it in a way that she deems promising for her goal and how she is only able to do so because of her wealth and whiteness. Hildebrand acknowledges this when she

says that Edna's "position as a white upper-middle class artist allows her to gender herself" (189).

4. Edna's Dual Life and her Perceptiveness

The description of Edna as the “regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (Chopin 604) also contains commentary on her distanced standing in her relationships which will later be explored, and, most importantly, her strong perceptiveness. In this context, Hildebrand introduces the “masculine role of the flâneur” (192), another male archetype that Edna supposedly seeks to fulfil. According to Hildebrand, Edna does this through her simultaneous enjoyment of consuming the life of the street and then portraying it in her art and her inviting the gazes of others and hence being aesthetically consumed herself. Her preference for walking, which is not considered usual for a woman of her time, is a vital part of this. While Hildebrand draws a connection between the observations she makes while walking and her art, I argue that she uses walking as a form of emancipation from the domestic sphere that contemporary women were often confined to. When walking home from her outing at Celeste's place, she acknowledges how sorry she feels for women who do not or cannot walk, as it lets her see “so many rare glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole” (Chopin 617). Here, again, Edna creates a new form of acting for herself. She claims the masculine privilege of experiencing her environment but without trying to conform completely to the script of the male flâneur, as she still publicly considers herself a part of the female gender.

Edna's extreme perceptiveness is both the attempt to step out of having to perform any kind of gender script and at the same time a new manifestation of her gender. After dancing with three different men on a Saturday night, Edna leaves the dance floor to sit outside and command a view of the whole scene (Chopin 553). When asked to pick a piece of music for Mrs. Ratignolle to perform, she refuses despite her fondness for music (Chopin 554). Another instance of her choosing to be an observer rather than a participant is when she feels no desire to converse with the Ratignolle family and instead spends the time waiting for her husband's return in thought (Chopin 565). These are instances in which she does not try to adhere to the masculine script of gender performance but to none at all, by taking refuge in her inward existence from being perceived.

Connected to Edna's enjoyment of observing is her realisation that a "dual life" (Chopin 545) exists, separating her life into a conforming outward existence and a questioning inward existence. Edna acknowledges this early on in the novel and while it implies that she is well aware of the societal norms that exist around her gender performance, she proceeds to act against them by displaying masculine acts that will be examined later on.

The narrator, although mostly covert, adds to the impression that Edna transcends the barriers of her script and plays a big role in proving that gendered scripts exist in the first place. Shortly after learning how to swim, it is said that "she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin 557), which is not a sentiment she articulates herself but one added by the narrator. Considering her newness to swimming it is likely that Edna does not know how far other women have swum and that while she is certainly using swimming as a form of physical emancipation, similar to her enjoyment of walking, she is not trying to outdo other women. Instead, the narrator is setting up a context of feminine actions and abilities, i.e. a script, that highlights Edna's individual performance and makes it easier for her to transcend the barriers of womanhood.

Not only does this narrative technique set her apart from other women, it also labels some of her actions as masculine, e.g. when stating that "she drank the liquor from the glass as a man would have done" (Chopin 596). Instead of describing her way of drinking, the action itself is instantly gendered through the narrator. This narrative voice also serves as a reminder that Edna cannot free herself of gendered scripts completely because every action that she takes will be socially examined in relation to her gender. Specifically, this means that an action can either conform with or deviate from one of the existing scripts of gender but she cannot perform any ungendered acts.

5. Edna's Gender Performance in Relationships

5.1 The "Mother-Woman"

The description of Edna as "not a mother-woman" (Chopin 540) needs to be examined in its context to understand the implications. Considering that Edna is both a woman and a mother one could very well call her a mother-woman. However, the term does not refer to Edna's factual maternity status, but to both the existence of and her deviation from the script that exists for mothers of her time and place. The "mother-woman" is here described as an extremely caring and attentive woman who tends to her children's and husband's every need and want and it is early established that this does not apply to Edna (Chopin 540).

Several points connect motherhood and womanhood in a way that makes it impossible to separate Edna's actions as a mother from her role as a woman, hence making it an important part of the exploration of her scripted gender performance. Firstly, children and their upbringing, or in the case of upper-middle class Pontellier family the overseeing of the nurse's work, are part of the female domestic sphere. Mr. Pontellier believes that Edna fails in her duty as a mother (Chopin 540), but the description of an ideal mother and its illustration through Mrs. Ratingolle focus on matters of emotional care and affection they provide their children with rather than specific actions that Edna fails to take. Hence, one possible conclusion is that the part of the script that Edna does not conform with is not so much the "mother", but the "woman".

Considering that Edna does not lack emotional warmth per se, which is especially apparent in her relationship with other women, it is useful to take into account her own upbringing. In general, Edna is not used to "an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others" (Chopin 547). It is said that both her sisters, as well as her childhood friends, were more practical types and valued intellectual conversations and practicality over emotional connections. The fact that Edna's mother died at an early age results in her not having any form of role model she could get advice from regarding the upbringing of her own children and also not having been able to observe the script of motherhood from a child's perspective.

Hence, Edna's behaviour towards her children is of an "uneven, impulsive" (Chopin 548) kind that moves between the two extremes of wanting to keep them close to her and forgetting about them. Hildebrand explains how Edna's willingness to give up material things for her children, but not sacrifice herself reflects her claim to the right of self-possession that is inherent to fathers but not mothers, who from the moment they have children exist mainly in relation to them and not as individual personas (Hildebrand 205). There are indeed parallels in the way that the Pontelliers treat their children. A scene in which Edna seeks to have a conversation with her sons results in them being handed sweets rather than attention because they are merely interested in the contents of a bonbon box and not in their mother's words (Chopin 543) reminds of an instance at the beginning of the novel in which Mr. Pontellier has come back from a trip with souvenirs for his sons which they explore eagerly (Chopin 539). There is no doubt that both parents love their children and fulfill their material needs but their similar way of expressing their love is regarded differently. Mr. Pontellier does not receive negative judgement for his behaviour towards his children and it is not claimed that he is not a "father-man", proving again that different scripts and expectations exist for parents of different genders. This difference also illustrates Butler's point of non-conforming gender performance being punished, in this case through the negative commentary and Mr. Pontellier's judgement of Edna's lack of motherly skills.

5.2 Edna and her Father

Hildebrand fittingly states that Edna's relationship with her father "suggests a complex oscillation between masculine and feminine modes of gender identification" (200). What his visit certainly shows is how her gender performance varies depending on the people she is surrounded by. During the short time of his stay, Edna's feminine gender performance reaches its peak. On the one hand, this happens through the extreme masculinity that her father embodies. Hildebrand calls him the hyper-masculine manifestation (201) of the patriarchy which is established through the descriptions of his appearance and of course the fact that he is a colonel. The harsh way in which he treats his grandchildren, shooing them away with his foot when they get too close, completes his picture (Chopin 588).

Hildebrand puts special focus on the scene in which Edna draws her father. When painting her female muses, she usually claims the privileges of the male artist by turning them into objects of her art. When painting her father, however, she stays in a feminine script. Due to her position as his daughter, this feminine role is unavoidable and instead of claiming the role of a male solitary genius, she "subverts the patriarchal system which presumes the artist to be male [...] and the model to be female" (Hildebrand 201), creating a new role for herself, the one of the feminine, dominant artist.

Edna reassumes the role of the "mother-woman" that she has rejected in the past when catering to her father's every want and need (Chopin 588) and refusing to let her servants or children help her in any way. While her husband takes her behaviour as a sign of a "deep filial attachment" (Chopin 588) Edna thinks of it as amusing. Her periodical transformation is also reflected in her behaviour towards her husband and Dr. Mandelet. At their shared dinner, she seems to them "excited and in a manner radiant" (Chopin 588) and is described in very feminine terms, resulting in her comparison to a "beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (Chopin 589). When the doctor tells the story of a woman whose love is momentarily confused and after a few days directed towards its "legitimate source", reminding strongly of Edna and her husband's situation, she presents her company with a counter-script, the one of a woman who leaves her home with her lover to disappear forever (Chopin 589). It is confirmed that this

exchange of tales about a woman's love and agency is a reflection of Edna's own situation when the doctor silently expresses the hope that it is not Alcée Arobin that Edna is speaking about (Chopin 590).

The conversation between the Colonel and Mr. Pontellier highlights the fact that even though Edna rejects parts of the feminine script of gender performance so clearly, she is still bound to the societal norms and rules of her time. Her father's advice that Mr. Pontellier needs to be much stricter with his wife to be able to "manage" her reaffirms the natural power imbalance between the two of them. Even though Mr. Pontellier is in the eyes of his father-in-law "too lenient", he plays a crucial part in the way that Edna acts out her gender. His decision to follow the doctor's advice and to let her do as she pleases automatically puts him in a position of power regarding Edna's own behaviour. It shows that, even in her decision to break out of the script of her feminine gender performance, she is reliant on her husband to let her do so and needs him to allow her or at least tolerate her new way of acting gender (Chopin 590).

5.3 Edna's Girlfriends and her Husband

Where Edna assumes an overly feminine role in her relationship with her father, it is through her interactions with other women that her masculine gender performance manifests itself. It has already been examined how in contrast to other women, especially Adèle Ratignolle, Edna's appearance is described in more masculine terms. Similarly, Edna often displays more masculine actions than her female companions. Hildebrand goes as far as stating that in her aspiring role as a male solitary genius she objectifies her friend Adèle for her art (198) just like a male artist would. This shows how her position as an artist is related to her muse. When painting her masculine father she stays in the realm of the feminine artist and claims agency that is not related to a masculine gender but when drawing the feminine Adèle she assumes a more masculine artist role. Hildebrand quotes Ellen Zehntel Lambert to highlight that Edna's striving for a masculine privilege does not necessarily lead her to employ a "male gaze" but rather a "spectrum of gazes" (198). Precisely, this consists of Edna's "gaze of love" which is filled with the affection and appreciation of beauty she undeniably feels for her friend and the desire to have mastery over her body, in an artistic sense. Both coexist and cannot be disentangled (Hildebrand 198). Another instance in which Edna assumes the more masculine role in her interaction with women is during a walk along the beach when Edna takes the fan from her companion Mrs. Ratignolle to provide them both with fresh air, an action which is often performed by the male part of a duo (Chopin 547). In contrast, Edna can let herself play a feminine role when interacting with men. When on a walk with her husband and the Ratignolles the women are "leaning upon the arms of their husbands" (Chopin 555).

Edna's relationship with her husband, which has already been touched upon offers much room for exploring her changing gender performance. One particular moment in which she begins to question their power dynamic is when she wishes to spend the night in a hammock and is told by her husband to come inside. Even though Mr. Pontellier says that he "can't permit" her to stay outside, indicating that it lies in his power to command her to come inside, she "could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted" (Chopin 558), emphasising that it is her inability rather than her wish that prompts her to stay outside. Edna then remembers similar occurrences in

the past in which she has submitted to her husband's command, questioning the reason for her former obedience (Chopin 558). This scene highlights how Edna's struggle is not merely one of artistic agency but rather self-ownership on a basic level.

This resistance against her husband's dominance over her is not an individual occurrence. Following her husband's expression of disagreement regarding her skipping her reception day, which is by Edna referred to as one of his "scenes" (Chopin 575) and therefore automatically grants it a performative character, Edna is filled with rage and the wish to "destroy something" (Chopin 575). This scene in particular highlights that Edna's gender performance is not limited to her own actions and mannerisms, as described by Butler, but exists in the context of her relationships and also the setting she is in. Not only are her surroundings set up in a detailed way, mentioning many senses by describing the "soft, dim light", the "perfumes and the dusky tortuous outlines of flowers" and the "voices [...] that came to her from the darkness" (Chopin 575) but also presenting her as part of the scene as she "went and stood at the open window", reminding of a stage design. Staying in this theatrical analogy, Edna's wedding ring functions as a requisite that becomes part of her rage through her attempt to crush it after flinging it on the floor, stamping "her heel upon it" (Chopin 575). To her dismay, this treatment "did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet" (Chopin 575). Even though Edna knows how to break the feminine script of gender performance by performing differently gendered actions, it is still a rather abstract concept. Hence, the attempt to destroy her wedding ring, the material manifestation of her marriage and connected oppression, holds special meaning for her journey to autonomy and her creating of a new script for herself that contains both feminine and masculine actions.

The highlight of Edna's marital emancipation is marked by her decision to leave the family house and instead move into the adjacent cottage on her own while her husband is away on a business trip. When prompted by Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna explains that her motivation is "never again to belong to another than herself" (Chopin 597). Considering that her husband is the provider of the family, this implies the wish to be financially autonomous and not rely on him anymore. Instead, she wants to use the money she is receiving from her parents, as well as her own which consists of money

won at the races and the pay she receives for her sketches on the art market (Chopin 597). This can quite literally be seen as a change of scenery, wished for and implemented by herself, as she is the one doing most of the moving and decoration work. While Edna has no issue letting her husband pay for the dinner party she intends to host as a last gathering at her old house, she is very sure and drastic in her decision to make her new place her own and refuses to take any of her husband's possessions (Chopin 601). Her move can be considered an attempt to create her own stage in which she can be free of any gendered pressure and behave in any way she desires, regardless of gender norms.

6. Conclusion

Generally, Edna has a complicated relationship with her gender, the connected societal implications and her performance of it. She rejects many of the expectations that are in place for women of her class and race and often tries to claim masculine privileges by behaving in a more masculine way. However, she does not try to fully assume a man's character and still embraces and showcases her femininity. Both her role as the "regal woman" as well as the dominant feminine artist show how instead of claiming a masculine form of privilege, she manages to create a feminine role with its own agency for herself, exceeding the agency contributed to feminine roles of her time.

When applying the title of the novel to Edna's journey of self-discovery one could expect a linear gender transformation during which she "awakes" from her feminine self and in the end assumes a fully masculine gender performance. This is not the case. Instead, the process of awakening mirrors the process of freeing herself from the forces behind the feminine script of gender performance, resulting in a more reflected way of behaving but not eliminating feminine actions. While she does not achieve freedom from being gendered, her defiance of the feminine housewife script exposes the arbitrary nature of gender norms and the fact that gender is not intrinsic but constructed and maintained through a collective societal performance, just as Butler claims.

Whether or not her death can be considered a punishment for or even the result of her struggling gender identification cannot be determined solely on the base of this analysis as one would have to take a closer look at her romantic relationships with other men, her artistic development and the information that is provided regarding her mental state. However, her changing gender performance certainly contributes to her isolation from her family and friends.

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