Desiring Her Self: a Reading of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Published on April 22, 1899, *The Awakening* came to face a series of bitter criticisms aimed at the deeds of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, and Kate Chopin herself as the creator of such a woman. Wife to a wealthy, Creole businessman, Léonce Pontellier, whom the other wives agree "the best husband in the world"(9), mother of two sons, Edna's life *should* be the embodiment of a happy, fulfilling, even ideal life for a woman. This was the reality for the most of reviewers and readers of the time, though the set of realities Edna awakens to is quite different. The gulf between Edna and them is evident in the reviews of the day. The reviewer of *The Mirror*, as a fellow St. Louisan, wishes "she [did] not [write] her novel"(162)¹ and another St. Louis newspaper also condemns it as "morbid" and speculates "[Chopin] herself would probably like nothing better than to 'tear it to pieces' by criticism if only some other person had written it" (163). Even her contemporary woman writer, Willa Cather, voiced her abomination of the theme, calling the work "a Creole Bovary" and a waste of "so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style"(170) of Chopin.

As her biographer Per Seyersted observes, while the critics admitted *The Awakening* was "a brilliant piece writing, they violently attacked it on moral grounds"(30). A good example of it is the review by C. L. Deyo published in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. He dedicates the whole of his first paragraph praising *The Awakening*’s "flawless art" with Chopin's "delicacy of touch of rare skill in construction, the subtle understanding of motive, the searching vision into the recesses of the heart"(164), but spends four times more space defending the morals of the time and concludes it is "sad and mad and bad"(165). The typical reactions, defensive accusations in these reviews, show how the rendition of married woman's selfhood and sexuality by a woman writer was ahead of the time, not even recognized as a worthy issue. In fact, as the review in the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* suggests, the reviewers and Chopin/Edna are speaking from totally opposite grounds: "A woman of twenty-eight, a wife and twice a mother who in pondering upon her relations to the world around her, fails to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion...can hardly be said to be fully awake"(167). While the reviewer thinks the marriage and motherly duties of Edna is what she should awaken to, Chopin portrays that it is something Edna awakens from.

The controversy *The Awakening* aroused developed into a scandal. The publisher of *The Awakening* refused to publish Chopin's third collection of short stories,² and her native St. Louis libraries took out the novel from the circulation. All these, according to Seyersted, drove Chopin to feeling of "an literary outcast"(30) and slowed down her writing until finally it ceased altogether. Chopin died in oblivion in 1904, and aside from some mentioning of her name as a "regional" writer, it was in the 1950s when *The Awakening* came to the attention of major critics. In 1953, a French critic, Cyrille Arnavon, translated the work into French (titled *Edna*), igniting an active discussion of
the literary tradition to which Kate Chopin belonged. In the US, breaking the 58 years of out-of-print status, the editor Kenneth Eble brought the novel back in print in 1964. And in 1969, Per Seyersted edited an extensive collection of Chopin's works as *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, along with *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, making her works available to wide range of scholars and students. The last coincided with the emergence of feminist criticism of the 70s. In their strivings to correct the gender bias in the canon of American literature, feminists focused their attention to the re-discovery of women writers; *The Awakening* was one of such works. Thus in the 70s, not only the physical text became widely attainable, but also the original feminist theme of the novel, for which both the work and the author paid greatly, finally came to be analyzed and discussed in depth and width. While the arguments as to the meaning of Edna's suicide were carried on from the earlier critics, feminists brought in diversity of themes in the interpretation of the work such as the institution of marriage and motherhood, patriarchy, language, and sexuality.

The present paper discusses the issues central to *The Awakening*, the very issues that caused the original scandal and probably Chopin's reticence after that. Although Edna's awakening as an individual and sexual being constitutes a whole that is not fit to be divided, this paper attempts to do just that in order to see how a would-be constructive critique of the marriage system should end up in death. In the first part, it aims to clarify the 19th century realities of the marriage institution from the perspectives of wifehood and motherhood in order to understand what Edna awakens from. In the second part, her awakening is discussed from another perspective, sexuality. Considering this aspect of her awakening sequential (though suspended temporarily by her marriage to Léonce) to "one propensity which sometimes...inwardly disturbed [Edna]"(18), the present author tries to show how it comes to resurface and develops, and finally eats up the protagonist herself.

The story opens with the scene of vacation island Grand Isle, which in this particular summer is inhabited almost solely by Creole families from the city of New Orleans. From the very start, the narrator lets the reader recognize the definite line that strictly divides the sexes. Mr. Pontellier is just visiting the island to be with his family for the weekend, thus not ready to plunge into the holiday spirit, burying himself in the day-old newspaper, irritated by the noise of the birds and the delay of newspaper delivery caused by the physical distance from the city. He is anxious to be gone, to the city, or if that is impossible, to the Klein's hotel where men gather and things happen. Grand Isle, especially the Lebrun "house" and its cottages, is set as a community of wives and children, an extremely private sphere as opposed to the city where their men engage themselves in the public sphere of business. The physical mobility between these two spheres is described as male activity, lending the community a quality of temporarily transplanted home. As Léonce remarks upon coming back from the Klein's, complaining Edna of her inattentiveness to their children, "[h]e himself ha[s] his hands full with his brokerage business...[and can] not be in two places at once"(7), gendered division of labor and space is present and quite adamant. As Gilbert and Gubar observe, women are "confined by the men who possess them"(101).

In Léonce's home sphere, his wife is indeed "a valuable piece of personal property" for which excessive exposure to the sun can be a "damage"(4). He has the responsibility to his wife just as to other items of his possession. Although Léonce is described by far milder than Edna's father who reproaches Léonce for being "lenient by far" and advises "the only way to manage a wife" be "[a]uthority [and] coercion"(68), he still retains the authority to check and rein his wife up whenever she goes out of his way because the value of his property is, in turn, his own value. Thus he gets
infuriated when his wife suddenly renounces her Tuesday receptions and has to cover up promptly when she later moves out to the pigeon house. Receptions work as the exhibition of his property items, an opportunity to show his customers and friends the security of his business and social status, his power of the provider. Even the quite emphasized generosity of Léonce, starting from boxes filled with "the finest of fruits, pates, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons" (8) to his fine taste in furnishing which is the target of "the envy of many women"(48), functions in the same manner though smaller in scale. His wife, ritually sharing the bounty, showing the house and furnishing, and herself as the topmost property of his, serves as his ad pillar.

Among Edna's shortcomings as his wife, her mothering comes under fiercest criticism of her husband, and for this he is well supported by the abundant specimen of "mother-women" at Grand Isle "who idolize...their children, worship...their husbands, and esteem...it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels"(9). Placed side by side with the "embodiment of every womanly grace and charm"(9), Edna's difference is thus emphasized. At the same time, however, the narrator is overtly ironical in portraying the angelic Aèlé Ratignolle with her "imaginative" dizziness and worries over the winter night garments for her children in the heat of tropical New Orleans, suggesting narrative sympathy toward Edna. While the narrator reproaches Edna for "her habitual neglect of the children"(7) borrowing Léonce's point of view, her description of the Pontellier boys suggests there is no problem in Edna's mothering, and rather her way might be better for the development of the boys:

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. Tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices, which usually prevailed against the other mother-tots.(9)

As the narrator comments that Léonce's reproach is formed by "something which he [feels] rather than perceive[s]"(9), his judgment is not based on the actual state of the children's development but on Edna's difference from the ideals of mothering of the day. As if forgetting the fact that it is an act that exists only in the relation to the child, it is defined solely based on the act and attitude of the mother. Moreover, the quotation that describes the "mother women" is abundant with the words that suggest religious fervency, such as "idolize," "worship," "holy privilege" and "angels." Aèlé is also referred to as "Madonna," suggesting that the ideals of womanhood are modeled on Virgin Mary, and thus purity or lack of sexuality is also encoded.

Thus are the conditions of the woman as Edna finds them after six years of her marriage with Léonce. Within the enclosure of the private, she is the mistress but subject to the larger and comprehensive authority of her husband, bears and raises his children according to his wishes and rules. She assumes a public existence only as the ornamental symbol of his economic and social status along with his other possessions; thus her relations to other people are also defined by her husband. While Léonce has the freedom of crossing the boundary of public and private, and of choosing the profession and the people he associates with, an adamant uniformity is forced upon Edna. Though time is abundant for her, or any woman of her class, with domestic laborers at hand, her activities within that time are also regulated under a certain set of rules, as shown in Aèlé's piano practice solely "on account of the children"(24) and Léonce's reproaching Edna for spending a long time in her atelier that "would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family"(55). The 19th century woman, as
portrayed through Edna, is under the demand to form her identity solely in relation to her husband and children.

The characterization of Mademoiselle Reisz stands as the state of social outcast as the result of choosing to define herself outside this realm. While her artistry is greatly admired, nobody goes near or associates closely with her at Grand Isle. Putting what Martin calls her "politics of separation"(21) into practice, she always lives on the top floor "to discourage the approach of beggars, peddlers and callers"(59), and the proprietor of her prior residence admits she is "the most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street [and he] thank[s] heaven she...left the neighborhood"(56). Her physical appearance never gains any pleasant descriptions, either, with her idiosyncratic, shabby, fake violets in the hair, and even when she plays the piano, the art for which she lives, "her body settle[s] into ungraceful curves and angles that [gives] it an appearance of deformity" (61). If Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle suggest two types of different plots and conclusions for Edna's awakening as Showalter observes,³ Reisz's story is never offered in any pleasant form, almost discouraging the protagonist to take that path. The unpleasantness and much emphasized abnormality surrounding Reisz points to the fear in which the woman outside the norm is held. With Adèle as what she awakes from and Reisz as improbable option, Edna is set at the starting line without a model.

After six years of living under these constraints, Edna starts to feel that "she ha[s] accomplished no good that [is] worth the name"(50). At twenty-eight, which is young but old enough to foresee her life's boredom, "[a]n indescribable oppression" starts to "[fill] her whole being with a vague anguish" (8) and thus her process of awakening commences itself. What is particular about this particular summer is that she is, though married to a Creole, immersed in the community of Creole women for the first time in her life. Lured by "the candor of [Aèle's] whole existence," Edna's "inward life which questions" that has been hidden by the "outward existence which conforms"(14) emerges itself. For Edna, who is an American born and raised in Kentucky and then Mississippi, it is her first experience of a different culture. Creoles at Grand Isle seem to her extremely frank in their speech, intimate in their gesture, and open in the matters that are personal and sexual. Starting from Aèle's relating "harrowing story of one of her accouchements withholding no intimate detail"(11) in the company of an old man to Robert's yearly and intimate devotions to the married ladies of his choice, it is a series of surprises and shocks on Edna's part. Though Creole culture is merely another set of codes that are different from what she has been accustomed to, Edna responds with casting away her life-long "mantle of reserve"(14).

When Edna persuades Adèle to accompany her to the beach leaving their children behind, the woman who "ha[s] all her life long been accustomed to harboring thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves"(46) begins to talk, about her childhood, her secret infatuations with men, how she happened to marry Léonce, and how she is not fit for the role of mother. With Adele who listens and ultimately criticizes nothing, Edna can, for the moment, forget about social mores and codes and first time in her life admit her true qualities that have been at odds with them. This scene works as a ritual of self-affirmation on the part of Edna which makes her feel "intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor," letting her take "a first breath of freedom"(19). One thing to note here is that the narrative voice just recollects Edna's past, and though she is feeling free, the reader is untold the reason for it. Her wishes for her present life or the goals of her awakening are never articulated, and this inarticulateness remains an outstanding feature of Edna's awakening to the end. She does not really know what she wants and her feelings and emotions are the only force that gives her directions. Just as in her childhood recollection of Kentucky meadow, she is "aimless...unthinking and
unguided"(17).

Hirsch observes that "[f]ragmentation and discontinuity rather than progression define Edna's course through the novel" and that "[t]he absence of plot and progression locks her into an endless moment from which she in incapable of emerging"(66). Though it might be expected that her initial, inarticulate awakening will develop into a well-reasoned, steady progress toward her self-defined womanhood, the story actually becomes more and more incomprehensible as it proceeds. Still, the path she takes after her initial awakening at Grand Isle is recognizable. Awakening to the limitations the marriage institution imposes upon her, Edna starts to free herself from the ritualized obligations as the wife of a wealthy businessman, to cultivate her own human relations that have nothing to do with her husband, to seek a way to support herself economically, and finally to seek a space of her own. Her renunciation of the Tuesday receptions in chapter 17, her newly formed association with a group of people, Mrs. Merriman, Mrs. Highcamp and Alcée Arobin met at the races in chapter 23, developing her art of painting to a degree that "a picture dealer" comes to ask for her "Parisian studies"(99) in advance, and deciding to move to a different place, the pigeon house, all seem coherent with her desire for personal independence, cultivation of her individual self separate from her husband and children. *The Awakening*, however, prepares from the very beginning, two driving forces for Edna's awakening. One is her rational ability, the "inward life which questions" that likes to "[hold] religious and political controversies," and the other is her secret inclination to "infatuation," sexuality. While both forces are healthy attributes to a woman, sexuality gradually becomes an obsession in the course of Edna's story.

Going back to chapter 7, where Edna and Adèle momentarily enjoy their privacy and intimate chat, the recollection of her childhood includes "one propensity which...sometimes inwardly disturbed her." It is Edna's girlhood infatuations with men. Edna was just before meeting Léonce when the tragic event was added to her train of infatuations, and "when alone she sometimes picked [his framed picture] up and kissed the cold glass passionately"(18). Edna, in her childhood and adolescence, imaginatively directed her burgeoning sexuality toward unattainable men. While this kept her "respectability" intact, it at the same time placed her at odds with the ideal of female purity of the time. She was threatened by her own sexuality, and thus it was "with some unaccountable satisfaction" that she realized, after her marriage to Léonce, "no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection"(19) for him.

The ocean with its sensuous "touch" and "embrace" whose "murmur reach[es] her like a loving but imperative entreaty"(19) is depicted in highly sexual tone in the work. Entering it and mastering the art of swimming have the symbolical significance of releasing her sexuality. Considering the nullification of female sexuality of the time, it is only natural that Edna hesitates for a long time before starting out into the ocean, overcome with "[a] certain ungovernable dread"(27). Her swimming lessons are largely guided by Robert Leburn, the object of her infatuation this summer, and the moment she finally masters the art of swimming their relationship suddenly becomes "pregnant with the first-felt throbings of desire"(30), signifying the rebirth of Edna as a sexual being. As Gilbert and Gubar interpret the ocean as a realm "beyond the limits and limitations of the cities where men make history" whose shore "mark[s] the margin where nature and culture intersect"(102), Edna now learns to enter nature where no stigma is attached to female sexuality.

Mademoiselle Reisz's music has the same function with the ocean. Edna hears her music for the first time in chapter 9, and the narrative description of her reaction is highly charged with sexuality:

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.

(26)

Reisz's music is brought to Edna by the mediation of, again, Robert. Consequently Robert works as the usher of Edna's sexuality, through swimming lessons and Reisz's music, and sets the narrative structure where Edna's awakened sexuality keeps stimulated regardless the absence of the ocean or himself; Reisz really is a "surrogate lover"(Showalter 74). During their day trip to the Chênière Caminada, which occurs the next day, Edna flees the church of Our Lady of Lourdes driven by a "feeling of oppression and drowsiness...during the service"(34). Here she discards what Gilbert and Gubar term the "traditional Christian (that is, patriarchal) theology"(106), and at Madame Antoine's she takes off "the greater part of [her clothes]," bashes herself, observes "as if...for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh"(36), and completes her ritual of rechristening with bread and wine.

Unfulfilled due to Robert's departure to Mexico and further heightened by Reisz's music, Edna's sexuality gradually becomes the only driving force of her awakening. Refusing to reflect upon her own past that thus "offer[s] no lesson which she [is] willing to heed"(44), Edna's desire eventually drives her to a cul-de-sac where her propensity endlessly repeats itself. Edna's infatuation with the tragedian before meeting Léonce suggests heightened sexual desire in her, and their marriage is the result of Edna's re-direction of her desire onto somebody else. After coming back to the city from Grand Isle, she again redirects the object of her desire from Robert to Alcée Arobin. Her total lack of affection for Arobin—he is "absolutely nothing to her"(74) — mirrors her attitude toward the marriage with Léonce Pontellier that was "purely an accident"(18). Even the pigeon house whose purpose was to have "the feeling of freedom and independence"(76) changes its significance. After Edna experiences "the first kiss of her life to which her nature...really respond[s]...a flaming torch that kindle[s] desire" with Arobin, the entire house on Esplanade Street turns against her with "external things around her which [Léonce]...provided for her external existence"(80). She realizes that gratification of her desire through Arobin is the "cup of life" and starts to feel like a person "who has entered...some forbidden temple," and driven by "a thousand muffled voices [bidding] her begone"(80), she flees to the pigeon house. Just as Martin points out, it has become an action of "regression and retreat"(22). The little house, just around the corner from the Pontellier mansion, could serve as an outside observing point to objectify her married life and herself, but Edna's rational ability is completely abandoned by the end of the story. Marriage is merely a fetter for the realization of her self, which she now solely identifies with her sexual drive. Thus when her long-awaited moment with Robert finally comes, what Robert can give her, relationship within the framework of marriage, is not what she wants.

Adèle's childbirth works as the crucial event that finally stops Edna's would-be train of lovers and calls her rational self for the last time. Staying by the suffering friend, she sees through the torturous scene "with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature"(104). The word "Nature," capitalized, appears twice more in Dr. Mandelet's words in the next chapter:

...youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decry to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost.(105)

By the "Nature's illusion," Mandelet seems to point to the social ideals of womanhood that defines the woman a passionless and selfless possession of her husband and bearer and caretaker of his children. It is a hard lot for a human being but as a decry it is made sacred with the woman rendered pure and holy, and women themselves internalize and embrace it with "an intensity approximating religious
conviction"(Klein). Edna is outraged because she now sees what is hidden behind this illusion. Apart from the effacement of women's individuality that she has refused, there is also this physical torture. Edna, however, comes to realize her responsibility to Raoul and Etienne, "little new [lives] to which she [gave] being"(104). It was a choice between her awakened self whose major drive of life is her sexuality and the retreat into her marriage that approximates "the soul's slavery"(108) for her, but she eludes it by taking her own life that has become "unessential" in comparison with her self.

_The Awakening_ is a bold study of woman's life in that it tries to incorporate the aspect of sexuality in the characterization of a woman in the age when the sexual drive was considered strictly a male trait and a fatal blotch when found in woman. Edna's sexual awakening, on one hand, works as a force that detaches her from her own marriage and enables her to see the structural limitations forced upon woman as wife and mother. On the other hand, after life-long suppression it comes bouncing back with enormous force even to gulp down the person herself. The reviewers of the time reacted to the depiction of woman's sexuality on moral grounds. Their extremely strong reactions to this aspect of _The Awakening_ was, in a sense, to the point. Edna's awakening to the limitations of marriage for woman and her following acts could still be contained within the marriage. They call for redefinition of gender roles and relations within the marriage, but does not necessarily destroy the system itself. Her sexuality, however, once turned into an obsession and the only driving force of her life, does not leave any room for the institution of marriage to remain.

Death is death, but one can attempt at a positive interpretation of her suicide. Adrienne Rich's analysis of the childbirth blurs the line between or even inverts life and death of the mother.

under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child, her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother...will spell the "death" of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies for herself...(166)

Edna is twice dead in her married life: as wife and mother. By swimming out in the Gulf, where her long-suppressed sexuality reemerged, and where eternal satisfaction is promised by the sensuous waves, she is finally born.

Notes

1 Contemporary reviews are cited from the 1994 Norton Critical Edition, and the page numbers indicated within this article correspond to it. The original publication datum for them are (in the order of appearance) : (in the first paragraph) _The Mirror_ 9 (4 May 1899) : 6 ; _St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat_ 13 May 1899 : 5 ; _Pittsburgh Leader_ 8 July 1899 : 6 ; (in the second paragraph) _St. Louis Post-Dispatch_ 20 May 1899 : 4 ; and _New Orleans Times-Democrat_ 18 June 1899 : 15.

2 It was titled _A Vocation and a Voice_ and published finally by Penguin in 1991, 87 years after Chopin's death.

3 In Showalter's analysis, "Adèle's story suggests that Edna will give up her rebellion, return to her marriage, have another baby, and by degrees learn to appreciate, love, and even desire her husband," while "Mademoiselle Reisz's story suggests that Edna will lose her beauty, her youth, her husband and children—everything...but her art and her pride—and become a kind of New Orleans nun"(76).
Works Cited


