The Myth Of Femininity, ‘’a Second Coming Of Aphrodite” In The Awakening By Kate Chopin

The Awakening, Kate Chopin’s second and last novel, is considered to be one of the earliest novels presenting the beginnings of the American feminism seen through the eyes of Edna Pontellier, the novel’s protagonist, a wife, mother of two and a woman with an urging task to free herself from her husband’s objectifying eyes and to defeat the patriarchal society in the conservative state of Louisiana, which ultimately crushes her liberating wings and entraps her back in her gilded cage where she can be cherished and controlled by the male society.

As it is important to mention beforehand, in this essay I am going to argue the myth of femininity and the ideas according to which Kate Chopin’s novel has nourished in one’s assertion the desire to associate the heroine with Aphrodite, in this particular novel considered by many critics as a “Creole Bovary”, a feminist “critique of the identity of mother-women”, “a eulogy on sex and a muted elegy on the female condition” or “a New Orleans version of the familiar transcendentalist fable of the soul’s emergence, or lapse into life”.(Willa Cather, review of The Awakening by Kate Chopin, p.6)

In order to have a better understanding of the novel and Chopin’s turn-of-the-century innovation, it is required to have a good look at the surroundings and backgrounds in which the novel was written, as we must do with any creation in order to penetrate and discover its deepest meanings and secrets, shedding a light upon them. Thus, Kate Chopin’s novel, The Awakening, was shaped by the tiny sparkles of change, yet so important, regarding women’s status in society and their position in relations with the opposite sex, an example in this sense could be the publication of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s treatise “Women and Economics” whose most poignant topic was the subjugation of women to their husband’s power due to women’s inability to procure for themselves, as this would implicitly infer gaining their independence. (Kate Chopin’s The Awakening: A Sourcebook, p.5)

Moving on, there is nothing accidental in portraying the two birds in the beginning of the novel, as the female in the Victorian America was seen as a pretty colored bird, admired by men, but its beauty was only appreciated if caged and controlled. Moreover, as Sandra M. Gilbert states in her “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire” that there is a certain connection between Edna and the two birds, as those incarnates the heroine’s most undermined desires and even her awakening.

“...these birds together prefigure both Edna’s restlessness and her irony, her awakening desire for freedom and her sardonic sense that freedom may ultimately be meaningless, her yearning for solitude, and her skeptical worries about solitude.” (The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire, Sandra M. Gilbert, p.48)

In her summer spent at Madame Le Brun’s pension, Edna is surrounded by female figures like her friend Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz to which she grows closer, being able to share with Adele a certain memory from her childhood that represents Edna’s first attempt to escape the patriarchal society in which she was forced to live in and obey by its rules. Edna’s story places her back in Kentucky, in “a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean” in which

she “threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water” (Kate Chopin, The Awakening, ch.7) trying to run away from the religion of men, just as she will be later in life running away from her husband’s patronage and that of other men in her life, by throwing herself in the water and swimming until her powers leave her. “She was running away, that is, from the dictations and interdictions of patriarchal culture, especially of patriarchal theology, and running into the wild openness of nature.” (Kate Chopin, The Awakening, ch.7). Moreover, it is important to highlight the fact that there is a strong connection between Edna’s action in her childhood, where she is spotted trying to run away from the core of men’s society, namely religion and its canonical perceptions towards women, considering them object that ought to be controlled by the men in their life, and her decision to leave her husband’s house, moving into a pigeon house, freeing her shadowed spirit and expressing her deepest and oppressed desires.

Edna’s last swim into the ocean can be interpreted as her acceptation of femininity which can be achieved, in her times, only through death and rejecting the patriarchal values and continuously struggling between the imaginary and the symbolic, she is said to enact the feminine Oedipal crisis, according to Deborah L. Madsen in her Feminist Theory and Literary Practice “In The Awakening, Edna Pontellier enacts the feminine Oedipal crisis; caught between Imaginary and Symbolic orders, she rejects her patriarchal gender identity but she is unable to embrace the feminine except in death.”(p.108)

Another important aspect of Edna’s autonomy and escape from her husband’s patronage “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions […] I give myself where I choose.” (Kate Chopin, The Awakening, ch.36) and that is articulated by her refusal to dress up and act as a doll, according to the accepted dress codes, choosing to wear an “ordinary house dress” instead of her “usual Tuesday reception gown” in this way, undermining her husband’s authority and strengthening the idea that she is no longer an object easily controlled by Mr. Pontellier.

Apart from Edna’s awakening, that might seem as if she had regained and strengthened her autonomous femininity, her actions made her the center of some comparisons with Aphrodite, many referring to Chopin’s character and its awakening as “The Second Coming of Aphrodite”. As Sandra M. Gilbert associates Edna with Aphrodite or an ephebe of that goddess, after her bath, long sleep in Madame Antoine’s cottage and her feast with Robert, sitting “ceremonially, at the feet of fat, matriarchal Madame Antoine, who tells them legends of the Baratarians and the sea” Edna having the impression that she entered a fictive world in which the myths are real and the ordinary reality is mythical. (Sandra M. Gilbert, The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire, p.54)

The scene that portrays Edna’s success to swim by herself for the first time “like a little, tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence” (Kate Chopin, The Awakening, ch.10) can be identified as her baptism that revitalizes and makes her feel renewed and reborn, empowering Edna to aspire to greater actions, surpassing her mortal limitations by her desire to swim “far out, where no woman had swum before”.(Kate Chopin, The Awakening, ch.10) Suffice it to say that Edna’s final and successful attempt to swim would not have been possible in other circumstances, for in this symbolic swimming Edna is said to be feeling “as if some power of significant import had been given her” and her desire to overcome every woman’s distance swam before, drawing a clear distinction between her, Chopin’s Aphrodite that emerges from

the sea, and the usual women. Moreover, Edna's rebirth into "a Second Aphrodite" takes place in special and even mythical circumstances "at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon" that night when "the white light of the moon[has] fallen upon the world like mystery and softness of sleep" and sat "lightly upon the sea and land" and the waves that were breaking on the beach "in little foamy crests… like slow white serpents"(Kate Chopin, The Awakening, ch.10) strengthening the idea according to which Edna was not only swimming with the powers of a goddess, but heading towards her destined place, "a kind of alternative paradise or female paradise" as Sandra M. Gilbert highlights. (Sandra M. Gilbert, The Second Coming of Aphrodite…, p.52)

It is extremely important to mention Edna's dinner party, where she is portrayed as "the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stand alone", but her instrumentality is ultimately reminded, first by her friend Adele Ratignolle, who whispers to "think of the children", fact that makes Edna realize that she is not entirely free, nor she will ever be, free from her mother status which would force her to return back home to her husband, and Robert's dreams about a possible exchange of possession between him and Mr. Pontellier, making Edna Robert's property. (Kate Chopin, The Awakening)

However, as Sandra M. Gilbert ponders upon the fact that Edna's death might not be a suicide, but a defeat of the reality in which she lives that draws away all her energy, leaving her powerless, in her struggle to overcome the imposed patriarchal ideas that have controlled her whole life; Thus, she is pictured at the end of the novel swimming as a defeated goddess towards Cyprus, "Defeated, even crucified, by the "reality" of nineteenth-century New Orleans, Chopin's resurrected Venus is returning to Cyprus or Cythera."(Sandra M. Gilbert, The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire, p.58)

To conclude, Kate Chopin pictures in her novel, The Awakening, considered to be a requiem of early feminism, the real status of women in the nineteenth-century America through Edna Pontellier and her never-ending struggle to escape reality's canonical and patriarchal values in which she lives, being able to fulfill and embrace her femininity only in death, as the real world of that time could not understand, nor appreciate women's true value.

Works Cited

1. Gilbert, Sandra M., "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire", The Kenyon Review, New Series, Vol.5, no.3(summer, 1983), pp 42-66 https://www.jstor.org/stable/4335384?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents accessed 09-01-2019 23:01 UTC
2. Beer, Janet and Nolan, Elizabeth, "The Awakening: A Sourcebook", Routledge Guides to Literature, 2004
3. Madsen, L. Deborah, "Feminist Theory and Literary Practice", Pluto Press, London, Sterling, Virginia, 2000
4. Chopin, Kate, "The Awakening", Herbert S. Stone& Co., 1899
5. Cather, Willa, review of "The Awakening" by Kate Chopin, Pittsburgh Leader, 1899, p. 6