

Female Spatial Narration and Expansion in *The Awakening* under the Absence of the Husband

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Abstract: *The Awakening* is one of Kate Chopin's famous works. This paper focuses on the impact of the husband's absence on the life and psychology of the protagonist Edna Pontellier and delves into the profound significance of female spatial expansion against this backdrop. It points out that Edna has long faced the physiological and psychological absence of her husband, Léonce Pontellier, which has not only affected her daily life but also prompted her to engage in profound self-reflection and exploration. In the space created by her husband's absence, Edna is able to expand her personal space, shifting from the family environment to society and nature. The paper thus criticizes the constraints imposed by traditional society on female roles and emphasizes the importance of personal space for women's growth and autonomy.

Keywords: absence, female space, space expansion

1. Introduction

Kate Chopin is an American feminist writer with the most prominent female consciousness and the greatest literary achievement in the second half of the 19th century. Her representative work *The Awakening* successfully portrays a new era female image with self-consciousness and sexual consciousness and the courage to pursue self. Many scholars focus on feminist narration, subject consciousness, instead of the reason why Edna can expand female space. This paper more focuses on the absence of husband and how it develops plots.

2. The Absence of the Husband and Female Spatial Narration

The heroine in *The Awakening* is Edna Pontellier, a woman who gets married with a businessman in New Orleans, Mr. Pontellier. Edna has long faced the absence of her husband, making it difficult for her to find a sense of worth as a wife. As a husband, Léonce Pontellier is absent from Edna on both physiological and psychological levels. He is preoccupied with work and frequents clubs, to the extent that Edna only truly response instinctively to a kiss is from her lover, Alcée Arobin. On a psychological level, Léonce also lacks a common language with his wife. Mr. Pontellier didn't care about her wife. For instance, "His entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and fast asleep when he came in." [1] He lacks of consideration for her rest and the disruption of her sleep, only caring his own feeling. When Edna falls into depression and moves out to find a new residence, Léonce cares little about her psychological state, viewing her departure merely as a loss of his personal property.

He also falls short as a father, being inattentive and always neglecting the children, considering it entirely Edna's responsibility to care for them. For instance, when their children fell ill, he only informed of this information to his wife, but Raoul didn't fall ill. "Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after. Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it." [1] Mr. Pontellier considers that all he needs to do is to make a living to support his family, instead of housework, looking after children. "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them." [1]

The consistent absence of husband impacted the Edna's daily life but also profoundly influenced her psychological state and emotional world, providing her with a space to reflect on herself, explore her personal desires, and pursue freedom.

Space is a venue for self-reflection. In the absence of her husband, Edna often has more time and space to reflect on her marriage, family, and life. These reflections often occur in specific spatial environments, such as a quiet corner of the house or a solitary walk along the seashore. These spaces become a reflection of the Edna's inner world, mirroring her loneliness, confusion, and desires. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, the heroine experiences spiritual freedom for the first time on a small island when she leaves her residence and family. It is young Robert Lebrun who went with Edna to swim. "Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun." [1] While vacationing on Grande

Island, her self-awareness began to gradually awaken.” [2] In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her.”[1]

After her husband went on a business trip, and children were sent to grandmother’s house, Edna moved out of the big house where she and her family lived. It is in such an occasion, without husband and children, in the new house, she can really have their own space to think and to self-reflect. “The pigeon-house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow. There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual.” [1]

Spatial transitions drive plot development. The absence of the husband is often accompanied by changes in the protagonist’s living spaces. She may transition from a familiar family environment to unfamiliar social settings, or from a closed-off personal world to the vastness of nature. These spatial transitions not only enrich the plot of the work but also propel changes in the protagonist’s psychology and emotions. Due to Mr. Pontellier’s ignorance, he often had no time to accompany his wife. This absence provided Edna with a relatively free space, allowing her the opportunity to deviate from the traditional roles of wife and mother. She began to engage deeply with people like Adele Ratignolle and Robert Lebrun. These interactions not only broadened her social circle but also made her start to realize the importance of her own independence and emotional expression.

Spatial narrative enhances theme expression. Through spatial narrative strategies, writers can more deeply express the themes and meanings of their works. In *The Awakening*, the combination of the husband’s absence and spatial narrative together reveals the protagonist’s struggles and awakenings in her pursuit of personal freedom, love, and happiness. Edna’s rebellion progresses to independence and liberty when she chooses to move into “a little four-room house around the corner” from her husband’s house with a single servant[3]. She states, “I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence.”[1] By creating an individual space for herself, Edna seeks further autonomy and individuality. Edna’s transition from a spacious and comfortable mansion to a cramped “pigeon house” symbolizes the expansion and awakening of her spiritual space. In the mansion, despite her material wealth, she felt spiritually oppressed and unable to truly express herself. However, after moving into the small house, she gained unprecedented freedom and independence, beginning to bravely pursue her dreams and happiness. The small house becomes Edna’s spiritual space for pursuing herself and freedom. It is in this pigeon-house that Edna temporarily creates an independent, free material and spiritual home for herself.[4] Here, she can freely think, feel, and express herself, no longer bound by traditional family values and social norms. She learns how to establish more equal and respectful relationships with herself and others, gradually recognizing her own independent value and the possibility of pursuing happiness. Through this framework, Chopin not only vividly portrays Edna’s psychological journey in pursuing personal freedom, love, and happiness but also profoundly reveals the constraints and limitations imposed on women’s roles by society at that time.

3. Deep Meaning and Influence of Female Space Expansion

The male space is considered to be public, productive and rational, while the female space is considered to be private, reproductive and emotional. Women are often associated with family, housework, community, fertility, upbringing and so on. Edna Pontellier’s living space in the novel serves as a microcosm of a male-dominated society, where women often feel confined and restricted. This male-dominated space not only limits women’s physical movements but also constrains their emotional and intellectual growth[5]. The traditional system has historically defined and confined female spaces, severely limiting women’s autonomy and agency.

The novel meticulously maps out a spatial pattern that includes Chanel Island, the Pontellier mansion, the Pigeon House. These spaces serve as critical settings that reflect the changing dynamics of Edna’s life and her journey towards self-discovery. The Pontellier mansion and the island represent the family space, where traditional roles and expectations are enforced. Conversely, Edna’s own living room and the Pigeon House symbolize her personal space, offering her a refuge from societal constraints and a platform for self-expression. Edna’s move into the pigeon house symbolizes a key step towards independence[6].

The transformation of space includes from family to individual, from outside to inside. Meanwhile, the awakening of Edna’s subject consciousness is a gradual and contradictory process. These changes mirror Edna’s internal transformation as she gradually awakens to her own subject consciousness. Her journey is marked by contradictions and gradual realizations, as she navigates the complexities of her desires, relationships, and societal expectations. As she expands her personal space and asserts her agency, Edna challenges the traditional order and redefines her place in the world. The expansion of female space in the novel symbolizes not just a physical shift but a profound transformation in Edna’s identity and self-awareness. Her journey highlights the importance of personal space in fostering individual growth and autonomy, and it serves as a

powerful critique of the traditional systems that have historically confined women.

4. Conclusion

This paper attaches great importance on the Mr. Pontellier's absence and inaction. In such an occasion, how Edna explores her own mental and physical space. By exploring Edna's experiences, the novel encourages readers to reflect on the role of space in shaping identities and the need for greater autonomy and agency for women in society.

References

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