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### Edna's Ultimate Promenade

"The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace... Exhaustion was pressing upon and over-powering her... There was a hum of bees and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (Chopin 109). These final words to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* mark the protagonist Edna Pontellier's finale. Chopin guides readers on Edna's exploration of her self-awareness of the cage-like constraints through her self-reinvention, and finally to her culmination of escaping from societal confinement. Especially in Edna's final walk, Chopin instills ambiguity to deliberately construct an incessant invitation for readers' response. Because Chopin uses polar extremes in the characterization of Edna's two closest acquaintances in *The Awakening*, we can conclude that Chopin wanted readers to view Edna's final walk as inevitable.

Chopin utilizes characterization to exemplify the socially accepted roles of women in contrast Edna's discontent with her adoption of these roles. It is apparent in the novel that Edna lies between these two extremes, and Chopin uses both Madame Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz to portray it. Along with being representatives of extremes, they are also Edna's foils in the novel, each character contrasts one another while highlighting particular qualities within each other.

Chopin's first extreme comparison to Edna Pontellier is the "mother-woman". She begins her depiction of this role with her husband's dissatisfaction when it came to his

wife's duties toward her children. Chopin gives an ironic description of the "mother-woman:"

It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were woman who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (9)

Here, Edna shows her true belief in the adoption of this role in life. Kathleen Streater explains how "this exaggerated description at once captures, and mocks, the idealized patriarchal role of mother-as-saint" (Streater 407). Chopin sarcastically ridicules the ideologies behind these women who devote themselves chastely to their families.

But, Chopin creates a romanticized characteristic, when she describes Madame Ratignolle as the ideal "mother-woman," "a by-gone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (Chopin 9). Adele embraces the social responsibilities and duties of her family allowing the reader to gain a more relatable view of the "mother-woman" role. Chopin further justifies Edna's lack of desire in her participation as a "mother-woman" when Edna explains to Adele that "[she] would give up the unessential; [she] would give [her] money, [she] would give [her] life for [her] children; but [she] would give [herself]" (46). Chopin reveals Edna's belief of the loss of individual identity and the sense of subordination found in the "mother-woman." Adele continually attempts to persuade Edna to think of the children, but what she doesn't realize is that Edna believes that by making her final decision she is thinking of the children. Edna cannot fully give herself to her children or

husband, but she can give them her life; therefore, through the characterization of Adele, one can see the inevitability of Edna's feeling, which leads to her final walk.

Robert Lee Mahon explains the opposite of a "mother-woman" as "a position of autonomy, of 'independence,' the position of one who 'stops for neither thanks nor applause'" (Mahon 230). Chopin places Mademoiselle Reisz as the embodiment of this representation of freedom and independence. Reisz is seen as the most influential character to Edna because she is single, childless and devotes her life to her passion of music. Edna finds Reisz as a confidant because Reisz is the only person who knows of Edna's feelings for Robert. Reisz's lifestyle is the reality of what Edna aspires.

Reisz tries to counsel Edna while she is attempting to self-reinvent. Edna explains to Arobin how Reisz tends to state unusual things in bantering ways; she doesn't realize the significance until afterwards:

When I left her today, she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. '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 79)

Reisz knows that Edna must relinquish herself from tradition and prejudice to excel as an independent and free person. Reisz tried to explain that if Edna aspires to be an artist than she needs to completely devote herself to that subject, but here is where Edna has her dilemma. Jules Chametzky explains that this wasn't the adoption that Edna wants. Edna desires an answer to the question of "how to be free in one's self and for one's self but still meaningfully connected to others" (Chametzky 222). Edna never receives an answer to this

question. The narrator connects Reisz's advice in Edna's final walk when states, "How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneers if she knew! 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies'" (Chopin 109). Edna recognizes that even the Reisz-like womanly role doesn't fulfill her desire for independence.

Chopin use of polar extremes in the characterization of Edna Pontellier's acquaintances portrays Edna's belief that suicide was inescapable. She believed it was her only way to true self-identification and independence from societal constraints. Edna's suicide was critiqued on two extremes too: some who believed "it had the sensuous beauty as all the rest," and others like Kauffmann who see it as "the confrontation of resultant consequences without plot contrivance and escape" (208).

Works Cited

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