

serious about her work as an artist, then she must give herself to it entirely—a renunciation, really, of the flesh and conventional human relationships. That, of course, is an answer, but no answer to the woman's question posed in this book, how to be free in one's self and for one's self but still meaningfully connected to others. Posed in this way, the question, of course, applies to everyone. What makes it peculiarly related to the woman question in *The Awakening* is Mrs. Chopin's unwillingness to make her heroine's situation easier by removing from her selfness the burden and possibility of motherhood. As indicated earlier, Mrs. Chopin stumbles ambiguously on this question, as indeed we still do.

Awakened by a realization of her sensuous self, Edna Pontellier grows in self-awareness and autonomy. But it is a lonely and isolated autonomy that exacts a terrible price. Like Kate Chopin herself, who broke through to new perceptions and honesty as an artist, Mrs. Pontellier, in the context of her time and milieu, found no firm ground beneath her, either in theory or practice, and she went under.

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DONALD A. RINGE

Romantic Imagery†

* * * *The Awakening* posits a double world, one within and one without. Early in the book, Edna Pontellier feels contradictory impulses impelling her, impulses that at first serve to bewilder her, but which also reveal that she is "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." As with Emerson's theory,¹ moreover, it is through the eyes that these worlds meet and influence each other, the outer world perceived and colored by the unique nature that lies within, and the inner world brought to its self-awareness by the influences that enter from the world without. Thus, when Edna returns from Chênrière Caminada on the fateful Sunday she spends there with Robert Lebrun, she begins to perceive a new self "in some way different" from her old one. Though Edna does not yet fully suspect what is happening, the author makes

† From Donald A. Ringe, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Literature*, XLIII (January 1972), 580–88. Author's footnotes have been renumbered and some have been omitted.

1. The author is referring to Emerson's theory of correspondence. See *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), I, 13–80. [Editor.]

abundantly clear that a process is occurring that closely resembles the transcendentalist theory of self-discovery: "she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment."

The process is triggered, moreover, by an experience that Edna has in the ocean, an experience described by Kate Chopin through imagery that has deep romantic roots. As W. H. Auden has pointed out in *The Enchafèd Flood*, the sea plays an important role in romantic iconography. It is "the place where there is no community," where "the individual . . . is free from both the evils and the responsibilities of communal life." It is the place, moreover, where "decisive events, the moments of eternal choice . . . occurs."² In *The Awakening*, the sea serves precisely this purpose, for it is in the Gulf that Edna experiences the crisis that determines her development throughout the rest of the book. As in much romantic art, however, the sea serves here a double purpose for the individual: it invites "the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation." In other words, it can turn the soul's attention outward to the infinity suggested by the endless expanse of encircling horizon and sky—to confront the universe alone—or it can cause, as it does to Pip in *Moby-Dick*, an "intense concentration of self" that can hardly be endured.³

Edna experiences both of these feelings on the night she learns to swim. When she pulls herself through the water for the first time, "a feeling of exultation [overtakes] her," as if she has received "some power of significant import . . . to control the working of her body and her soul." She turns away from shore "to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy," and as she swims out into the Gulf, she seems "to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself." The expansive feeling of striving toward the infinite is not to last, however, for when she turns to look at the shore, which seems to her now to be far away, a "flash of terror" strikes her, a "quick vision of death [smites] her soul," and she hurries back to her waiting husband and friends. The fear of death, of a threat to the self, clearly reveals the intensification of self-awareness that the experience has given her—an awakening of the self as important, perhaps, as any other in the novel. For from this point on, Edna develops a growing self-awareness from which there is no turning back.

2. W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood; or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (New York, 1967), pp. 15, 13.

3. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or The Whale*, eds. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York, 1952),

p. 412. We must not assume, of course, that *Moby-Dick* itself lies behind *The Awakening*, but that both Herman Melville and Kate Chopin drew upon a common tradition of romantic imagery.

The process, however, is not complete until she returns to New Orleans. This is the romantic "city" which, as Auden has pointed out, is the symbolic opposite of the sea. It is community, with all the demands that the social organization makes upon the individual, and which the self sometimes finds hard to accept after the expansive experience on the sea or, we may add, the innocent interlude on the "happy island," a third romantic symbol⁴ which, in Edna's case, is Grand Isle. It is not surprising, then, that in keeping with the romantic imagery through which the book is developed, Edna's rebellion should become complete when she returns to society. She refuses to take seriously the social forms through which the community functions, but instead determines to go her own way, independent of both her family and the society in which they live. By this time, even Léonce, her husband, sees that Edna is "not herself," that is, not her old self. As Kate Chopin puts it, "he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world."

But if Edna's real self is revealed as a result of this process, we may legitimately ask what that real self is like. It is one that insists upon its own inviolability, that will brook no interference from others. Indeed, Edna carries this insistence upon her own integrity almost to an extreme. As she tells Adèle Ratignolle at one point, she would be willing to give up what she considers the unessential for her children—her money or even her life—but she would not give up herself. "Nobody has any right," she believes, to force her to do anything, and she frankly admits to Doctor Mandelet, "I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter . . ." Though Edna usually exempts the children—at least partially and hesitantly—from her sweeping statements on her individual inviolability, she is indeed willing to sacrifice everyone else to the demands of her sole self. As a consequence, her characteristic state in the latter half of the novel is solitude. For the most part, she is alone.

Kate Chopin compares and contrasts Edna's state with a number of others in the book, developing her theme through the polarities of self-absorption (Madame Reisz) and willing surrender of self to another (Adèle and Alphonse Ratignolle). In Madame Reisz, the consequences of insisting on the self alone are clearly developed. Though she is indeed a fine artist, she is also self-assertive, imperious, and disposed "to trample upon the rights of others." She is

4. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood*, p. 20. That Grand Isle may serve this familiar function in *The Awakening* seems clear from the innocent relationships that the

characters maintain there until Edna's awakening drives Robert away to Mexico.

venomous, disagreeable, and rude. Small wonder, then, that she is more often than not alone. By contrast, the Ratignolles are a prime example of two individuals who, like right hand and left, heart and soul, have indeed become one. "The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union." Chopin, of course, makes no explicit judgment on these two ways of life, but it is apparent that Edna lies between the two extremes.

Yet another contrast is symbolized by a recurring detail that appears in the depiction of life on Grand Isle. Throughout this part of the novel, a pair of lovers and a lady in black, who is usually saying her rosary or reading her prayer book, are frequently seen in the background. As symbolic figures, they cannot perhaps be assigned precise meanings. But the two lovers are indeed so lost in each other as to be almost completely oblivious to what is going on around them. There is surely no self-assertion here. Nor does there seem to be any in the lady in black who, in praying to her God, is surrendering herself to the Deity. Both the couple and the lady in black represent a strong contrast to Edna, who never really achieves the loss of self in love for another, and who is never portrayed as submitting herself to worship God in communion with others. She is pictured instead as running away from the Presbyterian service as a girl, and as leaving the Catholic mass with "a feeling of oppression" on Chênère Caminada.

Edna stands apart from all these people, even those, like Madame Reisz, whom she most resembles. She vacillates between the polar positions, reaching out to her children on occasion, and even to her old friend Adèle, who calls for her during her labor. But she turns away from all of them eventually, and takes pleasure most often in being alone. Edna, moreover, is hardly consistent in her behavior, for she is unwilling to allow others the same freedom she demands for herself. Though she insists that she will not be possessed by anyone, it is clear that she wishes to possess Robert. She wants to hold on to him when he decides to leave for Mexico, and she accuses him of selfishness when he will not submit to her demands. Indeed, when she returns from Adèle Ratignolle's confinement expecting to find Robert waiting for her, "she could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than *possession* of the beloved one. His expression of love had already *given him to her* in part" (*italics mine*). She demands of others what none may demand of her; she wishes to possess, who will not herself be possessed.⁵

Edna's reaching out to others is either brief and transitory (as

5. Unlike the Creole husbands, moreover, who never feel jealous, Edna becomes jealous almost as soon as she

perceives that she loves Robert, and the emotion recurs later—a clear sign of her desire for possession.

with Adèle and the children) or colored by a selfish motive (as with Robert). Indeed, as the story develops, one begins to suspect that Edna's self is by its very nature a solitary thing, that she is utterly incapable of forming a true and lasting relationship with another. The men to whom she is attracted before her marriage are either such as might inflame a youthful imagination (the cavalry officer and the tragedian), or the kind she is told she must not covet (the young man who is engaged to the lady on a neighboring plantation). Forbidden fruit seems to appeal to her most, a sign, perhaps, of a certain perverseness in her character. She married Léonce Pontellier partly at least because her family was opposed to him, and one suspects that the appeal of Alcée Arobin—and even of Robert Lebrun—derives from the fact that she knows she should not become involved with them.⁶ The result is that she either ends up as a possession—and both Léonce and Alcée treat her as one⁷—or she is herself overwhelmed with the desire to possess another. Both relationships are, of course, thoroughly destructive.

Edna's final awakening, her ultimate self-discovery, reveals an inner nature that is devoid of hope. After she learns that Robert has left her for good, she lies awake throughout the night, a sense of despondency that never lifts overwhelming her spirit. She faces the truth about herself, that for her no lasting union with anyone is possible. Though she may want Robert with her now, she "realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone." Even her children appear to her as enemies, as "antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days." Since Edna cannot give herself to anyone, but instead remains aloof from any true relationship with another, she is doomed to stand completely alone in the universe, a position that is clearly symbolized by the final episode in the book: her solitary swim far out into the emptiness of the Gulf.

The sea is presented here in language almost identical with that of the passage quoted above. A very important clause, however, is omitted. In the former passage, the dual nature of the sea experience is suggested, the outward expansion into the infinite, and the intensification of self-awareness that can also result from finding oneself alone in the apparently limitless sea. Here, the second aspect of the experience is not included. By now, Edna has explored herself completely and has penetrated to her true nature, solitary and

6. Note too that one of the few women she associates with in New Orleans is Mrs. Highcamp, whom her husband had advised her not to encourage socially.

7. This relationship is suggested by

parallel scenes. Once his affair with Edna is established, Arobin settles down to smoke a cigar and read his newspaper in her house, in much the same way Léonce does in the first chapter of the book.

aloof though it may be. The seductive voice of the sea, therefore, can only incite her spirit "to wander in abysses of solitude." This Edna does, swimming on and on, pleased with the thought that she is escaping the slavery represented to her imagination in the form of Léonce and the children. But the price she pays for her escape is death. In defending her self against the threat of community, she loses it in the infinity suggested by the expanse of the sea.⁸

Read in these terms, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a powerful romantic novel.⁹ It develops the theme of self-discovery so important in the works of the transcendentalists and does it in terms of imagery that is thoroughly appropriate to its presentation. Unlike the transcendentalists, however, Kate Chopin allows her character no limitless expansion of the self. She presents her, rather—in terms suggesting Melville—as a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender. Chopin herself makes no explicit comment on Edna Pontellier's actions. She neither approves nor condemns, but maintains an aesthetic distance throughout, relying upon the recurring patterns of imagery to convey her meaning. It is not the morality of Edna's life that most deeply concerns her, nor even the feminist concept so obviously present in the book. It is, rather, the philosophic questions raised by Edna's awakening: the relation of the individual self to the physical and social realities by which it is surrounded, and the price it must pay for insisting upon its absolute freedom.

CYNTHIA GRIFFIN WOLFF

Thanatos and Eros†

* * * An astonishing proportion of that part of the novel which deals with Edna's sojourn at Grand Isle is paced by the rhythm of her basic needs, especially the most primitive ones of eating and sleeping. If one were to plot the course of Edna's life during this

8. Edna's death by drowning seems consistent with the sea imagery through which much of the theme is developed. According to Auden, once the island is left behind, "the only possible place of peace for the romantic is under the waters." *The Enchafed Flood*, p. 24.

9. I am aware, of course, that both *The Awakening* and the whole local color school to which Kate Chopin is said to belong are usually classified as late

nineteenth-century realism. That realistic detail is not inconsistent with romantic imagery, however, is amply illustrated by so thoroughly romantic a book as *Moby-Dick*.

† From Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Quarterly*, XXV (October 1973), 449-71. The author's footnotes have been renumbered.