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Edna Flirting With Chance: A Feminist and Deconstructionist Interpretation of Chopin's The Awakening

A lot of novels invite the reader to see the life of a character and judge for themselves if the character's decisions are right or wrong; in a way this is the equivalent of the traditional museum tour to intellectually observe a series of paintings. Kate Chopin's novel presents a series of vignettes in which the main character and the reader experiment an awakening; the latter's reaction is most likely provoked by the end of the novel in opposition to Edna's—the main character—strongest argument. She says, "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." (p. 69) The first part of the argument sounds reasonable and conventional, or appropriate for a mother. However, the last part of this phrase, "*but I wouldn't give myself*" is not congruent with the first part; it resonates in the back of the reader's mind perhaps as loud and frequent as, "is Edna's death on purpose or an accident?" Continuing with the metaphor of the museum, Chopin's novel is the equivalent of a more interactive installation that allows the reader/participant to speak against or for Edna as a mother and woman. I was itching during my first reading, because I noticed that the author never mentioned that Edna Pontellier and other characters took a shower after bathing in the ocean. I associated this itchiness with the concern that Edna was probably going to cheat on her husband with Robert.

At first, the phrase "but I wouldn't give myself" made me think that she would not

give up her life for her children since she seemed like such a bad mother. But when Edna expanded her explanation to Madame Ratignolle about giving or sacrificing herself, "I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me," I started to understand Edna a little bit more. I would never give my life for anybody other than my son, and I would never kill, commit suicide, steal money or do something stupid in the name of love or friendship. This reasoning, which is "telling" the reader what Edna believes instead of "showing" is very important, since it summarizes what is going on in Edna's head, and it also reminds the reader that this is a philosophical and religious argument. Madame Ratignolle answers that she does not understand what Edna means when she says "unessential," and then she adds, "but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that--your Bible tells you so." (69-70) Even though this dialogue represents a deep reflexion and a premonition of what Edna would do at the end, both women are cheerful and laughing. Edna ends the topic of this conversation by assuring that a woman was able to do more than *give her life for her children*, "Oh, yes you could!" In the movie version, Edna acts more responsible than in the novel, even Robert pays more attention to the children than she does, and Madame Ratignolle believes that Edna is a good mother. In the novel, Edna's worries less about a sick child, she does not interact with the boys too much, and she feels very happy when they go to visit their paternal grandmother. Then, what does she mean when she says she would give the "unessential" up? Does she mean that "unessential" are money and her children? Or herself as an independent woman?

Edna and I have several characteristics in common, we are both mothers, wives whose first language and dominant culture are different from those of our husbands, we both are bad swimmers, and struggle to produce art. However, in my first reading, I easily took Madame Ratignolle's point of view, because I did not agree with Edna's behavior in general, and I kept thinking about Madame Ratignolle's answer to Edna, if you give your life, what else can you give for your children? On my second reading I took Edna's perspective and this change brought more questions than answers, "Was the end of the novel the result of Edna's new found free will?" "Is chance, and not Robert, Edna's real love?" In the following pages, I aim to answer these two questions from two intellectual approaches—feminism and deconstructionism—with the support of my first and second readings. Feminism represents the opposite view of Madame Ratignolle, which may bring more light about Edna's way of thinking. Since I was afraid to take Edna's perspective, because I considered her a bad mother and later I found more spiritual and philosophical angle to the novel, I decided to take the risk of using feminism, even if this approach does not represent my usual point of departure. Deconstructionism represents also a fresh platform for me, but it will allow the examination of opposite answers to the questions.

Feminism

Edna Pontellier does not label herself as feminist in the novel or the movie, but it is possible to apply feminist theory to The Awakening and its cinematic version, Grand Isle. In her article "Choice is the Power of Feminism," Ali P. Crown starts with the

frequently heard expression, "*I'm not a feminist, but*" Fill in the blank: I agree that men and women should earn equal pay . . . I believe that sexism still exists . . ."

Women are different, therefore feminists are different too, argues Crown; and feminists do not necessarily hate men since it takes time and effort to focus on one issue, "[m]ost of us are too busy doing more important things. Neither do we wish we were men. On the contrary, we celebrate our womanhood."²

Even if Edna does not belong to an activist movement, rants about men, or searches for equal civil, economic, and social rights, she still acts as a feminist in several ways. She starts by not paying too much attention to her children, or at least pay the same attention that her husband pays to them; he finds out that one of the boys has a fever and he does not move a finger to treat the fever, and she acts in the same manner. Léonce, her husband, spends more time at the club than with the Edna and the children when he is in Grand Isle, while she spends her time with Robert and Madame Ratignolle. In New Orleans, Léonce pays more attention to his business and she spends more time perfecting her drawing and painting skills, as well as visiting with her friends. Léonce wants Edna to follow the social rules of receiving callers at the same time her husband does, but she stops receiving them and even goes out when he is busy with his visitors. Léonce stays at home in New Orleans during the summer and goes to New York for months. The readers do not know what he actually does at clubs, during his lengthy stays at home and up north, but even if he has affairs people around

1 Emphasis added.

2 In this article Ali P. Crown sees feminism as the fight for equal rights and salary and that if women want that to happen, then they need to enter the political movement. Since her main point is to allow all points of view into the feminist community, she accepts that there is no one definition of the modern feminist.

him and the readers contemporary to the first publication of the novel would not take Léonce's affairs as offensive and morally scandalous as Edna's two affairs and her independent living. She hosts a dinner party by herself and talks loudly. She generates her own money by selling her art work. She also attends horse races, bets and talks about horses with men and women.

When Léonce consults with the family doctor about Edna's new personality, the first symptom he describes is more of a complaint about her performance as a house wife than a physiological or mental disorder, "[s]he lets the housekeeping go to the dickens." (p. 88) Then Léonce explains to Doctor Mandelet little by little his wife's new behavior, and the doctor responds by telling the husband that all women are different; but then the doctor inquires about her female friends and associations,

"Has she," asked the Doctor, with a smile, "has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings? My wife has been telling me about them."

"That's the trouble," broke in Mr. Pontellier, "she hasn't been associating with any one. She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark. I tell you she's peculiar. I don't like it; I feel a little worried over it."³ (88)

Contrary to the "little worried over" his wife behavior, Léonce must be desperate since he is consulting with the doctor without talking to Edna. Mr. Pontellier probably

³ Léonce says that he rarely gets sick and he believes his health comes from his Creole heritage. He also argues that his wife genetic make is very strong and healthy.

spoke to Madelet first because he does not trust his wife, or perhaps because both doctor and husband are Creoles. In any case, the doctor recommends that Edna go to her sister's wedding and to be left alone. Based on Susan Faludi, Crown explains that the fear of feminism resembles a "perpetual viral condition;' that every time women achieve something, the fear appears again." When the doctor deduces that Edna does not suffer from "feminism," then he continues his "in absentia" diagnosis. "Don't bother her, and don't let her bother you. Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism—a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar." The naturalist perspective of Madelet makes him see Edna as a strange creature or organism. According to Mandelet the best name for her condition is "peculiar," and its cure is out of reach for him and his field, and even a regular psychologist. He speculates that "[i]t would require an inspired psychologist" to deal with Edna. Fortunately, this condition will go away if Léonce lets his wife alone. (p. 89)

This prescribed solitude turns out great for Edna. Not only Léonce leaves, but also her children go with their grandmother, Robert goes to Mexico, Madame Ratignolle decides to stop their friendship, and even the servants do not have that much contact with her. Even before the doctor recommends solitude, Edna starts her own isolation from her husband, her sisters and her father, and the high society of New Orleans. Elaine Showalter mentions that the full name of Chopin's novel is The Awakening: A Solitary Soul, and that "Edna pictures solitude as an alien, masculine, and rightening, a naked man standing beside a 'desolate rock' by the sea." In contrast, at the end "she

has claimed a solitude that is defiantly feminine” by going back to Grand Isle during the off-season, “to stand naked and 'absolutely alone' by the shore, and to elude 'the soul's slavery' by plunging into the sea's embrace.” (p. 203)

Edna's model of self sufficiency is Mademoiselle Reisz., who is a musician, a real artist as she reaffirms, lives by herself and does as she pleases. Solitude and free will seem to go together, since being alone frees Edna of her role as a mother and wife, as well as a member of the Creole society and a member of either the Presbyterian or Catholic Church.

When Edna finally consummates her affair with Alcée, he wants to continue seeing her but she rejects him. Then, why did Edna have sex with Alcée? Perhaps to imitate men or to explore one front in which men are not criticized for, but women are. In the first episode of the television adaptation of Sex and The City, a book by Candice Bushnell, the women set themselves up to have sex like a man: men use women for sex and then they leave without remorse. It seems that Edna is using Alcée in with the same purpose that Bushnell's four women had one hundred years later.⁴ In Grand Isle, the 1992 movie adaptation of Chopin's novel, one of the most dramatic moments is the scene with Edna and her two men in her living room. She must decide what to do: choose Robert, with whom she is apparently in love; or choose Alcée who means sex and the conquest of the greatest Don Juan of the region. She decides to stay with Robert, because Alcée means less freedom for her at that moment.

Then, when Edna has the opportunity to stay with Robert and have sex with him,

4 Bushnell a series of essays under the title Sex and The City in 1997. The HBO show started a year later. During the first episode the main character, Carry Bradshaw, proposes to her three friends to start having sex like men, instead of suffering too much to find real love.

she chooses to visit Madame Ratignolle when she is giving birth. The friendship with Adèle Ratignolle is possible, even if Adèle and Edna have philosophical and religious discrepancies. Labor pains are intense and giving birth is perhaps one way of giving yourself for your children. At the time, the decade of 1890, a pregnancy represented a great chance for the women to die during labor. Edna had two children, while her friend had twice as many. Maybe, this way of giving yourself up was unnecessary and “unessential” according to Edna; maybe swimming into the deep ocean and disappearing was less painful and more solitary than giving birth. Procreating another child to take a chance at death means to create more responsibility and another soul that she can hurt. Edna knows that she will not see Adèle again and talk freely about her thoughts like she did when they both were by the bathhouses in the island.

The real solitude and real freedom for Edna finally takes shape when she goes to Grand Isle by herself. All her ties and responsibilities are now erased or they may not be the same in the future, if there is one. Gone are her roles as mother, wife, relative, best friend, sex partner, lover, church-goer, Bible-reader, etcetera. She asks Mariequita and Victor for food, but she does not consume it; instead, she goes into the ocean. This seems to be a sign of cutting her need for food, but actually searching for food for her soul. The moment Edna knows she will drown herself in the Gulf waters, she begins thinking about her family, herself as an artist and lover. Next, she says to her sons, "Good-by--because I love you." (pl. 139) Clearly, she is thinking about the little boys, not about her lovers.

My interpretation of the end is that she did not want her children to live with the

stigma of having a “peculiar” mother that had affairs with two men and was not able to demonstrate that she was a real artist. She gave herself so that her boys would have a dead mother with a bad reputation—which by the time they are adults it may disappeared—instead of a living mother with the worst reputation, in other words: a woman who depends on other people's opinion. If she loved her children to the point of committing suicide, then why did she have affairs and lived a “peculiar” life? Perhaps because her first love was chance and defiance. She married Léonce against her father's will, not because she was in love with him. Was her suicide a way to prove Adèle that she was able to give her life, art, and reputation for her children?

Deconstructionism

In “What Is Deconstructionism?” Ross C. Murfin explains that deconstructionism may work with other critical literary approaches, such as feminism, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and orientalism for example. (p. 303-306) First, I will examine a few words that show contradiction in the novel. In order to have a more cohesive discussion in this paper, at the end of this section I will review the conclusion of the feminist perspective and provide the opposite view.

Jorge Luis Borges used to say that if you are writing about love, the word that you should avoid in your text is love. Following this advise, I searched for the words love, free will, feminism, and suicide in The Awakening. Only **love** appears in the novel and it more than a dozen times, as a noun and as a verb. Instead of looking for philosophical and religious conceptualizations, I decided to compare opposite

characters. Edna and Adèle are friends, but they are very different from one another. Edna is not pretty—at least not as pretty as her friend—, she is a non-Creole, Presbyterian from Kentucky, and she is indiscreet. She represents chance, searching for meaning and awakening to a new philosophy. While Adèle is beautiful, Creole, Catholic from Louisiana, discreet, and signifies the premeditated and planned life, a woman who follows society's rules, who has received her culture's wisdom from her elders and does not need a new philosophy, because she knows what she is, she is a mother, wife, gate-keeper of *les convenances*—the appearances, the decorum, and good image among Creoles.

Edna represents chance and free will, but she does not act in an irresponsible way at all times. In the film Grand Isle, Edna and Robert never show affection for each other in front of her children, at least the boys never see neither understand their mother's desire to kiss Robert.⁵ The most lyric scene in the novel and the film is Robert and Edna's trip to Grande Terre island at Madame Antoine's home, which is place where she cannot be seen by the children or her husband. She also has her affair with Alcée Arobin when her children are with their grandmother and Léonce is in New York. Edna's indiscretions start since the very beginning and Adèle knows it, but for the Creole society the real indiscretion starts when she stops receiving callers at home on Tuesdays and her lack of interest in keeping the house ready for visits. This is the reason why her husband tells this symptom first to Doctor Mandelet, "[s]he lets the housekeeping go to the dickens." (p. 88)

⁵ In the first five minutes of the movie, Léonce sees that something is going on between his wife and his landlady's son, but he does not say anything.

Edna does not choose her challenges at random as it seems; before she married Léonce she made sure that he was in love with her, or at least that she was going to be treated like a queen and they were going to have a stable economic situation. Robert flirted with Edna just like he did with Adèle, but Edna did not fight for the relationship until she knew that Robert loved her. Similarly, she made sure first that Alcé was the most famous Don Juan in New Orleans, before she had a sexual relationship with him.

Adèle pretends to be the paramount of Creole married women, but in reality she also enjoys Robert's company and her indiscreet friend's stories. Adèle seems to be comfortable with her philosophical, religious, marital and familial status, but the scene by the bathhouses tells us that she also wonders about a life with less ties and worries. This is probably why she is constantly sick or acting in a delicate manner, because this is the way she achieves some solitude in her daily life. Her husband probably followed Doctor Mandelet's prescription of letting her alone from time to time.

The fact that Adèle keeps her friendship with Edna and that she calls her when her labor pains start tell us that Madame Ratignolle does not have all her life planned as it looks. Perhaps because it is God who has planned her life and not her, and because she recognizes that one cannot interfere with free will. When the two women are discerning about sacrificing themselves for their children, Adèle reminds Edna, that her point of view is also found in Edna's bible. Adèle will only explain and suggest, but not impose her culture onto Edna.

As mentioned before, Adèle is the good mother and Edna the bad one. Edna does not take care of her boys because she has servants to do that, and at Grand Isle

Robert helps to keep them busy and safe. Léonce is not as young as Edna and much less Robert, which makes the latter a better companion for the kids. If Edna had to choose among her lovers, she chose Robert because the boys knew him and it would not be too difficult for them to see their mother with the young man, who practically babysits them when they play at the beach. Adèle has several children and cannot take care of them at all times since she is always pale and allegedly sick. Why does she keep having babies when her health is always fragile? In the last analysis, Adèle is more irresponsible than Edna because she claims she would give herself for her children, but they may grow up without her just because she is always sick and busy giving birth.

Did Edna plan to end her life? Probably no. The end suggests that she found herself in a situation in which she was tired and was not able to go back to the shoreline, besides she was not an experienced swimmer. She went there in the first place only to think deeply about herself and her situation; but, as with her other endeavors and challenges, she obtained more than what she was looking for. She accepted her irresponsibility and made peace with her children and herself in her mind. Did she go to the island to think about Robert, because she loved him? Probably yes. If she was planning to live by herself, with her children and lover, and suddenly that outcome of her situation is impossible, then she had to rethink her life and how to retrace her steps to go back to her children and husband.

Evaluation

The two questions that I aimed to answer, "Was the end of the novel the result of

Edna's new found free will?" and "Is chance, and not Robert, Edna's real love?" were not easy to answer. Other approaches that may help in answering these questions would be symbolism and psychoanalysis.

I used deconstructionism because it took me a few weeks to prepare my presentation about Derrida. When the semester started, I was afraid of using feminism in literature, however, after listening to Peggy Wallace's presentation about feminism and her comment about the struggles of some feminist who did not want to be men-haters; and discussing this point in Blackboard, I decided that I had to work to conquer my fear. Last week, Timothy Towslee posted on his status in Facebook that he "wouldn't mind it if *The Awakening* disappeared into oblivion for another seventy years," and finished with, "[s]orry, feminists." In the same way I told my students at the hospital that they had to learn how to say, "I have cancer" in Spanish even if they did not have cancer, but they had to know it in case their cancer patients needed to express that, I felt that I had to go ahead and learn about feminism and deconstructionism and pretend in an essay that I was from both communities of literary critics. Actually, that I was a literary critic. I hope that after simulating criticism, I will be a critic.

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