

AN ANALYSIS OF *THE AWAKENING* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SARTRE'S ONTOLOGY AND ETHICS

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***Abstract:** This article examines Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* from the perspective of Sartre's ontology and ethics. The study starts with a short introduction to existentialism and its main representatives. Then, it analyses the novel by applying Sartre's phenomenological ontology of being and its three structures (being in-itself, being for-itself, and being for-others). Finally, the book's main ideas are explored through Sartre's ethical concepts of freedom and responsibility, authenticity and bad faith.*

***Keywords:** authenticity, existentialism, being, freedom, responsibility*

1. Introduction

Related to the root word "existence", existentialism is a philosophy of life. Some of the questions that this school of thought addresses are: How should I live my life? Does life have meaning? What gives life meaning? More specifically, existentialism is described as a philosophy of the meaning of life. It highlights the individual's unique place as a self-determining entity responsible for making meaningful and authentic choices, in order for the individual to create personal meaning in a world that has no intrinsic meaning.

Prior to existentialism, philosophy was rather abstract in placing an excessive emphasis on the rationality of human beings and their ability to act according to rational plans, flourish, and lead a successful life, a view maintained since Aristotle, who declared that we are rational animals. The existential movement revolutionized the prevailing thought by focusing on the absurdity of human condition, and the struggle of the individual to shape their existence. The forerunners of existentialism are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky. Often considered as the father of existentialism, Kierkegaard (1813-1855) lived at the end of Enlightenment. Called also the great Age of Reason, this philosophical trend highlighted the importance of establishing a universal social order based on reason and natural law, until it progresses to perfection. Kierkegaard renounced the movement for its excessive reliance on objective truths and application of logic and science to provide solutions for life's biggest problems, including what a true self is. Kierkegaard, while not totally denying the importance of objective truths, favoured subjective truths by stating: "subjectivity is truth and truth is subjectivity" (Online).

While Kierkegaard, as a theistic existentialist, stressed the importance of personal choices in relation to God, but unaffected by the Established Church, Nietzsche (1844-1900) presented a Godless universe, by declaring in *Thus Spoke*

Zarathustra: “God is dead” (2006: 69). This implies the idea that Christian values, divine perspective, and the notion of immortality – which had prevailed in Western Europe for about two thousand years – had become obsolete. As a consequence, life has no more meaning, nor purpose. Through this statement, Nietzsche also implied that the overall system of traditional values was ineffectual. It follows that, in order not to slip into anarchy and nihilism, people had to invent a new system of morality and overcome themselves.

A highly influential writer, Dostoyevsky was also greatly praised for his philosophical ideas. Scholar David Kauffman (1956: 15), in his book “Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre”, points out that “It is as if Kierkegaard had stepped right out Dostoevsky’s pen.” His novel “Notes from the Underground” (1864) ranks among most important works of existentialism, where the author attempts to justify the existence of individual freedom as a necessary aspect of humankind. He states that abstract ideologies make a person live an inauthentic life.

The existentialist school of thought rose to prominence during the second half of the 20th century with major representatives, such as: A. Camus, M. Heidegger, and J. P. Sartre. For Camus, the major issue in philosophy is that of suicide, which he puts forward in the first lines of “The Myth of Sisyphus”: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that” (1991: 1). He also related the meaninglessness of life to the absence of God. Sartre, a completely atheistic thinker, argues that absurdity is part of the universe before consciousness comes into play. While Camus consistently emphasizes the absurd, Sartre maintains that human nature is a product of contingency.

In 1945, Sartre held a lecture in Paris, before Club Maintenant, entitled “Existentialism is a Humanism” – published with the same title the following year – to defend the humanistic nature of existentialist doctrine as one that “makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity” (Sartre 2007: 18). His statement that existence precedes essence is considered the cornerstone of existentialism. This proposition was the reversal of Aristotle’s belief that essence precedes existence, according to which people and objects have a predetermined essence, prior to their existence. Sartre argues that this is true only for objects, giving the example of a paper knife: before producing it, the craftsman has a clear concept in mind and knows in advance the purpose this product will have. But we could not state the same for human beings, since there is no “human nature” found in all men, as was also maintained by 18th century atheistic philosophers like Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant (Sartre 2007: 22). Nor does Sartre accept the idea of God as a divine artisan, who created each individual according to a certain concept. Sartre argues his interpretation as follows:

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence – a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man, or, as Heidegger put it, the human reality. What do we mean here by “existence precedes essence”? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because, to begin with, he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no

God to conceive of it...man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (Sartre 2007: 22)

In his whole philosophy, Sartre insists on subjective existence in all relations, and emphasizes man's dignity in a Godless world. "Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower" (Sartre 2007: 23). Sartre further emphasizes man's inability to transcend human subjectivity (idem: 24). This seems to mean that by acting of his own free will man creates something out of nothing, which gives man the attributes of God.

The main link that connects Kate Chopin's novel to the existentialist movement is the major issue of individual existence. *The Awakening*, published in 1899, centers on the sexual and artistic awakening of Edna Pontellier, a married woman, who commits suicide in the end. Most of the critics at the time condemned the work for its taboo themes: female noncompliance with societal norms, extramarital romance of a married woman and the way she handled it, suicide. The novel was labeled as "morbid," "unhealthy," "not wholesome," "vulgar," "repellent," and even "poison"; Edna's character was described as "sensual and devilish" and "not good enough for heaven, [but] not wicked enough for hell" (Bracken, Online). Greatly astonished and disheartened, Chopin turned to writing short stories exclusively. Rediscovered in the 1950's, the novel was acclaimed for its literary sensibility.

2. A phenomenological ontology of being

Sartre popularized the existentialist movement worldwide through the publication of his most important work "Being and Nothingness" (1943). He conducted a thorough phenomenological analysis of ontology by probing into the nature of our being in terms of immediate experience and consciousness, in general. He distinguishes three structures of being: being-in-itself (*l'être-en-soi*), i.e. the nonconscious being, which is the being aspect of something; being-for-itself (*l'être-pour-soi*), i.e. the conscious being; and being-for-others (*l'être pour-autrui*), i.e. our being as it exists in the consciousness of another, which Sartre calls the Other.

The being-in-itself is what it is, not dependent on anything for its being; nor does it require a construction of mind or thought for existence. In a word, it refers to a way of existence that simply is. In not being conscious, it is neither active nor passive, thus cannot transcend itself. The for-itself is conscious of what it is not: it is not its own being, i.e. not a being-in-itself, as regards physical mass or shape, so it depends on the in-itself by negating it. The encounter of being-for-itself with being-in-itself creates the real world. The for-itself is initially void, which is filled upon encountering the in-itself. If there is nothing of which for-itself can be conscious, it no longer exists. Being-for-itself (consciousness) "is not what it is and is what it is not" (Sartre 1956: 301). This means that the in-itself and the essence of consciousness do not encounter in the consciousness, but externally in the relationship of consciousness to its object. It 'is not what it is' means its essence is not intrinsic or internal to it [consciousness]. It 'is what is not' means that its existence and essence are to be found in the object it is directed on. In other words, by recognizing what is, the individual focuses on what is not. For Sartre, this means that consciousness is characterized by sheer directedness. He also adopted

the phenomenological concept of intentionality to state that consciousness is always conscious of something. The for-itself is considered by Sartre as ‘authentic’ consciousness, in being able to question, eliminate possibilities, and make decisions based on negation of what is. Sartre also states that the for-itself never “exists for itself, but only for the object, and that subjectivity is a consciousness with subject”. (Desan 1960: 29) This means that the for-itself can remain free only if it is not matter.

Apart from the characteristics of directedness and intentionality, Sartre argues that there is no self in the Freudian sense, “hidden” in the consciousness, so consciousness is also self-conscious. To explain the understanding of self-consciousness and production of ego in the conscious activity, Sartre introduced the concepts of pre-reflective consciousness and reflective consciousness. Pre-reflective consciousness is impersonal, so there is no *I* at this level. For example, when I am watering a plant, the plant is the intentional object, and the attention is directed on it, not on me. But, if I stop doing this action, by leaving or undertaking something else, then the focus shifts on me being aware of doing this other action. For Sartre, the act of consciousness directing on the pre-reflective consciousness brings forth the *cogito*, as a synthesis of two consciousnesses. This way, he considers the unconscious unworthy, because every act has an explanation, as well.

We mentioned above how reflective consciousness negates the unreflective consciousness by rendering it its object. The negating power of the for-itself in the case of reflection creates an instability in the self between being placed as unity and reflecting as duality. It is, thus, the duty of the for-itself to ground the self. In Chopin’s novel *The Awakening*, we learn that Edna, while an adequately functional person on the outside, is detached and unbalanced within, lacking the awareness of herself as herself, due to the social and cultural pressures. The awakening of her true self occurs in chapter 6:

Edna Pontellier could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined, and in the second place have followed in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her.

A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her – the light which, showing the way, forbids it.

At that early period, it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears.

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.

But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult! (Chopin 2011: 21)

There are three events that bring forth Edna’s awakening: her presence among Creole women, who talk freely about sex, yet remain faithful to their husbands; her listening to Mademoiselle Reisz playing on the piano; and the lovely time spent with the young and flirtatious Robert Lebrun, while on vacation. In each of these cases, Edna turns out to be a fast learner, surpassing her teachers. Thus, Madame Ratignolle, with her warm and expressive nature, helps Edna to come out

of her shell and appreciate the sensuality of the female body. But, while Madame Ratignolle remains the devoted mother-woman throughout the novel, Edna is transformed both as a mother and a woman. In a similar light, Mademoiselle Reisz, a talented pianist, captivates Edna during a musical evening party. "One piece which that lady played Edna had entitled 'Solitude'. It was a short, plaintive, minor strain. The name of the piece was something else, but she called it 'Solitude'" (Chopin 2011: 40). Identifying herself with the music has a dual purpose. For one thing, it helps a solitary Edna become aware of the need to establish true connections with other people. Likewise, the music arouses in her the inner artistic potential to paint like never before, which constitutes another important form of self-expression. The unapproachable unmarried lady, on the other hand, remains secluded by choice and is largely avoided by others. This renders the influence of her art in her community minimal. Self-conceited, she also shuns love because she believes that no individual of the opposite sex deserves her. As a result, she discourages Edna to pursue both real love and true art because, according to the mademoiselle, "to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul" (Chopin 2011: 68). While the eccentric pianist makes no major impact on society, Edna challenges the present state of affairs in the end. Finally, Robert rekindles romantic feelings and passion in Edna, which in turn stimulates her growth as an artist. While Robert does not want to be taken seriously by any woman he flirts with, Edna overcomes her former repression and is willing to sacrifice her marital and social status for the sake of their love. She becomes assertive, in a way that is uncommon of a woman in the community, when Robert shows neglect and indifference towards her after his return. "I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn't matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like" (169).

In terms of inter-personal relationships and the presence of the Other, Sartre, quoting Hegel, states: "The consciousness of self is real only in so far as it knows its echo (and its reflection) in another" (Sartre 1956: 293). Thus, one's consciousness as consciousness of self depends on the appearance of the Other. However, it is predominantly an encounter based on mutual objectification of each other: I am, in the main, an object for the Other, as he is an object for me; the Look of the Other denies my subjectivity, and reduces me to a tool. He presents to me his own subjectivity, a foreign world to which I have no access. On the other hand, I take revenge by destroying his inner unity. Except for my being, the Other steals the world from me, by imposing his own perspective. For Sartre, human reality is originally and essentially built on conflict rather than harmony.

The first feeling that arises from the Look of the Other is shame. "Shame is the feeling of *original fall*, not from the fact that I would have committed such and such a fault, but simply from the fact that I am 'fallen' into the world, in the midst of things, and that I need the mediation of the other in order to be what I am" (Sartre 1956: 349). Edna is overwhelmed by shame when reproached by her husband for being irresponsible towards the children:

An indescribable oppression which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. (Chopin 2011: 10)

Other reactions of the for-itself towards the Other are: indifference, hate, desire, love etc. Of primary importance here, with the regard to the novel, is the love attitude. Its ambiguity and paradox concern the question whether I love the Other as object or as subject, and the impact that this has on my freedom and his freedom, and our relationship. Thus, If I treat the Other as object, I negate and appropriate his freedom, which, according to Sartre, is the foundation of my Being. In stealing his freedom, I risk losing my own, as well. Through love, I destroy the very love I sought. In a similar light, in the novel, the strong love that Edna feels for Robert boomerangs on her. While she has gained considerable independence from her husband – by her living in a separate house, developing her artistic talent and making her own money – she is unable to manage her emotional and romantic life. Madly in love with Robert, she expects the same feelings and devotion from him, undermining in this way his subjectivity and limiting his freedom as a flirtatious beau. In doing this, she puts her own freedom at stake: “[...] all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference.” (Chopin 2011: 165) But, when Robert tells Edna that he will ask Mr. Pontellier to set her free, in order for him to marry her, she wakes up to the reality, understanding that she has destroyed everything. Refusing to be treated like some property to be passed from one man to another, she refuses his proposal. Later, Robert, unable to see Edna as a subject, sends her a note, reading: “I love you. Good-bye – because I love you.” (idem: 178) Essentially, this means that he is not strong enough to overcome social barriers and accept Edna for the individual she is, thus leaving her alone in her awakening and shattering her dream world.

Finding her life to be totally meaningless, she asserts her authentic will by making suicide the final choice. For Sartre, “suicide [...] is a choice and affirmation – of being. By this being which is given to it, human reality participates in the universal contingency of being and thereby in what we may call absurdity. This choice is absurd, not because it is without reason, but because there has never been any possibility of not choosing oneself.” (Sartre 1956: 479) However, for Edna, death appears to be inevitable, given the utter imbalance of her outer and inner self, total isolation from others, and particularly the social and historical setting of the novel. Refusing to go back to her older self, and as a mark of protest against stringent societal norms, Edna drowns in the sea:

[...] when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

[...] The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.

[...] She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. (Chopin 2011: 182-3)

The sea, a symbol of autonomy for Edna at the beginning, after she learns to swim, represents the same freedom at the end, “so she freely goes to the sea, losing her life. But she does not lose her self (Jones 1981: 169).

3. Freedom and responsibility

For Sartre, as man lacks a predetermined essence, he has to create himself out of nothingness. "...human reality is its own nothingness. For the for-itself, to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is." (Sartre 1956: 439) The for-itself exists as lack, and this lack is its nothingness, which in turn is absolute, in that it is the condition of the for-itself. This way, "man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all." (idem: 441) In being undetermined, the for-itself is free to make itself and create its values, by reaching beyond the situation it is in through its choices and acts. In the existence of the for-itself, freedom would not be possible without choice and action, just as choice and action would not be possible without freedom.

Sartre also considers the for-itself an ecstatic temporal structure that nihilates the in-itself through the past, present, and future.

For Sartre, the past of the "for-itself" amounts to that which was but is no longer [...]. By mirror opposite, the future of the "for-itself" amounts to which it intends to be but is not yet [...]. And between the two, the present of the "for-itself" is that which it is not, for its being is characterized as being-not-the-thing-of-which-it-is-conscious [...]. (Kelly, Online)

Almost halfway through the novel, Edna comes to this realization:

The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant, was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded. (Chopin 2011:71)

Overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness, she lives, up to this point, in a world of phantasy, memories, and desire. However, for Sartre, the real self is created in *praxis* through action, because "to act is to modify the shape of the world; it is to arrange means in view of an end." (Sartre 1956: 433) Thus, for an act to be considered valid, it has to be intentional. And since an act is directed to an end, it is not realized yet. Thus, an act cannot be determined by an antecedent causality. Sartre (idem: 435) states it as follows:

No factual state whatever it may be (the political and economic structure of society, the psychological "state," etc.) is capable by itself of motivating any act whatsoever. For an act is a projection of the for-itself toward what is not, and what is can in no way by itself determine what is not.

It is true that there can be no absolute freedom, once the for-itself is engaged in a situation, but our freedom has to find its mechanisms to manage these limits. The relationship between freedom and factual situation is, in fact, a paradox: "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom." (idem: 489)

Freedom entails also responsibility for one's actions and others:

If indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's actions by reference to a specific and given human nature. [...] We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free:

condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. (Sartre 2007: 29)

If freedom is absolute, so is responsibility. While capable of creating a personal moral code that renders her life meaningful, Edna becomes disoriented in the long run. The burden of responsibility proves to be too heavy for her, which in turn causes her a lot anguish and despair. Given that her choices and actions are simply based on feelings, she loses her grip on reality. However, in having made her own choices and committed to them, she accepts the consequences of her freedom with dignity. The final scene of her entering the sea is depicted as embracing the highest dimension of freedom, while being conscious that she lived authentically. Regarding this sense of pride, Sartre (1956: 554) points out that:

He must assume the situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it, for the very worst disadvantages or the worst threats which can endanger my person have meaning only in and through my project; and it is on the ground of the engagement which I am that they appear. It is therefore senseless to think of complaining since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, what we are.

4. Authenticity and bad faith

The central ideas in Sartre's philosophy are individual freedom and authenticity. Inextricably linked to each other, they are dependent on our incessant choices towards the project. In this context, Sartre (1956: 480) states that

Since freedom is being-without-support and without-a-springboard, the project in order to be must be constantly renewed. I choose myself perpetually and can never be merely by virtue of having-been-chosen; otherwise I should fall into the pure and simple existence of the in-itself.

This simple existence of the in-itself brings forth the phenomenon of bad faith, which equates with a lack of authenticity. Bad faith is a type of self-deception whereby the individual consciously hides the truth from himself and lives in self-denial. To illustrate this, Sartre gives the example of a waiter whose conduct is too "waiter-esque". His voice oozes with an eagerness to please; he carries food rigidly and ostentatiously; "his movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid" (Laing 1969: 44). With his exaggerated behaviour, for Sartre, the waiter is deceiving himself, because he is not a waiter in essence. He is never a waiter in-itself, but a fundamentally free individual, who is not what he is and is what he is not, as he could well at any moment decide to stop being a waiter. By focusing on himself as a static being, he's denying the dynamic nature of his being.

Bad faith means surrendering oneself to the influence of facticity. "Much more than he appears 'to make himself', man seems 'to be made' by climate and the earth, race and class, language, the history of the collectivity of which he is part, heredity, the individual circumstances of his childhood, acquired habits, the great and small events of his life. (Sartre 1956: 482) In defining himself through these givens, the individual adopts false societal values and denies his freedom and possibility of transcendence.

The phenomenon of bad faith is ubiquitous in the novel. In the beginning, Edna is not aware of her essential freedom and, like other women, considers herself as an extension to her husband. Later on, she manages to surpass her existence as mother and wife by challenging the societal barriers. While she is the only one to create an authentic life for herself, the other characters do not experience any transcendence. For one, Madame Ratignolle, whose entire world revolves around being a model wife and mother, is the epitome of bad faith, in also constantly reminding Edna of inattention to her children. Edna – and the reader – cannot help feeling sorry for this woman.

The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, - a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. (Chopin 2011: 88)

The in-itself mode of being is also embraced by Mr. Pontellier, who feels too comfortable in his role as traditional husband that strives to keep up appearances at all costs. To him, Edna is just some property in his possession. In a similar light, Mademoiselle Reisz, though an artist, is unwilling to challenge the status quo. Her secluded world and freedom as a single lady suffice her. Likewise, Robert, though in love with Edna, is not courageous enough to commit and fight against social conventions.

5. Conclusion

Existentialism in philosophy and literature places man at the heart of its reflection as opposed to an abstract and conceptual philosophy. This school of thought emphasizes true and individual existence by granting each person the freedom to decide about themselves and create meaning and essence out of their life without the interference of religious or societal establishments. It highlights freedom and authenticity as the essential step towards self-identity and self-definition through thought, feeling, and action.

An exploration of the novel “The Awakening” through Sartre’s ontological and ethical approach brings to the light the complex nature of the human condition, which is what people have in common. The individual defines himself/herself and interacts with others as a being in a situation, which, in turn, imposes its limits and restrictions. Paradoxically, complete freedom is only possible if bound to a situation. Rejecting determinism, Sartre encourages the individual to overcome deterministic tendencies by always attempting to be more than his situation. “A prisoner is always free to try to escape.” (Sartre 1956: 484) Real success lies in trying. Being essentially free, man is totally free and totally responsible for his choices and actions.

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