Identity Theme: Motherhood and Chopin’s *The Awakening*

According to Norman N. Holland, literary theorist and author of *Unity Identity Text Self:*

“We theorists of literature used to think that a given story or poem evoked some “correct” or at least widely shared response. When, however, I began (at Buffalo’s Center for the Psychological Study of the Arts) to test this idea, I rather ruefully found a much subtler and a more complex process at work. Each person who reads a story, poem, or even a single word construes it differently. These differences evidently stem from personality” (Reading and Identity n.p.).

Some theorists of literature still continue to think that each text contains one shared response; however, Holland claims that with the vast differences in personalities, it is nearly impossible for us to react to a text with a shared response. He claims that each one of us brings our personalities--our own experiences and identities--to the text we read. While reading Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, I could not help but to bring my own personality and identity into the experiences of Edna Pontellier, Chopin’s protagonist. Edna, a young woman during the late 1800s, rebels against the identity that society gives her as loving wife and doting mother. Edna wants nothing to do with acting as a wife and mother, instead she longs for her freedom. Chopin creates a character whose identity theme propels away from a vocation of motherhood; whereas, my own identity theme is that of future motherhood. While reading Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, I found myself bringing my own perspectives--my own personality and identity--to my reading of the story. And like Holland’s reader-response theory explains, my engagement with Edna’s identity theme influenced the re-creation of my own identity theme as [mother](mailto:).
Though, before analyzing my own reading of *The Awakening*, and how my reading of the text influenced the re-creation of my own identity theme, it is imperative to discuss Holland’s reader-response theory of identity theme and how the understanding of identity plays into his theory. First, Holland’s theory of identity theme, explained in a conclusive definition by the *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, states that American ego psychology postulates that an individual’s life is held together, like a novel, by a single recurring element—an ‘identity theme’—which is unique to the individual. The reader response critic Norman Holland has used ‘identity theme’ to explain and systematize why different readers see different things in the same text. According to Holland, readers derive pleasure from reading, even though at first, some text may challenge their sense of self or worldview (Identity Theme 148-149).

In other words, in each of our lives, we can identify a recurring element that Holland defines as an ‘identity theme.’ According to his reader-response theory, a reader’s identity theme influences how he or she reads a text. He claims that some texts may challenge readers, and even re-create their identity theme, where other texts just solidify their identity theme.

Holland’s notion of identity theme, though, is more complex than just a recurring theme in one’s life. It revolves around one’s development of identity. His theory can only be understood through the psychoanalytic lens of identity, which Holland explains through Erik Erikson’s and Heinz Lichtenstein’s theories of identity. According to Erik Erikson, the notion of identity is compromised of “four meanings…: the individual’s awareness of the continuity of his existence in space and time and his recognition of others’ awareness of his existence; more, his awareness of the continuity in the style of his individuality, and its existence and the coincidence of his personal style with his meaning for significant others in his immediate community”
My own identity, then, consists of my awareness of my existence and others’ awareness of my existence, and also how my individuality affects my existence and others’ existence. Holland uses Heinz Lichtenstein’s theory of identity to link it back to the idea of theme. Holland explains, through Lichtenstein’s theory, that our identity revolves around a theme, based on the sameness and difference we experience through events. He claims that:

We are each constantly doing new things yet we stamp each new thing with the same personal style as our earlier actions. Think of the individual as embodying a dialectic of sameness and difference. We detect the sameness by seeing what persists within the constant change of our lives. We detect the different by seeing what has changed against the background of sameness. The easiest way to comprehend that dialectic of sameness and difference is Lichtenstein’s concept of identity as a theme and variations—like a musical theme and variations. Think of the sameness as a theme, and ‘identity theme.’ Think of the difference of variations on that identity theme. I can arrive at an identity theme by sensing the recurring patterns in someone’s life, just as I would arrive at the theme of a piece of music (Holland 814).

In other words, think of a musical theme. Then, think of all of the variations you have ever heard of that particular musical themes. You will hear differences between the variations, but you will also hear similarities. These similarities create that particular theme, just like how the similarities we see in our own experiences creates themes. Each of us has our own identity theme, and these themes affect how we react to other experiences.

According to our own personal identities, and identity themes, we analyze events, including how we analyze and perceive different texts. Holland explains that, “Identity defines what the individual brings from old experiences to new ones, and it is the newness of
experiences, both those from the world without and those from the biological and emotional world within, by which the individual creates the variations which are his life lived in historical time” (815). When we read a certain text--for me, Chopin’s *The Awakening*--we bring our past experiences to the new experiences in the text. And, arguably, then, as our past experiences shape our reading of the text, the new experiences we gain from reading the text shape, or re-create our identity themes. My reading of *The Awakening*, oftentimes influenced by my own identity theme as future mother, left me analyzing Edna and her own experiences.

Holland explains, though, that a text can challenge our own identity themes, and *The Awakening* has challenged mine. I would argue that my identity theme is that of future mother; however, because I also identify as a feminist, my views as a future mother are sometimes challenged. As a feminist, I can relate to Edna’s struggle for personal free and sexual liberation; however, my identity as future mother struggles with her decision to neglect her children. At the end of Edna’s struggle as a mother and wife, she decides she needs to break away. She goes to the beach and starts swimming, until she cannot swim any longer. Chopin leaves readers presuming that Edna drowns. She writes:

> She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. Her arms and legs were growing tired. She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul (139).

Edna’s unhappiness, caused by the identity of mother and wife forced on her through society and culture, leads to her ultimate demise, her death.
Furthermore, in search of her personal freedom and sexual liberation, she chooses to abandon her husband and children. And although she is a mother and a wife, she does not identify as mother and wife. Rather, Holland might argue that her identity theme is that of a twenty-eight-year-old woman seeking freedom, an early feminist. I would argue that Edna’s and my own personal identity theme are switched. Edna identifies as a young “feminist” seeking personal freedom, who happens to also be a mother and a wife. Whereas, I am a feminist, who identifies as a future mother and wife. Our priorities are different, causing our identity themes to differ. As much as I understand her need for personal freedom, I could not help but leave the text with disappointment for Edna’s decision. She leaves her innocent children motherless, with a father who seems to only care about his job and gambling. My first reaction at the end of the novel was not: Yes! Edna gains her freedom. No, it was disappointment that Edna was selfish enough to abandon her children to gain her own freedom. As a future mother and wife, my biggest fear is losing my children. I cannot imagine choosing to leave my children, in sake of my own agenda. I would fail as a mother, and then what would become of my identity theme?

Holland’s reader-response theory, explaining how a reader’s identity theme influences his or her reading of a text, largely influenced my own reading of Chopin’s *The Awakening*. I found myself relating my own personal identity theme to Edna’s identity theme, largely challenging my own, and eventually solidifying it. I found that even though I related to Edna’s identity theme as a young woman seeking personal freedom, my own identity theme as future mother overruled.

Works Cited

