

"Where No Woman Had Swum Before": Queer Feminism in *The Awakening*

At the closing of the 19th century, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin arrived like a storm on literary convention. Published in 1899, *The Awakening* follows Edna Pontellier from her time along the Louisiana coastline to New Orleans, immersed in the social machinations expected of women. Between Edna's visceral narrative and Chopin's writing style, *The Awakening* lambasts the remnants of the Enlightenment by establishing the staples of American modernism: changing cultural perspectives, rejecting spirituality in favor of realism. Furthermore, *The Awakening* stands out through its emergence of feminism; Chopin's focus on female characters, specifically Edna's differing thoughts on society, continues to draw critical acclaim due to unabashedly portraying controversial views on femininity, motherhood, and sexual liberation, groundbreaking when first released and still studied today. However, the rise and fall of Edna's story, achieving some semblance of agency only to commit suicide, raises a critical question in literary discourse: does Edna experience an awakening or is she actually a satirical example of feminism? Arguably, it is the women in Edna's life that do inspire her awakening; Edna favors homosocial relationships, but because she still chooses the constraints of a heterosexual romance, Edna reverts her awakening and kills herself over her loss of an identity. If Chopin's *The Awakening* does suggest satire, where a woman's freedom returns her straight back into patriarchal control, the question at issue is if Edna would have survived had she rejected all stereotypes of 19th-century femininity, including the heterosexual requirements that chained her to men to begin with.

Comparatively, Chopin's *The Awakening* likens to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, channeling the same criticism toward 19th-century social norms. However, while *A Doll's House*

helped launch *The Awakening's* prestige in the United States, carrying the same signatures of a female protagonist questioning her role of wife and mother, Chopin's perspective serves as a more satirical look rather than Ibsen's honest depiction. For example, at the end of Ibsen's play, narrator Nora Helmer autonomously leaves her family, despite the societal challenges she will have to face; in contrast, come the end of *The Awakening*, Edna's evolution into a more independent woman appears to be all for naught, as she submits to the ocean and kills herself. Yet, *The Awakening* is clearly empowered by its female characters—unlike how *A Doll's House* mainly focuses on Nora, Edna's narration is flanked by other predominant women, echoing and foiling her changing beliefs in society. As Susan G. Weber points out in "Undermining Heteronormativity in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," Edna represents the "New Woman in search of independence from the patriarchal constraints that suffocate her, including sexual rules and restrictions," yet she would never have reached this pivotal point without her female peers: Madame Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz (iii). While Adèle serves as Edna's foil, aghast at Edna's rebellious behavior, and Reisz acts as Edna's advocate, celebrating Edna's newfound prowess, both women and the extremes they represent are critical to Edna's development as an autonomous woman.

However, literary studies in queer theory appear to recognize Adèle and Reisz's contribution to Edna's awakening more than Edna actually does. Despite experiencing the positivity of homosocial relations, Edna still prefers to spend her time with men, like her lover Robert Lebrun, regardless of how heterosocial relations prove to negatively impact her. Admittedly, Edna does get a taste of a physical awakening when commencing her affair with Robert; it is this scandalous action, exacerbated when she continues dalliances with other men

outside of her marriage, where critics agree Edna does experience a notable sexual awakening.

However, while Edna's sexual liberation is a testament to *The Awakening's* feminist message, that freedom—tangible but still defined by her male lovers—is not enough to fulfil the distinction of the novel's title: it is not necessarily the titular awakening in question. Instead, like Weber argues, Edna seeks a visceral awakening, evolving her body *and* soul, best illustrated when Edna learns how to swim:

But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (Chopin 70-1)

Throughout *The Awakening*, Edna's connection to water and learning how to swim illustrates her rise—and subsequent fall—as an autonomous woman. It also describes how much she reaches beyond physical limits, such as having love affairs with men, to discover something deeper and more complex about her identity—to "swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (71).

As a result, her emotional connections with Adèle and Reisz contribute far more to the awakening she seeks, rather than simply occurring through heterosexual encounters.

Additionally, the fact that Edna clearly desires so much beyond her current status adds further validity to the queer theory interpretation: if Edna could just escape the confines of the

patriarchy, externalized in society and internalized in character, she would arguably recognize the women in her life as where emotional *and* physical release await.

According to Weber, Chopin avoids overt sexual implications, "[employing] safer heterosexual themes, plots, and conventions as a protective cover for the more dangerous, subversive topics which lie underneath" (iii). Yet, it is the very nature of *The Awakening*, nonconforming and provocative, that tempts critics into seeing Edna and her bonds with Adèle and Reisz through a queer theory lens:

Clearly, Edna Pontellier is involved in heterosexual relationships, including at least one outside of her marriage, but the text intimates that her desires are not purely heterosexual. . . . "the true power of the novel cannot be fully realized unless it is read not only as a feminist text, but also a lesbian text." . . . Edna Pontellier and *The Awakening* can and should be viewed more queerly with the term *queer* being defined as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant." (LeBlanc 289 and Halperin 62 qtd. in Weber 9)

It is important to recognize how *The Awakening*, as a feminist text, breaking the mold of literary convention, dismantles several aspects of patriarchal dominance, like its forced structure upon women as wives and mothers. Again, even though Edna's burgeoning independence reflects in her romances outside of her marriage, it is a dismal reaction upon her character at best. As studied in "Subjectivity, Individuality, and Abjection in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" by Kamelia Telebian Sedehi, Nur Fatin Syuhada Ahmad Jafni, and Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya, Edna "desires 'perfect love,'" but because she must work within the confines of patriarchal heteronormativity, she "[flits] from one man to another . . . With Mr. Pontellier, she submits to

him as a wife; as for Robert Lebrun, she [is] turned down because of Robert's reluctance to break the social norms; and [Alcée] Arobin is nothing more than a man to distract her from her abysmal relationships with Mr. Pontellier and Robert" (14). While "her fluid transition from one man to another" can represent Edna's ability to freely choose sexual partners, she is "continually frustrated . . . leading [her] to despair and withdrawal from life" (14). Edna's suicide at the end of *The Awakening* serves as a constant source of debate between critics, but within this interpretation, where Edna's external and internal heteronormativity prevents her from embracing her homosocial bonds, her decision to die cannot be compared with how she selected different male interests, as the two choices—the two examples of how she autonomously made choices—exist on wildly dissimilar planes. Rather, although Edna had discovered and appeared to embrace her newfound agency, it is the constant demands of compromise limiting that agency that continues to beseech her identity, the consequences to her rebellion determined to condemn her as much as when she followed the rules. Thus, Edna's suicide is not a result of her power as an independent woman—it is instead the only choice she can make without further sacrificing some emotional or physical part of herself, refusing to remain within a society that endlessly refuses a woman's development as a human being.

Prior to Edna's death, however, *The Awakening* does take steps to deconstruct female heterosexuality, accentuating the positivity and potential of Edna's relationships with Adèle and Reisz. Specifically, Edna's interactions with Adèle are interestingly dichotomous: Adèle clearly extols the goodness of matrimony and motherhood, appropriately uncomfortable when Edna begins to disagree, but Adèle also exalts her own brand of feminism, conveying strength within the sphere of the home and upon the patriarchal outside, to the point where one only hopes Edna

will take cues. In "Adèle Ratignolle: Kate Chopin's Feminist at Home in *The Awakening*," Kathleen M. Streater acknowledges how Adèle as a feminist can be difficult to pinpoint, not only "overshadowed by the radical feminism of [Edna]" but also opposed by feminist progression following *The Awakening's* release (406). For example, evaluating Adèle's character today calls to mind Virginia Woolf's 1931 speech "Professions for Women," where she adamantly encourages women to stop sacrificing themselves in order to maintain their role of "Angel in the House," or the dutiful wife and mother who was restricted to domestic duties and offered no opportunity beyond the home (Woolf). Through Edna's evolving perspective, Adèle fits all the requirements of the "Angel in the House" and, as a result, Edna rapidly begins dismissing Adèle's presence due to her apparent lack of agency—obviously, if Adèle does not portray some semblance of an identity, why would Edna continue associating with her? But, Streater points out the significant loss upon Edna's awakening by scorning Adèle:

Edna chooses suicide rather than a life confined by societal expectations, and her shocking resolution provokes passionate reactions in readers, as extreme acts will do. But to focus solely on Edna's radical feminism is to limit Chopin's exploration of feminism itself. . . . Chopin, through Adèle, offers her readers more than one definition of feminist expression. Granted, Adèle's subtle rebellion to patriarchal ideology is easy to overlook as she forges her resistance from behind and within masculine parameters, manipulating the male-defined borders of her identity as wife and mother, at once being and contesting the patriarchal ideals. Adèle's interior subversion is far less dramatic than Edna's total rejection, yet, as the

saying goes, Adèle 'lives to tell the tale,' and thus, through Adèle's character, Chopin offers an affirmation of feminist possibility" (406).

Like Woolf's speech illustrates, "to become a wife and mother is, on some level, to capitulate one's self to patriarchal systems," and Adèle subsequently is punished by Edna and reader alike for being "a 'mother-woman,'" as though her feminism is suspect (406). Yet, when Edna passes such judgments, unable to "perceive Adèle as a self outside of her societal roles," she "ironically [places] Adèle behind the same role limitations Edna herself is attempting to escape" (406). Admittedly, Adèle can be seen as the exception to the rule, but because Edna does not allow her homosocial relations with Adèle to continue flourishing, she is left more limited than ever before, rejecting the woman who learned to work the systematic oppression of the patriarchy in her favor and would have taught Edna how to do the same.

However, when Edna does look to Adèle, it is with great and complex detail, commenting on the "mother-women" with Adèle at the head of the pack: "It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood . . . women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 37). As Streater explains, "This exaggerated description at once captures, and mocks, the idealized patriarchal role of mother-as-saint," and curiously paints Edna in a position where she appears to not know whether to envy Adèle or resent her (407); in either lens, though, Edna's "description of Adèle suggests she is attracted to Adèle's sensual beauty . . . that Edna looks at Adèle's 'as she might look upon a faultless Madonna'" (Chopin 39 qtd. in Streater 409). In contrast, Edna's homosocial relationship with Reisz looks to be the metaphorical door finally

opening for Edna's development, as Reisz serves as the eccentric but independent figure Edna wishes to emulate. In "Art is an Unnatural Act: Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*," Kathryn Lee Seidel studies how "Edna's relationships with her women friends are as various, subtle, and more comprehensive than those with men" and notes a particular instance where Edna interrupts an intimate moment with a male partner in order to talk about Reisz: "In the middle of Alcée Arobin's seduction, Edna Pontellier mentions her friend Mademoiselle Reisz. Her comment derails Arobin's skilled and up to that point effective arousal of Edna's sexual desires. He and Edna begin to quarrel about Mademoiselle, and he complains, 'Why have you introduced her at a moment when I desired to talk to you?'" (Chopin 87 qtd. in Seidel 199). If Adèle represents the extremism of feminine domesticity, Reisz in turn portrays the exact opposite, an enigmatic "spinster" and "isolated artist" whose use of creative expression becomes a sort of goal for Edna to achieve, entering Reisz's world of art for the sake of personal pleasure (199). Yet, just like with Adèle, the bond that forms between Edna and Reisz carries overtones of attraction; furthermore, Reisz's status as an artist "embodies the traits of the female artist lesbian . . . [using] metaphors of homoeroticism and witchcraft, the traditional enterprise associated with the female artist, to develop Mademoiselle Reisz's characterization" (200). While Edna's view of Adèle remains complicated, Edna arguably looks upon Reisz in the same vein of her "female sexuality [exploration]," bridging "warm female friendships" with "homoerotic possibilities" (200).

Ultimately, both Adèle and Reisz contribute to Edna's progression as an autonomous woman, wherein both female characters provide some form of lesson or inspiration for Edna to follow. As Reisz offers Edna creative refuge and encourages Edna's love affairs, Adèle overcomes her discomfort with Edna's changes in behavior and defends Edna's eventual choice

to live in her own home; not only do Reisz and Adèle "refuse to be silenced," but they—particularly Adèle—are "willing to challenge conventions in feminist support of Edna's choices (Streater 411). As a result, Edna slowly transitions out of the domestic sphere, rejecting the roles of wife and mother, in order to find peace and comprehension within her own personal space:

When Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief. A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her. She walked all through the house . . . as if inspecting it for the first time. . . . The flowers were like new acquaintances; she approached them in a familiar spirit, and made herself at home among them. . . . That night Edna dined alone. . . . Then Edna sat in the library after dinner and read Emerson until she grew sleepy. She realized that she had neglected her reading, and determined to start anew upon a course of improving studies, now that her time was completely her own to do with as she liked. After a refreshing bath, Edna went to bed. And as she snuggled comfortable beneath the eiderdown a sense of restfulness invaded her, such as she had not known before.

(Chopin 102-3)

Although her transition begins yet sadly does not come to fruition, Edna is greatly impacted by the women in her life. Thus, whether or not Edna experienced an awakening, as Chopin's title would suggest, and it being an awakening on a visceral level, relies on just how much possibility could have been between Edna and her female peers, were she not continuously so trapped by the external and internal workings of patriarchal heteronormativity. Truly, *The Awakening* plays at satire in its most bitter form, as queer theory reveals the amount of what-could-have-been

opportunities for Edna's character—yet, because her antagonist stands as a culturally-accepted source of oppression, Edna has to die as no woman can freely live until such restraints on a woman's life are broken. Only then, as Edna and Adèle and Reisz work to illustrate through Kate Chopin's work, will an awakening be possible.

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