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Liminality, Personal Fulfillment, and Societal Expectations of Women in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening* tells the complicated story of a woman who finds herself unable to adhere to Victorian society's strict and unfulfilling gender roles and expectations. The protagonist of the novel, Edna Pontellier, undergoes a transformative process of awakening and self-awareness throughout the course of the novel, but her discovery of self is not one of success, as she realizes that there is no space for an independent and awakened woman within the realms of motherhood, marriage and society's accepted patriarchal ideals of female existence in the early twentieth century. Chopin presents Edna's liminality by constantly contrasting her with two other female characters; one represents the ideal Victorian woman, while the other represents the independent woman who lives free from society's expectations. Edna occupies a space in between the extremes demonstrated by these two women. What each woman lacks is what Edna exemplifies: the desire to be independent and human at the same time, to give herself to another while maintaining autonomy. Although Edna does achieve this liminal position, her success is fleeting, and she, like Chopin, falls victim to the limiting standards placed upon women by Victorian society. Before publishing *The Awakening,* Chopin was known as a "local color" writer and the time she spent living in Louisiana gave her rich material from which to draw. Her popularity as an author was cut short however, as critical reception of *The Awakening* was extremely negative, leading Chopin's publishers to cancel the publication of her upcoming work and essentially end her writing career (Green 10). Chopin's body of work, much like the body of a woman, was harshly and unfairly criticized once it stepped outside the realms of the patriarchal constructs upheld in the American South.

In order to fully understand the controversy surrounding *The Awakening* and its content, it seems necessary to know about Chopin's own life, as many of the novel's themes are quite relevant to her personal experiences as a Victorian woman who didn't quite adhere to the conventional female expectations of society. Following the tragic death of Chopin's father in a train crash in 1855, her mother and grandmother were left with a large fortune and the unusual opportunity to raise their family in a household dominated by independent women (Toth 9-10). Kate was well educated and had a keen interest in music, literature, and storytelling from a young age. She grew up hearing stories of her family's history, all of which included exceptionally strong and self-motivated women who seemed to exist outside of the typical domestic sphere which most women were limited to during the 18th and 19th centuries. Victoire Charleville, Kate's great-grandmother told Kate many stories of their family's heritage, who were among the first French settlers in Louisiana, dating back to the early 1700s. She explained to Kate the very unusual history of her own mother, Kate's great-, great- grandmother, Victoria Verdon, who made a living for herself as an independent business woman, selling goods to other women, and owning a line of keelboats which traveled between St. Louis and New Orleans (Seyersted 11-13).

Tales of female independence did not keep Chopin from marriage however, and in 1870, at the age of twenty, she married Oscar Chopin, a cotton broker from rural Louisiana with whom she had six children. Oscar, who was raised by his mother, was not a typical man of the Victorian

era. Friends of the couple report that he truly admired Kate for her individuality and quirkiness, never attempting to force her into the role of a mother or a wife, instead allowing her to continue to be a creative individual who thrived outside of society's conventions (Green 5-6). Chopin's diary suggests that she spent her time involved in activities which would typically be thought of as "unfeminine," drinking, smoking and attending events with her husband (Seyersted 35-36). In 1879, Oscar's business failed, and the couple moved to his family's lands in rural Cloutierville, Louisiana, with their five sons and a daughter on the way. Oscar opened a general store but died of malaria in December of 1882, leaving Kate and her six children debt-ridden and alone. Kate took over Oscar's business and brought the family out of debt but was generally disliked and seen as an outsider by her community in rural Louisiana; she eventually moved back to St. Louis to live with her mother (Green 6-7).

There is speculation that her decision to move back to her hometown had to do with a married man named Albert Sampite, who Kate began to see after Oscar's death. An alcoholic with a reputation for being charming and flirtatious while sober, Sampite was known to be abusive and violent while drinking. Unaccustomed to violent men and patriarchal households, Kate refused to tolerate such behavior that many women had grown to expect, and she left Louisiana in 1884 (Green 6-7). It is suspected by contemporary scholars that many of Chopin's male characters are greatly inspired by her affair, particularly Edna Pontellier's two lovers in *The Awakening,* whose names appear to be taken directly from Albert Sampite's name, as observed by Emily Toth. Toth writes, "When Kate Chopin drew on her own experiences for *The Awakening,* she did not thoroughly disguise them: *The Awakening* records her own dilemmas and her own choices" (Toth 333). Toth notes that Chopin gives each of Edna's lovers part of Albert

Sampite's name: AL-cée and Ro-BERT, "Her own bittersweet romance with another man had taught her about passion and pain and disillusionment-and had set her on the path to becoming a published author. Kate did not write her autobiography in *The Awakening,* but she drew on and reshaped what she had learned in forty-eight years" (Toth 330). Chopin's own experiences as a woman in the late nineteenth century add an element of truth and honesty to her writing.

After moving back to St. Louis, Kate began to focus on and develop her career as a writer. She first attempted writing local color stories about Missouri but found that the subject of Louisiana was much more appealing to readers, as it presented a much more exotic setting. Much of what Kate wrote was shaped by her own memories and influenced by who she had known in her lifetime and events which she had experienced. Although Kate proudly cultivated an image of being nonchalant about her writing, claiming that she did not have a writing room and simply scribbled down stories while taking care of her children, she actually cared very much about her work and its reception from readers (Green 8). Kate's short stories were quite popular, and many were featured in the first issues of *Vogue Magazine*, in the *Century* and in the *Atlantic* (Toth 1-3).

Chopin's stories of death, romance, miscegenation, racism, violence, family loyalty and the South were especially well-received by female readers, who felt that the author created honest and truthful characters whom they could relate to for their realistic portrayal and believable experiences. Her 1894 collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, was quite successful and gained more national attention than anything she had written previously, including her 1890 novel *At Fault.* As previously noted, Chopin's popularity ended abruptly with the publication of *The Awakening* in 1899. Both male and female audiences found the novel to be distasteful and morbid, as the heroine of the novel did not adhere to the rules within the patriarchal confines of

her gender (Green 10). One critic wrote: “One cannot refrain from regret that so beautiful a style and so much refinement of taste have been spent by Miss Chopin on an essentially vulgar story...The awakening itself is tragic, as might have been anticipated, and the waters of the gulf close appropriately over one who has drifted from all right moorings, and has not the grace to repent.” Deeply affected by the rejection of her profoundly personal novel, Chopin’s literary career dwindled to a close and her health underwent a quick decline, resulting in her death four years later in 1904.

Although the feedback on her novel was not entirely negative, and many critics who criticized the content of the book also praised her simplistic and beautiful writing style, Chopin could not be uplifted by the few positive reviews or the support of her friends. Per Seyersted, notes that “as the reviews went from bad to worse, she became stunned and bewildered, and even broken-hearted, at the reaction to *The Awakening”* (Seyersted 178). Seyersted asserts that Chopin was not easily put down, as “her great sense of humor and the fact that she felt eminently socially secure, made her a master of herself against all prejudice” (Seyersted 178).

However strong she was, Chopin was not immune to the criticisms she encountered after the publication of *The Awakening.* Seyersted writes that*“*Perhaps the chief reason was that she was deeply committed to her novel and now had to realize that she could never write as she wanted to... She had poured herself- thoughts and feelings- into the novel with utmost honesty” (Seyersted 178). Chopin’s body of work and its critical reception serve as evidence to the topics which she wrote about in *The Awakening.* Much like the heroine of her condemned novel, Chopin was unable to sustain an existence outside the realms of recognized Victorian normalcy. The rejection of her novel and the loss of confidence which followed resulted in Chopin’s

downfall, just as Edna Pontellier's loss of place and *raison d'être* led her to her demise at the end of *The Awakening.* The struggles faced by both Chopin and her heroine demonstrate the impossibility of being "awakened" as a woman in a society that denounces independent women. Chopin illustrates through Edna the unstable, liminal space which a woman occupies if she chooses to renounce societal expectations and instead focus on her own growth.

Throughout *The Awakening*, readers are experiencing, through Edna Pontellier's eyes, what life is like for an unfulfilled woman, a woman weary of the mundanity of life as a Victorian mother and wife. Twenty-eight-year-old Edna is married to Léonce Pontellier, a successful businessman twelve years her elder who provides a comfortable life for his wife and their two young sons. Though Léonce is kind and cares for Edna, the narrator clearly depicts their forced interactions and readers understand that their marriage is one without love, functioning more as a business relationship than one of romance. The narrator even explains that he views his wife "as one looks at a valuable piece of property" (522). At the beginning of the novel, the couple is spending their summer at Grand Isle, a beautiful environment where Edna finds herself feeling just as unfulfilled and full of ennui as she would back home in New Orleans.

Edna's deep-rooted discontent is evidenced through a certain angst and sadness which she herself cannot understand. "She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole body with a vague anguish" (527). Edna's depression comes from a lack of fulfillment, as she is trapped in a routine as a mother and wife to which there is seemingly no escape. It is at this point in the novel that readers are told that Edna does not conform to the traditional trope of a Victorian "mother-

woman." She loves her children and obeys her husband, yet her life does not revolve around them, as would be expected of her. The narrator explains: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman... [mother-women] were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it their holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (529). Because Edna is a mother but does not fit into this role as a mother-woman in an environment where "mother-women seemed to prevail," she is immediately established as being "other," as she doesn't emulate the women around her who live for nothing but their motherhood and take pleasure in wifely responsibilities (529).

In addition to being contrasted against the other women on Grand Isle, Edna is also othered by her background as a sheltered, white Protestant from Kentucky, while everyone else on Grand Isle, including her husband, is a Catholic Creole. "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles; never before had she been thrown so intimately among them. They all knew each other and felt like one large family, among whom existed the most amicable relations" (530). It seems as though Edna's initial disconnection from her surroundings and the other characters on Grand Isle is ultimately what leads her to recognize and comprehend her unfulfillment, pushing her towards her path of self-discovery and change.

Edna has been removed from the atmosphere of her mundane domestic sphere in New Orleans and placed in a setting which challenges her to come out of her shell and become open to new ways of thinking and interacting. Léonce often retreats from Grand Isle for work, leaving Edna and the children alone for days at a time. During his absence, Edna spends time with the other characters on the island, mainly a perfect mother-woman named Adèle Ratignolle, and the

son of Grand Isle's owner, Robert Lebrun, who takes a keen interest in spending time with Edna. As Seyersted points out, the distance between Léonce and Edna during the summer at Grand Isle allows Edna to be vulnerable and easily influenced by her surroundings and her new friends, leading to a change in her character. Seyersted observes that "the new candor is like a breath of freedom, and [Edna] is suddenly beginning to make her own acquaintance" (Seyersted 135). It is Edna's vulnerability which lends itself to her growing sense of self-awareness and discovery. "That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve which had always enveloped her" (535). The environment of Grand Isle and the characters who reside there with Edna all play extremely important roles in her process of awakening. Seyersted observes that "the other figures and the setting are worked out only to the degree they can support or contrast her development" (Seyersted 150). In order to understand Edna Pontellier's character and journey, it is necessary to examine each of the characters who provide her with new experiences and understandings, fuel her desires, and lead her to realizations about the world around her and the ways in which society constrains her.

Perhaps the most important character in Edna's awakening is Adèle Ratignolle, the beautiful Creole woman who embodies the role of the mother-woman in every aspect. Seyersted remarks that "The Creole and undoubtedly Catholic Adèle is a striking illustration of the patriarchal ideal of the submissive female who writes her history only through her family" (Seyersted). Chopin's descriptions of Adèle paint the woman as a "faultless and sensuous Madonna," (531-32) and Peggy Skaggs observes that "Adèle's body appears to have been designed to lure men, to incubate babies, and to nurture offspring" (Skaggs 90). To emphasize

this innate motherly instinct possessed by Adèle but not Edna, Chopin describes the differences in the body types of the two women. While Adèle possesses “the more feminine and matronly figure,” Edna is described as “long, clean, and symmetrical,” a “noble beauty” which is not obvious at first glance and which makes her “different from the crowd” (536). She is described as more “handsome than beautiful,” (524) and Joyce Dyer notices that “what seems most important about Edna’s face is that it hints at intelligence and depth...the language that describes her, like the woman herself, is necessarily more complex and abstract” (Dyer 40).

In contrast, Chopin writes about Adèle, “[She was] the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm... there was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms, her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent” (529). While Adèle’s sole purpose on earth would appear to be mothering children, Edna seems to occupy a different space, as Chopin illustrates that the women are physically made quite differently. Edna’s growing friendship with Adèle Ratignolle allows her to realize how different her own life is from that of the quintessential mother-woman, as she is constantly reminded that she does not possess Adèle’s inherent maternal nature.

Not only is Adèle the ideal Victorian mother, but she is also the embodiment of the perfect wife. The narrator explains their seemingly ideal companionship as such: “The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever a fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was certainly in their union” (549). Skaggs notes that “The astute reader may sense that this perfect union results more from the extinction of Adèle’s individuality than from the fusion of their two identities. But her husband is thoughtful, considerate, kind, and generous; and Adèle seems perfectly happy” (Skaggs 91). A particularly

revealing indicator of Edna's blossoming individuality is the fact that she does not envy the life which most Victorian women would have been expected to desire. In observing the ideal marriage of the Ratignolles, Edna feels pity for her friend rather than jealousy. Chopin writes, "The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but a kind of appalling and hopeless ennui" (585). While her own marriage is clearly lacking romantic love, Edna proves that she needs and desires more than a life of domesticity. Per Seyersted observes that "[Adele] is thus a perfect foil for Mrs. Pontellier as she becomes aware of her craving for independence and her sensuous nature" (Seyersted 141). Though Edna and Adèle are close friends, Edna's observations of Adèle further her own feelings of discontent, and lead Edna to understand that she cannot be satisfied by a life restricted to the domestic sphere.

The contrast between the two women continues throughout the novel through various conversations and actions, furthering Edna's realization that comfort and domesticity alone cannot satisfy her. Although Edna loves her children, she does not allow them to dominate her life, and they spend much of their time playing independently and being taken care of by servants. Léonce is often frustrated with his wife's detachment from her children: "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after her children, who's on Earth was it?" (526). Edna struggles to explain her feelings toward her children to Adèle Ratignolle, saying that she would "never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone," (575) but Adèle cannot begin to comprehend what her friend is saying. Edna states, "I would give up my money, I would give up my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I

am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me" (575). In passages like this one, Chopin urges readers to consider that it is not Edna who is at fault for being unsuccessful as a mother, but Victorian society which is to blame, as it demands that nearly all young women become mothers, before they are allowed a chance to explore independent interests and emotions.

Had Edna been permitted the opportunity to grow and develop as an individual, she most likely would have determined that she did not want a traditional Victorian life in which she is expected to be nothing more than a wife and mother. Edna is coming to terms with the fact that her existence up until this point has been based solely on the lives of her family, causing her to fall into patterns of self-neglect which have led to her feeling unfulfilled. Edna clearly requires more stimulation than she has been allowed in her life and is now discovering the inspiration to explore her own interests and move further from those of her family.

It is no coincidence that the novel takes place over the course of nine months, in which Adele is pregnant with her fourth child and Edna is becoming awakened to her true self. Edna experiences her own sort of gestation period in which she undergoes rapid change and growth as an individual, constantly moving further away from family and traditional expectations, and solidifying the innate difference between the two women as mothers. Not only is Adèle pregnant throughout the entirety of the novel, but she is also often unable to talk about anything other than her "condition," making her the physical embodiment of motherhood. Surprisingly, Adèle's experience with childbirth is one of intense fear and pain, leading the reader, and perhaps Edna, to wonder why she would willingly undergo such torture repeatedly. Peggy Skaggs criticizes Adè le, making the point that the woman is "apparently unable to perceive herself as an individual

human being, possessing no sense of herself beyond her role of wife and mother," rendering her unable to exist for any reason other than for her family. (Skaggs 94) Skaggs believes that "a healthy sense of her own worth would surely lead her to object to this biennial suffering; but having tied her entire existence to being the complete "mother-woman" she must continue to conceive and bear children" (Skaggs 94). In contrast, Edna does not feel sympathy for her friend during her painful labor, which Adèle has insisted on her being present for, but rather feels uneasy and filled with dread at the thought of childbirth.

Edna thinks back to her own experiences with birth as "unreal and half-remembered" (648). Edna recalls "awakening to find a new little life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go" (648). Chopin's language in this scene perfectly illustrates the difference in the sentiments of the two women on motherhood. Adè le undoubtedly believes that the entire world, and the entirety of her existence, revolves around the baby she has just delivered, while Edna thinks of her own experience with motherhood as being distant and fairly unimportant in the grand scheme of life. It also cannot be ignored that Edna's suicide directly follows Adèle's labor, in a symbolic fusing of life and death that seems to show Edna's final rejection to comply with the role which society has thrust upon her. However, before analyzing Edna's death, it is important to understand how her relationships with the other characters in the novel also moved her forward in her awakening, and ultimately to her suicide.

After Adèle Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz is the most important character in Edna's process of awakening. If Adèle is the embodiment of all things beautiful and motherly, representing the ideal Victorian woman, Mademoiselle Reisz is the opposite; she is a lonely and unpleasant woman who has dedicated her life to mastering the piano. Mademoiselle Reisz has

never married, has no children, and is generally disliked by everyone she encounters. Edna becomes her closest acquaintance, though even she finds Mademoiselle Reisz to be disagreeable and strange, saying to her, "I don't know whether I like you or not" (592). However, the pianist seems to care little about what others may think of her. Mademoiselle Reisz functions in the novel to demonstrate what it would look like to be an independent woman in Victorian society: she is the antithesis of Adele and yet Edna finds her an unattractive role-model. Edna admires Mademoiselle Reisz for her artistic ability and independence, yet Edna finds her lifestyle too extreme. Instead, Edna longs for an existence somewhere in between the sphere of complete domesticity and complete isolation. In portraying Mademoiselle Reisz as an artist, Chopin takes great lengths to describe negatively the lifestyle which the pianist leads, suggesting that it is certainly possible to be a woman who lives outside of society's accepted patriarchal norms, but it is an unpleasant existence at best, and leaves much to be desired. Descriptions of Mademoiselle Reisz allude to the idea that a woman would have to be completely unfeminine, denouncing all womanly qualities in order to live as Mademoiselle Reisz has chosen to live.

Whereas Adèle is described as beautiful and voluptuous, the narrator explains that Mademoiselle Reisz 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" (548). Her physical appearance is just as undesirable as her harsh nature, as she is described as "a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her head" (548-49). Even when Mademoiselle Reisz plays the piano, which would appear to be her only truly redeemable quality, she is described in a

grotesque manner, as “the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity” (594).When Edna attempts to find Mademoiselle Reisz back in New Orleans, she asks the proprietor of the neighborhood grocery store if he knows the woman and he responds that he knows her much better than he would like to and that he “did not want to know her at all,” as she was “the most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street. He thanked heaven she had left the neighborhood, and was equally thankful that he did not know where she had gone” (588). Chopin constantly reiterates the fact that Mademoiselle Reisz is disliked by all, however, Edna finds herself seeking the woman’s company as she is greatly moved by the artist’s musical ability and she finds her life of freedom fascinating.

Mademoiselle Reisz inspires Edna artistically and allows her to see a woman in a role which is vastly different from her own. Mademoiselle Reisz, however, does not represent a person to be envied, and even though she lives outside of society’s expectations, Chopin makes it clear that her uncommon lifestyle comes at a high cost. Peggy Skaggs observes that “Mademoiselle Reisz’s loneliness makes starkly clear that an adequate life cannot be built altogether upon autonomy and art”, and that the pianist has “settled more or less miserably for a partial existence as an artist” (Skaggs 96, 88). When Mademoiselle Reisz receives letters from Robert Lebrun confessing his love for Edna, she invites Edna over to her apartment and plays love songs on the piano while Edna reads the letters and reacts with passionate emotion. Skaggs writes that Mademoiselle Reisz is resorting to “vicarious satisfaction through Edna’s intense emotional reactions,” and that “only through her music can Mademoiselle Reisz express herself or communicate with people” (Skaggs 95).

When Edna speaks about the musician to Alcée robin, he responds, “I’ve heard she’s partially demented” (617). Though Edna replies in defense of the pianist, calling her “wonderfully sane,” Arobin’s comment proves how society as a whole might view a woman like Mademoiselle Reisz, making biased assumptions and speaking with prejudice. I feel that Mademoiselle Reisz’s function in the novel is to demonstrate how extreme and unusual it would be for a woman to step so far out of bounds from what society deems acceptable. Though she has maintained some degree of separation from the patriarchy, and is financially independent, she lives a life which is void of love and meaningful, lasting relationships. Mademoiselle Reisz lives life which does not appeal to Edna, as she requires the social and romantic stimulation which human relationships provide.

Though Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz’s friendship may exist in strange terms, the most important purpose which the pianist has in the novel is her impact on Edna artistically. She explains to Edna what it means to be a true artist and reveals that as a woman, an existence as an artist is one of bravery and disregard for the opinions of others. When Edna first visits the pianist in New Orleans, Edna tells her about her new fondness for painting, exclaiming, “I am becoming an artist! Think of it!” Mademoiselle Reisz replies skeptically and explains to Edna that to be an artist requires natural ability and a certain temperament, and “to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul...the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 594). Joyce Dyer observes that Mademoiselle Reisz’s speech about the “courageous soul” may be read as a kind of cautionary statement to the enthusiastic Edna. Joyce writes that “a major component of artistic temperament, as Mademoiselle Reisz demonstrates, is the ability to live alone. Mademoiselle Reisz, unlike Edna, reserves the status of “beloved” for her piano, her “beloved” instrument.

Solitude and art are inseparable companions" (Dyer 93-94). Edna could not occupy or thrive in an environment of artistic isolation, as she has proved that she requires human relationship in order to feel fulfilled and happy.

Although Mademoiselle Reisz seems to admire Edna, at least to some degree, she also seems to see in Edna a certain naivety which she feels might cause the young woman harm in the future. She warns Edna again when she becomes ecstatic with the news that Robert Lebrun is returning from New Orleans from his stay in Mexico. The musician asks Edna if her wings are strong and says, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wing. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back down to Earth" (617). Mademoiselle Reisz appears to warn Edna not to step out of bounds of society too ambitiously or too quickly, as defeat comes easier than success in such a situation, and even success may not be everything that Edna dreams that it will be. However, this does not keep Edna from her artistic explorations, which are a crucial part of her journey to being fully awakened to her true self.

At the beginning of the novel, Edna enjoys sketching and painting, but she thinks of it as "dabbling," in an "unprofessional way," though she does realize that she finds in her dabbling a "satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her" (532). Once Edna is back in New Orleans, her attitude about her painting changes and she begins taking it more seriously, spending more time on her art and allowing her priorities to shift. Edna transforms the upstairs atelier into her painting studio, which is significant, as it is separate from the rest of the home. Léonce becomes frustrated with Edna for spending more time in the atelier, removed from her domestic duties, saying that her time would be "better employed contriving for the comfort of her

family" (586). When Edna responds simply that she "feels like painting," Leonce angrily replies, "Then in God's name paint! But don't let the family go to the devil. There's Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn't let everything else go to chaos" (586). Joyce Dyer addresses the differences in Adèle's musical hobbies and Edna's need to paint, writing that "Madame Ratignolle plays the piano to beautify her home and enrich the lives of her family...keeping up her music on account of her children" (Dyer 86). She notes that Adèle's piano "resides in the central living area of her home," while Edna's art "does not inhabit the domestic center. Family and servants who pose for her must make a trip to her private space" (Dyer 87). This is important for Edna because it shows her moving away from what is expected of her and what she has never questioned in the past. It also relates to Chopin's comment that she did not have a writing room, and simply jotted down ideas while caring for her children, revealing that Chopin did not have a separation between her work and domestic duty, something which she seems to have found necessary.

Leonce's lack of understanding for Edna's artistic outlet may be read as society's views on women and where they belong. Dyer concludes that Léonce "fails to recognize the irony of having, and needing, his own private retreat from domestic activity and demands while scolding his wife for needing hers" (Dyer 87). As Edna becomes more of an individual, she begins to reject her husband and society, focusing on her own needs and desires and "resolving never to take another step backward" (586). Léonce, trapped in his patriarchal ways of thinking, feels that his wife is "growing a little unbalanced mentally," as he could see that she was "not herself." Chopin contrasts his thinking that she is "not herself," by following with the ironic statement that Léonce could not see that "she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self

which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (586-87). Léonce represents the challenges faced by a Victorian woman who desired anything other than the lifestyle which was typically expected of her. To require stimulation outside of the domestic sphere would cause others to question a woman's mental state, even though a man could seek entertainment in most any way he pleased without anyone thinking twice about it.

While Léonce's deep devotion to patriarchal views drive his wife further away from him, it is natural that Edna begins seeking attention from other men, as her husband clearly cannot understand her needs and her growing resentment towards him is inevitable. Edna's sexual awakening and desire for romance begins with Robert Lebrun, during the summer at Grand Isle. Robert becomes fond of Edna, following her around, and keeping her company while her husband is away. Their interaction begins innocently enough, but Roberts role in Edna's growing self-awareness is substantial, and his presence during her crucial moments of awakening lead her to believe that she has fallen in love with the young man.

One of these crucial moments in Edna's awakening occurs the night that she finally learns to swim after countless failed attempts and lessons from Robert and the other guests on the island. Her success inspires her, as Chopin writes, "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul… She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (551). Edna tells Robert after returning to the shore, "A thousand emotions had swept through me tonight. I don't comprehend half of them" (553). This night is extremely important because while Edna is swimming alone, she looks back towards the shore and becomes overwhelmed by how far she has travelled, and "a quick vision of death smote her soul" (552). In this scene Chopin

foreshadows Edna's actual death in the ocean at the end of the novel, alluding to the fact that this moment is the beginning of the end for Edna, spurring her journey which takes her further as a person than she ever imagined going, and bringing her closer to her demise at the same time.

After her swim, Edna leaves the beach to return home, followed closely by Robert, who decided to wait with her on the porch, keeping her company until her husband returns from the beach. Although Edna has been spending a significant amount of time with Robert, and has become hyper aware of his presence, it is during this time alone with him that Edna first realizes that she has romantic feelings for Robert. Chopin writes, "No multitude of of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (555). Their relationship remains fairly innocent, though the two continue to spend time together and their feelings for each other continue to grow, without any promise of a future together. Dyer writes that "we are often drawn to the romance of Edna and Robert, perhaps wanting so much to believe it ourselves….but Chopin, through symbol and irony, warns us to be cautious" (Dyer 82). Dyer explains that Chopin uses language which sets up the fact that Robert and Edna's relationship cannot ever be lasting, and the imagery of the two together alludes to impossibility of their romance, as the images offer "no permanent support, only the temporary brace of dependency" (83). Edna and Robert continue to grow closer to one another until he announces suddenly that he is travelling to Mexico for an indefinite period of time.

It is only after Robert departs that Edna realizes the magnitude of her feelings and acknowledges the sexual desire which she feels for him but has ignored up until this point. After Robert tells her goodbye, she "bit her handkerchief convulsively, striving to hold back and hide, even from herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotion which was troubling

her… for the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a young woman" (572). With Robert in Mexico and the Pontelliers back home in New Orleans, Edna becomes obsessed with the romantic emotions which she has cultivated for Robert and her passion for him continues to grow in his absence, pushing her further and further from her commitment to her husband and children, and closer to her liminal state. The natural feelings and emotions which Edna develops for Robert enable her to be more human than Mademoiselle Reisz or Adèle could ever be, as neither of their states-of-being allows room for this type of response.

In New Orleans, Edna seems different not only to the people who know her, but to herself as well, as she is able to recognize and understand her own changes in perspective. Edna has the "conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded," and in Robert's absence, she feels the great emptiness of her existence (573). The narrator explains, "Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything. The conditions of her life were in no way changed, but her whole existence was dull, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing" (573). Edna becomes angry at her husband and children for the hopelessness which she feels in her situation. In a desperate attempt to feel emotion and fight the feeling of being imprisoned, she flings her wedding ring onto the floor of her bedroom and stomps on it. When this action does nothing to satisfy her, she "seize[s] a vase from the table and [flings] it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The clash and clatter were what she wanted to hear" (581). The overwhelming emptiness which Edna feels leads her to becomes increasingly rebellious and inspired to make her own choices.

It is during this initial time of loneliness and realization that Edna becomes most aware of what she wants and what is important to her. In New Orleans, Edna's growth goes from gradual to drastic, as she begins acting for herself and travelling further down a path of personal fulfilment and self-exploration, disregarding the seemingly trivial duties and practices which once ruled her life. She begins focusing more on her intuition and personal interest. Skaggs writes that Edna "realizes that what she wants is not to feel the pride of ownership herself but to escape Léonce's ownership, to leave behind forever her place among his possessions" (Skaggs 105). This attitude becomes especially prevalent when Léonce leaves New Orleans to stay in New York for the rest of the summer.

Before Léonce leaves, Edna becomes very affectionate towards him, taking care to pack all of his things carefully and acting as "Madame Ratignolle would have done under similar circumstances" (603), even crying as he leaves, and worrying that she will grow lonely in his absence. However, as soon as Léonce has departed, Edna feels a "radiant peace settle upon her," and as her children have been taken to stay with Léonce's parents, she finds herself completely alone for the first time and "she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief" as "a feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her" (604). Chopin gives readers a strong sense that Edna's isolation from her family is necessary and natural; it is clear that she is finally awarded some relief from her burdensome routines.

In Léonce and her children's absence, Edna begins an affair with a young man named Alcée Arobin, who is charming and sweet but known for his scandalous relationships with women. In Edna's passionate longing for Robert, Alcée appears to fill a void for her, serving as a pleasant stand-in for Robert though unable to truly satisfy Edna as he can only fulfill a sexual

desire for Edna, but not a romantic one. When Edna begins spending time with Alcée, she finds comfort in his company, and once they spend time together, he “drew all her awakening sensuousness,” and his nature appealed to “an animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (609, 611). One night after spending time with Alcée, the young man kisses her hand and departs, leaving Edna feeling as though she has been engaged in an act of infidelity, however, Edna was not thinking of Léonce, but rather “she was thinking of Robert Lebrun. Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse” (610). Edna is beginning to realize that the feelings that she has for Robert far surpass any admiration that she has ever had for Léonce, and Alcée is simply filling the void created by Robert’s absence with physical contact. Edna’s growing awareness and understanding of her emotions and sexual desires allows her to become a more insightful individual, no longer believing that the act sex or marriage can result in love, or that the two are intrinsically linked.

While Alcée cannot fulfill Edna’s desires to the extent of replacing Robert, her relationship with him does allow her to explore her sexuality and grow as a person, learning about the differences in romance, love, and sex. Her relationship with Alcée also allows her to become confident in the fact that she can never be happy in a marriage void of true love. After learning from Madame Reisz of Robert’s plan to return to New Orleans, Edna is in high spirits and when Alcée Arobin kisses her, she responds passionately. She “clasps his head,” and “it was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch which kindled desire” (617). Seyersted finds this to be one of Edna’s most important moments, writing that Chopin, “in a single, crucial paragraph, explodes the romantic myth of the noble undivided passion...Edna now realizes that the physical component of love can stand apart from the

spiritual one, that sensuous attraction is impersonal and can be satisfied by a partner she does not love" (Seyersted 142). Reflecting on her kiss with Alcée, Edna feels "as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (618). Notably, Edna does not feel "shame or remorse," but rather a "dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her" (618). Edna's realization to the realities of love and desire lead her to be more sure than ever of her true love for Robert, as well as her need to distance herself from her husband.

Once Edna realizes that she must end her marriage to Leonce in order to maintain her happiness, she decides to move out of his mansion into a small house, just around the corner from Léonce's house, which she can afford to rent on her own. It is during this time of increased independence that Edna inhabits a completely liminal position. She lives on her own, in her own home, yet her family's home is just around the corner, practically within view of her cottage. She is a mother, yet her children have been away for weeks, and while she misses them after she visits with them, she quickly forgets about them after a short period of time. She is married, yet her husband is away and unaware of the extent of her change, and in his absence she has come to feel less and less like someone's wife, though her feeling this way does not change the fact that she is still married. She is deeply in love with a man she has not seen in months, and who has no idea of her love for him; all the while she is involved in a relationship with a man whom she only desires sexually. However liminal and unsustainable her position between states of being may be, it is significant regardless, as it furthers her strength as an individual. " Every step which she [takes] toward relieving herself from obligations add[s] to her strength and expansion as an individual. She [begins] to look with her own eyes, to see and to apprehend the deeper

undercurrents of life" (629). Although Chopin illustrates that Edna has become happier and more successful as an individual woman in society, there is an imminent feeling of failure, as it seems unlikely, based on Chopin's other characters and the first half of the novel, that Edna could be truly successful in her new life as an awakened woman in the Victorian South.

Once Robert returns to New Orleans, Chopin seems to confirm Edna's impending defeat, as their first interaction together falls short of the romantic meetings of her imagination. "A hundred times Edna had pictured Robert's return, and their first meeting...she always fancied him expressing or betraying in some way his love for her. And here, the reality was that they sat ten feet apart…" (634). When Edna and Robert finally do talk honestly, and she confesses her love to him, she finds that they view their predicament quite differently. Robert confesses that he had dreamt of a life with Edna, "a wild dream of your some way becoming my wife" (645). Edna, however, is already someone's wife, and has not even considered the idea of becoming a wife to someone else, even Robert. For Edna, marriage is another chain, another way of belonging to someone else, and Edna had "resolved never again to belong to anyone other than herself" (613). She does not desire marriage to another man, and what she craves more than anything is the ability to be autonomous and free from restrictions.

Edna has been dreaming of romance with Robert, however she does not contemplate the idea of marrying him, as she has learned from her recent experiences that love, sex, and marriage are not innately connected. She tells Robert that he has been foolish to waste his time thinking that Léonce would allow her to be free, claiming that she is "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (646). Robert does not

understand what Edna means, but before he can learn, Edna is called away to the home of Madame Ratignolle, who is giving birth. Seyersted writes that it is in this scene that Chopin suggests the ways which:

> pleasure and pain, conception and delivery are inextricably and inexorably intertwined. She sees how sex and pregnancy represent nature's play with woman, and she concludes that a woman's links, or chains, to her children make her hopes for independence illusory.
>
> She realizes that patriarchal society is quick to condemn particularly a freedom-seeking woman who neglects her children since she- rather than her husband- is 'intended by nature' to take care of them. (Seyersted 146)

This observation holds true in viewing Edna's awakening as a kind of gestation period, as it coincides with Madame Ratignolle's actual nine-month gestation period. Her full awakening and realization of self peaks at the moment Adèle gives birth, however, while Adèle's childbirth would be viewed as a success for the Victorian patriarchy, a continuation of the prevalent mother-wife, Edna's awakening would be received as a failure of the patriarchy and would not be allowed to continue inside the constructs of society. In Edna's world of the Victorian South, there is no room for the kind of liminality which she requires; there is no negotiation between the extremes presented by Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz, and no way to exist in a way which involves both maintaining meaningful human relationships, as well as independence, and freedom to make her own choices.

Upon returning to her little house from Adèle's home, Edna hopes to find Robert waiting. but instead finds only a note, reading "I love you. Good-by-- because I love you" (651).

Seyersted writes that “the note which Edna finds when she returns to her house is a further illustration of a woman’s situation in a man’s world. Robert’s words signify to her not only that he is afraid of braving conventions, but also that he would never understand her, or accept that kind of independence and equality without which she cannot exist” (Seyersted 146). Robert’s rejection of Edna’s true being is devastating to her, however, not surprising, as his response suggests Victorian society’s inability to embrace or accept anything out of the ordinary, particularly any woman who does not abide by the strict rules and conventions in place.

After months of dreaming of Robert, Edna accepts his letter quietly and without protest, and after a sleepless night, she finds herself back at the ocean of Grande Isle where the novel began. As Edna walks toward the ocean, she thinks about her lovers and her husband briefly, recognizing the insignificance of these sexual relationships which she has been so focused on recently. She also thinks about her children, however, her love for them is mingled with dread, as “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” (654). Madame Ratignolle’s unexplained words to Edna upon her departure from the birth scene, “Think of the Children, Edna!” (649), can be read as Adèle representing the voice of the patriarchy, as if urging Edna to assume her rightful position as a mother and abandon her dreams of independence. Adè le’s words weigh heavy on Edna’s mind, however they only make more clear what she is coming to understand; she cannot be both an awakened woman and a wife, as her children only limit her ability to become a true individual, and she cannot escape her position as their mother.

The concept of motherhood dominates Edna Pontellier’s struggle throughout the novel, and swimming in the ocean, she thinks about her family, “They were a part of her life. But they

need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (654). Dyer writes that it is "clearly not just the duties of motherhood that are oppressive, but the very concept of motherhood itself. More oppressive than the daily demands of children is the century's pervasive and limiting notion of gender, the notion that a woman's duty and reward are found in motherhood" (Dyer 103). In having children, Edna can never escape her position in Victorian society; she finds meaning in her artwork, yet the successful "artist-woman," such as Mademoiselle Reisz, does not have children, setting her apart from Edna. It is not possible to be a "mother-woman" *and* an "artist-woman," and Edna's sexual desires and aspirations for independence only work to further complicate and limit her chances for success at maintaining a meaningful existence.

Chopin makes it clear that Edna's position in the universe is unsustainable. Dyer writes that Edna "never attains the full 'human' status that she seeks. But in refusing to live without it, refusing to yield to the philosophy of motherhood that informed and directed her age, she is ironically reborn and, in a sense, gives birth to greater possibility for women in the century to come" (Dyer 101). In some senses, Edna's last swim in the ocean can be seen as a rebirth. Standing on the shore, Edna sheds her clothing and stands alone, feeling like "some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it has never known" (654). The sea seems to embrace Edna, as she swims out as she did in the beginning, further than any woman has swum before. The sea is "sensuous," and surrounds Edna's body as she swims in a "soft, close embrace" (654). She has a moment of fear, but continues to swim.

Edna does not look back toward the shore, or toward the limited life that she is giving up, but instead the novel ends with her imagining her childhood home of Kentucky, "the barking of

an old dog...the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks…" (655). Gentry writes that the end of *The Awakening* "leaves Edna in a dreamlike trance, a fantasy. By not describing in detail Edna's physical death or its aftermath, Chopin suggests a tone of peace and escape" (Gentry 43). The end of the novel has led to much criticism from critics who cannot understand how such a strong and seemingly resilient character could fall victim to suicide, however her suicide can be read as an inevitable denial and escape from the conventions of Victorian society. Marilynne Robinson states that "The yearnings that draw Edna to solitude and finally to death, have a universality in them that acts as a charm against the harsh self-absorption that more and more characterize her as they falls under their sway" (5). Edna's suicide may be read as Chopin's critique on the harsh expectations and limitations which society places on women. How can society be so strict and indifferent towards a woman's natural disposition and needs, forcing her into roles which she does not desire, yet allowing men to act in any way they see fit, without critique or limit?

While *The Awakening* received more harsh criticism than any of her other works, Chopin's themes of female confinement and desired independence are ever present in many of her short stories and poems. Her character, Louise, in the short story, "Story of an Hour," feels intense emotion and joy when learning that her husband has died, seeing before her an open window of possibility and freedom for years to come, an opportunity to live life for no one but herself. When Louise finds out that there has been a mistake, and that her husband is in fact still alive, she dies immediately of shock, though Chopin makes it clear that Louise really dies because she is unable to accept that the joy and freedom which she just experienced are actually unattainable. Chopin also wrote of sexual freedom for women, in her short stories, "At the

Cadian Ball," and "The Storm," neither of which was harshly criticized. For Edna Pontellier, it seems to be the abandonment of motherhood, the selfishness of seeking her own sphere, and the final dismissal of the patriarchy via suicide that caused critics to condemn *The Awakening*. Edna is selfish, yes, but selfishness and self-awareness are in some ways crucial in order to obtain a balanced and healthy existence.

For Edna, settling and accepting were not viable options. Once awakened, it became impossible to fall back into her role of submissive wife and mother. But she also understood that it was impossible to continue to develop as an individual. Robert's response to Edna's declaration of sovereignty, and her claim that she is hers to give to whom she chooses, can be read as representing society's response as a whole. Though Robert loves Edna, and longs for a life with her, he finds that she has simply become too radical, strayed too far out of the realm of acceptable feminine behavior, and he, and the patriarchy, cannot accept her. Edna's liminality follows her to her death, as the ocean can be read as a liminal symbol, a mysterious depth which exists in between various pieces of land. The sea envelopes her, it's voice "seductive, whispering…inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (654). Liminality subsumes Edna, drowning her both literally and figuratively. Edna chooses death, over partial existence, and in doing so, Chopin creates a character and a piece of fiction which goes well beyond her time, presenting ideas at the turn of the century which feel just as relevant today as they did over one hundred years ago.

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