

CONCISE ANALYSIS

The Awakening (1899)

Kate Chopin

(1851-1904)

In chapter nine, the pianist Mlle. Reisz plays "Solitude," a title close to *A Solitary Soul*, the subtitle and original title of *The Awakening*. Her playing impresses Edna Pontellier with "the abiding truth"; and the chapter ends with the response from her audience that "no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz!" (Norton ed. 27). Kate Chopin identifies herself by name with Reisz again in chapter 21, when Reisz says that Robert Lebrun wrote her a letter asking her to play Chopin for Edna (63).

Chopin does not equate herself with Reisz. The author and the character are obviously quite different in significant ways. Elaine Showalter sees the play on the name Chopin as a "punning signature that alludes to Kate Chopin's ambitions as an artist and to the emotions she wished her book to arouse in its readers" (47). It is also evident that Chopin wishes to do more through her art than arouse emotions. There is a more specific sense in which Reisz "plays" Chopin. As many critics note, Chopin is in the literary tradition of Realism, a corrective to popular Romanticism, and Reisz also is a realist in her perspective on life. Throughout the novel, Reisz is candid to the point of comedy, as when she replies to a rhetorical question about what a pleasant summer it has been, "Well...rather pleasant, if it hadn't been for the mosquitoes and the Farival twins" (49). The virginal twins are prone to play a duet from *Zampa*, a popular romantic opera that "includes a lover's death in the sea" (Culley 4, n3). As Edna is about to drown herself, she acknowledges, "How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame!'" (114).

This mockery sustains the tone of such earlier details as the name given to Edna's art teacher, Laidpore, as in French, *laid* means "ugly" (55). At the beginning of the final chapter, the author's ridicule rises conspicuously to the surface with references to the Roman satirist Gaius Lucilius and to "Venus rising from the foam" (111). Venus and Edna move in opposite directions. The satire continues with another contrast to Edna through the depiction of Mariequita, who would run away with any man she liked, and through Edna's remark to Mariequita just before she drowns herself, "I hope you have fish for dinner" (112). The satirical tone is also consistent with Chopin's personal attitude toward Edna as expressed in a note that she wrote after the novel was published: "I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did" (159).

While holding Edna responsible for her fate, Chopin balances her own satirical Realism with the perspective of Dr. Mandelet, who is a sympathetic Naturalist prejudiced in Edna's favor. He takes Edna's side before hearing the facts: "What have you been doing to her, Pontellier?" (65). Later, Mandelet sees Edna as a victim of neither her husband nor society but of Nature: "There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (70). When she tries to express her ambivalence about her children, he explains, "'The trouble is,' sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, 'that 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...'" (109-10).

Most critics emphasize determinism in the novel, yet the role of Dr. Mandelet as the character who advocates that view is consistently overlooked. For example, of 15 essays in the Norton Critical Edition (1976), 21 in the MLA casebook (1988), and 5 in the St. Martin's Press casebook edition (1993), none discusses the thematic significance of Mandelet, the healer with a "reputation for wisdom" (64). Yet in the end, Edna herself thinks of Mandelet as the one person who might have understood her, "if she had seen him." (114).

Like Chopin, Reisz postulates both the determinism of Nature and existential freedom when she tells Edna that to be an artist requires "absolute gifts" and a "soul that dares and defies" (63). Reisz, "by her

divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (78). Edna uses her freedom to unburden herself of the responsibility that Chopin attributes to her: "She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her [like Hester Prynne], as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (33). The novel contains an allegory illustrating that such irresponsible romanticism is self-destructive: "All sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference" (102-03).

Transcendence of such romanticism is evident in Chopin's symmetrical imagery, a stabilizing balance to her lyrical style. At the beginning of the novel the parrot and the mockingbird, caged symmetrically on either side of a door, are metaphors of "two contradictory impulses which impelled her" (14), of "the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (15). At the end, Edna thinks of Reisz and Mandelet in symmetrical contrast. Chopin affirms an egalitarian balance by offering Edna a male as well as a female guide, both of whom would disapprove of her suicide, and by reversing traditional gender roles, displaying a transcendental feminism.

Reduced by Edna's last thoughts to allegorical personifications, Reisz and Mandelet embody complementary modes of perception and poles of response. Reisz is the critical head, more developed on her masculine side than other women in the novel. Mandelet is the sympathetic heart, more developed on his feminine side than other men. Solitaries, each of their perspectives is limited. Chopin's aesthetic vision, as distinct from her personal attitude, synthesizes the best from both perspectives. Edna demonstrates that she lacks the courage to live as a rebel, while Reisz and Mandelet demonstrate capacities essential for development as a person, such as acceptance of limitations and regard for others, which Edna has rejected: "I don't want anything but my own way" (110).

Through Reisz and Mandelet, particularly their juxtaposition at the end of the novel, Chopin defines her position in relation to the dominant literary traditions of her time. She transcends both the Realism of Reisz and the Naturalism of Mandelet, expressing a synergy of perspectives that is holistic and Modernist.

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