

NARROW VISION, SHORT LIFE: THE DOOMED PERSPECTIVE OF EDNA PONTELLIER

by

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(Under the Direction of John Lowe)

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine how vision functions in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Vision, as it is used here, refers to an individual's perspective and their view of the world, not just physical sight. Ultimately, I argue that Edna's narcissistic vision keeps her from being able to see beyond her present state and conceive of a future for herself, which leads to her suicide.

INDEX WORDS: *The Awakening*; Kate Chopin; suicide; vision; southern literature

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Narrow Vision, Short Life: The Doomed Perspective of Edna Pontellier

I. Introduction

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* begins with the aural—a parrot demanding that listeners go away, “Allez vous-en!” (1). However, what is truly needed for understanding the novel is a sense of Chopin's employment of the visual. Throughout the novel, Chopin emphasizes what and how Edna sees, in addition to providing descriptions of the landscape that rely on color and depth. And though the novel begins with an emphasis on sound, it ends with sight. As Edna Pontellier swims out to sea at the end of the novel, “she did not look back now, but went on and on” (127). This is Edna's problem—she does not look back. And throughout the novel, she fails to look forward, as well. In these final moments, however, Edna does “look[] into the distance,” but this only serves to turn Edna's focus inward, so that the novel closes on her remembrances of a time when “there was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (128). To understand the novel, then, we should examine how the visual and, in turn, Edna's vision function in the text. The term vision, as I use it in this essay, does not refer to physical sight. Though they are connected, vision here is an act of perception and aspiration. Edna's vision is how she sees and understands the world, as it is now and as it could be in the future. If we can understand Edna's vision, then, perhaps we can understand her decision to commit suicide.

The novel's ending is the source of much scholarly debate. Some scholars identify Edna's suicide as a triumphant declaration of the Self.¹ Others connect her actions more directly to her

¹ Carole Stone, Ann Heilmann

artistic endeavors² or to her role as a mother.³ There are even those who argue that Edna's suicide is less the choice of death and more an escape or return to the womb.⁴ What is commonly accepted, however, is that Edna's suicide relates to her identity and conception of self. Otis B. Wheeler describes Edna's suicide as an act of "existential despair" because Edna chooses death when she cannot identify with any of the roles available to her (123). Similarly, Peter Ramos critiques Edna's unwillingness to accept available roles, stating "Edna's refusal finally to dedicate herself to an identity or creatively transform one for herself is a particular failure, one that ends in suicide" (148). Ramos suggests that it may have been possible for Edna to find an identity outside that of the typical artist or mother. That is, there may have been a viable, and even fulfilling, future for Edna, if only she had been able to envision it.

Edna's failure, then, is her inability to perceive new options for herself. Despite the fact that she is an artist and that she spends much of her time daydreaming, Edna's vision is surprisingly—and crucially—narrow. One way to understand the narrowness of Edna's vision is to study it through the lens of Freudian and Lacanian conceptions of the self because both emphasize the tensions between the internal and external self. For similar reasons, it is also useful to explore Emerson's influence on Chopin's work. Additionally, I will examine passages from *The Awakening* to study how Edna perceives the world and how Edna's vision ultimately fails because it is too self-centered. That is, Edna believes art and motherhood are the only options available to her because she cannot conceive of anything beyond her own direct experiences. Consequently, I will study Edna's understanding of these two identities to show why Edna fails to meet the expectations of both. Edna's narrow vision ultimately leads to her

² Roberta White, Lynda Boren

³ Joyce Dyer, Marion Muirhead

⁴ Sandra Gilbert, Cynthia Griffin Wolff

suicide because she cannot see beyond her immediate self and, therefore, cannot conceive of a life outside of her current situation.

II. Understanding Identity

When Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan studied identity, they did so, in part, to explain the difference between the internal and the external self. That is, they hoped to discover how we conceive of ourselves as separate from the world around us. Similarly, many of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays deal with how individuals can exist both for themselves and within a community. I study their work here in order to inform my understanding of Edna's vision, which includes her perception of her self and her place in the world. The need to study Edna's burgeoning identity is made apparent when the narrator tells readers, "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world *within and about her*" (emphasis mine, 16). To understand how Edna comes to this realization, we turn first to Freud.

Freud wrote often on the subject of identity, and Jonathan Culler explains that "for Freud, identification is a psychological process in which the subject assimilates an aspect of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, according to the model that the other provides. The personality or self is constituted by a series of identifications" (115). In his essay "On Narcissism," Freud writes on "libido theory," the formation of the "ideal ego" and their place in identity construction (415). As Freud conceives of it, the ideal ego, once formed, dictates one's actions and choices:

The ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. As always where the libido is concerned, man has again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when he

grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgment, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is substituted for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal. (415-416)

In other words, one is always chasing the ideal self, a version of the repressed childhood ideal.

The result is narcissism, an obsession with perfecting the self. John Glendening identifies narcissistic tendencies in Edna's actions, noting that "Edna's background and behavior correspond to a number of criteria often associated with narcissism, although she does not—her self-staged birthday dinner party is a significant exception—often or overtly evidence the grandiosity, self-importance, and exhibitionism that mark the condition" (56). Beyond the dinner party scene, Glendening also sees narcissism as the cause of many of Edna's actions, including her affairs.

Also important in Freud's theories of the ideal self is his understanding of repression. According to Freud, the tension between the "infantile ego" and the pressures of societal expectations—"the admonitions of others"—are what cause the initial repression of the ideal self. Similarly, Cynthia Griffin Wolff sees Edna as existing with a divided self, observing that "the cool distancing tone of [Edna's] 'visible' character conceals an ardent yearning for intensity, for passion" (451). Edna's ideal, then, is a self who lives freely, without the constraints of society. Throughout the novel, Edna attempts to create that sort of life, but this is not without its consequences. According to Wolff, "Once [Edna] has given up the pattern of repression that served to control dangerous impulses, she becomes engaged in trying to maintain a precarious balance in each of her relationships" (465). Edna's attempts to live according to her ideal ego put her at odds with those around her, who are used to the more socially conservative Edna. Part of

Edna's awakening, then, is the realization that her ideal self is not compatible with the society she lives in. Edna tries to make it work, but ultimately fails.

To further understand Edna's drive towards the ideal, we can look to the work of Lacan. Lacan builds on Freud's concept of identity and the self, describing what he terms the "mirror-stage." In *Ecrits* Lacan states,

This form would have to be called the Ideal-I, if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register, in the sense that it will also be the source of secondary identifications, under which term I would place the functions of libidinal normalization. But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality. (442)

Lacan's Ideal-I functions as the source of individuals' motivation because they are always striving to become that "fictional" best version of themselves. Or, as Culler explains, one's self begins to emerge when "the infant identifies with his or her image in the mirror, perceiving himself or herself as whole, as what he or she wants to be" (115). I draw on Lacan because the search for the ideal self plagues Edna. But part of her problem is that she does not know what her ideal is. Wolff suggests that Edna searches for passion, in life and in her self (451). This desire, of course, puts Edna at odds with the constricting social norms of late 19th century society.

In addition to Freud and Lacan, it is also helpful to think about Emerson when trying to understand Edna's sense of her own identity. Though Emerson receives only a brief mention in *The Awakening*, where Edna falls asleep reading some of his work, it is clear that the transcendentalist had at least some influence on Chopin's writing. Kathleen Nigro has identified how Chopin may have come to read and receive Emerson, and Anthony P. Petruzzini demonstrates how Emerson's conception of the self functions in Chopin's novel. Essentially, Petruzzini argues

that Edna misreads Emerson and that her misunderstanding is part of what leads to her death. It is easy to see why, on the surface, Emersonian self-reliance felt like a perfect fit to Edna.

Emerson's imperative that you "insist on yourself; never imitate" would certainly appeal to a woman trying to embody her ideal self in an unforgiving society (547). However, Petruzzi explains where Edna goes wrong:

Not having understood that Emerson's call to "self-reliance" means living in a holistic mode of being with "the surrounding system," Pontellier becomes more and more attracted to one of the two dualistic "dispositions." The allure of Idealism moves her away from an active engagement with her "surrounding system" in which she could prospectively disclose new ways to invest in herself. Chopin demonstrates a trap that exists in the act of withdrawal from society which occurs in new Idealism. (293)

In other words, Edna sees self-reliance as a complete separation from society, but what Emerson is really arguing for is "doing away with the binary idealism and materialism in order to create a holistic relationship between a world and the earth" (Petruzzi 294). Thus, Edna's complete isolation is, in fact, a failure of Emersonian self-reliance. Furthermore, understanding Emerson's influence on the novel can also impact one's understanding of the ending. Virginia M. Kouidis explains that "the difficulty readers have had in deciding whether Edna's suicide is cowardly or heroic may rest in the possibility that Chopin uses Emerson both as representative of the system that denies Edna's aspiration and as a judgment on the narrow vision by which Edna defeats herself" (118). Edna's failure to understand Emerson, then, is just another failure of her vision.

III. Edna's Vision

By applying these theories to *The Awakening*, I will show how Edna's vision works in the novel. But first, it can also help to differentiate between the ideas of "vision" and "gaze."

Theories on the gaze originate from Lacan, and one of the most notable is that of the male gaze which, according to Zoila Clark, is when a woman "becomes an object to be seen. . . . [Women]

are not persons anymore, but objects, because their bodies are fragmented—into a good bosom, a beautiful face, a tiny waist, or an angelic being” (340). Edna is objectified by the male gaze in the novel. The novel’s opening confirms this as it begins not with Edna but with her husband, Léonce Pontellier. The first introduction to Edna, then, comes as Mr. Pontellier is “looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage” (4). Léonce embodies the male gaze: when Mr. Pontellier first looks for his wife along the beach, he “fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at a snail’s pace from the beach,” turning his wife into nothing more than an object (4). Additionally, the novel’s narration even makes the reader somewhat complicit in Edna’s objectification. In describing Edna, the narrator states, “The charm of Edna Pontellier’s physique stole insensibly upon you. The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it” (17). The narrator’s “you” not only generalizes the commentary, it invites the reader to view—or at least imagine—Edna in a way that reduces her to her lines and angles. And while the narrator is trying to demonstrate Edna’s uniqueness by saying she is not like a “fashion-plate,” the very description calls to mind that of a work of art, not a person, especially because of the emphasis on Edna’s “poses.” The sense of Edna as art is only heightened by the description’s conclusion: “A casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd” (17). In this passage, Edna is reduced to her figure, an “it.” Additionally, the observer switches from “you” to “he,” confirming Edna’s position within the male gaze.

However, Edna does not lose her own power of sight in the novel. Whereas Mr. Pontellier's gaze functions consistently as a force of objectification throughout the novel, Edna's gaze, her vision, is a less certain thing. For one thing, Mylène Dressler—following the work of Kaja Silverman—separates the gaze and the look, arguing, “In eliding the gaze and taking up a position of unreflective artistic looking, Edna stands in danger both of duplicating the imagistic force of the look (as she stares at others) *and* of re-casting herself as simply another social construct (Mademoiselle Reisz's conventional talk of artistic “wings” in fact echoes the “wings” of the self-effacing angelic mother-woman)” (69-71). Part of Edna's “looking” relates to her acts of painting, so the scholarly conception of Edna's vision is often tied to her role as an artist. Deborah Barker, for example, writes, “Edna's painting grants her an active role in interpreting the world around her, and it also allows her greater control over her own life. Edna's growth as an artist and as an individual is marked by her progression from an obstructed view to a penetrative vision” (134). But when Barker writes of Edna's “penetrating vision,” she is mainly concerned with what Edna is allowed to see; that is, as Edna grows as an artist, as she achieves a greater sense of self, she can see more of the world. Barker cites Edna's final moments on the beach as the instance when “Edna is able to extend her vision without interruption” (136). If you take this to be Edna's most clear-eyed moment, then I would like to emphasize two things: one, in this scene, Edna is utterly alone and two, she has this experience after Adèle's plea to “think of the children!” (122). Part of what I am trying to argue is that Edna's narrow vision persists throughout the novel in part because she ignores her children in order to focus on herself, which is a function of the narcissistic drive to inhabit the ideal self. Therefore, to fully define Edna's vision, I am going to examine passages in the novel that focus on Edna's physical acts of

looking, as well as scenes that emphasize her lack of perception of the future, in order to highlight how narrow and self-centered Edna's vision really is.

Let us return, then, to that early moment when Léonce looks at Edna and sees a "valuable piece of property." Rather than resist this gaze, Edna "held up her hands, strong shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her lawn sleeves above the wrists" (4). Edna appears to look at herself the way Léonce looks at her, like an object to be inspected. Mylène Dressler writes, "At this juncture Edna's body seems only to remind her of her established role within a system of scopophilic ownership and display; she does not see herself, in other words, other than as she is used to being seen" (62). Thus, at this early stage, Edna's gaze seems to function as everyone else's in the novel. However, when the narrator introduces readers to Edna on her own terms, the function of her gaze changes: "Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought" (5). If Edna's vision is, in fact, a vehicle for her inner-thoughts, then perhaps her earlier observations of her hands does parallel her husband's objectifying gaze. That is, when Edna looks at her hands, she may be lost in her own thoughts, but she is also considering her hands as if they are separate from herself. This is suggested by the fact that "looking at [her hands] reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach" (4). In looking at her hands, Edna remembers her place as one of Léonce's objects. Still, this moment is also notable because it is rare for Edna to actually look at herself during the novel. Thus, when Edna observes her hands, it could, perhaps, be seen as the beginnings of a sort of Lacanian mirror stage. Lacan identifies the true mirror stage as lasting from around six to eighteen months of age. Edna is an adult, but she is frequently described in the novel with childlike or newly-born terms. For example, towards the end of the novel,

Madame Ratignolle cautions, “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna” (106). Adèle’s comment works to support one of the narrator’s earliest observations, that “Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. . . . But the beginnings of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic and exceedingly disturbing” (16). Otis B. Wheeler identifies this moment as part of Edna’s first awakening when she gains “a sense of personhood” (123). This fits in nicely with the mirror stage, then, because Lacan defines it as “an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (442). Placing Edna at the mirror-stage is important because it is from this stage of development that the ideal-I is formed. And, of course, with the ideal comes a sort of tunnel vision, where the only thing that matters for Edna is herself (or her Self).

Taking a journey of self-discovery, as Edna is beginning to do in the novel, is not necessarily a bad thing. However, when Edna’s vision turns on herself, it does so at the expense of other aspects of her life. In other words, Edna stops paying attention to things that are not her. One early example of Edna’s vision shows how its narrowness begins to affect various aspects of her life. In the following passage, before Edna begins her first artistic endeavor in the novel—a painting of Adèle Ratignolle—she is making clothes for her children, but she quickly abandons the task because “her mind was quite at rest concerning the present material needs of her children, and she could not see the use of anticipating and making winter garments the subject of her summer meditations” (11). It is true that Edna probably has no need to think about making winter clothes for her children; the gift boxes Léonce sends from New Orleans are proof that he is perfectly capable of providing for the material needs of his family. However, Edna’s

willingness to set aside her children's concerns to pursue her own whims is symptomatic of her own self-centered attention.⁵ Edna's focus on the present, at the expense of future concerns, also indicates a fickleness of nature that can be seen in Edna's romantic history.

Edna's history of short lived infatuations provides insight into her unwillingness to learn from the past and, therefore, demonstrates how she is always caught up in the present. When she was younger, Edna was ardently attracted to different men, but her attentions never last:

She remembered that she had been passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visited her father in Kentucky. . . . But the cavalry officer melted imperceptibly out of her existence. At another time her affections were deeply engaged by a young gentleman who visited a lady on a neighboring plantation. . . . But he, too, went the way of dreams. She was a grown young woman when she was overtaken by what she supposed to be the climax of her fate. It was when the face and figure of a great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her sense. (20-21)

This last infatuation is replaced by Edna's husband, Léonce, for whom "no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution" (21). In examining Edna's history, we begin to see a trend, wherein as each new love is found, the old is forgotten. Or, rather, Edna remembers her past infatuations, but continues to enter into the same pattern. Edna's repeated behavior indicates that she cannot, or will not, learn from her mistakes, which, in turn, implies that Edna lives only for the present.

Furthermore, Edna's romantic history illustrates how she is actually in pursuit of herself, and not a life partner. Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that each successive lover becomes less realistic and available and that Edna "reserves her greatest passion for a figure of pure fantasy, the tragedian whose picture one can admire" (452). In other words, according to Wolff, Edna is

⁵ I do not particularly want to imply that mothers cannot have their own pursuits and interests. However, this moment here is just one early example of a pattern of behavior, where Edna only ever thinks of herself.

pursuing “a romantic illusion, a dream—defined by its very ability to be consummated” (452). I find Wolff’s observations interesting because they highlight how Edna’s attentions are not about the men she admires but about herself. Even Robert Lebrun, the man Edna yearns for throughout the novel, exists more as Edna’s double than an independent character. They both enter the narrative together and mirror one another’s actions: “When they reached the cottage, the two seated themselves with some appearance of fatigue upon the upper step of the porch, facing each other, each leaning against a supporting post” (4). And later the narrator tells us that “in coloring [Robert] was not unlike his companion” (5-6). The two arrive together, act together, and almost exist as one. Or, at least, it certainly seems that way to Edna. Wolff writes, “[Edna] accepts his attentions, his services, his affection; and in so far as these are important to her, she comes to regard them as extensions of her own will or desire. Robert is not conceived of as a separate, individuated being. . . . Her feelings are fixed safely on the *image* of Robert” (original emphasis, 455). Edna is able to safely project her feelings onto Robert because he is a manifestation of Edna’s own identity. As John Glendening writes, “Edna is in fact narcissistically attracted to an image of herself, a projection aided by Robert’s screen-like ‘open countenance’ and consistent with the self-absorption implicit in her own gaze” (54). But Edna still gets lost in her infatuation for Robert (or herself). Eventually, obsessing over Robert consumes Edna so that she is often unable to do little else. Roberta White observes that “Edna’s fatal flaw as an artist is that she does not observe the world around her, thanks to her obsessive infatuation with Robert” (71). And while I would argue that Edna’s obsession is more with herself than Robert, or that an obsession with Robert is the same as an obsession with herself, the attention Edna gives Robert still results in a narrow, hyper-focused vision.

Therefore, when Robert leaves unexpectedly for Mexico, Edna reacts poorly. She has a tantrum of sorts, “bit[ing] her handkerchief convulsively, striving to hold back and to hide, even from herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotion which was troubling–tearing–her” (50-51). This moment further highlights the almost childlike state Edna is in and how, at least to some degree, her narrow vision is willful in that she tries to hide from herself even as she is attempting to understand what that self is. Furthermore, the narrator tells us,

For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman. The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation by any suggestion or promise of instability. The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded. (51)

Once again, Edna plays out the same pattern of infatuation of her past: loving an unavailable man. Notice that Edna does not admit her feelings for Robert until after he has already said goodbye. Also striking in this passage is the marked lack of growth. The indicators of age—child, teen, young woman—only serve to emphasize Edna’s unchanging nature. By giving only the present meaning, Edna narrows her understanding and only allows her consciousness a sense of immediacy. Edna’s unwillingness to learn from the past also forces her to make the same mistakes, to participate in the same short-lived passions, of the infatuations of her youth. In addition, the ‘present tense’ of Edna’s life adds urgency to all actions, allowing the present to “torture[]” Edna. John Glendening writes, “This passage identifies another narcissistic trait: a preoccupation with present needs that produces, as witnessed in the later stages of Edna’s story, impulsivity and a readiness to take risks to validate self-importance” (57). Thus, Edna’s infatuations are indicative of the path Edna’s life will take, a path filled with in-the-moment

decisions that fail to take the past and future into consideration. And finally, this passage adds a sense of hopelessness to her new and awakening state. By refusing to look towards the future, Edna can never enjoy an optimistic worldview because she cannot envision a world where things might be better.

The only sense of Edna looking towards the future is found in how she awaits Robert's return from Mexico. However, as I have discussed why 'attaining' Robert is not a true goal after all, it seems reasonable to suggest that Edna has little sense of purpose in the novel. That is to say, because Edna's lack of vision means "the future [is] often a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate," Edna has no sense of direction. By not looking ahead, she has no way of knowing where her life is going. During her time on Grand Isle, Edna feels as if she is "blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (36). When Edna thinks this, she is alone. The other hotel guests that are awake—and it is only a small number who are—are each caught up in their own pursuits. Thus, when Edna thinks that she has placed her life in "alien hands," those hands must be her own. Without any sort of vision or sense of the world outside of herself, Edna fails to realize that she is in control of her own life. This observation may seem at odds with Edna's actions in New Orleans, where she repeatedly tries to assert her independence. But many of Edna's actions indicate that she is still moving through life without a sense of direction. For example, when she first begins to interact with Alcée Arobin, the narrator tells us that Edna "wanted something to happen—something, anything; she did not know what" (83). Edna's attitude results, in part, from an early ambivalence towards Arobin. However, there are also other moments when Edna's actions hint at aimlessness. Edna's wanderings around the city are one example.

Shortly after the Pontelliers return to New Orleans, Edna shirks her regular Tuesday social duties because she “simply felt like going out” (57). As readers, we are not privy to this excursion, and no destination is mentioned. Suzanne W. Jones notes, “[Edna’s] decision to ignore [] social contracts is a manifestation of her choice to live for the moment and for herself” (111). But when Edna abandons her obligations “to live. . . for herself,” the result is that she simply wanders around the city. What does it mean that living for herself means walking with no destination in mind? It is possible that Edna was trying to escape the oppression she feels at home. Zoila Clark suggests that Edna is “relentlessly under surveillance by the inhabitants of her own house and even herself, because she always feels aware of her role as housewife in her home” (344). Additionally, Mylène Dressler identifies as “a central issue in the novel: the impossibility of escape, not merely from authority of natural forms, but from the realm of the visual altogether” (60). These arguments have merit—I am especially interested in Dressler’s because often when Edna goes on these wanderings she not only escapes from the gaze of her household, she escapes from the reader as well. The narrator tells us that Edna “liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in” (64-65). Unlike these “strange and unfamiliar” places Edna often visits, the wanderings the reader is privy to are usually visits to either the Ratignolles, the Lebruns, or Mademoiselle Reisz. But these visits are not about journeying forward, towards some goal. Rather, they are an attempt to return to the past, to the summer at Grand Isle. However, as I have already mentioned, not all of Edna’s journeys are visits to friends. Those are the visits that we, as readers, get to see, but we know they occur because Mr. Pontellier tells Doctor Mandelet, “She hasn’t been associating with anyone. She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in

after dark” (73). Edna is spending entire days–hours on end–wandering New Orleans. There appears to be no purpose to these journeys, no destination, except when she goes to visit her Grand Isle friends. All this unaccounted for time indicates that Edna is aimless, and Edna is aimless because she has no vision of the future and no goal.

Edna’s narrow perspective, then, is a function of her self-focused vision. As opposed to the objectifying gaze, like that of her husband Léonce, Edna’s vision is a manifestation of the mirror-stage and the resulting attempts at self-discovery. While a search for the self is not a bad thing–indeed, in many ways it can be viewed positively–Edna’s vision does affect many parts of her life, including her mothering, her romantic relationships, and her sense of the future.

IV. Edna’s Possible Identities

Though Edna’s lack of vision has led to a sense of aimlessness, there do seem to be two possible paths her life can take. Or, at least, there seem to be two options this Edna is aware of: art and motherhood. As I have mentioned earlier, Peter Ramos suggests that there may have been alternatives, had Edna been able to envision them. But Edna sees only two paths for her life, and, as a result, many scholars have written on the tensions between art and motherhood in the novel. Carole Stone, for one, explains that “in Chopin’s era childbirth was considered a woman’s noblest act” but that in the novel “birthing is a metaphor for the rebirth of the book’s protagonist, Edna Pontellier, as artist” (23). And Joyce Dyer attributes Edna’s suicide to unwillingness to sacrifice her (artist) self to the demands of motherhood. Others have focused more on just art⁶ or just motherhood⁷, but almost all seem to write on the topic in terms of Edna’s sense of self-identity. In this section, I am interested in how art and motherhood—which I see as linked—are

⁶ Roberta White, Deborah Barker, Janet Beer and Helena Goodwyn, Juliann Veronica Ulin

⁷ Katie Berry Frye, Marion Muirhead

presented as flawed possibilities to Edna. As part of her journey of self-discovery, Edna must come to terms with her feelings on these options, and their embodied forms as Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. But Edna's self-centered vision is still at play here, as evidenced by her flawed perceptions of the two women and by her strictly binary conception of her future.

It is interesting that Chopin chooses painting and drawing for Edna's artistic vocation, as opposed to other possibilities, such as music or writing. It is possible that Edna only works on what she feels talented at. Or perhaps there is too much a feeling of maternity involved in the other arts. After all, Adèle plays the piano: "She played very well, keeping excellent waltz time and infusing an expression into the strains which was indeed inspiring. She was keeping up her music on account of her children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (27). For Adèle, art and motherhood are not mutually exclusive. However, that is because for Adèle art is a function of her mothering; she plays piano to enrich the lives of her children. Still, what I find striking about Edna's pursuit of the visual arts is just that—they are visual. Mylène Dressler notices how, through art, Edna "has taken on the role of looker rather than looked-upon" (69). But Edna's unconscious has always functioned visually, as indicated by the way "musical strains, well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind" (29). Edna is drawn to visual arts because they are a way for her to express her already visually-inclined mind. As Michael Gilmore notes, "The artistic image frequently reflects something in the creator's mind and not in the physical world; it may owe its inspiration to a dream or a state of feeling" (77). But Edna's affinity for the visual arts still leaves her with a predicament: to what goal should she direct her life?

From the beginning, there is a distinct tension between art and motherhood in the novel. In the scene mentioned earlier, when Edna does not want to make winter clothes for her children,

art and motherhood are placed at odds. As Adèle continues to sew, Edna decides to paint. Edna is struck by how Adèle looks, and is moved to produce art: “She had long wished to try herself on Madame Ratignolle. Never had that lady seemed a more tempting subject than at the moment, seated there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color” (14). Though Edna is already judged as not being a “mother-woman,” Adèle is seen as the greatest of the mother-women, “the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (10). And again, when Edna finally decides to paint Adèle, it is when Madame Ratignolle can be seen as a “Madonna,” as an embodiment of the ultimate mother figure. It is interesting, then, that Edna chooses Adèle as her first art subject in the novel because it indicates that Edna is drawn to motherhood. Then again, Edna cannot abide by her depiction of motherhood. Though others seem to like Edna’s painting, she destroys it: “After surveying the sketch critically, she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface, and crumpled the paper between her hands” (14). If Gilmore is correct, and art acts more as a representation of the painter than the painted, then perhaps what Edna is destroying is a picture of herself as a mother. Adding to this idea is the fact that the scene moves rapidly from Edna as Artist to Edna as Mother. Immediately after Edna crumples her sketch, “the youngsters came tumbling up the steps” (14). There are a couple of ways to read this rapid transition between Edna’s crumpling of her art and the arrival of the children. One reading is slightly more sympathetic to the children: their delayed entrance could be seen as them (or their “quadroon” nurse) respecting Edna’s art time because it is not until Edna’s art is finished, critiqued, and destroyed that they interrupt the adults. Of course, there is a much less kind reading of the rapid transition, one where the destruction of art and the arrival of the children are conflated and children become the antithesis of art. Still, Edna does not seem angry at the children’s arrival; in fact, she “sought to detain them a little for a talk and some

pleasantry” (14). But the children are only interested in the candy that Mr. Pontellier sent from New Orleans. And I am struck, in particular, by the image the narrator provides of the children at this moment: “They accepted without murmuring what she chose to give them, each holding out two chubby hands scoop-like in the vain hope that they might be filled; and then they went away” (14). That the children must stand, beggar-like, at their mother’s side for her attention is further evidence of how un-motherly Edna is. For one thing, though the children’s supposed desire is candy, they accept “what [Edna] chose to give them” – a phrase that does not specify sweets. Then there is the fact that Edna’s interaction with her children is followed by a passage wherein Adèle sees to hers: “Her little ones ran to meet her. Two of them clung about her white skirts, the third she took from its nurse and with a thousand endearments bore it along in her own fond, encircling arms” (15). When compared to Adèle’s interactions with her children, Edna’s is noticeably lacking in physicality. Yes, the children seem to rebuff Edna’s attempts to talk, but neither does she try to hug them.

This scene, which is presented early in the novel, introduces a tension that will remain throughout the rest of the novel. Most notably, the choice between art and motherhood is starkly embodied in Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle, respectively. As Marion Muirhead puts it, these two women “represent oppositions in the binary of female subject positions in nineteenth-century society” (48). Edna meets each of those options in Grand Isle, which is important because, as Sandra Gilbert explains, “For married women of Edna’s Pontellier’s age and class the quasi-utopian communal household of the vacation hotel must have offered a unique opportunity to live closely with other women and learn from them” (50). But Edna cannot seem to fully identify with either woman which, according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, leaves Edna “without a guide or charted path” (287). And, thus, we return to Edna’s sense of

aimlessness. It seems clear fairly early on in the novel that Edna will not choose the path of motherhood. Edna's non-identification with Adèle is iterated again and again throughout the novel. Edna likes Adèle, which is evidenced by Edna's repeatedly seeking the Creole woman's company. Some scholars, like Fox-Genovese and John Glendening, see Edna's attraction to Adèle as an attempt to replace her own dead mother. But whatever Edna's reasons for visiting Adèle, it is clear that Edna ultimately cannot identify with Adèle's domesticity. For example, after a visit to the Ratignolle home in New Orleans, Edna

felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. 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 never have a taste of life's delirium. (63)

Here, we see another example of Edna's self-centered vision. She sees Ratignolle family ensconced in seeming domestic bliss, and can only think about their existence in terms of her own feelings toward family and motherhood. Ironically, Edna calls Adèle's life one of "blind contentment," not taking into consideration that motherhood could possibly bring Adèle joy. Edna fails to recognize in her own existence a sort of blind restlessness. And she is quite obviously restless. Whereas "the Ratignolles understood each other perfectly" (62), dining with Léonce send Edna to her room, where "she carried in her hands a thick handkerchief, which she tore into ribbons, rolled into a ball, and flung from her. Once she stopped, and taking off her

wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striking to crush it” (59).⁸

If Adèle is the ultimate mother-figure of the novel, then Mademoiselle Reisz is the archetypal artist (or, at least, woman artist). Mademoiselle Reisz’s introduction into the narrative establishes her immediately as an artist. In addition to her distinctive personality—“She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others”—Mademoiselle Reisz plays the piano for the Grand Isle dinner party (28). This dinner party also establishes the affinity between Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna. Mademoiselle Reisz only plays what Edna requests to hear, telling her, “You are the only one worth playing for” (30). And, as Fox-Genovese notes, “[Mademoiselle Reisz’s] performance draws together the threads of transformation that Edna is beginning to undergo” (285). In New Orleans, Edna continues to visit Mademoiselle Reisz, partly because the pianist provides access to news on Robert and partly because Edna seeks knowledge on what it is like to be an artist. Edna tells Mademoiselle Reisz, “I am becoming an artist. Think of it!” (70). However, the pianist is skeptical of Edna’s claiming the identity of an artist, calling it a “pretension[] (70). Mademoiselle Reisz is not sure Edna has the temperament to be an artist: “To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. . . . The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (70-71). Edna hears Mademoiselle Reisz’s warning, but she does not seem to understand. Unwilling to look toward the future, she does not consider why a courageous soul might be necessary for an

⁸ This is the second destruction of a handkerchief, and though I do not have the space to explore such thoughts in this particular essay, I am reminded of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, another text in which a character struggles to envision the truth.

artist. She cannot conceive of the obstacles she might face. Perhaps Edna's inability to conceive of the future is also tied to her art. Mademoiselle Reisz must be acutely aware of time, because music is inherently temporal. As a musician, she must be thinking in the moment, as well as ahead to the next note. Edna, on the other hand, loses track of time when creating her art. For example, she would force the members of her household to sit for hours on end "without accomplishing anything" (64). When Edna is painting in her atelier, time seems of no consequence. Therefore, Edna responds to Mademoiselle Reisz's warning by insisting that she has "persistence," assuming that since it has been sufficient this far, it will always be enough to sustain her artist's identity. There is, however, reason to doubt Edna's claim of persistence. In the in-depth description of Edna's painting habits, the narrator tells us that "there were days when [Edna] was unhappy, she did not know why,—when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead. . . . She could not work on such a day" (65). The fact that Edna's ability to paint depends on her mood indicates that Edna does not, in fact, have the persistence she claims will allow her to be an artist. Without courage or persistence, it seems that, like motherhood, art is an unsuitable identity for Edna to adopt.

Additionally, despite Edna's affinity with Mademoiselle Reisz, the two women are ultimately living very different kinds of lives. Mademoiselle Reisz is completely devoted to her art. Her home is designed for utility, not comfort, with the main concern being her music. Edna observes that "a magnificent piano crowded the apartment," but the rest of the apartment is "dingy" and mostly unwelcoming (69). Mademoiselle Reisz lives a life of mean solitude, where her most important concern is always only ever art. Edna, on the other hand, cannot throw off society, no matter how much she hates its constraints. For one thing, Edna describes the pigeon house she sets up for herself as "cozy, so inviting and restful" (88). Edna does not quit Léonce's

house in order to devote herself to her art. Though she is “beginning to sell her sketches,” she claims that her main motivation for moving is actually “the feeling of freedom and independence” (88). However, Edna still receives visitors at her new home, including Alcee Arobin and Robert. In addition to her focus not being entirely on her art, Edna is also unsuited to the life of the artist because she is unable to analyze or understand her own art. She must rely on the feedback of the art dealer, Laidpore. Edna tells Mademoiselle Reisz, “Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality. I cannot judge of that myself, but I feel that I have gained in ease and confidence” (89). Edna measures her artistry by how she feels in the act of painting, not by any of her actual artwork. This lack of a critical eye indicates that Edna is unsure of her own artistry. This uncertainty was initially presented in her first painting of Adèle, which she destroyed. Virginia M. Kouidis argues, “The scene indicates that Edna has neglected her talent, but it also suggests the limitations of her perception. Her dissatisfaction with her sketch may result from her inability to see or express Adèle’s shifting and complex reality” (122). That this same dissatisfaction is present both at the beginning of Edna’s career as an artist and at the end of it suggests that though Edna may grow in skill, she is not growing in inherent artistry.

Thus, in her interactions with Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna glimpses the different possible lives she could live. But each option is unsuitable to Edna, for various reasons. As Fox-Genovese writes, “Edna can accept neither of their roles as adequate to her needs” (287). Edna considers life as a wife and mother to be constricting and “colorless.” And she is unsuited to life as an artist because she lacks courage and persistence and because she will not live in Mademoiselle Reisz’s ascetic manner. Looking up to these two women is problematic

for Edna because she cannot live up to either ideal. Thus, even as she tries to assert her independence,

She felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. . . . There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable. (98)

Part of Edna's problem is that in seeking out guidance from Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna fails to recognize the true problem. The "acute longing" Edna feels brings with it a "spiritual vision" of Robert, but the "beloved" Edna should be pursuing and planning for is herself.

V. Edna's Suicide

Because Edna is unfit to live life as either an artist or mother, she feels she has no other options. At the end of the novel, Edna returns to Grand Isle and commits suicide by swimming far out into the Gulf of Mexico. As I have previously mentioned, Edna's final act has received much critical attention, with scholars supporting, critiquing, and dissecting the novel's ending. This is because, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese asserts, "The point of *The Awakening* lies in its ending. Edna's suicide organizes everything that precedes it" (262). While I certainly agree that Edna's suicide is crucial to understanding and interpreting the novel, I am not convinced that the act was inevitable, as Fox-Genovese suggests. Rather, I am more inclined to agree with Peter Ramos, who argues that Edna's suicide is the result of her inability or unwillingness to adapt or transform available identities to in order to suit her needs. Therefore, in this section I will examine the book's final moments to demonstrate how Edna's suicide was not an inevitable or necessary act, but rather the result of a failed, narrow vision of the world.

When she is present at Adèle's birth, Edna experiences another rude awakening, one where she must reconcile the reality she has constructed with the roles she is expected to fill: mainly, mother and wife. Adèle's imperative—"Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" – reminds Edna that she did not create a space for them in her new life (122). Despite Adèle's earlier (astute) observation that Edna "act[s] without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (106), Edna does, finally, reflect and thinks, "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 dupe to illusions all one's life" (123). Edna sees her life before the summer at Grand Isle as a dream, but in some ways her life in New Orleans was also a dream in that it did not take into account the societal expectations placed on her. Until now, Edna had attempted to assert her independence by ignoring those expectations. But Adèle's command reminds Edna that those demands, like her children, cannot be ignored forever. As Linda Huf writes, "The two messages are contradictory. Edna cannot dare and defy convention at the same time she must remember the children. She cannot realize herself, let alone her talent, as long as she is unwilling to see her children suffer for her behavior" (79). Thus, the mother or artist choice reaches its critical point.

Facing this new reality, where Edna must contend with both her desire for selfhood and her obligations as a mother, is too much for Edna. It seems Edna does not have the artist's courageous soul after all. So, Edna rejects this new life she has awakened to and instead tries to un-birth herself. Back at the beach on Grand Isle, she undresses, so that "she felt like some newborn creature," and she returns to the womb, the sea. Ann Heilmann reads this ending as a triumph, stating,

Edna's suicide. . . is a passionate assertion of her new found identity and

unconditional refusal to accept compromise: a rejection not of herself but of a social world that imposes moral imperatives on human desire, a celebration of this desire within a natural context that knows neither boundaries nor limits. (89)

While I agree with Heilmann in that I believe Edna should be able to celebrate her desire, I think Edna's suicide was preventable. As Peter Ramos writes, "Edna's refusal finally to dedicate herself to an identity or *creatively transform one for herself* is a particular failure" (emphasis mine, 148). Edna's refusal to study her past, to consider her future, leaves her tortured by her present. However, if she had studied her past and looked at how Léonce was willing to adapt to her decisions in order to "save[] appearances," she may have been able to have hope for the future. She may have been able to live.

I believe that there were alternative options for Edna, ones that did not need to end in suicide. For one thing, after witnessing Adèle give birth to her latest child, Edna sees her children as "antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (127). However, for the entirety of the novel, Edna has been acting independently of her children. On Grand Isle, the children are constantly accompanied by a nurse, and Edna only sees them when they come to her. She is only forced to seek them out once, when Léonce insists they are sick (7). And once the family returns to New Orleans, the children are taken to their grandparents' house: "Even the children were gone. Old Madame Pontellier had come herself and carried them off to Iberville with their quadroon. The old madame did not venture to say she was afraid they would be neglected during Léonce's absence; she hardly ventured to think so. She was hungry for them—even a little fierce in her attachment" (80). Though Madame Pontellier does not want to think that Edna would neglect her children, the presence of her doubt in the narrative suggests that the thought has occurred to the grandmother. And her response is to love and care for the children. In fact, when Edna comes to

visit the children, Madame Pontellier “was delighted to know that the Esplanade Street house was in a dismantled condition. It gave her the promise and pretext to keep the children indefinitely” (105). Not only is Madame Pontellier willing to watch over her grandchildren, she is eager to do so. Edna imagines her children to be a great burden on her life, but their general absence from the narrative, and the presence of a doting grandmother, suggests that they are not, and need not be, any great factor in Edna’s choice for her future.

Furthermore, the text suggests that Léonce may also be less of a concern than Edna might think. For a novel so caught up in the inner workings of Edna’s mind, I find it surprising that *The Awakening* does provide insight into Léonce’s thinking as well, especially since Robert and Alcee Arobin are not given the same treatment. The novel actually begins with Léonce and gives the impression that Léonce is a very orderly and particular man. And though Léonce is concerned by Edna’s mothering he does not act on it:

It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one else’s wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement. (10)

Though Léonce perceives a flaw in Edna’s mothering, he does not act on it. Instead, he leaves Edna to her own devices and behaves consistently throughout the novel. When Léonce senses that Edna is changing into a new person, he turns to Doctor Mandelet for advice. But Mr. Pontellier does not act to alter Edna’s behavior, even when he disapproves of it. In fact, his main concern is not Edna at all, but simply appearances:

When Mr. Pontellier learned of his wife’s intention to abandon her home and take up her residence elsewhere, he immediately wrote her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance. . . . He was not dreaming of scandal when he uttered this warning; that was a thing which would never have entered into his mind to consider in connection with his wife’s name or his own. He was simply thinking of his own financial integrity. (103)

Though Léonce does try to alter Edna's behavior, he recognizes the fruitlessness of this task and instead reacts and adapts: "But remembering Edna's whimsical turn of mind of late, and foreseeing that she had immediately acted upon her impetuous determination, he grasped the situation with his usual promptness and handled it with his well-known business tack and cleverness" (103). This depiction of Léonce as quick and clever illustrates his capability to adapt. He may not have liked Edna's actions, but the text suggests that he would have been able to make the best of the situation. In fact, perhaps Léonce could have served as an example for Edna, on how to adapt, if she had been willing to see it.

But Edna does commit suicide, and in her treatise on the feminine sublime, Barbara Claire Freeman notes that "Chopin's representation of the ocean continually emphasizes its independence from the domain of vision. It is significant, for example, that Edna hears it for the first time in total darkness" (28). When considered in this way, Edna's final act is to give up vision altogether and succumb completely to the voice of the sea. This is further emphasized by the way in which vision gives way to hearing in the novel's final paragraph:

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instance, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. (128)

Edna looks into the distance and is filled with fear, so instead she sinks into herself and her memories, which are all presented as auditory. The only other visual, "of pinks," is a moment of synesthesia in which the color is connected to a scent. By emphasizing what Edna can hear in those final moments, Chopin highlights Edna's failed vision.

VI. Conclusion

Edna's awakening is a journey of self-discovery, but her self-realization is hindered by her faulty vision. One evening, after her first liaison with Arobin, Edna realizes, "Above all, there was understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (93). In this moment Edna feels as if she has finally gained an understanding of the world. But because Edna is only concerned with her present state, this revelation, and the confidence it brings, are short lived. She throws herself a dinner party, celebrating her existence, but the party is just beginning when "the hopelessness which so often assailed her" returns (98). Edna simply cannot envision a future in which she finds happiness. And while it is certainly not my goal to harshly judge Edna, I do want to suggest that there may have been other options, other fates, available to her. To some degree, Edna actually achieves the independence she craves. She lives on her own, separate from her husband and children. But these are only superficial concerns, which Edna uses to conceal her true issue. Glendening writes, "Edna displays one final characteristic of narcissists the identifying of others as source of their own insufficiencies" (67). Edna wants to blame her problems on others, especially her children. But this is just another example of her attempting "to hide, even from herself" (50). Edna's vision is self-centered, and therefore faulty because it does not allow her to envision new possibilities for her future. But Edna also ultimately fails in how she sees herself. I find Edna to be a deeply compelling character, and I think the novel's end is disappointing because I want Edna to succeed. I want her to find a life beyond what she sees as possible for herself. My hope, then, is that studying Edna's failed vision can to more fully see our own situations in life and to see hope, even when we think there is none.

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