

known." And with her final act Edna completes the regression, back beyond childhood, back into time eternal. "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace."

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Edna's Suicide:

The Problem of the One and the Many†

The recent critical controversy as to the meaning and value of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is epitomized in the range of responses to Edna's suicide. This finale constitutes the critical crux of the novel, not only in that it is central to the interpretation of Edna's character and the theme of the story, but also because it is joined with the issue of Chopin's attitude to her protagonist and the artistic integrity of her work. It is primarily through the interpretation of the pattern of imagery by which Edna's suicide is dramatized, and of the tone of the narrative voice, that each critic decides whether or not to take the final swim with Edna and determines Chopin's complicity in the act.

The most emphatic affirmations of Edna's suicide are found in the criticism of Per Seyersted and Kenneth Eble. Each proclaims the nobility of Edna's achievements and the heroic grandeur of her final gesture. Seyersted, approaching the story through feminist and existentialist perspectives, sees Edna's death as motivated by an uncompromising desire for "spiritual emancipation." Her suicide is "the crowning glory of her development from the bewilderment which accompanied her early emancipation to the clarity with which she understands her own nature and the possibilities of her life as she decides to end it."¹ Eble, distinguishing Edna from such deluded romantics as Emma Bovary, places her with classical figures who "struggle with elemental passion." Her suicide, seen as an immersion in Eros, gives her "the power, the dignity, the self-possession of a tragic heroine."² Both Seyersted and Eble acclaim the artistry of Chopin and assert her sympathy for Edna.

Donald A. Ringe and George Arms, each focusing on Edna's romanticism, present more qualified views of the significance of her suicide and question the assumption of Chopin's sympathy for her protagonist. Ringe relates Edna's romanticism to the transcendental-

† A previously unpublished essay printed with permission of the author. All footnotes are by the author.

1. Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Univer-

sity of Louisiana Press, 1969), pp. 134-63.

2. Kenneth Eble, "A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Western Humanities Review*, 10 (Summer 1956), pp. 261-69.

ist theme of self-discovery and perceives her suicide as the consequence of her realization of her essentially solitary nature. Stressing Chopin's philosophic concern with the relation of the individual to external reality, he evaluates Edna's final act as "a defeat that involves no surrender."³ Arms, despite the basic realism of Edna's sexual emancipation, sees her as a figure motivated by romantic ideals, who "drifts" aimlessly into death. Noting the irony that pervades Chopin's treatment of Edna, he distinguishes between the romantic heroine and the realistic writer.⁴

Daniel S. Rankin represents the negative pole of reaction in his verdict on the work as "exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation." Edna's suicide is a testimony to the fact that "human nature can be a sickening reality." He identifies Chopin with Edna and judges the writer as an impressionable victim of romantic literature.⁵

George M. Spangler also presents a forceful indictment of the conclusion, not as does Rankin in terms of moral perversity, but on purely aesthetic grounds. He regards Edna's suicide as a pathetic defeat that is inconsistent with the depiction of her previous strength and achievements and accuses Chopin of a lapse from psychological subtlety into banal sentimentality.⁶

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, acknowledging Chopin's insight into human nature, sees her depiction of Edna as a penetrating account of psychological disintegration. Wolff analyzes Edna's experiences in the contexts of Laing and Freud and defines her as a schizoid personality whose erotic development has been arrested at the oral stage. Her suicide is a regressive act coming from "a sense of inner emptiness" and a failure to fulfill in real life her infantile yearnings for fusion.⁷

Between the positive and negative responses to Edna's suicide stand the views of Kenneth M. Rosen and Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith. Rosen insists on a purposeful ambiguity in which the sea is seen as symbolizing both life and death.⁸ Sullivan and Smith argue not for ambiguity but for ambivalence in Chopin's presentation of Edna through two distinct and irreconcilable points of view.

3. Donald A. Ringe, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Literature*, 43 (January 1972), 580-88.

4. George Arms, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in the Perspective of Her Literary Career," *Essays in American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell*, Clarence Gohdes, ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1967), pp. 215-28.

5. Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932),

pp. 171-76.

6. George M. Spangler, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: A Partial Dissent," *Novel: A Forum of Fiction*, 3 (1970), 244-55.

7. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Quarterly*, 25 (October 1973), 449-71.

8. Kenneth M. Rosen, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: Ambiguity as Art," *Journal of American Studies*, 5 (August 1971), 197-200.

The reader's response to Edna's suicide depends on whether he is compelled by the voice that indulges a romantic vision of life's possibilities or by the contrasting voice that insists on accommodation to the limitations of reality.⁹

Those critical views that distinguish between the realism of Chopin and the romanticism of Edna and question the value of her suicide reflect most closely the meaning and spirit of *The Awakening*. The vision of life that emerges from the novel constitutes an affirmation of the multiple possibilities of fulfillment, an affirmation made with a clear and profound grasp of the problematic nature of reality. Chopin's attitude to Edna involves the same mixture of irony and respect that marks her treatment of the other characters in the story. ~~Her sympathy, and perhaps even identification, with Edna are most evident in her dramatization of Edna's struggle to face the realities of life and her partial achievements of selfhood. But ultimately Chopin places Edna's suicide as a defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate herself to the limitations of reality.~~

This approach has affinities with the interpretations of Donald A. Ringe and George Arms and corresponds at points to the psychoanalytic study by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. But Ringe and Arms do not probe Edna's romanticism far enough to the psychological core, and Wolff tends to impose a clinically schematic pattern that sometimes distorts Chopin's use of imagery and implicitly raises the question of the author's control over her material. A reading that remains faithful to the psychological implications of Chopin's imagery in terms of her own apprehension of reality will illuminate most fully the meaning of Edna's suicide.

The editorial commentary that Chopin introduces at the point of Edna's first intuition of her passion for Robert provides the key to the author's thematic intention and to the central symbol in which it is embodied:

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. . . .

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!

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.

9. Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith, "Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Studies in American Fiction*, 1 (Spring 1973), 62-75.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.

What Chopin defines here are the two paths open to Edna from the point at which her instinctual nature is roused. Ideally, Edna's growth could bring her to self-awareness and community with the external world. But aware of the complex and vulnerable nature of the human psyche, Chopin emphasizes the perils that attend Edna's awakening. She stresses the universal temptation to yield to the primitive lure of the unconscious, to return to the primal sea in which body and soul are one. This symbolic invocation of the seductive sea that calls one to the ecstasy of immersion corresponds to Freud's conception of the Oceanic feeling of absolute fusion of the infantile ego.¹

Chopin repeatedly underlines Edna's particular susceptibility to the infantile yearning for regression and subtly weaves the patterns of imagery that will culminate in her final surrender. The struggle within Edna between the desire for selfhood in relationship with others and the longing for self-annihilation is enacted in the scene of her first swim. Stirred to passion by the music she has heard, she achieves her first mastery over the ocean and swims out far in a spirit of self-assertion. But her instinctual intoxication also makes her open to the regressive urge: "As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself."

Edna's regressive instincts are embodied in the series of fantasies of unattainable lovers that dominated her early life. The infantile core of her romanticism is revealed in the childhood memory reawakened by the sight of the "water stretching so far away." She recalls walking through a meadow of grass, feeling that she "must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it." She connects this experience of the infinite in "that ocean of waving grass" to her first passionate infatuation with a visiting cavalry officer.

Her uncertainty about her response to the incident—"I don't remember whether I was frightened or pleased"—suggests her ambivalence to her romantic yearnings. Sensing the impossibility of fulfilling such passions "in this world," Edna marries a man she does not love, "closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams."

When Robert arouses these fantasies once again, Edna determines not to love hopelessly in secret but to turn the phantom lover into reality, to take "possession of the beloved one." Through Robert she hopes to actualize her romantic need for Oneness in the act of sexual consummation.

1. See Wolff, *op. cit.*, for a fuller treatment of Freud's conception of the infantile ego and its relationship to the character of Edna.

Through her dramatization of the Sleeping Beauty motif, Chopin reveals the conflict between the basic reality of Edna's erotic desire for Robert and the impossibility of her romantic quest for fusion. When Edna awakens from a long sleep at Chênrière, she sees Robert as the Prince who has waited "one hundred years" to achieve his bride. The fact that she finds herself "very hungry" reflects her longing for a new life of sensuous satisfaction. Wolff's interpretation of this hunger as an indication that Edna's "libidinal energies have been arrested at a pregenital level" contradicts Chopin's use of food imagery as a positive symbol of life's nourishment.² Edna's problem is that she believes she can attain the final, unlimited union of the fairy-tale lovers. Robert's departure forces her to face the fact that real life is quite different from the idealized realm of the fairy tale.

Edna does achieve the existential integrity to value her painful coming to consciousness:

The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake 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.

She not only awakens to knowledge of external reality but succeeds in penetrating the core of her inner nature. She confronts the shattering truth that even had Robert stayed, he could never have ultimately satisfied her need for "one thing":

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.

Edna does not possess the strength to live her life alone and is therefore driven to seek the solitary security of death. Her view of her children as enemies who seek "to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" is the hysterical response of a woman who, compelled by the instinct to return to the unbroken bond with her mother, must perforce renounce her own motherhood.

Edna's suicide is not a conscious choice reached through her achievement of self-awareness. She was "not thinking" as "she walked down to the beach." In the grip of the unconscious she responds to the call of the sea: "The voice of the sea is seductive,

2. Wolff, *op. cit.*, imposes a Freudian context in interpreting Edna's preoccupation with food as an indication of her infantile nature. Chopin uses food imagery to represent Edna's desire for

life in contrast to her regressive desire for death by her request for fish for dinner before she starts her final walk down to the sea.

never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude." Her act of stripping off her clothes is not a gesture of self-liberation but rather a regression to the animality of infancy: "She felt like some new-born creature. . . ." Her experience of rebirth is directed not forward to new life but backward to the womb. Her final memories before her death represent a return to childhood, to her first fantasy lover, and to her walk in the meadow of infinity:

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.

Edna finds her union with the One in the sea. Chopin affirms the many possibilities for satisfaction to be found on the land. In her portraits of Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, she suggests the multiplicity of roles open to women. Adèle, the "mother-woman," the dutiful wife, embodies the fertility of nature and the harmony of marital union. Her forays into art are all family oriented: She continually sews clothes for her children and keeps up her music as "a means of brightening the home and making it attractive." She is raised above the level of mere bovine domesticity by her charm, her amiability, and the generosity of her nurturing capacities. She is counterpointed by Mademoiselle Reisz, the artist who is isolated by her unamiable and imperious disposition. The "artificial violets" that she perpetually wears in her hair reflect her discordance with nature. But she is strong enough to live alone on her own terms, giving enough to secure the friendship of Robert and later of Edna, and capable through her music of inspiring passion.

The richness of Chopin's vision of life comes from her awareness of the many paths to self-realization from which to choose, each one involving compromise and renunciation. Her realism is inherent in her refusal to endorse the sentimentality of a fairy-tale resolution or the feminist fatalism of presenting Edna as the victim of an oppressive society. Chopin, as wife, as mother of six children, and as writer, is herself an affirmation of the many modes of living a woman can attain—each limited, each problematic, each real.

In a personal essay on her writing, published in the same year as *The Awakening*, Chopin affords us a glimpse of her personal life:

. . . I write in the morning, when not too strongly drawn to struggle with the intricacies of a pattern, and in the afternoon, if the temptation to try a new furniture polish on an old table leg is not too powerful to be denied; sometimes at night, though as I grow older I am more and more inclined to believe that night

was made for sleep. . . . I am completely at the mercy of unconscious selection. To such an extent is this true, that what is called the polishing up process has always proved disastrous to my work, and I avoid it, preferring the integrity of crudities to artificialities.³

In this image of a writer who prefers at times to “polish” a piece of furniture rather than a work of art, who balances her commitment to writing with an indulgence to her moods and physical needs, one sees a woman who has learned to mediate between the inner and outer worlds, between fantasy and reality.

MARGARET CULLEY

Edna Pontellier: “A Solitary Soul”

One sees that dead, vacant look steal sometimes over the rarest, finest of women's faces—in the very midst, it might be, of their warmest summer's day; and then one can guess at the secret of intolerable solitude that lies beneath the delicate laces and brilliant smile.

—Rebecca Harding Davis,
Life in the Iron Mills (1861)

The Awakening, an existential novel about solitude, is distinguished from most of such fiction by its female protagonist. Because of her sex, Edna Pontellier experiences not only dread in the face of solitude, but also delight. As a woman, she has had so little sense of a self alone that new-found solitude suggests entirely new arenas and modes of activity. Solitude also brings a confrontation with the ultimate aloneness—death—and thus the threat of extinction of the fragile, newborn self. When dread of solitude possesses Edna, she seeks, as she has sought from her youth, the deliverance of the imagination; her sexual awakening now leads her to seek the deliverance of the flesh. When she understands that both these deliverers will fail her, she embraces death with the same mixture of dread and delight as when she first discovered her solitude.

Daniel S. Rankin states, “In 1899 Herbert S. Stone and Co. of Chicago published *The Awakening*, a novel the author intended to name *A Solitary Soul*.” One early reviewer suggests that the title we know was furnished by “intelligent publishers.”¹ In any case, when Chopin added the title *The Awakening* to her notebook, she did not cancel *A Solitary Soul*, as she usually did when changing a title; and Per Seyersted suggests she may have wished to retain it as a subtitle.

In 1895 Chopin published a translation of a Guy de Maupassant

3. As quoted in Rankin, p. 183.

1. Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia: Uni-

versity of Pennsylvania Press, 1932), pp. 171 and 173n.