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Triumph over tragedy

When we think of a tragedy, instantaneously the classic Shakespearean tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* springs into our mind. Thoughts of lost love and torments abound. The most human of emotions, sorrow, overwhelms us. We shudder, a chill creeps up our spine. We agonize over the tragedy, and the tragic figure. We lose sight of reality, and stumble headlong into the story. Enthralled by the suspense, captured by the Irony that, "we know" what plight lies ahead for the characters. We become enraptured by tragedies. We feel the pain, the suffering and the helplessness of the characters as the tragedy unwinds. However powerful a story Kate Chopins' *The Awakening* may be, it is by no means a tragedy. *The Awakening* does not possess the necessary components of a tragedy. There is no tragic figure, there is no tragic plot or theme, and the ending is far from tragic.

First, tragic figures must captivate the audience. They must create an atmosphere that is shrouded in irony, suspense and mystery. These figures must also make the audience love them, feel for them and experience the anguish and pain they will undergo. *King Lear* is a great example of a tragic figure. He appeals to the reader, and captures their attention. The reader ends up sympathizing for him, and wanting him to overcome the obstacles which block his path. He motivates the emotion of the audience and controls their feelings. *Edna Pontellier* does not have the depth of character or ability to be a tragic figure. From the opening chapters she is portrayed as a troubled woman, one who is captured within a society where she does not belong. Her marriage to *Leonce* is one of convenience, there is no love, no passion, and no affection between them. *Edna* portrays a woman who is caught up within a life which does not suit her. She is, in all aspects a possession. Her every action is dictated by her husband, and by the accepted rules of her society. As a result of all this, *Edna* starts to yearn for excitement, for adventure, and for an escape. She begins to see her true self buried beneath the formalities of Creole life, thus she rebels. *Edna* becomes enraptured by the search for the most desirable of human traits, freedom. *Edna* has no tragic flaw or character trait. On the contrary, she knows what she wants her life to hold, and she leaps for it. All of her actions are aimed towards fulfillment of her dream. She wants to be again as she was as a child, free to wander, free to experiment, and free to love at will. *Edna* transforms herself from an obedient housewife, to a woman who is alive with strength of character and unrepressed emotion. These are not the actions of a tragic character. Rather, they signify a character who is in pursuit of happiness. *Edna* does not have the capability to be a tragic figure. She is not one who captures the love of the audience. Her actions actually cause her to be an unlikeable character. For example, she abandons her children, cheats on her husband, and lives her life in a selfish, self satisfying manner. Seeing that *Edna* is the main character, and the plot revolves around her the fact that she is not tragic removes the potential for the plot to be somewhat tragic.

Furthermore, *The Awakening* does not possess the plot or thematic aspects of a tragedy. The plot of a tragedy must be highlighted by some decline in hierarchy, or emotional status. However, in Chopins' novel, there is no such trait. Rather, there is a shroud of sub-plots which serve to confuse the reader into believing in its falsified tragic elements. The mirage of affairs and lovers which revolve around *Edna* do not have anything to do with the main plot. These affairs do however, add an additional element of eroticism. *Edna* does not become a tragic figure because she lost the love of her life or because she has no one to love. These do not connote tragedy. This is a false sub-plot. The true plot

is that of a woman rising from her lowly state and taking control of her life. It is about being free, and the beauty of freedom. This plot possesses no tragic element. All of the steps which Edna takes are free willed and for the sole means of bettering her own life. Edna does not act out of self pity or remorse. She acts in a way which will inevitably allow her to possess the greatest freedom of all. As the story unfolds the fact that it is not a tragedy becomes more and more apparent.

Lastly, the concluding pages of the Awakening highlight just how far from a tragedy the novel is. Oedipus gouges his eyes out in excruciating remorse and self loathing. Romeo and Juliet both perish side by side for a love which could never bloom. These endings all have the elements of horror, and sadness. Here Edna whole heartedly plunges into the ocean. She swims among the waves immersed in her own ecstasy. This demise seems gleeful, and jovial in comparison to the anguish, remorse and horror associated with true tragedies. This conclusion is not meant to be full of sadness and horror. Rather, it serves to show the wonder and beauty of freedom. As Edna stands naked on the edge of the ocean, it seems as if she is on the brink of the universe, on the edge of civilization. With the world to her back she plunges headlong into eternity. The Image of the birds flying overhead serve here to illustrate the freedom of death. They show the grace of nature with no restraints. There is no tragic element here. Rather Edna standing solitary on the shore is the epitome of freedom and happiness. At last she is getting what she so longed for. It was not love which she so desired, no man could satisfy her desires. Edna simply wanted the world behind her and to let her spirit flow. She wanted the freedom she dreamt about. She wanted to again run through the fields of flowers as carefree as a child. All of these desires are being fulfilled at her own will and desire. She wants to perish so that she may be set free. Death in this case is not tragic because there was total free will involved. Suicide does not denote tragedy; It suggest total control and desire to leave the present world. This is not a characteristic of a tragedy. Rather it is serene and beautiful, not the type of conclusion commonly associated with a tragedy.

The Awakening is a powerful work of literature. It highlights the power of desire, and the beauty of freedom. The Awakening, does not, however, possess the proper elements to be considered a tragedy. There is overall, a feeling of fulfillment and excitement within the concluding chapters, as Edna embarks on her quest for freedom. Neither she nor the plot possess the necessary traits of a tragedy. Furthermore, the conclusion, usually the climax of a tragic work is lifeless save for the beauty and solitude of Edna's position within the circle of life. Again there is no tragic element hidden in this most tantalizing ending. Although this novel is rich in verse and content it lacks the characters, plot structure and conclusion, which are essential aspects of all tragedies.

