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The Awakening by Kate Chopin: Her Maturity and The Morality of Suicide

The Awakening (1899) by Kate Chopin (1850-1904) is a revolutionary novella because it raises serious questions about pre-twentieth century American gender standards, and the liberty women should or should not be allowed to enjoy. Chopin's carefully phrased novella does not answer these questions, which leaves readers with an ambiguous message that comes from Chopin's style of narration. It does not frame a clear moral standing. By examining this novella, other works of literature, and ideas of social theorists that promote utilitarianism, I will attempt to answer the morality of suicide in Edna's situation, and whether she was emotionally mature enough to make that drastic decision. *The Awakening* introduces themes of societal pressures and happiness in a way that is different in comparison to other stories about young women who stray from the expectations generations previous have set for them. Although stories like *The Awakening*, *Charlotte Temple*, and *The Coquette* all have the foundation of women who do not follow what is expected of them and all die prematurely, *The Awakening*'s Edna differs from the other women because she chooses her own death.

Edna chooses to drown herself after deciding she will be unable to find happiness and liberty with her children, and she learns she is unable to abandon them because of her motherly duties; if she were to divorce her husband and gain independence through that progression, her

children would suffer due to the social hierarchy they live in. Edna has a duty to provide the best life possible to her children, but she is unable to give herself for her children. For this reason, Edna justifies the suicide. Her children will not socially suffer for a tragic death in the same way they would be socially punished for a mother seeking independence. She chooses to drown herself in order to avoid sacrificing herself for her children, without harming her children by abandoning them in the eyes of her peers. She creates dinner plans with people on the beach in order to solidify her drowning to be perceived as an accident. However, even though the narration shows that this death is premeditated, it is unclear if Chopin is supportive or critical of Edna's decision to end her life.

At the very end of the novella, the narration suggests Edna might have found hope of a happier life through Doctor Mandelet, who may have understood her. Edna did not seem sure of her suicide for this reason. "Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him- but it was too late" (Chopin 322). It is possible that Doctor Mandelet could have given her the skills she needed to process her awakening and find a way to live without liberty, or find a way to achieve it while still being a mother. Doctor Mandelet's relationship with Edna seems to begin as impersonal; Leonce first reached out to the Doctor to ask for his advice in marriage: "'Has she,' asked the Doctor, with a smile, 'has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings? My wife has been telling me about them'" (Chopin 193). This beginning of trying to find a diagnosis shows the Doctor to have some problematic and misogynistic humor, and his happy solution of going to a wedding exhibits the doctor's misunderstanding of Edna's more complicated dissonance. It is clear that he does not feel a bond to Edna through this interaction because there is no depth to how Dr. Mandelet considers Edna's state. After meeting with her, the doctor has a deeper understanding

of her: “He knew his fellow-creatures better than most men; knew that inner life which so seldom unfolds itself to unanointed eyes. He was sorry he had accepted Pontellier’s invitation. He was growing old, and beginning to need rest and an imperturbed spirit. He did not want the secrets of other lives thrust upon him,” (Chopin 207). This dialogue suggests that after meeting with Edna, Doctor Mandelet more fully understands the complexity of Edna, and her desire to have an affair. Finally, Doctor Mandelet speaks to Edna after she witnesses Adele give birth: ““You shouldn’t have been there, Mrs. Pontellier,’ he said. ‘That was no place for you. Adèle is full of whims at such times. There were a dozen women she might have had with her, unimpressionable women. I felt that it was cruel, cruel. You shouldn’t have gone’” (Chopin 311). Doctor Mandelet is showing an intimate understanding of Edna, and he was able to foresee the emotional turmoil the birth would cause for her. Their relationship begins as professional, but the doctor later develops a bond to Edna that can be understood as a mentor and student. He offers to teach her about herself, and Edna rambles after the doctor offers his help: ““Oh! I don’t know what I’m saying, Doctor. Good night. Don’t blame me for anything’” (Chopin 312). It is clear that Edna is unsure about herself and is experiencing extreme cognitive dissonance with her status as a wealthier white woman, and her desire to be free of societal expectations. These expectations offer her a life of comfort under the constraints that a woman of her time was expected to follow.

Chopin’s writing is crafted to be ambiguous. The narration carefully follows Edna as she experiences her awakening and the emotional instability that is tagged with it. The narrator does not delve into her own opinion on how Edna is handling her information, but does allow for Edna to be supported, sympathized, and criticized. This is achieved through free indirect

discourse, where the narrator is frequently adopting the viewpoint of Edna while narrating the story from a third person point of view.

Her ambiguous writing opens up several ways for the life of Edna to be interpreted, and several ways for the message of *The Awakening* to be understood. It could be interpreted that Edna's choice to drown herself is the result of a valid observation from Edna concerning her living situation and the realization that liberty is not an achievable goal. The narrator shows Edna's willingness to do anything for her children but sacrifice herself; this could lead to Edna's potentially logical conclusion of ending her life, so she could avoid adopting the lifestyle of motherhood that conflicts with the lifestyle of an independent woman Edna desperately wants to claim. However, the narrator also suggests that Edna may be mentally unstable, and shows that she may have found happiness if she gave herself more time to mature into the new person she wanted to become. Just as easily as the narration suggests that Edna has made the correct choice in freeing herself, it could also be said that Edna was too hasty with her decision to drown herself, and she robbed herself and those around her of a fruitful life with Edna's presence.

Because of *The Awakening*'s ambiguities, the reader is left with many questions that can be researched and pondered, with the biggest question potentially being whether or not the narrator framed Edna's suicide in a way to be morally justified or not. In order to answer this question, I have found various ideas from social theorists that create context for *The Awakening* and guide my thoughts; I will use them as I consider the state of mind and events that develop into Edna's decision to drown in the ocean as the narration depicts it.

Through the ambiguity, Chopin's narration of Edna frames her as a confused and sensitive woman. The very beginning of the novella introduces her as a wife. Edna is not mentioned by her first name until page 11. This can help to explain the urges Edna has, why she

experiences them, and ultimately, her situation assists in explaining why she is unable to actualize them. She is framed to be confused with her role as a wife and mother, and with her own emotions, before her awakening. This awakening can be identified with Edna's first swim in the ocean; her awakening brings a strong shift in her character, and is the beginning of her more defiant acts that are made in the desire for liberty.

Her confusion before her awakening is clear in chapter three, where Edna does not feel the motherly instinct to care for her child, then is scolded by her husband: "Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after... Mrs. Pontellier was quite sure Raoul had no fever. He had gone to bed perfectly well, she said, and nothing had ailed him all day... He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (Chopin 21). Edna then refuses to speak to her husband, and, later after he falls asleep, finds herself crying. She leaves the room, and her gentle tears evolve into sobs. The narration suggests that Edna's crying was her own choice, and she was not truly upset, when her mood is calmed because of her annoyance with the mosquitos around her: "She began to cry a little... and went out on the porch, where she sat down in the wicker chair and began to rock gently to and fro. It was then past midnight... The tears came so fast to Mrs. Pontellier's eyes that the damp sleeve of her *peignoir* no longer served to dry them... Turning, she thrust her face, steaming and wet, into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. She could not have told why she was crying... She was just having a good cry all to herself... The little stinging, buzzing imps succeeded in dispelling a mood which might have held her there in the darkness half a night longer" (Chopin 22-25).

Edna seems especially strange when her depiction by the narrator is compared to how the narrator depicts Leonce. The narrator shares that even though Leonce has forgotten to bring his children treats, he still loves them, and his annoyance with Edna is justified logically through Leonce's point of view.

Edna does have moments of being a functional wife. She is comfortable with the gender role of being a woman when her husband is giving her half of his earnings after a night in the clubhouse gambling with his friends. She is at her simplest happy in that moment; she is happy without the implication that her desire for freedom is wrong, or that her social status is risked due to her coquettish and unmotherly behavior as someone who wrestles with the desire for an affair and the freedom that comes with independence. At the beginning of the novella, Edna is established as an emotional being, and perhaps emotionally unstable. Her good cry at her husband's critique, which was stopped by mosquitoes bothering her, her passionate emotion at Mademoiselle Reiz's musical skill, and her passionate emotion with childhood crushes that followed her to adulthood even after she tried to repress them, all suggest she is a woman with feelings that may be too much for her to handle. Her restraint is an interesting contrast to this part of herself. Her ability to restrain her emotion when she is not overwhelmed makes it more doubtful if she is emotionally unstable. I also hesitate to say she is emotionally unstable because of her intense crushes, passion for music, and occasional good cries. While these can suggest instability, I would also suggest that these are normal aspects of life, especially for a woman. Men are socialized to oppress this kind of emotive behavior, especially in the late nineteenth century, therefore it is more expected to see melodramatic women than men. This calls into question whether or not society is too quick to label a woman as being unstable when emotions are revealed. Personally, the majority of women I know can relate to every aspect of what was

listed to support the argument that Edna is emotionally unstable. Conclusively, the narrator is too ambiguous about Edna's mental state before her awakening to concretely decide if Edna is emotionally unstable, or simply emotional.

Edna's marriage is shown to be somewhat pleasant. Leonce is characterized as the perfect husband who is frustrated with his wife's odd behavior, especially whenever she is compared to women who love their children and devote themselves entirely to their families. His frustration is justified to be reasonable. Her children are shown to be happy; the love between Leonce and his children is clear in the narration, especially whenever Leonce goes to the club and his children wish to go with him. The narration makes it reasonable to imagine a happy father with children climbing on his back, and sharing laughter. Edna is mostly neutral over matters with her children. This is shown most effectively when she is not concerned over a potential fever of her son, which is shown by her refusal of her husband's request to check on them, and her harsh reaction when her husband scolds her for not being an efficient mother and wife. After her awakening, which I have marked as her first swim in the ocean, she becomes more defiant of her husband. When he first scolded her over her disinterest in her son's health and potential fever, she seemed shocked and upset with her usually endlessly patient husband. Her shock showed itself in a loss of self-control as she cried, then quickly shifted the next day to a pleasurable occurrence with her husband as they discussed money and a wedding gift for Edna's sister. After her awakening she seemed to care less about his reactions to her behavior.

After her awakening, Edna is immediately less concerned with the people around her. She ignores the social obligations her husband expects of her, which consists of holding conversation with the wives of his business partners and potential clients, and she blatantly refused to obey her husband when he requested she go inside. She also sends for Robert for the

first time, something that she may have done because she is no longer acutely concerned with the public's opinion of her. Here, Edna is framed as being defiant, and resembles a teenager who is rebelling against her father. "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant... she wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had" (Chopin 105). Edna is someone who has just learned that rebelling is an option, and she is surprised that she has not been doing so before then. This resembles a child maturing into an adult, with rebelling against authority acting as a first step to becoming an independent person with an independent thought process, who does not need a husband for guidance and commands. However, it must be noted that Edna gets into a fight of willpower with her husband as he decides he will stay out with her until she goes inside. Eventually Edna tires out and goes to bed, and Leonce stays outside a bit longer to finish a cigar. This shows that even though Edna has made a major change to herself, she still has a journey to maturation. She is not yet ready to be equals with her husband, even if she is rebelling against his commands.

After the event I have identified as Edna's awakening, the narrator also depicts Edna as gaining a new confidence. She leaves a church service over not feeling well, and Robert takes her to a cottage to rest. She washes herself and then sleeps in a bed by herself, which she enjoys as a new and exciting feeling. After some time she wakes up feeling as though she had slept for years: "Her eyes were bright and wide awake and her face glowed" (Chopin 120). Edna did not have moments of this brightness before her awakening. However, this brightness is also matched with occasional bleakness that is just as acute. After she learns that Robert is leaving for Mexico, her emotions and reactions are more dramatic than what she has experienced before her awakening. "Edna bit her handkerchief convulsively, striving to hold back and hide, even from

herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotion which was troubling -tearing- her. Her eyes were brimming with tears” (Chopin 140). The biting of the handkerchief indicates an unhinged emotional state, and her emotions are described as tortured. Her emotions after her awakening are certainly more passionate than before, and along with that passion comes high emotion that Edna struggles to control, as seen with her biting, which can be a self-soothing technique commonly used by young children. This is further proof she is not yet a mature adult.

After Edna’s awakening, she is also framed to have a more complex view of herself that she does not fully understand yet. In discussing her children and motherhood with Adèle, Edna attempts to explain her newfound identity: “I would give up the unessential: I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give up myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (Chopin 146). Edna’s awakening seems to intensify her feelings for her family. I would not have expected Edna to say she would give her life for her children as someone who did not respect her husband’s concern over the illness of one of her children. This is not the same attitude she had expressed when her son was potentially sick with fever, and Leonce had to scold his wife because of her relaxed reaction to his potential health crisis. Edna did not give the impression that she was willing to sacrifice her life for her children previously, but after her awakening she proves that she is, albeit she gives her life in order to protect herself and her liberty. Edna’s distaste for her husband also grows; she does not appreciate the tasks she is given to support her household and her husband’s income. This is proven by her abandonment of attending to her husband’s business partner’s wives simply because she did not feel like it. This negatively affects his business because it shows a lack of respect, and negatively impacts the opinion of Leonce.

The way she drowns suggests premeditation because of her arrangement of dinner plans beforehand. She encounters a young couple on her way to the beach she associated casually with over the summer and converses with them: “‘What time will you have dinner?’ asked Edna. ‘I’m very hungry; but don’t get anything extra... I hope you have fish for dinner,’ said Edna, as she started to walk away; ‘but don’t do anything extra if you haven’t.’” (Chopin 319). Her own dialogue, and concern that others do not go out of their way for her, suggest that Edna’s drowning is premeditated. She is sure that if she were to divorce her husband and live on her own or kill herself, her action would reflect poorly on her children and how her high society perceives them, and if she were to maintain her marriage to her husband and motherly duties to her children, she would be giving up herself. Edna is not willing to do either of these, so she finds a creative option and swims out so it appears to be a tragic drowning. In this circumstance, her children are the victims of circumstance, and Leonce can continue to live as a widower and single father without the shame of a failed marriage, thus also protecting the reputation of her children as well. Here, the narrator is framing Edna as a woman who appears to have run out of options. She is portrayed as a woman who is strong in her opinions, even whenever her emotions are high, and especially with her controversial situation. However, the narrator does not elaborate on Edna’s situation, so Edna’s potentially hypocritical actions are left to be interpreted by Chopin’s audience. Edna deciding to drown for the sake of her children is not a selfish act, but when it is considered that the act is done to selfishly maintain her sense of identity, it is reasonable to assume that the act is mostly self-motivated, as opposed to being motivated for the benefit of her children. The narrator is neutral in framing opinions on Edna’s suicide, and does not comment on the underlying issue that a mother’s suicide is nearly never for the benefit of children.

The narration of Edna changes throughout the novel as her character changes. She is originally framed as a character who is somewhat meek; she cries often, sometimes for the sake of crying, is submissive to her husband when he is stern, and is generally passive throughout her life. She does what is asked of her, even when she protests, internally or externally, over it. “Weepy” summarizes Edna well.

After Edna’s awakening, “weepy” is no longer an appropriate word to describe her disposition. While she still cries and occasionally mopes, her emotions of passion are strong. Edna is certainly high-strung, and the narrator shows her to be someone who is moody. This is conveyed in Edna’s relationship with Adèle. Edna trusts Adèle dearly and considers her to be someone worth confiding in, but occasionally shifts to have a patronizing opinion of her: “She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment” (Chopin 168). Edna’s moodiness can also be seen in her relationship with Robert. She quickly moves from elation that Robert has returned from Mexico, to devastation due to her realization that she will never have liberty, and the decision that she will never realize her life’s purpose of achieving liberty. This is the strongest and most severe mood shift to be found in the novella, and occurs after Edna’s awakening. I am more inclined to call her emotionally unstable after her awakening than before her awakening because of these sharp mood swings of highs and lows due to her changing perception of who she is and what she wants, and her evolving circumstances.

The narrator invokes limited feelings of sympathy for Edna: “I would give up the unessential: I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give up myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend,

which is revealing itself to me” (Chopin 146). Her statement that she would not give herself for her children but would give her life comes across as a noble declaration, and the reader is meant to experience sympathy for Edna, especially after her idea is misunderstood by Adèle, and not fully understood by Edna herself. Adèle is first introduced as a lovely woman who enjoys Edna: “Madame Ratignolle was very fond of Mrs. Pontellier” (Chopin 30). Introducing Edna’s relationship to Adèle, the narrator begins by discussing Edna’s past hesitance to confide in others, and her current inclination to confess her emotions, especially to Adèle: “There may have been—there must have been—influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways to induce her to do this; but the most obvious was the influence of Adèle Ratignolle. The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty” (Chopin 50). Hints of an erotic bond continue as the women discuss Edna’s feelings together: “Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, ‘*Pauvre chérie*’” (Chopin 60). Nothing more sensual develops from their relationship, and Adèle often misses the significance of Edna’s confessions, most notably in Edna’s confession to Adèle where she shares her desperate need to keep her self-identity.

Edna is consistently misunderstood, as in her miscommunications with Robert, especially when her attempt to connect with him when he discusses Mexico is mistaken for mockery. Even with the tragic circumstances of Edna’s push from childhood to marriage to desire for independence, the narrator does leave room for Edna to be critiqued. This is especially clear in the first half of the novella when the narrator follows Leonce’s point of view, and it is clear with the ambiguity of the writing which leaves room for criticism in Edna’s hasty and arguably

irrational decisions: “Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late” (Chopin 322). This comment allows for a potential solution to Edna’s dilemma that could have avoided her death. This is the implied critique that she may have acted too abruptly. While the narrator does not directly recommend that Edna has made an immoral decision, the audience is led to assume that Edna did not exhaust her options before resolving to die. The narration introduces Edna’s potentially hypocritical actions by outlining the extremities of her two options. Her choices of living a life where she will never experience freedom, or death, is severe, and it is unreasonable to assume there is no other option at all. The narration shows this, once again, with Edna’s shortly lived doubt that she may have found a friend and a way to achieve what she wants in life, through living, with Doctor Mandelet. The narration does not settle the hypocrisy of Edna ending herself to save both her children and herself. Because of this, the narration does not come across as sympathetic in Edna’s decision to end her life. It does, however, show sympathy for Edna’s situation, over which she does not have control. The narrator is aware of Edna’s life and her pipeline to marriage with no other option due to her desire to fit in and repress her passion. The narrator is sympathetic to Edna’s emotional state, and the consistent misunderstanding of herself from those around her and even from her own consciousness: “Edna could not help but think that it was very foolish, very childish, to have stamped upon her wedding ring and smashed the crystal vase upon the tiles. She was visited by no more outbursts, moving her to such futile expedients. She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked. She completely abandoned her Tuesdays at home, and did not return the visits of those who had called upon her” (Chopin 170). Here, it is outlined that Edna does not understand her own outbursts, and the suggestion that Edna views herself as childish and foolish invites readers to pity her. The anger Edna feels towards her wedding ring indicates that Edna did not

have a choice in her marriage, which was common for women of her status in her time. The audience is asked to feel sorry for her with caution. This can be seen through the narration's critiques of her throughout the novella, including the brief moment in chapter three, where the narration follows Leonce's point of view, and in Edna's moment of doubt, or moment of clarity, before her death. Even though her circumstances are unfortunate, it does seem that through her final thought of Doctor Mandelet, her opinion that life could not be good for her was made too quickly. This is the center of the narration's limited pity for Edna and her unfortunate circumstances. Edna chose to refuse Doctor Mandelet's offer to talk to her, to teach her ways of thinking she did not know existed, and guide her through her moods. He said he would blame her if something happened to her because it would be her own choice to not exhaust her options. The narration of *The Awakening* allows for sympathy, but it does not alone justify Edna's ultimate decision to drown herself in the pursuit of liberty.

Utilitarianism is a formal school of thought beginning in the 18th century that introduces the idea that all mentally sound people deserve the right to liberty. This idea is revolutionary for its strides towards arguing for individual rights for all people, and especially marginalized groups, which include women. This philosophy is based on doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. So, for an example of an extreme case, murder could be considered morally good if that murder prevented some horrible event, such as the holocaust. This example of extremity exposes one of the most severe critiques of utilitarianism, since it is impossible to know what events can be stopped in the future, and it is impossible to know what events are a result of an action that happened long ago. A couple could randomly meet and have a relationship that changes their life for the better. They could start a family, have a child that discovers a treatment for a terminal illness, then that child could have a child that is a vicious

killer. Would it be morally good if their meeting was able to be prevented? It is impossible to know, especially since we do not know what events are caused as a result of the people who are cured, and of the people whose lives were abruptly ended. Despite this flaw, utilitarianism still has merit in deciding the morality of actions because of its selfless foundation in requiring the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It is not a perfect school of thought, but it is still applicable despite its flaws. Utilitarianism's ambiguous nature is one reason it is especially interesting when considering how Edna is presented. It is also a feminist philosophy, as the people frequently credited with formally founding utilitarianism argued for women's rights, and to treat them as fully autonomous beings. So, its uncommon way of affirming morality, and its foundation in supporting women, allows utilitarianism to be an especially applicable philosophy to an understanding of *The Awakening*.

Considering suicide to be immoral in nearly all cases is an opinion held by many; it is commonly condemned in religion, and attempting suicide is considered a crime in several governments, including some areas of the United States. The legality of assisted suicide varies by state. So, suicide is condemned both in the social expectations that religion calls for, and in the social expectations that governments influence. However, utilitarianism and its unique ability to justify implausible acts like suicide and murder, can define it as a moral action under appropriate circumstances. It can be argued that the narration presented Edna's suicide as a moral overall good. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), one of the people often credited with creating the formal idea of utilitarianism, helped to frame the philosophy in a way that allows for this to happen.

Bentham is a well-known philosopher in the utilitarian school of thought¹. One of the major aspects that makes utilitarianism so unique is the male utilitarianists' promotion of women's rights. While Bentham is not a great example of a feminist thinker when compared to

people such as Mary Wollstonecraft, his writing is still revolutionary. In discussing “females”, Bentham states, “Suppose... due justice has not hitherto been done to the weaker sex” (Bentham xciii). So, while it should be considered forward thinking that Bentham is considering women when he discusses philosophy and what is morally just, it should also be noted that there is still clear bias through his use of the phrase “weaker sex”, and he should hesitantly be considered a feminist thinker.

Bentham references the universal-interest-comprehension and the appropriate intellectual aptitude as guides to make his decision for which treatment of women is fair, and states that if these do not apply to women, then it will be very difficult to apply them in other contexts as well. Bentham raises the question of what is an intelligent being, and admits that if women are not considered to be intelligent thinkers, the definition of an intelligent thinker is impossibly complicated to navigate. Because of this, Bentham concedes to supporting women’s suffrage and their rights as independent beings.

Bentham also supports suffrage for young independent people; at the time the voting age was 21. He argues that since children at the proper age are mature enough to make a will and choose a guardian, they are of sound mind to participate in government (Bentham xcii). However, he does mention that young children should clearly not be allowed to experience liberty, since it is a right only for those that are mature enough to use liberty. Those who have liberty without the ability to properly process through options and consequences are at a heightened risk of hurting themselves or others. For this reason, Edna’s right to liberty should be questioned.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) also addresses liberty and his own ideas on how it should be applied to people. He was a successful student under Jeremy Bentham. Mill worked closely

alongside Bentham, even if he did not agree with all of his points. They disagreed on how happiness should be measured; Bentham believed it to be solely quantitative, while Mill found that happiness also had a qualitative trait. Mill is responsible for creating The Greatest Happiness Principle, which he stated in the general remarks chapter of *Utilitarianism* (1863) as acting to produce the greatest amount of happiness, and least amount of unhappiness, for the greatest number of people. Happiness is measured in quantity, or the number of people who experience the happiness, but it is also measured in quality. This is why The Greatest Happiness Principle applies ambiguously to *The Awakening*. It can be reasonably assumed that more people would be negatively affected by Edna's death than positively affected by it, but, would Edna's quality of her unhappiness be so great it cancels out the happiness of those around her that enjoy her presence? Would the people around her be so wounded by her death that their unhappiness is greater than the unhappiness Edna is convinced she would experience for the rest of her life? It should be noted that many of the pleasures Edna sought to enjoy were sensual, which Mill ranked to be of a lower quality of happiness when compared to other, more intellectually stimulating pleasures. The quality, or value, of happiness is discerned based on whether or not animals can experience the same pleasure. According to Mill, this is the difference between the pleasure a good meal brings, and the pleasure stimulating conversation with a friend, or solving a difficult problem, brings.

Chopin sets Edna up to be a character who requires liberty to be happy. She is happiest when she is without children or her husband, and seeks independence for nearly the entirety of the novella. She behaves in a way to suggest that she will never be happy as she is because of her status as a mother, and this is a status she cannot reject. The narration does not make a clear

statement when Edna chooses to drown, so the correctness of her decision is a matter of interpretation, even when the principles of utilitarianism and Greatest Happiness are applied.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is a philosopher who, in contrast to the utilitarians who discussed approving women's rights as a side aspect to their school of thought, advocated solely for the rights of women. She claimed that women are not intrinsically unequal to men in matters of intelligence, but women do not have the opportunity to reach their full potential because they are kept from receiving an education. She claims that women are oppressed due to this, and suggests that men keep women from education to keep them submissive. However, she does mention that women and education would benefit the world as a whole. Women would be happier, children would be better cared for, and men would have better wives as a result of this education Wollstonecraft is suggesting women ought to receive. This way of thinking aligns with the primary foundation of utilitarianism, where the result of one change, women's education, benefits not only the party receiving the change but also positively impacts all people in the benefactors' sphere of influence.

This philosophy is interesting when considered alongside Edna. As seen in the discussion of how the narrator presents Edna, there is some question as to how thorough her knowledge of potential outcomes is when she decides to drown. As suggested by Doctor Mandelet, Edna did have much to learn, and was ignorant of what her life's full potential could be, when she died. But, by the time she considered the option of speaking to the doctor, it was too late; the narration suggests that she is already too far into the ocean to make it to shore when she thinks of him: "Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone" (Chopin 322). It is rational to assume that if Edna had met with Doctor Mandelet and allowed him to teach her what he was offering, she

could have found solace in the information she was given, and found a way to simultaneously be a mother and a person with liberty. The education Wollstonecraft argued for could have benefitted Edna, since her primary argument is for equality between men and women. In reference to women Wollstonecraft states: “I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves” (Wollstonecraft 66). Edna’s lack of power, or lack of liberty, is the direct cause of her conflicts. If Edna had power over herself, and was able to make choices that reflected her identity as an independent being, she could have almost certainly avoided the cognitive dissonance her awakening brought her. She would have been allowed to explore her independence without the expectation of her feminine gender roles as a wife, because she would not have been socially pressured into a marriage in order to maintain her position as a woman with high social status. If *The Awakening*’s world adopted Wollstonecraft’s ideology, where men and women are equal, Edna’s chances at finding a fulfilling life would dramatically rise.

Wollstonecraft would certainly approve of Edna’s pursuit of independence and her desire to be seen as an equal to her male counterparts. However, it is likely that she would have considered Edna’s choice to drown as irrational because of her decision to refuse the help of a man who seemed to have a deeper understanding of her than of herself. After Edna reunites with Robert, she reluctantly leaves him to be with Adèle who has started the process of giving birth, which Edna witnesses uncomfortably while she considers the unfairness of nature. Doctor Mandélet did not approve of Edna’s presence at Adèle’s labor, which he knew would be a dangerous environment for Edna to be in in her mental state: ““You shouldn’t have been there, Mrs. Pontellier,” he said. ‘That was no place for you... There were a dozen women she might have had with her, unimpressionable women. I felt that it was cruel, cruel. You shouldn’t have gone’” (Chopin 310). He could foresee Edna’s spiral due to her consideration of children and

how they may trap women. He was able to anticipate this with more accuracy than Edna and her closest friend Adèle. He also understood a style of Edna's veiled communication, which is shown when Doctor Mandelet shared a dream that foretold misfortune for Edna, and Edna responded with a story of rebellion at a dinner constructed by Leonce. He asked for the Doctor to come and observe Edna and her strange appearance, and in doing so he subtly told her of the dangers that come with passionate freedom without maturity. In another instance, he understands Edna's broken and unfinished thoughts she attempts to voice: "'Perhaps—no, I am not going. I'm not going to be forced into doing things. I don't want to go abroad. I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right—except children, perhaps—and even then, it seems to me—or it did seem—' She felt that her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts, and stopped abruptly. 'The trouble is,' sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, 'that youth is given up to illusions'" (Chopin 311). Doctor Mandelet certainly had an intricate understanding of Edna's psyche, especially in comparison to those around her, and could have potentially given Edna a new understanding of herself. Wollstonecraft would likely have reservations about a man guiding a woman through her psyche, but she would almost certainly prefer this education over the alternative that is Edna's suicide.

Wollstonecraft gives enormous credit to the human's ability to reason, and for this reason she would not have agreed with Edna's choice to drown. It is clear Edna did not exhaust her options. Wollstonecraft argues for an education system that allows free and equal education for all children up to a certain age. Edna could have benefitted from a metaphorical form of this as well, as seen in her awakening and rebirth, where she begins to behave as though she is experiencing a second maturing.

After exploring the intricacies of how Edna is portrayed and how the different ideas of philosophers may apply to her, her character can be properly analyzed. In order to understand if liberty applies to Edna, and if Edna made a rational, moral, decision in ending her life, her ability to evaluate her emotions must be discussed.

Edna does show ability to think through her own situation as her character has grown; this is demonstrated when she comes to the realization that Robert does not understand her or her need for independence. Robert suggested asking Leonce for Edna's hand and she laughed at him: "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (Chopin 302). This thought gives her the realization of what she defines independence as. She understands that she is not looking to be owned in a society she now perceives as one that will never allow her to claim liberty: "She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (Chopin 320). Edna finds clarity in the discovery that men will always want to own her, and her independence that she believes will never be realized is part of her personal identity. Edna desires men, and to love and be loved, but most importantly she wishes to do this without ownership. Because of her interaction with Robert, Edna has drawn the conclusion that she will decisively be lonely because she is not willing to compromise her liberty: "Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out

of her existence, leaving her alone” (Chopin 320). Edna realized a depth to Robert’s character, and his deepest desire is to own Edna in a relationship that is man and wife. Robert is fundamentally not different from the other romantic men in Edna’s life; his traditional desire to own her would eventually end the relationship. It should be noted that it is hasty for Edna to assume Robert is the only person she wanted to spend her time with, and she will ultimately be left alone. It would be reasonable to suggest Edna was not in her most rational state after Robert left her, even if she did ponder what his leaving meant for an entire night: “Edna walked on down to the beach rather mechanically, not noticing anything special except that the sun was hot. She was not dwelling upon any particular train of thought. She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning” (Chopin 320). Even though the narrator is phrasing this through Edna’s point of view and it is said that Edna is convinced she is being rational, a reader can see that she is not. It is simple; Edna cannot decide that life is not worth living in the span of a few hours because the man she loved has left her. Edna is not actively thinking and is in a trance. She needed to have a conversation with someone about her feelings before she allowed herself to spiral.

Edna is aware of her changes, even though she has not come to fully understand them. Notably, she references this state in a conversation with Adèle: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (Chopin 146). Edna understands that she has found a deeper meaning to life than being alive, but she is unable to understand it fully, or at all, and recognizes that through her confession that she is only just beginning to comprehend the huge implications of what she is learning.

Edna's dialogue suggests that she has not evolved from this state throughout the entirety of the novel, as seen in her discussion with Doctor Mandelet after she is present for Adèle's birth: "Some way I don't feel moved to speak of things that trouble me. Don't think I am ungrateful or that I don't appreciate your sympathy. There are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me. But I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives. Oh! I don't know what I'm saying, Doctor. Good night" (Chopin 312). Here, Edna provides a more detailed description of her need for liberty and her understanding of its consequences than in the conversation she had with Adèle; this shows growth on Edna's part, but again she is unable to properly share her thoughts and cuts herself off. This is significant, especially considering Edna is not shy of sharing her thoughts that may be considered immoral by others, as seen when she shares her story of rebellion at the dinner Edna and Doctor Mandelet shared with Leonce. Edna is simply unprepared to process her emotions on what she needs for herself and balancing others dependencies on her, notably her children's.

Edna's emotional state from the beginning of the novella to the end of the novella has evolved, and she does have a deeper understanding of herself. She also showed continuous growth in understanding herself, although a true revelation of who Edna is to Edna herself was never realized since she drowned before she could rationally conclude that the only way to achieve liberty as a mother is death. Edna had potential to reach that conclusion in sound mind, but she did not allow herself that opportunity.

Along with Edna's emotional state, her comprehension of her own responsibilities to herself and others must be analyzed in order to determine if she is of sound mind. Referencing

back to Edna's conversation with Adèle, it is clear Edna understands that her children need her, and her duty as a mom is to give her life to them if the situation were to arise. She is willing to do so; however, it should be questioned if Edna understands her children's dependency on her, or if they actually do depend on her at all with their emotional or bodily needs. It can be argued that Edna's children do not depend on her for their livelihood, since they have nannies to care for them and a present father. This same argument can be applied to their emotional needs for a mother. However, they do depend on her for status as children in a higher society. Edna shows an understanding for this in her decision to drown as opposed to abandoning them in a divorce.

These two questions, and the information gathered to address them, leads to the conclusion that, according to how the narration portrays Edna, she was not able to properly come to the decision to end her life, and thus did so without a proper claim to liberty and the moral right to do so. Edna might have if she had exhausted all of her options and rationally thought through what would happen, but the narrator suggests she acted impulsively before she was able to come to the rational conclusion that life would generally be better for herself and everyone else in it without her presence. The narrator could have presented Edna carefully considering discussing her ideas with Doctor Mandélet before taking her life, and that would have supported the idea that her drowning was a mature decision, but such a rational discussion would dissolve the essence of Edna's character and *The Awakening* would be a much weaker novella for it. Her rationality in realizing that she cannot do whatever her heart pleases without harming her children shows maturity as well, but conclusively her immature actions and the brevity with which she came to the conclusion that she could not live show that Edna's death was a flawed and hasty decision on her part. *The Awakening* depicts Edna to be an emotionally eruptive character who typically behaves in a way that is reminiscent of children, with glimmers of hope

for reaching maturity sprinkled throughout. That glimmer died the final time she swam into the ocean.

Notes

1. *Plan of Parliamentary Reform, in the Form of a Catechism, with Reasons for Each Article: With an Introduction, Shewing the Necessity of Radical, and the Inadequacy of Moderate Reform* is the work referenced for Bentham's ideology

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