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**DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA**

**Unveiling the Oppressor:  
Solipsism, Privilege, and the Impossibility of Self-  
Reliance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

Treball de Fi de Grau

Author: Ariadna Sánchez Martín

Supervisor: Noelia Sánchez Campos

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Grau d'Estudis d'Anglès i Espanyol

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

0. Introduction ..... 1

    0.1. Context and Objectives ..... 1

    0.2. Literature Review ..... 3

1. The Impossibility of Self-Reliance in *The Awakening* ..... 6

    1.1. The Notion of Self-Reliance in North American Literature and Culture ..... 6

    1.2. The Dangers of Privilege: Solipsism and Dependence .....10

2. Power Dynamics and the Pursuit of Freedom ..... 14

    2.1. Oppression: Masculinity, Misogyny, and Racism.....14

    2.2. The Failure to Attain Freedom.....18

3. Conclusions and Further Research ..... 21

Works Cited..... 23

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## **Abstract**

During the 19th century, notions such as individuality, self-sufficiency, and nonconformity characterized the literature and culture of the United States. Indeed, the influence of Emerson's philosophy and the New Woman movement prompted works such as *The Awakening* (1899) to be considered an instance of the correlation between self-reliance and female emancipation. However, the protagonist's final decision to commit suicide reveals the impossibility to attain independence and questions the nature of this failure. Although some authors contend that Edna's death results from the limitations placed on women, a close study of her power dynamics appears to contradict this idea.

Considering this, this dissertation aims to uncover the cause of the protagonist's failure to become self-reliant, suggesting that it is due to the solipsistic and oppressive tendencies stemming from her privileged socioeconomic position. I argue that her dependence on privilege and her insisting on a narrative based on victimhood evidence her solipsism and prevent her from being self-reliant, for she cannot conceive of life as separate from her advantaged status. Furthermore, her understanding of freedom in terms of privilege prompts her to pursue a masculine prerogative that ultimately unveils her oppressive tendencies. Therefore, self-reliance will remain unavailable to her as long as she relies on privilege and oppression to assert her freedom.

**Keywords:** Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, self-reliance, solipsism, privilege, oppression.

## **0. Introduction**

### **0.1. Context and Objectives**

The notion of self-reliance constitutes part of North American history, literature, and national identity. Formally introduced during the American Renaissance by transcendentalist author Ralph Waldo Emerson, it became one of the main themes in US literature and was characterized by its focus on individuality and nonconformity. Indeed, novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) emphasize a journey toward self-discovery and self-actualization that could be directly related to the transcendentalist ideal. However, it also presents some inconsistencies that question its viability as a model of self-reliance.

Chopin's novel has been studied through different lenses, ranging from feminism to naturalism and determinism, among others. Even though it was published in 1899, it was not until the late 20th century that it began to be considered a notable work of feminist fiction. The protagonist's journey toward self-fulfillment despite the strict gender constraints of the time has prompted a feminist reading that evidences how little opportunity women had in Victorian society. Furthermore, this reading is closely associated with the American notion of self-reliance, for it portrays the individualistic need to attain freedom by rejecting social conventions. Nevertheless, some authors consider the protagonist to be encouraged by egocentricity rather than self-reliance.

Given the controversy surrounding Edna's character and the lack of studies addressing the notion of self-reliance applied to Chopin's novel, this dissertation aims to unveil the cause of the protagonist's failure to become self-reliant. In order to do so, I question whether her failure to attain independence—and her subsequent suicide—is prompted by the impossibility of overcoming the limitations placed on women, as many

academics defend. Finally, I suggest that Edna's journey is not an accurate instance of self-reliance, for the solipsistic and oppressive tendencies inherent in her privileged socioeconomic position eventually prevent her from attaining freedom.

Firstly, I contend that her failure to master Emerson's ideal is due to her solipsism and dependence on privilege. Instead of pursuing independence from a place of self-acceptance and self-trust, she associates self-reliance with the status held by white men of her social class. Her building of a narrative based on victimhood proves her inability to see beyond her advantaged position and recognize any oppression besides the one she suffers. Therefore, the concept of self-reliance appears invalidated the moment her individualism turns into solipsism since she depends on her privilege to pursue freedom.

Secondly, I argue that both her solipsism and attachment to privilege result in her pursuit of a masculine conception of freedom that reveals her oppressive nature. Maintaining the status she believes will grant her independence—that of a white upper-class man—involves oppressing others and perpetuating the subjugation system she herself is a victim of. As Hegel's master-slave dialectic confirms, this power dynamic entails Edna's dependence on a subdued individual, which frustrates her attempts at achieving self-reliance. Hence, her oppressive tendencies and inability to relinquish privilege ultimately prevent her from fulfilling her desire for freedom.

To conduct the present study, I will carry out a close reading of the selected text and a thorough analysis of critical material, focusing on Emerson's insights and contrasting the perspectives on Edna Pontellier's character. This methodology will allow me to justify the impossibility of mastering self-reliance in *The Awakening* and its connection to the notions of solipsism, privilege, and oppression.



## 0.2. Literature Review

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has been deemed controversial since its publication in 1899. Its depiction of issues such as female sexual desire, adultery, and the rejection of motherhood resulted in its being considered immoral. As Beer and Nolan put it, "that Kate Chopin, then, in addition to creating a character who rejects all of the traditional expectations of womanhood also explores female sexual desire outside of marriage, and outside even of a loving relationship, accounts for the moral condemnation of her work" (6). Consequently, Chopin's work became censurable and hindered the development of her career as a writer: "its rejection by contemporary arbiters of literary taste had an impact on its circulation, and the long tail of its moral provocation did the rest: the novel remained largely forgotten for the next decades" (Kanzler 547). It was not until the late 20th century that Chopin's work was rediscovered and popularized, becoming a relevant work of American literary fiction and encouraging more contemporary readings.

Although the novel has been approached from various perspectives, it is often read from a feminist viewpoint that emphasizes the protagonist's determination to break away from the expectations placed on women at the time. Additionally, according to this reading, Edna Pontellier would fit into a tradition of self-reliant characters that embody the American ideals prevalent from the American Renaissance onwards: she finds herself on a personal quest for freedom and individuality rooted in non-conformity, thus seemingly adopting Emerson's notions of self-reliance. However, her suicide at the end of the novel puts into question the extent to which this idyllic independence is attainable for women. Even though this reading is widely accepted, the constant revision of feminist theories has brought new visions on the protagonist's journey that very much contradict it. Issues such as privilege and the lack of intersectionality appear to be neglected in previous readings and question whether Chopin's work can be approached through a

feminist lens. Besides, this perspective shifts the focus on Edna's role from that of a victim to that of an oppressor, which appears inconsistent with the aims of self-reliance and the New Woman movement. In analyzing and contrasting both perspectives, a question remains: is Edna's failure to achieve this ideal solely a consequence of gender discrimination, or is her racial and class privilege the obstacle to her own independence?

On the one hand, several authors regard *The Awakening* as a model of early feminist literature. For instance, while Kanzler defines it as "a key primary text on which feminist and gender criticism has evolved and sharpened its theoretical tools" (551), Margraf believes it to be "a remarkable achievement of *naturalism as feminism*" (93). Furthermore, most of these readings are closely connected to the New Woman ideal that emerged and culminated around the time of the publication of *The Awakening*. As Pizer explains, the protagonist "unconsciously adopts many of the means for achievement of female emancipation advocated by the New Woman movement of the 1890s" (9). Indeed, Edna would fit right into this movement, for she seems resolved to claim her rights and detach from the stereotypes and traditions regarding womanhood. Hence, this reading depicts the protagonist as a victim of patriarchal oppression, a position through which some authors justify her tragic ending.

Considering this feminist approach, most authors read her suicide as a result of the social and biological limitations that, as a woman, prevent her from attaining freedom. For instance, Băniceru sees her death as "her only way out or the natural answer to a constraining society" (2). Similarly, Pizer argues that "despite her belief that she has awakened to a need and a capacity to escape the confining roles of wife and mother, Edna remains trapped in these roles and can only escape them, she believes, in death" (11). Therefore, her inability to become the self-reliant individual that Emerson defended is mainly due to her condition as a woman. Authors such as Băniceru and Margraf read the

novel's ending as evidence that the transcendentalist notion of self-reliance is a male-oriented ideal that disregards women's experience, which would leave Edna with no option other than conforming or dying.

On the other hand, several academics oppose this reading and argue that Edna's self-centeredness, privilege, and oppressive behaviors prove that the novel cannot be considered from a feminist perspective. As Rosenthal puts it, "when analyzed through a third-wave feminist perspective Edna's journey to selfhood seems more like a solipsistic trip to nowhere" (3). Firstly, Jackson and Kanzler suggest that her feminism is rooted in privilege, for she disregards other women's experiences on the basis of class and race: "Edna, and invariably Chopin, are limited by their disregard of lives and experiences that are different than their own—lives that don't centralize themselves, whiteness, or their comfort" (Jackson 4). Additionally, the fact that the protagonist does not acknowledge the privilege she already has makes her feel unsatisfied and keeps her bound to her desire for more. According to Hildebrand and Rosenthal, it is precisely this longing for more privilege that prompts her to adopt the masculine, dominant prerogative she associates with freedom, which will eventually evidence her nature as an oppressor rather than a victim.

Therefore, according to this perspective, Edna's failure to persevere and attain self-reliance is not due to her condition as a woman as much to her solipsistic tendencies. Both her disregard for other women's experiences and her inability to relinquish privilege result in her perpetuation of the oppressive system she appeared to be defying. As Hildebrand puts it, Edna "desires not a fundamental change in the racial, class, and social system of her world, but simply the elimination of the barriers which prevent *her* from accessing all the vestiges of white masculine privilege" (190).

In conclusion, after having studied the selected literature, I contend that the protagonist's impossibility to attain self-reliance is a consequence of her solipsistic and oppressive behaviors, which contradicts the feminist reading of the novel. Even if "Chopin managed to undermine the entire social fabric of middle-class America, with a consistent rejection of each and every one of the traditional expectations of womanhood" (Beer & Nolan 10), she did so by exposing the protagonist's oppressiveness and self-absorption. Thus, this reading puts into question the extent to which Edna can be considered a feminist heroine worthy of embodying the American dream of self-reliance. As existing research appears contradictory and fails to delve into Emerson's ideal applied to the novel, this dissertation aims to unravel the reason why Edna Pontellier, unlike plenty of characters in American literature and despite her privilege, is ultimately unable to become self-reliant.

## **1. The Impossibility of Self-Reliance in *The Awakening***

### **1.1. The Notion of Self-Reliance in North American Literature and Culture**

"Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles" (Emerson 79). With this statement, Ralph Waldo Emerson concludes his essay "Self-Reliance" (1841), considered one of the most relevant works in North American literature since it "epitomized the emerging idea of the American dream and solidified many prominent American ideals" (Izaguirre 19). As part of the transcendentalist movement, Emerson's ideas focused on the importance of not letting oneself be influenced by societal customs or expectations in order to achieve individual freedom, defining self-reliance as the practice of nonconformity, self-trust, and

individualism. Furthermore, this tradition connected with the New Woman movement of the 1890s and is also considered an overriding topic in Chopin's *The Awakening*.

From the American Renaissance onwards, self-reliance has been a recurrent theme in American literature, depicting the most essential ideals of the nation's identity. As stated by Izaguirre, "writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman published works that distinctly defined and constructed a literary tradition in the United States rooted in the ideals of individualism, nature, and self-reliance" (19). In effect, works such as Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) or Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) follow the transcendentalist movement in their celebration of the individual, the rejection of external authorities, and the emphasis on nature as a powerful force deeply connected with the self. In the world of fiction, acclaimed novels including *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), by Hawthorne, or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), by Mark Twain, implement these Emersonian principles into their characters: both Hester Prynne and Huckleberry Finn are regarded as quintessential American characters given their will to build their own path in opposition to society's expectations. Therefore, transcendentalism has had a clear impact on the shaping of American identity, as evidenced in the literary works of the time.

Likewise, the protagonist of *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, is often seen as representative of Emerson's American ideal. In this case, the notion of self-reliance is directly linked to the rising New Woman movement and given a modern feminist reading. As defined by Beer and Nolan, "this was the era of the 'New Woman': she rejected traditional stereotypes of woman as delicate, passive and domestic; she demanded, and moved towards obtaining, education, careers, dress reform and suffrage (5). Certainly, Edna is seen as anything but delicate, passive, and domestic; instead, she appears as a woman willing to explore beyond societal conventions and determined to free herself

from its restraints. According to Pizer, “her effort involves freeing herself from the restrictions imposed on women by the conventions of a middle-class marriage while simultaneously discovering vehicles for the creation of her economic, sexual, and spiritual self-sufficiency” (8). Furthermore, her apparent interest in reading Emerson, as shown at the end of chapter XXIV, hints at her willingness to become this American ideal and suggests that “the story of Edna Pontellier’s development and demise can be interpreted as a revision of [the] concepts of self-reliance and individualism” (Margraf 110). From the beginning of the novel, Edna’s journey is presented as that of a woman that is “becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin 73), which concurs with Emerson’s insistence on respecting one’s true nature instead of adapting to external circumstances. Besides, as her journey advances, “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 121), echoing the transcendentalist perspective: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (Emerson 47). Hence, the protagonist appears to embody the American ideal of the individual determined to take control over their own life, as seen in the different spheres that shape it.

Even though her disconformity is mainly expressed through her rejection of domesticity, it inevitably expands through other areas of her life. She regards domestic life as “colorless” and admits that it “gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui” (Chopin 72). Additionally, she distances herself from the stereotypes surrounding wifehood, disregarding duties such as housekeeping and childcare. She actively rejects

motherhood and admits that the absence of her children “seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (Chopin 23). Thus, the fact that she dismisses her duties as a woman allows her to explore herself beyond the limitations placed on her gender, especially through art and sexuality.

The development of her creativity appears to be one of Edna’s means of achieving self-reliance and cultivating nonconformity. The novel portrays artistic expression as a form of courage and rebellion against convention, as stated by Mademoiselle Reisz in chapter XXI: “[...] to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. [...] The soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 81). Therefore, through her artwork, Edna is able to assert her power over her own life and subvert the traditional roles surrounding the figure of the artist: “She positions herself as the artist representing life rather than as the muse helping a man to capture its meaning” (Hildebrand 192).

Similarly, her sexual awakening is vital in her journey toward self-sufficiency. She is shown as willing to explore her sexuality beyond the bonds of marriage and love, as seen in her relationships with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin. According to Jackson, “the sexual liberation of Edna can be read as both feminist and revolutionary for its time as it represents women as full, complicated people capable of desire, sexual autonomy, and a present-focused happiness outside the restraints of scripted patriarchal expectations” (34). Consequently, this is often regarded as another instance of the protagonist’s attempts at self-reliance and female empowerment.

In essence, the feminist reading of the novel allows Edna to become a heroine embodying one of the most significant values in American culture. However, her suicide at the end of the story has sparked a discussion regarding the effectiveness of self-reliance. Her final decision to take her own life suggests that this ideal and the freedom that comes with it are not available to her, which several scholars have read as the transcendentalists’

failure to consider the experience of women: “Kate Chopin might be indirectly suggesting that transcendentalism is better suited to mirror the awakening and the transformation of the ‘male’ self, as it was envisaged by the movement’s main prophets: Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman” (Băniceru 4). In this case, self-reliance is viewed as an ideal made for and by white, privileged men, which could explain the protagonist’s failure to attain independence. Nevertheless, this interpretation could be questioned considering that some other characters in contemporary works of American fiction have succeeded in their journey toward self-reliance despite their gender and lack of privilege, as is the case of both Hester Prynne and Huckleberry Finn, for instance. This evidence could thus imply that Edna’s failure to attain personal freedom is not prompted by external limitations as much as by her own behaviors.

## **1.2. The Dangers of Privilege: Solipsism and Dependence**

As mentioned previously, the protagonist’s suicide at the end of the novel suggests that the idealized notion of self-reliance is ultimately not attainable for her. Even if it could be argued that this ideal is unsustainable for populations that are discriminated against, such as women or lower-class individuals, several authors and characters in American literature have proved otherwise. Therefore, Edna’s tragic ending could be read instead as a “siren-warning of the dangers of privilege which breeds solipsism, even to the point of melodramatically taking one’s life” (Hildebrand 190). Indeed, some authors believe that Edna presents a tendency toward solipsism that stems from her desire to increase her privilege and her inability to consider other people’s experiences. For instance, Bloom considers that Edna’s awakening is “a narcissistic self-investment” and that “she fails to see that her passion is for herself” (1), which implies that she is misreading the concept of self-reliance and, consequently, cannot succeed at it. Essentially, it could be argued



that the novel manifests the consequences of extreme individualism when regarded from an oblivious, privileged perspective.

In his essay, Emerson claims that “a man is to carry himself in the presence of opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he” (45), which refers back to individualism as an essential principle to understand the notion of self-reliance. In this sense, being an individualist involves freeing oneself from external, oppressive forces in order to be autonomous and in control of one’s destiny. As Izaguirre notes, the self-reliant American “believes in the unfailing sanctity of the individual who seeks to manifest his or her personal destiny in a nation filled with opportunities” (20). Hence, anything external to the individual must be considered “ephemeral,” that is, transitory and powerless in defining a person’s existence. Even though Edna Pontellier appears to be a nonconformist determined to weave her story according to her beliefs, she ultimately fails at detaching from external elements. She is bound to her privileges as a white, upper-class woman, which inevitably determine her life experience: “she is limited by the supremacy mindset of her presumed centrality that she is unable to fully escape, leading to her being incapable of imagining a fulfilling life for herself by the end of *The Awakening*” (Jackson 4). Consequently, Edna cannot be considered an individualist according to Emerson’s definition; instead, her behaviors tend toward solipsism in that her self-obsession keeps her from conceiving a reality beyond her privileged desires.

Throughout the novel, Edna presents herself as a victim suffering from deep dissatisfaction: “She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (Chopin 68). She regards the world as conspiring against her, even with all the privileges she benefits from throughout her journey. As Margraf points out, “Edna can live the carefree life of a leisure-class lady,

with a host of servants sparing her the efforts of household management and child-rearing. Yet, this is the life she has come to loath because it offers no prospect of ‘life’s delirium’” (109). Essentially, what Edna understands as “life’s delirium,” that is, the self-reliance she desires, is the absence of responsibilities and obligations, as stated in the novel: “Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual” (Chopin 121). However, she fails to acknowledge that the reason why she can dismiss those obligations is her privileged social standing, which applies to four essential pillars of her life: her domestic environment, her role as a mother, her artistic development, and her sexual awakening.

On numerous occasions, Edna is seen reshaping her domestic life to suit her idealized vision of freedom. At first, she begins to abandon her household duties in what would appear like an effort to distance herself from the expectations placed on womanhood: “She made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household *en bonne menagere*, going and coming as it suited her fancy, and, so far as she was able, lending herself to any passing caprice” (Chopin 72). Eventually, she decides to change residence to further her independence, arguing that “[...] I’m tired looking after that big house. It never seemed like mine, anyway—like home. It’s too much trouble. I have to keep too many servants. I am tired bothering with them.” (Chopin 102). Even if she could be regarded as self-reliant in actively choosing a lifestyle that satisfies her ambitions, her actions ultimately do nothing but reveal her obliviousness toward anything beyond her personal experience.

Furthermore, Edna’s privilege is also a decisive factor in her relationship with her sons. She admits she is unwilling to sacrifice herself for her children, stating that “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 60). Once again, her perception of reality

is tainted by the undervaluing of her privilege: “Her life and her money are her stability and the essence of her safety and comfort, yet she declares them unessential. Where would that leave her if she didn’t have money and a spare unessential life to give up?” (Rosenthal 17). Indeed, without these privileges, including the assistance of the nurses, she would not be able to even contemplate the possibility of distancing herself from her children and devoting time to pursuing her artistic aspirations, for instance.

Edna’s passion for painting is evidenced early in the novel and translates into her development as an artist. Instead of regarding art as mere entertainment or as an accessory, as women were often encouraged to, she strives to turn it into her occupation. However, as implied previously, having enough time to explore her artistic expression is a luxury that undoubtedly results from her privilege. As Rosenthal indicates, “Edna has different levels of household help; in order to paint at all she would need someone to watch her children” (19). Thus, the fact that she never acknowledges that her artistic opportunities are a product of her social status accounts for her self-obsession.

Lastly, the protagonist’s solipsistic tendencies also manifest in her exploration of sexuality outside marriage. Similar to her artistic awakening, her sexual awakening evidences her privileged position in that she is allowed to live alternative lives and neglect her actual responsibilities. Besides, it is quite revealing that “she never seeks to rebuild any type of community with others, outside of the physical and ultimately unfulfilling experiences with her lovers” (Jackson 54). It appears as though all of Edna’s relationships are primarily based on self-interest, which is proof of her inability to consider life beyond herself.

In short, when analyzing the protagonist’s behaviors throughout the novel, it is evident that her presumed empowerment is possible due to her socioeconomic advantages. The fact that she idealizes freedom and understands it in terms of increasing

her power and privilege prevents her from being self-reliant and eventually prompts her to reveal her oppressive tendencies. As Hildebrand argues, “Solipsism, utter self-absorption, will never provide women with freedom because such ideas, founded as they are on white masculine principles, re-encode an individualism that isolates women from one another” (204). Therefore, her attachment to privilege and her unconcern for other people’s experiences appear to be the foundation of her ultimate failure.

## **2. Power Dynamics and the Pursuit of Freedom**

### **2.1. Oppression: Masculinity, Misogyny, and Racism**

Even though some authors support the feminist reading of the novel by stating that “*The Awakening* can provide the reader with a good example of a healthy protagonist to identify with” (Larssen 19) or that “Edna is finally able to transcend the solipsistic tendencies of her individual quest for self-knowledge” (Margraf 108), the protagonist’s conducts prove otherwise. Eventually, the fact that she considers privilege the means to attain freedom results in her disregard for experiences external to her personal desires. Thus, her standing as the victim of an oppressive society falls short the moment she understands self-reliance in terms of privilege and self-interest. Despite Edna’s willingness to distance herself from the stifling expectations placed on women, Jackson points out that she “separates herself but does not realistically impact the system which oppresses her and future generations of women” (21). Indeed, her exploitation of privilege, her perpetuation of female subjugation, and her disregard for women of color are fundamental factors in corroborating her solipsistic tendencies and justifying her failure to attain self-reliance. In essence, Edna “desires not a fundamental change in the racial, class, and social system of her world, but simply the elimination of the barriers

which prevent *her* from accessing all the vestiges of white masculine privilege” (Hildebrand 190).

The acquirement of white masculine privilege appears to be, in fact, the protagonist’s primary ambition throughout the novel, for she regards it as a means to empower herself. As Larssen explains, “Edna grows more and more masculine throughout the novel, and simultaneously she gains agency” (21), a masculine prerogative evidenced through her physical countenance and behaviors. Firstly, Edna’s physical appearance seems to differ from that of other women in her environment, for she is described using traditionally masculine traits that would not be typically expected of women. For instance, early in the novel, she is depicted as “rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features” (Chopin 4). In contrast, Madame Ratignolle, who could be deemed as Edna’s antithesis throughout the novel, is presented as “the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams,” whose “beauty was all there, flaming and apparent” (Chopin 10). Hence, the protagonist is portrayed from the beginning as rejecting the idealized notion of femininity and presenting instead more masculine traits.

Likewise, this tendency toward masculinity is further seen in her lifestyle choices and behaviors. Hildebrand notes that “[a]s a woman of her race and class, Edna seeks the total freedom she associates with white, upper middle-class men that she is denied despite the masculine prerogative she gains as an artist” (190). Her pursuit of the arts is undoubtedly one of the main spheres in which she develops her masculine self. Although women were often known to be educated in the arts, it was usually for domestic purposes rather than as a vocation: for instance, Madame Ratignolle “was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (Chopin 30). Conversely, Edna regards

art as a means to strengthen her sense of self, gain independence, and even benefit from it economically, which are traditionally masculine aims: “Unlike the female amateur, who may paint for amusement or to create gifts for friends, Edna is adept in the masculine realm of the artistic marketplace” (Hildebrand 193). Additionally, apart from the artistic sphere, Edna explores this masculine prerogative throughout her rejection of motherhood and domesticity, her exploration of sexuality beyond love, and her overall attitude, which she herself deems as “unwomanly”: “I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn’t matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like” (Chopin 137). Therefore, although considering herself “a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex” (Chopin 106) could be viewed as a defiance of the conventions surrounding women at the time, her desire for power eventually becomes problematic since it induces her to exert the oppression needed to maintain such a level of privilege, which is especially evidenced through her misogynistic and racist attitudes (Rosenthal 6).

Despite Edna’s initial role as the victim of a confining male-dominated society, her assimilation of a masculine prerogative turns her ambition “to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 35) into an oppressive narrative resembling that which she was trying to oppose. As Hildebrand argues, “[b]y seeking and claiming the masculine privilege she associates with artistry, however, Edna perpetuates the system of female subjugation, most notably through her portrayals of her friend Adèle Ratignolle” (193). Throughout the novel, the protagonist regards Madame Ratignolle as a vehicle to reaffirm her power: the fact that she embodies the ideal Edna is trying to escape allows the latter to reduce her to a mere artistic object. She describes her companion as a “tempting subject” and “sensuous Madonna” (Chopin 14), entirely at her disposition to inspire her creative development. Therefore, other women’s value appears to be determined by the

extent to which their existence satisfies the protagonist's solipsistic interests. In short, "[r]ather than finding a new paradigm of feminine reciprocity, Edna chooses to adopt the masculine paradigm of the artist and his model-muse who is used for both aesthetic inspiration and artistic affirmation" (Hildebrand 197). However, Adèle is not the sole victim of the protagonist's oppression since Edna discriminates against other women as well, especially on the basis of race and class.

From an intersectional approach, Edna's solipsism manifests through her neglect of experiences beyond her own privileged one: "She is oblivious to the individuality and freedom that is denied to women of color in order for her to obtain her own" (Rosenthal 13). Said obliviousness is evidenced through her relationship with the housemaids that assist her with her household and childcare duties, especially the mixed-race woman who tends to her children. Despite their fundamental role in Edna's life, these women are often the object of criticism and are never given a proper characterization besides the emphasis on their skin color. For instance, her nursemaid is defined as a "huge encumbrance" (Chopin 9) even though her efforts allow Edna to free herself from her responsibilities as a mother and, consequently, to pursue her idealized notions of individuality and self-reliance. Nonetheless, she is unable to recognize her privilege and instead is seen "grumbling at the negligence of the quadroon" (Chopin 55) or "scolding the quadroon for not being more attentive" (Chopin 60). Essentially, the reason she can actively reject the model of the mother-woman and adopt a masculine prerogative is the fact that all her basic needs are covered; however, she appears to be completely alienated from this reality. The only occasion in which she seems to acknowledge her housemaids' presence is when she uses them as artistic objects, similar to her relationship with Madame Ratignolle:

The quadroon sat for hours before Edna's palette, patient as a savage, while the house-maid took charge of the children, and the drawing-room went undusted. But

the housemaid, too, served her term as model when Edna perceived that the young woman's back and shoulders were molded on classic lines, and that her hair, loosened from its confining cap, became an inspiration. (Chopin 73-74)

Therefore, the manner in which women of color are presented in the novel evidences that Edna's awakening is merely a result of her privilege and that, ultimately, she "is no less an oppressor than the patriarch himself, Léonce Pontellier" (Rosenthal 31).

Analyzing the protagonist's oppressive behaviors, it becomes apparent that her internalized misogyny and racial prejudices are fundamental factors in her ultimate failure. Contrary to the idea that "Edna is aware that her situation does not apply to only her, but every woman everywhere" (Larssen 26), her regard of femininity as a weakness and her taking advantage of other women prove that she refuses to escape her solipsistic interests. As Hildebrand defends, "[f]ar from a feminist heroine, Edna is in fact a cautionary vision of what it means to buy into a concept of complete and utter personal freedom [...] that is at its core male-defined and life-denying" (Hildebrand 206). In the end, her association of freedom with white masculine privilege prompts her to become what she was initially a victim of. That is, a dominating force that gains power through the oppression of the less privileged and, consequently, cannot exist on its own.

## **2.2. The Failure to Attain Freedom**

Some scholars defend that "Edna fails in this effort at self-determination of body and soul because she is unable to overcome the biological and social limitations which here present within herself and her world at Grand Isle" (Pizer 8). However, the previous analysis unveils the protagonist's privileged narrative and, consequently, her oppressive tendencies. From this perspective, Edna's suicide at the end of the novel cannot be considered exclusively an act of revolt against oppressive forces but a product of her



privilege and inability to rely solely on herself. As Rosenthal argues, “Edna is able to commit an act of suicide in the end because of her privilege. [...] She is under the impression that her life is completely meaningless and she has no purpose, but she doesn’t see the agency she still has” (11-12). In failing to acknowledge her authority and continuing to view the less privileged as a means to assert her power, Edna’s desire for independence becomes futile. Thus, the fact that her journey toward self-reliance is based on her adopting an oppressive masculine prerogative prevents her from attaining freedom, for she remains dependent on factors such as the privileges inherent in her social standing.

In order to understand the correlation between oppression and Edna’s failure at independence, it is crucial to understand the origin and consequences of such oppression. As stated previously, her pursuit of a masculine conception of power eventually becomes a threat rather than a source of individual empowerment since it involves assuming a dominant stance: “The freedom and privilege white men enjoyed involves seeing others as less deserving of the freedom one is demanding and asserting as absolutely necessary to realize one’s selfhood” (Rosenthal 4). Edna’s expansion as an individual is directly related to the subjugation of those considered inferior to her, a power dynamic that implies depending on external factors to fulfill her desire for self-sufficiency. Hence, considering Emerson’s reflections on individuality, Edna cannot be deemed self-reliant as long as she conceives her empowerment in terms of dominance, for dominance is indeed a form of reliance.

To further illustrate this notion, the protagonist’s power dynamic could be regarded as an instance of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. In his renowned work *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel studies human relationships and self-consciousness in terms of recognition, asserting that “[a] self-conscious being exists in and for itself in and through its existing thus for another self-

conscious being: it exists only as a being that's *recognized*" (91). Consequently, this dynamic requires two roles: the master, deemed the dominant being who seeks recognition, and the slave, who would be the subdued and provider of such recognition. However, as corroborated by Edna Pontellier's character, the master cannot conceive their own existence as separate from that of the slave. In other words, Edna cannot assert her independence without resorting to the oppression of the less privileged. In his work, Hegel analyzes the master's failure to achieve self-consciousness by stating that "[t]he unessential consciousness [the slave] thus objectifies for the master the "truth" of his certainty of self. [...] hence he's not sure that he truly does exist for himself, it being sooner this unessential consciousness and its insignificant activity that's the truth of him (96). Therefore, Edna can never be considered an independent individual as long as she desires to be a master, for she would always need external recognition as a means to assert her power.

Considering this, the impossibility of coexistence between dominance and independence accounts for Edna's failure to become self-reliant and her subsequent suicide. Her alienation prompts her to convince herself of her victimhood to the extent that she fails to recognize her own oppression. In believing herself to be the slave, she further estranges from the reality that she desires not independence but the unlimited privilege that she associates with freedom and white upper-class men. Hence, while being an oppressor seemingly brings her closer to this privileged ideal of self-reliance, her dependence on privilege ultimately prevents her from being free. As Hildebrand explains:

[...] it is Edna's racial and class *privilege*—not her gendered *oppression*—that prevents her from reconceiving her life as one worth living, and one worth fighting for. [...] privilege, like oppression, can limit the framework of consciousness. For Edna such limited consciousness means conceiving freedom only in terms of a masculine solitary life that ignores the necessity of other women and other, transformative modes of being. (204)

Indeed, Edna's solipsistic tendencies prompt her isolation from others resulting in a solitary existence sustained only by egotistic, unattainable desires. Instead of seeking support through the experiences of other oppressed women, her alienation prompts her to become self-destructive: "Voices of marginalized groups, who Chopin narratively silences, could have been a place of solidarity and expertise in re-orienting and navigating this new sphere Edna entered. Instead, she only further self-isolates and consequently dies" (Jackson 60).

Along these lines, the protagonist's suicide could be regarded as an act of liberation from her own oppression. She cannot conceive her life as separate from the corrupt privilege that keeps her from being free, and thus, the only way she can attain freedom is by relinquishing life itself. Even though she tries to justify her decision by insisting on her victimhood and stating that her children "had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (Chopin 148), it is not only the strict gender roles of the time that keep her subdued, but also the "internalized acceptance of the very mindset she is trying to escape" (Jackson 56). In essence, being self-reliant means taking responsibility for one's life, which Edna cannot do as long as she keeps herself bound to a dominant ideology based on solipsism, privilege, and oppression.

### **3. Conclusions and Further Research**

A close analysis of both the primary and secondary sources has allowed me to validate my thesis statement and to argue that the protagonist of *The Awakening* fails in her attempt to become independent due to the solipsistic and oppressive tendencies inherent in her socioeconomic position. Even though the novel has often been regarded as revolutionary for its apparent depiction of female empowerment, Edna Pontellier's character cannot be

considered a model of self-reliance nor be read from a feminist viewpoint since her behaviors contradict these notions. Indeed, contrary to what some critics argue, her final suicide is not simply a result of the oppression placed on her but of her need to exert that same oppression upon others to strengthen her sense of self.

Firstly, both Emerson's notion of self-reliance and the New Woman movement had a great impact on the late 19th-century United States. As a consequence, Chopin's novel has been considered an early instance of feminist fiction, presenting a protagonist willing to defy the expectations placed on women and live independently. However, this possibility eventually appears unattainable to her. Although she claims her difficulty in becoming self-reliant is due to external oppressive forces, her solipsistic perspective involves conceiving individuality from a place of privilege, which prevents her from fulfilling her desires. In other words, her self-sufficiency is not feasible since she is dependent on the privilege she associates with freedom.

Secondly, her reliance on status discloses the oppressive behaviors she uses to increase her power. Since Edna conceives freedom in terms of socioeconomic privilege, she assimilates a masculine prerogative that she believes will allow her to be free in the same way white upper-class men are. Inevitably, this involves assuming an oppressive stance capable of sustaining such a level of privilege, which translates into the protagonist's misogynist and racist behaviors. Edna is proved to be the dominant force she believes to be a victim of, depending exclusively on her privilege and oppression to empower herself. As a result, following Hegel's master-slave dialectic, the protagonist cannot attain freedom since she relies upon external factors to assert her individuality. Considering this, I have concluded that Edna's inability to conceive life as separate from the privileges of her socioeconomic position ultimately prompts her failure to become self-reliant.

In this dissertation, I have introduced some aspects that I could not fully develop within the scope of my research and that would provide a much deeper analysis of the power dynamics present in the novel. For instance, Hegel's philosophical insights appear crucial to understand the extent to which power influences human relationships. Notions such as alienation or self-consciousness could be explored in detail so as to understand the functioning of socioeconomic hierarchies such as the one Edna Pontellier inhabits.

Further research is also needed to explore the different layers of privilege exposed throughout the text. It is relevant to note that all the marginalized characters the protagonist interacts with—and exerts her power over—are women. Hence, this suggests that the presence of subjugated men, whether racialized or lower class, could compromise the protagonist's discourse throughout the novel. Her oppression of men would be a potential obstacle in the development of her case, for she would not be able to sustain a narrative based on victimhood.

Lastly, it would be interesting to carry out a comparative study between Edna Pontellier and other characters in North American literature that achieve independence and are thus considered models of self-reliance. This could prompt an exploration of the requirements needed to attain Emerson's ideal and further justify Edna's failed attempt at pursuing it. I would suggest that the lack of socioeconomic privileges is one of the main factors that allow these characters to practice nonconformity and strengthen their individuality. However, additional research is needed to corroborate such claims.

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