

The Signifier of Sound in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, a classic of 19th-century American women's literature, depicts the predicament of women in the late 19th century and their spiritual awakening. This paper explores the role of "sound" as a significant signifier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, analyzing how sound constructs the meaning of the work and reveals the complexity of Edna Pontellier's awakening. It examines three dimensions: the social codification of verbal sounds, which reflects the dominance and oppression of male voices in patriarchal society as well as the resonance and divergence among female voices; the metaphorical system of non-verbal sounds, including natural sounds symbolizing freedom, confinement, and fate, and bodily sounds revealing repressed desires and inner conflicts; and the interplay of multiple voices, which forms a polyphonic structure to present Edna's struggle between social constraints and individual freedom. The study concludes that sound, as a rich signifier, not only enriches the novel's artistic expressions but also reveals the predicaments and rebellious spirit of 19th-century women, deepening the feminist themes of the work.

Keywords: Sound Signifiers; *The Awakening*; Verbal Sounds; Non-Verbal Sounds; Female Awakening.

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Introduction

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is regarded as a classic work of 19th-century American female literature for its depiction of the plight of women in the late 19th century and their spiritual awakening. During Edna Pontellier's journey towards awakening, "sound" plays a role far beyond that of a mere physical phenomenon. It is not only a medium for communication, but also a powerful "signifier" system that carries the social power structure, internal conflicts within individuals, as well as resistance and liberation. This paper analyzes from three aspects---the social coding of verbal sound, the metaphorical system of non-verbal sound, and the interweaving of multiple voices---how the sound symbols in *Awakening* construct the meaning of the work, and reveal the complexity and inevitability of Edna's awakening.

1. Verbal Sounds as Social Codification

Verbal sounds, as the most direct material form of human communication, are marked by social codes in *The Awakening*. The power structure of the patriarchal society constructs a symbolic system to regulate gender relations through the pitch, intensity, and content of speech sounds. Male voices, with their dominant position, exert oppression, while female voices seek the possibility of self-expression through resonance and divergence.

1.1 Dominance and Oppression of Male Voices

In the work, the male characters' voices always hold a dominant position, serving as an important tool to maintain the patriarchal order. "Edna sustains the patriarchal disciplines from her husband Leonce in her daily life. As a matter of fact, his dominant disciplinary power is often displayed through his discourse" (Xu 34). His comments and demands towards Edna always revolve around the social roles of "wife" and "mother". When Edna shows enthusiasm for painting, Leonce Pontellier's words are filled with obvious disdain and suppression: "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (Chopin 101). Such words not only deny Edna's personal pursuits but also, through the strong tone of his voice, confine women's value within the family, directly oppressing women's self-awareness. Foucault affirms that "disciplinary power can be achieved by discourse because disciplinary power gives discourse strength and force, and the discourse is symbol of disciplinary power because disciplinary power can be expressed by the discourse" ("The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse

on Language” 126). Leonce Pontellier’s words use the social role coding of “wife and mother” to discipline women within the family domain.

Robert Lebrun’s voice, however, is even more deceptive. His romantic and sweet talk and praise for Edna seem to focus on her individuality, but in fact, they are emotional projections within the patriarchal aesthetic framework. When he flees out of fear of social pressure and leaves behind “a piece of paper that lay in the lamplight: ‘I love you. Good-by—because I love you’” (Chopin 177), the fragile nature of his romantic words and his ultimate denial of female subjectivity are fully exposed.

Dr. Mandelet’s voice represents the collusion of scientific rationality and moral authority. As a representative of social authority, he, under the guise of “concern”, actually attempts to pathologize Edna’s awakening behaviors, thereby re-incorporating her into social norms. When Edna’s behavior deviates from traditional norms, Dr. Mandelet tells Leonce Pontellier, “Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism---a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them” (Chopin 116). He uses medical discourse to strengthen men’s mental control over women. By using terms such as “peculiar and delicate organism”, it incorporates women’s transgressive behavior into the binary framework of “normal and abnormal”, allowing the oppression of patriarchy to permeate Edna’s life in a more “reasonable” way.

These male voices, whether forceful or gentle, authoritative or romantic, collectively form an impenetrable network of discourse, whose core function is to define women and limit their possibility of crossing boundaries. This is confirmed by the French thinker Michel Foucault’s discussion on the relationship between discourse and power: “that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its change events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (“The Order of Discourse” 52).

1.2 Resonance and Divergence in Female Voices

Compared with the dominance of male voices, the female voices in *The Awakening* present a complex state, featuring both resonance among the same sex and deviation from traditional norms.

Edna’s awakening process is a journey of her seeking and attempting to emit “her own voice”. In the early stages, her speech often manifests as silence, whispering, or appropriate responses in social situations that meet the expectations of a “good wife and mother”, which is a form of compliance with social norms. However, as her self-awareness begins to develop, her speech started to exhibit “distortions”. Her direct rebuttal to her husband’s orders---“She completely abandoned her Tuesdays at home, and did not return the visits of those who had called upon her” (Chopin 101) and “Without even waiting for an answer from her husband regarding his opinion or wishes in the matter, Edna hastened her preparations for quitting her home on Esplanade Street and moving into the little house around the block” (Chopin 142), the genuine emotions she expressed when discussing her personal dreams with Robert, and especially the emotionally charged expressions when confiding her “awakening” feelings to her close friend Adele Ratignolle---““I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 86), all mark her departure from the dominant voice patterns imposed by society.

Mademoiselle Reisz is a unique figure in the work. As an artist and an unmarried woman, she is to some extent detached from the mainstream social norms. Her voice, often expressed indirectly through piano music, is detached, independent, and even carries a touch of rebellious coldness. She sharply points out Edna’s futile pursuit of Robert’s love---“It seems to me if I were young and in love I should never deem a man of ordinary caliber worthy of my devotion” and “Why do you love him when you ought not to” (Chopin 139), and her words are like a sharp blade piercing through illusions, providing Edna with a voice template different from the traditional female role.

Adele Ratignolle represents the female voice that has been completely internalized by society. Her endless

praise of the sanctity of motherhood, her absolute obedience to her husband, and her confusion and concern over Edna's awakening---her voice is gentle yet possesses a powerful assimilative power. It is a model of how social norms are expressed through the selves of women.

Edna ultimately fails to find a voice that could be understood and accepted by society, and that could fully express her awakening. Her silence and her eventual "loss of speech" ---heading towards the sea, are both a despair over the inability to break free from the constraints of language, and an ultimate "speaking" through the body. The theory of the Swiss linguist Saussure regarding the relationship between "signifier" and "signified" is given a social critical dimension here: the process by which women seek their "voice" (signifier) for self-expression is a rebellion against the "identity" (signified) of women as defined by the patriarchal society.

2. Non-Verbal Sounds as Metaphorical Systems

The Awakening is filled with rich sounds that transcend human language. These natural sounds and bodily sounds are not merely environmental descriptions or physiological phenomena; instead, they form a delicate metaphorical system, carrying implications of emotions, desires, and fate, and often resonating or presenting a contrast with Edna's inner experiences.

2.1 Nature Sound Symbols

The sound of the sea is the most core and complex natural sound imagery in the work. "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (Chopin 35). On Grand Isle, the "sound" of the sea is initially mysterious and alluring to Edna, symbolizing the desires, free instincts, and vague yearnings for infinite possibilities that are buried deep within her heart. When she learns to swim and experiences the embrace of the sea, "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul" (Chopin 56). It is the manifestation of the instantaneous activation of the metaphorical free potential of the sea's sound. However, the sound of the sea also contains destructive power. At the end of the work, "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (Chopin 180). It becomes the summons for Edna to the abyss of death, symbolizing the ultimate predicament faced by individuals in their pursuit of absolute freedom---in an unyielding social reality, complete awakening and the possibility of self-ownership may lead to a tragic self-destruction.

The sound of birds constitutes another important sound signifier. The "green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door" (Chopin 17) and imitates human speech and the "the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door" (Chopin 17) symbolize the confined state of women in the family and society. Their voices are restricted, distorted, and even reduced to unconscious repetitions of their masters' words. In contrast, at the end of the work, "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin 180). The bird, although silent, has a falling trajectory that forms a strong intertextual connection with Edna's ending, suggesting the fate of the flight and awakening.

These sounds often accompany the crucial moments of Edna's emotional ups and downs, enhancing the atmosphere and magnifying her inner loneliness, unease, or sense of isolation from the outside world. "Myth is a type of speech", and "it is a mode of signification, a form" (Barthes 109). It refers to the system by which culture assigns specific social meanings to natural phenomena, helps to understand these natural sounds: they have been endowed with cultural connotations beyond their physical attributes, becoming important keys for interpreting Edna's fate and the themes of the work. These natural sounds, with their unique material forms, construct a free space opposed to human society, providing spiritual support for Edna's awakening.

2.2 Body Sound Symbols

The non-verbal sounds emitted by the body serve as an important tool into the hidden inner world of a person.

Edna's heartbeat is one of the most expressive symbols among them. When hearing Mademoiselle Raisz playing piano, it "sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column" (Chopin 54) and when alone with Robert, "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first felt throbbings of desire" (Chopin 59). The intense heartbeat is a direct physiological manifestation of her suppressed vitality, awakened desires, and intense inner conflicts. It is "the body sounds", expressing the inner truth that words cannot or dare not convey.

Crying in the novel is not merely "sadness", but a physiological reaction of Edna's inner world's collapse and reconstruction, revealing the rift between her "social role" and "self". One of the crying occurs after her husband reproaches with her inattention. "She began to cry a little, and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her peignoir" (Chopin 22) and "Turning, she thrust her face, steaming and wet, into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. She could not have told why she was crying" (Chopin 22). The crying has no specific linguistic reference, yet it exposes her contradictions: she desires love and freedom, but is also afraid of the consequences of breaking the marriage and social norms. The "cry a little" is her predicament---as a woman, even sadness cannot be allowed to "loudly" exist in society.

The pain experienced by Adele Ratignolle during childbirth is an expression of the extreme nature of women's bodily experiences. "After a moment or two she uttered a profound sigh and wiped her face with the handkerchief rolled in a ball" (Chopin 174). The sound of sign is heart-wrenching, filled with raw physical pain, and it is both the prelude to the birth of a new life and an unadorned revelation of the immense physical suffering and risks that women endure behind the "divine aura of motherhood".

These sounds constitute a dimension of "inner voice", which is not directly controlled by social discourse and more truly reflects the intensity of characters' emotions, their physical experiences and their existence states. Julia Kristeva introduced the language of pre-symbolic language into her theory of language. "It manifests as the babbling of infants and various emotional expressions without (symbolic) meaning" (Guo 31). Emotional expressions like heartbeats, crying, moans belong to the "semiotic" state of pre-language. They disrupt the stability of the symbolic order, release repressed, irrational life energy. They are the original expressions of the body's resistance to the "symbolic" patriarchal order.

3. Interplay of Multiple Voices and Thematic Representation

The charm of *The Awakening* lies in the fact that it does not present a single, authoritative voice. Instead, it allows various voices---those of men, women, society, individuals, verbal and non-verbal, to engage in dialogue, conflict and interweaving with each other, forming a "polyphonic" structure. The symphony of voices is the key to the complex presentation of the core theme of the work.

3.1 The Clash of Sound

Edna's inner world is a battlefield where various voices fiercely clash. Mr. Pontellier's admonition about responsibility, Robert's alluring yet ultimately retreating love words, Dr. Mandelet's diagnosis, and Miss Ratignolle's praise for motherhood---all these external social voices keep echoing in her mind, forming a powerful urging and suppressing force. At the same time, Mademoiselle Reisz's detached yet clear teachings, the eternal call of the sea, the wild heartbeat within her own body, and the inner voice of the freedom felt in that concentrated silence during artistic creation---all these together constitute the call for individual existence, freedom, and true self. Her final choice to go to the sea can be understood as the ultimate response to the inner voice of freedom after failing to find a realistic reconciliation solution. It is a rejection of the oppressive external voices.

3.2 The Silence of Sound

"Silence" in *The Awakening* is not absent from the sound system; rather, it is a special "sound" with powerful expressiveness. Edna's intentional silence in social situations is her silent resistance to social discipline.

Mademoiselle Reisz's silence while immersed in music at the piano is her state of deep communication with art and the inner self. And at the end of the novel, Edna's "absolute silence" as she walks towards the sea---casting her "unpleasant, pricking garments from her" (Chopin 180), and breaking free from all the social constraints, integrating herself into nature alone. The silence symbolizes her complete liberation from all the "sounds" imposed by society on her. When verbal and non-verbal metaphorical sounds cannot fully convey her existence after awakening, only by returning to the original source of life can one complete the ultimate possession and expression of "self".

4. Conclusion

In *The Awakening*, sound serves as a rich signifier, carrying social significance and metaphorical connotations. The verbal sound, through social encoding, reveals the dominance and oppression of men and the resonance and deviation of women in a patriarchal society; the non-verbal sound constitutes a metaphorical system, where natural sounds symbolize freedom and awakening, and body sounds represent the liberation of the body and self-identity; and the interweaving of multiple sounds comprehensively presents Edna's awakening journey in the conflict and resonance, deepening the feminist theme of the novel.

Kate Chopin's use of sound not only enriches the artistic expression techniques of the novel, but also reveals from a unique perspective the survival predicaments and rebellious spirit of 19th-century women in a patriarchal society. The denotative meaning of sound enables to more clearly observe the process of Edna's transformation from confusion to awakening, from silence to rebellion. It also provides us with an understanding of women's self-searching. The denotative analysis of sound in *The Awakening* offers a perspective for interpreting the classic work and provides useful references for exploring the symbolic meaning of sound in literary works.

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