

A Stylistic Analysis of Transitivity Processes and Their Effect in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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The Awakening written by Kate Chopin depicts Edna Pontellier and her struggle between her increasingly unorthodox views on femininity and sexual desires with the prevailing social attitudes under the American South circumstance. This paper will deal with the linguistic representation of the female character Edna in the novel, mainly through a discourse analyzing methodology based on systemic functional linguistics.

Keywords: *The Awakening*, systemic functional linguistics, transitivity, consciousness

Introduction

As Corse and Westervelt (2002) foreground, *The Awakening* fell under great critique from the 19th century both for its subject matter and its point of view of challenging a patriarchal literary tradition. In this incidence, reviewers frequently claimed that the erotic content and sexual description of this novel was disturbing and distasteful for the male gatekeepers, which can be seen in the case of Boston Herald (1899, p. 7) and Chicago Times-Herald (1899, p. 9) that emphasized *The Awakening* as “most unpleasant”, “poison”, and referred to Chopin as a writer of “sex fiction”. After being severely critiqued, ironically, Chopin was turning to a male mentor Maupassant who focuses on a male-centered perspective for help and it is noteworthy that Chopin's subversive feminist lies in the emulation of Maupassantian (Corse & Westervelt, 2002). Hence, overall, although Chopin subscribes to Maupassant's male gaze as well as male-centered perspective for creative inspiration, this paper will argue that *The Awakening* is an indictment of the male gaze and promotion of female autonomy and self-consciousness in relationships under the bondage of severe conventions in the society.

Background

Set in New Orleans and on the Louisiana Gulf coast at the end of the 19th century, the plot centers on Edna Pontellier and her struggle between her increasingly unorthodox views on femininity and sexual desires with the prevailing social attitudes under the American South circumstance. In this case, it is worth noting that New Orleans, considered as “the most exotic of American cities” (Cowan, 1983), situates as the social context of this

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story. Acting as a multitude of different cultures due to its colonial history, New Orleans underlines strict regulations including severe conventions for women and the established ideology of patriarchy to unify the society since people in New Orleans usually lead a willful and flirtatious life (Cowan, 1983), which also can be seen in Chopin's portrayal of various restrictions concerning Edna's daily life. Furthermore, with the launch of the first-wave feminist movement in America addressing the negative condition of women including married women's ownership of property and lack of right to vote, New Orleans women began to fight against the strict rules in the society which can be seen in the first stirrings of the suffrage movement in New Orleans (Culley, 1994). Thus, influenced by the feminist movement, Chopin sketched Edna as a rebellious woman in *The Awakening* and achieved her largest exploration of feminine consciousness in this story.

Overall, to explore the promotion of female autonomy and self-consciousness, Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics and the terminology of the transitivity model will be applied. As Halliday (1967, p. 199) foregrounds, this model is primarily concerned with "the set of options related to cognitive content" and deals with "feelings, thoughts, and perceptions", which can be employed in different discourses. Therefore, a linguistic analysis of Chopin's texts will demonstrate how the female character gradually dominates the action of the narrative and attains individual autonomy in sexuality through the frequent employment of material and verbal processes, whilst the male characters are threatened and become more powerless when the female character increasingly commands power in their relationships. These features of transitivity will reveal the female character's three episodes of awakening and exhibit how the woman becomes increasingly aware of her self-consciousness and achieves a dominant position in the relationships. Similar to Nguyen's (2018) analysis of Master's short story *The Lang Women* through Halliday's theory on transitivity, this paper will feature three extracts from Chopin's text and break them down into clauses as the "fundamental units of grammar" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 10). According to Halliday's (2004) distinction between material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes, the distribution of processes between the male and female character with particular reference to these terminologies will be analyzed in order to evaluate how Chopin grants agency to his characters and represents Edna's gradual awakening.

Analysis

Extract 1 is taken from the first half of *The Awakening*, in which Chopin depicts Edna's first episode of awakening when Mr. Pontellier reproached Edna for not taking good care of their children and no sense of responsibility of being a mother. Overall, this extract comprises a total of 24 clauses, including 15 clauses in which Mrs. Pontellier appears as a grammatical participant, which constitute 63% of the total number of clauses in the data. When addressing the participant of the action performed in these 15 existing processes, it is noteworthy that there is a high frequency of describing Edna as "Mrs. Pontellier" (Chopin, 2014, p. 51) rather than her first name, which depicts Edna as subordinated to her husband Leonce Pontellier without individual identities. As Chopin introduces at the beginning of the story, Leonce is portrayed as a middle-age married businessman in the 1890s New Orleans, who reaps enough money to sustain his big family and establish his fame, possesses a large set of properties, and enjoys the exertion of power and his family and servants' worship, while Edna is simply referred to as Leonce's wife—"Mrs. Pontellier" (Chopin, 2014, p. 51) with good appearance and an incompetent mother. This implies an unequal power relation in their marriage since the male, as the head of the family, is represented in a dominant position upholding absolute power whereas the female tends to be possessed by her husband as private property and restricted to marriage and motherhood.

Similarly, this also can be seen in the case of the striking absence of verbal processes in this excerpt. As Table 1 demonstrates, out of 24 existing clauses in which Edna is a grammatical participant in this analyzed extract, 13 are material processes and two are mental processes. Under this circumstance, the nonverbal detachment between Edna and her husband is evident since Edna is mistakenly accused of disregarding her sick children by Leonce but she surprisingly keeps silent and even does not retort or explain, which further reflects an unbalanced power relation in this traditional marriage in 1890s' New Orleans. More specifically, it is noteworthy that Edna's thoughts, desires, and emotions are suppressed by the absolute power of Leonce and the strict restrictions for a woman in 19th-century America in this instance since a woman is asked to be faithful to her husband and is never excused if she neglects her duty as a wife and a mother (Culley, 1994). Furthermore, Chopin's frequent use of material actions, which acts as the main tool of characterization, also needs to be sufficiently detailed. Firstly, Chopin employs a variety of verbs including "slipped", "went", and "sat", as a representation of Edna's physical actions after being reproached by Leonce.

Table 1

The Transitivity Representation of Edna in Extract 1

Types of processes	Roles of Edna	Frequency of distribution	Percentage distribution (%)
Material	Actor	13	87
Mental	Sensor	2	13
/	Total	15	100

Edna, as an actor in this example, is sketched by Chopin as a slightly rebellious woman who stands in sheer contrast with the daily rituals for a married woman in the 1890s New Orleans. As Culley (1994) foregrounded, there is endless etiquette for a woman in that society which suffocates every female, for example, a woman should soothe her work-weary husband every day and meet any need he demands unconditionally. However, in this case, Edna tends to break these conventional rules since she ignores her husband's criticism, remains silent on her husband's request, and leaves the room straightforwardly without asking for permission, which potentially can be seen as a starting point of awakening. Secondly, in the data under investigation, it is notable that the majority of the activities performed by Edna comprise attention given to her passive moods through a series of acts and poses such as "wiped (her eyes)", "thrust (her face into the bend of her arms)", and "dry (her face, her eyes, and her arms)" (Chopin, 2014, p. 51). By so doing, Edna's internal acts of resisting her husband's control can be revealed since she seems to have her own emotions and thoughts towards unfair treatment in the marriage rather than being mentally submissive to her husband, even though it appears to be weak and powerless. Moreover, apart from Chopin's dominant choice of material processes in a series of verbs, the use of independent clauses in this excerpt also needs to be evaluated sufficiently according to Halliday's transitivity model. It is apparent that the description of Edna's actions is lifted from a series of complex sentences with multiple short and abrupt clauses, whereas Chopin utilizes a simple construction in reference to Leonce. In this case, such frequent use of short clauses grants more detail to Edna's characterization, which not only reflects Edna's fluctuating moods towards her husband and marriage literally, but also serves to create tension by moving the narrative along more quickly, and forces the reader to become expectant of Edna's gradual awakening, such as being more rebellious and defying social conventions in various ways.

Extract 1 ascertains that the textual reality of Edna primarily consists of material processes, which illustrates the female's first episode of awakening. Regarding Extract 2, in addition to the predominant use of material

processes, Chopin also introduces Edna's mental existence and consciousness states, which can be interpreted as the sexual awakening of Edna after she had affairs with Alcee Arobin.

The narrative begins to depict both Edna's appearance and typical appearance-related activities, such as spreading her arms, posing and acting provocatively with her body, and this is a notable feature of Extract 2. When describing Edna's appearance, Chopin's dominant choice of Existential processes in Edna's text reveals her potential feminine beauty and creates rather an intimate ambiance to the readers. In this case, all of the descriptions of Edna comprise attention given to her own body, her shoulders, and her skin with feminine decorations such as "a soft fall of lace", which portrays Edna as an attractive female who possesses potential body appeal and sexual attractiveness since lace symbolically represents for sex appeal and feminine attractiveness and is referred to as more erotic than nudity according to Perniola (1989). Further, Chopin's assignment of Edna in a series of Existential clauses also constructs a romantic and intimate atmosphere at an intuitive level, which also forces the readers to be aware of the sexual awakening of Edna in this extract.

Similarly, Edna's sexual awakening also can be seen in Chopin's frequent employment of material processes. In the data under investigation, Edna's textual world is predominantly constructed in terms of material clauses, which constitutes 60% of the total number of clauses in the data. As Table 2 illustrates, out of 10 existing processes in which Edna is a grammatical participant in Extract 2, six are material processes which helps to display the nature of her actions through portraying the interaction between Edna and Arobin and representing appearance-related activities, such as leaning her head, closing her eyes, spreading her arms. As an actor in these examples, Edna is sketched by Chopin as applying direct influence on her body, especially her head, eyes, and arms. By doing so, Edna appears to be much more confident and relaxed with these body poses and physical acts and becomes more proud of her appearance compared to Extract 1 since she is able to stretch her body in front of Arobin naturally and tries to present herself positively and charmingly to Arobin through employing different physical positions. More specifically, Chopin's description of this series of physical acts and poses further demonstrates Edna's feeling of self-consciousness in physical since she becomes more aware of herself and her sexual attractiveness to males. Apart from describing Edna's body-posing activities, Chopin also depicts the interaction between Edna and Arobin in several material clauses as can be seen below.

Table 2

The Material Clauses of Edna in Extract 2

Types of processes	Roles of Edna	Examples
Material	Actor	(She) closed her eyes sensitively. (She) spread her arms....
/	Total	6

In this incidence, although Arobin tends to be the dominant participant of the actions performed in the analyzed excerpt, there remain two existing material clauses in which Edna is a grammatical participant when "she clasped his hand, holding his lips to hers". Obviously, Edna frees her long-repressed sexual awareness and becomes increasingly aware of her natural desires to Arobin when Arobin desperately shows his admiration to her and fulfills her sexual awakening. By doing so, she is no longer a passive female who is asked to submit to males unconditionally; instead, she attains individual autonomy in sexuality by controlling Arobin's physical position and becomes more powerful and rebellious to frees her natural desires and sexual passions.

In addition to describing Edna's activities in Material clauses, Chopin also sketched Edna's sexual awakening in several mental and behavioral clauses where Edna acts as either sensor or behavior. In the data under investigation, Edna is involved in one mental process and three behavioral processes as can be seen below:

Table 3

The Mental and Behavioral Processes in Extract 2

Types of processes	Roles of Edna	Examples
Mental	Sensor	She liked the touch of his fingers through her hair.
Behavioral	Behaver	She only looked at him.
		She looked into his eyes.
		(She looked into his eyes) and smiled.

Clearly, Edna is depicted by Chopin as "liked" with an emotion of joyfulness when she had affairs with Alcee Arobin (see Table 3). Instead of feeling shameful or regrettable, she finds pleasure in being touched by Arobin since he owns "a perceptual smile in this eyes, which seldom fail to awaken a corresponding cheerfulness in any one" (Chopin, 2014, p. 78) who stirs Edna's awakening in sexuality and sets Edna's sexual desires free. Similarly, this also can be seen in the case of the behavioral clause "smiled" which emphasizes her feelings of enjoyment and further reveals her awareness of erotic impulses towards Arobin. Moreover, by using behavioral processes "looked at" and "looked into", Chopin directs Edna's gaze at Robin's eyes—very sexually related parts, which highlights Edna's female sexual passions and needs since Arobin means something sensual and attractive. Further, "looked at" and "looked into" someone's eyes also appear to be very direct behaviors for females in 1890s' New Orleans since a woman is locked at home and centered on domesticity (Dyer, 1993), which potentially portrays Edna as a rebellious woman who surpasses the traditional rules and conventions.

In addition, Extract 3 is taken from the last part of *The Awakening*, which can be seen as the climax of Edna's awakening when Robert came back from Mexico. Obviously, Robert is portrayed as a fascinating youth and a romantic lover for Edna at the beginning of this story who brings Edna romantic longings and sexual passions and makes Edna become increasingly dependent on him. However, he still leaves Edna unexpectedly and proceeds to Mexico individually. Overall, this extract comprises a total of 27 clauses, including 14 clauses in which Edna acts as a grammatical participant and 12 clauses performed by Robert, which can be interpreted mainly through Chopin's dominant choice of material and verbal processes. Here, Chopin's established use of material processes to grant power to Edna is continued, alongside an emerging focus on her dialogue.

When it comes to Chopin's description of the interaction between Edna and Robert, out of 17 existing material clauses, 10 clauses in which Edna acts as an active actor constitute 59% of the total number of material clauses in the data. Compared to the earlier passage, Edna is significantly more passive than the male characters since there is a striking absence of physical interaction between Edna and Mr. Pontellier in Extract 1 and there solely remains two out of six material clauses (33%) in which Edna participates in physical interaction with Arobin in Extract 2. Hence, Edna becomes more active as being the actor of the material actions in this extract, which needs to be sufficiently detailed. As can be seen in the below examples, Edna appears to become more powerful and vigorous when showing her admiration to Robert as Chopin details how she kisses Robert through a series of physical positions and poses such as "leaned over", "put her hand up to his face and shoulder", and "took his face between her hands". Specifically, as an actor in this case, Edna is sketched by Chopin as applying direct influence on Robert since Robert becomes the goal of her sexualizing actions, which reveals that Robert's

body is submissive to Edna and further constructs Edna's leading role in this relationship as she appears to command the power and be in charge. Moreover, by using material processes "kissed", "put her hands up", and "pressed", Chopin directs Edna's physical acts mainly at Robert's sexually related body parts including his cheek, shoulder, forehead, and lips, which emphasizes Edna's long-repressed sexual passions and desires since she becomes increasingly energetic and "generates an even fiercer, more overpowering love for Robert" (Chopin, 2014, p. 104). In this case, Edna can be seen as a brave and rebellious woman who struggles for freedom physically and tries to attain individual autonomy in sexuality in the 19th century when Victorian culture prevails and sexuality is self-sacrificing for women since a good woman is asked to be passionless (see Table 4). Thus, due to Chopin's openness about female sexuality, *The Awakening* was unacceptable and highly criticized during that period.

Table 4

The Verbal Processes in Edna's Dialogue in Extract 3

Roles of Edna	Verbiage (quote)	Purpose	Target
Sayer	But not writing to me.	Statement	Robert
	You have been a very, very foolish boy...setting me free!	Exclamation	
	I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not.	Statement	
	I give myself where I choose.	Statement	
	If he were to say, "Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours," I should laugh at you both.	Statement	

Apart from Chopin's dominant employment of material processes in this text, Edna's textual world also can be interpreted in terms of verbal process since Edna's long dialogue is also a notable feature in this extract. Generally speaking, Extract 3 features six examples of verbal processes: Two are performed by Edna and four by Robert. Although in 67% of the dialogue Edna exists as the target, it is noteworthy that Chopin's frequent and successive use of short clauses in Edna's dialogue also grants more detail to Edna's characterization. In this case, the limitation of such numerical analysis can be seen as it does not account for the complexities of action in context, which could contribute to an inaccurate conclusion about the characters. Statistically, Edna appears to be the weaker character according to the percentage distribution (33%) in this extract while Chopin's successive use of short stative utterances in Edna's dialogue in a whole paragraph potentially grants power to Edna to show her brave resistance to the traditional culture of passive femininity. As demonstrated in Table 4, Edna's dialogue is mainly comprised of statements and exclamatory sentences with strong emotions, which declares that she is no longer the possession of Mr. Pontellier and she owns individual autonomy to do whatever she chooses rather than passively submitting to males. Under this circumstance, the vital use of statements and exclamatory sentences portrays Edna as a firm believer of her values who is increasingly aware of her self-consciousness and persists with her standards both physically and spiritually since there remain no quotations of questions in this extract. Moreover, she refers to Robert as "a very, very foolish boy, wasting time dreaming of impossible things" with a repetition of adverbs of degree "very" and an exclamation mark, which not only significantly highlights her negative attitudes towards the dominant culture of hegemonic masculinity and the traditional rules and conventions that repress women's passions and desire in the 19th century, but also establishes her leading role and dominant position in the relationship since Robert is considered as "foolish" and daydreaming and is addressed as "a boy" rather than a man from Edna's point of view. In other words, Robert appears to be immature from Edna's point of view in this incidence according to her emancipated values since she adopts a rather doting

voice when referring to Robert and responding to his previous utterances to indicate her negative attitudes, which potentially ascertains her fierce love towards Robert and further establishes that she commands the power in this relationship. Thus, in this extract, Edna awakens both mentally and physically in contrast to the previously analyzed excerpts and she presents her initiative towards males through speaking out against the severe conventions and prejudices towards women bravely rather than being silent or submit to men unconditionally, which can be seen as the climax of Edna's awakening in this story.

Conclusion

To summarize, this analysis of Chopin's distribution of transitive processes reveals how he uses language to portray Edna's gradual awakening and increasingly grant power to his female character. Through the dominant use of verbal processes and increasing employment of material processes concerning the interaction between Edna and those male characters, Edna ultimately awakens both mentally and physically and promotes female autonomy and self-consciousness in relationships.

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