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UNDERMINING HETERONORMATIVITY

IN

KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

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SUSAN G. WEBER

ABSTRACT

Many feminist critics view Edna Pontellier, the protagonist in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, as the prototype of the New Woman in search of independence from the patriarchal constraints that suffocate her, including sexual rules and restrictions. Most of these critics frame Edna in a traditional heterosexual world. Although *The Awakening* overtly focuses on male-female relationships, Edna's relationships with her women friends are more varied, nuanced, and comprehensive than those with men. I argue that Edna's desires are not purely heterosexual which is revealed through several secondary characters in the novel, and that Chopin employs safer heterosexual themes, plots and conventions as a protective cover for the more dangerous, subversive topics which lie underneath. I will show that Edna Pontellier and *The Awakening* can and should be viewed more queerly with the term queer being defined as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE FEMININE SIDE OF ROBERT LEBRUN.....	11
III. ADÈLE RATIGNOLLE AS CATALYST TO EDNA’S AWAKENING...	13
IV. THE SUBVERSIVE MADEMOISELLE REISZ.....	19
V. THE QUEERING OF EDNA HERSELF.....	28
VI. ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS.....	35
WORKS CITED.....	40

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In a pivotal scene in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, protagonist Edna Pontellier finally learns to swim, and "a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (27). Chopin penned these thoughts for her heroine in the late 1890s at the very brink of a tumultuous historical time period now referred to as Modernism, "a movement spawned in the wake of Marx, Freud, Darwin, the First World War, Einstein relativity and existential philosophy" that saw art and literature as the vehicles necessary to "respond to the scenario of our chaos" (Boone 5). In addition to all the other chaotic social upheaval occurring during this historical time period sometimes referred to as the "age of anxiety," was what "Samuel Haynes has called 'the vast change that took place in the relations between the sexes and in the place of women in English and [American] society in the years before the war'" (Gilbert and Gubar 21). In *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar reference a classic essay entitled "The Hard and the Soft: The Force of Feminism in Modern Times," in which author Theodore Roszak observes that

by the late nineteenth century...this supposedly marginal curiosity called the "woman problem" had become one of the most earth-shaking debates

in the Western world, fully as explosive an issue as the class or national conflicts of the day. Here, after all, was the world's largest oppressed "minority" threatening mutiny: something no man could ignore. And none did...The "woman problem" was argued about, shouted about, raved about, agonized about, endlessly, endlessly. By the final decades of the century, it permeated everything. (21)

This "woman problem" extended far beyond earning the legal right to vote, which is clearly conveyed by Edna Pontellier's emotions during her midnight swim. Women began to question every aspect of the gendered definition of woman, a definition dispensed to them from the powerful patriarchal paradigm controlling their very existence, a definition which denied them full participation as human beings, a definition which confined them to their "separate sphere," and by the end of the nineteenth-century, many, like Edna, "yearned to smash the glass and breathe freely" in order to "experience real life in all its intensity" (Singal 115-116).

Experiencing life fully includes experiencing life sexually, but most women of this time period were indoctrinated into believing that sexual pleasure and gratification belonged in the man's sphere, not the woman's. One tenet of Victorian belief was its "insistence on preserving absolute standards based on a radical dichotomy between that which was deemed 'human' and that regarded as 'animal'" and because the "animal" threatened self-control, it had to be repressed, with sexuality as the "foremost threat" of animalistic behavior (Singal 115). Because women were viewed as more emotional than men, unleashing their sexuality was a horrifying thought for these Victorians. They believed that man was more rational and, as such, could control his sexual desires. This

issue of sexuality was just one more aspect contained within the paradigm of patriarchal custom in which women were viewed as “self-less” and “named and described only in terms of their sexual relationships to men: virgin, whore, mistress, spinster” (Ewell, “Kate” 158). Because women had no “self,” they were viewed merely as “objects of sexuality, of discourse, of art – of men” (Ewell, “Kate” 158). With her status as object, woman is forced to “identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her,” and in this way, a woman is “required to identify against herself” (Fetterly vii). Simone de Beauvoir refers to this as the “expression of the duality between the Self and the Other,” and her definition of this concept stipulates that woman is “the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the Other.”

But the mothers of modernism disagreed, and these early feminists were “committed to overthrowing the Victorian ideal of closeted, domesticated, desexualized, disenfranchised femininity” (DeKoven, “Modernism” 177). This “New Woman” was determined to become more independent, educated, and sexually liberated in order to “transcend her traditional role and find a new self in order to realize her position in the universe as a human being” (Joslin 179). Breaking away from the authority of men as well as from the societal reinforcements of the dominant patriarchy, however, proved to be quite formidable for this “New Woman” because every element of her desired world, especially the “use of her own erotic capabilities” inevitably clashed with patriarchal norms (Pratt 29). In many cases, the female modernists yearned for a different life, but they generally feared punishment for desiring that change. In her essay "Gendered Doubleness and the 'Origins' Of Modernist Form," Marianne DeKoven asserts that “this new order was simultaneously alluring and terrifying” to the “New Woman” (20).

Searching for self-identity was “alluring to female modernists in its promise, simply, of freedom and autonomy,” but, at the same time this search was “terrifying in its potential for bringing on retribution from a still-empowered patriarchy” (21). Women writers, however, remained undaunted and some, including Kate Chopin, began to write about a woman’s personal quest for self-identity as a “New Woman.”

The quest for self-identity falls into a category known as the *bildungsroman*, which, according to the online *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, is defined as a class of novel that deals with the “formative years of the main character,” usually a male character, “whose moral and psychological development is depicted.” These novels typically end “on a positive note, with the hero’s foolish mistakes and painful disappointments behind him and a life of usefulness ahead.” Annis Pratt, author of *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*, stresses that for women, however, their novels of development portray “a world in which the young woman hero is destined for disappointment” (29). Pratt maintains that “women’s fiction reflects an experience radically different from men’s” because a woman’s drive towards growth as a full person “is thwarted by society’s prescriptions concerning gender” (6). In her readings of women’s fiction, Pratt realized that “tensions between forces demanding submission” with attempts at asserting full personhood characterize too much of women’s fiction to be coincidental (6). This “collision between the hero’s evolving self and society’s imposed identity” appears consistently throughout the history of women’s fiction (29). Pratt was also compelled to accept the “otherness” of all women because she discovered in women’s novels

...a clear sense that we are outcasts in the land, that we have neither a homeland of our own nor an ethnic place within society. Our quests for

being are thwarted on every side by what we are told to be and to do. When we seek an identity based on human personhood rather than on gender, we stumble about in a landscape whose signposts indicate retreats from, rather than ways to, adulthood. In existential terms, our desire for responsible selfhood, for the achievement of authenticity through individual choice, comes up against the assumption that a woman aspiring to selfhood is by definition selfish, deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender. (6)

Clearly, Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* qualifies as a *bildungsroman* with protagonist Edna Pontellier embarking on a journey toward self-discovery as a "New Woman." According to Larzer Ziff, *The Awakening* was the first novel to "[reject] the family as the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment, and on the eve of the twentieth century, it raised the question of what woman was to do with the freedom she struggled toward" (197). Ziff further contends that "*The Awakening* was the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America" (197). With Edna, Chopin explores the inner recesses of a woman's mind, a "hallmark of the modernist turn to modes of interior representation," and in these dark places, "a stream of libidinally charged thoughts, images, desires, and repressions associated with the psyche" burst forth in an attempt to free not just Edna herself, but to "free female sexuality from the romanticization of past literary representations" (Boone 5, 67, 419). Edna's tale is one of disillusionment, however, and she learns that life offers "not limitless possibilities but an unsympathetic environment in which she must struggle to discover a room of her own" (Fuderer 4). Edna tries desperately to find that room, but,

ultimately, just as she fears during her midnight swim, she overestimates her strength and is not quite strong enough.

Chopin's conflicted protagonist exhibits a sense of profound longing for a different life for herself, but because that different life included themes of sex and suicide, "early reviewers of *The Awakening*...gave testimony to the power of the novel in their vigorous condemnation of it" (Culley 159). The novel itself was ignored for half a century before a renewal of interest occurred in the 1950s. With the beginnings of feminist criticism and its attempt to transform the traditional canon, "early articles...anticipated what was to be an avalanche of feminist criticism" during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Margo Culley, editor of the Norton Edition of *The Awakening*, the critics

focused on a number of the issues that had preoccupied early reviewers of the novel – the meaning of the ending and Kate Chopin's perspective on her fictional hero. Analyses of the ending ranged from reading it as triumphant (Fryer) to reading it as regressive (Wolff) and every possibility in between. The novel became a text through which scholars wrote of patriarchy, marriage and motherhood, woman's independence, friendship, desire, sexuality, and language. (160)

For many critics, Edna's rebellion against the traditional feminine roles of marriage and motherhood that includes her falling in love with a younger man (Robert LeBrun) and having an adulterous affair with another man (Alcée Arobin), fits with the format of the female *bildungsroman*. In her attempt to break free from the patriarchal constraints that suffocate her, she violates the rules, especially the sexual rules. The

typical male protagonist in a *bildungsroman* is “expected to defy societal norms in his sexual initiation. However, if a female protagonist would venture to do the same, she would be ostracized from society for rebelling against her assigned role” (Labovitz 37). Using the theory of Saussure who asserted that “what is unnamed cannot be recognized or defined,” critic Gerri Brightwell asserts that because Edna is “trapped in the strongly patriarchal society of *fin de siècle* New Orleans, she is unable to vocalize her dissatisfactions of her desires because the registers available to her are unsuitable for that purpose” (37). In this way, “women are thus confined not only by their subordinate societal roles, but by their language which renders them powerless beside men” (Brightwell 37).

Edna’s quest to overcome patriarchal domination, however, wasn’t the only aspect of the novel to attract the attention of critics. Elizabeth Ammons suggests that this “surface story of Edna Pontellier” masks a “much more profound oppression” because Edna’s very quest for freedom “comes at the expense of women of other races and a lower class” (75). This discourse on gender and race inspired Anna Elfenbein to write that many of Chopin’s contemporaries were dismayed by this “profoundly subversive and courageous” novel that “collapsed the traditional categories that had long segregated ‘dark’ women and ‘white’ women in American literature and advanced a new conception of female desire that was color-blind and democratic”(304). Barbara Ewell, in her essay “Unlinking Race and Gender: *The Awakening* as a Southern Novel,” concurs with this interpretation because “white women were not supposed to be sexual; that physical and implicitly inferior task was imposed on ‘other,’ less pure females: whores and black women” (32).

Not every critic, however, viewed Edna as the prototype of the “New Woman” in search of independence. In an essay entitled “Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* in the Light of Freud’s Structural Model of the Psyche,” author Mehmet Recep Tas not only discounts Edna as a feminist, but he also condemns her actions because the true feminist struggle against patriarchy is “exerted to construct an equality of both men and women in social, economic and political spheres” (415). Tas contends that this struggle should not be “regarded as a luxury of fulfilling one’s all intrinsic desire,” and that Chopin’s protagonist Edna “does not employ any exertions in pursuit of women’s rights. She rather makes efforts to fulfill her amoral desires” (415). Using Freud’s model of the psyche, Tas believes that Edna suffers from a “psychic abnormality that due to not having a strong ego, she cannot balance out the demands arousing from her subconscious area – the id – of her mind” (416). Tas ends this essay by asserting that anyone who reads Edna Pontellier as a champion of the rights of women is guilty of what Harold Bloom calls a “strong misreading” (416).

Although these critics differ in their interpretations of the text, the vast majority of these writers frame Edna’s story through a heteronormative lens in which Edna, “a privileged heterosexual white woman” is caged in an “identity founded on the denial and suppression of independence and desire” (Menke 79). One fundamental assumption appears to be that sexual desire is always heterosexual in nature. Monique Wittig argues that “to live in society is to live in heterosexuality” because heterosexuality is “always already there within all mental categories” (Wittig 40, 43). Although the majority of critical interpretations of Edna do not move beyond the scope of heteronormativity, several critics have applied a homosexual lens to the text. Kathryn Lee Seidel, in her

essay “Art is an Unnatural Act: Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*,” posits that Chopin uses the pianist to “present lesbianism as a reality to be faced, perhaps even embraced, not condemned” (212). Although Seidel focuses mainly on Reisz, she contemplates the “extent to which Edna responds” to her and ultimately concludes that although Chopin does not “limit her exploration of female sexuality,” Edna’s awakening can be seen in “abundance” to “heterosexual desire and behavior” (211). Clearly, Edna Pontellier is involved in heterosexual relationships, including at least one outside of her marriage, but the text intimates that her desires are not purely heterosexual. Elizabeth LeBlanc, in an essay entitled “The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*,” recognizes that Edna herself does, and LeBlanc asserts that “the true power of the novel cannot be fully realized unless it is read not only as a feminist text, but also as a lesbian text” (289). Applying the conventional criteria of the “New Woman” narrative is therefore too limiting for a full understanding of this novel. Edna Pontellier and *The Awakening* can and should be viewed more queerly with the term *queer* being defined as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence” (Halperin 62).

Viewing this novel from a lesbian perspective would not be unrealistic for the time period since the late nineteenth century was a pivotal time in issues dealing with homosexuality. According to Chopin’s biographer Emily Toth, Chopin was familiar with the works of Oscar Wilde, who, in a famous trial in 1895, was sentenced and convicted of gross indecency with men. Furthermore, there is textual evidence that Chopin was aware of the “emerging stereotypes regarding lesbianism” (Seidel 202). Toth’s biography of

Chopin also “chronicles Chopin’s own close friendship with her schoolmate Helen,” and that prior to writing *The Awakening*, Chopin published a short story entitled “The Falling in Love of Fedora” which includes direct “homosexual content” although Toth was unable to “locate a living prototype for Fedora” (Seidel 204). Although *The Awakening* overtly focuses on male-female relationships, Chopin is also fascinated by the subtle tones of female friendships as it is Edna’s relationships with her women friends that are more varied, nuanced, and comprehensive than those with men. Perhaps the idea of bringing a sexual attraction between women to full narrative expression was too dangerous a move for Kate Chopin and so, instead, she employs safer heterosexual themes, plots and conventions, and uses those merely as a protective cover for the more dangerous, subversive topics which lie underneath. Edna clearly has “a sensibility that integrates and transcends categories not only of gender, but also of sexuality” and this queered sensibility is revealed throughout the novel through the use of secondary characters including Robert LeBrun, Adèle Ratignolle, and Mademoiselle Reisz (Biggs 169).

CHAPTER II

THE FEMININE SIDE OF ROBERT LEBRUN

The first character who can be viewed more queerly is, surprisingly enough, Robert LeBrun, the single young man with whom married Edna falls in love and whose “existence” not only “dominated her thought” but also “filled her with an incomprehensible longing” (Chopin 52). Readers are introduced to both Edna and Robert in Chapter I as they approach the cottage where Leonce Pontellier, Edna’s husband, awaits her arrival. The reader’s first impression of Robert is that he is more like one of the girls who has shared “some adventure out there in the water” with Edna and not in any way similar to the other men on the island who soon leave their wives to play billiards at Klein’s hotel (Chopin 4). Edna and Robert share similarities in “imagination, temperament, level of maturity, sense of humor, and most notably, appearance,” which prompts Elizabeth LeBlanc to assert that “Robert is as close a copy as would be possible in masculine form...of Edna herself” (301). Rather than smoke cigars, Robert prefers cigarettes which metaphorically reduces the size of his masculinity. His conversations with the other women, including a variety of topics generally stereotyped as female issues such as childbirth, as well as his attentiveness to their comfort, contribute to his portrayal

in these opening chapters as “more sensitive, nurturing, and compassionate,” all traditionally feminine roles (LeBlanc 301). Even the little children are “very fond of him” (Chopin 6). In these opening chapters, Robert is often viewed chatting away and “entertaining some amused group of married women” with stories as they work on their sewing projects (11). Readers are informed that Robert has often devoted himself to “some fair dame or damsel,” but “as often as not it was some interesting married woman” (11). A married woman, especially during this time period and in the Creole setting, would not be sexually available, making Robert’s relationships with them at least, benign, and at most, impossible, which brings his own sexuality into question. Although Chopin will reference Robert’s heterosexual inclinations in later chapters with Mariequita, in these opening chapters, she has intimated that Robert might be “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant,” the masculine (Halperin 62). Robert is simply part of the “female colony” of Grand Isle, which, in multiple ways, is a veritable “no man’s land” (Boone 81).

CHAPTER III

ADÈLE RATIGNOLLE AS CATALYST TO EDNA'S AWAKENING

A heteronormative, male-centered approach to this novel, however, declares Robert as the source of Edna's sexual awakening. Even Edna herself proclaims Robert as the sole initiator of her emerging new identity as she whispers to him, "it was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream" (Chopin 102-103). A closer examination of the text, however, reveals that Kate Chopin makes it quite clear that Edna's first awakening occurs with Adèle Ratignolle. Chopin sparks the initial homoerotic possibilities as Edna warms to the "excessive physical charm" of Adèle, the woman Edna "liked to sit and gaze at...as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (Chopin 14, 11). Mary Biggs asserts that "only a very stubborn homophobic insistence can transform this into a non-erotic reaction" (170). Adèle is first introduced as the epitome of the angelic "mother-woman" whose job it was to "[flutter] about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood" (Chopin 9). In this role, Adèle is also described as being "delicious" with "flaming" beauty, and the subsequent physical description of her evokes a "picture of the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (9). The use of the word *our*

implies inclusivity, not just the fair lady of the man's dream alone. In just a few paragraphs, the text "opens up a space between this near parodic representation of untouchable femininity and Adèle's sensual immediacy," and it is Adèle's very sensuousness that not only "deconstructs the spirituality that her angelic maternity is taken to signify," but that also "stimulates Edna" and allows her to begin to "explore her own latent eroticism" (Boone 81).

Adèle's beauty fuels Edna's artistic temperament and, even with Robert hovering nearby sitting on the step below Edna, her focus turns to Adèle, the "sensuous Madonna," and the narrator informs the reader with a phrase of delicious ambiguity that Edna "had long wished to try herself on Madame Ratignolle" who appears as a most "tempting subject" (Chopin 12). Although the connotation of the word *try* is connected to painting Adèle, a very subtle sexual undertone can be detected. Although she attempts to capture Adèle's beauty in a sketch, Edna is disappointed with her effort and "crumples up the paper between her hands," but clearly this scene has greatly impacted Edna because for the first time in the novel, the breeze "that came up from the south", is "charged with the seductive odor of the sea" (Chopin 13). Although Robert is present, it is "Adèle and the sea, two powerful avatars of the eternally feminine" that ultimately initiate "Edna's exploration of her relationship with the universe" (Lant 168). In Adèle, Chopin has created a "siren figure who both lures and imperils Edna" (Lant 167). And although Edna walks toward the beach with Robert to end Chapter V, Adèle is the catalyst that ignites the emotions lying dormant within Edna that now impel her to recognize that "a certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within, - the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (Chopin 14). Adèle's sensuous presence causes Edna to begin to "realize her position in

the universe as a human being,” and this beginning, like all “beginnings of things...is...tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” (Chopin 14). A heterocentric framing of this realization would suggest that this passage merely foreshadows Edna’s sexual awakenings that will culminate in her adulterous affair with Alcée Arobin, but a homocentric framing of this links Edna’s relationship with Adèle to Adrienne Rich’s contention that the lesbian reality is a “primary intensity between women,” not merely and only a sexual bond (qtd. in Seidel 201).

Lured by the “seductive...voice of the sea,” Edna’s “soul” has been invited to “wander for a spell in abysses of solitude,” and she chooses Adèle as her first companion, and the two women go alone, “arm in arm” through “tangled growth” (Chopin 14-15). In order for Adèle’s presence to begin its “liberating magic upon Edna,” the two women must escape all the restrictive forces of their world, including men and children, which “come eternally between a woman and her own desires” (Lant 168). As the two women begin to loosen their clothing, Edna also begins to loosen “a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (Chopin 14). Although the conversation begins as a dialogue between Adèle and Edna prompted by Adèle’s question “of whom – of what are you thinking,” the narration soon changes to a more intimate look into Edna’s past that is shared totally with the reader, but only partially with Adèle (16). With Adèle close by, Edna reflects on some childhood memories and some intimate thoughts which prompt Adèle to lay her hand on Edna’s, and when “the hand was not withdrawn,” Adele “stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand” (17). Although Edna is “not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection,” she nevertheless soon “lent herself readily to the Creole’s gentle caress” (17). This caress leads to the narration of the

infatuations Edna experienced as a young girl, always with unavailable men, and all of the circumstances that led to her marriage to Léonce Pontellier, whom she married because she realized “with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection” (19). Although Adèle only hears some of these thoughts, the emotional bond between the two has intensified as Edna “had put her head down on Madame Ratignolle’s shoulder” feeling “flushed and...intoxicated with the...unaccustomed taste of candor [which] muddled her like wine, or a first breath of freedom” (Chopin 19). The passion of this scene is destroyed, however, and “Edna’s incipient, faltering attempts to explore her own character...come to an end when she and Adèle are driven from their feminine solitude by the sound of voices” as Robert, along with the children, has come searching for them (Lant 170).

Although Adèle initially projects the ideal mother-woman image, Chopin’s portrayal of her is much more complex and queer. Kathleen Streater maintains that Chopin purposely exaggerates the stereotypical qualities of the mother-woman, but that by juxtaposing erotic descriptions and allowing Adèle “to hint at a sexual identity,” Chopin also “contests the boundaries of Adèle’s assigned gender roles: is she a mother? a femme fatale? a saint? a wild woman? Chopin suggests Adèle is all of them” (408-409). By queering the mother-woman’s defined limits, Adèle reveals her strength by “working the patriarchal system to her advantage” (Streater 408). Chopin will use the character of Edna to challenge the authority of the patriarchy more overtly, but with Adèle, “Chopin gives us a vision of feminism that not only addresses patriarchal reality, but addresses women’s existence in that reality, allowing for an accessible and life-affirming form of feminism” (Streater 415). Adèle will never abandon her role as “adoring spouse and

devoted *maman*,” but she recognizes Edna’s desires, and just as Adèle has sparked Edna’s awakening, Edna inspires “Adèle’s wry wit and gentle irony” (LeBlanc 292). Although Adèle’s role in the novel diminishes somewhat after the early chapters, in her subsequent scenes with Edna, her “personality takes on an ironic edge ordinarily suppressed” in her role as ‘mother-woman’ (Le Blanc 292). Even though her conversations with Edna about the importance of children and her concerns about Edna’s relationship with Alcée Arobin reveal a disparity between the two women, Adèle ultimately supports Edna’s choices. Chopin never intends for Adèle and Edna to enter into a sexual lesbian relationship, but “if we expand [the definition of lesbian] to embrace many more forms of primary intimacy between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life,” Edna and Adèle clearly indulge in a lesbian relationship (Zimmerman 456). Even though Edna rejects Adèle, “the mythical woman,” she cherishes Adèle, the human being (LeBlanc 299).

It is with Adèle that Edna begins her awakening, and it is with Adèle that Edna’s awakening ends. Near the end of the novel, all of Edna’s romantic dreams appear to come to fruition as she finally shares a “soft, cool, delicate kiss” with Robert, but further intimacy is halted when she receives the news that it is time for Adèle to give birth (Chopin 101). Because “their intimacy, begun at Grand Isle, had not declined,” Edna chooses Adèle in order to make good her promise to “go to her when her hour of trial overtook her” (Chopin 52, 91). This queer choice to abandon Robert in the midst of their most intimate, passionate moment ultimately leads to Edna’s “understanding of the unrealistic nature of her passion for him” (LeBlanc 300). The metaphorical connection of Adèle as a siren of the sea who lures and imperils culminates in the birthing scene. Her

hair, “coiled like a golden serpent,” mirrors the “foamy wavelets” that “coiled like serpents” around Edna’s ankles in the final chapter as she realizes that the day would come when Robert and “the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (Chopin 103, 108, 109). Adèle’s role as both muse and siren has climaxed with Edna’s queer realization that no man will ever satisfy her. With Adèle safely hidden behind the angelic wings of the “mother-woman,” Chopin has cleverly disguised a potent feminist force who, in the midst of childbirth, is “emotionally overwrought, yet certainly not overwhelmed,” and although Adèle’s final words exhort Edna to “think of the children” (104), the final impression of Adèle is of a woman “who voices her demands, her desires, and her command of her power as a life-giving force” (Streater 414).

CHAPTER IV
THE SUBVERSIVE MADEMOISELLE REISZ

Adèle Ratignolle provides the spark, but Mademoiselle Reisz fuels the fire of Edna's awakening. Edna's friendship with this incredibly odd, but extremely talented pianist traces "an equally eroticized movement from repression to self-expression" (Boone 82). Mademoiselle Reisz's appearance is detailed in stark contrast to Adèle Ratignolle. The ever-graceful Adèle's "flaming" beauty includes "spun-gold hair," "blue eyes...like sapphires," pouting red lips, and "exquisite" hands (Chopin 9). Mademoiselle Reisz, older than both Edna and Adèle, "was a disagreeable little...homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed" (Chopin 25). Reisz, who lived alone in a dingy attic apartment, could not tolerate children and "had quarreled with almost everyone," but her skills as a pianist always "aroused a fever of enthusiasm" from her listeners, especially Edna (Chopin 25, 26). Although polar opposites, both Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz form a strong bond with Edna, and according to Joseph Boone, author of *Libidinal Currents*,

female bonds are indispensable to the libidinal plot and politics of *The Awakening*; to put it simply, women are the most important agents, none

barred in Edna's awakening. Until recently it has been a commonplace of Chopin criticism that Robert LeBrun and Alcée Arobin trigger Edna's sexual awakening and that her two female friends...allegorize the mutually exclusive options – patriarchal marriage or a loveless career – that face Edna as a woman. Adèle and Reisz, however, are not simply cardboard figures, representing opposing types of womanhood, but figures whose structural functions in Chopin's narrative are in fact more alike than opposed. Without the subconscious influence they exert on Edna, an influence far more potent than the heterosexual attractions of Robert and Alcée – there would be, simply put, no plot of female sexual awakening for us to read. (81)

Mademoiselle Reisz only appears in five chapters throughout the novel, but each appearance follows Edna's emotional upheavals. Her first appearance occurs after Edna's recognition of herself as a human being, and Reisz's influence on Edna permeates the text from the moment of her first appearance at the party on Grand Isle where she agrees to play the piano for the guests. "The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column," and within minutes, the passions of "solitude, of hope, of longing, of despair...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" (Chopin 26). Like the siren Adèle, Reisz, with her music, is metaphorically connected to the erotic voice of the sea that murmurs and whispers to Edna throughout the novel, and "far from being the sexless

creature her fellow vacationers assume her to be,” Mademoiselle Reisz has literally “at her fingertips the power to bring Edna to the brink of orgasm” (Boone 82).

Many early critics of the novel, however, viewed Mademoiselle Reisz merely as the negative end of the spectrum of options for the “New Woman” who desired a life other than that of the traditional “mother-woman” represented by Adèle. A woman who chooses to abandon the established female roles determined by the patriarchy is doomed to live alone, unloved, and isolated on the fringes of society. These early critics found the character of Mademoiselle Reisz enigmatic and yet important to Edna’s awakening, and while some “noticed their close relationship, her appearance, and her role as an artist,” these critics never labeled her as a lesbian (Seidel 199). Elaine Showalter, in an essay published in 1988 entitled “Tradition and the Female Talent,” hints that Mademoiselle Reisz’s “attraction to Edna suggests something more perverse,” but Showalter only suggests that because her music “reduces Edna to passionate sobs,” Reisz might be viewed as a “surrogate lover” (316). Other critics characterize her as a “conjurer or even a witch” (Davis 89). Mary Biggs contends, however, that those critics who viewed her only as an isolated artist or eccentric spinster and “hedged their judgments of her sexuality” were guilty of “cowardice or naiveté” (167). Kathryn Seidel concurs with Biggs’ analysis and states that the metaphors associated with Reisz “of magic, witchcraft, and enchantment” have been subtly crafted by Chopin “to establish an alternate female linguistic code which contrasts with the patriarchal language which [Edna] hears from her father and husband, but rejects” (204). Seidel further maintains that Mademoiselle Reisz “embodies the traits of the female artist as lesbian” including “physical deformity, hostility to men and children and all domestic pursuits,” and that

Chopin purposefully uses “metaphors of homoeroticism and of witchcraft, the traditional enterprise associated with the female artist, to develop Reisz” (203). In “Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, and Sexuality,” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe that “many women writers use terms associated with female sorcery as a vision of female verbal power which stands apart from the sentences of patriarchy” (qtd. in Seidel 204). In addition, there were very few successful 19th century female concert pianists because “serious music” was the “domain of the male,” and any woman who endeavored to play the piano beyond the parlor was perceived by society as “suspiciously ‘masculine’ or in some other way peculiar” (Davis 90). Even the music choices that Chopin selects for Mademoiselle Reisz play a subversive role in the novel as her pieces are considered “masculine music” that produce what Judith Tick calls “virile” or “man-tones” in “powerful” forms (qtd. in Davis 96). Clearly the character of Mademoiselle Reisz queers the narrative as she “manifests herself masculinely in the ‘magnificent piano’ whose music ‘penetrates’ Edna” (Kearns 82). With Reisz, Chopin propels Edna’s exploration of her sexuality far beyond the heteronormative. Bonnie Zimmerman poses these questions: “when is a text a ‘lesbian’ text” and what “constitutes proof” (455). In *The Awakening*, Mademoiselle Reisz is the proof.

Chopin does not totally abandon the heterosexual world, however, and instead, she skillfully masks the homoerotic possibilities engendered by the piano playing of Mademoiselle Reisz within the still scandalous, but much safer, plot of adultery. After Edna is reduced to tears by Reisz’s music, she swims alone for the first time, and in so doing, she “seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (Chopin 28). Walking back to her cottage with Robert, Edna wonders if she “shall ever be stirred

again as Mademoiselle Reisz's playing moved" her that night, and later, as Edna watches Robert leave, "no multitude of words could have been more significant...or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (Chopin 28, 30). A heteronormative analysis of these words declares Edna's throbbing desire is for Robert, but a closer inspection reveals that Chopin has created intentional ambiguity with these words since it was Mademoiselle Reisz who initiated these feelings within Edna. LeBlanc mentions this scene as the beginning of Reisz's "nourishing of Edna's artistic ambitions," but the sexual imagery and its queer implications dominate this scene (299). Throughout the remaining chapters, Chopin uses Mademoiselle Reisz not only as the go-between for Edna and Robert, but also, in subtle ways, as the third of a *ménage à trois*.

After Robert leaves for Mexico, leaving Edna with the feeling that "she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded," she encounters Mademoiselle Reisz who "came creeping up behind Edna" who was on her way to the beach (Chopin 44). When Reisz touches Edna on the shoulder and inquires if she misses Robert, "the woman seemed to echo...the feeling which constantly possessed her" (44). Even though Robert is physically absent from this chapter, the three of them are together. This chapter, however, culminates with Mademoiselle Reisz watching Edna bathe in the ocean for "a long time" and then "[raving] much over Edna's appearance in her bathing suit" (Chopin 47). Joseph Boone views this scene as a perfect example of Reisz illustrating the "new turn of the century type of the Sapphic or lesbian, barely able to repress her crush on Edna" (83). Reisz is clearly drawn to Edna. Not only does she admire Edna's physical qualities, but she also "realizes Edna is different from the others at Grand Isle and it is this quality of

introspection – heightened by Edna’s various ‘awakenings’ that summer – that attracts the pianist” (Davis 98). At the end of this chapter, she gives Edna her New Orleans address, which allows her to become Edna’s “life line” and the one to whom Edna turns for inspiration (Davis 100).

Reisz’s third appearance in the novel occurs after Edna has returned to New Orleans. Here she exhibits queer behavior when she decides to “abandon Tuesdays at home” and do only what she feels like doing, which involves a return to painting (Chopin 54). She has her good days and her bad days, and when her “mood was one of despair, she turned to Mademoiselle Reisz”(Chopin 56). As Edna searches for Reisz’ apartment, Chopin uses the word *desire* several times, especially Edna’s desire to “listen while she played upon the piano” (56). The sexual imagery of the piano that was initiated in Chapter IX comes to a climax in this chapter. Mademoiselle Reisz’s dingy attic apartment “exists well outside of patriarchy and the heterosexual culture,” and offers the perfect atmosphere for comfort, inspiration, and seduction (LeBlanc 296). The chapter opens with foreplay as Reisz takes Edna’s hand “between her strong wiry fingers...and [executes] a sort of double theme upon the back and palm” (Chopin 60). “Adapting current lesbian diacritical discourse” to this scene allows for an interpretation of Edna as the “femme to Reisz’s butch” (Boone 82). In order to continue her seduction of Edna, Reisz uses a letter she has received from Robert making him “merely an instrument that helps her chart a route to Edna’s soul” (Biggs 167). Seidel interprets this scene as a classic lesbian seduction with Reisz as the older woman with the much younger Edna, disappointed in love, now living alone, becoming an artist, and “ripe for inversion” (209). As Edna reads the letter, Reisz improvises on the Chopin “Impromptu,” creating the

“most graphic sexual scene” in the novel and, ironically, Edna’s “most fulfilling experience of passion with Robert” occurs with Mademoiselle Reisz as “its medium...and co-creator” (Biggs 168). Reisz also “glides” from the Chopin to “the quivering love notes of Isolde’s song” (61). Readers familiar with the story of Tristan and Isolde know that Tristan’s love for Isolde cannot be reciprocated because she is married to another man, and the two ill-fated lovers can only find happiness in death. Viewing this allusion from a purely heteronormative perspective, Edna assumes the role of Isolde with Robert as her Tristan. A queerer view, however, casts Mademoiselle Reisz in the role of Robert, thus subtly subverting a total heteronormative vision. By using her music to “discern, arouse, and symbolically partake of Edna’s latent sensuality,” the ménage à trois becomes a *fait accompli* (Church 22). The “sobbing” Edna hopes she may “come again” (Chopin 62), and the “rapture Edna feels and Mademoiselle’s willingness to engender it suggest a passionate connection, unfulfilled in a literal sense, but present and alive symbolically” (Seidel 207).

The sexual imagery is not the only significant aspect of this chapter. Edna’s declaration that she is “becoming an artist” prompts Mademoiselle Reisz to warn her that “to be an artist requires much” and that “to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul...the soul that dares and defies”(Chopin 61). A soul that dares and defies must therefore also be a queer soul, one “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin 62). Echoed within these words are the beliefs of Oscar Wilde who believed that “art was by its nature the destroyer of convention” and that an artist should “strive to make his, or her, world a world of art without regard to morality” (qtd. in Seidel 200). These words haunt Edna throughout the remainder of the narrative, but

their import becomes more provocative when one applies them to Kate Chopin herself. With this novel, Chopin “dares and defies” conventional morality with both the overt heterosexual adultery plot and the covert homoerotic undertones.

Perhaps to stay within the safe confines of the heteronormative world, Chopin allows Edna’s passion to seek fulfillment with Alcée Arobin. With Arobin, Chopin seemingly creates the stereotypical playboy who enjoys seducing and using women, but even here, Chopin queers things as it is Edna who ultimately uses him to fulfill her physical desires. Before she returns for her next visit with Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna and Alcée become “intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps,” and he often talks to her in ways that “[appealed] to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (Chopin 75). The very next sentence that follows has Edna realizing that “nothing...so quieted the turmoil of [her] senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz”(75). The juxtaposition of these two sentences cleverly brings Reisz into this relationship as well, which provides a queer contrast to the stereotypical, heteronormative love plots of Edna’s marriage, her longing for Robert, and her affair with Arobin. As always, Edna turns to this woman seeking comfort, and this time the scene is rife with metaphoric proofs of Reisz’s infatuation with Edna including the “little stove...roaring; it was red-hot, and the chocolate in the tin sizzled and sputtered” (Chopin 76). Enticing Edna with another letter from Robert, Mademoiselle Reisz then “approached her beloved instrument and began to play” (Chopin 77). A heteronormative interpretation of the phrase “beloved instrument” connotes only the piano, but a homocentric interpretation recognizes that Edna is also the “beloved instrument” upon which Reisz plays in order to vicariously participate in Edna’s infatuation with Robert. Once again, Reisz plays a “much more

ambiguous and complicitous role, one indicative, perhaps, of her own thwarted desires for Edna” (Boone 88).

Reisz’s final actual appearance in the novel occurs at the dinner party that Edna hosts before moving to the pigeon house, and when she leaves, “she kissed Edna upon the shoulder and whispered: ‘bonne nuit, ma reine; soyez sage’” (Chopin 85). The Norton Critical edition of *The Awakening* translates those words to mean “Good night, my love, be good,” but *soyez sage* can also be translated as “be wise” (85). Mademoiselle Reisz is the only character in the novel who truly appreciates the difficulty of the life-altering choices facing Edna, especially for those who attempt to flout cultural limitations, both patriarchal and heteronormative, so these final words of advice foreshadow her concern that Edna does not have the “strong wings” needed to “soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (Chopin 79). Safely hidden within this seemingly innocent phrase, the lesbian metaphors of Mademoiselle Reisz’s sexual preferences and her artistic theories also reveal that “Chopin recognizes the emerging stereotype yet understands and still regards positively the range of behavior Reisz exhibits” (Seidel 202).

CHAPTER V
THE QUEERING OF EDNA HERSELF

Nothing in the text itself suggests that Edna Pontellier ever indulges in a physical sexual lesbian relationship, but that does not mean that the term *lesbian* cannot be applied to Edna. Beginning with the description of her physical appearance in the opening chapters, Chopin's heroine defies traditional gender descriptions. The traditionally masculine adjective "handsome" is used to describe her rather than the feminine "beautiful," and Chopin focuses more on her "engaging manner" and less on her exterior beauty (Chopin 5). This description places her in the middle of the continuum of female appearance with Adèle Ratignolle's Petrarchan beauty at one end of the spectrum and Mademoiselle Reisz's homely, almost disfigured appearance at the opposite end. From the outset, readers view Edna as "something other, a fascinating creature who stands apart and resists definition" (LeBlanc 294). Also, her physical appearance in many ways mirrors that of Robert LeBrun, and LeBlanc wonders if "Edna forms a potent attachment to Robert because he suggests the female partner for which her unsuspecting soul longs, housed within an acceptable male form" (301). The mirroring images of Edna and Robert also vividly portray the masculine within the feminine and the feminine within the

masculine, a concept that, because it is at odds with the prevailing definitions of gender, queers this seemingly rigid dichotomy.

Monique Wittig argues that the “first task of lesbians is to reject, to obliterate the culturally constructed ideal of ‘woman’,” and this obliteration begins by deconstructing the traditional masculine concept of feminine beauty. In addition, the “lesbian” retains ties to “individual women” and “reaffirms the community of women” (qtd. in LeBlanc 297). In this novel, Edna’s primary ties are to other women, except her passion for Robert, which Chopin purposefully frames within a conventional heterosexual plot. The two most important women in Edna’s life are Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, who, although they live very different lives, both assist and support Edna as she explores which life she wants. Both women also arouse erotic undertones, and it is “only in the eroticized company of other women” that Edna ceases “to be her husband’s possession,” and, instead, begins to “speak for herself, as a woman with unanswered desires and a separate identity, and as a woman whose awakening has the potential either to muddle her perception or to grant her a new sense of freedom” (Boone 82). Even after they leave the “protected female space of Grand Isle” and their interactions become less invasive, the bonds these women form “expose the omnipresence of sexuality that is already present in Edna’s life, long before she becomes actively involved with Robert or Arobin” (Boone 83). The irony in this, however, is that the “sexual currents set into motion by these female bonds have become the textually repressed, the unspoken, in a story that began as an awakening *from* repression” (Boone 90). This textual repression might be the result of Chopin’s need to stay within the safer plot of heterosexual adultery or the

result of a heteronormative reading, but the ostensibly quiet homoerotic undertones speak volumes.

Although both women exert an influence on Edna, it is Mademoiselle Reisz who causes feelings within Edna “so powerful that they undermine the calm, domesticated underpinnings of society” (Seidel 201). According to Adrienne Rich, Edna becomes a “lesbian feminist” as a direct result of her relationship with Reisz. Although Adele Ratignolle’s beauty acts as the catalyst that initiates Edna’s awakening, Edna realizes that she cannot be Adele who belongs to the old world, a world that Edna desperately desires to leave behind. Mademoiselle Reisz is the one to whom Edna turns for the inspiration needed to “swim” where “no woman had swum before” (Chopin 27). Examples of Edna as “a person who has made an analytic severing from certain patriarchal cultural practices” include stopping her “Tuesdays” at home, throwing off her wedding ring and stomping on it, starting to paint, not sleeping with her husband, spending time betting at the race track, and finally moving out of Leonce’s home into the smaller pigeon house (DuPlessis 134). Edna progresses from one who “[lends] herself to any passing caprice” to a woman who is “no longer one of Léonce Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not” (Chopin 54, 101). Clearly, Edna awakens to more than just her sexuality, and Doris Davis contends that part of Edna’s growing awareness that summer is the “fact that she sees, or wishes to see, herself in the older woman” (98). Both are “perceptive about people”; both are “given to bluntness”; both “show contempt for superficiality and hypocrisy” (Davis 98). Mademoiselle Reisz lures Edna to “the ‘other side of everything’ – to the questioning of primary institutions of social, sexual and cultural organization,” which results in Edna joining the “lesbian continuum” whose

meaning has broadened “from a sexual minority to an oppositional and woman-identified behavior whose scope is much greater than had been suspected” (DuPlessis 134, 135).

The ways in which Chopin wields Mademoiselle Reisz’s influence on Edna presages the declaration of Virginia Woolf in 1931 that “killing the angel in the house was part of the occupation of the woman writer” (Woolf).

Although Edna seeks out both Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz when they return to New Orleans, she yearns to be with Mademoiselle Reisz “to share her most private, intimate thoughts” and to be “physically aroused by her” (Seidel 205). The seductive power of Mademoiselle Reisz haunts Edna, and her words “provoke thoughts, or at least plant seeds of thoughts, that lie beyond the rather obvious” (Biggs 171). This is best seen in Chapter XXVII when Arobin begins seducing Edna, but just as his caresses begin to arouse her, she interrupts the foreplay by asking Arobin if he knows Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna tells him that Reisz felt her shoulder blades to see if her “wings were strong” (Chopin 79). Alcée’s question of “why have you introduced her at this moment” is indeed a provocative one as Mademoiselle Reisz, once again, forms a ménage à trois, this time with Edna and Alcée rather than Edna and Robert. Perhaps at this moment, subconsciously, Edna realizes that she has already been seduced earlier that day by Reisz, making it clear that “woman-identified experience has caused Edna to question heterosexual conventions and to conceive, at least, fleetingly, of other possibilities” (LeBlanc 300). After Alcée asks this question, Edna assumes a sexual pose by “clasping her hands beneath her head,” and tells him he may “talk” to her if he likes, but she plans to “think of something else” while he does (Chopin 79). Clearly her enjoyment of their “talk” won’t be totally heterosexual in nature because while she thought of something or

someone else, his kiss becomes “a flaming torch that kindled desire” (79). This description literally detaches the man from the kiss, and the resulting implications that Edna’s desires might also derive from homoerotic pleasures provide a sense that Edna is becoming more queer and more “at odds with the normal” by assuming “an identity without an essence” (Halperin 62).

The bonds Edna forms with both women also “bring to the surface [her] latent autoeroticism” which is revealed in Chapter XIII (Boone 83). This chapter is set on the island of *Chênrière* just after the night Edna swims alone for the first time and begins to “feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream”(Chopin 31). On the island, in the midst of the Catholic church service, Edna feels faint and Robert takes her to Madame Antoine’s to rest. It is here, when she is alone on the “big, four-posted bed, snow white,” that she “loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them” and then “ran her fingers through her loosened hair” and “looked at her round arms...and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely...the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh” (Chopin 35, 36). This autoerotic performance is not only a sign of Edna’s willingness to give herself pleasure, but it also connotes self-love, and “homosexuality is often encoded textually as self-love or narcissism” (DuCille 106). Even though Chopin continues to include the frame of the conventional heterosexual plot throughout the remainder of the novel, this episode causes readers to wonder whether it is Robert/Alcée and heterosexual sex or hedonistic desire that Edna craves. As shown in later chapters with both Robert and Alcée, sex and men are ingredients that “combine uneasily in Edna’s erotic experience” (Boone 86). Even after Edna’s heterosexual encounters, especially with Alcée, her desire is undercut by her apparent hedonism. She

is conscious more of a desire for her own pleasure than she is of the men she supposedly desires. Edna engages in conflict with the heteronormative frame that Chopin continuously fits around her at every move, but the conflict within becomes her love of self-pleasure, and, for the remainder of the novel, these hedonistic pleasures will be in constant tension with the heteronormative community that surrounds her.

If, as Julia Penelope Stanley argues, the “lesbian character creates for herself a mythology of darkness, a world in which she moves through dreams and shadows,” then Edna undoubtedly qualifies as a lesbian character (qtd. in Zimmerman 464). Edna spends a great deal of time in the shadowy realm of dreams and sleep, but also in the “traditionally female mythic associations of moonlight and water” where “her new strength and her new ambition are symbolically fostered” (Gilbert 273). Edna is even compared to Aphrodite, who was supposedly born of sea foam, who “has sexual energy for herself, her own grandeur, her own pleasure,” and who serves as the “patron goddess of Sappho” (Gilbert 281). Chopin purposefully embeds the “seductive...never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring” voice of the sea throughout the novel (14) because the “sea instills, or releases, desires in Edna that she can neither articulate, actualize, or abandon”(LeBlanc 303). Once she has left Grand Isle, the only ways she can channel these emotions are by painting and listening to Mademoiselle Reisz’s music, both connected to “Grand Isle and lesbian identity” (LeBlanc 303). The voice of the sea also serves as an echo of the poetry of Walt Whitman with which Kate Chopin seems very familiar. Lewis Leary contends that “the whole of *The Awakening* is pervaded with the spirit of Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’” and that Edna “is awakened to herself, until with Whitman she might finally say, ‘I exist as I am, that is enough’” (217). Although Leary’s

essay does not mention homosexuality in connection with Whitman, readers and critics of Whitman's own time recognized the homosexual implications of his celebration of "forbidden voices, voices of sexes and lusts...voices indecent" ("Song of Myself" 516, 517, 518). Also, questions regarding the implications of his celebration of manly love in the "Calamus" series of poems began immediately, "and critics and scholars have most often considered the poems of both sections primarily as clues to Whitman's psychology" (Hunt 482). Perhaps Chopin, like Whitman, wanted to "sound [her] barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," but as a woman writer in the late nineteenth century, these roofs proved too solid in their unacceptance of a more perverse lifestyle, and so, just as Whitman was forced to conceal his true passion by merging his homoerotic poems within a larger work that deals with manly love in ways beyond just the homoerotic, Chopin queers her homoerotic themes within a conventional heterosexual love story ("Song of Myself" 1333).

CHAPTER VI
ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Edna's awakening begins at the sea and so to the sea she must return. Suzanne Wolkenfeld, in her essay entitled "Edna's Suicide: The Problem of the One and the Many," states that the final chapter

constitutes the critical crux of the novel, not only in that it is central to the interpretation of Edna's character and the theme of the story; but also because it is joined with the issue of Chopin's attitude to her protagonist and the artistic integrity of her work. It is primarily through the interpretation of the pattern of imagery by which Edna's suicide is dramatized, and of the tone of the narrative voice, that each critic decides whether or not to take the final swim with Edna and determines Chopin's complicity in the act. (241-242)

In her essay, Wolkenfeld first summarizes the multiple interpretations of the ending before arguing that "Chopin's sympathy, and perhaps even identification, with Edna are most evident in her dramatization of Edna's struggle to face the realities of life and her partial achievements of selfhood" (243). Wolkenfeld maintains, however, that

“ultimately, Chopin places Edna’s suicide as a defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate herself to the limitations of reality” (243). Other interpretations suggest that Edna ends her life in the sea because she is not strong enough to take on the role of the “New Woman,” and that the constraints of the patriarchal traditions that surround her have finally defeated her. Edna is the “bird with a broken wing” that is now “reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (Chopin 108). Like the heroine in the female *bildungsroman*, Edna does experience an awakening, but unfortunately, she is “awakened to limitations,” and so freedom in death rather than confinement in life appears to be her choice at the conclusion of the novel (Rosowski 313).

What these critics have in common, however, is the fact that they have all analyzed the tone and imagery of this novel from a heteronormative perspective with the belief that Edna throws away her entire life for heterosexual sex. Chopin’s text, however, is never so forthcoming as to make such an assertion, remaining ambiguous until the end, an ambiguity analyzed by LeBlanc. Although the final paragraphs of the novel contain reminders of the patriarchal, heterosexual world that Edna has rebelled against throughout the novel including the mention of her father, Léonce, her children, Robert, Alcée, and even the cavalry officer, she has also become aware that the “men produce more anguish and despair than joy and ecstasy, and ultimately each proves profoundly unfulfilling” (LeBlanc 301). Edna returns to the sea because it has been the sea through which Edna has channeled the power of the erotic. What she now seems to understand is that no man can ever give her what she seeks, but the sea, her “metaphorical female lover,” can (LeBlanc 302). How appropriate that she returns to the

“female colony” of Grand Isle, the “no man’s land” where her awakening was first nurtured (Boone 81). How appropriate that she casts aside “the unpleasant pricking garments from her,” and greets her lover “naked in the open air” which creates a “delicious” feeling within her (Chopin 108, 109). In this place and in this way, Edna “meets her figurative female lover, naked and without fear” which is “more suggestive of a sensually satisfying erotic encounter than a desperate attempt to escape life” (LeBlanc 305). Edna’s thought that “Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew”(109) is misguided as Edna finally swims within and perhaps also “toward a female paradise”(Gilbert 274), brimming with the “musky odor of pinks” (109). Her death viewed this way queers the interpretations that Edna’s suicide merely signals her defeat at the hands of the unrelenting dominance of the patriarchal, heterosexual world and instead, affirms that Edna, like Isolde, will “drown now, sinking, unconscious, void of all thought,” and achieve “Höchste Lust,” the “Highest Bliss” (Wagner).

The Awakening is a perfect example of a text which contains what Roland Barthes calls “a galaxy of signifiers [to which] we gain access...by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (qtd. in Kohn 137). The signifiers in Chopin’s novel provoke so many questions about what it means to be human without any definitive answers. But, if it is the writer’s responsibility to “tear off the veil” that has draped human existence with a set of restrictive behavioral codes put into place by those in power, then clearly Kate Chopin has torn off the veil “more decisively and daringly than has yet been fully realized” because she questions both patriarchy and heteronormativity (Biggs 174). Through the character of Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin explores female sexuality beyond the heterosexual liaisons to include “autoerotic

fantasies, warm female friendships, and homoerotic possibilities” (Seidel 199). This multi-faceted vision demands that *The Awakening* be viewed more queerly as it requires readers to examine preconceived assumptions and question their validity. But is *The Awakening* a lesbian text? If the definition of lesbianism is restricted to a pre-defined category of a woman having or desiring genital contact with another woman, then this novel is not a lesbian text because Edna’s actual sexual encounters in the book are purely heterosexual. Adrienne Rich, however, believes that definition is too limiting and must be expanded in order to define *lesbianism* as

a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience...if we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical...support, we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical definitions of *lesbianism*. (qtd. in Zimmerman 456)

Using that definition queers a pre-defined category and ultimately creates a new one. As a result, Edna Pontellier is a lesbian and *The Awakening* is a lesbian text. The intensity of the bonds forged between Edna, Adele Ratignolle, and Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna’s loyalty to both of these women “seems a higher value than obedience or loyalty to any man or institution or convention” (Biggs 171). Hidden within the plot of a heterosexual adulterous love affair is the story of a woman who queerly “subverts traditional notions of female submissiveness, passivity, and virtue,” the type of woman Bertha Harris regards as a “monstrous lesbian” (qtd. in Zimmerman 463-464). In this early modernist

novel, Kate Chopin poses “every question that is forbidden in polite society” which, at the time of its publication, caused the novel to be censured and, perhaps, even banned (Baker 6). “Indeed the novel’s critical rejection silenced Chopin herself,” but her words remain alive (DuCille 86). Like the “voice of the sea,” Chopin’s words are “never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul...to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation” of what it means to be a woman and of how to remove the limitations and obstacles that have been placed before her for centuries (Chopin 14). With Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin champions a queerer vision of the world, and although the world wasn’t quite ready for this in 1899, Edna Pontellier patiently waits for all women to join her in a “shout for joy” when they too experience the “feeling of exultation” offered to them with this alternate vision, a vision that defies the traditional, a vision that opens their eyes to the unlimited possibilities of womanhood (Chopin 27).

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