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## Victorian Maternity and Edna Pontellier's Awakening

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VICTORIAN MATERNITY  
AND  
EDNA PONTELLIER'S AWAKENING

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A Thesis  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts

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by  
Shari Dean Schäffer

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nineteenth-century conception of woman as mother in Kate Chopin's novel, The Awakening.

Both historical study and study in the novel itself reveal the influence of a woman's body and reproductive function in her definition within society. Edna Pontellier, Chopin's protagonist, discovers this correspondence in the course of the novel. Her awakening to the reality of a woman's role in society causes the depression which leads her to commit suicide.

By examining the women around Edna in relation to their maternity, all possible alternatives for self-definition are discussed. Adele Ratignolle, the mother-woman, looms largest of all the women in the book. She not only sees herself primarily as mother, but she also proves her maternity by having a baby near the end of the novel. Mademoiselle Reisz, another prominent woman in Edna's life, also manages to reveal her maternal nature in obscure ways. Her life as an artist in the Victorian mind represents a curious maternity in and of itself. All of the women in The Awakening exhibit maternal nurturance that defines them as women. Edna realizes and confronts this social expectation during the crucial childbirth scene.

It is through the discussion of the birthing scene that social expectations are revealed to the reader as well. By discussing these elements, this paper presents Edna's suicide as essentially anti-social and evasive.

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When Kate Chopin published The Awakening in 1899, the Victorian world of the post-war South was in the midst of rapid and radical change. Her novel entered an already turbulent and controversy-laden society that readily accepted economic, and rejected domestic, change. The implications of the unemotional suicide scene at the end of the novel deeply disturbed a contemporary public who expected women to be satisfied with the roles of wife and mother. Refusing to live out these social expectations, Edna represented to the late nineteenth-century audience a scandal to femininity. What was seen at publication as scandalous has now become for many critics a true assertion of womanhood. Because Edna asserts herself as woman beyond society, modern critics present her suicide as an example of true liberation. Certainly the final scene at Grand Isle has become for many the central issue of the novel itself, prompting critical debate from scholars all over the world.

One of the first critics to present the suicide as liberating, Per Seyersted, renewed interest in Chopin with the publication of his critical biography. He reintroduced the critical debate over her actions with the assertion that

Edna thus takes her life because she, on the one hand, insists on sexual and spiritual freedom, and

on the other, acknowledges a duty not to "trample upon the little lives." Her suicide was entirely valid for her time when her ideas of self-assertion were bound to be condemned outright by the Victorian moral vigilantes. (146)

The first and foremost of the early critics, Seyersted focuses on Edna's sexual awakening and the nobility of her self-sacrifice. He approves her final swim as a model for other women facing the rigid social codes of patriarchy. Many other critics agree with Seyersted. Most notably, George Arms describes Edna's experience as essentially sexual in her transcendence into rebirth through death. He extends Seyersted's argument by revealing Edna as victorious because of her suicide. Sandra Gilbert even suggests that Edna conquers death in order to create a female myth of rebirth and regeneration similar to the Christian idea of rebirth.

Even critics who seem to recognize the fundamental failure of Edna's actions praise her self-assertion. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for example, notes the regressive nature of Edna's "awakening," her reluctance to accept responsibility and grow as an adult. Like Donald Ringe, she draws attention to Edna's consuming romanticism. She also points out, along with others, Edna's childlike propensity to sleep and eat through the most important sections of the novel. Yet, in the end, Wolff comes forward in favor of Edna's actions. Death again provides a means of expressing disdain for the "cruel message" of Nature: "the hopelessness of ever satisfying the

dream of total fusion" (470).

Other critics are not as eager to accept Edna's death as a positive statement. Anne Goodwyn Jones reveals Edna's life as a failed attempt to control sexuality, thought, art, and social existence. George M. Spangler calls the end of the novel a "painful failure of vision (or, more likely, of nerve)" that is "fundamentally evasive" (253, 255). This failure, according to Spangler, reduces The Awakening from the status of a masterpiece to that of an interesting book. James Justus also calls Edna's actions regressive, suggesting that she moves toward childhood in an "unawakening" (106).

Because Edna's suicide can be approached in so many different ways, the main responses to the novel range from unquestioning affirmation to a dissatisfied denial of Edna's actions. Yet, in every case, the understanding of the work relies upon the reader's reaction to the final scene on the beach at Grand Isle. Few scholars have noted the actual moment of crisis, the point at which Edna confronts her situation for the first time, the childbirth scene the night before her suicide.

Accustomed to Edna's passivity throughout the novel, most critics fail to notice her first real personal reflection: when Edna returns home after witnessing the birth of Adele's latest child, she sits on her porch and thinks. Edna's inactivity, something the reader has accepted constantly throughout the novel, does not denote passivity here. Instead, she spends the time sorting out her situation in



response to what she has just experienced in the birth chamber. The narration follows closely the intensity of what she has experienced:

the tearing emotion of the last few hours seemed to fall away from her like a somber uncomfortable garment, which she had but to loosen to be rid of. She went back to that hour before Adele had sent for her; and her senses kindled afresh in thinking of Robert's words, the pressure of his arms, and the feeling of his lips upon her own. (110)

Edna consciously rejects the thoughts of the birth and returns to a romantic "intoxication of expectancy" (110). Yet, she persistently hears "Adele's voice whispering 'Think of the children; think of them'" (110). Again she makes an effort to suppress these thoughts. She convinces herself that she will think about the birthing later: "She meant to think of them [the children]; that determination had driven into her soul like a death wound--but not tonight. To-morrow would be time to think of everything" (110).

The depth with which Edna has experienced the birth becomes evident by Chopin's use of the words "death wound." It is, finally, the need to "think of [her] children" that sends Edna to her death. The birth that she witnesses does become the wound that kills her. All of the intensity of these emotions returns when she discovers that Robert has left, and Edna spends the night in contemplation:

she stretched herself out there, never uttering a

sound. She did not sleep. She did not go to bed. The lamp sputtered and went out. She was still awake in the morning, when Celestine unlocked the kitchen door and came in to light the fire. (111)

Edna makes all of her decisions during this sleepless night. The next day, on the beach, Chopin states that "she was not dwelling upon any particular train of thought. She had done all the thinking that was necessary . . . when she lay awake upon the sofa" (113).

The suicide is a direct result of the emotional upheaval Edna experiences during and after the time she spends with Adele in labor and delivery. It is curious that Edna should react so violently to the natural scene she witnesses. Why does this confrontation with birth incite such a violent reaction from her? What does she experience that is different from the twentieth-century childbirth? How does her response point out an important understanding of The Awakening? Although the experiences of a woman in labor in the nineteenth century clearly differed from those of a woman in labor today, Edna's reaction seems extreme. In order to understand the implications of Chopin's emphasis on the birthing chamber and Edna's response to it, it is necessary to examine both the nineteenth-century social values concerning women, especially those relating to birth and maternity, and Edna's comprehension of her social role.

Women's roles in the late nineteenth-century South were in the midst of many changes. Just beginning to seek more autonomous positions within the culture, some women were challenging the strictly patriarchal world of the Victorians. Yet it was in cities like New York and Boston that most of the upheaval occurred; the primarily rural South mainly sought to establish and maintain stasis after the turbulent war years and the horrors of Reconstruction. Southern men, hoping to regain some sense of pride and accomplishment, retained control over the political and economic world, and, most especially, over the microcosmic world of the individual family. They clung fiercely to their power as a last vestige of the glories of the old South.

The best features of the pre-war South were magnified in order to avert attention from the evils of slavery. Southern writers began a real campaign to "resurrect" the wonders of the past. This need to romanticize ante-bellum life produced the deification of the Southern lady. The beautiful, gracious, loving, and kind plantation mistress seemed to exemplify all that was good in the old South. The nearly impossible task of living the myth of the Southern lady fell to the women of the post-war period. Women were expected to remain at home as wife and mother and exist simply to perpetuate this myth while the men toiled long and hard in the business world.

The single most influential factor in this nineteenth-century woman's life was not her husband's position

but her own body. Unlike socio-economic position, a woman's body was a constant influence from which she could never escape. Historians and literary critics alike remark on the association between every aspect of a woman's life and her reproductive organs, beginning before the onset of menses when every young girl experienced the tension of menarche. . Because both doctors and scientists considered the body a closed energy system, any abnormal development revealed excessive activity in another area. Therefore, a girl who began to menstruate before about fourteen was viewed as excessively sexual, probably masturbatory; one who began after about eighteen, too late by nineteenth-century standards, signified an over-stimulated mind. Both extremes were considered dangerous to the girl (Hellerstein 19). The immense physical oppression that the social pressure exerted on young girls emphasized the constant, nagging pressure of menstruation:

The topic, rarely mentioned save through euphemisms and almost never appearing in literary works, cramped and confined every aspect of a young girl's life, just as at menarche she was cramped by a tight corset and long, heavy skirts--which, as sensible women tried to point out, were much more likely to cause an uncomfortable menses than interesting and invigorating studies would. It is not surprising that middle-class girls, watched so closely, yet . . . with so much unspoken tension, were commonly afflicted with neurasthenia, hysteria, and chlorosis

. . . . Not surprising either is the fact that tuberculosis, which often found its victims among those weakened by poor diet, lack of exercise, and nervous tension, yearly accounted for about half the deaths among women aged fifteen to thirty-five in mid-Victorian England. (Hellerstein 19)

As scholars are quick to point out, the similarities between Victorian England and the late nineteenth-century United States were significant, with the strongest parallels between Victorian ideals and the ante-bellum South.

English, American, and particularly Southern associations between a woman's ruling bodily functions and her social function become apparent by examining several of the many manuals of feminine health and hygiene. Often pseudo-scientific books, they dealt with treatment and cure of "female troubles." Titles like The Marriage Guide or Natural History of Generation and The Physical Life of Woman: Advice to the Maiden, Wife and Mother were easily available to women (Wood 29). Because of the obsessive Victorian prudery that persisted until the beginning of the century, many women dreaded and even refused doctors' examinations. They preferred to rely on the "expert advice" found in handbooks such as these; and the "doctors" remained fairly consistent. In almost every case, any disorder or discomfort suffered by a woman was related in some way to her womb.

The associations between the all-governing womb and every aspect of a woman's life were unspoken but powerful. All of

the "specific dangers to women" listed by nineteenth-century doctors related to female sexuality. Women were thought to be completely controlled, in physical and social health, by their "inward parts." They were encouraged to "live a cautious life shaped by the demands of their inward parts, which were the keys to their own physical and social fulfillment" (Wertz 94). Not only were their lives determined by their wombs, but many people also believed that women suffered twice as much from any illness because of "mysterious sympathies connecting the womb with every other organ in the body" (Stage 76). This mystical connection translated into the womb-centered woman.

Convinced of the fragility of their bodies and the mystery of their wombs, women became truly frightened by and extremely dependent upon doctors, who made themselves "indispensable comforters of women" (Wertz 93). Transformed into a sort of high priest and counsellor, the physician added a moral dimension to his practice, "holding that the healthy functioning of a woman's organs was a measure of her personal and social worth" (Wertz 105). This interest in the "social worth" of women is directly related to the idea that women were more moral than men. They were closer to God and pure spiritual existence because they did not soil themselves every day by entering the business world.

A repository for spiritual value, women were also the symbol of the guilt of the fall. God Himself seemed to regard women strictly in terms of their procreative powers. Eve, the originator of sin to many Victorians, brought on herself and

all women thereafter the pain of childbirth and the discomfort of the "illness" of menstruation. Because women were the cause of the fall, they carried the burden of the "wounded," "diseased" nature that expressed itself most graphically in their monthly bleeding (Stage 70). Unable to stop this monthly "wound," women were condemned for their lack of self-control. Anything that could not be controlled seemed repulsive to late Victorians in this era of personal and public reform; thus, men, not plagued by monthly bleeding, must be superior to women who bled monthly (Stage 73).

To raise women to the level of men, doctors tried to correct immoral or improper behavior. They became guides to morality for women, setting a standard near perfection (Wertz 91). Advice such as the following given by Samuel Jennings, an early Victorian doctor, is typical:

In obedience then to this precept of the gospel [Paul's command for wives to submit themselves to their husbands], to the laws of custom and of nature, you ought to cultivate a cheerful and happy submission. (62)

Doctors' suggestions were not always as simple and painless as Jennings' "cheerful and happy submission." They usually took the form of dangerous and unnecessary therapy or surgery. Clitoridectomies and ovariectomies were two of the most frequent operations performed on women in the nineteenth century.

Regardless of the symptoms the woman exhibited, the

uterus, her controlling organ, was suspect. Treatment for almost any problem, therefore, centered on a woman's reproductive organs. The standard order of treatment began with a manual investigation. Although the potential for a doctor to discover any disorder by the manual examination was very low, prevailing Victorian prudery, "delicacy," would not permit the doctor to view the genitalia. Instead, he conducted his exam with eyes averted and hands covered by a sheet. Many women with real gynecological problems were misdiagnosed along with the many women who were treated for problems like "contrariness" (Wertz 80).

When the manual examination failed, doctors began the second stage in the treatment of physical and behavioral disorders, leeching (Wood 30). Although it was a common practice throughout the century for many different illnesses, the local application seems particularly disturbing. One doctor in his training manual "advocated placing the leeches right on the . . . neck of the uterus, although [another] cautioned the doctor to count them as they dropped off . . . lest he 'lose' some" (Wood 30).

Assuming the failure of the first two methods of treatment, fluid injection was attempted as a third recourse. Almost any type of liquid was a viable solution; most often doctors preferred to use water, milk, linseed tea, or warm or cold marshmallow. If this failed, surgery usually followed; doctors especially favored cauterization of the ovaries with either nitrate of silver or a hot iron instrument.



Cauterization required several operations over the course of a few days. Because anesthesia use was not widespread at this time, the pain these women suffered must have been tremendous (Wood 30-31).

The progression of these painful treatments reveal the male doctor's desire to dominate women sexually. The movement from the manual examination to the injection of "medicine" parallels the man's active role in sexual intercourse: manual manipulation, followed by "sucking" (represented here by the doctor's surrogate, the leech), culminating in penetration. Symbolic sexual domination must have been widespread, for

Nineteenth-century doctors universally expected sick (or cantankerous) women to spread their legs and admit leeches, "decorations," the scalpel--whatever the physician chose to insert. But these were mere adolescent pokings compared to the mature phallic healing introduced by S. Weir Mitchell. The physician, according to Mitchell, could heal by the force of his masculinity alone. (Ehrenreich 120).

Doctor Mitchell's famous "rest cure" certainly emphasized male sexual and social dominance. It "cured" the women by reminding them of their true place in the world and in the home. During the rest treatment, women were expected to lie in bed for six weeks without getting up. Some doctors refused to let them out of bed for any reason, including personal functions. Throughout the period, women were to remain absolutely passive, accepting no visitors except the doctor

himself. Weight gain during this treatment was inevitable; and women completed the "cure" very pale and fat. By simulating a pregnancy, the doctor asserted his control over the woman and forced her into the maternal role she seemed to reject. If a woman for some reason had refused her "natural" role as mother, her body was convinced of her maternal capabilities. If after the treatment was completed the woman refused to leave the bed, Mitchell assured her that he would join her there. If she still hesitated, he began to remove his clothes. By the time he reached his pants, only the most obstinate woman had not gotten up (Wood 39).

Some obstetricians also viewed delivery as sexual mastery. Augustus Kinsley Gardner saw his obstetric role as "mediator and transmuter standing between the base and worthless powers of female nature and the valuable and civilized forms of wealth, pleasure, and progress" (Barkner-Benfield 303). G. J. Barkner-Benfield argues convincingly that Gardner used his role as facilitator to assert male dominance:

As a "great organ" which "disseminated pleasure," he could become a huge and perpetually replenished penis, even as he identified its function with parturition . . . . He both funneled and delivered fetal resources and eternally satisfied vaginas standing perpetually open. (305)

These attitudes were popular during the nineteenth century not only because they permitted the doctor to assert

his (superior) masculinity but also because women had little or no choice in the treatment. Doctors and husbands usually discussed and decided treatment without consulting the women. If other treatments failed, the clitoridectomy was often used as a sort of bridge between behavior modification and "scientific" cures. Because all female troubles were linked in one way or another to their sexuality, doctors attempted to destroy female sexual response while leaving intact reproductive capabilities. Any woman who showed any type of sexual responsiveness was suspect (Rich 169-70). Virtuous women, wives, could not possibly experience the animal lusts that were associated with slave women and prostitutes. The ideological remnants of Queen Victoria's wedding night advice to her daughter still lingered in the minds of men and women alike: "Lie still, and think of the Empire" (Hellerstein 124).

Actually, most men were relieved to hear that women found no pleasure in sexual intercourse. Because the body was a closed energy system with bodily fluids of especial importance, men feared a woman's capacity to accept into her body his own fluids in the form of semen. For some men, women became almost vampiric in their uncanny ability to gain strength by sapping that of a man (Stage 72). Some doctors preached the dangers of masturbation and excessive sexual activity of any kind for men because of this loss of crucial fluid/energy. [1] One claimed that semen was the purest part of blood; if men kept it in reserve by not spending it idly

on women or auto-eroticism, then their superior energies and intellect could be better applied in the business world (Barkner-Benfield 98). Women thus represented a physical danger to men when they exhibited sexual consciousness. They were taught to deny the very existence of a sexual nature. At the same time, the outcome of sexual contact, maternity, was upheld as a woman's greatest achievement.

The reverential celebration of woman's highest expression of herself, thus, became irretrievably linked with the female identity (Skaggs 346). Society reinforced the importance of bearing children by the almost cultish worship of motherhood beginning in the middle of the century (Hellerstein 129). Dorothy and Richard Wertz describe it in these terms: "the doctors endlessly reiterated that each woman's individual and social fulfillment turned basically upon becoming a mother" (93). "A spiritual essence inseparable from pure womanhood" (Auerbach 5), motherhood became the sacred cow in the patriarchal society. In order to maintain order in the home, men presented women with a vocation of their own (du Plessis 19). At the same time, men may have felt intimidated by the power and mysticism of the birth experience (Wertz 94).

The ambiguous nature of pregnancy, however, did not permit a woman to revel in her role fulfillment. In order to conceive, a woman must first have sexual intercourse. A public appearance during pregnancy proudly acknowledged this physical contact. Thus, pregnancy became both a woman's shame and her glory (Wertz 79). Confined for the duration of her

term, her marvelous social and individual fulfillment seemed less a reward than a punishment for enduring the distasteful sex act. The actual dangers of parturition, however, greatly outweighed any discomfort or boredom experienced during confinement. Thousands and thousands of women died from delivery complications, infections contracted during the birth, and from puerperal fever, the most extensive of all the risks. Pregnancy and motherhood came to represent confinement and danger masked by the Victorian ideal of maternity as a woman's highest expression of her self.

Even today, the remnant of Victorian mother worship lingers: some psychiatrists have described childbirth as "the only significant reality in a woman's life" (Auerbach 4). The pervasiveness of this attitude in the late nineteenth-century, however, reveals the extent to which women were viewed as only maternal. Nina Auerbach writes that "for the Nineteenth Century popular imagination, motherhood was not merely a biological fact, but a spiritual essence inseparable from pure womanhood" (5).

Unlike most women in the Victorian world of the South, Edna Pontellier lives in an open society. Coming from what was probably a typically Victorian and repressive childhood and adolescence, she enters the world of the Creoles only after she has married. There she finds people who actually discuss the difficulties of delivery, books that cause her to

blush passed from family to family without embarrassment, and, above all, childbirth that may be witnessed by caring friends. Edna actually witnesses a birth while many doctors of the period had never even seen one. Because she is an outsider faced with Creole honesty, the life style she confronts on Grand Isle forces upon Edna the previously unnoticed truth about her choices for self-expression as a woman in society.

In the opening pages of the book, Edna notices the proliferation of mother-women at Grand Isle that summer. The most prominent of them all is Adele Ratignolle, who is rarely seen without her children and even more rarely without knitting, sewing, or some piece of work for her family. She makes winter outfits for her "precious brood"; she constantly seeks their company. The nearly perfect picture of married bliss that Edna witnesses in New Orleans begins with Adele sorting laundry for her family and ends with the family dinner. Most important, however, is Adele's pregnancy. She actively seeks and enjoys her role as physical creator, manifesting herself very definitely as a nurturing mother. Certainly presented as the chief nurturing figure in her own family, she crosses the social boundaries of family ties and seems to become the symbol for both mother and nurturing woman. The language used to describe Adele is poignantly taste-centered:

Her beauty derives its power from a sense of fullness, ripeness and abundance. Her very essence might be described as a kind of plump succulence,

and the narrator reverts to terms of nourishment as the only appropriate means of rendering her nature.

(Wolff 459)

The nurturing good mother of the nineteenth-century mind is brought to life in Adele Ratignolle. Edna unconsciously reveals the association when she refers to Adele as a "faultless Madonna" (12) and a "sensuous Madonna" (13). Adele, who provides physical needs, food, clothing, shelter, and moral guidance, is compared to Mary, the archetypal mother. She is the ideal of maternity brought to life and presented to Edna.

Adele herself is strongly conscious of her maternal identity, exploiting it in her relationships with others. She seems to sense a struggle within Edna that brings out her mothering instinct even more than usual. On the beach at Grand Isle,

Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, "Pauvre chérie." The action was at first a little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress. She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection. . . . Her older sister, Margaret was matronly and dignified, probably from having assumed matronly and

house-wifely responsibilities too early in life, their mother having died when they were quite young.

Margaret was not effusive; she was practical. (18)

Edna has obviously never been confronted with the sentimental ideal of motherhood that Adele represents, her own mother having died when she was very young. Her comments equating Adele with a Madonna deny the reality of the dangers and worries of actual motherhood. As the mother-woman incarnate, Adele represents the nineteenth-century ideal of maternity.

As the personification of nineteenth-century womanhood, Adele adopts motherhood as her identity. Although she plays well, she "keep[s] up her music on account of the children" (25). She constantly draws attention to her "condition." In one case, Edna doubts the extent of her illness: "The spell was soon over, and Mrs. Pontellier could not help wondering if there were not a little imagination responsible for its origin, for the rose tint had never faded from her friend's face" (25). Her preoccupation with her pregnancy reminds the reader that Adele defines herself through her pregnancy and expects others to acknowledge her primarily as mother.

If Adele personifies motherhood and is able to relate to Edna only in terms of her maternity, then Edna opposes her in many ways. Chopin makes it very clear from the beginning that Edna is different from the mother-women of Grand Isle. She writes that "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (10). She seems incapable of the selfless activities that occupy so much of Adele's time. Although Edna loves her children and



cares for them in her own way, the sporadic attention that she devotes to them is insufficient for a mother-woman. Instead of a constant, guiding, loving hand, Edna alternately pets and ignores her children. She treats them much as Leonce treats her, as a prized possession to keep intact. Sensible of their upbringing, she permits them to visit their grandmother in the country. When she goes to visit them there, Chopin writes of her pleasure in their company.

How glad she was to see the children! She wept for very pleasure when she felt their little arms clasping her. . . . She looked into their faces with hungry eyes that could not be satisfied with looking. (93)

Her interest in her children cannot be denied. Yet Edna refuses to allow herself to be identified solely as a mother. Although she loves them for themselves, they are not her entire existence.

It was with a wrench and a pang that Edna left her children. . . . All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul.

(94)

Edna, unlike the mother-women, does not make her maternity an all-consuming existence.

Yet simply because Edna's treatment of her children differs from that of Adele does not mean that she fails as a

mother. Preferring to rely on her quadroon nurse, she takes a more passive role in mothering her children (Skaggs 362, Allen 234). Raoul and Etienne are described as independent, self-reliant little boys. In fact, it is in conjunction with Edna's inability to be considered a mother-woman that Chopin describes her sons:

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. Tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices, which usually prevailed against the other mother-tots. (9)

The Pontellier boys "prevail" against the sons of the mother-women. Chopin applauds their social independence by differentiating between them and the aptly named mother-tots.

In this and other passages, Chopin seems to be ridiculing the prevailing attitude toward maternity. Simply labelling these women as mother-women is a sarcastic comment on their role and the skill with which they perform it. They are not mothers; nor are they women. They are the peculiarly Victorian idea of woman as mother that is embodied by Adele. Certainly the Pontellier boys are more self-reliant and mature than those mother-tots who run to their mothers at the slightest provocation. When Edna's style of mothering is

compared to Adele's, Chopin seems to prefer Edna. Yet society, represented most often in the novel by Leonce and his concern with appearances, disapproves. Near the beginning of the novel, Leonce states his and society's point very succinctly when he criticizes Edna for neglecting their boys:

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after their children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. (7)

Leonce expects Edna's constant devotion to the boys. She does not fulfill his expectations; she is definitely not a mother-woman.

The mother-women are not the only mother images in the novel. In several important scenes in The Awakening, Chopin introduces other women who are able to approach Edna only through their maternity. At the island retreat on Cheniere Caminada, Madame Antoine, a fat native immediately accommodates herself and her house to Edna's desires. In the course of the day she provides Edna with food, drink, water and towels for washing, and a four-poster bed on which to rest. She attends Mass with her son and returns to tell stories to Robert and Edna about the life on Cheniere Caminada. Presented maternally first and foremost, Madame Antoine is the middle-class conception of a lower-class woman. The typical lower-class mother of the period was usually described as "robust." She was considered full of life and energy in

contrast to the frail, sickly lady of the household. The Victorians tended to channel sexuality onto the poor, insisting that true ladies not reveal their sexual nature by behaving like a poor woman, a slave, or a prostitute (Hellerstein 125). Thus, Madame Antoine becomes representative of the sensual life of the native woman. [2]

Edna finds a surrogate Cheniere Caminada in New Orleans at the garden house owned, significantly, by a mulatresse named Catiche. There, too, Edna seeks nourishment, peace, and the sensuality of the native life. She discovers the hideaway by accident:

She caught sight of a little green table, blotched with the checkered sunlight that filtered through the quivering leaves overhead. Within she had found the slumbering mulatresse, the drowsy cat, and a glass of milk which reminded her of the milk she had tasted in Iberville. (104)

Clearly these two worlds are not available as alternatives for Edna. Chopin presents in these two women the stereotype of the lower-class mother: nourishing, happy, fat, and part of the sensual world that Edna discovers first at Cheniere Caminada. Their identity, linked as soundly with their maternity as a middle- or upper-class woman, also includes racial identity that permits a sexual nature. This is in no way an option for Edna in her search. Instead, it tends to reveal the equally narrow middle-class definition of women in the lower-class. [3]

One woman who represents a radically different option for Edna is Mademoiselle Reisz. Her presence is felt just as persuasively as Adele's throughout the novel. An artist, she creates through the music she produces on the piano. Everyone agrees her talent is immense; yet she refuses to play for most people. Only Edna and Robert of the Grand Isle company can convince her to play for them. She singles them out, probably for their artistic sensibility, and attempts to teach Edna what it is to be an artist. She is well-qualified to speak; her music has a powerful effect on Edna.

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. . . . The very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it . . . . She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (27)

Edna is strongly affected by the music. Her emotional response contrasts sharply with the trite comments of the others in the group:

Her playing had aroused a fever of enthusiasm. "What a passion!" "What an artist!" "I have always said no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz!" "That last prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!" (27)

Edna is profoundly moved by the artist. Mademoiselle Reisz' creative life is a social identity that appeals to her, one that seems essentially different from that of Adele

Ratignolle.

The differences between Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele are evident from the very beginning of the novel. Chopin clearly designates the two women as the most important options for Edna; yet they are diametrically opposed. Adele is the quintessential mother, while Mademoiselle Reisz is the stereotype of the female artist. Living alone, she reveals herself as the embodiment of her own description of an artist, one who possesses a "brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (63). She has the courage to live an independent life. She is carefully separated from the rest of the lodgers. Refusing to swim and rarely approaching the water, she excludes herself from the social world of Grand Isle. Her almost anti-social behavior marks her as different. Instead of creating her self through relationships with others, she creates through her music.

Like Adele, Mademoiselle Reisz lacks any sensitivity for a lifestyle other than her own. Her complete separation from others denies relationships of any kind. Her tutorial communication with Edna is her closest attempt to any real human contact in the novel. Many critics have noted the unattractive qualities in Mademoiselle Reisz. Marianne Hirsch especially emphasizes the unapproachable exterior that Mademoiselle Reisz projects (Hirsch 45). Refusing to acknowledge her as a true artist and seeing her as only an interpreter of art, Hirsch finds Mademoiselle Reisz an unappealing character. Chopin certainly emphasizes

Mademoiselle Reisz' aloof stance. In one of her first descriptions in the novel, she is seen as "shuffling away" from the rest of the company, "dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby" (26). The easy-going family-oriented Creoles never object to a baby, yet she seems to reject maternity in its most basic form. The contrast is sharp:

She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others.

(26) [4]

These are attributes that are almost exactly opposite to those expected of the typical Victorian mother. She should be sweet-tempered, patient, loving, morally upstanding, and above all, submissive. Submission is counter to the world of Mademoiselle Reisz. She is asexual and domineering, an outsider in the Creole world.

Edna, the other outsider in the Creole world, is also intimidated by the artist. Knowing the older woman's aversion to the water, she attempts to escape her by going in for a swim, remaining "a long time in the water, half hoping that Mademoiselle Reisz would not wait for her" (49). Mademoiselle Reisz' dislike for the water is a source of much raillery for the summer lodgers; Chopin reminds her readers again and again of Mademoiselle Reisz' preference for the unnatural rather than the natural. She always wears a bunch of

artificial violets; she has a false hair piece; refusing Madame Lebrun's food, she prefers the chocolates that she eats for their "sustaining quality" (48). She excludes herself from the natural world, creating her own nature through her art, which, like her chocolates, has a sustaining quality. [5] It is able to touch and "nourish" Edna spiritually. She shuns real physical nourishment.

Mademoiselle Reisz does not enjoy eating with the company at Grand Isle, explicitly criticizing the quality of Madame Lebrun's fare. In her own apartment, she never prepares food. It is either brought in or she eats out (Fox-Genovese 286). Incapable of nourishing herself physically, she is presented as an opposite nourishing alternative to the perfect physically nourishing symbol of Adele. Aloof where Adele is social, asexual where Adele is sexually productive, physically unattractive where Adele is physically beautiful, aesthetic where Adele lacks artistic sensibility, and unable to nourish the body where Adele seems unable to nourish the spirit, Mademoiselle Reisz becomes an alternative example for Edna, a distinctly non-maternal expression of womanhood.

Mademoiselle Reisz and her artistic creations interest Edna. Edna sees in her a different way to assert herself as woman in society. Showing a real interest in developing artistic talent, Edna attempts to use her painting and artistic creation to express her self, much as she sees Mademoiselle Reisz do. Edna is seen sketching early in the novel:



Mrs. Pontellier had brought her sketching materials, which she sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way. She liked the dabbling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded. (13)

Yet the satisfaction that Edna receives only persists as she "dabbles," as she continues to create. Once finished she rejects her work:

It was a fair enough piece of work, and in many respects satisfying. Mrs. Pontellier evidently did not think so. After surveying the sketch critically she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface, and crumpled the paper between her hands. (13)

This is not the only occasion in which she destroys her work. Later in the novel she destroys several pieces. Her satisfaction with her creations as expressions of her self is small. She refuses to acknowledge the works at all. Her hope to become an artist is also destroyed by the true artist, Mademoiselle Reisz, who tells Edna that "'to be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts--which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul'" (63). Later in the novel, Mademoiselle Reisz feels Edna's back to see if her wings are strong enough to "'soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice'" or if she will be doomed to be one of the "'weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth'" (82). The "plain of

tradition" to which she refers is obviously the Victorian idea of the perfect household, complete with mother, father, and children--- the accepted outlet for the all-encompassing maternal instinct. In order to step outside the traditional expectations, Edna must be prepared to "dare and defy." Mademoiselle Reisz believes Edna incapable of such strength. What Mademoiselle Reisz fails to realize is that her own means of "daring and defying" is part of the very same identity she rejects in others.

It is clear from the nourishing figure that she represents, whatever the type of nourishment she provides, that Mademoiselle Reisz also gains her self-definition from the maternal. Not only does she attempt to nourish and teach Edna, fulfilling the accepted expectations of maternity, but she also defines herself as a "brave soul" precisely because she rejects the role of wife and mother in society. She refuses to embody the traditional motherhood represented by Adele. Instead, she is presented as a sort of "unmother," unnatural and different. In each case, however, the identity is a derivative of the social understanding of maternity. She chooses to refuse maternity in the strictest sense; and yet she demonstrates her maternal nature to Edna through their relationship and to society through her art. Throughout the nineteenth century, female artists were indulged as peculiar creatures who produced art rather than children. Their art was the result of their maternal instinct to create. Thus Mademoiselle Reisz becomes only one more manifestation of

maternity and maternal definition presented to Edna.

Edna recognizes the maternity inherent in artistic expression and in Mademoiselle Reisz herself. Consequently, she rejects the role of female artist. She prefers to remain a student indefinitely, to "dabble." She is always unhappy with the result of her work, even though she enjoys the creative process. She understands that socially her art must be an expression of her maternity and knows it is impossible for her. She refuses to recognize her creativity as only an expression of maternity.

Two other expressions of the female role are presented to Edna: the lady in black and the two young lovers. The lady in black, who is constantly saying her rosary or seen with her prayerbook, only speaks once in the novel. At the meal before Robert leaves Grand Isle she asks him to find out about a special indulgence she had received with some prayer-beads given to her in Mexico. Every appearance she makes reinforces her spiritual relationship with God. Dressed in black, even identified by her dark, uninviting clothing, and usually alone, her anti-social behavior marks her as the epitome of spiritual separation and oneness. Although they are not companions, the lady in black is always presented simultaneously with the two young lovers, an example of another option for Edna for creating herself in society.

The two young lovers are never seen apart. Their sole function is to parade before Edna an example of a social and physical relationship. Never speaking to others, they are

completely involved in themselves and create one true union. Like the lady in black, the young lovers are never named. They, too, are identified as an ideal rather than as people. They remain mere representatives, unimportant as characters yet important as alternatives for Edna. Just as Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz become opposing nourishing alternatives in their natural versus artistic worlds, the lady in black and the young lovers become opposing alternatives in relationships.

The lady in black, like Mademoiselle Reisz, has adopted a solitary life. She has chosen her "art," her work, as one of solitude. Fully as anti-social as Mademoiselle Reisz, the lady in black cultivates a relationship with God. She has taken on the lifestyle of a nun. Even assuming she is not a nun, she has in effect married herself to God and adopted the model of the divine mother, Mary. Like Mademoiselle Reisz, she represents spiritual nourishment in an asexual and anti-social atmosphere. The complete denial of sexuality is opposed by the example of the young lovers.

Because of the physical nature of their relationship, the young lovers present a sexual response to life that appeals to Edna, whose awakening is often seen in purely sexual terms. The passionate affair between Edna and Alcee Arobin and the desired but unconsummated union between Edna and Robert Lebrun demonstrate her response to the sexual awakening discussed by the majority of the critics of The Awakening. Many critics see this as Edna's strike against the restrictive roles for

women of the time. Chopin constantly draws attention to Edna's sensuous nature. She describes Edna as having an "awakening sensuousness" (76); she is "some beautiful sleek animal waking up in the sun" (70); her langorous rest at Cheniere Caminada includes a highly descriptive appreciation of Edna's body. The night of her long-awaited dinner party, Edna's appearance is that of a goddess:

The golden shimmer of Edna's satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her. There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. It was the color of her skin, without the glow, the myriad livening tints that one may sometimes discover in vibrant flesh. (88)

In explicit terms, Chopin points to Edna's awakened sexuality as she walks with Alcee to the "pigeon house." Edna watches the "black line of his leg moving in and out so close to her against the yellow shimmer of her gown" (91). Only a few hours later, Edna consummates her affair with Alcee.

To accept the role of mistress, in the Victorian mind, was to become a whore; removing the maternal nature of a relationship removed femininity also. As mentioned earlier, female sexual identity had been confined to the lower-class, blacks, and prostitutes. Accepting the role of mistress would be the equivalent of denying the maternal nature of woman, embracing the savage, animalistic side of humanity, and becoming a "non-woman." Doctor Mandelet's comment when he realizes that Edna is infatuated with someone is very telling:

"I hope it isn't Arobin. . . . I hope to heaven it isn't Alcee Arobin'" (71). The doctor knows the type of man Alcee is. He knows Alcee's reputation and that he is likely to attempt seduction. He also knows the social implications if Edna succumbs. Yet Edna is unsatisfied with her role as a purely sexual being. It does not take long for her to realize that "To-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me" (113). She knows that "the day would come when [Robert], too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone" (113). Her attraction to Robert and Alcee is of a physical nature. To accept a self-definition based solely on her sexual nature is impossible for Edna. Just as maternity defines a woman through her womb, a purely sexual understanding of her self would also equate her with her sex organs. She also knows full well the consequences of such a life for her children.

Edna's awareness of the great influence her sexual exploits could have on her children certainly affects her actions. She cares for her two boys and constantly reminds herself and is reminded by others to think about them and the consequences her actions could have in their lives. Priscilla Allen suggests that "Edna, in freeing herself from the immediate oppressions she felt, had reached a point where she could have damaged the future of her children publicly, in the community" (235). Her children need her honorable reputation as a part of her maternal expression. Samuel Jennings in his nineteenth-century household guide states:

You are deeply sensible, that, on the mother's conduct and example is depending not only her own happiness but also the well-being of her children, and of her children's children, down to the last generation. (5)

Edna is aware of this responsibility. She loves her children and cannot disgrace them so. She is also painfully aware of the results of the sexual existence represented by the young lovers. The young lovers are well on their way to being young parents. To accept the damning option of sexual woman would not only destroy her children, it would also return Edna to the motherhood that she seeks to escape. Thus, the young lovers do not offer Edna a viable option.

The lady in black's completely spiritual existence is also impossible for a woman as sensual as Edna. Chopin clearly illustrates Edna's inability to exist in a world that denies the sexual when Edna leaves the church at Cheniere Caminada during Mass because a "feeling of oppression and drowsiness" overcomes her and "her one thought [is] to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air" (36). Religion holds very little influence over her; she admits to being "just driven along by habit" (18) in both her childhood Presbeterianism and her present Catholicism. She also recognizes the important role the Church has played in encouraging maternal identity. Mary, who is defined only as a mother, and, significantly, a virgin mother, figures very strongly as the role model for women within the Church. Also,

nuns, the most devoted of all women, are married to the church and express their maternity through their charity to others. Like Adele, they represent ideal mothers. Unlike Adele, they reject completely a woman's sexual nature. The spiritual and asexual realm severely limits Edna and, again, forces her into the role of mother. She cannot accept such a self-definition.

All of the possible options for personal identity for Edna are, in fact, not options because they all stem from the late nineteenth-century idea of woman as mother. In a sense, every option is the same option: maternity. Represented most obviously in Adele, the maternal female permeates the novel. Even women who seem to reject the role of traditional mother are, in fact, only expressing their maternal nature in less traditional ways: Mademoiselle Reisz brings forth her own creations while maintaining a teaching and nourishing relationship with Edna; the woman in black represents spiritual maternity in her marriage to the church; and the young lovers are well on their way to parenthood. In every case, the possible expressions for Edna become the same: the pervading Victorian idea of woman as mother forces her into a maternal relationship of some type. Edna is forced to recognize this, finally, in the important childbirth scene at the end of the novel.

Although the reader does not experience Edna's childbed first hand within the action of the novel, both her reaction to Adele's accouchement and her memories of the birth of her own children are extremely important in conjunction with



Edna's ultimate rejection of nineteenth-century maternity. Edna attends Adele's accouchement against her will. She does not at all look forward to the experience of witnessing a birth. Considering the Victorian sensitivity to the woman's body and her natural functions, the reader can hardly be surprised at Edna's reluctance. She is repulsed by the entire "scene of torture" (109). "Seized with a vague dread" (108), Edna wishes she had not come but remains for her friend's sake. In fact, it is at Adele's insistence that Edna promises to attend her at the birth. Adele is adamant about Edna's attendance: "Adele had been inconsolable until Mrs. Pontellier so kindly promised to come to her" (107); and she will not permit Edna to escape for one minute. Adele's insistence is consistent with her desire for Edna to "Think of the children" (109). She is attempting in every way possible to force Edna to a recognition of the truth of her womanhood. She again takes the motherly, tutorial role, trying to present to Edna the glory of maternity. Yet Edna is repulsed by the "natural" role for women, calling it a "scene of torture" and wishing only to escape the chamber: "With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture" (109). What Adele sees as natural is presented to the reader through Edna's eyes as unnatural and ugly.

Adele's attempt to incite a natural maternal response in Edna meets with a disgust at the ways of nature. Edna sees, upon entering the chamber, her normally calm, kindhearted

friend turned into a demanding and domineering woman. Her personality is altered; her patience is gone. Yet the real difference in Edna's point of view stems from the physical difference that reveals the unnatural demands childbirth forces on a woman. She sees Adele

in a white peignoir, holding a handkerchief tight in her hand with a nervous clutch. Her face was drawn and pinched, her sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural. All her beautiful hair had been drawn back and plaited. It lay in a long braid on the sofa pillow, coiled like a golden serpent.

The serpent imagery and the evil associations that would accompany it are directly contrary to the "sensuous Madonna" Edna sees in Adele earlier in the novel. It is also reminiscent of the Victorian association between Eve, sin, and the curse of a painful childbed. During one of the labor pains, Edna sees a further change in Adele. She sees Adele

set her teeth hard into her under lip, and . . . the sweat gather in beads on her white forehead. After a moment or two she uttered a profound sigh and wiped her face with the handkerchief, sprinkled with cologne water. (108)

All that may seem natural and beautiful to Adele as the essence of true womanhood seems only unnatural and horrible to Edna. This is the first time that Edna has witnessed such events. Outside of Creole society few people would ever have the opportunity, whether they wanted it or not. Even at the

birth of her own children, she was not confronted with the birth.

Edna's own experiences as a delivering mother differed greatly from Adele's. Adele chooses to avoid anesthesia, whereas Edna accepted it. She remembers her own delivery:

an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go. (109)

Edna's experiences resemble much more closely the standard turn-of-the-century childbed. She prefers to escape the horror and disgust of her body's actions just as many women preferred to escape the embarrassment of a physical examination by separating themselves from the doctor with a sheet. At the birth of her boys, she had separated herself from the truth of the experience, from the reality of maternity. Adele will no longer permit her to escape this truth; she forces her to attend her delivery and confront the reality of female existence in the late nineteenth century. She understands the extent of the sacrifice demanded of women by the society in which she lives. The physical suffering of childbirth, the fear of death, the male control by the newly male dominated medical field, all of these aspects and many more are made clear to Edna for the first time; and Edna unites the social and natural scene of torture in "a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature."

Perhaps Doctor Mandelet senses some of the struggle and horror that Edna feels at the experience because, as he walks her home, he asks her to confide in him. He truly seems interested and willing to help. He says:

It seems to me, my dear child . . . you seem to me to be in trouble. I am not going to ask for your confidence. I will only say that if you ever feel moved to give it to me, perhaps I might help you. I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not many who would--not many, my dear. (110)

Like Adele's, Doctor Mandelet's help is genuinely offered. What he fails to realize is that he represents the very thing Edna wishes to escape, male dominance and insistence on maternity in women. Not only were many doctors intent on dominating women through treatment, but the medical field in general was also ousting midwives and closing itself off to many female practitioners. Mandelet represents more fully than anyone else the symbol of male manipulation of women. Edna may not have intellectualized Mandelet's role so thoroughly; yet she certainly understood his kindness intuitively as another example of male control of a "difficult" woman. Simply his repetition of "my child" and "dear child" emphasizes his attitude toward her as a woman. Therefore, when he insists that they will "'talk of things you never have dreamt of talking about before'" (110), Edna knows very well the limits of the world Doctor Mandelet offers. The world he suggests is the world she already desires to escape,

the world where womanhood and maternity are synonymous.

Whatever Doctor Mandelet's failings, his conversation with Edna is very important, insofar as it reveals the extent to which Edna has responded to the birth. Trying to express herself, Edna says, "'Nobody has any right--except children, perhaps--and even then, it seems to me--or it did seem--'" (109). She stops, unable to articulate her frustration. Oddly enough, the representative of male dominated society states very well Edna's disgust with the role of woman. Doctor Mandelet, "grasping her meaning intuitively" (109), finishes her confused ideas:

The trouble is . . . that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost. (109-110)

Edna agrees. She also believes that her past life is like a dream; and she wishes she could have gone on dreaming because the horror is "to wake up and find--" (110) the new life that she has created, as the reader must finish her statement. This is the ultimate confrontation with maternity: Edna sees the new life lying in her arms; and she understands it for the first time in conjunction with herself. This is the awakening to which the title refers: "An awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being" (109). The birth of the child signals the death of her self. Here Edna

experiences the real understanding toward which she has moved from the beginning of the novel.

Concluding that it is better to wake up after all, at least to understand rather than to exist blindly, Edna, at last, expresses her desire to find herself in a situation where she is more than a social construct, a woman seen only in light of her reproductive capabilities. She wants to escape the maternal world in which she exists and have her "own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others--but no matter--still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives."

(110)

Realizing her situation fully, Edna still refuses to "trample upon the little lives." She is already doing as Adele bids and thinking of her children. Unwilling to destroy her children, she is forced to destroy herself. The irony is that in order to be the best mother she can be, she must be no mother at all. Motherhood itself becomes a form of suicide. The self must be utterly denied in order to fulfill the role of mother. This is where Edna fails: because she cannot kill her self, she is finally forced to kill herself. The note left by Robert symbolizes Edna's legacy for her children: "Good-by--because I love you" (111). Knowing she must leave them because she loves them, Edna returns to Grand Isle.

The final swim that moves the reader, once again, to the sensual sea at Grand Isle is in no way defiant. Edna may feel

outraged, but she passively accepts the idea that rejection of social roles is complete isolation. The only real isolation open to her is death. It is appropriate that she return to the island where her awakening began; only there on the beach is she truly cut off from society. Only there, can she escape the constraints of the world by removing all vestiges of social custom. She takes off her clothes and stands naked before the water:

When she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air. . . . How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.

(113)

Edna is a new creature in a familiar and yet unknown world. She has rejected the social constraints that formerly plagued her. She has cast aside the masculine eyes with which she formerly beheld the world. The new world that she sees is a world in which female and mother are not synonymous.

Yet Edna does not possess the strength of will to carry her vision back to the social world. She is able to understand, unlike Adele and the other maternal figures in the book, the role a woman must adopt in order to exist in society. She cannot, however, revise the social view. In her passivity, she cannot do what the novel does very well through

its images, characters, and, finally, its message: reject both the role of woman as mother and the anti-social solution of suicide. Unable to integrate different conceptions of womanhood without an all-encompassing maternity, Edna must reject a society in which there are no unmaternal options available. By laying bare the Victorian South's identification of womanhood and maternity, Chopin (unlike her protagonist) works within the constraints of this society to reveal its narrow view. In the calm almost objective tone of her language, she never judges society, choosing instead to challenge a world which equates woman and mother. Her challenge is The Awakening.



## Notes

1 Men, too, suffered for "lack of control" in the form of nocturnal emissions. One rake "cured" himself by tying a whipcord around his penis at night. Upon the pain of an erection, he awoke, took a cold shower, and thereby saved himself from a dangerous loss of semen (Stage 70).

2 Edna reveals the association between race and sexuality two other times in the novel. When she meets the young native Mariequita she immediately assumes some sort of relationship between the girl and Robert. Her jealousy is spurred further when Robert returns from Mexico with a gift from a Mexican woman. Edna questions him at length about the woman who gave it to him.

3 The two women as mother images is also found in Fox-Genovese, 282.

4 Chopin's use of the word "trample" to describe Mademoiselle Reisz clearly illustrates the contrast between the artist and Edna who refuses to "trample upon the little lives" (110).

5 A good discussion of Mademoiselle Reisz' disgust with the natural world is found in Jones, 171.

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