

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY NATURALISM
IN KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

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The appearance of Kate Chopin's The Awakening in 1899 came as a shock to the Victorian society of the time. The consensus of the critical reviews was that, while Kate Chopin had considerable talent as a writer, her theme, characterization, and plot were ill-advised. The novel was published to the dismay of a good many newspaper reviewers. Literary reviews of her work were mixed. Although some critics noted its fine workmanship and pellucid style, they nevertheless rejected its focus on the love affairs of its central character, a wife and mother. The Boston Herald critic stated,

So far as construction and plot are concerned, Mrs. Chopin shows quite as marked ability in the writing of a novel as she has in her sketches, and we only regret that she has not chosen a more agreeable theme. The ruptures in love affairs after matrimony are not altogether commendable for fiction, except as steppingstones to better conditions.¹

According to the New York Times Saturday Review:

The author has a clever way of managing a difficult subject, and wisely tempers the emotional elements found in the situation. Such is the cleverness in the handling of the story that you feel pity for the most unfortunate of her sex.²

Regarding plot and characterization in the story, the Indianapolis Journal critic concluded:

Edna is a weak and emotional but interesting young married woman who is unhappy without knowing why and naughty without intending wrong. The awakening is when she finds herself in love

with another man. It is not a healthy story, yet it is clever and one feels while reading it that he is moving among real people and events.³

While criticizing the book for its dealings with sex and sensualism in a somewhat open manner, critics therefore could not deny that it reflected existent conditions which would perhaps be of special interest to women. Even so, the St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat concluded that "It is not a healthy book. Though characters are deftly drawn, it is a morbid book, and neither of the principal characters claims admiration or sympathy."⁴ The anonymous writer of this journal saw its sensationalism as stemming from its focus on the overworked field of sex fiction, although admittedly analytical and feminine, and of sufficient force to make its ending very effective.

There was little doubt among these early reviewers that plot and characterization were most competently handled by the author of The Awakening. The chief objections centered on the alleged fact that "Edna's awakening is confined entirely to the senses, while all the higher faculties which govern conduct fall asleep."⁵

The modern point of view, as might be expected, is less likely to judge the book as harshly as the preceding criticisms, if for no other reason than the current age considers itself sexually literated and enlightened. The novel is all too easily seen as an American Madame Bovary, uninhibited and beautifully written. Edna Pontellier, the central character, in this modern view, is likely to be nothing more

than a woman who seeks love outside a stuffy, middle-class marriage. Whereas Edna might feel that she was seeking fulfillment of her essential nature, the modern critic might tend to see this fulfillment as nothing more than the working out of a natural instinct, or mere sensualism.

It appears that one of Kate Chopin's goals in the novel was to depict Edna as a Southern lady who sought to follow her essential nature, to do what she wanted to do. Kenneth Elbe is right when he says that "it begins with a mature married woman's awakening to physical love and ends with her walking into the sea."⁶ While the theme may be morbid at times, its exotic and erotic nature is everywhere evident.

Moreover, another goal of the author seems to have been to combine sensualism with naturalism. That natural symbolism abounds throughout the novel cannot for one moment be doubted. The problem lies with the sense in which the reader wishes to construe the natural symbolism and themes: either as libidinal passion and obstinacy of a self-centered female, or as a personal transcendent outreach toward greater self-fulfillment. In her effort to find happiness, Edna tends to ignore the ethical convictions of society. It is this second sense of naturalism that permeates the pages of The Awakening, a sense that is expressed through liberal use of natural symbols such as the land, the sea, and the birds. However, Kate Chopin goes beyond a limited conception of naturalism. Edna

Pontellier does not seek sensual gratification only. She is a complex woman who tries to be happy in her life. In her desire to find happiness, she is completely unhindered by considerations for her family or for her honor. She tries to transcend the restraints that society places on everybody. Thus Kate Chopin mingles naturalism with transcendentalism to embody her artistic vision.

According to Kenneth Elbe, Chopin "seems to have grasped instinctively the use of the unifying symbol--here the sea, sand, and sky--and with it the power of individual images to bind the story together."⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that the sea, the sand, the sun, and the sky of the Gulf Coast became almost everpresent in her novel. Even the sea can be seductive, clamoring, and murmuring, no less than a human being. Elbe notes that "the way scene, mood, action, and character are fused reminds one not so much of literature as of an impressionist painting, of a Renoir with much of the sweetness missing."⁸ However, Edna is neither a mere Emma Bovary deluded by superficial ideas of romance nor the sensual woman we may encounter in certain novels. While on the one hand "The heroine is simply a sensuous woman who follows her inclinations without thinking much about these issues (free love, women's rights, and the injustice of marriage) or tormenting herself with her conscience," she also may be seen as someone who has "the power, the dignity, the self-possession of a tragic heroine."⁹

The book ends with the heroine finding death by walking naked into the sea, an event given much significance by Chopin, as evidenced by the author's description of Edna's state of mind: "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" (p. 301). Such outpourings indicate that Chopin was not beyond searching for universal meaning that goes beyond a limited "naturalism" that can be identified only with the awakening of feminine instincts and the sensual body. For Chopin, naturalism signifies the greater world about us, a world of nature that has universal significance. *biological*

Thus the logical conclusion is that naturalism in the novel may therefore be viewed from two perspectives: the sensual, impulsive inner drives and the setting of an external natural world in which these inner drives manifest themselves. Character and plot in Kate Chopin's The Awakening evolve simultaneously along both lines of naturalism. In particular, Chopin's extended concept and usage of naturalism is instrumental in helping her to raise plot and characterization above petty selfishness or mere hedonism. Chopin's use of literary naturalism was in a fuller sense, one that sought to transcend gross human nature in search of greater universal meaning. Chopin depicted the clash of human values in as direct a manner as she knew how-- through a natural symbolism treating the process of personal

growth and development, its theses, antitheses, and syntheses. Kate Chopin makes use of naturalistic devices not only to depict Edna's sensuality but also to embody the great universal significance of her quest. The novelist employs literary naturalism in order to delineate Edna's sensuality and also to portray the major incidents of the novel.

Kate Chopin's The Awakening focuses on Mrs. Edna Pontellier, a girl of Mississippi and Kentucky plantation background and Protestant upbringing, whose marriage to a wealthy French businessman of New Orleans has separated her from her own family. Edna treats her children in an impulsive way--sometimes passionately loved and missed with intense longing, sometimes ignored and forgotten. Mr. Pontellier is a businessman, husband, and father not given to romance or much of anything outside his business. When he comes to Grand Isle, the summer place of the Creoles in the novel, he is anxious to get back to his cotton brokerage in Carondelet Street, New Orleans, and he passes his time on Grand Isle at the hotel smoking his cigars and playing cards. When he is on the beach at all, he is there as a watcher rather than as a participant. Kate Chopin writes:

He [Mr. Pontellier] fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunk of the wateroaks and across the strip of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath

its pink-lined shelter were their faces, Mrs. Pontellier and young Robert Lebrun (p. 4).

Robert Lebrun, however, is a full participant in the activities taking place in the Creole society. It turns out that Robert Lebrun is the young man who first awakens, or rather, is present at the awakening of Edna Pontellier into passion, a passion which Mr. Pontellier neither understands nor appreciates. Slowly Edna and Robert fall in love. Eventually, young Labrun goes away, and during his absence, Edna becomes idly amused by Arobin, a local profligate to whose advances Edna succumbs. When Robert returns, he finds that Edna is willing to resume their former relationship. But Robert refuses the offered reunion. He leaves, and Edna turns once again to the scene of her awakening, the sand and sea of Grand Isle:

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water (pp. 300-301).

The environment of Grand Isle is such that it is conducive to the sensual awakening of women like Edna. Drowsy muffled voices and the sound of a band playing in a hotel across the water definitely seem to arouse Edna's passion:

. . . the strains reached them faintly, tempered by the distance. There were strange, rare odors abroad--the tangle of the sea smell and damp, new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms

somewhere near. But the night sat lightly upon the sea and the land. There was no weight of darkness; there were no shadows. The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like the mystery and softness of sleep (p. 57).

Much of the sensuousness of the book derives from the way Chopin uses sea imagery. A key theme of the novel is found in the phrase, "the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, clamoring, murmuring." It appears at the beginning of Edna's awakening and at the end. Edna contemplates the sea and to such contemplation produces in her a predilection towards sensuality: "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (p. 34). Such a statement reveals how Edna was forgetting more and more her duties as a married woman and thinking only about the satisfaction of the yearnings of the body. Also, she tries to gratify her spiritual desire to lead her own life, untrammelled by standards of conventional morality.

Kate Chopin has the ability to capture character, to put the right word in the mouth, to impart the exact gesture, to select the characteristic action.¹⁰ She deftly handles even minor characters, as in her treatment of Edna's father. When he leaves the Pontelliers after a short visit, Edna is glad to be rid of him and "his padded shoulders, his Bible reading, his 'toddlies,' and ponderous oaths" (p. 47). A moment later, a hitherto unsuspected size of Edna's nature is revealed. She feels a sense of relief at her father's absence; she reads "Emerson until

she grew sleep" (p. 48).

The "awakening" of Edna is more than just a stimulation of passion. It takes on many facets which Kate Chopin subtly links to the interplay of natural forces, both internal and external. For example, there is an apparent terror which genuine emotional involvement inspires in Edna, and, accordingly, her marriage to a man like Leonce Pontellier is no accident; such a prosaic marriage protects her from the deep involvement that a subconscious part of her fears, a kind of clash between a yearning for death and an instinctual desire for love.

A deeper and more complex example consists of all the experiences that Edna has in the ocean, experiences described by Kate Chopin through imagery that has romantic roots. Chopin typically treats the ocean as a place where moments of eternal choice take place. Edna experiences in the Gulf the crises that determine her development throughout the rest of the book. The sea serves a double purpose for Chopin. The sea can turn the soul's attention outward to the infinity suggested by the vast expanse of sky, to confront the universe alone, or it can cause an intense concentration of self that can scarcely be endured. Edna experiences both of these feelings on the night she learns to swim. When she pulls herself through the water for the first time, "a feeling of exultation overtakes her," as if she has received "some power of significant import to control the workings of her body and her soul." She turns

away from the shore "to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy," and as she swims out into the Gulf, she seems "to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (pp. 70-71). The expansive feeling of striving toward the infinite is not to last, however, for when she turns to look at the shore, which seems to her now to be far away, a "flash of terror" strikes her, a quick vision of death smites her soul, and she hurries back to her waiting husband and friends" (p. 72). Donald Ringe sees this "awakening" as a kind of self-awareness:

The fear of death, of a threat to the self, clearly reveals the intensification of self-awareness that the experience has given her--an awakening of the self as important, perhaps, as any other in the novel. For from this point on, Edna develops a growing self-awareness from which there is no turning back.¹¹

There is a wealth of sensuous imagery in the novel, as has been noted consistently by most critics. However, as John May points out, what has not been noticed--apparently not even by scholars of Chopin's works--is that sensuousness is a characteristic feature of the setting, a product of climate and the Creole temperament. Sensuousness means that which is "readily susceptible through the senses." Thus sensuousness may be considered also as very much a part of the natural and social environment that Edna marries into, not merely as an exclusive preoccupation with sex. May notes that it is such environments that are "the

undoing of the American woman."¹²

This sensuousness comes out in a number of places in the writing of the novel. The Gulf breeze that reaches the Lebrun cottage is "soft and languorous, charged with the seductive odor of the sea" (p. 153). After the Lebrun party, as the guests leave for the beach, there are "strange, rare odors abroad--a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and camp, new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near" (p. 154). Chopin describes the "everlasting voice of the sea" which breaks "like a mournful lullaby upon the night" (p. 154).

As the novel progresses there is an increasing emphasis on tactile imagery. When Arobin ceremoniously apologizes for offending Edna, the touch of his lips is "like a pleasing sting to her hand" (p. 251). During her reunion with Robert, Edna notices the "same tender caress" of his eyes. Edna's "soft, cool, delicate kiss" is a "volumptuous sting," penetrating Robert's whole being. When Edna leaves Adele after the birth of her child, the air is "mild and caressing, but cool with the breath of spring and the night" (p. 252).

It is the personification of the sea that dominates all the imagery. The sea is the central symbol of the novel, but like all natural symbols, it may be variously interpreted. The sea embodies for Edna all of the sensual attractions of her new environment. The sea presides over

the dawn of Edna's awakening, as it does over the night of her fate; but is not just another sea. Chopin's imagery attempts to capture the mystery and enchantment of the semi-tropical Gulf. An early passage describing the voice and touch of the sea becomes a poetic refrain when repeated at the close of the story: "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (p. 34).

Chopin's use of symbols creates tension between freedom and restraint. Edna's remembrance of the contrast between the Kentucky meadow and the Presbyterian household of her youth parallels the significance of sea and city in the temporal sequence of the narrative. She recalls the summer day when as a child she ran from the Sunday prayer service that her father always conducted "in a spirit of gloom." The meadow seemed like an ocean to her as she walked through it, "beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water" (p. 25). The young lovers and the mother-woman represent the actual limits imposed by the Creole environment. Because of her marriage and children, Edna rightfully belongs to the mother-woman group, but she is not and cannot be one of them. Edna's rebellion against the restraints of Creole society symbolizes her withdrawal

into solitude, a withdrawal that is equivalent to the quest for freedom. According to Robert Cantwell, Edna is not driven by any profound motive to tragedy: "It is rather that the atmosphere itself is the motive, a summer like a green meadow, through which she seems to herself to move, idly, aimlessly, unthinking, and unguided."¹³

Moreover, some reviewers make much of the idea that Edna felt she was not being fulfilled as a natural woman. According to George Spangler, "As her frustration increases and her longing fixes itself on Robert, the first practical result is an unreasoning, stubborn resistance to the will of her husband, whose very presence reminds her of the false role of a devoted wife and mother which impedes the expression of her latent selfhood."¹⁴ This in turn leads Edna to rebel against conventional obligation, which reaches its climax when she decides to establish a home apart from her husband. Indifferent to appearances and indefinite about her future, she also rejects sentimental qualms about her children. She had resolved "never again to belong to another than herself" (p. 208). reflecting her passional nature's drive for fulfillment. Edna's awakening is thus simply "a fact of nature, whatever its implications for the individual and society, and is conveyed metaphorically through the pervasive linking of her desire with images of the sea."¹⁵ Consistent with Spangler's opinions are those of Per Seyerstend who holds that "Kate Chopin concentrated on the immutable impulses of love and sex,

and Whitman and Maupassant were two of the authors who spoke most deeply to her, probably because they acknowledged the existence of Eros and because they had helped to extend the literary limits to the treatment of sex."¹⁶

Most of the critics at the turn of the century recognized Chopin's realistic characterization, that although there were no blemishes in her art, she made much of sensualism in her novel. Willa Cather noted the similarity of the Chopin novel theme with Bovary, that both novels are about women who demand "more romance out of life than God put into it." Cather felt that Edna is of the class of women who unrealistically expect love to gratify every need of life. Cather concluded that "next time I hope that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible, iridescent style of hers to a better cause."¹⁷ A bit harsher was Frances Porcher's conclusion that the novel left one sick of human nature: "One would fain beg the gods, in pure cowardice, for sleep unending rather than to know what an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster Passion can be when, like a tiger, it slowly stretches its graceful length and yawns and finally awakens, the kind of an awakening that impresses the reader in Mrs. Chopin's meroine."¹⁸

The Los Angeles Times saw the novel as a book about "fool women," but could not decide on whether the author merely wanted "an analytical study of a selfish capricious woman or whether she wanted to preach the doctrine of the right of the individual to have what he wants," with the

reviewer tending to believe that Chopin supports Edna's foolishness.¹⁹ Writing in The Nation, one reviewer would have preferred that had Edna "flirted less and looked after her children more, we need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself."²⁰ Another reviewer agreed that Kate Chopin had a marked ability in the writing of a novel with regard to construction and plot, but "we only regret that she has not chosen a more agreeable theme," that the "ruptures in love affairs after matrimony are not altogether commendable for fiction, except as stepping-stones to better conditions."²¹

One early review recognized Chopin's beautiful style and refinement of taste, one which had been misspent on a "vulgar story" which was "for adults only," a not unfamiliar phrase to one acquainted with classifications of current literary and motion picture film output. The same review, however, noted that "the story does reveal with some success the consequences of a loveless marriage and the struggles of an independent-minded woman."²² Another review was more positively slanted, admitting that Chopin has "a keen knowledge of certain phases of feminine character" and that, although not a pleasant story, "the contrast between the heroine and another character who is devoted to her husband and family saves it from utter gloom."²³

Far more understanding of the work are Ruth Sullivan

and Stewart Smith, who reject these narrow interpretations. They suggest that "Edna never really becomes a free woman because she confuses impulsive action with liberation and because she never understands herself or her own wishes and goals."²⁴ Sullivan and Smith correctly sense the complexity of the novel by recognizing the difficulty for Chopin in presenting an unusual woman with significant problems, one who is evidently thoughtless and almost wantonly self-destructive. The authors claim for Kate Chopin an objective, amoral, and detached view of Edna.

Even so, Sullivan and Smith do not accept Chopin's interpreting Edna's predicament in terms of "her position in the universe as a human being" or "the beginnings of a world." These collaborators object to Chopin's asking the reader to believe that a woman's dawning sexual awareness is a cosmic event, that awareness of sexual need leads to understanding of life and truth, as exemplified in passages such as "She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life" (p. 219) or "Perhaps it was the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth" (p. 66). According to Sullivan and Smith:

There is not convincing evidence that Edna understands what is happening to her; certainly none that she understands Truth or Life. In fact, despite the number of times the narrator says that Edna thinks, the reader finds only rare examples of either the thinking or its results. Edna does not think; she is driven. She acts impulsively; she has fancies, dreams, moods, sensations, and passions; but she rarely

has thoughts.²⁵

Sullivan and Smith do not recognize, however, that some of Edna's qualities are conveyed through natural images-- the bird, for example. When Edna tells Mlle Reisz about the ellicit passion for Robert, the pianist says, "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" (p. 217). In Edna's suicide swim, she sees before her "a bird with a broken wing beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (pp. 300-301). But Sullivan and Smith choose to interpret this natural imagery as meaning that Edna's suicide is far from being the courageous act of a strong and free woman. They seem unaware of Chopin's use of the natural imagery for the purpose of conveying Edna's transcendental yearnings. Even if Edna herself were as thoughtless as the two authors maintain, the grand cosmic themes are nevertheless there; if not in Edna, then at least in the natural symbolism found throughout the novel. If the novel were indeed nothing but a thoughtless psychological and sexual escapade depicting the downfall of a foolish woman, it is strange that Chopin is continually concerned in the novel with natural images such as the sea and its intimate relationship with both universal and inner personal themes.

In fact, unless the reader is willing to accept such complexity in this novel, one which takes into account the

two kinds of naturalism, he is not likely to understand the novel's conclusion. For example, George Spangler finds the conclusion inconsistent in characterization because the reader, according to him, is asked to accept a different and diminished Edna from the one developed so impressively before. Spangler sees Edna's strength in terms of her ruthless determination to go her own way, that in thought and act she had rejected unequivocally the restraints of conventional morality, social custom, and personal obligation to her husband and children. Spangler says: "Yet in the final pages, Mrs. Chopin asks her reader to believe in an Edna who is completely defeated by the loss of Robert, to believe in the paradox of a woman who has awakened to passion in life and yet quietly, almost thoughtlessly, choose death."²⁶ He sees this as a destruction rather than as a resolution. Spangler cannot understand Edna's sudden concern for her children who had mattered so little before, or her sudden collapse. Spangler seems to miss the significance of the sea and what it represents for the author. What Mrs. Chopin chose not to directly verbalize in a formal sermon she expressed through her naturalistic symbolism. Kate Chopin sought cosmic truth, if not in Edna Pontellier, then in the total environment in which we all evolve. Reviewers such as Spangler, Sullivan, and Smith miss this point, possibly because they insist on restricting naturalism to primitive sexual or psychological drives and an unromantic concept of the natural and universal.

There are at least two approaches to the naturalism and symbolism employed by Chopin in this novel. One may confine interest to a somewhat prim Victorian conceptual framework, as illustrated in the reviews of 1899, and to the permissive modern emphasis on the legitimacy of sex and the erotic theme. A second approach is to go beyond purely personal sensual naturalism and strive for insights into Chopin's concern with naturalism in its more universal aspect, where the sea is not sex, but rather a transcendental experience in which Edna wants to find the fulfillment of her life.

An examination of the novel reveals Kate Chopin's employment of naturalistic technique in the characterization of the heroine and the portrayal of the significant events. But Kate Chopin does not limit herself to a limited concept of naturalism. She goes beyond the sensual and explores the transcendental leanings of her heroine.

Ottavio Casale is in agreement with those who look beyond the sexual theme in The Awakening and relate Edna's attitudes and some of the novel's imagery to certain elements in the American transcendentalists. He points out that Chopin gives us a hint of this influence through her having Edna read Emerson, not Krafft-Ebing or Freud: "And the major idea of the transcendentalists, that of self-assertion or, metaphorically, the awakening of self to self, is underlined in word, symbol, and action throughout the novel."²⁷

Casale documents his observation with quotations from

the novel. The language and symbolism of the transcendentalists is evident in Chopin's comment that Edna "could not see that she was becoming herself, and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world." In another place Chopin says: "At a very early period she [Edna] has apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions," a statement paralleling Emerson's "Outside, among your fellows, among strangers, you must preserve appearances--a hundred things you cannot do; but inside--the terrible freedom!"²⁸ Such concerns with inner and outer forms and with issues of true self are central themes to the transcendentalists such as Thoreau or Emerson. Thus some of Chopin's ideas regarding transcendental issues are remarkably analogous to the ideas of the celebrated American transcendentalists. For this reason Edna emerges not as a simple feminine character but a complex personality who desires more from life than society can possibly give her.

From the very beginning of the novel, Edna is pictured as a restless Eve-like heroine dissatisfied with the superficial world, an incipient individual waiting to be born. Her search for sexual fulfillment and her desire to swim suggest transcendental and romantic drives for knowledge and being. Thus Edna's rebellion is only partly sexual, there being good evidence to suggest the theme of self-discovery. The sexual interaction with Arobin is ultimately

not the answer to Edna's desire, but part of a larger movement toward self-assertion. According to Casale: "The Ocean, after all, speaks spiritually as well as sensually to her throughout, and she continues to identify with the bird soaring--as so many birds do in Romantic literature--far above the earth."²⁹

Edna's real and spiritual cosmos is symbolically the land, an island or mid-world, and the ocean. These symbols include other associated symbols. The land and its meanings may be seen as that from which Edna craves release. New Orleans or the New Orleans society of Grand Isle suggest safety, established social-moral relationships, a kind of conformity which spells spiritual death for Edna, one with which Edna's husband identifies.

On land, Edna tries to bring into being the primitive, natural order she has experienced on Grand Isle. In so doing she neglects her calling hours, her house, and eventually her marriage vows, finally moving into a little rented house, a kind of primitive island in the middle of New Orleans. Grand Isle is a kind of spiritual mid-world or halfway station where the land-locked may continue to pursue their social habits, but where Edna begins to awaken to the larger life. On Grand Isle, real sexual desire emerges, with Robert Labrun as the object, while at the same time she begins to answer the call to selfhood. Parallel to the dropping of old ideas and habits is a symbolic divestiture; the imagined identification with the naked man, the

taking off of her rings, and the daring of sun and sea.

Chopin uses geography as a trope for psychological and spiritual probing. Ordinary religion is not possible for Edna, who craves a more primal communion; the church represents constriction, whereas she leans in the direction of the sea. Her affair represents a transfiguring release from the temporal order. For Edna, the sea is death and life, annihilation and fulfillment. Casale sums it up well: "What Edna finds in her suicidal swim outwards is what the dark romantics always knew: to become (or re-become) Adamic, angelic, or godlike in knowledge, experience, or being is perilous."³⁰

Although Edna's struggle is with Eros itself, it is not mere capriciousness. The significant development is Edna's awakening into self-awareness, one which gives the story dignity and significance. Greek tragedy knew well that eros was not the kind of love which can be easily glorified or sentimentalized. Edna is no Emma Bovary, deluded by superficial ideas of romance, nor is she a sensuous but guilt-ridden woman of a sexy novel. Her struggle is not melodramatic, nor artificial, nor vapid, but objective, real and moving. Thus Edna has the power, the dignity, and the self-possession of a genuine tragic heroine. Kenneth Elbe shows insight when he says that,

And when she walks into the sea, it does not leave a reader with a sense of sin punished, but rather with the sense evoked by Edwin Arlington Robinson's Eros Turannos:

. . . for they
 That with a god have striven
 Not hearing much of what we say,
 Take what the god has given;
 Though like waves breaking it may be,
 Or like a changed familiar tree,
 Or like a stairway to the sea
 Where down the blind are driven.³¹

Early critics of the novel easily fell into the trap of seeing nothing but immorality and selfishness in Edna. True, the sea was sensuality, but, according to Kenneth Rosen, "Why might not the sea be both life and death for the newly-awakened Edna?"³² Rosen does not feel that Chopin equates passion with either good or evil, nor does she praise or condemn conventional conduct. Edna's view of herself is both simplistic and aggravatingly ambiguous: "By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am" (p. 216). The novel deals with the simultaneous command for action and acceptance of the status quo. According to Rosen: "It reflects the ambiguous nature of the role an awakened woman must play in a world which denies the very nature of the woman herself."³³

Edna's awakening is a sensuous one, but not exclusively or even primarily sexual. Cynthia Wolfe notes that it would be naive and limiting to suppose that Edna's principal complaint ought to be described in terms of sexual repression.³⁴ Wolfe justifies her view with a quotation from Kate Chopin herself as narrator of the story:

That summer at Grand Isle she [Edna] began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had

always enveloped her. There may have been--there must have been--influence, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways to induce her to do this; but the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignolle. The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty" (p. 35).

Also, a major controversy is whether Edna's death is affirmative or negative, a culmination of her awakening or a defeat of and perhaps punishment for her rebellion. Poles of the controversy range from the view that Edna's death was a triumphant assertion of her inner liberty to a defeat rooted in a self-annihilating instinct. A resolution of the controversy lies in seeing death as one phase of a recurring human cycle of eros, birth, and death. Seen in such a context, Edna's suicide may be viewed as affirmative, a beginning as well as an ending. Death is but part of life's cycle. Elizabeth House indicates that this cyclical view of life is evidenced through use of repeated patterns, especially of motion and sound, which suggest an "endlessly rocking," repeating cycle:

For example, the sea with its perpetual ebb and flow permeates The Awakening as it does Whitman's poems. Throughout the novel too, characters rarely move without retracing their steps. On the broadest level, they go from seat to city and back again, but even in Chopin's descriptions of their seemingly insignificant steps, she has them repeat their motions as one does in rocking. With a dizzying succession of repeated movements, the characters suggest again and again that life is cycle.³⁵

On the night of her awakening, Edna swims into the sea and is overwhelmed with a vision of death, and at the novel's

end when she swims out to death, she has a vision of life's beginning--her childhood. These events indicate the phase-like nature of life, one involving eros, birth, and death.

Joan Zlotnick, in commenting on the problem of interpreting characterization and plot in The Awakening, notes that truth exists in a constant state of tension, that one may expect a good deal of ambivalence as Edna explores the conflict between realism and romance, between responsibility to others and debt to the self: "Could not one call The Awakening a problem novel in which the author has employed poetic and psychological argumentation in lieu of more conventional modes?"³⁶ Thus the novel may be seen in the context of social and psychological commentary, with natural symbols used throughout to indicate that a woman's sexual experience is but an episode in her continual growth, rejecting the family as the equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment. It is therefore not surprising that Chopin's heroines often defy society in their quest for freedom.

Chopin approves of Edna's awakening, even though its end results are adultery and death. Chopin indicated that Edna was becoming herself, casting aside her fictitious self which most individuals wear like a garment as a facade to the world. Edna was, in effect, caged by husband and children, Creole culture, and Tuesday afternoon receptions. She finds her loss of freedom unbearable when she is awakened to her own sensual and spiritual selfhood. Chopin's implicit approval is stated, through metaphor, on almost

every page as she frequently associates Edna's awakening with the natural process, with sea, sun, and bird imagery. Sensuous prose and the sexual-mystical experience in moon-dominated nature appears in The Awakening in such lines as "At that mystic hour and under that mystic moon" (p. 67) when "the white light of the moon had fallen upon the earth like the mystery and softness of sleep" (p. 69).

Kate Chopin was undoubtedly aware of the price that the individualist must pay in society, but nevertheless urged women to ask themselves "what they are for" and to march to the sound of their own drums. According to Joan Zlotnick, Kate Chopin's fiction is "a call to self-discovery and a celebration of personal freedom."³⁷

price too great

Moreover, the sleep-waking metaphor often appears in the novel, thereby opening the novel to a much broader interpretation. According to Donald Ringe, "The metaphor is an important romantic image for the emergence of the self or soul into a new life, an image that appears in the works of transcendentalists, two of whom Chopin specifically mentions in her fiction."³⁸ Emerson is of special importance in the novel, with his positing of a double world, one within and one without. This transcendentalist theme is especially evidenced in Chopin's artistic endeavor to show how Edna tries to relate to the external world, thereby finding fulfillment of her unrestrained desire in her own subjective way. The inner world of Edna is brought to life, to awareness by the influences of the

outer natural world. Edna's experience epitomizes the transcendentalist theory of self-discovery: "She was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment" (p. 102).

Thus an examination of Edna's character demonstrates the transcendental aspects of her quest. This transcendental desire makes her very different from a woman whose only passion is the gratification of her sensuality. However, this study has also pointed out that Kate Chopin conceives Edna's character in the naturalistic mode. Thus the conclusion is inescapable that the author has made use of both naturalistic and transcendentalist doctrines in her novel.

First published in 1899, The Awakening was too much to bear for American society of that era primarily because of its dealings with illicit sex and passion. Had critics looked more carefully, they would have found serious socio-psychological and transcendental themes. The modern emphasis on the erotic and the sensual does little better in correctly apprehending this fuller scope intended by Kate Chopin. Chopin expertly constructed by means of natural symbolism a plot and characterization reflecting a theme far more serious and optimistic than that typical of the "sexy novel" or tale of woe and damnation. Of course, there are pronounced naturalistic characteristics in the novel. Sensuality is a prominent feature of Edna's

character. The desire for sensual gratification drives her to form illicit relations with two young men: Lebrun and Arobin. Also the environment of Grand Isle influences her passion, incites her sensuality and makes her behave in an unmistakably naturalistic manner.

However, the awakening of Edna is not just a stimulation of passion. Rather, it is linked to the interplay of both internal and external natural forces in the context of a quest for personal identity inseparable from universal meaning. It is in the ocean that moments of eternal choice occur for Edna. The sea is, to be sure, sensual. But it also represents a spiritual challenge and significance. The sensuous imagery is there, but so are the transcendent themes, as well as the social and psychological themes of personal emancipation. It is true that Edna was not fulfilled as a "natural" woman, a fact that many reviewers have chosen to interpret in a purely psycho-sexual and psycho-social context. Far more important for Kate Chopin was the fact that Edna was not fulfilled as an existential being, one seeking her own identity, greater self-awareness, and spiritual fulfillment. Edna's was more than an escape from a stuffy, middle-class marriage. Hers was an escape from a social entrapment and spiritual strangulation.

Edna's rebellion is not merely sexual or social, but one motivated by the need for self-discovery. She identifies with soaring birds, the "mystic moon," and the ocean, all of which speak spiritually as well as sensually. The

land and the sea are mere backgrounds for a kind of psycho-spiritual probing. Her suicide death is a culmination of her awakening, a triumphant assertion of her inner liberty. More appropriate than a modern psychosociological or Freudian analysis is Walt Whitman's conceptual framework, one which sees death as one phase of a recurring human cycle of eros, birth, and death.

Truth exists in a constant state of tension. In The Awakening, Kate Chopin uses natural symbols throughout to indicate that a woman's sexual experience is but an episode in her continual growth, that the family is not the equivalent, for all women, of feminine self-fulfillment. In a word, freedom is her goal, one characterized not by selfishness and libido, but a discovery of the inner essence and true spiritual selfhood. Kate Chopin uses metaphor to depict the emergence of Edna's self or soul into a new life. Edna's inner world is brought to life through a dynamic interplay between inner and outer forces. She eventually comes to see with different eyes, a transformation consistent with the transcendentalist theory of self-discovery. It is this transformation that constitutes the awakening.

NOTES

¹"Current Literature," Boston Herald, 12 August 1899, p. 7.

²New York Times Saturday Review, 24 June 1899, p. 408.

³"The Awakening," Indianapolis Journal, 14 August 1899, p. 4.

⁴"Notes from Bookland," St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat, 18 June 1899, p. 3.

⁵"Review of the The Awakening," New Orleans Times-Democrat, 18 June 1899, pp. 14-15.

⁶Kenneth Elbe, "Introduction," in The Awakening by Kate Chopin (New York: B. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. viii.

⁷Elbe, p. x.

⁸Elbe, pp. x-xi.

⁹Elbe, pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁰Kenneth Elbe, "A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's The Awakening," The Western Humanities Review, 14 (Summer 1956), p. 265.

¹¹Donald Ringe, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's The Awakening," American Literature, 43 (January 1972), p. 583.

¹²John May, "Local Color in The Awakening," The Southern Review, 6 (October 1970), p. 1033.

¹³Robert Cantwell, "The Awakening by Kate Chopin," The Georgia Review, 10 (Winter 1956), p. 231.

¹⁴George M. Spangler, "Kate Chopin's The Awakening: A Partial Dissent," Novel, 3 (Spring 1970), p. 231.

¹⁵Spangler, pp. 251-52.

¹⁶Per Seyersted, The Complete Works of Kate Chopin

(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 24.

¹⁷Willia Cather, "The Awakening," Pittsburgh Leader, 8 July 1899, p. 6.

¹⁸Frances Porcher, "The Awakening: Kate Chopin's Novel," St. Louis Mirror, 4 May 1899, p. 6.

¹⁹"The Awakening," Los Angeles Times, 25 June 1899, p. 12.

²⁰The Nation, 69, 3 August 1899, p. 96.

²¹"Current Literature," Boston Herald, 12 August 1899, p. 7.

²²"Books and Authors," Boston Beacon, 24 June 1899, p. 4.

²³"Books of the Day," Chicago Times-Herald, 1 June 1899, p. 9.

²⁴Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith, "Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin's The Awakening," Studies in American Fiction, 6 (Spring 1973), p. 63.

²⁵Sullivan and Smith, p. 65.

²⁶Spangler, "Kate Chopin's The Awakening: A Partial Dissent," p. 254.

²⁷Ottavio Marke Casale, "Beyond Sex: The Dark Romanticism of Kate Chopin's The Awakening," Ball State University Forum, 19 (Winter 1978), p. 77.

²⁸Casale, p. 77.

²⁹Casale, p. 77.

³⁰Casale, p. 80.

³¹Kenneth Elbe, "A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's The Awakening," p. 269.

³²Kenneth M. Rosen, "Kate Chopin's The Awakening: Ambiguity as Art," Journal of American Studies, 5 (August 1971), p. 199.

³³Rosen, p. 198.

³⁴Cynthia Griffin Wolfe, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's The Awakening," American Quarterly, 25 (October 1973), p. 458.

³⁵Elizabeth Balkman House, "The Awakening: Kate Chopin's 'Endlessly Rocking' Cycle," Ball State University Forum, 20 (Spring 1979), pp. 53-54.

³⁶Joan Zlotnick, "A Woman's Will: Kate Chopin on Selfhood, Wifehood, and Motherhood," The Markham Review (October 1979), p. 2

³⁷Zlotnick, p. 3.

³⁸Donald A. Ringe, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's The Awakening," American Literature, 43 (January 1972), p. 581.

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