Women’s Awakening: Analysis of Sleep Images in The Awakening

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How to cite this paper: Xing Zhang, Heng Wu, Wenjing Min. (2023). Women’s Awakening: Analysis of Sleep Images in The Awakening. The Educational Review, USA, 7(2), 265-268. DOI: 10.26855/er.2023.02.025

Received: February 8, 2023  
Accepted: March 5, 2023  
Published: April 4, 2023

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Abstract

Sleep is an indispensable part of human life, and so it is for the characters in literary works. Sleep in literature is sometimes skipped by the writer with few words due to its natural features and to disadvantage to narration, while sometimes it is depicted carefully with implied meaning. This dissertation states that the importance of sleep images should not be undervalued with The Awakening, the feminist novel of Kate Chopin as an example. Sleep images can be discovered through the writing including the heroine’s falling asleep, wakening, refusing to sleep, her death as the extreme state of sleep, and so on. They assist the transform of Edna’s emotion and self-awareness, witnessing her sexual, emotional and spiritual awakening. This paper will analyze how the sleep images contribute to the feminist theme of the book, and the meaning of Edna’s death will be elaborated in particular as it is a key of her resistance to the patriarchal world.

Keywords

Sleep images, The Awakening, Kate Chopin, Feminism

The present dissertation contains four sections. It first demonstrates the reason why sleep is favored in literature and its contribution in presenting the theme in general. Then, The Awakening is taken as an example to further justify how sleep images are related to its feminist theme. Additionally, it is used to interpret the ending, indicating the meaning of Edna’s death. Last, several limitations of this dissertation will be given after a conclusion.

1. Undervalued sleep images in literary works

Sleep in literature has not been paid much attention for its limits in narration. People’s consciousness and memory are largely suspended during sleep. When sleep appears in literature, it means the stop of narration for the most time. Michael Greaney, a senior lecturer in Lancaster University, points out in his paper that sleep is “unthinkable” in literature, because it represents “a certain limit to thought”, “a region of human experience that cannot be consciously experienced” (Greaney, 2010). In this case, sleep is more like a stop compared with daytime activity cutting us from the world, in which we have no sense of place and time. Nathaniel Wallace, an English literature professor in South Carolina State University, also argues that there is “a fundamental antagonism between sleep and narrative”. He used several sleep-related art and literary works to support his idea whose protagonists all vertical figures refusing to sleep to keep their reason and consciousness (Wallace, 2001). Allan Rechtschaffen, a psychophysiologist responds their views arguing that dreams are “isolated” and “unimaginable” where human are all “uncritical observers” based on his research (Rechtschaffen, 1978). All of these examples thus seem to indicate the disadvantage of adopting sleep image in literature.

Nevertheless, writers have been making sleep a carrier of meaning in literature because of its complexity and uniqueness. Colin M. Shapiro, a professor of psychiatry and ophthalmology at the University of Toronto In Sleep, defines sleep as an “inactive, common and basic human function” in Art and Literature. (Shapiro) However, though everybody

DOI: 10.26855/er.2023.02.025
sleeps, they feel differently, like the article further explained: “Sleep delights, frightens, regenerates, and may even lead to fatigue.” (Shapiro) Besides, sleep is also “a unique experience” for everybody. When people fall asleep, they enter into a space and no one knows what is happening there. In this private space, there may be different “connotations” and “emotions”, and abundant “internal activities” may be carrying on. (Shapiro) Therefore, it is the possibilities of sleep and plenty room for interpretation that has attracted writers’ and artists’ interest.

Sleep images have appeared in many literary genres like mythology, fairy tale, drama and modern fiction, and it contributes a lot in theme conveying. Thomas Wheatland, a cultural critic, and Greaney did a review study of sleep in literature respectively covering writings before and after 19th century (Wheatland) (Greaney, 2010). Plenty of examples from these two studies reflects the importance of sleep image in theme conveying in works such as Charles Dickens’s The Pickwick Papers, and Macbeth and Richard III of Shakespeare. To further discuss its importance, this paper will take Kate Chopin’s The Awakening as an example, for sleep images, including falling into sleep, refusing to sleep, and dreams, appear for multiple times in this novel, and play a significant role in the presentation of its feminist theme and the interpretation of the ending.

2. Sleep images and the feminist theme in The Awakening

The Awakening, by American writer Kate Chopin in 1899, started out as a scandal, but became a classic for it embraces the voice of women and reveals secrets of their condition, according to Alfred Bendixen, a professor in the department of English at Princeton University (Bendixen, 2012). It depicts a woman, Edna, who awakens from the role given by patriarchal society and attains her identity with self-awareness. In this section, the paper will analyze how sleep images attribute to developing its feminist theme. Sleep images in this paper mainly refer to her dreams and sleep related behaviors of the heroine Edna including falling asleep, wakening and refusing to sleep.

Edna refused the identity as a submissive wife by making her own decision of sleep and sex. The description of Edna’s behavior before going to bed in Chapter 11 marks her first resistance to her husband. It is quite late and Mr. Pontellier’s demands as “I thought I should find you in bed, are you asleep”, through which he proclaims his control of her body indicating his dominant role (Chopin, 41). In the past, Edna would say yes feeling no sense of “submission or obedience” listening to her husband’s command automatically out of women’s duty. However, the enlightened music from Reisz and the successful try of swimming have aroused her passion and made her aware of her desire and free will. She replies: “No, I’m going to stay out here”. In this context, Edna’s answer is the denial of order as well as refusing the potential invitation of sex from her husband declaring the independence of her will and body. This is her incipient attempt of seeking her identity and a start of her awakening.

Edna’s sleep-related experiences correspond to her announcement of self-ownership. In Chapter 3, Chopin describes the scene before Edna falling asleep as she takes off part of her cloth and “stretches herself in the very center of the high, white bed.” As Greaney claims, “The bed in modernism becomes a privileged, neurasthenic subjectivity”, exemplified with Sophia Jansen in Jean Rhys’ Good Morning, Midnight (1939) and the oppressively sleep-deprived heroine of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) (Greaney, 2010). Bed can be regarded as a symbol of the world. Edna lying in the “center” of the bed reflects her self-centered image and the desire of being the master of herself. Then she looses her hair and observes her round arms closely “as if it were something she sees for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh.” Noticing physical charm is a prominent symbol of one’s sexual awakening, which is also a part of her self-awareness.

Chopin further illustrates her feminist view through one of Edna’s dreams, revealing that women should possess free will and their talent should not be wasted. In Chapter 25, Edna had a dream at the night after seeing Miss Highcamp playing the piano. The dream goes like:

Edna was dreaming of Mr. Highcamp playing the piano at the entrance of a music store on Canal Street, while his wife was saying to Alice Arobin, as they boarded an Esplanade Street car: “What a pity that so much talent has been neglected! but I must go. (Chopin, 101; sic)

To make the dream authentic, the author twists some facts for dreams are normally not to be identical to reality. In real world, Mr. Highcamp cannot play. It is his daughter Miss. Highcamp who plays the piano during the family party. So, the comment made in Edna’s dream is actually targeted at Miss. Highcamp. Apart from her achievements in music, Miss. Highcamp also reads classics, as her father emphasizes proudly that she missed their activity for going to “Dante reading” before dinner, which all indicates she is well-educated. However, Edna was indifferent about Miss. Highcamp’s performance, criticizing that “she seemed to have apprehended all of the composer’s coldness and none of his poetry”. In her dream, she further comments that her talent has been neglected. In her opinion, Miss. Highcamp is gifted because few women at that time could attain the achievements both in music and literature, but she also pities her for

DOI: 10.26855/er.2023.02.025 266 The Educational Review, USA
her unhappiness. Her lifeless playing shows that she does not enjoy music though she gets mass admiration and respect from the society, which is opposite to Mademoiselle Reisz who is passionate about music but grasp few skills. Edna’s judgement manifests that she values passion and free will more than social recognition. Edna’s dream together with other plot description in this section reflects women’s efforts to meet the expectations of patriarchal society. They are complemented by the crowd but still fail to unleash potential out of their own will and to make their voices heard.

However, Edna is not always that strong-minded and independent in searching her identity as many papers argue. Her hesitance and struggle can also be reflected through the sleep images, namely her unsettling dreams. In Chapter 11, after she disobeying her husband for the first time: she feels like awakening from “a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream” (Chopin, 42). For a short moment, she feels that she could be free from constriction, but even she herself knows that is impossible. That evening, she does not sleep well, tortured by “intangible” dreams that leave her only “an impression upon her half-awakened senses of something unattainable” (Chopin, 43). According to Freud’s “id and ego” theory, ego that represents reason and common sense is trying to influence and replace id featured by desire (Freud, 19). Edna has those confusing dreams and constantly awakes because her reason and desire are fighting against each other. On the one hand, she desires to break down the rules set by patriarchal culture and makes her own choices. On the other hand, she is condemned by social disciplines rooted in subconsciousness and punished for not doing her duty as a tamed woman. Edna’s uneasy dreams signify her struggle to resist the imprisonment of mind in patriarchal society and the uneasiness of triumph.

3. Edna’s death as a sleep image

It is not rare to discover death being compared to sleep in literary works. In Bible, the dead people are named as “those who have fallen asleep”. Another typical example will be the main characters’ death in Macbeths which has been one of its study focuses.

In this context, Edna’s death is considered as a triumph act as a feminist can also be viewed as a sleep image, and her mental state before she committed suicide can also be reflected through her sleep-related actions. In Chapter 35, there are three paralleled sentences about her feeling around sleep time, depicting Edna’s attitude to Robert changing from the positive to the negative. It is said that she wakes up full of “speculation” at the beginning. Then she awakes with “hope” while ends up the day with “despondency”. Finally, there was neither hope nor despondency (Chopin, 139 and 141). Sleep is a useful tool of recovery. No matter how disappointed she is at night, she could regain hope and strength when she wakes up. Once she expects that her lover and his love could lift her out of desperation. However, it turns out that Robert is incapable of bearing this one-way expectation. Her hope gradually fades. Love is not as magical as she thought.

Two chapters latter, Robert comes to her expressing his affection again, which arouse Edna’s determination of stripping away the constrains. She adopts a sleep image to describe her feeling:

_The years that are gone seem like dreams--if one might go on sleeping and dreaming--but to wake up and find--oh! Well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life._ (Chopin, 151)

“The awakening” has been a process since she realized her needs. Here, Edna finally gets enough power to admit her unwillingness of pretending to be happy. Even though awaking form dream to reality is rather painful, the pretended satisfaction is no other than surrender.

However, Robert disappears, after being aware of the responsibility and Edna’s expectation. This time, the last hope vanishes. Edna thus refuses to sleep. Sleep deprivation is regarded as “a technique of torture” because sleep is indispensable to human. (Shapiro) In this context, Edna breaking the balance of sleep circle indicates that the agony brought by losing the sense of meaning weighs more than the discomfort of her body, which is the total opposite to the scene where she is lying in the center of the bed appreciating her body beauty. The next day morning, she finally figured out: “Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else”, and the hope-to-despondency circle could also be endless (Chopin, 155, sic). Borne this in mind, she walks into the sea and never comes back.

Edna’s death is, as Dr. Iraj Montashery summarizes, a member of Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain. They argue that Edna’s death is “an act of liberation and emancipation”, and gets rid of “social constraints” by committing suicide which makes her an ultimate feminist (Montashery, 2013). She feels so tired before she ends the life. Potential waste of the talent, refined hobbies, bondage of domestic life, losing of the voice, and the irresponsible lovers, all squeezes her vitality, reminding her of the inability to resist the male-dominated world. Death becomes her last choice to declare the ownership of herself. Instead of being resigned to the circumstances, she finally settles for a long sleep.
4. Conclusion

Exemplified by Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, this dissertation discusses the important role sleep images serving in literary works. They have been undervalued because of the illogical feature of sleep. However, writers have been adopting it to highlight and enrich their theme, get the characters vivid, and to bring an authentic rhythm of narration. In *The Awakening*, sleep images appear through the novel and witness Edna’s sexual, emotional and spiritual awakening. With those sleep images, Chopin conveys the heroine’s predicament as a woman, and her struggle for self-ownership and identity.

Several limitations of this research should be made clear. First, it fails to testify whether sleep images are applied as a technique in other works of Kate Chopin. Second, the sleep images in this novel are still not fully discussed, which deserves further exploration.

References


