Transgression and Individual Rebellion: Edna Pontellier’s Life of Apprenticeship in Kate Chopin’s the *Awakening*

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**ABSTRACT**

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin denounces the culture that infantilizes and degrades women, defies traditional proprieties, challenges patriarchal ideologies of maleness and femaleness, and pioneers new roles for women. Chopin’s Edna Pontellier questions the traditional ideologies of female subjugation, confronts the limitations the New Orleans Creole society imposes upon her because of her gender, and commits suicide at the end. To have an identity in Creole society, Edna must choose from the operative categories open to her within it- the dependent role of wife/mother or the independent role of artist/spinster. Neither role satisfies the sexual and spiritual aspects of her fictional character that make up the core of her identity, which she seeks to establish and preserve at all costs. The traditional role does not mean for Edna the promise of a free, meaningful life but rather negation, chaos, and death. Convinced that she cannot coexist with a society that would condemn her transgressions, Edna drowns herself in the waters of the gulf. She does not take her life because of or for the sake of others; she does so out of concern for the preservation of her individual and particular interests. Her suicide stands as final proof of her independence, self-determination, and self-preservation.

**Keywords:** Traditional Proprieties, Transgressions, Self-determination, *Awakening*, Suicide, Self-preservation.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

More than a hundred years of its publication, *The Awakening* (1899) remains a text that profoundly affects readers and continues to generate a large body of critical writing (Norton Critical Edition 1976). Without a doubt, a large measure of its appeal lies in its protagonist, Edna Pontellier. During the course of the novel, Edna challenges Victorian assumptions about gender, refuses to conform to traditional concepts of exalted, domestic womanhood, and follows a tortuous pathway to self-discovery and identity. When, midway through *The Awakening*, Edna announces, “I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself,” (48) the American female hero has defied the socially constructed voices of the epoch repeating and echoing what is proper or conventional and made a quantum leap into the future. Implicit in her declaration is the consciousness and growing realization of some deeper, separate self, distinct from that which has been socially preordained and sanctioned. Like the nineteenth-century fictional female heroes before her, Edna’s success is measured wholly and unequivocally by subscription to the divine plan–marriage and motherhood. But unlike those earlier female heroes, she recognizes that this pattern of Victorian True Womanhood, which is in fact a patriarchal ideology that expects woman to be perfect in her virtues but denies her autonomy as a human being, and those predictable relationships, which it subsumes, are inadequate, for they limit her role narrowly to the home sphere as a subservient caretaker. In her own writing, Chopin wrote, she wishes to show “the truth of human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it” (*The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* 691).

The notion of the limitations which milieu imposes upon the individual is the very stuff of which fiction is made. Indeed, the history of the novel from its first full flowering in the eighteenth century through the modern period can be read as the struggle of the individual against the restrictions imposed by the environment in which success is, at least in part, measured by the degree...
of achieved consolidation between self and world. The example of the nineteenth century American novel is particularly instructive. As Richard Chase points out, in no other literary tradition is there so obsessive and repeated a dramatizing of man against the world, the cosmos, the elements, and himself as in this native genre (11-17). And it can be added that in no other fiction is the hero subjected to the strictest codification of gender-related issues and attitudes than in woman’s fiction. Throughout history women had been subjected not just to the fate of domestic labor and legal and economic dependence, but also to the fate of sexual suppression and exploitation. As Kate Millett observes in Sexual Politics, though in patriarchal society women tend to be treated as sexual objects, they have not been encouraged to enjoy the sexuality which is regarded to be their fate; instead, they are made to suffer for and be ashamed of their sexuality (119).

Growing up in a world that is infused with patriarchal oppression, Kate Chopin breaks with a nineteenth-century literary tradition that essentially upheld domestic ideology and tended to present female characters as either pious angels or shameful objects of pity or scorn. She comes to critically depict the constraints of social conventions and to repudiate conventional gender distinctions and restrictions. She portrays women facing conflicts that are at the same time personal and universal and provides a wide variety of resolutions to those conflicts, both conventional and controversial, and both optimistic and pessimistic.

Chopin is deeply aware of the crippling effects of social feminization, and she consciously rebels against the patriarchal social order. In her view, American society has constructed artificial restrictions for women, and these restrictions have severely hindered women from becoming full human beings. In her fiction, she argues that gender distinctions are artificial, man-made constructions, and thus changeable. In work after work, she examines and denounces the culture that infantilizes and degrades women, defies traditional proprieties, challenges patriarchal ideologies of maleness and feminality, and pioneers new roles for women. She asserts that women are as intelligent as men and therefore are entitled to a career and to a public voice. Her major fictions, taken together, constitute the most searching feminist analysis of the construction of femininity produced by any novelist in the twentieth century.

Like Kate Chopin, a number of women writers at the beginning of the twentieth century also explored social issues concerning all women, defied the patriarchal order of their time, and defined themselves against the restrictive social expectations. Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Mary Austin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, and Gertrude Stein were all middle-class women who resolved to live independent lives and became professional writers. Knowing that the code of the “perfect woman” in the home functioned to deny and suppress female consciousness which was essential to woman’s emancipation, these writers sought to create alternative bases of consciousness by emphasizing female subjectivity and female experience outside the home. Their works challenged the conventional view on female status, temperament and role, and created new images of women as strong and intelligent human beings outside of the domestic world.

Chopin’s creation of strong female characters effectively destroys the Victorian myth of the “fair sex,” which holds that women are physically fragile and intellectually inferior beings fit only for the home. More important, she creates female characters who insist upon their own freedom and independence in and outside the home. Chopin’s Edna Pontellier leads a seemingly traditional life until she awakens to needs and desires that are in conflict with socially acceptable behavior. She comes to reject domesticity and chooses to live a more active social life. Realizing that she has lived a life of self-denial in the service of her husband and children, she is determined to live a new life of self-fulfillment, which includes a small cottage of her own, artistic creation, and the fulfillment of her physical desire. Though within the novel Edna’s quest for a new life is short-lived and her love for her young friend Robert Lebrun is never consummated, she nevertheless exhibits a new revolutionary female consciousness that seriously undermines the institution of marriage and the patriarchal social order. In fact, she opens up a whole new territory in which women begin to claim the sexual freedom that has been denied to them for centuries.

Recognizing that her physical and intellectual needs are not being met within the domestic role, Edna questions the traditional ideologies of female subjugation, confronts the limitations the New Orleans Creole society imposes upon her because of her gender, and commits suicide at the end. To have an identity in Creole society, Edna must choose from the operative categories open to
her within it—the dependent role of wife/mother or the independent role of artist/spinster. Neither role satisfies the sexual and spiritual aspects of her fictional character that make up the core of her identity, which she seeks to establish and preserve at all costs. The traditional role does not mean for her the promise of a free, meaningful life but rather negation, chaos, and death. Convinced that she cannot coexist with a society that would condemn her transgressions, Edna returns to Grand Isle, the scene of her first awakening, and drowns herself in the waters of the gulf. She does not take her life because of or for the sake of others; she does so out of concern for the preservation of her individual and particular interests. Her suicide stands as final proof of her independence, self-determination, and self-preservation.

Edna’s refusal to submit to the laws of patriarchy, her election to die rather than continue to suppress her needs and desires, and her assertion through suicide of the same individual rights as the male threatened the established social order at the time of the novel’s publication and resulted in her figure becoming the embodiment of evil and, consequently, the recipient of social scorn. Most of the early critics’ negative response focuses upon the immorality of the novel and attacks Chopin for daring to glorify a woman who abandons herself to sexuality with no apparent regard or remorse for her husband and children. These critics judged the novel potentially harmful to readers because of its erotic and morbid content, which was devoid of redeeming qualities (Priscilla Allen 224-225; Per Seyersted 173-178). As late as 1932, in writing the first biography of Kate Chopin, Daniel S. Rankin emphasized the lubricity of the novel, describing it as “exotic in setting, morbid in themes, [and] erotic in motivation” (175). A few years later, in 1936, Arthur Hobson Quinn, while conceding that the story was told with “admirable economy,” still characterized The Awakening as a study of “morbid psychology” (357).

The critical emphasis on the sexual aspect of the novel derives in part, as Helen Taylor contends, from its novelty in American women’s literature of the period (302). But more importantly, it stems from fear about the detrimental effects the novel might have on readers of the “gentle” sex. For Chopin’s daring, non-apologetic depiction of a woman’s sexual desire uncovers an aspect of womanhood that society preferred to keep hidden well into the twentieth century. In the nineteen fifties and sixties, the feminist movement’s newly awakened concern with all aspects of women’s lives and accomplishments led to a reappraisal of the novel’s merits. Once again, critics from the mid-fifties forward consider the novel a model of craftsmanship and an artistic success. Kenneth Eble declares The Awakening to be “a first rate novel” which resembles what Gide called roman pur, an atypical novel in America (262). Larzer Ziff adds to the praise, noting the novel as the most important work published before 1966 about a woman’s sexual life (197). In addition Per Seyersted asserts that the novel is a pivotal work in American literature and that Chopin has been a long neglected pioneer (262).

Robert Cantwell and Marie Fletcher, who also consider The Awakening a masterpiece of short fiction, place the novel within the category of works of local color where naturalism and realism are subtly intertwined to depict the special flavor and mores of Creole society (Cantwell 489-94; Fletcher 117-132). Moreover, critics cite the novel as an exponent of French influence in American literature and trace the work’s lineage to male ancestors, in particular Flaubert and Maupassant. They argue, however, that The Awakening moves beyond mere imitation because Chopin’s creation of Edna gives it individuality (Eble 262-63; Fletcher 121; Jasenas 312-322). A refreshing exception is Helen Taylor’s statement that elements in Chopin’s life and her novel hark back to French and English female authors, rather than male. This critic offers Mme de Stael, George Sand, and George Eliot as models available to Kate Chopin (301-304).

A few studies of The Awakening pronounce the novel as an example of the romantic tradition. For Donald Ringe, it is a powerful romantic work (580). Lawrence Thornton modifies that judgment by defining it as a political romance (50-52). James H. Justus further suggests that the novel is not simply a romantic tract, but a self reflective work which explores the pathology of romanticism (107). Jules Chametzky shares Margo Culley’s view that The Awakening is an “existential novel about solitude” (247). Chametzky proposes that in the novel Chopin explores the question of “how to be free in one’s self, but still be meaningfully connected to others” (222). Because the novel undeniably deals “with the psyche and with areas of consciousness,” Marina L. Roscher deems the novel to be a “forerunner of the contemporary poetic novel” (297-98).

Still others attempt to define the novel by what it is not. Both Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Susan Rosowsky reject the entry of the novel into the bildungsroman category. According to their analyses, Edna’s
development does not follow the characteristic pattern for protagonists in this genre. It should be noted, however, that Rosowski’s disqualification of *The Awakening* as a novel of apprenticeship appears motivated by her desire to create a new category, the “novel of awakening.” This “separate but equal” categorization recognizes that because of her sex Edna awakens to limited options and per force does not arrive at a philosophy of living. But the newly created label for the text, in its presupposition that males have unlimited options and that they succeed in developing a philosophy of life, perpetuates the culturally sanctioned pattern of differences between sexes. Members of both sexes face limitations as they mature, but only females have had to choose between their sexuality or their intellect as Edna has to do. Proof of Edna’s philosophy of life is paradoxically contained within her death, for it affirms her belief that life is the ability to be a whole self, and any other type of existence is not worth living.

In recent years, a few critics have stated that *The Awakening* is not a novel of liberation. According to Helen Taylor, although Chopin attempts to portray Edna’s liberation, her effort is doomed to failure because her portrayal of women fits the stereotypes which conform to southern white views. Joining Taylor, Elizabeth Ammons contends that “the very liberation about which the book fantasized is purchased on the backs of black women” (310). Anna Shannon Elfenbein, also concerned with the race issue, differs in her appraisal of the novel. While agreeing with Taylor and Ammons on Chopin’s limitations because of her privileged position as southern white woman, she nevertheless asserts Edna’s suicide indict both sexism and racism. For Edna, and Edna alone among the world of the novel, awakens to the truth about her own sexuality and that of other women, a truth concealed by romantic racist fictions. (298-99)

The multitudinous interpretations the novel and its protagonist have received from the time of its publication clearly reveal that the persistence of negative criticism results from the combining patriarchal assumptions about appropriate female behavior and the cultural aversion to suicide. In contradiction to the conclusions reached in most of this critical response, my examination of Edna illustrates her learning and growth process during the course of the novel, from being an outwardly conventional woman of her time to being a self-assertive new woman with aspirations and desires to fulfill her sexual as well as her spiritual self. From the moment that Edna discovers the nature of her identity and emerging self, symbolically depicted in the novel as the moment when she swims alone in the Gulf, maintaining this newly-found persona and preserving the integrity of her sexual/spiritual self become her fundamental purpose, a purpose which is forcefully and courageously expressed in her final statement, her suicide. Edna’s self-sought death represents the culmination of her pilgrimage to self-realization. It attests to her achieving a fully developed identity—one that admits and accepts responsibility for its component parts: her body, which longs to be nurtured and her intellect, which rejects oppression and dependency.

Not only does Edna differ from the traditional feminine heroine that appeared throughout nineteenth-century and eighteenth-century novels, she also differs significantly from all the women who inhabit *The Awakening*. Chopin establishes a gulf between Edna and her “female mentors,” Adele Ratignolle and Mlle Reisz, who assist her as she “explores which life, the True Woman or New Woman, she wants” (Elizabeth Elz 15). If anyone in *The Awakening* represents the ideal of the Angel of the House, it is Adele Ratignolle, who is almost a caricature of the traditional romantic heroine who exists merely to love and be loved. Adele has redeeming qualities, including her devotion to motherhood and her concern for Edna’s welfare. However, in describing her, Chopin’s narrator comments somewhat dryly, “There are no words to describe her save the ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams,” (10) proceeding to enumerate the charms of Adele’s “spun-gold hair,” her “blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires,” (10) her pouting, cherry-red lips, and her delicate white skin, which she protects from the sun far more carefully than Edna protects her own. The terms in which Adele is presented are a strange coalescence of sexual ripeness and Madonna-like purity. Her beauty is rich and luxuriant, but she is covered in filmy whiteness so that she emerges as a kind of saintly earth goddess, a sensuous deity whose absolute function it is to ensure the continuance of the race. Moreover, Adele adores being a wife and mother, a trait which along with her beauty makes her “the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (10) in the world of late-nineteenth-century New Orleans society. Adele never questions her role—she is at all times either pregnant or newly delivered—but moves through the
world of the novel with consummate ease. She is the very summa of Woolf’s “angel in the house” who must “charm, sympathize, flatter, conciliate, be extremely sensitive to the needs, wishes, and moods of others before her own,” and who does, because she must, “excel in the difficult arts of family life” (qtd. in Olsen 34).

In contrast, Edna, who is clearly not a “mother-woman” like Adele, is almost an androgynous figure. Edna is described at the beginning of the second chapter as “handsome rather than beautiful,” and the narrator notes that “her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression,” (5) not a typical trait associated with feminine charm in the nineteenth century. In comparing Edna’s body to Adele Ratignolle’s “more feminine and matronly figure,” the narrator comments:

The lines of her body were long, clean, and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotypical fashion-plate about it... But with more feeling and discernment [a casual observer] would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd. (16)

Moreover, Edna’s hands reveal determination, for they are “strong and shapely” while Adele’s suggest frailty, “never were hands more exquisite than hers” (10). Edna’s hands do not engage in artistic endeavors like playing the piano, as Adele’s do to entertain her friends and family. Indeed, Edna uses their strength to stray from the conventional by pursuing painting as a career. After all, Edna, who, as she perfects her aquatic skills, wishes to “swim far out, where no woman had swum before”(28).

As Edna had been set against Adele Ratignolle early in the novel, clarifying for the reader as well as for Edna the image of woman as glorified in her self-abnegation, so, as the work progresses, she is set against a very different, yet equally significant character, a Mademoiselle Reisz, who presents an alternative possibility—that of the artist, in this instance childless and unmarried, whose commitment and dedication are to herself and her work. Edna finds a kindred spirit in Mademoiselle, who receives her warmly in her shabby apartment: “There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna’s senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. ...The woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (78). However, Chopin’s narrator also presents Mademoiselle Reisz in a negative light, describing her as a “disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others,” (26) and though she inspires Edna and encourages her to free herself from tradition and prejudice, the latter finds her personally “offensive” (78). Edna’s dilemma is that she is neither “mother woman” nor artist. She only knows, with increasing certainty as she becomes gradually awakened, that she must live all she can, and that nothing in her background, her personality as it had been previously constituted, and indeed, nothing in the world that is presented to her expanding consciousness and developing impulses can provide her with the opportunity to do so.

Chopin establishes not only a clear difference between Edna’s physique and that of the foils the other women represent in the story, but she also portrays Edna’s behavior which stands in opposition to the cultural ideals of bourgeois nineteenth-century femininity. A striking feature of that life rests on its abandonment of societal norms. Evidence of the protagonist’s individualistic tendencies surfaces in flashback descriptions of Edna’s childhood years which reveal that “at a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (15). Its roots dating back to childhood, Edna’s independence expresses itself in her disregard for established norms of behavior. As a child, she abandons a church service to explore unknown fields where the grass is almost as tall as she is. As an adolescent, she develops a rich fantasy life, vivid, often erotically tinged, and in bold contrast to her increasingly reserved exterior. She falls in love repeatedly, but always the love object is remote, unavailable, or unreal. She becomes infatuated with a cavalry officer her father’s age rather than with the boy next door. Edna disregards religious injunctions by coveting her neighbor’s fiancée, and she channels her passion toward a tragedian rather than the local school hero (19).

As a mature woman, Edna further confirms her individuality by her demeanor. While other women engage in flirting socially, “she herself was almost devoid of coquetry” (68). Furthermore, she “would never have felt moved to any kittenish display to attract their notice--to any feline or feminine wiles to express herself toward them” (68). At the races, Edna stands out among her
female companions because her attendance derives from her love of horses rather than the social event. In addition, her voice has authority within that setting. She has a reputation for being knowledgeable, and those around her “.... lent an attentive ear to her utterances, hoping thereby to secure the elusive but ever-desired ‘tip’” (74).

Not only does Edna exhibit independence of thought and action in these few instances, more importantly, she does so in a basic aspect of her life: her role as a woman. Edna fails to meet the socially accepted mother-woman model which Adele personifies in the novel. She fails to meet this standard in its three significant aspects: the overprotection of children, the worship of husbands, and the suppression of individual desires. First, Edna promotes the development of self-reliance rather than dependence in her children. Instead of rushing to help them whenever they take a tumble, she allows them to recover their footing alone and continue playing. Edna fosters their courage and self-confidence, and her nurturing proves fruitful. For the boys, "... tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices, which usually prevailed against the other mother-tots. (9)

Chopin does not question Edna’s ability to function in her maternal role. Instead, she depicts Edna as a loving mother concerned about her children’s happiness and welfare. She even declares:

It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one else’s wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. (9)

Secondly, Edna never worshipped her husband, Leonce. Her marriage to him was “purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of fate” (19). Indeed, Edna considers marriage to Leonce both as a way out of her father’s house and as part of a woman’s life cycle. Her decision to marry despite familial objections illustrates not only compliance with cultural expectations, but also the assertion of her will in matters concerning her future. Edna also, at the outset of her marriage, does not expect “the acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian” (19). Motivated by the belief that “there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them,” (19) Edna settles on Leonce. That this assumption proves incorrect after the wedding reflects more on the courtship rituals of the period than on Edna’s lack of judgment. (8)

Finally, Edna has not relinquished her identity for the sake of being a wife and mother, nor has she longed to become a “ministering angel.” In her relationship with Leonce she has acted through habit, has yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us. (32)

During her six years of marriage, she has separated herself from the ideology of the “angel in the house.” Chopin shows Edna’s frustration with the domestic role by disclosing the feelings Edna experiences in the performance of her duties. Seeking to satisfy Leonce’s culinary expectations, Edna devotes an “entire evening” to write out “a menu for the week” (52). Edna derives no pleasure from fulfilling her wifely duties. She feels “she had accomplished no good that was worth the name” (52). To reinforce the protagonist’s lack of satisfaction with her role, Chopin remarks Edna “is poorly fitted” (54) to deal with household affairs.

In addition to Edna’s rejection of True Womanhood, the uneasiness that she arouses in other characters within the novel and in its readers confirms her uniqueness. Edna’s acquaintances perceive her behavior as trespassing on social rules. Both Leonce and Mme Lebrun, the owner of the resort at Grand Isle, find her “capricious” (29). Edna’s refusal to go indoors “instantly” (32) at her husband’s request might give this impression. But her reply to him—“I don’t wish to go in, and I don’t intend to. Don’t speak to me like that again”—shows Edna’s lack of “proper” wifely submission (32). This act is not the result of capriciousness, but the determination to break away from her husband’s control in all aspects of her life.

The harshest critics of Edna’s behavior which challenges male authority are her husband and her father. These two men directly affected by the protagonist’s unconventional conduct complain loudly of her shortcomings. Edna’s father observes in his daughter a “lack of filial kindness and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly consideration” (71). In Leonce’s eyes, Edna fits the “peculiar” (66) category. Frustration over Edna’s letting “the housekeeping go to the dickens,” (65) leads Leonce to seek medical advice. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg amply illustrates in the chapter “The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Conflict in
Nineteenth-Century America” and as Phyllis Chesler clearly witnessed in her clinical practice, husbands of real non-conformist wives often sought that advice. The result of their consultations, given male hegemony over the scientific world, was to confirm their suspicions of mental illness in their wives.(9) In reality, their behavior as well as Edna’s constitute a statement of sanity because it shows the rejection of authoritarian paternalistic rule for self-rule.

The factors which establish Edna’s individuality, define her as a character, and dictate the course of her voyage of self-discovery and her awakening are the island setting, the role of the sea, the pursuit of her painting, and her relationship with Robert Lebrun. Edna’s unvoiced feelings toward her children and her wifely duties become audible during a summer vacation on an island outside New Orleans. At Grand Isle, free from the social constraints of city life, Edna awakens to fundamental needs dormant under layers of acculturation. At Grand Isle, free from the social constraints of city life, Edna awakens to fundamental needs dormant under layers of acculturation. The island setting, the role of the sea, the pursuit of her painting, and her relationship with Robert Lebrun. Edna’s unvoiced feelings toward her children and her wifely duties become audible during a summer vacation on an island outside New Orleans. At Grand Isle, free from the social constraints of city life, Edna awakens to fundamental needs dormant under layers of acculturation.

Chopin summarizes the initiation of the process in a tone that alerts the reader to the significance of the events:

Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relation as an individual to the world within and about her. (14-15)

Edna’s definition of herself as a willed individual rather than as a submissive participant in a web of social relations constitutes a subversive move because it places the woman in the position of subject, not the usual for a woman. The radical nature of Edna’s thoughts can be gleaned from Chopin’s attempt to diminish their import through the teasing tone she employs to describe the experience.

This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (15)

Another influential factor in Edna’s awakening at Grand Isle is the voice of nature, symbolized by the sea. It speaks to her of freedom, a release from the bondage of civilization. Edna responded to its call when as a child she abandoned a stifling church service and ventured into open air to traverse a sea of tall grass. At the island, the voice of nature beckons once again. Edna’s reply manifests itself in her swimming alone for the first time. This accomplishment constitutes an outstanding feat since Edna has previously felt an “ungovernable dread” unless she could count on Robert to “reach out and reassure her” (28). Edna’s journey as a solitary swimmer is clearly a metaphor for her journey—outward to new experience, inward to the discovery of the self. Chopin conveys Edna’s awareness of the significance of her act by reporting her feeling that “a significant import had been given her soul,” (28) whereby she desired “to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (28). Swimming for Edna represents the vindication of her self-worth and the gaining of a new-found strength. The sea functions as the locus of her baptism into selfhood. Through it, she demonstrates her ability to work at a task, to overcome her fears and risk failure, and to achieve her goal. She is like a child, “who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone” (28).

The pursuit of Edna’s artistic ability constitutes a third factor in her voyage of self-discovery. (10) Besides responding to the sea’s entreaty, Edna allows the expression of her creative impulses to unfold, seeks artistic selfhood, and devotes considerable time to painting by setting up a studio in the attic of the new Orleans house and by continuing to paint when she moves into the “pigeon house” around the corner. Along with many of her contemporaries, she has “sketching materials, which she sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way” (13). But unlike them, her interest in “dabbling” evolves into a vocation. She derives from her painting “a satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (13). Edna’s professionalism is evident in her relationship to her work. Chopin does not exaggerate the quality of the protagonist’s talent or her dexterity. Edna is a beginning artist who “ handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came, not from long and close acquaintance with them, but from a natural aptitude” (13). Yet she shares with other artists some self-imposed standards of excellence which she strives to achieve. Chopin shows us the presence of this trait by showing Edna “critically” examining a sketch deemed acceptable by her companions, marring it with paint and crumpling it to destroy it (13).

The fourth and last important factor in Edna’s awakening is the discovery of herself as a sexual being. Although on the surface it appears to be a contradictory proposition because of her marital status and motherhood, both of which confirm sexual knowledge, it is not unusual. In the context of nineteenth-century culture, sexuality for “proper” women was limited to its acceptance as part of marital duties and for the purpose of...
procreation, not as a source of pleasure. Through contact with Robert, Edna awakens to feelings of intimacy not present in her marriage. In the novel’s first chapter, Chopin contrasts the husband and wife relationship to that between Robert and Edna. Within the married couple, the expected inequity between male and female partners shows through in Leonce’s feelings of authority and ownership over Edna as she returns from the beach:

‘You are burnt beyond recognition,’ he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. (4)

Edna and Robert, on the other, have established a relationship based on equality. The existing camaraderie permeates their introduction at the beginning of the novel. They first appear together walking under “the pink-lined shelter” (4) of a parasol and laughing over an earlier incident. The enjoyment derived from each other’s company is further highlighted by the fact that while Leonce opts to entertain himself playing billiards Robert chooses to stay with Edna for the remainder of the evening.

The nature of Edna’s and Robert’s relationship, which is different from that of husband and wife, is not surprising. (11) Intimacy and shared feelings, the elements which bind Edna to Robert, are not part of the Pontellier’s marriage. In contrast, her marital relationship rests instead on a pragmatic system of exchange where the female body is offered in payment for male-supplied material comfort. But the friendship also contrasts with Robert’s previous summer flirtations. Specifically, his expectations are different. He declares:

‘I hope Mrs. Pontellier does not take me seriously. I hope she has discernment enough to find in me something besides the blagueur’. (21)

Edna senses Robert’s special treatment of her and responds. She begins to internalize his presence in her life, paradoxically, because she notices his absences “just as one misses the sun on a cloudy day without having thought much about the sun when it was shining” (28). (22) The emotional connection with Robert combined with a sense of freedom she acquires through her solo swim unlock Edna’s characteristic reserve. Consequently, she can recognize within herself “the first-felt throbings of desire” (31). A few nights later, at Madame Antoine’s cottage, Edna acknowledges her body as a source of pleasure. The protagonist

… stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed... She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. (37)

In brief, the island setting, the response to calls from nature and her creative impulses, and the discovery of her sexuality all play a significant part in Edna’s journey of apprenticeship. In Chopin’s words, Edna by the end of summer could only realize that she herself--her present self--was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect. (41)

Edna returns to the city a changed person. She reappraises old customs and pursues activities which help her fulfill her awakened needs. The difference in Edna is apparent to her husband and acquaintances. He remarks: “Her whole attitude--toward me and everybody and everything--has changed” (65). Victor Lebrun also notices it. After seeing Edna at his mother’s house, he declares: “‘Some way she doesn’t seem like the same woman’” (61).

It is important to follow the “new” Edna as she accomplishes the task of bringing her outward life into compliance with demands of her inner self. From her actions, it becomes evident that Edna strives to reshape her life so she can live both as a sexual and independent being. The obstacles she encounters test her will to the limit, but never defeat her. Edna’s final choice, her suicide, gives testimony to her relentless pursuit of her fundamental goal--to be sexual and independent of male control.

Part of Edna’s re appraisal of customary behavior is the elimination of unessential activities from her life. She absents herself from her home on Tuesday--the designated reception day. Marital conflict ensues because Leonce regards Edna’s action as a serious breach of social etiquette. His words of censure attest to the depth of his commitment to social codes as they encapsulate all Edna has abandoned.

‘I should think you’d understand by this time that people don’t do such things; we’ve got to observe les convenances if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession. … It’s such
seeming trifles that we’ve got to take seriously; such things count’. (51-52)

Edna’s reaction to this statement and to Leonce’s criticism of the meal being consumed reiterates the existence of her awakened inner self. Her behavior and feelings differ substantially from those the “old” Edna expressed. In the past, she would have felt “unhappy” and lost her appetite.

… But that evening Edna finished her dinner alone, with forced deliberation. Her face was flushed and her eyes flamed with some inward fire that lighted them. (52)

Edna’s changed demeanor also accounts for her sharply worded rejection of Leonce’s acquisitive needs, which seem more one of self-interest than of concern for her future well-being, and her refusal to join him in a shopping excursion. This unwillingness to comply with her husband’s wishes echoes the incident at Grand Isle. The similarity extends beyond the simple assertion of Edna’s will. Her refusal to participate in the consumer game, the capitalistic system of exchange that undergirds bourgeois society, symbolically punctuates her resistance to objectification, to being a man’s possession. (13)

Edna has become aware that she is, in fact, “becoming herself [emphasis added] and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (57).

After her awakening, Edna is determined to live in a manner that satisfies her fundamental interests: she will pursue her craft and the fulfillment of her emotional and sexual needs. Edna launches into her painting after critically reviewing her previous paintings and assessing “their shortcomings and defects” (54). She produces art that meets the approval of Laidpore, a dealer. “[He] is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality” (79). Edna has “sold a good many” pictures through him and has acquired “ease and force and individuality” (79). Edna has “sold a good many” pictures through him and has acquired “ease and force and individuality” (79) in her ability to support herself through her work. To reinforce her image as a productive artist, Chopin describes later on Edna’s negotiations for some “Parisian studies” with another agent (103).

But Edna’s role of the solitary artist is inadequate. Robert, who, as a love object had initiated erotic impulses within her, has left for Mexico, and Edna’s desire for fusion, expressed as explicitly sexual fulfillment, throws her into the arms of Alcee Arobin. Edna’s association with Arobin centers around sexuality. At the time she meets Arobin, Edna’s husband is away on an extended business trip, and she has decided to leave their home and take a small place of her own. The decision and its implementation a short time later are critical. The act of leaving that residence which had defined her life with her family, and of taking a small place nearby with funds solely her own is her first resolute step in the direction of independence. She cannot stay in the big house, she tells Mademoiselle Reisz, because, “the house, the money that provides for it are not mine” (79). The emancipation she seeks—a freedom predominantly sexual—requires that she break all ties, relinquish all obligations, for, “whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself” (80). It is this attainment of principled independence—she is now her own woman—that potentiates the abandonment to Arobin and to lust, an indulgence which Edna never recognizes as love. Arobin appears as a boy-toy, a sexual object for Edna to enjoy. By placing Edna in the position of consumer-subject, a position usually reserved for males, Chopin subverts the order of male/female relationships. Chopin’s description of Edna’s feelings toward Arobin—“[He] was absolutely nothing to her” (80)—reinforces the point that Edna’s reaction to Arobin’s first kiss is strictly sexual.

Accepting a purely sexual liaison with Arobin and disregarding possible repercussions to her social standing, Edna proves her resolve to experience her sexuality as an integral part of her self. To show her determination, Chopin shows Edna leading rather than submitting at the time of kissing: “She clasped his head, holding his lips to hers” (83). Because Edna has taken charge of her sexuality, this “becomes the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (83). Clearly, Edna has learned to be an agent in the service of her destiny; she has learned to choose the circumstances of her existence. The deliberateness of her choices is conveyed with unfailing psychological conviction as she gains increasing control over her life: First, in her romantic involvement with Robert, then in her departure from her “husband’s house” and then, in taking as a lover a man whom she knows to be only a sophisticated womanizer, and, in fact, who is “absolutely nothing to her,” for the unalloyed bliss of surrender to physical passion. No less deliberate is her choosing her own death, that final, that ultimate act of free will, which as all elements of the novel have combined to suggest, is an integral part of Edna’s awakening.

Edna’s final act has been interpreted in diverse ways.
In fact, a considerable number of critics writing on The Awakening touch on and explore Edna’s suicide. Within this group, the majority of male and female writers who find Edna has positive character traits reject her final action. The approaches critics use to deal with Edna’s self-destruction vary in focus and depth. They can be grouped into three categories according to the vantage point from which Edna’s suicide is interpreted. One group of critics base their readings on scientific (psychological/psychiatric) theories; another on the source of Edna’s motivation (the children/Robert/literary convention); and the last, on the intentionality of the act itself.

Analyzing Edna and her suicide from a psychological or psychiatric perspective, some critics declare Edna’s voyage of self-discovery to be a regressive experience which culminates in her seeking to lose herself in the enfolding embrace of the sea, equivalent to the maternal womb (Wolff 449-71), to a child-like state with no constraints (Justus 120), to a fusion with nature, or to a return to the collective unconscious (Roscher 295-96). All of the explorations of Edna’s suicide based on a psychological theory yield negative assessments. Such a response reflects the predominant belief within the psycho-scientific community that suicide proves the presence of mental illness, and consequently, the occurrence of an irrational act.

Critics who focus on the source of the motivation for Edna’s self-destruction conclude that either the children or Robert underlie her decision. Because these two sources of motivation confirm traditional belief in the role of woman as wife and mother, critics espousing these views can understand Edna’s final act. Those designating the children as motivators point to Edna’s witnessing Adele at childbirth as the moment in which Edna fully realizes the strength of the biological ties that bind her destiny to that of her sons. According to these critics’ conjectures, since society pities the family of a suicide, but ostracizes that of a fallen woman, Edna believes that the sacrifice of her life would ensure that her children will not suffer for her sinful sexual behavior. Although the children are an integral part of Edna’s decision to commit suicide, making them the single causal factor is more from traditional critical presuppositions on the nature of women and suicide than from textual evidence.

In Western culture, a woman appears as a selfless object that, deriving validation from her offspring, willingly sacrifices everything for them. Within this cultural setting, suicide is for the most part a negative act which reveals the weakness of the perpetrator. Edna, however, cannot be judged using traditional standards. Although she admits the possibility of giving up “the unessential” such as “money” or even her life, Edna refuses to relinquish everything for her children. As shown in her declaration: “... I wouldn’t give myself” (48). Ostensibly, the critics’ reluctance to accept the validity of Edna’s declaration derives from a cultural denial of a woman’s ability to know and act on what she wants for herself. Evidence of this pervasive popular attitude, which denies women’s intentionality, abounds in Freud’s famous rhetorical question “What do women want?,” and its implied answer: they do not know. With regard to The Awakening, critic Andrew Delbanco in particular exemplifies this denial of female agency. His explanation of Edna’s suicide rests on his contention that, in the course of the novel, Edna exchanges the female for the male role. In effect, to this critic, Edna is not really a woman at the time of her self-destruction.

Another group of critics also finds the motivation for Edna’s suicide outside of her self, but assigns it to Robert rather than to the children. In this interpretation, traditional cultural presuppositions also prevail. Rather than viewing Edna as a being endowed with self-agency, these critics insist on portraying her as reactive to and dependent on the male for physical and emotional sustenance. As the children do, Robert also factors into Edna’s decision, but he does so more as an icon for Creole manhood than as an individual. The manner in which Robert frames a romantic relationship with a single woman of his class characterizes him as the epitome of Creole man. He can only conceive it in terms of marriage. For Edna, the love-marriage dyad which Robert offers her represents the social and cultural rejection of the independent and sexual woman and of the very identity she aspires to attain.

Critics who dismiss Edna’s suicide as escapist or unwarranted stem from the position that anything is better than death and that adapting to difficult circumstances is a sign of courage. Chopin presents Edna’s need to preserve her identity in terms which make Edna’s pursuit similar to what psychologist Patricia Pabst Battin labels as a “fundamental goal.” Edna’s final decision is justified, because, according to Margaret Battin, modifying one’s fundamental goal in order to adapt can result in life-long psychological trauma of such magnitude that suicide becomes a better option than adaptation. Besides, to refer to Edna’s suicide as...
impulsive, thoughtless, or unwilled contradicts both the textual and psychological information available. Before Edna commits suicide, she spends the night stretched on a sofa. “She did not sleep. She did not go to bed. ... She was still awake in the morning” (111). The impact of Robert’s departure and Adele’s delivery earlier in the evening suggests that Edna spent the night taking stock of her life, prioritizing and making her final decision. Previously, the voice of the narrator has been ever-present. The void of its silence during the night speaks more clearly than the actual words about Edna’s time being devoted to deep reflection. That no intervening events occur between this night and Edna’s appearance at the death site the following morning makes a strong case for her suicide being a premeditated rather than an impulsive act.

Edna’s acceptance of Victor’s room, her inquiry about future meals, and her request for towels prior to her final swim may appear to readers as proof of lack of premeditation. However, her suicide should come as no surprise to the astute reader. A careful reading of the text and knowledge of suicidal behavior prove her premeditative act. Edna shows little concern about where she will sleep—“Any corner will do” (112). In addition, although she expresses a desire to have fish for dinner, she follows this remark with: “don’t get anything extra,” and “don’t do anything extra if you haven’t” (112). These statements examined in retrospect denote a desire to avoid inconveniencing Victor over details that will not affect her. Her desire for towels is the only thing that cannot be rebutted by readers. But that still does not make Edna’s death accidental and unwilling. Psychological studies show the existence of a suicidal logic which allows for those planning to commit suicide to continue acting routinely, in Edna’s case towels to dry herself with, even though death renders the routine as senseless.

What is more important, throughout the novel, two sets of images are continually juxtaposed: that of two young lovers, arms entwined, oblivious to the rest of the world; and that of a lady in black, silent, alone, counting her beads. The first is that ideal of blissful union to which Edna aspires, but which she is never permitted to know; the second is the somber, unmistakable metaphor for the death which is to be her youthful destiny. These symbolic figures and, even more emphatically, the strategically placed lyrical hymns to the sea act as a kind of counterpoint to the novel’s events and to Edna’s developing consciousness.

The early scenes of The Awakening have an island setting: the sea is simply, ineluctably, there. However, it soon carries increasingly romantic connotations; it is the source of life and that to which we are returned; it is that unique region where no one can know the limitlessness of the universe, and the finiteness and utter aloneness of the self. It is precisely this knowledge which comes to Edna when she first awakens in the sea, “reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself,” and experiencing “an encounter with death and a flash of terror” (29). As the novel progresses, the voice of the sea becomes insistent, intrusive, beckoning her with a lover’s promise of wholeness, of completeness, of lasting fulfillment. The poetic refrain first heard early in the novel is heard again just before her final swim: “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude... The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (15).

As she walks along the beach toward the water, she understands clearly, for the first time, what she meant when she had told Adele that she would give her life for her children, but not herself. She realizes, too, that there is, literally, nowhere for her to go. She cannot live as a perpetual Sybarite, bringing shame and disgrace upon her children, and she is prepared for nothing else.(19)

Edna’s awakening is to the bitter paradox of her newfound freedom: her quest for a selfhood, separate, inviolate, only serves to illuminate those same limitations which had defined her previous existence. She witnesses, during her last days, the “scene of torture” at Adele’s delivery, and hears Adele’s plaintive injunction to her, “Remember the children!” (109). She discovers that Robert, now returned, wishes to claim her as his own and to ask her husband to free her, and he is shocked and comprehending when she tells him, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose’” (107). She realizes that Arobin would be only the first in a succession of lovers: “Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else” (113). And so, she has been assured once again of the only identities available to her—mother—woman, wife, mistress—each derived from and anchored to her biological function.

Edna is at last reconciled to the only liberation possible if she is to preserve her newly awakened being. Having returned to that locus of spiritual birth, the Gulf
Waters at Grand Isle, she removes her clothing—those last vestiges of social identity—and for “the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her” (113). This final surrender to the sensuousness of the phenomenal world is “strange and awful and delicious,” and makes her feel like “some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (113). Swimming out into the vast expanse, she escapes those who would “drag her down into the soul’s slavery,” and finds freedom from those who “would never understand” (113). Her suicide affirms her right to exit as body/intellect, spirit/flesh and becomes the mark of her victory, for it is carried out to preserve her fundamental interest: the need to be sexually fulfilled as well as spiritually and intellectually independent.

The significance of Edna’s death lies partly in its being an existentially determined choice: “The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant, was hers” (46). In this sense, it is like so much else about The Awakening—remarkably prophetic. But more important than the novel’s avant-garde philosophy is the daring and thoroughly convincing portrayal it brings to literature of a woman, who, recognizing the impossibility of being an individual apart from the rigid, gender-determined roles society has constrained her to adopt, chooses to die rather than conform, to sacrifice “life” in the insistence on and celebration of “self.” Edna’s death constitutes the ultimate proof of her indomitable will to live as an adult female. Through her final actions, she joins the ranks of heroes who, assessing the options open to them, die rather than compromise their ideals. An identity discovered, an attempt made to establish it, and a willingness to die instead of adapting it to traditional molds, bear witness to heroic courage.

NOTES


(2) Mary E. Papke, in “Chopin’s Stories of Awakening,” Approaches to Teaching The Awakening, ed. Bernard Koloski (New York: MLA of America, 1988) studies the elements that make the “novel the masterpiece we deem it to be” (73).


(5) Seyersted makes a passing reference to the similarity between Edna’s rebellion and those of Mme de Stael’s and George Sand’s (145).

(6) Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in “Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,” Southern Studies 18 (1979): 261-90, characterizes Edna’s journey as regressive; Susan J. Rosowski, in “The Novel of Awakening,” Genre 12.3 (Fall 1979): 313-32, argues that the genre is mainly designed to accommodate young males who grow into maturity whereas Edna is a grown woman when the novel begins and she can only awaken to limitations; and in “The Awakening as a Prototype of the Novel of Awakening,” Approaches to Teaching The Awakening,
ed. Bernard Koloski 26-33, Rosowski further differentiates Edna’s situation from that of the Bildungsroman protagonist in stating that her suicide “serves as a powerful reminder that she has not acquired an ‘art of living’” (27), something essential pertaining to this genre.

(7) Taylor states that the novel’s “focus on marriage, its use of the slavery correlative, and the suggestive use of topographical and historical materials, mediated through European intertextual readings, all combine to produce a feminist regionalist work that nonetheless lapses into unexamined racism” (307).

(8) In Parallel Lives. Five Victorian Marriages (New York: Knopf, 1983), Phyllis Rose touches on the courtships preceding marriages to show they were unions between almost virtual strangers who often discovered too late their incompatibility.

(9) Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct (New York: Knopf, 1985) 197-216; and Phyllis Chesler in Women and Madness (New York: Avon, 1972). Taylor, referring in particular to the novel, states that “in Creole eyes, women who flout the codes governing female behavior are dangerous or mad” (305).


(11) In a recent and interesting essay, Mary Biggs examines Chopin’s complex variations on traditional assumptions about gender and especially about sexuality, claiming that Robert is defined by homosexual characteristics. See Mary Biggs, “‘Si tu savais’: The Gay/Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,” Women’s Studies 33 (2004): 145-181.


(15) See the following critics: Chametzky 221; Patricia Hopkins Lattin, “Childbirth and Motherhood in The Awakening and in ‘Athenais’,” Approaches to Teaching The Awakening, ed. Bernard Koloski 43; Peggy Skaggs, “The Awakening’s Relationship with American Regionalism, Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism,” Approaches to Teaching The Awakening 84; and Thornton 66.

(16) According to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, in the Preface, of Freedom on Women. A Reader (New York: Norton, 1990) xi, Freud asked this question to his friend Marie Bonaparte after World War 1, when feminist critics “objected to what they perceived as a denigration of women in psychoanalytic theory.” Evidence that women are not taken seriously abound in medical matters. For example, women’s complaints of chest pains are often dismissed, a practice that puts women’s health at greater risk than men’s. The same holds true in the case of terminally-ill women. Their requests to their physicians that they refrain from using life support systems on them go unheeded (The Dallas Morning News, “Sexual Bias Traced in Right-To-Die Cases,” December 20, 1990: A17).

(17) Delbanco (99-105) observes this phenomenon in Edna’s abandoning the use of female language, identified as “language of impulse,” for male language which is based on power. As the novel progresses, Delbanco asserts that the theme of a “woman passing for a man” predominates so that “Edna becomes what once she fled.”


(19) Ziff notes in The American 1890s that the novel’s rejection of the family as the automatic equivalent of female bliss raises the question of what a woman was to do with the new freedom toward which she struggled. It is interesting to recall that earlier, Ibsen’s Nora, engaged in much the same struggle, chose only to go through and then close the door. Chopin’s darker vision may well reflect the additional difficulty of being a woman in Puritanical America.
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