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KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*: NARCISSISM IN THE SUICIDE AND SEXUALITY OF EDNA PONTELLIER

THESIS

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By

Suzanne M. Lehman, B.S.
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The central figure in The Awakening, Edna Pontellier, is shown in this thesis to pursue a narcissistic flight from existential reality. Following a review of contemporary criticism, Edna Pontellier's narcissism is discussed in connection with her sexuality and suicide. Sources cited range from biographies of Kate Chopin to scholarly articles to the works of modern psychologists. The emphasis throughout the thesis is on the wealth of interpretations that currently exist on The Awakening as well as the potential for further study and interpretation in the future. Rather than viewing The Awakening as a purely feministic novel, it is stressed that The Awakening can transcend such categorization and be appreciated on many levels.

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INTRODUCTION

In analyzing Kate Chopin's novel, The Awakening, my purpose will be to explore information which already exists and to reveal new avenues of interest. I do not wish to refute present scholarship but to add to the interest that The Awakening has already generated and to demonstrate that, like any great work, it possesses a richness which invites frequent reappraisal and re-discovery. A need exists mutually between the body of readers and the work of art. The novel must be reassessed to maintain its vitality just as the readers must reassess the impact of the novel and the relevance the novel has to their world. The novel that is no longer discussed has no impact--it ceases to amuse, entertain, agitate, or perplex. The Awakening, Chopin's finest work, possesses great value and should be viewed from every angle and rediscovered time and time again.

The readers of this research and discussion will hopefully read (or re-read) The Awakening and appreciate the depth and richness of this novel. Original contributions will be made within this paper in the area of psychological analysis and, hopefully, will invite interest and, perhaps, even debate. By generating discussion concerning Chopin and The Awakening the goal of this thesis will be achieved.

The initial chapter is concerned with the life of Kate Chopin, which is presented in the form of a brief biographical sketch. This seems necessary and appropriate as it honors the author and presents insights into matters which may have affected the author's attitudes. It highlights areas that might have motivated or discouraged her.

A brief history of the life of the novel itself is included. This is particularly important in the case of The Awakening because its early reception was volatile, and it has experienced peaks and valleys of popularity. Its reemergence is evidence of the quality of the work and its importance over the decades and from one century into the next. Withstanding the test of time and trend, The Awakening may one day achieve the status of a literary classic.

A review of the major areas of scholarly criticism is important to the paper in that it establishes the climate into which all new appraisals of the work must be welcomed or rejected. The four major areas of criticism covered are local color or regionalism, feminism, symbolism, and psychological analysis.

The local color or regional critiques stress Chopin's insights into the life of the Creoles and the Southern tradition. The Southern art of implication rather than overt statement particularly comes through in Chopin's dialogue. In addition, she captures the unique combination of

modesty and boldness that is patent in the traditional Creole women.

The feminist critics demonstrate fully the awakening that Edna experiences _as a woman_. Her femininity is stressed as she breaks free from traditional constraints experienced by many women in the nineteenth century. In many of these commentaries her suicide is seen in a very positive light as she breaks free ultimately from every earthly constraint. Some of these critiques also emphasize the essence of Edna as a _member of humanity as a whole_, not just a female being but a human being.

The Awakening is replete with symbolism. The use of symbols and imagery adds to the novel's integrity, elevating it from the level of simple story to that of art. For example, the young lovers, the woman in black, and the ocean itself are simple characters on a surface level while functioning as important symbols on a deeper level.

The psychological criticisms of _The Awakening_ are by far the most controversial. They range from basic introspection into the motivations of Edna Pontellier to complex Freudian analyses of her sexual maturity. These articles are perhaps most controversial because they go beyond conventional literary criticism, combining the art of literature with the scientific approach of the study of the human mind. Much is speculation, but it is fascinating speculation indeed.

Because I found this criticism the most intriguing, my analysis of _The Awakening_ is meant to contribute another psychological slant on the main character of _The Awakening_, Edna Pontellier. Primarily I have relied on Ernest Becker's theories concerning man's existential dilemma as he presents them in _Denial of Death_. As I paralleled Edna's behavior with Becker's model, it became apparent that throughout the novel Edna attempts to come to terms with her death fear through several mechanisms, most notably narcissistic denial. Edna is a beautifully drawn female character and a credit to the literary genius of Kate Chopin. More importantly, however, she exemplifies the dilemma that exists not only for women, but for all human beings; she struggles to come to grips with a life that Becker describes as half symbolic (the inner-self or "soul" of man) and half creaturely (the physical, and therefore fragile, shell that the soul must occupy) (41). Edna fails to deal heroically with this dilemma, but to witness her earnest struggle and to see her attempt to cope with this insoluble human dilemma is reason enough to applaud Edna Pontellier. Edna does not give the reader an answer in the final chapter of _The Awakening_. She merely clarifies the question.

CHAPTER 1

KATE CHOPIN AND THE AWAKENING

Kate Chopin's major work, The Awakening, first appeared in 1899. Because the heroine, Edna Pontellier, was portrayed as a "sensuous, independent woman" (Seyersted, Biography 9) the critics of the day viciously attacked the novel. Despite the negative criticism which prevailed in early reviews, however, a small measure of praise was given grudgingly to the work.

The critics termed it a brilliant piece of writing, but they were horrified by the heroine's self indulgence and the author's objective treatment of it, and they admonished her to go back to the description of 'sweet and lovable characters'(Seyersted, Biography 9).

The influence of The Awakening's critics was deeply felt in the literary world. Chopin was ostracized for her unseemly yet "brilliant" novel, and the work was banned in many cities; even in her own hometown, St. Louis, Chopin was reviewed harshly, and her greatest literary achievement was banned (Seyersted, Biography 173). Bruised by the battering of the critics, Chopin retreated from the difficulties of publication and wrote little more until her death in 1904 (Seyersted, Biography 9). Kate Chopin had shown bright

promise as a writer, but her works had entered a societal climate that was at that time unsuitable for such daring treatment of a female character. It is ironic that a work which was later proclaimed a symbol of the women's movement and of female liberation, a work that was entitled quite accurately The Awakening, produced precisely opposite results for its own author. The early rejection of The Awakening was unfortunate, yet it was not completely surprising. The original controversy stirred by The Awakening speaks of the power of the novel to stimulate interest and touch the heart of the reader. Kate Chopin and The Awakening have earned a place in the literature of the past and perhaps the future.

Katherine O'Flaherty was born on February 8, 1851, in a fashionable section of St. Louis, Missouri. While she was very young her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was killed in a railroad accident. Facing such a tragic event as a child probably drew her even closer to her remaining parent, Eliza O'Flaherty. In addition to her close relationship with her mother, she had a positive female role model in her great-grandmother, Madame Charleville, who helped to shape the character and temperament of the young author-to-be by encouraging two pastimes which were later to become absolute passions--speaking French and playing the piano (Ewell 5-7). Shades of these two passions permeate Chopin's fiction. Her love of music, particularly, is shown in Edna Pontel-

lier's transformation upon hearing the music of Mademoiselle Reisz:

> The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. (Ewell 33-4)

The preceding passage touches on the mystical quality of music, which not only sways its listeners spiritually but also causes physical reactions as well. Perhaps such qualities in music inspired Kate Chopin to the very aspirations she gives her lead character, Edna. After hearing the music played by Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna swims for the first time in her life. Rejoicing in her newly acquired autonomy, Edna "wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Ewell 36). Perhaps, like Edna, music inspired the young Chopin to reach inside herself and then to break away from all binding restraints.

Chopin's life certainly had its pleasures, but these were equally balanced by hardship and tragedy. She endured the death of her brother George, the death of her beloved great-grandmother Charleville, and the trauma of the Civil War as a Southern sympathizer. In contrast with this suffering, she enjoyed the powers and pleasures of music, nature, and youthful romance. Even while enjoying her most carefree moments, however, she showed an introspection and

depth that foretold her future success as a writer. In her commonplace book she wrote:

> I am a creature who loves amusements; I love brightness and gaiety and life and sunshine. But is it a rational amusement, I ask myself, to destroy one's health and turn night into day? (Ewell 9)

Chopin blossomed into a charming woman who would later be "remembered most [for] her quiet manner and quick Irish wit, embellished with a gift for mimicry. A gracious easy-going hostess, she enjoyed laughter, music, and dancing, but especially intellectual talk, and she could express her own considered opinions with surprising directness" (Ewell 5-6). This directness, combined with a knack for observation and colorful description must have helped Chopin to develop her own fluid, candid, impressionistic style. Her gift of "mimicry" is unquestionably essential to the author who wishes to paint a realistic portrait of human life.

Chopin admired the style of Flaubert, Maupassant, and, later in life, Sara Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. The common denominator in this group appears to be hauntingly realistic description. Chopin herself, in describing her love of Maupassant's work, unknowingly foretold the strengths of her own prose:

> I read his stories and marvelled at them. Here was life, not fiction; for where were the plots, the old-fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinking way I had fancied were essential to the art of story making. Here was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and

> who, in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw. When a man does this, he gives us the best that he can; something valuable for it is genuine and spontaneous. He gives us his impressions. (Ewell 19)

Chopin's admiration for Maupassant is mirrored in her work as she uses many of the same elements she admired in Maupassant in her own fiction. She expresses without fear the life and feeling she saw around her with a refreshing spontaneity. Chopin deliberately placed her characters in a rich and exciting environment, an environment that she was familiar with--Louisiana. She intentionally strips her characters of the prim and proper artificiality that was common to fiction, particularly fiction written by a female in the late nineteenth century. Chopin, like Maupassant, gives her _impressions_; these impressions were and are extremely powerful. Due to this very power, Chopin's characters, naked in the face of critics, scandalized the readers of American so greatly that _The Awakening_ was shunned into obscurity for many years. Ironically, the harsh and scandalous realities that drove _The Awakening_ into the closet at the turn of the nineteenth century pulled it into full view in the twentieth. Modern readers and critics seem more able to appreciate the artistry of reality, particularly liberated reality, than were the early critics of _The Awakening_.

Kate Chopin's first publication was on October 27, 1889, when she published "A Point at Issue!" in the St. Louis _Post_

Dispatch. Following soon after was the publication of At Fault, Chopin's first novel, on August 19, 1890. The novel dealt primarily with domestic matters, especially the difficulties of marriage, and was presented in the typical format of that time. The characters and the action followed the pattern of the nineteenth century domestic novel (Ewell 30).

Soon after finishing At Fault, Chopin began work on her second novel, Young Dr. Gosse and Theo. Unable to find a publisher for the novel, Chopin, unfortunately, disposed of it. Despite her failure to find a publisher for her latest novel, Chopin was active in literary circles during the 1890s. She associated with notables such as C. L. Deyo, Willian Marion Reedy, Henry Dumay, and William Shuyler. It was at this point that Chopin returned to the short story genre, writing tales of Louisiana and Creole life. Her readers were mainly those who subscribed to magazines aimed at children and youth (51). Riding the crest of the local color movement of the time, Chopin achieved some popularity with her short, regionalistic stories.

Following this success, she sought a publisher to print a "collection of creole stories" (Ewell xiii). She found a publisher in Houghton Mifflin, which printed Bayou Folk in March of 1894. This accomplishment was coupled with the publication of "Desiree's Baby" in the inaugural issue of Vogue magazine that same year (Ewell xiii). Chopin had

achieved success with her Creole stories, but the author who loved the work of Maupassant was not content to write works to be viewed only in one light; Chopin was destined to combine the beauty of the Creole tradition with a penetrating vision that was all her own, that defied regional classification. She continued to be active in the literary world, attending such events as The Indiana Convention of the Western Association of Writers, and trying her hand at writing from different perspectives. Her experimentations included two "rare first person sketches" (Ewell xiv), critical essays for St. Louis Life, and translations of Maupassant. It was also during this time that Chopin began her "Impressions" diary and notebook. The culmination of this period of experimentation and diversity was the idea for a novel; Chopin began writing The Awakening in June 1897 (Ewell xiv). In November of 1897 A Night in Acadie, another collection of Creole tales, was published by Way and Williams. One year later A Night in Acadie was transferred, along with the completed Awakening to H. S. Stone Publishers. On April 22, 1899, The Awakening was received by Chopin's supporters, fans who were accustomed to the popular stories of Chopin, fans who were for the most part unprepared for the impact of The Awakening. As late as 1986, Barbara Ewell would write that

> Even now, withholding its own judgments, the novel quietly implicates us in its probing of such moral questions as the nature of sexuality, selfhood, freedom, the meaning of adultery and suicide, and

> the relationship between biological destiny and personal choice. (158)

The editor of the 1983 Norton Critical Edition of The Awakening, Margaret Culley, concluded that,

> Whatever one may think of the moralistic tone of the early reviewers of The Awakening, who are responsible in part for the half-century neglect of the novel, one must conclude that they were correct in their basic perception: The novel is a powerful one about female sexuality. It may still be a dangerous book. (144)

The topics directly addressed in The Awakening, while they are talked about openly now, were addressed only in whispers in the late 1890s, and even then, the discussions of such issues always ended with an admonition not to fall prey to such satanic flaws and queries. To look too deeply or to question too much seemed, to many people of that time period, almost as great a sin as adultery itself.

In order to fully appreciate the turmoil caused by The Awakening's first publication and the impact such criticism had on Chopin herself, a perusal of the reviews of the time is helpful. The novel that was praised in 1956, years after its author's death, as "advanced in theme and technique over the novels of its day" (Eble 165), "amazingly honest, perceptive and moving" (Eble 166) was given harshly negative contemporary reviews in 1899. Although it is held in high esteem today as a breakthrough in fiction, the criticism of the late 1890s and early 1900s was either brutally negative or cautiously admiring.

Leading the camp of harsh critics were those who tried to downplay the importance of Edna Pontellier's experience, either by belittling women as a group or by denying Edna Pontellier as a representative specimen of womankind. These critics seemed to throw all of their energies into proving that The Awakening should not be taken seriously; if this had actually been the case, their protest would never have been elicited by the novel to begin with. For example, one critic from the Los Angeles Sunday Times described Edna Pontellier as "one individual out of that large section of femininity which may be classified as 'fool women'" ("Fresh Literature" 152). This sweeping generalization is followed by a description of the entire novel as "unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling" ("Fresh Literature" 152). Obviously, the idea of a woman struggling to find her own identity was so dangerous that it must be silenced quickly - before it might infect other women with such ludicrous concepts as self-awareness and individuality.

Other critics went to even greater lengths to frighten away prospective readers. One of the most interesting critiques brings the full passion of The Awakening to life in the form of a terrifying beast:

> One would fain beg the gods, in pure cowardice, for sleep unending rather than to know what an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster Passion can be when, like a tiger, it slowly stretches its graceful length and yawns and finally awakens. (Porcher 6)

This vivid, gripping description of passion must have frightened away many prospective readers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Porcher clinched his moving description with his image of Edna as awakening "to know the shifting, treacherous, fickle deeps of her soul in which lies, alert and strong and cruel, the fiend called Passion that is all animal and all of the earth, earthy" (146). Although such reviews might intrigue readers today, they doubtlessly prompted many of Chopin's contemporaries to reject the novel.

As if the portrayal of passion as a monster or, at the very least, the pursuit of only "foul women" were not enough to discourage potential readers, other critics attacked The Awakening from the religious standpoint. C. L. Deyo, one of Chopin's more charitable critics, described Edna as "not good enough for heaven, not wicked enough for hell" (148) and admonished [readers] sadly that "If she had been a courageous woman she would have put passion away and waited for love, but she was not courageous" (149). Not as reserved as Deyo, other critics blasted Edna's conduct as "totally unjustifiable" ("New Publications" 15) and The Awakening as "promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires" ("Books of the Day" 15) in addition to being "an essentially vulgar story" ("Fiction" 570). Fortunately for Chopin, such negative criticism, although prevalent, was sometimes mixed with a smattering of praise. The majority

of critics allowed their vision to be completely blurred by the sexual content of the novel and the free reign given the lead female. A few were able to see past the constraints of their century and appreciate Chopin's work on a less confining level. For Chopin and for today's readers, it is pleasing that some critics did not surrender completely to the typical restrictions of the nineteenth century.

A good example of mixed criticism is seen by Willa Cather, who criticized the theme as "trite and sordid" but praised Chopin's style as "flexible and irridescent" (Cather 153-5). C. L. Deyo also found positive aspects of Chopin's fiction demonstrated in The Awakening. Describing it initially as "positively unseemly," "disturbing - even indelicate," Deyo also stressed that "all must concede its flawless art" (Deyo 147). Even beneath a barrage of negative criticism the artistry of Chopin shone through. Deyo summed up the view of the contemporary critics when he described The Awakening in these words: "It is sad and mad and bad, but it is all consummate art" (149).

Sadly for Kate Chopin, she could not foresee the resurrection of The Awakening in the late 1950's. All she could see was the burial of her greatest work by short-sighted critics who were not prepared to accept such a work. Chopin was surprised and disappointed by the reception of her new novel, particularly because it followed a successful phase in her life as a writer. She had been enjoying steady

progress writing stories such as those in the collection A Night in Acadie and had built up quite a following for her local color sketches (Ewell 156-7). The brutal onslaught of criticism prompted Chopin to publish a reply, interestingly termed a "rejoinder" by Barbara Ewell in her Kate Chopin biography (157) and a "retraction" in the Norton Critical Edition of The Awakening (159). Whether seen as a 're-joinder' or a 'retraction,' Chopin's reply definitely was written with a grand dose of verbal irony (bordering on blatant sarcasm):

> Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. (Ewell 157)

The tone of the reply somehow passes over the boundaries of true repentance. It is likely that Chopin, though disil-lusioned, was not truly sorry for the actions of Edna. She was, however, truly wounded by the rejection The Awakening encountered.

After the failure of The Awakening, Chopin attempted to publish a new story, "Ti Demon," but was unsuccessful. After this rejection there was a brief lull in her writing, followed by a renewed attempt at publishing in which she published two stories (Ewell 26). Other than these few efforts, she seemed to turn away from the pursuit of litera-ture after The Awakening, but she continued as before to be

active in society and to enjoy life. In 1903 Chopin moved to a more modern section of St. Louis. At the early age of fifty-two her health began to deteriorate. She died on August 22, 1904, leaving six children. She is quoted as saying that she wanted to die before her children "so that I will not lose any one of you" (Ewell 26). Shortly after her death most of her work lapsed out of print.

CHAPTER 2

CRITICAL VIEWS OF THE AWAKENING

Temporarily lost but not forgotten, Chopin's greatest novel, The Awakening, was reprinted in 1964 by Capricorn Publishers. The novel, which was once scorned by critics is now commonly praised as a work of literature that was ahead of its time as well as a work that can be appreciated on multiple levels: as local color, feminist literature, symbolic literature, and a psychological novel.

For a period of about sixty years after Chopin's death few efforts were made to study or even to read her works. The major contributor to Chopin research during this time was Daniel S. Rankin, who wrote a biography of her, Kate Chopin and her Creole Stores, and also saved the original manuscripts of Chopin (9, 236), which now reside in Missouri Historical Collections, St. Louis (NUCMC 20). The collection consists of "a commonplace book, notebooks, poems, stories, clippings, translations from de Maupassant, album, and photos"--all donated as a gift (NUCMC 20). This collection was extremely helpful to Seyersted in his later work on Mrs. Chopin, giving insights into her personal life and also providing him with unpublished works (Seyersted Biography 11). Aside from Rankin's biography and the safe

deposition of her manuscripts, however, the period between 1904 and 1964 was a barren one for Chopin scholarship. Had anyone desired to study The Awakening, even acquiring a copy would have been far from easy. Looking back through Books In Print quickly illustrates the dilemma encountered in finding copies of any of the works of Chopin. Beginning in 1950, skipping to 1955 and 1960, one finds that no copies of any of Chopin's works were available. In 1965, The Awakening was available from one publisher, but no other works were in print. By 1970, three publishers offered The Awakening, and a half dozen of Chopin's other works were also available in print singly or in collections. Through the '70s and '80s, Chopin's works gained a new popularity and were widely printed and researched. In the 1985-86 Books In Print there are twelve available copies of The Awakening (some single, some in collections) (BIP 1955, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, 85-6).

Within the past twenty years there has been a tremendous growth of interest in and research about Kate Chopin and her fiction. Part of this interest can be attributed to the women's movement, but feminists are by no means the only ones interested in Kate Chopin. Over the past twenty years literary criticism has increased, particularly on her major work, The Awakening, which is the focus of this paper.

A survey of current scholarship on Kate Chopin and The Awakening shows four major areas of interest: regionalism, feminism, symbolism, and psychological significance.

Frequently, Kate Chopin has been referred to as a 'local colorist' because of the primarily Southern settings of her novels and short stories and her characterization of the uniquely Southern Creoles, Negro servants, and others. Too often this accurate description of Chopin's work as 'local color' has been used in the pejorative sense to downplay the significance of Chopin's literary contribution. This, when it has occurred, has been unfortunate, mostly for American readers. True credit should be given to the importance of place in a story and for an individual author. The hallmark of American realism is the creation of a believable setting, a particular regional area. Great writers do not write solely from the imagination, envisioning some intangible paradise; they write from the heart and as Lord Byron said, "There is no instinct like that of the heart." Chopin, according to her son, was an almost completely instinctual, spontaneous artist. He is recorded as saying that "the short story burst from her . . . [She would] go weeks and weeks without an idea, then suddenly grab her pencil and lapboard . . . and in a couple of hours her story was complete and off to the publisher" (Ewell 20). These heart-told tales have endeared Chopin to readers and critics as well. The spontaneous beauty of the regional scenes and

characters created by Chopin should secure a place for her among the great American realists.

The idea of specific place is central to The Awakening. The setting plays such a major role that it can be seen as a central character in the novel. Like a character, its predictability contrasts sharply at times with its abrupt and surprising about-faces. Specifically, The Awakening features the sultry, sensual appeal of the sea at Grand Isle juxtaposed with the more controlled, reserved city life of the Creole quarter of New Orleans. As Percival Pollard pointed out, Edna "was under the influence of a Southern moonlight and the whispers of the Gulf and many other passionate things before there began in her the first faint flushings of desire" (41). This comment, although included in a rather negative criticism of The Awakening, emphasizes the provocative power of the setting which Chopin created.

A prevalent element in the setting is the steamy heat caused by the hot Southern sun. The weather alone often has a decided effect on Edna's character. One day, after dabbling at her painting with no more success than usual, Edna achieves a complete reversal of mood by thinking back to "the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind" which caused a "subtle current of desire [to pass] through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn" (76). Following this recollection "her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors,

the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day" (76). With such images, Chopin paints the psychological influences of the Southern clime while also recording the physical effects.

Great attention is also paid to the presence of the Gulf in The Awakening. The water is vital to Edna's newfound freedom and autonomy; she discovers that she can swim for the first time during the summer at Grand Isle. The water is her ally as she realizes her emerging self for the first time. After swimming out "intoxicated with her newly conquered power" Edna turns to survey the surrounding "space and solitude" and particularly "the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky" (36). Unlike the perfectly matched moonlight and sea, Edna is not yet able to find her perfect niche. As Edna had struggled to swim, she must struggle to find her place. Consistently, the tranquil setting painted by Chopin of sand, sea, and moonlight, contrasts with Edna's turmoil. In the end, Edna seeks refuge from her turmoil in the tranquility of the sea. As she strolls into the Gulf "the touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (152).

Edna Pontellier does not seem a part of the Creole life that bubbles around her at Grand Isle and in New Orleans. Her Kentucky background simply accentuates the eccentricities of the Creoles by whom she is surrounded. A Creole is a descendent of either the French or Spanish who settled in

Louisiana. The Creoles in Louisiana are distinctly separate from the Cajuns of the same region. The two groups differ in cuisine as well as custom. The Cajuns are typically more countrified folk with backwoods ways and hearty food. Creoles, on the other hand, tend to congregate in urban areas, observe formal etiquette, and dine more sparingly on a select menu of expensive foods. The Creole's culture is skillfully evoked by Chopin in The Awakening.

Creole sexual roles are very finely drawn, leaving little if any room for individual choice. Particularly the role of the Creole woman, wife, and mother is narrowly measured out by custom and culture. Marie Fletcher in her article, "The Southern Woman in the Fiction of Kate Chopin," clearly outlines the many responsibilities (and few rights) of the Creole woman. She describes Edna accurately as "not like the Creole women in being able to continue as a long-suffering, self-sacrificing, faithful, and loyal wife and mother when love is gone" (117).

Adele Ratignolle is cast as the stereotypical Creole wife, living completely for her husband and children rather than for herself. The contrast between Edna and Madame Ratignolle is so sharp that Madame Ratignolle herself warns Robert Lebrun "She is not one of us: she is not like us." Madame Ratignolle particularly differs on the subject of children. Adele Ratignolle says she would give up all that she has for her children, meaning her life. Edna asserts

that she, too, would give up her life but not her self. To Adele this is a contradiction in terms because for the Creole woman there exists very little if any "self" outside of traditional roles.

Even the physical descriptions of Adele and Edna contrast sharply. Edna is angular and strong, striking rather than beautiful. Edna is described upon coming to dinner one night as "a rich, rare blossom" (53). Adele, on the other hand, is Madonna-like in appearance and in attitude. She is rounded, soft, golden, and warm - with arms fleshed out in a nicely rounded way which conforms perfectly to holding an infant. Edna speaks out, while Adele is content to listen attentively as her husband speaks. Much of chapter seven consists of detailed and interesting contrasts between Adele and Edna, emphasizing the Creole heritage that separated the two women.

Despite Edna's more independent nature, her demand for modesty is amazingly greater than that of the Creole women. Although unrelentingly faithful and chaste, the Creole women feel free to discuss subjects that conservative Edna would never dream of talking about in mixed company. Adele Ratignolle, for example, openly relates tales of her children's births and her present "expectant" condition. The right of a Creole woman to flirt, cajole, or discuss risque topics was taken for granted as a harmless sort of amusement. For example, Madame Ratignolle, anxious to entertain Edna's

father, the Colonel, "coquetted with him in the most captivating and naive manner, with eyes, gestures, and a profusion of compliments" while Edna was described as "almost devoid of coquetry" (68). The overall image created of the Creole woman is that of the puppet devoted to acting out her part in the play correctly. To do this they completely surrender individuality, adopting instead traditional roles and values. To the Creole woman, duty must always be served before desire.

In contrast with the lack of control over their lives exhibited by the Creole women, Chopin describes the Creole men as at least autonomous if not complete masters of their own fates. The Creole men were free to come and go at will, playing cards, drinking, and smoking cigars, but were still held fast to the family by their overriding commitment to children and wives. Unfortunately, this commitment often took the form of possessing rather than sharing with loved ones. Leonce Pontellier, Edna's husband, fell unfortunately into this mold. This is illustrated by his reaction upon looking at his sun-burnt wife "as one looks at a valuable price of personal property which has suffered some damage" (3). Leonce Pontellier was constantly concerned with maintaining the appropriate accouterments for a person of his position in society. This concern came before concern for his wife's mental state. Illustrative of this is his reaction to Edna's move to the small house around the block;

he quickly disguised her move as one planned to free the house for remodeling and improvements. His greatest fear was not about separation from his wife but about his precious reputation.

Another characteristic of Southern society revealed in The Awakening is the concept of male authority. In The Awakening both the doctor, Doctor Mandelet, and Edna's father, the Colonel, fall into this category. Leonce Pontellier, unable to communicate with his wife on any but a superficial level, consults both of these men (to no avail). The Doctor's reply, although certainly not very helpful to Mr. Pontellier, is highly indicative of the mystery that surrounds the female species. This mystery is not unlike that attributed to alien beings of non-human origin:

> Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism - a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. (87)

The "you and me" indicated in the preceding passage not only shows a typical Southern speech pattern; it also points out the extent to which the "good old boy" network travels back in history. In Louisiana, and in Texas as well, this is still very common.

Children in The Awakening float in and out of Edna's center of concern depending on Edna's whim. Typically Southern is the presence of caretakers for the children such

as Edna's (deliberately possessive) quadroon. The quadroon not only took care of Raoul and Etienne, but also posed "for hours before Edna's palette, patient as a savage" (76). Other blacks are also described in characteristically Southern fashion as mulattoes and octoroons indicating a mixed black and white ancestry. For example, Edna found when seeking out Mademoiselle Reisz, that "the house was occupied by a respectable family of mulattoes" (77) and that Mademoiselle Reisz was nowhere to be found in that particular house.

Entirely apart from these local color qualities, Chopin's fiction has often been mentioned as belonging to American realism. She is particularly noted for her objective, impressionistic style. Chopin relates the characters' actions and feelings without casting the shadow of her own personal prejudices or judgments over them. It is almost as if the action played out despite the author rather than because of the author. Per Seyersted, in Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography compared Chopin to Crane, Garland, Norris, and Dreiser. Seyersted praised Chopin for "complete honesty" in her description, comparing this aspect of her fiction to Dreiser in his Sister Carrie. This comparison is particularly apt because Dreiser's gift, like Chopin's, was in presenting life as he perceived it to be in a spontaneous and uninhibited fashion. His writing lacks artificiality and orchestration in Sister Carrie as

Chopin's lacks such distractions in The Awakening. Seyersted pointed out the fundamental difference in approach that Chopin demonstrated; she "concentrated mainly on the biological aspects of a woman's situation, while the other writers are more concerned with the socio-economic forces" which shape their characters' lives. Viewing Edna's situation as hopeless, Seyersted expressed a positive reaction to Edna's suicide. He saw it as a triumph over static circumstances rather than an existential defeat (Biography 190-6).

He saw, as many authors have, that Edna was imprisoned by her biological as well as her social roles. Escape from such roles in some way, such as suicide, might seem to be Edna's only option. Such critics see the realities Edna encountered as insoluble and inescapable. They romanticize her suicide as a heroic exit from the pain and toil of existence in an unfair world.

As one of the many levels on which The Awakening can be analyzed, the local color perspective is interesting and pertinent in the study of Chopin's work. The realistic portrayal of the setting and characters common to the South is also a positive quality in her fiction. Certainly place in a novel and for a writer provides a sense of 'groundedness' and adds to the realism of the author's writing; however, to shuttle The Awakening pell-mell into a cubbyhole labeled 'local color' is to miss a multitude of other pos-

sibilities. Without questioning the legitimacy of the local color movement itself or The Awakening's position as a part of that movement, the reader of The Awakening should retain an attitude of speculative receptivity toward other interpretations, a guarded questioning but not an unwillingness to be receptive to other critical approaches, such as feminism, symbolism, and psychological criticism.

The Awakening has been widely acclaimed and criticized as a feminist novel about women. For example, Emily Toth in her article, "Kate Chopin's The Awakening as Feminist Criticism," asserts that the truths revealed in The Awakening apply solely to women: ". . . Edna Pontellier is a woman, and what happens to her would not have happened to a man" (241). The feminists have championed the novel for its realistic treatment of nineteenth century female roles, its examination of the female concept of self, and its inquiry into the nature of female sexuality. This attention is greatly deserved, as The Awakening does deal primarily with a female in the nineteenth century struggling to make sense of what could truly be called 'a man's world.' Nevertheless, it cannot be stressed too greatly that Chopin does not write merely for and about women, but for and about people. Fiction treating the individual's relation to society and to his (or her) inner self cannot be categorized by gender. Still, The Awakening was revived at a time (the 1960s) when these were not merely questions that women were dealing with

as individuals - they were, and still are, political issues as well. Appraisals of The Awakening from the purely feminist view, such as Emily Toth's "The Independent Woman and 'Free Love'" and "Kate Chopin's The Awakening as Feminist Criticism," offer insight into Chopin's great influence on the women's movement. Edna, as a feminist role model, experiences both victories and defeats in her search for her place in society.

Interestingly, Edna is not the only character in The Awakening who is of interest to feminists. In fact, it is Edna's important interaction with two other female characters, Madame Ratignolle and Mademoisells Reisz, which most aptly demonstrates the full range of societal expectations for women. The three women are worth studying together because by contrasting them with one another each individual characterization is more sharply drawn. Madame Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz, and Edna Pontellier vary greatly in the degree to which they conform to societal norms and the attitude with which they embrace their 'life positions.'

Societal conformity has always been one of the primary issues confronted by feminists. Women have struggled to break free of the traditional female roles of wife and mother. This has often been an uphill battle to say the least. Even today, when women have finally achieved the "freedom" to join the teeming work force, they are still tied biologically to the role of procreation. Inescapably

linked with the creation of new life, women have in 1988 earned the right to be 'superwomen.' They have the dubious privilege of earning a living as well as encountering some of the same problems Edna Pontellier dealt with in the nineteenth century. In summary, the struggle continues and progress is slow. In Edna's Creole Louisiana Adele Ratignolle epitomized complete societal conformity.

Adele Ratignolle was the stereotypical Madonna, concerned solely with her husband and family, allowing only a few trivial distractions to sway her attention from this primary focus. In his book, _The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation_, Larzer Ziff describes the Creole female role which Chopin termed that of a "mother woman" (10):

> The Creole woman's acceptance of maternity as totally adequate to the capacities of her nature carried with it the complements of a fierce chastity, a frankness of speech on sexual matters, a mature ease among men, and a frank and unguilty pleasure in sensual indulgence. (215)

Adele personified this image of the Creole woman with a confidence and grace that Edna admired and envied. Edna particularly was attracted to her lack of inhibition, "the candor of the woman's whole existence" (18). Edna observed closely Adele and the other mother women "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as indi-

viduals . . ." (10). Adele Ratignolle devoted her entire being to mastering the role set by society for her and was entirely successful in doing so.

Madame Ratignolle, unlike Edna Pontellier and Madame Reisz, never sees beyond her static physical existence as a mother. She fails to comprehend at all a self other than the one dictated by her societal role. In conversations between Edna and Adele Ratignolle, this difference in awareness between the two women is accentuated. In discussing what they would give up for their children, Edna states that she would "never sacrifice herself" (62) meaning her <u>inner self</u> but would sacrifice the "unessential." Edna continues in her self-delusion, defining among the unessential things "my money" and "my life" (62). This concept of life as unessential is beyond the grasp of the earthy Madame Ratignolle, who bases her entire existence on the very tangible processes of humanity, most notably reproducing life. Therefore, life is not seen by Adele Ratignolle as merely a non-essential companion to the soul; it is seen as the single most important thing in an otherwise lifeless societal maze. As a by-product of conformity, Adele possesses great complacency. Following Edna's shocking revelations as to what she considers essential, Adele neatly dismisses her by saying ". . . a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that - your Bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that" (62). This

statement, particularly with its reference to one of society's classic proofs, the Bible, simply reinforces the fact that Adele deeply and completely accepts her role in traditional society.

Madame Ratignolle is so secure in her position as wife and mother that she loses her own personal identity; it is impossible to distinguish the real woman from the part she is playing in the drama. It is impossible to tell the act from the actress herself. This is strikingly apparent in her marriage, which is not a partnership of two unique individuals striving toward common goals but a melting of two people into a mold which effaces the originality of each partner. As Edna observed them together she thought, "If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (73).

The stark Mademoiselle Reisz contrasts sharply with the warm and motherly Madame Ratignolle. Evident in their appearances alone are their attitudes toward societal norms. Madame Ratignolle's golden beauty, warm sensuality, and fashionable clothing are all seen as marvelous assets: "the excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty" (18). It seems fitting that the standard or traditional path should possess the lure of beauty, while in contrast Mademoiselle Reisz, representing non-conformity, is intriguing but not attractive physically. She does not dress fash-

ionably nor does she boast of classic beauty. On the contrary, on the night that Mademoiselle Reisz first plays for Edna 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 hair" (33). The small weazened face and body points to the lack of interest she displays in attracting men and in her physical self in general. This contrasts with Madame Ratignolle's supple, goddess-like bodily attractiveness. Madame Ratignolle has enshrined her bodily temple in the latest fashions, while Mademoiselle Reisz has all but abandoned her physical needs.

Mademoiselle Reisz extends her lack of concern for the fleshly to lack of concern for her physical environment. She is found by Edna in her cramped apartment "up under the roof" (81). The things mentioned as Edna surveys the apartment are the necessities for Mademoiselle Reisz: "A magnificient piano crowded the apartment. In the next room she slept and in third and last she harbored a gasoline stove . . ." (81). The piano represents her art and, therefore, takes the greatest space in the apartment as it does in Mademoiselle Reisz's life. The necessities of sleeping and eating are provided for with no show of the slightest extravagance, once more indicating her disregard for the biological demands of life. Importantly, however, the lit-

tle dingy three-room apartment has "plenty of windows in her little front room" from which she can see "the crescent of the river, the masts of ships and the big chimneys of the Mississippi steamers" (81). This view indicates that while Mademoiselle Reisz has sacrificed or done away with much of society's ornamentation, she has expanded her ability to see or to view the world. This vision is a crucial part of her characterization. Recalling her physical description, it is important to note that though surrounded by a deteriorating physical self, Mademoiselle Reisz had "eyes that glowed." She is warmed by an inner spiritual fire that cannot be fueled by the material rewards of society. In her solitary dwelling she is not afforded much physical luxury, but she is more than compensated for this lack by the spiritual vision her simple life gives her.

Mademoiselle Reisz has acquired a presence through her art and her individuality, but she has paid the price in solitude and isolation from society. It is fitting that the piece played for Edna by Mademoiselle Ratignolle at Grand Isle was entitled "Solitude" (33). When Edna seeks to understand the mystery of Mademoiselle Reisz she visits her small apartment. She tells Mademoiselle that she is "becoming an artist" (83). The reaction of Mademoiselle Reisz and her warning to Edna show her awareness of the societal role that she herself had chosen. She warns Edna that

> To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts--which have not been

> aquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. (84)

In this warning to Edna, Mademoiselle Reisz describes the soul that she herself possesses while drawing attention at the same time to the soul of Edna Pontellier. Does Edna, like Mademoiselle Reisz, possess the "soul that dares and defies"? (84)

Edna Pontellier, of the three women, is the most ambivalent concerning her desires. She is unable to commit completely to society or to accept its mandates, but, on the other hand, she is unable to thrust aside the familiar constraints upon which she has become dependent. She is unable to find fulfillment in the world of Madame Ratignolle because she has listened to and heeded her inner voice. She can no longer be content as she once would have been with marriage, family, and societal functions. She has tasted the sweet wine that is freedom and independence and cannot return to pure water. This transformation is clearly indicated by Edna's reaction to freely expressing her ideas and feeling to Adele Ratignolle: "She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor" (24). She further describes how "It muddled her like wine, or a first breath of freedom" (24). Edna feels that her only choice is to be a "brave soul" and defy society. Unfortunately, she is unable to summon the courage and stamina required for such a task.

While attempting to reach for spiritual and emotional independence, Edna never truly releases her dependence on relationships with men.

Adele Ratignolle openly and candidly expressed her dependence on her husband for sustenance and support in every single facet of her life. Mademoiselle Reisz openly paraded her disregard for men in general and her need for no particular companion, male or otherwise. Edna, deviating from both of these decisive avenues, asserted independence and self-assuredness yet continually relied on male devotion for support. This pattern began in Edna's youth when she experienced her first infatuation with a cavalry officer. This infatuation from afar was followed in adolescence by another infatuation, this time with a portrait of a tragedian which "began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses" (23). It was at this point that she met her future husand, Leonce Pontellier.

Although of course unable to fulfill the fantasy qualities of the tragedian, Edna felt that she could, with Leonce as the doting husband, "take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality . . ." (24) Edna seemed to settle into her role as a wife and mother on a surface level, but she never abandoned the idea of a fantasy male whose love and support she craved. She was given an opportunity to realize this fantasy for the first time with Robert Lebrun. The deciding factor which ended their re-

lationship was that Robert could not break away from the standards set by society concerning the wife of another man --he simply could not defy society by committing adultery. This affair seemingly over, Edna struck up an alliance with Alcee Arobin. Edna still had not fulfilled her fantasy, still had not become an artist, and had only moderate success in escaping societal pressures. To Edna, death seemed, if not a solution, at least an escape from a world of unfulfilled fantasy.

Edna's dilemma is illustrative of the narrow limits set in nineteenth century society. She cannot be seen as a heroic feminist role model, but she should be seen as demonstrating important conflicts met by women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If any of the three female charactes (Madame Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz, or Edna Pontellier) should be singled out for praise or deemed heroic, it is Mademoiselle Reisz. However, even she points to the tragedy of female stereotypes in that she must choose between society and self--she cannot have them both. Thus, The Awakening, seen as an instrument in pointing out the predicament of women in society, is extremely enlightening. The Awakening dared to discuss things concerning sex, marriage, and motherhood that had only been whispered about before its first printing in 1899.

Sexual freedom is an important theme in The Awakening. As Kenneth Eble said, "Quite frankly, the book is about sex.

Not only is it about sex, but the very texture of the writing is sensuous, if not sensual, from the first to the last" (261). The Awakening confronted the American public with a number of frightening proposals; that the nuptial or prenuptial loss of virginity does not necessarily constitute a sexual awakening, that women are capable of sexual fantasy and of deliberately seducing rather than being seduced, and, most shocking, that the object of such awakened desires need not be the woman's husband. Obviously, the considerable dangers of such proposals, should they infect the mainstream American public, could be devastating. It is for this reason that The Awakening was obscured for so many years, and it is also for this reason that the woman's movement felt that it must be read.

The first proposition about sex made by The Awakening, that the nuptial or prenuptial loss of virginity does not necessarily constitute a sexual awakening, has been enthusiastically argued against by many critics. Percival Pollard, for example, in his "The Unlikely Awakening of a Married Woman," does a delightful job of using tongue in cheek remarks in an attempt to diminish the significance, and even the very existence of, Edna's sexual awakening. (This article was first printed in 1909). Typical comments from the article include:

> She was married to a man who had Creole blood in him; yet the marrying, and the having children and all the rest of it, had left her still slumbrous, still as innocent of her physical self, as the

> young girl who graduates in the early summer would have us believe she is. (41)

This comment only proves that Pollard has missed the point of The Awakening. The sexual awakening that Edna experiences is one of desire and freedom, not a mere physical orientation, which might have been administered by her dutiful Creole husband.

> The cynic was forced to observe that simply because a young woman showed interest in a man who was not her husband . . . the aforesaid fair female had lain coldly dormant all her life. (Pollard 41)

It is, of course this sort of defensive criticism that serves to emphasize the need which existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for a novel such as The Awakening.

The Awakening cast a new light onto the sexuality of women. It presented a likable female character, not cast in the role of villainess or seductress for gain, living in a typical nineteenth century setting. The candid portrayal of Edna Pontellier was flawed in only one aspect - it hit too close to home. As Margaret Culley said:

> Chopin's study of "A Solitary Soul" [the original title of The Awakening] is particularly poignant because the soul is a female soul, characteristically defined as someone's daughter, someone's wife, someone's mother, someone's mistress. (228)

Thus, the readers must envision themselves or their loved ones as they saw Edna Pontellier.

It is very important to note that Edna acts as the catalyst in her own sexual awakening. The fact that she

assumes control of the moment rather than being controlled is pivotal in her attempt to break away from traditional constraints. After looking into Alcee Arobin's eyes for an eternity, Alcee leans forward to kiss Edna. As he did this, Edna "clasped his head, holding his lips to hers" (110). Edna, it seemed had been the aggressor for once in her life rather than simply allowing herself to be buoyed along by society's expectations. Rather than merely dreaming as she had done with the cavalry officer and the tragedian, she had fulfilled her own fantasy. As she kisses Alcee, the narrator tells the reader that "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (110).

Edna had led the easy but suppressed life that was the lot of many women in her situation in the nineteenth century. She was not concerned for her daily survival, for mere sustenance. Physically, she was well-cared for, even pampered, by her husband, but emotionally, her life was barren. Her husband treated her more like a treasured possession than a partner. Edna herself saw their marriage as "purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (23). On the other hand, Leonce Pontellier felt that he asked very little of his wife, only that she perform certain social niceties such as seeing callers. As Edna's rebellion mounted and she refused to continue to keep up appearances

by seeing callers, Leonce admonished her for her irresponsibility and reminded her that they must do these things if they "expect to get on and keep up with the procession" (67).

Edna, to the dissatisfaction of Mr. Pontellier, continued to shun her place as mistress of the household. Although he had always been a mild-mannered husband before, this blatant neglect of her duties, this challenge to the established order of husband-wife relationships, shocked him:

> Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met with a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him. (75)

Mr. Pontellier's reaction demonstrates ample concern for the state of <u>things</u>, but not for the state of <u>people</u>, particularly his own wife. Less concern for housework and more for Edna might have worked wonders.

Edna had gained momentum by conquering fear of the unknown when she learned to swim, she had conquered established societal codes by disregarding her husband's wishes, and she had broken the final taboo by passionately embracing Alcee. Edna had made a tear in the fabric of which society is woven, defying her roles as wife and mother and daringly exploring a sexual freedom that was unheard of in that time. "She was seeking herself and finding herself . . ." (69). Because of this search, Edna is to be commended and deserves

the praise she has received from the feminist ranks. If Edna cannot be proclaimed a heroine, it is just as well because, after all is said and done, few women relate as completely to a heroine as they do to the struggles of a rather remarkable woman trapped in a common, tragic situation.

The Awakening is resplendent as a symbolic novel. It is fairly easy to discern the major symbols. The difficulty exists in the fact that the symbols must be seen through some critical context. In as objective a manner as possible, giving basic symbols and their meanings, in this section I will show the richness of Chopin's symbolism rather than emphasizing any one critical view of the novel as a whole.

One very important idea conveyed in the novel is that of vision. Mademoiselle Reisz is remarkable for her vision and Edna struggles to achieve a vision that will guide her. The idea of awakening itself is visual because only when one is awake can life's problems be clearly seen and hence resolved. Emily Toth examines a scene from Edna's childhood which is extremely significant concerning her vision. When Edna was telling Adele a story from her childhood in Kentucky, she could not remember what she had seen at one point. When questioned, Edna stated that "My sun-bonnet obstructed the view" (21). According to Toth the bonnet symbolized the limits placed on women of that time: "These

accessories [bonnets, parasols, and gloves] protect her from the sun, but also insulate her from a life of the senses." Toth also interprets Edna's other garments as confining her symbolically, which explains why "At the end of the novel Edna has cast aside all confinements, all garments, and stands naked at the sea." The sea seems, like the meadow of her childhood, to represent an infinity of possibilities (Toth 245).

The sea, which plays a distinct part in the setting of the novel, is also symbolic. One of the first descriptions in the novel is a powerful image of the sea:

> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. (17)

This initial view of the sea as siren-like, calling out to Edna, comes at the beginning of the novel when "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being" (17). The novel progresses full circle, ending with Edna once more reflecting on the exotic nature of the sea, surrendering to its pleas for oneness. As Edna walks into "the waves that invite[d] her" she feels that "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (152). The sea, like the sirens, beckoned Edna to her doom.

Another way the sea is used in The Awakening has been compared to Walt Whitman's use of it, "especially [in] his 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,' in which "the sea

whispers the strong and 'delicious' word death" (Leary 169). In addition, the sea has been interpreted as Edna's own subconcious and as representing Eros. If the sea is seen as her subconcious, suicide is a negative escapist act; however, if the sea is seen as eros, her suicide is viewed in a very positive, even heroic act.

The figures of the couple walking arm in arm and the old woman in black following behind with her ever-present prayer beads appear throughout The Awakening. One common interpretation of their symbolism casts the couple as Eros (sex) and the old woman as Thanatos (death). Other interpretations see the couple and the old woman as the limitations set by Creole society and as the unsatisfactory options offered to Edna (Rosen 198).

John R. May sees the figures as representative of the limited options open to a woman in Creole society. He adds to the figures, the couple and the old woman in black, one more representative figure in Creole society--the mother women (1031). Edna has passed the phase of the young couple, completely oblivious to anyone and anything apart from each other. She is unwilling to go on to the phase of the old woman, counting her beads, waiting to die. She should rightfully, according to Creole tradition, take her place as a mother woman, but she cannot see herself in that role. Thus, the limits set by Creole society give her only unsatisfactory options.

When they are interpreted as sex and death, the symbolic figures serve as a mobile back drop for the entire story, representing the limits set by creatureliness itself. Since Grand Isle bustles with concern for children and childbirth, the ever-present figures of sex and death are fitting for the environment. Sex initiates the process of new life formation whereas death represents the limitations set by nature. Human beings can unite and create but they cannot defy the limitation set on this creativity--death. The old woman, counting her prayer beads and constantly pacing directly behind the young lovers, shows the ability of the human race to cope with death through religion.

Edna is unable to identify fully with either the couple or the old woman. Although attracted to the intimacy displayed by the young couple, Edna is aware of the biological consequences imposed by nature. This is particularly shown after she attends the birth of Adele Ratignolle's child "with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken, revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture" (146). Unable to accept the cruel hand dealt by nature, Edna is similarly unable to find solace in religion. At one point, she is talking about religion with Adele Ratignolle and is shocked to find that she has lost her faith in the church:

> . . . during one period of my life religion took firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until - until - why, I suppose until now . . . (22)

Thus, Edna is unable to relate to either the couple or the woman, and, as a backdrop, they symbolize the ever-present realities of the world Edna attempts to flee.

The ring is yet another symbol of the traditional institutions of society. Edna's wedding ring is a limiting factor that she is unable to escape. At one point, after she had been asked to attend a wedding, her husband reports that Edna says ". . . a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (87). Earlier, when Edna first began her process of self-discovery, "seeking herself and finding herself," she had cast off her wedding ring, symbolically flinging away her connection to Leonce Pontellier. Looking down at the symbol of commitment as it sparkled from the floor "she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it" (69). Edna is helplessly fighting against the strength of years of established tradition and commitment. She cannot simply throw away or stamp out her alliance with Leonce and the result of that alliance--her children. Thus, ". . . her small boot did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet" (69). The circular nature of the ring and the manner in which it symbolizes the unbreakable bonds of matrimony might also be compared to similar circular objects - shackles.

Another prominent symbol in The Awakening is the birds that flutter around Grand Isle. Like the other symbols, these may be interpreted in many ways, but it is hard to

deny their place in the novel as symbols of freedom. The birds by their very nature are not tied to the earth as is mankind. They are able to experience the full range of natural beauty offered at Grand Isle: sea, sand, earth, and sky. Their existence seems boundless, but in the final analysis, is like Edna's, finite.

Mademoiselle Reisz, upon first learning of Edna's maverick desire to be an artist, warns her that she must "possess the courageous soul" (84). Edna is perplexed by this warning and questions Mademoiselle, who answers that she must have "The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (84). As Edna tries to break further and further away from tradition, Mademoiselle Reisz becomes more and more concerned for her well being. She voices her concern this time with a metaphor incorporating the birds:

> The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectable to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth. (110)

Mademoiselle Reisz has anticipated Edna's flight and its outcome. At the end of the novel one of the last sights witnessed by Edna is, significantly, "A bird with a broken wing . . . beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (152). This symbol emphasizes the tragic fact that Edna, like the bird, has been unable to soar to her expected heights and has been brought down unceremoniously to her final act, suicide. It is ironic that one of her first acts of confidence and

autonomy, swimming, is also her last act of despair and surrender.

The Awakening is richly filled with symbols. These symbols, in order to be fully appreciated, should be traced in detail throughout the novel and, thus, placed within a critical context. Each reading of *The Awakening* seems to increase the symbolic value of the novel and its power to intrigue the reader.

In its focus on the life of Edna Pontellier, *The Awakening* also offers a great deal of material which by nature is ideal for psychological analysis. The trials and tribulations of Mrs. Pontellier as she traverses the path which leads to her suicide are fascinating. It is especially interesting to dissect the inner workings of such characters as Edna because they are complex. By striving to understand the complexities of Edna's psychology one may achieve a greater understanding of the novel. Several critics have devoted a great deal of time and energy to exploring the psychological intricacies of *The Awakening*. The views given here are primarily those of Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Peggy Skaggs, and Otis B. Wheeler. They are intended as a survey of the psychological dimensions of the novel.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff identifies the primary conflict in *The Awakening* as "an existential confrontation between the heroine and some external repressive force" (449). She cites other psychological analyses which concern themselves

with the same basic issue yet filter their perceptions through slightly different theories concerning the exact nature of Edna's repression. For example, traditional standards might be seen by a feminist critic as the primary agent of repression. Wolff particularly rejects, however, the view of Edna as an important character only because of her femaleness. She urges that, ". . . she interests us because she is human - because she fails in ways which beckon seductively to all of us" (450).

Edna's humanness is particularly revealed, according to Wolff, by her erection of barriers to protect herself from psychological harm. Wolff fits Edna into R. D. Laing's framework for the schizoid personality which "consists of a set of defenses which have been established as an attempt to preserve some semblence of coherent identity" (453). Edna chooses to shield herself from the real world which is dangerous to her "coherent identity," by relying not on reality but on the consistency of a fantasy world which she herself creates, monitors. Two examples of this are seen in her fantasy relationships with the cavalry officer and the tragedian. Later, this can be seen in her effort to retreat into her art.

Edna's self-possession and her insistence on protecting (perhaps over-protecting) what she terms the "essential," her inner-self, is seen in her relationships with others. Wolff points to R. D. Laing's view that

> There is a constant dread and resentment at being turned into someone else's thing, of being penetrated by him, and a sense of being in someone else's power and control. Freedom then consists in being inaccessible. (453)

This lack of "accessibility" is decidedly present in Edna's relationships. Edna herself even recognizes her inability to relax with others, an ability she admires in her friend, Adele Ratignolle.

Edna is able through several coping mechanisms to successfully avoid genuine emotional involvement. Wolff points to such strategies as denying an adult relationship with Robert at Grand Isle and fixating her desire on the image of Robert rather than the real man. In addition, Wolff applies Freud's oral fixation theory to Edna with some success, using as support the infantile pattern of eating, sleeping, and nurturing that Edna follows with Alcee Arobin and, to a lesser extent, with her friend Adele, who represents motherhood.

Extending Edna's infantile search for safety and fulfillment, Wolff sees Edna's suicide as a regressive move symbolic of returning to infancy (Wolff 449-71). The sea as a symbol for the womb would seem to support this interesting psychological analysis. The only problem that arises with Wolff's analysis is that it seems to underplay the tenacity and fire that are sometimes displayed by Edna Pontellier while exaggerating her introspective and repressive qualities.

Equally interesting from the psychological perspective is Peggy Skaggs' analysis of Edna Pontellier. Skaggs sees Edna's fundamental dilemma as one of synthesis. Edna must successfully deal with integrating three aspects of her femininity: individuality, sexuality, and maternity. The quality of individuality is exhibited most strongly in Mademoiselle Reisz, while the maternal figure is embodied in Adele Ratignolle. Each woman is seen in a tragic light, as scarificing other aspects of femaleness to specialize in a single area (Skaggs, "Three Tragic Figures . . ." 345-64).

Skaggs' analysis provokes interesting questions concerning The Awakening and its characterization. Why does Adele Ratignolle dislike Mademoiselle Reisz and vice-versa? Is this meant to demonstrate an irreconcilable conflict between individuality and maternity? More likely is the idea that envy exists on the subconcious level in each woman --a desire to regain that part of her feminine self that she has sublimated. Further research into the characterization of Reisz and Ratignolle demonstrates the strength of Skaggs' theory concerning the two women, but the question remains: What can Edna do to integrate these three qualities into her own psychological makeup, and is such a resolution possible?

According to Skaggs, complete existential peace is not demonstrated as a possibility for Edna. She points out that Chopin divided identity in her fiction into two interdependent phases: ". . . one's own, continuing sense of

self and the roles one plays in relationship with others . . . But the phases are hopelessly at odds in Edna's life; as one develops, the other deteriorates" ("Three Tragic Figures . . ." 361). Edna is unable to achieve the equilibrium that might bring her happiness. Skaggs ends her article on a strong note, emphasizing the nature of Edna's brief existence:

> Tragically unable in her milieu to have a full human identity, Edna--unlike Adele the 'mother woman' and Mademoiselle Reisz the artist woman--chooses to have none at all. (364)

The implication here is that Edna was not heroic in her suicide but was just a hapless victim of poor choices extended to her by an unjust society.

Otis B. Wheeler sees Edna's eventual suicide in a way that is very similar to the way Peggy Skaggs sees it. Unlike Skaggs, however, he leads Edna through an interesting journey consisting of five awakenings. Also unique is his view of Edna's death as a denial of "Victorian myths of love" and "'the infinitude of the private man' that had sustained Emerson and Whitman" (128).

According to Wheeler, Edna's five separate awakenings are as follows:

> 1) a sense of personhood; 2) a sense of "true love" as self-consecrating; 3) the awareness of sensuality independent of love; 4) the discovery that love is only a biological trap; and 5) existential despair--the conclusion that there is no exit but self-destruction (123).

The first awakening (to personhood) can be seen in her rejection of the role of "mother-woman" and in her acquisition of skill in swimming. The second awakening occurs with her love for Robert Lebrun. The third awakening occurs when she realizes in her alliance with Alcee Arobin that sensuality exists without love. The fourth awakening occurs when Edna witnesses the birth of Adele's child. And, finally, the last awakening is one of despair when Edna realizes that she cannot change the rules that nature and society have made for her (Wheeler 118-128).

The most fascinating aspect of Wheeler's analysis is his portrait of Edna as an instrument in destroying "pervasive myths of Victorian culture" (127). He points to Edna's escape into the ocean as an effort to "alienate herself from life-defining and life-supporting" relations. He does not heap praises upon Edna as a heroine, but he excuses her actions by saying that "There may be persons . . . who can successfully escape from family, church, politics, and love, into art. But Edna Pontellier cannot" (Wheeler 127). Her inability to find a solution to her existential dilemma is tragic, yet it serves to emphasize for the reader the severity of the dilemma itself.

Before concluding the psychological analyses of Edna Pontellier, it is interesting to note the wide variety of viewpoints concerning her suicide. These varied opinions range from the purely pessimistic to the righteously scorn-

ful to the openly erotic, and finally, to the generously empathetic.

The earlier reviews reveal the most pessimistic view by far. From Frances Porcher, for example, in 1899, comes his famous comment ". . . it leaves one sick of human nature and so one feels--cui bono! [What's the use?]" (6). Porcher, like many reviewers, saw Edna's suicide in an entirely negative light. He felt that Chopin's denouement served only to depress rather than to elevate the reader to a new level of thought. Rankin expressed his agreement in 1932 when he envisioned the audience's response:

> The reader, following Edna as she walks down to the beach at Grand Isle--well what does he feel? Merely that human nature can be a sickening reality. (175).

These pessimistic views were intensified by some reviewers who added the threat of hell-fire and brimstone. For example, the St. Louis Daily Globe Democrat, in 1899, scolded that ". . . her very suicide is in itself a prayer for deliverance from the evils that beset her, all of her own creating" ("Notes . . ." 5).

Other reviewers reacted against negative criticism, envisioning Edna's suicide as a postive act of erotic fulfillment. Robert Arner, in his beautifully worded prose, exemplified such a positive view:

> It is ironically to a final sleep that her awakenings have brought her . . . In the arms of her demon lover, the sea, she has satisfied at least the most primitive of organic instincts, the drive

> towards death. There is no self deeper to find. (118)

This comment combines the erotic symbolic value of the sea itself with an allusion to Freud's instinctual theory. It seems to particularly capture the intensity of Edna Pontellier in he quest for an answer to her existential dilemma.

Finally, some reviewers, seeing that Edna suffered from difficulties which are typical components of the human dilemma, pity Edna's tragic demise. As James Justus succinctly put it, "Edna is given enough knowledge to destroy herself but no enought to save herself" (122). Unfortunately for the vast majority, Edna's situation was and is frighteningly typical, the norm not the exception.

Certainly, a wide range of views are held concerning the suicide of Edna Pontellier. Whether seen as boldly heroic or cowardly escapist, the act itself is unquestionably one of the most sensational and debatable aspects of <u>The Awakening</u>.

CHAPTER 3

THE AWAKENING: NARCISSISM IN THE SUICIDE AND SEXUALITY OF EDNA PONTELLIER

Thus, Kate Chopin's fiction has, in recent years, been studied and praised for numerous reasons: Its local color, its rich characterization, and its link with the women's movement, have all provoked an interest within the past twenty years that continues to grow. Such interest results from a rapidly growing appreciation of Chopin's contribution not only to women, but to society as a whole. To view The Awakening as a purely feminist novel, a purely regional novel, or a purely romantic novel is to cheat oneself of Chopin's deeper underlying themes. The reader must keep in mind that "Chopin is not a writer primarily concerned with women, but with humanity, and in particular with the individual in relationship to his social environment" (Muhlenfield 224).

Many critics have focused on Chopin's treatment of the individual in relation to society in The Awakening. Because this is an area of primary concern in Chopin's fiction, this chapter will address Chopin's theme of the relationship of community to self as seen in The Awakening from a slightly unconventional angle. The angle that will be utilized in

approaching the main character of The Awakening, Edna Pontellier, is derived primarily from readings of Ernest Becker's Denial of Death, Otto Kernberg's Severe Personality Disorders, and Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning.

In reading The Awakening and considering the character of Edna Pontellier it became increasingly apparent that she could be considered a truly narcissistic character in the psychological sense. Closer scrutiny and a paralleling of the traits and actions of Edna Pontellier and those of the pathological narcissist led to what seemed to be an inescapable conclusion: Narcissism is the controlling factor in the sexuality and suicide, the life and death, of Edna Pontellier.

The term "narcissism" tends to conjure visions of the mythical Narcissus falling in love with his own reflection (Lowen 20) or of a mild and relatively harmless conceit. However, the legend of the original Narcissus reveals that the narcissist is plagued by a much greater burden than one would at first suspect. According to mythology, Narcissus was a strikingly handsome young man, much sought after by the young maidens solely because of his physical attractiveness. Narcissus, much to the regret of the maidens, particularly Echo, graced them with little attention in return: ". . . Narcissus went on his cruel way, a scorner of love" (Hamilton 88). He continued to hurt others thoughtlessly; they loved him greatly, but he gave no love in return.

Passion seemed never to touch the cold Narcissus. Finally, one of the many maidens that he had wounded prayed, "May he who loves not others love himself" (Hamilton 88). Nemesis, the goddess of righteous anger, saw to it that this wish was carried out. It was then that Narcissus gazed into the legendary pool and fell in love at last, with himself.

Self-love would seem to be a great boon, but such is not the case with narcissistic love. Echo watched as Narcissus became frozen in his final long gaze. Narcissus recognizes the consequence of his self absorption when he says "Now I know . . . what others have suffered from me, for I burn with love of my own self--and yet how can I reach that loveliness I see in the water?" (Hamilton 88) Here the classic predicament of the narcissist arises; self is completely cut off from community. The narcissist cannot reach the idealized reflection nor can he see outside himself to commune with others. He is trapped by his desire to love himself; importantly, it is an idealized self over-burdened with the narcissist's own self-expectations. Narcissus, in the legend, realizes this immediately and says "Only death can set me free" (Hamilton 88) Echo, living a futile repetitive existence herself can only mimic Narcissus as he dies, "Farewell-- farewell" (Hamilton 88).

In modern terms then, narcissism can be seen not as harmless pride but as a psychological condition that affects deeply the way an individual deals with society and feels

about himself. According to Otto Kernberg, narcissists "have a highly idealized self-image and omnipotently deny anything that interferes with this picture" (180). This idealized self-image can also be called the "ego ideal" and is considered the focal point of the narcissist's existence. Hubristic thinking on the part of the narcissist leads to the development and nourishment of the ego ideal. With typical hubristic feelings of omnipotence and invincibility the narcissist reasons that as long as he maintains his ego ideal he can evade death.

Maintenance of the ego ideal takes the form of lying, rationalization, and change. Lying most often takes the form of denial. Narcissists will deny any aspect of themselves that threatens to dismantle their carefully constucted ideal. Rationalization may take the form of altered ideals when a formerly cherished illusion threatens to fade or disappear altogether. Acts by narcissists which are unacceptable must, of course, be rationalized away or edited completed from their "autobiography." Change, lastly, is extremely important because it generates new social settings with new chances for ego-gratifying experiences. In addition, too much exposure in a single setting encourages true relationships, and the greatest fear of the narcissist is that someone should really become acquainted with his inner self.

While apparently outwitting death in his conscious mind, the narcissist's subconcsious mind is constantly aware of the eminent and inescapable threat of death; at the very core of his being the narsissist's ultimate fear is that perhaps the ego ideal is not as strong as he thought--he is human and he will die. This fear was expressed by Narcissus when he equated death with freedom.

Such a complex illusion as that constructed by the narcissist requires an enormous amount of energy to maintain. The life of the marcissist is spent in acquiring this fuel and in shielding himself from his own subconscious knowledge of death as the destiny of humanity. Despite this frenetic inner activity, the narcissist may, surprisingly, maintain a very normal outward appearance. He may display all the characteristics of a normal human being struggling to cope with life, and he may form relationships, even lasting relationships. However, relationships formed by the narcissist are extremely one-sided; the narcissist will stay with the supplier (one who furnishes supplies for the ego ideal) only so long as he continues to gratify the narcissist in some way. Such gratifications encompass a wide range of stimuli: money, love, attention, praise, and change are just a few. As mentioned earlier, change is especially crucial in nourishing the ego ideal because a primary characteristic of the narcissistic personality is

boredom, often coupled with a sense of emptiness. Just as typical are depression and rage.

With amazing deftness, the narcissist will do anything necessary to protect the ego ideal, sacrificing anything and anybody as merely dispensible objects in the face of the all-important ego ideal. Characteristic narcissistic personalities form relationships quickly and intensely, moving rapidly through the primary phase of infatuation and thereby directly feeding the ego ideal. After the initial infatuation passes and the ego ideal is no longer being supplied, the narcissist will frequently devalue the former object of his infatuation (Kernberg 180). Therefore, deep emotional bonds cannot exist for the narcissist because narcissists cannot emerge from themselves enough to truly commune with others.

Succinctly, narcissism can be defined as a journey into oneself (Becker 48). Such a journey is a retreat from reality--the reality of life and death. Narcissism is a flight from life in that it functions as an avoidance technique. It distances one from <u>real experiences</u>--empathy, pity, love, suffering, hope, failure--everything outside the ego ideal is devalued. Narcissism is also a flight from death in that the ego ideal is maintained as a death defense, omnipotent and invincible, and in that, by denying life, the narcissist feels safe from death. On the outside the narcissist may be charming and apparently well-adjusted,

projecting the illusion of normal intimacy and involvement. Inside, however, the narcissist dwells in a lonely pit that he has created within himself, isolated from community and emotionally cold.

It is particularly interesting to note that The Awakening was not in fact Kate Chopin's first choice as the title of her novel. Indeed, her first choice seems ultimately more appropriate in view of Edna's self-imposed isolation of self from society--"A Solitary Soul" (Arner 106). And it is from this perspective, the idea of Edna as a 'solitary soul,' that her narcissistic flight from life to a solitary, self-imposed death can best be traced.

Edna Pontellier's life before going to Grand Isle is sketched only briefly by Chopin, yet this brief sketch contains several keys to understanding Edna's complex character. Her Protestant upbringing and the absence of her true mother surely affected her early psychological development. Chopin informs the reader that during her childhood, Edna "lived her own small life all within herself" (II 893). Edna, as an adolescent, creates for herself a world of fantasy that she later recalls as she talks to Adele Ratignolle: "The enveloping sea of grass," the succession of phantom lovers." This creation of fantasy is common in the narcissistic personality; if 'real' supplies for the ego ideal are unavailable, imaginary ones can be created. And yet, in Edna's case, real as well as imaginary objects

appear for her to focus her infatuation on. Edna recalls her series of infatuations as an adolescent and remembers that they all just drifted out of her life, causing little trauma. Edna's lack of deep emotional attachment or any lovesickness is due to the shallowness of the emotional bonds that she allows herself to form. People, to the narcissist, often seem like shadows, drifting in and out of existence--when necessary and gratifying to the ego ideal, they seem real, tangible, but when unnecessary they seem to disappear. This manifestation of narcissism occurs not only in Edna's early life, but recurs throughout the novel in her relationships with her husband, her children, and her lovers.

As a case in point, Leonce Pontellier serves as the ideal husband for Edna's needs. He does not demand passion or intimacy; he asks only that Edna conform to the societal expectations of his class of people. When Edna tires of seeing callers on Tuesdays, managing the cook and servants, and even refuses to go to a wedding declaring that " a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (87), Mr. Pontellier becomes concerned. Edna has discovered that even life as "the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her" is not enough. Not surprisingly, whenever Mr. Pontellier leaves, Edna experiences a sense of freedom and thinks little if anything about him while he is gone.

Childlike, Edna sees the world as revolving about her--people are real to her only when she is directly involved with them. Until the point when Edna goes to Grand Isle, her narcissistic ego ideal has weathered no major trauma. She had passively lived her life, entered a loveless marriage, and managed to nourish her ego ideal adequately. Her sole maintenance at this time lay in her illusion of "herself" as untouchable, distant from her family, and special. This is a typical fantasy of the narcissist because he "feels that he is truly living when he affirms himself egotistically as a unique, separate, and distinct human being" (Gordon 86).

This quest for uniqueness and individual space is seen often in Edna throughout The Awakening but is particularly apparent in her childhood recollections. For example, the recurring illusion of the sea of grass, limitlessly stretching, with Edna being the only human being to discover its beauty and depth symbolizes Edna's desire to maintain control over her own destiny. Edna thinks back, recalling "I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever" (21). What is particularly attractive about this vision is that it reinforces Edna's feelings of omnipotence and invincibility. Such feelings of separateness extended to Edna's early personal relationships as well. Edna "had had an occasional girlfriend" but "they seemed to have been all of one type--the self-contained"

(22). By associating with people who were, like herself, reserved, Edna never risks true intimacy.

When Edna arrives at Grand Isle, she is in what can be termed a "dormant" state. Her life has been fairly uneventful, with few breaks in tradition or routine, and she has been carried along passively. Her existence can be compared to that of a moth that has not yet broken out of its cocoon--she has been living inside herself, surrounded by a protective narcissistic shell.

At the resort in Grand Isle, Edna is suddenly given the time and the stimulus required to allow breaks in her previously impervious shell. For the first time, Edna's ego ideal comes under fire. The two most important discoveries that Edna makes at Grand Isle, that violate her internalized world the most, are Eros and Thanatos. Sex and death are witnessed as inseparable, symbolized in the novel by the lady in black (death) that constantly follows the young lovers (sex). Edna experiences, almost simultaneously, an increased awareness of both death and sex.

Edna had tried in vain all summer to learn to swim. Finally achieving her goal, Edna swims too far out for her feeble and unaccustomed strokes, "intoxicated with her newly conquered power" "she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (36). Plunging through the sea that was described earlier in the novel in incredibly sensual terms, Edna turns to see "the stretch of water behind her" which

had "assumed the aspect of a barrier" (37). The sea, like the young lovers who walk arm in arm is representative of sensuality, and it too is linked inescapably with death. Edna realized in an instinctual flash all that had passed in that moment of vision and "A quick vision of death smote her soul . . ." (37). Following this experience, Edna is fatigued. Her concious mind, unaccustomed to such brutal revelations is shocked. She marvels that "A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night. I don't comprehend half of them" (38). Edna is beginning to recognize realities which she had never before allowed herself to experience.

A second surge of recognition takes place when she first hears Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano:

> It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of abiding truth. (34)

Edna is incapable of withstanding the bluntness of this truth--the truth connected with life and death. She immediately attempts to translate the truth portrayed in the music into appropriate, ego-satisfying fantasies, but is unsuccessful:

> She 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, hope, or 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. (34)

Edna demonstrates here the terror and confusion experienced by the narcissist when the ego ideal is threatened. She then begins to search for ways to adjust to the new revelations about death and sex that are troubling her. Death and sex, both body-oriented, are now troubling her mind, her inner self. Edna cannot comprehend how she can integrate her ego ideal with the idea of creaturliness--of life within an animal body that experiences sex and death. Her vision when listening to Madame Reisz play "Solitude" is symbolic of this inner conflict between mind and body:

> When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him. (33)

The naked man represents Edna's physical self, a self that she has neglected until now because with the pleasures that the body offers in sensuality come the penalities of unavoidable aging, death, and decay. The bird flying away represents Edna's ego ideal; it is free, heaven-bound, god-like. The demeanor of the man, resignation, symbolizes the fact that Edna cannot reconcile her creatureliness with her ego ideal. Ultimately, the ego ideal will demand and receive anything necessary for maintenance, even the sacrifice of the body, of life.

Thus, Edna is confronted with a seemingly insoluble dilemma: she cannot be at the same time fully human, sensually awakened to the life of the body, and maintain the

reserve, the distance from the weakness of the body, necessary to maintain her ego ideal. In a desperate attempt to resolve her narcissistic dilemma, Edna turns to two role models, Adele Ratignolle and Madame Reisz, and to two lovers, Arobin and Lebrun.

The two role models that Edna emulates seem at first glance to be complete opposites, but further consideration shows a major similarity: both Adele Ratignolle and Madame Reisz are creators, and therefore, god-like. Adele Ratignolle represents the earth and motherhood. She has majestic good looks and her queenly carriage as she walks among her children shows her god-like role. She creates by giving birth and is described in glowingly sexual terms:

> . . . the spungold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain . . . two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries . . . . (10)

Edna herself describes Adele as "some sensuous Madonna" (14). For all Adele's sensuality and ease, however, Edna sees that Adele has paid the price--she has completely conformed to society. As Becker says, "Man is protected by the secure and limited alternatives his society offers him, and if he does not look up from his path he can live out his life with a certain dull security" (74). Adele is perfectly comfortable with her stereotyped role and "Even as she herself is a 'mother-woman,' she tends to perceive others in stereotyped terms also" (Skaggs, "Three Tragic Figures . . ." 349).

Edna can, to a certain extent, relate to the role of "mother woman" as creator, but ultimately her hubris must reject such an "ordinary," "natural," and "unexciting" role. Occasionally she thrills to her role as "mother woman"; on such occasions she embraces her children or enthusiastically spends time with them. These fits of motherhood are sporadic, however, and short-lived. Her children remain to her, as are all others, merely shadows that float in and out of her mind. She is more than relieved to see them go to their grandmother's and thinks little of them while they are gone. It is primarily for this reason that I believe her using "their little lives" (note the elevated, god-like tone of "little lives") as an excuse for sacrificing her life to her ego ideal is a sham. It seems to be just another creator-fantasy that she is using to nourish her faltering ego ideal--she is grasping for straws.

Edna's attitude towards the body is vividly contrasted with Adele's. Adele holds her body in high esteem as the seat of her power, the power to procreate. Edna holds her body as an object which houses her unique and individual self--her mind. Although dreading childbirth, at the same time Adele "approaches it as her moment of glory to be fully savored" (Skaggs, "Three Tragic Figures . . ." 349). She is constantly reminding everyone of her "condition" and is not the least bit shy in detailing the accounts of her heroic "accouchements." Edna, in contrast, barely remembers the

births of her children and is reluctant to discuss anything concerning them. Avoiding the unpleasant connection of birth and death, she remembers them in a vague, dreamlike, idealized way. She expresses this at Adele's bedside as she is giving birth:

> She was seized with a vague dread. Her own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half-remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go. (145)

The role of "mother-woman" did not aid Edna in integrating her mind with her body, and unfortunately, the role of artist did not work either. Edna was greatly attracted to the idea of creating art--it seemed somehow pure and rewarding to her initially. In addition, the praise she garnered from Adele and others was what she needed desperately to comfort her bruised ego. Madame Reisz warns Edna in a foreboding way that she must possess "the courageous soul, the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (84). Madame Reisz also foreshadows her suicide:

> The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth. (110)

This is particularly apt as Edna must, like all humans, return to the earth. Although Edna pities the "colorless existence" of Adele, she too is doomed to the same mortal

fate. She cannot meet her ideal of uniqueness and supra-humanity.

The two lovers, Alcee Arobin and Robert Lebrun, are also only divergences from Edna's real problem--her weakening ego ideal. She gives her body to Alcee, for example, yet comments that "Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her." Though her infatuation with Robert is deeper than that with Alcee, it remains always on the level of infatuation--she never truly communicates on an intimate level because she is unable to experience real emotional intimacy. The gratification she receives from her sexual encounters is one of possession rather than love. For example, as she returns home from witnessing Adele's "accouchement," "she could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one" (148). Sexuality for Edna is an experience of possession, not of sharing. She is very willing to take ego gratification and adoration, but she is unwilling to extend herself.

In the final chapter, Edna realizes that the forces of life and death are converging upon her--they are inescapable. "It is quite common for the pathologically narcissistic person to believe that the ultimate power over life and death is to commit suicide . . ." because it gives him a feeling of control over his own life and death (Mitchell 18). Edna is very willing to sacrifice her very life for the ego ideal that she has protected for so long: "I would

give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" says Edna (62). Edna is willing to go to any extreme to prevent loss or damage to the ego ideal; there is a "disturbing, even alienating ruthlessness about Edna" (Spangler 251). She demonstrates some of this ruthlessness when she tells Doctor Mandelet: "I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have the trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others --but no matter . . ." (147). Edna has no compunction about trodding on the lives of others, and it is for this reason that her fabrication about saving the lives of the children by her suicide is merely a pretense (once again designed to gratify the ego ideal and hide the true reason for her suicide). Looking back, Edna reflects on the unreality of the life she has led:

> The years that are gone seem like dreams--if one might go on sleeping and dreaming--but to wake up and find--oh! well! perhaps it is better to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life. (147)

And so it is that Edna reaches her final phase--utter despondency. She intuitively grasps the fact that she cannot maintain the ego ideal forever as she has up to this point. She realizes that she lacks the "brave soul" talked about by Madame Reisz. She realizes that "To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else" (151), and that it will never be gratification enough to preserve the im-

mense ego ideal of uniqueness and power that she has created. This failure to maintain her ideal is symbolized by the scene of the wounded bird as she approaches the beach: "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down to the water" (152). This visual image harkens back to her earlier image of the naked man and the bird, wherein the man represented the human bodily life, one devastated by death, and the bird represented her ego ideal. Like the bird, her ego ideal is now as Madame Reisz warned--"bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (110). Emma cannot bear to witness the destruction of the idealized self--a destruction which would leave her only with her vision of the naked man --vulnerability and creaturliness. Although Edna's fear of death is great and remains until the end, "the old terror flamed up for an instant" (153), her fear of relinquishing what is most precious to her, the ego ideal, is greater.

CONCLUSION

The Awakening clarifies, through Edna Pontellier's struggle, the existential dilemma of mankind. Edna cannot be seen as truly heroic because she fails to resolve herself with the duality of human existence, an existence that is boldly divided--half god, half animal. As a result of this failure, Edna opts to surrender her life rather than continue what she views as a futile existence wherein she must always struggle with an insoluble dilemma. It is Kate Chopin's account of Edna's struggle that establishes the true worth of *The Awakening* as a novel.

It is of particular interest that Edna is a woman because the female of the species seems to bear the brunt of creaturely knowledge in a more meaningful and lasting way than the male of the species. Firstly, the woman's focal role in reproductive efforts is acknowledged from a very early age. According to Becker, "The woman, as a source of new life, a part of nature, can find it easy to willingly submit herself to the procreative role in marriage . . ." (170). This is evidenced fully in *The Awakening* by Adele Ratignolle, who is the embodiment of maternity itself. Edna tries to fit this role but is discouraged by its limitations. When the person immerses totally in physicality,

an experience of possession, not of sharing. She is very willing to take ego gratification and adoration, but she is unwilling to extend herself.

In the final chapter, Edna realizes that the forces of life and death are converging upon her -- they are inescapable. "It is quite common for the pathologically narcissistic person to believe that the ultimate power over life and death is to commit suicide . . ." because it gives him a feeling of control over his own life and death (Mitchell 18). Edna is very willing to sacrifice her very life for the ego ideal that she has protected for so long: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" says Edna (62). Edna is willing to go to any extreme to prevent loss or damage to the ego ideal; there is a "disturbing, even alienating ruthlessness about Edna" (Spangler 251). She demonstrates some of this ruthlessness when she tells Doctor Mandelet: "I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have the trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others -- but no matter . . ." (147). Edna has no compunction about trodding on the lives of others, and it is for this reason that her fabrication about saving the lives of the children by her suicide is merely a pretense (once again designed to gratify the ego ideal and

male roles from that of their distinctive individualities is that these things are intricately confused" (170). Edna asserts her individuality as a symbolic creature while denying her animal role. Since the two roles are in reality inseparable, she is doomed to failure in this effort to deny her own animality.

The fact that Edna is a woman is fortunate in that it reveals the unique situation that women confront. On the other hand, the significance of Edna as a woman should not obscure her significance as a representative member of the human race in conflict with herself and the world with which she must cope. The procreative conflict is only one of the many conflicts that Edna encounters; although significant, it is not to be seen as an isolated or solitary conflict.

Edna is very resourceful in constructing projects to dominate her interest and therefore shield her conscious mind from knowledge of her fate. One such ploy, often used by both sexes is the idea of "romantic fusion" (Becker 167). Romantic fusion can best be described as the process of bonding with another individual in order to avoid existential reality. It is an effort to join together against fate. "We turn to the love partner for the experience of the heroic, for perfect validation; we expect them to 'make us good' through love" (Becker 167). The theory of romantic fusion has two primary weaknesses. Firstly, no individual can face fate other than alone, which is one of the greatest

fears of mankind as a social animal. The terrifying aloneness of mankind in relation to the universe is an omnipresent threat. Secondly, a validation or redemption cannot occur through the use of another human being. It must come from what Becker describes as "our conceptualization of the ultimate source of things" (Becker 168).

Edna attempts with both Robert and Alcee to achieve such fusion. She is, not surprisingly, unsuccessful in the end. Enroute to that end, however, sexual and romantic fusion does fuel Edna's narcissistic fire with some success. A description of an encounter with Robert Lebrun illustrates the power of romance and sex to make man feel more fully alive and, therefore, more safely in control of his destiny:

> She leaned over and kissed him--a soft, cool, delicate kiss, whose voluptuous sting penetrated his whole being . . . (106)

Similarly, because of her love for Robert, Edna is able to transcend the guilt feelings that might otherwise surround such an adulterous encounter. Through her relationship with Robert, Edna is able, for a short time, to lose herself and thereby lose her existential terror as well. Becker has a detailed description of this type of sexual relationship in Denial of Death. Rather than going on at further length, a brief excerpt from Becker's discussion sums up the concept of immersing oneself in sexuality as a release from existential fear:

> Love is one great key to this kind of sexuality because it allows the collapse of the individual

> into the animal dimension without fear and guilt, but instead with trust and assurance that his distinctive inner freedom will not be negated by an animal surrender. (42)

It is clear that while Edna's love for Robert is sufficient to absolve her of all guilt, her lack of love for Alcee Arobin has precisely the opposite effect. Her affair with Alcee remains vaguely unsatisfying because she cannot capture in it the spirit of self-immersion which she felt with Robert. Ultimately, Edna abandons romantic fusion as a means of ego-gratification and as a means of avoiding existential fear. She decides in the end to stand alone, which is, after all, the only real choice that is ever extended to man.

According to Kierkegaard, mankind's mental health depends on developing coping mechanisms which are not in themselves healthy, but are in fact, neuroses. In essence, Kierkegaard felt that full acceptance of possibility and destiny are beyond the capabilities of man and that he must shield himself from these things (Becker 85-87). One way that men are able to shield themselves from an existential reality that they cannot accept is through the normal machinations of human society. By conforming to such a safe framework, unexpected and frightening perceptions are impossible. Thus, man is safely swathed in a protective society. If not content with this alone, man may wish to reach beyond the immediacy of daily life, to ponder the creator or the divine reason for his existence. By "project[ing] one's

problems onto a god-figure, to be healed by an all-embracing and all-justifying beyond" (Becker 285) the individual is able to achieve a share of peace which can not be found within himself alone.

Observing the preceding framework, it is easy to see how Edna circumvents these possible solutions and drowns herself in existential despair. Edna is unable to accept the constraints of society or to work within that society toward any changes that might be achieved. She is unable to believe in a divine creator beyond the narrow bounds of human society. She rests her sole bid for transcendence of earthly cares on herself. Though valiant, Edna's quest for narcissistic fulfillment is doomed to failure. Her suicide is not heroic because it indicates her failure to come to terms with the nature of her being, her failure to accept life as half-deity, half animal. On the other hand, her suicide is not a reflection of insanity either, but rather of her failure to develop the routine insanities or mental illnesses that enable most people to cope with an existence which must at some times appear hopelessly muddled in ambiguity. Finally, Edna's contribution is not that of a heroic individual but of a typical woman struggling to find an answer to life's most paradoxical question.

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