Abstract

This research aims at studying the tragic bildungsroman of a young female in Kate Chopin’s (1850-1904) *The Awakening* (1899). As a bildungsroman novel, *The Awakening* tackles the progress of a young female protagonist toward self-understanding and a sense of social responsibility. Kate Chopin portrays the awareness and struggle of her protagonist against the social forces repressing her. The tragedy which happened to her in searching for self-identity could not be fulfilled due to the wrong choices the protagonist had made and the traditions of the society which she could not change. Chopin believes that women must not be tied to the irrational limitations and conventions of the society because they have their own will which should not be violated.
1. Introduction

Bildungsroman is one of the most important genres of literature for the young female adults. It is a novel of personal development of a young woman / man.

Bildungsroman originated in Germany in the later half of the 18th century and has since become one of the major narrative genres in European and American literature. It charts the protagonist’s actual or metaphorical journey from youth to maturity. Initially the aim of this journey is reconciliation between the desire of the individuation and demands of socialization.

The word bildungsroman consists of the nouns “Bildung” and “Roman”. “Bildung” has several meanings: “portrait”, “picture”, “shaping” and “formation”, all of which give the sense of development or creation. “Roman” simply means “novel”.

The bildungsroman, or apprenticeship novel, is used to describe works that deal with the psychological growth of a central character from adolescence to maturity. The term bildungsroman is most closely associated with a small group of German novels written by Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. Goethe’s novel Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (1795-96) is considered the most famous example of the bildungsroman and is regarded as the prototype of the genre. The word “Lehrjahre” can be translated as “apprenticeship”.

“Apprenticeship” has many connotations, most of which deal with education and maturation. An apprentice learns and develops his/her own identity. Similarly, the bildungsroman is characterized by the growth, education, and development of a character both in the world and ultimately within the character.

The English bildungsroman is more concerned with social mobility, with class conflict, than is its German counterpart. In its English form, the bildungsroman linked the individual’s moral, spiritual, and psychological advancement.

According to Jerome H. Buckley, in his book Seasons of the Youth, the bildungsroman in the English literature is “in its broadest sense...a convenient synonym for the novel of youth or apprenticeship”.

The bildungsroman is particularly attractive for women writers not only because of its focus on becoming an individual in the society but also because its conventions foreground the dialectical interactions of the individual and society in a manner also characterizing much feminist theory about the interplay of personal experience and socio-cultural formations.

Anne White called the bildungsroman “the most popular form of feminist fiction”. In its female shape, the bildungsroman concentrates on
the problems encountered by the heroine as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom that is the difficulties every woman in her society must meet and overcome. This woman does not have a chance to develop as male have, cannot leave the country for the city, cannot serve family ties as easily as men, and cannot have an active role in society and so come to terms with it.

Buckley also argues that the most common characteristic of the bildungsroman is the education of the main character. This education is crucial, in that it is part of the character’s maturation and preparation for impending adolescence. Often the education is a sticking point of the character’s home life. Part of the development of the character is the desire to search for her own identity. Throughout this search, the character moved from the country to the city. Buckley points out that this journey is “more importantly...his [her] direct experience of urban life”. However, this urban experience is not always a pleasant one.

Sometimes, the heroine may encounter a harsh reality to bear. In this case, her journey, although it seems full of opportunities, is the source of “disenchantment more alarming and decisive than any dissatisfaction with the narrowness of provincial life”.

An aspect of this new life in the city is that of love. The heroine is usually presented as having her first real experience with love. Buckley writes that there are “at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting”. Usually, between the debasement of one love affair and the disillusionment with the city, the heroine takes the final step in her development.

Therefore, tragic bildungsroman can be perceived when the heroine’s image of that optimistic journey is not so much better than the life she had at home. Thus, the consequence of this journey, whether it is a metaphorical journey from adolescence to maturation or actual journey from town to city, is usually an unfortunate and tragic one.

2. Tragic Female Bildungsroman in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening

Women were considered the properties of their husbands. Kate Chopin’s The Awakening scorned and ostracized such crucial and critical crisis.

When cultural and social structures appeared to support women’s rights and struggle for independence and individuality, Kate Chopin began to employ her heroines in fictions to reflect these changes. She portrayed women who have taken different types of female roles. She focused her writings on women’s identity formation and the factors shaping self-perception and social roles.
Chopin embodied the bildungsroman genre in her novel *The Awakening* by presenting a heroine, Edna Pontellier, who manages to develop and grow up while upholding the expectations of her society. To Chopin, Edna’s formation, as a character, doesn’t mean only personal maturation but also consciousness to the meaning of life which intuited early in her character.

Hence Chopin’s *The Awakening* depicted the inferior social status of Edna Pontellier especially in South America in the early 1900’s who revolted against her society and led the life of an independent female regardless of all the risks. At that time wealthy women were seen as “trophy wives” of their husbands just as Edna was for Leonce, her husband. Women were expected to marry, have children, and take care of the house, with no single thought of their own needs.

In *The Awakening*, Edna struggles with the stifling duties imposed on her as a wife of a successful New Orleans businessman, and a mother of six children. *The Awakening* unfolds the two stages of Edna’s life. She is in conflict between her exterior world, the role of a wife and a mother that society imposes on her and her interior reality of emotions and sexuality which are initially asleep and awakened throughout the course of the novel.

Wearing the mask of bildungsroman, *The Awakening* attacks the tradition of life as narrative development, a tradition that leads inevitably to self-destruction instead of seeking for self-creation and self-understanding of the women to their needs to be individuals rather than mere wives and mothers.12

### 2.1. The Autobiographical Aspects

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin brought some materials from her own life to employ them in this novel. Buckley mentioned that the bildungsroman is an autobiographical novel, and an author naturally:

> does bring something of his own life into his work, especially in a form in which childhood recollections are so important to the development of the protagonist, and the flow of the novel itself13

Moreover, Kate Chopin incorporated bites of her own life in the settings and characters of *The Awakening*. The locals for *The Awakening* were St. Louis, New Orleans, and Grand Isle. Chopin had lived in these towns. In 1870, the Chopin’s family moved from St. Louis to New Orleans and vacationed during summers in Grande Isle, a place in which the Chopins used to spend vacations.14

Grand Isle in the 1870s was a charming place populated by middle class Creoles. In this society men dominated the households and expected
their wives to provide them with well-kept homes and many children to carry on the family.\textsuperscript{15}

The Grand Isle that Kate Chopin knew had a pension like the pension of Mrs. Lebrun in \textit{The Awakening}, who rents summer cottages. For Kate Chopin, Grand Isle was paradise-like. This island was a tropical paradise. It was seductive to imagination with its palm, vines, orange and lemon trees.\textsuperscript{16} Everything there is beautiful like the birds, the rare odors and perfumes, and above all the sea and its voice is so seductive, as it is also described by Edna Pontellier “\textit{The voice of the sea is seductive}.”\textsuperscript{17}

Kate Chopin paid attention to the people and to the events that went around her, and the details found their ways into \textit{The Awakening}. She characterized her aunt’s marriage, her mother’s death, her friends, her friends’ husbands, and her husband’s business. She also portrayed everyone and every single event she found interesting. Many incidents from Chopin’s life are reflected in \textit{The Awakening}.

The characters’ names came from different layers of Kate Chopin’s past. In her New Orleans years, she learned from Edgar Degas, a friend, about his friend Berthe Morisot and her sister Edma, the painter who gave up her art when she married Adolophe Pontillon in 1869. Also, Chopin knew from Degas about his neighbour, in New Orleans, Leonce Oliver was the impeccable but uninteresting husband whose wife left him for another man some years later. And so Chopin combined the names: Edma Pontillon, the artist silenced by marriage, and Leonce Oliver, the unsatisfactory husband, became Edna and Leonce Pontellier. On the other hand, Berthe Morisot’s sister, Edma, had a close friend named Adele Colonna. In \textit{The Awakening}, Chopin depicted the initial name of this woman for one of her female characters named Adele Rtignolle.\textsuperscript{18} Chopin combined the real-life names that she heard and knew and also brought her lifelong observation to portray them in \textit{The Awakening}.

\textbf{2.2. Self-realization and Awakening}

\textit{The Awakening} explores Edna’s desire to find and live fully within her true self. Part of the heroine’s maturation, which is mentioned earlier, is marked by a desire to search for her own identity. This desire developed as the heroine sought to gain an identity of her own. This development occurs in her thinking and lifestyle.

In \textit{The Awakening}, Edna is presented as a Creole woman in search of her female identity. She was unsatisfied and uncomfortable in her role as the “\textit{patriarchal woman}” (p.15). Patriarchal society refers to any society whereby men are the decision-makers and hold authoritative positions. Lois Tyson, a critic explains that: “\textit{patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and assertiveness}”.\textsuperscript{19} Then, he points to the absence of these qualities as proof
that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive.  

The main purpose of the patriarchal society is to place women in submissive roles which allows men to control them more easily. Women as well as men have roles, they have to play in patriarchal society. The male role is to be strong, and to provide for his family as the head of the household. The patriarchal society places the woman in an inferior position to the man and gives her a submissive role which means she is the one who takes care of the man, the children and the husband. A woman’s greatest wish should be to marry and have children, and she should not want to partake in any business, meaning she should not be able to take care of herself financially.

Edna Pontellier grows up in Kentucky and moves to New Orleans where she encounters a different type of behaviour than what she is used to from her childhood and upbringing. Edna is affected to some degree by this different behaviour and finds that she “loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (p.13).

Edna realized that a fulfilling, autonomous life driven by her desires would be impossible because of her socially prescribed roles of mother and wife. She also realized she fills the gaps of other’s desires for her; as Adele (Madame Ratignonlle) mother-woman, a close friend of Edna’s, and Mlle. Reisz, a struggle artist. As far as these others are concerned, Edna has no desires of her own. Edna wants to feel and articulate desire as private property, as a language to which she has access. The production of this female subjectivity emerges out of the opposition between Edna’s dissatisfaction and the Creole culture’s reification of woman-as-sign.  

Edna’s relationship with Adele (Madame Ratignonlle) is developed, she is very influenced and affected by Adele, the “patriarchal woman” (p.15), who is very affectionate and flirtatious when she interacts with others, including Edna:

*They may have been... influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways,...but the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignonlle. The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty* (p.13)

Through her relationship with Adele, Edna learned a great deal about freedom of expression. She confided to Adele that she experienced for the first time a genuine expression of her small self, which intoxicated her “like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (p. 16).
Edna for the first time started to “realize her position in the universe as a human being and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world” (p.13). Her rediscovery of feelings that she had long repressed underlined her search for freedom, self-expression, and love. All her life Edna has maintained the duality of “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (p.15). Edna’s relationship with Adele begins her process of “awakening” (p.6) and self rediscovery.

In the novel, Kate Chopin described Adele as “the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (p.8). When the Pontelliers family moved to Grand Isle for vacation, Edna greatly enjoyed Adele’s company. They spent time together near the beach of Grand Isle. They went “to the beach together, arm in arm, under the huge white sunshade” (p.14).

The process of Edna’s awakening and self-realization accelerate as Edna comes to know Robert Lebrun, the elder, single son of Madam Lebrun, the owner of the Pontelliers family cottage in Grand Isle.

Robert is known among the grand Isle vacationers as a man who chooses one woman each year. Edna’s emotional awakening was stimulated by Robert whose presence beat up her confidence allowing her to break out of her private inner world reinforcing a totally different angle of viewing her life. 

Intense emotions were foreign to Edna, but later on she started to allow her friends to touch her, something that she had not previously done. At first, the relationship between Robert and Edna is innocent. They mostly bathe in the sea or engage in an idle talk. They grow close, and Robert affections and attention inspire in Edna savor internal revelations. She feels more alive than ever before, and she starts to paint again as she did in her youth. she also learns to swim and becomes aware of her independence.

Edna and Robert never openly discussed their love for one another, but the time they spent alone together kindles memories in Edna of the dreams and desires of her youth. She becomes depressed at night with her husband and profoundly joyful during her moments of freedom, whether alone or with Robert.

Edna begins to realize for the first time, at the age of 28, that she is an individual. She feels like “one who awakes gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream” (p.32). After this self-discovery, Edna changes. She disregards her husband’s wishes and often ignores her children.

A crucial incident affected Edna’s life with her husband. After an evening of gambling with friends, Leonce, her husband, returns to their cottage in Grand Isle in a lively and talkative mood “it was eleven o’clock
Tragic Female Bildungsroman in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening.

that night when Mr. Pontellier returned from Klein’s hotel. He was in an excellent humour, in high spirits, and very talkative” (p.5). Edna is sleeping and his entrance awoke her. He was completely unaware that she exists as an individual separate form him. He ignored his wife and didn’t care that she is sleeping.

Chopin emphasizes Leonce’s selfish concern for his own needs and inability to see his wife as having a life separate from his own. Leonce, in his thoughts, complained that Edna “the sole object of his existence, evince(s) so little interest in things which [concern] so little his conversation” (p. 5). But in truth, Leonce has many other interests, one of which is his desire to spend his evenings with friends. However, he clearly expects Edna to have no interests other than her husband and children. Leonce is so completely focused on his own desire that initiates so many arguments with Edna concerning their children.

According to Leonce, “his wife failed in her duty toward their children” (p.8). This argument is not the first time Leonce has complained to Edna about her failure towards their children. Edna knows that she is not “mother-woman” (p.8), whom Chopin describes with the bird metaphor as “fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when only harm, real or imaginary, threatened [its] precious broad” (p.8). Chopin also describes the mother-women as “women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering” (p.8). Edna recognized that she is different form the other women who spent their summer at Grand Isle, doting on husbands and children. Edna was more complex than these women; she had desires and needs beyond those of other wives and mothers. Her strength is her independence.

During the summer days in Grand Isle, Edna spent her time whether with Adele or with Robert. Although Edna and Robert spend a great time together, no one, not even Edna, was suspicious of their relationship or Robert’s intentions when he laid his head on her arm while she was sketching, she “could not but believe it to be thoughtlessness on his; part yet that was no reason she should submit to it” (p.11). So far, his devotion to Edna had not been framed in mock romance 24, for which she is grateful. “it would have been unacceptable and annoying” to her (p.12).

Edna has a susceptibility to sensuality that is linked to romance, to the soft touch of the warm breeze and the swim. Robert insisted on Edna to come with him and swim, he said: “You mustn’t miss your bath. Come on, the water must be delicious; it will not hurt you. Come ” (p.12). At Robert’s insistence that Edna should go for a swim with him, she “Could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert” (p.13). She hears the Gulf’s “sonorous murmur... like a loving but imperative entreaty” (p.12).
Near the beach of Grand Isle, something happened to change Edna’s life. She “had attempted all summer to learn to swim” (p.26) but has not been successful. She “had received instructions from both the men and women; in some instances from the children” (p.26). But with her passions a flame, Edna is suddenly able to swim, and as a result, she realizes a new kind of freedom.

Chopin uses the concept of learning to swim as a motive of empowerment. It provides Edna with strength and joy. She experienced a new kind of joy, even she “could have shouted for joy” (p.27). In the water, she experienced a “feeling of exultation” (p.27) that makes her feel reckless and daring. She wants to swim farther than “a woman had swum before” (p.27). In the water, Edna is free of the conventions of her life. By swimming farther, she can dare more and risk more, but most importantly, she is alone, “she turned face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude” (p.27). She is not chained to her husband or her children, and she is not restrained by land, there is only water. The water with its buoyancy, feels different than it did when she was only able to splash about in the shallow parts. But now Edna experiences a sensual awareness of the water as it moves against her body and offers even more freedom than she had previously experienced.

Edna ignores everyone else and swims out alone, she “turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there” (p.27). Although Edna becomes afraid when “A quick vision of death smote her soul” (p.27) but she finds the strength to overcome her panic and swims back toward the shore. This indicates that Edna now is able to overcome the difficulties she may encounter. Her thoughts, personality, and point of view are totally changed. She can recognize life in a different way.

Swimming provides Edna with a new kind of freedom. Also the sea becomes a crucial element in awakening her desires to this new and joyful experience. She becomes more aware of her body and awakens to her own individuality. Thus, when she enters the sea for the first time and wears off her clothes, she wears off the social conventions of her society.

Edna used to swim with Robert in the beach of Grand Isle. Robert is coming to represent sensuality and passion for Edna. He invites her to sensual experiences and uses sensual language which awaken her hidden desires and thoughts. Robert’s words just like the Gulf’s “sonorous murmur” which reached her “like a loving but imperative entreaty” (p.12).

Adele, being a close friend of Edna, noticed that Edna is completely changed after meeting Robert. Edna starts to spend more time with Robert rather than her family. Therefore, Adele asks Robert to “let Mrs. Pontellier alone”(p.19) rather than continue with his devotion with Edna. With the instance of his mother, Robert decided to leave Grand Isle
and to join his family’s friend “Montel” (p.20) in Mexico to pursue business interests. Recognizing how intense the relationship between him and Edna has become, Robert honorably removes himself from Grand Isle to avoid consummating his forbidden love.

When Robert abandons Edna, she spends time alone in the ocean swimming, but she always returns to the shore. Her problem is that she cannot recapture the sense of self she felt when Robert used to accompany her, because she had to discover her own identity by herself. Consequently, Edna becomes obsessive about the memories of Robert, she said “Robert’s going had some way taken the brightness, the colour, the meaning out of everything” (p.47).

Robert’s departure affected so much Edna’s life. She again returns to her art as a painter and to listen to music. Music and, in particular, Mademoiselle Reisz play an important role in Edna’s self-realization and awakening. Mademoiselle Reisz draws out Edna’s deep appreciation for music and encourages her to listen and play music again. Edna is “fond of music” (p.25), she thought it was a way of evoking pictures in her mind. She is also attuned to music that, when she hears certain pieces, she is able to conjure images of life that interpret the music. She even describes images of a naked man:

> when she heard it [Reisz’s music] there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him (p.25)

Edna was that bird, who has now been captured by a man, he is her husband. This indicates that she is still tied to her husband’s harsh authority.

Edna’s response to Reisz’s music is sensual. Even more, when she hears Reisz’s music as if she is emerging from the depths of her body. She experiences passions that are “aroused within her soul, swaying, lashing it” (p.25). Even when Edna hears Reisz’s music she “trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her” (p.25).

Reisz’s music is the catalyst that completes Edna’s awakening. In addition to that, this music is the basic element which helps Edna to find out herself, to rebel against her society’s conventions, and it made her aware of her situation as an individual.

When Robert returns New Orleans, he finally expresses openly his feelings for Edna and she declares her love for him:

> I love you...only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-
long, stupid dream... Now you are here, we shall love each other. We shall be everything to each other (p.111)

He also admits his love for her, but reminds her that they cannot possibly be together, since she is the wife of another man: “Because you were not free; you were Leonce Pontellier’s wife” (p.110).

Edna explains to Robert her nearly established realization for independence, denying the rights of her husband over her and explaining how she and Robert can live together happily, ignoring everything extraneous to their relationship. But despite his love for Edna, Robert feels unable to enter into such affair, because it will be a selfishness to destroy Edna’s family.

Robert knows that their relationship cannot end as they wish, thus he begs Edna to remain with her husband. He left for her a note, saying: “I love you. Good-by-because I love you” (p.115). This acknowledgement leads Edna to undergo the final and tragic revelation of her awakening. Now Edna realizes that she is still trapped and tied to the society’s conventions and its expectations.

After this tragic realization, Edna left New Orleans and returns back to Grand Isle, the place where she first awoke to love and to the life’s promises. She comes to rest, but first, she wants to take a short swim in the ocean. By returning to the water, Edna returns to the freedom. In the water Edna is finally an individual who controls her own life. She feels power and control while swimming. Her choice of returning to Grand Isle is an escape to a time when she felt free of the burden of life, her husband, the children and even Robert.

Edna rejects her society and has already made up her mind to drown herself. She considers all her options and choices and makes sure to leave no traces of her intentions. She goes with her plan and “she had done all the thinking which was necessary” (p.117), she “went on and on” (p.118) thinking of her children, husband and Robert. She swims far away form the shore “and her strength was gone”(p.118), she looked to the distance and finally “sank again” (p.118) and dies.

Committing suicide is the consequence of Edna’s choice to immerse herself in the sea that is the only place she can transcend her own limits as well as her society’s. By dying, Edna finally gives herself the freedom she desires but cannot achieve in life, and at the same time she saves her family’s reputation.

3. Conclusion

It is perceived that Kate Chopin in The Awakening elucidates the problems women face. Chopin describes the central idea of Edna
Pontellier who seeks self-identity. She realizes her position in the universe as an individual in her community.

In the shape of a bildungsroman, *The Awakening* focuses on Edna’s difficulties of achieving maturation and inner development while constrained by the limitations inherent in being female in the society. Chopin portrays Edna’s struggle to find her female role in her society. Edna’s search is filled with a series of awakenings and self-realizations as in swimming, music and falling in love with Robert.

Once Edna embarks upon her quest for independence and self-fulfillment, she finds herself at odds with the expectations and conventions of society. She is required to subvert her own needs to the needs of her family as well as the others. The fulfilling of her desires could essentially cause social ostracism for her and her family, yet she is unable to find repose in her life. Thus, the final solution to her awakening to her desires is suicide. Suicide is an act of ultimate submission to the power of social traditions.

Besides, it can be concluded that Edna’s suicide is perceived as her rebellious assertion of her own will, because she refuses to be tied down and sacrifice her life for the sake of maintaining her integrity and independence. Although it is a tragic action, it is a self-determined one.

**Notes**

2. Buckley, p.10.
8. Buckley, p.20.
15. Toth, p.108. Creoles saw themselves as different from Anglo-Americans and maintained cultural traditions passed down from their French and Spanish ancestors. They enjoyed gambling, entertainment, and social gatherings and spent a great deal of time in these activities.
17. Kate Chopin, The Awakening and other Short Stories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 13. Subsequent references to the text will be to this edition and only page number will be cited parenthetically with the text.
18. Toth, p.271.
23. Toth, p.120.
Tragic Female Bildungsroman in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*.

References


