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A Sea Change

An Examination of the Imagery in Chopin's

The Awakening

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Title: *A Sea Change – An Examination of the Imagery in Chopin's The Awakening*

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Abstract: *The Awakening* is Kate Chopin's tale of a woman seeking her individuation and self-fulfillment in a male-dominated society – it is a novel about female emancipation. The aim of this essay is to examine the imagery in *The Awakening* in order to see how the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, and her struggle for individuation are depicted. This will be done making use of arguments and theories from a range of different feminist critics and theoreticians with the purpose of showing different aspects of female emancipation. Primarily, the essay will focus on symbols of coming-to-consciousness in a patriarchal society, and explore how the turn-of-the-century social structure is depicted. The essay will point at the ambiguity surrounding Edna's awakening, and the fact that there are no straight answers to if Edna truly awakes or not. It will show that the protagonist's journey to self-fulfillment is clearly mirrored in the imagery, and that it contains symbols of empowerment, boundary, and defeat.

Keywords: Kate Chopin, Edna Pontellier, imagery, symbolism, feminist, female emancipation, individuation

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1. Introduction

Literature often serves as a mirror of different realities within the world. In the context of 19th century industrial urbanization in the West, First Wave Feminism arose, and accordingly, women started to protest against the gender inequalities they faced in their contemporary society. (Rampton, online) Writing became over time the most prominent medium through which a minority group of feminists and female artists debated the misogyny ingrained in society, and channeled a desire for self-fulfillment. Their works were often marginalized, but to cite Joanna Russ, author of *How to Suppress Women's Writing*: “Minority art, vernacular art, is marginal art. Only on the margins does growth occur” (129).

Growth did occur. During the feminist movement of the 60s and 70s, works by female authors that had previously been neglected were rediscovered, analyzed and celebrated (Griffith 141-142). Kate Chopin, an American writer treating issues often controversial to her contemporary society, was one among these artists recognized and reappraised. Her books are now widely read, often with a canonical respect, and she has undoubtedly earned a place in the spotlight. *The Awakening* (1899), the novel which will be subject to examination in this essay, provoked debate among Chopin's contemporary critics. Shortly after the novel was published, critics were in several cases enraged over the morbid theme and the protagonist's vulgar conduct.¹ Chopin was an early 20th century female writer who brought the subject of women longing for liberation up to the surface, and by doing so, she challenged current values and ideals. One early book review from *Public Opinion* stated that “we are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death,” and argued that Edna, the protagonist, was extremely unpleasant and unconvincing (Culley 168). However, critics who met *The Awakening* with negativity proved to be far fewer than those cherishing the novel for its importance.

The Awakening is set in the turn-of-the-century southern Louisiana and New Orleans. In short, it is the story of Edna Pontellier, a woman in her late-twenties who desires to fully live her life in relation to her self, as an individual. As a wife and mother, she must face boundaries and

1 A review from the *Chicago Times-Herald* categorizes the novel as “sex fiction”, and calls the story unpleasant, although “the contrast between the heroine and another character who is devoted to her husband and family saves it from utter gloom.” Another from *The Outlook* considers the novel “not really worth telling” by arguing that “its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent.” A third, from *Literature*, states that “[o]ne cannot refrain from regret that so beautiful a style and so much refinement of taste have been spent by Miss Chopin on an essentially vulgar story” (Culley 166-168).

responsibilities and fight against them in order for her yearnings to come true. She is also forced to meet the social expectations, norms and values of the Creole upper middle class, to which her husband Léonce Pontellier belongs. Her increasingly romantic feelings for Robert Lebrun, the son of summer-colony owner Madame Lebrun, are a driving force behind this process of awakening.

Nature and its forces are conveyed in the novel through Chopin's tale, which is filled with sensuous pictures and subtle sensations speaking to the reader's imagination. In other words, nature imagery plays a great part in the book, and is an important feature participating in giving the story its depth. Perhaps the most prominent piece of imagery in the text is water, which in this essay will be examined along with the symbolic meaning of birds, houses, and the binary opposition between clothes and nakedness. With previous studies on the subject in mind, I will try to map out some aspects of the imagery in the novel that I find not only extremely intriguing, but also helpful if trying to understand Edna's awakening. Accordingly, the imagery will be studied in the light of Edna's process, and I will argue that it not only contains symbols of empowerment, but also reflects boundaries as well as defeat.

There have been numerous critical reviews, along with a large number of literary interpretations of the novel. *The Awakening* was written more than a hundred years ago, and thus, much has happened in the field of criticism. This is pointed out by Elizabeth LeBlanc in "The Metaphorical Lesbian," who summons some of the standpoints of interpretation having been used to analyze Edna Pontellier: "'A derelict in a moral ocean"; "a selfish, capricious woman"; "a Creole *Bovary*"; "the Woman of Thirty"; "a tragic heroine"; "a valiant woman"; "an orally destructive self, a limitless void"; "an alternative to the... patriarchal myth of Jesus"' (289). While many discussions of the novel take either a gender or psycho-analytical perspective, others have emphasized other aspects such as race². Perhaps, what is most interesting with this book, and why it never will cease to be an object of study, is its multifaceted content speaking to readers through Chopin's narrative.

The essay will be built on a method of close reading of selected passages in the novel where chosen aspects of the imagery appear. Sandra Gilbert's essay "The Second Coming of Aphrodite"

2 Michele A. Birnbaum's "Alien Hands: Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race", published in *American Literature*, is one example of works taking issue with race in *The Awakening*.

and Ellen Moer's *Literary Women* will be used extensively for backing up arguments. Other critics' works will also be weighed into the examination. Most of these sources are the works of feminist critics and theoreticians. Hence, the theory used in this essay will be feminist. Feminist literary theory, also sometimes referred to as gender criticism, or as a part of gender studies, cannot easily be described. Feminist and gender criticism are two conceptual fields growing into each other, and one can be quite hard to differentiate from the other. Feminist literary theory is an offspring of the so called "Second Wave Feminism", the feminist movement that began somewhere around the 60s and continued into the 90s. In an online exclusive article for *Pacific*, Marta Rampton provides the following description of the birth of feminist literary theory:

The second wave was increasingly theoretical, based on a fusion of neo-Marxism and psycho-analytical theory, and began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother. Sex and gender were differentiated—the former being biological, and the later a social construct that varies culture-to-culture and over time.

In other words, feminist literary theory may seek to reveal and convey patriarchal and masculinist structures in works of literature, influenced by other theories of interpretation. If a work of art is interpreted from a gender perspective, social constructions of gender in general may instead be the focus point. Kelley Griffith writes in *Writing Essays about Literature* that gender studies "has evolved out of feminist studies in order to address broader issues; notably, the nature of both femininity and masculinity, the differences within each sex, and the literary treatment of men and homosexuals" (141). There are other entryways to the subject as well, since there are numerous sub-genres in this theoretical approach, but this essay's focus will be that of feminist literary theory. Attempts have been made to show what stance this theory has in terms of interpretation, but feminist literary theory tends to differ from one theoretician to another, and the theoretical approaches have been under development ever since the second wave of feminism began. This essay will primarily focus on symbols of coming-to-consciousness in a male-dominated world. In other words, it will seek to reveal the masculinist structure the novel reacts to, and how the turn-of-the-century social field is depicted.

In the light of Edna's process of individuation, chapter one will focus on water imagery. From a close reading of selected passages where water imagery appears, the symbolism will be examined and contrasted making use of different feminist literary critics' arguments in order to

provide a multifaceted interpretation. Chapter two will cover miscellaneous imagery in order to give the reader an overview of how the protagonist's awakening is depicted in it. The symbols I intend to cover in this section are birds, houses and the binary opposition between clothes and nakedness. The last pair will be discussed in terms of Edna's paradoxical suicide. A question I intend to answer in this essay is to what extent her awakening can be seen as a success.

Chapter one: *The Whispering Sea*

Water imagery in *The Awakening* is strikingly symbolic, and the attributes given to the element are numerous. This chapter will provide an illustration of water in Chopin's vivid narrative, and the symbolic meaning will be examined in a close reading of selected passages where water imagery appears. The argument is that the imagery reflects a threefold aspect of Edna's process of female individuation, or self-fulfillment: empowerment, boundary and defeat. The aim will be to illustrate these three aspects and give the reader a sense of the ambiguity surrounding Edna's process.

The first sixteen chapters of *The Awakening* are situated at Grand Isle in Madame Lebrun's summer colony, where the Pontelliers spend their annual vacation by the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Sandra Gilbert describes the situation of the colony in "The Second Coming of Aphrodite" as "outside patriarchal culture, beyond the limits of the city where men make history, on one of those magical shores that mark the margin where nature intersects with culture" (272). The nautical surroundings nurture Edna's awakening in allowing her to relax and distinguish herself from the social expectations met in New Orleans, the city where the Pontelliers live. The social structure of the colony could be seen as predominantly matriarchal, with Madame Lebrun as the ruler surrounded by mother-women and children. The men, except for a few characters, are in the background, and everyone seems to adjust to the reigning matriarchy. In the broader culture, the colony seems to be an exceptional environment for exploring values and norms of the turn-of-the-century South. As Gilbert points out, Grand Isle is "beyond the limits of the city," and thus, it is possible for current ideals to be stretched. The predominant female presence enables Edna to explore prevailing female ideals and expectations within the resort's social structure. Since it seems to mirror and enhance the ideals of the Creole women, it becomes possible for Edna, born and raised in Kentucky, to set herself apart from the others. She realizes she is not a mother-woman, nor especially wifely. Nevertheless, patriarchal norms are still present at Grand Isle, and above all mirrored in Edna and Léonce's marriage.

The reader is introduced to the surroundings of the summer paradise at an early stage, but it is not until the sixth chapter, in which Edna begins to "realize her position in the universe," that Chopin for the first time assigns a personification to the sea:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul

to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (14)

The attributes the sea has been given in this excerpt expose the reader to an immediate association with the features of a living creature. Edna's senses react to its touch with pleasure. Also, the sea has a seductive voice that clamors, murmurs, and constantly lurks in the outskirts of the novel, always waiting for the protagonist to “wander for a spell in abysses of solitude”. What is fascinating, and of great significance to the novel as such, is the return of this passage in the last chapter right before Edna's act of drowning, which also interestingly happens to take place in the Gulf of Mexico. By repeating these exact words in the end of the novel, Chopin highlights water as perhaps the most important piece of imagery in her work; one that ties the whole narrative together.

In an event following the passage above, water imagery is once again symbolically charged and anticipates a key-event in the novel: when Edna masters swimming. Edna talks with Madame Ratignolle, one of her closest acquaintances, and suddenly recalls a childhood memory. She remembers having run away from the Presbyterian service read by her father: “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” (16-17). Gilbert argues Edna had run away “from the dictations and interdictions of patriarchal culture, especially of patriarchal theology”, and that she had run “into the wild openness of nature” (273). In that respect, the meadow, which here is compared to an endless sea, symbolizes a world full of possibilities, without oppression and boundary.

Rosemary F. Franklin argues in “The Awakening and the Failure of Psyche” that “Edna sleeps and lives in a world of romantic fantasy far more than she seems to awaken to self or reality” (510). Given the fact that Edna yearns for something unattainable, it indeed appears as if she lives in a romanticized version of reality. In mastering swimming, she fulfills her lifelong wish for liberation from the boundaries of patriarchal society portrayed in the childhood memory. Nevertheless, this fulfillment could be compared with her feelings of empowerment,

slowly fading away as she realizes living according to her self's yearnings will be impossible in practice. It seems as if Edna at the end of the novel unconsciously tries to reverse the process of awakening by returning to the sea in which she experienced her nearly limitless strength. As Franklin points out, Chopin indicates early in the novel the difficulty with a journey like this, especially for a woman:

In short, Mrs Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight – perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult! (14)

This excerpt suggests the author's irony concerning Edna's individuation. It seems as if Chopin herself questions whether her protagonist ever truly wakes up to individuation from her first feelings of empowerment, or if she perishes in the tumultuous beginning. This paradox surrounding Edna's journey is embodied in the last chapter of the novel, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Right before Edna's first major encounter with sensations of empowerment – when she manages to swim for the first time – an excerpt with similar features of personification to the passage mentioned above appears: “The sea was quiet now, and swelled lazily in broad billows that melted into one another and did not break except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents” (27). On the night of the swim, mysticism seem to be the ruling power on the Gulf coast. Chopin describes the moon casting a white light over the water, which “like the mystery and softness of sleep” falls upon the world (27). A slightly erotic description of the odors of the sea, along with a heavy perfume of white flowers and damp earth, adds to the notion that this is a mysterious, sensuous and intimate occasion. Gilbert emphasizes the female mythical associations of the moon and water, and proposes that “Edna is swimming not only with new powers, but into a kind of alternative paradise” (273). The slow, white foam-serpents coiling at the shore suggest that water is indeed an element of a different reality or dimension. Also, there is a sense of celebration of this mysticism. Consider for instance the night-bathing women and men who walk into the sea “as though into a native element” (27).

When taking her first strokes in the water, Edna is described as a “little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly

and with over-confidence” (27). Water, the encompassing of this mystical encounter, might in this context symbolize a birth-mother in that it releases Edna from the boundaries of the material world and enables her to comprehend her nearly limitless strength. Ellen Moers covers the nautical surroundings in this passage in *Literary Women* by pointing out that they are “charged with female privacy”, and contain “emotions ranging from the erotic to the mystical.” Accordingly, Moers continues to argue, the seaside is not just a literary scenery, or an imaginative creation significant for literature written by and for women, but a genuine female landscape (261). Indeed, Edna seems to be able to experience her encounter with feelings of individuation due to the fact that the situational circumstances agree with the possibilities of her female liberation. The environment, mystically charged, fuels Edna's illusive notion of reality. The occasion is described as sensuous, speaking to Edna's soul. Accordingly, Edna seems to be able to leave her patriarchal marriage on land, along with the ideals and values of the Creoles. It seems as if Chopin's protagonist for the first time manages to fully abandon social expectations. A new Edna is born from the sea, along with a newborn realization of her self, her sexuality. Gilbert highlights the sea's symbolical meaning in describing it as “an element, indeed, of otherness – in whose baptismal embrace she is mystically and mythically revitalized, renewed, reborn” (273).

A close reading of the excerpt above, where the sea “swelled lazily in broad billows melting into one another,” indicates that the suggested depiction of the sea as a mother, which the “new” Edna is symbolically born from, is a relevant symbol in terms of the protagonist's journey. Before Edna swims out for the first time, she has felt safe whenever in the presence of water – almost like a fetus in its mother's protective womb. However, like all newborn children, Chopin's protagonist must face the outside world with its norms, values and expectations. Edna's sudden feeling of terror and the instant flash of death, functions as a warning saying that her inner experience of empowerment comes with a price. Accordingly, the price for Edna to pay is the conflict and struggle between her inner yearnings for liberation and the social boundaries she must face.

Right before the passage where Edna manages to take her transformational swim, the reader is made aware of the swimming-lessons Edna has received “from both men and women; in some instances from the children” (27). It seems as if everyone in the summer-colony has attempted to

teach Edna the art of swimming. Gilbert describes Edna's education as lessons about politically staying afloat in society (273). When she swims of her own effort, despite people's directions and preconceptions, she ascends in the social order, and takes charge of the situation politically. This view turns the sea into a symbol for the social boundaries that Edna manages to overpower by staying afloat after her numerous attempts to learn how to swim. However, her inability to live pragmatically, rather than in her own romanticized world, drives her to a dead end. The suggested representation of the sea, along with Edna's illusive reality, points to the sea as an ambiguous symbol.

As discussed above, only when taking place in the water does the rise of Edna's empowerment seem to be possible. When Edna is back on land, her marriage, which unquestionably is of an oppressive nature, becomes the first discouraging force. After Edna's encounter with the flash of death experienced in the water, she tells her husband: "I thought I should have perished out there alone." Mr. Pontellier answers: "you were not so far, my dear; I was watching you" (28). Similarly, an earlier event, when Edna comes back from a plunge in the sea and her husband looks at her "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property" (4), suggests that Mr. Pontellier seeks to dominate his wife.

Considering again Gilbert's argument about Grand Isle being outside patriarchal culture, the social expectations in New Orleans are more felt than on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. This is so firstly because of Edna's marriage and the domestic boundaries that come with taking care of a house and two children, and secondly because of the expectations Edna must face in her social network in New Orleans. A key-character in the novel is the talented pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, whose music allows Edna to experience the symbolical presence of water in the city. She is also an important character in relation to Edna's process due to the fact that she questions her purposes and acts in order to make her reflect. Michael Worton writes in "Reading Kate Chopin through contemporary French feminist theory" that Mademoiselle is an interlocutor of privilege for Edna "not only because of her artistry as a pianist but especially because she makes Edna think – and think differently" (115). Adèle Ratignolle, one of Edna's closest acquaintances, also witnesses her attempt to follow her self, but does not exactly talk to Edna in favor of her longing for individuation. Instead, she begs her to think rationally, and of her family. Mademoiselle's awareness of Edna's awakening is highlighted in several instances. What is most interesting in

this context is her music, which, as previously mentioned, bears metaphorical connotations to water. This is what Edna experiences at Grand Isle on the night of the swim, when she for the first time hears Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano: “She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body” (26). Water continues to let its presence felt in the tunes of Mademoiselle's piano-playing on Edna's first visit to her apartment in New Orleans:

The music grew strange and fantastic – turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room. It floated out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air. Edna was sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her. (61-62)

In both passages, music has been given a metaphorical association to water. Even though Mademoiselle's music enables Edna to experience feelings of oceanic nature, the patriarchal structure of the social life in the city discourages her process of liberation. Mademoiselle Reisz captures these boundaries when Edna tells her she wants to become an artist:

“Ah! an artist! You have pretensions, Madame.”

“Why pretensions? Do you think I could not become an artist?”

“I do not know you well enough to say. I do not know your talent or your temperament. To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul.”

“What do you mean by the courageous soul?”

“Courageous *ma foi!* The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies.” (61)

Mademoiselle simply emphasizes the need for standing up for one's own opinion and actions, even if it challenges current ideals and norms, and stick to it, whatever the cost. When realizing that the meadow of opportunity is limited for a woman in her position, Edna desperately seeks to adjust her life after her own sense of self, but by doing so, her solitude grows.

Franklin discusses Mademoiselle Reisz's music – “the city's version of the sea” – in terms of Edna's encounter with her own unconscious, or as Franklin puts it: “the dangerous realm” Edna has to negotiate. She highlights Edna's first visit to Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, when the

protagonist is leaving and asks if she may come again, whereupon Mademoiselle answers, “Be careful; the stairs and landings are dark; don't stumble” (62). According to Franklin, Mademoiselle could here be viewed as a “threshold guardian” to Edna's unconscious (521-522). I would like to suggest an alternative viewpoint, namely that Mademoiselle's response may imply the conflict previously highlighted; that of Edna's struggle with values of patriarchal structure, and with the illusion she lives according to. The road to individuation Edna must walk in order to be liberated is dark, and contains many traps. As Chopin indicates: “the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” (14). One has to be clear-headed to live through such a tough process.

Edna's last wading out in the water, depicted again with its significant symbolical attributes, adds a mythical notion to Chopin's ending and reaffirms the initial idea of the sea as some sort of being:

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (109)

Again, these are almost the same attributes as when Edna began to awaken at Grand Isle; the water's “soft, close embrace”, the foam-serpents and the sea's sensuous touch. The serpents in particular reflect the sea's ambiguity; it is both venomous and inviting. The mythical attributes add to an equivocal sense of the sea, and the reader ends up wondering what Chopin's intentions with the imagery were in the first place. The fact that the author lets her heroine die in the embrace of water says something about water imagery's importance. Symbolically, her suicide could be viewed as triumphant in that it enables her to return to her birth-mother's protective womb. In terms of Edna's struggle with the social structure, however, there is a twofold aspect to her death, which leads us into the next chapter where this paradox will be covered.

Chapter two: *The Broken Bird*

This chapter will examine miscellaneous rhetorical images symbolically valuable to the context of Edna's liberation. This will be done in order to give the reader an overview of other features of Chopin's imagery in *The Awakening*. Initially, birds and houses will be examined as part of the imagery mirroring different aspects of Edna's process of individuation. Lastly, the binary couple clothes and nakedness will be discussed in terms of the protagonist's paradoxical suicide. Edna's clothes at her dinner party – the great “coup d'état” as her lover Alcée Arobin calls it – will be discussed and compared with the final scene, where the protagonist strips off her clothes and swims out to meet her death naked. Again, the imagery will be examined in a close reading of passages important to the context, and the thesis is that the imagery reflects a threefold aspect of Edna's awakening in symbolizing empowerment, boundary and defeat.

In the beginning of the novel, Edna is described as distinguished from the other mothers at Grand Isle. “In short”, Chopin writes, “Edna was not a mother-woman.” This candid distinction is followed by a passage with metaphorical connection to birds: “The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer on Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood” (9). The mothers, depicted as nurturing and caressing, seem to live only for their children. Their flutter and protective wings metaphorically suggest that the women are some kind of birds. Moers provides an interesting interpretation of the symbolical value of these animals: “Of all creatures, birds alone can fly all the way up to heaven – yet they are caged. Birds alone can sing more beautifully than human voices – yet they are unheeded or silenced.” She continues to discuss “the meaning to a girl of the bird itself”, which partly, she argues, may correspond to the idea of sexual freedom (250). In this respect, what sets Edna apart from these bird-like mothers is her longing for self-fulfillment in which the sexual aspect is included. One of these mother-birds is Adèle Ratignolle, described as the idealistic example of a mother-woman who possesses inner and outer qualities which few seem able to live up to. She cherishes her husband and her children, and seems to be wonderfully content with the duties of domestic care. In numerous ways, she represents qualities of normative values. Edna wants to fly away from the patriarchal structure, in which the maternal role is included – she does not want to be caged by anyone. For instance, after Madame Ratignolle's childbirth, the exhausted Adèle urges Edna to think of her

children, whom Edna at that point sees as her antagonists chaining her to her duties as a mother.

The bird metaphor continues to appear in several instances in the novel. One example is when Mademoiselle Reisz feels Edna's shoulder blades in order to see if she has got strong wings. Mademoiselle again points to Edna's need for courageousness. If she intends to follow her self's yearnings, she will have to "soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" (79). Wings and soaring are here used symbolically to depict the protagonist as a bird, who has to possess a "soul that dares and defies" if she wants to fly (61). Flying in this instance means sexual liberation, i.e., freedom of choice. Only by being courageous, and by standing firm against prejudice and social expectations, can a woman like Edna positively affirm her sexuality. Sexual boundaries, which I dare say are still more prominent when concerning women, can be very difficult to cross, which is exactly what Mademoiselle means. For Edna, it becomes a tough flight.

After having realized that she is an individual with a self yearning for liberation on different levels, Edna attempts to cross the boundaries caging her sexuality. It is essential to her individuation, and very much bound to the social structure, although, as discussed before, her illusory reality complicates the process. Her longing for Robert seems to be nothing more than a longing for something unattainable, which in turn could be interpreted as what seems to be her deepest desire: sexual freedom. It has been repressed in her marriage with Léonce, whom she does not love. Consequently, in order to explore the boundaries tying Edna to the patriarchal marriage, and her sexuality, she becomes limitless. When her husband is away on business, Edna befriends Alcée Arobin, a man who eventually becomes her lover. When Edna realizes that she will never be truly satisfied, not with Robert or anyone else, she decides to take her life. In this view, Edna's sexual liberation in terms of flying is bound to crash.

Edna's escape to, what her maid Ellen calls, "the pigeon house", is a daring move, which physically separates her from the Pontelliers' cage-like residence, and the domestic boundaries it represents – although, the question is if Edna's move is nothing more than a relocation from a large cage, into a smaller one. Consequently, the most interesting aspect of this event is the name of the new residence. By nature, the pigeon is a free bird, but for a long time it has been captivated and altered into a domesticated animal. The pigeon represents Edna, who feels like a domesticated bird. By moving, she is temporarily satisfied by feelings of liberation. Her flight,

speaking in bird-like terms, enables her to feel free. It also makes her feel independent, and she believes her liberation is possible. Her reason for moving from her husband unravels on a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz:

Neither was it quite clear to Edna herself; but it unfolded itself as she sat for a while in silence. Instinct had prompted her to put away her husband's bounty in casting off her allegiance. She did not know how it would be when he returned. There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself. (76)

Ironically, conditions do not adjust themselves for Edna. On the contrary, she realizes that she remains in captivity; her notion of liberation is blurred by a longing for something unattainable. Judging from Edna's motif in the excerpt, and the name of the house, the symbolic value of her move is twofold, just like her paradoxical suicide. It reflects the ambiguous ending in the novel, which will be covered more thoroughly in the end of this chapter.

Before Edna walks out in the ocean for the last time, the beach is described as a barren landscape, with “no living thing in sight”, except for a bird “beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (108). The bird with its broken wing may symbolize the flight of Edna's, doomed to fail because of her distorted notion of self and sexuality.

The duality in Edna's suicide, whether it might be looked upon as a triumph or defeat regarding the character's awakening, could also be discussed in terms of the binary couple clothes and nakedness that plays a significant part in Chopin's splendid imagery. Numerous descriptive passages of the characters' clothing can be found in the novel, and in several instances conventional dress-codes seem to be ignored. Katherine Joslin points out that there is a consistent theme of “Edna's shredding of clothes,” especially at Grand Isle; “the sort of place a lady might loosen and even remove clothing without the notice and censure of her tribe” (83). The novel, as Joslin puts it, “casts away gown and bustle” (84). Female fashion in the late nineteenth century was prescriptive in many ways; the rules of fashion Edna breaks by dressing comfortably rather than conventionally. Clothes reflected social constraints, values and norms faced during the period, especially when concerning women. Margo Culley, the editor of *A Norton Critical Edition of The Awakening*, states that “it is hard to appreciate the significance of “for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air,” without a picture of what the

bathing costume Edna has just cast aside would have been like” (122).

An event of significance with regard to how Edna's clothes reflect her awakening is her dinner party, which she insists in hosting in order to celebrate her moving into “the pigeon house”. Edna says to Mademoiselle Reisz that her intent with the dinner is to celebrate the move, but reading between the lines, it is rather to celebrate her physical separation from Léonce, her children, and the boundaries of domestic care. This is ironically pointed out by Alcée Arobin, who calls the protagonist's celebratory dinner “the grand event, *the coup d'état*”: a political overthrow of a sitting parliament (81). In Arobin's expression, the Pontellier-marriage is depicted as an authorized force, and Edna tries to take over the ruling power by moving into her pigeon house.

The following passage describes Edna's royal appearance during the dinner, which paradoxically is followed by a description of her depressive state on the occasion.

The golden shimmer of Edna's satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her. There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. It was the color of her skin, without the glow, the myriad living tints that one may sometimes discover in vibrant flesh. There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone. (84)

Here, Edna is portrayed as “the regal woman,” which suggests a noble appearance; the attributes are similar to those of a queen. Also, she is depicted as independent, as “the one who rules.” Judging from her clothes in this passage, her coup has succeeded, and she is now the ruler of the reigning social structure. Edna's freedom of choice and sexuality, her giving herself where she chooses, which she later emphasizes in a conversation with Robert, seems to be at its peak (102). Still, on the inside, “as she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition” (84). Edna's feelings transform her clothing on this occasion into a veil, failing to reflect her inner state of mind which she hides from her guests by the illusive surface of beauty and power. Joslin argues that Edna's exclusive clothing on this happening symbolically turns her into her husband's “valuable piece of personal property” (84). This, rather self-contradictory idea, suggests that the outcome of Edna's intent becomes distorted. On the one hand, she tries to transcend the boundaries tying her to her marriage with Léonce, while on the other, she sits in her high-backed chair with garments and jewelry her husband has

paid for. Edna's rising hopelessness seems to be born from the realization of unattainable freedom from these limitations. Thus, the dinner has a foreboding effect on Edna's act of drowning, because from there on, everything seems to be disappointing for Edna, until she reaches a point where she sees everyone as antagonists:

There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her as antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. (108)

In stripping off her bathing-suit before wading out in the water for the last time, she symbolically abandons the fetters of patriarchy:

Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded, upon its accustomed peg. She put it on, leaving her clothing in the bath-house. But when she was there behind the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. (109)

When she casts “the unpleasant, pricking garments” from her and swims out naked in the Gulf for the very last time, she sheds not only the physical garments which belong to her husband, but also the sacred bonds of marriage and motherhood. In “*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction,” Ann Heilmann compares the ending in the novel to that of Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper”, arguing that “having broken free from the patriarchal structures of marriage, both women have “got out at last” and, whatever might happen to their physical entities, in spiritual terms they “can't [be] put [...] back”” (101). Gilman's short story depicts a young woman, much in the same age as Edna, who suffers a postpartum depression, loses contact with reality, and becomes obsessed with an intriguing wallpaper-pattern in the room she is confined to by her husband, who happens to be a doctor. In the end of the story, the protagonist has reached a psychotic state and crawls over her husband who passes out on the floor at the sight of his wife. Gilman's protagonist and Edna Pontellier both struggle with their suppressive marriages, but the contradiction in terms, their methods on how to break free, makes them even more alike. To Edna, swimming out in the Gulf of Mexico for the last time is a victorious act, her refusal to reconcile to motherhood and patriarchal marriage, which she feels suppress her sexuality. Still, it is a paradoxical victory. Since society has no space for her freedom, she could either choose to

end her life, and thus liberate herself from oppression, or she could continue living as a caged pigeon. Just as in Gilman's short story, the ending could be interpreted as a triumph, or as a defeat. The fact that Edna gives up fighting for her self, her realization of her inability to live up to what Mademoiselle Reisz so vividly expressed was of great significance to a journey like Edna's, suggests that her suicide is nothing more than a defeat. In this point of view, the ending reflects the protagonist's unwillingness, or inability, to face existing social expectations, values and norms, which she inevitably must struggle against on her road to self-fulfillment; this is a journey that in many aspects is impossible since she lives in her romantic illusion.

At one point, after she has witnessed Adèle giving birth, Edna says to Dr. Mandelet: “The years that are gone seem like dreams – if one might go on sleeping and dreaming – but not to wake up and find – oh! well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (105). This event precedes her suicide, and shows that deep inside, she is aware of her distorted outlook on her self and her sexuality. Interestingly, she describes the defeat of her process with her own words. When undressing before wading out into the sea, Edna illusory strips off her piece of clothing and stands naked in front of the Gulf of Mexico. She feels “like some new-born creature” in her nakedness, which suggests that she is still fantasizing and chooses to “remain a dupe” to her illusions. In a way, she reverses her process of awakening:

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to a sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. (109)

In recalling the memory of the cavalry officer, whom Edna had amorous feelings for as a young girl, she returns to her romantic illusion. Accordingly, her individuation fails, and she takes her own life in favor of her memories. The sensual description of the atmosphere surrounding the shores of the Gulf – bees' humming and the air filled with a heavy flowery odor – suggests that conditions are perfect for the reversal of Edna's symbolical birth in the sea.

Interestingly, Chopin leaves Edna's suicide for the reader to interpret. Her paradoxical ending raises questions, not restricted to just one of the conflicting ideas covered in the end of this chapter. It is a terrible destiny Chopin's protagonist must face, and the question is if she really liberates herself in the end, or gives up the struggle.

Conclusion

By examining Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in terms of the protagonist's journey to individuation, this essay has provided a notion of the imagery's significance to the novel, and how it mirrors Edna Pontellier's struggle. My thesis is that the imagery reflects Edna's journey from a threefold view: empowerment, boundary, and defeat.

The first chapter starts discussing the connection between the possibilities for female liberation and the situation at the summer-colony of Grand Isle. Edna's childhood memory is then covered in order to give the reader a sense of the protagonist's longing to escape social structures, especially those of patriarchy faced in her childhood, as well as on Grand Isle and in her marriage with Léonce. Symbolically, the sea is depicted as a birth-mother, and Edna's swimming is discussed in terms of a newborn child's meeting with the outside world. The chapter is tied together with a discussion of Mademoiselle Reisz and her music, the character's importance to Edna's awakening, whose piano-music features metaphorical connotations to water.

In terms of bird imagery, the second chapter covers the mother-women at Grand Isle. The fact that Edna could be seen as another kind of bird searching to “soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice”, to cite Mademoiselle Reisz, is argued with respect to Edna's “flight” from the Pontelliers' cage-like residence to “the pigeon house.” The houses in different ways symbolize domestic boundaries, and the pigeon house is discussed in terms of the self-contradiction the name implies; that by moving, Edna wishes to cast off her husband's bounty, but figuratively ends up as a caged pigeon. Clothes and nakedness as part of the imagery symbolically mirroring Edna's struggle are emphasized, primarily with two passages in focus: the first is Edna's celebratory dinner and the second her suicide. In conclusion, the paradoxical nature of her death is discussed.

From a close reading of selected passages placed within the context of Edna's awakening, along with different feminist critics' arguments weighed into the discussion, I have shown that there are no straight answers to the question whether Edna triumphs in her individuation or if it should be looked upon as a defeat. The novel challenges the reader to decide. However, there are clear indications that the imagery in several instances mirrors Edna's struggle with patriarchal structures, as well as other social norms, values and expectations; these are oppressions

especially hard for a woman during the turn-of-the-century to face.

The fact that Edna seems to live in a romanticized version of reality, where her awakening to individuation becomes distorted and compressed into an urge for something unattainable, is perhaps the most ambiguous element of the novel, and the reason why the novel has been subject to so many interpretations.

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