

TENUOUS FEMINISM AND UNORTHODOX NATURALISM: KATE CHOPIN'S UNLIKELY LITERARY VICTORY AT THE CLOSE OF THE 19th CENTURY

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As its title suggests, *The Awakening* is a novel about a process rather than a program, about a passage rather than a destination. It is a transitional female fiction of the *fin de siècle*, a narrative of and about the passage from the homosexual women's culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism.

Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice*.

Chopin resists either the clear editorial judgment or the clear invitation to an identification with Edna that would permit a firm statement about the message of the novel. Antinomies balance each other so neatly that the center of the novel remains deadlocked.

Elisabeth Fox-Genovese, «Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.»

Published in the last year of the 19th century, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has become in recent times a favorite of critics and literary historians alike. Owing to its ground-breaking constituents in thematic and stylistic terms and the overwhelming variety of interpretations to which it has given rise, the novel is considered by many «as

the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman.»¹ One of the main reasons bringing *The Awakening* to the central position it occupies today in the debates of the academe is that the text deploys such an immense wealth of nuances and connotations that almost any critical orientation is bound to find grounds to re-appropriate it in order to support its own tenets. Very likely, the most cogent explanation to this «density of meaning» is the convergence in the novel of several distinct literary influences ranging from American transcendentalism to the closer-in-time European naturalism.² For the critics, the consequences of this merging of different traditions in the book are twofold, for while it is true that they find little difficulty in coming up with evidence illustrating their hypotheses, it is also clear that the task of producing an all-consistent interpretation of the work is almost inconceivable. As a matter of fact, if anything becomes apparent while reading the literature on the novel it is that each of the commentaries can be fairly easily deconstructed by someone taking an alternative –but equally acceptable– approach to the text.

So far, perhaps the most extreme interpretative clashes in the discussions of *The Awakening* have been those between scholars who, like Per Seyersted, have read the novel as a tale of «spiritual emancipation» and those who interpret it as quite the opposite since, in their eyes, it mostly traces the heroine's gradual «psychological disintegration.»³ Of course, these two irreconcilable understandings of the text very often result from the critics' own interests and biases which determine what is important and what is trivial in the book. Naturally, it is those commentators who depart from a more explicitly partisan position in their analyses that tend to see the novel as conveying a definite ideological message. Yet, apart from the prejudices that each reader inevitably brings into his/her interaction with the text, it is also unquestionable that Chopin's second published novel is characterized by her conspicuous «failure» to keep a single viewpoint and political stance throughout. Not only this, but some critics have even come to the conclusion that the novel's finale is highly evasive because «the painful failure of vision... implicit in the changes prevents a very good, very interesting novel from being the extraordinary masterpiece some commentators have claimed it is.»⁴ Although I would

1. Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 65. See also Larzer Ziff's early appraisal of the novel in «An Abyss of Inequality: Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin.» in *The American 1890s: The Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 305.

2. For two dissections of the novel illustrating these two possible readings, see Donald A. Ringe, «Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*,» *American Literature*, 43 (1972), 580-88; and Nancy Walker, «Feminist or Naturalist: The Social Context of Chopin's *The Awakening*,» *Southern Quarterly*, 17 (1979), 95-103.

3. See Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, «Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*,» *American Quarterly*, 25 (Oct. 1973), 449-71.

4. George M. Spangler, «Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: A partial Dissent.» in *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Margo Culley (New York: Norton & Co., 1976), 211.

never go as far as to declare the book «flawed» or «diminished» on account of its discontinuities, it is only natural that one should raise a number of questions in connection with this fairly generalized perception of the book: How can such an ambivalent literary piece have attained the outstanding position it occupies today in the canon? What is it that makes it so appealing to the contemporary reader in spite of the frequently contradictory elements that emerge in it?

As the two epigraphs to my article show, several scholars have contended lately that, despite its heterogenous constituents and its somehow upsetting denouement, *The Awakening* still deserves to be included among the most remarkable works of fiction produced at the turn of the century. The arguments held to support this opinion tend to present Chopin as an innovator of women's writing who had to wrestle with the legacy of domestic fiction and the prescribed social roles of woman at the time. Naturally, these pressures dating from an immediate past were not easily subdued and, as Fox-Genovese remarks, Chopin's fiction could hardly manage to «weave a complex pattern of progression and regression in the course of the woman who seeks to escape the institutional context of female life.»⁵ Although it is a fact that much of the tension that we experience while reading the novel derives—as these feminists would have it—from the rejection of previous writing conventions and the vindication of new rights for women, the present writer believes that a deeper and more strenuous contest takes place in the text. In my opinion, the repeatedly conflicting stances that the author is forced to take in front of her heroine's (mis)behavior are fully explainable only if one bears in mind the kind of demands that her adherence to the New Woman cause and her observance of the naturalist conventions of fiction writing exacted from her. The problems posed by bringing together these two programs and their very specific aims soon become evident given that, in general, both their ideology and the form of their discourse are prominently at odds. Yet, what I intend to show in my discussion below is that Chopin surprisingly succeeded in combining the new feminist elements with some of the major naturalist features that characterized the literature of the period. Contrary to what some analysts of the novel have argued, the feminist and the naturalist perspectives, far from generating inconsistencies and «unfortunate discontinuities» in the story, actually complement each other so that the portrayal of the heroine is ultimately more complete and realistic.⁶

Now, when one sets out to demonstrate the possibility of interpreting in a positive

5. Elisabeth Fox-Genovese, «Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*,» in *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Margaret Culley (New York: Norton & Co., 1976), p.257.

6. Cf. Paula Treichler, «The Construction of Ambiguity in *The Awakening*: A Linguistic Analysis.» in *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: Norton & Co., 1976), pp.263-71. Although Treichler focuses mainly on the complex linguistic structures in the text, she points out on several occasions that the dualities and contradictions in language parallel what the narrative tells us about the heroine.

light the intermingling of feminist and naturalist elements in *The Awakening*, the first problem one should tackle is that of the apparent mutual exclusiveness between both *Weltanschauungen*. On the one hand, women writers of the late nineteenth century – e.g., Charlotte P. Gilman, Sarah Grand, or Sarah Orne Jewett– explored new ways in fiction that took them toward imaginary worlds where they could feel free from the restrictive culture of their age. Sandra Gilbert and others have related this evolution in women’s writing to «the struggles for autonomy and emancipation» that brought about the most significant social and cultural changes in history for the «fair, frail sex.»⁷ There is little need to explain that the feelings of hope and liberation experienced by all these women were not unlike the ones that imbue Edna Pontellier early in Chopin’s novel:

Sailing across the bay to the *Chênrière Caminada*, Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening –had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails. (223)⁸

Quite clearly, then, the pervading sentiment in feminist fiction is one of exultation and optimism as the heroine succeeds in setting herself free from many of the dictates that society imposes upon her. On the other hand, naturalist writers are prone to present their characters –both male and female– as conditioned and controlled by forces such as the environment, heredity or chance, against which their will is little short of impotent. The typical naturalist plot is one, therefore, in which the oppressive reality of material forces causes a fatal decline of the individual. Barbara Hochman has noted that, notwithstanding the emergence of the first feminist utopias, fiction at the close of the nineteenth century «is particularly full of women characters who cannot make peace with the options available to them in their society, characters who cannot fulfill their needs or resolve their conflicts.»⁹ Paradoxically, Edna Pontellier can also be said to eventually fall into this category of the «defeated woman.» But how, then, does the critic make these two categorizations of Chopin’s heroine compatible? What is more, may such different perceptions of a fictional character be brought to reinforce each other?

7. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

8. Hereafter, all page references to Chopin’s novel will be from Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, intr. by Nina Baym (New York: Random House Inc., 1981).

9. Barbara Hochman, «*The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*: Plotting Experience and Experiencing Plot,» in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*, ed. by Donald Pizer (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 211.

There are two different ways of pursuing these issues although, as will be noted, the results in both cases are very similar. The first approach involves redefining what we understand by «naturalism.» Some of the most insightful specialists in American naturalist fiction have argued that what distinguishes it from its various European antecedents is that

There is always the tension between hope and despair, between rebellion and apathy, between defying nature and submitting to it, between celebrating man's impulses and trying to educate them, between embracing the universe and regarding its dark abysses with terror.¹⁰

Although Walcutt's characterization of the literary trend is obviously too male-centered and highlights exclusively the kind of pressures that human beings receive from the natural environment, one can logically deduce that his description is equally valid for female characters, who were mostly constrained by social impositions rather than nature. What is evident, in any case, is that this broader definition of naturalism allows some space for the significance of individual free will and the «belief in social justice and human rights.»¹¹ But not only does the subject matter of American naturalist fiction partly turn its back on the avowed determinism of the movement, the very form of the novels also suggests that the writer's conception of life is primarily dualistic. Thus, combined with the quasi-clinical depiction of the character's struggle for physical and moral survival, we also hear about his/her changing moods and psychological states. Donald Pizer, very likely the scholar who has studied the movement in more depth, has concluded on this point that «the naturalistic novel derives much of its aesthetic effect from these contrasts. It involves us in the experience of a life both commonplace and extraordinary, both familiar and strange, both simple and complex.»¹² No doubt, this expansion of the age-old conception of naturalist fiction enables us to visualize Chopin's innovative novel as partaking in this literary current. However, some further modifications need to be considered in the traditional definition of naturalism for *The Awakening* to be granted the outstanding place it deserves.

The second way to explain the ambiguous fluctuation between the feminist and the naturalist perspectives in the novel is to show how the former can only gain its full emotional and rational momentum when counterpointed by the latter. That is, Edna Pontellier's impressive growth in self-awareness and autonomy would bear little merit

10. Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973 [orig. Minnesota, 1956]), 17.

11. *Ibid.*, 18.

12. Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, pref. by Harry T. Moore (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), 14.

if the realization of «her position in the universe» did not occur in a context that constantly threatens to cut short her efforts to become her true self. Gilbert notes in this regard that, after the «fairy-tale chapters» in which we are privy to Edna's metamorphosis into what may be called a New Woman, «Chopin devotes the rest of the novel to examine the difficulty of the struggles for autonomy that she imagines would have engaged any nineteenth-century woman who experienced such transformation.»¹³ Without the appearance of obstacles to surmount in her arduous contest towards the achievement of her regeneration, her partial victories would acquire little relevance.¹⁴ The narrator herself seems to suggest so when, in chapter 6, she explains that «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 souls perish in its tumult!» (190). Such a narratorial comment may be reasonably interpreted as serving two different purposes in the novel. First, as has been noted above, by placing the emphasis on the exigencies that her new condition will imply, Chopin tries to enhance her heroine's will-power and her ruthless determination to have things her own way. As the saying goes: «There are no gains without pains.» Secondly, however, the quotation may also be read as an ominous foreshadowing of what the future has in store for Edna, since she may well be one of the souls destined to «perish in the tumult» of this menacing world. It is undeniable that this second reading would make the passage ring truly naturalist and, consequently, transform our original perception of Edna's battle for self-determination in significant ways. Nevertheless, such a change of our perception, rather than being inimical to feminist *exegeses* of the text, would open it to alternative mainstream and gender-neutral approaches that would definitely contribute to restore it to its rightful place in the literary heritage of the nation.¹⁵

After having shown how the feminist and naturalist worldviews can be in fact reconciled—at least, to a reasonable extent—in a work of fiction, I will move on to illustrate the well-crafted balance displayed in *The Awakening* between the aspects that the reader associates with each of the two perspectives. In order to do so, I have chosen to focus closely on those themes that lie at the very heart of the novel and that, as a result, have been recurrent in most of the criticism produced to our day. Among these, the following are capital: Edna's sensual arousal, her aversion to conjugal «duties,» her attempts to define her new identity through art and human relations, and her wavering sense of responsibility for her children. Much has been said about the memorable and

13. Sandra Gilbert, «The Second Coming of Aphrodite,» introduction to *The Awakening and Selected Stories by Kate Chopin*, ed. and intr. by S. Gilbert (New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1984), 29.

14. Cf. Dorothy H. Jacobs, «*The Awakening*: A Recognition of Confinement,» in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, ed. by Linda S. Boren and Sara de Saussure (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 80-94.

15. Cf. Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 84.

yet also traumatic consequences that all these rapid changes purport to the heroine's existence, but critics have almost invariably sought to study them as signs of either her victory or her defeat against a patriarchal system. Disregarding the narrator's own ambivalent comments on how Edna conducts her life,¹⁶ they try to bring home their ideas on what is admirable or, alternatively, reprobable in the central character's behavior. Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith have remarked, however, that the text brings together two distinct views of Edna, one sympathetic, the other notably critical: «The partisan narrative stance speaks for a romantic vision of life's possibilities; the alternate stance for a realistic understanding and acceptance of human limits.»¹⁷ In the analysis that follows, I intend to show that much of the originality and modernity of Chopin's novel derives from her skill to keep an unstable equipoise between our perceptions of the heroine as a victor and as a loser. Her masterful co-implication of different, and frequently antagonistic, discursive practices is particularly effective for achieving the «unresolved tension»¹⁸ that best describes her masterpiece.

The Awakening opens in a summer resort owned by a Madame Lebrun on Grand Isle, where a number of Creole families from New Orleans come to spend their holidays. Here, the Pontelliers: Léonce, Edna, and their two children, enjoy the easy-going attitudes and carefree lifestyle of a community that seems completely alien to the great changes taking place in American society at large. Mrs. Pontellier, in particular, is repeatedly overwhelmed by the incredible number of new sensations assailing her in the warm and exuberant seashore setting. Up to this point in her life, she has been a fairly committed mother and wife, an efficient manager of her household, and a gracious hostess to her husband's associates. But with the arousal of her senses by the landscape and the people around her, she begins to reconsider «her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her.» (189-90) This process of regeneration and self-affirmation is fostered by Edna's relationships with Adèle Ratignolle and Robert Lebrun but, above all, by the epiphanic experiences that she undergoes while listening to Mademoiselle Reisz's music and «the voice of the sea»:

16. This ambivalent narratorial stance seems particularly appropriate to Chopin's views on the necessary impartiality of the writer in fiction writing. In an essay entitled «Confidences,» she writes very eloquently about her distrust of the many activist rhetorics of her day and advises authors to purge their works of any explicit judgments on the action of their fictions. See Kate Chopin, «Confidences,» in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. by Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 701-2.

17. Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith, «Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*,» *Studies in American Fiction*, 1 (1973), 74.

18. *Ibid.*, p.75. For a similar evaluation, see also Cristina Giorcelli, «Edna's Wisdom: A Transitional and Numinous Merging,» in *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. by Wendy Martin (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 109-48.

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (190)

Both the sounds of the Gulf and the little lady's musical strains on the piano move the heroine in similar ways. On the one hand, they contribute decisively «to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her» (190), so that Edna begins to appear in front of others as the sensual woman that she really is. This first breath of freedom opens her eyes to the pseudo-imprisonment her life has become as the devoted wife of a man who worships her, but also «owns» her. On the other hand, the ocean and the music awake in her a number of fantasies that have been dormant since her earliest youth and that now come back to her with their full romantic force. After hearing Mlle. Reisz's first notes, she experiences something like a catharsis or an encounter with «the sublime» which cannot be easily translated into words or images:¹⁹

She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (210)

Of course, once her emotions have been stirred up in this manner by nature and art, the heroine needs to project those desires on somebody or something so that they come to their fruition. Both the swimming lessons and her short-lived, but intense love affair with Robert seem to provide her with *à propos* outlets for the excess of emotive energy that she keeps gathering throughout the first half of the novel.

Neither of these two challenges –learning to swim or to love again– is deemed attainable at first, since some kind of physical and psychological dread seems to weigh too heavily on Edna to let her «surface.» However, right after Mlle. Reisz's short concert something has been lifted in her spirit which permits her to face the two tests with unprecedented courage and self-reliance:

... she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-

19 . Cf. Barbara C. Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. (Berkeley, L.A. and London: University of California Press, 1995), especially 27-39. Freeman argues in her book that the main problem posed by *The Awakening* is: «The difficulty of symbolizing an excess that resists visual and linguistic formulation but is there nonetheless.» 30.

confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke of two she lifted her body to the surface of the water.

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (212)

Imagery related to rebirth and a newly-gained independence is prevalent in the sections that follow this first realization of her capacity to govern her own life. Edna spends more and more time with Robert while her relationship with her husband is no longer one of subordination. To a great extent, the local tales and legends that Robert shares with her are conducive to her growing awareness of the potential she still has to love passionately and to determine the direction of her existence in the future. Gilbert argues on this point that «Chopin wants to record not only the body's rebellion at confinement but also the soul's "moments of escape" along with the visions of power that motivate such escapes.»²⁰ What is evident, in any case, is that the author presents her heroine as shedding a former identity which has become too constricting and feeling the exhilaration of a number of exulting emotions which endow her life with a new sense and significance:

...she tried to discover wherein this summer had been different from any and every other summer of her life. She could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect. (232)

Most commentators have rightly agreed that the first part of *The Awakening* «can be said to concern Edna Pontellier's struggle to define herself as an active subject, and to cease to be merely the passive object of forces beyond her control.»²¹ It is no wonder that a majority of contemporary readers should see the heroine's awakening to a new set of possibilities in a very favorable light and wish that her struggles to achieve that more autonomous selfhood succeeded. Yet, from the very beginning, the narrator is cautious enough to mark Edna's progress towards her self-realization with a number of signs indicating the many hazards that she will be facing. Thus, for example, just before we hear about her recognition of a decisive change in «her position in the universe,» the narrator describes that knowledge dawning dimly on her as «the light which, showing the way, forbids it» (189). Just a couple of paragraphs below, the narrator explains how

20 . Gilbert, «The Second Coming...» 24-25.

21 . Treichler, «The Construction of Ambiguity.» 264.

very few are likely to survive the vagueness and chaos of such a sudden realization. All in all, there are as many suggestions that Edna's quest for a new identity is quite impracticable as passages conveying the idea that such a transformation is, in fact, under way. According to Suzanne Wolkenfeld, what Chopin tries to define at these early stages of the novel are the two paths open to her heroine:

Ideally, Edna's growth could bring her to self-awareness and community with the external world. But aware of the complex and vulnerable nature of the human psyche, Chopin emphasizes the perils that attend Edna's awakening.²²

Among the forces that threaten Edna's sensual and spiritual self-realization, I shall dwell upon three that, as I see it, especially hinder the magnitude of her «accomplishment»: one is cultural, another environmental, and the third one is purely human.

First of all, Edna is very much hypnotized by the openly sensual ways that the Creoles exhibit.²³ She is first bewildered by their uninhibited body contacts and the entire absence of prudery that they reveal in their expression:

Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her *accouchements*, withholding no intimate detail. She was growing accustomed to like shocks, but she could not keep the mounting color back from her cheeks. Oftener than once her coming had interrupted the droll story with which Robert was entertaining some amused group of married women. (184)

As the narrator notes about the heroine, although «she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of the Creoles.» (183-4) In fact, we see Edna repeatedly struggling to leave behind the self-contained and highly reserved personality that her Presbyterian childhood in Kentucky had molded in order to adapt to the more relaxed attitudes of the community at Grand Isle. Although she partly succeeds in this difficult task, Nancy Walker has pointed out that «by succumbing to the sensuality of the Creoles, she is denying what she has been raised to believe, so that in some ways the novel deals with the clash of two cultures.»²⁴ Naturally, such a cultural clash constantly endangers Edna's progress towards her regeneration since she is very likely to misread

22. Suzanne Wolkenfeld, «Edna's Suicide: The Problem of the One and the Many,» in *The Awakening: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: Norton & Co., 1976), 244.

23. Nina Baym has argued likewise that «...the heat and humidity and the luxurious idleness of Creole life, have an erotic and narcotic effect on Edna,» in her «Introduction» to *The Awakening and Selected Stories* (New York: Random House Inc., 1981), xxxii.

24. Walker, «Feminist or Naturalist,» in *Norton Critical Edition*, 253-4.

some of the factors that most encourage her on her quest. The conversation below between Madame Ratignolle and Robert makes quite explicit such a disturbing problem:

«Nonsense! I'm in earnest; I mean what I say. Let Mrs. Pontellier alone».
 «Why?» he asked; himself growing serious at his companion's solicitation.
 «She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously.» (200)

But apart from the several instances of Edna's cultural misreadings, what prevents her from proceeding confidently towards her much prized autonomy is the sense of guilt that invades her every time she gives herself over to the sensuality of the Creole. For instance, after her liberating trip with Robert across the bay to the *Chênrière Caminada* during which she had felt «being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast,» the next section opens with Edna's feelings as she attends a religious service at the little church of Our Lady of Lourdes:

A feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service. Her head began to ache, and the lights on the altar swayed before her eyes. Another time she might have made an effort to regain her composure; but her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of church and reach the open air. She arose, climbing over Robert's feet with a muttered apology. (224-5)

Evidently, in spite of Edna's efforts to abandon her paternal cultural heritage, there is an unconscious part of her that stubbornly resists such a radical transformation of her nature. No matter how hard she tries to cast off the principles and prejudices she has been brought up to follow, there is always a side of her personality that hinders her transition into a freer sense of her selfhood.²⁵

Regarding the environmental and human perils attending Edna's awakening, there is little doubt that the former are much more apparent to the reader than the latter. While it is true that the sea and the moonlit sky appear at first to Edna as vast, boundless spaces where she can escape from the oppressions awaiting her on land, it soon becomes evident that these solitary places are not without their dangers. Right after she feels «intoxicated with her newly conquered power» to swim away from her society, she entertains a brief vision of the fatal consequences that her audacity may bear:

Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had

25. Nancy Walker and others have argued that what is «unconscious» in fact, is Edna's response to the sensual ways of the Creoles. Of course, this interpretation is very convenient to support their view that her awakening is not one «to her equality or freedom as an individual» (252), but to a realization of her sensual nature. However, I think Chopin makes quite clear that while her efforts to adapt are highly conscious, not such thing can be said about the repressed influence of her past.

left there. She had not gone any great distance –that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.

A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land. (213)

Although Gilbert and other feminist scholars have read Edna's immersion in the sea as the culmination of her metamorphosis into «a powerful goddess of love and art,»²⁶ one must also admit that the feeling of fulfilment she experiences is invariably accompanied by one of terror. In fact, Barbara Freeman proves to come much closer to an understanding of the full implications of the episode when she contends that «finding her 'self' is, paradoxically, a matter of entering the water of the Gulf of Mexico and learning how to lose that which she has found.»²⁷ But Edna's realization of human limitations takes place not only out at sea. Many readers are surprised by the fact that, despite the romance and the fantasies prevailing in her spirit throughout much of the novel, Edna's life is still governed by very basic needs such as eating and, above all, sleeping. Of course, she often tries to resist these urges which, as she perceives them, may destroy one's illusions for a different life and sense of selfhood. Predictably, however, she mostly fails:

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. The physical need for sleep began to overtake her; the exuberance which had sustained and exalted her spirit left her helpless and yielding to the conditions which crowded her in. (219)

Once more, the heroine's moments of hope and longing are immediately followed by a recognition of her physical and psychological limitations. As several critics have noted, what Edna primarily learns throughout these progressive and regressive states of her consciousness is nature's cruel message that our desire of complete self-realization can never be satisfied.²⁸

Notwithstanding the rather reduced «visibility» of the human factors conditioning Edna's development of her new selfhood, there is no denying that they limit her chances to triumph most radically. This is so because, while she can easily discern the social and

26 . Gilbert, «The Second Coming,» 20.

27 . Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 31.

28. Cf. Griffin Wolff, «Thanatos and Eros,» 240-41.

natural forces that may make her progress problematic, there is little she can do to anticipate how individuals are going to respond to her desires. In fact, since a significant part of her dream of self-realization involves a total fusion with somebody else, she is perhaps too guileless and naive in believing that others will join her in her battle disregarding all consequences. Of course, the first signs of frustration and despondency dawn upon her when, after their idyllic affair on the isle, Robert suddenly announces his departure to Mexico:

The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson that 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. (241)

Robert, as his conduct later in the novel shows, is no mere seducer and strives to do what is socially and morally «correct,» even if it is at the expense of Edna's illusions. For some time, the heroine, already back in New Orleans, tries to rekindle those illusions by having a sexual affair with Alc  e Arobin who, unfortunately, happens to be a regular seducer. From the very start, Edna realizes this relationship cannot yield the spiritual union that she is after: «There was a dull pang of regret because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips.» (301-2) Carol Wershoven has correctly observed that «both Robert Lebrun and Alc  e Arobin propose conventional escapes from the tedium of marriage and motherhood»²⁹ and so they do not eventually seem acceptable alternatives for Edna. Close to the end of the novel, alone and bearing all the burden of her late realizations, she comes to see the volatility of placing one's hopes on other human beings.

Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. (349-50)

In the several examples discussed so far, it is not hard to discern a pattern which very much gives its final shape to the novel. On the one hand, Edna sets out on a quest for an independent female identity encouraged by some inner and outer compulsions. In principle, these forces seem neither favorable nor antagonistic to the heroine, who is

29 . Carol Wershoven, «Rebels Defeated and Compromised,» in her *Child Brides and Intruders* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 183.

generally allowed to do as she pleases to achieve her self-fulfilment. Thus, *The Awakening* cannot be said to depict the ominous and claustrophobic universe that characterizes most naturalist fiction.³⁰ On the other hand, when Edna gives herself over to her ostensibly infantile impulses or refuses to take responsibility for her unconventional behavior, we see those forces turning against her and making her situation even more oppressive than before. Sullivan and Smith have rightly noted that the author is suggesting in this way «that while making contact with one's instinctual self is good, such contact must somehow be brought into relationship with the demands of the adult world.»³¹ These demands are of course social in many cases, but we have also observed that the heroine's own conscience punishes her severely every time she tries to bring about changes which are beyond her capacities. In short, Kate Chopin –like some of the late naturalist authors; e.g. S. Crane– does not have her protagonist destroyed by biological, social, or institutional forces beyond her control; rather, it is mainly her specific upbringing and her psychological fragility that allow those forces to victimize her. Of course, such an understanding of the human condition requires reality to be represented in much more intricate terms which frequently oscillate between the objective and the subjective, the serious and the ironic, or the heroic and the tragic.³² By chapter 28 of *The Awakening*, Edna herself seems to be nearing a more accurate understanding of her position in the universe when «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.» (301)

Very likely, the theme that best discloses this more modern naturalist worldview in the book is that of the heroine's revolt against the consequences of the marriage vows. As has been remarked, from very early in the novel the reader realizes that Mr. Pontellier looks upon his wife as one of «his household gods,» ornaments which he greatly values because they are his and he derives «genuine pleasure from contemplating them.» (248) When Edna goes swimming at midday and burns herself a little, Léonce scolds her and looks at her «as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.» (173) Of course, neither Chopin nor her heroine can accept these traditional views on the marital institution, and *The Awakening* soon turns into a forceful critique of patriarchal constraints upon woman.³³ Parallel to Edna's sensual

30 . See George J. Becker's early study, «Modern Realism as a Literary Movement,» in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. by G.J. Becker (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 3-38 or Lars Ahnebrink's notes on the naturalist setting in *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction* (Upsala and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 177-82.

31 . Sullivan and Smith, «Narrative Stance,» 230.

32 . Cf. Giorelli, «Edna's Wisdom,» 110.

33 . For a good summary of these restrictions and an overview of the situation of women at the turn of the century, see Nina Baym, «Introduction,» xxxiv-vii.

awakening in the opening sections, we also observe her refusal to be defined by any of the stereotypes of passive femininity so generalized at the time. In fact, she is clearly opposed to the mother-women who prevailed that summer at the isle and who are described by the narrator as follows:

They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (181)

Although Edna had faced for six years the «realities of her marriage» and, even, grown fond «in an uneven, impulsive way» (198) of her husband and children, it is evident that with the emergence of her new consciousness, things radically change. She is no longer the quiet and submissive wife willing to comply with all of her husband's demands. As Fox-Genovese explains, «Edna's awakening consists, at least partially, in her growing rejection of the prescribed social role of woman, namely, the acquiescent creature of her designated lord and guardian.»³⁴ Thus, when Edna returns from her epiphanic experience as a fully capable swimmer and Léonce entreats her to go indoors to evade the chill of the night, she feels confident enough to reply: «Léonce, go to bed. I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you.» (218) While they are on Grand Isle, Mr. Pontellier does not give too much importance to his wife's negligence of the children or her stubborn refusals to some of his requests. But, predictably, when they return to the more properly social environment of New Orleans, his attitude utterly changes.

In the city, Edna had scrupulously followed since her marriage a programme of social activities that were mostly dictated by her husband's business interests. Now, when they come back from their vacation on Grand Isle, one of Edna's first actions clearly shows that she is not willing to keep up with this ridiculous agenda any longer. On a Tuesday, which was her «reception day,» she decides to go out in the afternoon, leaving no excuse with her servants. When Mr. Pontellier learns about it, he feels consternated:

«Why, my dear, I should think you'd understand by this time that people don't do such things; we've got to observe *les convenances* if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession. If you felt that you had to leave home this afternoon, you should have left some suitable explanation for your absence.» (249)

It is clear, however, that the heroine is not prepared to submit to her husband's

34. Fox-Genovese, «Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*,» 258.

will nor is she interested in keeping up appearances for the sake of society. Despite Léonce's reactions, which range from bewilderment at first, then shock, to anger in the end, there is no way of stopping Edna who, as the narrator declares, «was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world.» (260) Unable to find a solution to what he is beginning to think of as a kind of mental unbalance in his wife, Mr. Pontellier seeks advice in a semi-retired physician, Dr. Mandelet, who is a family friend and bears a reputation for his wisdom in these matters. Although the doctor proves better-intentioned and more understanding than all the other men in the novel, he still mistakes Edna's transformation for a passing whim or a mood that she would be getting over in a few months. Meanwhile, she changes her lifestyle altogether by embracing a new circle of friends, focusing on her work as a painter, and finally deciding to abandon her house on Esplanade Street. All these moves she makes rather impulsively and unreflectively, so when Mlle. Reisz tells her that she does not see her reasons for leaving the family home, the narrator comments:

Neither was it quite clear to Edna herself; but it unfolded itself as she sat for a while in silence. Instinct had prompted her to put away her husband's bounty in casting off her allegiances. She did not know how it would be when he returned. There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would somehow adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself. (295-6)

Though we surely admire all these gestures which underscore Edna's self-determination, the reader is never positive whether the heroine is mature enough in mind and spirit to define her own purposes and give a form to her new selfhood. In fact, the text is sown with images suggesting some sort of romantic incapacity in the central character to accommodate herself to her newly-conquered existential conditions. Probably, the dinner party Edna gives right after moving into the pigeon-house offers some of the most clear examples of this incapacity.

Several commentators of the novel have claimed that Edna's failure to free herself successfully is brought about by «the strength of the social and religious conventions and the biological mystique that entrap her.»³⁵ No doubt, the heroine is very conscious of the pressures working against her true awakening, and sometimes she questions the wisdom of her revolt against those forces. As she confides to Arobin at one point:

«One of these days, I'm going to pull myself together for a while and

35. Jules Chametzky, *Our Decentralized Literature: Cultural Meditations in Selected Jewish and Southern Writers* (Ahmerst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), or *Norton Critical Edition*, 221.

think –try to determine what character of a woman I am, for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it.» (299)

However, the more Edna withdraws from conventional society and listens to the urges of her soul, the more convinced she becomes that one must give up her social self in order to achieve her independence and individuality. When she moves to the pigeon-house, for instance, we are told that «there was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen to the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual.» (317) The problem, as the reader gradually realizes, is that there is a significant dose of self-deception in the heroine's belief that she can become completely self-sufficient. Her moves from the mansion to the little house, then to the suburban garden, and finally into the sea mark the stages of a liberation that is dearly paid by means of the solitude she has to suffer.³⁶ Wendy Martin observes in this regard that «although Edna has freed herself from the domestic imperatives of her husband's house, she becomes ensnared by romantic love, which masquerading as freedom, actually undercuts her possibility of autonomy.»³⁷ Rather than just the social and biological forces, what seems to render all of Edna's efforts to regenerate her individual selfhood futile are her impossible dreams of completeness and total union which, in fact, make her drift further and further from people and reality. In the latter chapters of the novel, the moments of despondency become much more frequent, as she loses her faith in the illusions she so much cherished. And yet, as she admits to Dr. Mandelet right before she receives Robert's good-bye note, «perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life.» (344-5) The heroine's demise is fully convincing because Chopin has managed to make us experience the tensions her dreams and her reality produce in Edna's mind and spirit. Wolkenfeld has correctly concluded about the author's choice of the *dénouement* for the novel that «her realism is inherent in her refusal to endorse the sentimentality of a fairy-tale resolution or the feminist fatalism of presenting Edna as the victim of an oppressive society.»³⁸ Chopin's greatest contribution to the literature of her age was that her female protagonist is eventually faced with a human dilemma quite clearly beyond the «woman's issue» and which demands to be dealt with in surprisingly modernist ways.³⁹

36. Cf. Margaret Culley, «Edna Pontellier: "A Solitary Soul",» in *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. M. Culley (New York: Norton & Co., 1976), 247-51.

37. Wendy Martin, «Introduction» to *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23.

38. Suzanne Wolkenfeld, «Edna's Suicide.» 247.

39. See Michael T. Gilmore, «Revolt Against Nature: The Problematic Modernism of *The*

In order to see how *The Awakening* often transcends the feminist and naturalist paradigms that critics have traditionally used to interpret it, it is essential to pay close attention to Chopin's handling of the question of choice and causation. At various points in my discussion, there have been references to Edna's awareness of a dual sense of selfhood: one, a fictitious and oppressive social self that she wants to put behind in her life; the other, an emergent «free» self that she is trying to develop through the novel. This Bergsonian understanding of the self complicates any analysis of the novel as a pure feminist tract or, alternatively, as a naturalist piece of literature by a «hard determinist» author, since freedom of choice and natural causation are given equal weight. With regard to this anti-monistic escape from previous conceptions of the individual, John Conder has remarked that «this escape is an example of a notable development in American literary naturalism, for it postulates the existence within the individual of two selves, one determined, the other free because irreducible.»⁴⁰ Although Conder only recognizes this more evolved form of naturalism in some twentieth-century writers like Dos Passos or Faulkner, the present writer believes that *The Awakening* already advanced this view of selfhood both as social and as «durational»⁴¹ –i.e., out of chronological– time. Very likely, the formal elements in the novel illustrating this new development are the centrality of the heroine's connections with others and the psychological processing of the events in her existence. Both of these underscore, first, Edna's longing for the consummation of her bodily and spiritual awakening and, then, her recognition of the multiple constraints that are bound to prevent such a consummation. Thus, what the novel offers with one hand in the new form of a feminist idealism, it takes with the other, for as Jacobs explains about the heroine, «she finally perceives herself within a world that while apparently open to her potentialities, remains closed to her deepest wishes and her will.»⁴²

Edna's realization of the possibility of generating a «durational» self transcending her predetermined relations with the world, and her ulterior disillusionment as she becomes conscious of the undesirable consequences of her feat, are best illustrated by looking at her relations with other female characters in the novel and, also, at her varying sense of responsibility towards her children. The heroine is free to choose her relationships with other women, while her two children are a compelling presence she has to live with; however, both of these connections eventually curtail Edna's chances of growing an autonomous selfhood. At first, she is convinced that her female friends can help her develop her newly-sprung identity and set herself free of the restrictions as

Awakening», in *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. by Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially 59-62.

40. John J. Conder, *Naturalism in American Fiction: The Classic Phase* (Lexington, Ken.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 19.

41. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

42. Jacobs, «*The Awakening: A Recognition*,» 80.

a conventional mother-wife. Nevertheless, the alternative roles that these women represent are not acceptable for Edna, who has lived through passions too intense to confine herself to the ordinary experiences and responsibilities of adult life. Gilbert has explained about her cultivation of these relationships that

none of these efforts succeeds in yielding what we might call an open space in the plot where Edna finds herself, and none is equal to the intensity of what is by now quite clearly the metaphysical desire that has made the heroine into, as Chopin's original title put it, «a solitary soul.»⁴³

If we add to Edna's rejection of these models her late realization that Nature does not provide for the consummation of her dreams of perfect fusion –the children being the living proof of this tenet–, it is not difficult to see the inevitability of her final act of self-destruction. After having been delighted by so many visions of human possibility, the protagonist is unable to admit limitations as part and parcel of the human condition.

The two female characters who initiate Edna into the world of sensuality and spiritual freedom are, respectively, Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Even before Edna's love rituals with Robert start, M. Ratignolle has already triggered off in her the capacity to respond sensuously to people and the environment. A very special bond is established between them that sometimes makes them resemble a pair of lovers:

Edna did not reveal so much as all this to Madame Ratignolle that summer day when they sat with faces turned to the sea. But a good part of it escaped her. She had put her head down on Madame Ratignolle's shoulder. She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom. (198-99)

However, presented as the epitome of the «mother-woman,» «the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams» (182), Adèle gradually becomes much more of a maternal figure to the motherless Edna than a female lover.⁴⁴ As her warnings to Robert clearly show, she sees the heroine as someone vulnerable and in need of protection who is in fact undergoing an untimely awakening to adolescent passions. Although Edna is grateful for her friend's affections and words of encouragement during the tumultuous initial moments of her self-realization, it soon transpires that there is no way in which Adèle will be able to help her in her quest from the position she occupies in society. This fact becomes most conspicuous when the Ratignolles also return to New Orleans and Adèle wholeheartedly resumes her place as a «mother-woman.» After one of her visits, when she walks away from the Ratignolles's place in the city,

43. Gilbert, «The Second Coming,» 30.

44. See Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 73-74.

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. (258)

The protagonist, the narrator comments, feels commiseration for her friend who, confined to this comfortable but colorless existence, will «never have a taste of life's delirium.» (258) Ironically, as the story moves on, this feeling of pity changes direction and it is Adèle who begins to see Edna as the victim of an existence that she is not able to control. Soon after she has moved into the pigeon-house, Mme. Ratignolle comes to her assistance: «In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life.» (320) Quite clearly, the breach between the two close friends becomes ever larger, to the point where they fail to communicate in their conversations.⁴⁵ Their worlds are so far apart that Edna can no longer think of Adèle as someone who would comprehend the kind of torture she is going through. As a matter of fact, the latter unwittingly becomes the heroine's ultimate torturer when she asks her to wait on her through the delivery of her fourth baby and, after the painful experience, exhorts her to «Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!» (343)

Although Mme. Ratignolle also introduces Edna to the world of the fine arts and is very enheartening to her in the protagonist's first attempts at painting, it is really Mlle. Reisz who makes her understand the true potentials of the artistic soul. While Adèle's musical performances—as seen in her *soirées musicales*—are highly conventional and tame, moving along the lines of her motherly nature and female decorum, the older lady's art is much more intense and disturbing. As has been pointed out above, a good deal of Edna's original sexual and spiritual arousal is brought about by listening to Mlle. Reisz's musical strains on the piano:

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. (209)

Each time Edna sits to listen to the eccentric woman's executions of Chopin's or

45 . Particularly representative in this regard is the argument that Edna and Adèle hold a short time before both families leave the summer resort on the isle over the question of what is «essential» and what is «inessential» in one's life (Ch.16, 244). At this point, it is already quite apparent to the reader that these two women understand the situation and needs of their sex in almost exactly opposite terms and that, therefore, they expect very different things from their lives.

Wagner's pieces, her soul feels strengthened and her repressed passion for Robert is set free. Again, the heroine's responsiveness to the sensuality of her art fosters in Mlle. Reisz a sort of infatuation that, as Showalter has claimed, makes her behave as a «surrogate lover.»⁴⁶ Yet, Edna herself confesses to the old pianist that she is not sure «whether I like you or not.» (267) Reisz is a social renegade living on her own that is perceived by most of her friends and neighbors as «partially demented.» Although the protagonist admires her art and her self-assertiveness, she cannot bring herself to think of this little lady but as a kind of tutor or advisor that may help her to become an artist.⁴⁷ Unlike Adèle, however, Mlle. Reisz is a tough master that repeatedly questions Edna's aspirations:

«I do not know you well enough to say. I do not know your talent or your temperament. 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.» (269)

Although the pianist is happy to see that Edna's spirit is daringly fighting –like hers once was– to break free from social conventions, Mlle. Reisz is probably aware of the heroine's psychological weaknesses, and as a result, rather doubtful about her capacity to succeed. In fact, her words to Edna ring a rather ominous note when she assures her that «The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.» (300) Hence, it is no surprise that one of the last images that come back to Edna's mind just before she drowns in the waters of the Gulf should be that of the old pianist who had been so insistent on the fatal consequences that her dreams of independence could bring to her:

How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew!
«And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.» (351)

Both Mme. Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz play a crucial role in Edna's sexual and spiritual awakening, and, consciously or unconsciously, both are instrumental to the heroine's rejection of the social codes that had hindered her individual development in the past. The old pianist in particular, who has suffered in her own flesh the consequences

46. Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 75.

47. For a most detailed and insightful analysis of this relationship, see Lynda S. Boren, «Taming the Sirens: Self-Possession and the Strategies of Art in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.» in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, ed. by Lynda Boren and Sara de Saussure (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), especially, 190-3.

of violating many of the same codes, reveals a strength of character and resolution that Edna looks up to. Edna would also like to have the necessary will power to direct her life to whatever objectives she sets for herself. Martha Black has contended, however, that

Although aroused by the older woman's music and envious of her freedom to pursue her artistic interests, Edna does not want to emulate Mlle. Reisz's lonely life any more than she wants to accept a life like Adèle's as a brood hen.⁴⁸

Eventually, neither of these two women can really help Edna in the last stages of her self-realization, because each of them responds to a prototype of the domestic or the outcast female that she finds extremely restricting and inadequate to complete her regeneration. The problem is, of course, that when she discards these options of female development she is forced to look for an alternative plot for her life. At this point, faced with the difficult task of providing her existence with a certain direction, Edna becomes an easy prey for forces beyond her control. Her intellectual and psychological frailty come to the surface in the last part of the novel when we discover her utter incapacity to handle in mature and practical ways the problems reality poses to her.⁴⁹ When romantic exaltation is over and she must make the fundamental effort to organize her experience and try to learn from it, Edna feels confused and even paralyzed. As Hockman notes, «Far from moving toward articulation in the course of her experience, Edna progressively refuses the orderly sequences and the constraining forms not only of social reality but of language itself.»⁵⁰ Her conversations with Robert and Dr. Mandelet in the closing chapters of the book reveal the protagonist's failure to give a meaningful use to everything she has learnt about her own nature and that of reality. Unlike Chopin herself, who managed to merge in the novel both the exalted moments of liberation (feminism) and the constraining elements of life and narrative structure (naturalism), Edna is not capable of envisioning an acceptable plot for her life and so she finally gives up.

Although Robert's failure to accept Edna's new «position in the universe» and his eventual disloyalty are primary causes of her defeat, the last part of the novel centers on the heroine's brutal re-awakening to her inescapable circumstances. Throughout most of the book, Edna struggles to emerge from behind the social self that her relations

48. Martha Fodaski Black, «The Quintessence of Chopinism», in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, ed. by Lynda S. Boren and Sara de Saussure (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1992), 111.

49. A similar conclusion is reached by Carol Wershoven in her book *Child Brides and Intruders* where she remarks that, «Dissatisfied within society, she [Edna] leaves it, only to find the loneliness unbearable. For her, there is to be no reconciliation of inner desires and external demands, no emergence of a new being who can confront society and create a new place within it.» p. 188. See also Suzanne Wolkenfeld, «Edna's Suicide,» 243-46.

50. Barbara Hockman, «*The Awakening & The House of Mirth*,» 218.

with others have defined for her. In order to do so, she needs to cut some strong ties with her family, her husband and his social circle, and even her children, all of whom she seems to regard as accessory elements preventing her from evolving into her new selfhood. As she tells Adèle Ratignolle at one point,

«I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something that I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.» (244)

For some time, Edna succeeds in freeing herself from this ballast that has kept her from sailing toward more open horizons. She makes her new conditions clear to her father, husband, and friends, and begins to organize her life as her new identity dictates it. However, although she is also relieved of her children by their paternal grandmother, in her moments of solitude Edna's conscience starts to question her right to deprive the boys of a mother's care and protection. After she visits them for a week in Iberville,

It was with a wrench and a pang that Edna left her children. She carried away with her the sound of their voices and the touch of their cheeks. All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was again alone. (319)

It is true that while she is busy with the preparations for her new life, she is mostly unaware of their absence. But when she witnesses Adèle's childbirth, her uncertainties come to a crisis and her confidence in the possibility of a complete independence falls to pieces. When after the dreadful experience, Dr. Mandelet suggests that she should go abroad with her husband, she replies: «...I don't want to go abroad. I want to be let alone. Nobody had any right –except children, perhaps– and even then, it seems to me –or it did seem–.» (344) Evidently, after seeing Adèle's delivery, many of Edna's dreams of autonomy and romantic union with the beloved collapse. As the old physician explains to her, those illusions are just «a provision of Nature, a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions...» (344). In a highly naturalist manner, Edna comes to see that although she may not be accountable for the expectations placed upon her by her husband, her lover, or any of the other grownups in her life, she is still very much responsible for her children. This realization puts an end to the heroine's hope for total fusion beyond social restrictions and brings her back to her real circumstances. Barbara Hochman has argued about this re-awakening that «Pregnancy and birth constitute a kind of natural trope for the notion of time running out. Edna's suicide itself can be seen as a refusal to reenter the cycle of sexuality and birth that makes the presence of 'a little new life'

inescapable.»⁵¹ By the time Edna takes her final walk down to the beach, she is convinced that there is only one way in which she can possibly elude the overpowering presence of her children.

The heroine's suicide at the close of the novel has unquestionably been the most controversial subject in the criticism of Chopin's masterpiece to our day. The main reason for the exacerbated debates over the significance of Edna's demise is probably that while readers can deal with a fiction that ambiguously fluctuates between different positions, they still expect the author to take a more decisive stance when the story is coming to an end. Of course, nothing of this kind happens in *The Awakening* which keeps the balance between images of hope and renewal, and those of despair and oppression to the very last paragraph:

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, 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. (351)

While in this case the passage reverses the direction of the protagonist's emotional shifts, that is, she moves from fright and constraint towards romantic images of childhood and freedom, still the ambivalent effect produced in the reader is very much the same. Now, problems are bound to appear when the critic tries to load Edna's death with connotations that are nowhere apparent in the text.⁵² It may be true that, as Sullivan and Smith have argued, «[the] complex narrative technique encourages its reader to project their own fantasies in the novel.»⁵³ Nonetheless, these (post)modern entreaties to have one's readers participating in the production of meanings of the work of art does not equal in any way a complete subjectivism in interpretation. To claim that Edna's final immersion in the ocean marks her last step in her symbolic regeneration into a new selfhood or, contrarily, that it is the punishment for having transgressed the current codes of femininity is to miss the most essential and original point of the novel. This is, as I have intended to show in my discussion, that both Chopin and her heroine wade along fictional and ideological traditions that while seemingly adverse may ultimately

51. Hochman, «*The Awakening & The House of Mirth*,» 230.

52. George Spangler's article «Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: A Partial Dissent» seems a case in point since this critic finds the protagonist's development through the novel and her «pathetic» death completely inconsistent. Spangler argues that this ending is only explicable as an attempt on the author's part to satisfy both sentimental and moralistic readers: «What happened was that Mrs. Chopin provided a conclusion for a novel other than the one she wrote, a conclusion for a novel much more conventional and much less interesting than *The Awakening*,» 209.

53. Sullivan and Smith, «Narrative Stance,» 75.

be brought to complement and enhance each other. Paula Treichler notes in this regard that «this process of cumulative association—this intricate and increasingly paradoxical interweaving of meanings—radically changes their impact. Whatever we accept as the meaning of the novel must take into account this process of transformation.»⁵⁴ Chopin's main achievement in *The Awakening* is to have been able to aesthetically encompass in a single novel cultural, political, and fictional traditions that for most of her contemporaries were mutually exclusive. The richness of her creation lies in the ways in which we see those different worldviews interacting with and transforming, first, the heroine and, then, each other.

To conclude, I hope to have made clear that Chopin's novel should occupy an important space both in feminist scholarship and in the broader tradition of *fin-de-siècle* American writing. One discovers with some regret, though, that the latest book-length contributions to the research on the period rarely include studies of Chopin's novel, as their working definitions of naturalism remain too narrow.⁵⁵ Until those outdated definitions are not opened to cover more varied perceptions and expressions of life at the turn of the century, our vision of the fiction of the period will be necessarily blurred and limited. Donald Pizer has definitely hit the nail on the head when he has recently argued that what we need—both critically and historically—is

a flexible concept of naturalism as a tendency or impulse reflecting the various ways in which human freedom is limited or circumscribed and the various ways in which this truth is made palatable by combining it with traditional notions of human worth...⁵⁶

Although it is a fact that the critic runs some risks by bringing into the canon of this tradition works of fiction that do not immediately fit into the patterns so long prescribed as laying down its nature, it is not less true that it is «liminal» novels produced on the boundaries between «orthodox» naturalist literature and some other trends that will allow us to test the accuracy of some of the representative aspects of the movement. Thus, for instance, my study of *The Awakening* has revealed that a naturalist piece of fiction does not need to preclude the appearance of free will and human possibilities.

54. Treichler, «The Construction of Ambiguity,» 268.

55. See, for example, John J. Conder, *Naturalism in American Fiction: The Classic Phase* (Lexington, Ken.: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), or Lee Clark Mitchell, *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) all of which concentrate on the works of the canonical naturalist authors, e.g., Crane, Norris, London, or Dreiser.

56. Donald Pizer, «The Study of American Literary Naturalism: A Retrospective Overview,» in *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism: Selected Essays and Reviews*, ed. by D. Pizer (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 9.

Although Edna finally proves psychologically too frail to manage correctly her opportunities to complete her self-realization, those opportunities are still available to her. In fact, Martin notes about the heroine's confusion when she sees her chances of self-determination radically reduced that «although this psychological indeterminacy sometimes borders on incoherence or chaos, it also creates a sense of possibility, of new beginnings and new social scenarios.»⁵⁷ As has been stated above, the substantial feminist component of Chopin's novel gains impetus by the fact that the ideals exposed in it are not so easily materialized as in some of her contemporary utopian fiction. Likewise, in terms of form, while it is evident that *The Awakening* displays a number of features present in more conventional naturalist novels, such as repetitions or a fallacious idealist diction,⁵⁸ it has been noted that a significant psychological ingredient is added. However, far from being detrimental to the overall realism of the work, this fairly innovative ingredient –Crane and Dreiser also made an effective use of it– helps the reader to determine the inner and outer forces that make the protagonist's existence eventually unbearable. In short, I agree with a handful of scholars who have described Chopin's novel as a fictional and ontological «borderland» –or transitional territory– where one can find both the human potential to project illusions and change conditions, and the controlling forces that will be limiting those possibilities.

57. Martin, «Introduction» to *New Essays*, p. 27.

58. Cf. Mittlell, *Determined Fictions*.