

A “Cry of the Dying Century”: Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, and the Women’s Cause

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Kate Chopin’s 1899 novel(la) *The Awakening*¹ has elicited a multitude of scholarly responses since the beginning of the revival of Chopin studies at the end of the 1960s.² Although feminist critics’ enthusiastic embrace of Chopin and her work has influenced *The Awakening*’s reception across the divided terrain of literary criticism, current views of the novel’s position on the “women’s cause” still vary greatly. Some scholars categorically label the feminist readings of the text anachronistic. Harold Bloom’s 1987 interpretation, which focuses on the narcissistic and autoerotic nature of the female protagonist Edna Pontellier’s sexual awakening, articulates such a non-feminist standpoint with particular clarity: “*The Awakening*, a flawed but strong novel, now enjoys an eminent status among feminist critics, but I believe that many of them weakly misread the book, which is anything but feminist in its stance” (1). In this respect, Nancy Walker’s reading from 1979,

I would like to thank Vera Kutzinski, Bo Pettersson, Liisa Saariluoma, and Mark Shackleton for their valuable comments on early drafts of this article.

¹ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899), in *The Awakening: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 19–137 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text).

² Following the common praxis, I date the beginning of the Chopin revival to 1969, the year of the publication of *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, 2 vols., ed. Per Seyersted, and of Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*. For a brief overview of Chopin scholarship predating 1969, see Walker 2001: 22–24.

which was anthologized at least twice in the 1990s,³ closely resembles Bloom's assessment: according to Walker, "[t]here is, in Chopin's novel, no stance about women's liberation or equality" (69).

A subtler reservation about tenets taken for granted by most feminist readings comes across, for example, in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's 1988 introduction to *The Awakening*. While probing the novel's possible connectedness with women's position in society, Fox-Genovese refrains from wholeheartedly accepting the notion that the book "addresses a social problem: the condition of women" (34). In her view, *The Awakening's* individualistic portrayal of the surfacing of Edna's sexual self from the depths of suppression seeks to treat the protagonist's sexuality "independent of gender relations," although Chopin wrote, concedes Fox-Genovese, "around or above" the women's cause (38).

Even cautiously expressed skepticism concerning Chopin's intention to address women's condition in and through *The Awakening* has, as can be expected, triggered resistance rather than appreciation in feminist circles. Martha Fodaski Black, for instance, powerfully attacks Fox-Genovese's reading in her 1992 article, "The Quintessence of Chopinism," whose title deliberately evokes Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. Black argues that Fox-Genovese "misleads us" by speaking of Chopin's "scant interest in social problems" and by suggesting that Chopin isolated Edna's individual sexuality from the larger context of the era's gender roles (Black 1992: 95; Fox-Genovese 1988: 34, 39). Since *The Awakening* opens with the portrayal of a caged parrot and a similarly confined mocking-bird, Black corroborates her criticism by evoking Shaw's "The Womanly Woman," which compares married women to caged parrots. According to Black, *The Awakening* "tests society's assumptions

³ Walker 1979, in *Contexts for Criticism*, ed. Donald Keesey, 3rd ed. (Mountain View, CA, 1998), 65-70; and in *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text, Biographical and Historical Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Margo Culley, 2nd edition (New York and London, 1994), 252-256. The later references to Walker 1979 will be to the pagination in *Contexts for Criticism*.

about women,” thus “effectively giv[ing] Shavian argument fictional form” (113).

Positioning myself between Black's and Fox-Genovese's readings, I suggest that Fox-Genovese's erudite analysis of the general historical and sociocultural background of the women of Chopin's class and era—which leads Fox-Genovese to highlight what she sees as Chopin's rather uncritical acceptance of the sexual politics underlying the social role of the Southern belle—needs to be complemented with a renewed focus on Chopin's personal and family history. In this respect, as in many others, scholarship on *The Awakening* can greatly benefit from perspectives partly opened up and partly re-affirmed by Emily Toth's carefully researched 1990 *Kate Chopin* (as well as its revised and shortened 1999 version, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*). Toth's work both builds on and significantly adds to the two earlier Chopin biographies by Daniel Rankin (1932) and Per Seyersted (1969).⁴ As my dialogue with Toth will demonstrate, such factors as Chopin's awareness of her strong

⁴ Toth's attitude to Rankin is much more reserved than her attitude to Seyersted and his work. She regards Seyersted—with his feminist mother (at one time, head of the Norwegian Feminist Association; Toth 1998a: xxi) and with his personal experience of divorce (Toth 1990b: 286)—as being much better equipped for his task than Rankin, a Catholic (Marist) priest, who, in Toth's words, lacked “worldly aids to understanding Kate Chopin” (1990b: 286). Toth also reproaches Rankin for certain fundamental deficiencies in his field work and methodology (1990a: 402–403; 1990b). From time to time Toth is, however, also critical of conclusions drawn by Seyersted. She scolds him for relying too confidently on Rankin's findings and for having scant interest in reinterpreting Chopin's life (Toth 1990b: 285, 291). In spite of her critical comments, however, Toth never belittles the significance of the pioneering work of Seyersted, whose crucial role in the rediscovery of Chopin is beyond dispute. One manifestation of Toth and Seyersted's mutual respect and cooperation is their common editorship of both *A Kate Chopin Miscellany* (with Toth as assistant editor) and *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* (mostly edited by Toth and published as “a particular tribute to Per Seyersted”; Toth 1998a: xxiii). The Chopin biography written by Toth, with its careful documentation of sources, reflects a scholarly attitude that is both meticulous and empathetic. As Toth herself wryly points out, by the publication of her 1990 book she had already been “working on Kate Chopin's literary career longer than she [i.e., Chopin] did” (1990a: 9). She revises and/or expands several findings of Rankin and Seyersted—starting from such a detail as Chopin's year of birth, which earlier Chopin research dated to 1851, but Toth (and with her, most of current Chopin scholarship) to 1850. As for the issue of empathy, Toth does not hide her intention of writing “feminist biography” (1990b: 292).

and unconventional female ancestors reveal her exposure to influences which facilitated a critical distance to the social role customarily assigned to Southern belles. Though never an active suffragist (see. e.g. F. Chopin 167), Chopin addressed the vicissitudes of the Southern female predicament by portraying—in *The Awakening* as well as several other works—private impasses experienced by fictional female characters. In so doing, she indirectly engaged in the sexual politics of her era.

Complicating the Image of Chopin's "Southernness"

In defending her argument concerning Chopin's scant interest in the women's cause, Fox-Genovese stresses Chopin's identity as a Southern woman. She reminds us that while the rise of abolitionism inspired many suffragists in the North, in the South the connection between race relations and gender relations rather resulted in the pressure to maintain the oppressive status quo in both racial and sexual politics (35–37). While addressing the slow dismantling of the antebellum way of life in the postbellum South, Fox-Genovese highlights the role imposed on the white women of Chopin's class and generation as preservers of the "closest possible facsimile of antebellum class and race relations" (37). She suggests that postbellum Southern belles were made to stand as "the bulwark against social and racial chaos," and that they, loyal to their upbringing, usually adopted and internalized this role. When arguing that no "systematic rebellion against women's prescribed role" can be found in the works of the first postbellum generations of Southern female writers, Fox-Genovese explicitly includes Chopin and *The Awakening* in this group of authors and literary works (37).

At first sight, Chopin's personal and family history seems to support Fox-Genovese's approach to Chopin and her writing. Although St. Louis (where Chopin, née Kate O'Flaherty, was born and raised) took the Northern side during the Civil War, mentally—or "sentimentally," as Rankin puts it (13)—Southern (particularly Creole) influences made themselves felt almost as

powerfully in the St. Louis of Kate O'Flaherty's childhood and youth as they did in New Orleans. (New Orleanians of French and French Creole origin founded St. Louis, and the Mississippi River kept the contact between the two cities close and alive; see e.g. Rankin 12–13.) Young Kate's parents—Thomas O'Flaherty, of Irish parentage, and Eliza Faris O'Flaherty, of French ancestry—were slave owners, and Kate received the education of a Southern belle. Her half-brother George, whom she loved dearly, died a Confederate soldier (perishing of typhoid fever) when she was thirteen. In the same year, her best friend's family, the Gareschés, were banned from St. Louis because of their Confederate sympathies (Toth 1990a: 67; Toth 1999: 28–29). After the war, Kate O'Flaherty's 1870 marriage to Oscar Chopin and her subsequent move to his native Louisiana initiated her into the life of a Southern wife and mother. The years she spent in Louisiana saw the birth of her six children in New Orleans and Cloutierville in 1871–1879. In 1884, the widowed Kate Chopin returned with her children to St. Louis, to be with her fatally sick mother. She stayed in St. Louis even after Eliza O'Flaherty's death in 1885, residing in the gradually changing city for the rest of her life.

Chopin's thinking and writing were influenced—though not mechanistically determined—by her Southern education and experience. However, the aspects of her Southernness which may have encouraged female submissiveness were counterbalanced, from early on, by an exposure to multiple models of female existence and diverse interpretations of womanhood. This exposure began with the stories of the young Kate's maternal great-grandmother, Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville (d. 1863). After Thomas O'Flaherty's tragic death in a railroad accident when Kate was five, she grew up in a household headed by two women—her mother and Madame Charleville, both widows who never remarried.⁵ Madame Charleville, who was a skillful and impressive storyteller, took over

⁵ Toth 1991: ix; Toth 1992: 24; Toth 1999: 10–11. By not remarrying after her husband's death, Kate Chopin chose a path previously taken by her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother (Toth 1991: ix).

Kate's education, and the child learned at an early age about strong and unconventional women in the maternal line of her family history (Toth 1990a: 34–40; Toth 1999: 13–15). Madame Charleville was able to tell Kate tales dating back to the time when life in St. Louis was part of the American frontier experience. The cultural tradition that Madame passed on to her great-granddaughter included, for example, stories of the early "frontier brides" of the Charleville family, and the story of Victoire Verdon, Madame Charleville's mother. Victoire and Joseph Verdon were the first married couple in Catholic St. Louis to be granted a legal separation; after the separation Victoire Verdon became a successful businesswoman who, after a modest start, eventually operated a line of trading vessels between St. Louis and New Orleans (Toth 1990a: 36–37). What is known of Kate Chopin's maternal family history shows that by managing her late husband's property in Louisiana, and especially by establishing a career as a writer, she created her own version of the female initiative and independence demonstrated by such protagonists of Madame Charleville's stories as Victoire Verdon.

Another factor that seems to have helped Chopin to reflect on options available to women from early on was her attendance, as a child, at a school run by nuns. The stereotypes related to the cloistered life are well known; what is often forgotten is that nuns were among the few (white) women in Chopin's society engaged in professional work outside the domestic sphere. They, for example, taught other people's children, were involved in scholarly work, and had administrative duties. The young Kate's closest friend, the intelligent Kitty Garesché—whom many scholars consider to be the real-life precursor of Edna Pontellier's childhood friend in *The Awakening* (A VII: 36)—later chose the vocation of a Catholic sister (Toth 1999: 3). True, Chopin wrote in an 1894 diary entry that she would rather be a dog than a nun (1894b: 182). However, despite this provocative remark by the secularized and mature Chopin, the Sacred Heart nuns (who were, in Toth's words, "famous for their brisk efficiency and keen intellect"; 1999: 3) were a significant influence in her early environment: their example showed that

women can dedicate their lives to aspirations and vocations other than traditional domestic duties.

We should also bear in mind that, first of all, Chopin's husband tolerated more unconventional behavior on his wife's part (largely because of his New Orleans Creole background)⁶ than our knowledge of the mores of the era's Southern upper classes would have us assume;⁷ second, that Chopin must have thoroughly and critically examined her acquired views of morality and gender roles during her romance (whatever its degree of actuality) with the married plantation owner Albert Sampite in 1883–1884;⁸ third, that Chopin was an internationally traveled woman; and, fourth, that she was profoundly acquainted with European literature, where such issues as marital infidelity were, at the time, addressed much more freely and explicitly than in contemporaneous American fiction. As all these factors show, discussions of Chopin's general sociocultural context should be complemented with careful consideration of her personal and family history. This history brings interesting twists and complications to what may otherwise be interpreted too straightforwardly as Chopin's "self-evidently" Southern female identity.

The Awakening as an Empathetic Tale

Nancy Walker argues in her 1988 article that *The Awakening* is "far from autobiographical" (67). However, while it is true that Chopin and Edna "were the products of very different backgrounds" (Walker 1988: 67), Chopin being a secularized Catholic from the

⁶ As Nancy A. Walker writes, "New Orleans Creole culture in the late nineteenth century constituted a world unto itself—a set of traditions, mores, and customs unlike any other in America. [...] [W]omen in Creole culture, as is evident in *The Awakening*, were far less affected by the Victorian strictures that dictated the behavior of middle-class women in other parts of the country" (1988: 67, 70).

⁷ See e.g. Rankin 81; Seyersted 38; Toth 1991: xi.

⁸ The inclusion of the Chopin-Sampite romance in the Chopin chronology published in *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, edited by Toth and Seyersted, implies Seyersted's approval of Toth's claim that the relationship was real, not just a rumor. See also Toth 1990a: 164–173. Walker, on the other hand, argues that the evidence Toth provides of the affair is "maddeningly anecdotal" (1993b: 8; see also Walker 2001: 49–50).

city of St. Louis and Edna a Protestant from rural Kentucky, Chopin's motivation in writing *The Awakening* seems to have arisen from a personal experience—a "vast solitude" in which she made "[her] own acquaintance":

About eight years ago [i.e., around 1888] there fell accidentally into my hands a volume of Maupassant's tales. These were new to me. I had been in the woods, in the fields, groping around; looking for something big, satisfying, convincing, and finding nothing but—myself; a something neither big nor satisfying but wholly convincing. It was at this period of my emerging from *the vast solitude in which I had been making my own acquaintance*, that I stumbled upon Maupassant. (1896a: 700; italics added)

Critics' comments on this passage, found in an 1896 essay draft, usually focus on Chopin's mention of Maupassant (see e.g. Ewell 159). However, the author's rare reference to her profound personal crisis—presumably triggered by the chain of events beginning with her husband's death—is equally important for the study of *The Awakening*. The crisis seems to have culminated in the years following Eliza O'Flaherty's 1885 death; Toth mentions in passing that Chopin abandoned the church within a year of losing her mother (1990a: 20). Probably referring to her own wrestling with fundamental existential questions, Chopin later wrote the two-line poem "I Wanted God" (1898b). The piece portrays the resolution of the poetic persona's existential quest in terms of a departure from organized religion: "I wanted God. In heaven and earth I sought,/And lo! I found him in my inmost thought."

A survivor, Chopin was able to redefine her social vocation and existential position; she, in other words, successfully coped with the unanticipated turns of fate that the young society belle Kate O'Flaherty in all likelihood could not have expected to be her lot in adult life. In *The Awakening*, however, she tells the story of a woman who did not survive—"A Solitary Soul" (the novel's original title) who could not find a way out from her "vast solitude" and create a

new life for herself after discovering that the role of a Southern belle did not satisfy her.⁹ Chopin's endeavor is deeply empathetic: *The Awakening* depicts an existential *cul-de-sac* resembling, at an abstract level, the author's own personal crisis which forced her to re-evaluate the meaningfulness of her prescribed social position. While Chopin's process resulted in the discovery of adequate survival strategies and a renewal of her artistic creativity, her heroine's search of self ends in suicide.

Chopin's 1899 poem "The Haunted Chamber"—often misinterpreted by readings confusing the poetic persona with the author—further illustrates the author's empathy towards the Ednas of her era and her subtle critique of Southern sexual politics. Chopin wrote "The Haunted Chamber" just after reading the proofs for *The Awakening* (Toth 1990a: 324; Toth 1999: 218). Although the poem and the novel share no such obvious features as, for example, common character names, "The Haunted Chamber" can be read, as Toth briefly suggests (1990a: 324; 1999: 218–219), as Chopin's commentary on *The Awakening*. Not unlike *The Awakening*, "The Haunted Chamber" is about "a fair, frail, passionate woman who fell." Rather than being introduced to the woman herself, however, the reader this time encounters two individuals discussing the woman's fate. Although she is dead, the tone of the conversation is light, jocular, and, more than anything else, patronizing: "[W]ith bottle between us, and clouds of smoke/From your last cigar, 'twas more of a joke/Than a matter of sin or a matter of shame/That a woman had fallen [...]." Judging from mere textual markers, the gender of neither the first-person narrator nor the discussion partner can be stated with certainty. Heather Kirk Thomas, who argues that the poem records Chopin's "burgeoning cynicism" about the

⁹ According to her biographers, Chopin seems to have evoked and modified in *The Awakening* the life history of a woman who had lived in the French Quarter of New Orleans and whose story and fate were well known there. While reiterating this assumption Toth says, relying on Rankin, that this was "a true story that Kate Chopin heard from Phanor Breazeale [an in-law of Chopin's]" (1990a: 324). Strictly speaking, Rankin does not actually claim that Breazeale told the story to Chopin. While doing field research, Rankin met Breazeale (Rankin vii), who simply seems to have implied in their discussion that Chopin must have known the story (Rankin 92).

approaching reception of *The Awakening*, seems to identify the "I" with Chopin herself (36). The author should not, however, be confused with the poetic persona; I agree with Toth that the poem's narrator is intended to be taken as male. Chopin used a male persona at least in one other piece—an unpublished essay draft where she both utilized and explicitly addressed the strategy of adopting a male disguise: "I disguised myself as a gentleman smoking cigars with my feet on the table. Opposite me was another gentleman (who furnished the cigars) [...]" (1896a: 700). In connection with the essay, Chopin's publisher regarded the male persona as a construction of "unnecessary machinery" and asked Chopin to change her strategy for the final version (W. H. Page 126). She followed the instructions (see Chopin 1896b) but deployed a similar technique in "The Haunted Chamber," which was not published in her lifetime.

"The Haunted Chamber" can be viewed as a sequel to *The Awakening*. After the untroubled gossiping that opens the poem, the narrator's companion leaves the "I" alone in his chamber. At this point, the poem's atmosphere changes drastically, now focusing on the tragedy of the "fair, frail, passionate" woman's fate. This alteration of the mood is brought about by the dead woman's voice, which suddenly reverberates in the room, filling the chamber with agony: "The far, faint voice of a woman, I heard,/ 'Twas but a wail, and it spoke no word./ It rose from the depths of some infinite gloom/ And its tremulous anguish filled the room." However, the narrator's emotions remain untouched, despite the pain clearly discernable in the voice of the ghost. Instead of empathy, he is only able to feel boredom while brooding over the possibility of an involuntary all-night exposure to the woman's "whin[ing]": "[N]ow I must listen the whole night through/ To the torment with which I had nothing to do—/ But women forever will whine and cry/ And men forever must listen—and sigh—[.]" These last lines of the poem, in particular, make little sense unless the "I" is interpreted as male.

The unresponsive narrator regards the woman's tragedy as an episode which does not concern him in any way; the thought that the societal values epitomized by him could have contributed to, or

even caused, the individual tragedy never occurs to him. The poem provokes the reader to resent the narrator's indifferent disposition—that is, his denial of any shared or communal responsibility for the deceased woman's fate. This aspect of "The Haunted Chamber" illuminates the existence of a societal strand in Chopin's oeuvre; the text could hardly have been written without recognition of the influence of societally determined gender roles on individual lives and fates. In "The Haunted Chamber," *The Awakening*, and several other writings, Chopin examines the connection between Southern belles' occasionally self-destructive, "irrational" behavior and the rigidity of the Southern definition of women's place in society.¹⁰

The Awakening as an Analytic Tale

While empathetic, *The Awakening* is also analytic—in Black's words, a "diagnostic" tale (98, 112); the term suggests a diagnosis of the social condition of Chopin's female peers. "Diagnosis" is an identification of the cause(s) of certain symptoms, rather than a proposal or plan as to how the malady could be remedied. *The Awakening*—a diagnostic *fin-de-siècle* novel which both reflects and actively examines the unresolved tensions characterizing the transitional position of the women of Chopin's class and era—similarly refrains from offering an answer to the question of how the tragic heroine could find a way out of her existential impasse. The "woman question" emerges in the novel literally as a question,

¹⁰ For St. Louis discussions concerning upper-class women's suicides around the time Chopin wrote *The Awakening*, see the newspaper piece "Has High Society Struck the Pace that Kills?" (Chopin 1898a). The piece contains brief interviews with Chopin and three other "society women," conducted in the immediate aftermath of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorial of January 23, 1898, which commented on four suicides committed by "young women of high social position" within a month. Chopin's statement is, unfortunately, brief and defensive, providing little material for analysis. Annoyed by the discussion's patronizing tone, she seems to have refrained from any comments that might have been interpreted as indicating, against her intentions, an approval of the implied suggestion of some gender-specific, feminine flaw: "But do not men do the same thing every day? Why all this talk about women?" (222). There is little doubt, however, that the four tragedies and the subsequent public debate gave Chopin food for thought, influencing the writing of *The Awakening*.

namely, a query as to why Edna (a woman of respected social standing, a woman with no apparent worries, and a woman married to a reasonably wealthy and decent man) considers her life so unbearable that she chooses death over the private status quo. Between the lines, *The Awakening* offers a diagnosis—not of a patient with a psychopathology, but of a woman whose individual fate opens up a critical perspective on the sociocultural condition of the women of Chopin's milieu, class, and generation.

Serving as an impetus for Chopin's diagnostic criticism, the notion that womanhood can be lived out in a variety of ways powerfully informs *The Awakening*. The novel attacks, first of all, Southern society's inadequate recognition of women as a diverse group of individuals who may hold different views as to what constitutes a fulfilling and meaningful life. (This attack was largely ignored by *The Awakening's* contemporaries, who mainly focused on deprecating the text's degree of sexual explicitness and labeled the novel "too strong drink for moral babes"; see e.g. Rankin 173; Martin 1988a: 8; Toth 1990a: 344; and Walker 1993b: 14.) Chopin approaches the issue of diverse womanhood by creating, as critics have noted, a constellation of three different women (see e.g. Walker 2001: 21; Showalter 1988: 47–48; Wolkenfeld 246). The novel's New Orleans Creole community embraces the devoted mother-woman, personified in Adèle Ratignolle. It also accepts, with some reservations, the dedicated and talented female artist, embodied in Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna, however—a woman refusing to be solely a wife and a mother, but lacking either the sufficient artistic talent or the passion and focused ambition necessary for the successful pursuit of an artistic career—cannot find a suitable social role for herself. Notably, *The Awakening* is not a melodramatic story about an individual endowed with extraordinary talents that would far exceed the degree of giftedness and creative passion around her. Chopin's very choice to endow her heroine with traits of mediocrity—"She [Adèle] isn't a musician, and I'm not a painter," says Edna to her husband (*A* XIX: 77)—is one indicator of the social criticism embedded in the novel. Edna's ordinariness invites and enables the reader to connect her

condition with that of the real-life Ednas who peopled late-nineteenth-century Southern communities.

The second, interrelated aspect of Chopin's social "diagnosis" comes across in the polyvocality of Edna's awakened self: *The Awakening* not only criticizes the depicted society's inadequate recognition of the diversity of women and their talents, but it also argues against the "one woman, one role" type of thinking that prevented women from choosing multiple callings simultaneously. The awakened Edna would like to pursue various roles and vocations, rather than being confined to one option: "She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (*A* XXXIX: 137). The grammatically unnecessary (and therefore emphatic) indefinite article in front of the expression "part of her life" highlights Edna's resentment of the cage effect—her *exclusive* placement in a niche that others have defined, on her behalf, as her lot in life.¹¹

The third aspect of Chopin's diagnostic criticism focuses on the same issue that Adrienne Rich addresses while discussing the Northern poet Emily Dickinson: Rich points out, quoting Richard Chase, that one of the careers always open to American upper-(middle-)class women of the nineteenth century was that of "perpetual childhood" (166). It is true that most Southern white women knew from personal experience what hard work on plantations and farms meant; the lives of Southern belles often changed drastically after they were married (see e.g. Bleser and Heath). However, while motherhood—one major aspect of the change—forced them to adopt adulthood in relation to their children, the same adulthood did not necessarily imbue all other spheres of their lives.

¹¹ This indefinite article, stressing how carefully Edna pondered her prescribed role in her family and community before swimming "far out," has a role to play in the analysis of the deliberateness of Edna's suicide; the quoted passage is taken from the novel's last chapter. Tellingly, Wendy Martin (1988a: 23), who considers Edna's suicide a passive, almost unmotivated drifting into death (a reading that I will challenge towards the end of this article) accidentally omits this tiny textual marker while quoting the same passage.

Before her awakening Edna, revealingly, never seriously questions the "career" of psychological childhood imposed on her. On learning how to swim, however, she exclaims: "Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!" (*A* X: 46). This realization notwithstanding, her process of maturing into adulthood (that is, into a genuine, self-conscious subjectivity) proves extremely difficult, although she longs for a comprehensive psychological independence. True, her sense of "having descended in the social scale" is outweighed by her "corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual [scale]" (*A* XXXII: 115) during the initial euphoria that follows her separation from her husband and her move to a new home. It soon dawns on her, however, that the task of constructing a new life will be much more arduous than dismantling the old one was. Having lived almost thirty years in a world whose rules and conventions have prepared her exclusively for one role, that of the obedient housewife, Edna is not in possession of psychological tools needed for coping with the new situation. She gradually realizes that if she permanently abandons her accustomed way of life, nobody will save her from the absence of familiar daily routines by offering her new ones, nor will anybody save her from existential anxiety by actively supplying meaning to her life. The demand that she should create a new life of self-reliance for herself,¹² piece by piece and day by day, proves too overwhelming for her. Tellingly, the awakened Edna's new residence is called the "pigeon-house." The pigeon is, as Black ironically observes, "a domestic bird, usually monogamous, that we associate with a coop or wobbling parasitically on the ground, hoping to be fed" (105; see also Martin 1988a: 22). When the awakened protagonist "nests in the little house," as Black puts it, the reader is not really convinced that Edna "will have the strength to soar and fly away" (105).

¹² In Chapter XXIV, Edna reads Emerson. Rather than linking the scene with "Self-Reliance," Toth emphasizes that Emerson "believed deeply in separate, complementary spheres for the sexes" (1990a: 52-53). Accordingly, Toth sees the detail that Edna "read Emerson until she grew sleepy" (*A* XXIV: 93) as an instance of Chopin's deliberately feminist irony.

The reader's suspicion is justified: ultimately Edna does not have the strength to fly, as is indicated by the last chapter's bird with a broken wing (the final piece in the jigsaw puzzle of *The Awakening's* oft-discussed bird imagery). After the months of Adèle's pregnancy that constitute the novel's temporal span, Adèle gives birth to a new baby, thus strengthening her already secure position in society. The reader is also left to assume that Mademoiselle Reisz will continue her existence—as introvert and prickly as ever, but able to survive because of her passionate art which nourishes her soul. Edna, by contrast, has “given birth” to a process that she cannot actualize in any way. For her, the experience of witnessing Adèle's labor becomes, as critics have noted, the final impetus that makes her realize her “position in the universe” (A VI: 31; see e.g. Seyersted 146; Jacobs 93). While watching Adèle's agony, Edna sees—as if for the first time, although she has children herself—the inescapability of the triad of sex (legal or illicit), childbearing, and childrearing, which the women of her generation and context had little opportunity to manipulate. The sight of Adèle performing the woman's “labor” reveals to Edna the fixedness of her own confinement to the prescribed role of wife and mother, mercilessly disclosing the futility of her effort to create an alternative way of life in the society of her contemporaries.¹³

Demonstrating, through symbolic behavior, that a circle has come full, Edna eventually returns to where everything began—the first site of her awakening, the sensuous tropical island of Grand Isle, which she now finds in an unwelcoming off-season condition. Mixing images of progression (a triumphant entrance into a limitless

¹³ Chopin breaks away from Victorian conventions of the birth narrative: rather than pointing to a secretive event taking place behind closed doors, and eventually having a doctor or midwife emerge from behind the doors with the baby, Chopin leads us into the birthing room. During this literary *coup d'état* (which includes, as critics have noted, a realistic depiction of labor pains), the narration focuses on the interaction between two women—Adèle, the mother in labor, and Edna, her companion during the ordeal. We never see the baby, nor do we find out its gender, nor are we even told whether the infant is healthy. The scene's deliberate focus on the women demonstrates how pointedly Chopin, at least at times, created what today would be called feminist or woman-centered writing.

freedom; see Gilbert 328) and regression (a return to childhood and even to the waters of the womb; see e.g. Wolff 257–258; Jacobs 94), Chopin shows how Edna "continues" her belatedly started process towards independence by choosing the only route that she considers open and available. Instead of returning to the community where she cannot re-create herself, Edna commits suicide by "swim[ming] far out, where no woman had swum before" (*A X*: 46).

Edna's Suicide

Chopin portrays Edna's awakening as potentially holistic and all-embracing: according to the narrator's remark in an early chapter, Edna "was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (*A VI*: 31–32). The primary framework, however, within which Edna eventually deals with the questions of individual and social identity, is the erotic and sexual one. Because her upbringing and adult life have not equipped her for psychological maturity, Edna resembles, as Showalter mentions in passing (1988: 48–49; 1991: 77), an adolescent whose search for self takes the form of an intense—and, inevitably, self-centered—interest in her own awakening sexuality. Edna does, though, look for a holistic connection with a man. However, none of her love relationships satisfies the needs of *both* body *and* soul. Her husband mainly signifies for her a safe haven, a harbor of financial security and a guarantee of respected social status—thereby constituting what she wishes to become independent of during her search of self. At an early stage of her awakening, she momentarily believes that she has found a soul mate in Robert Lebrun; she is soon disillusioned, however, and the relationship is never consummated sexually. With Alcée Arobin she discovers her passionate sexual self, but no significant mental connection is ever established.

Chopin's eloquent narration portrays the sea as the only one of all of Edna's seducers whose call contains the promise of a fulfilling response to the longings of both body and soul. The narration underscores this holistic call already at an early stage of the novel by

evoking the voice of the sea, which addresses the soul, and the touch of the sea, which caresses the body: "The voice of the sea is seductive [...]. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (*A* VI: 32). Part of this passage is repeated in the tragic final scene (*A* XXXIX: 136).

This literary eloquence of Chopin has led some critics to interpret Edna's suicide as a numb drifter's passive yielding to the seduction of the sensuous sea. The question of whether Chopin depicts Edna's suicide as a premeditated and deliberate act or as a passive surrender is vital for any study concerned with the nature and degree of Chopin's feminism in *The Awakening*. Moreover, any critic's views of the two issues—the deliberateness of Edna's suicide and the degree of Chopin's feminism—are interrelated.¹⁴ It is no coincidence that Nancy Walker, who finds little if any feminism in *The Awakening*, also argues that Edna more or less "drifts" into her death (1979: 69; for similar interpretations, see e.g. Martin 1988a: 23; Wolkenfeld 246). While interpreting Edna's death as her "final immersion into sensuality—the sea" (1979: 69), Walker stresses that Edna "resembles a sleepwalker much of the time, not aware on an intellectual level of what she is doing" (1979: 68). Walker's expression "much of the time" refers not only to the final scene but also to the events of the entire novel. For Walker, Edna's awakening is purely sexual (1979: 68)—a process that leads, by its overwhelming power and novelty, to what she interprets as Edna's ever-accumulating and essentially childlike "lack of command over her own feelings and actions" (1979: 69). In Walker's interpretation, Edna psychologically remains a child (1979: 69). Above, I have given the heroine credit for at least reaching adolescence, as it were. More importantly, I have also sought to stress, through the concept of diagnosis, that Chopin's covert explanation of *why* Edna fails to live out mature adult subjectivity points to Southern society's ways of organizing gender roles.

¹⁴ For summaries of critics' views of Edna's suicide, see Wolkenfeld 241–243; Martin 1988a: 13–14.

It is true, as Walker implies, that Edna's final act is permeated by ambiguity. This ambiguity does not, however, ultimately arise from what Walker and several other critics have interpreted as Edna's lack of will and decision, but from the fundamental contradiction that always characterizes suicide: through her deliberate choice Edna, as Paula A. Treichler puts it, makes "a decision no longer to decide" (328). Chopin's skillfully structured imagery patterns and their fusion at the novel's end corroborate this argument. Since these patterns have already been analyzed by Treichler and others, I only mention one aspect of Chopin's juxtaposition of sleep and wakefulness: the novel's sad finale begins when the narrator reveals that Edna stays awake all night after Robert's final abandonment of her (*A* XXXVIII: 134). In the novel's intricate web of imagery related to sleep and wakefulness, this turn in the plot is a powerful signal indicating Edna's entrance and withdrawal into a state of deliberate reflection, which will lead to a final and irreversible end. Indeed, the concluding chapter's sentence which Walker uses to support her argument of Edna's almost involuntary drifting into death ("She [Edna] was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach," *A* XXXIX: 136) is preceded by the narrator's crucially important comment, ignored by Walker, according to which Edna "had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning" (*A* XXXIX: 136). After returning to the site of her awakening, Grand Isle, Edna carries out her premeditated plan in a dream-like condition, in which difficult, thoroughly deliberated decisions are often executed in life. The motifs of wakefulness and dream therefore *merge* in the final scene.¹⁵

¹⁵ While defending her argument that Edna "drifts" into the fatal embrace of the sea after reaching the water's edge, Walker also refers to Edna's instructions to the minor characters Victor and Mariequita about dinner (1979: 69; *A* XXXIX: 135). This detail in the plot, however, rather underscores Edna's need to ensure that no one will surprise her on the beach and prevent her from executing her final decision. Had her behavior deviated from normal routines, she would have risked raising suspicions and ruining her plan. Besides, Edna advises Victor and Mariequita that they should not "get anything extra," thereby discreetly attempting to save them from what she knows to be futile work.

Edna's undressing on the beach also underscores the premeditated nature of her suicide. By literally throwing off the "garment with which to appear before the world" (*A XIX*: 77; see also *A XXXIX*: 136, where the word "garment" is repeated) Edna breaks an ultimate taboo, the taboo of public nakedness. She thereby commits what is, in spite of the lack of eye-witnesses, an act of extreme unconventionality in her sociocultural context. Through this scene Chopin indicates that Edna has reached, and mentally gone beyond, the point of no return; she has already withdrawn into her own world where rules neither matter nor apply. The undressing is followed by the logical consequence of what the reader has already witnessed: Edna opts for the ultimate solitude, death.

What Edna "drifted" into was not her final fate but the vocation of marriage and motherhood: "Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (*A VII*: 36). Just like Chopin's short story "A Vocation and a Voice" (1896),¹⁶ *The Awakening* is also about a vocation and a voice, and a

¹⁶ See Chopin 1896c. This piece, which was first published in 1902, recounts the story of the sexual awakening of a young boy on the verge of manhood, a penniless orphan of Irish origin from "The Patch" (the name is suggestive of St. Louis's north-side Irish ghetto Kerry Patch; see Toth 1990a: 265). One day, while wandering in a large park, the boy accidentally encounters a Romany couple, Suzima and Gutro. He joins them, adopting their traveling lifestyle. Suzima and the boy develop a bond of mutual affection and sexual attraction. However, soon after the boy's initiation into the world of sexual pleasure by the older and more experienced Suzima, Gutro finds about the romance. The boy leaves the couple and joins a Christian brotherhood. He becomes Brother Ludovic, sublimating his repressed passion into a project of building a stone wall around the brotherhood's abode (pointedly called the "Refuge"). One night, however, Suzima comes back, singing a song that Brother Ludovic recognizes immediately. He abandons his religious vocation, leaves behind everything that he has built (literally and metaphorically) during his stay at the Refuge, and simply follows the voice of the woman. While the story contains obvious thematic parallels with *The Awakening*, the considerably less complicated or anxious atmosphere of "A Vocation and a Voice" is even more significant and striking than the similarities between the two texts are. The story's ending is happy, and Brother Ludovic makes his decision to follow Suzima in a split second, without any anguished soul-searching. Chopin needed an entire novel, or novella, for the story of Edna Pontellier's awakening, but only approximately 36 pages (depending on the edition) for "A Vocation and a Voice." These observations suggest that for Chopin the issue of female sexuality brought with it additional complexities that did not lend themselves to easy resolutions.

vocation and a choice. In her awakened condition Edna refuses to perform the one role for which she has been educated, and to accept its exclusive mode as the only vocation available for her. Edna literally finds her own voice during her awakening: when she learns to swim, she utters a shout of joy, momentarily abandoning her typical reserve (see also Treichler 313–314). At the novel's end, however, she chooses to silence herself by surrendering to the same sea which once prompted, through what seemed to be a promise of a new freedom, her cheerful shout. Upon fulfilling her desire to "swim far out, where no woman had swum before," Edna, paradoxically, has to give up her voice and her entire existence. Chopin mentions, in an 1894 essay, the "cry of the dying century" (1894c: 691); in *The Awakening*, Edna's shout of joy—whose content and ramifications only gradually dawn on the protagonist and remain unaccepted by her community—turns into a silenced cry of the dying century and of a passing way of life.

Conclusion

According to her own (somewhat contradictory) statements, Chopin wanted to depict universal themes, on the one hand, and focus on the individual and particular rather than the societal, on the other. She considered the timeless aspects of humanity to be manifested in such "human impulses" as love and erotic passion (Chopin 1894a: 693). Her oft-quoted comment on Ibsen¹⁷ reveals her position that literature should not be harnessed to serve "mutable" social ends; tangled in webs of transitory details, fiction promoting social causes endangered, in her view, its long-term survival. *The Awakening*, however, illuminates the very fact that the depiction of the individual and particular—understood here, in Chopin's sense, as manifestation of the universal—in isolation from the societal is difficult or impossible. Fiction, if it is to portray the "universal" via

¹⁷ "[...] Ibsen will not be true in some remote to-morrow, however forcible and representative he may be for the hour, because he takes for his themes social problems which by their very nature are mutable" (Chopin 1894a: 693).

the representation of the specific, usually depicts, at least to some extent, interpersonal relations—and the portrayal of such relations tends to be suggestive of the author's consciously or subconsciously acquired social views. While “navigat[ing] between specificity of detail and universality of theme” (Fox-Genovese 1988: 39), Chopin seems to have been less aware of this interconnectedness of the universal, individual and societal than her twenty-first-century readers (who benefit from the twentieth century's rapid developments in social sciences and psychology) usually are. While *The Awakening* by no means represents socially “preachy” fiction, which Chopin abhorred, the societal permeates the text more powerfully than she herself probably realized. Chopin may, indeed, have wanted to “treat sexuality independent of gender relations,” as Fox-Genovese suggests, but she failed, so to speak, in this rather impossible task. The “woman question” does inform *The Awakening*—literally imbuing the novel as an open question, however, rather than a fixed social agenda.

Written in a time period already witnessing the demise of the traditional Southern (Creole) ways but still predating women's liberation, *The Awakening* portrays an intermediary phase between an old way of life which had already begun to crumble and a new one which was yet to emerge. This transitional state, marked by unresolved tensions, characterizes the protagonist, whose awakening and final fate Chopin depicts through language and imagery pregnant with ambiguity (Treichler; Giorcelli). While *The Awakening* refrains from promoting any clearly defined social “movement,” it insightfully portrays the problem of white, upper-(middle-)class female frustration, which the twentieth century addressed by drastically increasing the number of roles available to women. Although Chopin was not a prophet capable of predicting what the future might bring with it, she was one of the first women of her context and era to give literary expression to questions later addressed by the women's movement(s) and social changes of the twentieth century.

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