Conventionality Vs. Instinct In “Daisy Miller” And “The Awakening.” Essay, Research Paper

Second Term Essay

Henry James’s Daisy Miller and Kate Chopin’s The Awakening were first published twenty-one years apart, the former in 1878 and the latter in 1899. Despite the gap of more than two decades, however, the two works evince a similarity of thought and intent that is immediately evident in their main themes. Both works display characters whose lives have been governed almost solely by the conventions of their respective societies. Furthermore, both works also attempt to demonstrate to the reader what happens when these conventions are challenged by individual instincts, which more often than not are in direct contradiction to the dictates of convention.

The theme of conventionality versus instinct predominates both works. In Daisy Miller the theme is embodied in the character of Frederick Winterbourne, an ex-patriot American living in Europe. The Awakening’s Edna Pontellier serves as the means through which Kate Chopin examines her version of this theme. Both Winterbourne and Edna are trapped in conventional worlds, and both are affected by a deep, instinctive need to break free of the bonds that restrain them so absolutely.

The portrayal of this theme, however, is accomplished in different ways by Henry James and Kate Chopin. The main reason for this is that although the theme is common to both works, the protagonists’ experience of it are not. Conventionality has entrapped them in different ways, and their instinctive reactions arise out of differing circumstances.

Frederick Winterbourne, for example, comes to a realization of his internal struggle between conventionality and instinct not in and of himself, but because of Miss Daisy Miller. Winterbourne meets the young Miss Miller in Vevay, Switzerland, while visiting his aunt, Mrs. Costello. He realizes immediately that Daisy is not a conventional person, whether deliberately or through ignorance of European conventions.

Winterbourne and Daisy, in fact, represent two vastly different ways of looking at the same world. He views reality in very conventional terms. Daisy has an unconventional perception of life and reality in Europe, and she acts accordingly. Winterbourne is stiff, though worldly. Daisy is spontaneous and naive. It is no coincidence that she is dressed in white when we first meet her. James intends us to understand that she is very innocent, if only of European conventions.

James reinforces Daisy’s unconventionality almost immediately. When Winterbourne first meets her we are told, “In Geneva, as he had been perfectly aware, a young man was not at liberty to speak to a young unmarried lady except under certain rarely occurring conditions” (James 131). But Daisy flouts this convention immediately upon their first meeting. She not only speaks with him, unchaperoned, but makes a date to go with him to the old castle, also unchaperoned.

Winterbourne is at a loss. He does not know how to react to Daisy. James explains that “Winterbourne had lost his instinct in this matter, and his reason could not help him” (137). He does not understand Daisy, and so he reverts to his conventional views and tries to categorize Daisy in conventional terms.

By this point the reader has realized that although the work is entitled “Daisy Miller,” it is really the story of Winterbourne’s internal struggle. Daisy is the catalyst through which Frederick’s old instincts begin to be reawakened, and to struggle against his conventional views of Daisy. This struggle is portrayed through the use of language and words, mostly in Winterbourne’s internal dialogue. He is continually attempting to understand Daisy and his own views of her unconventionality, by trying to define her through the use of language. But he discovers that words ultimately fail.

On the occasion of their first meeting he decides after a while that “she was only a pretty American flirt” (Ibid). His conventionality is satisfied, and James tells us “Winterbourne was almost grateful for having found the formula that applied to Miss Daisy Miller” (Ibid).

Following this incident, Winterbourne discusses Miss Miller with his aunt, and again we see him trying to categorize her. He asks Mrs. Costello if Daisy “is the sort of young lady who expects a man, sooner or later, to carry her off?” (James 143). Later in the same conversation he poses the question, “But don’t they all do these things – the young girls in America?” (Ibid).

His conventionality is struggling to place Daisy into a conventional category, so that he can know once and for all how to react to her. As he ends his conversation with Mrs. Costello he is impatient to see Daisy again, “and he was vexed with himself that, by instinct, he should not appreciate her justly” (Ibid). This statement is ironic, of course, because it is his conventionality that will not allow him to appreciate Daisy. His instincts, although blunted through a long subservience to convention, are attempting to lead him to the truth about her. They refuse to allow him to dismiss her simply as a ‘flirt’. His instincts, in fact, draw him to Daisy, and he tells her, “You are a nice girl; but I wish you would flirt with me, and me only” (James 175). Although he still uses conventional language and categories, his instincts recognize within Daisy a deeper self, a self that cannot be defined with the single word, “flirt.”

Daisy, however, does not make Winterbourne’s internal struggle an easy one. While in Rome, she takes up with an Italian named Giovanelli, a young man who is interested in marrying her for her money. The other ex-patriots recognize Giovanelli for what he is, but the innocent nouveau-riche Daisy does not. The other ex- patriots, the ultimate examples of conventionality, shun Daisy for fear that they will be judged by her.

She is snubbed horribly at Mrs. Walker’s party when the hostess turns her back on Daisy and her mother. Daisy’s innocence is starkly emphasized here. For the first time since we have met her she has no idea what to do or say. She is shocked at the level of censure her actions have elicited. It would be wrong to assume that Daisy was fully ignorant of the conventions she was flouting, but it would seem fair to say that she did not realize how deep- seated and important they were within the ex-patriot community. To Winterbourne’s credit he chides Mrs. Walker for her actions. To his discredit he does not follow Daisy to comfort her. His conventionality will not allow him to risk his place in the ex- patriot community.

Throughout Daisy Miller Winterbourne’s instincts lose the battle with his conventionality, and, in his final encounter with Daisy before her death, this is again the case. He comes upon her and Giovanelli alone, at night, in the Colosseum. This is of course much worse than anything she has done before, and it is evidence of her new defiance in the face of Mrs. Walker’s snubbing. Daisy could not possibly have been ignorant of the conventions she was breaking in this instance.

Upon seeing her there, Winterbourne’s internal battle is decided. He is finally able to place her, unequivocally, within a purely conventional category. And again, this is portrayed through his choice of words when he thinks to himself, “She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect” (James 186). He is relieved, even exhilarated, that he is finally able to categorize her. From this point his language changes. He is no longer polite to her. When Daisy asks him if he really believed that she was engaged to Giovanelli, he replies stingingly “I believe that it makes very little difference whether you are engaged or not!” (James 188). His words, and even his tone, are curt and brutal. He is even laughing as he says it.

Later, at Daisy’s funeral, he discovers that he has misjudged her. Giovanelli tells him that Daisy “was the most innocent” young lady he had ever known (James 190), and that she would never have married the young Italian. Winterbourne’s conventional views are punctured, but it is too late.

He understands his mistake now, and we know that he is aware of it through his choice of words. He says to Mrs. Costello, “I was booked to make a mistake. I have lived too long in foreign parts” (James 191). In other words, he allowed the conventions of the ex- patriot community to rule his instincts, and therefore lost a chance for happiness with Daisy.

Having said this, however, Winterbourne remains in Europe, the same place that blinded him to opportunity. As well, he becomes involved with “a very clever foreign lady” (Ibid). The words “clever foreign lady” are all opposite to ones which would be used to describe Daisy. So, not only does Winterbourne remain in Europe, he also takes up with a woman who is the opposite of Daisy. Even after realizing his mistakes, Winterbourne has associated himself again with conventionality.

The theme of conventionality versus instinct is slightly different in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening. Whereas Winterbourne has a prior association with instinct, Chopin’s heroine Edna Pontellier does not. Her life has been governed purely by the conventions of a patriarchal society. Before her summer at Grand Isle instinct had never been a part of her life.

This particular summer, however, her instincts begin to make themselves felt. She begins to feel an attraction towards Robert Lebrun, and this becomes the catalyst for her internal struggle between conventionality and instinct. It is unthinkable for Edna, a married woman, to become involved with Robert. Her duty is to her husband and children.

Her attraction for Robert, however, is too strong to allow her to simply dismiss him. She begins to contemplate the unthinkable, and thus begins the struggle between the conventions of her world and her new-found instincts. Her rebellion against conventionality does not end with her feeling for Robert, however, but spills over into other facets of her life. Thus Robert becomes the means through which her internal struggle is born and realized.

Unlike James, Chopin portrays her theme mostly through the use of symbolism. Although her choice of words is sometimes startlingly insightful, it is through the wealth of representative symbols and images in The Awakening that Chopin examines and reveals her theme.

The first such symbols we encounter are Edna’s wedding rings. They are at this point symbolic not only of her conventionality, but also of her ignorance that she is trapped by convention. In the first chapter Edna returns from a swim with Robert, her would-be lover, to the cottage where her husband Leonce sits reading the Saturday newspaper. She had given her rings to him to hold for her. Upon returning, “She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm. She slipped them upon her fingers…” (Chopin 45). In other words, she blindly accepts a return to the conventions of marriage and patriarchy which bind her, perhaps even welcoming their long-known comfort. Her instincts have not yet surfaced.

Later that night Leonce returns from a night at the local club. Upset that his wife seems to evince little interest in his conversation, he upbraids her for the lack of attention she displays towards him and the children. His conventional male sense of superiority cannot stand to be slighted, and so he seeks to reestablish his authority by scolding her.

Edna realizes this on an instinctive level and, upset, she begins to cry. Her instincts have not been awakened, precisely, but she experiences a deep dissatisfaction with the conventions that motivate Leonce’s rebuke. It is a vague dissatisfaction, one she does not as yet understand sufficiently to articulate, even to herself. Chopin explains that “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish” (49). At this point she has begun to feel the oppression of the conventional world, but her instincts have not yet led her to rebel against them.

A third series of references in the opening chapters symbolizes Edna’s conventionality. These are associated with Edna’s reluctance to openly acknowledge her own sexuality. We are told that the Creoles’ “freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her,” and that “Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her accouchements, withholding no intimate detail” (Chopin 53).

Similarly, a book of an erotic nature had been going around the summer compound. The others read the book openly, but when it was Edna’s turn “She felt moved to read the book in secret and solitude” (Ibid). These incidents are symbolic of Edna’s conventionality suppressing her instincts towards free expression and exploration of her own sexuality as a woman.

Later in the novel, however, once Edna’s instincts have led her to rebel against the stifling conventions of her patriarchal world, sexual imagery abounds. On the night of her final dinner party in Leonce’s house, for example, Arobin stays after the others have gone. This entire scene is sensuous. Arobin strokes and caresses Edna, kissing the palm of her hand. By this time she has left conventionality far behind, symbolized here by her willingness to explore a sexual relationship with Arobin. He makes no answer when she bids him good night, “except to continue to caress her. He did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties” (Chopin 150).

Further symbolism of Edna’s recently awakened sexuality is seen when she meets Robert at the out of the way cafe she frequents. Before Robert arrives she is stroking the old cat owned by the proprietress, suggestive of auto-eroticism. When Robert enters she pushes the cat away to make room for him. Once Robert is settled comfortably the cat climbs onto his lap, and he “stroked her silky fur” (Chopin 166). Through the use of the cat as a symbol Chopin is demonstrating Edna’s willingness to follow her own sexual instincts rather than the dictates of convention.

There are three major events which symbolize the struggle between conventionality and instinct in Edna Pontellier. All three occur on the same night, and follow directly on the heels of one another. The first occurs when Mademoiselle Reisz plays for the assembled group one Saturday night. Usually, music conjured up images for Edna. One, of a naked man standing alone on the seashore, is described by Chopin to show us that even in her own imagination Edna’s world is governed by patriarchal images.

But tonight is different. No images come to her, “But 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 72). Edna is no longer bound solely by the patriarchal conventions. She has abandoned her conventionality.

Immediately after this Robert proposes a swim, “at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon” (Ibid). On this night, for the first time, Edna is able to swim on her own, like a “child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone” (Chopin 73). Chopin says “She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Ibid). And so she does, swimming so far out that for a moment she is afraid that she has gone too far. But she conquers her fears and swims. Her instincts have rushed in to fill the void left by the absence of convention. Physically and symbolically, she has left the world of patriarchy behind her.

The third event happens on Edna’s return from her first swim. Leonce orders her to bed, and she refuses him. She has now completely abandoned her conventionality and the male authority, symbolized by Leonce, that goes with it. She realizes how often she has responded automatically to his commanding tone, “But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded” to him before (Chopin 78). When she finally goes to bed it is on her own terms, and in her own time.

But the struggle to leave conventionality behind and to follow her instincts is not an easy one for Edna. As Mme. Reisz warns her, “The artist must possess the courageous soul..,” “the soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 115). In the end Edna realizes that she cannot completely abandon the conventions of her world and remain within it. She returns one last time to Grand Isle, for one final swim.

On the surface her swim is simply a suicide. It appears that Edna has given up, that she hasn’t “the courageous soul” of which Mme. Reisz spoke. But symbolically it is much more. It is in fact the final triumph of her instincts over her conventionality. The swim is her final repudiation of the conventions which continue to try to reclaim her. Notice that Chopin never actually tells us that Edna is dead. What she does tell us is that Edna “felt like some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world it had never known” (Chopin 175).

The last sentences of the novel describe Edna’s thoughts as nostalgic, fastening on to some of the happier symbols and images of her life. Edna, in fact, is swimming not to her death, but rather towards life, “back into her own vision, back into the imaginative openness of her childhood” (Sandra M. Gilbert, in Chopin 31).

Thus we see the final difference between James’ and Chopin’s portrayal of this theme. James’ Winterbourne and Chopin’s Edna Pontellier face the same internal struggle between conventionality and instinct. Whereas Winterbourne returns to conventionality, however, Edna leaves it behind her and swims towards a new life, a life where her instincts hold ultimate sway.

Yet the theme in both works is similar in one way. For, while the weight of judgement does fall against the ex-patriots in Daisy Miller, we realize that they are not wholly in the wrong, for they do recognize Giovanelli for what he is. And although we praise Daisy for her refusal to submit to their conventions, we realize that she was not necessarily perfectly correct in ignoring all of the conventions. Similarly, we praise Edna for breaking free from the conventions that a patriarchal society forced upon her. In the end, however, she is forced to leave that world, since she cannot accept any of its conventions. The true theme in both Daisy Miller and The Awakening, then, is not that it is better to flout convention and live by instinct, but that life must necessarily be a synthesis of convention and instinct.