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## The Wonders of Water: How the Sea and Water Awaken Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier's Sense of Self in *The Awakening*

Rosario Jarrell

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THE WONDERS OF WATER: HOW THE SEA AND WATER AWAKEN KATE CHOPIN'S  
EDNA PONTELLIER'S SENSE OF SELF IN *THE AWAKENING*

A Thesis

by

ROSARIO VITAL JARRELL

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2019

Major Subject: English

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Approved as to style and content by:

Chair of Committee,	John Dean
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**ABSTRACT**

The Wonders of Water: How the Sea and Water Awaken Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier's Sense of Self in *The Awakening* (July 2019)

Rosario Vital Jarrell, B.A., Texas A & M International University;

Chair of Committee: John Dean

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* protagonist Edna Pontellier is a white, upper-class southern American woman who seems to have it all: wealth, a loving husband, and beautiful children. She does not, however, have a sense of self, for she is not content with living a domestic life. What she does have is a close proximity to the sea, and the sea awakens Edna to new prospects for her life because each time that she returns from being in the sea's transformative waters, she feels empowered to rebel against the patriarchy in her nineteenth-century Creole society in Louisiana. Not only does the sea embolden Edna to take more risks, but the water from her own tears also acts as a cathartic factor in compelling her to reevaluate her identity as a person. The stringent patriarchal society in which she lives, however, is a significant roadblock in her path toward self-fulfillment. Wives are the property of their husbands in this era, and a life outside the domestic sphere is unthinkable for a woman in Edna's position. Society notwithstanding, her own inner battles with her society's needs for propriety and her own needs for fulfillment clash as Nietzsche's theory of the Apolline and Dionysian proves. Furthermore, because Edna is a symbol of how marginalized women from any segment of the social hierarchy felt, her journey in seeking her identity is analyzed from a feminist theoretical perspective in

addition to the analysis of two female characters on opposite sides of the patriarchal spectrum. Examining Edna's endeavor to achieve a sense of autonomy, though a defiance to her society's norms, illustrates the message that women must have a choice in the path their lives will take, or they will do whatever it takes to achieve it.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is lovingly and primarily dedicated to my husband, Gordon B. Jarrell, without whose undying love, endless encouragement, and unconditional support I would not have been able to complete. Thank you for filling the empty role that I left as a result of the seemingly endless days and nights I spent reading and writing for my courses and my thesis. You became the family chef, taxi, housekeeper, gardener, counselor, and my caretaker these past two years. I know I would not have been able to accomplish my dream of getting my master's degree without your love and support. You are my rock, and I love you so much for your being there for me every single day of this journey. This thesis is first and foremost dedicated to you.

This thesis is also lovingly dedicated to my children, Gordy, Christopher, and Terry. Thank you for cheering me on throughout this endeavor of mine. I hope I have made you as proud of me as I am of each and every one of you. I love you all so very much.

I also want to dedicate this thesis to my daughter-in-law, Isela, and my granddaughter, Ariana. Thank you for your unending love and believing in me and for being a part of my life. I love you both.

Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my sister, Norma Ramos, for simply being the best sister a woman could ask for, and the rest of my family and close friends who have supported and encouraged me every step of my way. I love you all.

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God has blessed my life in so many ways that I feel I am unworthy of, but I am nonetheless most grateful for all His blessings, including my love of literature. Without this passion that I have for literature, I certainly would not have had the stamina to pore over countless readings in my quest to earn a master's degree. I thank God for the strength and determination He graced me with in all my academic endeavors. I would like to thank my undergraduate professors who fueled my fire for literature: Dr. Robert Haynes, Dr. Kevin Lindberg, Dr. Thomas Mitchell, and Dr. Deborah Scaggs. I truly enjoyed every single class I took with all of you. Thank you. I certainly would not be at this point in completing the graduate program without the support and encouragement of my graduate professors: Dr. John Dean, Dr. Robert Haynes, Dr. Ula Klein, Dr. Jonathan Murphy, Dr. Paul Niemeyer, and last but not least, Dr. Deborah Scaggs, whose relentless insistence of excellence in writing still inspires me every time I sit down to write anything. Dr. Scaggs, you are truly amazing, and I thank you for being such a great role model. To my committee members, Dr. Murphy, Dr. Klein, and Dr. Blackwell: thank you for giving of your time and talent to nurture and inspire me. Your words of wisdom never fell on deaf ears. I consider myself lucky that I had such a diverse and talented committee. Dr. Klein, I would like to thank you especially for meeting with me before I began my thesis to offer your ideas and perspectives. They were the springboard that helped me focus on the topic for my thesis. Lastly, I must thank my committee chair, Dr. John Dean, for his invaluable guidance in helping me write my thesis. Dr. Dean, your calm demeanor and patience every time we met helped assuage my apprehensions about my writing. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Without water, life itself would not exist. As science tells us, humanity sprang forth from the primordial ooze millions of years ago. Since human life began in water, our intuitiveness to return to the source of our existence calls to us again and again. The sea, specifically, has played a significant role in literature as a source of rebirth and even death in works by poets, novelists, essayists, and playwrights alike. In *The Awakening* (1899), Kate Chopin's heroine, Edna Pontellier, embraces water's affective influences through her immersion in the sea and in her own tears. In examining Edna's actions when she is in close proximity to the sea or any other water source—including her own tears—we may discern a distinct representation of the human condition in response to water. Water's seductive powers call to Edna time and again. Once she accepts water as the source of her awakening, she returns to it of her own volition to give her life back to that which allowed her to break free from the confines of her existence in the first place. One of the confines is her marriage to a man she does not truly love, but divorce is not an option for her because she depends on him financially. The other confine is motherhood. Once a woman has a child, she is essentially tied down to that child until he or she reaches adulthood, and Edna's sons are only four and five years old. Lastly, Edna is confined to a limited sexuality since wives in the nineteenth century are not thought of as sexual beings; a wife's sexual role is to pleasure her husband and produce his offspring. All of these confines are constructed because of the historical, social, and political training that men and women are expected to follow. Furthermore, Edna's plight is illustrative of Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of the Apolline and Dionysian at opposing ends within Edna, which creates further turmoil in her reasoning. Edna

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This thesis follows the model of *Victorian Studies*.

will be able to resolve all of her issues with these confines the more time she spends in the sea because she will only find the answers that she seeks when she is in contact with water.

The novel opens in Grand Isle, a scenic island off the coast of New Orleans where Edna and her husband, Léonce, dwell in a summer home with their two young sons, Raoul and Etienne, aged four and five years old. Rather than introducing her title character first, Chopin chooses instead to introduce Edna's husband to set the tone of the patriarchal system that was in place at the time of the novel's publication. Chopin alludes to Léonce's wealth since he is perusing day-old market reports on a Sunday while he listens to the hustle and bustle of several servants nearby and a quadroon nurse who tends to his children.<sup>1</sup> Chopin then alludes to his male dominance by his smoking a symbolically phallic cigar instead of a cigarette. In doing so, Léonce becomes the quintessential, high-status, southern Creole male of the time.<sup>2</sup> As he surveys his wife's appearance when she comes in after spending some time on the beach with her personal assistant, Robert, Edna is sunburned, and Léonce is perturbed that his personal property "has suffered some damage" (Chopin 5). In nineteenth-century America, wives were considered the property of their husbands "given all the actual ways in which men had the ability to coerce and constrain wives and daughters and the legal fact that wives and daughters were, to some degree, the property of their husbands and fathers" (Stansell 423). Edna has no choice but to submit to her role as a wife. Chopin symbolizes Edna's obedience to the law when she requests her wedding rings from her husband (which she had given to him for safekeeping) and places them back on her finger—the universal symbol of one human being belonging to another. At the

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<sup>1</sup> Quadroon: a term used in the nineteenth century to designate a person with one-fourth black ancestry. This term is now considered pejorative and racist, but my use here is only in reference to the character in the novel referred to as such.

<sup>2</sup> As used in the novel, a Creole is a person descended from the original French and Spanish settlers of New Orleans; an aristocrat.

onset, Edna represents white, upper-class, southern women of the late nineteenth century whose lives were restricted due to society's expectations solely because of their gender. Chopin cleverly contrasts this restrictive climate against women with the seemingly boundless expanse of the sea, for the sea will play a remarkable role in Edna's defiance of the repressive patriarchal norms.

Even after Edna places her wedding rings back on her finger and her husband has chastised her for damaging his property, she nonetheless remains in a jovial mood. Being close to the sea has had a lively effect on the Edna because she "look[s] across at Robert and [begins] to laugh," and "[h]e sent back an answering smile" (Chopin 5). This is the first event in which water affects Edna in a positive way. She does not care about the damage to her arms, nor the fact that her husband is angry about the damage she has inflicted on his personal property. When they attempt to relate to Léonce their "adventure out there in the water" (5), he is uninterested in their little escapade and leaves for New Orleans. Edna and Robert, however, revisit their "amusing adventure out in the water" (7) since it was so entertaining that it lifts their spirits with the memory of it. Thus begins Edna's exciting yet tumultuous relationship with water.

The subsequent interaction that Edna has with water is when she is figuratively drowning in her own tears. Léonce returns home late at night expecting for his wife to perform her wifely duties, but instead finds a surly, contentious woman who is reproached by her husband for not caring about their children. As she walks out into the porch to be alone, the "everlasting voice of the sea [...] broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night" (Chopin 9). At this point she begins to cry so fiercely that she surprises even herself. Edna's tears and the calling of the sea unite to elicit a profound, virginal emotion that she had not felt before. Although she brushes it off as a woman simply "having a good cry all to herself" (9), her instinct tells her that something is missing in her life. Edna's seaside escapade with Robert coupled with her crying episode

illustrates how water stimulates her thought processes in such a way that she cannot ignore the changes that are beginning to stir within her.

Edna, however, after her initial escapade in the sea with Robert and the bout of weeping she has at the beginning of the narrative, begins to rethink her role as wife and mother. Edna feels an “indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, [which] filled her whole being with a vague anguish” (Chopin 9). Although Edna is unable to comprehend what is happening to her at that time, the sea and her tears clearly have an effect on her being since she is feeling the first of many novel emotions that she had not allowed herself to feel before. One of these feelings is her recognition that she does not fit the mold of a conventional “mother-woman” since her children are not in the habit of running to her when they need comfort or love; they are more inclined to go to their father for affection.<sup>3</sup> The other women around Edna, on the other hand, make her inadequacies of motherhood even more obvious because all of these mothers “idolized their children” (11). Not only that, as wives these women “worshiped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (11). Not being able to relate to these women and feeling disconnected from her children contribute to Edna’s growing tribulation regarding her status as a wife and mother. As she ponders what she does not want in her life and what she does, a dip in the sea with Robert ignites “a certain light [which] was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it” (16), yet she will refuse to extinguish that light because she feels it will lead her toward a new path for her life.

When the sea calls to Edna once again, her awakening begins. Robert invites her for a dip in the ocean whose “murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty” (Chopin 15), and

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<sup>3</sup> “Mother-woman”: the term Chopin uses to describe women who were lovingly devoted to their children and husbands.

at this point in the narrative, Edna is “beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being” (16). The water acts as the catalyst for her rebirth as a person instead of a mother, wife, or piece of property. She will have other encounters with the sea and water, but perhaps the most compelling is when she learns to swim for the first time. Although “a certain ungovernable dread [had] hung about her when in the water” (30) all summer as she had tried to learn how to swim, in that defining moment when she ventures out into the sea alone and intrepid, “a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul [and] [s]he grew daring and reckless” (30). What was once a symbol of fear and angst for Edna becomes a symbol of empowerment and strength. From a geographical perspective, Keith Cartwright and Ruth Salvaggio explain that the gulf’s “currents draw inward— like some vortex of desire” and that “[s]omething about the Gulf can be mapped, defined by certain limits and boundaries— even as something else tugs and pulls one under into a buzzing vortex, or a lacuna” (3), but from a theoretical standpoint, the authors suggest that Edna is “[d]rawn to and into this ‘Gulf spirit’ [and] becomes consumed by a quest for ‘misty spirit form’ consummated desire, and new combinations of consciousness” (2). This perspective relates to Edna, for after returning to the shore to the praise and admiration of her friends in finally learning how to swim, she decides to go back into the water to swim out alone. She nearly drowns, but it shows her that she is stronger than she thought she was, and “a thousand emotions [...] swept through [her] to-night” even though she admits that she did not comprehend half of them (Chopin 31). Those emotions are what will guide Edna to her final, inexorable meeting with the sea.

Although her submission to these new emotions will take time for Edna to discover, the fact that the water has stirred new emotions within her catapults her into unknown territory. Her forbidden love, Robert, leaves her at the water’s edge when he departs to México. Shortly

thereafter, she plunges into the sea again. Instead of the euphoria that she felt the last time she was in the water, this time “she felt depressed, almost unhappy” (Chopin 51). Soon, though, the water invigorates her spirit, renewing her enthusiasm at what life will have in store for her now that summer has come to an end. At this point in the narrative, Edna and her family leave the summer home and move back to New Orleans. The sea, however, has accomplished its job of catharsis: Edna begins her ascent into uncharted territory for a white, upper-class, southern woman of the late nineteenth century who refuses to be dominated by a man and who desires her independence and freedom from the obligations of marriage and motherhood.

At the family home in New Orleans, Edna initially attempts to continue to follow the rules of her southern Creole society because her husband and her community expect her to do so. According to Mary L. Shaffter, a Creole wife in America in the nineteenth century “entertains beautifully” and even “[h]er salon, her toilet, show the refinement of her taste” with a “*noblesse oblige* that one respects.”<sup>4</sup> Shaffter, moreover, alludes to these women being content living within the domestic sphere because, for them, women’s rights are “the right to love and be loved, and to name the babies rather than the next president or city officials” (155-56). A few weeks after leaving Grand Isle (where her invigorating swim stirred her need for autonomy), she abruptly decides that she would rather spend her weekly reception day out.<sup>5</sup> Léonce, horrified that she would defy such an established rule of conduct, cries out, “I should think you’d understand by this time that people don’t do such things; we’ve got to observe *les convenances* if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession” (Chopin 53).<sup>6</sup> Edna’s disdain for her

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<sup>4</sup> *Noblesse oblige*: literally, “nobility obligates”—the benevolent or charitable behavior regarded as the obligation of those born to privilege.

<sup>5</sup> Reception days: a day once a week when a woman was expected to be “at home” to receive visitors.

<sup>6</sup> *Les convenances*: proprieties, social conventions.

wifely obligations compels her to reject this standard of conduct for married women in favor of feeling free and in complete autonomy as she walks the streets of New Orleans on her own.

Edna's defiance for social norms continues. She ends her reception days altogether, roams the city streets, and renews her interest in art. Her husband, however, is completely alarmed at his wife's uncharacteristic behavior and begins to wonder if she was "growing a little unbalanced mentally" (Chopin 59) because Edna would spend hours painting in her studio. But her longing for the sea's guiding qualities filled her with unease. One day, she merely closes her eyes and recalls "the ripple of the water" and the "glint of the moon upon the bay" (60), but the mere memory of being in the sea is not enough. She does have the coast close by, but she chooses to stay away, for to take another full plunge into the sea at this point would open her eyes completely in order to make some difficult decisions regarding her marriage and motherhood, and she simply is not ready at this point to deal with either. Some days are filled with happiness, but more often than not, Edna's life has no direction. Even though she discontinues her reception days, she continues to entertain in her home, welcomes a visit from her father, and goes to the horse races, a common practice for women of noble birth. Yet Edna needs a sense of direction once more that only water can provide. The night she takes a refreshing bath, a "sense of restfulness invade[s] her, such as she had not known before" (75), for thereafter she enters into a sexual affair with the young Alcée Arobin and decides to move out of the family home in New Orleans to rent a small, four-room "pigeon-house." Matters become even more complicated for Edna upon Robert's return from México. Again, she needs the embrace of the sea for direction, for when Robert tells Edna that he has been "seeing the waves and the white beach of Grand Isle" since his return from México, she lies that she too has been

doing the same, but she adds that even though she has “been working with little more comprehension than a machine” she is nonetheless “still feeling like a lost soul” (101).

At this point, Edna must decide what she intends to do about her own life. She and Robert go to her “pigeon-house” to continue their conversation. After she bathes her face and hands, Robert informs her that he fled to México because he was in love with her, but he was unsure of whether she felt the same for him, yet he nevertheless returned in the hopes of marrying her. The water served to clear her mind as to her situation with Robert and Léonce. She informs Robert that she is “no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not” and that she will give herself wherever she chooses (Chopin 109). Clearly, Edna has come to terms with her position as a woman and not as a wife or mother. She has finally realized that, as a human being, she is not anyone’s property to be given or taken by any one man.

Edna’s final re-engagement with water is spurred by her friend Adèle Ratignolle’s *accouchement*.<sup>7</sup> Being in the presence of the birth of a baby emerging from the blissful protection of the womb’s waters causes Edna to yearn for that same peace and tranquility from the troubles of this world. As she walks home with her physician, Dr. Mandelet, accompanying her, she exhibits her complete awakening as she declares, “[P]erhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (Chopin 112). She is reflecting on her role as a wife and mother and realizes that she is suited for neither, but at this point in her life, she understands that any decision she makes will hurt her loved ones. To remain in the status quo, of course, would mean that she would hurt herself. Edna returns to her “pigeon-house” expecting to find Robert there waiting for her, but all she finds is his note of farewell. The man she loves has left her; the man she is married to but does not love will be back in town soon; and her children will return from visiting their grandmother as well. All is coming apart

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<sup>7</sup> *Accouchement*: The birth of one of her children.



and she is despondent. Her awakening is not just a figurative one at this point; it is a literal one too: she remains awake all night. By morning, she decides to finally take that necessary plunge into the cleansing waters of the sea that will free her from her ordeal. As she walks to the beach, she remembers her thoughts on her sleepless night. Edna realizes that she did not truly need Robert, Arobin, or Léonce in her life since “[t]o-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else” and that “the day would come when [even Robert] and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (115). Even her children are not as important as they should be in her life because “she would never sacrifice herself for her children” (115).

As she walks toward the beach for the last time, she can smell the alluring voice of the sea. To be in its weightless embrace, free from constraints, conventions, and children, is exactly where Edna yearns to be. She sheds her clothing so as to feel the water on every inch of her skin as she did when she was in the comfort of her mother’s womb. In the distance, a bird with a broken wing is desperately trying to take flight from the waters below it, but it keeps falling back down to the sea. Like the bird, Edna has been desperately trying to soar above the water’s surface as a free woman, liberated from the social restrictions that hinder her full awakening. As she swims farther and farther out into the open sea, she thinks about her family. Even though they were a part of her life, “they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (Chopin 116) because she finally sees that people are not the property of others. As Raoul and Etienne’s mother and as Léonce’s wife, the stigma of being attached as a possession is too much for this free-thinking individual who simply desires autonomy. The farther Edna swims out, the more liberated she feels. She has finally resolved her issues with her identity. The water has allowed her to transcend social, cultural, and political boundaries into a realm of independence that she could not have achieved otherwise.

Because *The Awakening* was first published in 1899, readers must understand the impact of the historical, social, and political contexts which dictated how white, upper-class, southern women such as Edna could live their lives, and Chapter II of this thesis will explore these issues in more detail as they relate to the novel. During this time period, this segment of the population was prodigiously restricted in independence and freedom. Margot Culley's article "Contexts of *The Awakening*," for example, reveals that "[m]ost married women in Louisiana [...] were the legal property of their husbands" (141). As such, Culley explains that wives could not consider any money they may have earned or material items they may have purchased as their own. Further, "[t]he wife was 'bound to live with her husband, and follow him wherever he [chose] to reside'" (141). Wives were likewise forbidden from signing any legal contract without a husband's consent, and Culley reveals that Article 1591 of the laws of Louisiana specifically stated that women were one class of individuals who were "absolutely incapable of bearing witness to testaments" (141). Because Chopin lived in Louisiana for more than ten years, she was fully aware of the southern society's expectations of white, upper-class women, hence adding the authenticity which makes Edna's marital and maternal situation even more troublesome for her.

Not only was southern society restrictive for white, upper-class, married women, but American society had certain standards for these women as well. For example, Richard A. Wells' *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* (1886) was a guide which well-bred married women were to follow in keeping with the rules of propriety. Domesticity was the norm for these women since wives were supposed to do everything in their power to make their homes "the nucleus around which her affections should revolve" in addition to ensuring that she present herself in the best possible light both outside and

inside her home since a wife would not want her husband to complain about her being the “object of admirations as respects [her] dress and manners when in company, while [she] is negligent in both the domestic circle (144). A wife’s role in white upper-class American society during this time period was strictly delineated for her such as making herself available for reception days and hosting dinner parties often. Wells also describes guidelines for motherhood: women with a “true mother-heart” will prefer the companionship of her children above all others (144). Absent from Wells’ rules and etiquette guide are job-related guidelines because these women were not allowed to be gainfully employed. Although being white and upper-class would be considered an advantage for anyone, these women were marginalized to the point where their autonomy was stripped from them.

Readers can also approach *The Awakening* from a theoretical perspective. In Chapter III of this thesis, Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of the Apolline and the Dionysian which he explores in *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872) can be applied to Chopin’s novel whereby the combined forces are at work within Edna. Apollo is the god of sun and light, and he is rational; Dionysus is the god of wine and music, and he is irrational (14). Thus, Nietzsche’s theory can also be symbolically linked to the sea (water) and the land (society)—Dionysian as the sea and Apollo as the land. Edna’s inner struggles with her identity exemplify Nietzsche’s theory of the Apolline and the Dionysian being in constant contention in the metaphysics of being. For example, at the beginning of the narrative when Edna and Robert return from their escapade in the sea, the Dionysian is at work in freeing her from her societal constraints, but as soon as her husband confronts her about her sunburned body, the Apolline takes control of Edna’s psyche, for she cedes to her husband’s concerns about his damaged property, and she complies with being a dutiful wife by placing her wedding rings back on her finger. Another

example of the Dionysian spurring Edna to think of herself as an individual and not a piece of property or someone's mother is her first crying bout when her tears are literally soaking her nightgown. The Apolline has caused the tears in the first place, but it was the cathartic release of the tears that ignited the Dionysian. These are but two examples that will be further explored along with others in this thesis to illustrate how Nietzsche's theory can be applied to this character in order to better understand Chopin's use of the sea as a motif for Edna's awakening.

Because *The Awakening* is considered to be a modernist novel and because the main character is a woman who wants independence and autonomy, Chapter IV will explore Edna's sexuality and gender fluidity since she faces more stringent restrictions to her identity as a white, upper-class, southern woman. One scholar who questions what happens when a female character exhibits strong characteristics is Nancy Armstrong. She contends that a female character that possesses "an inclination for adventure, intellectual precocity, forthright speech, [or] all manner of noncompliance—automatically puts her in violation of the principle that women are naturally subordinate to men" (102). Because Edna possesses these qualities, she does indeed traverse a turbulent road because of the patriarchy that prohibits her defiance. That being the case here, authenticity is crucial in making the character of Edna a believable one. Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) notes that although women need strong role models to identify with, a literary work must contain female characters who are not idealized beyond plausibility, and that the demand for genuine female characters should supersede all other requirements (47-48). Edna's journey through her struggles with her own identity and those that the patriarchy has thrust upon her can only be managed through the baptismal effects that water has on her.

In approaching the importance of the sea and water in Edna's life, readers can clearly understand the life-giving symbolism of water even when Edna uses it to end her life. Her suicide is not an end to her life, but a new beginning for her, free from the chains that had held her prisoner since she became Léonce's wife. That she chose to take the reins of her identity to steer them to a path that would guarantee her freedom, Edna is the enduring symbol of a woman who is unafraid to take full control of her destiny. By creating a strong female character that refuses to capitulate to society's standards, Chopin empowered women readers to take full command of their lives and not submit to expectations. As to the influence that this novel has on today's society, the main message is that *all* women *should* have a choice as to how to live their lives because only when the whole of society ceases to assign roles to women will true liberation for all women become possible.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL/SOCIAL/POLITICAL CONTEXTS IN *THE AWAKENING*

Human behavior can be the result of the training society assigns to people, depending on the context of the environment. The patriarchal system in America in the nineteenth century, for example, elevated males as the dominant gender while females were relegated as the weaker sex that men needed to control. For white, upper-class women in America's south, the patriarchy has an especially strong hold on women who were wives and mothers because "these women had been raised with a particular sense of 'woman's place' derived from some mythic age of chivalry" (Culley 141). Though Edna was born and raised in Kentucky, she is a relative stranger to the Creole society in Louisiana in which Léonce is a native. Their culture is "at first incomprehensible" to Edna because of "their entire absence of prudery," but she soon discovers that Creole women were expected to have a "lofty chastity [that] seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (Chopin 12). This kind of social training led to men and women alike adhering to established social conventions whereby men had more rights and privileges while women dutifully conformed to the established patriarchy. Although American women's rights groups have made great strides in re-training women to resist the tendency to submit to any male-dominated culture, this particular time period in American history had one of the most oppressive environments for white, upper-class women. In this era, women are expected to marry young, birth several children, and devote their lives to their husbands and children.

Absent from this scenario is the right to vote or engage in politics, the choice to remain single, or the opportunity to be gainfully employed. Women simply did not have the same privileges afforded to white males of any social class because women were deemed subordinate. At the same time, the end of the nineteenth century saw the rise of women's rights movements

and the suffragette movement. It was in this social climate that Kate Chopin wrote her controversial novel *The Awakening*. Unremarkably, the novel was criticized because of its defiant female character, Edna Pontellier, and her deviant sexual behavior. Because of the historical, social, and political context of the time period, Edna is a character that begs to be admired for her resilience and tenacity in her courage to confront the established patriarchy and take charge of her own life. However, that kind of strength needs help, and Chopin ingeniously imbues Edna with ferocity via the one element that is necessary for all life: water. In the narrative, whenever Edna is in or around the sea or is engulfed in her own tears, she is empowered to resist the training she has been subjected to all of her life and takes charge of her own life to live it the way *she* desires. Water has this effect on Edna because, as water is *the* source of all human life, it therefore has the power to infuse a person with newfound perspectives about one's own life simply by being immersed in it. As an intelligent, sensible woman, Edna welcomes the sea's influence in effecting Edna's exploration in venturing forth to discover alternate avenues for her life. Her social training and the rigid expectations that come with it, however, will make it difficult for her to break the patriarchy's hold on her identity.

A significant aspect of Edna's training is her role as a mother. She acknowledges that she is not a "mother-woman" since she did not miss her young sons when they would be away visiting their grandmother, and "their absence was a sort of relief," which "free[d] her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (Chopin 21). That Edna lacks the maternal instinct to bond with her children certainly illustrates that not all women are born to be mothers. This dilemma pits Edna against her society because in nineteenth-century America, "women are enlisted as mothers whose primary job becomes the production of children" (Nelson 46). In the process of this "production" women are somehow

expected to welcome each new life they produce and love and nurture him or her to adulthood. But Carol Stone argues that “*The Awakening* is even more radical in its treatment of motherhood because it questions the assumptions that childbirth and childcare are a woman’s principal vocation and that motherhood gives pleasure to all women” (32). Edna, however, derives no pleasure from motherhood. She realizes this the night that Léonce reproaches her for neglecting Raoul who, according to him, had a fever. After grudgingly checking on him and listening to her husband chastise her for her lack of concern for the children, she goes outside and suddenly sobs uncontrollably. Through her tears, she experiences a “strange and unfamiliar mood” (9) as of someone who has just had an epiphany. She realizes that she lacks maternal instinct. Another example of her realization is when she watches Adèle give birth. Edna’s own “like experience seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered” (Chopin 111), but as any devoted mother can assert, the birth of a child is a truly unforgettable experience, and the fact that Edna cannot recall her own experience in giving birth to two children illustrates Edna’s awkwardness in her role as a “mother-woman.” At times, all of these circumstances weaken Edna’s resolve to foresee how she would be able to rectify her situation as a mother because she attests that she “would give her life for her children” (49), yet she is certain that she is not the kind of mother that they need. Edna discovers the fortitude to face this predicament when she is in the sea’s sweet embrace.

As for her husband, the marriage “was purely an accident,” and she only married him because of “the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic” (Chopin 20-21). Her impetuosity, however, causes her to become trapped in a life that did not meet her needs. Many white, upper-class women faced the same predicament in that



time period. In fact, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg delineates an ideal nineteenth-century wife's role in America as follows:

Her sphere was the hearth and the nursery; within it she was to bestow care and love, peace and joy. The American girl was taught at home, at school, and in the literature of the period, that aggression, independence, self-assertion and curiosity were male traits, inappropriate for the weaker sex and her limited sphere. Dependent throughout her life, she was to reward her male protectors with affection and submission. At no time was she expected to achieve in any area considered important by men and thus highly valued by society. She was, in essence, to remain a child-woman, never developing the strengths and skills of adult autonomy. (656)

Edna does indeed endeavor to accept her training by complying with her society's expectations, but the sea's seductive powers awaken her to resist her prescribed gender role. On the day she finally learns to swim in the ocean, for example, a "feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul" (Chopin 30). She decides to swim far into "the vast expanse of water, [for] as she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (Chopin 30). Clearly, the sea has unleashed new sensations that embolden Edna to "reach out for the unlimited" possibilities that the patriarchy has denied her thus far. After this day, Edna begins to fathom the prospect of a life that need not be consumed with marriage and motherhood. Thanks to the ocean's refreshing waters, Edna gains strength to make some difficult decisions regarding her life.

Now that the sea has essentially baptized Edna into a new life, she begins to explore other avenues to engage with her individuality as a person. One of these is her ability to earn a living for herself, separate and apart from Léonce, but the problem is that white, upper-class women were not supposed to work outside of the home for their own income. Leila J. Rupp's article "Reflections on Twentieth-Century American Women's History" describes how industrial development in the nineteenth century affected the labor force. She reveals that lower- and

middle-class women increasingly entered the labor force in significant numbers and that these women were not necessarily young and single but older and married as well (276). Edna is not oblivious to these changes; however, she is from the upper echelons of society, so seeking employment is simply out of the question. Second, even if she were to defy her social standing and gain employment outside of the home, the money she would earn would not be hers to keep since “all of a wife’s ‘accumulations’ after marriage were the property of her husband, including any money she might earn” (Culley 141). Regardless of her circumstances, Edna bets money at the horse races and wins, and she begins to sell her artwork so that she may begin to feel a sense of independence. Edna makes these rash decisions after she reads a letter from her forbidden love, Robert, to their mutual friend, Mademoiselle Reisz. Robert had abruptly left to México the day after he and Edna had spent the day together and all indications point to the possibility that they have fallen in love; however, Robert cannot deal with the fact that he is in love with a married woman, so fleeing to México is his only alternative. He does not write to Edna, but he does write to Mademoiselle Reisz who informs her that Robert’s letters “might as well have been sent” to Edna because “it was nothing but Mrs. Pontellier from beginning to end” (Chopin 65). When she is done reading one of his letters, Edna is sobbing furiously “just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her” (66). Once again, her cathartic tears compel her to consider other options for her livelihood which may lead to mapping out a new identity for herself—options such as being an accomplished artist that are entirely too delicious to ignore.

Léonce, however, is not pleased with the possibility that his wife wants to pursue her artistic talents since it would undoubtedly lead to the sale of the artwork which would create a new host of problems for the couple. As Edna’s unacceptable behavior becomes publicly

noticeable, Léonce becomes more and more concerned about appearances, for she “has abandoned her Tuesdays [reception days] at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark” (Chopin 68). Léonce fears that he is losing control of his wife, and her determination to pursue her art will surely demand that he take drastic measures to rein her back in to her role as a wife and mother. Unfortunately for Léonce, the tug of the sea at Edna’s heartstrings is too much to deny. On one of the first times she spends an entire day working on her art, she is “moved with recollections” of “the ripple of the water” (60) from the bay, and it inspires her to move forward with her plans to become a full-time artist. Christine Havice explains that in nineteenth-century America, a female artist’s work is highly personal, and it reveals and asserts the artist’s identity “not only as an elegant gentlewoman but also as a capable, respected, and successful practitioner of her profession” (35). Edna’s work as an artist would be a wholly new identity for her that is not based on her gender, but Léonce’s patience with her new endeavor wears thin when he confronts her about the amount of time that Edna’s art is consuming, believing it to be “the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family” (Chopin 59).<sup>8</sup> Employment of any kind—even self-employment—would jeopardize the ideal domestic tableau he has worked tirelessly to maintain “because employment takes women out of the domestic sphere, out of their ‘place’ in the home” (Rupp 278), and Léonce cannot allow that to occur. His community would frown upon a man of his prestige having a wife who works and neglects her duties to home and hearth. Edna is oblivious to her husband’s concerns since the sea has given her only one focus: her own identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Atelier: art studio

Seeing herself as an artist takes precedence for Edna. She visits Mademoiselle Reisz soon after to happily inform her, “I am becoming an artist” (Chopin 65). Being that Mademoiselle Reisz is a pianist, Edna hopes that she has found a kindred spirit who will understand her need to assert her identity and independence devoid of marriage and motherhood. At odds with this desire are the Victorian ideals of the nineteenth century that precluded upper-class, white women from seeking employment. According to Nancy Folbre, “these ideals proved appealing [for men] partly because they helped stabilize a traditional patriarchal system that was being shaken by women's new economic opportunities outside the home” (468) since women were supposed to remain in their separate domestic sphere. That the responsibilities of maintaining a home and raising children rested solely on the shoulders of women certainly must have placed tremendous pressure on women from all backgrounds and social classes to fulfill their duties on the domestic front. *World History Encyclopedia* outlines this nineteenth-century principle thus:

In this ideology, which held sway until the late nineteenth century, men’s activities outside the home were considered vital to the maintenance of his family and to the functioning of business and government. Women’s role in the home was similarly elevated. Indeed, women’s household activities took on a heightened meaning in the nineteenth century: the cult of domesticity suggested that women’s work was entirely essential to the social order. Thus, though seemingly confined to the private sphere of the home, women of the period were charged with an important civic responsibility: creating and maintaining the very foundations of civilized society. (193)

Edna’s desire to be free of her domestic bonds is not as simple as she would like it to be. Shutting herself away in her atelier and wandering the streets of New Orleans is illustrative of a person who cannot deal with the pressures that society has placed on her, so avoiding the reality of her situation is more amenable. Despite Edna’s determination to pursue her artistic talents, too much time away from the sea is adversely affecting her. As the days pass by, “[s]he had reached a stage when she seemed to be no longer feeling her way, working, when in the humor, with

sureness and ease” (Chopin 75). The sea is the empowering force she needs to learn exactly what she desires from her identity since the elation of becoming an artist is quickly fading.

Clearly, Edna is running out of options that do not include her domesticity. Even though the nineteenth century in the United States was the beginning of the organized feminist protests and of great importance to women as a whole, Mary Ann Mason Burki assesses that these public protests received the bulk of the attention for their efforts because of the individual women who spearheaded these endeavors; however, the historical focus is minimal for women in general (194). As such, white, upper-class women could not possibly entertain the notion of becoming involved in unacceptable behavior which would demean their social status. These women in particular were bound even more stringently to their unique conventions since they were “distinctly subjected to systems of law, labor, religion, politics, and culture,” yet “[b]y the terms of these systems, [all] women were subjected to the authority of men as fathers, brothers, and husbands” (Snyder 432). Despite these conditions, Edna is not a woman who is going to succumb to them. For example, during Robert’s absence she recalls the day they had spent together sailing out in the bay, and a new defiance swells within her because “[s]he [thereafter] made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household *en bonne menagerie*” (Chopin 59).<sup>9</sup> A prime example of this aspect of the patriarchal training that women were subjected to is in an opinion column entitled “Woman’s Way” from the June 20, 1897 edition of the New Orleans newspaper *The Daily Picayune* which extols the virtues of the American husband: “American men are the best husbands in the world” and “when wives rebel at our lot, we are simply proving that we do not deserve our good fortune” (26). Edna herself forcibly admits “that she knew of none better” (Chopin 10) than Léonce, but having a good husband is not what she wants.

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<sup>9</sup> *En bonne menagerie*: “As a good housewife.”

Unfortunately, how Edna feels about marriage is irrelevant in this epoch. Being single is simply not an option for a white, upper-class woman, which is one of the reasons she married Léonce. In mid- nineteenth-century America, unmarried women were disdained by society, for a new ideal became the norm for young women as Folbre explains: “Growing class differences also contributed to a new view of married women’s roles. The ‘lady,’ long the ideal of English aristocratic society, began to supplant the housewife as a cultural ideal in the United States during the 1830s. With the increased availability of domestic servants, middle- and upper-class families redefined the role of wives, emphasizing their qualities of personal nurturance and their civilizing influence on husbands and children” (467). What complicates matters more for Edna is the fact that her friend, Adèle, is the epitome of a wife and a “lady.” Adèle relishes her role as a wife and mother, and her husband is equally enchanted with their marriage. Chopin’s inclusion of this paradigm is necessary to assess the pervasiveness of the patriarchy’s control over women as she exaggerates the Ratignolles’ bliss: “If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere, it was surely their union” (58). Adèle does not experience the sea’s power to influence a person’s outlook on life because she never enters into the sea, while Edna does so time after time. Edna’s battle with her own ideals of marriage is further compounded with Adèle’s constant influence of a wife who is willingly following the rules of society. But the sea’s influence supersedes that of her friend’s. Even Adèle’s husband, Monsieur Ratignolle, makes note of the fact that Edna is not quite herself away from Grand Isle and suggests she take a tonic, but Edna “felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving [the Ratignolles’ home]” (Chopin 58) since she is far away from the perfect environment which fills her with security. As she watches the Ratignolles interact lovingly with one another, Edna

recognizes that she does not have that kind of relationship with her own husband. She does not desire it though.

Even though domestic values take precedence over the wants and needs of women, the birth of a women's rights movement had already begun in the nineteenth century. Feminism was on the rise and with it the license for women to contemplate singlehood and independence from the patriarchy. Christine Stansell indicates that by the turn of the twentieth century, young "New Women" were averse to the status quo and insisted on claiming the privileges of men with an audacious perspective on equality that did not have to rely on the protection of husbands and fathers, so women across America were inculcated with the politics of this second generation of "New Women" that transcended racial, class, and national boundaries (429). Chopin metaphorically compares Edna to this "New Woman" as Edna reflects about women venturing into unknown territory, for Edna herself has already dared to defy the standards by which women are measured each time she has immersed herself in the sea or her tears. She stumbles into Robert at an isolated outdoor café after he returned from México when she muses that she does not "mind walking" and that she "always feel[s] so sorry for women who don't like to walk [for] they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life" because as it stands, "women learn so little of life on the whole" (Chopin 107). When Edna speaks of these "women," she is not singling out the women in her upper class; she sees that women as a whole are being marginalized across the country regardless of race, politics, religion, or social class. Dana D. Nelson attests that scholars who have studied the oppression of women in the nineteenth century had to "rethink the dimensions of white middle-class women's victimization by patriarchy, and especially to attend to how they participated in (and sometimes resisted) the victimization of fellow women in less privileged classes" (39). In order to fully embrace their individuality and

independence in the world of men, all women had to follow Edna's example and take the plunge into these uncharted waters.

Further exacerbating Edna's position in seeking independence is the fact that women were considered the weaker, more sentimental sex. Women *needed* men for protection and guidance. Mason Burki cites the roles of religion and science in the nineteenth century for perpetuating the notion that women were indeed weaker because the church declared that men, being stronger and morally superior, should be the ones to guide women toward spiritual development, and science attested that women were intellectually weaker because of lighter brains and the inability to maintain control over their emotions (197). Edna's physician, Dr. Mandelet, confirms this precept when Léonce pays him a visit because he is concerned about his wife's defiant behavior ever since the early summer at Grand Isle when she first came back from her little adventure out in the sea with Robert. Dr. Mandelet, describes Woman as "a very peculiar and delicate organism," and ordinary men could not possibly "cope with their idiosyncrasies" since most women are "moody and whimsical" and Edna is one who is "especially peculiar" (Chopin 68). Consequently, Edna's disregard for the status quo is perceived as nothing more than a weak woman who is perhaps going through some sort of nervous condition. Neither Léonce nor Dr. Mandelet seems determined to delve into the real reasons Edna is acting out. She is not "peculiar" at all; she is a woman who has gone into the sea as a conformist and surfaced as a rebel against the patriarchy. This kind of stereotyping of women was further bolstered by the medical community that depicted women as deranged or hysterical. No woman was immune. Smith-Rosenberg explains that nineteenth-century physicians "saw hysteria as caused either by the indolent, vapid and unconstructive life of the fashionable middle and upper class woman, or by the ignorant, exhausting and sensual life of the lower or working



class woman” (667). That physicians across the country were dismissing these afflictions by women from every rung of the social ladder demonstrates the pervasiveness of many women’s malcontent with their domestic lives since being a wife and mother was the most prevalent role for a woman. If a woman were to speak out against her marriage or motherhood, she would be branded as a hysteric, for hysteria was strictly a *female* problem. Husbands may have been oblivious to the emotional pain that this type of life was inflicting on their wives, believing that their wives’ maladies were of a temperamental nature. For instance, Edna’s father, the “Colonel,” lambasts Léonce to “put [his] foot down good and hard [since it is] the only way to manage a wife” (Chopin 73) when the Colonel witnesses Edna’s rebellious behavior. Instead of just *asking* his wife about her feelings, getting angry or ignoring her is Léonce’s way of dealing with her erratic behavior. This is the reason that Edna turns to water’s rejuvenating power for comfort from the constraints of her domestic life. No human has been able to provide her with the succor, security, and above all, strength, to make some difficult decisions regarding her individuality more than the sea or her own tears.

The nineteenth century was a decidedly difficult era for women who were not destined for domesticity. Edna represents that segment of the female population in America that did not fit neatly into the box that the patriarchy had designed for all women. Although strong-willed, defiant women did emerge to lead the fight for women’s rights in many facets of the social order, the vast majority of women nevertheless sacrificed their free will in order to conform to the expectations of the male-oriented hegemony. Because not enough women were demanding a change in the status quo, it was increasingly difficult for women to exact change in their personal lives, for true strength lies in numbers. Had more women taken up the fight for equality in their private and public lives so that they did not have to live in separate spheres, the solidarity this

would have created would have empowered many women to follow their hearts and not submit to the established training that marginalized and oppressed them so tenaciously. Edna would have felt less alone in her quest to seek a life that would have made *her* happy instead of living a life that made everyone else happy.

**CHAPTER III**  
**FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE'S THEORY OF THE APOLLINE**  
**AND THE DIONYSIAN EMBODIED IN EDNA**

Human behavior can be explained in a myriad of ways, and one of these is the concept that people's behavior is a result of the training that is imposed on them by social, cultural, political, or religious conditions. Theories abound for untangling the web of mystery surrounding the infinite diversity of people's rational and irrational behavior. One of the theorists who interprets this kind of behavior is Friedrich Nietzsche, and his theory of the Apolline and the Dionysian is applicable to the character of Edna Pontellier. According to Nietzsche, the Apolline is based on Apollo, the Greek god of light, which keeps people grounded in logic and conformity while the Dionysian is based on Dionysus, the god of wine, which sets people free from any constraints that bind them to rules and propriety. Edna is a woman who is under the influence of the Apolline when she is bound to the land and all its conventions and restrictions; when she is in the sea, however, she is under the influence of the Dionysian, and a newfound feeling of exultation releases her from the chains of the patriarchy. The land, therefore, represents the Apolline side of humanity because of its rigid confinement to the established social order, while the sea and water represent the Dionysian because of the feeling of weightlessness—hence, unbound from land and its gravity—that being in water gives to people. Human beings, however, need both sides in order to truly contemplate their roles in this world. Nietzsche's theory is accurately embodied in the character of Edna because, in following Edna's journey throughout the narrative in which she experiences a progressive awakening each time she comes in contact with the sea, her tears, or water, readers discover how the duality of the Apolline and the Dionysian elements drive her to awaken to her true self beyond that of being a wife and

mother. Nietzsche's theory allows us to acknowledge Edna's struggles because in her world, the only acceptable feelings of passion were restricted to the maternal realm. As Edna challenges these precepts, Nietzsche's ideas help us to understand that her inner turmoil is a universal one for all people.

Nietzsche introduces his concept of the duality of the Apolline and the Dionysiac in order to logically show how he represents this duality in the gods of Apollo and Dionysus. According to Nietzsche, Apollo is the god that has "that restraining boundary, that freedom from wilder impulses, that sagacious calm" (16), which humans must possess. Dionysus, on the other hand, is the god that Nietzsche compares to being in a state of intoxication in which "urges are awakened, and as they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self" (17). At the beginning of Edna's narrative, she is walking back to the beach to meet with her husband after having an "adventure" with Robert out on the water. Refreshed from her frolic in the ocean, Edna is in a state of ecstasy until Léonce reminds her of her obligations on land, one of which is the fact that she is his property. As such, he detests damage to his property. He complains of her being "burnt beyond recognition," and she submits to his control by asking him to return her wedding rings he was holding for safekeeping. She then promptly places them back on her finger (Chopin 5), illustrating how she, too, is complicit at this point in adhering to her social conventions. The Dionysian has yet to make itself known to Edna, but it is lurking in the sea of her subconscious awaiting the moment to break through.

The Apollonian, however, is necessary for Edna's awakening. As the god of light, Apollo maintains peace and security for us; otherwise, our lives would be in constant turmoil. Nietzsche describes Apollo as "the shining one" whose "glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis* from whose gestures and looks all the delight, wisdom and beauty of 'illusion'

speak to us” (16).<sup>10</sup> Were it not for the Apolline driving us toward the self-preservation that protects from the storms of life, we would succumb to the recklessness of the Dionysian. For Nathan P. Devir, the Apolline is “an orderly, defined essence that sees the self as a separate ego” but must remain as part of the “whole” (75). Were it not for the Apolline, we would not be able to cope with the adverse aspect of the Dionysian. This is one reason why Edna is “not a woman given to confidences” because “even as a child, she had lived her own small life all within herself” (Chopin 16) thus not allowing the Dionysian to surface and disturb her life of contentment. One childhood memory she recounts to Adèle, however, has implications of the Dionysian lying in wait: “The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace—of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water” (Chopin 19). Although she is not literally immersed in water, figuratively speaking, however, Edna realizes as an adult that this specific memory is the beginning of her quest to allow the literal sea to infuse its regenerative potential to unleash the powers of the Dionysian.

Edna is not yet able to fully allow the Dionysian to emerge, however, because of the foil to her character. Her good friend Adèle is living in complete domestic bliss as a wife and mother, so Edna tries to search deep within herself to find that same fulfillment. Patricia L. Bradley believes that since “Adèle [...] has perfected the subtle balance of fidelity, flirtation, and fecundity that is every Creole matron’s specialty,” she is the symbol of patriarchal conformity because “Adèle [...] reinforces expectations of proper feminine behavior and actively work[s] to suppress Edna’s divergence from the scripted feminine roles of their culture” (52). Adèle

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<sup>10</sup> *Principium individuationis*: The principle of individuation in which all our experience comes to us parcelled up, especially including our awareness of ourselves; it is therefore illusory since reality is undifferentiated.

conforms because she never sets foot into the sea. As much as she would like to see Edna stay within the confines of their scripted female roles, she is keenly aware that Edna is different from her and the other women in their society. Early in the narrative, after she and Edna have spent time at the beach, Adèle senses that something new is stirring within Edna (the narcotic effects of the sea), and since Robert has been overtly flirtatious with Edna, Adèle is fearful that the platonic relationship could escalate into something more. She warns him to “let Mrs. Pontellier alone” because as she explains, “She is not one of us; she is not like us” (Chopin 22). In other words, the fact that the Kentucky-raised Edna is relatively new to the white Creole society means that she has not had enough time to be fully trained in the ways of Louisiana’s high society. Nietzsche’s assessment that the Apolline “seeks to pacify individuals by drawing boundaries between them and by repeatedly calling them to mind as the most sacred universal laws in his demands for self-knowledge and moderation” (50) characterizes how the white people of the upper echelons of society had a moral and social obligation to maintain their way of life.

The illusion of safe and secure boundaries of the Apolline can remain subdued in Edna for only so long though. The Dionysian incarnate in the sea will inevitably surface. Edna’s idyllic world of comfort and high society is not enough to fulfill her needs as a person. While the Apolline rewards her with order and security, the Dionysian “represents tumult, flux, and disorder,” and once a person is “overtaken by the Dionysian, the Apollonian finds its individuality overwhelmed by the pressures of the world as a tumultuous whole and its noble goals threatened by worldly-wise despair” (Bradley 46). At least Edna can rely on a sense of solidarity from her friend, the eccentric Mademoiselle Reisz, “a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive” (Chopin 27). Mademoiselle Reisz lives her life according to her own rules and is not

inclined to submit to the prescribed gender role of the hegemony. She too must be under water's spell because "[f]rom her windows [of her home] could be seen the crescent of the river, the masts of ships and the big chimneys of the Mississippi steamers" (Chopin 63). She is an example of how Nietzsche uses the analogy of how a slave feels after the rigid and hostile boundaries that had distressed him break down and unite him as one with his neighbor, but the person must capitulate to the Dionysian (17). Although the Dionysian impulses can induce impetuous or irrational behavior which may lead to emotional pain and strife, the reality is that no human goes through his or her life without experiencing suffering or heartache. Regardless of negative outcomes, DeVir rationalizes that life's trials and tribulations are "indeed the true nature of the world and, as such, should be accepted and embraced rather than despaired of or run away from" (72). The emergence of the Dionysian, therefore, is not only necessary for a healthy balance of illusion and reality, but unavoidable in terms of our human existence. Chopin includes the character of Mademoiselle Reisz to illustrate that, although she is living life on her own terms and is perfectly content with her life, she is perceived as "disagreeable" by others. Despite Mademoiselle Reisz's querulous temperament, Edna is drawn to her not only because Reisz is an independent woman, but also because Reisz lives so close to a river—another source of water that provides succor in soothing Edna's conflicted self.

Edna's dilemma in coming to terms with the Apolline and Dionysiac prompts her to confront her feelings toward the patriarchal system and her desire to eschew her unwished-for marriage and motherhood. Because she is a nineteenth-century, southern, upper-class woman, she does not truly have a choice about her life as an adult; she *had* to marry while she was still young, and she had to marry someone of high status and bear his children. At first, Edna believes herself to be a lucky woman because "she knew of none better" (Chopin 10) than her husband

whose “kindness and uniform devotion” is admirable. In time, however, the “everlasting voice of the sea” (9) springs forth a realization in Edna that perhaps marriage is not suited for her, for one night as she is crying uncontrollably after a disagreement with her husband, a “strange and unfamiliar mood” filled her with a “vague anguish” unlike any she had ever felt before (Chopin 9). Her torrent of tears has awoken something within her that she had not realized needed to be roused from its slumber. Nietzsche compares the unfamiliar feelings to a person being “under the influence of a narcotic potion” as it “joyfully penetrat[es] the whole of nature [as] those Dionysiac urges are awakened, and as they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self” (17). Without water’s Dionysiac push, the Apolline would keep Edna in a perpetual state of sameness.

What is unusual about Edna’s defiance to the social order is that she is unashamed of her immoral actions. When she and her family move back to New Orleans after summer’s end, she sends her children to their paternal grandmother’s for an extended visit, and she has an illicit sexual affair with Alcée Arobin while her husband is away on business. She also becomes romantically involved with Robert who is also younger than she. These actions are indicative of someone who is audaciously experimenting with greener pastures as a result of waking up to a new outlook on life. The sea and her tears have opened new doors for Edna, and she is eager to open them all. Patricia Bradley attributes Edna’s brazen behavior to “what Nietzsche would call ‘the innocence of becoming’” and that the reason for “Chopin’s non-recriminatory tone [is that it] echoes Nietzsche’s attitude of derision for audiences” (53) who “listen to tragedy [such as Edna’s demise] solely as moral beings” and “feel elevated and inspired by the triumph of good and noble principles, by the sacrifice of the hero in the interest of a moral view of the world” (Nietzsche 106-07). The Apolline must prevail in order to avoid immorality and chaos, and Edna



does indeed comply with expectations. However, the “voice of the sea speaks to the soul” (Chopin 16), and Edna has no choice but to surrender to its calling. Shame be damned.

Edna’s awakening to the sea’s calling is not simple, however. As Chapter II established, the patriarchal society Edna lives in does not allow white, upper-class women to be strong-willed and independent individuals. Marriage and motherhood are the only choices for these women, lest they be shunned from society forever. James A. Justus interprets Edna as “a figure beset more by a divided will than by the circumstances of an enviroing world. The imbalance which haunts Edna is within the self, and the dilemma is resolved in terms of her psychic compulsions” (108). Again, Nietzsche’s theory of the Apolline and Dionysian can be applied to Edna’s situation because the internal struggles that Edna is facing have to be resolved by her and her alone. In order to let go of the Apolline and allow the Dionysian to take hold of her, she must decide what exactly she wants out of her life, and the sea’s rejuvenating influence is where she will find the strength to move forward with her quest to find her sense of self. One possibility is that she needs to discover her own individuality separate from the attachments of marriage and motherhood which have nothing to do with her as a person. After going for a dip in the gulf, she “recognize[s] her relations as an individual to the world within and around her” (Chopin 16) to illustrate the sea as her Dionysian catalyst that will detach her from the bounds of the Apolline land long enough for her to reflect on the course of her life.

Chopin herself alludes to Edna’s Dionysian experiences when Edna describes it as “a world [being] vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” yet from which “few of us ever emerge” with “many souls [that] perish in its tumult” (16). True, the Dionysian is messy and frightening when compared to the calm of the Apolline. However, Nietzsche contends that humans must embrace both because when we are in the Apolline state, he describes individuals

as “dream artists,” and when we are in the Dionysiac state, he refers to people as “ecstatic artists,” and all inevitably become “imitators” of both kinds of artistry at the same time (18). Edna is juggling both, but once the sea and her tears begin to effect a new perspective for her, Edna’s inner struggles become more pronounced. She has a duty to fulfill as a wife and mother of a high-class Creole society, but she knows that she is not suited for either role. Because of her increasingly rebellious behavior after each encounter in the sea or her fits of crying, her disgruntled husband reproaches her for her lack of attention to him, their children, and their home. In a sense, Edna has “an empirical self living in ‘the world’ and going about its daily routine, and [...] a self-reflective self that meditates on the empirical self and has insights into its fiction” (Parvulescu 478). In spite of the troubles she is creating for herself, she turns to the Dionysian sea and her cathartic tears to give her the strength she needs to persevere towards a life that she is meant to live even though she is bound to her marriage and motherhood.

One step Edna takes in the direction towards that new life is living in a home of her own. Since she has always lived under someone else’s roof, the opportunity to be the mistress of her own home is completely tantalizing for Edna. She is confident that she will “like the feeling of freedom and independence” (Chopin 81) even though she is well aware that separating from her husband would cause her to fall in social status in addition to the possibility of being ostracized by her community as her friend Mademoiselle Reisz has been. Regardless of the repercussions, her goal of freedom “added to her strength and expansion as an individual” (Chopin 95). So powerful is Edna’s yearning for a home of her own that it is symbolic of what Nietzsche refers to as Dionysus’ chariot overflowing with flowers and garlands and being pulled by tigers and panthers that Nietzsche describes as the magic of the Dionysian (17). Edna’s “chariot” turns out to be a rental house so small that Chopin coins it the “pigeon-house.” Edna *needs* this chariot in

order to fully awaken to the Dionysian impulses yearning to surface, but while Edna may feel free for now because her children and her husband are away, the ride on the chariot will come to a halt upon their return. Jennifer Gray believes that Edna's temporary state of autonomy is echoed in the name for the house, for pigeons are not free soaring birds because even though they may fly away, they always return (66). The Apolline keeps dragging her back to land—to an unwanted, difficult reality.

The one reliable chariot that will take her away from the realities of the land is the sea. Being able to stand before one of the majesties of nature compels Edna to feel as grand as that natural wonder. Chopin describes the “voice of the sea” as “seductive [...] inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (16). Thus, the sea is where Edna discovers the personal space she needs to meditate on her life and identity. When she learns to swim for the first time, for instance, she is dismayed that she had “not discover[ed]” that swimming “was nothing,” and this newfound sensation makes her feel “daring and reckless” (30). Yet daring and reckless is certainly not acceptable behavior for wealthy, young, married women with children. Nevertheless, Gray celebrates Edna's physical achievement, for it makes Edna feel powerful and accomplished, and the feeling of intoxication with her newfound strength inspires a growing sense of spiritual and physical self-awareness as well as an expanding confidence in herself (69). Edna's awakening in her first swim is comparable to how Nietzsche explains that “[t]he individual, with all his restraints and moderations, [is] submerged in the self-oblivion of the Dionysiac state and [forgets] the Apolline dictates” (27). For Edna, learning to swim “represents her soul's further receptivity to the Dionysian” (Bradley 50), which clearly has a cathartic effect on her inhibitions, thereby releasing the Dionysian impulses at the expense of the Apolline's structure and security.

Assuredly, motherhood is an Apolline structure that must be adhered to. If a mother were to shun the Apolline in favor of the Dionysian for her own sake instead of her child's or children's, one or more innocent lives could be adversely affected. One of the controversial aspects of the novel is the fact that Edna is not a good mother to her young, innocent children. There are only a few instances in which Raoul and Etienne actually seek out their mother for comfort and affection, but they mostly run to their father or to the quadroon nurse who cares for them when they want attention. Not at all ignorant to the fact that she is not a "mother-woman," Edna is unapologetic when she admits to herself that she does not miss her children when they are away visiting their grandmother, yet she faces a conundrum because she is nonetheless "fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way" (Chopin 21). It was only after her first weeping bout that she comes to terms with the realization that she will never be a "mother-woman." Because Edna has essentially been thrust into the role of motherhood, she cannot come to terms with the Apollonian which demands that women sacrificially embrace this role at all costs and the Dionysian which pushes for self-interest and hedonism. Edna embodies the two forces because, even though she knows that she is not a good mother, it does not mean that she is not a good person who has a right to relish in the beauty of life. Nietzsche's theory affirms the tandem relationship between the opposing forces:

Here the Dionysiac, as against the Apolline, proves to be the eternal and original artistic force, calling the whole phenomenal world into existence: in the midst of it a new transfiguring illusion is required if the animated world of individuation is to be kept alive. If we could imagine dissonance becoming man—and what else is man?—then in order to stay alive that dissonance would need a wonderful illusion, covering its own being with a veil of beauty. That is the real artistic intention of Apollo, in whose name we bring together all those innumerable illusions of the beauty of appearance, which at each moment make life worth living and urge us to experience the next moment. (116)

One of the beauties of life that Edna wants to pursue is her art, but it must be at the cost of neglecting her children for hours on end. On the other hand, when she allows the Dionysian to emerge, her artistic talents grow. Burcu Tercan uses the juxtaposition of Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz to illustrate how their artistic talents differ to show that women were capable of creativity only when allowed to venture outside the domestic sphere: Adèle's domestic limitations restrict her artistic productivity to giving birth and being a housewife. In contrast, the single, childless, but artistic Mademoiselle Reisz expresses herself through music. Hence, the more Edna paints and ignores her children and marriage, the more the quality of her artistry develops (680). Even though it may appear that Raoul and Etienne are the casualties of their mother's embrace with the Dionysian, the fact that she makes the ultimate sacrifice when she takes her final swim shows that she was, in fact, thinking of their well-being because she would rather be gone than continue to be an unfit mother to her sons.

Even though Edna chooses death over life, the beauty of her decision is that she finally has agency over her life. In the sea, she has the freedom to opt for an end to her emotional turmoil and to act on what is right for herself. In this respect, Nietzsche's theory of the Apolline and the Dionysian contains the truths regarding human nature. We are in a constant state of flux because of these two tendencies within us. Chopin's Edna is one example of a person who cannot embrace her true identity because of the Apolline holding her back. However, in endowing Edna with the gift of a spiritual awakening via the sea, Chopin notably illustrates the Dionysian at work. Although it is an uneasy experience for Edna to accept the chaos and turmoil to come, the result is a person who is finally able to come to terms with who she is. Edna would not have been able to undergo her awakening without first being confined to the restrictive patriarchy. In embracing the Dionysiac after grappling with the Apolline, she was able to reach a

state of being that not many women of her time and social class would have been able to achieve. Her strength and courage in defying conventions embody Nietzsche's theory so completely that neither the Apolline nor the Dionysiac is deemed adverse because they are equally responsible for Edna's awakening to her true identity.

## CHAPTER IV

### EDNA'S SEXUALITY AND GENDER FLUIDITY

When Chopin's novel was published in 1899, the general public disdained it, deeming it immoral because of Edna's sexually immoral conduct, and it quickly fell out of print. *The Awakening*, however, revived in 1969 thanks to Per Seyersted who published a biography of the novelist and edited *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* for Louisiana State University Press (Culley ix) which coincided with the birth of the Women's Liberation Movement in America. In time, *The Awakening* went on to become required reading material in women's studies courses of literary and feminist perspectives in colleges and universities across America because its subject matter, at the time of publication, openly dealt with the unmentionable issues of female sexuality. In this climate, Chopin was therefore a pioneer in depicting her strong-willed Edna as she questions the arbitrary sexist establishment that marginalized women, leaving them with finite opportunities for individual growth in realizing their sexual identities. As Edna begins her awakening via the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, she desires so much more than the life that has been apportioned for her by the patriarchal society she inhabits. In this way, *The Awakening* is emblematic of a novel that can be viewed from a feminist perspective not only because of Edna's struggles with sexuality but because of her juxtaposition to two women who represent the opposing sides of the patriarchy. In examining these characters' attitudes of the social constructs in conjunction with Edna's own quest for sexual identity, one can appraise the feminist challenges she faces in confronting the hegemony that stifles her audacious experimentation with her sexuality.

To openly discuss sex and sexuality in the nineteenth century was taboo. As opposed to men, women were not considered sexual beings because the sole purpose for a woman having

sex was for procreation or to satisfy her husband and not for her own pleasure as Cynthia Griffin Wolff explains: “[a]fter about 1849, the notion of a ‘woman’s sexual awakening’ became, by definition, an impossibility—a contradiction in terms—because the medical establishment in America began to promulgate the view that normal females possessed no erotic inclinations whatsoever” (3). Therefore, if women did not have sexual feelings for men, they definitely were not supposed to have any such feelings for women. Edna, however, becomes aware of the different elements of her sexuality because of the sea’s “seductive” voice. As she and Adèle are at the beach of Grand Isle early in the narrative, Adèle lays her hand over Edna’s causing Edna to “len[d] herself readily to the Creole’s gentle caress” even though Edna found it “at first a little confusing” (19), but soon her attraction to Adèle seems deeper as Edna finds her “more beautiful than ever [...] in a negligé which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the rich, melting curves of her white throat” (Chopin 57). Edna is indeed under the sea’s seductive spell because she is considering her sexuality in a completely unorthodox way. Elaine Showalter believes that “it is Adèle who belatedly initiates Edna into the world of female love and ritual on the first step of her sensual voyage of self-discovery” (294). Elizabeth LeBlanc interprets this intimate encounter between Adèle and Edna as “melt[ing] the startled Edna’s habitual coolness and pav[ing] the way for her sensual and sexual awakening. [As such] Edna becomes attached to Adele the person as sister, friend, ‘lover’” (299). Because these non-verbal exchanges between the two women elicit a strong erotic sensation in Edna, she welcomes the possibility of pursuing sexual gratification in an unexpected way. Although she is predominantly heterosexual, she is not afraid of bisexuality, and because of this initial encounter with Adèle, she realizes she is capable of opening herself up to both sexes and multiple drives and desires (Pontuale 41). That



she perceives of sex unmindful of gender shows that Edna desires further exploration into the multiplicities of human sexuality, and all this is due to the sea's hypnotic dominion.

Unfortunately, same-sex or bisexual relationships in the nineteenth century were prohibited because, traditionally-speaking, the social sciences maintained that only heterosexual love was considered "normal," and women needed men as social and economic protectors, for adult sexuality, and for psychological completion (Rich 657). Nevertheless, Adèle's touch has sparked a new avenue for Edna's sexuality. It is in these complex avenues that Hélène Cixous celebrates Woman with the "infinite richness of [her] individual constitutions [since] you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another" (876). As Edna is discovering, human sexuality does not fall into the singular heterosexual category that was acceptable in her era, and sexuality is less about pleasure and more about the intimate relationships that people can develop with one another regardless of gender. The sensation of Adèle's gentle touch, coupled with the "seductive voice of the sea," arouse Edna unlike any man has ever aroused her before. Edna soon decides that she will share her body only of her own volition even where her husband is concerned. For instance, when Léonce comes home late one night and expects his wife to "yield to his desires" as she typically "unthinkingly" (Chopin 33) has so many times before, she flatly refuses his entreaties. Chopin phallogcentrically symbolizes Léonce's sexual frustration by his smoking several cigars while his wife remains unwilling to submit to her wifely duties. Edna is illustrative of what Francesco Pontuale cites as Edna's developing awareness of her body and sexuality which makes her capable of responding to beauty that is not confined to men or masculinity and to women or femininity (41). Her sexual pleasure can be had in different ways with people of both genders.

As a result of Adèle's first caress, Edna recalls several men whom she was attracted to before Léonce came into her life. The first was a "dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer" whom she "had been passionately enamored of"; the second was "a young gentleman who visited a lady on a neighboring plantation"; and the third was a "great tragedian [who] began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses," whose picture still "stood enframed on her desk" with whom she would have experienced "the acme of bliss" had she married him (Chopin 20). Ironically, Edna already knows the constraints and challenges of marriage, yet she intriguingly pines for a man she has never even met. Edna's training in the romanticism of marriage and love is part of the "ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry" (Rich 645). Chopin is complicit in this ideology by including this scene with Edna's past love interests and her fantasy in marrying a famous man based solely on his appearance. Nina Baym sympathizes with Chopin and other women writers of the era who "create a story that conforms to the expected myth, [for] it is not recognized for what it is because of a superfluous sexual specialization in the myth as it is entertained in the critics' minds (76), but this is the reason why this text is so important in viewing through a feminist lens. As a young girl and woman, Edna initially cedes to her social training regarding her sexuality; therefore, when her immersion in the sea changes her perspective completely about who she is as a sexual being, the text itself brings her feminist issues to light.

As Edna proceeds to question the social constructs regarding female sexuality, she continues her quest to find other ways for personal gratification, and water appears to be the key to the journey. After she learns how to swim, for example, her relationship with Robert grows stronger each time they are together. Although he is much younger than Edna and she is on the

verge of committing adultery, she is unperturbed. She goes sailing to *Chênrière Caminada* with Robert and feels “as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails” (Chopin 36).<sup>11</sup> Being upon the water serves to set her sexual spirit free to the point where she is contemplating an affair with a younger man. Sandra M. Gilbert suggests that Edna and Robert’s courtship has a “metaphorical intensity and a mythic power far weightier than what would appear to be their mimetic function, [whose] intensity create[s] a ghostly subtextual narrative that persists with metaphorical insistence from Edna’s baptismal swimming scene in chapter ten through her last, suicidal swim in chapter thirty-nine” (52). Edna is no longer just a wife: she is a woman who is at the cusp of fulfilling her romantic and sexual desires in a more liberated fashion than what the hegemony imposes. She *thinks* she is falling in love with Robert because he is the reason that she has awakened to a new outlook on life, but he is more of a means to an end because when she finally admits to Mademoiselle Reisz that she is in love with Robert, Edna only describes his outward appearance as the reasons she is in love with him. Sharmita Lahiri summarizes Edna’s relationship with Robert:

In reality, however, her love for him is an extension of her adolescent infatuations. Like her fantasy love for the tragedian and the cavalry officer, it is a vague longing for the unattainable, a craving for the satisfaction of unfulfilled desires. Edna is enamored of her fancy image of Robert, just as she had once been enamored of the concept of marrying a Catholic, who she thought shared her thoughts and tastes, against the violent opposition of her father and sister. Hence, the more distant Robert is from her, the more he compels her imagination. (68)

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<sup>11</sup> *Chênrière Caminada*: An island between Grand Isle and the Louisiana Coast.

Edna is so imbued with the exhilarating feelings of sexual liberation and her prowess at attracting a younger man that the sea has bestowed on her that she is confusing those feelings with true love.

Her relationship with Robert never progresses to the intimate level, but it does, however, do so with Arobin. After Robert leaves to México and Edna is husband- and child-free in New Orleans, Arobin becomes obsessively infatuated with Edna. The young man's passion with Edna is so strong that it "drew all her awakening sensuousness" (Chopin 78), so she does not stop his overt advances, for now Edna has another way to explore her sexual identity thanks to the power of the sea and her newfound swimming skills. His persistence in destroying her inhibitions is accomplished when "the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her" (79), but she is still in complete control of her body as she toys with him repeatedly before she finally yields to her own desires and sleeps with him. Chopin cleverly implies the sexual encounter after their kiss acts as "a flaming torch that kindled desire" (85) for Edna. Armstrong reasons that female writers of that era had to find a way to make a woman's audacity appealing to men while remaining sensible enough to challenge her cultural norms without becoming disgracefully tawdry (102). Although the era in which Chopin wrote was not one in which these types of sexually implied scenes were acceptable in print, feminist theorists believe that this is all the more reason why this novel is so important because female writers were indeed limited in the subject matter of their work, and sex was one of those limitations. Cixous bemoans the fact that not enough women were bold enough to write about their true feelings and frustrations since "[i]t is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (881). However, by

bringing these contentious issues regarding women to light, theorists such as Cixous have advanced awareness of the oppressive constructs that women were subjected to when evaluated through the literature of the time period.

One of the predicaments for Edna is that her secret love (sexual) interest is her good friend Adèle who embraces the male-oriented ideology which Edna is fighting against. Chopin describes Adèle as a sexually alluring “beauty” with “spun-gold hair, [...] blue eyes that were nothing but sapphires [and] two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries” (11), and she has spent the last seven years of her married life having children. In essence, Adèle is the epitome of what the heteropatriarchal society expected of all women. Edna, though, pities her for her “blind contentment” because Adèle “would never have the taste of life’s delirium” (58). That “delirium” can be inferred as sex outside of the marital bed with people of both genders. Edna is not afraid to boldly search for that “delirium” since she has already experienced eroticism with a woman and with several men, and another round of uncontrollable sobbing at Mademoiselle Reisz’s home again elicits a new mindset about sex. Chopin notably takes great care in her wording of the sensitive subject of sex because female writers of the era are limited in creating authentic female characters due to society’s gender-based conventions, so these writers are expected to adhere to the creation of drama based on the scheme solely allotted to her in a male melodrama: to be silent and to create conventional works (Baym 77). Readers must interpret the subtleties in Chopin’s words to understand that Edna is more than willing to come to terms with her sexual identity. As she immerses herself in either her own tears or water, she slowly recognizes that her own “life’s delirium” is within her grasp.

Not only does Edna wish to find her sexual identity, she also yearns for the chance to be free of the chains of the commitment to her husband, her children, and her upper-class, white

society because her current identity defines her as a wife, a mother, and a woman, yet she would like nothing more than to be simply a person. Edna's husband, for example, does not value his wife as a human being; she is his property and an integral part of the gender roles package he has invested in. Edna is limited in the scope of her identity because a woman's role during this time "is either a singular and limited expression of identity or ultimately an impossibility beneath the pressures of hegemonic society" (Gray 56). In the sea, however, Edna belongs to no one. Her fear of the water at the beginning of the narrative represents her current life filled with restrictions and duties. Once she learns to swim, however, the weightlessness and anonymity that the ocean gives her is transformative, and it represents the freedom that she craves. She cannot get enough of the liberation. Lahiri reasons that her "[s]wimming fearlessly is her first step towards asserting her freedom and expressing her desire to rule her own life" (65), but her transformation into a free woman is not going to be simple. Even though she feels free out in the water, she must eventually come back to land and face the oppressive life that is hers. Peter Ramos claims that "Edna's search for such an unrestricted, undefined and, ultimately, impossible state—a freedom from identity—ironically deprives her life of meaning" (147) is debatable. From a feminist perspective, Edna's life would definitely have meaning because she is stripping herself of an identity that her Creole society has constructed for her, and in the process she is creating an identity of her own that does not involve anyone's or anything's expectations. She would be free to choose the path that she wants and not one that someone else has formulated for her.

Her children also possess Edna because as Raoul and Etienne's mother, she cannot just divorce herself from them the same way she could divorce her husband. She is inextricably bound to them even though she is inadequate in her role as mother. Gaining freedom from *them*

would make her an aberration in everyone's eyes. The conundrum is in the statement Edna makes to Adèle that "she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (Chopin 49) because readers can infer from some of her actions and thoughts throughout the narrative that she does indeed love her sons and "would give [her] life for [her] children" but she also admits that she "wouldn't give herself" (Chopin 49). Wolff examines Edna's puzzling attitude toward motherhood by observing that the children's care is mostly thrust upon the quadroon nurse, so the emphasis she makes about giving up her life for them is more of an "internalized social directive" that in having the agency to renounce it because it is "an unacceptable violation of her emotional integrity" brings her one step closer toward freedom (10). She can only renounce it, however, after she allows the sea's or her tears' waters envelop her in their dauntless embrace. Edna has accepted the fact that she is not what her children need; she sees what a good mother is supposed to be like because Adèle is a constant reminder of what a devoted "mother-woman" is. But how to escape her familial obligations is the problem. Ramos suggests that the solution is simple, proposing that women, "by taking control of the very means of representing or determining their social selves in a society that would otherwise determine or represent them, strong, dedicated women—like those in other marginalized groups—have overcome many of the social restrictions they faced" (148). This concept is not applicable to Edna because she is unwilling to retain her role as a wife and mother, and therefore, "taking control" of her "social self" as Ramos claims, is irrelevant because of her unique situation as a woman who simply wants a self all her own free of the "social" aspect. Edna recognizes this self-truth more and more each time she is close to the sea, for as Cixous metaphorically attests, "[O]ur seas are what we [women] make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless; and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides,

swimmers, children, waves...” (889). Edna relishes the thought of constructing her own “sea” in which she can swim free of the social obligations that keep her grounded on land. This is when she decides to rent her own home and explore her sexuality with Arobin while her husband is away on business and the children are with their grandmother. Although she had to know deep down that Léonce and the children would be returning soon, she nonetheless needed to feel the thrill of what it is like to be a childless single person.

Edna, the person, does indeed matter. She thirsts for the chance to ascertain for herself *who* she is instead of *what* she is. This quest for self-knowledge will not be acquired easily, for in Edna’s society “women mattered less than men did,” and this society “thought women barely belonged in the great parade of culture that defined women as at best marginal and silent tenants of the cosmic mansion and at worst guilty interlopers in that house” (Gilbert 35). Perhaps this is the reason that women themselves were complicit in their own internalized oppression. The consistent training from society which defined women as subordinate to men made it difficult for any woman to break from the training’s expectations in order to create an identity not based on gender. Women had to be impregnated with boldness so that they could overcome these difficulties and adversities. Edna is certainly emboldened by the water’s power, for she progressively gains the tenacity to persevere in her journey to discover her sense of self instead of succumbing to her social training. In a way, the training is a set of “false beliefs that rely on subordinating reasoning *and* perpetuate oppressive systems [which] are forms of internalized oppression, and therefore, decisions that result from these beliefs should not count as autonomous” (Charles 416-17). Although Edna wants nothing more than to have independence, her decisions regarding her marriage and her children are based on the patriarchal system’s constructs that do not believe women have a right to live their lives unless they are wives and



mothers. Inasmuch as she desires autonomy, in the end, she understands that it is not possible for her to desert her prescribed gender role. As she swims out into the open ocean for the last time, she thinks of Léonce and the children because “[t]hey were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (Chopin 116). She also recalls Mademoiselle Reisz’s words the day she had admonished Edna for calling herself an artist since the “artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies” (116). It may appear that Edna is being neither courageous nor daring and defiant, but she ultimately is taking full control of her destiny. People might interpret her suicide as a cowardly act; however, Edna is finally able to choose the only autonomy that is possible for her. As she swims out deeper and deeper into the sea, she is symbolically returning to the place where her life began—in the waters of her mother’s womb. This is the only place where neither gender, class, social status, nor training ever matters. Peace at last.

Edna’s journey throughout the narrative of *The Awakening* represents one nineteenth-century, upper-class, white woman’s foray into the uncharted waters of an alternative female identity. From a feminist and gender studies perspective, Chopin’s female characters emblemize the oppressive patriarchy which Adèle embraces, Mademoiselle Reisz rejects, and Edna is in the process of defying. By juxtaposing all three characters, Chopin illustrates the inner workings of a socially-constructed system of gender roles that subjugates complicit women to the private domestic sphere and condemns women who defy it. When Per Seyersted resurrected Chopin’s work in the late 1960s, the time was perfect for feminist theorists across the globe to dissect and explore the intricacies of Chopin’s text. As a role model, Edna is morally flawed because of her infidelity and her rejection of motherhood. She is, nonetheless, a symbol of courage and audacity in the face of insurmountable odds. In her quest to achieve autonomy, she

illustrates how the battle against women's oppression and subjugation is worth the fight. Her suicide represents an act of defiance that no one can take away from her. In this way, she assures future generations of women to fight for their right to live life according to their own will.

Today, women have achieved more rights than at any other time in America's history. With this social progress, the stigma of traditional female stereotypes is lessening because now women have choices and opportunities—rights which were sorely lacking during Chopin's time. When women *and* men no longer are trained in prescribed gender roles, society as a whole will benefit. No one should feel trapped in a life that has only way out.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Edna Pontellier is caught in an emotional whirlwind because she is a woman who longs for more in her life than being a wife and mother, yet she cannot escape those bonds because of the white, upper-class, nineteenth-century society she lives in. Exacerbating her dilemma are two women on opposite sides of the spectrum regarding said society: on one side is Adèle and her willing compliance with marriage and motherhood; on the other is Mademoiselle Reisz and her personal fulfillment in living her life as a single, childless musician. As much as Edna would like to conform to her role because she does indeed have a good husband who cares and provides for her and two sweet little boys who love her but are mostly under the care of the quadroon nurse, she nonetheless feels that something is missing in her life. One of the things she discovers after several excursions in the sea is that she wants to explore her sexuality in more ways than one; the other is that she wants to feel what it is like to live in a home of her own. Although all of these new experiences tantalize her with a glimpse into autonomy, the feelings will be short-lived. Robert's final farewell towards the end of the narrative causes her to take a closer look at her options to decide what her next step should be, but it will not be an easy one. She tells herself that Léonce "doesn't matter" but her children do matter, and they would "overpower and [seek] to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days, But she knew a way to elude them" (Chopin 115). Her only option, therefore, is to escape the bounds of her earthly life.

This kind of escape is extreme, but given the climate of nineteenth-century, white upper-class society, Edna was truly trapped because regardless of the social class women were in, they were in essence their husbands' property. Additionally, women had no right to vote; few attended institutions of higher learning, and those who chose not to marry and remain childless

were social pariahs. Perpetuating the facade of domestic bliss were the women who willingly submitted to this climate. This is the situation Edna finds herself in. The shackles that bind her to the land were only breakable when she was in the sea or consumed by her own tears. For instance, in her “adventure” with Robert out in the sea at the beginning of the narrative, she is in high spirits until she has to confront her husband: the constant reminder that she is his property. That evening, though, “a single faint light gleamed out from the hallway of the house” right before she wept uncontrollably (Chopin 9). That light is symbolic of the hope that she must hold onto in order to face the challenges awaiting her in the future. In the midst of darkness and despair, there is light in her life.

The sea and water’s catharsis in juxtaposition to the oppression that Edna faces on land represents Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of the Apolline and Dionysian: two opposing forces that unsettle Edna’s world. Once Edna reaches a balance between these two impulses, she is able to reflect on her identity as a person within the society that restricts her to the Apolline, and the scintillating experiences that the Dionysian offers. Having the perfect domestic life counterbalances the life she would have as a free, independent woman since the Dionysian always wants more than what the Apolline has to offer. It may be chaotic, and it may be tumultuous, but the only way for Edna to be happy in both of these realms is to boldly accept the Dionysian so that she can have no regrets about heeding its passions. As she is about to take her final swim out into the gulf, for example, the Apolline compels her to put her bathing suit on, but then the Dionysian urges her to “cast the pricking garments from her” until she stands completely “naked in the open air [...] as the waves invited her” (Chopin 116). Instead of viewing Edna as a coward who opts for death instead of facing the consequences of her objectionable actions, she must be viewed as a person who is undaunted in accepting the

impulses that clash within every one of us. She fearlessly represents the epitome of a person who will not cower to a hegemony that seeks to enslave her to a life she repudiates. Her triumph in dealing with her confinement on her own terms illustrates the success of the Dionysian at work. Although Edna's outcome may not seem admirable, she nevertheless held the reins of her chariot and charged ahead full speed and "did not look back" (Chopin 116).

Because she is a strong female character, Edna Pontellier is a beacon for feminine criticism and theory. When Per Seyersted reintroduced her to the world, countless female scholars from across the globe embraced Edna as a symbol for the struggles that women have had to endure under the patriarchal system. Chopin illustrates this struggle when she first introduces a caged parrot followed by Léonce Pontellier's extensive physical description that ends with his smoking a cigar—the phallogocentric symbol of man's dominance. The parrot, on the other hand, represents Edna and her domestic captivity. When she finally does make a physical appearance in the narrative, she is simply a damaged piece of property that slips the proprietary symbol of ownership back on her finger. *The Awakening* is brimming with these kinds of juxtapositions in which Edna's identity is very much in question. The female friends in her life represent the conformist/nonconformist sides of the patriarchy. Her sexuality is also a conundrum that she tries to solve because, although she is dominantly heterosexual, she enjoys some new erotic feelings toward another woman that she cannot deny are absolutely titillating. All of these facets of Edna's character offer a plethora of perspectives and theories which feminist scholars can analyze and evaluate the novel. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this novel is the fact that Chopin engaged Edna's character in overt sexual circumstances that were unheard of during Chopin's lifetime. As brazen as the character she created, Chopin was undeterred in her determination to create an authentic female character who questioned the

gender roles that women had to abide by in the nineteenth century. Although Chopin did not live to see the positive impact that her novel has and continues to make on the feminist community, our society owes her a debt of gratitude for her vision in Edna's victory in overcoming the repressive male hegemony.

Of course, the only way that Edna was going to persevere in her journey towards the reclamation of her identity was via the restorative powers of the sea and water. Each time Edna was either in the sea's waters or consumed by her weeping, she surfaced with a new outlook for her life. Water gave her the strength to seek out what society had denied her, and each time she was in any water's welcoming arms, she became emboldened to do just that. No longer would she be defined by what she was to her father, husband, or children. In the water, she had no role and no gender; she was simply a human being who had a right to live according to her will. Were it not for the water imbuing her with audacity and brazenness, she would have remained locked away in the patriarchy's cage. As Edna herself said, "I don't want anything but my own way" (Chopin 112), so she was determined to find her identity at all costs. Though she is mindful of the repercussions of her choices in seeking her identity, her compulsion for her own needs as a person supersede the needs of her family. Truly, Edna is symbolic of a woman who realizes that she would not be able to truly and lovingly fulfill her duties as a wife and mother, so she ventures forth in finding ways in which she could fulfill herself. Only by trying to regain a sense of self would she be able to live in this world free of regret and resentment.

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