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The self as solitary soul

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The Self as
Solitary Soul

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The Self as Solitary Soul

by

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Abstract

In this master's thesis, I trace Edna Pontellier's relation to art to show how this medium invites Edna to access passion about her self and her life, which has been suppressed by patriarchal institutions like marriage and motherhood. Her "awakening" occurs on various levels: sexual, physical, spiritual, and creative. Yet none of these "awakenings" prove as useful as those which seek to move Edna forward while simultaneously inviting her to return to a figurative home, constructed by her self and her desire for art. With the assistance of Luce Irigaray, in particular, I attempt to construct a dialogue among Kate Chopin, Edna Pontellier, and Luce Irigaray about what the self means, how it relates to art, and how it moves Edna to persist in her "awakening" even after death.

Introduction: Woman Artist, Know Thyself

She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself.

--*The Awakening* (1899), Kate Chopin

Of key importance in this passage is the stultification of the heroine's "thoughts and emotions." As a twenty-eight-year-old woman in the late-nineteenth century, Edna Pontellier's self is narrowly prescribed and defined by Victorian social standards, which ill-fit her with the roles of mother and wife. Since her innermost "thoughts and emotions" are never prompted or encouraged by other individuals in her life, Edna does not participate in "struggles" relevant to the cultivation of a true self; instead, she remains static throughout most of her life until she begins to awaken to the possibility that these "thoughts and emotions... belonged to her and were her own." Her recognition in this passage, positioned halfway through the novel, serves as a pivotal moment in Edna's life as she awakens to "the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself." Such reclamation of these thoughts and emotions, and her eventual possession and protection of these intangible aspects of her life, signal an attempted maturation and identification of self, free from narrowly-assigned roles or insufficient social constructs of who she as a woman should be.

Not easily named or even identified, the self eludes Edna for the greater portion of her life. She is unable to exactly define what the self means and how it assists her work and her art in productive and liberating ways. Part of this struggle is due to the suppression of her "thoughts and emotions" for much of her womanhood. Since these were "never voiced," we can rightfully conclude that they were often "silenced" by

patriarchy in the guise of her father first and her husband last. While Chopin does not specifically offer a definition of self, she nevertheless attempts to provide one via Edna's engagement with the sea, art, and intimate relationships. These three avenues point to a more knowable self for Edna and the reader simultaneously. Chopin, in fact, attempts that most liberating of ventures for women which Luce Irigaray then expedites courageously and radically in her feminist theories. Irigaray extends Chopin's move towards female liberation by seeking to disband dominant ways of communicating and posits, instead, a discourse which allows women like Edna to give voice to themselves and speak together as collective Woman, not just as fragmented women speaking the same coded language of patriarchy.

Edna approaches the delicate task of attaining self-knowledge through art, a hobby of hers which develops into a passion and eventually becomes fused with a radical purpose: to understand what it means to possess a sense of self, as well as the "courageous soul... the brave soul... the soul that dares and defies" a socially-constructed and all-too-easily identifiable self (61). Chopin's subtle consideration of passion mixed with art, underscored by female individuality and rebellion against patriarchy, culminate in an anti-naturalist move away from the only available work for women—i.e., reproduction, mothering. The woman artist's full investment in this passion and art render a greater form of work available, one that transcends the status quo and moves towards an engaging process which provides both product and pleasure.

Though Chopin attempts to approach and offer a clear definition of "self," the term lacks stability and is not easily categorized—evident even today among feminists as a whole, and feminist poets and writers specifically. In "When Our Lips Speak

Together,” the closing chapter of *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray invites us to “invent our own phrases” (215). With this inducement in mind, I, too, will attempt to invent my own conception of “self,” informed primarily by Kate Chopin and Luce Irigaray, yet also enlightened by Susan Willis and Virginia Woolf.

Returning Home to the Fluidity of Self

For both Chopin and Irigaray, the self involves retaining individuality while embracing fluidity of experience; sharing oneself but respecting oneself enough not to compromise that self while sharing an experience with another; staying true to that Self, not just pleasing the Other; honoring that self by remaining true to one’s personhood without succumbing to absolute truths, patriarchal ideologies, or social constructs; engaging in estimable acts that solidify the self as a whole person, not just a fragmented social construct who engages continually in self-sacrificing acts; cultivating an awareness of one’s likes and dislikes, passions and pleasures, capabilities and challenges. Both Chopin and Irigaray propose that the self not belong to the Other, that the self not remain silent, and that the self not remain static in its pursuits of pleasure, joy, and creativity. Extending this definition of self is Irigaray’s concern with the self “being moved” the strong sense of “never [being finished]” with those duties unique to woman (210). While the self is concerned with returning to safety (i.e., home, or the body as home), it also progresses forward to the unknown and as yet unexamined life, evolving into a more complete person in the process. Irigaray clarifies that the self is not engaged, however, in “mov[ing] indefinitely far from yourself... return[ing] closed, impenetrable” (210). While Edna “want[s] to swim far out, where no woman had swum before,” she does not return “closed” or “impenetrable.” Rather, she returns liberated and aware to “the body

as home for the self” (346), to draw on the theoretical formulations of Susan Willis in her essay “Work[ing] Out” (1990). This liberated body and soul which the self achieves thus renders a “home for the self” that is constructed by the self, not the Other.

Chopin’s ideal self never fully comes to fruition in Edna who demonstrates that one’s life is never complete since it can be abbreviated by death. Similarly, Irigaray asserts that we are never finished being born: “the birth is never accomplished” (217). While Chopin and Irigaray concur on this point of the unfinished self, they diverge as Irigaray reads the unfinished self more optimistically and productively, arguing that there is a joy in never completing that evolution of the fully-realized self (217). Irigaray intimates that only death can silence or prevent our “thoughts and emotions” from being “voiced.” She posits: “only the limiting effect of time can make us stop speaking to each other. Don’t worry. I—continue” (217). The continuation of this act—“inventing our own phrases,” cultivating a new language to transcend gendered barriers—offers hope beyond mortality. Even death offers a new birth into an unknown eternal sphere. If we allow death or any experience to preclude communication, “if we separate ourselves that way” by “break[ing] ourselves up into parts,” then “we ‘all’ stop being born” (217). The cessation of birth thus invites the silencing of women to continue.

Akin to Irigaray’s claim about continuous birth, rebirth, and unfinished birth is Chopin’s sea imagery. For instance, the sea symbolizes the womb—“sensuous, enfolding the body [the embryo, the life unborn yet] in its soft embrace” (14)—which mimics the “body never created once and for all, the form never definitively completed, the face always still to be formed” (Irigaray 217) until it gives birth to itself. Such description mimics Chopin’s description of a woman’s world and of Edna’s awakening: “But the

beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” (14). Just as the birth of a newborn feels unfamiliar, strange, and frightening to the infant, so does the birth of the self (and the acknowledgement of this new self) shock the new creature. Chopin reads this process as a frightening prospect perhaps because a newly birthed being is vulnerable, relying solely on others for care and security. Yet this is exactly the trap from which Chopin seemingly deters Edna via her awakening to the self. Her marriage and motherhood trap her by lowering her self-esteem and confidence; Leonce treats her like a child and attempts to seduce her in believing that she needs him for survival. In part, she does need him for economic survival, although her artwork attempts to free her from monetary constraints (a point which will be explored further in the subsequent section).

Unlike Irigaray, Chopin suggests that the process of identifying and knowing the self is “vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing.” Though Irigaray acknowledges such chaos when she observes how “we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere,” she does not view awakening to one’s self as a “disturbing” beginning; she views it as a necessary means to a never-completed end. Chopin, however, anticipates the anxiety associated with beginnings, acutely observing: “How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult” (14). Use of “tumult” recalls the sea imagery of waves rising and crashing, advancing onto shore and receding back into the larger sea. Similarly, the unfinished self experiences highs and lows while developing self-knowledge and self-awareness. Edna demonstrates this image quite well as we follow the vacillation of her moods from pleasure to dissatisfaction, particularly over her work and her dissatisfying relationships.

However difficult, such beginning processes are crucial to giving voice to the self as a means of resisting patriarchal mastery. This voice, Irigaray reminds us, requires that “the lips never [be] opened or closed on a truth” (217) since “a truth”—singular and absolute—offers a narrowly prescribed view of the self, a view which the self should be dismissing in the first place. Rather, using Irigaray’s model, we as twenty-first-century readers can invite many lips—Chopin’s, Edna’s, critics’, theorists’, and our own—to give voice to Edna’s self, her magnum opus.

Sea-ing the Artist, Rejecting the Other

Edna’s interactions with the sea allow her to experience a fluid self which mimics Irigaray’s considerations of the actualized self (Irigaray 215). Chapter six in the beginning of the novel and chapter thirty nine, which concludes the novel, describe the sea in similar terms. The former describes how “the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (14). This seduction of the soul to experience solitude recalls Chopin’s original title for the novel *A Solitary Soul*, which her editor urged her to change since it sounded too depressing. Once the soul has listened to this seductive voice, it then transforms into a self capable of experiencing “the touch of the sea [which] is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (14). This fluid image of the self as affected by the voice and then touch of the sea reverberates Irigaray’s premise of the self “being moved” back and forth simultaneously to home, always remaining intimately connected with “the body” as home, and always moving toward the outer reaches of the figurative “sea” which promises continued freedom for the self-actualizing individual. Such fluidity allows and invites those “first-felt throbbings of desire” (Chopin 30), which

are not exclusively sexual; rather, this desire serves as an impetus for Edna to create art, resist patriarchy, and tackle duties, boundaries, complexities, and difficulties “struggles” named in the opening passage. Most crucially, this desire for a new self allows Edna to resist surrendering to the sub-altern, one who is “absorbed into familiar scenes, worn-out phrases, routine gestures. Into bodies already encoded within a system” (Irigaray 206). Rather than allowing the “system” to possess both her physical and spiritual body, Edna liberates herself by “awaken[ing] gradually out of a dream” (31).

The first sign of Edna resisting absorption into the “system” occurs when she “denied and resisted” Leonce’s orders to come to bed. Her consideration of the following demonstrates how Edna learns to “pay attention to the self” (Irigaray 206): “She wondered if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded...” (31). Distancing herself from the mundane routine of her life in order to question its affect on her self permits Edna to examine “the life which has been portioned out to us” (30). She begins to create that “tumult” characterized earlier by the sea in order to reject the “portioned out” life; further, she becomes “indifferent,” to use Irigaray’s term, as she resists patriarchy and “struggles” to transcend its influence (207). Irigaray continues to outline what meaningful resistance entails for the self: “When you stir, you disturb their order. You upset everything. You break the circle of their habits, the circularity of their exchanges, their knowledge, their desire” (207). Interestingly, Edna “break[s]... their desire”—patriarchal desire for female subservience—when she identifies those “first-felt throbbings of desire” in the company of a man other than her husband. Though these

desires are often conflated with sex throughout the novel, Chopin pushes Edna to the forefront of evaluating her self as its own entity and creation.

Part of separating Edna from the other characters in the novel involves tracing Edna's cultivation of a language that will allow her "to express multiplicity" (210), not mimic that encoded language of patriarchy which she currently engages in. Pairing Edna closely with Adele Ratignolle demonstrates such limited communication. Described as "the faultless Madonna" (11), the ultimate example of the "mother-woman" (9), Adele is categorized as one of those "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" (9). Thus, they define themselves in terms of their children and husband, lacking a substantial self on its own terms. She voices her internalized discomfort with "yielding to their language" (Irigaray 207) when she asserts to Adele "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (46). Interestingly, the "unessential" includes anything beyond her self—the personal realm of who and what she represents, her struggles, and her pleasures. Following this bold revelation to Adele is "a rather heated argument; the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language" (46). Yet Irigaray endorses dissimilar forms of language, arguing: "It's our good fortune that your language isn't formed of a single thread, a single strand or pattern. It comes from everywhere at once. You touch me all over at the same time. In all senses" (209). Though Adele's admonishment of Edna's behavior upsets the intimacy between these two friends, Chopin uses Edna to enlighten Adele about her own capabilities beyond motherhood:

'I don't know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential,' said Madame Ratignolle, cheerfully; 'but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that.'
'Oh, yes you could!' laughed Edna. (46)

In this passage, Madame Ratignolle imposes restrictions and limitations on her own life as a woman. Her final claim, "I'm sure I couldn't do more than," renders immediately a lack in her self and closes that self off as "impenetrable." But Irigaray calls us to understand how "We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plentitude, fulfillment from the other. By our lips we are women: this does not mean that we are focused on consuming, consummation, fulfillment" (209-210).

Edna, in contrast to Adele, seeks full rights to herself to avoid falling victim to those "lacks" established by patriarchy. She seeks the right to choose and act freely, to paint and create, and to be a mother or an independent woman alternately rather than compulsively all the time. Art, more than any other "outlet" (even sex), allows her to assert her individual rights and reject the socially imposed role of mother-woman which Adele's experience commands as essential to the female experience. Since Edna will not consistently mother her children, Madame Ratignolle attempts to consistently mother Edna, urging her to observe "a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (91). Ironically, Edna does observe "a certain amount of reflection" by Irigaray's standards, privileging a cultivation of self above a natural acquiescence to the Other.

Yet despite her "'courageous soul... the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies'" (61), Edna is still overcome "With an inward agony, with a flaming outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature" (104)—the Nature of female biology which fits women with tools to reproduce offspring, rather than produce a wholly complete self of

one's own first. Edna wholeheartedly rejects motherhood as a natural, fulfilling occupation and as her life's work. Instead, she turns to art as a means of self-knowledge, self-discovery, and ultimate dismissal of an ill-prescribed self. The "reflection" that Madame Ratignolle deems so necessary is found, instead, on Edna's canvas; here, her creations mirror the "strength and expansion" she comes to discover and develop "as an individual" (89).

Edna: Portrait of the Artist as Self

In Virginia Woolf's essay "Professions for Women," she attempts to imagine what the female self is and declares what the female self needs to do: "what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill" (qtd. by Jones 1). Edna's self cannot fully actualize until she has "expressed herself" in outlets and endeavors for which she is best suited: art. Concomitant with this expression is the pleasure she derives from creating and painting. As Irigaray reveals in her chapter "This Sex Which Is Not One," "Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking..." (26). Rather than remain "the beautiful object of contemplation" (26) which Madame Ratignolle signifies as the "mother-woman," Edna seeks to create rather than be created or fashioned according to someone else's standards. Interestingly, though, she seeks approval from the mother-woman, while simultaneously admitting "that Madame Ratignolle's opinion in such a matter would be next to valueless, that she herself had not alone decided, but determined" to study painting with a fictitious painter named Laidpore (53). As the footnote to this name reveals, no such painter ever existed in New Orleans (the setting of the novel). Yet the

term “laid” in French means “ugly,” indicating an anxiety over Edna’s attempt at self. In other words, if she prefers to create rather than be the created, then she shrinks from modeling herself as a wife or mother—the only proper, conventional roles allowed to women at the time. She cannot adequately model such virtues, so she engages in mimicking the beautiful via art.

This division within the artistic self between the beautiful and the ugly, the passive female and the courageous soul, resonates with Maurice Beebe’s work *Ivory Tower and Sacred Founts* (1964). Suzanne W. Jones explains, “His thesis is that the artist hero is a divided self—a human being of sensual longings, who is drawn to life, the ‘Sacred Fount,’ and a detached creative spirit living apart in an ‘Ivory Tower,’ who transcends life through art” (2). By relation, Edna distances herself from her home with Leonce and lives apart from him for quite some time in a cottage she secures of her own volition. Compounding this premise and Beebe’s proposal is Linda Huf’s argument from her influential work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (1983). Huf asserts, “unlike the artist hero, the artist heroine is torn not only between life and art but, more specifically between her role as woman, demanding *selfless* devotion to others, and her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work” (Jones 2-3; [my italics]). Noteworthy is Huf’s use of the word “selfless,” which parallels Edna’s initial experiences as mother and wife, as one who is literally self-less, lacking a tangible and knowable self. Edna’s torn self is evident early on when the narrator observes: “At a very early period she [Edna] has apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (14).

Irigaray confirms this division in the self when she posits: “We put ourselves into watertight compartments, break ourselves up into parts, cut ourselves in two, and more... If we separate ourselves that way, we ‘all’ stop being born” (217). In essence then, Edna seeks to unite this inward division via art to experience a rebirth, an awakening, rather than a stunted and limited existence very much like death.

Instead of nineteenth-century marriage and motherhood, Fate fits Edna Pontellier for that task which Woolf names: “express[ing] herself.” Though Edna first expresses herself through art in an “unprofessional way,” her real “strength and expansion as an individual” emerge when the narrator reveals that Edna “liked the dabbling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (12). As difficult as the self is to name and define, so, too, is the “satisfaction of a kind”—the pleasure, passion, and purpose which art allows. The “dabbling,” in a sense, mirrors the “tumult” of the “vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” beginning of the process to “know thyself.”

Mademoiselle Reisz serves as the only available model for “dabbling” as a female artist, specifically a pianist. After playing for the dinner party, the guests exclaim in approbation “‘What passion!’ ‘What an artist!’” (26). The artist and his/her work are thus predicated on accessing that passion deep within one’s self. Upon observing this passionate artist, Edna feels empowered: “A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (27). While Irigaray would applaud her “daring” to become an artist in her own right, she would arguably caution Edna’s impulsive move “to swim far out.” Irigaray

speaks to this point when she asserts: “In your eagerness to find yourself again, you move indefinitely far from yourself... Taking one model after another, passing from master to master, changing face, form, and language with each new power that dominates you” (210). Such power, she intimates, must be cultivated from within the self, not dominated by the Other, even if it is in the guise of woman.

Nevertheless, Mademoiselle Reisz offers the greatest guidance, both as Edna’s artistic mentor and friend. The “passion” (26) which Mademoiselle Reisz demonstrates in playing for the dinner party draws Edna to her; Reisz thus serves as a model for her to cultivate the artist within her exclusively for her own pleasure and self-satisfaction. Their connection affords Edna the recognition of both her art and her new self that she so desperately needs. Their working relationship also fuels Edna’s passion for art, and even for life since her marriage with Leonce lacks passion and inspiration.

Consequences of Passion

Passion threatens marriage in the nineteenth century, evidenced in the following passage: “[Edna] grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (19). This “unaccountable satisfaction” translates to an absence of passion, characteristic of nineteenth-century marriage as an uncompromising and narrowly-designed institution. Absence of any emotion or sentiment seems responsible for their lack of true, romantic love. The narrator observes that for Edna, Leonce’s “kindness” and “uniform devotion” came “to be tacit and self-understood” (8). His commitment to her as a husband remains constant, but no passion exists which allows him to act on or speak of their union as lovers. Irigaray addresses

this lack of passion in heterosexual unions when she discusses men's and women's roles in fantasies:

Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of men's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. (25)

This "desire that is not her own" portrays Leonce as the one who imposed his desire for her onto her body and her existence; "He fell in love" with her (18), leaving room for doubt over whether she actually fell in love with him. Chopin further compounds this doubt when she reveals how Edna's "marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (18). Following social mandates to marry and be "flattered"—not necessarily in love—confirm the initial "pleasure" Edna finds with Leonce, but quickly proves the impulsiveness of her character to marry for all the wrong reasons.

Chopin enumerates the causes of their marriage, which led to an easily-identifiable translation of Edna's dependency from father to husband:

It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her [...] Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband. (18-19)

As this passage suggests, Edna's marriage to Leonce is based more in a self-destructive act of defiance against one form of convention and patriarchy (i.e., that of her father and family), which she merely exchanges impulsively for another form. Even Leonce's act of falling in love with Edna further complicates the authenticity of their union, since he falls

in love as part of a male “habit.” Additionally, their meeting does not instigate “her secret great passion”; rather, he interrupts this passion since “she met him [...] in the midst” of it. The interruption of this self-designed passion recalls Irigaray’s “unfinished self,” and proves problematic for Edna when she returns to this passion via art but cannot find pleasure in it due to Leonce’s constraints. Leonce goes so far to assert: ““It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family”” (55). His judgment immediately questions the value of her work and attempts to promote household and family care as a “better” form of employment because it serves his self and stunts Edna’s passions.

While passion interferes with nineteenth-century codes of conduct for virtuous wives and ideal, angelic mothers, it is essential for the artist woman who must experiment not only with coloring her own canvas, but also with coloring her inner sexual nature—even with illicit affairs. These absences in marriage and motherhood are crucial, however, in that they allow Edna, eventually to give herself over to “her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work” (Huf qtd. by Jones 3). Edna separates her two forms of work—that of wife/mother and artist—in order to reclaim her long-suppressed self, her “soul’s summer day” (8). Chopin reveals how Edna begins to unearth her latent passions:

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. (39)

Immediately, we recognize how the summer season is the setting for Edna's reclamation of her "soul's summer day" (8). Also noteworthy is how the "coloring" and "changing" nature of her environment mimics an artist's endeavor to color and change a picture, portrait, or creation. "Coloring" and "changing" also reverberates the unfinished self which Irigaray describes as a liberating experience, directing us to "never give ourselves orders, commands, or prohibitions" (217). Leonce attempts to dissuade Edna from her artwork in the middle of the novel. Edna's bold resolve to keep painting coincides with Irigaray's guidance to resist prohibitions. Edna addresses Leonce's critiques in the following passage, defending art as her constructive outlet for the self:

'I feel like painting,' answered Edna. 'Perhaps I shan't always feel like it.'
'Then in God's name paint! but don't let the family go to the devil. There's Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn't let everything else go to chaos. And she's more of a musician than you are a painter.' (55)

Leonce's caustic remarks, as well as his comparison of Edna with Madame Ratignolle, signal his wish for maintaining the nineteenth-century patriarchal structure, subsuming the artist-woman to the mother-woman and ultimately seeking to obliterate the former. Further, his indictment of Edna letting "everything else go to chaos" actually confirms Edna's pursuit of the chaotic, tumultuous examination of the self as artist and woman beyond the patriarchal home. Leonce cites this "chaos" in an ill-guided attempt to convince her to return to their home; ironically, it encourages her to leave their home in pursuit of one which belongs solely to her and serves as her private space for creation and exploration. As Irigaray suggests earlier, the process of "being moved" and "never being finished" suggests an ongoing evolution, which Edna's continuous attempts at painting reinforces and simultaneously repudiates the mother woman, the false self, within her.

Until she hears Mademoiselle Reisz at Grand Isle during this particular summer of her “awakening,” Edna only hears music played by others like Madame Ratignolle. Since Madame Ratignolle plays out of devotion to her children and in accordance with late nineteenth-century social conventions, this is the only “music” metaphorically (i.e., social codes and mandates of motherhood) Edna hears. Mademoiselle Reisz’s music, by contrast, stirs her to approach and locate her own self within the music: “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” (26). When Edna realizes that she is now “ready,” then she begins to hear her own truth, the “abiding truth.” As she “awakens gradually out of a dream” a few pages later, the artist within herself begins to emerge (31).

Awakening from a “dream,” her pre-scripted life, proves difficult and complicated for Edna because it requires her to be moved—in the Irigaray sense—by the strong sense of “never [being] finished,” wanting to be satisfied and challenged more. At the same time, she departs the house in which she lived as Leonce’s wife and as the mother of her children. Moving into the cottage signals a move towards a “home” in Edna installs the self above all others. Art and Mademoiselle Reisz’s encouragement serve as a refuge for Edna to feel at “home,” safe and secure, free to paint and even “dabble” in extramarital affairs.

Her sexual love affair with Alcee Arobin only masks her true feelings for Robert; she can engage physically with Alcee to fill the emotional void she possesses due to her true love for Robert. Yet even thoughts of Robert LeBrun leave her with “an incomprehensible longing” (52), offering more despair than promise. Only when she

resolves “‘I believe I ought to work again’” (53) do we see Edna’s real self emerge—the soul that resists, questions, dares, and defies. While Leonce views such rebellion as mental imbalance, both Edna and the reader grow increasingly aware of the following reality:

she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world... She was working with great energy and interest, without accomplishing anything, however, which satisfied her even in the smallest degree. For a time she had the whole household enrolled in the service of art. (55)

Edna thus immerses herself in art and finds relief, enjoyment, stimulation, and satisfaction in it. Arguably, she resumes her pursuit of that “great passion” she was “in the midst of” when she met Leonce. Also important is identifying how her sexual passions for Alcee, and her spiritual, less-sexualized but equally attracting passion for Robert, only distract her from the passion which returns her to “the body as home for the self” (Willis 346).

Even though external forces (such as the weather) tend to affect her mood and exacerbate that isolation, she takes advantage of those brighter days—those days, perhaps reminiscent of her “soul’s summer day” (8)—and paints for pure pleasure:

When the weather was dark and cloudy Edna could not work. She needed the sun to mellow and temper her mood to the sticking point. She had reached a stage when she seemed to be no longer feeling her way, working, when in the humor, with sureness and ease. And being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work in itself. (70)

Working for pleasure and deriving “satisfaction from the work in itself”—not from money, advancement, or even public approval and adulation—marks the true emergence of Edna’s self as one unencumbered by “orders, commands, or prohibitions” (Irigaray 217).

Donald Pizer, however, poses a different argument, claiming: “in Grand Isle... Edna awakens from her earlier death-in-life existence as a middle-class Creole wife and mother... in New Orleans, she attempts to translate her rebirth into the actualities of her life” (1). Yet little evidence exists to support this claim that her self (her actualized and independent self) fully awakens at this point. Rather, Chopin does not convince us until chapter twenty-six that Edna fully possesses and owns her self: “she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself” (76). Only at this point does Edna leave her home with Leonce and the children, “mov[ing] indefinitely far from [her]self” (Irigaray 210) in order to locate the real self, her self-created self. Afterwards, Edna’s task becomes identifying ““what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don’t know”” (79). This confession signals two moves: first, Edna does not know how to identify herself because her new, real self is so unknown and rare in her society. Only Mademoiselle Reisz hears Edna’s “brave soul,” yet she is nearly ostracized by their community. She remains alone, an outcast. As Edna experience shows, even a woman finds it difficult to identify or name “what character of a woman I am.” Yet her indeterminacy aligns itself with Irigaray’s move to “continue” in pursuit of the self, and to embrace that unfinished self as a lifestyle according great freedom, creativity, and pleasure. Further, this lifestyle permits a sisterhood, which clearly develops between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz. Irigaray asserts: “Under all these artificial constraints of time and space, I embrace you endlessly. Others may make fetishes of us to separate us: that’s their business. Let’s not immobilize ourselves in these borrowed notions” (217). The “I” who embraces Edna endlessly functions first and foremost as Irigaray as feminist, sister to all women interested in embarking on this journey for the unfinished self.

Connected to *The Awakening*, however, the “I” also represents Mademoiselle Reisz who actually does embrace Edna, instilling her with courage to transcend “borrowed notions” of womanhood and selfhood. As Edna tells Arobin,

‘when I left her today, she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. ‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.’ (79)

Referencing the “weaklings” allows Reisz to acknowledge the immense difficulty and struggle associated with the emerging self. Yet her embrace of Edna as sister supports her “being moved” in the Irigaray sense and instills Edna with confidence and strength to continue this transcendence of the less-actualized life “of tradition and prejudice.”

Artist Alone

Interestingly, Chopin herself acknowledged the isolation of Edna’s quest, originally entitling the novel *A Solitary Soul* and later changing it to *The Awakening* by her editor’s suggestion. This move confirms the discomfort which even readers today experience over a tale that ends with a disappointing and appalling suicide. Such preference for a more optimistic title also signals how threatened her critics, men in particular like her editor, were by such a depressing account of womanhood. As Emily Toth reveals, “It was the male critics, editors, and gatekeepers in St. Louis and around the nation who condemned *The Awakening* and cut short Kate Chopin’s writing career” (Culley 119). As Linda Dittmer reminds us, “the artist’s difficulties are the author’s too” (Jones 137). Both their lives of self-expression are abridged unnecessarily. While Edna battles against those patriarchal forces that attempt to suppress her art as they suppress her will, so, too, did Chopin confront constraining forces which led her to adopt her own

“solitary soul.” Toth confirms this parallel between the fictional artist and the author-creator: “But *The Awakening* also has its roots in Kate Chopin’s own life, especially her pursuit of solitude, independence, and an identity apart from her children—and apart from the men who always admired her” (114). Ultimately, Edna finds little satisfaction and more work than pleasure in maintaining her marriage or love affairs—even though Chopin convinces us that she genuinely loves Robert. Yet just as Chopin refused to remarry after her husband’s death (Toth 119), so, too, does Edna refuse to give herself to anyone but herself because “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” and without the self of the artist-woman any longer (108).

Fittingly, then, and perhaps as a way of preserving the self which she has worked to paint emotionally and artistically, she returns home to the sea which invites her—and all of us searching for the lost or not yet reclaimed self—to “wander in abysses of solitude” (108). Toth concludes that “Like Edna, she [Chopin] was ‘the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone.’ She was her own woman” (119). Both Edna and Chopin—art and artist, created and creator—become Beebe’s Ivory Tower—“a detached creative spirit living apart... who transcends life through art” (Jones 2). Yet living as a “detached creative spirit” proves necessary for Irigaray since it allows us “to forget the feel of our own skin. Removed from the skin, we remain distant. You and I, apart” (218). Though solitary, Jones and Irigaray intimate that this self is not alone. Rather, it has shed its own skin, its own body of distractions and “borrowed notions,” in order to construct the self as a new body, a new entity, for which home becomes a place of identification and strength. Returning to the sea at the close of the novel invites Edna

to return to a fluid home, unrestrained or imposed upon by earthly concerns. Edna's death is "no beginning and no end" (109), but an ongoing self "being moved" of its own choice and free will "like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (109).

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Biography

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Teaching Experience:

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- Received the E. Beverly Field Women's Studies Award from Skidmore's Women's Studies Department
- Received award for senior thesis from Skidmore's Periclean Honors Society

**END OF
TITLE**