

The Awakening

The Awakening has frequently been compared to *Madame Bovary*. Like Emma Bovary, Edna Pontellier craves a kind of passion she does not find in marriage, has an extra-marital affair, and commits suicide. Some critics feel that a major difference between the novels is that “the ironic distance of *Madame Bovary* is replaced by a high degree of narrative sympathy” (Walker 1993, 144). As Chopin tells it, Edna’s is not a story of romantic folly but of a woman’s awakening. Others agree with Willa Cather that Edna Pontellier and Emma Bovary both “belong to a class, not large, but forever clamoring in our ears, that demands more romance out of life than God put into it” (1899, 6).

These contrasting responses reflect one of the major features of the criticism of *The Awakening*: lack of agreement as to the nature of the story. For some the novel is a feminine *Bildungsroman* that depicts a woman’s liberation, while for others it is the tale of a woman who does not grow up or who regresses to an early stage of development. There are many other versions of the story as well. The ending has been the subject of the greatest controversy. Is Edna’s death a victory or a defeat, a triumph over the forces that would thwart her authenticity or the consequence of psychological problems that compel her to destroy herself?

The critical disagreements are the product not only of differing perspectives but also of contradictions within the novel itself. The indictment of the social system and claims for self-realization that Edna seems intended to illustrate are contradicted by the mimetic depiction of her character, which shows, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has observed, that “we are dealing with personal pathology . . . not with social or sexual injustice at all” (Culley 1994, 262). The situation is further complicated by the fact that there are tensions not only between rhetoric and mimesis but within the rhetoric itself. Although the narrator usually presents her heroine as a woman struggling toward freedom and self-realization, she

engages at times in a Flaubert-like mockery of Edna's romanticism and describes her as foolish or immature. There are moments when the narrator sees Edna quite clearly. In order to understand the relation between rhetoric and mimesis in this novel, we must first separate the strands of the rhetoric and see how they conflict with each other.

Although the rhetoric is full of contradictions, the mimetic portrait of Edna is consistent. She is not as fully drawn as Emma Bovary, but she is still a well-conceived and fascinating character. Her puzzling behavior has often been misunderstood, but it is intelligible, I believe, if approached from a Horneyan perspective. A psychological analysis of Edna will show that she is far from finding herself and that she is driven to suicide not by external conditions, as many critics contend, but by her inner conflicts.

There is little question that Chopin wants us to see Edna as undergoing a process of liberation and psychological growth. Edna awakens out of a "life-long stupid dream" (ch. 36) of habitual submission to her husband and her society's expectations of her as a woman. She will not be one of the mother-women who idolize their children, worship their husbands, and esteem it "a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (ch. 4). During the summer at Grand Isle, she begins to resist her husband's domination, and on her return to New Orleans she frees herself from one after another of her social obligations. She gets in touch with feelings she has suppressed, including her sexuality, and has a sense of becoming more and more herself.

Chopin surrounds these developments with a celebratory rhetoric. When, back in New Orleans, Edna goes out on her at-home day and begins to do as she likes, her husband cannot see that she is "becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (ch. 19). This favorable rhetoric is supported by Dr. Mandelet's observation that Edna has been transformed "from the listless woman he had known" into a being who seems "palpitant with the forces of life. . . . There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (ch. 24). Later Chopin tells us that every step Edna takes "toward relieving herself from obligations add[s] to her strength and expansion as an individual" (ch. 32). She now apprehends "the deeper undercurrents of life" and no longer feeds on opinion. The

narrator does not specify what Edna apprehends, but the reference may be to her sexual awakening. After she is aroused by Arobin's kiss, Edna feels that a "mist [has] been lifted from her eyes," enabling her to comprehend "the significance of life" (ch. 29). She liberates herself not only from the sexual constraints of her culture but also from its treatment of women as property, proclaiming to Robert that she is no longer "one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions" (ch. 36). This is all very stirring and has understandably sparked feminist interest in the novel.

Edna can be seen as a more courageous Hedda Gabler or as a Nora Helmer who must face the consequences of her rebellion. Since *A Doll's House* ends with Nora storming out into the night, Ibsen does not have to imagine what will happen to his heroine. Chopin seems aware from the outset that Edna will not be able to translate her emancipation into a viable way of life. After telling us that Edna has begun to recognize her relation to internal and external realities, Chopin foreshadows the end of the story:

This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.

But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many would perish in the tumult! (Ch. 7)

Edna is presented as a pioneer in the struggle for women's liberation who perishes because she knows too much and because the beginning of things is tangled, chaotic, and disturbing. This vague explanation is not developed in the novel, and by the time we reach the end it does not seem to apply to what has happened to Edna.

When Edna learns to swim, Chopin introduces a variation on the theme that she perishes because she is too far in advance of her time. Exulting in her new-found power, Edna grows "daring and reckless," overestimates her strength, and wants "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (ch. 10). As she swims out alone, she seems "to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself." When she realizes how far she has gone, she has "a quick vision of death" and struggles "to regain the land." She tells her husband, "I thought I should have perished out there alone," but he assures her that she had not gone very far and that he was watching her. The message here seems to be that those who try to go where no others have gone before are in danger

of perishing. The rhetoric is no longer exculpatory, since it seems to suggest that Edna is too reckless, that she overestimates her strength, and that she is a kind of Icarus figure who aspires to transcend the human condition.

Another important strand of the rhetoric presents Edna as failing to achieve her goals because she lacks sufficient courage. She has a good deal of courage, of course, and acts out her desires rather than trying to gratify them safely through a male, like Hedda Gabler. When she leaves no excuse for being absent on her at-home day, Léonce says “people don’t do such things” (ch. 17), and this is certainly something that Hedda never would have done. Hedda’s first and last act of rebellion is committing suicide. However, Chopin suggests through Mademoiselle Reisz that, bold though she is, Edna does not have “the courageous soul,” “the brave soul,” “the soul that dares and defies” (ch. 21). Mademoiselle Reisz tells Edna that “the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” and that it is “a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (ch. 29).

The bird imagery is important in the novel. When Mademoiselle Reisz plays the piece at Grand Isle that Edna entitles “Solitude,” Edna envisions “the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him” (ch. 10). This seems to express Edna’s hopelessness at this point about her ability to soar above the level plain. The nakedness of the figure and the fact that it is a man may express her desire for freedom from inhibition and her flight from womanhood. At the end, of course, Edna stands naked on the seashore, hopeless about her ability to soar. A “bird with a broken wing” is “beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (ch. 39). This is the sad spectacle of which Mademoiselle Reisz had spoken. In her final thoughts, Edna imagines Mademoiselle Reisz laughing, perhaps even sneering, at her: “And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies” (ch. 39).

What, according to Chopin, does Edna lack the courage to do? Her list of accomplishments is impressive. She has sloughed off all of her duties and does as she likes. She has freed herself from her husband’s domination, had an affair, and declared her love to Robert: “I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly,” she says, “but I have got into

the habit of expressing myself” (ch. 36). The one thing she cannot do is to be totally indifferent to the welfare of her children. When Chopin introduces Mademoiselle Reisz, she describes her as a “self-assertive” woman with “a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (ch. 26). Must Edna be ready to trample on the rights of others if she is to soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice in order to fulfill herself? Is Chopin saying that Edna is destroyed because she is only at the beginning of a movement that will eventually allow women to pursue their desires without being concerned about their children? This seems to be one implication of the rhetoric.

While the rhetoric usually presents Edna’s getting in touch with her desires and acting them out as a good thing, one of its strands presents this in a negative way. Emma’s experience during her summer at Grand Isle is portrayed both as an awakening and as a regression to the state she was in when she ran through the green meadow as a child. When she explains to Adèle that she was “running away from prayers,” her friend asks if she has been running away from prayers ever since: “‘No! oh, no!’ Edna hastened to say. ‘I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question’” (ch. 7). “Sometimes I feel this summer,” she goes on, “as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking, and unguided.”

Is Edna getting in touch with herself and striving to develop her human potentialities or unthinkingly following misleading childish impulses? Chopin seems to be supporting both positions. On the day Edna goes to *Chênrière* with Robert, she is described as “blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility” (ch. 12). This does not sound like a movement toward self-realization and authenticity. Later, in the same chapter in which Edna is described as “becoming herself” when she gives up her Tuesdays at home, we are informed that she uses her new freedom to lend herself “to any passing caprice” (ch. 19). Robert tells Edna that she lacks “forethought” (ch. 12), and near the end, Madame Ratignolle says that she seems “like a child”: “You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” (ch. 33). Are we supposed to see Edna as freeing herself from the social institutions and conventions that infantilize women or as throwing off adult responsibilities so that she can behave in an idle, aimless, unguided way?

Finally, Chopin presents Edna with Flaubertian mockery as a woman who is given to romantic fantasies about unattainable men. Before she reaches puberty Edna becomes “passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visit[s] her father” (ch. 7). She cannot “remove her eyes from his face, which [is] something like Napoleon’s, with a lock of black hair falling across the forehead.” The cavalry officer melts “imperceptibly out of her existence,” but in her early teens “her affections [are] deeply engaged” by the fiancé of a lady on a neighboring plantation. The realization that she herself is “nothing, nothing, nothing to the engaged young man [is] a bitter affliction” to Edna, but he, too, goes “the way of dreams.” Evidently her passions were not as deep as she had imagined them to be. As a grown young woman, she is “overtaken by what she suppose[s] to be the climax of her fate,” as “the face and figure of a great tragedian [begin] to haunt her imagination and stir her senses. The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness of it colored it with the lofty tones of a great passion.” The tone here is similar to that of *Madame Bovary*.

Courted by Léonce while she is “in the midst of her secret great passion,” Edna decides to accept him when she realizes that “the acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world” (ch. 7). It is not long before the tragedian goes the way of “the cavalry officer and the engaged young man and a few others.” When she marries, Edna feels that she has closed “the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” and has entered the world of reality. She takes satisfaction in the fact that “no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth” colors her affection for her husband, “thereby threatening its dissolution.”

Chopin presents Edna’s attraction to Robert Lebrun not only as a sexual awakening but also as a return to the realm of romance and dreams, which was not forever closed to her after all. When Robert leaves for Mexico, Edna recognizes in her despondency “the symptoms of infatuation” she had experienced a number of times before, but, like Emma Bovary, she cannot view herself with critical detachment:

The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation [of her love for Robert] 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. (Ch. 15)

The narrator, who possesses the detachment that Edna lacks, seems almost to make fun of her heroine's impassioned being in this passage. If Edna could heed the lesson of the past, she would realize that what she feels for Robert is just an infatuation that will go the way of her other dreams. But, like a child, she lives entirely in the present and is unable either to imagine the future or learn from the past. Chopin seems sympathetic toward Edna's pain, which is real, but scornful of her immaturity. When Edna returns to New Orleans, she is described as being "still under the spell of her infatuation" (ch. 18).

In part at least, *The Awakening* is, like *Madame Bovary*, a novel of disenchantment. Like Emma, Edna is presented as an unstable person who is happy when she is living in her romantic dreams and despondent when it seems "as if life were passing her by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled" (ch. 25). Her depressions do not persist because she is repeatedly "led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth [holds] out to her." Like Emma Bovary, she is an irrepressible romantic who is doomed to ultimate disenchantment because she demands more of life than it can give.

Edna's final awakening is presented as a recognition of life's realities. After attending Madame Ratignolle's accouchement, during which Adèle urges her to remember the children, Edna tells Dr. Mandelet that she does not want to be forced into doing things, that no one has the right to make demands of her, except perhaps the children.

"The trouble is," sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, "that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost."

"Yes," she said. "The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life." (Ch. 28)

Dr. Mandelet sounds a bit like Thomas Hardy here. The lure of parenthood is one of Dame Nature's vulpine tricks that perpetuates the race but brings misery to individuals. Once people procreate, they are trapped by conditions they feel obliged to maintain. This may not be a problem

for nurturing women like Adèle Ratignolle, but Edna, like Hedda Gabler, feels oppressed by “a responsibility for which Fate had not fitted her” (ch. 8). Through much of the novel Edna manages to unburden herself of her children, but at the end she realizes that she cannot escape her maternal responsibilities.

Edna tells Robert that her encounter with him on Grand Isle awakened her out of a life-long stupid dream of habitual submission, but she seems to fall immediately into another dream. On the night she refuses to go to bed despite her husband’s insistence, she is eventually forced to yield by fatigue: “Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (ch. 9). Edna is awakening here not from the old dream that had led her to conform but from the new dream of asserting her will and having the freedom to follow her whims. She lives in this second dream after her return to New Orleans but finds it to be grotesque and impossible of fulfillment when the reality of motherhood presses into her soul.

In terms of plot and rhetoric, then, *The Awakening* is a confusing novel. It seems to be telling a number of different stories that are often incompatible with each other. Is it a story of awakening, liberation, and psychological growth, or one of a woman who throws off her adult responsibilities and behaves in an aimless, unthinking, misguided way? Or is it the story of a foolish and irrepressible romantic who is ultimately disenchanted and chooses death to escape reality? Or is it the story of a victim of nature’s entrapments who finds herself in a maternal role for which she is not fitted but that she cannot disregard? Is Edna a pioneer in the struggle for women’s liberation who perishes because the beginning of things is tangled and chaotic? Or does she perish because she is too daring and reckless, overestimates her strength, and aspires to go where no woman has gone before? Or does she lack the courageous soul that dares and defies, making her unable to rise above the level plain of tradition and prejudice? We can make sense of the novel in terms of each of its strands if we ignore the others, but it seems impossible to integrate them into a unified whole and to say what the novel is really about.

So far I have focused on plot and rhetoric, but another way of approaching the novel is to look at the mimetic depiction of Edna and to ask what story it tells. Although Chopin did not know what to make of

her heroine, she understood her intuitively and had a gift for characterization. A Horneyan approach to the novel will help us to recover Chopin's psychological intuitions and appreciate her mimetic achievement. When we understand Edna in motivational terms, we shall see that some of the author's interpretations are more appropriate than others but that none is adequate to the richness and complexity of the psychological portrait.

I believe that Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is correct in saying that a recognition of Edna's personal pathology turns "the indictment of society" into "an individual case history" (Culley 1994, 262). *The Awakening* resembles *Great Expectations* in this respect. Chopin does not begin by dwelling on Edna's early life, as Dickens dwells on Pip's, but she provides enough information to enable us to see that the protagonist's difficulties derive more from compulsive needs and inner conflicts generated in childhood than they do from social conditions. Indeed, it is impossible to envision any social changes that would have enabled Edna to feel that she could have a satisfactory life. It is striking that the more she frees herself from her conventional roles, the more despondent she becomes. Her problems are related to the patriarchal nature of her society insofar as it influenced the behavior of her father, the fate of her mother, and her experiences in the family, but they have little to do with the conditions against which she rebels as an adult. She reacts to these conditions so intensely and self-destructively because of a hypersensitivity to constraint that has its origins in her family history.

It is through her father that the young Edna experiences the oppression of the patriarchal order. The only distinct picture we have of her response to him in childhood is her memory of "running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (ch. 7). Léonce tells Dr. Mandelet that Edna's father "used to atone for his week-day sins with his Sunday devotions" (ch. 23). The Colonel's week-day sins seem to have included gambling away his blue-grass farm in Kentucky. Our most important information about Edna's father comes when he reproaches Léonce for being "too lenient, too lenient by far" with his wife: "Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it" (ch. 25). Chopin observes that "the Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his wife into her grave."

Edna grows up, then, with a gloomy, tyrannical father who believes

that women must be managed with authority and whose coercion has driven her mother into the grave. She has an impulse to run away from his stern, hypocritical religiosity, but she has nowhere to turn. Her older sister “has all the Presbyterianism undiluted” (ch. 22), and her younger sister is hostile. Edna deals with this situation by retreating into herself: “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (ch. 7). In order to preserve a sense of inner freedom, she keeps others at a distance and envelops herself in a “mantle of reserve.” In describing the adult Edna, Chopin observes that “she had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that they concerned no one but herself” (ch. 16).

In Horneyan terms, Edna defends herself by becoming detached. She avoids conflict with her environment by being outwardly compliant and keeping her thoughts and emotions to herself. Her compliance is not that of the self-effacing person: she conforms not from a desire to win love, protection, and approval but in order to avoid friction that would disturb her peace and intrude on her inner life. Her secret thoughts and feelings do not generate struggles because she does not consider acting on them. Her environment is too threatening for that. She resigns herself to outward conformity and tries to preserve a sense of freedom by guarding her inner life.

Edna’s detachment is a response not only to a coercive environment but also to the absence of love. She loses her mother at an early age and is “not very warmly or deeply attached to her father” (ch. 23). Her older sister Margaret, to whom she must look for nurturing, is described as “practical” rather than “effusive.” She is “matronly and dignified, probably from having assumed matronly and house-wifely responsibilities too early in life.” Her younger sister, Janet, is a “vixen” with whom Edna quarrels a lot. With no warmth available to her in her family, Edna tries to do without it, especially since intimacy seems dangerous in view of her secret thoughts. Her occasional girl friends all seem to have been “of one type—the self-contained. She never realized that the reserve of her own character had much, perhaps everything, to do with this” (ch. 7). Edna is somewhat startled by the warmth and candor of Adèle Ratignolle, since she is not “given to confidences” herself and is unaccustomed “to an outward and spoken expression of affection.”

Edna wants to be self-sufficient, but she cannot help hungering for intimacy and love. Her hunger expresses itself in infatuations that inwardly disturb her “without causing any outward show or manifestation” (ch. 7). Edna “wonder[s] at” this “propensity” because it is so out of keeping with her need for self-control and reserve. Existing secretly in her imagination, her infatuations reflect both her craving for love and her fear of intimacy and emotion. They comprise the love life of a very detached person. Edna is attracted to unavailable men and has no real relationships before her marriage to Léonce. Her passion for the great tragedian perfectly suits her psychological needs. By keeping his picture on her desk, she can engage in her fantasy under everyone’s nose “without exciting suspicion or comment.” Indeed, she takes a wicked delight in expressing “admiration for his exalted gifts” while passing his photo around. When alone, she sometimes picks up the photograph and “kisse[s] the cold glass passionately.” She can kiss it passionately because it is cold glass and not a flesh-and-blood human being. Her mental image of the tragedian “stir[s] her senses” far more than does the actual presence of Léonce Pontellier.

Edna is attracted to Léonce in part because there is “no trace of passion” in her feeling for him (ch. 7). She marries him as a way of getting out from under the paternal roof without having her privacy invaded or subjecting herself to another authoritarian male. Léonce is really a very easy-going husband for the time. He offers her “absolute devotion” and a dignified place in the world. The fact that her father and Margaret are violently opposed to her marriage to a Catholic is an additional attraction, since it gives Edna an opportunity to act out some of her rebellious impulses. She submits to the conventions of marriage, represses her desires for intensity, passion, and merger, and relinquishes her romantic dreams. These never amounted to anything anyway, since they were so out of keeping with her need for emotional distance.

Edna carries the need for distance into her marriage, in which she behaves in a very detached way. Léonce’s primary complaint is that while she is “the sole object of his existence,” she evinces “little interest in things which concerned him” (ch. 3). She is also inattentive to her children and feels a great sense of relief whenever they are taken off her hands. As a married woman, Edna follows her practice of conforming outwardly in order to be left alone. There is less struggle than ever because her conformity seems to have deadened her inward questioning. She habitually yields to Léonce’s desires, “not with any sense of submis-

sion or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us" (ch. 12). She awakens from this almost somnambulistic state during the summer on Grand Isle.

One of the major changes that occurs in Edna during that summer is that she moves from a passive, resigned form of detachment to an active rebellion against the constraints imposed by marriage, motherhood, religion, and society's expectations of her as a woman. When Léonce reproaches her for "her habitual neglect of the children," "an indescribable oppression" fills "her whole being with a vague anguish," and she has a crying spell (ch. 4). Edna "could not have told why she was crying," but she appears to be oppressed by both her husband's reproaches and her duties as a mother, against which she has passively rebelled by being inattentive. Edna's detachment involves a resistance to obligations that is intensified, ironically, by her intimacy with Adèle. While this relationship makes her less detached in that it breaks down her reserve, it also leads her to get in touch with some of the rebellious feelings she has repressed.

The memory that surfaces as she talks with Adèle is of the day when she ran away from prayers read in a spirit of gloom by her father. She had been religious "by habit" since the age of twelve, but now she begins to question her unthinking conformity (ch. 7). Edna feels that she is returning this summer to the aimless, impulsive, unguided state that she was in when she walked through the green meadow that day. This had been a passing episode in her youth, but it is memorable to her because she was acting out her detached desires to follow her impulses and to be free of authority. She reenacts it, in a way, when she blindly follows her impulses by going to *Chênère* with Robert and then flees from "the stifling atmosphere of the church" she attends there (ch. 13).

Once they rise to the surface, Edna's desires to be free of authority and to follow her impulses become stronger and stronger, first on Grand Isle and then in New Orleans. When Léonce tries to assert his authority by telling her that he "can't permit" her to stay outside and that she "must come in the house instantly," Edna's "will" blazes up, "stubborn and resistant," and she cannot understand why she had "submitted to his command" before (ch. 12). "Don't speak to me like that again," she tells him; "I shall not answer you." It seems likely that Edna had long harbored desires to rebel against the coerciveness of her father but had never dared to act upon them, except, perhaps, in the matter of her

marriage. Léonce, however, is a much less formidable figure. He is a doting, indulgent husband, emotionally bound to her, who cannot cope with her defiance. The feebleness of his response intensifies her rebelliousness and allows her to experience her need for freedom with increasing urgency.

Edna's growing impulsiveness should be understood, I think, not as a regression to an infantile state but as an expression of her detached personality, with its need for freedom and independence. No doubt because of her father's coerciveness, she has a hypersensitivity to all forms of constraint that she has repressed and concealed because of its dangerousness. She deals with it by resignation, automatic conformity, and the cultivation of a secret inner life that is nobody's business but her own. When her repression and conformity break down during the summer on Grand Isle, her hypersensitivity rises to the surface, and she begins to behave impulsively as a way gaining the sense of freedom and independence she craves.

The more randomly Edna behaves, the more she feels that she is her own master. By "blindly following whatever impulse move[s] her" (ch. 12), she "free[s] her soul" of the "responsibility" that is so oppressive to detached people like Edna, Jake Horner, and Hedda Gabler. Once she learns to swim, that activity becomes associated in her mind with the power to do what she wants, to go her own way. She plunges and swims "about with an abandon that thrill[s] and invigorate[s] her" (ch. 16). As she sails to the *Chênrière Caminada* with Robert, she delights in the feeling that she is "being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening . . . leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails" (ch. 12). Edna has felt like a prisoner in chains. As is characteristic of the detached person, she craves *freedom from* constraint rather than *freedom to* fulfill herself. The main thing she wants to do with her freedom is to drift.

Edna's rebellion against authority escalates when she returns to New Orleans. She goes out on her at-home day and allows herself to feel her anger when Léonce, dissatisfied with dinner, storms out to dine at the club. Such scenes had "often made her very unhappy," but now they fill her with rage. She takes off her wedding ring, flings it on the carpet, and tries to crush it with her heel. When she cannot even make a mark upon it, she shatters a glass vase against the hearth: "She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear" (ch. 18). Chopin tells us that Edna is "seeking and finding herself," and in a

sense this is true. She is getting in touch with the resentment and fury she has been suppressing, first in her father's house and then in her marriage. This is not the same thing as finding her real self, however, since what she is uncovering are her responses to oppressive conditions rather than the spontaneous feelings she would have had in a nurturing environment. In a therapeutic setting, experiencing such rage can be a stage in psychological growth, but getting in touch with her anger does not help Edna to find herself.

Edna does not repeat her outburst but instead throws off her outward compliance and begins "to do as she like[s], and to feel as she like[s]" (ch. 19). She abandons her Tuesdays at home, does not return the visits of callers, and gives up the effort "to conduct her household *en bonne ménagère*." She takes up painting, but in a dilettantish way, since she has no ambition and only wants to work "when in the humor" (ch. 25). For the most part, she seeks to gain a sense of freedom by coming and going "as it suit[s] her fancy" and lending herself to any passing caprice (ch. 19). Chopin describes such behavior as "becoming herself," and perhaps that is the way Edna experiences it, but I think that Léonce is right "to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally." Instead of becoming more herself, she is becoming more compulsively impulsive and detached.

When Léonce is shocked and angered by "her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife," Edna responds by telling him, "Let me alone; you bother me" (ch. 19). Edna wants to be left alone, not to be bothered, and Chopin so arranges things that she is granted her wish. Léonce leaves for a long stay in New York, and the children visit their grandmother. These departures give Edna a pang, but "a radiant peace settle[s] upon her when she at last [finds] her self alone" and her time is "completely her own to do with as she like[s]" (ch. 25). A "sense of restfulness invade[s] her, such as she ha[s] not known before."

After Léonce's departure, Edna takes additional steps to free herself. She moves out of their house to a small one, dubbed "the pigeon-house." One of her reasons for doing this is that she is "tired of looking after" the large house with all its servants; she wants fewer burdens and responsibilities (ch. 26). Her primary motive is to achieve a greater "feeling of freedom and independence" by no longer relying on Léonce. She will support herself out of her inheritance from her mother, her winnings at the racetrack, and the sale of her sketches; and when she moves, she takes only the things that are hers. She resolves "never again

to belong to another than herself” and feels that her financial autonomy frees her of her “allegiance” to her husband. She exercises this freedom by having an affair with Alcée Arobin.

Perhaps a less conscious motive for her move to the pigeon-house is that it is too small for a family. “Where on earth,” asks Adèle, “was she going to put Mr. Pontellier in that little house, and the boys?” (ch. 33). There is no place in Edna’s new life for either her husband or her children. When she tells the boys about the house during a visit to Iberville, they ask where they and papa will sleep. Edna’s reply is that “the fairies would fix it all right” (ch. 32). She is living in a dream from which she awakens at the end.

At Edna’s dinner party, given on her twenty-ninth birthday (Hedda Gabler’s age) before she moves out of Léonce’s house, she seems to be in control of her life: “There was something in her attitude . . . which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (ch. 30). But Chopin goes on to say that, as Edna sat among her guests,

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. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed. 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. (Ch. 30)

Edna seems to have attained the power to make her own choices and the freedom from interference to which she has aspired, but she feels an ennui and hopelessness over which she has no control and is full of inner discords. Since her hopelessness seems to derive from her longing for an unattainable beloved, she is *not* the regal woman who is content to look on and stand alone. To comprehend why Edna is so unhappy despite the progress she seems to have made, we must return to the summer at Grand Isle.

In addition to her wish to be free of authority and to follow her impulses, other desires are aroused in Edna that summer. As we have seen, the young Edna had cravings for intimacy and love that expressed themselves in the form of romantic fantasies about inaccessible men. Under

the influence of Adèle Ratignolle and Robert Lebrun, this side of Edna's nature reemerges, more highly eroticized than before. There are passages suggesting not only the stirrings of desire in relation to Robert but also autoerotic feelings and a homoerotic attraction to Adèle. Much has been made of Edna's sexual awakening, and I do not wish to minimize its importance, but the revival of her romanticism is the more significant development, since it is the source of much of her later hopelessness and inner discord.

Edna's latent romanticism is stirred by her "night in a dream" (ch. 11). That afternoon, "the unaccustomed taste of candor" in her conversation with Adèle had "muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom" (ch. 7). Edna had never before opened herself to another person. In the evening, Mademoiselle Reisz's playing further liberates her feelings, and she experiences a pang of self-pity as she recognizes her hopelessness about ever fulfilling her dreams. This is followed by Robert's suggestion that they all go into the water "at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon" (ch. 10), and, after having tried unsuccessfully all summer, Edna finally learns to swim. Intoxicated by "her newly conquered power," she wants to "swim far out, where no woman has swum before." Roused from her hopeless resignation, Edna immediately begins to dream of great things.

The climax of the evening is Edna's conversation with Robert, in which she wonders if "any night on earth will ever again be like this one" (ch. 10). Robert exalts her as a demi-goddess who has been selected by the spirit who haunts the gulf and fears that perhaps she "will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence." Feeling herself to be the object of a grand passion, Edna experiences "the first-felt throbbings of desire" and refuses to go in at Léonce's command. The delicious impossible dream from which she awakens when fatigue forces her to go to bed is not only of freedom but also of romantic fulfillment.

Edna reenters her dream of freedom and romance on the following day, when, under the aegis of the "mystic spirit," she is borne away from the anchorage in which she had been held fast in chains and sails to *Chênère* with Robert. They fantasize about further excursions, in one of which the Gulf spirit will direct Edna to the island where treasures are hidden. Later in New Orleans, when stories are being exchanged at a dinner party, Edna tells "of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. They were lost amid

the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this" (ch. 24). The narrator tells us that the story is "a pure invention"; "perhaps it was a dream she had had."

The fantasy Edna has woven around Robert helps us to understand why she is so distraught when he goes to Mexico: he has reawakened her longing for a grand romance and then left her frustrated. She has become so emotionally dependent on him that his departure takes "the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything," leaving "a void and wilderness behind" (ch. 16). Her "whole existence [is] dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing."

Edna's experience in her family generated needs for freedom and for love. In youth, she deals with the conflict between these needs by developing romantic fantasies about inaccessible men. When she marries, she gives up her fantasies but remains detached and becomes passive and resigned. During the summer on Grand Isle, her needs for freedom and romance are both reawakened, and they become more intense as the novel proceeds. Neither need can be satisfied, since Edna wants absolute freedom and a grand passion that occurs only in dreams. To make matters worse, the needs are in conflict with each other. The more obsessed Edna becomes with freedom, the less possible it is for her to be emotionally bound to another person.

As an adult, Edna tries once again to reconcile her contradictory needs through fantasy, but she does not always succeed. On her happy days she likes "to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested" (ch. 20). She has here both the solitude and freedom from interference that she craves and dreams of love through which she can escape her sense of isolation. There are unhappy days, however, "when it did not seem worthwhile to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood." On such days, she seems to be suffering from what Jake Horner calls cosmopsis, the cosmic view, which paralyzes her as it does him.

Edna oscillates between losing herself in dreams and feeling that life is absurd. In a way, she is a combination of Emma Bovary and Flaubert. Like Emma, she often feels that life is leaving its promise unfulfilled but is repeatedly led on by youthful dreams. Like Flaubert, she is a detached

observer who sees through the illusions and follies of mankind. There are times when she looks at life from a very great distance indeed. She remembers awakening after having given birth “to find a new little life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go” (ch. 38). This is an extraordinary reaction for a new mother. Her detachment here is perhaps closer to Hardy’s than to Flaubert’s.

Edna oscillates also between seeking freedom and independence—aspiring to be the regal woman who looks on and stands alone—and feeling despair because of her “acute longing” for Robert, which overpowers her “with a sense of the unattainable” (ch. 30). She becomes increasingly despondent despite her growing liberation because of her hopelessness about fulfilling her romantic dreams. Edna has no inner core, no self-realizing aspirations that her freedom enables her to pursue. Like the shallow-living detached people whom Horney describes, she needs external stimulation, perhaps even danger, to dispel her ennui, fill her inner emptiness, and make her feel alive.

Although Edna’s romantic dreams are an expression of her need for love, she is not looking for the kind of domestic bliss that her friend Adèle has found. To her the “fusion” of the Ratignolles is repugnant, and she feels that “domestic harmony” such as theirs would bring “an appalling and hopeless ennui” (ch. 18). She pities their “colorless existence,” the “blind contentment” that would never give them a “taste of life’s delirium.” Like Emma Bovary, Edna is often “restless and excited” and wants “something to happen—something, anything” (ch. 25). She pursues excitement by gambling at the racetrack and associating with a man like Alcée Arobin. It is only a grand passion, however, such as she envisions with Robert, that can give her a taste of life’s delirium. Thus, despite the celebration of her impending freedom at her birthday dinner, she feels overtaken by ennui.

The aspect of Edna’s behavior that I have the most difficulty understanding is her becoming involved with Alcée Arobin just after she learns from Mademoiselle Reisz that Robert left because he loved her and that he is about to return. She responds to Arobin’s kiss that evening, and she begins an affair with him the night that she moves out of her husband’s house. Nonetheless, she expects Robert to seek her out “at the very first hour” of his return and to express or betray “in some way his love for her” (ch. 33). I do not quite know what to make of this. In terms of rhetoric, Chopin may be emphasizing the speciousness of Edna’s

romanticism by having her become involved in a purely physical relationship with Arobin despite the imminence of Robert's return. But what is Edna's motivation? Is it simply an ungovernable craving for immediate sexual gratification? She has been sexually awakened, to be sure, but her needs thus far do not seem to have been overpowering. How does she reconcile her affair with Arobin with what she feels to be her exalted passion for Robert and her expectation that he will declare his love? Thematically, her relationship with Arobin seems to parallel Robert's liaison with the Vera Cruz girl. Is Chopin saying that if men can have casual sex while romantically devoted to another, women can do the same? Is she attacking the double standard? Perhaps, but such a thematic reading does not explain Edna's motivations. Does the prospect of Robert's return arouse her fears of emotional closeness and dependency, and does she need to confirm her sense of freedom and independence by having an affair? While longing for union with Robert, does she need to prove that she does not belong to any man? This may be the best explanation.

In any event, when Robert returns it seems at first "as if [Edna's] dreams [are] coming true after all" (ch. 33). She becomes "a prey to despondency" when he does not call on her after their initial reunion (ch. 35). Then she meets him by chance, boldly declares her love, and tries to take possession of him: "Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence" (ch. 36). But she is called away to be with Adèle during her delivery, and when she returns Robert has left because he loves her too much to destroy her standing in society. Edna does not commit suicide because of Robert's departure, however, but because of problems she would have had even if he had remained.

What happens at the end is that Edna awakens from her dream of freedom and love and feels trapped by reality and her inner conflicts. Her suicide, like Hedda Gabler's, has many motives, serves many needs, and is both a triumph and a defeat.

Edna's dream of freedom is shattered when Adèle, after having had a difficult delivery, urges her to "Think of the children. . . . Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (ch. 27). Edna, of course, has been trying to forget the children. We are told early on that she is not one of the mother-women, like Adèle, but she is drawn to Adèle, admires her,

and cannot free herself entirely from her sense of maternal responsibility. This clashes with her need for freedom, which has become so intense that she has a phobic reaction to anything that impinges on her. When Dr. Mandelet asks if she will be going abroad with Léonce when he returns, she says, "I'm not going to be forced into doing things. . . . I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right—except children, perhaps—and even then, it seems to me—or it did seem—" (ch. 38). Edna's bargain has been that if she asked nothing of anyone else, no one would have a right to ask anything of her—hence her need not to be beholden to her husband. But once Adèle asserts the rights of the children, Edna can no longer maintain her claim to be let alone. "I don't want anything," she explains to Dr. Mandelet, "but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives."

Edna's inner conflict has been indicated by the fact that she is drawn to both Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, women who embody opposite solutions. Madame Ratignolle is a self-effacing woman, whereas Mademoiselle Reisz has a self-assertive temper and a disposition to trample on the rights of others. At first, Mademoiselle Reisz's influence appears to be stronger; but she cannot ignore Madame Ratignolle's pleas to think of the children, to remember them. When Dr. Mandelet says that she should not have been at the delivery, Edna answers "indifferently," "I don't know that it matters after all. One has to think of the children some time or other" (ch. 38). She recognizes that she would eventually have had to confront her maternal responsibilities and resigns herself to the fact that she could not have brought herself to disregard them. It is her inability to free herself from her sense of obligation to her children that prevents her from soaring above the level plain of tradition and prejudice.

Even before she returns home to find Robert gone, Edna feels doomed by her determination to think of the children, which "had driven into her soul like a death wound" (ch. 38). Her dilemma is that she can neither free herself of her responsibilities nor bear the feeling of being coerced by them: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (ch. 39). Edna's feeling of enslavement is, in part at least, the result of her hypersensitivity to any form of constraint, which has become intolerable to her. She has entirely

lost her capacity for outward conformity. The children would interfere with her life not only by disrupting her plans for an independent existence in the pigeon-house but also by depriving her of sexual freedom: “She had said over and over to herself: ‘To-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne!’ ” She feels that she would be indifferent to the consequences of her behavior and that Léonce’s suffering does not matter, but the children would be socially stigmatized. She decides “to elude them” by committing suicide.

As Edna conceives it, her suicide is a way not only of eluding her children but also of fulfilling her responsibility to them. During one of her conversations with Adèle on Grand Isle, she had said that “she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one”: “I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (ch. 16). Not understanding Edna’s distinction, Adèle replies that “a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that.” Since she identifies her “self” with the freedom to follow her impulses, Edna feels that if she remained alive she would have to sacrifice her self for her children. By sacrificing her life, she will avoid the unbearable feeling of being enslaved and will protect her children from the shame she would have brought upon them if she insisted on having her own way. Neither they nor Adèle will be able to reproach her. As she swims out to her death, she thinks of Léonce and the children: “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her body and soul” (ch. 39).

One reason why Edna commits suicide, then, is that, in her society, if she behaves as she likes she will harm her children, and she cannot resolve her inner conflict between the need to be absolutely free and the need to fulfill her responsibilities as a mother. It is important to recognize, however, that if Edna had possessed the courageous soul that dared to defy the duties of motherhood, or if she had lived in a society in which her sexual behavior would not have harmed her children, she would still have been trapped by her conflicting needs for freedom and love. Her romantic fantasies would still have collapsed, leaving her to face the prospect of continued loneliness and despondency in a series of meaningless liaisons. There are no social changes that could resolve Edna’s psychological problems.

It is not only her dream of freedom from which Edna awakens at the end but also her dream of romantic love. Robert’s departure is a blow,

of course, but she knows that he still loves her. The decisive factor is her realization “that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (ch. 39). This is the realization she fails to have when Robert leaves for Mexico—that her infatuations are not the grand passions she thinks them to be and that they will all go the way of dreams. She tells Robert that they will be everything to each other, that nothing else is of any consequence, but her vision of their relationship could never have been actualized. Before she knows that Robert has left, she tells Dr. Mandelet that she wants to be let alone and that she does not want anything but her own way. Her detachment is the most powerful force in her personality and is hardly compatible with her romantic dream of merger with her lover. Her freedom is more important to her than anything else.

After Edna returns to find Robert gone, she becomes despondent and plans her suicide. She is so disenchanted and paralyzed that there is “no one thing in the world that she desire[s]” (ch. 39). Every desire seems either futile or in conflict with another. Suicide provides an escape from her inner conflicts and external pressures, while giving her a sense both of freedom and righteousness. Although she is driven to it by her dilemma, she has the illusion of choice.

Edna seems to experience committing suicide, in part at least, as a triumph, as a fulfillment of her desires for freedom and love. There are a number of images of freedom. Disliking the confinement of clothing, like many detached people, she throws off her “unpleasant, pricking garments,” stands “naked under the sky,” and feels like a “new-born creature” (ch. 39). As she swims out, she thinks “of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end.” The meadow is associated with her flight from her father’s coercion. Instead of being narrow and restrictive, like her everyday world, the meadow seems to present a limitless expanse. In this respect, it resembles the sea in which she is immersing herself. As exhaustion begins to overcome her, she hears the voices of repression (her father and her sister Margaret) and “the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree.” She may be reminding herself through these images of confinement of the enslavement she is escaping.

Edna’s merger with the sea is presented as a kind of erotic fulfillment: “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close

embrace” (ch. 39). The sea is a lover with whom she can be alone and unencumbered. It offers her the combination of solitude, freedom, and union that she requires because of her inner conflicts. She has found this combination before only in her fantasies, one of which recurs as she hears “the spurs of the cavalry officer” just before she drowns. This seems to suggest that she dies with an illusory sense not only of freedom but also of romantic fulfillment.

Edna also experiences committing suicide as a defeat. She imagines that Mademoiselle Reisz would laugh, perhaps even sneer, at her “if she knew”—if she knew, presumably, that Edna was killing herself because she lacked “the courageous soul that dares and defies” (ch. 39). Edna despises herself because she cannot actualize her idealized image of herself as the woman who goes where no other has gone, who can soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice. She is caught, as we have seen, in a crossfire of conflicting shoulds: if she lives up to the inner dictates of her detached solution she will hate herself for trampling upon the little lives, but if she does her duty as a mother she will hate herself for allowing herself to be enslaved. She tries to escape her self-hate by committing suicide, and she partially succeeds, but she cannot help imagining the truly unencumbered woman, Mademoiselle Reisz, sneering at her.

In a relatively brief novel, Kate Chopin has created a remarkably rich mimetic portrait of her heroine. She has grasped Edna’s conflicting needs and portrayed her behavior with considerable subtlety. At the same time, she has presented a bewildering picture of Edna in terms of plot and rhetoric. She seems confused about the nature and meaning of her heroine’s story. Her confusion may be partly the result of Edna’s complexity, which escapes her conscious understanding, but it is also the result of her psychological conflicts. I am speaking here of the implied author, the Chopin we infer from the text.

Like her heroine, Chopin oscillates between detached, self-effacing, and aggressive tendencies. The detached side of Chopin sympathizes with Edna’s desire for freedom and independence, celebrates her rebellion against the constraints imposed by marriage, family, and her feminine role, and mocks Edna’s dreams of romantic love and her deception by the fresh promises held out to her by her youth. Her aggressive side

is aligned with her detachment. She seems to criticize Edna for not having the courage to trample on the rights of others, including her children, when that is what she must do in order to gain her freedom. Her self-effacing side is expressed in her admiration for Madame Ratignolle, through whom she insists on Edna's maternal responsibilities, in her repeated suggestions that Edna's capriciousness is misguided and immature, and in her sympathy with Edna's longings for love and merger.

Chopin cannot resolve the conflict between these tendencies, any more than can Edna, and she is ambivalent toward all of them. She is attracted to both Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, but she is also critical of each from the point of view of the opposing solutions they represent. She is also ambivalent toward Edna's demands for freedom and her desire to follow her passing caprices. Sometimes she presents Edna's impulsiveness as a sign that she is being true to herself, while at other times she seems aware of how compulsive and self-destructive is Edna's need for absolute freedom and how little happiness she derives from her increasing independence. While presenting her heroine's story as one of a woman's liberation, she seems to know that Edna is in deep psychological trouble and that she cannot find her way out of it.

Because of her inner conflicts, Chopin creates a thematic morass out of which she cannot find *her* way. From an aggressive perspective Edna's rebellion does not go far enough, but from a self-effacing one it goes too far. The dream of freedom from which Edna awakens when fatigue forces her to go to bed is described as "grotesque" as well as "delicious" (ch. 12). When Léonce remonstrates with Edna for spending so much of her time in her atelier, Edna replies: "I feel like painting. . . . Perhaps I shan't always feel like it." "Then in God's name paint!" says Léonce, "but don't let the family go to the devil" (ch. 19). This is not, on the face of it, unreasonable. Léonce wonders if his wife is "not growing a little unbalanced mentally." Although Chopin dismisses this by saying that he "could not see that she was becoming herself," Chopin has allowed Léonce to give expression to some of her own misgivings.

Chopin's ambivalences are what make the novel, and especially the ending, open to so many conflicting interpretations. She mocks Edna's fantasies, but, like Flaubert, she empathizes with the protagonist's romantic aspirations even as she satirizes them, and she sympathizes with Edna's frustrations even though they are the fruit of her folly. Unlike Flaubert, she takes pity on her heroine and grants her a death in which

her cravings for love and freedom are fulfilled, if only fleetingly, in her erotic union with the sea. But she cannot resist introducing Edna's fears that Mademoiselle Reisz is sneering at her and also the bird with the broken wing that is "reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (ch. 39).