Defense Mechanism: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on The Awakening

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Abstract. The Awakening is one of the representatives of Kate Chopin in nineteenth century. After its publication, it was controversial because of its open discussion on the emotional and sexual needs of women. With the development of feminist movement, The Awakening is seen as a remarkable work of early feminism. Apart from its achievement on feminism, Chopin illustrates the unconscious mind and the work of human psyche. Through analyzing two types of defense mechanism—repression and regression—this essay tries to examine that because of the trauma of losing her mother, Edna’s psyche is repressed since childhood and regresses to the oral stage.

Introduction

Kate Chopin is an intelligent and independent woman, who is considered as a forerunner of feminist authors of the end of 19th century. She wrote many controversial stories about women, sex, and marriage. Her famous novel The Awakening describes a woman who struggles between the individual autonomy and social conformity and commits suicide in the end. After the publication of The Awakening, it was hard to be accepted by the public, and some critics thought that Edna was a selfish and immoral woman. But later critics began to view it as a story about the sexually awareness and a rebellion against the social conformity, expressing a notion of female sexuality and equality. In recent years, this story is analyzed from various perspectives about the ambiguous of the ending (an expression of desperation or a relief), the meaning of “awakening” (constructing a new self or uncovering deeper levels of the old one), and the factors of Edna’s awakening (Robert, Adele, Madame Ratignolle, or the atmosphere of the Grand Isle). Besides, in this novel, Kate Chopin creates a vision of the human psyche and explains the Freudian concept of defense mechanism. This essay tries to analyze the influence of the death of Edna’s mother from the psychoanalytic perspective. Applying the defense mechanism, Edna’s psychology is repressed since childhood and regresses to the oral stage.

Defense Mechanism

In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanism is unconscious psychological strategies brought into play by various entities to cope with reality and to maintain self-image. The purpose of ego defense mechanisms is to protect the mind/self/ego from anxiety, social sanctions or to provide a refuge from a situation with which one cannot currently cope.[1] Anna Freud concludes and develops her father Sigmund Freud’s study on defense mechanisms. In her book The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense, Anna Freud discusses fifteen defense mechanisms, including repression and regression.

The childhood experience is important to the development of people’s psychology. Edna’s mother died when she was quite young. The death of her mother is a trauma to Edna. In order to protect the individual from the trauma of losing the mother, Edna’s memory of her mother’s death and her sexual drives are deeply repressed into the unconscious, and she regresses to the oral stage.
Repression since Childhood

Repression of the Memory of Mother’s Death

Although Kate Chopin never mentions the accurate time of the death of Edna’s mother, this essay presumes that her mother died at her very young age when they lived in Kentucky. “Walking through the grass” actually is the “concealing memory” of searching for her mother. In Chapter Four “Childhood and Concealing Memories” of *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud states that:

The indifferent childhood memories owe their existence to a process of displacement. It is shown by psychoanalysis that in the reproduction they represent the substitute for other really significant impressions, whose reproduction is hindered by some resistance they do not owe their existence to their contents, but to an associative relation of contents to another repressed thought, deserve the title of "concealing memories" which I have designated them.[2]

The early childhood recollections may be not the true memories but the distorted form of the repressed memories. Repression as one of the defense mechanism is the “withdrawal from consciousness of an unwanted idea, affect, or desire by pushing it down, or repressing it, into the unconscious part of the mind”[1]. The trauma of losing her mother is deeply repressed into the unconscious and disguised as the entertaining experience of walking in the tall, sea-like, and endless grass. Recalling this piece of memory, however, Edna still has some feeling of fear, “I don’t remember whether I was frightened or pleased…just following a misleading impulse without question”[3]. The feeling of the fright is the repressed fear of losing her mother, and the “impulse” is her desire for the mother. Walking in the endless meadow to search for her dead mother is displaced by the happy, free-feeling memory.

Repression of the Sexual Drives

Her motherless childhood and domineering father transformed her into a submissive daughter and wife to the social convention. Her drives and wishes were repressed by the social and moral roles since childhood. According to Lacan’s theory about human psyche, the father dominates the Symbolic Order. In the Symbolic Order, the father represents “cultural norms and laws. It is who stands between us and our mother, and it is he who enforces cultural rules by threatening to castrate us if we do not obey”[4]. The result of the absence of her mother is that Edna was raised in a repressively patriarchal and masculine-dominated home. After the period of her mother’s death, “religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until—until—why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it—just driven along by habit”[3]. Edna’s sexual drives and wishes are censored by social norms, morality, values and ethics, so that they are block off into the unconscious.

Since her mother died, and gradually dominated by her father, Edna’s sexual impulses has been disguised as fantasies. Freud says in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” that the motives forces of all fantasies are “unsatisfied wishes and every single fantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality”[5]. From Edna’s relationship with the three men to that with her husband, it shows the process of repression of Edna’s sexual drives. From the sad-eyed cavalry officer, a father’s friend, to a young Mississippi gentleman, a neighbor’s suitor, then to the great tragedian, a star, her passion’s objects are less available for her, and eventually her passion becomes the fantasies. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff posits in his essay “Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” that, “Edna provides the passion she needs in the only manner which seems safely available to her—through daydreaming”[6]. Then when she married to Leonce, she submitted to the reality and became a devoted wife, “closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams”[3].

The setting of Grand Isle awakens Edna’s drives and desires repressed since childhood. The hot wet weather and the seductive sounds of the sea arouse Edna’s fervid sensuality; the freedom of expression loosens the “mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her”[3]. When husbands work outside, wives and children take a holiday in the Gulf, where females can shake off the shackles of patriarchal and conventional society. After Edna meets Robert, she feels more alive, and the repressed impulses are more active to show out. When she hears Madame Ratignolle play piano, some images
appear. She imagines the figure of a naked man “stand beside a desolate rock on the sea shore” and look toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him”[11]. Other pieces of music call the imagination that she “comes down a long avenue between tall hedges”, and “a demure lady strokes a cat”[3]. The imagination of Edna is the fulfillment of her sexual wishes. In Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, coming down a long avenue symbolizes the process of intercourse, and the cat is the symbol of pubic hair[7]. And after the function of “displacement”—the latent element is replaced by a well-concealed allusion—the “naked man” in Edna’s imagination is the displacement of Edna. And the bird is also the symbol of Edna who wants freedom in sexuality. Under the relaxing and seductive atmosphere of the Grand Isle, the strength of social censoring agency grows weaker, but the censor is still attentive, so that those drives and wishes are distorted and displaced by other images or figures.

The sea is the symbol of unconscious, whose power is seductive and irresistible. The voice of the sea is “seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring... The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace”[3]. At that night after party, seduced by the “white serpents”, Edna walks into the water and learns to swim. As Jung states in “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious”, “Water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious…. Water is earthy and tangible; it is also the fluid of the instinctive-driven body, blood and the flowing of blood, the odour of the beast, and carnality heavy with passion”[8] At night, under the weaker repression, faced with the mystery and seductive water, Edna enjoys losing herself in the unlimited unconscious. Powerful drives along with repressed materials from earlier periods of her lives rush out, awakening her body. Robert is the fulfillment of her great passion repressed since childhood. But when Robert leaves her again, she feels isolated, because no one can understand her in the society where social custom prohibits female autonomy. At last, only through returning to the embrace of the sea, can Edna entirely immerse herself into the abyss of instinctive drives.

**Regression to the Oral Stage**

**Regression, Oral Stage, and Pleasure Principle**

According to the definition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, regression is a “return to earlier stages of development and abandoned forms of gratification belonging to them, prompted by dangers or conflicts arising at one of the later stages”[9]. Arguing that everyone passes through five psychosexual stages during the first five twelve or so years of life: the oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital stages, Freud thinks that “the child’s initial interactions with the world are primarily via the oral cavity”[10]. Powerful hunger and thirst drives are satisfied through sucking, needs are expressed through crying, and pleasure is derived through the intake of food and water. The oral stage represents a state of oneness with the mother. The great consuming libido is satisfied with the contact with the mother. An individual fixed at the oral stage might begin eating or smoking excessively, or might become very verbally aggressive and yell at others[10]. In infancy and early childhood, the Id rules behavior by obeying only the pleasure principle, which In Freudian psychology is the psychoanalytic concept describing people seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering (pain) in order to satisfy their biological and psychological needs.[11]

**Edna’s Regression to the Oral Stage**

Along with the awakening of sexual drives repressed since childhood, Edna’s trauma of losing her mother emerges from the unconscious. The “concealing memory”—walking through the meadow—has shown that the memory of her mother’s death is deeply repressed and reshaped into another form. At that night when Edna learned to swim, walking into the water, she felt not only the exultation of being immersed in the sexual drives, but also the fear of her mother’s death which was repressed into the unconscious. When she swims a little farther away the shore, “A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. ...She made no mention of her encounter with death and her flash of terror”[3]. The terror and the fear of her mother’s death rise out
of the water. In order to protect the individual from the anxiety caused by traumatic experience, Edna’s psyche regresses to the oral stage.

After remembering the traumatic experience of her mother’s death, Edna begins to regress to the oral stage. Edna’s drives can be satisfied through oral cavity. For example, the word “delicious” is a main adjective Edna uses: “a delicious song”, “how delicious it would be to have him there with her”[3], and she describes the feeling of standing naked under the sky as “how delicious”[3]. What’s more, Edna abandons adult coping strategies in favor of more childlike patterns of behavior. Edna becomes resistant to her husband, “I mean to stay out here. I don’t wish to go in, and I don’t intend to. Don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you”[3]. When going back to New Orleans, Edna refuses to receive the visitor on Tuesday, and she wants to destroy something. She becomes unconcerned with her children, and views them as a burden. Her behaviors are childish and selfish. Being self-centered, Edna cares for nothing but her own pleasure. Madame Ratignolle also comments on Edna’s moving into her own little pigeon house that: “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna”.[3] James H. Justus argues in his essay “The Unawakening of Edna Pontellier” that:

“This is not a distorted description of her so-called awakening if we think of childhood as that stage in which dreams are delicious and self-contained whether they come true or not, a period of suspended self-fulfillment when satisfactions are gained at the expense of others, when desires are unanchored and the imagination is free to attach these desires to whatever shapes and forms the fancy dictates, above all, a time…when self-indulgence has no costs to threaten its pleasure.”[12]

It shows that handling the impulses in a more childlike way can satisfy Edna’s biological and psychological needs, because the behavior of a child would not be judged and limited by social and ethical norms.

Her walking into the sea and committing suicide is the action of an infant who is looking for her mother and return to the arms of her mother. When Adele, a “mother-women”, gives birth to a baby, it reminds Edna of her mother again: “Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread”.[3] Only by regressing to the oral stage, can Edna feel the oneness with the mother. When Edna stands naked in the water, she feels “like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never know”[3]. Like a self-centered new-born baby, Edna seeks the pleasure principle and gets satisfaction through the contacting with the mother. In the end, the memories of her childhood flash back. She remembers the voice of her father and her sister, the spurs of the cavalry officer, and the happiness before the death of her mother. Cynthia Griffin Wolff also argues that Edna’s fascination with the sea betrays a longing to return to the gratifying “oceanic” state of the infant still at one with the mother, still immersed in the amniotic fluid[6]. Walking in the water likes searching for her mother in the blue-grass meadow. The sensuous touch and embrace of the sea likes the touch of her mother. At last, Edna opens her arms to reunion with her mother.

Summary
Kate Chopin’s description of Edna’s psychology illustrates the Freudian concept—defense mechanism. As the defense mechanisms to the trauma of losing her mother, on one hand, Edna is controlled by the patriarchal society and her sexual drives are deeply repressed into unconscious. On the other hand, her memory of losing her mother is also repressed and disguised as the “concealing memory”—walking through the meadow, and when the memory of this trauma awakens, Edna’s psyche regresses to the oral stage at which Edna can keep oneness with her mother. In the end, not understood by the patriarchal and conventional society, Edna goes to the embrace of the sea to seek the oneness with her mother.

References


