

HANGING IN THE BALANCE: THE LURE OF NIETZSCHE'S APOLLONIAN AND
DIONYSIAC IMPULSES IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

by

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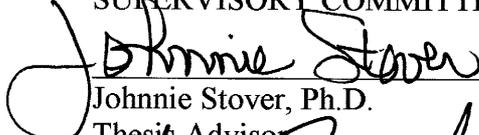
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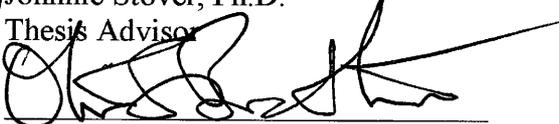
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Johnnie Stover, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

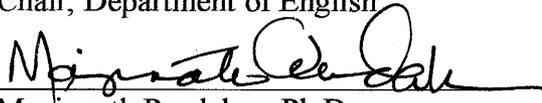
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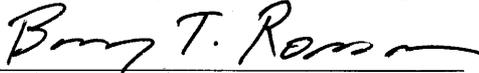

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis represents a study of Kate Chopin's groundbreaking novel, *The Awakening*. Further, it applies Nietzsche's principles of Dionysiac and Apollonian impulses to the literary analysis of the novel. I argue that the protagonist of the novel, Edna Pontellier, embarks on a quest to determine how she may live an authentic life—that is, a life whereby she is true to her *self* above all others. Ultimately, her search for self is overwhelmed by the imbalance of the Apollonian and Dionysiac impulses against which she struggles. Because Edna cannot successfully mediate this struggle, she reaches the conclusion that she may only attain a truth to her self if she finds that truth in death.

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Introduction

Undoubtedly there are feminist tones running throughout Kate Chopin's groundbreaking novel, *The Awakening*. Chopin's novel was considered so daring when it was published in 1899 that it was largely ignored, even dismissed as sex fiction by some critics. The expectations and the roles available to women at the fin de siècle were much different than those that exist today. Biographer Emily Toth writes, "According to the majority of 1899 reviews, *The Awakening*'s Edna Pontellier is a selfish wife and mother who not only does not appreciate her good husband, but she also rebels in the worst possible way – by taking a lover or two. She is not sympathetic; she is wicked, foolish, or both" (*Unveiling* 209). While many of the taboos of turn of the century society have disappeared, or at least declined in their perceived seriousness, many still exist, though they are carefully cloaked. Kate Chopin's novel outraged the critics and the reading public; she paid the price for her daring by being ostracized as a result of her fiction. She died broken-hearted and disillusioned. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim, "Whether she is a passive angel or an active monster, in other words, the woman writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives her culture offers her" (2033). Despite the risk to her reputation and livelihood, Kate Chopin dared to create Edna Pontellier.

I suggest, however, that there is much more to the story of Edna Pontellier than that of a weak, fallen woman. I suggest that her story is not only a story of a woman who defies the social mores of her time; it is the story of someone who does indeed possess a courageous soul. Edna eventually realizes that she desires a life without obligations to other people....a completely *free* life. Because Edna married and had children young—before she was fully “awake” to the possibilities of life—that free life is no longer an option. She refuses to desert and thereby humiliate her children, but the most shocking thing of all, especially in that time period, is that Edna also refuses to desert herself. She chooses her *self* over everything and everyone in her life. Of course she could continue in her life, living blindly and moving through a fog, but then she would not be living an authentic life. In Edna’s estimation, it is better not to live than to live a lie. Edna comes to understand that, in order to live a truly authentic life, she must first be true to her self. The concept of *self* is a complex one; it is something that is not easily defined nor easily agreed upon. In the context of this paper, the concept of self will refer to Emerson’s concept of self, specifically his idea that one must be true to one’s self—that is, our first obligation as human beings is our obligation to our selves, not to others. Emerson writes:

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. (225)

Edna Pontellier must learn to listen to the voices she hears in solitude, and, more importantly, she must develop the courage to defy the expectations that others place on her. Edna must develop the courage to be a non-conformist. Emerson states, “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself” (225). In order to live an authentic life, Edna must first define who she is and what she wants in this life; then she must take the steps to achieve that life.

Edna’s story was all the more shocking at the time of its publication because it is the story of a woman. Because women and men were not treated equally in 1899, the story was misinterpreted by Chopin’s contemporary audience as being the story of a woman gone wrong—a selfish and weak woman who probably got what she deserved. Times and perceptions change, however, and today most modern critics place the novel within a feminist context. Perhaps Edna suffers a dilemma that many contemplative and independent people encounter at some point in their lives, but her dilemma is exacerbated by her being a woman in the fin de siècle South. Edna Pontellier realizes that she can no longer walk the tightrope of life; she can no longer mediate between her life of responsibility and obligations and her own personal freedom and desires. The realization that she can no longer maintain this balance in her life brings her to a state of hopelessness and despair.

Early reviewers of the novel focused on Edna’s deviation from her expected role as wife and mother. The first review that *The Awakening* received, printed in the *Republic* under the headline, “Kate Chopin’s New Book Is the Story of a Lady Most Foolish,” claimed the following: “Given a woman at a summer resort with nothing to do, more interested in herself and her own emotions than in her husband and children, and a

man who had nothing to do except make himself agreeable to the aforesaid woman [. . .] the woman who did not want anything but her own way drowned herself” (qtd. in Toth *Unveiling* 220). Focusing on the “selfish” qualities of Edna Pontellier, this anonymous reviewer is obviously unsympathetic and perhaps even secretly pleased with Edna’s demise.

As late as 1956, Kenneth Eble describes *The Awakening* in his “A Forgotten Novel,” saying, “Quite frankly, the book is about sex” (9). While this statement represents a gross oversimplification of the novel, sexual awakenings do play an important role in the novel. “Unlike other American novels published in the same period, *The Awakening* makes references to sexual pleasure and to the sexual life of a woman. This is especially daring given its social and historical context: the American South among the Creoles of New Orleans at the end of the last century” (Pontuale 37). More recently, the criticism about Chopin’s novel seems to have shifted to a more feminist interpretation. As Wendy Martin states in the “Introduction” to *New Essays on The Awakening*, “It is about the emerging individuality of a woman who refuses to be defined by the prevailing stereotypes of passive femininity but who lacks the psychological resources and training to resist the tradition of enforced passivity” (17). The novel is partly about sexual awakening, but, as Martin states, it is also about so much more; it is about a woman who awakens, as if from a dream, to her reality, and finds that she is trapped in a situation which becomes intolerable. She awakens to the reality of her life and to all life; she removes her blinders, her veil, and truly sees for the first time. Sadly, she does not like what she sees. She has slept too long and too soundly.

With *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin has written a powerful story—it is a story that unsettles its readers—it is thought-provoking and disturbing, largely because it forces its readers to question the authenticity of the lives they lead. It forces readers to re-examine the choices that life presents and to re-evaluate priorities and question convictions. It also compels readers to ponder suicide and the inevitable but almost unspeakable question—is suicide ever a courageous choice? Critic Steven Ryan argues, “Chopin saw the weakness [of Edna] in Darwinian terms as a woman hungry for life, strong enough to rebel, but too weak to sustain herself against the forces of nature and society” (Ryan 253). In so doing, Ryan seems to oversimplify Edna’s complexity and label her as “weak.” I disagree with this conclusion regarding her character. Both Edna Pontellier and Kate Chopin were ahead of their time...the world was not ready for them in 1899. As feminist theorist Hélène Cixous points out, “A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic...” (2051). Kate Chopin’s masterpiece was no less than earth-shaking.

While Chopin’s novel has often been examined as a feminist text, it is not often examined using Nietzsche’s concept of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac as a theoretical framework by which to articulate the experience of Edna Pontellier. I intend to examine Chopin’s novel through the lens of Nietzsche’s ideas of the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac urges. When Edna finally awakens from her stupor and tastes physical, emotional, and artistic passion for the first time, she can no longer return to the life she had previously known, a life that she felt she had stumbled into accidentally through a series of what Chopin describes as non-decisions. It is interesting that, although there is

no definitive evidence that Chopin ever read Nietzsche, she had come to similar conclusions concerning the necessity of living a life in balance. Nietzsche wrote about the dangers of plunging too readily and too deeply into Dionysiac rapture; he also wrote about the dangers of succumbing too whole-heartedly to the bleakness of the Apollonian abyss. In the character of Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin has created a woman who, in many ways, finds herself experiencing both the Dionysiac rapture and the Apollonian abyss for the first time in her life. Because Edna has not developed the tools necessary to keep those impulses and urges in balance, she is thrown into a state of upheaval; she begins to question everything she has thought she has known in her life. When she cannot readily find the answer and key to attaining contentment, she longs for the abyss. She comes to believe that it would be better not to live at all than to live a life of pain and uncertainty. Edna cannot determine how to live an authentic life while functioning in the roles thrust on her by society; further, she cannot determine how to navigate the fine lines between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac—and the line between life and death. Instead, she loses her balance once and for all.

Chapter One: Waking from the Dream

The Awakening opens with the image of a caged bird squawking, “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!” (3). The symbolism becomes clear as the story unravels; Edna Pontellier is a caged bird – one who is trapped and not fully understood by anyone, even herself. Léonce Pontellier tries to read his paper amidst the din of the unruly parrot, but to no avail. His gaze shifts to his approaching wife, walking toward him from the beach. It is notable that she is hidden by a sunshade; our first vision of her is obscured—we have not been introduced to the authentic Edna yet. That is, the Edna that we meet in the beginning of the novel is an incomplete Edna—she is evolving and emerging, and at this early stage, she does not seem to be living an authentic life. She is unsure of who she is and what she wants at this point. In fact, it is as if her life has been a walking dream up until this fateful summer. She has been drifting aimlessly through life, almost unconsciously, finding herself in situations that she feels she did not choose nor does she particularly care for. These situations include her non-decisions to marry and have children. She does not seem to feel that she has chosen either but instead has drifted into each commitment. Pontellier’s first remark to his wife is one of remonstrance, “What folly! To bathe at such an hour in such heat!” He continues, “You are burnt beyond recognition” (4). Chopin describes his objectifying gaze as he looks at his wife “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (4). Despite this objectification, we are given a suggestion of

Edna's inner strength when she holds up "her hands, strong, shapely hands. . ." (4). Chopin seems to be hinting to us that Edna is strong, both physically and emotionally; her internal strength is reflected in her external body. We have not seen that inner strength yet, but Chopin foreshadows that it lies just below the surface in Edna. Beyond this impression is another, more subtle one. It is clear, upon further reflection, that Edna is looking at her own hands, to see if, in fact, she is "burnt beyond recognition" (4). Even at this very early point in the novel, she wants to reach her own decision about the nature of things, not fully content to take her husband's word for the nature of the truth of the matter. Ironically, at this moment she is reminded that she is not wearing her wedding rings and reaches toward her husband for them. This moment presents an interesting juxtaposition of power tamed by confinement. We are given a glimpse of Edna's underlying thirst for freedom, but she seems to remember her obligations in the form of the symbol of her wedding ring. She blindly reaches for them, as she has gone through her life to this point, doing what is expected of her—getting married and having babies and playing the role of the young wife and mother. This undercurrent of strength is again displayed through Chopin's direct characterization of Edna as "rather handsome than beautiful" (5). If masculinity were to imply strength in the world of the novel and in the world of 1899 America, Chopin is certainly dropping hints as to Edna's "masculinity," or growing strength. Again, we are left to ponder Chopin's notion of strength as represented in her protagonist. It is important to remember that at this time, women were often depicted as frail, swooning creatures, expected to be dependent on their male counterparts for almost everything, even for their very survival.

That night when Léonce returns from his time at Klein's, a men's club at Grand Isle, he finds his wife fast asleep. When she does not leap out of bed and attend to his every word, he is disappointed. Chopin writes, "He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (7). The use of the word "object" here is very telling. To punish Edna, he tells her that their son, Raoul, has a high fever. Léonce "reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (7). Though she is sure Raoul has no such fever, she goes to check on him, as it is her duty as wife and mother. After Léonce is asleep, Edna cries to herself, though "she could not have told why she was crying [. . .] An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar" (8). The imagery of oppression and depression is striking, yet Edna is still in a state of denial. She tells herself that "she was just having a good cry all to herself" (8). The rebellious feelings are bubbling to the surface, but she is not yet ready to face them.

While Léonce himself cannot quite put his finger on how Edna is deficient as a mother, Chopin explains it quite clearly. She writes, "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (9). The bird imagery continues as Chopin describes the mother-women at Grand Isle, like Adèle Ratignolle, as "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings" (9). The mother-woman represented the ideal of womanhood in turn of the century America; for some people, it still does. The mother-women are "women who idolized

their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (9). The characterization of Edna as non-mother-woman was enough to vilify her in the minds of Chopin’s contemporary audience. As Mary E. Papke explains in her *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*, “The ideology of true womanhood advocated specific social roles for women – that is, possible self-fulfillment as mother, wife, and lady free from the toil and exploitation of the marketplace [. . .] The ideological demands, in other words, necessitated that woman exploit a male ideal of Womanhood and thus erase her own individual specificity and self-will” (16). Edna’s sexual “crimes” notwithstanding, she was already doomed in the eyes of Chopin’s society as immoral and selfish. The ideal woman had no *self*; her *self* was forged of her willingness to deny and sublimate it, as mother-women do. Edna is beginning to realize she wants more from life—she wants more than to meet the expectations of others—she wants to do whatever it is that she wants to do. In short, she is not sure at this point what it is that she really wants—she just seems to be realizing that she does not want what she has.

Chopin warns us of Edna’s impending realization as early as chapter six, “A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, -- the light which, showing the way, forbids it [. . .] In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (14). This ponderous revelation is bound to create chaos in a world which values the effacing of women as individuals over their development. The chaos

for Edna is just beginning, as is her seduction by the sea. Chopin here uses a sequence of sentences which is repeated later in the novel: “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (14). Chopin evokes imagery of sensual self-discovery in this passage.

Interestingly enough, the sea has also always represented the abyss of the unconsciousness, the infinite, and the unknowable. Chopin certainly seems to use it in this way in her novel. The sea calls to Edna, tempting her throughout the story, and in the end, she cannot resist its voice. Though Edna is literally surrounded by people during her summer at Grand Isle, she is very much alone. She attempts to connect to others but ultimately will feel that she alone must make her own decisions, for once in her life.

Tying together Edna’s unconscious and the image of the endless sea again, Chopin writes of a conversation between Edna and Adèle as they sit together on the beach. Adèle asks Edna what she is thinking, and Edna at first instinctively replies, “Nothing” (16). She then tries to retrace her thoughts and admits to Adèle that she was thinking of “the water stretching so far away” followed by the image of “a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass. . .” (17). Edna then states, “‘Likely as not it was Sunday,’ she laughed; ‘and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of’” (17). She then confides to Adèle, “sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow

again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (17). This daydream is quite telling. Nietzsche states, “A person with artistic sensibility relates to the reality of dream in the same way as a philosopher relates to the reality of existence: he attends to it closely and with pleasure, using these images to interpret life, and practicing for life with the help of these events” (“The Birth of Tragedy” 885). Edna seems to quite naturally make the link between her daydream and the feelings that are permeating her consciousness presently. On some level, Edna recognizes the similarity between her adult self and her little girl self: she is once again on the brink of growth and discovery. It is during this conversation with Adèle that “she is suddenly beginning to make her own acquaintance” (Seyersted 135). It is worthy of note that in both her childhood memory and her experiences this summer, Edna is running away from church and from the obligations of a conventional lifestyle. She is fleeing from the expectations that the patriarchal society has thrust on her, first in the form of her minister father, then in the form of her husband. There is also a link between the child Edna and this adult Edna in her naivete, her innocence as she stumbles along in her process of realizing her self. Edna begins to realize that many of her life decisions thus far have actually been non-decisions, even describing her marriage to Léonce Pontellier as “purely an accident” (18). Having been flattered by his attentions and satisfied that her family objected, Edna had agreed to marry the Creole. She is *fond* of Léonce; she is not *in love* with him. Edna loves her children, though “in an uneven, impulsive way” (19). When they are gone, Edna feels relief, “though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (19). It is as if she has been sleeping through life so far, blindly moving in whatever direction

she was pushed, following the expectations laid out for her. When Edna begins to see this, and as she admits it to herself, “it muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (19). The life Edna has “chosen” to live is no longer enough to sustain her, or rather, she now wishes for more than just sustenance. Further, this freedom gives her a taste of Dionysiac rapture as it “muddles her like wine.” Mary E. Papke claims “the life, then, of a true woman was to be one of submissive sacrifice, self-martyrdom, profound effacement of self for the promotion of an amoral, depersonalized world. . . . Female reality was clearly, then, one of severe limits and inevitable compromise” (17). Edna Pontellier is clearly no longer happy compromising her self.

Chapter Two: Edna, Chopin, Reisz, and Nietzsche

If a careful reader traces the story of Edna's awakening, the terrible conclusion of the novel actually attains a kind of inevitability. In 1876, Friedrich Nietzsche gave us a whole new way of looking at how any individual processes the stimuli with which he or she is bombarded every day. He speaks of two contradictory forces and impulses, two creative wellsprings that are at work in any person: the Apollonian and the Dionysiac impulses. Nietzsche describes the relationship between the two forces: "These two very different drives (*Triebe*) exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking (*reizen*) one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent in the opposition between them, an opposition only apparently bridged by the common term 'art' [. . .]" ("The Birth of Tragedy" 884). The Apollonian impulse has its origins in the intellect, in reason. It seeks quiet, solitude, and cold, clean light. It "must include that measured limitation, that freedom from wilder impulses, that wise calm of the image-making god. In accordance with his origin, his eye must be 'sun-like'" (886). Conversely, the Dionysiac impulses are carnal in nature, and they stem from sensual pleasures such as eating, music, drinking, and sex. Nietzsche explains the Dionysiac impulse as follows. He claims that it:

is best conveyed by the analogy of intoxication. These Dionysiac stirrings, which as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to

the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life [. . .] there now sounds out from within man something supernatural: he feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: all nature's artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity. ("The Birth of Tragedy" 886-7)

Each person is, according to Nietzsche, being pulled in opposite directions by these two contrasting impulses, and each person must be careful to keep himself or herself open to each set of stimuli, but always remember the two most important commandments for a well-balanced and fully-actualized life: "Know thyself," and "Nothing too much" ("Apollonianism and Dionysiacism" 181). He also states, "Apollo found it impossible to live without Dionysos" (181-2). The two impulses must coexist and find balance in each person; imbalance is dangerous. The first taste of awareness of the Dionysiac rapture exhilarates and excites Edna Pontellier, and she begins a dangerous journey without fully understanding the implications of her desires and demands.

Nietzsche connects the god Apollo to one of the forces at work within us—the intellectual creative wellspring. He makes the observation that dreams are our highest intellectual accomplishment, because in dreams we are fully engaged: "The fair illusion

of the dream sphere, in the production of which every man proves himself an accomplished artist, is a precondition not only of all plastic art, but even, as we shall see presently, of a wide range of poetry. Here we enjoy an immediate apprehension of form, all shapes speak to us directly, nothing seems indifferent or redundant” (“Apollonianism and Dionysiacism” 172). He argues that only when we are asleep are we fully engaged intellectually and creatively; when we are awake, the “noise” of the world interferes too much for us to really perceive “the whole divine comedy of life” (172). Nietzsche writes, “Although of the two halves of life—the waking and the dreaming—the former is generally considered not only the more important but the only one which is truly lived, I would, at the risk of sounding paradoxical, propose the opposite view” (“Apollonianism and Dionysianism” 180). He connects the god Apollo with this creative wellspring, since he is the god of light, reason, and intellect. The sea has some of these qualities in *The Awakening*. It seems to whisper seductively to Edna, always lingering on the edges of her vision, tempting her toward the abyss. As early as chapter six, we are put on full alert for these Apollonian images: “A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light, which, showing the way, forbids it[...] The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (14). This interesting passage suggests the Apollonian qualities of the sea, the dreamlike state of the abyss. It invites the soul to lose itself in “abysses of solitude,” and to lose itself in “mazes of inward contemplation” (14). The word “maze” sets off some distant alarms in our minds; a maze is a tangle, a labyrinth that often cannot be escaped.

It circles back on itself and twists the mind, so that no good answer seems possible. It seems that by the end of the novel, Edna has lost herself in such a maze. However, even in this early passage, it becomes evident that that sea has some Dionysiac qualities as well. There is clearly something carnal, almost sexual about the whisper of the sea, the touch of the sea, which is “sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (14). In this very early passage, Edna appears to be first awakened to the possibility and pleasurability of a sexual climax, something that she has not seemed to have experienced in the “golden cage” of her marriage with Léonce. The sea is a constant presence in the novel, tempting and taunting with its seductive promise of rapture—rapture which has both Apollonian and Dionysiac elements suggested.

Nietzsche also links the Dionysiac impulse to music. He states, “If one were to transform Beethoven’s jubilant ‘Hymn to Joy’ into a painting and place no constraints on one’s imagination as the millions sink into the dust, shivering in awe, then one could begin to approach the Dionysiac” (“The Birth of Tragedy” 887). One of Edna’s earliest awakenings comes from the rapture she experiences as she listens to the enigmatic character of Mademoiselle Reisz as she plays the piano.

Mademoiselle Reisz is perhaps both the most radical feminist portrayed in the novel and also more conventional or acceptable to society than Edna finally becomes. However, Mademoiselle Reisz is the antithesis of the perfect “mother woman” that we have in Adèle Ratignolle. Kate Chopin even uses color imagery to underscore this impression: Adèle dresses in white, soft, fluttering peignoirs, and Mademoiselle Reisz always dresses in black. Throughout the novel, Reisz serves as a very powerful

inspiration and role model for Edna. However, in the final analysis, Edna goes past her in her search for individuality. She eventually swims out into far more dangerous waters, and she loses touch with the shore, or with this earthly life, entirely.

When Kate Chopin first introduces us to Reisz, it is very clear that most of the Creoles find her to be unpleasant; some even wonder if she is entirely sane. On the night of Edna's first sensual awakening, Reisz plays the piano for Edna, in response to Robert's request that she do so. Robert is frequently the catalyst for these earliest "awakenings," but Reisz is the medium for Edna's first powerful sensual response:

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth.

She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (26)

Critic Barbara C. Ewell writes, "Like the ocean, Mademoiselle's music speaks to Edna's deepest self" (155). Worth noting here is the nature of Edna's response to the moment of

passion, brought on by listening to Reisz play the piano. Her response is not verbal at all; it is absolutely physical and spiritual. She cannot even begin to articulate her desires. At some level, she is just beginning to realize that she wants more from life with regard to passion and Dionysiac rapture than she has experienced so far. Beyond that, however, is the idea that she cannot even articulate, perhaps first to herself, and then second to anyone else, what is this “more” that she wants. Examining this idea more closely, it becomes evident that some of the notions of the time could explain Edna’s inability to express herself a little more clearly. According to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, women of this time period were supposed to tolerate sex, but not desire it: “Men have sexual impulses and needs (and these are quite independent of any wish to sire offspring); women crave children (and consequently they might be said—very indirectly—to ‘want’ sexual activity)...a woman’s possessing sexual ardor independent of her yearning for babies became a defining symptom of abnormality or immorality or both” (4). Wolff quotes prominent physician and Chopin contemporary William Acton, who states: “It is to be expected, that, at the time when the man is physically in the fittest state to procreate his species, nature should provide him with a natural and earnest desire...He now instinctively seeks the society of women. Intercourse with females increases his excitement, and all is ready for the copulative act...He feels that MANHOOD has been attained...This feeling of virility is much more developed in man than is that of maternity in woman”(4). In Acton’s view, no woman in her right mind desires sex just for the pleasure of the act. She tolerates it, because it is a means to a desirable end—that of bearing children, but it is not, in and of itself, something she would openly desire. Therefore, Edna’s passionate, but inarticulate response to Mademoiselle Reisz’s beautiful

music is even more significant. Clearly, it is indicative of Edna's desire for a more passionate life. Although she has brought two children into the world, she has apparently never really known sexual pleasure. She is "fond" of both her husband and her children; Chopin's careful use of that word indicates the half-hearted pleasure that both her children and her husband bring to Edna. Chopin chooses the word "fond" because of its lackluster connotation. Both her husband and her children have, by the very use of this word, been damned with faint praise. Edna is "fond" of them, but, from this moment on, that is not enough. Her desires, however, at this early point in the novel remain unspoken; perhaps, she has not even found the words in her own mind. The Dionysiac influence has not yet broken through to Edna's consciousness. Further, she is nowhere near ready to be brave enough to speak them out loud, and even if she were, her society would condemn her for such desire. It is logical to suspect that such desires were experienced by women of her time, but apparently, they were not openly articulated. The playful Creoles with whom Edna spends much of her time that summer come close to it, but even they draw the line at acting on such desires. In his book entitled *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation*, Larzer Ziff writes, "The Creole woman's acceptance of maternity as totally adequate to the capacities of her nature carried with it the complements of a fierce chastity, a frankness of speech on sexual matters, a mature ease among men, and a frank and unguilty pleasure in sensual indulgence" (197). Edna, however, is not a Creole woman. She is not comfortable with the quick, easy caresses of even Adèle; she becomes embarrassed when Adèle speaks of her "condition" in mixed company; and she most certainly has not accepted maternity as the totality of her existence.

Mademoiselle Reisz is a catalyst to this first awakening; she is, of course, herself a woman with passionate desires. She is also an outcast, regarded by many of the Creoles as weird, maybe even crazy. At many different times in the novel, people refer to Reisz as strange, maybe even dangerous, even as, in some perverse irony, they seem to respect her talent and maybe even feel intimidated by her. Alcée Arobin, the Creole playboy with whom Edna later enters into an extra-marital affair, refers to Reisz as “partially demented,” although Edna counters his description with her own. She replies to Arobin, saying that Reisz is “wonderfully sane” (79). For Edna to even express support and admiration of Reisz is a daring thing. Reisz is, by their culture’s definition, perhaps not even fully a woman. She has, after all, defied expectations by being single and having no children. Critic Marie Fletcher writes, “With their [the Creoles’] assumption that marriage is of supreme importance, these women see no happiness, actually no real existence, without marriage; and most of them are wed young. To satisfy her strong maternal instinct, it was assumed that a woman should by all means have children to complete the family. If she is unable to marry or if she marries and has no children, she feels the lack very deeply” (195). Not only does Mademoiselle Reisz not feel the lack, she does not feel the need to apologize for or to explain her choices.

Mademoiselle Reisz tries to warn Edna on several occasions about the dangerous direction in which she seems to be proceeding, and to encourage her to think about the consequences of her decisions. Reisz seems to respect or perhaps to sympathize with Edna too much to ever lecture her, but she does, on several occasions, push her to think more deeply about things. On one such instance, when they have left Grand Isle and

moved back to New Orleans, Edna seeks her out. Reisz teases Edna, saying that she did not know if Edna would come to see her, because she was not at all sure that Edna really liked her. Edna replies, with a wisdom perhaps beyond that which is fully articulated in her own mind at the moment, “I don’t know whether I like you or not” (60). If Mademoiselle Reisz represents the quest for individuality, then Edna’s answer resonates even more poignantly. Mlle. Reisz represents another avenue Edna could have chosen to take at one time in her life—she could have chosen to defy expectations and to live alone, dedicated only to herself and her art, but she did not choose that life: “Reisz stands for the possibility of female independence. Her life may be austere and frugal, but it is her own. And her unappealing external frame harbors a rare musical talent. Her music, indeed, seduces and entwines Edna, blending into, even as it seems to articulate, the nameless, shapeless longing that consumes and fires Edna’s soul” (Fox-Genovese 260). This artistic and sensual seduction mediated through the character of Reisz is something that Edna cannot recover from. Reisz, who meets Nietzsche’s definition of a true artist, introduces Edna to Dionysiac rapture through music. Edna can no longer “turn away in scorn or pity” from Reisz and the Dionysiac; she has seen “how spectral and deathly pale [her] ‘health’ seems when the glowing life of Dionysiac enthusiasts [such as Reisz] storms past [her]” (“The Birth of Tragedy” 887). The seduction began on Grand Isle, where Reisz first played for her, and it continues in New Orleans.

As this scene continues, Mademoiselle Reisz asks Edna what she has been doing, whereby Edna rather boldly announces that she is becoming an “artist.” Mademoiselle Reisz’s response seems to gently warn Edna, again, questioning whether or not Edna has

really thought this decision through very thoroughly. As the the novel progresses, we come to recognize just how dangerous the word “artist” truly is. At this moment, Reisz simply says, “Ah! An artist! You have pretensions, Madame....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” (61). This speech is clearly a warning to Edna. And, Edna recognizes it as such. She asks for clarification, and Mademoiselle Reisz defines an artist as someone with “the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (61). This is a dangerous challenge, and it is one that Edna does not fully appreciate at that moment. She describes herself as having “persistence” and asks Reisz if that counts. The rapid answer indicates to us that she has not realized the ominous portent of Reisz’s words. And we, as readers, get a hint of the impending disaster. Edna is willing to dare, but only so far. And Edna is willing to defy society’s conventional expectations, but only so far. Through Reisz’s carefully worded questions, the reader is given the impression that she senses Edna’s naivete.

The scene then presents us with another powerful interaction between Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna. As Reisz plays Chopin’s *Impromptu* on the piano, a sensual sweeping piece of music, she drifts, although it is surely a purposeful ‘drift,’ into an aria from *Tristan and Isolde*, a tale of doomed lovers, and then back into the *Impromptu*. As she plays, Edna reads the letter Robert had sent to Mademoiselle Reisz, and she is swept away by tears. In fact, when evening has fallen and the last notes fade into the evening air, the letter is soaked, crumpled, and thrown down on the floor. Edna, too, is tear-stained and crumpled, and her response to the passion of the words in the

letter is her response to the final disappointments and realizations that we are building toward. Again, we see Nietzsche's element of the Dionysiac rapture as Edna lets herself be taken over by the music and her emotions. When Reisz is finished playing and Edna is finished with the letter, Edna is exhausted; she is dangerously close to being pulled out of balance. Through the juxtaposition of the characters in this powerful scene, it is tempting to push the comparison of the two women even further. Edna's tears and passions are obvious; conversely, Reisz is characterized by keeping her emotions in check. This careful control is indicated by her very different handling of the letter. Whereas Edna is sobbing, and the letter is crumpled when she is done, "Mademoiselle reentered and lit a candle. Robert's letter was on the floor. She stooped and picked it up. It was crumpled and damp with tears. Mademoiselle smoothed the letter out, restored it to the envelope, and replaced it in the table drawer" (64). She carefully packs the letter away, putting it first in its envelope, then in the drawer, and finally closes the drawer. It is as if every one of these steps further confines her own emotions. Perhaps this very deliberate action represents the type of emotional control that Edna must learn to develop in order to survive. Edna does not seem capable of such control at this point; rather, she is teetering on the edge of a precipice. Mademoiselle Reisz has learned to walk the tightrope of life. Mademoiselle is a generation older than Edna and Adèle: she has never married, and she has never brought a child into the world. According to critic Carole Stone, "Mme. Reisz, a serious artist, is unmarried. She exemplifies the solitary life of the dedicated artist" (2). Furthermore, Edna has already made some decisions in her life that render Mademoiselle Reisz, at least in some ways, irrelevant as a role model. Carole Stone writes, "The woman who represents a structured form of art is Mme. Reisz, the true

artist Edna wishes to become...Mme. Reisz however is unmarried, childless, eccentric in manner and in dress, and alienated from society. She cannot serve as a role model for Edna” (3). Edna perhaps realizes that she does not know if she likes Reisz or not, because she does not know if she likes what she stands for or not. However, the choice that Reisz made a long time ago—never to marry and have children—is no longer a choice that is open to Edna. She has done both, and that fact will complicate her search for absolute individuality.

After the night on Grand Isle where Edna has her experience with a true artist, the night where Mademoiselle Reisz plays the piano for her, Robert proposes a night swim. It is at this moment that Edna experiences her second sensual awakening, and her appetite for more heightened experiences intensifies. She has tried to learn to swim all summer, and she has failed. Learning to swim requires letting go. The person must trust the water to hold her up. Letting go is something that Edna is getting more used to this summer, but it is still a new and exhilarating experience for her. On this night, Edna is “like the little, tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who all of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over confidence....A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (27). In a clear foreshadowing of the final scene, Edna feels intoxicated by her own strength. She wants to swim out farther, where no woman has ever gone before, and this decision is exciting, but it is also dangerous. The sea is inviting, but she may be invited to test her

newfound strength more quickly than she is ready for. At first, Edna embraces this new experience with pleasure: “She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (28). There are clear echoes of Nietzsche’s imagery at work here; Chopin seems to see the Apollonian qualities of the sea—it presents an “impression of solitude” and the “unlimited” in which Edna might lose herself. Clearly, there is some self-destructive imagery already at work. Edna seems to be aware of the danger, for when she swims out a little farther that night, she experiences a moment of panic: “Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance—that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses” (28). Even in this delicious moment of triumph, Edna has a momentary awareness that she is flirting with danger, potentially mortal danger. Although Edna is perhaps thinking only about swimming at this moment, it is clear that Kate Chopin is working on two levels. She has already given us a taste of the decision that Edna will make in that final scene.

When Edna discusses her experience with Robert a few moments later, her words carry an ominous import. She tells him, “A thousand emotions have swept through me tonight. I don’t comprehend half of them. Don’t mind what I’m saying; I am just

thinking aloud. I wonder if I shall ever be as stirred again as Mademoiselle Reisz's playing moved me tonight. I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one'" (28). She has experienced at least two moments of rapture—her response to Mademoiselle's playing the Chopin *Impromptu* and her ability to swim out into the water, on her own strength. Both of these experiences have carnal or Dionysiac elements—both have given her physical pleasure. However, both of them have some essence of the Apollonian as well—the pleasure of beautiful music is, at least at some level, a pleasing blend of melody and harmony. And the ocean makes one contemplate the abysses of solitude. So, Edna has experienced these moments, each with a perfect blend of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac elements that Nietzsche speaks of. The problem is—now she wants more.

She goes back to her cabin and sits out on the porch in a hammock. She does not go into the cabin; therefore, she does not go to the bed that she must share with Léonce. According to Carole Stone, Edna makes a decision that night, and the decision is that she will no longer be a wife to Léonce Pontellier. Stone writes: "This evening she learns to swim and feels herself 'reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.' Loss of boundaries suggests orgiastic union which foreshadows Edna's final mergings 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 of desire' for Robert" (30). After that night, Edna stops sleeping with Léonce, as we later find out when Léonce approaches Doctor Mandélet for help with his difficult and infuriating wife. The next morning, without much thought, she asks a servant to tell Robert that she wishes him to take the

boat over to the Cheniere to attend Mass there. However, she becomes faint during the Mass and must leave the church, reminding us of the little girl she once was, who left the Presbyterian service presided over by her father. Edna is again running away from convention, religion, and society's expectations. She rejects church, one of society's institutions, in favor of sensual pleasure, which she experiences quite unexpectedly, in Madame Antoine's cottage.

In this scene, Edna lies in a lovely big bed provided by Madame Antoine. She removes most of her clothing, and then, lying in the scented bed, explores and discovers the beauty of her own body, seemingly for the first time: "She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh"(36). This "intoxicating" scene again calls to mind Nietzsche's Dionysiac imagery. The "luxurious," "quaint bed with its sweet country odor of laurel lingering about the sheets and mattress," her "loosened hair" and "strong limbs" all connote a physical pleasure and carnality (36). It is in that state of rapture that Edna is transported to the Apollonian dream-like state. When she awakens, Robert subtly compares her to Sleeping Beauty, and his comparison is interesting. Edna might be a little like a sleeping beauty, but she is a sleeping beauty who has awakened and now cannot return to being someone's princess. When she comes out of the cottage and rejoins Robert, she is ravenous—for the first time in the novel. This increased appetite seems to represent an increased appetite for all carnal pleasures, especially sexual ones. Before her collapse, she was already hinting at these desires with

Robert. When he asks her what she would like to do the next time they get a chance to slip away together, she answers that she would like to explore some of the deserted islands here in the Caribbean, hunting for hidden treasure: “I’d give it all to you, the pirate gold and every bit of treasure we could dig up. I think you would know how to spend it. Pirate gold isn’t a thing to be hoarded or utilized. It is something to squander and throw to the four winds, for the fun of seeing the golden specks fly” (34). Clearly there is ejaculation imagery here, whether Edna consciously intends it or not.

Furthermore, if we allow “pirate gold” to be sex, then her message is clear. The only “pirate gold” she has known so far has been utilized and hoarded by Léonce, whom she is no longer so willing to share it with. She is ready to let the golden specks fly.

Obviously, at some level, Robert understands her imagery, because he blushes and says that they would “share it, and scatter it together” (34). Later that night, as Robert and Edna sit with Madame Antoine before returning to Grand Isle, Edna listens to Madame Antoine’s stories, and as “the night came on, with the moon to lighten it, Edna could hear the whispering voices of dead men and the click of muffled gold” (38). Chopin disguises this very dangerous thing she is saying—Edna has powerful sexual desires that have not as yet been satisfied within her marriage. Furthermore, she is ready and willing to go outside her marriage vows to get that satisfaction. She is a sleeping beauty who has awakened and has an appetite for passion and for rapture.

Just in case the import of Edna’s transformation has been unclear, Kate Chopin draws our attention to it at the close of the chapter. When Edna gets home to her children, she finds her husband away, having gone to his men’s club for the evening,

apparently not very concerned about the whereabouts of his wife. Edna herself takes a moment for some honest introspection, and she realizes that “she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect” (39). Chopin allows herself a subtle editorial comment, and she alerts us to the fact that Edna’s very “self” is changing.

The word “self,” like the word “artist,” is one of the dangerous words of this novel. Its importance becomes clear when studying the somewhat strained conversation between Edna and Adèle that we hear about in chapter sixteen. The conversation has taken place earlier, but we are told about it after Robert has left for Mexico and the two women find a quiet moment to talk. Edna tells Adèle, almost casually, that she would never sacrifice her *self* for her children. Chopin writes that Adèle did not seem to understand what Edna was saying, that it was as if Edna were speaking a different language. Edna replies with these words, and they have an ominous undertone that will be echoing until the last page of the novel: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (46). Adèle is completely bewildered. In fact, “Her talent is only important to her in the context of her roles of wife and mother. She has no way of conceiving of herself as a separate person—indeed, she rarely is a separate person because she is always pregnant” (Bogard 3). Adèle tells Edna that she does not understand what Edna is saying, and that her remarks make no sense: “I don’t know

what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential,' said Madame Ratignolle, cheerfully; 'but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that.'" Edna answers flatly, "'Oh, yes you could'" (Chopin 46). These words will echo and resonate throughout the rest of the novel. In that haunting final chapter, Chopin comes back to this conversation. As Edna walks down to the beach, filled with despair, she thinks about her earlier statement: "She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (108). However, although Edna understands clearly what she means, the reader is left to try to figure it out. Chopin declines any further definition. Rather, the reader must work with several suggestions as to what Edna means by "herself." The word seems to mean a commitment to honor obligations to her *self*—that is, to be true only to herself on this new path of self-discovery. Edna has apparently, at this point decided that she will no longer sacrifice this obligation to her *self*.

At the end of chapter 36, when Robert and Edna seem to be on the verge of finally acting on their passionate attraction for each other, they are interrupted by a summons from one of Adèle's servants. Adèle is in labor, and she is calling Edna to her bedside, to keep her promise that she would be with Adèle in her hour of need. So, Edna does not get to explain her thoughts to Robert. However, what she does say to him has a chilling undertone, and it brings us closer to understanding Edna's mindset in that haunting final chapter. Robert tells Edna that while he was away in Mexico, he dreamed of coming back, confronting Léonce, and eventually marrying Edna. She answers in a statement

that, at first, seems somewhat conventional and understandable, and then suddenly veers off into a much darker direction:

“You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both” (102).

He is clearly startled, even frightened by her response, and as he asks her what she means, his face grows white. The servant from Adèle interrupts them at this moment, and so she never gets to explain. We do not get to hear her answer either. We hear it, or fragments of it, in the final chapter as she makes that final walk down to the water which has been whispering to her more loudly now at the end of her journey. However, it is clear that in this moment of self-declared independence, Edna is deceiving herself. She confronts the reality of that conclusion in that final chapter. By the end of the novel, she has come to realize that the independence she declares here is unattainable, unless she is willing to pay a terrible price. Chopin uses Edna’s predicament to suggest that it is nearly impossible to live without any obligations to others; to do so, one would have to live a solitary life—to be a truly solitary soul. The character who comes the closest to being free of obligations is Mademoiselle Reisz, for she is elderly, has never married and has never had children. She carefully controls even the limited friendships she allows herself, and she lives on her own terms. Edna does not want to be that, nor can she at this point. She has a husband, and even if she is willing to publicly disavow him, she is a

mother of two children, whom she would have to humiliate and disown. In the final analysis, she finds herself unwilling to do that. As she walks to the sea, there is a numbness in her soul, a desperation: “She had said over and over to herself: ‘Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne!’”(108) As if to clarify what Edna is thinking about in these moments of final desperation, Chopin extends her thoughts: “There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them” (108). We hear a definition of personal obligations that has some frightening nuances implied—obligations are antagonists that threaten to overcome her *self*. Obligations are antagonists that threaten to drag her soul into slavery. The children she has brought into this world, whether she was ready to or not, are “obligations” that she no longer wants to honor. She is ready to divest herself of the obligation to Léonce, but she is not ready to humiliate her boys. These two children, who never speak a line in the novel, are the only things that matter at this final moment. And they “matter” only in that she will not publicly embarrass them. Perhaps she hopes that her death can be explained as a swimming accident. After all, she was not a very accomplished swimmer. At any rate, “she knew a way to elude them” as she walked down to the water’s edge, this time, intending to swim out too far and to not look back. Chopin does not define her thoughts any more clearly than this. In fact, in her next

sentence, she writes: “She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach” (108). It is as if Chopin is telling us that all such examination and analysis is done, and Edna has already reached her dreadful conclusion.

Revisiting Nietzsche, we find a way to approach this final moment. Edna has been tempted by the Apollonian abyss. She is tempted by the wisdom of Silenus, the Greek mythological creature whom Nietzsche quotes as he tries to describe the Apollonian abyss, the terrible logical conclusion of too close an examination of the human condition. Silenus, according to Nietzsche, tells the foolish Midas, who asks what the greatest good a man could hope for is: “Ephemeral wretch, begotten by accident and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it would be your greatest boon not to hear; What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach; not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best is to die soon” (“Apollonianism and Dionysiacism” 178). The so-called wisdom of Silenus is the logical conclusion of the nature of the human condition if only the Apollonian instinct is in play. After all, in the eyes of Silenus, human life is made of pain. Silenus believes that we are born in pain, we face a series of obstacles, losses, and disappointments, and we die in pain. If that is what it is to be human, who would want to wish that experience on anyone? The best thing, Silenus states, would be to never be born, and the second best thing would be to die soon. However, someone who has reached this conclusion has forgotten about keeping his or her balance. We must allow Dionysiac pleasures in to balance the wisdom of Silenus. Nietzsche pictured a person as being constantly pulled in two directions by two opposing creative wellsprings—the Apollonian, or intellectual, and the Dionysiac, or carnal. If we

allow ourselves to be too Apollonian, we might well reach the conclusion spoken of by Silenus. However, to do so is to forget sensual pleasures. At this moment in the novel, Edna is vulnerable to the Apollonian abyss, to the wisdom of Silenus. She has, after all, just witnessed the “scene of torture,” to use her words, of Adèle giving birth to another child. While Adèle’s actual experience in regards to childbirth could be classified as a Dionysiac experience, the feelings that Edna experiences upon witnessing the birth scene, which we are told was not an easy one, bring her to the Apollonian abyss. The wisdom of Silenus resonates very powerfully at this moment. Edna is overwhelmed, and teetering on the edge of despair.

To use Nietzsche’s model, the only thing that could save her at that point is a Dionysiac experience. To Edna, at that moment, the human condition seems to be one prolonged experience of pain and loss. She desperately needs physical contact; she needs to be reminded of physical, and specifically sexual, pleasures and their redemptive powers. She needs to make love to Robert. But Robert is gone. When Edna arrives home at her little “pigeon house,” she sits on the porch stairs for a moment and makes a visible effort to pull herself together. This effort on her part occurs right after a very important conversation that she has with Doctor Mandelet that we will address in the next chapter. Edna seems to recognize that she is on the edge of a precipice, and she makes a conscious effort to calm her desperation, to pull herself back from the abyss. Chopin writes:

The night was quiet and soothing. All the tearing emotion of the last few hours seemed to fall away from her like a somber, uncomfortable garment,

which she had but to loosen to be rid of. She went back to that hour before Adèle had sent for her; and her senses kindled afresh in thinking of Robert's words, the pressure of his arms, and the feeling of his lips upon her own. She could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one. His expression of love had already given him to her in part. When she thought that he was there at hand, waiting for her, she grew numb with the intoxication of expectancy. It was so late; he would be asleep perhaps. She would awaken him with a kiss. She hoped he would be asleep that she might arouse him with her caresses.

(106)

Examining this passage, it becomes very clear that Chopin's interpretation of the moment aligns itself very clearly with Nietzsche's ideas about the necessity of keeping one's impulses in balance. While debate ensues about whether Chopin had ever read Nietzsche, it is known that she had read Schopenhauer, according to critic Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (257). However, her imagery is absolutely in line with Nietzsche's. Edna has been tempted, seduced by the wisdom of Silenus. She has witnessed the terrible "scene of torture" which is Adèle's childbirth experience. She has recalled her own experience with childbirth, and mostly what she remembers is a drugged stupor and a sense of bewilderment. Now, at this moment, she tries to pull herself back from these thoughts. And she believes that in order to do that, she needs to experience carnal pleasure. She needs to open herself to Dionysiac rapture, and that would come if she could make love to Robert. She tells herself that the desperate emotions that she has been haunted by are

like ‘uncomfortable garments’ which she has but to loosen to be rid of. It is strange that this loosening of uncomfortable garments will come back in that final, fateful chapter, with even more ominous undertones. The reader can feel Edna thinking about having “her senses kindled afresh” and about the touch of his lips on hers. She even halfway hopes he is asleep so that with her kisses, she can “arouse” him. At least at this very dangerous moment, Dionysiac rapture could have saved Edna. However, Robert, having done what he thinks is the noble thing, is gone. He has left a note behind which reads, “I love you. Good-by—because I love you” (106). He clearly believes that he has done what is best for Edna, because he knows that both of them have decided to make love, and he knows further that this would compromise her reputation beyond repair. For them to live together would be taboo, even impossible. What he does not understand is that she has moved past such concerns. Perhaps if she had been able to answer his question of “What do you mean?” before she was summoned to Adèle’s bedside, called to fulfill an obligation to her friend, he might have understood her more completely. Perhaps he did understand her and on some level knew that he would never have been enough for Edna. Perhaps. But it is doubtful, for Edna is in far more dangerous water than any Robert has ever known about. That night, after coming home to an empty house, Edna stretches herself out on the couch and thinks—awake all night. Chopin writes: “The lamp sputtered and went out” (106). There is a clear warning here—Edna’s hopes of adjusting and finding a way to not sacrifice her “self” have sputtered and gone out. So, she makes her journey back to Grand Isle and to the water, which has been waiting for her all along.

Chapter Three: Sexual Awakening and the Would-be Intervention of Dr. Mandelet

Before turning to that last chapter, it is necessary to take a look at the very important character of Doctor Mandelet. He really comes into the novel about half way through, and since he is only in a couple of scenes, it would be very easy to underestimate his importance in the novel and his importance to Edna's battle to understand herself. Since the novel is frequently perceived as a feminist novel, and a very bold one, it is tempting to concentrate on the two female foils for Edna—Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz—while neglecting characters whose relationship with Edna is not so easily discerned. Such a study is very rewarding, and there is much to be gained from comparing and contrasting Edna with each of these women. However, Doctor Mandelet, although not a woman, brings another interesting perspective to Edna's dangerous evolution during the half year of her life we see portrayed in the novel.

He first shows up as a consultant to Léonce, who carefully and privately seeks his opinion on the changes that Edna seems to be going through when they arrive back in New Orleans. In chapter 22, Léonce tries to explain to Doctor Mandelet the nature of his concerns, and we see that Léonce is right to be concerned. He tells Mandelet: ““Her whole attitude—toward me and everybody and everything—has changed...She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and—you understand—we meet in the morning at the breakfast table””(63). We remember the

night of Edna's first swim, and we remember that she would not go into the cottage, into her husband's bed, that night. Therefore, Léonce's hesitant words here resonate powerfully. He cannot bring himself to say it. To do so would be emasculating. To admit that his wife does not come to his bed anymore would be much too personal an admission for a man as proud as Léonce, but his meaning is obvious when he says, "you understand—we meet in the morning at the breakfast table" (63). And Doctor Mandelet clearly understands. By the end of the chapter, he suspects that there is another man involved, but he "knew his Creole too well" to make such a blunder as to ask Léonce if that could be what is going on (64).

However, from this moment on, Doctor Mandelet is watching Edna, and we observe the changes in Edna through his eyes. At first, the awakenings that he perceives in Edna seem to be positive changes, although perhaps a trifle dangerous or unconventional. Léonce has described Edna as pouty and uncommunicative, as wan and perhaps even ill. That is not what Doctor Mandelet witnesses when he comes to dinner at the Pontellier mansion at Léonce's invitation: "He observed his hostess attentively from under his shaggy brow, and noted a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (67). His observations flatly contradict Léonce's suggestion that she does not seem well. Rather, he sees her as "some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun." It is interesting that Chopin uses the word "animal" here, because it is Edna's "animal" or

carnal instincts that are awakening. It is also interesting that Chopin places that qualifier “for the moment” in the Doctor’s observations. He thinks that at least at this particular moment, Edna seems very much alive, almost like she is just discovering who she is, but perhaps the qualifier indicates that on some level he knows that this vitality is only temporary. Perhaps he understands that this new life, this emerging person can not survive in society; something will have to give.

As the evening wears on, everyone is supposed to tell an after dinner story, to entertain the other guests. Each guest tells an appropriate story, one that fits his perspective on life. Edna’s father tells a story about his accomplishments in the war, and the Doctor tells a story about a woman who, for a while, lost her way, but came home eventually to her husband and to her true calling in life—her family. It is clear that he is, in his own gentle way, trying to guide Edna. Chopin writes that his story did not seem to impress Edna at all. Then she tells one, and her story causes the doctor alarm. She tells a story about a young woman and her lover who slipped away “one night in a pirogue and never came back. They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this. It was pure invention. She said that Madame Antoine had related it to her. That also was an invention. Perhaps it was a dream she had had” (Chopin 70). Once again, at least at some level, this passage makes us think of Nietzsche. He suggests that dreams are our highest intellectual achievement, for in our dreams the whole weight of our intellect is engaged. Nietzsche writes that the god Apollo

“[. . .] also governs the lovely semblance produced by the inner world of fantasy. The higher truth, the perfection of these dream-states in contrast to the only partially intelligible reality of the daylight world, together with the profound consciousness of the helping and healing powers of nature in sleep and dream, is simultaneously the symbolic analogue of the ability to prophesy and indeed of all the arts through which life is made possible and worth living.” (“The Birth of Tragedy” 886)

We cannot know if Edna has actually dreamed this vision that she relates in her story or if she is just speaking her wishes out loud. No matter what, it is a daring story for her to tell as she sits in the presence of her company and her husband. And it is enough to convince Doctor Mandelet that she is either having an affair or is about to have one. As he leaves the Pontellier mansion at the end of the evening, he is shaken by what he has witnessed: “He was sorry he had accepted Pontellier’s invitation. He was growing old, and beginning to need rest and an imperturbed spirit. He did not want the secrets of other lives thrust upon him. ‘I hope it isn’t Arobin,’ he muttered to himself as he walked. ‘I hope to heaven it isn’t Alcée Arobin’” (68). Apparently Doctor Mandelet has already reached a conclusion about the nature of Edna’s awakening. His only hope is that her affair is not with Alcée Arobin, a known rake who does not seem to be bothered by the restrictions implied in the unspoken Creole code. Ordinarily, a Creole man may flirt with another man’s wife, but this is just a harmless game. No Creole gentleman would ever sleep with another man’s wife. However, Alcée Arobin arrives in Edna’s life when she is particularly vulnerable, and when he perceives that she may suddenly be approachable,

he presses his advantage. Chopin describes him in the following way: “His manner was quiet, and at times a little insolent. He possessed a good figure, a pleasing face, not overburdened with depth of thought or feeling” (71). He has carried on affairs with women before; and his reputation is well known. Most of the men in the novel speak of him with thinly veiled disgust.

However, at this particular moment, Edna is desirous of a sexual awakening. She has had her introductory tastes of rapture—through Mademoiselle Reisz’s passionate piano playing, through her swimming, which becomes symbolic of thinking independently, and through her rapturous day at Cheniere Caminada with Robert. She knows that she has never known sexual rapture. She longs to “squander” her pirate gold, to experience the fun and the thrill of “seeing the golden specks fly” (34). Just as she reaches the conclusion that she must have this, Robert leaves for Mexico. And shortly thereafter, Alcée Arobin arrives on the scene.

Ironically, Arobin, with whom it seems Edna has several sexual encounters, does not end up being a vehicle for sexual rapture for Edna. After the first sexual encounter with Arobin, of which we are told, “He did not answer, except to continue to caress her. He did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties,” we are given another statement which seems to be as daring as Chopin can be in admitting the sexual nature of Edna and Arobin’s ongoing relationship (88). We are told at the end of Chapter 36 that “It was late when he [Arobin] left her. It was getting to be more than a passing whim with Arobin to see her and be with her. He had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature’s requirements

like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom” (99). In fact, Arobin ends up being a catalyst for a very different understanding. However, the passages that Chopin wrote about Edna and Arobin caused the novel to be virtually blacklisted. In the opinions of the publishers who considered her manuscript for publication, Chopin had written something damnable, and further, untrue. No responsible, ethical woman would ever behave as Edna had, nor would she be tempted to do likewise. The *Providence Sunday Journal* dated June 4, 1899, claimed, “The worst of such stories is that they will fall into the hands of youth, leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, and promoting unholy imaginations and unclear desires. It is nauseating to remember that those who object to the bluntness of our older writers will excuse and justify the gilded dirt of these latter days” (167). Even Edna seems to suspect that there will be no happy ending for herself, nor will there be the fulfillment that she so ardently desires. On the night before her fateful birthday party, she kisses Arobin, and as soon as he leaves, she feels regret and disappointment, but this regret is not because she has been unfaithful to Léonce. Rather, it is something much more profound: “She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which had assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips”(80). It seems from this passage that Edna has already decided that she is going to have sex with Arobin, but it also seems that she is fully aware of the fact that she does not love him. She seems to suspect that her sexual encounter with Arobin will not be enough to satisfy her. Perhaps it will divert her, but it will not be

enough to hold her. Furthermore, it is interesting that in her perceptions, life is a monster, made up of beauty and brutality. The brutality of her experience will soon overwhelm its beauty in the final chapters.

On the night of her birthday party, she assembles a handsome party of guests. It is as if she has decided to announce, in her own way, that she is publicly breaking with her husband and with society's expectations of her. Feeling the Dionysiac stirrings within her, Edna puts herself on display. Nietzsche explains the surfacing of these impulses in the following way:

He [man] feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: all nature's artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity. ("The Birth of Tragedy" 886-7)

It is as if Edna herself has become a work of art. Chopin describes her as having "a magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled, that almost sputtered, in Edna's hair, just over the center of her forehead" (83). We are not usually made privy to the specifics of Edna's appearance, but Chopin describes Edna's regal presence in this scene in detail:

"The golden shimmer of Edna's satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her. There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. It was the color of her skin, without the glow, the myriad living tints that one may sometimes discover in vibrant flesh" (84).

Her beauty and mysticism, however, only seems to distance her even more from her guests.

Throughout the night, although she is surrounded by attractive and attentive dinner guests, the finest food and drink, she seems to be aloof and alone: “There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high backed chair and spread her arms which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone. But as she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition”(84). The description that Chopin gives us here of the way a feeling of depression can literally inundate Edna calls to mind that final night, when such a depression sweeps over Edna and she has lost the ability to fight it off.

On the night of the birthday dinner, she fights the feeling of depression with sex. She has been warned by Mademoiselle Reisz that she should be careful. Reisz kisses Edna on her shoulders as if to recall for Edna the conversation they had about having wings that are strong enough to allow the artist to soar above the expectations of common society. However, Edna seems determined to break with all such conventions on this night. She locks up the Pontellier mansion, clearly never intending to go back there. It is Léonce’s house, so it will never be her house again. Instead, she allows Alcée Arobin to walk her home to the little cottage she is renting now with her own money—and this seems to be a point of honor for her. She has decided that if she will not be faithful to her husband, then she has no right to live off of his money: “Instinct had prompted her to put

away her husband's bounty in casting off her allegiance. She did not know how it would be when he returned. There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself"(76). Considering this moment of insight and decision, it seems that Edna is, at this particular moment terribly naïve. There is no way that conditions could adjust themselves so that she could still be married to Léonce while living on her own and carrying on extra-marital affairs. And perhaps even more frightening than that is her determination "never to belong to another other than herself" (76). This decision is, in the final analysis, completely unworkable. It is unworkable precisely because Edna has long since passed the point in her life where she could effectively make this decision without hurting people. Perhaps if she were an old woman whose parents had died, and she had never married or brought children into the world—in other words, perhaps if she were Mademoiselle Reisz, such a decision would be possible. However, that is not Edna's situation, and her determination to never belong to anyone else is completely untenable, at least while she lives. She does belong to others—if to "belong" to someone else means to have an obligation to that person. She has obligations to her husband and children; yes, she could cast off those obligations, but she seems to have decided that, on some level, she will not do so. If we mean "belong" in another sense—as a state of mind—Edna still has not proven that she is capable of living by and for only her self.

Still, on this night, she surrenders to Alcée Arobin, at some level thinking that perhaps a Dionysiac or carnal experience could help her find her balance and stave off

the abyss that lurks on the edge of her vision. At the end of chapter 31, Chopin depicts this surrender, choosing her words carefully, writing almost obliquely, perhaps in the vain hope that her novel would be publishable:

He stood up beside her and smoothed her hair with his soft, magnetic hand. His touch conveyed to her a certain physical comfort. She could have fallen quietly asleep there if he had continued to pass his hand over her hair. He brushed the hair upward from the nape of her neck...”I thought you were going away,” she said, in an uneven voice.

“I am, after I have said good night.”

“Good night,” she murmured.

He did not answer, except to continue to caress her. He did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties. (88)

Although she has written this passage very carefully, and we have to read between the lines to understand what has happened, it is clear that on this night Edna sleeps with Alcée Arobin.

Furthermore, we can infer that there are several occasions on which she does so. In chapter 33, Adèle, now very pregnant, drags herself over to Edna’s little “pigeon house” to warn her that people are starting to talk about her behavior. To this remark, Edna replies, “Does he boast of his successes?” with an indifferent tone of voice (91). The fact that Edna uses the word “successes” suggests an admission that she now has

become one of his several conquests. It is at this moment in the novel that Edna makes a fateful promise to Adèle. It happens so simply and so naturally, that we might overlook its importance at the time. Adèle asks Edna to promise her that she will come to her side when it is time for her to deliver the baby. What is Adèle's motivation at this moment? It seems unlikely that she believes that Edna will be a particular comfort to her in the midst of her suffering, although that is possible. They are, after all, good friends; Adèle and Edna had formed a close relationship at Grand Isle, and Edna had promised she would be with Adèle when she was needed. However, it is unlikely that Edna could actually do anything to alleviate the suffering that is sure to come. Rather, it seems possible that Adèle is hoping that by having Edna witness once again the miracle of birth, she can save her friend from committing a grievous mistake, that of continuing to carry on this affair with Arobin. By looking at the scene of labor and delivery, and by paying careful attention to what Adèle says to Edna, this interpretation gains credence. It becomes clear later that this promise that Edna makes has deadly consequences. It is interesting and noteworthy that Edna makes the promise so blithely. In answer to Adèle's request, Edna says, "At any time—any time of the day or night, dear" (91). What is striking about this is that the woman speaking these words of promise and obligation is the very same woman who has just decided that she will never belong to another other than herself. While this promise is not evident of Edna's "belonging" to Adèle, it is a promise to help her friend, and it represents an obligation that Edna feels she must fulfill, no matter the inconvenience to herself. This obligation is representative of the social obligations that Edna can not seem to be courageous enough to cast off. At

the moment that Edna makes this promise, the full import of what is being asked of her does not seem to be at all clear to her. But it will be at the end.

Edna does honor this promise to her friend, and the fact that she does so at a moment when her own desires to make love to Robert are very high, is also striking. Adèle suffers through a difficult labor and delivery, and Edna is almost overcome as she witnesses her friend's suffering. As her uneasiness intensifies, the wisdom of Silenus, in the form of her frustration with Nature and the unfairness of the human condition, begins whispering to her:

She began to wish she had not come; her presence was not necessary. She might have invented a pretext for staying away; she might even invent a pretext now for going. But Edna did not go. With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture. She was still stunned and speechless with emotion when later she leaned over her friend to kiss her and softly say good-by. Adèle, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (104)

Now Adèle's intentions become clear. She apparently believes that having Edna witness the miracle of birth will help her to get her priorities straight. She will remember her obligations to Raoul and Etienne, her two little boys, and put her inappropriate behavior aside. Sadly, her words do resonate very powerfully with Edna, but not at all in the way she intended them to.

When Edna leaves Adèle's bedside, she is stunned, almost as if drugged. According to Carole Stone, "In Chopin's era childbirth was considered a woman's noblest act; to write of it otherwise was unacceptable...By shattering the illusion that giving birth is a glorious experience, Chopin attacks the patriarchal structure which denies women control of their bodies"(1). And that is exactly what Chopin does—she attacks the myth that childbirth is a glorious experience, and she attacks the myth that a woman is only completely a woman when she has given birth. The reader has no illusions that Adèle's childbirth scene at the end of the novel is glorious at all, and witnessing the event brings a drug like stupor to Edna. It is in this scene that Doctor Mandelet plays his most important role. He takes one look at Edna and understands that she is in trouble. He tells her that she should not have been there, that it was no place for her. He could not be more right. When he asks her questions about her upcoming plans and if she is going abroad with Léonce, Edna replies clumsily, her answers not even really making sense. Doctor Mandelet seems to understand at once that she is in real danger, and he tries to put a hand out to her, almost as if to steady her boat, to use Schopenhauer's image that Nietzsche borrows so effectively. Nietzsche quotes Schopenhauer: "Just as the boatman sits in his small boat, trusting his frail craft in a stormy sea that is boundless in every direction, rising and falling with the howling, mountainous waves, so in the midst of a world full of suffering and misery the individual man calmly sits..." (qtd. in "The Birth of Tragedy" 886). He sees that she is in real trouble, and showing much more understanding for her predicament than is frequently shown by the men of this time period, he tries to help her find her way back to a balance point:

“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 the moral consequences, or arbitrary conditions we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost.”

“Yes,” she said. “The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! Well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life.” (105)

Chopin writes very carefully here, and still, what Doctor Mandelet says is very daring for this time period. What he dares to say is that many young women become mothers when they are not prepared or well suited for the obligations that motherhood entails. He further suggests that there can be dreadful consequences to their doing so. It is interesting that his phrasing suggests that this is a fact of life—it’s just “Nature.” Nevertheless, he clearly sees Edna as someone who was not prepared for the responsibilities she cannot now choose to ignore, and he sees her suffering and confusion. Her answer is even more alarming. Right now, she sees living as suffering, and again we hear the satyr Silenus whispering in her ear. The abyss is too tempting.

Doctor Mandelet speaks very boldly to her now. He tries, very forcefully, to offer himself as a confidant, as someone who will listen, no matter how outrageous her concerns may be. While it is not clear if he realizes just how far Edna has already gone

in her analysis, he still speaks carefully to her: “My dear child...you seem to me to be in trouble. I am not going to ask for your confidence. I will only say that if ever you feel moved to give it to me, perhaps I might help you. I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not many who would—not many, my dear” (105). Unfortunately, he is terribly right about this. Perhaps this realization eventually washes over Edna. Living in that particular time period, Edna may realize that there are not many who would understand. Still, it seems as if Doctor Mandelet does. It is interesting that the character who attempts to offer Edna a life raft of sorts, who offers to listen unjudgmentally to her truth, is a man. We are left wondering if Edna dismisses his offer because she assumes he cannot understand her predicament, or because she has already made her decision at some level.

Upon careful examination of Edna’s response, it becomes clear that she is in a darker and even more dangerous place than even the good doctor probably realizes. It is important to remember that Chopin hoped that this novel would be published in her own time. She had six children to support, and she believed that she was writing something very fine and very honest. This particular moment in the novel is absolutely critical to understanding its tragic conclusion:

“Some way I don’t feel moved to speak of things that trouble me. Don’t think I am ungrateful or that I don’t appreciate your sympathy. There are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me. But I don’t want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample on the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of

others—but no matter—still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives. Oh! I don't know what I'm saying, Doctor. Good night. Don't blame me for anything.” (105)

In a rare moment of self-insight, Edna says that a period of despondency has overtaken her. The problem is, of course, that the one thing that could pull her back from the brink of despair, from the Apollonian abyss is Dionysiac rapture, to make love to Robert. That may not have been capable of holding her out of the abyss forever, and she actually articulates this thought in the final chapter, but at this particular moment, it may have protected her or at least provided temporary solace. She says that she does not want anything but her own way, which is an unrealistic desire for a young woman who has children. And that is exactly what her next thought is about—her children. She realizes that fulfilling her desire to have nothing but her own way would entail trampling on the lives and the hearts of people. She is willing to trample on Léonce's feelings, but she is not willing to trample on the lives of her children. Just what she means by this trampling, we cannot know, because she does not expand on this comment, but certainly there is the suggestion that either her behavior would break their hearts and embarrass them, if she is no longer a proper wife to Léonce, or that she would abandon them. It is clear that she is wrestling with some very dangerous ideas at this moment. She does not seem concerned with trampling “on the prejudices of others”—we have already begun to see this new daring side of her emerge as she moved into her pigeon house and began an adulterous affair. But Edna does care about “trampling on the little lives.” Perhaps Edna realizes that she has revealed too much, because she quickly speaks that qualifier: “Oh! I don't

know what I'm saying" (105). Or, perhaps she realizes at this moment that she has not followed these thoughts to their logical conclusion. That process happens in the final chapter. Nevertheless, her last sentence in this speech has a very ominous sound. Doctor Mandelet certainly hears that last remark with some alarm, because he quickly makes another attempt to reassure Edna that he will listen, and that there is a way out of her despair. He says, "Yes, I will blame you if you don't come and see me soon. We will talk of things you never have dreamt of talking about before. It will do us both good. I don't want you to blame yourself, whatever comes. Good night, my child" (105).

However, his words are not enough to give her any sense of hope. Clearly, she is more desperate than that. It is at this moment that she sits down on the porch and tries to pull herself together, thinking about waking Robert with her kisses. When she goes inside and finds his well-intentioned note, she is overwhelmed with despair. Adèle has asked her to remember the children. That is just what she does when she walks down to the seashore in the final scene, but her remembering takes on a far more dreadful connotation than Adèle could have ever imagined.

Chapter 4: Into the Abyss

Chopin knocks the reader off balance with the opening to the final chapter. It takes us a minute to realize that the scene has shifted and we are now back at Grand Isle, the place where Edna's series of awakenings began the summer before. It is off season time at the resort, and there are no tourists around. The only people who are in this scene besides Edna are Victor and Mariequita. They are doing minor repairs on the LeBrun resort in preparation for the upcoming season, and they are completely surprised when Edna suddenly shows up, looking "tired and a little travel-stained" (107). Edna is much more than weary; she is desperate.

There is almost a drugged quality to her conversation with them. They try very hard to make her feel welcome, even though the resort is not ready for guests, offering her a little lunch and dry towels. Edna seems almost numb and oddly non-communicative as she deflects their interest and questions. She indicates that she will be back for lunch, perhaps to make sure that they do not follow her down to the beach. At this point in the novel, Chopin is writing very deliberately. She sets up the final scene with a picture of Edna moving as if on auto-pilot: "Edna walked on down to the beach rather mechanically, not noticing anything special except that the sun was hot. She was not dwelling upon any particular train of thought. She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning"

(108). This passage would seem to indicate that Edna had reached a decision as she lay awake that night. Although Chopin never clearly articulates what that decision is, we can infer from the thoughts she does attribute to Edna that it is a desperate one.

Chopin writes:

She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children. Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. (108)

She has decided that she will not sacrifice herself for her children. Earlier in the novel, she has spoken these words; now she understands what she meant so long ago. Kate Chopin does not translate this for us, but Edna's subsequent actions do the translating for us. She acknowledges that at this moment in her life, making love to Robert might hold her out of the abyss, but she suspects that he will not hold her for long. He cannot "save" her from the abyss; no one can. Toth argues, "Edna ultimately believes herself incapable of escaping woman's state of confinement. Escaping through a man would simply be choosing the same avenue" ("Feminist Criticism" 6). She can foresee a time when her love for Robert will not be enough to sustain her, even if she could convince him to come

back to her, and she will in the end find herself overwhelmingly alone. In the end, he would have become another life she would have to trample on, another obligation. And she has decided that she wants to be free of all obligations. It seems as if Edna has realized that she can not live the life she wants to live—she does not have the courage to live a solitary life.

When Chopin writes that Edna envisions the children to be “antagonists” who seek “to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days,” it becomes clear that Edna has come to view her obligations as inescapable and stultifying. Critic Jules Chametzky describes what he claims is the “woman’s question posed in this book: how to be free in one’s self and for one’s self but still meaningfully connected to others” (222). Verging on the Apollonian abyss as she is, Edna cannot seem to figure out how to accomplish this task: “But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach” (Chopin 108). This passage speaks very powerfully to her desperation—her children are antagonists trying to drag her into slavery, and motherhood and familial obligations are the slavery she must elude. We are told that all her thinking is already done. She is no longer weighing options in her mind. Discourse and discussion are done.

The final awakening is not a positive one. The final realization that comes to Edna is that if she is determined to live alone, never sacrificing herself for anyone, she cannot do this unless she is willing to hurt people. She believes that her children have a right to expect her to honor some obligations to them; that is the nature of the human condition, and she has decided that she will no longer do that. To honor such an

obligation would constitute a “slavery” that she has decided she must escape. When she walks down to the water, there is an eerie, almost preternatural feeling to the scene. Edna seems numb, devoid of emotion. And yet, there is a very strange, but very dark baptismal quality to the final scene. Edna walks down to the water, and the scene is oddly barren, the only living creature a broken winged bird reeling and fluttering, circling down to the water. Clearly, this bird symbolizes Edna, who has perhaps found that she does not have the wings of an artist. Mademoiselle Reisz challenged her to ask herself if she had the wings that would soar above the expectations of the masses, the wings that could dare and defy. Perhaps Edna has decided, in the final analysis, that she really does not have these wings. She stands there in the water, dressed in her old bathing suit, and then she changes her mind, stripping that old suit off. It is as if the bathing suit has become a symbol for the obligations she is ridding herself of: “But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (109). Here we are told that Edna sees, at this moment, a ‘familiar world that she has never known.’ Edna is looking at the world through new eyes, eyes stripped of self-deception, eyes that see things as she had never before allowed them to see.

As Edna walks out into the water, the baptismal quality of the water is replaced with something much more sinister—it “coiled like serpents about her ankles” (109). She

swims out, and she does not look back. We recall the night of her first swim, when she experienced a momentary panic and looked back longingly at the shore. Even then she suspected that the abyss could kill her. And here, it does. As she swims out, she remembers the grassy field that she had crossed as a child, which seemed like it had no end. But the ocean has no end, not for human strength unaided. And as she swims out, she loses herself in the abyss. Her last thoughts are of those people who constitute the obligations of her life: “She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. 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’” (109). As she recalls the words of Mademoiselle Reisz, the mocking tone seems to have elevated in her imagination. She is mocking herself now, realizing that she was never strong enough to fly away. She recalls the words of Robert’s letter, but those words bring her no comfort. The word “love” has lost its redemptive power: “‘Good-by—because I love you.’ He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone. She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again” (109). The old terror could be the fear of dying—the fear of the unknown—the fear of the abyss. It surfaces for a moment, and then Edna seems to peacefully give in to her fear. As she loses consciousness, her thoughts drift back over images of her life. . . .”an old dog . . . the hum of bees” (109). The novel ends with Edna slipping into the

Apollonian abyss...suggesting that her surrender calms her and soothes her as she drifts into the unknown.

Conclusion

Perhaps she is not courageous enough to live her authentic life without apology; Edna Pontellier is, however, courageous enough to accept defeat. She realizes that she awoke too late from her slumber—her life had already been decided for her. She married young and gave birth to two children, although it is worth noting that both births took place while Edna was in a drug-induced haze. She does not even remember the specifics of the births of her children—perhaps that is why witnessing Adèle’s experience is so shocking and raw for Edna. Edna does not even feel as if she made the choice to have children at all: “[The children’s absence] seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (19). This statement comes early in the novel, before Edna has come to terms with her decision. As a result of these obligations and relationships, Edna is no longer free to live her own life. She cannot pursue Dionysiac rapture without paying a price too steep; she cannot be sexually fulfilled and romantically connected to Alcée Arobin, to Robert LeBrun, or to anyone else...without trampling the lives of her children. Ironically, the anti- “mother-woman” actually in essence does sacrifice her life for her children in the end, just as she said she would—she just does not sacrifice her self. Edna strikes out into the unknown...a solitary soul, true to her word and shrugging off all earthly obligations in the end.

Perhaps it is the ambiguous ending that most leaves *The Awakening’s* readers

uncomfortable. We cannot know for certain what Edna thought in those final moments. Chopin makes a point of telling us that her thinking was done. In her final moments of semi-consciousness, Edna returns to that dreamlike state that Nietzsche praised. Her unconscious pursues the embrace of the Apollonian abyss. She can no longer “overcome the somber contemplation of actuality, the intense susceptibility to suffering, by means of illusions strenuously and zestfully entertained” (Nietzsche “Apollonianism and Dionysianism” 179). There are no more illusions for Edna—she has told us this herself. As Edna drifts into her final sleep, a montage of images from her childhood floods her mind. Perhaps Edna’s subconscious returns to her last moments of pure freedom—the freedom of childhood replete with possibility, as she is newly baptized in death. Perhaps Chopin intends that we think of this ending as a beginning. Early in the novel, Chopin claims, “But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!” (14) We had, indeed, been warned from the outset.

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