

**Conflicts of Influence, Society,
and the Self in
Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

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Spring 2019

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In any process of growth, a person often mimics and models the characteristics of important people in their lives in order to craft their own identity, and the story of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* proves to be no exception. Many young women look to their mothers as role models whose traits they emulate—but Edna, not having a mother, looks to two women she meets during her summer on the isolated Creole island of Grand Isle: Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Despite their blatant differences, Edna grows in simultaneous relationship with the two women, each enabling her to further her process of awakening, and each informing her of the characteristics she does and does not want to weave into her own identity. The contradictory influences of Ratignolle and Reisz contribute to Edna's development of a personal identity that deviates from social codes and leaves her alienated within society.

Edna's relationship with Adele Ratignolle informs her of the benefits and drawbacks of the role of a woman as a mother in society. From her first appearance in the novel, Adele is characterized as the model “mother-woman” amongst the social group of women on Grand Isle, thus rendering her the perfect embodiment of maternity. Edna's initial impression is one of deep admiration and enchantment with the role that Adele plays, and as such Edna is prompted to enter into an honest relationship with her. Their first meaningful interaction occurs when Adele's encouragement inspires Edna to fluidly tell her of a childhood memory from Kentucky. The candid expression of otherwise private thoughts leaves Edna feeling “intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the accustomed taste of candor...like a first breath of freedom” (19). Edna's willingness to be open with Adele, and the elixir that follows, is indicative of the level of trust and admiration she esteems upon her. It prompts Edna to favor the maternal nature of Adele

which allowed her to feel such comfort and freedom. Additionally, their interaction makes evident that the relationship Edna holds with Adele is vital in the process of her own awakening, as it provides the space necessary to give Edna a voice and to have that voice validated, rather than let it remain silenced within her mind. Having this space provided by a member of the elite Creole social circle, such as Adele, gives Edna the courage she later needs to defy pre-established codes in front of members of this circle.

Insofar as Adele shows Edna the sphere of maternity, Mademoiselle Reisz teaches her about the opposing sphere of creativity. Reisz effectively occupies the end of the female social spectrum opposite of Ratignolle, shown through her rejection of feminine desires and her life alone in an apartment. Edna's relationship with her begins when she first hears Reisz play the piano at a gala on Grand Isle, inspiring "a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column...it was the first time she was ready, perhaps her first time being tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth" (26). Edna is struck by Reisz's expression of creativity through her piano-playing. The beauty and passion with which Reisz plays is indicative of her dedication to her art, and thus dedication to her individual passions. Hearing the music spurs not only an admiration of her creative work, but a realization that self-sacrificial maternity is not the only option available to women. Although disliked by most members of the more elite social circle, Mademoiselle Reisz is also Creole, like Adele, which allows her to present to Edna an opposing female role within that culture.

The similarities between Edna's first personal encounters with Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz immediately establishes the parallelism of Edna's developing relationships with each of the two women. In both interactions, Edna has intense feelings of elixir, building the internal conflict she confronts in wanting to take part in two opposing spheres. The parallelism is

furthered through use of the word “first” both times to describe the feelings she experiences. This word connotes that each of the interactions ignite a beginning to Edna’s journey of discovering herself. Edna’s journey is markedly enlightened by *both* scenes, revealing the equal impact of both relationships—without one or the other, her identity would not have developed in the same way.

In spite of the parallelism of the relationships that Edna holds with Reisz and Ratignolle, the two influences are intentionally oppositional towards one another. In “Reconceiving the Terrible Mother: Female Sexuality and Maternal Archetypes in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*”, Amanda Kane Rooks points to specific aspects of the characterization of each Reisz and Ratignolle to further assert them as opposites. Rooks emphasizes the metaphor of Adele as the “Madonna”, who is kind and comforting in her interactions with Edna. In contrast, Rooks calls Reisz the “negation of life and maternity”, materialized through a “lifeless ‘deformity’ (79)” (137). The posing of Edna’s two influences as opposites informs an understanding of the deep internal conflict that arises within her as she navigates the journey of defining her identity. Strong and convincing influence from differing extremes render Edna unable to identify with either one.

Understanding historical contexts helps to shed light on why Edna’s influences were so contrasting, and how the equal force of the two influences in her life created internal difficulty. In “Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book”, Showalter compares Chopin’s themes to those of other feminist writers of the period, reflecting “the conflicts between maternity and artistic creativity”. She asserts that in the period, “artistic fulfillment required the sacrifice of maternal drives, and maternal fulfillment meant giving up artistic ambitions” (207). In Chopin’s novel, the purposes of Adele Ratignolle’s life solely exist in relation to her responsibilities to family, and as such her character is crafted to represent the extreme of

choosing maternal fulfillment over personal interests. Mademoiselle Reisz represents the opposite extreme; by pursuing her individual passion for music, she consequently lives alone with no husband and no children. Edna is influenced by both women, both of whom enable her journey of self-exploration, thus leading her to weave pieces of each of their archetypes into the way she comes to define her identity. However, the sacrificial nature of each of the roles leaves little room for occupying an “in between” space in Edna’s society, and it is Edna’s inability to find this space that she desires that leads to her alienation.

Edna’s enchantment with both females slowly begins to fade as her progression leads her to recognize the exclusive nature of each of the roles towards the characteristics she desires from the other. As such, she moves away from mirroring either one of them towards deviating from both of them. Her deviation away from Ratignolle is most evident in an argument that takes place between them following Edna’s attempt to explain her willingness to sacrifice as much as her life, but never her own self, for her children. As they argued, the two women “did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language” (47). In this confusion, the separation between Edna and Adele becomes apparent. Adele, fulfilling her representation of perfect maternity, never doubts that she would give up anything for the sake of her children. Edna, however, has recognized a “self” through her process of awakening that Adele cannot understand from her place in her sphere. This “self” is a personal identity, separate from the one owed to her children, which Edna prioritizes above all else. Edna’s attainment of this understanding alienates her from Adele and the societal role that Adele plays as a mother.

Edna similarly begins to deviate from Mademoiselle Reisz as she becomes increasingly aware that Reisz’s pursuit of individual ambitions necessitates the giving up of all other pursuits. Upon leaving Reisz after a conversation about Edna’s love interest with Robert, Reisz comments

“‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth’” (83). Despite defending Reisz’s character in front of Robert, Edna nevertheless regards this comment as strange. Reisz’s words reflect the need to sever ties with everything else in order to claim a space within the sphere of artistic pursuit and creativity. By relaying the interaction to Robert, Edna proves that she is unwilling to leave behind her other feminine roles—lover, mother, wife—in order to solely follow her creative aspirations. The exclusivity of the role that Reisz occupies leads Edna less inclined towards emulating her exactly, thus alienating her from Reisz’s sphere.

Edna Pontellier’s inability to identify with just one of the two roles outlined for women in her society leads her towards alienation, which prompts her decision to commit suicide by drowning herself in the ocean at the end of the novel. At the start of Edna’s journey of self-exploration, her awe of both women—their strong personalities as well as their abilities to fuel her process of awakening—captures her interest and leads her to cling to both of them as important role models. However, as she becomes more aware of not only the differing passions of the women, but of their roles in relation to society, Edna becomes less able to mimic one or the other, understanding that choosing to take part in one sphere would require giving up the other one completely. What Edna truly desires is a combination of femininity and maternity, as emulated by Adele Ratignolle, with Reisz’s individuality in ambition for personal interests. The society in which Edna lives does not allow for women to exist in both spheres at once. Upon the realization of such, Edna feels that she no longer has any place in society, and turns to the ocean for release.

The ocean’s place in Edna’s suicide can be read as a symbol for ambivalence, further extending the argument of Edna’s alienation as a result of her inability to align herself with either

one of the realms of her female influences. Amanda Kane Rooks makes this assertion in “Reconceiving the Terrible Mother”, remarking upon the sea’s ability to be “simultaneously nurturing and destructive”—thus refusing to conform to one single standard, much like Edna. Rooks further argues that the involvement of water in Edna’s suicide can lend the event to be regarded as a rebirth rather than a death, symbolizing Edna’s “transition from ignorance to knowledge, from bondage to freedom” (133). Through such a lens, it can be understood that by going out to sea, Edna leaves behind the society from whence she came, and overcomes the constraints that it imposed upon her so that she may live according to what she has defined to be her true self.

Edna’s final decision of the novel to commit suicide can be seen as feminist insofar as it reflects her refusal to except the binary of roles set out for women by the patriarchal society. However, depending on how the suicide is read, it has the potential to be seen as a defeat under, or as a championing over, the pre-established social codes. Nonetheless, Chopin’s assertion that women possess identities beyond those strictly constructed for them by the male-dominated society is a radical and intrinsically feminist idea in and of itself. Further, the existence of two female characters as potent as Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, and the focus of the novel on an inward-facing quest for identity by a woman, makes this novel feminist. Just as Edna’s awakening was a long and slow process, so too was (and is) the feminist movement. Chopin’s novel, in challenging social norms and exploring female identity, contributes greatly to the progression of this movement.

Works Cited

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