

46 CRITICS DIFFER ON THE ENDING OF *THE AWAKENING* (1899)

“How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! ‘And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.’” (Edna Pontellier)

“Edna Pontellier, fanciful and romantic to the last, chose the sea on a summer night and went down with the sound of her first lover’s spurs in her ears, and the scent of pinks about her. And next time I hope that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause.” (Willa Cather)

“I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did.” (Kate Chopin)

Approaches to Teaching Chopin’s The Awakening, ed. Bernard Koloski (MLA 1988):

“Students usually find it easy to empathize with Edna, who in ‘becoming herself’ is daily ‘casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment ...before the world’.” (Ann R. Morris & Margaret M. Dunn)

“As if embodying every infant’s wish come true, she slips into the universal womb--the ocean, where she can go on wishing...we readers relish her liberation. (Jo Ellen Jacobs)

“The suggestion of a new beginning hints that Edna’s final act of escaping her children may be a triumph that keeps her reborn self intact.” (Patricia Hopkins Lattin)

“Edna’s problems are insoluble given the environment, the era, and the strength of her newly discovered, uncompromising identity.” (Barbara H. Solomon)

“Edna begs for understanding. Not judgment.... We cannot but admire Chopin’s Edna for the strength of her uncompromising dreams.” (Joyce Dyer)

“Judgmental attitudes tend to fade when students understand Edna’s social milieu and the naturalism in the novel.... The romantic setting and plot of *The Awakening* become antiromantic as they stifle Edna and prevent her expansion as a person.” (Peggy Skaggs)

“Chopin must end Edna’s story with suicide because of her own inherited notions. Seeing the advantages and disadvantages of playing the traditional roles of wife and mother and of liberating oneself from such roles, Chopin cannot reconcile her conflicting feelings.” (Suzanne W. Jones)

“In talking about how to teach this novel, I presume to stand outside the text. Yet I am also within it, constructing a story about Edna Pontellier that is consistent with my theory.” (Elizabeth Rankin)

“Students have little trouble recognizing the basic parts all three men play in forcing Edna to her marginal and finally suicidal position at the novel’s end.... Dr. Mandelet...addresses Edna as his subordinate, as ‘my dear child.’ (E. Laurie George)

“Chopin’s novel...demonstrates the lack of ‘truth’ in any of the ideological positions on women she orchestrates as ‘voices’ in the novel. (Dale Marie Bauer & Andrew M. Lakritz)

“Having taught *The Awakening* in various literature classes over the last six years, I have seen a clear pattern emerge in my students’ responses. Invariably, their first reading of the novel is an almost purely emotional experience. They sympathize or identify with Edna; they vicariously enjoy her rejection of social conventions and expectations. At the same time, however, most students are deeply disturbed by Edna’s seeming helplessness or passivity, her dependence on others for a new, self-fulfilling life.” (Mary E. Papke)

“Many who criticized *The Awakening* right after its publication probably did not notice the distinction between Chopin and this parodic narrative voice, erroneously thinking that Chopin herself had succumbed to a decadent romanticism.” (Rosemary F. Franklin)

“It is my belief that students must understand the degree of Edna’s illusion at the end of the narrative as she dies with the romantic sound of the cavalry officer’s spurs that return her to her adolescence.” (Lawrence Thornton)

“*Jane Eyre, Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Middlemarch*--all present a female character’s development through a series of awakenings to limitations. All learn that their inner, private values are incompatible with public ones; all measure their achievement by their capacities to realize restrictions...the women tame or circumscribe men in marriage.” (Susan J. Rosowski)

“Many black women, especially older ones, who have a long heritage of overcoming vastly greater obstacles than Edna’s, are frankly disgusted with her cowardice (white ladies just don’t know what real trouble is!)” (Barbara C. Ewell)

New Essays on The Awakening, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge U 1988):

“It is ironic that Edna Pontellier sacrifices her life for the ideal of personal freedom; nevertheless, her suicide indicates that personal autonomy is not an ineffable ideal but a priority that is deeply embedded in American life.” (Wendy Martin)

“Readers of the 1890s were well accustomed to drowning as the fictional punishment for female transgression against morality and most contemporary critics of *The Awakening* thus automatically interpreted Edna’s suicide as the wages of sin.” (Elaine Showalter)

“By the end of the narrative, Edna has become one with the inner life that is her real identity. She commits suicide rather than continue what she now recognizes to have been a sham existence.” (Michael T. Gilmore)

“Her walk into the sea is a deliverance from a limbo that Chopin is at pains to liken to that of the mulatto woman in whose home Edna takes her almost final refuge.” (Andrew Delbanco)

“She breaks the isolation of her existence, sublimates her instincts by directing them toward the Ideal and joins the universe.” (Christina Giorcelli)

The Awakening, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Margo Culley (1976; 1994)

“She realized that you can only put out fire with water.” (Percival Pollard)

“Edna’s inexplicable suicide, which seems to stem from her negative attitude toward life, is in reality a flight from sexual experience.” (Cyrille Arnavon)

“The irony is that to keep from relinquishing [her independence], she has to commit suicide. Sexually awakened as she is, she cannot bear to live on as the wife of Leonce Pontellier.” (Marie Fletcher)

“When the apparently defeated Edna takes off her clothes...it symbolizes a victory of self-knowledge and authenticity as she fully becomes herself.” (Per Seyersted)

“Edna has sinned in thought and deed against accepted sexual morality, and for the average reader in 1899, her sin required that she suffer and die.... In the final pages Edna is different and diminished: she is not longer purposeful, merely willful; no longer liberated, merely perverse; no longer justified, merely spiteful.” (George M. Spangler)

“She cannot accept the restrictions that nature and man have conspired to impose upon her, the perpetual frustration of desire that living entails. And so, paradoxically, she surrenders her life in order to save herself.” (John R. May)

“Whether she is weak and willful, a woman wronged by the requirements of society, or a self-indulgent sensualist, finally and fundamentally romantic, who gets exactly what she deserves—these are not considerations that seem to have concerned Mrs. Chopin.” (Lewis Leary)

“Edna has explored herself completely and has penetrated to her true nature, solitary and aloof though it may be.... Swimming on and on, [she is] pleased with the thought that she is escaping the slavery represented to her imagination in the form of Leonce and the children. But the price she pays for her escape is death.” (Donald A. Ringe)

“Edna may refuse motherhood, reject her husband, and become sexually promiscuous, but eventually her unrecognized guilt will demand terrible retribution.... *The Awakening* portrays neither the feminist’s heroine nor an impulsive, somewhat shallow self-deceiver; it portrays both in unresolved tension.” (Ruth Sullivan & Stewart Smith)

“Edna’s longing can never be satisfied. This is her final discovery, the inescapable disillusionment.... And with her final act Edna completes the regression, back beyond childhood, back into time eternal.” (Cynthia Griffin Wolff)

“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.” (Suzanne Wolkenfeld)

“Having dismissed both possibilities of deliverance from her solitude [romantic love with Robert and sexual indulgence with Arobin], and unable to sustain the delight it brings her, Edna embraces death whose voice she has heard in her aloneness.” (Margo Culley)

“Edna drifts into death because she does nothing to stop it; in this action, as in preceding ones, she has not controlled her own destiny.” (Nancy Walker)

“We are dealing with personal pathology—with a proclaimed ‘outsider’—not with social or sexual injustice at all.” (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese)

“The flight from the controlling norms—morality, marriage, maternity—that began on a Sunday in childhood, when, running from the church, she found herself in a grassy meadow, blue-green like the sea, ends with Edna’s vision of a ‘bird with a broken wing...reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water’.” (Lee R. Edwards)

“*The Awakening* brings together the romantic...the mingled voices of European and American naturalistic determinism and progressive or utopian feminism, and the hopelessness and joyous defiance of the ‘New Woman’ who refuses political, social, and personal compromise.” (Helen Taylor)

“The book brilliantly spins the privileged white female fantasy of utter and complete personal freedom out to its end, which is oblivion.” (Elizabeth Ammons)

Kate Chopin, Modern Critical Views, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House 1987)

“Unfortunately, she fails to see that her passion is for herself, and this error perhaps destroys her.” (Bloom)

“The only way to renounce biology is to renounce the physical self.... Edna awakens to the horrible knowledge that she can never, because she is a female, be her own person.” (Kathleen Margaret Lant)

“*And how, after all, do we know that she ever dies?* What critics have called her ‘suicide’ is simply our interpretation of her motion, our realistic idea about the direction in which she is swimming. Yet as

Chopin's last words tell us, that direction is toward the mythic, the pagan, the aphrodisiac.... Defeated, even crucified, by the 'reality' of nineteenth-century New Orleans, Chopin's resurrected [?] Venus is returning to Cyprus or Cythera." (Sandra M. Gilbert)

The Awakening, ed. Nancy A. Walker (St. Martin's 1993)

"Edna's death in the ocean dramatizes the self-ownership rhetoric of Elizabeth Cady Stanton." (Margit Strange)

"She transcends the mythologies offered to her, and to us, and this is treated as a triumph, not a failure. No matter what specific interpretations one gives the story's ending, its language has been living its own life and preparing for this resolution." (Paula A. Treichler)

Michael Hollister (2014)

The novel is sustained irony from beginning to end--Realism countering Romanticism--especially in the last chapter, where a satirical tone is set by a reference in the first paragraph to the Roman satirist Gaius Lucilius, who likewise ridiculed the indulgences of his society as expressed at lavish banquets. Talking to Mariequita at Grand Isle out of season, Victor compares Edna's dinner party to a "Lucillean feast" and she herself to "Venus rising from the foam"--ironically as it turns out. Venus and Edna move in opposite directions.

Mariequita thinks Victor must be in love with Mrs. Pontellier. When she threatens to run away with someone else, the reader is reminded of the irony that the poor girl is more free to be impulsively romantic than Edna. The simple directness of relations among common people, exemplified by the banter of Victor and Mariequita, contrasts with the complications of relations among the affluent. The ironic tone of the chapter is sustained as Victor insults and threatens to murder his rival for Mariequita's affections: "This assurance was very consoling to Mariequita. She dried her eyes, and grew cheerful at the prospect."

Edna arrives at the hotel, surprising Victor and Mariequita. She asks what time dinner will be served and declares her intention to go swimming before dinner. She asks for towels, then expresses the hope that they will serve fish--a dark joke from Chopin as it turns out. She walks to the beach "mechanically": "She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning." She has done so little thinking that it is not presented in the text, only what thinking was "necessary"--apparently to decide what to do now. It is clear that she has finally awakened to her true nature: "To-day it is Arobin; to morrow it will be some one else." As an existential artist, she has made herself a female counterpart of Arobin. Unlike him, however, she is a romantic in love and feeling sorry for herself even though she knows now that eventually she would have grown tired of Robert.

Childishly she blames her children for her own life choices, feeling they are "antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days." Of course, that is absurd. They have spent most of the book with their nursemaid and their grandparents. She is making her children scapegoats for her guilt. Her children have become her conscience. "But she knew a way to elude them." Edna is similar to Poe's William Wilson, who tried to escape his conscience by murder, whereas Edna kills herself. Her commitment to "elude" her children indicates that it is in her mind at some level to elude them by killing herself, though "She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach." Her requests for dinner and towels suggest that she is not *thinking* about killing herself and that makes her suicide seem impulsive, though she may already have decided to do it. In any case, by not thinking about it anymore, she has to some extent predetermined her own fate.

The lyricism of the prose style conveys the romanticism of Edna and the archetypal lure of the sea. "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water"--analogous to her own descent. Mademoiselle Reisz cautioned her that she needed strong wings to defy society, whereas Edna is broken by losing her fairytale dream of Robert and by awakening to her true nature: "She felt like some new-born creature, opening eyes in a familiar world that it had never known."

Her awakened self cannot survive self-knowledge, which accounts for her odd “indifference” to her Fate at critical times, as she has occasional intimations of the truth.

As she swims out into the Gulf--now a gulf between her and the world--she immerses herself in cold water yet imagines that she is back in the warm meadow “she had traversed when a little child.” This contradiction sustains the ironic tone. Childishly again she accuses her husband and her children of thinking “they could possess her, body and soul.” In fact, her husband has followed Dr. Mandelet's advice and let her go her own way, and her children make slight demands upon her. “How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! ‘And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame!’” Having twice identified herself with Reisz, Chopin clearly wants to be understood as expressing her personal opinion of Edna through Reisz at the end, but she transcends her personal opinion in her art by including the perspective of Mandelet.

“Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him--but it was too late.” Mandelet has already displayed his ability to understand and not to blame her, but she is too impulsive to seek his help. Whether he could have helped her is questionable, since she has said that she only wants her own way. At the end, Edna thinks of Reisz and Mandelet in symmetrical contrast, representing contradictory perspectives like the two birds at the beginning of the novel. Chopin is egalitarian in offering Edna a male as well as a female guide, both of whom would disapprove of her suicide. Reduced by Edna's thoughts to allegorical personifications, Reisz and Mandelet embody complementary modes of perception and poles of response. Solitaries, each of their perspectives is limited, but together they constitute a balanced view.

Edna demonstrates that she lacks the strength and courage necessary to live as a rebel. Her last thoughts are a sentimental regression to childhood and identify the primary motivating forces in her life as (1) rebellion against authority, as expressed by feeling “chained” like a dog and as represented by the voices of her father and her sister Margaret, which she associates with family conventions and the church; and (2) romantic longing for “the unattainable,” as first spurred by her infatuation with a cavalry officer wearing spurs. Chopin's aesthetic vision, as distinct from her personal opinion, synthesizes the Realism of Reisz and the Naturalism of Mandelet with all the additional implications of the novel, expressing a synergy that is holistic and Modernist.

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