

The Denotation of Room and its Impact on the Construction of Female Identity in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract:

“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” According Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, money and room are the predominant items that empower a woman to gain independence and self-reliance. Thus, this article will deconstruct the idea of the room both in a physical and metaphorical sense and apply Woolf’s thesis to the life of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* to show how exactly the notion of the room is able to shift a woman’s personality which has already developed in an environment dominated by the patterns of patriarchy.

1 Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* tells the story of a married woman, Edna Pontellier, who, at first, devotes her life entirely to the domestic duties and to the happiness of her children and her husband, trying to meet the requirements of a Victorian woman (Bender 466). When she goes on vacation to Grand Isle with her family, she becomes acquainted with Creole women like Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz who trigger her journey of self-discovery. However, this developing process already seals her fate, since she is not able to hold on to this slowly awakening part of herself due to the social restraints of her time. This article will deal with these restraints and with the question of how the denotation of room — both its physical and metaphorical representation — stirs the process of self-discovery and finally leads to the construction of a female identity.

2 Drawing on Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, the topics of room and money will be examined, since their lack is considered as the reason for the small number of female authors, as the main statement of her essay shows: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). Thus, room and money are identified as the objects that are able to offer a woman independence.

3 However, the main aim of this article is to deconstruct the idea of the room both in a physical and metaphorical sense. Woolf’s thesis will be applied to the life of Chopin’s Edna Pontellier to show how exactly the notion of the room is able to influence and to shift a woman’s personality; a personality which was developed within the confines of a patriarchal society.

4 Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* analyzes the correlation between the female deprivation of room and its ensuing intellectual poverty. The question that arises here is in what sense the female sex is considered as being poor or inferior to men and how this inferiority is able to hinder them from writing fiction and being independent. Is this lack of

fictional output caused by the environment women were surrounded by until the 20th century or does it rather lie within the nature of the female sex?

5 In general terms, it is noticeable that Virginia Woolf chooses a first-person and fictional narrator for *A Room of One's Own*. By these means, she is able to give voice not only to one woman in particular or to a few women of a specific social class, but to women in general. She emphasizes this in the very beginning by saying: "Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please — it is not the matter of any importance)" (5). Nevertheless, it becomes evident that the narrator in her essay addresses the female sex in particular: "Are you aware that you are the most discussed animal in the universe?" (30).

6 In chapter two of her essay, the narrator's argument about poverty and women (29) strikes the eye. At first glance, it seems that there are many facts supporting the assumption that the poverty of women has an impact on their ability to write fiction. It is stated that women are weaker and therefore poorer in the moral sense, that they have a small size of brain and that they thus are mentally, morally and physically inferior to men: "Hence the enormous importance to a patriarch who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half of the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself" (40). To answer the question which was posed earlier, these assumptions give evidence for the fact that women are not able to write fiction not primarily due to their natural disposition, which means that they are naturally inferior to men, but due to the social restraints a patriarchy causes, as "England is under the rule of a patriarchy" (39).

7 With the hypothetical example of Shakespeare's sister, the narrator puts more emphasis on the social restraints of patriarchy women had to cope with. Woolf argues that if Shakespeare has had a sister, she would not have the same opportunities he had as a man. She would have very few chances of receiving education and "no chance of learning grammar and logic [,] let alone of reading Horace and Virgil" (55), since education was almost entirely denied to women. Instead, the main tasks that were expected from her lie in fulfilling domestic duties and to marry at a very young age: "her parents [...] told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. [...] Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighboring wool-stapler" (ibid). Since education was not considered something that women should partake in, they could not turn to writing, either. The narrator of *A Room of One's Own* assumes that, as it was not expected from a woman to write, the influence of this restraint would have been noticeable in her work, since she would have to endure "stress" and suffer a "dilemma" while

composing it and “whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination” (58).¹

8 Another argument of the narrator’s is that a woman is not able to pursue writing the same way a man does, since she is not given enough room to express herself freely and not because she is inherently intellectually inferior, but rather because “all the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind” (59). However, the argument of the deprivation of room and money again captures the concept of poverty both in a financial and social sense. It is stated that if a woman wants to write fiction, she has to be financially independent and also has to have a private place, ideally with a key and a lock: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). This demand for room can be understood in two ways: First, in the physical way, which means that 20th century women did not have a private place of their own or, second, that they did not have the financial strength to sustain themselves or to receive education as mentioned earlier.

9 In terms of the physical realization of room, women did not usually have a private place: “In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century” (61). Additionally, women were supposed to devote their time entirely to their domestic duties and to the happiness of their families which made a private place unnecessary. Regarding money, women were not able to support themselves without help, since this period offered them few chances to earn a living. This is shown by the narrator’s statement which presents some possible occupations for women in this period: “I had made my living by cadging odd jobs from newspapers, by reporting a donkey show here or a wedding there; I had earned a few pounds by addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten” (43).

10 Usually women were financially dependent on their husband, to whom they were also legally bound through marriage. If they were not married, they were legally and financially dependent on their fathers: “Her pin money, which depended on the goodwill of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed” (61). Besides earning money, the narrator also presents another way women could be financially secured, namely through the inheritance of deceased

¹ Furthermore, it is stated that due to the fact that women mostly used a male pseudonym to veil their real identity in order to ensure that their work gets published, they, at the same time, confirmed the conventions and gave in to them.

relatives: “My aunt Mary Beton [...] died by a fall from her horse [...] she had left me five hundred pounds a year for ever” (43).

11 Furthermore, Woolf presents a very interesting view on money and its effect on the individual. It is said that money, which ensures financial security, has the power to shift the mindset by changing the emotional state of a person: “What a change of temper a fixed income will bring about. [...] Therefore not merely do effort and labor cease, but also hatred and bitterness” (44). Thus, money can almost have the effect of medicine or rather of morphine, since it is only able to suppress not to heal negative emotional conditions as emotional turmoil and stress, so that a more positive attitude can be ensured. Furthermore, its psychological effects help to broaden the horizons of women which were limited through social constraints as observed before. As a result of this, freedom of the mind and intellectual independence are accessible: “The greatest release of all came, which is freedom to think of things in themselves. That building, for example, do I like it or not? [...] Is that in my opinion a good book or a bad? Indeed, my aunt’s legacy unveiled the sky to me” (45).

12 Moreover, Woolf’s arguments on the poverty of women also apply directly to the concept of a “True Woman” (Elz 26). The concerns of a *True Woman* do not revolve around business affairs or politics, since her main occupation is to be “the moral and chaste center of the family” (ibid). This view is also mirrored in Kate Chopin’s novel where, at the beginning, Edna Pontellier resembles the characteristics of a *True Woman*, since she tries to meet the requirements of the Victorian ideal of the “Angel in the House” (Woolf: *Professions* 236). This ideal is also thematized in Virginia Woolf’s essay *Professions for Women* where she elaborates on the characteristics of this phenomenon. According to that, this ideal is attributed to women who are described as being charming, unselfish and self-sacrificial (237). Furthermore, Woolf states that this kind of woman: “[...] never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others” (ibid).

13 However, as Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening* progresses, Edna becomes more and more affiliated with the concept of a “New Woman” (Elz 26). The term *New Woman*, which also found discussion in Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* (1897), stands in stark contrast to the Victorian ideal of the *Angel in the House*. Although this term caused controversies among the literary critics (Dowling 446), it can be said that a woman whose characteristics are associated with the concept of a *New Woman* is one who “has access to educational opportunities that her mother did not have, is capable of using her education to achieve financial independence from the men of her family, marries not only for social alliances but also for love, and is sexual and controls her ability to reproduce” (Elz 26). Drawing on the

women's movements, it can be said that the first wave of feminist movement, perceptible in England in the 1850s (Dahlerup 3), was mostly concerned with the fight for political representation of women in government and thus with the fight for political room (ibid). The aim of the second wave, which was also termed the "new women's movement" (Dahlerup 2) and took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s in most Western countries (2), focused instead on the expression of individual or personal needs which was also reinforced by the slogan "The personal is political" (ibid).

14 However, in Chopin's *The Awakening* this very conflict between the notion of the *New Woman* and the correlated attempt to destroy the concept of the Victorian ideal of the *Angel of the house* is explored and especially catalyzed through the significant symbol, namely the room both in its physical and metaphorical representation. In terms of the physical realization of the room, Chopin uses two major settings, namely the city and the island, to illustrate how the notion of room, as a symbol, works on the issue of self-realization and the construction of female identity by allowing women to achieve freedom in different ways. As the impact of this symbol has already been analyzed, this part of the article will consider the shifts in personality which Edna, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes in each of the places she stays at. Furthermore, it will show in how far these places are able to contribute to the construction of her independence. Therefore, the first step of the investigation will concentrate on the physical rooms depicted in this novel, while the second step will deal with the metaphorical realization of room and discuss the question of whether Edna has achieved absolute independence and freedom.

15 In terms of the investigation of the idea of room as a physical place, Edna primarily enters the cottages of Madame Lebrun at Grand Isle at the very beginning of the novel, where she vacations with her husband and her two sons. This island is highly significant, especially for the progress of achieving self-awareness, since the cottages on the island are able to offer Edna partial liberation from her family. Thus, she is not occupied with the custody of her two sons, since a quadroon helps her to take care of them. She does not spend much time with her husband, since he occupies himself with his work most of the time. Thus, he does not show much interest, in, for example, accompanying his wife to the sea and bathe with her: "Mr. Pontellier finally lit a cigar and began to smoke, letting the paper drag idly from his hand. [...] The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. [...] Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun" (Chopin 4). At Grand Isle, she is also liberated from the duties of the household by Madame Lebrun and from the society of New Orleans which demands adherence to high societal standards of her

(Jones 121). But this liberty cannot be seen as absolute, since Edna has to meet new challenges instead.

16 At Grand Isle, she is not only surrounded by her own family but also by the Creole women. In particular, she makes the acquaintance of Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reiz, whose “passion” and “candor” (Jones 120) leave a conflicting impression on her. Their personalities and their behavior, which are shown through a third-person narrator, demonstrate that the Creole women Edna meets at Grand Isle “idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals” (Chopin 9). But this holds true only for Adèle Ratignolle, since Mademoiselle Reisz is not married, as the expression “Mademoiselle” already implies, and does not have any children. However, this view of motherhood seems to be completely different from Edna’s, as the narrator emphasizes: “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (9).

17 This leads Edna directly into a conflict between the predefined social role of a woman, which she is expected to perform, and her own personal views on the matter. However, it seems that this conflict is needed to make her question her own status quo and to make her aware that this suggested social role is not compatible with her character: “Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life — that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (14). Additionally, this quotation gives an insight into the social conventions of her Presbyterian household in Kentucky. She had to be reserved and modest, since the people there only allowed women to pursue freedom in their inner private, but not in the outside world. The influence of the Creole women teaches her that values and morals are relative, and automatically leads her to the kind of emotional turmoil which she has not allowed herself in New Orleans (Jones 121). Through this impact she is able to perceive freedom of expression. Faced with the more outgoing lifestyle and personality of the Creole women, Edna’s Victorian prudery vanishes. They fuel again her desire for freedom which she wants to act upon even in the outside world and thus prompt her process of gaining self-awareness more strongly (Jones 121f.).

18 The next important physical room which has to be considered is Madame Antoine’s home at the Chênrière Caminada. During this trip to the island, Edna is, in terms of physical distance, far away from her family. She is freed from the confining rules of her Presbyterian background, from her husband, from the domestic duties, from the requirement to be a good wife, and from the demands of her children. Thus, this room gives her in a sense freedom and the chance to violate social taboos with impunity (Jones 122). This offers her the opportunity

to become aware of herself as an individual. The progressing process of self-awareness is also supported by Robert, the son of Madame Lebrun, and revealed in her behavior towards him: "She had never sent for him before. She had never asked for him. She had never seemed to want him before" (Chopin 32). This quotation also shows that Edna is driven by her desires and slowly abandons her reserved behavior, although she herself is not aware of this process which accelerates in its intensity, since the island offers her the chance to perceive the world with her senses rather than with her mind: "Sailing across the bay to the Chênrière Caminada, Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening" (33). Furthermore, she learns to follow her instincts and responds directly to them. When she gets hungry, "she bit a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong, white teeth" (36) or she "pluck[ed] an orange from the [...] tree" (36-7). When she was thirsty, she "poured some of the wine into the glass and drank it down" (36).

19 Back from her vacation, Edna returns to her house in Esplanade Street, New Orleans. In the city, Edna is surrounded by both her family and the old duties of a woman, wife and mother. Furthermore, she no longer has a private place or a room of her own where she can retire or take a rest. This change of setting therefore means a new challenge for her, since she learned to yield to her instincts during her trip. Thus, she has to adapt the newly triggered process of self-awareness to the highly restricted conditions of her old life. Since she is now able to see with "different eyes" (39), her old life not only seems disconcerting to her, but also adversarial: "The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (51). As a result of this challenge, she "breaks out of her social confinement by ignoring the temporal and spatial boundaries that limit her existence" (Jones 122). She begins to "do as she liked and feel as she liked" (Chopin 54). She starts to neglect her domestic duties and her reception days at home (Justus 117). Consequently, it is seen that although she achieves self-awareness at Grand Isle and at the Chênrière Caminada, the freedom of her inner self becomes less valuable in the city, since the highly restricted conditions of her old life make it harder for her to perform said freedom in the outside world.

20 Due to the fact that Edna's newly achieved sensualized lifestyle is not compatible with the old patterns of her social life, she begins to suffer under an internal conflict. Consequently, she decides to move into a house around the block towards the end of the novel. She arrives at that decision "without even waiting for an answer from her husband regarding his opinion or wishes in the matter" (50) which again shows Edna's shift of

personality from reserved and controlled behavior to a more independent manner. This is also exemplified by the things Edna considers as being worth to be taken with her: “Everything which she had acquired aside from her husband’s bounty, she caused to be transported to the other house, supplying simple and meager deficiencies from her own resources” (80). Thus, this house which is also called the “pigeon house” (81) by the servant Ellen, since it is small and looks like one, turns out to serve as a room of her own where she can pursue freedom in manifold ways. Firstly, she is physically liberated from her children, who stay at Iberville with their grandmother, and from her husband, who has to leave to New York for business. Secondly, she is also free from the things her husband purchased, which are in fact not her own. Thus, she starts to make herself comfortable in her new home, even by physical labor: “Arobin found her with rolled sleeves, working in company with the house-maid [...] She was mounted upon a high stepladder, unhooking a picture from the wall when he entered” (80). Thirdly, this house offers Edna the chance to act out her feelings and desires as she was able to do at Grand Isle and in her childhood. She also starts to pursue her sexual desires with Alcée Arobin in New Orleans more intensively than she did with Robert Lebrun at Grand Isle.

21 The physical representations of the different rooms and the progress of Edna’s independence in each of them now prompt the investigation of the idea of a cage as a metaphorical place. Thus, the following paragraphs will be dedicated to the question of whether Edna is a woman who is able to break through the restricted patterns of social life and achieve ultimate freedom and independence or whether she rather jumps from one cage into another, contenting herself merely with partial liberty.

22 Woolf’s requirements of room and money for personal freedom are met, but Chopin’s novel shows the complexity of these elements. In terms of room, the ones previously discussed show that Edna is granted only a short glimpse of freedom and independence, since she is offered them only to a limited degree. Even the last physical room, the pigeon house, does not allow her to pursue freedom and independence on an unlimited level, since her overall restricted environment prevents her from that.

23 In terms of money, Edna is able to feel its power, since it is connected with “conviviality, the enjoyment of herself as she converses with friends and pursues artistic interests” (Davis 146). Therefore, she considers money as being valuable and desirable and knows that it can allow her freedom (145-6). Although she has no need to work to earn money, she starts reflecting about selling some of her artistic work to gain financial independence (146). In context of this process, she manages to move into a house of her own

and sustains herself with “her mother’s estate, her savings, and the livelihood derived through art” (149). Thus, financial independence plays a highly significant role for women in order to let them develop their abilities, although it is also connected with some obstacles: “And when the woman, left alone with no man to ‘support’ her, tries to meet her own economic necessities, the difficulties which confront her prove conclusively what the general economic status of the woman is” (Perkins Gilman 10).

24 Although Edna attains the two requirements postulated by Woolf, it still seems that she is confined and trapped like a bird in a cage generated by patriarchy. Every attempt to break out of this cage and to fly away leads her automatically back into it: “Edna recognizes that in living she will, as her moving from her home to the pigeon house demonstrates, merely be moving from one type of confinement to another” (Elz 20). Consequently, by moving from her home in Esplanade Street to her “pigeon house” around the corner, she trades “a gilded cage for a simpler one” and even when she flees she cannot escape (22). A reason for Edna’s fate is that she does not have the “strong wings” which a “New Woman” (18) requires in order to fly as Mademoiselle Reisz points out: “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (Chopin 79). But Edna does not understand her: “I only half comprehend her” (ibid). But she also cannot suppress the developing “New Woman” in order to fit the patterns society postulates for the “True Woman” (Elz 18). Thus, she has to realize that she cannot maintain a dual-life but must choose a life that fits into the social restraints of patriarchy, since the cage of marriage does not allow her to act upon her feelings the way she does at Grand Isle. This inner conflict then prompts her to resign herself and thus leads to her suicide at the end of the novel. Consequently, a parallel can be seen between her and a bird she sees with a broken wing who “was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (Chopin 108). A possible interpretation of this could be that due to the fact that her search for freedom and independence is in vain, she tries to find these values in death.

25 As Edna’s example shows, merely a room and money are not able to give independence to a woman, at least not for a considerable time or for her life as a whole, since the social restraints hinder a woman from developing her own identity. This identity is also not chosen by the woman herself, but allocated by her position in society as a mother, daughter, wife or widow. But in terms of Edna, these roles stand in conflict with her changing personality as Peggy Skaggs points out: “Thus woman’s existence [...] intertwines with her maternal nature. Edna’s sense of herself as a complete person makes impossible her role of

wife and mother as defined by her society [...] her role of mother also makes impossible her continuing development as an autonomous person” (111).

26 It seems that female independence is not only introduced to the society but also eventually authorized by it as well: “Edna [...] represent[s] the New Woman who was evolving in society [at] an early stage when society had not yet adapted to tolerate a New Woman” (Elz 25). Edna’s search for independence, ahead of her time, leads her inevitably into solitude.

27 The main aim of this article has been to show whether and how the denotation of room is able to encourage a woman to construct a female identity, as Woolf’s ponderous statement that “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4) presupposes. Thus, a woman can only pursue writing when she has already gained independence, which means that the room, as one part of the requirements, serves as a solution to escape and to break through the social restrictions a woman has to endure in society.

28 Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* with its protagonist Edna Pontellier offers a chance to investigate more precisely how the room can have an impact on the construction of identity on a physical as well as metaphorical level. In a first step, it has been shown that physical realization of room has an impact on the construction of a woman’s independence. Edna becomes for the first time aware of herself as a person at the cottages of Grand Isle, away from any role society assigns her. This process of developing self-awareness is made possible by the conditions of her vacation. Thus, she is able to view the roles of wife and mother from a different perspective and to change the way she sees the nature of herself. Through this reflection she comes to the conclusion that she does not see herself in any of the roles society determined for a woman. However, this process of self-awareness and emerging independence has another side effect. She now has to maintain a dual life which appears to be rather a burden than a relief, since the slowly awakening *New Woman* in her has to be suppressed in favor of the *True Woman* which she has to be to fit the patterns of the society. Thus, she realizes that she is, metaphorically speaking, entrapped in a cage like a bird, since the freedom and independence she has achieved are limited and cannot be pursued in the outside world. This conflict leads her then to the decision to rather die in that cage than to endure life’s burden any longer.

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