

The Process of Awakening:
An Analysis of Transitivity in Kate Chopin's
Novel *The Awakening*

Åsa Hellström Andersson
University of Gothenburg
Department of Languages
and Literatures
C-level essay

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Abstract

This essay investigates transitivity in extracts from Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. The system of transitivity belongs within systemic functional linguistics and is used for analyzing experiential meaning in language, that is, the way in which we talk of our experiences. The method can be used for analyzing literary texts. The aim of the essay is to investigate how the transitivity in the extracts reflects the process that the main character Edna goes through, and if it reflects the subject of conflict between human nature and culture. The results show that Edna's representation in the transitivity changes as she develops. They also show differences in sentence structures between the parts of the extracts that describe Edna's feelings and those which describe her actions. When it comes to her feelings they are repeatedly cast as forces, filling the doer-role of subject in the sentences. In the sections which describe Edna's actions, on the other hand, Edna is often an agent, and a medium-initiator. These patterns give an impression of Edna as being in control of her actions, but not of her feelings. The recurrent use of feelings as forces is regarded as reflecting the subject of conflict between human nature and culture.

Keywords: transitivity, systemic functional linguistics, Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, stylistics

1. Introduction

The most commonly known meaning of transitivity is that of the ability of verbs to take objects. Within the branch of linguistics known as systemic functional linguistics, transitivity has a broader meaning. It is that concept of transitivity that is used here. Transitivity is then, as Thompson explains, “a system for describing the whole clause, rather than just the verb and its [o]bject” (2004:88-89). The system of transitivity is used for analyzing the experiential meaning in language, that is, the way in which we talk of our experiences. It builds on the assumption that verbs can be divided into large groups depending on what kind of process they describe. Each kind of process has certain participant roles linked to it, and the process is normally set against a number of circumstances. (Thompson 2004:86-90). Analyses of transitivity have been used within stylistics, as a tool for investigating literary texts. The kind of processes a character takes part in, and the kind of participant roles he or she has, may contribute to characterization, or, the representation of a character in terms of transitivity may change as the character develops.¹ It is also possible, that by analyzing transitivity, certain language patterns can be found that are interesting when it comes to interpreting the subject and theme of a novel or short-story.²

Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* was published in 1899. At that time, according to Gilbert (2003:17), ideas and writings about the tension between human nature and culture were present among intellectuals. Referring to an essay by Linda Dowling, Gilbert mentions “the fundamental desire of the *fin de siècle* avant garde: the dream of living beyond culture”. Gilbert also points out, that Oscar Wilde, among others, “speculate[d] . . . on the nature of impulses that might transcend the imperatives of nineteenth-century ‘morality’”. (2003:17)

¹ Kennedy (1982) has examined characterization in “Two Gallants”, one of the short-stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Toolan, in his introductory book on stylistics, has used J.M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K.* to show how Michael K’s development is signaled by which participant role he occupies (Toolan 1998:92-93, 103-104).

² According to Kennedy, who in his article investigates not only the experiential (ideational) meaning, but also the interpersonal and the textual, the grammar of systemic functional linguistics can be used to “[isolate] patterns . . . from a text which will provide an objective linguistic basis for interpreting a work” (1982:96).

The Awakening tells the story of Edna Pontellier. Edna's development can be described as a growing realization of her own needs and a change in her behaviour and actions, corresponding to these insights. *Awakening* is a fitting title for the process that she goes through. Her first insights are vague. She is often overcome by moods and her actions seem in a way naive. She acts on impulses. When Edna, at one point in the story, is described through the eyes of the family doctor, as a *sleek animal waking up in the sun* (Chopin 123³), this corresponds well to my picture of her character and her awakening.

With this picture in mind, of Edna as *a sleek animal waking up in the sun*, and regarding what has been said above, about the subject of conflict between human nature and culture, it is tempting to see Edna's development simply as her nature awakening. It awakens and there is no room for it in the society in which it lives.⁴ The novel ends with Edna committing suicide by drowning herself. According to Gilbert (2003:30-31) this is "[the only . . . way] [she] can think of 'to elude' a society that keeps trying to put her back in her proper domestic place".

The aim of this essay is to investigate how the transitivity in extracts from *The Awakening* reflects the process that Edna goes through and if it reflects the subject of conflict between human nature and culture.

Before describing the system of transitivity in terms of processes and participants, something should be said about systemic functional linguistics (SFL).⁵ SFL is an approach to language study originally developed by the linguist Michael Halliday. According to Eggins, "what is distinctive to systemic linguistics is that it seeks to develop both a theory about language as a social process and an analytical methodology which permits the detailed and

³ All references to the text of *The Awakening* are to the 2003 Penguin edition, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, see the list of references.

⁴ See also Wheeler (1975). According to him, Edna's awakening should be seen as five awakenings (1975:123), and "the content of [her final] awakening . . . [is] that so long as she lives she is a prisoner of the social order . . ." (1975:127).

⁵ This is a very brief summary of the main points of SFL. It is based on the introductory chapters of Eggins' (2004:1-21) and Thompson's books (2004:1-12, 28-39). According to Eggins the abbreviation SFL is often used (2004:1).

systematic description of language patterns” (2004:21). SFL sees language as a system of choices. We choose from the system of possible wordings and grammatical structures in order to express meanings. Each choice acquires its meaning against the background of choices that were not made. SFL also views language as making three main kinds of meaning simultaneously. These meanings are the experiential, the interpersonal and the textual. In order to describe the structures available in language, and how we make meanings by choosing, Halliday developed the grammatical system used within SFL, the functional grammar. The grammar supplies systems for analyzing the three kinds of meaning. This essay only deals with the system of transitivity which is used for analyzing the experiential meaning.

Experiential meaning refers, as mentioned above, to the function language has in talking of our experiences. Thompson explains:

“From the experiential perspective, language comprises a set of resources for referring to entities in the world and the ways in which those entities act on or relate to each other. At the simplest level, language reflects our view of the world as consisting of ‘goings-on’ (verbs) involving things (nouns) which may have attributes (adjectives) and which go on against background details of place, time, manner etc. (adverbials).” (2004:86)

Things that happen, “the goings-on”, can be described differently. In order to analyze these differences the system of transitivity is used. The labels of processes and participants will be described in section 2.2.

2. Material and method

2.1 Material

Nine extracts have been chosen from the novel. They have been transcribed and analyzed in the order in which they appear. The extracts, which describe Edna's insights, feelings or actions at different points in the story, are all significant in picturing her character and her awakening. Extract 1, as Treichler puts it, "offers the first overt signal of Edna's discontent" (1993:309). Extract 2, can be seen as the first explicit description of Edna's awakening. Extract 3 describes how Edna is overcome by unexpectedly strong emotions, when listening to an informal piano concert. Extract 4 is from the chapter in which Edna learns to swim, an episode which is a "turning point" (Treichler 1993:315) in the novel and "obviously symbolic" (Gilbert 2003:26). In extract 5, Edna is once more overcome with feelings and she leaves church during the service. Extract 6 describes Edna's actions rather than her feelings. It pictures Edna, as she rests in a nearby cottage after having left the service, and "sens[es] in a new way the strength of her body" (Wheeler 1975:125). Extract 7 also focuses on Edna's actions rather than her feelings, when she is alone as her husband and children have gone away for some time. Extract 8 describes Edna's feelings as she stays with her friend Adèle Ratignolle during Adèle's delivery. According to Wheeler, this is one of the events that "trigger [Edna's] final awakening" (1975:127). The morning after the birth scene, Edna returns to Grand Isle⁶ for "her much-debated suicidal last swim" (Gilbert 2003:31), extract 9, and the novel reaches its conclusion. In extracts 2 and 9, sections of the text that do not describe Edna, but the sea, have been included in the analysis, since the symbolic role of the sea is important. No examples of dialogue have been analyzed. Neither have the parts of the novel that picture Edna's relationship with Robert Lebrun or Alcée Arobin been analyzed. In

⁶ Grand Isle is a summer resort on the Gulf of Mexico (Gilbert 2003:11), where the first part of *The Awakening* takes place.

some cases, short paragraphs that have not been analyzed have been included to make the context clear.

2.2 Method – processes and participants

The method used for analyzing the extracts is that of analyzing transitivity in Halliday's functional grammar. The starting point for analyzing clauses within that system is always the verb. As mentioned above, verbs, all of which describe certain kinds of processes, are divided into groups on semantic and grammatical grounds. The processes may be material, mental, relational, verbal, existential or behavioural, and each has its own set of participant roles. The following description of Halliday's method is based on Toolan's (1998:75-104).

Material processes are processes of doing. In clauses describing material processes, there is always a **medium**. The medium participant is the "entity to which something happens or is done" (Toolan 1998:79). An example would be the sentence:

- (1) After a refreshing bath, Edna went to bed. (Chopin 127)⁷
medium mat.pr.⁸

A clause that describes a material process may include an **agent**, such as:

- (2) Edna plucked all the bright flowers she could find[.] (Chopin 126⁹)
agent mat. pr. medium

Toolan describes the agent as "a human intentional actor who acts upon a given medium" and emphasizes that the process's medium should always be identified first (1998:79).

The difference between mediums such as *Edna* in (1), who acts intentionally, and *the bright flowers* in (2), which are simply being plucked, is made clear by subdividing them.

Toolan's subdivision takes into account one kind of human medium not previously mentioned

⁷ All examples are my own unless otherwise indicated. I have also used names from the novel in my own examples.

⁸ See page 32 for list of abbreviations.

⁹ This clause is part of a sentence in the novel; *Edna plucked all the bright flowers she could find, and went into the house with them, she and the little dog.*

here, namely someone who does not act intentionally. This kind of medium is exemplified in (3) and (4).

(3) Etienne fell from the rocking horse.

(4) Raoul pushed Etienne off the rocking horse.

The labels used for the different kinds of mediums are medium-initiator, or **medium-i**, which refers to a “volitional human initiator of the process” (Toolan 1998:88), such as *Edna* in (1), medium-target, or **medium-t**, such as *Etienne* in (3) and (4), and finally **medium**, when referring to a nonhuman medium, for example *the bright flowers* in (2). A further kind of medium should be mentioned, the **effected medium**, a medium which is the result of the process, as in (5).

(5) Adèle sewed a new tie for Monsieur Ratignolle.

The participants yet to be mentioned in material processes are listed below with examples. The list with comments in parentheses and examples is entirely Toolan’s (1998:80¹⁰):

Beneficiary (often preceded – or “precedable” – by *for*)

Jules made ratatouille for Jim.

[...]

Recipient (often preceded by *to*)

The store delivered to me the TV Mary bought.

¹⁰ Toolan’s original list (1998:80) includes more examples.

they describe unintentional reactions or doings by, typically, human participants. The only participant is the **behavior**:

- (7) Etienne was crying wildly.
behavior beh. pr.

Another kind of activity is that of communicating. Verbs that describe communication, for example *reporting*, *saying*, *telling*, belong in the group of **verbal processes**. The participant roles are **sayer**, **said** and **addressee**:

- (8) [. . .] Mr. Pontellier, [. . .], asked Edna if she would not meet him in town
sayer verbal pr. addressee said

[. . .] (Chopin 103¹¹)

Two types of processes remain. **Relational processes** are used for description. They relate a certain quality to someone or something, or relate a person (or entity) to a certain role or standing. As Thompson points out, they differ from material and mental processes in that “[t]here is no process in the normal sense of ‘something happening’” (2004:96). The main verb is typically *be*, or verbs like *seem*, *become*, *sound* or *look*, the meaning of which in relational clauses is close to *be* (compare *she is sweet* and *she looks sweet*). Relational clauses are either attributive or identificatory. The attributive clauses assign someone or something a certain quality, as in the clause *Mrs. Pontellier’s eyes were quick and bright* (Chopin, 45). The identificatory clauses, then, identify a person or thing by means of the pattern “noun phrase be noun phrase” (Toolan 1998:82), for example *Edna Pontellier is the most skilful painter in New Orleans*. The noun phrases in the identificatory relational clauses can be reversed; *the most skilful painter in New Orleans is Edna Pontellier*, whereas this is not possible with the attributive ones. The participant roles have different labels in the two kinds

¹¹ This is part of the sentence: *The following morning Mr Pontellier, upon leaving for his office, asked Edna if she would not meet him in town in order to look at some new fixtures for the library.*

of relational clauses. In the attributive clauses the participants are **carrier** and **attribute**, whereas in the identificatory clauses they are **identified** and **identifier**:

(9) Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright[.] (Chopin 45)
carrier rel.pr. attribute

(10) Edna Pontellier is the most skilful painter in New Orleans.
identified rel.pr. identifier

Existential processes are used for expressing that someone or something exists, or that something has happened. They are often, but not always introduced by there. The only participant role is the **existent**:

(11) There was more noise than ever over at the house. (Chopin 44)
ex.pro. existent

(12) Beneath [the sunshade] were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert
ex.pr. existent

Lebrun. (Chopin 44)

Before analyzing the extracts from *The Awakening*, some remarks made by Toolan regarding the different participant roles should be included. Toolan points out (1998:89) that the participants in material processes can “be ranked . . . in terms of the degree of active, powerful, controlling engagement that the role implicitly ascribes to the individual filling it” and lists the participants in the order “from the material process participant that is most active and in control to that participant that is most acted upon, controlled, and objectified”. The list consists of two groups. The first one ranks the various “kinds of do-ers”: agent, force, instrument and medium-initiator, in which the agent is the most powerful role. The second

face, steaming and wet, into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not
 medium attribute circumstance behavior beh.pr.
 senser

caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. She could not have told why
 ment.pr. phenomenon sayer verbal pr.

she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life.
 said carrier circumstance rel.pr. attribute circumstance

They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's
 medium mat.pr.

kindness and uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood.
 carrier rel.pr. attribute

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her
 force mat.pr. circumstance

consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow,
 mat.pr. medium-t instrument carrier rel.pr. attribute

like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar;
 attribute carrier rel.pr. attribute

it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband,
 identified rel.pr. identifier behavior behavioural process

lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was
 force mat.pr. medium-t circumstance behavior
 (Fate)

just having a good cry all to herself. The mosquitoes made merry over her, biting her
 behavioural process agents mat.pr. medium-t mat.pr.

firm, round arms and nipping at her bare insteps.
 medium-t mat.pr. medium-t

The little stinging, buzzing imps succeeded in dispelling a mood which might have held
 agents mat.pr. medium force mat.pr.

her there in the darkness half a night longer.
 medium-t

In the first sentence, Mrs. Pontellier herself has no role as participant. Her *tears* are medium both in the main clause and the subclause, her *sleeve* is instrument and her *eyes* are

only a circumstance, the place to which the tears come. In the following three sentences, Mrs. Pontellier has participant roles. She is agent of material processes, in that she *hold[s]* her chair, *turns* and *thrust[s]* her face. She is a behavior, in *crying*, a senser in *not caring to dry* etc., and finally a sayers. In the last two sentences of the first paragraph she has no participant roles, they are filled by her *experiences* and *her husband's devotion*.

In the first sentence of the second paragraph, the *indescribable oppression* is the force and Edna's *consciousness* is merely the place – a circumstance – where it generates. Neither in the following two sentences does Edna have a role as participant. They are relational clauses, describing the *oppression* or *anguish*, introduced in the first sentence. In the rest of this paragraph Edna is a behavior or a medium-t. In the final sentences, in which Edna, *her footsteps*, her *mood* and parts of her body are medium-t, *Fate* is a force and *the mosquitoes* are agents. Edna does not do anything actively; it is the mosquitoes that dispel her mood, and the mood is what might have held her.

Treichler comments on certain differences between these two paragraphs (1993:309-311). According to her, the first sentences of the first paragraph (ending with *her face*, *her eyes*, *her arms*) “establish[.] for Edna a strong and clear physical presence which in some ways challenges the notion of her passivity and helplessness” (1993:311). The language of the second paragraph, on the other hand, describes Edna as “a silent, baffled receptacle for feelings that fill her mindlessly, as though she were a hollow vessel” (1993:310).

Treichler also points out (1993:310, 311) that these paragraphs exhibit certain sentence structures that recur in the novel. Regarding the sentences of the first paragraph, they are examples of the sentence structure “in which Edna's name or the pronoun she makes up the head noun phrase and serves as syntactic subject – and for the most part semantic subject, . . . , as well” (1993:311). Treichler argues that “the pronoun *she* anchors [Edna's] physical self to the language”, and that the repetition of that pronoun and “the concrete actions she performs .

. . help to create a portrait of her as forceful and independent, demonstrably capable of action” (1993:311). According to Treichler, the elements that characterize the language of the second paragraph, are “abstract nouns and adjectives, dense with latinized prefixes and suffixes, the chain of prepositional phrases [and] the *it was* construction” (1993:310).

The analysis of transitivity has shown that in the first paragraph Edna is the agent of three material processes, that is, in the terms of Toolan’s list, a doer. In the second paragraph her role is repeatedly that of medium-t, thus an individual to whom things are done, and in the first sentence, in which a feeling is the force, she is simply a circumstance.

3.2 Extract 2

At Grand Isle, Edna spends a great deal of time with a young man named Robert Lebrun. The chapter preceding this extract ends with the two of them going to the beach. At first Edna says that she is tired, but when Robert insists, she comes along.

2) (56-57)

Edna Pontellier could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined, and in the second place have followed in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her.

A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, – the light which, showing the way,
 medium mat. pr. circ. circ. force mat.pr. medium

forbids it.
 mat.pr. medium

At that early period it served but to bewilder her. It moved her
 phen. ment.pr. senser force mat.pr. medium-t

to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her
 circumstances force mat.pr. medium-t

the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears.
 senser ment.pr. phen.

In the first sentence of the next paragraph Edna's role is that of senser, she *realizes* and *recognizes*. The final sentence of this short paragraph speaks of a *young woman of twenty-eight*, and of *any woman*. The participant role of *any woman* is that of recipient, she is given wisdom by *the Holy Ghost*, the agent.

The three final paragraphs do not explicitly describe Edna. The short paragraph that has not been analyzed is probably best interpreted as a comment by the narrator on the emotional turmoil that is the effect when a young woman is given wisdom about her position in the universe. This is followed by the two paragraphs about the sea. The sea is described by relational clauses, but it is also personified in that it is the sayer of verbal processes, and an agent of a material process.

Even if the structure in which a feeling is the force and Edna simply a circumstance is the same as in extract one, there are also differences. In the second paragraph of extract 1, the *oppression* can merely be interpreted as a negative feeling. Edna's predominant role is that of medium-t, the *mood* holds her and is [*dispelled*] only by the *mosquitoes*. Here, the *light* seems to refer to insights that she is about to make. Even if this light moves her to *anguish*, it may also provide *wisdom* in the end, and Edna's role is that of recipient and senser.

3.3 Extract 3

One of the visitors at Grand Isle is Mademoiselle Reisz, a skilful pianist. Edna is *what she herself call[s] very fond of music and [m]usical strains, well rendered, ha[ve] a way of evoking pictures in her mind* (71). As Robert asks Mademoiselle Reisz to play one evening after dinner, the music evokes not only pictures but strong feelings in Edna.

3) (71-72)

She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very
senser ment. pr. phenomenon

passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the
 medium mat.pr. circumstance mat.pr. medium-t mat.pr. medium-t
 force

waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears
 force mat.pr. medium-t beh.pr. beh.pr. force

blinded her.
 mat.pr. medium-t

Again a process of arising feelings takes place within Edna. In the second sentence, *the [. . .] passions* are the medium of the material process *were aroused*, and the force of the material processes *swaying* and *lashing*. In the first process Edna's *soul* is a circumstance, and in the two latter ones it is medium-t. The sentence contains a simile as well, in which *the waves* are the force and *her splendid body* is medium-t. In the final sentence Edna is participant of two behavioural processes. She is also a medium-t of a material process, in that *the tears blind[.] her*. Treichler describes "[Edna's] response" as "an escalated version of her earlier crying" and remarks that "again she is described as being at the mercy of forces beyond her control" (1993:313). The simile of waves beating upon Edna's body carries a physical element to the description of her reaction, as does the behavioural processes in the last sentence.

Whereas in extract 1 the feeling that was in control of Edna was *oppression*, a negative feeling, and in extract 2 the process that took place within her seemed to lead to insights, the feelings described here are *the passions themselves*. Feelings of passion are different from both oppression and insights.

3.4 Extract 4

After Mademoiselle Reisz's playing, in spite of the late hour, they all go to the beach, and that very evening Edna learns to swim.

4) (73):

Most of them walked into the water as though into a native element. The sea was quiet now, and swelled lazily in broad billows that melted into one another and did not break except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents.

Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim. She had received instructions from both the men and women; in some instances from the children. Robert had pursued a system of lessons almost daily; and he was nearly at the point of discouragement in realizing the futility of his efforts. A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her.

But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a
carrier rel.pr. attribute (material processes) senser
medium-i
sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-
ment.pr. phen. mat.pr.
confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke
sayer verbal pr. sayer verbal pr.
or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water.
ag. mat.pr. medium
A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been
force mat.pr. medium-t medium mat.pr.
given her to control the working of her body and soul. She grew daring and
recipient medium (power to control) carrier rel.pr. attribute
senser
reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman
ment.pr. phen. senser ment.pr. phen.
had swum before.

In the first paragraph Edna has the participant roles of carrier in a relational process, senser in a mental process (*realizes*), medium-i of a material process (*walks*), sayer of verbal processes and, finally, agent in a material process as she *lift[s] her body*. In literary terms the first sentence contains a simile, in describing Edna as a child.¹²

¹² Treichler comments on this simile and the entire swimming scene (1993:313-316). According to her, Chopin in the swimming scene, “creates a perfect verbal merging between the forces that act on Edna from outside her and the imperatives of her own self, between the abstractions of consciousness and the concrete language of her physical world” (1993:315).

In the second paragraph, the first sentence contains two patterns that are familiar from previous extracts. Again, a strong feeling, *a feeling of exultation*, is the force of a material process and Edna's role is that of medium-t. Furthermore, the pattern of the subclause, in which Edna (*her*) is the recipient, who is *[given] some power of significant import to control the working of her body and soul*, resembles the sentence in extract 2 in which Mrs. Pontellier is described as being given *more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman*.

Edna's learning to swim is, as Treichler points out (1993:315), a turning point in the novel. Wheeler, who argues that Edna's development, should be seen as five "awakenings", describes it as "[t]he focal episode of the first awakening" (1975:124).

From the point of view of transitivity and the extracts analyzed here, Edna is for the first time the medium-i of a material process, in that she *walks*. She is also the agent of a material process, in *lift[ing] her body*. The only place in extracts 1-3 in which Edna is agent is in extract 1, and then she is crying. Walking, and lifting one's body can be seen as positive expressions of strength and of being in control of one's body. The participles *stottering*, *tumbling*, *clutching* are also material verbs. According to Treichler, "they are concrete and visual, and though they suggest faltering and vulnerability, they are intransitive, thus active, not passive" (1993:314). These material verbs of activity contribute to the impression that Edna is now awake.

3.5 Extract 5

The morning after her learning to swim Edna sends someone to wake Robert up and the two of them go by boat to a nearby church to attend Mass. Extract 5 describes how Edna suddenly feels unwell and leaves the service.

5) (82-83):

A feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service. Her head began to
force mat.pr. medium-t behaver

ache, and the lights on the altar swayed before her eyes. Another time she might have made an
beh.pr. medium mat.pr. circ. senser ment.pr.
effort to regain her composure; but her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of the
identified rel.pr. identifier

church and reach the open air. She arose, climbing over Robert's feet with a muttered
medium-i mat.pr. mat.pr. circumstance

apology.

The pattern of the first sentence is similar to sentences from earlier extracts. Again, a feeling is force and Edna is the medium-t. *Her one thought* is described by a relational clause; it is *to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air*. In the next sentence, Edna is the medium-i of two material processes, she *a[rises]* and *climb[s] over Robert's feet* to leave church.

It is interesting to compare this paragraph to the other extracts in which Edna is overcome by feelings. In the second paragraph of extract 1, when *[a]n indescribable oppression [. . .] fill[s Edna] with anguish*, Edna does not react actively. In the rest of the paragraph she is a behaver and a medium-t, and it is *[t]he mosquitoes who dispel[.][her] mood*. In extract 2, when *[a . . .]light dawn[s . . .] within her*, she is circumstance, medium-t, senser and recipient of *wisdom*. In extract 3, when *the very passions themselves [are] aroused within her soul*, the *soul* is circumstance and medium-t, her *body* is medium-t, and in the final sentence she herself is a behaver and a medium-t. In this extract, though, she is a medium-i and reacts to the *feeling of oppression* by leaving the church. I would say that the relational clause, which describes Edna's *one thought* contributes to an image of impulsiveness; she is filled by this thought only, and she immediately reacts on it.

3.6 Extract 6

Robert follows Edna out of the church and takes her to a nearby cottage where she can rest. The following text describes Edna as she makes herself comfortable before falling asleep.

6) (84):

Edna, left alone in the little side room, loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of
agent mat.pr. medium mat.pr.

them. She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows.
medium ag. mat.pr. medium

She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white
ag. mat.pr. medium mat.pr. medium

bed. How luxurious it felt to rest thus in a strange, quaint bed, with its sweet odor of laurel

lingering about the sheets and mattress! She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She
ag. mat.pr. medium ag.

ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as
mat.pr. medium senser ment.pr. phenomenon

she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it
ag. mat.pr. medium mat.pr. medium ment.pr.

were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh.
senser ment.pr. phenomenon (it)

She clasped her hands easily above her head, and it was thus she fell asleep.
ag. mat.pr. medium behavior beh.pr.

In this section, Edna is six times an agent in material processes. In these clauses, her clothes or parts of her body are mediums. Edna is also a senser in experiencing her body, *her round arms* and *the fine, firm quality of her flesh*. The representation of Edna is different from the ones of previous extracts. So far, she has at the most been agent twice in one extract, extract 1. There is one similarity though, between her being agent in extract 1, extract 4 and here, namely that her body, or parts of it, are mediums.

This extract has been commented on by Treichler and Wheeler. Treichler puts forward this paragraph as an example of the recurring sentence structure mentioned in the comment of extract 1, the one in which Edna's name or the pronoun *she* repeatedly fills the subject role (1993:311). As mentioned in section 2.1 Wheeler describes Edna in this extract as "sensing in a new way the strength of her body" (1975:125).

I would say that one effect of repeatedly casting Edna as the agent of material processes, and as subject when she undresses and examines her body is that of conveying an impression of satisfaction and sensuality. This is related, naturally, to her sexual awakening, which will not be dealt with explicitly, but it also, in my opinion, contributes to the picture of Edna as a *sleek animal waking up in the sun* (Chopin 123).

3.7 Extract 7

Instead of merely visiting mass, the excursion with Robert lasts all day. Shortly after this Robert leaves for Mexico. The Pontelliers return to New Orleans, and after some time Mr. Pontellier leaves for New York and the children are sent to their grandmother's. The following extract describes Edna investigating the house and enjoying the garden once everyone has left.

7) (126):

When Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief. A feeling that
 carrier rel.pr. attribute beh.pr. force

was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her. She walked all through the
 mat.pr. medium-t medium-i mat.pr.
 senser

house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time. She tried the various
 ment.pr. phen. ag. mat.pr.

chairs and lounges, as if she had never sat and reclined upon them before. And she
 medium medium-i
 senser

perambulated around the outside of the house, investigating, looking to see if windows and
mat.pr. ment.pr. ment.pr. phenomenon

shutters were secure and in order. The flowers were like new acquaintances; she approached
ag. mat.pr.
medium-i

them in a familiar spirit, and made herself at home among them. The garden walks were
medium mat.pr.
damp, and Edna called to the maid to bring out her rubber sandals. And there she
sayer verbal pr. said medium-i
ag.

stayed, and stooped, digging around the plants, trimming, picking dead, dry leaves. The
mat.pr. material processes material processes medium

children's little dog came out, interfering, getting in her way. She scolded him,
sayer verbal pr. addressee
behavior
agent

laughed at him, played with him. The garden smelled so good and looked so pretty in the
beh.pr. mat.pr. medium

afternoon sunlight. Edna plucked all the bright flowers she could find, and went into the house
agent mat.pr. medium mat.pr.
medium-i

with them, she and the little dog.

Edna has several participant roles in this extract. In the second sentence, a feeling is the force of a material process and Edna is the medium-t. In the rest of the paragraph, though, there is a predominance of material processes in which Edna is the agent or medium-i. She is also a senser in inspecting her house, and a sayer in speaking to the maid and the dog.

There are some differences compared to previous extracts that are worth pointing at. Even if the *feeling [comes] over [Edna]*, it does not seem to completely control her as the feeling of *oppression* in extract 1, and *the passions* in extract 3 did. It is possibly because a feeling that is *delicious*, simply is not as strong as a feeling of oppression or feelings of passion. Another explanation is that Edna is in control of her actions in the following sentences, in that she is an

agent and a medium-i. Furthermore, when being an agent, she is not merely in control of her own body, but she moves around the house and the garden. As a senser, she investigates them, and as a sayer, she speaks to the maid and the dog. Thus, she is in control of the situation.

3.8 Extract 8

When Mr. Pontellier is in New York, Edna leads her own life. As Robert comes back to New Orleans Edna has rented a house for herself. One evening, as Robert and Edna finally have spoken of their love for each other, Adèle Ratignolle, who is going to give birth, sends for her. The following paragraphs describe Edna's feelings at the childbirth.

8) (170):

Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread. Her own like
senser ment.pr. phen. medium mat.pr. instrument

experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an
carrier rel.pr. attribute senser ment.pr.

ecstasy of pain, the heavy odour of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and
phenomenon

an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great
unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go.

She began to wish she had not come; her presence was not necessary. She might
senser ment.pr. phenomenon carrier rel.pr. attribute

have invented a pretext for staying away; she might even invent a pretext now for going. But
ment.pr.

Edna did not go. With an inward agony, with a flaming outspoken revolt against the ways of
circumstances

Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture.
senser ment.pr. phenomenon

She was still stunned and speechless with emotion when later she leaned over her friend to kiss her and softly say good-by. Adèle, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!"

In terms of transitivity, there is a predominance of mental processes and Edna's role is that of the senser. The mental processes describe Edna's feelings and thoughts at witnessing the childbirth.

There are certain differences between this extract and others that describe Edna's feelings. For one thing, her feelings in previous extracts are often described by means of material processes, in which Edna's role is that of a medium-t. Here, her feelings are described mainly by mental processes and her role is that of the senser. In the second sentence, a material process is used, but the *dread* is an instrument and not a force. In the last sentence of the same paragraph *agony* is a circumstance in a mental process.

The other difference regards Edna's role as subject. As Treichler points out, the sentence structure with *Edna* or *she* in the subject role recurs in the novel. It has not been seen in previous extracts describing Edna's feelings though (apart from extract one in which she is crying). I agree with Treichler, in that "the pronoun *she* anchors [Edna's] physical self to the language" (1993:311).

According to Wheeler, the scene described in this extract is one of "[t]he events that trigger [Edna's] final awakening" (1975:127). Treichler points out (1993:323) that "Edna, having just declared her love for Robert, comprehends with vivid clarity the inescapable link between sexual fulfilment, childbirth and responsibility for those 'little lives'".

3.9 Extract 9

Walking home from Adèle, Edna is accompanied by Doctor Mandelet.¹³ Their conversation is another important event in triggering Edna's final awakening (Wheeler 1975:127, Treichler 1993:323), but will not be commented upon here. When Edna comes home, she finds a note

¹³ Doctor Mandelet is the family doctor who thought of Edna as *a sleek animal waking up in the sun*, earlier in the novel (Chopin 123).

from Robert: *I love you. Good-by – because I love you* (Chopin 172). According to Wheeler (1975:127), the fact that Robert ends their relationship, is the last event leading up to Edna’s final awakening. Wheeler argues that “the content of [her] awakening” is “that as long as she lives she is a prisoner of the social order, through obligations to her children and through the cast-iron respectability of people like Robert, and of the biological order, through the sensuality of her nature” (1975:127). After lying awake all night Edna goes to Grand Isle the next morning. Extract nine describes Edna’s thoughts as she walks down to the beach and how she swims out, not to come back.

9) (175-176):

Despondency had come upon her in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one
 force mat.pr. medium-t mat.pr.

thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew of a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach.

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun.
 medium mat.pr. circ. rel.pr. (cf. The water was gleaming)

The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring,
 carrier rel.pr. attribute verbal processes
 sayer

inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude.
 addressee

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles.
 medium mat.pr. circ. mat.pr.

She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was
 medium-i mat.pr. carrier rel.pr. attribute medium-i mat.pr. carrier rel.pr.

deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke.
 attribute ag. mat.pr. medium mat.pr.

The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.
 carrier rel.pr. attribute mat.pr. medium
 agent

Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her.
 force material processes medium-t

The structure of describing strong feelings by means of material processes, in which the feelings are forces and Edna's role is that of medium-t, is found again at the end of the book. Here, *[d]espondency [has] come upon her*, and *[e]xhaustion [. . .] press[es] upon and overpower[s] her*. The structure in which Edna is an agent when it comes to controlling her body is also found here. In the paragraph in which Edna walks out into the sea and starts to swim, it is interwoven with relational clauses describing the water.

The last two paragraphs of extract 2, the ones about *[t]he voice of the sea*, are repeated almost word by word, but do not hang together as they did in that extract. Treichler calls these sentences 'the voice of the sea refrain' (1993:327).

4. Conclusion

Two patterns can be distinguished in the extracts. On the one hand, Edna is described as a medium-t, overcome by emotion. On the other hand, she is an agent and a medium-i, when it comes to controlling her own body and her actions. When Edna is a medium-t, overcome with emotion, her feelings are forces that fill the doer-role of subject in the sentences.¹⁴ In the extracts that describe her actions, however, the sentence structure is that in which Edna is

¹⁴ The *indescribable oppression* in extract 1, the *light, it*, in extract 2, *the very passions* in extract 3, *[a] feeling of exultation* in extract 4, *[a] feeling of oppression and drowsiness* in extract 5 and *[d]espondency* in extract 9

subject and doer.¹⁵ These sentence structures give the impression of Edna as being in control of her body but not of her feelings. In extract 8, the pattern is different. Even if Edna experiences strong feelings in this scene, her predominant role is that of senser and subject.

In the introduction, Edna's development is described as a growing realization of her own needs and a change in her behaviour and actions, corresponding to these insights. She is also described as seeming naive, acting on impulses. My impression of her awakening is that of a *sleek animal waking up in the sun* (Chopin 123). The transitivity in the extracts can be seen as reflecting the process that Edna goes through in the following way. In the first three extracts she mainly has the roles of medium-t, senser and behavior. Sometimes, when strong feelings are involved, she is merely a circumstance. She experiences oppression (extract 1), feelings of passion (extract 2) and has certain vague insights (extract 3). From extract 4 and onwards she is increasingly active. In extract 4 she is for the first time a medium-i, and she is an agent in controlling her body in the water. The sentence structure in which Edna is a medium-t or circumstance when experiencing strong emotions does not disappear, but in extract 5 she reacts to the feeling of oppression by leaving the church. Her participant role is then that of a medium-i. In extracts 6 and 7, Edna is several times an agent and she is a medium-i. In extract 8, there is a change in sentence structure, which regards not only the participant roles, but also Edna's role of subject in the sentences. In my opinion, this change in sentence structure signals the importance of this episode in Edna's awakening. In extract 9, then, the sentence structure in which Edna is a medium-t and strong feelings are forces, occurs again. The sentence structure in which Edna is an agent in controlling her body occurs as well though, as she swims out into the sea.

As Toolan (1998:90) points out, "any recurrent use of forces, especially in the 'do-er' role (. . .) is a kind of foregrounding, usually worth closer consideration: the teller may be denying

¹⁵ Treichler 1993:311, extract 6, 7 and the second and third sentence of extract 1.

that any human has an agentive role in the events depicted, or may be attempting to conceal or disregard implicit human participation”.

In my opinion, it is possible to see the recurring use of feelings as forces, as reflecting the conflict between human nature and culture. When it comes to feelings such as *the passions themselves*, it is interesting to refer again to Gilbert, who points out that, at this time, Oscar Wilde, among others, “speculate[d] . . . on the nature of impulses that might transcend the imperatives of nineteenth century ‘morality’” (2003:17). Regarding Edna’s feelings of oppression it is possible to see them as coming from her sense of not being comfortable with the role that is hers and her dawning realization that there is no role available for her, in which she can live as she would wish.¹⁶ It would express, then, that human beings, including women, have certain impulses, or needs, and that the culture of the late nineteenth century left no room for acting on those needs. The interpretation of *The Awakening* as picturing a society with limited roles for women is not new. According to *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2008:1604), “Chopin presented nothing less than a ‘wasteland’ for women of her generation”.¹⁷ It is interesting, though, how the transitivity in the representation of Edna contributes to creating this meaning and how it reflects the subject of conflict between human nature and culture.

Did Kate Chopin consciously choose to picture Edna as being in control of her body but not of her feelings? And did she thereby want to state that women had impulses and needs that ultimately could not be confined within the boundaries of Victorian culture? It is, naturally, not possible to answer these questions. It is interesting, however, that she chose to describe Doctor Mandelet’s impression of Edna as *a sleek animal waking up in the sun* and that she described Edna’s feelings as she stands on the beach in the last chapter; *[s]he felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known*. Animals are

¹⁶ About the oppression, see Gilbert (2003:24), compare Treichler (1993:323). Wheeler points out (1975:123,127) that Edna “refus[es] to live within any role available to her”.

¹⁷ See also Wheeler (1975).

in control of their bodies, but merely follow instincts or impulses. After the birth scene Edna is fully awake as to her possible roles in society and to what the consequences may be of not adhering to any of those roles. She then chooses the sea, which can be seen as representing nature.¹⁸

5. List of abbreviations

ag. = agent

beh.pr. = behavioural processes

circ. = circumstance/s/

ex.pr. = existential process

mat.pr. = material process

medium-i = medium initiator

medium-t = medium target

ment. pr. = mental process

rel.pr. = relational process

phen. = phenomenon

verbal pr. = verbal process

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¹⁸ According to Gilbert (2003:25-26), a shore can be seen as "mark[ing] the margin where nature intersects with culture".

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