

Eng. 531-901 Literary Criticism
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Deconstructionist and Feminist Analysis of *The Awakening*
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Introduction

I began my reading of *The Awakening* with no prior knowledge of the novel or the work of Kate Chopin. I saw the film for the first time this semester. I expected that the novel might address the tension between the expectations of women in the Victorian Era, with its concerns about morality, proper behavior, and manners, and the changes occurring in the role of women due to the Suffrage Movement. The theme that emerged from my first reading was the theme of Edna's budding individuation. As I read, I traced the development of Edna's individuation in the patterns underlying her words and nonverbal behaviors and in the images that intrigue her and reoccur throughout the narrative. Because of my training as a psychotherapist, I am intensely interested in the choices we make in creating lives for ourselves, in why and how we make those choices, and in the reasons some of us abandon the responsibility to create our lives. I am interested in what her story has to teach other women who struggle with locating their own voices. Some feminist authors and critics foreground the themes of "interruption and deferral" [that are] characteristic of women's lives (Gilmore cited in Walker 192). I am interested in the reasons some women are able to transform trauma into pearls and others die . . . sometimes physically, but sometimes intellectually, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. I hypothesize that it has something to do with finding the balance between one's responsibility to self and one's responsibility to others. Through my analysis, I expect to prove that Edna did begin a process of individuation but that she ultimately was unable to find enough balance to maintain her sense of self and her hope in the future. I want to look specifically at what tethered her to her hopelessness and ennui. I will utilize a feminist analysis because feminism as a movement encourages women

to examine their thoughts, feelings, and bodies and locate their voices not in reaction to men but in individuated relationship to them. I will also utilize a deconstructionist analysis because an examination of the unprivileged half of the binary oppositions might yield some additional insights into the reasons that Edna abandons her individuation as well as some morsels of wisdom perhaps obscured by the surface text that might assist other women in the process of their own individuations. Every woman facing the challenge of creating her own life is in search of a guide, a role model, a new behavior, or a recognition of some essential missing element to nurture her and to inspire her to summon the moral courage necessary on this journey.

Feminist Analysis

American feminist critics conducting “feminist critique” have reread works by male writers to examine how women are portrayed (Walker 189). *The Awakening* falls within that phase (1880-1920) described by Showalter as one in which women “protested against its [the masculine tradition’s] standards and values (189-190). These critics have found recurring “concerns, images, and themes” because the authors lived “in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are both overtly and covertly patriarchal” (Gilbert and Gubar qtd in Walker 189). Putting *The Awakening* within context, Showalter notes that Chopin follows the literary tradition of sentimentalists with their “veneration of motherhood, by intense mother-daughter bonds, and by intimate female friendships” and the 19th century idea of “passionlessness” – “the belief that women did not have the same sexual desires as men” (Showalter 205). Writers looked to motherhood for metaphors . In the 1870 -80s women began to be attracted to male worlds opening up to women and concomitantly, the female local colorists began to publish stories about regional life (207). This group introduced the “question of ‘selfishness,’ the ability to put literary ambitions before domestic duties” (Showalter 207). The conflict between motherhood and “artistic fulfillment” was a theme in

their writing (Showalter 207). By the 1890's the New Women writers (of which Chopin was one) were "ambivalent or even hostile" toward idea of women's culture which they saw as "boring and restrictive" (Showalter 208). Dowling noted that one of the ways they expressed this disagreement was through the inclusion of sexual consciousness and expression in their writing (Showalter 209). New genres focused on female consciousness, to "tell the terra incognita of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her" . . . (Egerton qtd. in Showalter 209).

The Awakening is a novel about gender relations which brings into sharp focus the stifling effect of societal expectations on a woman's growth as a person. Chopin offers a view of the intrapsychic pain this causes the main character, Edna, which encourages our identification with and understanding of her. *The Awakening* continues in the tradition of the local colorists with its references to Creole culture. The theme of "selfishness" or art before domestic duties figures prominently in the text as do themes of the restrictive women's culture and sexual expression in writing. Still the themes were so novel that the book was banned. Showalter notes that Chopin's literary awakening led to an "emancipated fiction" (204). ". . . Chopin had come to believe that the true artist was one who defied tradition, who rejected both the 'convenances' of respectable morality and the conventions and formulas of literary success (Seyersted qtd. in Showalter 204).

A specific gender difference in women's writing reinforces this theme. The novel at this time moves away from realism to an impressionistic rhythm of epiphany and mood and . . . a focus on Edna's consciousness" (Showalter 211).

In the traditional literary canon, female characters played minor roles (Beauvoir cited in Bressler 173 - 174, 182, Donovan cited in Kessler 225). Female characters were used to help/hinder male protagonists and were portrayed as Other, not as persons with real Selves (Donovan cited in Keeseey 225). Stereotypical female characters inhabited a dichotomy of

spiritual/good vs. material/evil, defined by the way they served men. For example, the Good Woman is wife, mother, and lady vs. the Deviant Woman who is sex object, seductress, and career woman (Donovan cited in Keesey 228). Feminist writers on the other hand do portray women as authentic characters with a “reflective critical consciousness, as “moral agent[s], capable of self-determined action, and as a Self, not an Other” (Donovan cited in Keesey 229). The focus in *The Awakening* is on Edna’s real Self. Edna is the main character of the text. She is articulating her own role (Bressler 182). She is not presented as a stereotype as we have ample information about her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In developing Edna’s character, Chopin was influenced by Maupassant. What impressed her most about Maupassant was that he had ‘escaped fro tradition and authority . . . had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes’ (Seyersted qtd. in Showalter 204).

Feminist authors believe that to avoid exploitation of female characters, suffering may not be “morally meaningless” (Donovan 228). To put it another way, the suffering must somehow be transformative.

Feminist authors also encourage the development of the “resisting reader” who reads with an assumption that the reader will be female. This enables the resisting reader to “read with a perspective that recognizes the sexism inherent in their moral vision” . . . because’ “literature can precipitate action” (Donovan 230). For example, a resisting reader would recognize the dismissive tone in Mr. Pontellier’s talk with Dr. Mandelet about Edna’s behavior when he says, she had “got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women . . .” (88)..

The feminist author and critic examines the images of women portrayed in a text. examine here the different images of women portrayed in *The Awakening*, This type of literary criticism is called “gynocriticism.” Feminist critics conducting “gynocriticism” have

found it useful to look at the images of women portrayed by women authors to discover how women “have felt, perceived themselves, and imagined reality” (Spacks cited in Walker 189). There are three images of women in *The Awakening* and each is represented by one character. Showalter notes that Adele is the first relationship after beginning of Edna’s awakening and calls her the “Empress of the ‘mother-women’” (213). Showalter notes that she “responds to Adele’s caresses, the first she has ever known from another woman, as Adele clasps her hand ‘firmly and warmly’ and strokes it fondly. The touch provokes Edna to an unaccustomed candor; leaning her head on Adele’s shoulder and confiding some of her secrets, she begins to feel ‘intoxicated’ (Chopin qtd. in Showalter 213). Showalter suggests that Edna seeks Adele out for nurturance as a mother figure (213). The relationship with Edna provokes self-reflection and it is “through this relationship that she becomes ‘Edna’ in the narrative rather than ‘Mrs. Pontellier’” (Showalter 214). Chopin has Edna actually “moved by pity for Adele’s ‘colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment (Chopin qtd. in Showalter 217). Adele is the consummate “Mother-Woman.”

At the other end of the continuum is Madame Reisz, an unmarried, childless, pianist and performer. Madame Reisz tells Edna about the courage necessary to be an artist – “the artist must possess the courageous soul” (Chopin qtd. in Walker 86). Also, she tells her that she must have “strong wings to soar ‘above the level plain of tradition and prejudice’ (Chopin qtd. in Showalter 204). She functions as her guide and mentor in the world of art. Showalter suggests also that she is a “surrogate lover” who is a “renegade, self-assertive and outspoken” . . . “violat[ing] the most basic expectations of femininity (214).

Finally we have the portrayal of Edna. Mr. Pontellier and Edna communicate little of their real needs to one another. Chopin notes that she is “fond of her husband,’ with ‘no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth’ (Walker 40). Henry James wrote in 1892 about “the growing divorce between the American woman (with her comparative leisure, culture,

grace, social instincts, artistic ambition) and the male immersed in the ferocity of business, with no time for any but the most sordid interests, purely commercial, professional, democratic, and political. [He declared,] This divorce is rapidly becoming a gulf” (James qtd. in Showalter 212).

Edna’s consciousness is fully explored throughout the novel. Chopin states, She “go[es] through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us” (53). Gradually she moves toward following her feelings – “blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she has placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility” (54).

As she establishes some awareness and allegiance to herself - “her present self - was in some way different from the other self” (62), she begins to break out of her routines. She was losing interest in many of the routines and obligations of her life (76) – “domestic harmony” . . . “was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui” . . . “ a colorless existence” . . . a “blind contentment” . . . (78). Chopin establishes the conflict between her continued acquiescence to the expectations of her husband/society and her growing awareness of her own thoughts, feelings, needs, and personhood. Chopin masterfully reveals her self-actualization in the stories of her escapades with Robert, Mrs. Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz, Arobin, depicting her increasing conflict with descriptions of her inner thoughts and resulting behaviors.

Edna begins to exercise choice at a time when 19th century women were seen as weak, illogical, governed by their emotions and easy to please. “She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked” (79). The story then becomes not only the story of what she will do with her relationship with Robert but what she will do with and for her self. In the end she has little efficacy and as Showalter suggests, she sees herself falling back into her prescribed rituals (218). Her dinner party is act of individuation and for the evening she seems comfortable in her autonomy – “There was something in her attitude . . . which suggested the regal woman,

the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (Chopin 111-112 qtd. in Walker). After she leaves her husband, she is aware of feeling that she has “descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength, and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life” (117). Showalter’s reading of *The Awakening* describes Edna’s ““evolution from romantic fantasies of fusion with another person to self-definition and self-reliance”” (qtd. in Walker 203). My But by the end of the story “she has claimed a solitude that is defiantly feminine, returning to the nearly empty island off-season, to stand naked and ‘absolutely alone’ by the shore, and to elude ‘the soul’s slavery’ by plunging into the sea’s embrace (Showalter citing Chopin 138; ch. 39 qtd. in Walker 203).

Gynocriticism also draws attention to what it feels like to be a woman in a woman’s body. Feminists have pointed out the absence of “the body, reproduction, children, and intimate interpersonal relationships” in the traditional literary canon (Walker 192). Showalter notes Chopin’s bold excursion past her predecessors into the arenas of “women’s longing for sexual and personal emancipation” (203). As Edna finds herself emotionally, sensually, and sexually, the change in her is noticeable. As Edna finds herself, the change in her is noticeable. “He [the doctor] . . . 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” (92). She begins the affair with Arobin. “They became intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps . . . appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (101). After her first sexual encounter with Arobin, she possesses “understanding. She felt as if a

mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life . . . (106).

The Awakening is also an awakening to an oppressive culture and her reaction to it (Showalter cited in Walker 194). It seemed that she had reached solid ground - . . . “she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself” (103). This sounds as if she is becoming an individuated person, responsible for her own destiny. But Edna is in a battle with depression. “[I]t seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled. Yet there were other days when she listened, was led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth held out to her” (96). Just as we think she is constructing her identity as an artist (“drawing satisfaction from the work in itself” (96), as a sensual and sexual woman, as a mother, as a woman in love, she abandons the life she was creating for herself because of the loss of Robert. We could say that in the end she makes a choice based on her own desire and not on her blind obedience to what is expected of her. For a moment as she stands on the beach, naked, she feels “like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (138). But then she walks into the sea, revealing that much of her development had been founded on the hope/necessity of a relationship with Robert. Showalter says that some critics have seen as “a heroic embrace of independence” (Showalter 219). But I suggest that this act brings into sharp focus the latent or intransigent dependency that Edna has upon a relationship with a man (Robert). She has used him as a transitional object while she negotiates toward her identity.

Deconstructionist Analysis (8-10 pages both together)

The binary oppositions from *The Awakening* that I have chosen to address in this paper are Grand Isle/the city, awakening/sleeping (consciousness/unconsciousness), agency/passivity, individuation/conformity, art/motherhood, sensuality/frigidity, hopelessness/hope, solitude/relationship. In each case, the first term listed is privileged over

the second term. “Deconstruction theory” posits that a text may intend to say one thing but actually say something else (Bressler 117). Derrida’s concept of difference states that we know something only because it is “differs from something else to which it is related” (Bressler 125). As we examine each of the oppositions, we will utilize the difference to provide additional information about the text.

Grand Isle/the city – The novel begins on Grand Isle and this setting, whether due to a change of scenery, or time to think, brings to Edna a new awareness and perspective about the direction of her life and relationships. Showalter notes that Grand Isle is a “woman’s culture,” owned and operated by Madam Lebrun and inhabited by women and children who are joined by husbands and fathers on weekends (212-213). It is on Grand Isle that Edna begins to share confidences with Adele and falls in love with Robert. However, Edna does not leave these relationships behind when she returns to the city. The city itself provides a cover for her to continue her relationships with Adele and Madame Reisz through whom she maintains connection with Robert. In Grand Isle she contemplates change, but it is in the city that she acts. Thus, the city serves to reinforce the theme of awakening.

Awakening/sleeping – This is the primary metaphor of the novel representing the opposition of consciousness/unconsciousness. The metaphor may include also the awakening of Edna’s sensuality and sexuality (see discussion below). The novel contains more than 100 references to waking and sleeping (Class Discussion 04/20/09). At the beginning of the novel, Chopin states, [Edna goes] “through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us” (53). Gradually she begins to recognize and act upon her emerging feelings – “blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she has placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility” (54). As she develops her awareness of her own thoughts, feelings, needs, and personhood, she becomes conflicted between her continued acquiescence to the expectations of her husband/society and her own inner

thoughts, needs, and behaviors. Chopin masterfully reveals her self-actualization in the stories of her escapades with Robert, Mrs. Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz, Arobin, A light begins to dawn “dimly within her, -the light which, showing the way, forbids it” (34).

Sleeping has netted her safety, security, acceptance and in its own way has met important needs. The underlying assumption then is that she has needs that will be in conflict with one another. Thus, the conflict is not entirely external in her relationship with her husband but within herself. This conflict within herself fuels the emotional turmoil with her husband, children, and lovers. This is why she is alternatively stunned, speechless with emotion, “numb with the intoxication of expectancy” and depressed. And she is more apt to be overcome by the duality of her images (Class Discussion 04/20/09).

Agency vs. passivity - As she establishes some awareness and allegiance to herself, she begins to break out of her routines. She recognizes that “her present self - was in some way different from the other self” (62). She discontinues her reception day, she begins to study art, she commences the affair with Arobin, and she plans a dinner party for herself. **INSERT**

OTHERS HERE? Her dinner party is act of individuation and for the evening she seems comfortable in her autonomy – “There was something in her attitude . . . which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (Chopin 111-112 qtd. in Walker). After the loss of Robert, however, she regresses and Showalter suggests that she sees herself falling back into her prescribed rituals (218). Whether Edna is active or passive, she is still the author of her fate and as she discovers, this can be an exhausting proposition. If she regresses to passivity, she is still making a choice. Thus she will either deal with the consequences of her choices or the consequences of her inaction which is also a choice. Inaction then becomes an action or choice and undermines the contrast between the oppositions. What is underscored is Edna’s responsibility to create her own life.

Individuation/conformity – This binary opposition might also be defined as Expectations of self/expectations of others for self. The novel is set at the end of the Victorian Era, a period of concern with manners, propriety, and morals. Edna copes with rigid role expectations prescribed for her by her husband. Chopin states that “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women . . . idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (29). These expectations are part of the historical/social context of the time. Mr. Pontellier’s criticizes her care of the children and her refusal to host visitors on her Tuesday afternoon reception day. It is clear she is failing in his eyes as a wife and mother. He feels she was not well or had “got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women . . .” (88)..Ms. Ratignolle models and reinforces societal expectations, telling Edna that she will not be able to visit her should she continue to see Arobin.

Edna, however, is losing interest in many of the routines and obligations of her life (76) – “domestic harmony” . . . “was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui” . . . “ a colorless existence” . . . a “blind contentment” . . . (78). “She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked” (79). The story then becomes not only the story of what she will do with her relationship with Robert but what she will do with and for her self. After she leaves her husband, she is aware of feeling that she has “descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having *risen in the spiritual* [italics mine]. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength, and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life” (117).

The images of the sea and herself as a young girl are intertwined and serve to reinforce her individuation. The freedom of the water (which formerly evoked fear in her) now triggers her memory of running through the meadow as a child. At that time, though she

was aware of her dual life, “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions,” she felt free (35). Again, as she swims out into sea for the final time, she remembers the “blue-grass meadow” (139). Her equation of the water with freedom (80) eventually draws her back to it.

The opposition between individuation and conformity instantaneously resolves when we want to meet others’ expectations of us or when others are willing to compromise with us. Thus, the two may not always stand in opposition but may deepen our experience of individuation. At other times our inability to conform may provoke rejection. Edna assumed she could not be her self in her relationship with her husband, yet she already was being her self on many fronts. Though he did not approve of her choices, he had not rejected her. Perhaps it would have been more comfortable for her if he had, but the fact that he had not undermines the argument that she could not be herself with him.

The feminist reading of the text privileges Edna’s awakening in the face of rigid role expectations in a constraining marriage and a patriarchal society. However, a deconstructionist view of the text reveals the possibility that her husband and society may have tolerated at least some of her expressed needs. He had allowed her to spend a great deal of time with Robert, deliberately left them alone together on several occasions, and was even solicitous for her when he was gone – “How do you get on without him, Edna?” (69). The fact is that she did not express them and this isolation, far from symbolizing her independence as Showalter suggests (xx), deepened her hopelessness and led to her suicide.

Art/Motherhood – In Edna Chopin privileges art over motherhood. Chopin fits into the new category of women writers after the 1890s who “viewed motherhood as an obstacle to, not a metaphor for, women’s creativity and artistic achievement” (Walker 194). Edna sees her children as a duty. Her fledgling sense of self impairs her engagement with her children. She does not have what she is being asked to give – her Self. It is only in her last visit with them

that she allows herself to really connect with them – “She lived with them a whole week long, giving them all of herself, and gathering and filling herself with their young existence” (117). In the end, Edna’s delight in them is temporary. After the loss of Robert, her children are seen by her as “antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (138). It is ironic that in her rejection of her children, Edna cut herself off from the potential to more fully discover herself in her play with them. This might have nourished her art in ways not conscious to her. However, she could see only the “duty” in her relationship with them. In the end, she has neither her art nor her children. A feminist reading of the text would concur with Edna’s choice of art over motherhood because it was her choice. However the deconstructionist view of the text suggests the possibility that engagement with her children might have nourished her art as during her last visit with them, she was giving them all of herself, and gathering and filling herself with their young existence” (117).

Sensuality/Frigidity - Chopin clearly privileges sensuality over dissociation from the body or frigidity. Showalter notes that Edna begins with “autoeroticism” – “Edna’s midnight swim, which awakens the ‘first-felt throbbings of desire,’ takes place in an atmosphere of erotic fragrance, ‘strange, rare odors . . . a tangle of the sea small and of weeds and damp new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms;” (Chopin qtd. in Showalter 212). As Edna finds herself emotionally, sensually, and sexually, the change in her is noticeable. “He [the doctor] . . . 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” (92). Chopin uses the sea to reinforce her developing sensuality. Initially she does not know how to swim and so is in circumstances beyond her control that are potentially dangerous to her

(Class Discussion 04/20/09). As she moves into the water, she also discovers her body. “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” (35). Chopin uses music seems to reunite her with a forsaken passion in herself. “The music grew strange and fantastic-turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” (86). “[T]he music penetrated her whole being like an effulgence, warming and brightening the dark places of her soul” (103). After her first sexual encounter with Arobin, she possesses “understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from he eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life . . . (106).

The film version of the narrative evidences the fact that it has been made for a contemporary audience by excessive nudity. This is particularly inappropriate during the scene depicting Edna’s suicide as it refocuses attention to her sensuality from her emotional pain. Donovan notes, “Exploitation for aesthetic purposes amounts to bad faith by the artist, ‘an author’s immoral use of his characters.’” (Donovan 227). Unfortunately this is an example of such an exploitation.

The opposition between frigidity or dissociation from the body and sensuality dissolves when we understand that frigidity is only useful to Edna to help her maintain a sense of control. Now that she has discovered her body, she can decide for herself whether she allows herself to experience her sensuality or sexuality or whether she retreats from the body. **Ironically, her frigidity then may contribute to her potential for sexual arousal because she is fully in the choice.** The feminist and deconstructivist readings of the text serve to reinforce Edna’s developing sensuality and sexuality because in each reading, she is able to

exercise choice. No longer dissociated from her body, she is able to and fro along the continuum of dissociation, sensuality, and sexuality as she pleases.

Hopelessness/Hope - Edna is in a battle with depression. “[I]t seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled. Yet there were other days when she listened, was led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth held out to her” (96). Chopin uses the sea to invite her to move beyond her fear of change and glimpse the “unlimited” (49). Later at her dinner party, she is besieged in the midst of her guests by “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. [It was] . . . it was a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed. There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable” (112). Clearly there is something yet unexplored, unresolved. “Edna remains very much entangled in her own emotions and moods, rather than moving beyond them to real self-understanding and to an awareness of her relationship to society. She alternates between two moods of ‘intoxication’ and ‘languor,’ expansive states of activity, optimism, and power and passive states of contemplation, despondency, and sexual thralldom” (Showalter 215).

Despite all her efforts toward change, her work as an artist, her newfound awareness of her capacity for love and her sensuality and sexuality, the discovery of her ability to bond with and enjoy her children, her preparing a new home for herself, eventually none of this matters because of her loss of her relationship with Robert. “She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning. . . . 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” (138). She does not see any reason to go on and walks into the sea.

Both hope and hopelessness relate to the presence or absence of the same root word which means “to expect with confidence or to trust” (Hope 2009). In either state, Edna would have difficulty. Without hope she plunges into depression. With it she is filled with anxiety lest the object she hopes for goes away. In addition, either state may or may not be tied to external circumstances. Hopelessness can descend as a result of worry, even when all is well. Hope can exist in the midst of devastating circumstances. The ability to cope with either state of being is what is needed. A feminist reading of the text would assume that increased empowerment would facilitate coping. A deconstructivist reading of the text reveals that this is not always the case. In fact, empowerment provide just enough energy for suicide.

Solitude/relationship – The final binary opposition selected for discussion is that of solitude/relationship. Chopin states that Edna “had resolved never again to belong to another than herself” (103). This sounds as if she is becoming an individuated person, responsible for her own destiny. She senses Robert’s love for her - “She found in his eyes, when he looked at her for one silent moment, the same tender caress, with an added warmth and entreaty which has not been there before – the same glance which had penetrated to the sleeping places of her soul and awakened them” (121). But Robert does not believe that she will abandon her marriage for him - “No; I only think you cruel . . . [m]aybe not intentionally cruel; but you seem to be forcing me into disclosures which can result in nothing; as if you would have me bare a wound for the pleasure of looking at it, without the intention or power of healing it” (129). “Now you know,” he said, “now you know what I have been fighting against since last summer at Grand Isle; what drove me away and drove me back again” (110). . . . “I forgot everything but a wild dream of your some way becoming my wife” (131). “I realized what a cur I was to dream of such a thing, even if you had been willing” (131). The note he left for her appears to sacrifice his relationship with her for her own sake (if indeed what he wrote is true) – “I love you. Good-by – because I love you” (136). When Robert leaves her, she

realizes ““that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone”” (Chopin qtd. in Showalter 217). It is at this point that Edna abandons the life she was creating for herself. When faced with the loss of Robert and when faced with solitude, she kills herself, revealing that much of her development had been founded on the hope/necessity of a relationship with Robert. This brings into sharp focus the latent or intransigent dependency that Edna has upon him. She longs for emotional intimacy yet she is unconsciously engaged in a pattern of involvement with men who are unavailable or not capable of emotional intimacy.

The film suggests that Edna and Robert are lovers, “tainting their amour with the potential for guilt” (Coggin 2007). In fact, the book establishes Robert’s respect for her and his honorable intentions toward her. He leaves the first time because he wants to marry her and does not want to place her in a compromising position. Coggin (2007) also states that Edna would not marry him – “Even the man she has her heart set on would put her right back in the cage.” He believes this realization is what provoked her suicide.

A feminist reading of the text would laud her awakening and her establishment of relationships. A deconstructivist reading reveals the danger and complexity of her entanglements at this stage of her development. The opposition here cannot be resolved because we can never be fully in control of relationship. Relationships depend on an Other and on the ability of both persons to tolerate movement along the continuum of solitude and intimacy. We can be in control of solitude, and so avoid pain. It is ironic that Edna’s awakening was fostered by her relationships with Adele, Madame Reisz, Robert, and Arobin. Yet she cannot tolerate the intrinsic pain of relationship and ultimately ensures a solitude more profound than that she endured prior to her awakening.

Evaluation (1-2 pages)

My analysis has looked in depth at the major themes and oppositions of *The Awakening*. These essentially revolve around Edna's intrapsychic processes and her relationships. They include her awakening consciousness, her developing autonomy, her individuation as a person and her ability to withstand relational and societal pressures to conform, her capacity for motherhood, her sensuality and sexuality, her fragile and residual hopelessness, and her conflict over solitude versus relationship.

Several gaps remain unsolved for me. I would like to know more about the nature of Robert's relationships with other women on Grand Isle and his true feelings for Edna. We know what he says but I need to know something about his relationships with others to determine his credibility. Also, I am left wondering if Mr. Pontellier loved his wife or only did his duty by her because she served his purposes. We do not know if he loved her and in what way he loved her. I am left wondering if he did not care for her or if he cared for her, was inarticulate, and expressed it only by providing for her. I am also left wondering about Edna's bond with her children and their attachment to her. The protective instinct seems absent in Edna. Does her sadness render her so self-absorbed that her judgment is impaired? Or does she simply not care for them? A close re-reading of the text perhaps utilizing Semic or Cultural Code analyses might provide further insights. Also, the application of New Historicist criticism would be helpful to better understand her relationships with Robert and Mr. Pontellier. For example, her husband Leon's concern and pride in her body and person as his property (Walker 275) might not seem as patriarchal in the light of knowledge about the times as it does today. The New Historicist Perspective might also elucidate the concept of motherhood, particularly as the concept of voluntary motherhood did not exist in the 19th century. Showalter mentions for example the influence of "American transcendentalism, European realism, and fin-de-siecle feminism and aestheticism" (Walker 203). Also, some of the questions from Cultural Poetics might be helpful, such as those relating to behaviors

enforced by the work, social understandings on which the work depends, and larger social structures (Keesey 438).

Conclusion

“Ideally, the work of great artists helps us to see reality in all its conflicting diversity and therefore to make choices that are truly responsible to the real contexts in which they are made” (Donovan qtd. in Wallace 2009 or go back to Donovan in Keesey). Put Gardner here?

The female Soul described here is, by Donovan’s definition, morally responsible as she acts, presenting a “valid model for imitation” (Gardner, qtd. in Donovan, 230). Also, she acts with some awareness of her own needs and is able to realistically assess others. Murdoch calls for the “redirection of the will and attention” in feminists in order to recognize the impact of myths on our perceptions (qtd. in Donovan 232). She notes that “it is love that enables us to get under the mythic net, for love demands an awareness of realities beyond the self” (cited in Donovan 232).

- citing Murdoch, Donovan suggests that we “[g]et behone the network of mythic confabulations we are enshrouded in.” “Murdoch insists that we fall into the habit of mythic construction out of fear, weakness, or inertia. Murdoch proposes that we can get out of the epistemological trap by means of moral effort – by a redirection of the will and attention. Sch redirection can lead us to a moral knowledge of the real and of the good.” (Donovan 232).

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love that enables us to get under the mythic net, for love demands an awareness of realities

beyond the self” (cited in Donovan 232).

John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction* established some criteria for “Goodness of a Work of Art : 1) “Clear positive moral effect, 2) Presenting valid models for imitation, Eternal verities (values) worth keeping in mind, 4) Benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire human beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destructive indifference” (Donovan 230).

Tie back in to goal at the beginning.

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