

# Edna's Tactile Journey Towards Awakening in *The Awakening*

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**Abstract:** Kate Chopin is an outstanding American female writer in the 19th century. *The Awakening* depicts Edna Pontellier's journey toward self-discovery and awakening, revealing women's survival predicament in the patriarchal society of the 19th century. Tactile experiences can reflect one's intentions. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory, this paper aims to analyze Edna's tactile experiences with the sea, clothing, ring and different men, through which her awakening can be traced.

**Keywords:** *The Awakening*; Kate Chopin; Tactile experiences; Female consciousness

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## Introduction

Written by Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* was once condemned by the public and banned from bookstores due to the moral issues and the unconventional female characters in the novel. Chopin's works were not accepted until the rise of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s (Hu 54). *The Awakening* follows the story of Edna Pontellier who is trapped in the cage of social conventions and experiences a profound awakening in a summer holiday. She gradually rejects her roles and identities defined by society, seeking her own identity, independence and subjectivity. However, her journey towards self-discovery is limited by the social environment and she finally commits suicide to gain true freedom. The novel deeply depicts Edna's journey of awakening through delicate sensory depictions. Tactile sense in the novel is not simply a physical perception but a metaphorical vehicle for Edna's exploration of physical and spiritual liberation.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that existence as subjectivity is identical with existence as a body and with the existence of the world (431). He also puts forward that one can perceive his intentions in his body through tactile experiences (368). Laura U. Marks follows Merleau-Ponty's opinions in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, holding that the effect of tactile sense on the subject occurs simultaneously at the psychological level and the physical level (18). In *The Awakening*, Edna's tactile experiences have impacts on her both physically and psychologically and they can reflect her intentions at the same time. Her existence as a subject can be proved through the subjectivity of her body. This paper aims to analyze Edna's tactile experiences and explore her awakening from this perspective.

## 1. Tactile Experiences of the Sea from Resistance to Embrace

The sea begins and ends the novel. Edna's tactile experiences of the sea undergo a process, from initial fear to the mastery of swimming, obsession with the sea, and finally to her return to the water. The sea serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for Edna's awakening. Each shift in her physical interaction with the sea reflects a deeper layer of self-awakening.

Edna's early encounters with the sea are marked by fear and resistance. "A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when on the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her" (Chopin 41). Edna has attempted to learn to swim during the entire summer, and many people try to teach her, all failing in the end. She feels a deep fear of the sea. Her tactile aversion is not merely a physiological reaction but a symbolic expression. The sea, with its boundlessness, stands in contrast to the rigid rules imposed on Edna as a wife and mother. Edna has adapted to the traditional roles, afraid to break free from them. Her inability to swim indicates her inability to recognize her own desire and consciousness.

But her contact with the sea has planted within her a seed of awakening. In chapter 6, "the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of

solitude” (Chopin 20). The sea is inviting her to come close. She could also feel the call of freedom. The word “seductive” and the sentence “the touch of sea is sensuous” (Chopin 20) describe the sea as seductive and sensuous, which may imply the connection between Edna’s subsequent mastery of swimming and her sexual awakening.

Edna suddenly experiences a breakthrough shift from fear of the sea to mastery of swimming later. Chapter 10 depicts the scene where she can swim freely. “But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence” (Chopin 41). In this sentence, the author describes Edna as a child. When Edna can swim alone, her awakening reaches its climax. At this moment, she is like a newborn in awakening (Wang 113). She can now control her body. Her tactile transformation signifies her acquisition of body autonomy and sexual awakening. Tactile experiences of the sea have become the enlightenment of her awakening. After her mastery of swimming, she is obsessed with the sea. The sea is a realm apart from society. In the water, she can escape from her social identity, and she is no longer Mrs. Pontellier here. Tactile sense becomes a way to experience pure selfhood.

However, apart from the awareness of Edna’s own power, the sea also brings her the awareness of death. “She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 41). “A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses” (Chopin 42). After learning how to swim, Edna wants to swim further to area where no woman has swum before, then she feels the sense of death and terror. The sea area where no woman has swum before may symbolize that no woman has broken away from social conventions previously. And the death Edna senses may symbolize the danger and difficulties faced by women who attempt to challenge social norms in the 19th century. This implies that women will be punished once they break gender norms and social discipline. And the sense of death here foreshadows Edna’s later suicide. In that male-dominated era, even though women’s consciousness awakens, it is still difficult for them to gain true freedom and subjectivity. Women’s awakening can only be achieved completely through self-destruction.

Edna’s final return to the sea is the culmination of her tactile experiences. “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 20). The sentence appears at the end of the story. It also appears again in chapter 6. The repetition of this sentence suggests that the sea serves as both a source of life’s awakening and an embrace of life’s cessation. Her decision to drown is not merely an act of despair, but also a final realization of autonomy. She can only escape from the patriarchal ideology in death (Gray 54). Through suicide in the sea, she shakes off the shackles of society, achieving eternal liberation. In the water, Edna is finally an individual who controls her own life.

Edna’s tactile experiences with the sea from fear to embrace map the journey of her awakening. It also reveals that a woman’s complete liberation and freedom can only be obtained at the cost of life in a patriarchal society.

## **2. Tactile Experiences of Clothing and Ring from Compliance to Shedding**

Edna’s journey toward self-discovery is intricately woven with her tactile experiences with clothing and her wedding ring. As the story progresses, she gradually sheds off the clothing. Although the act is seemingly simple, it represents Edna’s inner independence because she breaks the rules set by society (Gan and Ning 169). Her tactile experiences with clothing and ring reflect her gradual consciousness awakening, from submission to liberation.

Initially, Edna’s tactile experiences of clothing and ring are passive acceptance, reflecting her obedience to the requirements of society. Scholarship on nineteenth-century women’s history and dress explores the power of corsets to regulate women’s behavior as well as to signify women’s subordinate status (Fields 355). At that time, women need to wear corsets and elaborate clothes. The corset reflects how the social order controls women, shaping women’s appearance, gesture and movement to an ideal delicacy. Adorned in tight corsets and elaborate dresses, Edna is constantly reminded of her social position and identity. In the novel, “Mrs. Pontellier, attired in a handsome reception gown, remained in the drawing-room the entire afternoon receiving her visitors” (Chopin 76). When they receive visitors, Edna needs to wear an elaborate reception gown, which reminds her of her role as a wife. Edna is

treated like Mr. Pontellier's property, serving the same function as any other object in the house. She needs to maintain perfection all the time to be appreciated and displayed by him. Edna's initial tactile experiences with clothing signify her initial acceptance of bodily discipline. The ring also plays a role of restraint, reminding Edna of her marriage. In the beginning of the novel, she is used to wearing the ring. "She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm" (Chopin 3). Edna is accustomed to wearing the ring at first. It is acknowledged that married people usually wear wedding rings to indicate their marital status. The ring is regarded as a symbol of marriage and commitment (Ding 98). The act of putting on the ring can be seen as a symbol of being fettered. It is like a tiny shackle fastened on her finger, reminding her of her roles as a wife and a mother. The act also lays the groundwork for the latter act of taking off the ring. Edna's voluntary act of putting on the ring presents her passive submission, a result of the internalization of social discipline.

As Edna's consciousness awakens, her contact with clothing transforms from passive compliance to active engagement. In chapter 14, "Edna, left alone in the little side room, loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them. She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed" (Chopin 55). Edna breaks from the constraints of clothing. It symbolizes a rebellion of social constraints and rigid norms. Her shedding of the clothing reflects her awakening self-consciousness and her growing desire for freedom and individuality. Additionally, unlike previous times, Edna does not wear a handsome reception gown when she receives visitors. "Mrs. Pontellier did not wear her usual Tuesday reception gown; she was in ordinary house dress" (Chopin 76). Her departure from conventional dress codes shows her resistance to social conventions. In contrast to her early act of wearing the ring, Edna later takes it off. "Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it" (Chopin 80). Her act of taking the ring off symbolizes her resistance against the constraints of marriage and society. But she reluctantly puts it on later. "Edna held out her hand, and taking the ring, slipped it upon her finger" (Chopin 80). The act indicates the inescapable social constraints and the limitations of her rebellion. She wants to break free from the fetters of marriage and society, but she cannot achieve it.

Edna's final act of removing her clothing before entering the sea represents the culmination of her awakening. "She cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air" (Chopin 177). The sea, as a symbol of freedom and rebirth, becomes the setting for her ultimate liberation. The act of being nude in the water is a return to a primal state. She takes off all her clothes, casts aside all social constraints, and returns to her true self, uncovered and unfettered (Jin and Qin, 66). The tactile experiences of shedding her garments can be regarded as her final rejection of social conventions and her assertion of personal autonomy. Her naked body echoes the state of birth. At birth, everyone is naked. From this perspective, it implies that Edna gains a new birth through suicide.

Edna's tactile experiences with clothing and ring shifts from passive acceptance to active rejection. The clothing and ring represent the social restraints imposed on her. Her action of shedding off these clothing and ring reflects her gradual awakening.

### **3. Tactile Experiences with Different People from Passivity to Active Desire**

Edna's awakening from social oppression to self-autonomy is also vividly reflected in her tactile interactions with different men including Léonce, Robert and Arobin, evolving from passive compliance to active desire. Edna's tactile contact with them serves as a mirror of her psychological transformation, tracing her journey from being an object of others to becoming a subject who actively seeks her own individuality.

Edna's interactions with Léonce are passive. There is no affection in their marriage. Their tactile exchanges are perfunctory, which reflects that their marriage is like a performance without genuine love. Léonce's interactions with

Edna are acts of ownership rather than affection. There is no explicit description of their intimate physical contact, but it is obvious that Léonce regards Edna as a private possession rather than an independent individual. “His entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and fast asleep when he came in. He talked to her while he undresses, telling her anecdotes and bits of news and gossip that he had gathered during the day” (Chopin 7). “He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation” (Chopin 7). These plots show that Léonce only focuses on his own needs, treating Edna as a listener and a tool to take care of the children. Their interaction is ritualized, and there is no real love and affection in their marriage, only filled with coldness. In such a marriage, affectionate touch is missing, and Edna suppresses her own individual desires.

Edna’s interactions with Robert function as a catalyst for her self-discovery, challenging the social constraints and illuminating her awakening to sexual desire and personal autonomy. “She arose, climbing over Robert’s feet with a muttered apology” (Chopin 53). “He familiarly adjusted a ruffle upon her shoulder” (Chopin 57). Edna’s contact with Robert stems from genuine affection. As a wife and mother, Edna’s interactions with Robert challenge social conventions. But an irresistible impulse pushes her toward him. Robert awakens Edna to emotions she has never experienced in her loveless marriage to Léonce. He makes her question the emptiness of her role as a wife and a mother. Robert’s sudden departure to Mexico becomes a turning point, forcing her to confront her feelings and desire. Then Edna comes to recognize her genuine love and her existence as an independent individual. She then moves out of the house and pursues her independence with determination.

Edna’s tactile interactions with Alcée Arobin mark a radical departure from both her passive compliance with Léonce and her emotionally restrained connection with Robert. Their physical intimacy, rooted in sexual desire indicates that Edna asserts active sexual encounters, dismantling the idea of female sexual passivity. She starts to assert herself as an active participant in her own sexuality. “When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers. It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin 128). In her previous marriage, Edna’s interactions with Léonce lack emotional connection, just governed by obligation. Her exchanges with Robert, though stirring her heart, are always overshadowed by the restraint of social norms. However, Arobin’s kiss makes her feel instinctively physical and emotional freedom from external constraints for the first time. Edna is no longer a passive recipient of touch, but an active participant, asserting her own desire and pleasure. This marks her break from the long-term suppression of her own desires and her beginning to embrace her own sexual needs.

Edna’s tactile experiences with persons shift from passivity to active desire. Her marriage to Léonce lacks affection. Robert arouses Edna’s emotional longing and Arobin stirs her sexual desire. These tactile encounters trace Edna’s psychological transformation, as she changes from a submissive wife to an individual embracing her own individuality and needs.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier’s awakening is vividly traced through her tactile experiences, reflecting her struggle for individuality in a restrictive patriarchal society. Her evolving engagement with the sea, from fear to mastery and final embrace, symbolizes her growing consciousness of freedom, while her tragic return to the sea reveals the harsh reality that women’s complete awakening comes at the cost of life. Her tactile experiences of clothing and the wedding ring, from passive acceptance to deliberate removal, reflect her rejection of social constraints and her assertion of the right to self-definition. Moreover, her passive interactions with Léonce, affectionate interactions with Robert and sexual experiences with Arobin mirror her shift from passivity to sexual awakening. As tactile experiences bridge physical and psychological realms, they become Edna’s tool to claim her subjectivity. Her suicide underscores society’s denial of women’s selfhood, but her awakening remains a powerful testament to women’s pursuit of freedom and independence.

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