

EDNA PONTELLIER'S DIGRESSIVE QUEST FOR THE MATERNAL IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

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10.31902/flil.24.2018.3
UDK 821.111(73).09-32

Abstract: The quest that Kate Chopin's heroine Edna Pontellier undertakes in *The Awakening* begins in the summer she spends in Grand Isle in the sensuous atmosphere of the Creole society and her newly found self with Madame Ratignolle and Robert Lebrun. The former, whom Chopin calls mother-woman, embodies all the qualities of womanly beauty, virtue and motherly attachment. With her, Edna, an orphan who lost her mother at a very young age, awakens to an emptiness left by her mother's loss, which she had formerly tried to repress. Although the novel has often been read from the perspective of sexual awakening, her awakening involves a deeper and archaic need for mother. Edna tries to satisfy her maternal yearnings first with Madame Ratignolle and then with Robert, who has to compete with her for priority in Edna's life. Next to these flesh and blood substitutes for mother, there is the sea, a stronger maternal force that murmurs to Edna in sonorous tones at the key points of her gradual awakening. In the end, Edna answers the entreaty of the sea leaving behind not only her husband and children but also the two characters that had substituted for her mother. At the end Edna's need for mother is seen to be a need for transcendence rather than a physical embodiment that can be found in the immanent world, and despite their competitive representations, both Madame Ratignolle and Robert Lebrun prove in the end to be digressions on her journey to her final destination, the sea.

Keywords: *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin, Edna Pontellier, maternal search, sea, suicide.

Edna Pontellier's quest in *The Awakening* is open to multifold interpretations. The novel has been read as a woman's quest for sexual freedom, self, or rebirth; and as one of rejection of patriarchal institutions. Without doubt, such readings reveal certain aspects of the novel; nonetheless, they fall short of shedding light on Edna's quest in *The Awakening* in its entirety. For example, reading the novel as the protagonist's sexual awakening has certain shortcomings. For although Robert Lebrun seems to be the object of Edna's desire, he represents only a dimension or rather a façade of what Edna seeks. Edna simply laughs when Robert proposes to marry. In fact, he is the successor of other men that she was infatuated with as a young girl. Before him, Edna experiences powerful platonic impulses concerning a cavalry officer, a young gentleman engaged to

her sister's friend, and finally a tragedian, this last one she never knew in person. All these men who captivate Edna's fancy have one thing in common: they are luring yet inherently unattainable, and her chances of a much-sought-after communion with them are fleeting or non-existent in this world.¹ Edna's interest in the men that she can actually conquer does not endure. Therefore, it is not completely satisfactory to regard her search as one of sexual freedom.

The Awakening encompasses a more fundamental existential question than a mere sexual or even feminist awakening, a question related to Edna's need for a mother. In the novel, the quest for mother reflects a quest for the transcendent, both symbolized by the sea. However, Edna's quest is delayed and temporarily stalled by the allure of the physical world, appearing most strikingly in Madame Ratignolle and Robert Lebrun, in whom she mistakenly and in vain seeks a perfect pre-verbal union as one has with her mother. Underneath all of Edna's attachments and affections, it is possible to trace her need and search for a mother. According to Kathleen M. Streater, "the loss of her mother at an early age left [Edna] with a psychological void" (411). This loss goes so deep into her psyche that what she misses is not her own mother but an archetype, a transcendental figure that speaks to her in the voices of the sea. Edna's quest ends in the sea, which makes its presence felt throughout the novel and appears the most powerful influence on Edna. The sea is described in terms of sounds, odors and touch—rather than sigh—images requiring absorption, merging and mixing, reminiscent of mother-child bond.² Inspired by Mademoiselle Reisz's

¹ On Edna's impossible desire for the tragedian, Kate Chopin comments: "The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world" (19). On this statement, Cynthia Griffin Wolff remarks that "such bliss is not for anyone *in this world*. It is a romantic illusion, a dream—defined by its very inability to be consummated" ("Thanatos and Eros," 452). Similarly, Angela Hailey-Gregory states the impossibility of Edna's quest since "there is no place for her fully realized and passionate self on the mortal plane, no place where she can be free of 'soul's slavery' that is her only option (p. 138). [...] She is a mere mortal trying to achieve something available only to the gods" (296).

² Heilmann, who foregrounds sexuality in Edna's awakening, calls attention to the maternal qualities of the sea:

Neither the romantic lover (who turns out to be another conventionally minded male shocked at female sexual self-governance) nor Mademoiselle Reisz's and Madame Ratignolle's female communities of sinister artists and coquettish mother-women offer Edna an adequate model for an alternative existence. And so she (re)turns to the maternal embrace of the sea, whose 'everlasting', seductive voice has been calling her from the beginning (886). The 'feminine' element of the sea, with its sensual touch and cyclical periodicity, both inscribed into the novel's highly patterned, lyrical use of language and rhythmic structure, acts as the pivotal metaphor of Edna's awakening to her sexuality. (99)

music and swimming for the first time, Edna feels exulted and extraordinarily courageous after she “walk[s] into the water as though into a *native element*” (Chopin 47; emphasis added).³ The sea continues its presence throughout the novel with its sonorous music and murmurings, a language that evokes in Edna feelings she often associates with her childhood. During the summer she spends in Grand Isle, Edna’s psychology demonstrates a regressive movement towards her childhood, which is epitomized at Madame Antoine’s cot. Earlier in the novel, when she goes to the beach with Madame Ratignolle, Edna notices that the images and thoughts from her childhood begin to crowd upon her imagination. Inspired by the sea and her companion, the picture of the green meadow that she was walking across as a child frequently visits her thoughts. She says to Madame Ratignolle, “sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again, idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (30). As Edna’s final destination, the sea signifies not a finality but open-endedness that involves multiplicity of meanings and associations including sexual awakening and sense of freedom as a woman, both transcendence / death—suicide in Edna’s case—and the origin of life. By extension, it is a metaphor for the mother’s womb and as such it is the great mother that gives life and nurturance. There have been quite a few scholars who have deemed Edna’s walking into the sea naked not as an act of suicide but as a return to the mother’s womb and a promise for rebirth and new life freed from the confines of the material world in the watery depths of the womb-like sea.

As an archetype, among a wide range of other meanings, the mother is associated with “longing for redemption, such as Paradise, the Kingdom of God, the Heavenly Jerusalem” (Jung 14). Therefore, behind Edna’s search for mother, a deeper religio-existential quest exists. It is probably more revealing of Edna’s motives to take up Karen Simons’s stance concerning her quest: “What Edna yearns for is transcendence” (247). Although by definition, the transcendent is not to be captured or embodied in the immanent, its origins in the human imagination can be found in a child’s relationship with his/her mother.⁴ As Cynthia Griffin Wolff noted in as early as 1973, “[wishing] a kind of pre-verbal union, an understanding which consistently surpasses words” (467), Edna equates her lost mother with the transcendent and tries to find

³ All references to *The Awakening* will be made to the 1972 Avon Books edition and will be entered parenthetically throughout this text.

⁴ This pre-verbal, symbiotic relationship underlies much of the images of a golden past, be it the Garden of Eden or the Golden Age, as well being the source of the transcendent divine. The characteristics of the Golden Age and the Garden of Eden, in which humans were fed without work and sweat, lived without fear and enmity, in harmony with all other beings, innocent of vices and sins, are reminiscent of the oceanic state in which the child lives without separation from the mother.

satisfaction for her platonic maternal yearnings for the transcendent in the world of the phenomena, especially in lovers. In other words, unable to fulfill a successful separation from her mother, Edna inadvertently believes that she can find another embodiment of the transcendent with whom she could relive the perfect pre-symbolic union she once had with her mother. As such the confusion in Edna's mind between a yearning for transcendence and a perfect union with a lover can be traced back to the loss of her mother. Her relationship with both Robert is, for Edna, representations of her mother and the perfect union with her she yearns for, but since "the saintly mother woman [...] [is] non-existent" (Streater 412) in any physical embodiment, she is gravitated towards the sea, whose elusiveness emblemizes the transcendent and her long-lost mother.

For Edna, like any mortal, reaching transcendence is impossible just as she will never be able to reunite with her mother in this life. Chopin notes "the two contradictory impulses that impelled [Edna]" (25). Of these, one is about the immanent, of this world. The other, to which she re-awakens, has archaic roots in her life and is related to her transcendental yearnings that often take the shape of romantic longing. With her marriage to Léonce Pontellier, Edna thinks she has "clos[ed] the portals behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" and "take[n] her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality" (33). Yet in Grand Isle, the portals are opened in response to the sensual atmosphere that surrounds her. Underneath this sensuality are the seductive sounds, odors, and the sensuous and enfolding embrace of the sea. However, before she identifies the source of the invitation as "the voice of the sea [that] speaks to the *soul*" (25; emphasis added), Edna seeks an answer in the material world, namely in Robert and Madame Ratignolle.

In Edna's life, *materialized* images of maternal presences appear in two forms, either as actual mentors and lovers like Madame Ratignolle and Robert or platonic, archetypal imaginary beings associated with her childhood, which the sea evokes in her imagination. As already noted, the transcendent is not the only gravitational force in Edna's life; it is counterbalanced with the forces that represent the immanent / material world. Edna is suspended between the two forces in her journey that is finalized in the sea. While at one end of the axis of her search stands the sea that speaks to the soul, and at the other stand Robert and Madame Ratignolle. Both characters play key roles to turn Edna away from her destination, the mother-sea. Therefore, in their own ways, those two characters stand in opposition to and provide detours to Edna's final destination—the sea, the mother, the transcendent.

Madame Ratignolle functions as the major source for Edna's awakening to her need for a mother. They represent the extreme ends

of the range of womanhood. Almost as a contrast to Adele Ratignolle's lush femininity and maternity, Edna is described as "rather handsome than beautiful" (9), evoking a sense of the body of an androgynous being: "The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; [...] there was no suggestion of the trim stereotyped fashion-plate about it" (27).⁵ It is this contrast that attracts each towards the other. Madame Ratignolle, the quintessential "mother-woman" and the model of feminine beauty, is ready to reciprocate the childlike Edna's attachment with motherly affection: "Madame Ratignolle was very fond of Mrs. Pontellier" (17). As long as Madame Ratignolle allows Edna to dwell on her unattainable dreams, Edna is content to pass for her child.⁶ When they are first described together, accompanied with Robert, their sitting positions, focuses of attention, and tone of speech clearly indicate that Madame Ratignolle occupies the position of the authority of a loving mother for both Edna and Robert.⁷ While Madame Ratignolle sits on the rocker, busy with her sewing, the two

⁵ Heilmann suggests Edna's androgynous appearance in relation to the New Woman typology that climaxes at her twenty-ninth birthday party:

The quasi-Dionysian crowning of Robert's younger brother Victor with a garland of roses, performed to a recital of Charles Algernon Swinburne's 'A Cameo', completes the association with the 'New Woman', 'decadent' and 'androgynous' (with her 'long, clean and symmetrical lines' [894] Edna is as androgynous in appearance as Victor). (95).

⁶ Edna's regression to childhood is noted by critics such as Wolff, Taylor and Fineman. Especially her appetite for food and long and sound sleep at Madame Antoine's cottage are mentioned as demonstrative of Edna's regression to the infant's cycles of feeding and sleeping.

⁷ The similarities between Edna and Robert underlie the attraction between the two. Both have lost one of their parents and the remaining one is not generous with love and affection to make up for the loss. Edna's father is a distant patriarchal figure who does not express much affection for his daughters. Robert, Edna discovers, is not Madame Lebrun's favorite son. Mademoiselle Reisz explains, "Aline Lebrun lives for Victor, and for Victor alone" (49). Like Edna, Robert has lost the parent of his own sex; just as she tries to fill the gap her mother's death left in her with Madame Ratignolle, Robert fills in the absence of his father with Montel, who "was a middle-age gentleman whose vain ambition and desire for the past twenty years had been to fill the void which Monsieur Lebrun's taking off had left in the Lebrun household" (23). For both Robert and Edna, the attachment they feel for their surrogate parental figures surpasses the one they feel for each other. When a letter from Montel arrives, inviting Robert to Mexico, Robert chooses to follow him, instead of staying with Edna. Likewise, Edna leaves Robert at home in order to attend Madame Ratignolle's childbirth. (In this sense, it is possible to read *The Awakening* as a "family romance"). Nonetheless, there are differences between the depths of Robert's and Edna's needs for parental figures. For Robert, Montel is literally a surrogate father; in Edna's psyche, however, Madame Ratignolle not only substitutes for Edna's dead mother, but Edna also expects her to satisfy her transcendental yearnings.

sit on the steps of the porch facing each other. The embodiment of courtly love, Robert “had lived in [Madame Ratignolle’s] shadow during the past month. [...] Since the age of fifteen, which was eleven years before, Robert each summer at Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel” (20). Both the topic of the conversation and the focus of Edna’s and Robert’s attention are Madame Ratignolle. The verbal exchange between the two concerning Robert’s unrequited love for her carries the tone of joke, Madame Ratignolle lightly admonishing her surrogate lover-child. Like Robert, Edna is taken by her: “Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at their fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna” (20). Thus, Edna clearly associates her with one of the most potent symbols of motherhood. Nevertheless, Madonna as the “virgin mother” also represents an impossibility. Moreover, this figure also testifies to the spiritual dimension of Edna’s quest, one that is invariably denied to humans in this world.

Like mischievous children, Robert and Edna “exchanged occasional words, glances or smiles which indicated a certain advanced stage of intimacy and *camaradery*” (20). Initially, the intimacy between the two is not in any sense romantic; they act like two young siblings competing for the attention of their mother. Not only do Edna and Robert look alike but they also both lack a certain sophistication and maturity. When they are in each other’s company, they talk about themselves: “Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young and did not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason” (10). Like young children who amuse themselves with the small wonders of the world, they have their “inside” jokes that do not amuse others much. When they relate to Mr. Pontellier such an “adventure” they had in the sea, “it did not seem half so amusing when told” (7). Nonetheless, left alone, Edna and Robert find that “it had again assumed its entertaining aspect” (9-10).

Edna hungers for Madame Ratignolle’s company and wishes to have her all to herself. Working on a portrait of Madame Ratignolle, Edna is actually irritated by Robert, who watches her work with her brushes and paints, for she does not want to be distracted by anyone from focusing on her female friend.

During his oblivious attention he once quietly rested his head against Mrs. Pontellier’s arm. As gently she repulsed him. Once again he repeated the *offence*. She could not believe it to be thoughtlessness on his part; yet there was no reason she should submit to it” (22; emphasis added).

Edna has her happiest moments of communion with Madame Ratignolle when she “had prevailed upon Madame Ratignolle to leave the children behind, though she could not induce her to relinquish a diminutive roll of needlework. [...] In some unaccountable way they had *escaped* from Robert” (26-27; emphasis added). That day, Edna takes such pleasure in the company of her friend that she prefers to stay with her without going into the sea; “they had just strolled down to the beach for a walk and *to be alone* and near the water” (28; emphasis added).

Kate Chopin describes the Creole community in Grand Isle as a large family, among whom Edna is an outsider and a virtual orphan. She is not a Catholic and she is from Kentucky. Socially isolated from her environment and orphaned by the death of her mother early in life, Edna does not act surprisingly by attaching herself to the motherly affection of Madame Ratignolle. Yet, Edna’s sense of isolation is more deeply rooted than it appears in her social relations. “There is something ‘other’ about her that sets her apart,” something that can be traced back to her early childhood (Hailey-Gregory 310). She has always felt different since she was a little girl. Since this sense of psychological isolation makes her vulnerable; “like an animal culled from the herd, she has also understood, however, she needs to repress her feelings of detachment and try to fit in her social and physical environment” (Hailey-Gregory 310). Kate Chopin clearly shows the divided life of Edna Pontellier, noting that the dreaming and isolated self is the real one and the conforming self is only the shell that she puts on in public (26). This fragmented identity manifests itself in the sudden and unfathomable waxing and waning of conflicting feelings in her.

There were days when she was happy without knowing why. [...] There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why—when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. (97)

Since “Edna is left ‘unguided’ by an absent mother to bring order to this fundamental chaos that dominates life,” her initial focus of interest is, rather than Robert, Adele Ratignolle, “Chopin’s quintessential mother figure,” because for Edna, she not only acts as a surrogate mother but also represents the possibility of realizing what is

existentially lost to human beings and cannot be achieved yet lingers on in legends and dreams (Hailey-Gregory 298). Early in the text she was described as “the *bygone* heroine of romance and the fair lady of our *dreams*” (17; emphasis added). For Edna, Madame Ratignolle begins to pass for her mother, the ultimate unattainable lover that she *can imagine*. Obviously, the attraction that Edna feels towards Madame Ratignolle does not have its origin merely in the physical; she seems to Edna to be the embodiment of her dreams. Madame Ratignolle’s extraordinary beauty creates in Edna a sense of awe that one feels when confronted with manifestation of the transcendent.

The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty. Then the candor of the woman’s whole existence, which everyone might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve—this might have furnished a link. Who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the subtle bond which we call *sympathy*, which we might as well call *love*. (26; emphasis added)

The physical presence of Madame Ratignolle, then, is for Edna, an affirmative answer to the possibility of attaining the transcendent on earth. Such influences, Kate Chopin notes, lead Edna to “loosen the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” and reach the dreaming and romantic self that is hidden underneath the shell of conformity (26).

Madame Ratignolle, however, is totally of this world and, as such, implicitly knows that behind Edna’s attraction to her lies her inherent susceptibility to escapism. Therefore she warns Edna, at first indirectly, about her responsibilities in the real world, namely her home and children. Just as the Creole society at Grand Isle, impressed by the generous gestures of Mr. Pontellier, reminds Edna that he “was the best husband in the world” (15), Madame Ratignolle, in a fashion fitting her maternal role, continually reminds Edna of her motherly duties. Visiting Edna,

[s]he had brought the pattern of the drawers for Mrs. Pontellier to cut out—a marvel of construction, fashioned to enclose a baby’s body so effectually that only two small eyes might look out from the garment like an Eskimo’s. (17)

Edna is not in the least interested in sewing for her children,

[b]ut she did not want to appear unamiable and uninterested, so she had brought forth newspapers which she spread upon the floor of the gallery, under Madame Ratignolle's directions she had cut a pattern of the impervious garment. (18)

Madame Ratignolle's inducements, however, distance Edna from her. She channels her yearnings to more challenging and more dangerous objects, which call her from the depths of existential wilderness. As opposed to Madame Ratignolle's efforts to keep Edna's mind on the immanent, the sound of the sea keeps inviting her to transcendental infinitude either by "sonorous murmur" or seductive and "loving but imperative entreaty" (24). According to Hailey-Gregory, the sea is yet another mother, a "sensuous one" as opposed to the image of Adèle Ratignolle as the "perfect mortal mother" (299).⁸ More radically, as Emily Toth suggests, "the sea represents limitlessness and transcendence, enduring beyond human notions of time" ("Timely and Timeless," 274). After she is fascinated with Mademoiselle Reisz's music when Edna learns to swim for the first time, Robert notes the spiritual transformation in her:

On the twenty-eighth of August, at the hour of midnight, and if the moon is shining [...] a spirit that has haunted these shores for ages rises up from the Gulf. With its own penetrating vision the spirit seeks some one worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of semicelestials. [...] [T]onight he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell. (49-50)

Robert's joking remarks reveal the truth about Edna, who from that night on, will be haunted with spirits of the sea. Where he does not strike the right chord is that this spirit is a she, not a he.

Together with other sounds of nature, Treu suggests, "[the sea] stands for a good deal that realism tries to reject. It is subjective, and tends to humanize nature for the individual's *deepest yearnings*" (26; emphasis added). These yearnings for the timeless and the limitless sea are reminiscent of the yearning for the mother's womb,

⁸ Kathleen Streater comments on the significance of Edna's suicide in the sea: "Symbolically she returns to the womb and the lost mother, suggesting that if she had experienced a mother in life, she would not now have to seek her in death" (415).

an individual's deepest yearning. Yet, it is both a beginning and annihilation, and just before she refers to the seductive whispering of the sea "inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (25), Chopin warns about the dangerous side of this possibility: "the beginnings of things [...] is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, exceedingly disturbing' How many souls perish in its tumult!" (25). Entering this chaotic and tangled vagueness of the watery embrace of the sea or the mother's womb with the hope of coming out anew is always accompanied with the danger of death and annihilation. Yet it is in this chaos and entanglement with both life and death that Edna finds the only possibility of freedom. Commenting on Edna's first success at swimming after listening to Mademoiselle Reisz, Treu notes that

she experiences panic at the possibility of drowning, but she persists. Chopin tells us Edna "wanted to swim where no woman had swum before." Soon after, as she sits alone on the porch of their cottage, Léonce commands her to come in. For the first time in the novel, she defies him. Her swimming experience has been liberating, partly because it involves death. (32)

When Edna swims for the first time, "[her] thoughts are 'somewhere in advance of her body' and she is unable to 'overtake them' (p. 51)" (Hailey-Gregory 301). It is when they are alone on the beach that Edna tells Madame Ratignolle about "the delicious picture" that the sea invokes in her mind:

[T]he sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace—of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now! (29-30)

The green meadows are Edna's safe haven against the preaching of her Presbyterian minister father. She remembers "running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (30). Like the sea, the meadows pose a maternal protection from and an alternative

to her father's patriarchal dominance. For Edna, both are sites of freedom from earthly bonds and a possibility of rebirth. When she finally into the water at the end of the novel, Treu sees "a language of rebirth and rebellion dominat[ing]. [...]. From the moment Edna removes her swimming clothes, she feels 'like a newborn creature' (Chopin 1976, 113)" (30). Likewise, Jürgen Wolter, comparing Hester Prynne and Edna Pontellier, reaches a similar conclusion:

the brook and the sea are places of empowerment and symbolic rebirth, and both women choose such alternative sites when they try to rid themselves of the signifiers of their bondage, "casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (Chopin 587). (8-29).

In spite of rejecting her father's Presbyterianism, Edna is not obviously without a sense of the spiritual. She explains to her companion that "during one period of my life religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve end until—until—why, I suppose until now, though I never though [*sic*] much about it—just driven by habit" (30). Edna's quest for the transcendent coincides with her entry into womanhood around the age of twelve. Sandra M. Gilbert suggests that

The Awakening is a female fiction that both draws upon and revises *fin de siècle* hedonism to propose a feminist and matriarchal myth of Aphrodite/Venus as an alternative to the masculinist and patriarchal myth of Jesus. (44)⁹

⁹ Not every critic shares Gilbert's positive attitude towards Edna's last act. Robert Treu, provides a survey of critical responses to her "suicide":

It has been argued that she kills herself because "she cannot sacrifice herself to the consequences of sexual activity and at the same time is not willing to live without sensuous experience" (Allen 1977, 237); because she discovers her role as mother makes her continuing development as an autonomous individual impossible (Skaggs 1985, 111); because she is guilty of "succumbing to the promises of romanticism" (Thornton 1988); because she cannot hope for significant change in American social arrangements (Ewell 1986, 157); or because she has failed as an artist. [...] Michael Gilmore (1988, 65) [...] sees Edna's suicide as motivated by her inability to adjust to the historical change from impressionism to modernism. Susan Wolkenfeld is certain that "Chopin places Edna's suicide as a defeat, a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, a romantic reality" (1976, 221). [...] Joyce Dyer seems to vacillate on this issue, offering the intriguing notion that "the ambiguous sea supports the puzzling but wonderful possibility that we are to view Edna not as dead but, rather, as yet unborn" (1993, 114). Patricia Yaeger sees Edna's death as a failure of her male-derived language to sustain her (1987, 446), while Priscilla Leder blames literature itself, in that

Edna's choice of friends in her childhood testifies to the hold that the abstract have upon her. As opposed to flesh-and blood Madame Ratignolle, Edna's former friends were

all of one type—the self-contained. [...] Her most intimate friend at school had been one of rather exceptional intellectual gifts, who wrote fine sounding essays, which Edna admired and strove to imitate; and with her she talked and glowed over the English classics, and sometimes held religious and political conversations. (31)

Edna is inevitably drawn to the philosophical and spiritual, but she cannot go beyond the stage of imitation. In terms of platonic discourse, Edna seeks to comprehend the world of *ideas* only through their worldly shadows, which may cause misreading of the ideas themselves.

Edna's failure in interpreting signs appears in her relationship with Madame Ratignolle. Unaccustomed to physical expressions of affection, Edna misreads Madame Ratignolle's interest in her. "The action was at first a little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress" (31). In the pregnant woman, who flaunts her sexuality in terms of her fecundity and motherhood, Edna finds an object of erotic desire.¹⁰ Madame Ratignolle's affectionate and gentle caresses are meant to propose an alternative to Edna's search for transcendence; however, they create an effect that Madame Ratignolle does not foresee: Edna awakens to her sexuality and channels her yearnings for the transcendent to an infatuation with Robert.¹¹ Sensing Edna's reluctance to follow the

"the suicide appears once more as both failure and triumph—the failure of 19th century literary forms to do justice to women's experience and the triumph of a work that at once evokes and exceeds those forms, swimming with its heroine toward the 20th century" (1996, 225). (Treu 29)

¹⁰ Edna does not, however, realize that she reiterates the dominant gender ideology against which she wishes to rebel, because just like the dominant ideologues of her day, she equates eroticism with motherhood. "[A] profound displacement or confusion was introduced by this accommodation [of sexual desire to procreation]: the language of feminine sexuality became inextricably intertwined with discourse that had to do with child-bearing and motherhood" (Wolff "Unbearable Longing," 7).

¹¹ In Edna's transfer of erotic desire from a woman to a man LeBlanc sees patriarchy's breaking apart of female bonds that originate in mother-daughter relationship. Referring to Adrienne Rich, she states:

In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich argues that women's primary emotional and physical bonds (stemming from the mother-daughter

requirements of her social role and her vulnerability to the Creole mores, Madame Ratignolle makes a direct request to Robert: "Let Mrs. Pontellier alone. [...] She is not one of us" (35). Adèle is certainly right, for not only is Edna *not* a Creole *nor* an adult, but she alone has transcendental yearnings that she tries in vain to satisfy in the down-to-earth Creole world. That is for this last reason, rather than the first two, that Edna is an outsider in the Grand Isle community. Robert's answer to Madame Ratignolle's request to stay away from Edna is far from reassuring: "there is no *earthly* possibility of Mrs. Pontellier ever taking me seriously. You should have warned me against taking myself seriously" (37; emphasis added). What Robert fails to understand is that Edna's interest in him does not come from an earthly source but from some unearthly force that keeps entreating her through the voice of the sea. Once her fascination is directed at Robert, Edna will have no socially corrective response. Robert serves as the socially unacceptable, and, therefore, all the more attractive alternative to Madame Ratignolle in representing Edna's transcendental yearnings.

It is worth noting that Edna is not attracted by figures such as Alcée Arobin and Victor Lebrun. They offer no more than lust while for her sexual intimacy transcends physicality. Alcée comes into Edna's life when Robert is away, and "[s]he wanted something to happen—something, anything, she did not know what" (126). Edna is well aware that Alcée is after another sexual feat through her; therefore, the only significance he holds for her is mere sexuality divorced from any intimacy. "Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her" (129). Kate Chopin describes the sensation that Victor's kiss arouses on her hand in strikingly similar terms: "The touch of his lips was a pleasing sting to her hand" (150). Robert Lebrun has none of the womanizing spirit these two men possess; not only is he genuine in his feelings for Edna, but his feelings stem from a need for intimacy, albeit different from hers.

Edna's transfer of her feelings of attachment to Robert coincides with her success at swimming and the first time she listens to Mademoiselle Reisz on the piano. Her music affects Edna like the sea: "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body" (44-45).

connection) are with other women and that these drives are forcibly redirected toward men by various psychological, emotional, and physical methods. (290).

Learning to swim the same night, Edna is overjoyed with the sense of freedom that she associates with the sea.

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (47)

In fact Edna's ambitions are greater: she wishes to reach where no living human has reached before. Kate Chopin describes the night's activities with words such as "mystic" and "mystery." For the first time in the novel Edna's mind, freed from images, surpasses the tangible and finds itself in a mystic territory, moved by an unknown power. This mood, however, will not remain with her long. The dreams that she has that night confirm for her the unattainable nature of her yearnings. She is "disturbed with dreams that were intangible, that eluded her, leaving only an impression upon her half-awakened senses of something unattainable" (55). Like the sea, her own dreams warn Edna about her undertaking an essentially elusive and intangible pursuit. Waking up to find that she is surrounded by phenomena, Edna hopes to rekindle through Robert a sense of what she felt the night before. Her expectations from Robert, however, are doomed to failure for Edna from the start because he speaks as person bound to this earth whereas she is a human being beginning to awaken to a higher reality. She cannot express the sentiments she felt listening to Mademoiselle Reisz's piano and swimming because, according to Mou, Robert's position as a male character makes it impossible to understand her words:

[H]e, as another consciousness representing liberal male perceptions about women, not only fails to understand Edna, but also, consciously or unconsciously, tries to play down the importance of her first successful swim. [...] Robert is not the genuine reason behind Edna's emotional awakening. [...] But Edna mistakenly transfers her awakening onto Robert and falls in love with him. (109 - 110).

The divide between Edna and Robert is not simply or only gender divide, however, for Robert's aspirations are about this world and future oriented, but Edna's are transcendental and regressive.

Her attachment to Robert has the overtones of the filial attachment she felt for Madame Ratignolle. Just as a child does not

distinguish between itself and the world around it, particularly its mother, she thinks of him as a part of herself.¹² When he leaves her side, “[s]he wondered why Robert had gone away and left her. It did not occur to her to think he might have grown tired of being with her the livelong day” (67). When she returns home after swimming alone, followed by Robert, on the “mystic” night, they sit on the porch quietly. Chopin writes that “no multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire” (51). Two orphans, deprived of parental affection, both Edna and Robert transfer their infantile longings for love to each other in this imitation of pre-linguistic communion. With Robert’s departure, Edna is left “with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded” (76; emphasis added).

Robert’s absence results in Edna’s further idealization of him and shaping her memories of him to represent her existential yearnings. She attributes to him her desires without really expecting him to validate them actually. Kate Chopin describes Edna’s feelings concerning Robert in terms of both a longing for transcendence and a pre-symbolic symbiosis:

It was not that she dwelt upon details of their acquaintance, or recalled in any special or peculiar way his personality; it was his being, his existence, which dominated her thought, fading sometimes as if it would melt into *the mist of the forgotten*, reviving again with an intensity which filled her with an *incomprehensible* longing. (90; emphasis added)

Robert continues to represent the spiritual communion that Edna seeks until he assumes a role that establishes his separate identity rooted in social mores. In response to Edna’s incomprehensible longing, Robert can only respond in a marriage proposal; because unable to imagine anything beyond the material, he is stuck in a world made up only of social customs.

¹² According to Wolff, “Robert is not conceived of as a separate, individuated being. [...] [O]nce physically absent, he can be made magically present as a phantom, an object of her imagination” (“Thanatos and Eros,” 455). In their article “Kate Chopin: Pre-Freudian Freudian,” Walter Taylor and Jo Ann B. Fineman argue that Edna continues to live in the “‘oceanic state,’ a period of early childhood when the infant, unaware of the boundaries between her own body, her mother’s, and her environment, identifies erotically with all three” (35).

Edna has gone far beyond the point that Robert is willing to venture for love—that he is still held by the community belief in the sanctity of the marriage bond and thus the need of the husband to condone any loosening of this bond, and that he is deeply disturbed, despite his love for Edna, to find that she does not accept this belief. (Pizer, no p.)

Up to that point, however, Robert occupies center-stage in Edna's life. In his absence, just as she does in her lost mother's absence, Edna substitutes for him with art. For example, she takes up painting more seriously than before and aspires to become an artist like Mademoiselle Reisz. However, because she never takes up painting for its own sake rather than a replacement, art seems to hold none of the significance and centrality in Edna's life as it does in Mademoiselle Reisz's. In fact, Mademoiselle Reisz's example and art seem to come closest to the transcendent, which Edna seeks. However, her maternal fantasies and yearnings misdirect her to Madame Ratignolle, who offers nothing other than what Edna is trying to escape.

Mademoiselle Reisz functions as the only example of a free, independent woman whose hardiness Edna must emulate if she is to succeed and soar above "tradition and prejudice." There is no question that the older woman provides Edna with a more viable model than Adele Ratignolle, who is, after all, trapped without even knowing it. (Thornton 55)

Edna in fact misses an opportunity by taking art to be only an imitative act but not another language that connects the world and the transcendent. Reisz warns Edna that "the artist must possess the courageous soul. [...] The soul that dares and defies" (63). Edna, however, is only ready to go half-way; she is "devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work itself" (123). She also admits to her husband, "I am not a painter" (96), a self-evaluation that Kate Chopin does not contradict. Edna's art does not move any onlookers as she is moved by Mademoiselle Reisz's piano playing. Obviously, for Edna, painting is not an end but a means. It not only provides a livelihood for her but also serves as a substitute for the object of her desire. She goes on to announce to her husband, upset with her negligence of household duties, "It isn't on account of

painting I let things go" (96).¹³ Edna does know that it is not art, she realizes that it is not Robert or even Madame Ratignolle, but her lost mother, or the idea of mother that she seeks. She will soon decipher the inviting maternal voice of the sea and direct her quest in that way.

With Robert gone and her art far from capturing the essence of the pre-verbal connection she desperately desires, she seeks the mother figure that started her quest and turns her attention back to Madame Ratignolle. In fact, she resumes painting on Madame Ratignolle's advice even though her opinion on matters of art is less than valuable. Like a child, Edna needs someone she associates with her mother to approve of her pursuits. Encouraged by Madame Ratignolle's kind words of praise for her talent, Edna seizes upon the opportunity to prolong her motherly affections. The evening she spends with them, however, disappoints Edna immensely because she observes the perfect harmony that Madame Ratignolle has with her husband, instead of her. "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 their union" (56; emphases added). However, for Edna this night turns into a disappointment, because she wants to achieve more than "this sphere" will naturally allow. She feels

a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. (93-94)

Kate Chopin reveals though that Edna herself is not sure of what she means by "life's delirium." It is "some unsought, extraneous impression" (94).

Edna's longing is suspended between Madame Ratignolle and Robert, both of whom have proven unattainable, the former by virtue of her domestic commitments and the latter by being physically absent. It is not clear to Edna to which of these personified objects of desire her longing is directed. Edna refers to the object of her desire as

¹³ According to Michael T. Gilmore, Edna's paintings are a part of her aspiration to rebel against the norms of Nature, which she associates with the Creole rules of marital relationships. She tries to create, therefore, "and imageless art [that] is autonomous, neither mirroring nor duplicating an external form, and it shakes Edna to the depths because it provides entrance to the subjective world of feelings" (78). Despite Edna's efforts, however, "[n]either the heroine nor her creator is capable of imagining an awakened self liberated from mimetic consistency" (83).

the “beloved one” twice in the book. The first of these references takes place at the dinner, which neither Madame Ratignolle nor Robert attends. The second takes place after she has waited on Madame Ratignolle’s *accouchement* and is on her way to meet Robert, who, she finds, has left. Because Edna has announced her independence to Robert and left him for Madame Ratignolle in order to fulfil her promise to accompany her during her childbirth, there is reason to believe that for Edna Madame Ratignolle still has priority. It is essentially observing her giving birth, rather than Robert’s ensuing departure, that obliterates all hope for a communion with the beloved one.

Madame Ratignolle’s *accouchement* awakens Edna from a long yet disturbed dream that she desperately wishes to continue. This crucial event confirms for Edna that Madame Ratignolle has pressing priorities in her life now as the mother of an infant, thus sealing Edna’s sense of isolation on many levels. She witnesses once again that life begins with a prime act of separation with no return to the previous unity; the rest of life is built on separated and isolated individual existences. This event also confirms the futility and deception of love and sexual desire. These feelings are no more than a passing whim, the present beloved only being a temporary filler of a vacuum that is impossible to be fittingly full of any natural substance. Edna muses while walking to the beach to her final act of defiance, “[t]o-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else” (188). In fact her aroused sexuality is no more than Nature’s trap to contribute to the multiplication of lives on earth. In Dr. Mandelet’s words, “youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race” (184). Having fallen into this trap herself as the mother of two children, Edna realizes that rebellion against Nature equates with annihilation of life itself. Madame Ratignolle’s words, “Think of the children, Edna. Oh, think of the children! Remember them,” echo in her mind as she walks back to find Robert. Her children seem to her as the most concrete reminders of her ties to the material world weighing her down like an anchor to this world. She faces the choice of motherly responsibilities, which will mean that she will have to give up “the essential,” herself, or keep it for herself, which she cannot do as a mother who has contributed to *this* world as long as she is part of it. Edna tragically acknowledges that

[she] has defied the wrong thing, the mere phenomenal forms of the Will, not the Will itself. Hence, she is not only too late, insofar as she has already been “duped” into motherhood, but

she is too wrong in that she has inflamed rather than suppressed her desires. (Camfield 115)

Life offers to Edna only *variations* on the theme of transcendence in lovers and in surrogate mothers, but it never reveals the transcendent itself. Edna tries in vain to negotiate with the rule-makers of life. As long as they provide an object to satisfy her unattainable yearnings, she is appeased. However, both Robert and Adèle prove to Edna to be no more than the obstacles she fights against and fake representations of the transcendent that defies any earthly representation.

Chopin announced her views on suicide in response to a society page interview by *Post-Dispatch* on women and suicide: "The tendency to self-destruction is no more pronounced among society women than it ever was, according to my observation. [...] But do not men do the same thing every day? Why all this talk about women?" (Toth "Divine Love and Suicide," 120). Chopin's view that suicide is not an issue primarily connected to femininity testifies to the fact that Edna's suicide stems from the limitations of human condition, only worsened by the social forces in the case of women. To a considerable extent, Edna manages to cast off the requirements of her social role: She rejects the major patriarchal institutions that bind her, including marriage, both her father's Presbyterianism and her husband's Catholicism, and the wealth that he brings to her life from his business. Before she plunges into the sea, as the last symbolic act of her renunciation of everything that society has bound her with, she takes off her clothes. Her rejection of social mores, however, does not bring her the long-sought sense of pre-linguistic bliss. She has to leave behind everything that belongs to this world. Unless she annihilates the last remnant of her material possession, namely her bodily existence, she will never be divested of her obstacles.

Like the eternal self-renewal of the sea, Edna's rebirth marks a return: to childhood, to the "blue-grass meadow" with "no beginning and no end" from which she had gained so much pleasure as a young girl, to the "oceanic maternal space" of the womb. Edna's suicide, if that is what it is, is a homecoming. (Heilmann 101)

When Edna finally answers the sonorous and seductive call of the sea, then, she is choosing not death, but another form of life, where she will reunite with her mother. Her destination turns out to be her point of origin, her home where she belongs and where she will never feel

orphaned or rejected; it is her native element in whose sensuous embrace she will feel safe and loved. At least this is what Edna hopes to attain with her last plunge into the absolute unknown.

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KATE CHOPIN'IN UYANIŞ (THE AWAKENING) ROMANINDA EDNA PONTELLIER'İN DOLAMBAÇLI ANNE YOLCULUĞU

Kate Chopin'in *Uyanış (The Awakening)* adlı romanının başkahramanı Edna Pontellier'in arayışı Grand Isle'da Kreol'lerin tensel atmosferi içinde, Madame Ratignolle ve Robert Lebrun ile yeni benliğini hissettiği yazın başlar. Chopin'in "anne-kadın" diye nitelediği Madame Ratignolle erdemliliğiyle, güzelliğiyle ve anneliğiyle toplumsal olarak onaylanan tüm kadınlık normlarını barındırır. Annesini çok erken bir yaşta kaybetmiş olan Edna, annesinin kaybindan kalan, daha önceleri bastırmayı başarabildiği boşluğa uyanarak bunu genç kadınla örtmeye çalışır. Roman çoğu kez bir kadının cinsel uyanışı olarak ele alınsa da, Edna'nın uyanışının ardında daha derin ve arkaik bir anne özlemi bulunur. Edna bu özlemini önce Madame Ratignolle, sonra da Edna'nın hayatında öncelik alabilmek için onunla yarışan Robert ile kapatmaya çalışır. Ancak, romanda bu kanlı canlı insanlardan çok daha güçlü bir annelik gücü olan deniz, uyanışındaki dönüm noktalarında Edna'ya kâh mırıltılı kâh yüksek tınlı bir sesle fısıldar. Sonunda, Edna hem kocasını ve çocuklarını, hem de Madame Ratignolle ve Robert'ı geride bırakarak denizin çağrısına uyar. Sonuç olarak aralarındaki görüntüdeki rekabete rağmen, bu iki karakterin Edna'nın gerçek hedefi olan ve aşkınlığı simgeleyen denize yolculuğunda yoldan uzaklaştıran geçici duraklar olduğu görülür.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Uyanış (The Awakening)*, Kate Chopin, Edna Pontellier, anne arayışı, deniz, intihar.