

The Role of Choice

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The role of choices is a very important aspect in both *The Awakening* and *Quicksand*. Edna's and Helga's choices are limited by society and they do not have full and complete freedom to live their lives and express themselves. In *The Awakening*, the choices Edna makes for herself are positive, but they eventually lead to a negative ending. In *Quicksand*, Helga makes both positive and negative decisions, which also lead to a negative ending. The narrators in both novels set up the main characters to be tragedies from the start.

In Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, Edna decides to not follow the societal norms, which is to be a Creole woman. A typical Creole woman is meant to be exactly like Madame Ratignolle, who only marries once and is fully devoted to her husband and children. Edna, as the narrator says, is:

Not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle... They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels (Chopin 1259).

Edna just does not feel the enthusiasm for catering to her husband, Léonce, or having a family to look after. Instead, she chooses to pursue Robert because in that relationship she feels something that she hasn't felt for her own husband—passion. Edna wants nothing but freedom to do whatever she desires, and she desires to have freedom. Because it is nearly impossible to obtain a divorce from her husband, Edna decides to buy her own house with her own money and move out while her husband and children are away. While not being in her husband's house, she is

free, at least in her own mind, to do as she wishes. Although everyone in town knows what's going on behind closed doors, it doesn't seem as though Edna even cares about their perceptions of her because she is happy that she finally has a glimmer of freedom in her life again and can chase after passion.

The bad choices Edna makes in *The Awakening* set her up to be a tragic character. Right from the start she chooses to stray from the Creole lifestyle and strive towards passion. Edna goes out with other men, like Robert and Alcéé, who are known to the people of the town to be extremely flirtatious with married women, even though it is usually never taken seriously. Adèle worries that Edna will take Robert seriously and asks him to “let Mrs. Pontellier alone” to which Robert responds, “Why shouldn't she take me seriously?” (Chopin 1268). Having Edna choose to keep pursuing Robert as a married woman, and even while everyone knows what she's doing, will eventually lead her to her ultimate downfall because it is impossible for her to get everything she truly desires. Even Robert wants to marry a Creole woman, and Edna still wishes to be anything but that even for Robert, to whom she truly loves.

In Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Helga also chooses to not follow any type of societal norms. Helga looks like she is a black woman, so she should be part of the black society. However, unlike Edna, Helga just keeps making too many decisions and cannot decide in which society, black or white, she belongs because although she looks black, she still has “white blood” inside of her. When she is in Naxos, she is engaged to James Vayle, a black man, but after some time, she realizes that she doesn't fit in with James' family because she has no real family to belong to. The narrator says that “she had wanted social background, but—she had not imagined that it could be so stuffy” (Larsen 367). Helga always wanted a family she could be a part of, but once she is close to achieving that goal, she feels that she just doesn't fit in well. She also didn't

feel that she fit in with Naxos itself. When Helga attends a jazz club in Harlem, she first enjoys being there with the other black men and women. Helga is described as being “drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra” (Larson 397). Only when she notices that she is enjoying herself and that she fits in with the rest of the people there does she choose to draw herself away and begins to judge all those in the club, as if she is a white woman surrounded by blacks.

Helga then goes to Copenhagen to live with her aunt and uncle among an entirely white society. There, she wears dresses in bright colors with low-cut backs, which usually only white women wore. Her aunt says to Helga, “That black and orange thing there is good too, but too high. What a prim American maiden you are, Helga, to hide such a fine back and shoulders” (Larsen 402). Back in America, Helga followed the norms about dressing, color-wise, although she had always loved bright colors that were not allowed on black women. Being able to express herself in Copenhagen is extraordinary to her. When she comes back to Harlem, she continues to still wearing the low-cut and brightly color dresses, choosing again to go against societal norms of blacks in Harlem.

Helga has a lot of freedom to choose to live between either the black or white society, but she has more of a battle internally that retracts her freedom. Helga is always so worried about what others will think of her, which causes her to not feel comfortable in either society. She almost genuinely considers marrying Axel Olsen, a white man, and spending the rest of her life in Copenhagen where she believes the rest of society accepts her as the way she is. She only decides against this when she sees the two black people in the circus and the way Axel and the rest of the white audience seem to be so entertained by them. At the end of their performance, “the audience applauded with delight. Only Helga Crane was silent, motionless... And how the

enchanted spectators clapped and howled and shouted for more!” (Larsen 411). Being so offended and distraught, she then decides to leave Copenhagen and go back to Harlem once more because she felt she no longer fit in with the white society.

Instead of follow her passion and desire like Enda did in *The Awakening*, Helga withdraws from her passion because she is terrified of it. If she does follow her passion, in marriage or life in general, it is likely that the people of both the black and white society will accept her choice, even if it is undesirable for them. Because Helga is petrified of not fitting in with society, much like the relationship between her father and mother was not accepted, she is unable to commit to following her passion, which is Mr. Anderson. He is another person who appears to be black, but is also mixed-raced, just like Helga. The bad impulse decisions Helga makes in her life show that she wants to follow her passion, but is deeply impacted by society, which makes her retract from the pursuit of happiness. Once she knows that Mr. Anderson does not want to be with her, she settles for the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green because he holds a nice position in society, and he is black, just as she looks. Helga settles for society, which will eventually lead to her ultimate downfall because she does not actually have the infatuation and desire for Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. Helga makes one unselfish choice throughout the novel, and that is when she decides she is going to risk her own happiness so that her children can have both a father and a mother so they will not be outcasts like she feels. When Helga is thinking about leaving Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, the narrator says:

Of the children Helga tried not to think. She wanted not to leave them—if that were possible. The recollection of her own childhood, lonely, unloved, rose too poignantly before her for her to consider calmly such a solution (Larson 443).

Helga decides to remain unhappy for the rest of her life just so that maybe her children can have a pleasant life where they actually fit comfortably into society.

Chopin and Larsen have Edna and Helga make choices that seem self-destructive and unintelligent because both are stories about passion. Edna is a character of passion and makes all of her decisions based on her immediate desires. It is proven that she will do anything to get what she desires that moment, including moving out of her husband's house and into her own so that she can be with Robert. Helga is a character that fears passion because her parents' relationship was full of passion, which was not acceptable in society because it was between a black man and white woman. Helga tries to back away from any kind of choice resulting from passion, so she consistently makes impulsive decisions to run away from passion.

Personally, I believe *The Awakening* to be a story filled with positive choices, but leads to a negative ending. Edna does what any human should and follows what she loves, believes in, and will do anything to get there. Unfortunately, the rest of society does not agree with that logic and prefer her to conform to be a typical Creole woman. Edna ends up destroying her life because she loses the respect of all those around her, and still doesn't end up with Robert in the end. Edna's story ends in death because she cannot escape societal norms and cannot choose to live her life how she wants to and with whom she wants to. She drowns naked and "free" in the ocean by not fighting against the current, which leads me to believe it is suicide. As for *Quicksand*, I believe it to be a story filled with both positive and negative choices that also lead to a negative ending. Helga wants to do what makes her happy, but is too afraid of her own passion and what society will think about her decisions. Helga always has good intentions on making decisions and really wants to do what she thinks is best for her, but she just cannot seem to find the balance between her own passion and societal norms. Helga ends up destroying her

life, as well, because she settles for abiding by societal norms and marries a man she can hardly even stand to even look at. At the end of the novel, Helga loses all of her emotion, which is almost like death itself.

Works Cited

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