Death By Deliberation: An Analysis Of The Deaths Of Edna Pontellier And Lily Bart

In Kate Chopin's novel, The Awakening, heroine Edna Pontillier struggles between her role as a housewife, mother of two, and spirited artist. As a beautiful 28 year old woman, she strives to identify herself as something independent of these three identities. Throughout the novel, she attempts to challenge the patriarchal society in which she lives. Edna's awakening takes place during her vacation to Grand Isle residing at the home of the Lebruns. She spends every day of the trip with Robert, who awakens her sexual desires outside of her marriage. Her relationship with Robert makes her question why she ever married, who she really is, and whether or not she wants to continue assuming the role she has been assigned within society. Upon her return to New Orleans, Edna's husband, Leonce, leaves town and her children stay with their grandmother. Thus, Edna devotes herself to her art and forgets her duties around the house. She feels free and develops her true self. She also begins a surface level affair with Alcee Arabin when her husband and children are out of town. She develops a sexual attraction to Arabin which helps her and realizes she has been in a dull marriage all these years. She is content with herself, until her relationship with Robert, whom she loves, fails, she struggles as an artist, and loses her new-found independence. Thus, she swims to the sea beyond her ability to return which serves as evidence that her death was a suicide.

In Edith Wharton's House of Mirth, Lily Bart is a 29 year old woman who is beautiful in a jaw dropping kind of way. She is a social butterfly and has the social skills and standing to secure a marriage and life of luxury and ease. Throughout the novel, she searches for the perfect suitor to give her this sort of lifestyle. Her actions and demeanour ruin many of her relationships. Bart struggles with her pride. Her ego prevents her from talking to Rosedale, allowing Bertha believe that Selden came to Bellomont to visit her, to explain her side of the Monte Carlo affair, or to marry a man like Selden who is not as wealthy as she desires. Additionally, she refuses to be true friends with a genuine woman like Gerty because her social status and appearance is inferior to hers. Lily repeatedly refuses any sign of poverty as though it were harmful to her physically. Eventually these events lead to her demise and her speculated accidental overdose of sleeping pills to ease her pain.

Edna and Lily's behaviors throughout each novel suggest their deaths were suicides. The Mayo Clinic lists multiple signs of suicidal thoughts in any adult person, some of the most pertinent possessed by both women include: "withdrawing from social contact and wanting to be left alone, having mood swings (i.e. feeling happy one day, and deeply discouraged the next), feeling trapped or hopeless about a situation, and increasing use of alcohol or drugs (ie doing risky or self-destructive things)" (Ashley C.). Readers are likely to assume that since neither woman explicitly stated she was suicidal that their deaths were accidental, but I intend to prove that both suicides were premeditated and both women expressed suicidal tendencies throughout their respective novels.

Edna and Lily have experienced detrimental loss. Edna does not love her husband Leonce. She finds herself discouraged at the complacency of her marriage. She engages in an affair with Alcee Arobin, but this is nothing more than a sexual fling for both parties. Edna experiences loss of true love when Robert leaves her. Extreme loss often pushes individuals toward suicide

(Ashley C). Edna says, “I would give up the unessential (...) I would give up my life (...) but I wouldn’t give up myself” (Chopin, 122). By not being with Robert and returning to her old way of life, she feels as though she is giving up herself and who she wants to be. Thus, she would rather die than suffer through being a mother and an uninterested lover.

Additionally, Lily Bart experiences loss in various aspects of her life throughout the novel. Wharton writes in reference to Lily’s losses, “But now all the things she cared for have been taken from her, and all the people who taught her to care for them have abandoned her too; and it seems to me that if some one could reach out a hand and show her the other side – show her how much is left in life and in herself ” (Wharton, 263). Her actions have caused the loss of her social status, her ability to maintain real friendships, and her chances of being a married woman. Therefore, she finds herself extremely lonely before her death. She says, “The clutch of solitude [was] at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years… the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral… she saw there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life (...) to her mood after taking the drug, in which she ‘had been unhappy, and now she was happy’” (Wharton, 310). Bart is reliant on exterior factors that make her unhappy when they are absent from her life. I think that she fills the void of loss with sleeping pills which she believes will ease her pain. As previously stated as a suicidal tendency, Lily’s engagement in risky behavior (drug use) as a coping method supports the argument that her death was suicidal

Secondly, neither woman can solve her internal conflict with herself. Edna Pontillier’s internal conflict is with herself and society. I believe that her internal conflict is a consequence from the norms society demands of her. Throughout the novel, she feels guilt and other emotions due to her skewed relationships with her husband and family. Edna is also unable to maintain her sexuality and independence (Isma). Therefore, she feels that her only escape is by way of the sea. Lily Bart’s internal conflict is her goal to find a husband but how she cannot bring herself to commit to such a selfish assignment. As a result of her inability to complete this task, Bart is “ostracized from society and disinherited by her aunt” (TheBestNotes.com Staff). This leads to her overdose in a run-down boarding house after having to use every last penny to pay back her debt to Gus Trenor (TheBestNotes.com Staff). Bart says that she “could not count on her continuity of purpose,” and was “frightened… [by] the thought that she might gradually accommodate herself to remaining indefinitely in Trenor’s debt” (Wharton, 287-288). This quote emphasizes her feelings of hopelessness to her situation. It is implied that Bart felt as though she could not escape her misfortunates except by way of death.

Lastly, both women knew the outcome of their actions. Pontillier and Bart were aware and prepared for the situation. Edna knowingly swam out to sea too far for her to return safely. When she swims, she feels free of all that binds her in society. She desires liberation. Chopin remarks that by performing this action Pontillier “surrenders her body and her existence on earth and saves the essential - her soul” (Chopin, 216). Lily Bart knowingly took more than the recommended or usual amount of sleeping pills. She states that “the only hope of renewal lay in the little bottle at her bedside” (Wharton, 288). Both women believed that their only escape was by means of terminating life.

While neither explicitly stated that she intended to kill herself, I believe Pontillier and Bart had enough knowledge to know what would transpire. Additionally, their actions and quotes throughout the novel serve as evidence to the claim that both women committed suicide. Both women, at various points throughout the novels, withdrew from social contact, wanted to be left

alone, had mood swings, felt trapped or hopeless about a situation, and became involved in risky behavior, all of which are tendencies of suicidal individuals. Edna and Lily both experienced loss, were unable to solve their internal conflicts, and knew the outcome of their final actions. These three experiences, combined with external pressures, are enough to push someone to consider suicide. Therefore, the deaths of Edna Pontillier and Lily Bart were deliberate actions made by both women making The Awakening and House of Mirth effortlessly tragic novels.

Works Cited

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