The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: Birth and Creativity

Author(s): Carole Stone
Source: *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
Document Type: Critical essay


Full Text:

[(essay date 1986) In the following essay, Stone views Chopin's birth imagery in *The Awakening* as symbolic of the birth of Edna Pontellier as an artist.]

When Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was published in 1899 critics attacked its depiction of a heroine who sought sexual pleasure outside of marriage and condemned Chopin for "failing to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion which experience has taught her is ... evanescent."¹ But *The Awakening* is even more radical in its treatment of motherhood because it questions the assumptions that childbirth and child care are a woman's principal vocation, and that motherhood gives pleasure to all women.

In Chopin's era childbirth was considered a woman's noblest act; to write of it otherwise was unacceptable. Thus, the clinical details of pregnancy and birthing remained largely unwritten. As Dr. Mandelet tells Edna in *The Awakening*, "The trouble is that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature to secure mothers for the race."² But Dr. Mandelet's insight is rare for a man because he is a physician. By shattering the illusion that giving birth is a glorious experience, Chopin attacks the patriarchal structure which denies women control of their bodies. In addition, however, she goes beyond naturalism in her use of the birth motif. On the symbolic level birthing is a metaphor for the rebirth of the book's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, as artist. The novel can be read as a depiction of the growth of the female artist, a *bildungsroman*, in which birth is emphasized as unique to the female experience.
Many recent critics of *The Awakening* fail to see Edna’s growing sense of power and control as signs of progress toward a new self-definition. They view her as a woman deluded by romanticism who is unable to make a conscious choice, such as the decision to become an artist, because her instincts are regressive. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for example, considers Edna passive, an artist at the mercy of her work. Further, she finds that for Edna birth is a psychic trauma awakening her to the impossibility of total fusion with another. \(^3\) Another critic, Suzanne Wolkenfeld, considers that Edna's "experience of rebirth is not directed toward new life, but backward to the womb."\(^4\) And James Justus observes that Edna's "awakening is not an advance towards a new definition of self but a return to the protective self-evident identity of childhood."\(^5\) while Donald A. Ringe considers Edna's romanticism part of a voyage of transcendental self-discovery, but concludes that Chopin "allows her character no limitless expansion of self."\(^6\) A more recent critic, Carole Christ, views Edna's awakening in a positive light, seeing her evolving sense of self as spiritual rebirth. However, Christ, too, finds Edna ultimately socially defeated in spite of the very important fact that this heroine grows as an artist.\(^7\)

In this essay I will argue that Edna’s memories of her childhood, her immersion in the sea, and her search for a mother figure are emblems of regression in the service of progression toward an artistic vocation. Rather than returning to the dependency of childhood, she goes forward to a new conception of self, a definition of herself as artist. Further, I will suggest that Edna's romanticism is positive because it catalyzes her imaginative power. As the final step forward functioning as an autonomous human being, moreover, she sees through the delusion of romantic love after confronting the horror of giving birth.

Edna's artistic birthing is shown through the contrasting characters of two women, Adèle Ratignolle, a "mother-woman," and Mme. Reisz, a pianist. As Per Seyersted has observed, "the novel covers two generations and births ... a finely wrought system of tensions and interrelations set up between Edna's slow birth as authentic and sexual being and the counterpointed pregnancy and confinement of Adèle."\(^8\) Adèle embodies
female biology, always talking of her condition, for she has a baby about every two years. Adèle's opposite, Mme. Reisz, a serious artist, is unmarried. She exemplifies the solitary life of the dedicated artist.

A third influence on Edna's artistic development is Robert LeBrun, a young Creole man who, because he has not yet assumed the masculine values of his society, can be a friend to Edna as her husband cannot. He teaches her to swim, furthering her autonomy, and with his easy way of talking about himself, encourages her self-expression. Because he has aroused sexual desire in her, she eventually has an affair with another man, Alcée Arobin, an affair which functions as a rite of passage to sexual autonomy.

Each of these three figures has positive and negative qualities that help and hinder Edna's struggle to be creative. Adèle Ratignolle, a sensuous woman, awakes Edna to the sensuality of her own body. Also Adèle's candor in talking about such subjects as her pregnancy helps Edna to overcome her reserve. Furthermore, Adèle encourages her to express thoughts and feelings she had kept hidden, even from herself. For example, at Adèle's urging to say what she is thinking as they sit together by the sea, Edna recalls "a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl ... She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water." (17) When Edna says that she feels as if this summer is like walking through that meadow again "unguided," Adèle strokes her hand, and we see that in fact, though not an artist, it is she who guides Edna toward warmth, openness, and creativity. For Edna's memory is an important step in the growth of her power of free association, necessary in the creative process.

In these early scenes by the sea Chopin also establishes the sea as a central symbol for Edna's birthing of a new self. The connection in her mind between the grass and the sea foreshadows the autonomy she achieves by learning to swim, as well as her final walk into the sea at the book's end. Symbolically, the sea is both a generative and a destructive force in *The Awakening,* it represents danger inherent in artistic self-
expression--losing oneself in unlimited space--as well as the source of all life, facilitating rebirth, so that Edna in her first moments of being able to swim feels like a child who has learned to walk. The ocean has also been seen as a symbol of woman or the mother in both her benevolent and terrible aspects. Madame Ratignolle, in association with the sea, represents the benevolent mother who nurtures Edna and even inspires her to paint. Adèle seems to her, as she is seated on the beach, like "some sensuous Madonna," and she paints her picture.

At this beginning point in her artistic development Edna thinks of herself as a "dabbler." However, though Edna has had no formal training, Chopin establishes the fact that she is talented for "she handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came not from a long and close acquaintance with them but from a natural aptitude." (12) We also see early on that Edna has the capacity for self-criticism as "after surveying the sketch critically, she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface and crumpled the paper between her hands." (12) Later when Edna's critical faculties are turned against conventional values of home, husband, and family in the direction of autonomy, Adèle will show the negative side of her mothering qualities. By constantly reminding Edna of her duty to her children, she binds her to society's rules and impedes her creative growth.

In these early scenes at Grand Isle where Edna's struggle to be an artist is beginning, Robert is another source of imaginative power. As she paints Adèle's portrait, he encourages her with "expressions of appreciation in French." While this may simply be Creole flattery, it is more encouragement than she has ever received from her husband. Like Adèle, he is sensual, and as she paints he rests his head against her arm. He also speaks about himself freely, telling her of his plans to go to Mexico. Under his influence she speaks to him about her life, and it is he who awakens her to the passions of her body. A few weeks after the painting scene on the beach, Chopin again uses the sea as a symbol of growth, and again in connection with Robert. One evening he proposes a night swim and we see him lingering behind with the lovers, "and there was not one but was ready to follow when he led the way." (28) Robert's appearance is associated
frequently with lovers; he becomes Cupid who awakens Edna to the force of Eros. This evening she learns to swim and feels herself "reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself." (30) Loss of boundaries suggests orgiastic union which foreshadows Edna's final merging with the sea. Significantly, that evening as she lies in a hammock, an image of lovemaking, she feels herself "pregnant with the first felt throbbing desire" (32) for Robert.

When her husband returns later she refuses to go inside when he asks her to. By now she has achieved mastery over her body by learning to swim and mastery over her environment by challenging his authority. She now has to achieve mastery over her imagination, but at this point can only "blindly follow whatever impulse moved her." (34) Next morning, without much thought, she asks a servant to tell Robert she wishes him to take the boat with her to Cheniere for Mass. Walking to the wharf, there are, as always when Robert appears, lovers who already stroll "shoulder to shoulder." Edna's imagination is subsumed by the romance phase of her creative growth as she spends an idyllic day with Robert. This chapter could be considered an epithalamion which, like Edmund Spenser's, is governed by the position of the sun during each part of the marriage day. On the boat trip, "The lovers were all along. They saw nothing, they heard nothing." (36) Edna and Robert became like the lovers, infatuated with each other, as the sun was high up and beginning to bite." (36)

Edna grows tired in church during Mass, and we see her reject another of society's institutions of authority in favor of the natural force of Eros. Robert takes her to the home of Madame Antoine where Edna partially removes her clothes and while Robert waits for her outside, lies down "in a strange, quaint bed, with its country odor of the laurel, lingering about the sheets and mattress." (39) The laurel, expressive of victory and celebration, is a tree sacred to Apollo, and since the sun charts the course of this harmonious day, the association is clear. The festival being celebrated is a mock wedding, and the hammock which Edna slept in the night before has been replaced by the marriage bed.
Edna wakes to an Edenic world of simple pleasure and magical properties. Beside her bed are bread and wine, symbolizing communion. Outside she picks an orange from a tree in a natural paradise where, Robert tells her, she has slept for a hundred years while he guarded her. As the day ends they watch the sun "turning the western sky to flaming copper and gold," (41) as Madame Antoine tells them stories. She represents the oral tradition of art, a simple phase which Edna can enjoy and emulate. On the boat trip back, Edna hears "the whispering voices of dead men and the click of muffled gold." (42) This day is the high point of romance in Edna's imagination, and she will return to it in her memory as she paints, and as she repeats Madame Antoine's stories.

The woman who represents a structured form of art is Mme. Reisz, the true artist Edna wishes to become. While Madame Ratignolle plays the piano solely for the pleasure of her family, Mme. Reisz plays Frederic Chopin with great feeling and art. Before hearing Mme. Reisz play, music had evoked pictures in Edna's mind. After listening to her play, Edna's passions are aroused. But like such nineteenth century female artists as Emily Dickinson, Mme. Reisz is unmarried, childless, eccentric in manner and in dress, and alienated from society. She cannot serve as a role model for Edna. Nevertheless, Edna's creative development continues. After the family's return to New Orleans, she takes up her painting once more in spite of her husband's admonishment that she "not let the family go to the devil" while she paints. She works with "great energy and interest" though she feels she is not accomplishing anything. Often she sings "Ah tu savais," the song Robert sang on Grand Isle, and she recalls:

the ripple of the water, the flapping sail. She could see the glint of the moon upon the bay, and could feel the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind. A subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn.(62)

On the one hand romance limits her work, but on the other hand it is a source of inspiration.
There are factors beyond Edna's control, however, which limit her development. Gilbert and Gubar, in a discussion of the woman writer in patriarchal society, describe "the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent need for a female audience." Certainly this describes Edna's situation as she seeks out her two contrasting women friends for validation, Mme. Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle. She brings her paintings to Adèle even though she knows in advance, "her opinion in such a matter would be next to valuens ... but she sought the words of praise and encouragement that would help her to put heart into her venture." (59) Adèle, true to her character as a "mother-woman," tells her that her talent is immense, and Edna is pleased even though she recognizes "its true worth." She receives a much harsher judgement of her artistic capacity from Mme. Reisz. In reply to the question of what she has been doing, Edna tells her "I am becoming an artist" and her friend says, "Ah! an artist. You have pretensions, Madame." (68) Sensing the insecurity which keeps her from total commitment to art, Mme. Reisz warns, "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." (68)

But there is much evidence to show the growth in Edna's capacity to be an artist. She is learning to enjoy solitude, and her teacher, an art dealer, observes that her work "grows in force and individuality." At a dinner party she tells the Baratarian story she heard from Madame Antoine, and her imagination has grown so much that she makes "every glowing word seem real" to her listeners. Shortly after, she moves out of her husband's house, using money from an inheritance and from the sale of her paintings, into a smaller house of her own. Edna's little house, like Woolf's "room of one's own," is a symbol for growing psychic and financial independence. In addition, even more important than these actions, Edna has defined herself as an artist. Jokingly she says to Mme. Reisz, "You see that I have persistence. Does that quality count for anything in art?" (68) Indeed it does. Edna paints even though she lacks the serious criticism from others that could help her shape her art and despite the fact that she misses the support of women artists who understand the special obstacles that impede female creativity.
Two events occur almost simultaneously at the novel's climax, events which portray the forces that finally defeat Edna's search for artistic wholeness. One is her witnessing of Adèle's suffering in childbirth and the other is Robert's admitting that he loves her and wants to marry her. Edna has gone to Adèle, leaving Robert just after he tells her he has dreamed of marrying her if her husband will free her. She has replied that she is no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to be given away. When she returns from Adèle's he is gone, having explained in a note that he has left not because he doesn't love her but because he does. Robert has been deeply connected to her sexual growth, which in turn affected the growth of her imagination. Through him she has begun to transfer the authenticity of her romantic vision to her paintings. Now, romantic illusions shattered, she loses the catalyst for her art.

The other illusion that is shattered is that of childbirth being a moment of joy. Edna does not remember her own pain when she gave birth, since she was chloroformed. Now, seeing Adèle's pain, she recognizes that she cannot rebel against nature. Adèle's parting words "think of the children" remind her of her mother-role which conflicts with her new-found freedom. Chopin was far ahead of her time in exposing the myth of bearing children as a woman's ultimate fulfillment, calling Adèle's "acouchement" a scene of torture. Almost a century later Sylvia Plath was to use the same image in The Bell Jar by describing the delivery room as "some awful torture chamber." And a doctor tells Plath's protagonist Esther, just as Dr. Mandelet told Edna, "They oughtn't to let women watch. You'll never want a baby if you do. It'll be the end of the human race."

The next morning Edna returns to Grand Isle and walks to her death in the sea. Is her suicide triggered by Adèle's suffering in childbirth? By the knowledge that it is futile to rebel against biology? Does she kill herself because Robert has left her? Or because she has failed to become an artist? Edna drowns herself because she cannot live as a conventional wife or mother any longer, and society will not accept her newfound self. The solitude she enjoys makes for artistic growth, but she is bound to children, home, social duty. She will not sacrifice her new autonomy because, as Anne Jones points out,
"she will not relinquish the core of her vision, which is not finally romance, but rather her own autonomous being ... so she freely goes to the sea, losing her life. But she does not lose her self."  

By beginning and ending The Awakening with the sea Chopin gives the book a wholeness that Edna cannot find in her life. Furthermore, Chopin's themes of sea/mother, love/lover, self/birth, sexuality/creativity are joined as Edna's birth of a new self is juxtaposed against Adèle's giving birth to another. In a moment of liberty she stands naked on the beach feeling like "some new-born creature" before entering the sea which becomes the universal Great Mother. To be sure, Chopin uses one image of defeat, the "bird with the broken wing," which Edna sees "reeling, fluttering, circling, disabled down down to the water." (124) This was the image used by Mlle. Reisz when, as if predicting Edna's fall she said, "it is a sad spectacle to see the weakling bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth." (89) But how strong must a woman be at this time in order to maintain her artistic vocation without any support from community? Certainly Mlle. Reisz has given Edna no encouragement, so Edna thinks of how she would have laughed at her, of Robert who would never understand, and of her children who "sought to drag her into the soul's slavery." (123)

Yet Edna's final moment is one of autonomous sexuality, as the world of her imagination resonates with fertility--"There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air." (125) Chopin repeats the description of the sea which describes Edna's first swim, "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace," (124) and with this symbolic closure portrays Edna becoming whole in the only way she can, by immersion in the universal sea of love. But how can Edna's death be positive? Many critics think it is not. Wolff, for example, uses it as further evidence of Edna's regressive instincts. Christ believes that while the ending of the novel was realistic for its time, suicide as a resolution cannot satisfy women now. Nevertheless, Edna Pontellier succeeds in giving birth to a new self even though the fact that she can not live on earth as this new self is tragic. The triumph of The Awakening lies in Chopin's depicting, when others did not, the conflicts faced by women who wish to become
artists. Courageously, she built in her novel a bridge from past to future so that women might find their way across. Like her heroine, she too was a pontellier, a bridgemaker.

Notes


2. Kate Chopin, The Awakening & Selected Stories of Kate Chopin (New York: The New American Library, 1976), p. 120. All quotes are cited from this edition.


11 Plath, p. 53.


15 Christ, p. 39.

**Source Citation**

**Document URL**
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420046584&v=2.1&u=malv39703&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|H1420046584