

EDNA PONTELLIER'S IMPOSSIBLE DREAM
Fantasy and Reality in The Awakening

A Thesis

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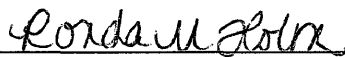
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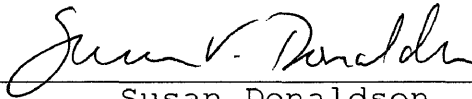


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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore and examine the conflict between fantasy and reality in the life of Edna Pontellier, the central character in Kate Chopin's novel The Awakening.

It is intended that this paper will demonstrate that Edna Pontellier's difficulty in existing contentedly within her society, and her eventual suicide, is not the result of gender oppression as is commonly argued, but arises more importantly from her absolute unwillingness to relinquish her fantasies and accept the responsibilities essential in being an adult member of society. Edna's revolt moves beyond the periphery of acceptable human behavior as she denies the existence of those responsibilities which belong to every person, regardless of gender, and searches for a means to return to the carefree existence of her childhood.

Edna Pontellier's insistence upon immersing herself in the dreams of her fantasy life and refusal to accept or acknowledge any responsibility for her actions contributes to her own entrapment in an impossible situation that leaves her few options, little chance for contentment, and ultimately leads to her suicide.

EDNA PONTELLIER'S IMPOSSIBLE DREAM
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"Sometimes I am tempted to think that Mrs. Pontellier is capricious."¹

"I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question."²

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's turn-of-the-century novel The Awakening is like most of us -- she wants to live a life in which she possesses the freedom to exercise her independence and assert her individuality. However, the manner in which Edna Pontellier chooses to do these things has inspired among the literary world a wide variety of critical readings of her behavior. For example, Emily Toth argues from a feminist perspective that "escape from confinement is the overriding theme of The Awakening, a book which demonstrates Kate Chopin's close connections with the ideas of feminist social critics."³ George Arms, on the other hand, pits romance and realism against one another as he explores complex sets of oppositions in Chopin's work and suggests:

Basically she [Kate Chopin] writes as a non-intrusive author but principally presents her material with a sense of constant contrast partly in the whole social situation, partly in Edna, but essentially as the author's way of looking at life.⁴

Marie Fletcher approaches the novel from yet another view as she imposes a regional, "local color" reading onto Edna's behavior. Ms. Fletcher argues that Edna fails because, hailing from Kentucky, she is an outsider among the cast of Southern women:

The easy-going, relaxed Creole women, with their South European Catholic background, function as norms against which to contrast Edna's little drama of revolt first against the life for which her ancestry and rearing designed her and then her final escape from the consequences of repudiating this life and learning about a more complex existence. Her suicide is the last in a series of rebellions which structure her life, give it pathos, and make of the novel a study in contrasting cultures...⁵

What these varied readings have in common is that they focus less on Edna as an individual and more on the things (social expectations and mores, male dominance, the roles of wife and mother, and so forth) that act upon her; that is, they read the impulses for Edna's behavior from the outside looking in rather than beginning within Edna's heart and mind and working outward. Consider this: The Awakening is not simply a profound exploration of one woman's sexuality, nor is it only an indictment of the constraints imposed upon women by a patriarchal society;

instead, this novel carefully delineates one woman's struggle to achieve the impossible. Living in a society in which her life has been reduced to a series of engagements, numbing repetitions, and meaningless rituals, Edna Pontellier labors to fashion an existence for herself that transcends the drudgery she associates with the traditional roles of wife and mother. This existence takes the form of an active fantasy life that Edna attempts to employ as a substitute for her real life with her husband and children. After a round of unsuccessful efforts to achieve her escapist goal of "life's delirium,"⁶ Edna finally discovers that reality cannot be eluded; the fantasy life she wants to maintain and the reality that intrudes upon her fantasy life cannot coexist peacefully, and it is this conflict to which Chopin directs the reader's attention. Edna ultimately admits defeat and, rather than conform to societal expectations or negotiate a middle ground for contentment, she succumbs to the gentle lure of the sea. By insisting upon immersing herself in the dreams of her fantasy life and refusing to accept or acknowledge any responsibility for her actions, Edna Pontellier contributes to her own entrapment in an impossible situation that leaves her few options and little chance for contentment.

When The Awakening first appeared in 1899, critical reception for the novel was anything but kind; considered by most critics an immoral, overly sexual book, Chopin's

novel quickly went out of print. Not until over half a century later did The Awakening resurface, this time to a flurry of appreciative criticism inclined to view the novel as a prefiguration of the modern women's movement; Edna's actions were read as a struggle against male dominance and her suicide viewed as a type of personal triumph over the restrictions of her society. For example, in an article entitled "Kate Chopin's The Awakening as Feminist Criticism," Emily Toth argues:

The novel moves us because it illustrates the need for women's psychological, physical, social, and sexual emancipation--the goals of feminists in the twentieth century as well as the nineteenth. In its picture of the particular limitations placed upon women, the novel belongs to the tradition of feminist criticism a century ago, a tradition which embraces both fiction and social commentary... [E]scape from confinement is the overriding theme of The Awakening a book which demonstrates Kate Chopin's close connections with the ideals of feminist critics.⁷

This sentiment is echoed in Priscilla Allen's essay "Old Critics and New: The Treatment of Chopin's The Awakening," in which Allen asserts that an unsympathetic response to Edna's plight on the part of the reader is the direct result of sexual discrimination. Allen explains:

Ordinarily a character's struggle for freedom would touch a responsive chord in all readers... However, these responses do not seem to operate on critics in the case of The Awakening. Edna is not accepted as representative of the human spirit simply because she is female. As female she must be dehumanized. It is a universal of our culture that she be designed solely to fit biologic functions, to be sex-partner and mother,

mere agent to the needs, sexual and nurturing, of others--the real human beings.⁸

Arguments of this sort, which identify gender oppression both within the text of The Awakening and without - on the part of the novel's contemporary critics - proliferate in the literature about this novel since its "rediscovery" after the mid 20th century.

There is evidence throughout the novel, which will be addressed later in this paper, that Edna's deepest conflicts perpetuate and intensify more from immaturity than gender oppression; however, it is also true that gender inequality does exist in Edna's life and she is the unwilling victim of separate societal expectations for women. Gender roles, and perhaps gender oppression, cannot be completely downplayed when evaluating Edna and her actions. The relationship between Edna and her husband demonstrates the differences in gender roles. Lèonce Pontellier, Edna's husband, asserts himself as the undisputed head of the household. He moves throughout the novel with an easy, unswerving confidence in what he considers to be his "rightful authority" and his attitude colors much of the novel. For instance, The Awakening barely opens before Chopin unveils Lèonce's narrow point of view: the reader's first peek at Edna is filtered through Lèonce's perception of her as he "look[ed] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage."⁹ This account of ownership is

reinforced by Lèonce's selfish wish to direct everything about Edna, for "he thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation."¹⁰ Lèonce's selfishness is nearly transparent, for the reader recognizes easily that Edna is in no way "the sole object of his existence," especially as Lèonce has just returned from yet another evening of drinking, billiards and male camaraderie.¹¹ Perhaps one of the most telling examples of gender inequality is shown on the evening Edna successfully swims for the first time. It is on this evening that she begins to feel the power of independent action and also begins to recognize the nature of her feelings toward Robert Lebrun. Wrapped in a tumult of emotions, Edna chooses to lie outdoors in a hammock. When Lèonce returns and demands that she move indoors, a struggle of power one-up-manship begins. Lèonce does not go to bed, as Edna directs him to, but joins his wife and punctuates her thoughts with repeated offers of wine, which he knows she does not want. The round is ultimately won by Lèonce when Edna finally moves indoors asking him to join her -- he is able to rebuff her request in order to finish his cigar, thus stamping out the evening of Edna's triumph with visions of phallic imagery and a sense of male authority.

It is true that in many ways, Lèonce stifles Edna. He assumes authority in their relationship and in their household because he has been socialized to accept and perpetuate a role in which dominance has been determined by sex. He does not give thoughtful or serious consideration to Edna's frustrations; it simply never occurs to him that his wife could have any of the same needs, interests or desires as he has. Lèonce does not prohibit Edna from doing the things she wishes to do, but he does make efforts to impose restrictions on her actions according to his own priorities, as is evidenced when Edna takes up her painting with renewed vigor, thus disturbing the equilibrium of Lèonce's life: "...her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him."¹²

Lèonce is so firmly entrenched in his notion of the proper order of his life and the proper role for Edna, as determined by his socialization, that he makes no effort to understand or even contemplate Edna's position, as is evidenced by this exchange:

"It seems to me 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."

"I feel like painting," answered Edna.
"Perhaps I shan't always feel like it."

"Then in God's name paint! but don't let the family go to the devil. There's Madame Ratinolle; because she keeps up her music,

she doesn't let everything else go to chaos. And she's more of a musician than you are a painter."¹³

This telling exchange demonstrates clearly Lèonce's prejudices and attitudes; he is willing to support Edna's interests provided that they align neatly with his own priorities. That is, the family (particularly Lèonce) should come first and then Edna's needs may follow.

However, Edna's failure to find contentment and make peace with herself is not, ultimately, the result of gender role conflicts or male domination. What is at the heart of Chopin's novel is Edna's inability to act in an appropriate, mature, and responsible fashion in response to the limitations placed on women by her society. Early in the novel Chopin hints that Edna marches solely to the beat of her own drummer when she explains that "[e]ven as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself."¹⁴ For Edna the deepest conflict arises from the disparity between the reality of everyday life and the romance of her imagination. George Arms, in his article entitled "Kate Chopin's The Awakening in the Perspective of Her Literary Career," argues that "...one of the oppositions which the author develops throughout the novel is that of romance and reality, and she suggests that Edna remains a figure of romantic ideals in spite of her acting with a sexual freedom that the common reader would call realistic or even naturalistic."¹⁵ A careful look at Edna's

actions and responses throughout the novel demonstrates that Edna's problems stem primarily from her willful refusal to relinquish the fantasies and the carefree existence she enjoyed in her childhood.

Edna's proclivity for fantasies, daydreams, and unrealistic expectations emerges in her childhood; unlike most people, however, Edna does not grow out of her fascination with a fantasy life as she matures but instead carries these dreams and desires with her throughout her adult life. Chopin tells the reader of Edna's early romanticized infatuations with inaccessible men. Still in childhood, Edna was "passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visited her father in Kentucky. She could not leave his presence when he was there, nor remove her eyes from his face."¹⁶ This cavalry officer, who was probably not even especially conscious of Edna's existence and who, quite possibly, could have been of sufficient age to be her father, eventually "melted imperceptibly out of her existence" only to be replaced in her one-sided affections by the fiancé of a neighbor.¹⁷ This infatuation as well existed only in Edna's dreams "and the realization that she herself was nothing, nothing to the engaged young man was a bitter affliction to her."¹⁸ Although these infatuations are typical of adolescent love, Chopin points out that Edna did not outgrow them for she was a "grown young woman...when the face and figure of a

great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses."¹⁹ The "bitter affliction" of her unrequited attachment to the neighbor's fiancé is now replaced, in Edna's mind, with a near-martyrish exaltation in the sheer impossibility of her situation. Chopin explains, "The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness of it colored it with the lofty tones of a great passion."²⁰

These infatuations color Edna's view of, and her behavior in, marriage. Edna's immaturity is clearly exposed as Chopin explains how Edna rushes headlong into matrimony with a man whom she did not really know and does so for all the wrong reasons. A close reading of the text shows that Edna, in her refusal to relinquish her fantasies and look squarely in the face of reality, trapped herself in a mediocre marriage. Edna does not relinquish her passion for the tragedian until after she has married Lèonce Pontellier. She enters this marriage because she is attracted to the pleasurable, giddy romance of the situation; she seems to imagine herself a fairy-tale heroine pursued by a handsome prince: "He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her."²¹ Chopin makes it abundantly clear that Edna's irrationality propels her toward this unfortunate marriage: "She [Edna]

fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken."²² Further evidence of Edna's immaturity and of her impetuosity recast in her decision to wed Lèonce surfaces as Chopin explains that Edna's family's opposition to him because he is Catholic only serves to increase his value in Edna's estimation. This is more a response of childish rebellion than a thoughtful decision about her future. Perhaps most revealing of all is Edna's belief that the act of marrying itself would serve as the catalyst for her transformation to a mature being; once again she fails to recognize the active role she must play in her own maturation process. Chopin reveals that Edna "felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams."²³ This is another fancy in which Edna is mistaken.

In a sense, Edna bears a large portion of responsibility for her own unhappiness. She never comes to understand, as every adult must, that we are each ultimately responsible for the way in which we allow adversity to affect us and for the choices we make to reduce the effects of such adversity and increase our own potential for contentment. Happiness rarely comes to those who sit passively and wait for it to overtake them. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that Chopin's novel is

"densely peopled with socially adapted women" among whom are Madame Lebrun, Madame Ratignolle, Mlle. Reisz, Mrs. Highcamp and Mrs. Merriman; such women "have all found a social space adequate to their existence."²⁴ Fox-Genovese determines that

the point is that the patriarchal world depicted in The Awakening provides considerable space for a variety of female being. Men may set the public terms of female existence, but they do not seem capable of crushing the female spirit.²⁵

Edna is not thwarted, ultimately, in an effort to achieve an identity or a means of self-expression, for she has both. Edna takes up painting, providing an outlet of expression for the artist within her. Whether or not Edna possesses true artistic gifts is of little importance--she wants to paint and she does so, and she finds enjoyment in that. Chopin clearly demonstrates that Edna did enjoy an outlet of freedom of expression when she explains that while at Grand Isle

Mrs. Pontellier had brought her sketching materials, which she sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way. She liked the dabbling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her.²⁶

One should also note the important ways in which Edna Pontellier exercises her freedom throughout the second half of the novel: she does away with her 'Tuesdays at home' (much to her husband's discomfiture), no longer feels obliged to reciprocate the visits of friends and

acquaintances, begins painting regularly, refuses to attend her sister's wedding, rents her own apartment, takes a lover--all within the span of a few, short months! She is neither timid in asserting her wants nor regretful about her actions afterward. Viewed not from a late 20th Century perspective but instead through the time and place of Edna's life, it seems that Edna does enjoy a measure of freedom and self-expression greater than most other women we meet in the novel. The very fact that Edna's husband and society afford her the latitude to initiate and maintain the actions noted above suggests that she is not helplessly and hopelessly oppressed.

Edna Pontellier contributes to her own unhappiness by chasing after the impossible dreams of her fantasies. Emotionally little more than a child in a woman's body, Edna longs to live in a fantasy world where all her dreams can come true; she craves something more than reality can give her. Ultimately, Edna is questing for "life's delirium," an elusive goal which neither she nor Chopin can define in tangible terms but which is inextricably knotted together with the freedom of childhood.²⁷ Edna is drawn to memories of her childhood and describes her desire for freedom and infinity to Madame Ratignolle as she recalls

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...

I was just walking diagonally across a big field. My sun-bonnet obstructed the view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it.²⁸

It is precisely this limitless expanse of freedom that Edna recalls fondly from her childhood and that she wishes to regain, a freedom unobstructed and unfettered by people, manners and mores existing beyond her limited field of vision. In her book Tomorrow is Another Day, Anne Goodwyn Jones quotes James Justus as saying, "The awakening of Edna Pontellier is in actuality a reawakening; it is not an advance toward a new definition of self but a return to the protective, self-evident identity of childhood."²⁹ Edna continues to shrink from maturation, responsibility for her own actions and acceptance of the consequences that follow from the choices she makes. Instead she looks constantly and longingly toward her past, with no clear eye on her future, and no thought of trying to bridge her past and future in an acceptable adult fashion. Chopin emphasizes this point when she describes Edna's initial recognition of her feelings for Robert:

For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a young girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman. The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation by any suggestion or promise of instability. The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate.³⁰

Chopin unequivocally demonstrates that Edna's quest is a childish one--she demands the absolute freedom to pursue her fantasies and desires without assuming responsibility for the consequences of her actions. Chopin takes pains to remind the reader of Edna's childish nature; Edna is described as being "like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its power, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence."³¹ When Edna is first introduced to the reader, the childishness of her behavior is underscored; Chopin writes, "Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young, and did not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason."³² First impressions of major characters are important, and it is significant that Chopin chooses to color our initial perception of Edna in this way. Adele Ratignolle even confronts Edna with her childish proclivities; Madame Ratignolle explains, "In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life."³³ Edna's immaturity pervades nearly every aspect of her behavior; Marco Portales explains in his essay, "The Characterization of Edna Pontellier and the Conclusion of Kate Chopin's The Awakening":

At no point in The Awakening does she [Edna] pull herself together to think about or consider the possible consequences of her acts...motivated primarily by impulse, she acts thoughtlessly, which is to say that even though in Chapter 27, as we have seen, Edna claims to want to think and that she does think, neither here nor in any other part of The Awakening do we see her thinking realistically about her possible future.³⁴

Anne Goodwyn Jones underscores this idea that Edna is not learning from or thinking realistically about her experiences as she explains:

On the whole, though, Edna learns only how to know and say what she feels; she does not learn the freedom of the discipline of self control. Similarly, her awareness of her body moves from apparent ignorance of it to the capacity to express herself through her body, yet stops short of a sense of the power of self-control.³⁵

This thoughtlessness and absence of maturity through experience is a component of Edna's behavior throughout the novel; her childish irresponsibility makes it difficult to align oneself completely with her frustrations and desires in as much as her demands for freedom without limits or costs is, ultimately, unreasonable.

No adult member of society, regardless of gender, can expect to shirk responsibility for himself or herself while at the same time indulging in his or her own desires at every opportunity, without encountering opposition from others. Edna demands just that. She longs to live her life just as she pleases, to act on a whim, to give her attention to whatever strikes her fancy. The problem here

is that Edna does these things always at the direct expense of others (usually her immediate family and close friends) without thought of or regrets about the consequences and this selfish behavior reaches its ultimate peak when she chooses to kill herself. Chopin reveals Edna's thoughtlessness and carelessness most notably when discussing the Pontellier children. Chopin shows us one extreme of motherhood -- the "mother-woman" and explains that "[t]hey were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels."³⁶ Her vision of Edna is not one of a more moderate mother role, but one at the other end of the spectrum. Chopin announces that Edna "was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them...Their absence was a sort of relief...It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her."³⁷ Throughout the second half of the novel, the Pontellier children live with their paternal grandparents for a period of several months. During their absence, there is no evidence given by Chopin that Edna even thinks of her children, much less misses them. She makes one short visit to Iberville during which she briefly assumes the role of an involved and caring parent. She seems delighted with

her visit and in fact "all along the journey homeward their [the children] presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song;" however it doesn't take long for Edna to shirk the mantle of motherhood as Chopin explains that "by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul."³⁸ Even in the last moments of her life, thoughts of her children do not fill her with love or provide comfort--they are merely opponents to be "eluded"; for Edna, "the children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days."³⁹ In Edna's relationship with her children (as with most of her interactions with the people in her life), the familiar adage "absence makes the heart grow fonder" always takes a backseat to another adage--"out of sight, out of mind." Although Chopin's extreme depiction of the mother-women in her novel seems to be a critique of the maternal ideal, she does not endorse Edna's brand of motherhood as the ideal either. Edna's selfish and irresponsible behavior appears not only as a revolt against society and a strike at traditional gender roles but also as a repudiation against motherhood.

In the terms of this novel, "nature" can be divided into two categories: true nature and societal constructs of nature. Edna revolts against both. One cannot blame her for struggling against (male) society's self-serving

rules of nature, that is, those constructs that decree that women should be the sole caretakers of children, should subjugate all interests and desires to the "more important" duty of rearing the family, should sacrifice all instincts toward individualism to the greater duty of preserving and perpetuating the great chain of human life. A revolt against this sort of oppression and inequity should be applauded. However, it is disturbing that Edna willfully chooses to ignore the natural responsibilities to which she has already committed herself by bearing two children. The lack of a meaningful, emotional relationship between Edna and her sons is unnatural. It is unnatural that she should ultimately wish to abandon her sons, that she should feel no bond between them and herself, that their absence causes no void in her life whatsoever.

Edna's revolt against nature defines itself most notably in her 'on again, off again' relationship with her children for, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out, "Chopin also ties the children to Nature, to the essence of womanhood. Edna rebels not merely against the social constraints of a female identity but against the natural ones. She revolts against being a woman."⁴⁰ Instead, it seems as if she wants to be a child again herself, to enjoy the freedoms and irresponsibility of her youth. Although there is a natural responsibility inherent in being a parent (regardless of the sex of the parent), Edna feels no

natural obligation whatsoever. Edna's near-dissociation from her children evidences itself fairly early in the narrative. She sends the children off to play all day under the guidance of a nurse while she enjoys the flirtatious attentions of Robert Lebrun--in essence, she removes her children from her sight, thus effectively denying their existence and allowing her to revert to the position of a giggling schoolgirl with Robert. Scenes similar to this, where Edna forces a separation between herself and the boys, proliferate in this novel. Even though Edna's socio-economic status affords her the luxury of hiring alternative caretakers for her children, the fact that Chopin does not counterbalance the scenes of separation with scenes of genuine maternal involvement only serves to emphasize the very minor role Edna chooses to play in the lives of her sons. Further, although Lèonce's suspicion of fever in Raoul is purely imaginary, there is a significance in his need to "reproach[] his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children."⁴¹ It almost seems as if Lèonce attempts to get Edna to notice that she has children and feel some responsibility for them, but he is unable adequately to express his feelings about the situation. Chopin explains:

It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived,

and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement.⁴²

Per Seyersted suggests that Edna "sees her boys as opponents" and perhaps this is a partial explanation for the inconstancy of her love and compassion for them.⁴³ In any event, Edna's young sons, Raoul and Etienne, understand intuitively that they must fend for themselves; they recognize that their mother offers neither comfort nor security, and they behave accordingly:

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his mouth, and go on playing. Tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices.⁴⁴

That these very young children can assume so much responsibility for themselves is admirable but that Edna's behavior forces them to assume positions of maturity and responsibility--when Edna chooses to avoid such stances--only underscores her own immaturity and the unnatural state of her relationship with the boys.

Chopin is not advocating a type of mother-child bond in which the mother is subsumed by the demands and needs of the child and this is demonstrated by Chopin's lightly mocking attitude toward the "mother-women" who "seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle"; Chopin explains that "they were women who idolized their children, worshipped

their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels."⁴⁵ Chopin is clearly derisive of the alacrity with which these women completely abandon their own sense of self or identity in order to further the interests of others and of their religious devotion to the task. But Chopin's portrayal of the "mother-women" also shows, quite startlingly, how near Edna is to the other end of the spectrum of motherhood; Chopin does not paint either end of this spectrum as being particularly commendable, and perhaps her failure to do so suggests that she advocates the real role of the mother lies somewhere between the two ends.

That women are responsible for bearing children is a fact of nature that no amount of wishing will change. Edna is unable to see any joy in the birth of Adèle's child; instead she "began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread...she began to wish she had not come."⁴⁶ Dr. Mandelet attempts to explain to Edna that the bearing of children is a natural function and not a social one; he lectures, "youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature, a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost."⁴⁷ This lesson, however, is lost on Edna. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese succinctly sums up

this dilemma as she explains that "motherhood cannot be reduced to a social convention, however much society attempts to do so. Motherhood also has something to do with bringing forth life--an experience that Chopin herself supremely valued--and with accepting one's place in the succession of generations."⁴⁸

Chopin employs various means clearly to depict the gulf between those things Edna desires and those she can attain. For example, the disparity between reality and fantasy in The Awakening is underscored by Chopin's construction of the narrative. Chopin says of Edna, "She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility";⁴⁹ Later in the novel, after a visit from Arobin, Chopin concedes that "there was with her [Edna] an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility."⁵⁰ In instances such as these, Chopin admits that Edna's behavior is not predicated on mature, conscious, or responsible thoughts and decisions. Action without forethought or responsibility is essentially characteristic of Edna throughout the novel and it is a form of behavior to which she desperately clings as the foundation of her existence. Ultimately, it is demonstrated on multiple occasions that Edna's desire for unfettered freedom is unreasonable and impossible as Chopin structures the narrative in such a way that Edna's dreams are constantly punctured by reality.

The initial sentence in Chapter Nine is a fairly good example of Chopin's device of punctuating fantasy with reality: the sentence begins in the diction of Edna's fantasies with the words "every light in the hall was ablaze," and is immediately followed by Chopin's qualifier of reality, "every lamp turned as high as it could be without smoking the chimney or threatening explosion."⁵¹ Another fine example of this device appears when Edna hosts a small dinner party upon the occasion of a visit from her father. Near the end of the evening, Edna relates to her guests a romantic story of two lovers who ran away together and never returned. Although Edna's tale was "a pure invention,"⁵² Chopin explains, in Edna's diction, that not only Edna but also her guests were swept up in her fantasy:

They could feel the hot breath of the Southern night; they could hear the long sweep of the pirogue through the glistening moonlit water, the beating of birds' wings, rising startled from among the reeds in the salt-water pools, they could see the faces of the lovers, pale, close together, rapt in oblivion, forgetfulness, drifting into the unknown.⁵³

The sensual romance of Edna's tale, which captivates all of Edna's guests with its intoxicating and artistic power, is immediately tempered by Chopin's sobering explanation that, "The champagne was cold, and its subtle fumes played fantastic tricks with Edna's memory that night."⁵⁴ A critical scene in the novel is the one in which Edna hosts a dinner to mark the end of her tenure in Lèonce

Pontellier's house and the beginning of her independent existence in her new home. The language used throughout the description of the dinner evokes images of an evening of wealth, luxury, warmth, splendor, and good fellowship. This splendid dinner, which Edna presides over with the bearing of a "regal woman" should have been considered an unqualified success, yet in the very middle of the dinner scene Chopin offers us a glimpse of reality bearing down upon Edna:

But 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. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed. There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable.⁵⁵

The placement of this passage in the middle of the dinner party scene is telling, for as Joan Zlotnick notes, "It is true that Mrs. Chopin's feelings are sometimes ambivalent as she explores the conflict between realism and romance, between responsibility to others and debt to the self. A measure of this ambivalence is the way in which she undercuts with irony the dreams and ambitions of her heroines."⁵⁶ Edna's romantic diction surfaces throughout the novel, usually when she would like to feel most removed from her life with Lèonce and the boys. It occurs again when she awakens from her nap after attending mass. She asks Robert in a fairy-tale fashion, "How many years have I

slept? The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics."⁵⁷ Robert, the figure in this novel who is most willing to participate in Edna's fantasies, responds somewhat in kind, but even he cannot resist reminding her what is real; he says, "The only evil I couldn't prevent was to keep a broiled fowl from drying up,"⁵⁸ letting Edna know that she has long slept through dinner and evening is rapidly approaching.

Another instance of the intrusion of reality upon Edna's romantic nature shows itself after Edna has gone to hear mass at the Cheniere. On the return trip Edna listens to Madame Antoine softly spin romantic tales, and the last thing we are told about this evening is couched in terms conducive to this atmosphere of romance: "When she [Edna] and Robert stepped into Tonie's boat, with the red lateen sail, misty spirit forms were prowling in the shadows and among the reeds, and upon the water were phantom ships, speeding to cover."⁵⁹ This ethereal, other-worldly romance is exactly the type of existence Edna is pursuing, yet Chopin points out how far that world is from the one in which Edna is grounded when she fashions the abrupt transition to the next chapter and explains, "The youngest boy, Etienne, had been very naughty, Madame Ratignolle said, as she delivered him into the hands of his mother."⁶⁰

The reality of Edna's life and the responsibilities she must deal with are actually placed into her hands--this is a moment when reality physically intrudes upon Edna's dreams, drawing both Edna and the reader away from any thought that Edna's quest to absolve herself of responsibility for her own actions and to remove herself from social and moral scrutiny from her peers might be possible.

The most painful moment of the confrontation between fantasy and reality occurs near the end of the novel. Edna believes herself reunited with Robert and is prepared to take off on yet another flight of fancy when she is summoned to Adele Ratignolle's bedside. It is an important moment for Edna when, after just leaving the man she wishes to make her lover, she must face squarely the consequences of sexual passions. Edna wants to be a sexual, sensual being, yet she is repulsed by the thought of bearing more children; it is a sacrifice she will not make. This entire episode discomfits Edna for "with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene's torture."⁶¹ Edna returns home after this episode expecting to find Robert awaiting her and she is anxious to embark upon another adventure of fantasy. Chopin reminds us how much a child Edna is as she demonstrates how easily Edna casts off the lessons learned that evening:

All the tearing emotion of the last few hours seemed to fall away from her like a somber, uncomfortable garment, which she had but to loosen to be rid of. She went back to that hour before Adèle had sent for her, and her senses kindled afresh in thinking of Robert's words, the pressure of his arms, and the feeling of his lips upon her own. She could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one.⁶²

Instead of Robert, Edna finds only a note waiting for her which read, "I love you. Good-bye -- because I love you."⁶³ Robert has left, not because he does not care deeply for Edna, but because he knows he can't participate in the unconventional and unrealistic relationship she wants. Robert wants to marry Edna and "live happily ever after", so to speak, amongst their Creole society; Edna will not consider such a thing and rebukes him:

You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy, she is yours,' I should laugh at you both.⁶⁴

Instead, Edna offers Robert a relationship on very different terms: "Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence."⁶⁵ However, Robert understands very clearly that many things in the world are of consequence and thus he leaves Edna. The

episode of the birth of Adèle's child, followed by Robert's refusal to partake in her fantasies, finally pushes Edna to a realization that she simply cannot follow her dreams without being held accountable for them.

Edna's suicide is her willful refusal to accept adult responsibility and awaken from her dreams. After Robert's departure, Edna stays awake all night repeating to herself:

Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Lèonce Pontellier -- but Raoul and Etienne!" She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children.⁶⁶

She now understands that her actions will affect her children, and she does care about them, but she is unwilling to alter her behavior for the sake of her children. This impasse has its results as "despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted."⁶⁷ Although it is unclear whether or not she intentionally returns to Grand Isle to drown herself, there can be little doubt that Edna welcomes the seductive voice of the sea when it sings to her. As Edna takes her final walk toward the beach, Chopin shares Edna's thoughts:

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 like 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.⁶⁸

Throughout The Awakening Edna fights to pursue a life that is unavailable to her; she realizes too late that her desires are inconsistent with her responsibilities, for by then she has already formed the bonds of wife and mother. But she is unable to relinquish her fantasies either, and she continues to maintain that her husband and children "need not have thought they could possess her body and soul."⁶⁹ Although the novel does not suggest that Edna's suicide is a victory, at the same time it does not claim that her death is a mistake--for Edna, death is perhaps the only way to achieve her impossible desires. As the novel, and Edna's life, fade away we are returned to her childhood:

Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the 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.⁷⁰

The language and the vision are soft and romantic and have the qualities of a lullaby, reminding us of the scenes in the novel where Edna recounted happy and pleasurable episodes from her childhood, when she had no responsibilities other than the pursuit of her own pleasure. That the last paragraph of the novel returns Edna

to her childhood and frees her from a life of too much reality is important, for Chopin explains, finally and subtly, that Edna's desires could never be fulfilled in life.

NOTES

¹Kate Chopin, The Awakening and Selected Stories (New York: Random House Inc., 1981) 214.

²Chopin, 195.

³Emily Toth, "Kate Chopin's The Awakening as Feminist Criticism," Louisiana Studies (Fall 1976) 242.

⁴George Arms, "Kate Chopin's The Awakening in the Perspective of Her Literary Career," Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham, NC: Duke Univerisity Press, 1967) 217.

⁵Marie Fletcher, "The Southern Woman in the Fiction of Kate Chopin," Louisiana History (Spring 1966) 126.

⁶Chopin, 258.

⁷Toth, 241-242.

⁸Priscilla Allen, "Old Critics and New: The Treatment of Chopin's The Awakening," The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism, eds. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977) 229.

⁹Chopin, 173.

¹⁰Chopin, 177.

¹¹Chopin, 177.

¹²Chopin, 259.

¹³Chopin, 259.

¹⁴Chopin, 190.

¹⁵Arms, 218.

¹⁶Chopin, 196.

¹⁷Chopin, 196.

¹⁸Chopin, 197.

¹⁹Chopin, 197.

²⁰Chopin, 197.

²¹Chopin, 197.

²²Chopin, 197.

²³Chopin, 198.

²⁴Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Kate Chopin's Awakening," Southern Studies (Fall 1979) 276.

²⁵Fox-Genovese, 276.

²⁶Chopin, 186.

²⁷Chopin, 258.

²⁸Chopin, 194-195.

²⁹Anne Goodwyn Jones, Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) 155.

³⁰Chopin, 240-241.

³¹Chopin, 212.

³²Chopin, 175.

³³Chopin, 320.

³⁴Marco Portales, "The Characterization of Edna Pontellier and the Conclusion of Kate Chopin's The Awakening," Southern Studies (Winter 1981) 433.

³⁵Jones, 164

³⁶Chopin, 181.

³⁷Chopin, 198.

³⁸Chopin, 319.

³⁹Chopin, 350.

⁴⁰Chopin, 350

⁴¹Fox-Genovese, 284.

⁴²Chopin, 181.

⁴³Per Seyersted, Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) 145.

⁴⁴Chopin, 181.

⁴⁵Chopin, 181.

⁴⁶Chopin, 343.

⁴⁷Chopin, 344.

⁴⁸Fox-Genovese, 284.

⁴⁹Chopin, 220

⁵⁰Chopin, 301

⁵¹Chopin, 204.

⁵²Chopin, 280.

⁵³Chopin 280.

⁵⁴Chopin, 281.

⁵⁵Chopin, 309-310.

⁵⁶Joan Zlotnick, "A Woman's Will: Kate Chopin on
Selfhood, Wifehood, and Motherhood," The Markham Review
(October 1968) 1.

⁵⁷Chopin, 228.

⁵⁸Chopin, 228.

⁵⁹Chopin, 230.

⁶⁰Chopin, 230-231.

⁶¹Chopin, 343.

⁶²Chopin, 345-346.

⁶³Chopin, 346.

⁶⁴Chopin, 339.

⁶⁵Chopin, 340.

⁶⁶Chopin, 349.

⁶⁷Chopin, 349.

⁶⁸Chopin, 349-350.

⁶⁹Chopin, 351.

⁷⁰Chopin, 351.

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