

19th CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE
The Importance of Symbolic meanings in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract

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Using Semiotics and Feminist Literary Theory reveals how symbols such as birds and wings, water and sea develop a theme of solitude in American author Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* published in 1899. This imagery critiques what has been called the Cult of True Womanhood in a subtle way. The research design of my thesis and the methodologies that are utilized create a truly a multi-faceted approach to analyzing literature. Through a close reading, I provide a detailed literary analysis of the novel *The Awakening*. Using a feminist lens and Elaine Showalter's New Feminist Literary Criticism, I provide an interpretative analysis of the key themes and symbols within this novel and their importance as a cultural critique of the dominant ideologies of American society of the 1850s. My research is a qualitative endeavor with a social

constructivist flair. I call on Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response Theory to show the role of the reader as an interpretive strategy that is socio-historically centered. Finally I use the study of semiotics and signs and symbols to highlight any repeating motifs and their meanings as a tool is often utilized in conducting a literary analysis.

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For the ones left behind, the ones who could not leave.

&

For Ashlyn

FOREWORD

In *Marxism and Literary Theory* Raymond Williams writes, “the difference between science and art is not that they deal with different objects, but that they deal with the same objects in different ways.” (Williams, 18). Science gives the reader the conceptual knowledge of a situation and art gives us the experience of a situation. Art (in this case literature) shows the readers what the situation was like from a human perspective and how their own lived experience was perceived. This is how subjectivity becomes so vitally important in understanding the social historical context of the time through the combination of the real lived experiences of the people who were there.

It is critical for the readers of this paper to understand that although literary interpretation is not considered “objective” in the classic sense, my argument for interpretation of symbolic meanings is logical and is based on clear textual evidence. From a positivist perspective, objectivity is the main focus in research analysis. Positivist researchers believe that there is one factual truth that can be achieved through analyzing research through the scientific method. This paper is based on complete subjectivity and interpretative interactions of the readers and of the researcher.

As a social constructivist, I believe that there is no such thing as complete objectivity. There is no such thing as the pure and simple truth. As Oscar Wilde once wrote, “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” (Wilde, 67). Every part of our lives and any research is tainted by biases. Subjective research and analysis is based on one’s own personal experiences, perspectives, values and beliefs. Literary interpretation is largely based on the reader’s response to the text and their own values and beliefs. Wolf Gang Iser wrote that what a reader believes

about a text says more about their own values and beliefs than what it reveals about the author's intent.

This paper is a feminist perspective critiquing the patriarchal ideology of late 19th century American society. I am inspired to write about this topic because I am a woman who has firsthand experience of being oppressed due to my gender. I also have experienced the debilitating sexism and devaluation of my gender through the social institution of marriage and the historical and legal institutionalization of women's rights and property. Through the powers of cultural hegemony, I grew up being aware of a problem in the inequalities between men and women that are often found in a patriarchal society such as America without knowing who, what, why or how it operated. The invisibility of gender privilege permeated my life and I had no idea how this accepted way of life was created, or why. I even questioned my own value as a human being and in true hegemonic style, policed my own behaviors to reflect the ideology of the dominate class because I thought it was the so called "ideal" way of life.

This led to a very unhappy existence and it was only through my education in sociology, women's studies and women's literature that I was able to pull back the curtain and discover the powers behind the machine that pulled the levers and controlled the dominant ideology of a patriarchal American society that generated these feelings of inadequacy within my own gendered experience. Feminist analysis arose out of the lived experiences and subjectivity of women in response to this patriarchal ideology. I learned that I was not alone in this experience and that many women I have known felt much the same way based on her own experiences as a gendered woman in American society.

As I studied literary works of many American women writers, I quickly identified with the experiences of the characters of these novels and written works. I recognized the same

feelings of helplessness, determination, fear, sadness, loneliness, and frustration with an unbalanced and unequal way of life. Understanding and sharing this experience with other women from the present to the past created a passion inside me to share that information with men and women of all races and classes. If I can help even one other person “awaken” to being self-aware and socially conscious of the world in which they live, perhaps it can start a change toward a more equal and free society. This is why this research is so critically important to me.

19th Century American Women's Literature
The Importance of Symbolic Meanings in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Introduction

“There are some battles in life which a human being must fight alone”

-Kate Chopin

When Kate Chopin wrote *The Awakening* in 1899, the book was instantly attacked for its blatant depiction of a woman's desire for independence and sexual freedom. The novel challenged the idea that a woman would be satisfied only in the domestic sphere. This novel portrays a woman who is dissatisfied with domesticity, which constitutes the social norm, and explores the consequences of her attempts to attain greater self-awareness. For the time, these ideas were so foreign to the normalized and often idealized way of life, that it was considered an insult to the way people were ‘taught’ to behave.

The Awakening begins and ends in the late 19th century on the very real vacation resort in Louisiana called Grand Isle. The main character Edna Pontellier starts to question her role as wife and mother with a desire to become independent of these domestic responsibilities. Although married with children, she falls in love with a young man named Robert Lebrun. Aware of the social conventions of the time, Robert runs to Mexico to escape his feelings for Edna. Once Edna returns to New Orleans, she acts upon her desire to be independent and rejects her roles as hostess and housewife. She begins to paint and wander the streets of New Orleans alone. After her children and husband have left for an extended period, she leaves her husband's house and moves into a much smaller home by herself. She then takes a lover and when Robert unexpectedly returns, she tells him that they can be together. Edna tells Robert that she chooses to give herself “where she wants” regardless of her husband. Edna is then drawn away to her

friend's agonizing birth scene. Robert is so shocked by her independent change that he flees again. Finding Robert gone upon her return, a dazed Edna returns to Grand Isle and swims to her death.

This paper analyzes the theme of solitude and symbolic representation found within Chopin's text in an attempt to highlight the growing dissatisfaction that many women had with the restrictions placed on the gendered expectations of American women at the turn of 19th century. Birds, the sea and themes of solitude all come together in this novel as a strategy to critique the dominant male ideology in a subtle way. Edna is like a bird that is learning to fly and enjoying the newfound freedoms of flight only to find there is a danger of falling. Edna discovers that there are also hidden dangers in exploring such forbidden freedoms. What are the costs of challenging the patriarchal society during the late 1800s?

Reading this novel through the critical lenses of semiotics and feminist criticism illustrates the ways that images of birds, wings, water and sea develops a theme of solitude that is central to Chopin's critique of the Cult of True womanhood. This imagery critiques what has been called the Cult of True Womanhood through the use of symbolism. This is important in understanding the text in the socio-historical context of time. Women were not in a position in society to blatantly critique the male dominated world in which they lived without facing serious social and at times financial ruin. (Toth, 17).

Methodology

The research design of my thesis and the methodologies I have utilized create a multi-faceted approach to analyzing literature. Using the tools of semiotics and a feminist lens influenced by Elaine Showalter's book *The New Feminist Literary Criticism*, I provide an analysis of the key themes and symbols within *The Awakening* and their importance as a cultural critique of the dominant gender ideologies of American society of the 1850s. My research is a qualitative endeavor with a social constructivist flair. I call on Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response Theory to show the role of the reader as an interpretive strategy that is socio-historically centered (Iser, 2006). This means that the reader's response and understanding or interpretation of a text is largely based on their own cultural values and beliefs. This is reflective of the time and values of each reader. As society and cultural beliefs change, the reader's response and interpretation also changes.

According to Terry Eagleton in the book *Introduction to Literary Criticism*, a literary analysis is a close reading of a work of literature in an attempt to understand both the writer's intent and the reader's interpretation of a text. Common themes, repeating patterns, socio-historical context, style, prose and subject matter are all open to interpretation and analysis. Scholars conducting literary analyses seek to understand why the work was written, the significance of the text for readers and its influence in the literary world. Structure, symbolism, tone, setting, character development, signs and themes are all elements of a literary analysis.

Eagleton argues reading a text challenges readers to be flexible and open minded, to put their beliefs aside and allow themselves to be transformed by a deeper self-consciousness that allows for a much more critical view of their own identities. This is the transformative power of

literary works. Chopin's novel encourages readers to do all of these things and to "interrogate and transform their values and beliefs" (Eagleton, 7). In the book, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Roland Barthes stresses reading for the love it and argues that reading for pleasure will open the eyes to a world that they never knew existed. He argues that "all readers are socially and historically positioned and how they interpret literary works will be deeply shaped by this fact" (Barthes, 84). As generations of readers have read *The Awakening*, changes in the reception of the text become important in reflecting how society has changed.

Some may argue that that an author's intent is the most important element in understanding literature, but I argue that it is the reader who plays the most important role in understanding the impact that literature has on society. In his book, *How to do Theory*, Wolfgang Iser explains that Reader Response "explores reactions to the literary text by readers in different historical situations" (Iser, 57). This means that a reader from the 1890s will have a socio-cultural interpretation that is a reflection of the ideas and belief systems of the time, whereas a reader in the 2010s may have a completely different interpretation of the same text. As ideas, values and beliefs change, so does a reader's understanding of a text.

What the author meant and what the readers think the author meant are fascinating to this research because the tension between the two highlights the prevailing ideologies and changes in the dominant ideologies over time. This complements my use of a feminist analysis because both are concerned with what the text and its reception tells us about our own society. It requires us to inquire into what values have stayed the same or changed as reflected in the reader's response and interpretation.

Sometimes referred to as a feminist perspective, a feminist lens is a way of looking at the written works through the experiences of women characters found within the novel. What rights

did women have or not have in the novel? What choices were women making and why? How the tension between the community and the individual is reflected in the choice that these characters are making? What roles were the women playing and why? Were they good mothers? Were they mothers at all? A feminist lens is concerned with the issues that female characters faced and how those characters navigated their environments and communities as women. A feminist view looks at the ways that women perpetuate their own oppression or rebel against oppression. It also looks at how women understood the social order, where they saw themselves within that order, where they bought into it and where they subverted it.

According to *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, by Lois Tyson, feminist criticism is concerned with "...the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women". This school of thought looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and how this patriarchal ideology operates. Feminist perspective in literary analysis are also concerned with "less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon...unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to under-represent the contribution of women writers" (Tyson 82-83). This is important in my research because my main analysis is focused through a feminist perspective. I am fascinated with the ways that women navigated their lives while living in these restrictive patriarchal social norms of the late 1800s.

Elaine Showalter argues in her book *The New Feminist Criticism* in 1985 that feminist literary criticism is a literary tool used in analyzing literature that has its roots in Feminism and feminist perspective. This is a major component of my research and raises such questions as:

How is the relationship between men and women portrayed? What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)? How are male and female roles defined? What constitutes masculinity and femininity? How do characters embody these traits? Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? (Showalter, 29-31)

This information is critical in my analysis of *The Awakening* as it reflects the dominant ideologies of society at the time through a feminist perspective. This kind of analysis depends heavily on how a reader interprets the text through their own cultural lens. Reader Response Theory also focuses on the role of the reader in understanding the literary meaning of written works.

The study of signs and symbols works well with feminist critique because symbolism in a text reveals meaning about gender roles and ideologies. Through the use of semiotics, my research will show how the repeating patterns, signs, symbols, motifs and themes all come together in a literary analysis to show the significance of each element. Again asking questions such as, what do these symbols mean in a socio-historical context for readers at the time and in today's readers interpretation. Common questions that form the basics of understanding signs and symbols within a text are:

What patterns exist within the text that make it a part of other works like it? What patterns exist within the text that make it a product of a larger culture? What patterns exist within the text that connect it to the larger "human" experience? In other words, can we connect patterns and elements within the text to other texts from other cultures to map similarities that tell us more about the common human experience? This is a liberal humanist move that assumes that since we are all human, we all share basic human

commonalities. What rules or codes of interpretation must be internalized in order to 'make sense' of the text? (Tyson, 225)

For example a reader can follow a text and never think about the symbolic meanings represented in the work and still enjoy the read. Although through a close reading of a text and a literary analysis, the reader focuses on finding repeating patterns, signs and symbols in an effort to read between the lines. What is unsaid becomes just as important as what is being said in the study of semiotics. My research has pulled out elements of semiotics, signs and symbols and has analyzed their significance within *The Awakening*.

The symbolism of birds in relation to human beings has been traced back to French cave drawings from over 18,000 years ago with a picture of a man's soul leaving this earth guided by a bird. In *Birds in Literature*, Leonard Lutwack, explains that:

Of all the wild animals, the bird has always been the closest to human kind because so much of its life can be easily observed and appreciated. Flight and song make birds exceptionally noticeable in every sort of environment... the very attributes that make them familiar to us, flight and song; still retain an air of mystery that sets birds apart from other animals. This familiarity and transcendence has given birds a wider range of meaning and symbol in literature than any other animal. (Lutwack, x-xii)

There are countless references throughout literature to the interaction of birds and humans, and symbolic references go all the way back to the ancient Greek mythologies.

Kate Chopin uses these motifs of bird imagery to express the idea of how one woman wants to fly above the social conventions of the time to be free from all restraints. Bird imagery is a tool that Chopin uses to show Edna's dissatisfaction with the tenets of the cult of True

Womanhood. The main character Edna in comparison to bird imagery in the text is profound. She is the parrot found in the opening lines of the novel. She is an exotic bird like creature during a dinner party. She is the lone bird that attempts to fly above it all. She is the bird with wings growing. She is broken bird that falls to her the sea. Birds and winged imagery symbolize the struggle between women and the Cult of True Womanhood. What are the results of caging these beautiful birds into narrow, confining spaces that break and silence their song of independence and freedom?

Bird imagery, the sea and themes of solitude are all powerful images within *The Awakening* that combine to emphasize a woman's growing dissatisfaction with the male dominated social order that she belongs to. The use of symbolism is a well thought out strategy that the author utilized as a way to critique the social order of the time. What has become known as the Cult of True Womanhood ideology influenced the lives of women and men by placing each into very restrictive gendered roles. Chopin uses symbolism to highlight the tenets of this ideology and the consequences for going against the social order.

The Cult of True Womanhood

“They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.”

-The Awakening

While ideologies that promote the spheres of domesticity have existed for hundreds of years, it wasn't until Barbara Welter's 1976 article, "The Cult of True Womanhood" that the term *Cult of True Womanhood* came into being. Otherwise known as the domestic realm of women, the Empire of The Mother, Victorian Motherhood, the True Woman ideology and Republican Motherhood, the four main tenets that each ideology holds dear are the same throughout. According to Welter:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife- woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (Welter, 152)

These ideals were promoted through popular media of the time such as magazines, books and advertisements, as well as the religious pulpits and family conversations about duties between mother and daughter and from friend to friend.

Welter argued that religious beliefs was the primary virtue that women were expected to exhibit, since “if it (piety) were there, all else would follow” (152). Celebrated in poetry and religious circles *the cult of true womanhood* reached its height of popularity in the 1850s, showing that *The Awakening’s* main character, Edna Pontellier would have grown up in the midst of such indoctrination. According to a religious sermon of the time, any woman who ignored her religious duties to home and hearth “should have been publically whipped” and was considered the “lowest form of human nature” (Welter, 154).

According to Welter, purity was an equally powerful component within the cult of true womanhood. To be accused being impure or committing adultery “brought madness or death” (Welter, 154). To reinforce the value of purity, young girls were regaled with stories of unfortunate women who had lost their “innocence” and as a result had lost their minds and their places in society. Welter uses Mary Beard’s 1946 book, *Women as a Force in History* to emphasize the value of staying pure for one’s husband. She writes, “The wedding night was the single great event of a woman’s life, when she bestowed her greatest treasure upon her husband, and from that time on was completely dependent upon him, an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own.” (Welter, 155). It was through this rhetoric that all true women were advised to stay pure for their husbands and to maintain their virtue at all costs.

Submission was considered to be one of the most feminine virtues of the cult. It required women not “to feel and act for herself” because her husband was next to God and to defy his direction was to tamper with the order of the universe (Welter, 159). According to Welter’s research, the common belief of the time was that “women were weak and timid” and “women must have a male protector” (Welter, 159). Limited to the domestic sphere, “she was to work only for pure affection, without thought to money or ambition” (160). A woman was to concern

herself only with domestic duties and to support her husband's goals and ideas without giving advice, unless directly asked for it. Welter writes, "To suffer and be silent under suffering seems the great command she has to obey" (162). The safest place for such an innocent woman was the warmth and security of the home.

The last virtue in the Cult of True Womanhood is the tenet of Domesticity. Welter highlights that, "The true woman's place was unquestionably by her own fireside- as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother." (162). The only legitimate reason for leaving her home was the sickness or death of a family member or close family friend. Properly caring for her home was a full time job with little time left over to reflect on one's own interests. It was in the home that women were able to bring men back to God through their endless endeavors to make the home a place of solace and retreat from the outside world and its temptations for men. Home was to be a place of warmth and welcoming so that men would not look elsewhere for "fun".

In the domestic sphere, woman had told they held the power to change the world. It was believed that a woman's duty was to follow the ideas that "producing moral and social reforms begin at home." (163) Social change was argued to begin in the home with the influence of the mother. As the mother was seen as a highest symbol of love, charity, purity and religiousness, it was argued that a mother was empowered in her role because she had the power to mold the character of her husband and children into well behaved members of society. This was a deceptive form of empowerment because it highlighted that a woman was only important in her role of wife and mother, not as an individual.

The tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity work together to create a woman that Welter describes as an angel of the home:

The duties of wives were first and foremost to her husband, who makes it her daily study to lighten his cares, to sooth his sorrows and to augment his joys; who, like a guardian angel, watches over his interests, warns him against dangers, comforts him under his trials, and by her pious, assiduous, and attractive deportment, endeavors to render him more virtuous, more useful, more honorable, and more happy (170)

The balance of good and evil and society's continued orderly existence stood in the balance. If a woman were not to do all she could to achieve these goals, she was disrupting the proper order of the society. Every woman had a choice to determine her life. "Yours it is to determine, whether the beautiful order of society shall continue or whether society shall break up and become a chaos of disjointed and unsightly elements." (Welter, 173) This was a tall order for women to fulfill and some women found that no matter how hard they tried, they could not be a 'true' woman.

When women could not meet the strict adherence to the tenets of the Cult, they sometimes blamed themselves, some blamed the tenets and challenged them, and others tried to embrace the ideology and "enlarge the scope of womanhood" (174). This shows just how powerful the ideologies were in influencing the behaviors of women. Taking a close look at the passages in *The Awakening*, over the years many readers have drawn their own conclusions about the fate of one woman who dares to defy such a powerful ideology alone.

Barbara Welter was not the only historian and literary critic to study the causes and effects of the Cult of True Womanhood. In the *Power and Ideology of "Woman's Sphere"* Judith Lowder Newton wrote, "to have influence the middle class woman was urged to relinquish self-definition; she was urged to become identified by her service to others, in particular to men." (Warhol & Herndl, 767). Sandra M. Gilbert wrote, "Though the pressures and

oppressions of gender may be as invisible as air, they are also as inescapable as air, and like the weight of air, they imperceptibly shape the forms and motions of our lives.” (qtd. in Showalter, 33). Many women critics and scholars were critiquing the Cult of True Womanhood and its influence on the lives of women and men.

Literary Critiques of *The Awakening*

It is interesting to note that although the initial reception of *The Awakening* by most literary critics of the late 19th century was both harsh and unforgiving, there were a few brave critics calling for the “unpleasant truths” that Chopin writes about to be acknowledged as a very real and very common situation for women. When the book was first received in American society, the book was instantly attacked as a shocking and immoral tale of a young woman gone wrong. By the time the feminist movement took root in the 1970s and 1980s, the book was received in a more positive light and Chopin was heralded as the “first feminist American writer” of her time.

In the book *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, Alice Petry argues that most of Kate Chopin’s work was written with a “keen sensitivity to the plight of women in the 19th century” with Edna “Selfishly refusing to subscribe to the Cult of True Womanhood” (Petry, 5). Decades after its initial publication, a resurgence in the popularity of *The Awakening* helped it become one of today’s canonical American texts, reflecting the ways social norms had changed between the societies of the 1890s and the 1980s.

In 1899, the *Providence Sunday Journal* called *The Awakening* a disgrace, arguing that it was filled with “language not fit for publishing” and that the book “promoted unholy imagination and unclean desires” (Petry, 53). The critics called the book nauseating and accused the main character of having animal instincts, and of falling into the arms of the first man she meets” (Petry, 53). The author closed this critique by warning young minds to stay away lest they be ruined by an “unhealthy” way of thinking. This review illustrates the power of social conventions, particularly with regard to controlling the behaviors of young women. The censorious reception of *The Awakening* suggests that Edna and her rejection of the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood was an affront to the norms of Victorian society.

Critiques of *The Awakening* of the late 19th and early 20th century made their ideas and rejection of the novel clear. *The Public Opinion* newspaper wrote, “We are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death.” (Petry, 58). Percival Pollard wrote in his book, *Their Day in Court* that, “In the north, Robert Lebrun would have been lynched” (Petry, 59). He wrote that there was no excuse for Edna’s behavior and that she drowned herself because “you can only put out fire with water.” (Petry, 68). *The Nation* ’69 wrote that the book was a “real disappointment” and that “she (Edna) should have flirted less and looked after her children more” (Petry, 52). This critique shows that Edna was not considered a ‘natural’ mother, and because she had abandoned her greatest responsibility she deserves the death that she received. However, other critiques seemed to, if not openly support Edna’s quest for independence, at least offer some support for Chopin’s attempt to challenge the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood.

The New York Times in June 1899 wrote that the novel forced the reader’s to question whether it was better to remain asleep or to be awakened to the harsh truths that self-reflection brings. The article asks “Does awakening bring happiness? Is it better to stay asleep?” (Petry,

57). It closes by arguing that in some cases such as Edna's, the answer is no. Awakening to the harsh realities of life as a wife and mother with strict obedience to the social codes of behavior was not easy. For Edna the only choice she has left is death. This article is more accepting to the plight of women like Edna and asks society to think about the consequences of imposing these expectations on young women. This shows that Kate Chopin was not the only person at this time who was asking themselves about the oppressive restraints of the tenets on women.

A month later in May 1899, *The St Louis Dispatch* wrote a positive review of *The Awakening* in an article written by literary critic Charles Deyo. He wrote that while *The Awakening* forces readers to open their eyes to the "unpleasant truths" of the novel, it also calls for an awareness of the unrealistic expectations of Victorian society for the behaviors of women. He argued that the book constitutes "flawless art" in its style and content. He also stated that the book is not intended for young audiences not because of its low morals and corrupting powers, but because a younger audience will not understand:

It is for the seasoned souls, for those who have lived, who have ripened under the gracious or ungracious sun of experience and learned that realities do not show themselves on the outside of things where they can be seen and heard, weighted, measured and valued like the sugar of commerce, but treasured within the heart, hidden away, never to be known perhaps save when exposed by temptation or called out by occasions of great pith and moment. (qtd. In Petry 54)

What he means is that older readers who have lived longer and have had more life experiences can appreciate the telling of these very real experiences because, although it is not open to public or even private conversations, the feelings and journey that Edna endures is not uncommon or unheard of.

To stay asleep or to awaken into self-awareness as Edna does is not something to be taken lightly. As a wife and as a mother the choices that women have to face in life and marriage are not always easy. Deyo is aware of these life altering choices that adults have had to make as they live life with all of its heartaches and tears. He writes that as a theme of motherhood, Edna said that “while she would be willing to die for her children, she couldn’t give up anything essential for them” (Petry, 55). This is a hard concept for many mother-women to understand and Edna has often been criticized harshly for being an “unnatural” mother.

Deyo argues that older generations who have faced those choices and have made sacrifices in one area or another will recognize the plight of Edna Pontellier and have pity on the soul that “could not forget her womanhood and to save the remnants of it, she swam out into the sun kissed gulf and did not come back.” (Petry, 56). Like many others before her, Edna has to face the realities of life’s responsibilities and the unavoidable consequences of the decisions that she makes. Deyo tries to help the readers of the late 19th century understand that what many quickly criticized as “deplorable behaviors” of a wife and mother were really possible thoughts that could be easily recognized and understood by the older readers.

Deyo’s critique of the book as suitable for older readers mark a change in attitude, as well as an acknowledgment of the effect of literature in shaping ideologies as well as reflecting them. Even unspoken truths carry weight with the readers who have perhaps made different choices than Edna but never the less walked the same path that she traversed, asking the same questions of society and its unattainable expectations for women. Soon after Kate Chopin’s death, the book was all but forgotten in society. It wasn’t until the late 1950s and the mid 60’s that *The Awakening* emerged as contemporary readers found a novel that deserved to be re-awakened in American society.

In his 1956 book *The Forgotten Novel* Kenneth Eble, analyzes the resurgence of *The Awakening* as a literary masterpiece that should never have been “forgotten.” Eble examines the symbolic representations of the “sea, the sand, the sun and the sky” (Eble, 81) as personifications, arguing that the sea has its own voice that speaks to Edna throughout her journey of self-discovery. The main theme of the novel, he argues, is the “discrepancy between Victorian morals and woman’s nature” (81). Eble wrote, “It is her self-awareness and her awakening into a greater degree of self-awareness than those around her can comprehend which gives her story dignity and significance.” (83). This analysis is important because it showed how a modern audience was more accepting of the challenges to the conventional expected behaviors of women. This also reflects of the changing discourse of literary analysis because the article initiated a dialogue about symbolic representations within the novel that had previously been neglected. Eble’s book written in 1956, reflected the changes in gender ideologies and expectations about gender roles in American society.

When Lawrence Thornton wrote about *The Awakening* for *American Literature* magazine in 1980, he also analyzed Chopin’s subtle use of symbols to challenge the societal expectations of women’s behaviors. He wrote that the sea symbolizes imagination and that the novel’s emphasis on the sea reflects the “seductive isolating effects of inward contemplation”. (Thornton, 53). Thornton argued that the irresolvable conflict of the novel was centered on “Edna’s version of herself as an independent woman and Victorian society” (55). Thornton also noted that this conflict and inward contemplation can only result in Edna’s death as she “realizes too late the insurmountable social dilemma which can only be escaped in death”(53).

Thornton’s analysis was critical in highlighting the seriousness of what happened in the late 1800s when a “respectable” woman of upper middle class society threw off the restraints of

“proper” behaviors in an effort to secure her own individuality. He writes that symbolic representation becomes important in this novel as Edna’s death is “foreshadowed in the imagery of defeated flight” (53). The birds, the sea, the sky, the sun all intertwine as symbolic representations of Edna’s journey from beginning to end.

Thornton analyzes the themes of motherhood within *The Awakening* in an attempt to show the reader that for Edna death is the only choice. When Edna states, “I would give up my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give up myself” Thornton argues that it is her children that bind Edna to the conventions of the Cult of True womanhood. While she is bound by the laws of marriage, she has no guilt or feeling of duty and responsibility to her husband or society. The children are obstacles to Edna’s desire to be free. Thornton writes that, the soul’s slavery of which Edna so often speaks, refers to the children who “would drag her back” (56). He argues that this is too great a price for Edna to pay now that she has tasted freedom. In doing so Thornton offered an analysis of *The Awakening* that critiqued Victorian social norms and positioned Chopin as a pioneer in literary fiction.

In the beginning of *The Awakening*, the reader finds Edna breaking away from social conformity in an attempt to maintain her own individuality. She creates and discovers areas of solitude that give her time to reflect on her circumstances and the social conventions that have imprisoned her for her entire life. Using bird and wing imagery, these spaces of solitude allows Edna to question the tenets found in the ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood and the price that would be paid for rebelling against this ideology. Very specific passages within the text will show just how important spaces of solitude are in this process. Edna’s self-imposed moments of solitude are frowned upon by Victorian society that celebrates a wife and mothers’ unending

devotion to her family. When Edna chooses to be alone as the expense of her husband and children, she is viewed as being selfish and cruel.

The following analysis is one that highlights the author's use of symbolic representation of women as birds, the importance of the sea and elements of solitude to show Edna Transformation as she challenges social conventions of the expected behaviors of women. For Chopin, birds were not only the symbol of freedom, and water/the sea became a motif to signify independence. The symbols highlight the theme of solitude as a necessary condition for Edna's growth and journey towards self-awareness. Whenever the symbolic images occurred in the novel, solitude also played a large part in the scene. From the very first lines of the novel, to the very last word, birds, sea and solitude were intertwined together to create this story of a solitary soul.

Examples & Analysis of Symbolic Representation in *The Awakening*

"There is that in such a soul that will not be pent up- that must find a voice and expression; a heaven kindled spark, that is unquenchable; an earnest, soaring spirit, whose wings cannot be clipped" - author Fannie Fern

At the beginning of *The Awakening*, as an upper middle class wife and a mother from the late 1800s, Edna Pontellier was expected to abide by each of the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood. Edna is a young mother that becomes aware of her oppressive life in her quest for freedom and independence. The novel explains the theme of solitude as a necessary part of her journey. The prevailing images of water and the ocean reinforce her need for solitude and how

solitude is imposed on her because of her inability to fit in with Créole society. The birds and wings imagery shows how she is both caged and yet desires to fly free. Edna is afraid, dissatisfied and doesn't know why.

Early on readers can see Edna's naiveté in the narrators description of her as "not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles...their freedom of expression was incomprehensible" and shocking to her delicate sensibilities (Chopin, 10). When a highly scandalous novel makes the rounds that summer, Edna cannot believe that people would be so open in discussing such "unspeakable" topics. She only reads the book "in secret and solitude" (11) and quickly hides it when she hears anyone approaching. Understanding the social behaviors that Edna had always followed is critical in seeing just how far Edna pulls away from all of her societal expectations and responsibilities.

At first Edna does not realize her entrapment as a wife and mother in upper middle class society. For seven years Edna has been performing all of the responsibilities of being a wife that she has been accustomed to without question. In this opening of the novel, the parrot is symbolic of Edna in that she is like an exotic bird that is trapped in a gilded cage. When Edna defies this her virtue, bird imagery again becomes a symbol for the confines of a patriarchal society. The parrot and the mockingbird are confined to cages just like Edna is confined to her role as a wife and mother.

Chopin uses visual imagery of birds and wings to symbolize the main women of the book and the roles that they play in 19th century Louisiana's, upper class, Creole, society. The opening line of the book starts with a parrot who calls out in French, "Go away...go away for God's sake...." (Chopin, 3). The green and yellow bird hangs in a cage outside the door and it represents how Edna is trapped inside the cage that is her home, in her domestic roles of wife

and mother. Like caged birds, women's movements are limited by the rules of conventional society. They are restricted in how they are able to communicate within the society and the world in which they live. Throughout the text there are countless references to birds and wings, often associated with two prominent women who serve as foils for Edna. The mockingbird symbolizes Mademoiselle Reisz and the wings of an Angel are used to describe Madame Ratignolle also known as Adele.

While Edna initially behaves in accordance with the codes and rules of society, she does so without thought as to why. She is a dutiful mother, but not a passionate one. Even her husband feels that she is not as attached to her own children as she should be. Chopin writes that, "It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define wherein his wife failed in her duty toward her children. It was something that he felt rather than perceived... Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother—woman" (9). The children were always being looked after in the novel by various servants and while Edna was never mean or neglectful of the children, she wasn't as attentive as she could have been.

Chopin writes that Edna was "fond of her children in an uneven impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart and other times forget them" (19). Edna is often relieved to be free from the responsibilities of being a mother. The author writes "It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which fate had not suited her." (19) This quote is important because it highlights the argument that Edna might not be well suited for the role of mother. She blindly assumed the mother role, never questioning if it was what she wanted for herself. Edna loves her children. Throughout the novel, whenever the children are mentioned, Edna makes sure that all of their needs are being met. She at times misses them and at times are relieved to be free of them.

While in modern times these feelings are understood as being completely normal and healthy, in the late 19th century, it would have been sacrilegious to have such thoughts because it would have been considered unnatural not to be completely devoted to one's children. The ideologies of the Cult of True Womanhood dictate that a mother must place her children at the center of her existence. The children are the justification of a mother's life. In writing *The Awakening*, Chopin is showing that contrary to popular belief of the time, gender qualities are not an innate function of biology. Some women are comfortable in the domestic sphere of True Womanhood, but it doesn't mean that it is a natural state for all women. This points out that sometimes men and women do not always fit into social expectations of gendered roles. By nature, Edna is expected to have instinctive maternal behaviors and when she doesn't it is puzzling to her husband and to others.

As Edna starts to question these feelings and thoughts, she begins to transform from an obedient wife to a woman who only wants to be free to explore her desire to be free from the restraints that society has placed on her. Edna is stifled by the Cult of True Womanhood but doesn't know exactly why. As each step she takes toward her own independence separates her from others in her social circle, who strictly adhered to these conventions, Edna becomes more and more criticized for her choices.

In this era, the duties of a caring wife and devoted mother were considered to be the most important role a woman should strive to be. Women were considered to be property and as a wife they were to be a great asset to their husbands. According to the tenets of the Cult of True womanhood, a woman of Edna's social standing would have been held hostage to the highest standards of modesty and decorum.

The attributes of the true Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues- piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. (Welter, 152)

This quote was mentioned earlier in this analysis, however it is vital to remind the readers just how powerful these virtues are in this time period. These virtues or tenets paint the picture perfect portrait of the life that Edna has led up to her awakening. She has never questioned her role as dutiful wife and mother. She has never questioned her life or position in society until that summer in Grand Isle.

The first night of the novel finds Edna alone, on the porch, while everyone is sleeping. After arguing with her husband, Edna is left alone crying and hears the voice of the sea; “the everlasting voice of the sea...it broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night.” (Chopin, 7). Arguing with her husband never affected her this way before and she couldn’t really say why she was crying. She felt an indescribable oppression weighing on her soul. This shows the readers that Edna is not happy with her position as a wife and mother. She is awakened by her husband who asks her to take care of the sleeping children. According to the tenets of the cult, the children should always come first and as a mother there was no need too small for her attentions. Edna does not feel the need to check on the children and when her husband insists, she does as he bids. Her husband goes to sleep while Edna goes on the porch and begins to cry. Here in solitude the voice of the sea calls to Edna.

A few nights later, while waiting for her husband to return to their cottage on Grand Isle, Edna is alone and in her solitude is summarizing the changes in herself. “She could only realize that she herself- her present self- was in some way different from the other self. That she was

seeing things with different eyes and making acquaintance of new conditions within herself that colored and changed her environment” (39). Here solitude becomes an important part of Edna’s self –reflection. Edna is aware of the new and strange changes within herself, but does not seem to consider the consequences of these changes on her family and her position in society.

Edna is just awakening to these strange thoughts of independence and her “stubborn will” flares up. She wants to be alone to consider and contemplate what all of this means and what she wants. She asks herself why she has never thought to question her husband’s demands before. Edna is confused and wonders how and why she never considered her role as wife before. “She wondered is her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she did then” (31). Here Chopin shows that after the sea and the solitude has entered her soul and filled her with power, Edna was awakening to the realities of her life and her roles as a dutiful wife and mother only to be left with questions and puzzlement about her life before she “awoke”. Now that Edna was awake, there would be no going back to sleep.

Taking a look at each of these moments of solitude in the novel reveals just how powerful solitude becomes in Edna’s development. The ways that the sea and water, birds and wing imagery relate to this theme help portray Edna’s development throughout the novel as she changes from obedient housewife to a woman who is self-aware. Edna needs solitude because her roles as wife and mother stifle her ability to develop as an individual rather than as the ideal woman. But the ideal woman, who lives by the Cult of True Womanhood, does not desire anything outside the roles as wife and mother, both of which require her to live for someone other than herself.

The words that the parrot calls out to the reader are a foreshadowing of danger. “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!” Translated to mean, “Go away! Go away! For God’s sake!” the bird speaks a mixture of French and English in the same sentence. Chopin writes, “He could speak a language that nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door.” (Chopin, 3). This is highly symbolic of the behaviors that Edna exhibits later in the novel. As she awakens to the sensual desires that have been silenced and dormant for most of her life, like the parrot she begins to speak a language that no one can understand. It seems only Mademoiselle Reisz who is symbolized by the Mockingbird truly understand her struggle. The foreshadowing that is found in the opening lines is that as Edna begins her journey of challenging the codes of behaviors for women at this time, it will come at a great price. The parrot is a warning, telling the reader to go away, this is not a happy story. For God’s sake, go away!

The language that Edna is speaking of is the language of independence and freedom from the restraints that society has placed on women. Edna is like the parrot who calls out in French. Chopin writes of the parrot, “He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood” (Chopin, 3). Edna is also speaking a new found language, a language that no one in her social circle seems to understand. Her close friends and family can vaguely make out her words and actions, but not her meanings. This symbolism of Edna as the parrot is pivotal in the opening of the novel because it quickly aligns Edna with the symbolism of birds.

Edna mirrors the parrot as she calls out for everyone to go away as she is becoming more enveloped in solitude. This is important in understanding how the theme of solitude also plays a critical role in the novel as a symbol of Edna’s desire to be free and independent. Solitude is important in the growth of Edna’s feminine power. She begins to push everyone away as she

becomes more and more introverted in her discovery of who she is and what she wants out of her life. This can be seen when through the text as she pushes her acquaintances away when she decides to stop having her Tuesday receptions. She often pushes her husband away and when her children go to visit family, she relishes the solitude.

Chopin uses the theme of solitude with conjunction with references to the ocean and the sea. She does this so that the sea and solitude are combined to give each more strength as powerful forces that shape and guide Edna's choices as she transforms from an obedient wife and mother to an independent woman who wants her own life free from the restraints of the Cult of True Womanhood. The symbol of water and the theme of solitude are very powerful forces. The sea keeps calling to her, seducing her, beckoning her to "wander in the abysses of solitude" (Chopin, 103). Here again Chopin is uniting these two forces so that their hold on Edna only becomes stronger and stronger until without thinking, Edna swims out to her death.

Chopin also uses the sea as a personified symbol within the text. It has a voice, it has a smell and a sensual touch. It invites and speaks to Edna. It calls to Edna to "soar above the level of plain tradition" and the voice of the sea "is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to lose itself in the mazes of inward contemplation." (25). It has arms that reach out. "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (109). It has serpent like coils that wrap around her ankles. Each of these descriptions personify the sea. Chopin uses this tool to make the sea an overpowering force that Edna was no match for.

Solitude in this way also becomes a powerful force that motivates Edna to keep searching within herself for the answers that she needs. There are instances in the book where solitude and moments of isolation reveal Edna's internal thoughts and feelings about her life and the changes

that she is working so hard for. When Edna is alone, there is no one to interrupt these important moments of self-awareness and self-critiques. It is in these moments of solitude that Edna is searching her heart and soul in an attempt to understand who she is and who she wants to be.

In chapter nine the images of the sea and solitude come together in a way that touches Edna's imagination and soul. "Musical strains always had a way of invoking pictures in her mind." Edna is listening to Mademoiselle Reisz's recital and names the music she hears "Solitude" for the images that it paints in her mind, "...the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him." (26). Here the reader finds all three major symbols of solitude, the sea and bird imagery in Edna's vision. Again foreshadowing things to come. This is exact image that Edna produces just before she swims away into the sea to her death.

In the article, "The solitude of Surrender" Jill Blackmon, highlights the symbolic meanings behind the sea and the ocean in *The Awakening* writing:

How many lives have been lost to the sea? The sea is once liberating and captivating, a destination and an uncertainty. Each who enters is filled with some yearning desire that compels each shaky, frightening step forward. It is no surprise then that young Edna joins the fate of all the previous victims of the mysterious wrath of the sea. (6)

Blackmon write about the paradoxical symbolism of the sea for Edna. The sea is what frightens Edna. The sea is what awakens Edna from her stupor. As her fear of the sea lessens, Edna embraces the sea as a symbol of freedom and release.

In the beginning of her transformation, Edna is scared of the sea and cannot swim at all. It is only after hearing Mademoiselle Reisz's recital and picturing a naked man on the beach with

a bird in flight above him, that Edna ready to cast off her fear and surprisingly finds that she can swim on her own. No one was there to teach her. Swimming seemed to come naturally to her. “She wants to swim out further than anyone had gone before” (Chopin, 27) and for a brief moment has a sharp fear of drowning. This foreshadows her death later in the book. Edna’s swimming is a catalyst for her quest to be alone and independent. It is after she learns to swim that she is awakened to her sensual side and her desire to “do what she wants to do” without thought to her husband, children or her domestic responsibilities.

On the night that Edna teaches herself to swim, something important happens with the sea, solitude and Edna’s awakening. She felt, “a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul...She wanted to swim out far out, where no woman had swum before.”(27). this passage is important in connecting Edna to the sea and to her new found desire for solitude. When others called her back to swim with them she was “Intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she would not join them... she swam out alone.”(27) For the first time in the novel, Edna is filled with a sense of power. The power of the sea and the power of solitude have entered her soul and left her feeling like she could fly on the waters. “As she swam out, she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.”(28) In this passage, Chopin is challenging the notions of the tenets of The Cult of True womanhood. Chopin is using this imagery to show that a woman can be happy and free without the restraints of the tenets and that her possibilities are endless and full of power.

Edna is fascinated with the endlessness of the sea. It reminds her of when she was a small child on her father’s plantation in Kentucky with fields of blue grass that as a child Edna would pretend to swim on its endless waves. As an adult, while she is swimming, Edna begins “reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (48). The visual of a young girl and a

young woman lost in the vastness of the sea or the sea like fields of her childhood home creates the idea of a vast endlessness in which one could lose oneself. In the final scene of the novel, Edna is again remembering the vast endlessness of the Kentucky Blue grass and how like the sea, “it had ending and no beginning” (Chopin, 103).

While back in New Orleans, the thoughts of the sea and the ocean do not penetrate her daily thoughts as when she was in Grand Isle. Now the power of solitude on Edna really begins to become part of her daily life. Even at the risk of alienating and insulting her acquaintances, Edna refuses to host her Tuesday receptions. When her husband reprimands her, she fires back, “Mercy! Why are taking the thing so seriously and making such a fuss over it?” (48). She went to her room alone and stood looking out the window. “She was seeking herself and finding herself in such sweet, half-darkness which matched her moods” She flung off her wedding ring and stomped on it. This is a huge part of Edna’s development as a woman who is defying the Cult of True Womanhood. She is no longer submissive or domestic and the results were shocking to many readers of the time. It is one thing to want to be independent and have rights, it’s quite another to stomp on one’s wedding ring. All of these things are happening when Edna is alone.

Once back at home, Edna dwells more into her solitude and leaves her responsibilities as wife and mother almost as an afterthought. Women who choose independence risk the chance of being socially ostracized and silenced by society. There is one part of the book when at a recital the parrot calls out again, “Go away! For God’s sake!”(Chopin, 3). What is interesting about this is how Edna’s husband reacts to the parrot’s noise making. Mr. Pontellier is disgusted and annoyed at the interruption and decides that while he cannot silence the bird, he can move away from the source of his irritation. This is seen when “Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting

their society when they ceased to be entertaining.”(Chopin, 3). This quote is especially important in the development of the book. It foreshadows what is to occur between Mr. Pontellier and his wife.

As Edna becomes more independent and rebellious toward her husband she is no longer entertaining to him. He still cares for his wife and is worried enough to consult the family doctor. On the doctor’s advice, he leaves Edna alone with the belief that this is just a phase and when he comes back home, everything will be as it once was. He starts spending more and more time away from home, finally leaving on an extended trip to New York on business.

Edna reveals in her solitude. When she has moments of isolation she is often happy and joyful. Once alone “a radiant peace settled upon her”. Even the children were gone. “When Edna was alone at last, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief” (69). Finally free of her responsibilities as wife and mother, now Edna can truly do as she wishes. Here Chopin is showing that once free from the tenets of the Cult, women would be happy and joyful. Edna gardens, takes long walks, paints, reads books and “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 as she liked.”(70). Never once in all of this activity does Edna think about the consequences of her actions and how her future might look. Never does she give pause to what will happen when her husband and children come home.

As Edna navigates the new path she is careening down, she is heavily influenced by her two closest friends, Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz. Birds and winged imagery is a powerful tool that Chopin developed to help the reader understand the motivations behind each character and their lives. Adele is the Angel Mother, Mademoiselle Reisz is the unsociable mockingbird. While these two women do not interact with each other directly, each one has a strong hold on

how Edna views her new place in her world and her dissatisfaction with the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood.

While there are many instances and references to bird imagery, it is the use of various bird imagery that becomes highly symbolic within the character development of Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz and their influence on Edna's journey of awakening. Adele is described as an Angel Mother because she is a perfect example of a True Woman.

Adele tries continually to encourage Edna to take a more obedient role in her marriage. When arriving at Adele's home the reader finds "Madame Ratignolle looking more beautiful than ever there at home"(Chopin, 51) This highlights how in her element, Adele is at her best. To Edna however, there is nothing more depressing:

The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. 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, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would have never have the taste of life's delirium. (54)

Chopin is showing how the domestic sphere which served to trap women into a blind existence held no fulfillment as an individual. The domestic sphere constrained and condemned. The sphere of freedom that she desired was coming ever near. To Edna the two spheres were incompatible and could never be blended.

Adele tries to protect and warn Edna throughout the novel in regards to her duties as a wife and mother. In a sense Adele serves as a surrogate mother for Edna which only reinforces

her own status as a mother woman. Time and time again she tries to warn Edna of the dangers of her behavior. Edna refuses to listen and doesn't understand what Adele means when she says "Don't forget the children Edna!"

While Adele repeatedly tries to protect and warn Edna of the damage to her image that she is facing, Edna doesn't listen to her friend's well intended warnings. When Adele first begins to realize that Edna is highly impressionable and could be heading down a dark path, she also tries to warn Robert Lebrun to the dangers of flirting with Edna. She asks Robert to leave Edna alone. Adele states, "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously." (20) In this dialogue, Chopin is showing how Adele is concerned that Edna doesn't have a mature understanding of her role in Creole society. She tells Edna that she is childlike in her understanding of society's rules and expectations of a wife and mother. She is an example of what Edna should be and how Edna should behave, but to Edna there is nothing worse than spending a life in such drudgery.

Again Adele tries to warn Edna and tells her that she is in some ways like a child because she is not thinking about the consequences of her actions. Edna is so wrapped up in her moods and emotions, rather than moving beyond them into real self-understanding and to an awareness of her relationship to society, she stays like an adolescent who cannot transform into mature womanhood. She implores Edna to think about how her actions are being viewed at by society and to think of the children.

This time period has also been referred to the Empire of the Mother as a way of understanding the power that women held in the domestic sphere. In the story the one character that highlights each of the virtues of the Cult of True Womanhood is the angel-like Adele. Chopin creates the character of Adele to symbolize the virtues of the empire of the mother and to

highlight how Edna can chose to follow that path. Adele had always been a close friend to Edna after Edna married Leonce. Chopin refers to these types of women in her novel as “mother women” whose sole purpose is to be protectors of the children and propagators of the human race. Adele Ratignolle is the epitome of the mother-women. Chopin again uses bird imagery to describe the mother-women in the text:

It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any threat real or imaginary threatened their precious brood. They were 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, 9).

Adele is described as a “faultless Madonna” and “She was the very embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (9). “Spun gold hair, eyes like sapphires, red pouting lips like cherries, fair white skin, sewing away winter clothes for babies during her summer vacation”(9) Described as an angel so sweet that sugar wouldn't melt in her mouth, Adele is the iconic mother woman of the white upper middle class of 1850s American society. Although she is a strong symbol of the Empire of the Mother, Adele should not be mistaken for being weak. Her number one concern is always the children, followed by her husband. She is self-aware of her place in society and the consequences that would happen if she failed in these duties. She also plays a critical role in trying to help Edna understand her own responsibilities as wife and mother.

In their article “Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*”, Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith argue that although Adele and Edna are close in age, it is Adele who serves as a mother figure to Edna. They write, “Adele as a mother figure coddles Edna, encourages her to

express her feelings, shows concern about Edna's reputation, and worries about Edna's children." (Petty, 155). This is important in understanding Adele as the symbolic representation of the Empire of the Mother. She not only cares for her husband and her children, she also feels it is her duty to reach out and be a mother figure to Edna.

Once when speaking about the importance of motherhood, Edna tried to explain to Adele "that she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (46). This led to a huge argument between the two. Chopin wrote that the two women did not seem to be speaking the same language because Adele, as a representative of the mother woman, could not allow herself to consider a life that was not completely wrapped up in the children. Edna wanted Adele to understand that while she would give up her life, she would never give herself. Adele smiles then because she believes that "a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that- your bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that!" Edna laughingly replies, "Yes you could!" Two things stand out here. One is that the two women are still speaking a different language. Second is that Edna understands that a physical life and her soul are two very different things.

Adele is speaking about the belief that the greatest gift a mother could give would be to sacrifice her own life for the life of her children. Edna is speaking about how to sacrifice the very soul of a human being is worse than death. She would gladly give her life for her children, but not her soul. This is another example of foreshadowing in the book that hints how Edna feels about being a mother and sacrificing her life, but not her soul for her children. Will Edna be called to give one or the other? While Adele is the epitome of the True woman ideology, Edna's other close friend, Mademoiselle Reisz, has lived a life free of these constraints

Comparing these two women together allows Edna to see how each woman can offer a guide for her to live by. Edna is at a cross roads and must decide which path to take. She can choose to follow convention like Adele or she can turn her back on those expectations and become a recluse like Mademoiselle Reisz. Adele believes that Edna will get over her feelings and become a good mother. Mademoiselle Reisz believes that Edna will have to lose all her family ties in order to become a true artist. Mademoiselle Reisz has a different perspective on her place in society. At first Edna becomes more entrenched in the artistic ideals of Mademoiselle Reisz.

Mademoiselle Reisz has lived a life free from the bonds of being a mother woman. Mademoiselle Reisz is considered by many in the social circle to be eccentric and odd because she refuses to follow convention. Like those who do not conform, Edna can choose either to be silenced, conform to society's rules or written off as eccentric and artistic. This helps to explain her friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna learns through the Mademoiselle Reisz's influence that "artistic fulfillment required the sacrifice of maternal drives and maternal fulfillment meant giving up artistic ambitions." (Showalter, 67). Bird imagery also become very important in this passage of the novel as well when Chopin describes Mademoiselle Reisz.

With the development of the character Mademoiselle Reisz, Chopin also uses bird imagery to describe her as the Mockingbird. Like the parrot, the mockingbird is introduced in the opening lines of the story. Mockingbirds are noted for being difficult and obnoxious birds. Mademoiselle Reisz also has a reputation for being, "no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample on the rights of others." (Chopin, 20). In spite of the conventions of the society, Mademoiselle Reisz has the fortitude to be independent and live a life of solitude. As she and Edna become friends,

Mademoiselle Reisz talks to Edna about her wings being strong enough to handle what is to come. This is very important as it shows that Edna has a choice. She can choose to be alone like Mademoiselle Reisz or conform like Adele.

In *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* Berly Rowland writes that, “The mocking bird in literature often sings of death and longing. (68). He shows that the music that the mockingbird “sings eloquently of love and loss of a mate that perishes when it is swept out to sea.” He uses many historical references in literature to show that the Dove, the Nightingale, the Thrush and the Mockingbird are considered mourning birds in literature and in semiotics. In *The Awakening* this description of the Mockingbird fits so well with Mademoiselle Reisz.

The mockingbird is aligned with the Parrot in the opening lines of the novel when Chopin wrote that the mockingbird was the only one who understood the unknown language of the parrot. The mocking bird hung on the opposite side of the door from the parrot, “whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (Chopin, 3). This is also a symbolic representation on Mademoiselle Reisz as she is often playing music for Edna and believes that a true artist sacrifices much for her art in order to be exceptional. The true artist has “The soul that dares and defies”.

Bird imagery is used again and again in regards to the friendship between these two women. From the first time that Mademoiselle Reisz plays for Edna, Edna is filled with an image of a lone man naked on the beach “as he looked toward a distant bird winging it’s flight away from him”(Chopin, 25). This is almost a mirror to the analysis by Rowland’s mockingbird. Both produce music that create an image of solitude, water, birds, and desolation. Mademoiselle Reisz is like the Mockingbird who often sings of death and longing.

When Edna is longing for Robert after her return to New Orleans, she visits Mademoiselle Reisz and while reading a letter from Robert, Mademoiselle Reisz begins to play the Chopin Impromptu. She plays music that “grew strange and fantastic, turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” (75). When she finished playing, Edna was “sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her.” (76). In this scene, Mademoiselle Reisz is the mockingbird who sings of love and loss on the endless sea.

Later Edna tells a friend about Mademoiselle Reisz’s comments about her needing strong wings. Mademoiselle Reisz 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.” (Chopin, 61). This quote has three separate symbolic meanings. First it serves as a foreshadowing of what is to come for Edna. Second it shows Mademoiselle Reisz as the mockingbird who sings of death and longing. Third it aligns Edna directly in bird imagery as Edna transforms into a bird that Mademoiselle Reisz needs to check to see if Edna’s wings are strong enough to fly free from the restraints of the Cult of true Womanhood. The free bird imagery here is used to symbolize the dangers that will come to Edna as she continues to defy the tenets of the Cult of true Womanhood.

In the story, Edna comes to a cross road in her life. She can choose to stay where she is as a wife and mother and obey the laws of the society like Adele, she can choose to become like Mademoiselle Reisz and be a free independent woman, viewed as being an eccentric or conversely she can choose to be free in another way. What this way is has not been revealed to Edna and she is not sure exactly what it means.

The bird imagery is developed in such a way that the reader can see how Edna is struggling with this concept and choice for her life. Like a bird just learning how to fly, she is shaky and uncertain. Will she be able to fly free as she wishes or will she crash, “bruised and exhausted” down to earth? Throughout the novel Edna measures herself next to these two women and in the end, Edna cannot choose neither model of behavior and swims away alone. Edna chooses death. What is not immediately clear and has been left intentionally vague are the reasons why. Edna in comparison to bird imagery in the text is profound. She is the parrot found in the opening lines of the text. She is an exotic bird like creature during her dinner party. She is the lone bird that attempts to fly above it all. She is the bird with wings growing. She is the broken bird that falls to her death into the sea.

One way that Edna and bird imagery works well in the text is when Edna suddenly decides to leave her husband’s home. Her children are in the country with her husband’s mother and her husband is away on business for an extended time. Her husband was worried about leaving Edna because of her recent erratic behavior, but he believes the doctor who tells him to give Edna her space and she will come back to her senses. This is a grave mistake because neither the husband nor the doctor know just how far gone Edna has flown. While her duties of wife and mother have been put on hold, Edna makes a clear choice about where she will live. She suddenly moves into a small house that a servant calls “the pigeon house” because it is so small. She decides that she will live her life as she wants to and rejects society’s rules. When questioned about how the Pigeon house received its name, Edna laughingly tells Alcee, “that’s the name Ellen gives it, because it is so small and looks like a pigeon house” (Chopin, 81). While this satisfies the reader on a first read, a close reading reveals the symbolism that is

dominant in this seemingly innocuous name. This house and its name has a deeper meaning than the average reader would normally uncover.

In 1991 Bert Bender wrote an article called, *The Teeth of Desire: The Awakening and The Descent of Man*. Bender shows how Edna's pigeon house was not just given the name by the house maid. Bender's research shows that the name of Edna's new house has a history and meaning to it that could not be known by the average reader. He argues that Kate Chopin was a great follower and passionate critic of Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man*.

Bender writes that in Darwin's *Descent of Man*, one section is devoted entirely to the subject of the behaviors of male and female pigeons and the topic of sexual selection in nature. Bender writes that Chopin, "in creating Edna's pigeon house, refers to Darwin's theories of sexual selection" (Bender, 126) in the behavior of pigeons. He writes that Darwin describes pigeons as "creatures who occasionally feel a strong antipathy towards certain males without any assignable cause and a preference for certain other males" (126). Bender argues that Edna shows this tendency as well in her rejection of her husband and in her selection of Robert and Arobin. According to Darwin, when a female pigeon rejects a certain male nothing can persuade her to submit to him. On the other hand, if a female pigeon will abandon her own mate if she has "taken a strong fancy" for another male pigeon (126). Bender argues that these actions taken by the female pigeons reflect the exact actions of Edna in *The Awakening* as she struggles against the patriarchy.

Chopin's use of bird and winged imagery in *The Awakening*, helps illustrates Edna's choices and how she wants to live her life. She decides that she will choose who she gives herself to. When she explains all of this to the object of her affection and infatuation, Robert,

she realizes that he will not break the rules of society to be with her. He leaves her because he loves her and realizes what would happen if they stayed together and defied societies expectations. When this happens, consciously or subconsciously, Edna decides to take her own life. In the final scene, Bird imagery comes once again just as Edna steps out into the waters of the sea. While it seems that Edna has not taken a moment to think of the future and how it would realistically work for her, her decision to move into the pigeon house brought with it a momentary reflection on what would happen when her husband came back. She thought to herself:

She did know how it would be on his return. There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself. (76)

Here readers see that Edna reflecting on the future, but not understanding the consequences that would fall on her shoulders due to the scandal of her choices in leaving her husband.

Another example of Edna living in a fantasy world is seen when Mademoiselle Reisz asks Edna what she intends to do when Robert comes back. Edna laughingly replies, “Do? Nothing, except feel glad and happy to be alive.” (78) Here Edna refuses to even acknowledge that there will be consequences for her decisions. She does have a moment when her irresponsible actions weigh down her thoughts, but the next morning these thoughts are pushed aside and Edna continues on her journey of no return. Even Adele cannot reach Edna.

Adele came to see Edna at the pigeon house and in this visit Adele once more begs Edna to consider the consequences of her actions. She tells Edna, “In some way you seem like a child,

Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life... I advise you to be a little more careful in while you are living here alone” (91). When Edna refuses to pay heed to Adele, Adele continues, “you know how evil minded the world is- someone was talking of Alcee Arobin visiting you. Of course it wouldn’t matter if Mr. Arobin had not such a dreadful reputation... his attentions alone are enough to ruin a woman’s name.” Then she lets Edna know that she can’t come back to see her again. She states “that is was very, very imprudent today” (91). Adele is showing how far Edna has transformed. Adele may not be able to visit with Edna anymore for fear that it would damage her reputation as well.

Edna does not acknowledge even to herself the dire consequences of her actions. It is as if she does not believe that any harm can come to her. Chopin even writes that “because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference” (98). Again the reader finds Edna in a state of fantasy. This fantasy world of no consequences sets up the disastrous ending for Edna because she cannot seem to awaken to the truth that lays before her. She must choose which life she will live, but yet cannot see that this must eventually happen. Another example of her fantasy world is her reaction when Robert comes back.

When Robert returns to New Orleans from Mexico, Edna is filled with joy at the thought of their finally being together; however, as Robert again stays away from her she becomes deeply despondent and loses hope for their future that she has imagined for these months since Grand Isle. Finally Robert cannot stay away no longer and come to Edna in her new home. Edna tells Robert:

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." (102)

Robert is so shocked at the change in Edna that "his face grew white". He cannot comprehend what Edna is saying. By the end of the book, it is hard to imagine that Edna cares at all for what anyone thinks about her behaviors. This is a complete opposite from the Edna the reader is introduced to at the beginning of the novel. Edna has transformed so completely that she can never go back to the role of dutiful wife and mother. She is ready to reject these roles and become an outcast. She wants Robert to cast off the conventions of the Cult of True Womanhood and join her, regardless of the consequences.

Suddenly Edna is called away to Adele giving birth. Before she leaves she tells Robert that, "Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence." (103). Here again the reader finds Edna refusing to acknowledge the reality of her circumstances. Divorce was illegal at the time in Louisiana. What would have happened to the two lovers once Edna's husband returned was a question that never entered her mind. When Edna went to accompany Adele in her birthing time, Edna was to receive a shock of reality that would touch her to the core of her soul.

Although Edna had given birth to two children, she was in and out of consciousness and did not know the realities that accompanied such an ordeal. She had never accompanied anyone during birth before and was not prepared for what she was about to witness. While she could leave, she did not go. She watches Adele give birth:

With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture. She was still stunned and speechless with emotion when later she leaned over her friend to kiss her and say softly good-by. Adele, pressing her

cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice; “Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (104).

It isn’t until after Adele’s birthing scene that Edna begins to consider the effects of her actions will have on her children as Adele’s last words to Edna become prophetic. As Edna is leaving, shocked by what she was made witness to, she is overwhelmed and in a state of shock after witnessing Adele give birth. As she is walking home with Dr. Mandelet as her escort, she stumbles over her thoughts and tries to make sense out of what she witnessed. Dr. Mandelet tells her that she shouldn’t have been there to see such a horrific sight. He said that he felt it was cruel to expose Edna to such a shock. Faulting and stumbling, Edna replies, “One has to think of the children some time or another; the sooner the better.” (105).

In the next few sentences she continues to lose her train of thoughts and felt that “her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts” and stopped speaking. The Doctor tries to reach out to Edna to let her know that it is not too late to repair the damage that has been done. Edna tries to argue that she still wants only to be let alone to do as she wants but has a hard time justifying this desire because now thoughts of the children force her to examine what she has done. The Doctor tells Edna to come to him before it is too late.

In this scene Edna is waking up to the consequences and responsibilities as a mother in a way that she never has before. Suddenly the children become a huge part of her consciousness and she isn’t sure how or why or what she will do. All she knows is that she must get back to Robert so she can try and forget the children and her responsibilities to them. She tells the Doctor, “The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming--- but to wake up and find—oh! Well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (105). Again the way the words and her

thoughts are jumbled and disjointed reflect her inward struggle and shock at what she now knows. She continues on to say, "...still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives. Oh! I don't know what I am saying, Doctor. Goodnight. Don't blame me for anything." (105). She tells herself that she will think of the children tomorrow, tonight she just wants Robert. When she walks in the door she finds that Robert again has run away when she needed him the most.

Alone in despair, Edna does not go to sleep. She does not weep or cry out. She stays up all night long on the sofa completely awake now and thinking of the children and her future. At the end of the story, Edna has come to the sea alone and heart broken. She never admits to thinking about taking her life. She is truly bruised and exhausted. She has walked away from so much in her life in her quest for independence. She thinks of her children, her husband, her friends, her unrequited love and her life. She has no desire other than to take a long swim. The sea seduces her and beckons her into its liberating power of freedom. She walks down to the water and looks up to see "a bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water." (Chopin, 108). Edna takes off her clothing, walks into the water and begins to swim.

It is here in the conclusion that all of the foreshadowing and imagery come together. Edna becomes the vision of the naked man on the beach that she first imagined during Mademoiselle Reisz's recital on Grand Isle. Edna was listening to Mademoiselle Reisz's recital and names the music she hears "Solitude" for the images that it paints in her mind, "...the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him." (26). Edna has now become the naked man on the beach alone in desolation.

She is like the bird soaring into the complete freedom of death. She thinks of the children as Madame Ratignolle had urged time and time again. “Oh think of the children Edna! Remember them!” (104) Instead of pushing everyone away, Edna could have stayed in the role of the perfect mother-women or she could have become like Mademoiselle Reisz and rebel against societal norms. While Edna could have made either of these two choices, she knowingly chose death instead.

Ambiguous Ending- Suicide, Escape and Death in Chopin’s *The Awakening*

“Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obligated to maintain at any cost.”- The Awakening

Is Edna’s sudden and unexpected death the wages of her sins as many critics have argued? Or has suicide in some way become the ultimate escape and true freedom from a patriarchal ideology that would have pulled her soul into a life time of slavery to her husband and children? Is suicide the ultimate empowerment for women who dare to defy social norms? Is Edna still out in the sea swimming to her freedom, waiting for the right time to come back? Was her death even a suicide at all? Did she simply swim out to sea and in her grief and exhaustion simply lose the will to turn back? Or has Edna made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of her children which in turn should redeem her actions in the eyes of society because she has given the greatest gift, the gift of her own life, for her children? Or is her death a commentary on the power of social norms? Out of all the debates and reviews of Chopin’s ambiguous endings I have not found one that has yet to uncover the irony in Edna giving her life for her children and

in doing so, saving her own soul from a life time of submission while at the same time propelling her to the altar of the ever sacrificing mother figure that society has so immortalized.

The Awakening allows readers to understand certain complexities of gendered role and class expectations to which upper-middle class women were expected to adhere in the late 19th century Creole society of Louisiana. Peggy Skaggs wrote in 1979 that 20th century women still face problems similar to those that Edna experiences. Women are often searching for their own individual identities while balancing the roles of wife and a mother, which can be so demanding at times that many women feel at risk of losing who they are outside of those roles (Petry, 129). Around that same time, Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith describe *The Awakening* as, “a novel about a woman’s emancipation from a stuffy middle class marriage with its domestic routines and rigid standards prescribing how to be a good wife and mother” (Petry, 147). Both of these articles argue that in a world dominated by men, Edna commits suicide “as a free act of self-assertion and refusal to return to her domestic trap.” (Petry, 148). Debates of whether Edna drown as punishment for her transgressions or is she escaped from the conventions of the Cult of True Womanhood still exist even today.

Beryl Rowland writes that the sea, birds and death symbolism references dates back to ancient Greek Mythology. He writes that “the image of the sea and the mourning bird date back to ancient Greek Mythology and has been used countless times in literature.” He mentions the Goddess Asterie who tried to escape Zeus by turning herself into a Quail and dropping into the sea. Rowland also writes that the most common visualization of the human soul is a winged creature such as birds (119). Both of these references work well in describing Edna’s journey. Edna drops into the sea to escape her husband and her maternal responsibilities. Her soul is aligned with the falling bird with wings not strong enough to fly against the powerful forces of

the patriarchal system in which she lives. Of course this reading suggest that her death is not triumphant.

Rowland writes that upon death, “The soul either became a bird or was carried by a bird to the realm of the afterlife” (119). This is reflected in ancient Egyptian histories as well as in Christian visuals of death and the afterlife. This become especially metaphoric in the moments before Edna’s death as she swims out to sea. There is no living thing on the beach except “a bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down to the water” (Chopin, 108). This bird is symbolic of Edna as she too is broken and unable to fly against the dominant forces that will restrict her freedom from convention. The bird here too perhaps also serves as a guide for Edna into the afterlife. The bird and Edna dies in the ocean within moments of each other. This also serves as a symbol of their soul’s connecting even in the afterlife.

According to Elaine Showalter in *Literature*, a woman’s drowning was often considered punishment for adultery. (Showalter, 81) In many arguments, Edna’s suicide becomes the wages of her sins. Drowning as fictional punishment for female transgression against morality has existed for hundreds of years. As Showalter points out in *Sister’s Choice* the ending of *The Awakening* seems “to return Edna to the 19th century female literary tradition of drowning as a way of punishment for female transgressions” (81). Edna was defined and ultimately destroyed by a society that could not conceive of allowing a woman- especially a wife and mother- the kind of autonomy that she desired. What was a woman to do with the freedom she was searching for? Where would it lead? And what about the children? Edna’s desire for freedom was so strong that it wasn’t until the end of the novel that she realizes the devastating importance of Adele’s continued warning to think about the children.

Showalter also explains that some critics have seen Edna's much debated suicide as a heroic embrace of independence and a symbolic resurrection into myth (81). In this reading, suicide becomes powerful because it symbolizes Edna's 'triumphant embrace of solitude' (82) and represents a choice that one can make when all other options are non-existent. Showalter also argues That Edna's suicide is a source of empowerment and the swimming out to sea as becoming the ultimate escape for Edna. So is Edna's suicide punishment or empowerment?

In *Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin's the Awakening*, Sullivan and Smith argue that the ambiguousness of the ending is an escape from what Edna called the soul's slavery. In *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, Emily Toth quotes novelist Kill McCorkle who "believes that Edna is still out there in the sea swimming." She suggests that Edna is waiting for the right time to come back. (Toth, 209). This is an idealistic notion that Edna will return when she will be valued by a culture and society that can publicly welcome and embrace her actions as normal for any woman. Has that time come? According to some academics, the answer is yes: -Edna is welcomed. But, many students who study *The Awakening* in college classes still debate how horrible she was as a mother and argue that her first responsibility was to her children, reflecting how different readers respond differently based on their personal experiences and beliefs.

The beauty in the ambiguity of the novel's ending is that according to feminist perspectives there are multiple truths. Truth is subjective and ever changing based on the experiences, feelings of individuals. Feminists strive to make rooms for the oppressed to speak of their experiences, and the ambiguity of multiple truths reflects specific socio-historical contexts. The voice of every person matters and reader's interpretation of the ending of *The Awakening* reveal more about themselves and the socio-cultural ideologies of the era in which they live than about the intentions of the author.

While there are many different critiques and reviews about the ambiguous ending of *The Awakening*, a close reading of the novel's ending provides Edna's thoughts and the decisions she makes that result in her death. Edna does indeed intend to commit suicide. Perhaps there are elements of empowerment in her decision. Perhaps Chopin wrote the ending as a way of satisfying those who would argue that death is the only proper fate for such an "un-natural" mother and as a tool to save her own reputation as a serious writer from the scorn that she knew would follow the publishing of such a controversial book. I argue that Chopin wrote the ending in the way that she did for all of these reasons and more.

I argue that it was Edna's true awakening to the realities of her choices, combined with the love she had for her children and the even greater love that she had for herself drew her to the beach that day. Beginning in chapter 37, the fantasy world that Edna has built for herself begins to come undone. Up until this time, there has been no one to rein in her flighty impulses. Her husband has gone to New York City on business. Her children are safely away with their paternal grandmother in the country. Madame Ratignolle has been confined to her home as the birth of her child is expected at any moment. Edna has moved into her pigeon house and has been living in a fantasy that she created free from the restraints and expectations of the Cult of True Womanhood.

In *Sharing Secrets*, Christine Palumbo-DeSimone writes a compelling argument about the sacrificing mother. She writes, "An important aspect of the 19th century mother ideal was the personal sacrifice involved in mothering, a complete giving of oneself which presumably all "true" women accepted willingly as part of their female destiny" (31). Here is another example of how mothers were supposed to behave in polite society. The mother that sacrifices for her child is a direct example of sacrifice tenet of the Cult of True Womanhood. At first read it seems

that Adele shines in this role, while Edna refuses to conform. A closer read shows that with Edna's choice at the end of the novel, she indeed has given up her life for the children. According to the tenets of the Cult, this is the truest act of love a mother can give to her children. In this interpretation Chopin tries to save Edna from complete and public shaming by having her give up her life for the sake of the children.

I believe that Chopin write this ambiguous ending so that the readers would be left questioning the intention and meaning behind Edna's death. This is a book about transformation and perhaps part of the transformation occurs within the consciousness of the readers as they too question Chopin's motives and Edna's death. I argue that Chopin wrote the ending as a way of redeeming Edna to the realms of the ever sacrificing mother that is the truest virtue of the Cult of True Womanhood while at the same time critiquing the Cult of True Womanhood as a force so powerful that as a loving mother, death is the only true option that Edna had. This can be seen when Chopin writes:

She had done all of the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa until morning. She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; the rest of her days. But she knew away to elude them. (108)

Edna is for the first time awake to the realities of her life. She is now at the pivotal moment when she decides what she will do. Her choices are to give up her needs as a woman and sacrifice herself for the children to be dragged into the soul's slavery, shrug off her responsibilities and become as true artist as Mademoiselle Reisz would like or elude them all by

committing suicide. “It is the female soul that cannot be bound by social convention even though a patriarchal society seeks to cage it by making its wings clipped. The voice of women rises above such attempts of subjugation” (Campfield, 6) Edna Choose to escape the responsibilities of being wife and mother, but not to leave her children to suffer the societal consequences of her actions. She stayed awake all night for the first time in the novel, she does not go back to sleep. She found a way to elude them. She would gladly give her life for her children, but not her soul. She chose suicide as an escape. Edna refused to sacrifice her soul for her children. She will sacrifice her life, but not her soul in in doing so rejects the ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood.

CONCLUSION

“There is no beginning and no end”- Kate Chopin

The Awakening has become an important example of a feminist text that questions and critiques the Cult of True Womanhood and its influence on women at this time in history as well as women readers today. Edna’s journey of self-determination challenges the status quo and she envisions a life free from the restrictive bonds of The Cult of True Womanhood. Women still find themselves subject to the gendered expectations and social conventions that restrict their identity and independence by pushing them into pre-determined roles of motherhood and marriage. This is a lesson in rethinking the maternal.

This kind of writing by women authors is empowering because it highlights how women managed to break the silence and find a voice that could reach readers. These stories are still reaching and influencing readers over 100 years later. Chopin wrote a resistance piece that involved transformation in order to “actively engage in the historical process of struggle against

cultural and gender oppression” (Harlow, 48). Edna’s story is a story of transformation. She resists the cultural pressures to be a model mother and an angel of the home like Madame Ratignolle. She resists the choice to be a social pariah like Mademoiselle Reisz. She transforms from a dutiful wife and mother into a broken bird that cannot fly above the powerful tide of a society entrenched in patriarchal ideals.

Literature can be transformative for its characters as they transform within the text, and also for the readers who experience the world through the eyes of the characters and are thereby transformed in their understanding of social and historical contexts. Many students complain that history is boring because it seems like rote memorization of dates and times. When literature reflects the history of the time through the eyes of the characters, history becomes real in the sense that the reader can visualize the experience of the event or timeframe and its impact on the lives of the everyday people. Literature provides a new way of perceiving the reality of the time. Literature also “reflects the dominant ideology of the time” (Williams, 20). Analyzing *The Awakening* is like a puzzle. The reader begins to read between the lines and finds the hidden meanings in the text that reflect what is happening at the time historically.

On the subject of Kate Chopin, Rowland writes that “She is responding to the Nietzschean idea that people must revert to the instincts of their animal heritage in order to free themselves from the restraints that civilization has put in the way of their proper self-realization” (142). This is evident in *The Awakening* as animal imagery is used to describe Edna’s actions and behaviors. Rowland argues that birds are a common symbol of woman. He also states that “the plight of the captive bird became a common metaphor for any restraint imposed upon a person’s freedom.”(202). This is important because both of these symbolic representations can be directly related to Edna. Edna is a bird “trapped and finally destroyed” (213).

The beginning of *The Awakening* begins with a parrot calling out to go away. This hints at danger ahead. The last lines of the book complete this warning with Edna looking up into the sky and seeing a battered and bruised bird in flight falling back to the earth and falling into the sea. Is this a warning for women who would dare to believe that they can rise above the powerful forces of patriarchal domination and the tenets of social expectation on women and be free? Is this the author's way of saying that if you try, you will fail?

What does the novel reveal about the cost of female transgressions? What happens when women reject those roles that society pushes them into? Kate Chopin uses *The Awakening* as a way to resist oppression in marriage and motherhood. What Edna loses as a result of her choice becomes symbolic for women who dare to defy. Edna's life is centered around the conflict of individual freedom and conformity. Early reviewers condemned Edna as weak, selfish and immoral and believed that the wages for these sins was her death by drowning. Later the novel had a resurgence in popularity with the second wave of feminism as readers recognized in the book their own "revolt against socially prescribed roles and especially definitions of female sexual behavior" (Campfield, 1). Themes of individual freedom for women and social conformity are examined and critiqued.

Chopin's writing of *The Awakening* may have been a bit too much for her culture and society to accept openly. Today's readers are far more accepting and understanding. In today's society there are still those who say she was punished by drowning for her indiscretions. Although the majority of readers have a far more accepting approach to the actions of Edna, our society is still heavily influenced by patriarchal ideology and therefore Edna is still not free from the judgments of the Cult of true Womanhood.

The power of social pressures to conform to the dominant ideology still influences women. Although the Cult of True Womanhood ideology has evolved over the last hundred years, women still find themselves being subjected to many of the issues that Edna wrestled with. Ideas of purity, piety, domesticity and even submissiveness are still debated over as women navigate their own decisions about how they live their lives. Some women may feel as if they have no choice. Some women may embrace the patriarchal ideals of wife and mother. Some women may completely shun the ideology and live a life free from such restraints. Edna shows readers how she navigates these decisions and how painful such a journey can be. The Awakening is a novel that continues to last the test of time and influences men and women to consider their own ideas about women and gender roles.

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