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## **A Road Map to Awakening: Examining the Function of Supporting Characters in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

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Once diminutively coined a regionalist novel, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has since been reassessed for its critical examination of a variety of complex and difficult themes, including hegemonic structures, the power of patriarchy, and the challenging process of personal growth. More specifically, *The Awakening* functions as a road map, delineating protagonist Edna Pontellier's developing self-consciousness amidst the looming hegemonic structures of motherhood and marriage. Chopin begins Edna's path to self-awareness in Grand Isle, a small island off the coast of New Orleans. Within the feminine space of Grand Isle, Edna first swims "out alone," initiating her awakening (Chopin 27). While on the island, Edna develops as a character, becoming more and more self-aware. However, Edna's vacation must come to a close and the Pontellier family returns to the masculine space of New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> Here, Edna continues her trajectory of growth, but the lack of an awakened female model for her to follow alongside the pressures of patriarchal society undoubtedly causes her to regress. Realizing that there is no way for her to function as an awakened woman in nineteenth-century New Orleans society, *The Awakening* concludes with Edna's suicide, her final swim out alone.

In order to fully analyze Edna's path to awakening, I must first define my own interpretation of what constitutes Edna's awakening. Since the publication of *The Awakening*, critics have proposed a number of vastly different understandings of Edna's awakening in the novel. These interpretations range from Edna's developing sense of her own sexuality, to her desire to be part of the sublime, to her growing selfishness. Some critics have even argued that Edna's awakening is a pseudo-event, observing that Edna ends the novel in the same place she

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<sup>1</sup> I will discuss the feminine versus masculine natures of Grand Isle and New Orleans later on this essay.

began.<sup>2</sup> One critic in particular, Deborah Gentry, interprets Edna's awakening as her attempt "to kill off the false identities of the angel and the monster that imprison her in an effort to substitute in their place a third, integrated and true identity" (Gentry 26). Like Gentry, I define Edna's awakening as her developing sense of self-awareness, her understanding of herself apart from the influence of patriarchal society. Consequently, when I refer to Edna's progression and regression as a character, I am denoting her uneven journey towards becoming self-aware.

When analyzing Edna's development, it is almost impossible to ignore the influence of the novel's supporting characters upon her path to awakening. These characters, specifically Mr. Pontellier, Adele Ratignolle, Robert Leburn, and Mademoiselle Reisz are intimately related to Edna. Consequently, these characters play an influential role in Edna's non-linear awakening, ultimately (and perhaps ironically) encouraging both her progress and regress as a character through their actions and characteristics. Published during the fin de siècle, a period of "social and intellectual ferment" and "reaction and resistance to change," *The Awakening* imparts the turbulence of nineteenth-century New Orleans onto its supporting characters (Culley 119). In this essay, I will specifically analyze how the supporting characters in *The Awakening* facilitate Edna's awakening while they simultaneously prompt her suicide. I will argue that the female characters prompt Edna's suicide by failing to provide an adequate role model for her to follow as an awakened woman. The male characters additionally encourage Edna's suicide by ultimately failing to address her in a manner different from the constraints of patriarchy. Considering this gender divide in the minor characters, I will frame my analysis of these characters through a gender binary structure, as both the female and male characters seem to

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<sup>2</sup> Respectively, the scholars I am referring to include Margo Culley in "Edna Pontellier: 'A Solitary Soul,'" Barbara Claire Freeman in "*The Awakening*: Waking Up at the End of the Line," Rafael Walker in "Kate Chopin and the Dilemma of Individualism," and Robert Evans in "Renewal and Rebirth in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*."

exist within the novel as opposites of each other. Traditionally, the term gender binary refers to the feminist idea that men and women are forced to fit into oppositional roles based on their gender. However, when I use the term I am more specifically referring to the progressive and reactionary roles that the characters in *The Awakening* seem to singularly take on. Within this context, Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle represent the reactionary or conservative view of women, whereas Mademoiselle Reisz and Robert Leburn embody the progressive view of women. My goal in this paper is to examine how these characters, no matter which aspect of the binary they represent, both inhibit and facilitate Edna's awakening. It is through this examination that I hope to add nuance to the popular but often reductive interpretations of the minor characters in the novel and Edna's path to awakening as a result.

### **Embodiments of Hegemonic Structures: Analyzing the “Reactionary” Characters**

The first pair of characters I will examine are Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle. I will begin this paper by examining how both of these characters seem to embody the hegemonic ideals of husband and wife, respectively, consequently representing one end of the gender binary. The apparent reactionary nature of Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle inhibit Edna's progression as a character. A variety of other scholars have specifically examined how these characters, especially Madame Ratignolle, work to prevent Edna's awakening throughout the novel. However, as I will analyze later on in this essay, in a much less obvious manner, both Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle play influential roles in Edna's developing sense of self-awareness.

Perhaps most striking in *The Awakening* is the marital relationship between Mr. Pontellier and Edna. Both characters apparently do not feel a great sense of love for one another.

Edna is described as “realizing that with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection” for her husband (Chopin 19). Mr. Pontellier and Edna instead seem to be engaged in a business partnership with each other. Mr. Pontellier gives Edna money and relative freedom as long as she outwardly upholds patriarchal societal standards regarding her actions as a woman, wife, and mother. It is through this business partnership that Mr. Pontellier embodies the hegemonic ideals for both father and husband.

According to patriarchal societal standards, the “perfect” husband and father is synonymous with the provider of economic security and the protector of family values. Chopin uses the business partnership exchange between Mr. Pontellier and Edna in order to highlight Mr. Pontellier’s ability to provide for his family. This ability to provide can perhaps most clearly be seen when Chopin writes, “Mr. Pontellier gave his wife half the money which he had brought away from Klein’s hotel the evening before. She liked money as well as most women, and accepted it with no little satisfaction” (Chopin 8). The “service” Edna provides for Mr. Pontellier in exchange for his money (her outward upholding of patriarchal ideals) additionally underscores his representation of the hegemonic father. By essentially paying Edna to act like the “perfect” hegemonic mother, Mr. Pontellier shows how committed he is to protecting “family values,” or perpetuating the patriarchal system. When Edna breaks her end of the bargain by moving in to her own home, the Pidgeon House, in the middle of the novel, Mr. Pontellier’s desire to “protect” family values manifests through his primary concern over “what people would say” (Chopin 88). By depicting Edna as engaged in a business partnership with Mr. Pontellier, rather than a marriage based on love, Chopin highlights Mr. Pontellier’s embodiment of “the best husband in the world” (according to societal standards) and uses him as an obvious antagonist to Edna’s awakening (Chopin 9).

Possibly the two most powerful hegemonic structures that Mr. Pontellier represents and consequently perpetuates are that of marriage and family life. In her “The Escape of the Sea: Ideology and *The Awakening*,” Jennifer Gray describes the nineteenth-century hegemonic ideals of marriage and motherhood as societal institutions that “required women to be objects in marriage and in motherhood, existing as vessels of maternity and sexuality, with little opportunity for individuality” (Gray 53). The incredibly restrictive and objectified nature of these patriarchal ideals is undoubtedly oppositional to Edna’s development of her self-awareness as her awakening is reliant on her understanding of her own individuality. According to Gray, in order for these hegemonic ideals to be perpetuated, interpellation, or “the recognition and adoption of an ideology and its practices,” must occur through the process of hailing, “a calling to participate in a form of ideology” (Gray 54, 55).

Throughout *The Awakening*, Mr. Pontellier attempts to hail Edna in order to interpellate her within hegemonic motherhood. Though Edna at times seems able to resist many of Mr. Pontellier’s hailings, she is unable to overcome his hailings to motherhood. This can perhaps be seen most clearly when Mr. Pontellier reproaches Edna for her “inattention, her habitual neglect of the children,” asking her to check on her son whom he believes is sick (Chopin 7). Here, Mr. Pontellier calls on Edna to behave as the patriarchal ideal for a mother should. Though Edna knows her son is not sick, she still responds to Mr. Pontellier’s hailing and upholds hegemonic structures in the process. Edna’s final conversation with Dr. Mandelet, the Pontellier’s family physician, emphasizes that even though she continues to progress throughout the novel, she ultimately cannot overcome the interpellation of this motherhood ideal. Edna states, “But I don’t want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn’t

want to trample upon the little lives” (Chopin 105). Through Edna’s worry about trampling “upon the little lives,” Chopin shows that Edna’s full awakening is inhibited by the hailings to motherhood made by Mr. Pontellier.

Additionally, Mr. Pontellier attempts to hail Edna into fulfilling the hegemonic role of a wife. As mentioned earlier, the nineteenth-century ideal for women in marriage requires them to behave and be treated like objects (Gray 53). Mr. Pontellier hails Edna to fulfill the hegemonic role of wife most powerfully by treating her like property, rather than a living, breathing, equal person. Twice in the novel Chopin uses Edna’s wedding rings as a means of indicating her position as an object in her marriage with Mr. Pontellier. Chopin first does so at the beginning of *The Awakening* when Mr. Pontellier returns Edna’s wedding rings to her after her swim in the ocean. Edna dutifully takes the rings from her husband and “slip[s] them upon her fingers,” successfully responding to Mr. Pontellier’s hailing her as his property (Chopin 4). In the second instance later in the novel after Edna has begun to develop much of her self-awareness, she again responds to the hailing of her husband even though he isn’t physically there. This scene takes place when Edna, frustrated with her marriage and motherhood, throws her wedding ring on the floor, stamping “her heel upon it, striving to crush it” (Chopin 50). However, upon realizing that “her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet,” Edna picks up the ring and places it back on her finger (Chopin 51). Here, Edna demonstrates that she has internalized Mr. Pontellier’s hailings, interpellating herself in the process. Through the successful hailings to hegemony by Mr. Pontellier, Edna’s full awakening is inhibited, partially encouraging her suicide at the end of the novel.

Like Mr. Pontellier, Edna’s closest female friend, Madame Ratignolle, also represents and perpetuates the hegemonic ideals of motherhood and marriage, inhibiting Edna’s complete

awakening. Madame Ratignolle perhaps most powerfully represents hegemonic ideals through her embodiment of the “mother-woman” (Chopin 9). Chopin describes the mother-woman as a woman “who idolized [her] children, worshiped [her] husband, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 9). Basically, Chopin’s representation of the mother-woman encompasses Gray’s idea that hegemonic society requires women to exist as objects rather than individuals (Gray 53). Throughout *The Awakening*, Madame Ratignolle proves herself to be the complete embodiment of Chopin’s mother-woman. She unconditionally loves her children and her husband, placing her family’s needs above her own desires and happiness. Even when playing music, an avenue of expression that could possibly mark her developing individuality, Madame Ratignolle’s artistry underscores her position as the mother-woman, a “ministering angel” rather than an individual. Chopin writes, “She [Ratignolle] played very well, keeping excellent waltz time and infusing expression into the strains which was indeed inspiring. She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband considered it a means of brightening the home” (Chopin 24). Here, Ratignolle’s devotion to her music parallels her ultimate underlying devotion to her family.

Madame Ratignolle’s representation of the mother-woman undoubtedly opposes Edna’s developing sense of awakening. Similar to Mr. Pontellier, Madame Ratignolle perpetuates the hegemonic forces through her upholding of the patriarchal ideals for marriage and motherhood. According to Gray’s definition of the hegemonic structure of marriage, the wife must function as a vessel for sexuality for her husband, while still maintaining her purity with other men. Madame Ratignolle can be seen various times in the novel acting as a safeguard for Edna’s purity, and



thus acting as an antagonist to her awakening.<sup>3</sup> This preservation of Edna's purity can be seen early on in the novel when Madame Ratignolle implores Robert, the man Edna will eventually fall in love with, to "Let Mrs. Pontellier alone" (Chopin 20). In sensing Edna's developing love for Robert, Madame Ratignolle works to uphold the hegemonic ideal for a wife by trying to end Edna and Robert's relationship when it is first beginning. In addition to guarding Edna's purity with Robert, Madame Ratignolle also attempts to stop Edna's relationship with Alcee Arobin, a second man whom Edna will have an affair with. In the midst of giving birth to her fourth child, Madame Ratignolle begs Edna to "Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 104). Here Ratignolle asks Edna to think about what her affair with Alcee Arobin will do to her children, simultaneously perpetuating the hegemonic ideals of purity and maternity. Similar to Mr. Pontellier, Madame Ratignolle appeals to Edna's internalized ideas of motherhood, using Edna's children as a threat to keep her actions in check. As we see at the end of the novel, Madame Ratignolle's final act of protecting Edna's purity by drawing on her maternity is successful. After listening to Madame Ratignolle's plea, Edna returns to Grand Isle where she commits suicide, believing this is the best course of action for both herself and her children (Chopin 108). Thus, Edna's act of suicide ultimately ends her relationships with both Robert Leburn and Alcee Arobin, protecting her children in the process. Through her suicide and the premature ending of both of her relationships, Edna's complete sense of awakening is not able to fully develop.

Perhaps the most powerful way Madame Ratignolle inhibits Edna's awakening, in addition to her perpetuation of hegemonic ideals, is by not presenting herself as a suitable model

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<sup>3</sup> Though I do not agree with critics like Margo Culley who argue that Edna's awakening is a sexual one, I do concede that Edna's developing sense of sexuality is a key component of her developing sense of self-awareness. Her acuity to her desire for other men functions as part of her understanding of who she is as a person outside of hegemonic ideals.

for Edna to follow as an awakened woman. As seen throughout the novel, Edna does share some similarities with Adele Ratignolle. Both women ultimately care for their children and their families. Though Edna's love for her family is often depicted as sporadic, her reasoning behind her suicide (her desire to protect her children) suggests that she cares for her children in a similar fashion to Madame Ratignolle.<sup>4</sup> Because of this biologically determined role these two women share, Edna could use Madame Ratignolle as a model to follow, showing her how to properly navigate the confines of patriarchal society. What better woman for Edna to idolize in this situation than the supreme mother-woman herself? However, as Deborah Gentry states in *The Art of Dying*, Edna cannot model herself after Madame Ratignolle because Ratignolle's entire existence functions within the confines of hegemonic society (Gentry 36). Additionally, Edna is even unable to model the biological aspects of her life (her children and her position as mother) after Madame Ratignolle because of the exclusive nature of Ratignolle's role as mother-woman. For Edna to take on the "alternative self" of Madame Ratignolle, she would be required to renunciate "another part of [herself] vital to her existence," the authentic parts of her character that go against hegemony (Gentry 31, Lant 122). If Edna were to take on the delimited role that Madame Ratignolle represents, she would essentially be renouncing her entire awakening altogether. Understanding the tension between Madame Ratignolle's delimited role and her own desire to be self-aware, Edna realizes that she cannot model her newly awakened self after Ratignolle. Left without any one to support her in her developing sense of awakening, Edna turns to suicide as her only means of fulfilling her biologically determined role while still preserving her "individual dignity and integrity above all else" (Gentry 22).

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<sup>4</sup> By protect, I am referring to Edna's desire to do what is best for children.

The reactionary nature of both Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle clearly works as an antagonistic force to Edna's awakening. As described previously in this essay, numerous scholars, including myself in this paper, have explored the tension between the hegemonic forces these characters represent and Edna's quest for awakening. However, I posit that Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle also function as facilitators of Edna's awakening, providing the impetus for her developing self-awareness. I even go so far as to argue that Edna's awakening would have never occurred without the oppositional forces of these two characters. It must be noted, however, that these characters seem to only function as facilitators, rather than inhibitors, of Edna's awakening while Edna is in the feminine space of Grand Isle. In their canonical book *No Man's Land*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the distinctly feminine nature of Grand Isle, stating, "Madame Leburn's *pension* on Grand Isle is very much a woman's place, not only because it is owned by a woman and dominated by 'mother-women' but also because...its principle inhabitants are actually women and children whose husbands and fathers visit only on weekends" (Gilbert and Gubar 101). It is in this feminine space that Edna feels liberated enough to push against the hegemonic ideals that her husband and Madame Ratignolle represent, initiating her awakening. When back in the masculine space of New Orleans, the patriarchal embodiments that these characters represent seem to revert back to inhibitors of Edna's development. Unfortunately, by relegating Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle as facilitators of Edna's awakening only in Grand Isle, Chopin seems to suggest that awakenings like Edna's can only truly be fostered in un-masculine spaces.

Just as one of the most powerful ways Mr. Pontellier inhibits Edna's awakening, he also most profoundly facilitates her awakening through his representation of the hegemonic structures of marriage and motherhood. The incredible rigidity of Mr. Pontellier's enforcement of these

hegemonic structures causes Edna to push back, acting as an impetus for awakening. It is in fact one of Mr. Pontellier's earliest attempts at hailing Edna that initially ignites her dissatisfaction with the confining roles she is placed in. This hailing occurs when Mr. Pontellier asks Edna to check on her children, believing that one of them is sick. Though, as mentioned earlier, Edna does respond to her husband's hailing by checking on her son, she is immediately filled with a sense of oppression upon performing her "motherly role." Chopin's narrator describes Edna's feelings, stating, "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day" (Chopin 8). Here, Chopin infers that this is Edna's first time understanding the societal confines placed upon her life. With this developing understanding of her own oppression, Edna's awakening can begin to take form.

In addition to opening Edna's eyes to her state of oppression, Mr. Pontellier's rigid representation and perpetuation of hegemonic structures fosters Edna's developing sense of agency. This sense of agency functions as a key component of Edna's awakening, giving her the power to stray from societal norms. Mr. Pontellier again attempts to hail Edna as an object when he tells her to come to bed upon his request. Symbolizing her growth since her husband's last hailing, Edna this time does not respond to Mr. Pontellier's call, exerting her own agency in the process. Edna is instead described as:

Perceiv[ing] that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did. (Chopin 31)

Edna then voices her newfound agency, telling her husband “Don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you” (Chopin 31). Through this attempt at hailing, Chopin suggests a sort of metamorphosis taking place within Edna. Mr. Pontellier’s hailing provides the impetus for Edna to simultaneously discover and exert her agency.

Similarly, Madame Ratignolle’s strict adherence to and perpetuation of patriarchal gender roles also functions as an impetus for Edna’s awakening. However, unlike Mr. Pontellier’s representation of these gender roles acting as an antagonistic force against Edna, Madame Ratignolle’s internalization of hegemonic roles more so functions as a safe space for Edna to exert her newly developing agency. Essentially, Edna appropriates the patriarchal forces that tie Madame Ratignolle down, using them as a means of furthering her own awakening. This fairly negative view of Edna’s appropriation of patriarchal forces is echoed in Rafael Walker’s essay “Kate Chopin and the Dilemma of Individualism.” Here, Walker examines how Edna has no sympathy for the plight of the other women around her despite her understanding that “it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (Chopin 105). Though Walker specifically looks at how Edna exerts a sort of patriarchal control over minor female characters of color, Edna’s appropriation of this control can be extrapolated to cover Madame Ratignolle as well. Edna uses Madame Ratignolle’s confined position as mother-woman in order to foster her developing sense of self-awareness predominantly through the means of narrative power. As the supreme mother-woman, Madame Ratignolle is unable to be anything but a maternal figure to those around her. Ratignolle’s maternal role often extends beyond her children, allowing her to act as a pseudo-mother for Edna. By placing Edna in this role as child to Madame Ratignolle, she is ironically elevated above her position as mother amongst her own family. In this role as child, Edna is able to take advantage of the “self-

effacing” nature of Madame Ratignolle, allowing her to exert her agency for the first time through speech (Chopin 9).

When Chopin first introduces Edna in the novel, she does so in a manner similar to that of the male gaze (Gentry 24). At this time, Chopin refers to Edna as Mrs. Pontellier (connoting Mr. Pontellier’s ownership over her), almost solely focuses on her physical attributes, and rarely allows Edna to speak (Chopin 4 and 5). Scholar Joseph Urgo elaborates on Edna’s lack of speech, positing, “Edna cannot appreciate conversation because, when we first meet her, she is essentially mute. For the first six chapters of the novel, she says all of four sentences” (Urgo 23). Chopin uses these strategies in order to highlight Edna’s objectified position prior to her stay on Grand Isle. However, when Edna’s friendship with Madame Ratignolle begins, there is an almost immediate transformation in Edna’s character, especially in her ability to speak and tell stories. Narrative is one of the most influential means of perpetuating hegemony. The ability of a character to have narrative power suggests that character has agency over their lives and potentially those of others. Edna’s narrative power seems to first emerge when she and Madame Ratignolle travel to the beach together at the beginning of their vacation. At this time, Madame Ratignolle asks Edna what she is thinking about. In questioning her, Madame Ratignolle behaves as a mother-woman towards Edna, providing her the opportunity to “have her story told” (Urgo 23). Edna responds to Ratignolle’s questioning not with a straightforward answer but a narrative about her past: “The hot wind beating in my face made me think...Of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass” (Chopin 16-17). Here, upon being encouraged to exert her agency by Madame Ratignolle’s questioning, Edna first realizes her own narrative power, marking a key point in her awakening process.

## **Edna's Role Models?: The Function of the "Progressive" Characters**

This paper will now shift its attention to the superficially "progressive" minor characters in the novel, specifically Robert Leburn and Mademoiselle Reisz. These two characters have often been heralded as the ultimate facilitators of Edna's sexual awakening and Edna's awakened role model, respectively. Scholars tend to especially overlook or ignore the negative qualities of Mademoiselle Reisz, upholding her position as Chopin's idea of the fully awakened woman. These scholars often argue that Chopin gives Edna a model to follow as an awakened woman in nineteenth-century New Orleans; however, Edna simply "is not strong enough" to be this awakened woman completely (Edwards 131). Conversely, I will argue that Robert Leburn and Mademoiselle Reisz function as facilitators of Edna's awakening in accordance with these scholars, yet both of these cursorily progressive characters also greatly inhibit Edna's final development as a character. In a similar fashion to my analysis of the "reactionary" characters in the novel, I will begin this portion of my paper by examining how Robert Leburn and Mademoiselle Reisz more obviously facilitate Edna's developing sense of self-awareness. I will then conclude by analyzing the less apparent reactionary qualities of these two minor characters. As with Mr. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle, it must additionally be noted that the environment in which Robert Leburn and Mademoiselle Reisz are located is greatly important when examining their roles as either facilitator or inhibitor. Robert Leburn and Mademoiselle Reisz act as facilitators of Edna's awakening almost solely while in the feminine space of Grand Isle. Upon returning to the masculine space of New Orleans, however, both of these characters function predominantly as inhibitors of Edna's development.

The most powerful way in which Robert Leburn encourages Edna's awakening is through his developing romantic relationship with her while in Grand Isle. It is through this relationship

that Robert encourages Edna to break out of the confines of hegemonic nineteenth-century society, particularly the patriarchal ideal of female purity outside of marriage. In an etiquette book published around the same time as *The Awakening*, Richard Wells describes this nineteenth-century ideal of female purity outside of marriage, stating, “Never let your husband have cause to complain that you are more agreeable abroad than at home; nor permit him to see in you an object of admiration” (Wells 248-249). The mere fact that the idea of female purity is present in etiquette books during the late nineteenth-century speaks to its importance as a societal ideal. The stringent upholding of this ideal is confining, forcing women to ignore their true feelings for others apart from their husbands. However, through Robert’s encouragement in their relationship, Edna is able to fully understand her love for another outside of her marriage and consequently break out of the limiting patriarchal standards of female purity. For example, when Robert and Edna travel to *Chênère* together in order to attend mass, the two can be seen becoming more intimately involved with one another. Though it is Edna’s idea to travel to the small island, Robert agrees, encouraging the developing intimacy between the two. While on *Chênère*, Robert and Edna only actually attend mass for part of the service. Chopin describes “a feeling of oppression and drowsiness over[coming] Edna during the service,” causing the two to leave mid-way through the mass (Chopin 34). In encouraging Edna to leave mass, Robert additionally facilitates Edna’s subversion of one of the hegemonic structures supporting the female purity ideal—religion. Upon exiting mass early, Robert and Edna then travel to Madame Antoine’s house where they are sensuously described as laying in the grass and listening to stories being told by Madame Antoine: “Edna and Robert both sat upon the ground— that is, he lay upon the ground beside her, occasionally picking at the hem of her muslin gown” (Chopin 38). Here, Robert and Edna are clearly becoming more intimate with each other. By upholding



their intimate and romantic relationship, Robert encourages Edna to subvert the female purity standard and the religious institutions that perpetuate it.

In a similar manner, Mademoiselle Reisz also plays a part in facilitating Edna's awakening while in the feminine space of Grand Isle, particularly through her incredible musical ability. It is through her expertise on the piano that Mademoiselle Reisz encourages Edna to fully experience the emotions she has long kept suppressed. By encouraging Edna to face her emotions, Mademoiselle Reisz essentially facilitates her developing sense of self-awareness. Mademoiselle Reisz's musical power is seen most powerfully the night Edna first swims out into the ocean. Prior to her symbolic baptism while swimming out alone, Edna listens to Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano for the first time, priming her for this key point in the awakening process. When listening to Mademoiselle Reisz play for the first time, Chopin describes Edna's feelings:

She [Edna] waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (Chopin 26)

Prior to listening to Mademoiselle Reisz play, Edna used to imagine emotions as "material pictures," viewing them as feelings that only others could experience, essentially distancing them from her own life (Chopin 26). Here, however, Edna is depicted as feeling the emotions "of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair" for herself, accepting that they are emotions that she authentically feels (Chopin 26).

Despite his ability to facilitate Edna's development as a character, Robert Leburn also conversely functions as an inhibitor of Edna's awakening. While back in the masculine space of New Orleans, Robert begins to impose upon Edna the very same hegemonic control he once helped her subvert. In order to impose this control, Robert predominantly works to take away Edna's developing narrative power by indoctrinating her with his own. As Patricia Yaeger discusses in "A Language Which Nobody Understood": Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*, "Robert's attempts at controlling Edna's narrative power are present at the very start of their relationship, ultimately manifesting themselves during the final pages of the novel."<sup>5</sup>

Yaeger examines the beginning of Robert's attempt to control Edna's narrative power just after her first swim out into the ocean alone. Upon returning from her swim, Edna believes that "there must be spirits abroad to-night" (Chopin 28). Rather than allowing Edna to establish her own narrative regarding her swim in the ocean, Robert responds to her statement with a story about "a spirit that has haunted these shores for ages" (Chopin 29). Through this story, Robert "frames and articulates the meaning of her [Edna's] adventure" (Yaeger 201). Though Edna initially is upset by Robert's story ("Don't banter me," she said, wounded at what appeared to be his flippancy"), she quickly internalizes his narrative (Chopin 29). Later in the novel when Robert and Edna sail to *Chênrière Caminada* together, it is apparent that Edna has internalized Robert's metaphors: "sailing across the bay to the *Chênrière Caminada*, Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening- had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad" (Yaeger 201,

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<sup>5</sup> Though this process of taking over Edna's narrative power first begins in the feminine space of Grand Isle, I argue that the most powerful manifestations of this process are apparent in the second half of the novel when Edna is back in New Orleans. It is during this time that Robert's attempts at controlling Edna are most harmful to her awakening.

Chopin 33). Here, Edna clearly extrapolates Robert's story, using it to define her later experiences.

At the end of the novel, just before her final act of suicide, Chopin portrays Edna's internalization of Robert's narrative power, emphasizing its ultimate destructiveness upon her process of awakening. It is through this imposition of his narrative power that Robert essentially traps Edna in the patriarchal discourse of romance. When analyzing Robert's story and Edna's internalization of it, it is apparent that "the plot he [Robert] invents involves a mystical, masculine sea-spirit responsible for Edna's sense of elation, as if romance were the only form of elation a heroine might feel" (Yaeger 201). Through this plot, Robert perpetuates patriarchal romantic discourse onto Edna. In *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, Joyce Dyer examines the ideological role of romance in hegemonic society. Dyer concludes that romance is a dominant tool used for "securing unions—and children—for young men and women;" a tool used to "disguise the inequitable relationship a bride was about to accept" (Dyer 75). In the final scenes of the novel, Edna reiterates this discourse of romance imposed upon her when expressing her love for Robert. In this almost hyperbolic expression of love, Edna clearly mimics the overtly emotional "damsel" of modern romance:

"I love you," she whispered, "only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream. Oh! You have made me so unhappy with your indifference. Oh! I have suffered, suffered! Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence. I must go now to my friend; but you will wait for me? No matter how late; you will wait for me, Robert?" (Chopin 103)

Through her expression of love for Robert, Edna essentially counteracts her entire process of development up until this point. In equating Robert as the sole reason for her awakening, Edna gives up her agency while simultaneously upholding the patriarchal system she once felt so strongly oppressed by. Robert's powerful ability to stunt Edna's development is aided through Mademoiselle Reisz's own perpetuation of hegemonic structures, like that of romance as well.

One of the most powerful ways in which Mademoiselle Reisz perpetuates hegemonic structures and inhibits Edna's awakening as a result is through her appropriation of the patriarchal power structure. Much like Edna in her relationship with Madame Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz predominately perpetuates these structures by appropriating patriarchal control in her relationship with Edna. From the beginning of the novel, Chopin describes Mademoiselle Reisz as "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (Chopin 25). Here, Chopin incorporates many of the signifiers of the "perfect" patriarchal male (powerful and self-assertive) into her characterization of Mademoiselle Reisz. Interestingly, these "male" characteristics that Chopin ascribes to Mademoiselle Reisz are also the characteristics encouraged by hegemonic systems in order to maintain the patriarchal power structure. It is through this "disposition to trample upon the rights of others," that Mademoiselle Reisz extrapolates the patriarchal power structure that has once kept her oppressed, using it to oppress those around her.

Though Edna appears to wield the power in their relationship (often demanding Reisz to play music for her), Mademoiselle Reisz clearly exerts patriarchal power over Edna by encouraging her romantic relationship with Robert. Mademoiselle Reisz does so by acting as a means of communication between the two lovers. When Robert leaves for Mexico, he stops all

communication with Edna, writing letters only to Mademoiselle Reisz and his mother. Mademoiselle Reisz, in turn, gives the letters she receives from Robert to Edna—"The letter was right there at hand in the drawer of the little table upon which Edna had just placed her coffee cup. Mademoiselle opened the drawer and drew forth the letter, the topmost one. She placed it in Edna's hands, and without further comment arose and went to the piano" (Chopin 61). Here, not only does Mademoiselle Reisz make communication possible between Robert and Edna, she further encourages Edna's romantic feelings toward Robert by playing music while Edna reads Robert's letters. As seen in Edna's reaction when she hears Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano for the first time, Mademoiselle Reisz clearly understands the emotional impact her playing has upon Edna. Thus by playing accompaniment on the piano while Edna reads Robert's letters, Mademoiselle Reisz intentionally primes Edna's emotions, making her more vulnerable to Robert's romantic discourse. By enabling Edna's relationship with Robert upon her return to the masculine space of New Orleans, Mademoiselle Reisz facilitates Edna's internalization of romantic discourse and consequently perpetuates the confining hegemonic forces that are so oppositional to Edna's awakening.

Furthermore, Mademoiselle Reisz inhibits Edna's development by not acting as a suitable role model for Edna to follow as an awakened woman. Oppositional to Madame Ratignolle's position as the mother-woman, Mademoiselle Reisz embodies the artist-woman. I define the artist-woman as a woman who has given up her external relationships with other people to solely focus on her art. For clearly biological and societal reasons, Edna differs from the artist-woman and Mademoiselle Reisz because of her marriage to Mr. Pontellier and her two children. Edna is essentially bound to her husband and children, making the artist-woman's denial of interpersonal relationships almost impossible. Though Edna increasingly demonstrates her ability to detach

herself from her husband and his control, she ultimately is unable to evade her feelings of obligation towards her children as a result of her internalized patriarchal ideals of motherhood. Edna's obligatory feelings toward her children can be seen in her final conversation with Dr. Mandelet at the time of Madame Ratignolle's labor. It is during this conversation that Edna rather incoherently reveals to Dr. Mandelet, "But I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (Chopin 105). Here, Edna's concern over trampling upon "the little lives" denotes her lingering feelings of obligation towards her children, making Mademoiselle Reisz's artist-woman model impossible for her to follow.

Interestingly, Chopin's own life seems to directly contrast with that of Edna's. Chopin was able to successfully be an artist and a mother of six children, superficially making Mademoiselle Reisz's position as artist-woman a seemingly plausible path for Edna to take. Chopin was able to blend these two roles as mother and artist by waiting until she was widowed and her children were grown up before pursuing her career as an artist (Toth 64). This aspect of Chopin's own life has caused numerous critics to question why Edna could not have just waited until her children grew up to pursue her complete awakening. However, I posit that Edna is unable to follow Chopin's path because of Mademoiselle Reisz's inherently problematic position as artist-woman.

Even if Edna were to somehow evade her responsibilities to her children, Chopin reveals that Mademoiselle Reisz is still not a suitable model for Edna to follow in her road to awakening. As Gray argues in "The Escape of the Sea: Ideology and *The Awakening*," Mademoiselle Reisz's position is inherently problematic predominately because of the delimiting nature of the artist-

woman role. Chopin negatively describes Mademoiselle Reisz as “a homely woman with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed,” and again as “a disagreeable little woman... who had quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (Chopin 25). Furthermore, Mademoiselle Reisz is repeatedly referred to as merely “the musician,” suggesting her identity is limited to only her musical abilities. In order to fit this role as artist-woman, Mademoiselle Reisz must sacrifice “female attractiveness, sexuality, love, and connection” (Gray 62). Gray concludes that Mademoiselle Reisz’s circumscribed role “is not oppositional to the hegemonic ideal prescribed for women because it is not overtly threatening to the patriarchal system” (Gray 62). Essentially, Mademoiselle Reisz has been limited so extensively as a character that she poses no threat to the patriarchal system. Because Chopin places Mademoiselle Reisz in this limited role, she is ultimately unable to demonstrate to Edna how to break out of the confines of hegemonic patriarchy.

Since its initial publication in 1899, *The Awakening* has elicited a wide range of reactions from readers. Upon first being published, the novel received exceedingly harsh criticism. Critics coined *The Awakening* “moral poison,” “vulgar,” and “unhealthy,” leading to its extremely limited success in the United States (Davis). Upon her death in 1904, Chopin and her writing remained “virtually forgotten for a half a century, until Per Seyersted rediscovered her in the 1960s and American feminists embraced her” (Toth 65). The often inflammatory nature of *The Awakening* can partially be attributed to the complexity of Chopin’s minor characters and Edna’s non-linear development. Through her use of binary pairs of characters who are at once both reactionary and progressive, Chopin successfully demonstrates how each of these characters simultaneously inhibit and facilitate Edna’s awakening no matter which end of the spectrum they

inhabit. In doing so, Chopin ultimately underscores the difficult path Edna takes to awakening, a path filled with both progression and regression. Literary critic Bernard Koloski highlights the growing popularity and impact *The Awakening* has had during recent years: “The recent re-emergence of *The Awakening* has helped satisfy Americans' suddenly discovered hunger for a classic woman writer who addresses some of contemporary women's concerns” (Sprinkle). It is the nuanced characters and development in the novel that has made *The Awakening* the timeless literary masterpiece it is today.



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