

Choosing the End:

Women's Suicide in Literature and the Search for Agency in Impossible Circumstances

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Historically, literature has offered a space for debate on a plethora of social issues, and the literary timeline is scattered with authors who bravely approached controversy through their writing as a way to fully explore these ideas. One of these very difficult topics that is often approached by literature is suicide. As a public health issue, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among young people, and many people believe that it is a permanent method to solve largely temporary problems which causes pain to families and friends that long outlasts the life lost. However, divorced from its real-world implications, suicide within literature can be used as a striking symbolic action that any number of characters might take.

In her novel, *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin expertly employs this symbolism as her main character, Edna, struggles to reconcile the role she is expected to play within society and the one she wants to be able to create for herself. In her transition from the imposed role as a subservient wife to her desired one as both an artist and an increasingly dominant and sexually liberated woman, Edna takes more agency for herself at every opportunity that emerges. However, when she is harshly confronted with the reality that she could not have the life she wanted, Edna chose to end her own existence, walking into the ocean, where she had earlier had her first epiphany of independence. In doing this, Edna chose suicide as a way to fully claim agency over the way her

life would play out. Her choice mirrors that of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, whose similar death demonstrates a form of taking control over a situation she otherwise had no control over by choosing to remove herself from the societal construct she was incapable of living up to rather than trying to conform to it. The literary symbol of women's suicide exists as a method to show female characters taking control of their own lives within the oppression of a patriarchal system, even when that means ending them.

To properly examine Edna's death as a literary symbol, it would be prudent to approach the similarities to it in the literature that preceded her. One such work that features female suicide as an agency-granting choice is William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; specifically, this choice is demonstrated through the character Ophelia. As a young woman of the court in medieval Denmark, Ophelia was powerless within her situation to act in her own interests. From Ophelia's first appearance, her family make it clear that her utmost concern should be to preserve her chastity or, more frankly, her virginity, from Hamlet's potential advances. Her brother, Laertes, in his parting message to her, asks her to, "...weigh what loss your honor may sustain / If with too credent ear you list his songs / Or lose your heart or your chaste treasure open / to his unmastered importunity. / Fear it, Ophelia; fear it, my dear sister" (Shakespeare 1.3.33-37). Her value and honor to her society, and her family, are largely influenced by her own ability to preserve her virginity, regardless of what she desired for herself. However, when Hamlet starts to pretend madness, Ophelia's father, Polonius, offers her up to be used by the royal family as a pawn in their political game to discover the motivations of young Hamlet. Not only does this action directly contradict his earlier warnings away from Hamlet, but that choice also put Ophelia in danger. When Hamlet senses that her conversation with him is being observed and her thoughts within it are not necessarily her own, he reverses his own affection toward her and

replaces it with aggression, saying “Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?...If thou dost marry, I’ll give thee this plague / for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as / snow, thou shalt not escape calumny” (3.1.131-32,146-48). He commands her to a nunnery which, in an example of expert Shakespearean wordplay, could have been either a convent or a brothel, again relating his uttered curse upon her to the idea that her value comes from her virginity. Performances of this scene often feature Hamlet being physically aggressive toward Ophelia as he shouts at her, starting Ophelia on her course toward madness which is accelerated when her father is killed and she is suddenly without male family figures in her life. However, her madness and subsequent suicide show the audience that, for the first time, she becomes truly able to choose her own course of action without interference from these male influences.

Additionally, Ophelia’s suicide is relayed to the court by the only other woman of importance in the story, Queen Gertrude, who frames it as an accidental death in order to spare Ophelia’s reputation and allow her to have a proper burial. The true conditions of her drowning are revealed to the audience when Hamlet first learns of her death as the gravediggers are burying her body and joking about how she drowned in knee-deep water: “Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she willfully seeks her own salvation?...It must be {*se offendendo*;} it cannot be else” (5.1.1-2, 9-10). They know that her death was in ‘self-offence’ but that the coroner spared her family’s reputation and allowed her a proper burial despite the facts. Even in death, Ophelia is unable to escape her role as a pawn in the game the male characters play for power, ultimately being used to lead into the fight that ends their lives. King Claudius uses the anger Laertes feels over the loss of his family to convince him to kill Hamlet, and Hamlet allows himself to be both the provoker and the provoked at Ophelia’s graveside, hoping to create the

opportunity he had been seeking through the whole play to kill Claudius and avenge his father's death.

It must be noted that Ophelia's story is told by a male author with a text that is meant to be performed rather than read. As such, neither the reading nor the viewing audience directly hear anything of her true motivations or her perspective except what she says aloud and what other characters within the story say interpret her perspective or desires to be. Because of the nature of the text as a dramatic piece, actors have leeway with how they portray this conflict of actual versus desired identity since the internal thoughts of the majority of the characters are not expressly written within the lines of the play. Additionally, what the audience does see of Ophelia within the text is through a male lens of interpretation, both from the author and the characters within the play. Most of the characters who assert their knowledge of the best course of action for Ophelia to take are men who require her to fulfill patriarchal expectations of chastity and mental subservience. When this weight became too much to continue to live under, Ophelia chose not to, making the ultimate decision to end her existence on her own terms rather than to suffer through a life she did not want.

Kate Chopin, in her work *The Awakening*, was equally able, if not better equipped, as a female author, to explore the idea of a patriarchal society setting female characters up to fail in any instance of non-conformity. Chopin, who lived from 1851 until 1904, experienced the outworkings of a patriarchal, Victorian society in her own career. In the journal *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, Per Seyersted writes, "*The Awakening* caused quite a stir...it was denounced by many critics for its amoral treatment of infidelity...Seeing that she would never be allowed to publish the kind of realism she was aiming at, Chopin practically stopped writing" (153). As a result of the publication of her seminal novel, Chopin's career suffered, and she

eventually died an unknown figure of the American Realism movement. Chopin, a female author writing about the female experience, had expertise to draw from as a participant in the female experience within a Victorian society that a male author, whether it be Shakespeare or one of Chopin's contemporaries, would only be able to speculate on as an observer.

Edna Pontellier, the lead character in Chopin's controversial work, was largely trapped by the constriction of her circumstance within a male-dominated, nineteenth-century idea of womanhood. However, "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,--the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (Chopin 57). She was awakened to a consciousness that, because she had a husband and two children, there were a multitude of expectations of her that she was unable or unwilling to fulfill; she could see that her life was not going the way she truly wanted it to go, but she also saw no possible way to find and move toward true fulfillment. Her husband points out her perceived failure to uphold the duties he expected her to, comparing her to one of the other women in her life when he says, "'don't let the family go to the devil. There's Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn't let everything else go to chaos'" (108). Mr. Pontellier clearly voices his frustration with his wife's failure to maintain the duties he expected her to in the same way the women in their social circle did, including the care of the home and children. Chopin makes it clear, however, exactly how the statement should be interpreted by following the exchange with: "[Mr. Pontellier] could see plainly that [Edna] 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" (108). Rather than framing Edna's nontraditional desires as wrong, Chopin reminds her reader of the male failure within the story to see the way that Edna was finding her path to fulfillment.

Despite her shedding of the roles she did not want, Edna had no concrete idea of what would bring her fulfillment or how to pursue it in the long term, and, as such, was unable to progress very far in any direction. When Edna does start to free herself from the bounds of self and society, she turns first to the figure of Mademoiselle Reisz, the one female influence in her life who was neither a mother or wife. Mlle Reisz resonates with the artistic side of Edna despite being perceived by most others in their social circle as an abrasive and negative personality, and encourages Edna in her pursuit of painting. Because Mlle Reisz is not demonstrated to be much of a nurturing figure, especially toward children, the people around her tend to characterize her as disagreeable and harsh; however, Chopin implies that Mlle Reisz enjoys cultivating this picture of herself, preferring to devote herself to her artistic practice. Edna, in her own artistic practice, seeks out Mlle Reisz for advice and companionship, and is told, ““To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts--which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul...[t]he soul that dares and defies” (115). Especially as a woman, it would require bravery and defiance in order to make a successful path in the art world on top of any natural gifts Edna may have possessed that made her a good painter. The friendship between Edna and Mlle Reisz is exploratory, allowing Edna to test how she might find fulfillment both in her artistic practice and with female companionship. As her skill at painting develops, Edna is even able to make money selling artwork to independently support herself.

However, there is another competing aspect to Edna’s rejection of traditional roles, demonstrated in the way she begins to embrace her own sexuality outside of her marriage, eventually kissing one man and confessing her love for another. Unlike Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna finds herself unable to give up sex or sensuality. Instead, as she feels no true attachment to

her husband and is even irritated by his presence and his expectations of her, she seeks out the company of other men to fulfill her desire. This starts with Robert at the beginning of the story but, when he is perceived to have abandoned her, Edna seeks out the fulfillment of her sexual need with another man, Alcée Arobin, who is well-known in their social circle for his sensuality. Of him, Edna is aware that “it was no labor to become intimate with Arobin. His manner invited easy confidence” (130). Arobin coaxes Edna into embracing her sexual needs, and it is with him that Edna shares her first physically sensual experiences outside of her marriage. However, while this is happening, Edna feels guilt for betraying her relationship, not with her husband, but with Robert, who she is emotionally devoted to: “She felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity...she was thinking of Robert Lebrun. Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse” (132). Her attitude toward her husband was contrary to the traditional expectation that women, regardless of whether they married for love, should maintain a devotion to their husband and reserve all hint of sexual desire or action for the marriage bed. Her full rejection of marriage and monogamy does not come until later in her progression away from tradition; she does, however, recognize that her emotional investment is not in her marriage, but in Robert, who is the first man in her life who seems to value her desires and hear her when she voices them. Unfortunately, while she seems to love Robert, Edna has no way to leave the life she has completely to be with him, or to shed the expectations of the society around her. Robert, when they do eventually reunite and confess their true feelings, suggests that he desires marriage. But Edna, at the height of her understanding, says, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both” (167). In this moment, Edna fully embraces her sexuality and

the agency she wanted to maintain over it, and it startles her lover that she does so, to the point that he abruptly leaves very shortly after they were reunited.

That night, Edna is confronted with the reality that she cannot expect to live the bohemian lifestyle that she had cultivated for herself. Faced with all of the continued expectations of her as a mother and wife under the construct of a patriarchal society, and no realistically fulfilling options as either a devoted artist or an unrestricted lover, Edna decides that the only available option is for her to end her participation in society, swimming out beyond the point of return into the ocean where she had her first revelation of independence. The language Chopin uses in this passage directly references earlier scenes, talking about the call of the ocean and Edna's childhood recollections, "[t]he voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in the abysses of solitude" (175). This symbolically rounds out the completion of Edna's 'awakening' to the plight of women, and shows readers how she made her final choice to resolve the limitations of her own agency within her life and the society she lived in.

In both cases, Ophelia and Edna reach a point in their lives where they have little to no agency, are unable to meaningfully act in a way that they wish to in contrast with the life that is expected of them, and find themselves unable to remain in and maintain the constructs that society has set up for them to exist within. In her article "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and *The Awakening*," Jennifer Gray explains, "The hegemonic institutions of nineteenth-century society required women to be objects in marriage and in motherhood, existing as vessels of maternity and sexuality, with little opportunity for individuality" (53). Thus, Ophelia and Edna each choose to die rather than to suffer through a life and situation they no longer want to attempt to bear. This choice can be interpreted as a way for these characters to take some form of

power over their situation, even if that power is in the decision to stop being. In literature, this is a powerful symbol that points readers to the overwhelming suffering of women who become aware of their severe, societal limitations and are unable to do anything else to change or release themselves from such limitations. Margaret Higonnet, in her article “Frames of Female Suicide,” explores examples of literary readings of female suicide, saying of Roxane’s character in Montesquieu’s *Les Lettres persanes* “Roxane’s death...returns us to death as an ultimate form of self-legitimation and self-understanding...She transforms herself from the object of [her husband’s] desire and nostalgia into a subject with ambitions and a voice of her own” (233). By taking power over her situation, Roxane was able to shift the perception of herself in death from object to subject, forcing readers to perceive her as a person with desires and free will. Kate Chopin, as a female author, is an exemplary voice for late nineteenth-century women in the face of such oppression, confronting her audience with the largely unambiguous reality that death is an option that some women are willing to choose when they have no other choices available to them. As Margaret Higonnet asserts, “Suicide is a scandal. It ruptures the social order and defies sovereign power over life and death...suicide becomes the essential biographical act” (229). By choosing to end their own lives, both Ophelia and Edna, along with many other female literary figures, make the powerful move to self-determine the final chapters of their respective biographies. Unlike Shakespeare’s work, Chopin gives the audience valuable insight into the thoughts and motivations of her characters; she walks her audience through the elimination of choices from Edna’s life, through her perspective, until suicide seems like the only option that is left.

Suicide, outside of a literary context, is a grave public health concern that affects thousands of people on a daily basis. In most cases, it is a heartbreaking and largely preventable

choice that has the potential to destroy the lives of those left behind in the wake of those it claims. However, as a plot device within literature, removed from its real-world implications, suicide works, in its own problematic way, to give agency to characters who otherwise have none. As such, the use of suicide as a tool for powerless female characters to take control over the way their lives play out under an otherwise inescapable, patriarchal system is a powerful and jarring device that Chopin employs expertly. When women make the choice to die in the face of oppression, they defy cultural and societal norms to assert their own autonomy, and point a glaring spotlight on the plight of other women in their wake. Their symbolic action, even in the ambiguity of both Edna and Ophelia's deaths, creates waves that readers well into the 21st century both resonate with and must live with the consequences of.

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