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THE DISCOURSE OF FEMALE MENTAL ILLNESS IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

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May 2011

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

MAY 2016

We hereby approve this thesis

For

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Candidate for the Master of Arts in English degree

for the Department of

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And

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S  
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Student's Date of Defense: April 28, 2016

## DEDICATION

To Grandpa Foley—  
for sharing in my love for literature and for instilling in me a lifelong love for learning.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty that made this project possible. In particular, I would like to extend a special word of gratitude to Dr. Karem for his guidance throughout this process.

Thank you—also—to my always supportive family and my ever patient husband.

THE DISCOURSE OF FEMALE MENTAL ILLNESS IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

ELISE M. COLLMAN

**ABSTRACT**

This study addresses the consequences that befell Edna Pontellier for seeking an identity apart and outside of the roles of wife and mother. In particular, it focuses on the correlation made by the male characters in the novel between rejecting motherhood and marriage and perceived mental illness. Edna's onset of contradictory behavior causes Léonce and Dr. Mandelet to hypothesize the cause of her new behavior. In an attempt to understand and cure Edna, they take a diagnostic approach towards her awakening. Their misunderstanding of her awakening reveals the misinformed societal dogma that linked women's desire for autonomy to mental instability.

There is a lack of scholarship in regards to Dr. Mandelet, chapter XXII, and the broader implications of medicine and mental illness in *The Awakening*. Although feminist discourse has celebrated Edna's sexual liberation, there is a lack of scholarship in understanding Chopin's more subversive feminist theme of the male tendency to misunderstand and misdiagnose the female mind that steps outside socially prescribed roles.

Using social, historical, and gender based perspectives were helpful methods in understanding this issue. Studying the historical, cultural, and social atmosphere as well as the accepted gender roles during the time Chopin was writing is essential in realizing her subversive feminist plight. Chopin is questioning the socially prescribed gender roles and notions of 19<sup>th</sup> century female normative behavior.

Chopin is calling into question the limitations and misunderstandings of her time, and, as her fin-de-siècle suggests, she is also calling for an active reconsideration of gender roles moving into the new century. Some critics interpret Edna's suicide as evidence that she was unable to overcome these societal limitations; however, textual support from the final chapter of the novel lends itself to a more hopeful interpretation. Suicide is Edna's first and final act as an autonomous, liberated woman. Chopin beckons for women in following centuries to continue in Edna's plight, and, perhaps, what Edna was only able to achieve in death, generations of women to come would be able to achieve in their lifetime.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin calls on readers to participate in questioning the assumptions of women's roles in light of historical, social, and gender-based perspectives. Published in 1899, *The Awakening* teeters on the edge of the twentieth-century and brings to light the competing voices of "truth" women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century heard and were forced to engage with. Edna Pontellier, Chopin's haunted, humorous, and honest heroine, proclaims: "One of these days I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a *devilishly wicked specimen* [emphasis added] of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am" (Chopin 91). Edna was unable to define herself by the "truths" available to her from her culture; consequently, she was faced with the decision to either conform to them or awaken to something new.

From Edna's quote, Chopin subtly outlines her feminist plight in *The Awakening*. Edna, in her intentional and honest admission of an identity crisis, establishes a need to define her own identity apart from the societal codes in which she operates. She is painfully aware of the price that is paid for "soar[ing] about the level plain of tradition

and prejudice” yet, in spite of this, she embarks on an awakening towards authentic selfhood above and outside the 19<sup>th</sup> century societal standards of marriage and motherhood (Chopin 92).

After her initial awakening at Grand Isle, when she experiences “a certain light beginning to dawn dimly within her—the light which, showing the way, forbids it,” Edna begins to understand more fully “her position in the universe as a human being,” and, in particular, she begins to understand more fully her identity as a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman (Chopin 15-6). She deliberately sets out to form a new definition of selfhood that is not limited to the narrow scope of marriage and motherhood, and, consequently, the male figures in her life viewed her as a question to be answered, a problem to be solved, and, most detrimentally, an illness to be diagnosed. Chopin’s careful use of the word “specimen” from her protagonist’s mouth alludes to the notion that women were viewed as secondary, almost subhuman entities that needed to be examined and studied in order to be understood and therefore accepted.

Perhaps Chopin is using this medically charged word to reference the diagnostic approach some men in the novel took towards Edna’s shift in behavior as she sought an identity that existed outside the realms of wife and mother. *The Awakening* is largely a narrative of a young woman searching and asking “what does it mean to be a woman?”, “who am I allowed to be?”, and “what/who controls female identity?” The questions Chopin inspired in her fin-de-siècle novel transcend cultural and historical limitations, and, through *The Awakening*, she “opens the way towards illuminating which ideas survived, which have wholly died out, and which are in the process of emerging into being in our time” (Bauer and Lakritz 52). To this extent, Chopin’s canonical novel continues to engage readers in the centuries that have followed its publication.

The patriarchal codes, the rigid and tightly held 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles, that have permeated every aspect of society and Edna's life, were major obstacles for her in her search for an authentic identity because they placed limitations on who she was allowed to be and the choices she was allowed to make. As Edna more readily rejects these codes she was acquainted with and begins to search for a new vocabulary to define herself, she is misunderstood by the men in her life. This misunderstanding leads to a "misdiagnosis" of her very calculated and courageous search for autonomy. Chopin creates a character that is aware of this misunderstanding and is willing to grapple, even until death, with the consequences of deviating from these codes. As 19<sup>th</sup> century onlookers make her feel like a "devilishly wicked specimen of the [female] sex," Edna is unable to accept this title as a personal reality (Chopin 91). She may not be entirely sure of who she is yet, but she seems certain of who she is not. She is not merely a wife and mother and not merely a person who exists only in relationship to those she serves.

At times during this journey she has bursts of clarity where she is able to authoritatively form a vocabulary to explain this awakening: "I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence...resolv[ing] never again to belong to another than [my]self" (Chopin 88-9). At other times she is paralyzed with silent inner questioning that often leads her to seemingly unexplainable bouts of ennui: "She nursed a mood ...It was not despair; but it seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfilled. (Chopin 81). Edna's journey towards awakening is depicted as a *painful yet purposeful* process that Edna never fully understands herself and is never fully able to accomplish in her lifetime.

Edna continually battled over "this tension between the old and the new, between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the twentieth, the traditional and the modern," and this struggle is

evident throughout the novel (Dyer 4-5). As a writer, Chopin understood that Edna stood, in part, as a representative of the rejection of 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles and the consequences that would follow. Chopin dared to take risks in this novel because she knew there was a great reward at stake, not only for her protagonist, but perhaps for many women who would follow. By utilizing historical, social, and gender-based perspectives, readers can better understand Edna's painful yet purposeful journey and the male resistance and misunderstanding she experienced throughout it. Chopin, in *The Awakening*, creates a female protagonist who deviates from the female normative behavior of the time. In doing this, Chopin also presents the antagonistic view some men have towards Edna for this deviation. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Chopin is drawing the correlation between female deviation from socially prescribed roles and the negative "diagnoses" some male characters come up with to explain Edna's change in behavior.

**CHAPTER II**  
**MENTAL ILLNESS: AN OVERLOOKED ANALYSIS OF THE MALE**  
**MANAGEMENT OF THE FEMALE MIND**

*Awakening*, a specific aspect of Edna's complex and courageous character has been overlooked under the broad umbrella of feminist scholarship. In particular, Chopin's commentary on the male attitudes towards perceived mental illness in women during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has not been thoroughly or adequately explored, especially in its relationship to the roles of motherhood and marriage and how these roles not only shaped and dictated 19<sup>th</sup> century womanhood but also condemned women who sought identities outside of these roles. The feminist critique of mental illness in *The Awakening* is a more subversive and subtle context in which to evaluate the text in regards to Edna's journey towards finding identity because it shifts the focus away from Edna's sexual liberation as the only feminist triumph within the novel.

The discourse of female mental illness and the (mis)interpretations of it, made particularly by the men within the novel, are necessary studies within *The Awakening* because they reveal a more complete picture of the socially prescribed gender roles during Chopin's time and reveal her courageous call for a revaluation of these misunderstandings and mistreatments moving forward in hopes of moving past old

ideologies towards newer, more progressive ones. To this extent, Dyer comments “like her name (‘Pontellier,’ as Wendy Martin observes, means ‘one who bridges’), Edna herself is one whose mission is to begin the painful process of bridging two centuries, two worlds, two visions of gender. So appropriate as a turn-of-the-century piece, *The Awakening* is about the beginning of selfhood, not its completion” (Dyer 116) *The Awakening* was a feminist catalyst that initiated a conversation about not only female sexuality but, more importantly, the larger issue of women desiring selfhood and the scrutiny they faced for seeking autonomy.

Although feminist scholars have been and should continue to be applauded for the work they have done to ignite and to perpetuate *The Awakening*’s readership and scholarship throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there are gaps within that scholarship that should be filled. Kate Chopin, in *The Awakening*, in a seemingly subtle way, comments on notions of female mental illness within the 19<sup>th</sup> century; furthermore, she exposes the patriarchal misinterpretations of these “conditions” within the novel as they pertain to 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles. It is important to explore these issues in this particular text because Chopin was writing her fin-de-siècle novel at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the cusp of the twentieth-century.

Chopin’s protagonist “strides into a world not eager to receive her, not ready with new scenarios,” and, perhaps, through this novel moving into the twentieth century, Chopin is calling for a reconsideration of not only the attitudes of male doctors and husbands towards “misbehaving” women but also the medical and marital institutions as a whole for their role in, what Michel Foucault calls, the production of truth (Jacobs 90). By exposing the shortcomings and shortsightedness of her century, Chopin guided, guarded and gave way for more progressive conversations about women’s roles and who

defines and dictates them.

Throughout the novel, Edna's life is punctuated by her relationships with men: her father, husband, doctor, lovers, and even her sons, and these men define and regulate who she is allowed to be as a woman. Particular to this study, Léonce Pontellier and Dr. Mandelet's relationships with Edna offer insight into Chopin's commentary on mental illness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as it appears in her novel and how it is perceived by the male characters. Chopin's portrayal of Léonce Pontellier and her inclusion of Dr. Mandelet, for example, point towards her intentional commentary on the issue of some men's tendency to misunderstand women's desire for identity. Moreover, their misunderstanding of Edna's awakening reveals the misinformed societal dogma that linked women's desire for selfhood to mental instability.

In order for Edna to overcome her societal "limits, [she] must confront the institution of science itself" (Bauer and Lakritz 49). The female hysteric and nerve doctor were not totally uncommon subjects in 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction; however, Chopin's novel has not been examined thoroughly in regards to the discourse of mental illness. A closer examination of the male characters in *The Awakening*, more specifically Léonce and Dr. Mandelet, and their diagnostic approach towards Edna reveals Chopin's subversive feminist theme of the male tendency to misunderstand and mismanage the female mind that dares to step outside socially prescribed roles; furthermore, through her fin-de-siècle novel, Chopin is calling for a reconsideration of female autonomy in regards to the limitations of marriage and motherhood.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **LIBERATING THE FEMALE MIND: MOVING BEYOND A SEXUAL LIBERATION**

Edna's perceived transgressions against the holy roles of wife and mother are undeniably addressed by the male characters and are the catalyst for concern over her mental health. More important than Edna's choices, however, are the conclusions that are drawn about her because she made choices that contradicted and corrupted these roles. Chopin, during the time of publication, was heavily criticized for her inclusion of overt sexual content in *The Awakening*. In particular, readers and critics alike condemned Edna's character as a "discontented 'fool woman' who went outside marriage to seek sexual fulfillment," and they deemed her a "shameful woman...an unacceptable focus for a book" because it's protagonist flagrantly opposed the roles of wife and mother (*KCPP* 296) (Dyer 18-19). Edna's sexual conduct outside of marriage certainly and overtly promoted Chopin's feminist agenda in reevaluating female sexuality. Undoubtedly, Chopin was "beginning to set down the roots of modern feminism during the 1890s" through the sexual content of her novel, and it was for this reason that feminist scholars in the 1960s initially celebrated *The Awakening* (Dyer 5).

Although sexuality is a large component to Edna's liberation, it is an obvious and



natural observation of the text. More subtle, however, is Chopin's call for the liberation of the female mind from two of the male dominated spheres of the time: marital and medical. She calls for a form of female liberation that is less sexually central but no less risky: the liberation of the female mind to think, contemplate, question, dare, and soar above and outside the socially prescribed and accepted roles she was allotted without being diagnosed, by male onlookers, as unbalanced or unwell.

Edna's search for identity and independence do not come to fruition through her affairs; rather, her searching for self is rooted in her desire to be an active, autonomous decision maker instead of a passive recipient of male authority. Feminist discourse has heavily emphasized Edna's embrace of extramarital affairs as her freedom or escape from Léonce and her children. Critics like Sandra Gilbert praised "Edna [as] a radiant symbol of the erotic liberation that turn-of-the-century women had begun to allow themselves to desire" (Dyer 27). However, Edna herself, while speaking to her lover, Robert Lebrun, laughs at "recalling men who had set their wives free" (Chopin 119). She playfully yet authoritatively tells him: "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. *I give myself where I choose* [emphasis added]. If he were to say, 'here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (Chopin 119). For Edna, female liberation was not merely a release from one relational confine to another. Rather, it was a complete relinquish from belonging to anyone other than herself and having the freedom to define herself outside of the limitations of her time. It was about possessing the freedom and right to navigate through her life without 'marriage' and 'motherhood' as her guiding north star without being met with misunderstanding and resistance.

Feminist criticism has pointed towards Edna's sexuality as an escape route from marriage and motherhood; however, Chopin, through her text, pushes beyond that transparent agenda towards something deeper and, perhaps, far more dangerous; She moves towards a radical individualism that not only rejects the confining nature of marriage and motherhood but also confinement in its totality. The men in Edna's life define and regulate the terms of her female definition, and, in *The Awakening*, Chopin portrays a female protagonist who is calling to light some men's misunderstanding of Edna's selfhood and the negative implications that are made by these male-onlookers. Edna, at the dawn of her awakening, says that she "wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before," and, through the creation and publication of *The Awakening*, Chopin seems to be demonstrating a new feminist agenda that moves beyond a mere sexual liberation into uncharted waters that the world of her time had not dared go before (Chopin 31).

## CHAPTER IV

### MALE MISUNDERSTANDING OF FEMALE SELF-DEFINITION: EDNA'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

Edna, as she reflects on her time at Grand Isle, says of herself that she, “At a very early period, [had] apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions,” and it is precisely the tension between this duality that causes Edna to begin her complex journey of awakening to her authentic self, that is to say, a selfhood that is not contingent upon her relationship to others (Chopin 16). Through the course of the novel, Edna begins to reject and question male authorities present in her life in hopes to break the outward conformity that is impressed upon her. Edna describes this inward experience as “[feeling] as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—had snapped the night before ... leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails,” foreshadowing Edna’s final act of freedom in the novel (Chopin 39). Disregarding the societal outward conformity and choosing to set her sails in another direction, however, comes with a price that Chopin carefully and deliberately depicts in her novel.

As the novel progresses, Edna’s quiet inward contemplations lead to bold outward rejections of male authority, and this shift in behavior confuses male observers. In an

early seemingly insignificant scene within the novel, Léonce authoritatively tells his wife: “I can’t permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly”

(Chopin 35). Edna, growing increasingly more defiant,

settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did (Chopin 35).

With a growing sense of self-awareness, or at least a growing desire to be more self-aware, Edna more readily, boldly, and vocally rejects the submissive role of wife she once blindly fulfilled.

Edna also begins to reject the limiting nature of her role as mother. She does not, however, reject the role entirely; rather, she rejects the idea that motherhood was the most supreme role a woman could hold. This is most poignantly illustrated when Edna tells Adele Ratignolle, the epitome of a “mother-woman,” that “[I] [Edna] would never sacrifice [my]self for [my] children or for any one. . . I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (Chopin 53). This ‘revelation,’ almost of cosmic proportions, that Edna begins to grapple with is directly connected to her deviation from the societal standards of the time; The more self-aware she becomes as an individual, the harder it is for Edna to adhere to the behavior and roles expected of her by society. Edna begins to realize that Léonce and the children have not only encroached on her individual identity but have threatened to become her identity if she did not take decisive action to

reject her current circumstances and reroute her life trajectory. Throughout the novel, Chopin depicts an increasingly more self-aware Edna, and, consequently, an increasingly more antagonistic view of her from her male-onlookers.

Within *The Awakening*, Edna's male counterparts, more specifically, Léonce and Dr. Mandelet, are left to *hypothesize* the cause of Edna's "blazed up, stubborn, and resistant" will that has manifested itself in her rejection of the limitations of matrimonial and maternal identities (Chopin 35). After hypothesizing and diagnosing the cause of Edna's new demeanor, the men are compelled to form a course of treatment to cure Edna from her "devilishly wicked" behavior (Chopin 91). These men consistently try to 'diagnose' her as a specimen to be studied in light of 19<sup>th</sup> century normative female behavior that her new identity clearly contrasts. These male characters interpret and reduce Edna's deviation from the prescribed roles to an explanation of mental instability in need of remedy in order to restore Edna to her "social" and "biological" roles of wife and mother that *they* believe to be truth.

Edna's marital and maternal capabilities are inescapably linked to her mental capabilities; How Edna performs as a wife and mother directly affects the perception men have of her mental stability. As Edna more readily rejects these roles and searches for a new identity, her mental health is questioned by some male observers who are operating within the societal standards and medical rationale of the time. These male forces, whether within marital confines, represented by Léonce, or within the medical community, represented by Dr. Mandelet, continually define Edna by what she is *not*: not the image of a 19<sup>th</sup> century True Woman. The overarching dilemma Edna faces within the novel is the tendency of Léonce and Dr. Mandelet to resist her desire to define herself apart from the female normative roles of her time without being labeled as mentally

unstable and in need of remedy.

That which is unknown to Léonce and Dr. Mandelet is understood as “illness” and therefore presents a need to diagnose, treat, and cure these “peculiarities” they find in Edna. Exploring Chopin’s more subtle feminist content of liberating the female mind, exemplified in chapter XXII, will help develop a richer appreciation for Chopin’s accomplishments as a feminist forerunner writing at the cusp of a new century. Explicating chapter XXII, in particular, helps demonstrate the diagnostic approach these men have towards Edna as she pushes against a limited definition of female selfhood toward a radical individualism of “resolv[ing] never again to belong to another than herself” (Chopin 89). Chapter XXII, an understated and unexamined chapter in *The Awakening*, helps readers glean Chopin’s more subtle feminist agenda of exposing the shortcomings of 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal institutions in understanding female desire for self-definition outside the roles of wife and mother.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CHAPTER XXII: THE UNDERSTATED AND UNEXAMINED CHAPTER**

Chapter XXII is one of the shortest chapters in the entire novel, consisting of only three and a half pages, and is situated roughly in the middle of the novel. In light of the meta-narrative of the text, chapter XXII could be initially interpreted as superfluous; if omitted, the plot would read understandably. It is in this chapter that Chopin introduces readers to Dr. Mandelet, the only physician within the novel, and exposes readers to the dialogue between Dr. Mandelet and Léonce Pontellier concerning Edna's behavior. Dr. Mandelet has very little presence within the novel, only appearing a couple of times after his introduction in the text, yet his interactions with the Pontelliers and his commentary have profound implications on studying the discourse of female mental illness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as it pertains to the roles of wife and mother.

With these observations in mind, there are necessary questions that arise concerning the purpose of chapter XXII and the inclusion of Dr. Mandelet that should be explored more deeply to understand Chopin's commentary on the misunderstanding and mismanagement, primarily by male participants, of the female mind that thinks outside what is acceptable. Why does Chopin include this seemingly unessential chapter that contains an obscure and previously unmentioned character? Why does she develop a

relationship between a physician and Edna's husband when the text is about Edna's awakening? What does the content of the chapter reveal about the cultural realities of Chopin's time and what is she trying to accomplish by revealing this to readers? By exploring the characters involved in chapter XXII, the catalyst of their interactions and the conclusions drawn from their conversation, readers begin to understand more clearly the feminist agenda Chopin is promoting through the inclusion of this specific chapter.

In chapter XXII, Chopin invites readers into a "house [that] stood rather far back from the street" to Dr. Mandelet's study where Léonce has come to consult "his old friend and family physician" regarding Edna and her recent change in behavior (Chopin 73). She allows readers to listen in on the private conversation between the men, held in Dr. Mandelet's "quiet and peaceful" study, and through it she reveals the deeply ingrained, misguided beliefs both men held that were indicative of a more general male opinion of the time (Chopin 73). Chopin allows an inside look into a private conversation and through this intentional inclusion of an otherwise superfluous chapter, she is able to expose the misguided opinions, carried out through male dominated institutions, of women who do not function within the acceptable roles.

She metaphorically 'opens the doors' of Dr. Mandelet's office and allows readers to observe the men in their natural atmosphere having a frank and honest conversation concerning Edna's deviation from female normative behavior and the conclusions they draw from the data they have collected. Within the conversation, Léonce's concerns over "what ails [Edna]" and Dr. Mandelet's reactions towards those concerns point toward the cultural misunderstandings patriarchal institutions, more specifically marriage and medicine, held regarding female selfhood during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Chopin 72). Chopin's inclusion of this brief, private, and seemingly unexpected dialogue between husband and



doctor is proof of her more subtle feminist agenda for reevaluating the interpretations of deviation from female normative roles.

Important to note in this chapter are the characters involved: a physician, Dr. Mandelet, and Edna's husband, Léonce. Both the marital and medical institutions were controlled by men, and in chapter XXII Chopin explores and exposes the interplay between these two institutions. Men not only created the societal standards women were expected to adhere to, but they also regulated the deviation from those rules because of their authoritative positions as physicians and husbands. By both creating and regulating the rules and roles of female identity, men were able to enforce behaviors they rationalized and believed to be most appropriate. It becomes clearer then that Chopin is making her intervention into this circular form of control in hopes of placing the power of decision making into the hands of women. The doctor, while instructing Léonce, says that "authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife" (Chopin 79). Important to note is the word "manage," as it connotes the power structure at play between Edna and the male dominated roles of husband and doctor that are above her. Chopin, through *The Awakening*, helps expose this misguided mismanagement from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and promotes a protagonist who sets out to manage her own life by rejecting the limited roles afforded to her.

Léonce had the right to consult with a physician about Edna's behavioral health without her prompting or her permission. As readers of the twenty-first century, this violation of medical privacy is almost incomprehensible, but this was a common, unquestioned reality of Edna's time. Léonce and Dr. Mandelet, products of their time, have a fundamental misunderstanding of Edna and draw conclusions about her in light of her inability to perform the way they expect her to. Chopin is questioning these male

power structures, is calling for a reevaluation of gender roles and male attitudes towards them, and is beckoning for a movement towards a feminist radical individualism moving into the twentieth century. Using Edna as a mouthpiece, Chopin seems to try to bridge the gaps between the two centuries by exposing and retiring the old way of thinking so that women can have the freedom to define selfhood in their own words and on their own terms.

Chopin opens chapter XXII with a description of Dr. Mandelet as a “semi-retired physician” who “bore a reputation for wisdom rather than skill,” that leads readers to view him less as an authoritative figure and more as an outdated voice in the medical community (Chopin 72). Although a long-standing “physician” and family friend, Chopin strips the Doctor of some credibility by describing him in this way from the beginning. It seems early on that Chopin in portraying Dr. Mandelet as an outdated and invalid voice in the medical sphere which lends to her feminist agenda in calling for a reevaluation of this patriarchal institution. Opening the chapter in this way allows Chopin to communicate her critical tone early on, and the interactions between Léonce and Dr. Mandelet that follow can be interpreted not as a legitimate medical discussion but as a satire that exposes the male misunderstanding, both social and biological, of the female desire for autonomy and its manifestations in rejection of conventional female normative roles.

Léonce opens his conversation with Dr. Mandelet by “whirling his stick between his two hands,” and, through this phallic symbol, Chopin illustrates the power and authority Léonce tries to assert over Edna by seeking medical advice without her prompting, permission, or participation (Chopin 72). He explains the catalyst for his concern to the Doctor listing that “[Edna] lets the housekeeping go to the dickens...she’s making it

devilishly uncomfortable for [him]...she's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women" (Chopin 3). Chopin very clearly outlines Edna's social deviation from her roles of servitude and channels readers into Léonce's inner thoughts and reactions towards her behavior. Edna is no longer confined to the domestic sphere where she was under the ownership of her children and husband, she no longer places her husband's comforts over her own, and she has begun to understand the right she has to be a fully functioning autonomous woman.

These rejections of her marital and maternal roles lead Léonce "to wonder if his wife were not growing a little *unbalanced mentally* [emphasis added]. He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (Chopin 64). It is after Edna has shed this fictitious self and "freed herself of illusions about marriage, domesticity, and 19<sup>th</sup> century womanhood" that Léonce began to question her mental stability and caused him to bring his concerns to the Doctor (Dyer 106). For Léonce, Edna's rejection of her roles of wife and mother was symptomatic of an ailment and imbalance. For Edna, however, her rejection of these roles was a sign of personal and spiritual growth and wellbeing. The same behavior was perceived entirely differently based on the perspectives used to approach it: a patriarchal perspective where men defined and regulated strict gender roles or a feminist perspective that promotes autonomy and self-definition. The challenge for Chopin, and, perhaps in many ways for today, was bridging that disconnect and misunderstanding.

The careful use of the phrase 'unbalanced mentally' demonstrates clearly the improper 19<sup>th</sup> century correlation between deviation from socially prescribed gender roles and mental illness that Chopin is criticizing. It seems Chopin was strategic in Léonce

bringing his concerns to a physician because it allowed her to highlight the greater cultural reality that:

“physicians were generally using their authority to *prescribe conventional behavior* as well as medicine [emphasis added]. Some doctors...emphatically insisted on the *curative value of domesticity* [emphasis added]. The anatomy and temperament of women were seen as perfectly suited to motherhood; thus, equilibrium and health could be gained only through its pursuits” (Dyer 9).

Conversely, then, if a woman resisted the roles in which she was “perfectly suited” to, she was viewed as unbalanced and unhealthy. Chopin’s inclusion of a physician in her novel and the inclusion of chapter XXII help to draw that distinction more clearly.

Although less emphatically than Perkin-Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,”<sup>1</sup>—the physician in *The Awakening*, Dr. Mandelet, does subtly point towards this domestic curative treatment, instructing Léonce to “send [his] wife up to the wedding...it will do her good,” as if being in the mere presence of a wedding would restore Edna to her proper role as a wife (Chopin 73). Bauer and Lakritz note “that Léonce Pontellier consults Dr. Mandelet suggests the trouble Edna’s culture has separating its social problems from bodily illness,” and this disconnect is made evident in chapter XXII when Léonce seeks medical answers for his wife’s behaviors (Bauer and Lakritz 49). The social issues Edna grapples with throughout the text surrounding female identity are mistaken and misconstrued as a bodily or mental illness. The interplay between the authoritative male roles of husband and doctor and socially prescribed gender roles is certainly present within the novel, and by evaluating the text with this in mind, readers are able to see Chopin’s more subtle agenda begin to take form.

Dr. Mandelet’s response to Léonce’s concerns, under the guise of medical authority,

further exposes the patriarchal misunderstanding of women who thought and operated outside the parameters of female normative behavior. Already having discredited Dr. Mandelet as a legitimate medical authority, Chopin guides readers into interpreting his responses to Léonce as misguided and they elicit a reevaluation of the medical diagnostic approach towards women in relationship to contradicting traditional gender roles. A deeper look into the 19<sup>th</sup> century medical profession is not only beneficial but crucial in understanding the challenge Chopin was taking on in publishing a novel.

**CHAPTER VI**  
**THE MALE-DOMINATED MEDICAL FIELD: MISINFORMED MEDICAL**  
**RATIONALE**

The male cultural understanding of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was largely based on misguided, yet held as authoritative, “medical” rationale that was influenced less by concrete evidence and more by male observation and opinion: “The hysterical female character gradually began to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century medical literature, one based on interpretations of mood and personality rather than on discrete physical symptoms” (Smith-Rosenberg 202). Medical theories arose in 19<sup>th</sup> century medical literature, hoping to explain female behavior that deviated from culturally accepted gender roles. Ranging from “reflex effects of utero-ovarian irritation” to thin blood “causing nutritional inadequacies in the central nervous system,” the male medical sector earnestly sought to define, explain, and treat these idiopathic ‘diseases’ that plagued women and prohibited them from fulfilling the subservient roles they were destined to fulfill (Smith-Rosenberg 204,206). Male physicians, and a husband’s right to consult those physicians without their wives consent, were able to assert control and power over their female patients because, as physicians, they were defining, prescribing, and enforcing these gender roles

by using their medical title as a basis of authority and truth. To this extent, Michel Foucault, in *Truth and Power*, proposes that:

“the ‘political economy’...is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses...The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people’s consciousnesses—or what’s in their heads—but the political, economical, institutional regime of the production of truth” ( Foucault 1668-1669, 1670).

In *The Awakening*, the male-dominated sphere of medicine is an ‘economic apparatus’ used to regulate and exercise power over female behavior. As Foucault articulates, Chopin is calling for a total reconsideration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century production of truth within the medical sector. As Edna rejects the truth available to her and seeks the greater truth of autonomy apart and outside these limitations, she realizes “that final truth, that greater truth, cannot coexist with the social, the moral, or even the biological obligations of motherhood,” and Chopin’s plight seems to be finding a solution to bridge the chasm between marriage and motherhood and her desire for autonomy (Dyer 105). Chopin’s more subtle feminist agenda in *The Awakening* adopts a Foucauldian model of calling into question not only the individual misinformed male thought processes, but more importantly it calls for a deconstruction of the patriarchal institutions that are producing a truth that she disagrees with. Evidence of this is found in her purposeful inclusion of Dr. Mandelet.

The Doctor, the only physician in the novel, at first reading, stands as a representative of the medical rationale and medical production of truth of the time: “from the 1870s

onward, this generation of doctors presented a constellation of *rigid views on gender roles* [emphasis added]” that shaped how a woman was understood by a male physician and informed his attitudes towards his female patients (Showalter 122, Smith-Rosenberg 216). Chopin, often referring to Dr. Mandelet as The Doctor, capitalizes his name to almost connote the larger Foucauldian truth this character represents. Chopin’s inclusion of chapter XXII and Dr. Mandelet point towards this Foucauldian inspired feminist agenda for liberating the female mind from the patriarchal conventions that have defined, regulated, and restrained it.

As presented in chapter XXII, Léonce approaches Dr. Mandelet seeking these ‘medical’ answers to explain his wife’s change in behaviors when he frustratingly tells the doctor that Edna is “odd, she’s not like herself. I can’t make her out...It isn’t easy to explain” (Chopin 72). Léonce is sincerely perplexed by his wife’s change in behavior, and his natural reaction is to assume that it is symptomatic of some deeper medical ailment in need of medical attention from the physician. Dr. Mandelet also alludes to this medical rationale in his conversation with Léonce, explaining that “woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism—a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar” (Chopin 74). In the endnote of the Oxford edition of *The Awakening*, scholars note that Dr. Mandelet is referencing “myths of feminine irrationality” through this commentary and is operating under the belief that “women’s bodies [were] highly organized, fine tuned, structures,” physicians believed that an imbalance would directly affect women’s mental health and behaviors (Chopin 369). These notions of femininity, both social and medical, were created, promoted, and enforced by men. They not only had an impact and formed the roles that women played within the domestic sphere but they also tethered them to these



roles.

Léonce clumsily tries to navigate through Edna's awakening and seeks medical counsel through Dr. Mandelet in hopes to 'diagnose' and 'treat' his wife and her change in behavior. In chapter XXII, The dialogue between Dr. Mandelet and Léonce concerning Edna reveals more intricately these misunderstandings both men possess in their respective relationships to Edna and the roles they believe she should be fulfilling. It is important to evaluate Léonce's character more deeply because his relationship with Edna has a profound impact on Edna's development.

## CHAPTER VII

### LÉONCE PONTELLIER: MARRIAGE & MOTHERHOOD

Léonce Pontellier is the character that most powerfully defines Edna because he is the cause and culmination of her two most defining roles: wife and mother. Léonce, perceived by the others as “a great favorite,” and by other women, more specifically, as “the best husband in the world,” is known for his financial generosity and loyalty towards his family (Chopin 9). Chopin’s portrayal of Léonce is, in part, that of a “rather courteous husband,” one that “pleased [Edna]; his absolute devotion flattered her,” and he was “a man who worshipped her” as a prized possession (Chopin 63, 21). Although he views Edna as more of a possession than a partner, he is still loyal and generous to her. These semi-complimentary descriptions of Léonce are important to note because they dispel the notion that he is the villain of Chopin’s narrative.

It seems that his judgment and criticism of his wife were not necessarily malicious in nature but borne of a sincere misunderstanding of her transformative awakening. This interpretation pushes against feminist commentary that tends to demonize Léonce, and it promotes a more subversive feminist agenda that proactively calls for a reevaluation of the roles of wife and mother and the institutions that regulate the definition of these roles. Chopin does not describe Léonce as violent, withholding, abusive, or as *consciously*

oppressive; rather, he is mainly concerned with how things appear, pleading with Edna “to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say” (Chopin 103).

As Edna “began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked,” Léonce grew increasingly more confused by her, noting that “her new and unexpected line of conduct completely *bewildered* him. It *shocked* him,” and, undoubtedly, left him with questions to be answered concerning his wife’s shift in behavior [emphasis added] (Chopin 63). As an outside observer, Léonce compared his wife’s change in behavior to the normative roles he believed she was expected to fulfill and did fulfill through the course of their six year marriage; His natural reaction to her deviation was shock and bewilderment. Interestingly, this misunderstanding of Edna’s behavior prompts him to take his concerns to the medical sphere. He was seeking to have his questions answered under the authority of medical rationale.

Perhaps Chopin’s careful portrayal of Léonce, in this regard, helps readers understand the fundamental misunderstandings, not necessarily always *malicious* but still *dangerous*, that directly affected the perception of women. Furthermore, this unconscious and perfunctory male view towards women seems, in Chopin’s mind, to be far more dangerous than an overt oppressor because it is harder to change that which is commonly accepted and unconsciously carried out. In her subtle feminist plight, Chopin’s female protagonist is not merely fighting against one overly sensationalized male oppressor; instead, she is fighting against something much larger: the entire social and cultural misunderstanding of women’s desire for a fuller existence and the incorrect connection that had with their mental health.

Although misunderstood, Léonce did openly condemn and criticize his wife for abandoning the rules and roles she was expected to obey and adhere to. There is evidence

in the text that supports his authoritative role. In particular throughout the text, he criticizes her marital and maternal capabilities and draws conclusions about Edna for her failure to “me[e]t a certain tacit submissiveness,” for “her absolute disregard for her duties as wife,” and for “her habitual neglect of the children” (Chopin 63, 8). As she increasingly fails, in Léonce’s eyes, to perform as a wife and mother, she is increasingly viewed as mentally unstable. Léonce’s complaints are built upon the premise of 19<sup>th</sup> century female normative behavior and the “mother-woman” outlined in Chopin’s text, and Edna’s refusal to behave within these expectations and her inability to embrace the “mother-woman” role elicits Léonce’s frustration and prompts his decision to reach out to Dr. Mandelet.

**CHAPTER VIII**  
**19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SOCIALLY PRESCRIBED FEMALE ROLES: OUTLINE OF**  
**FEMALE NORMATIVE BEHAVIOR**

In order to more fully appreciate Chopin's accomplishments as a feminist forerunner, it is important to outline briefly the societal expectations of 19<sup>th</sup> century women and to explore the ways in which Edna most clearly contradicted them. Social-Historians note that women in 19<sup>th</sup> century America were all expected to possess a similar and almost universal female personality: "Among these qualities were cheerfulness, vivacity, and powers of endurance" that were necessary for a woman to be "capable not only of bearing her own share of ills, but helping to bear those of others" (Showalter 123). Women were never afforded an acceptable and unique female identity free from their subservient relationships to others, and this reality is the catalyst for Edna's awakening and journey towards self-definition and autonomy. Women were socially praised if they were "pious, pure, domestic and pleasing to *others* [emphasis added]," in particular to their husbands and children (Corse and Westervelt 147). This was true to such an extent that "the role for women of the day was managing the house and raising the children," making them become, "along with the house and the children, the property of [their] husband[s]" (Joslin 171).

Chopin makes this typical convention of her time evident in the novel through Léonce's attitude towards Edna. Only a couple pages into the first chapter of *The Awakening*, Léonce observes Edna's sunburned body by "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of *personal property* [emphasis added] which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 4). Having ownership over his belongings, not necessarily for their intrinsic worth but because of the power of ownership they afforded him, was a source of pride for Léonce because "he greatly valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his...his household gods" (Chopin 56). The role of a woman was clearly defined to the domestic sphere where she performed as wife and mother and, as Chopin illustrates, if a woman dared to step outside the metaphorical four walls of her "home," she would be met with not only misunderstanding but also criticism: "He [Léonce] reproached his wife with her inattention" and neglect to fulfill these subservient wifely duties (Chopin 8). Edna casts aside the expectations her husband, and the culture he represents, has placed on her and abandons the household rituals she has performed for the past six years. Within the novel, tension begins to build as Edna neglects "the programme which [she] had religiously followed since her marriage, six years before," and apathetically disregards her wifely duties of keeping up appearances to Léonce's inner circle of colleagues and friends (Chopin 10)

Dorothy H. Jacobs points out that throughout the novel, "Léonce Pontellier has the polished and distanced demeanor of a sophisticated proprietor," and Edna was expected to serve her husband and children dutifully because, in a very real sense, she was considered to be under their ownership (Jacobs 82). Léonce's devotion to his wife was not necessarily based on authentic love, mutual respect, or equal partnership; rather, Edna was his prized possession that he was able to establish ownership over and therefore

establish authority over. When he is no longer able to maintain authority over his possession, who is “making it devilishly uncomfortable for him,” he turns to the medical sector to regain power over his wife by subjecting her to another authority figure, The Doctor (Chopin 73).

Léonce, perplexed by his wife’s insubordination, explains to Dr. Mandelet that Edna has “got some notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (Chopin 73). Although Chopin never speaks of the “eternal rights of women” explicitly in the text, she does allude to Edna’s growing sense of awareness of “her relation as an individual to the world within and about her” and the inequality that is becoming increasingly more apparent as she journeys through her awakening (Chopin 16). Dr. Mandelet echos this notion by asking Léonce if Edna “ha[d] been associating...with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women— super-spiritual superior beings?” (Chopin 73). Both Léonce’s reference to the eternal rights of women and Dr. Mandelet’s reference to this circle of women point toward the idea the New Woman, “the term used at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe women who were pushing against the limits which society imposed” upon them in search for independence and self-realization (Melani 1). Showalter notes that “the appearance of the New Woman, with her demands for education, work, and personal freedom” began to emerge as both a 19<sup>th</sup> century societal figure and a as a literary figure, and, the inclusion of Dr. Mandelet and Léonce’s commentary echo the plight of the New Woman in *The Awakening* (Showalter 121).

More important for the study of the discourse of mental illness in the novel, Chopin seems to be drawing the connection between the New Woman’s desire for a fuller existence and the medical misinterpretations that followed. Showalter notes that “at the same time that new opportunities for self-cultivation and self-fulfillment in education and

work were offered to women, doctors warned them that pursuit of such opportunities would lead to sickness, sterility, and race suicide. They explicitly linked the epidemic of nervous disorders to women's ambition" (Showalter 121). Chopin's inclusion of these brief yet insightful remarks in chapter XXII reveals the deeper implications that surrounded the New Woman and the choices she made to defy traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles. The more Edna understands the grim reality that her culture denies women the right to define their own identity, the clearer it becomes to her that she needs to form an identity for herself apart from the limitations placed upon her no matter what the cost. The conclusion of the novel begins to take on a different meaning in light of Edna's revelation of her desire for autonomy, and, a later explication of Edna's suicide will demonstrate her logical carrying out of her desire for ultimate autonomy.

Similar to his criticism of her marital shortcomings, Léonce also criticizes Edna for her inattention towards her role as mother in the care of their two boys. Criticizing his wife's maternal capabilities, he rhetorically asks, "if it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home" (Chopin 8). Léonce has clear expectations for the division of labor within the family, and Edna's primary obligation was to serve the children.

Motherhood is an overarching and undeniable theme of the novel. Edna struggles throughout to understand herself in relationship to her children and is never afforded the opportunity to think through this complex issue without being scrutinized, reproached, or, most detrimental, without being diagnosed. To this extent, Skaggs notes that "in her maternal role, as well, Edna encounters resistance to her desire to become a fully developed human individual. The same culture that deems woman to belong to man also



demands her subordination to his offspring; Edna's society, therefore, abounds with 'mother-women,' emphasizing the notion that women were defined by their subservient roles not only to their husbands but also to their children (Skaggs 108).

The issue of motherhood, in particular, is essential in understanding Edna's decisions because it is the role that she most clearly struggles to conform to, and, as Dyer proposes, "it is the issue of motherhood, perhaps more than anything else, that forces Edna into the sea" (Dyer 101). Evidence of this is found in the final pages of *The Awakening*; Edna's children haunt her deepest thoughts at the close of the novel, moments before she takes her life she envisioned that "the children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (Chopin 127). Chopin's bold decision to publish a novel whose protagonist harbored these strong oppressive feelings of discontentment and resentment towards her children, and, more broadly, toward the concept of motherhood as the ultimate identity, undoubtedly rattled 19<sup>th</sup> century readers to their core. To this extent, Dyer explains that "more oppressive than the daily demands of children is the century's pervasive and limiting notion of gender, the notion that a woman's duty and reward are found in motherhood" (Dyer 103). In fact, it was Edna's yearning for self-worth and reward outside the role of mother that was a primary catalyst for Léonce and Dr. Mandélet's diagnostic approach towards her behavior.

A closer evaluation of how Chopin presents motherhood is not only beneficial but absolutely essential in understanding the misinformed correlation between rejecting the 19th century role of motherhood and male misperception of female mental illness. In a society where unfaltering devotion towards children was a womanly expectation, readers of the twenty-first century can begin to understand the bold and intentional risks Chopin

was taking by describing her female protagonist, a woman who views her own children as antagonists, in such a contradictory way. With the male role typically operating in the public sphere, Edna's life was confined to the domestic sphere where she was fully expected to fulfill the socially prescribed "obligations to submit to the needs of the family and to conform to the model of self-sacrificing 'womanly' behavior" (Showalter 144). Chopin most frequently describes Edna's rejection of her maternal responsibilities by contrasting her to, what she coins, the "mother-woman." Chopin's inclusion of the societal figure points readers towards drawing distinction between Edna and the "mother-woman."

**CHAPTER IX**  
**MOTHERHOOD: SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE “MOTHER-WOMAN”**  
**AND EDNA**

A “mother-woman” is best summarized through Edna’s reflections: “It was easy to know them [mother-women], fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 10). Edna is consistently contrasted from the “mother-woman” figure, because she was, “in short, not a mother-woman,” and by observing the consequences of this reality, Chopin is able to depict the commonly held ideologies of her time. Victorian America held tightly to strict gender roles mentioned earlier, and, in particular, the Victorian woman, “society dictated, was to be chaste, delicate, and loving” mothers and nurturers (Smith-Rosenberg 183). Social historians have examined the Victorian woman and the culture she represents, and Chopin very purposefully includes Adele Ratignolle, the most “delicious in the role,” as a point of reference to that societal figure (Chopin 10). Rather than celebrating this prominent societal figure, however, Chopin explores the downfalls of this limited definition of self.

Skaggs comments on Chopin’s critical portrayal of Adele, explaining that “apparently

unable to perceive herself as an individual human being, possessing no sense of herself beyond her role of wife and mother, Adele exists only in relation to her family, not in relation to herself and the world” (Skaggs 94). Chopin reduces the idealized ‘mother-woman’ figure to a walking insecurity that has no “healthy sense of her own worth” (Skaggs 94). By minimizing the role of “mother-woman,” Chopin emphasizes the importance of autonomy and female self-definition that her protagonist desperately searches for. By so clearly contrasting Edna from Adele, the perpetually pregnant mother-woman who is primarily defined by her ability to conceive and bear children, Chopin promotes the belief that “women must be given thorough recognition because of their worth as human beings, not because of their reproductive capability” (Dyer 101). The New Woman, the antithesis of the “mother-woman,” rejects the idea that motherhood is the highest and most natural role for women. Furthermore, the New Woman promotes that freedom for women to choose an existence outside of this role without being damned or diagnosed. As Edna begins to minimize the primacy of motherhood, “she realizes that patriarchal society is quick to condemn particularly a freedom-seeking woman who neglects her children since she—rather than her husband—is “intended by nature” to take care of them” (Seyersted 146).

Motherhood is interestingly explored in *The Awakening* because the children are very much absent. Skaggs comments that “although children play only minor roles in this novel, motherhood dominates the lives of both Adele and Edna. Chopin sees an absolutely inescapable link—basic, natural, and powerful—between the female identity and motherhood,” and Chopin very clearly scrutinizes this reality (Skaggs 90). It is this inescapable link that drives Edna to grapple with the realities of what it means, if at all possible, to belong to herself while still belonging to her children. Edna, contrasting

herself from Adele, reflected that “she was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them [her children] passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (Chopin 21). As Edna oscillates between affection and no recollection of her children, never denying loving them, it becomes clear that “what she most defies is the central perception of her century that women are mothers first and individuals second—or not at all. She never denies the value of motherhood and admits on more than one occasion that the children were part of her life. But she does deny its supremacy over larger truths of human existence” (Dyer 106). Edna was seeking for the opportunity to discover herself as an autonomous human being. She struggled throughout to try to reconcile the role of mother and the role of self.

For Chopin, then, the issue with motherhood is the issue of autonomy: “Thus woman’s existence, first and last, *intertwines* [emphasis added] with her maternal nature. Edna’s sense of herself as a complete person makes impossible her role of wife and mother as defined by her society; yet she discovers that her role of mother also makes impossible her continuing development as an autonomous individual” (Skaggs 111). Throughout the novel, Edna tirelessly attempts to untangle the meaning of autonomy from the meaning of motherhood; it is a task she labored to complete up until the close of the novel, and a later explication of Edna’s suicide will demonstrate Edna’s courageous efforts and victory over her circumstances

Constructing a female protagonist who dared to minimize the role of motherhood and reject its limiting nature proves Chopin’s audacity and offers insight into her feminist agenda. Chopin creates a dichotomy between Adele and Edna to display the extent to which Edna contrast the society she lived in. Whereas “Adele reaches her apex of perfection in motherhood,” a self-sacrificial role, Edna’s is the closest to reaching

completion when she resigns to never live her life for another human being (Skaggs 91). With this clear contrast laid out in the text, the male reactions towards Edna reveal the misinformed theories surrounding 19<sup>th</sup> century female mental health in light of normative behavior. Dyer notes that “motherhood and selfhood were incompatible in Edna’s century, and in some ways, as we have seen, incompatible in Edna herself,” and it is this incompatibility that helps explain, in part, Edna’s suicide that will be explored later (Dyer 103). As the novel progresses and Edna’s desire for autonomy grows, she begins to more boldly and outwardly reject the female normative behavior that is expected of her, and readers are able to see increasing evidence of the link that exists in male minds between Edna’s mental health and her rejection of these maternal functions.

## **CHAPTER X**

### **MOTHERHOOD: BIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Inescapably linked to the social aspect of the female domestic role of servitude were the biological convictions that patriarchal Victorian America held regarding women and their consequent roles. Male doctors consistently highlighted women's reproductive obligations to society, noting that "woman's work was clearly motherhood, which fulfilled and exercised her nature as it also served the needs of society and the race," firmly believing that "women were mentally constituted to take care of children, as well as physically constituted to give birth" (Showalter 123). If women strove for definitions outside of the roles of wife and mother, "doctors warned them that pursuit of such opportunities would lead to sickness, sterility, and race suicide," motivating women, through fear, to fulfill their biologically ordained roles in life (Showalter 121). Dr. Mandelstam alludes to this when he tells Edna that the purpose of motherhood, in part, is "a decoy to secure mothers for the race" in order to fulfill their reproductive responsibilities to society (Chopin 123).

It becomes clear, then, that not only were women expected to adhere to social models of female behavior, but also they were biologically obligated to fulfill their reproductive roles in child bearing. To defy the roles of wife and mother was to defy womanhood in its

entirety, both socially and biologically. Women who opposed these roles, as Edna did, could not be, in the minds of male onlookers, mentally healthy or ‘of their right minds’. Social-Historians comment on this connection between socially prescribed roles and ‘medical’ interpretations of women, noting there was an undeniable “relation that existed in the physicians’ minds between their categorizing of disease[s] and the role women were expected to play in society. These patients did not function as women were expected to function” (Smith-Rosenberg 202). If women chose to contradict the societal standards of female normative behavior, their mental health was called into question and, consequently, a diagnostic approach was taken towards understanding the female desire for autonomy.

In summary, “woman can be seen as both product and indictment of her culture,” and, for Edna, this becomes increasingly more apparent as she “awakens gradually out of a dream” and begins to understand the grim reality she is attempting to overcome in her search for selfhood outside the roles of wife and mother (Smith-Rosenberg 215, *The Awakening* 36). By the end of the novel, Edna seems to be painfully aware of society’s response towards her awakening. Chapter XXII offers Chopin’s insight into 19<sup>th</sup> century perception of mental illness in relationship to women seeking selfhood outside the roles of wife and mother. Her inclusion of chapter XXII, and, in particular, the inclusion and presentation of Dr. Mandelet and Leoncè point toward her subtle feminist agenda that calls into question the 19<sup>th</sup> century production of truth and reveals her call for a reevaluation of female autonomy moving into the twentieth century and beyond.



## **CHAPTER XI**

### **EDNA'S SUICIDE EXPLAINED**

Chopin is faithful in presenting her protagonist as an emerging New Woman unwilling to allow her self-sacrificial roles to dominate her identity through the enforcement of marriage or medicine. As Edna begins to understand the weight of her awakening, so too she realizes the weight of the resistance she experiences. In learning who she is and is not, her “gradual awareness of her voice, her burgeoning consciousness, is crucial in her resistance of the repressive demands made by society” (Bauer and Lakritz 49). As she grapples with the reality that the world of her time is not ready for the autonomy she is searching for, Edna is faced with a choice. She needs to silence the voices of her culture and turns to the “the voice of the sea” that “is seductive...inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” to find her ultimate expression of self-definition (Chopin 127).

The conclusion of *The Awakening* has been widely debated since its publication in 1899. In the conversation about 19<sup>th</sup> century perceptions of mental illness, Edna's suicide cannot be overlooked, and, in particular, it must be examined in light of Edna's desire for autonomy. Throughout the novel, Edna's struggle to become an autonomous being undoubtedly challenges her mentally and emotionally; however, her suicide cannot be

understood as legitimate mental illness defined by contemporary guidelines. Evaluating Edna, a 19<sup>th</sup> century literary figure, in light of modern medicine does not take into account the great historical, social, and gender based concepts Chopin is trying to communicate to her readers. Rather, her suicide must be explained in relationship to the meta-narrative of the novel. In an arduous search for truth and identity, Edna's suicide is perhaps the only moment in the novel where she has clarity and becomes an active decision maker in her own life. Her suicide is her first and final act as a fully autonomous human being that has overcome the limitations of 19<sup>th</sup> century female roles.

Most scholars agree that Edna finds some sort of final rest from the exterior demands of motherhood and marriage through her suicide; however, these interpretations imply her fleeing from the oppressive forces in her life rather than victoriously and decidedly overcoming them through her choice of suicide. This 'escapist' theory of Edna's suicide overlooks Chopin's more subtle feminist agenda of liberating the female mind from patriarchal institutions that define and regulate female selfhood. Barbara C. Ewell notes that *The Awakening* ends with "perhaps the most *ambivalent* [emphasis added] conclusion in all American Literature"; however, in light of textual support for Chopin's more subtle feminist agenda, Edna's suicide becomes less ambivalent and more of a calculated decision in reaching the ultimate autonomous existence (Ewell 164). Evidence of this is found in Edna's carefully laid out final thoughts where "she had done all the thinking which was necessary" before taking her life (Chopin 126). Skaggs argues that "[Chopin] communicates the deep tragedy of this woman who, unable to achieve a full existence, chooses to be no one"; however, there is stronger more compelling evidence to the contrary of Skaggs argument (Skaggs 113).

Although she was never fully able to reconcile the gap between 19<sup>th</sup> century

expectations and her desire for autonomy pragmatically in her life, Edna's suicide seems to be a result of her reaching a full awareness of who she is and what she wants.

Knowing the realities of her time, "Edna refuses to return to a world that values only her performance as a [subservient being], whose highest expectations for women are self-sacrifice and self-effacement. She refuses to return to a world in which this idea is pervasive and inescapable" (Dyer 105). Edna chooses to embrace and exercise the most decided act of autonomy. As Edna stands before the open sea, she exclaims, "how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature," referencing a type of rebirth she experiences as she strips herself of the fictitious self that has adhered to societal standards of womanhood and is reborn into an independent and autonomous human being (Chopin 127). Ironically, moments before she dies, Edna is reborn. In fact, Chopin does not present a crippled, hopeless, or victimized Edna; rather, Edna stands before the world as a new, self-aware and fully awakened being.

Edna was never able to reconcile her roles of wife and mother to her identity as an individual because her society would not allow it; however, she battled until death trying to find a way to overcome this seeming impossibility. Moments before she walked into sea, she "thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin 128). Chopin's describes the *painful yet purposeful* journey for Edna and sets the stage for continuing the conversation of what it means to reconcile the competing "truth" of society with the truth of self-awareness and autonomy. Dyer remarks that:

"Edna cannot reconcile her responsibility to her two young sons with her responsibility to herself. She chooses not to live in a world that forces her to value

herself first as a mother and second as a human being. She is born into the new century too young to know how to change this equation. Chopin decides there will be no easy answers for Edna, just as there would be no easy answers for the women of the twentieth century who followed her” and calls for a continuing discussion of redefining women’s roles (Dyer 17).

Although she chose suicide as the ultimate answer for her protagonist, Chopin proposes that the process of seeking autonomy, although painful, is still a worthy pursuit. In a nuanced way, Chopin ends her novel with a hope and optimism that only becomes fully actualized through Edna’s suicide.

In the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Edna gestures back to the Doctor reflecting, “perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him” and explained her actions and inner thoughts (Chopin 128). The medical establishment, and the relationship between her husband and the medical establishment, had made it impossible for Edna to define herself without being diagnosed and mentally unbalanced; therefore, she uses her suicide as an ultimate authoritative act to overcome these oppressive forces in her life. Edna emerges as a confident and courageous soul at the end of the novel, and, as she gestures back to Dr. Mandelet in her final moments, it is as if she is exclaiming “if only the Doctor could see this clarity and confidence, then he would understand.” If the Doctor was able to see her in that moment, then he would reassess and reconsider his diagnosis of her. Perhaps what was achievable for Edna through death would be achievable in life for generations to follow.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>The Doctor, capitalized in the text as a symbol of authority, after a moment of reflection, tells Léonce that Edna's behavior "was some passing whim... due to some cause or causes which [they] need not fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if he [leaves] her alone" (Chopin 74). This is an important passage to note because it differentiates Chopin from Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, whose short story, "the Yellow Wallpaper," was "published in the New England Magazine in 1892" (The American Short Story and Its writer 390). The unnamed female protagonist of Perkins-Gilman's short story is being treated for a nervous breakdown by her physician-husband, modeled after real doctor S. Weir Mitchell, through confinement and restriction of activity. Gilbert and Gubar note that 19<sup>th</sup> century literary women were trying to escape "into the open spaces of their own authority," and Perkins Gilman accomplished this by exposing the grave injustice and mistreatment mentally-ill women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century experienced from husbands and doctors (Gilbert & Gubar 2021).

Perkins Gilman and Chopin, as feminist forerunners publishing around the same time, both exposed the misunderstanding of the male dominated medical field in their texts. However, Chopin's feminist critique seems to be far more subtle. The Doctor's commentary that Edna's behavior is a passing whim, not to be taken seriously or personally by Léonce, stands in stark contrast to the abusive physician-husband figure in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Although Dr. Mandelet did still believe that authority needed to be exercised over a wife in order to manager her and maintain order within the household, it becomes clear that Edna's behavior is viewed as nonthreatening because her desire for autonomy is not being validated or taken seriously. It is a more passive

approach that utilizes the mentality that instructs Léonce to ‘not bother her and do not let her bother you.’ The doctor does not take Edna’s desire for autonomy seriously, and, consequently refused to validate the profound implications behind her shift in behavior.

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