

Edna's Pigeon House: A Heterotopia of Freedom and Constraint in *The Awakening*

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Abstract: Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, this paper examines the pigeon house in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as a space of both freedom and constraint. The pigeon house exhibits spatial juxtaposition, heterochrony, and a dual nature of openness and closure, allowing Edna Pontellier to temporarily resist societal norms and reconstruct her identity through art and social interaction. However, as a heterotopia, it remains entangled with the patriarchal order it seeks to defy. The absence of a sustainable mirror image, the illusion of spiritual independence, and its physical proximity to her former home ultimately expose the limits of Edna's awakening, highlighting the difficulty of achieving true self-liberation within a still-dominant power structure.

Keywords: Kate Chopin; *The Awakening*; heterotopia; space and power

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Introduction

The Awakening, written by Kate Chopin, is a work that combines significance and controversy. In this novel, Edna Pontellier moves from the confining spaces of her domestic life to more liberating environments like Grand Isle and her own "pigeon house," reflecting her solo journey towards self-discovery and independence. Over recent years, many critics have turned their attention to the study of the spatial locations. For example, Donald Ringe, in her article "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*", points out that different places have different effects on Edna, especially the ocean and the urban area (587). In this essay, I will further focus on the significance of space, primarily employing Foucault's theory of "heterotopia" to interpret the role of the pigeon house for Edna.

1. The Heterotopic Characteristics of the Pigeon House

Michel Foucault introduced the concept of "heterotopia" during a lecture in 1967, as part of his broader exploration of spatiality and its relationship to society and power. He proposed "heterotopia" to describe real spaces that exist within society but function in ways that are fundamentally different from the norm (*Of Other Spaces* 24). These spaces are both physical and symbolic, and they challenge conventional spatial and social order.

In this novel, Edna moved out of her husband's house and into her own pigeon house, which is imbued with heterotopic characteristics. Firstly, the pigeon house exhibits spatial juxtaposition, a key feature of heterotopia. Unlike her previous home, which was part of the conventional domestic space prescribed by society, the pigeon house stands as a distinct and separate entity. It is a small, self-contained unit that allows Edna to physically distance herself from the social and familial constraints of her previous life. This spatial separation creates a parallel world within the larger social context, where Edna can explore her own desires and independence. For example, in the pigeon house, she is free to entertain guests on her own terms, such as her artist friend Mademoiselle Reisz, without the social obligations that her marital home imposed. This juxtaposition of spaces allows the pigeon house to function as a space of otherness, where the rules and expectations of the outside world are suspended.

Secondly, the pigeon house embodies heterochrony, or the presence of multiple temporalities within the same space. For Edna, the pigeon house represents a break from the linear progression of her life as a wife and mother. Here, she is able to reclaim her time and use it for self-reflection and personal growth. The space becomes a temporal refuge where she can pause the demands of her previous roles and explore new possibilities. The novel describes how Edna spends her time in the pigeon house painting, reading, and thinking, activities that are not merely leisurely but are part of her awakening. This space allows her to exist outside the conventional timeline of her society, creating a unique temporal bubble where she can redefine herself.

Lastly, the pigeon house's heterotopic nature is evident in its duality of openness and closure. On one hand, the house is closed off from the larger society, providing Edna with a sense of privacy and seclusion. She can shut out the expectations and judgments of others, creating a space where she can be truly herself. On the other hand, the pigeon house is also open in the sense that it allows for new connections and experiences. It becomes a space where Edna can meet and interact with people who challenge her and inspire her, such as Robert Lebrun and Mademoiselle Reisz. This openness to new influences and ideas is crucial to her awakening. The pigeon house thus functions as a heterotopia by being both a closed, private sanctuary and an open, transformative space.

In conclusion, the pigeon house exemplifies a heterotopia through its spatial juxtaposition, heterochrony, and dual nature of openness and closure. It provides Edna with a distinct space to break free from societal constraints, allowing her to explore her identity and desires. This unique environment enables her to reclaim her time, engage in self-reflection, and form meaningful connections.

2.The Subversive Efficacy of the Pigeon House

In *The Awakening*, Edna's private spaces mainly include the Pontellier cottage at Grand Isle and the Pontellier house at New Orleans. These two places are all controlled by her husband, Mr. Pontellier. He has a very strong desire to control the house because he believes that everything within the house, including Edna, belongs to him. Edna is treated not equitably and is regarded as an object by her husband in this house. When Edna moves to the pigeon house, the small house pleases her so that "there was a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual"(Chopin 152). In the pigeon house, she achieved the reconstruction of social relationships and the awakening of her self-awareness.

The pigeon house functions as a Foucauldian "space of resistance," (*Of Other Spaces* 26) where Edna begins to reconstruct her social relationships and assert her independence. At the heart of this transformation is the dinner party she hosts, which serves as a microcosm of her defiance against societal norms. Edna's decision to hold the party in the pigeon house is a deliberate act of spatial defiance. Traditionally, such gatherings would take place in the grandeur of her husband's larger home, a space imbued with patriarchal authority. However, by choosing the pigeon house, Edna claims a space that is distinctly her own. She decorates it with "a few odds and ends of furniture" and "some Japanese prints" (Chopin 151), creating an environment that reflects her personal tastes rather than adhering to the expectations of her social class. This act of spatial reclamation allows her to invite guests on her own terms, free from the constraints of her husband's social obligations. During the party, Edna's interactions with her guests reveal her growing sense of autonomy. She engages in lively conversations, sharing her thoughts and opinions without the need to conform to the submissive role expected of a wife. Her behavior challenges the traditional social hierarchy, as she asserts herself as an equal participant in the discourse. This is evident when she discusses her art with Robert and Arobin, two men who are otherwise accustomed to dominating conversations. Edna's defiance is further underscored by her decision to wear a simple white gown, a stark contrast to the elaborate dresses worn by other women, symbolizing her rejection of societal expectations.

The pigeon house also becomes a crucible for Edna's awakening of self-awareness, showing in her artistic expression. It serves as a sanctuary where she can explore her passions and desires without the scrutiny of her husband or society. Here, Edna devotes herself to painting, an activity that allows her to channel her emotions and assert her individuality. Her dedication to art is a form of resistance against the societal expectation that women should prioritize domestic duties over personal pursuits. Edna's art becomes a medium through which she can express her innermost feelings and challenge the notion that women's lives should be confined to the domestic sphere. The pigeon house, as a boundary between Edna's private world and the external society, enables her to extend her influence beyond the confines of her immediate surroundings. From this vantage point, Edna begins to assert her presence in ways that were previously unimaginable. She refuses to adhere to the "reception day" tradition, a weekly social event that was meant to showcase her as a dutiful wife and hostess. Instead, she uses the pigeon

house as a base to forge new connections and redefine her social role. This is exemplified by her interactions with Mademoiselle Reisz, who comments that “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth”. (Chopin 141) Edna’s journey in the pigeon house is marked by a growing sense of self-determination and a refusal to be defined by societal norms. Through her actions, she reclaims her space, asserts her independence, and begins to carve out a life that is true to her own desires and aspirations.

The pigeon house, as a unique topographical space, is full of rich meanings for Edna’s growth in her self-realization. The place has its own meanings. It is the spot that Edna creates and offers on her own hands and still the place in which she keeps on her longing of art. She has her tries at her self-realization with her tries used on the small house.

3.The Limits of Awakening Within the Pigeon House

In this novel, the pigeon house serves as a heterotopia, a space that both reveals and ultimately prevents Edna Pontellier’s awakening. The pigeon house, initially perceived as a haven for Edna’s self-discovery, ultimately exposes its tragic inability to sever ties with the dominant social order. This aligns with Foucault’s assertion that heterotopias are inevitably reabsorbed into the broader network of power. (*Discipline and Punish* 301) Despite its initial promise as a space of resistance, the pigeon house fails to provide a sustainable alternative to the patriarchal norms that govern Edna’s life. As Chopin describes, Edna’s move to the pigeon house is a “declaration of independence” (Chopin 132), yet this independence is illusory, as the space itself remains entangled in the very system it seeks to defy.

The absence of a viable mirror image for Edna further underscores the limitations of the pigeon house as a heterotopia. Mademoiselle Reisz, the independent artist, could have offered Edna a new model of selfhood. However, Edna remains fixated on Robert as the ultimate reference for her self-actualization. When Robert refuses to enter the heterotopia of the pigeon house, Edna experiences what Lacan might describe as a “collapse of the symbolic order” (Lacan 154). Without the validation of the Other, Edna’s subjectivity falters. Foucault emphasizes the role of the mirror in heterotopias, suggesting that these spaces function by allowing individuals to reconstruct their real selves through virtual means. In Edna’s case, Robert’s withdrawal disrupts this mechanism, leaving her without a means to affirm her identity.

Edna’s spiritual independence is another illusion exposed by the pigeon house. The small home still talks about news over these. It is a small room just “two steps away” (Chopin 137) from her large home on the street. The closeness of the home to her house implies that she is not capable to stop all her connections to her previous life. The narrowness of the home shows more an escape and trouble than a happy understanding of her liberation. Her situation decides her selection. Therefore, Wolff thinks that “this gesture to independence can be understood as part of a relatively great hope to regress” (462). The behavior made Edna into a more independent abyss of self-centered and concealment.

In addition, the sea emerges as the ultimate heterotopia in *The Awakening*, symbolizing both freedom and death. As the pigeon house becomes increasingly penetrated by the disciplinary mechanisms of society with gossip and ethical condemnation, Edna turns to the sea as her final refuge. Foucault describes the sea as an “unregulated heterotopia,” a space that resists the imposition of order (*Of Other Spaces* 24). For Edna, the sea represents the ultimate act of heterotopic practice - death. By immersing herself in the infinite waters, she dissolves her body and escapes the spatial markers that define her identity. Therefore, it is suggested that the pigeon house, as a heterotopia, cannot enable Edna to achieve self-liberation.

In conclusion, the pigeon house, as a heterotopia, reveals the profound limitations of Edna’s awakening. Despite its initial promise as a space of resistance and self-discovery, it ultimately fails to provide a sustainable alternative to the patriarchal order. The absence of a viable mirror image, the illusion of spiritual independence, and the eventual

need to escape to the sea all highlight the pigeon house's inability to fully liberate Edna. While it offers a temporary space for her to explore her identity, it remains entangled in the previous system it seeks to challenge, thus reinforcing the inescapability of the power structures that govern her life.

4. Conclusion

In summary, through Foucault's heterotopia theory, we see the pigeon house in *The Awakening* is a unique space with dual qualities. It shows spatial juxtaposition, heterochrony, and a mix of openness and closure, offering Edna a place to break free from traditional constraints. Here, she reconstructs social relationships and awakens self-consciousness via activities like hosting parties and pursuing art. However, the pigeon house can't fully disconnect from the dominant social order. Its limitations, such as the lack of a viable mirror image and the illusion of spiritual independence, reveal that Edna's awakening within it is incomplete, ultimately highlighting the inescapable influence of patriarchal power.

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