Analysis of the Awakening Process of Edna in *The Awakening* by Using “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs” Theory

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The Awakening written by Kate Chopin is published for a long time, which stirs up streams of praise for its bold content. Most researchers make analysis on this novel from different perspectives including postmodernism, deconstruction, feminism, binary opposition, and so on. Based on the “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”, this paper lays emphasis on the transition of protagonist Edna from suffering the traditional shackle to pursuing the self-independent. This paper aims to help readers realize an awakening process of Edna and appeals for more concern on the transformation of females’ roles.

Keywords: “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”, awakening, transition of female

Introduction

“Hierarchy of Needs” is proposed by Abraham Harold Maslow who is a famous American psychologist focusing on the pyramidal pattern of people’s development. According to the Maslow’s research, this theory is classified into five parts: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization. Deficiency needs ranging from bottom to top include physiological need, safety need, belongingness need, and esteem need while the growth need which is opposed to the deficiency needs only contains the self-actualization need. The fulfillment of deficiency needs depends largely on others or environment but the growth need is fulfilled independently (2007, pp. 6-7). This thesis divides the deficiency needs into two parts including the basic needs and the psychological needs. The basic needs include physiological need and safety need. If people cannot fulfill these needs, they cannot gain the safeguard to pursue the higher needs. After people fulfill the basic needs, the psychological needs which contain belongingness needs and esteem needs could be implemented with the help from others. Having realized the basic needs and psychological needs, people can achieve the growth needs to gain the positive attitude towards the future. This theory presents the hierarchical distribution, which evolves from low-level requirements to high-level requirements and emphasizes that different parts play the dominating roles in different periods. *The Awakening*, written by Chopin, demonstrates a picture in which Edna gradually meets her higher-level requirements. In the first place, Edna only keeps a watchful eye on her household chores, which is the symbol of fulfilling the basic needs. As time passes by, except for the household affairs, she gives priority to her own life on the giving list so that she gains true friends

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and love. In this process, she fulfills the love needs and esteem needs. At the end of this novel, Edna moves into a small house by herself in order to obtain the independent life, which embodies the self-actualization needs. This thesis illustrates the awakening process of Edna from these three parts: basic needs, psychological needs, and self-actualization needs.

Awakening Process of Edna From Three Parts

Edna is a traditional woman who is willing to sacrifice everything to take care of her family. Suppressed by the conventional dogma, she introspects herself and gradually awakens her consciousness. In her awakening process, Edna satisfies her needs from the lowest to the highest.

Fulfillment of Basic Needs

In the first place, Edna should fulfill the physiological needs. At the beginning of this novel, the writer depicts that Edna lives in a rich life for her husband who is a businessman can earn much money. If we pencil a pair of concentric circles to classify different social roles of male and female characters in the novel, the majority of submissive domestic women would be placed in the inner circle, and the outer circle must be entrenched by the male force, which dominantly supported the family and operated the social machine (Zhuang, 2011). Owing to a large amount of money, their house as one of the most splendid ones in that region is decorated beautifully. Besides, there are many servants to look after them. Obviously, Edna does not need to worry about the daily necessities in the light of the prodigious material life. Within the context of richness, Edna meets the physiological needs without any difficulties.

After fulfilling the physiological needs, Edna reckons that she should find some challenges that can bring a sense of surprise to her life in order to cast off the dull life. Within this context, Edna has an opportunity to meet the safety needs while swimming in the sea.

In *The Awakening*, Edna learns to swim all summer. At first, Edna is inundated with fear of death when she swims in the boundless sea. With Robert's encouragement, she plucks up courage to swim. While she swims away in the sea, she is driven by instinct to withdraw and seek protection. A quick vision of death smites her soul, and then appalls and enfeebles her senses. However, by the effort she rallies her staggering faculties and manages to regain the land (Chopin, 2003, p. 38). Edna makes bold attempt to swim in the sea, which is a miracle for the whole society. Owing to her bold behavior, many people think that Edna is a crazy woman and they do not allow themselves to approach her. Edna is eager to have access to the help from other people while there is nobody giving her a hand except for Robert. At that moment, Robert is the only person who can assist Edna to overcome fear, so Edna entrusts herself to Robert. If Edna is in danger of drowning, Robert must go to his great lengths to rescue her. Due to the support from Robert who is in favor of her swimming, it is safe for Edna to swim in the sea.

Fulfillment of Psychological Needs

The psychological needs include love needs and esteem needs. The belongingness and love needs are mainly obtained from friends and lovers while the esteem needs are usually from the person himself.

At the beginning of this novel, a parrot kept in the cage comes into view. The parrot epitomizes Edna who is shackled by her family in the cage. Edna shoulders the responsibilities coming from her family, which means she must be a good mother and wife. She puts all her efforts on her family so she cannot go out of her way to live a life.

By contrast, she yearns for free life. In her awakening process, she endeavors to make communication with outside world, especially with the good friends Robert and Reisz, who have given her great influence. Even though Reisz is unwelcomed by the public, Edna does not disgust her. When Edna intends to live independently in a tiny house instead of living a big house with her family, Reisz encourages her to discount the rumor and live in her own way. In the perspective of friendship, Edna meets the belonging needs from Miss. Reisz.

Besides, Robert is another friend who helps her to fulfill her love needs. When Edna swims, Robert is always there to give her warmth and encouragement. In that age, almost few women wearing the swim suits swim freely in the sea because most people reckon it as an absurd behavior which is not in line with the tradition. Edna longs for having a free forum in which the oppressed mind can be purged and understood whereas she is scared of shaking the bondage of tradition because no woman has ever done that before. Nevertheless, she attempts to fight against the constraint forced on her even if no women rebels the tradition, fortunately she has Robert as her solid shelter whenever she is merged by the gossip. Within the context of frequently contacting with Robert, Edna embraces an intimate relationship with him.

Even though Edna has many friends in her life, she only considers Reisz and Robert as her true friends and lover respectively, which illustrates that she gains belongingness and love needs from these two people.

After fulfilling the belongingness and love needs, Edna begins to introspect herself and pays more attention to her inner thoughts. She is eager to obtain the pleasure from her work or life to fulfill the esteem needs.

Even if Edna lives a rich life, she also desires to earn money by herself instead of counting on her husband. Women are not men's appurtenances. Chopin doubts that women's roles stipulated by the society were to raise their children and to obey their husbands (Wei, 2000). If Edna has the idea of getting away from her family or the traditional fetter, she must face how she can make a living by herself. Edna shows the talent in drawing, so she decides to paint for making a living. At that time, ignoring the blunt comments from others, Edna considers painting as a good way to earn money. She can obtain some pleasure and confidence from her working life, satisfying her inner self-esteem by utilizing her subjective initiatives to take the great leap in her life. Edna is not only willing to earn money by painting but also eager to obtain the acknowledgement from other people. In this novel, she paints a portrait for Madame Ratignolle. The picture completed bore no resemblance to Madame Ratignolle. Madame Ratignolle was greatly disappointed to find that it did not look like her. But it was a fair enough piece of work, and in many respects satisfying (Chopin, 2003, p. 15). It shows Edna's painting gains recognition from Ratignolle, which demonstrates the fulfillment of esteem needs. Having been recognized by other people, Edna is satisfied with her life.

Fulfillment of Self-Actualization Needs

The self-actualization needs are at the top in "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs". The self-actualization underlines that we should explore our potentials to become the person we expect. After gaining the love and belongingness from others and having been recognized by others, Edna has the confidence to pursue the independent life.

Edna entertains her friends on the 29th birthday which is a new start in her life, declaring that she decides to move into a small house in order to live an independent life (Liu, 2011). Virginia Woolf once said in *A Room of One's Own*, if women are eager to completely obtain the independence, they must meet these two demands: One

is that they must have their own home, the other is that they must achieve the economic independent (1934, p. 2). Even if her life is not luxurious as it used to be, her heart is filled with happiness because of getting rid of the traditional role imposed on her. She has more free time to do her things, not catering the other people with the mundane matters.

Conclusion

Edna is a brave woman who tends to sacrifice everything to achieve her ideal life but she used to be a traditional woman who centers on her family and echoes others blindly, which means it is a long journey for her to awaken herself. In the awakening process, she satisfies her needs from bottom to top and she finally achieves the self-actualization. Analyzing the awakening process from five parts of this theory, this thesis helps readers better understand Edna's thoughts and appeals for more concern on the transformation of females' roles in the changing time.

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