

Foreshadowing and Characterization through Opera and Piano in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract: *The intertwining of music and literature has been a prevalent phenomenon, spanning beyond contemporary trends. Since the inception of these two artistic forms, their reciprocal influence has shaped creative expressions. This paper explores the ways in which Kate Chopin's novel, The Awakening, exemplifies this interplay as it integrates opera, classical music, and the piano to propel the protagonist's journey of self - discovery. In addition, this paper examines different aspects of this integration in light of the theory of intermediality, by scrutinizing the employment music for foreshadowing and characterization, and the impact of music as the catalyst for Edna's awakening. Additionally, it examines the socio - cultural significance of music in the 19th century and its influence on the novel's narrative. In this context, the analysis reveals that music serves as a powerful tool, influencing the plot, themes, and character development.*

Keywords: 19th Century Literature, foreshadowing, Characterisation, The Awakening, Intermediality

1. Purpose

The purpose of this article is to investigate and explore the interplay between music and literature by analyzing Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, as it exemplifies this interplay through the integration of music elements such as opera, classical music, and the piano. The article aims to delve into specific aspects of this integration, and to investigate the use of music for foreshadowing and characterization. In addition, this paper seeks to underscore the transformative impact of music on the protagonist's journey.

2. Significance

This paper contributes to the understanding of the theory of intermediality between music and literature and the use of musical elements as a literary tool. By analyzing the integration of music in Kate Chopin's novel, and through the exploration of various aspects of this integration, including foreshadowing and characterization, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of music in narrative development, particularly in the context of 19th - century literature. Additionally, the examination of the socio - cultural significance of music in the 19th century enriches our comprehension of the broader context in which the novel unfolds.

3. Introduction

The incorporation of music and musical instruments in literary works for diverse formal and thematic aims is indeed far from being a recent trend. Music and literature's reciprocal influence prevailed ever since these two arts have appeared. This "interdiscursive nature of literature" which manifests "in the manifold 'intermedial' relations between literature and other arts and media" (Wolf, 2009, p.134) is what the theory of intermediality whose emergence is closely tied with the concepts of Bakhtinian dialogism and Kristeva's intertextuality (Jensen, 2016, p.2) seeks to investigate. The fashion in which verbal and non - verbal

arts act in conjunction to deliver meaning is indeed noticeable in the 19th century's literary works. This is demonstrated in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in which opera, classical music, and Piano are part and parcel of the protagonist's existential journey of self - discovery. Since its publication at the end of the 19th century, Chopin's controversial novel ignited various debates regarding the sexuality of its protagonist, Edna Pontellier, and her rebellion against the 19th Century's patriarchal system. In this framework, the first section of the essay examines referential intermediality for the sake of foreshadowing in *The Awakening*, the second section scrutinizes the utilization of piano in terms of characterization to highlight the contrast between Adèle Ratignolle as a mother woman and Mademoiselle Reisz as a social outcast, while the third and final part analyses the impact of music on the protagonist and the way it represents the major trigger of her awakening.

4. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to comprehensively investigate the integration of music and musical instruments in Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*. The data collection process involves a close reading of the novel, identifying instances where music and musical instruments are mentioned, and thoroughly examining their thematic and formal significance within the narrative. Additionally, a contextual analysis is employed to delve into the broader historical and cultural context of the novel, including an exploration of societal norms and the prevailing patriarchal system of the 19th century. By synthesizing the findings derived from the close reading and contextual analysis supported by relevant examples from the novel, this study unveils the overall impact of music on the narrative structure and character development. Furthermore, the theory of intermediality is to be utilized as a theoretical framework, emphasizing the thematic and formal significance of music in Kate Chopin's critically acclaimed novel.

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5. Discussion

Referential intermediality is used deliberately by Chopin in more than an instance for the sake of foreshadowing as numerous musical pieces are incorporated into the novel “to tease [its] love triangles, affairs, and suicide” (Cuff, 2016, p.340). The first example of intermediality occurs as early as the beginning of the first chapter. We are barely introduced to the characters and the setting when “Two young girls, the Farival twins” play “a duet from *Zampa* upon the piano” (Chopin, 1899, p.3). Interestingly, the same characters replay this same extract from Louis Joseph Ferdinand Herold’s opera on the ninth chapter of the novel. This explicit reference is an instance of “Intermediality in the narrow sense of intermedial references” (Rajewsky, 2005, p.52) which, as opposed to indirect intermediality, consists in “specific reference to a musical genre or composition” (Wolf, 2017, p.251) according to Steven Paul Scher’s typology in musico - literary studies. Despite the fact that *Zampa* is briefly mentioned and that the characters performing it are insignificant in the novel, the choice of this opera is not arbitrary. *Zampa* or *The Marble Bride* was a popular French opera during the 19th Century. During its first act, the young Count of Monza leaves his lover Alice and becomes a pirate. Devastated by her partner’s desertion, Alice roams searching for him until she dies of a broken heart, but her spirit haunts a statue crafted by Lugano who sheltered her before her death. In fact, Alice’s downfall and tragic death related to the sudden departure of her lover is highly reminiscent of Edna’s calamitous relationship with Robert who leaves her twice to go to Mexico. Edna’s affair with Robert is indeed pivotal in Edna’s journey as not only the start of this affair triggers her sexual awakening and fuels her longing for independence from the marital ties, but the ending of this affair is directly related to her suicide which takes place right after receiving Robert’s farewell note.

The second significant instance of foreshadowing through musical reference is during the twenty first chapter when Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz after Robert’s first departure. Reisz reveals to her that Robert keeps mentioning her in his letters. By reading one of her beloved’s letters, Edna discovers that he did not forget her but is still deeply infatuated with her. Furthermore, Robert requests Mademoiselle Reisz to play Chopin’s impromptu in case she meets Edna. However, Mademoiselle Reisz improvises parts of Wagner’s opera, *Tristan and Isolde* while playing the suggested piece. When Edna “sat in the sofa corner reading Robert’s letter by the fading light, Mademoiselle had glided from the Chopin into the quivering love - notes of Isolde’s song” (Chopin, 1899, p.166). Richard Wagner’s three acts opera tells the story of a forbidden love affair between Tristan and Isolde, his uncle’s wife. The couple’s suffering is further enhanced when they accidentally consume a love potion mistaking it for the poison, they intended to use to put an end for their torturous desire. The Opera ends tragically by Tristan’s death in the arms of his beloved. Therefore, this opera is highly reflective of Chopin’s novel not only because both couples are constantly tormented by their unfulfilled desire as their affair is forbidden, but also because in both the opera and the novel love end with a tragic death. Moreover, The final lines of *Tristan and Isolde*, and the

metaphors related to drowning in the ocean while Isolde mourns her deceased lover singing “In the billowing sea, in the ocean of sound, in the world’s soul depths profound, - to drown now - swoon in the night – last delight” (Williamson, 2014, para.5) are highly akin to Edna’s final drowning scene in which “for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun (...) and the waves that invited her. (...) She felt like some new - born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.”(Chopin, 1899, p.301). Furthermore, another common theme between Wagner’s opera and Chopin’s novel is the portrayal of death as the end of all suffering. In *Tristan and Isolde*, the final song entitled “Liebestod”, which can be translated to “love - death.”, implies that “With death comes the end of all striving and a descent into eternal bliss” (Judd, 2020, para.4) and that dying puts an end to “yearning and struggle” (Hutcheon & Hutcheon, 1999, p.275). Additionally, “Three times in the opera, Tristan seeks death deliberately as the gateway to a purer happiness than the shows and the gauds of the world can ever bring him” (Williamson, 2014, para.6). In other words, in Wagner’s opera death is portrayed as a realm where passion is eternalized, pain is dissipated, and freedom is found. This reference therefore clearly foreshadows Edna’s final decision of seeking in death what she could not reach in life. In other words, Edna’s suicide which surprised many readers and critics can easily be predicted just by scrutinizing the referenced music during the first half of the novel.

Nevertheless, Chopin’s use of intermediality is not limited to opera. Known for her passion for music, especially piano, from a young age, Chopin heavily relies on this instrument as an efficacious tool for characterization especially when it comes to the protagonist’s female companions Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle whose portrayals encapsulate patriarchal stereotypes of 19th century creole society. Chopin interestingly uses the manner in which these characters play piano to emphasize the type of women they represent as well as their social positions. For instance, Madame Ratignolle is the perfect representation of the “mother women” who “worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.”, (Chopin, 1899, p.19). In this context, Adèle “gaily consented to play for the others. (...) She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said” (Chopin, 1899, p.61). The nature of this performance sheds light on how playing piano for Victorian women is supposed to be merely pleasant and entertaining to the audience of the event the woman is attending. It should be neither challenging, nor self - expressive as rebellion and individuality are looked down upon. In fact, under the Louisiana Code, patterned after the Napoleonic code, a married woman legally belonged to her husband and was equated with minors (Lentz, 2021, para.4). Thus, playing piano is merely related to social grace and sophisticated appearances. Some critics even confirm that music for Adele is “a kind of domestic decoration” (Davis, 2004, p.91). That is to say that despite the fact that the piano was a common ornamental fixture in middle and upper class houses, “he artistic space that female piano players occupied was primarily in the domestic sphere” (Perry, 2019, P.4). It goes without saying that Adèle’s performance in which emphasis is not laid on talent or creativity but on meeting

social expectations is utilized by Chopin as a tool of characterization which complements Adèle's physical and psychological depiction throughout the novel. The beautiful pure creole is described as a constantly pregnant but extremely graceful, charming, and sensuous "Madonna" (Chopin, 1899, p.28) whose devotion to her husband and children is exaggerated, making of her an almost unrealistically perfect reflection of the 19th century patriarchal social expectations of women.

Contrastingly, the polar opposite of the flawless "mother - woman" is Mademoiselle Reisz who is also nicknamed "the little musician" (Chopin, 1899, p.161). Unlike Adèle, the embodiment of the hegemonic ideal of female beauty, Mademoiselle Reisz' characterization is stripped of all femininity and attractiveness. During her performance, "She sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity." (Chopin, 1899, p.166). Even her laugh is described as "a contortion of the face and all the muscles of the body" (Chopin, 1899, p.161). The unattractive manner in which Mademoiselle Reisz is portrayed is reflective of the description of real female professional pianists during the 19th century. In his article "The Enigma at the Keyboard: Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz", Doris Davis enumerates various examples such as Clara Schumann who was depicted as "a great artist with masculine energy" and who can hardly be called "a graceful or sympathetic woman", Teresa Carreno who "played like a man" and Fannie Bloomfield - Zeisler, who performed with "full, hunched shoulders" and a "sinewy body" (Davis, 2004, p.91). Furthermore, the piece of music that Mademoiselle Reisz plays more than once during the novel, "Chopin's impromptu", was considered "masculine" according to the "system of sexual aesthetics" adopted by some critics during the 19th century to divide music into "feminine" delicate pieces and "masculine" virile and powerful ones (Davis, 2004, p.95). In other words, despite the fact that the piano was an important instrument for reputable women as a sign of education and a means of entertainment in prestigious social events, "Serious music—whether in performance or composition—was viewed by most in the nineteenth century as the domain of the male" (Perry, 2019, P.11). Taking into consideration the crucial role Mademoiselle Reisz plays in the protagonist's "awakening" as opposed to Madame Ratignolle's triviality, the utilization of this socio - cultural context to make Mademoiselle Reisz' musical identity highly significant to her overall masculine description can be interpreted as an attempt from Chopin to shed light on the absurdity of the Victorian way of categorizing women. In other words, portraying women as masculine just for deviating from the conventional path of marriage and motherhood is as absurd as assuming their masculinity just for competing with men in the musical field.

In this context, Intermediality for the sake of characterization perfectly illustrates the "intratextual functions of intermediality" that Hallet related to the way intermediality in a certain text affects "the comprehension of literature explicitly or implicitly". The "intratextual functions of intermediality" are related to the main components of a literary text such as the plot, themes, or characterization. Within the framework of Hallet's

intermedial methodology, the intratextual function in terms of "Character and character development" (Hallet, 2015, p.613) is perfectly illustrated not only in Chopin's characterization of Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, but also in the protagonist's character development which is equally influenced by music.

The significance of music in *The Awakening* is not bounded by the aforementioned instances of foreshadowing and characterization but represents a pillar on which Edna's whole awakening process is founded. In fact, the most important events which either trigger or further emphasize Edna's emotional frustration leading to her downfall, are accompanied by music, more precisely, piano being played by Mademoiselle Reisz. The first and most significant turning point occurs on the night in which Edna hears Mademoiselle Reisz playing piano for the first time "The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. (...) perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth." (Chopin, 1899, p.66) The effect of Reisz' music clearly initiates Edna's awakening as "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her." (Chopin, 1899, p.66). On that same night, right after Mademoiselle Reisz captivating performance, Edna miraculously becomes able to swim for the first time despite her continuous efforts to learn swimming during the entirety of summer. During this scene, Edna feels a fascinating power which enables her to control "her body and her soul." and ignites her desire "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." (Chopin, 1899, p.71). This critical incident can be directly related to the protagonist's downfall towards her final scene of self - destruction as this desire of swimming "far out" is what she fulfills on the final chapter while she deliberately keeps diving into the depth of the ocean until the shore "was far behind her, and her strength was gone" (Chopin, 1899, p.302).

The other instances in which an important event happens in the presence of Mademoiselle Reisz and her music is when Edna reads Robert's letters. Realizing that her love for Robert is reciprocal and grasping the possibility of being reunited with her beloved, Edna's reaction to the first letter she finds at Reisz' house is similar to the aforementioned scene. "Edna was sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle" (Chopin, 1899, p 166). This seemingly hopeful letter overwhelms Edna with false hope which contributes to, and paves the way for, the greatness of her final disappointment at the end of the novel after reading Robert's last note. Moreover, when Edna reads a second letter by Robert and learns that he will return to Grand Isle, a similar reaction is triggered as "She sat holding it in her hand, while the music penetrated her whole being like effulgence, warming and brightening the dark places of her soul. It prepared her for joy and exultation" (Chopin, 1899, p.210) In this context, this correlation between music and Edna's emotional climaxes creates an automatic expectation from the reader for a significant event to occur whenever piano is played by Mademoiselle Reisz. This scheme is also

highly reminiscent of “Leitmotif” defined in the musical field as “A melodic passage or phrase (...) associated with a specific character, situation, or element.” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2011).

6. Conclusion

To conclude, *The awakening* interestingly foregrounds the impact of music on one’s life and identity as well as the socio - cultural importance of music during the 19th century. The omnipresence of music and musical elements in Chopin’s novel is a natural result of her personal connection to both of these sororal arts. For as her biographers confirm, Chopin not only played music since the age of six, but also her first publication was a piece of music. Consequently, the dominance of musical references in Chopin’s *Awakening* is not surprising especially that shed depicts music as “an art so powerful as an agent in awakening the slumbering passions in the heart of man” (Toth & Seyersted, 1998, p34). To sum up, this paper has demonstrated the significant role of music, particularly opera and piano, in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. The musical elements contribute to foreshadowing and characterization, enriching the narrative and providing a deeper understanding of the protagonists’ journey of self - discovery. In this framework, This research underscores the potential of music as a narrative tool in literature, suggesting a need for further exploration of this aspect in other literary works.

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