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## *The Awakening's* Edna Pontellier, Female Companionship, and the Sea

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## *The Awakening's* Edna Pontellier, Female Companionship, and the Sea

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### Abstract

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, considered a foundational American feminist text, follows Edna Pontellier, a young wife who experiences a physical and spiritual awakening after learning to swim that causes the woman to reevaluate her position in society. Since the book's publication, scholars have speculated about what Edna's journey, artistry, and potential suicide say about 19th-century womanhood and how Edna defies or reinforces the patriarchy. Some, like Molly Hildebrand, argue that Edna upholds the male gaze through her art and chooses to isolate herself in imitation of the stereotypical stoic male artist. However, in my essay, I utilize a framework established by queer theorists Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth LeBlanc to argue that Edna represents a "metaphorical lesbian," who rejects her expected social role to live a women-centered life. This identity manifests through her relationships with the feminine "mother-woman" Adèle Ratignolle and the more socially-independent pianist Mademoiselle Reisz. Observing these two contrasting lifestyles, which both displease her, contributes to Edna's return to the sea, an unambiguously female figure which Edna simultaneously views as a mother and a lover, in hopes of perfectly capturing her desired metaphorical lesbian life. By analyzing Edna's dynamics with female friends, I conclude that the tragedy of *The Awakening* is Edna's inability to make a better life for herself in the present because she desperately wants more freedom than the time will allow.

Keywords: *The Awakening*, *Kate Chopin*, *Feminism*, *Analysis*, *19th Century Literature*

Kate Chopin's 19th-century novella *The Awakening* begins on the luscious Grand Isle, a popular summer destination for wealthy Creoles living in nearby New Orleans. There, Edna Pontellier, a young wife vacationing with her two sons, experiences a physical and spiritual awakening after learning to swim that causes her to reevaluate her position in society, desiring the freedom to choose how to spend her time and with whom. Despite this new independence, Edna's relationships still define her. She feels a sense of duty towards her husband, Léonce, and her children, Etienne and Raoul, and misguided devotion towards Robert, the lover she meets on her trip and continues seeing once she returns to the city. At the same time, Edna searches desperately for community among other women, including Adèle Ratignolle, a Creole family woman, and Mademoiselle Reisz, a socially-independent pianist, in a way she never has before. Yet, both relationships eventually fail because rigid societal structures render Edna incapable of imagining a life beyond the ones those two women model, which do not appeal to her. Edna's final return to the sea, personified as female throughout Chopin's novel, represents her last, deliberate attempt to regain female companionship in a patriarchal world.

Edna exemplifies what Adrienne Rich, one of the 20th century's most prominent and widely-read gender theorists, termed the "lesbian continuum" in her influential article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," published in 1980. Rich distinguishes between "lesbian existence," or "the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and continuing creation of the meaning of that existence," and the "lesbian continuum," which includes anyone who prioritizes a "woman-identified experience" (648). Such women engage in the "sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the receiving of practical and political support...marriage resistance, and 'haggard' behavior" (649). Elizabeth LeBlanc utilizes this framework, along with the ideas laid out in Bonnie Zimmerman's "Lesbians Like This and That: Some Notes on Lesbian Criticism for the Nineties," to reveal Edna as a "metaphorical lesbian." Such a character is a "disrupter of heterosexuality, a presence standing outside the conventions of patriarchy, a hole in the fabric of gender dualism... [and] cannot be contained within these institutions" (qtd. in 290). Edna perfectly fits these criteria, beginning with her relationships.

First and foremost, rather than passively becoming acquaintances due to their close proximity, Edna actively seeks Adèle's company, establishing an authentic, reciprocal friendship on the Grand Isle *before* the moment of her awakening. Edna, used to living "her own small life all within herself," finds herself charmed by Adèle, who "loosen[s] a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (Chopin 57). At first, the two sit together and talk at Adèle's volition, but one morning, Edna "prevail[s]" in convincing Adèle to come to the beach with her (58). Adèle challenges Edna's tendency for self-isolation and shows her that perhaps a strict separation between someone's public and private lives is unnecessary. For example, Adèle shocks Edna by speaking communally about her sexual "*accouchements*" without shame, observing throughout her stay at the Grand Isle that Adèle's behavior reflects a greater tendency among Creoles to discuss such matters openly (53). However, Edna associates most with Adèle and enjoys a high level of comfort in her presence, evidenced by how she "remov[es] her collar and open[s] her dress at the throat" (59). This behavior subverts "'feminine' dress codes" meant to "confine [women] physically and prevent their movement," and Edna disrupts this patriarchal attempt to subjugate women through her intimate relationship with Adèle (Rich 639).

While Molly Hildebrand claims that Edna, taking on a masculine artistic role, sees Adèle as an objectified muse, Edna clearly values her friend's personality over her appearance. According to Hildebrand, Edna constantly fails to acknowledge Adèle's humanity, presenting her as either a mystical figure of perfection or a trope (195). Introduced as "mother-woman," Adèle epitomizes the traditional matriarch and garners comparisons to the Virgin Mary multiple times. The narrator even describes Edna watching Adèle "as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (Chopin 54). However, through Edna's eyes, Adèle moves from "constructed ideal to individual subject" (LeBlanc 297). Edna initially notices Adèle's "excessive physical charm," but Adèle's "candor...furnished...the subtle bond which we might as well call love" (Chopin 57). Edna recognizes Adèle's beauty but loves her honesty because she challenges Edna's restrictive Protestant mindset.

Adèle does not, as Hildebrand asserts, epitomize Edna's "sexually conventional foil" (194) as Chopin subverts stereotypical gender assumptions with Adèle's character. For instance, Adèle expresses enthusiasm for

sex even while pregnant, unheard of at the time (Streater 409). She also uses gender expectations to her advantage: when she notices Robert's flirting makes Edna uncomfortable, Adèle feigns weakness so he will take her home and firmly tells him to leave Edna alone (411). Still, Hildebrand claims that Edna's "need for Adèle...is masturbatory" because she "allows Edna to 'intoxicate [herself] with the sound of her own voice'" (197). However, in context, this moment takes place after Edna reveals her complex, often negative, feelings towards her husband and children to Adèle for the first time and has nothing to do with her art. She feels "the unaccustomed taste of candor" that "muddled her like...a first breath of freedom" (Chopin 63). This exchange confirms the two women's unique bond because Adèle's "candor," which first facilitated Edna's fondness, gives her the space to be honest as well. Therefore, Edna's intense reaction illustrates emotional catharsis, not vanity. In both instances, Adèle offers Edna the emotional and practical support she needs and cannot receive from a male companion.

On the Grand Isle, Edna also develops a supportive friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz, who becomes her model for female self-sufficiency. Mademoiselle Reisz, unmarried and without children, exists outside the island's community because most people find her combativeness "disagreeable" (Chopin 70). Nevertheless, everyone admires her immense skill on the piano and frequently calls upon her to entertain their party guests. In many ways, Mademoiselle Reisz stands as the "actual" lesbian to Edna's "metaphorical" one. Her abrasive personality, disdain for domesticity, physical disability, and occupation as an artist all code the older woman as a lesbian according to 19th-century standards of literature (Seidel 204). Chopin furthers this subtext by describing Mademoiselle Reisz in almost mythic terms, associating her artistry with magic and witchcraft (206). At one point, as Reisz plays, "The shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room. It floated out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air" (Chopin 116). Her music becomes a tangible entity, overwhelming Edna to the point of tears in another moment of uniquely feminine catharsis.

However, despite a reputation for "trampling upon the rights of others," (Chopin 70) Mademoiselle Reisz, like Adèle, is multi-faceted and shows surprising emo-

tional intelligence in her relationship with Edna, immediately recognizing her as a fellow artist. When her musical piece greatly affects the younger woman, Mademoiselle Reisz "perceives" her agitation, then aims to comfort Edna, declaring her the only one worth playing for (72). Then, Mademoiselle Reisz supports Edna after Robert departs from the Grand Isle because she realizes Edna misses her friend (94). While the popular perception of Mademoiselle Reisz holds some truth, she consciously tries to maintain camaraderie with Edna. Edna's emotions towards Mademoiselle Reisz are more complicated, but the older woman fascinates Edna both as an artist and as a woman. In New Orleans, Edna habitually reunites with Mademoiselle Reisz when, in listless states of depression, she longs to hear her play the piano. These visits "quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses," and "the presence of that personality which was offensive to her...seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (133). Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz relate to each other intellectually through their art. Edna feels strangely comfortable with the other woman because, similar to Adèle's honesty, Mademoiselle Reisz's disregard for social norms allows Edna to engage in "haggard" behavior, including willful arguments and intractable emotion, without reservation.

While Edna embraces her relationships with Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz, she distances herself from Léonce and her children—not as Hildebrand insists—because she approaches life as an "individual adventure" best undertaken in "solitary contemplation" (192), but because these social ties constrain her freedom. Once back in New Orleans, Edna stops attending to her expected tasks, such as waiting on Tuesday callers, and spends most of her time painting, inciting Léonce's disapproval. She resents his objectification, and when Robert, the main subject of her romantic fantasies, expresses the same sentiment, wishing Léonce would "set her free," she dismisses him as well, saying, "I give myself where I choose" (Chopin 167). At that moment, Edna understands that Robert upholds patriarchy just as much as Léonce and sees her as a thing to control, not a fully autonomous human being. Edna also partially denounces her maternal duties. Hildebrand criticizes Edna for a supposed lack of care towards Etienne and Raoul, defining her unhappiness as "the masculine right of self-possession that divorces oneself from other people and denies its inevitably relational construction" (205). Yet, Edna's struggles to reconcile her children with her

newfound independence are uniquely feminine. Edna bore Léonce's sons not out of any personal desire but because, as a married woman at this time, people expected it of her. Edna sends her children away "to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (Chopin 63). Edna partially keeps Etienne and Raoul at a distance for their own safety because she knows she is not a "mother-woman" by *nature*, nor preference, and the boys receive more love and care outside their home. Edna loves her children, but they represent a time before her awakening when she let institutional pressure dictate her actions. Motherhood and individuality are not "mutually exclusive," as Ivy Schweitzer argues (162). Rather, motherhood is incompatible with Edna's distinct journey precisely because she cares for them so deeply she will never be free as long as they tether her inextricably to her previous condition.

Edna, neither fully feminine nor masculine, naively attempts to disregard the rigid, patriarchal system Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz have learned to embrace. On a superficial level, Chopin represents Edna as physically "transcending traditional gender descriptions" (LeBlanc 293). She contrasts the "long, clean and symmetrical" lines of her body and its "graceful severity of poise and movement" with Adèle's "more feminine and matronly figure" (Chopin 45). Yet, Edna attracts the attention of men with a "noble beauty... which [makes her] different from the crowd" (45). This dichotomy manifests further through Edna's inability to communicate her identity using language. Edna looks down upon Adèle's "perfect" domestic life as a "mother-woman," but that position empowers Adèle much more than Edna, even after her awakening, and gives her purpose. Jennifer Gray claims that only Edna embodies the "free-woman," possessing both individuality and sexual freedom (56). Yet, from the beginning, Adèle demonstrates "sexual self-ownership" (58) by discussing her affairs brazenly *and* maintaining a virtuous image as a loving, attentive mother. Still, Edna concludes that Adèle's public wife- and motherhood eclipse her private identity. When, during dinner, Adèle listens intently to her husband's speech, at times even "taking the words out of his mouth," Edna incorrectly assumes this means she plays a subservient or supportive part in the conversation (Chopin 107). Rather, in the domestic sphere, the couple are equals, standing in stark contrast to Edna and Léonce, who often sit in silence because they share no common inter-

ests to discuss (Streater 410). Additionally, Adèle disputes her husband's opinions when she disagrees with them. She relays Monsieur Ratignolle's warning about Edna's affair with Alcée Arobin, a known rake, but quickly qualifies her own perspective, telling her not to mind the advice, even though she disapproves of Edna's pursuit as well, because she respects Edna's right to decide for herself. Unfortunately, Edna never offers Adèle the same courtesy (411). Edna observes Adèle's happy household and comments, "It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui" (Chopin 107). Edna views the world in a simplistic way. Just because she would not enjoy such circumstances, she brazenly determines that Adèle must live a "colorless existence," devoid of both genuine pain and genuine joy. However, she quickly admits that the "delirium" she seeks is undefinable and therefore subjective (107).

Similarly, Edna refuses to choose a definitive course of action after her awakening because, as the "self-author rewriting her own life's narrative," she, more than anything, wants to avoid an ending (Cuff 329). When learning to swim, Edna compares herself to "the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (Chopin 73). She considers her success the beginning, rather than reaching a goal, emphasizing her inexperience and potential for future improvement (Cuff 333). When she returns from vacation, Edna, intent on displaying her awakened soul and disrupting the patriarchy, impulsively starts an affair with Alcée Arobin and moves into a new home, nicknamed the "Pigeon-House" by a servant, deliberately not considering their future repercussions and further reinforcing her metaphorical lesbian identity. According to LeBlanc, Edna's relationship with Alcée is just as much about "striking out against the patriarchal code" and "asserting her right to seek fulfillment" outside her marriage, especially given his status as a womanizer—already a bit of a social outcast—as her own sexual pleasure (Seidel 301). He means "absolutely nothing to her" as a person (Chopin 133). Similarly, LeBlanc classifies the Pigeon-House as a "lesbian space," where Edna "escapes... a specific social relation to a man... which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation" (297). There, Edna is free to indulge in her painting career, ignore her expected duties, and come and go as she pleases, all without her husband's oversight.

Nonetheless, Edna's philosophy results in a monotony where she waits for events to happen to her, and she obfuscates the future by never capitulating herself to any concrete goal. She looks to the future as "a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers" (Chopin 94). She perceives the future as completely out of her control, causing her to indulge in fantasies, hoping "something" happens, though "she did not know what" (129). Mademoiselle Reisz, again revealing genuine worry for Edna's well-being, confirms the younger woman loves Robert, then pointedly asks her what she plans to "do" after he comes back. Edna replies vaguely, "Do? Nothing, except feel glad and happy to be alive" (137). Again, Edna picks ambivalence over firm devotion to any specific design, categorizing her reaction based purely on emotion because her interest in Robert stems from an unobtainable romantic ideal, not realism (Ramos 154). LeBlanc even argues that Robert represents Edna herself, sharing her imagination, humor, and even physical appearance, including their yellow-brown eyes and hair. He "suggests the female partner for which her unsuspecting soul longs, housed within an acceptable male form" (301) and she pines over him until he proves his undeniable maleness by regurgitating patriarchal ideas. This shallow worldview detrimentally affects Edna's ability to achieve freedom in the patriarchal world, something her female friends understand.

Despite their divergent personalities, Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz recognize Edna's indecision equally and provide remarkably similar advice imploring Edna to dedicate herself entirely to a chosen social role. Adèle compares Edna to a child, telling her she acts without a "certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (Chopin 153). In other words, Edna must cease her childlike fantasies and embrace the freedoms *and* responsibilities that adulthood entails (Ramos 155). Adèle never implies Edna must follow her example and become the picturesque housewife, but Edna cannot realistically abandon her place in society and needs to find fulfillment in her current circumstances. Ironically, Edna believes the past "offered no lesson which she was willing to heed" (Chopin 94). Yet, she will not conform like Adèle because she holds onto a naive, idyllic version of freedom that allows unique, unbridled expression without any social burden (Cuff 336). Adèle, out of sincere concern, tries to teach Edna that she will not survive unless she matures beyond this childish perspective.

Mademoiselle Reisz also seeks to correct Edna's hesitation. When Edna asks whether Mademoiselle Reisz thinks she can become an artist, the older woman replies that the avenue requires both natural talent and staunch commitment. Successful artists possess "the brave soul...that dares and defies" (Chopin 115). She reiterates this message later by telling Edna, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (138). Through his analogy, Mademoiselle Reisz warns Edna that female artists—as well as metaphorical and actual lesbians—face strict scrutiny for defying gender norms, and though she believes in Edna's artistic potential, lacking the strength to survive an alternative lifestyle, which includes societal ostracization, Edna will come "fluttering back to earth," like a bird with weak wings (138). However, Edna, accustomed to living inside her own head, ignores their advice and begins regressing toward her pre-Grand Isle solidarity because she cannot reconcile her romantic desire to integrate herself into the community without compromising any part of herself with her friends' more pragmatic attitude.

Even as Edna isolates herself from her friends, one incorruptible companion remains: the sea. The narrator consistently conflates the sea with femininity, comparing it to a mother and lover, more than a friend, because, within the waters, Edna simultaneously appears like a child and seeks erotic pleasure. Edna incorrectly attributes her awakening to Robert's love when, in actuality, that relationship only develops after her metaphorical rebirth learning to swim, an accomplishment she equates to a toddler clumsily taking their first steps. Like that infant, Edna fully grasps her own autonomy, progressing "as if some power of significant import" controls "the working of her body and her soul" (Chopin 73). This discovery affects more than Edna's summer activities. Now, she realizes her capability to achieve more than anyone, even herself, expects with the strength she gains from the water.

Edna returns to the sea at the novel's conclusion, hoping to reaffirm her autonomy after Robert leaves without telling her. She strips off all her clothes and stands on the beach "absolutely alone," like "some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (Chopin 175). Hildebrand contends that this isolation before her final swim "validates the masculine right of the solitary soul," (205) but the situation does not appeal to Edna, and she quickly abandons

this isolation. The narrator personifies the sea, describing how the waves “invite” Edna to enter, and once she does, “the touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 176). Furthermore, earlier in the novel, Edna visualizes “Solitude” as a man naked and alone by the sea with an attitude of “hopeless resignation” (71). Far from an isolationist, Edna consciously seeks comfort and finds companionship with the feminine sea. Sandra Gilbert argues in “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire” that the ocean represents the “autonomy and urgency of female desire,” equating Edna to a successor of Venus, or Aphrodite, famously depicted as emerging from the water full-grown in popular culture (61). Edna desires companionship, specifically female companionship, and when her other relationships fail, she returns to the entity that first facilitated her growth and cannot help but let it consume her. Gilbert also briefly mentions that Venus was a known patron of Sappho, whose “lyric imagination was fostered by unique erotic freedom” (62) but ignores the deeper implication of how this influence advances a queer reading of the text. In fact, Gilbert never considers the sea as a lover for Edna inasmuch as a representation of her desire. While swimming, Edna, reminded again of her childhood, imagines the water as the never-ending meadows she raced through as a young girl. Edna, failing to capture her adult pleasure, tries to recapture the adolescent freedom Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz know is lost forever because she cannot thrive within a society that requires her to conform to their standards, regardless of the future she may be able to build.

Edna’s frantic desire for intimacy motivates her journey in *The Awakening*. Her vacation on the Grand Isle fundamentally shifts her mindset by exposing her to new people and situations. Edna “awakens” to her personhood after learning to swim, but that epiphany builds on the knowledge she gains from her friendship with Adèle, who allows Edna to examine her interior life and observe a woman who resides outside a strict, sexually repressed Protestant ideology openly and honestly. So, Edna rejects any oppressive obligations, including submission to her husband and, to a lesser extent, caring for her children while cultivating deep, meaningful connections with Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Her withdrawal from these oppressive responsibilities in favor of independence and prioritizing female relationships makes her an exemplary example of LeBlanc’s metaphorical lesbian. Yet, in doing so, Edna alienates

herself from the community she so desperately wants to keep. Rather than carve a place for herself inside the patriarchal world, like Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna clings to impossible fantasies where she earns the benefits of society without incurring the difficulties. Finally, after being abandoned by Robert, whom she idealizes most, Edna travels to the sight of her awakening, a source of maternal and erotic comfort, in the ultimate effort to appease her loneliness. In the end, Edna fails because she cannot apply her mental awakening rationally, and she ends the novel as she lives, constantly moving, swimming in search of something more, never appreciating the world right in front of her.

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