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Place, Perception, and Identity in The Awakening

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A charming house on a fashionable street in New Orleans, with furnishings "after the conventional type" and a yard kept "scrupulously neat" (931). An island paradise where the gulf melts "hazily into the blue of the horizon" (882) and acres of yellow camomile reach out to plantations fragrant with lemon and orange trees. These two settings, which Kate Chopin uses in *The Awakening,* reflect two different ways of life. The first is structured and refined, the second is more natural. Life in New Orleans is lived according to a "programme" (932). Every Tuesday afternoon Edna Pontellier receives female callers, and every Tuesday evening she and her husband Léonce entertain his business friends and their wives. One evening of the week is spent at the opera, another at the theatre. Time is carefully measured: Léonce leaves home each morning between nine and ten and returns each evening between half-past six and seven so that he can dine promptly at half-past seven. In contrast, time means little on Grand Isle and even less on the remote island Chêniére Caminada. Unfettered by a schedule while vacationing on Grand Isle, Edna acts according to desire, not convention. She eats when she wants, sleeps when she wants, sees her children when she wants and summons Robert Lebrun, an admirer, when she wants. In this setting where gratifying the senses is more important than satisfying notions of a well-regulated household, the emphasis is on food, drink, sleep and sexuality. In contrast to the *soirées musicales* and the Dante readings in New Orleans, the activities on Grand Isle are more sensual than cultural—evening dances and moonlight swims. Even Mademoiselle Reisz's piano recital is valued for the passions she arouses in her listeners rather than for her own technical accomplishments.

On Grand Isle Edna mixes intimately with the Creoles for the first time (even though her husband is a Creole) and is thus given a chance to see the world through their eyes. On the islands in the gulf, the passion and

candor of the Creoles make Edna Pontellier seem, in comparison, inhibited. She is a shadow to herself and others not only because she is reserved, but also because she masks her true self in order to play "mother-woman," a role in which women "idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals" (888). Playing a role for which Chopin says "Fate had not fitted her" (899), Edna frequently finds herself in tears without really knowing why. Since her social role conflicts with her true identity, Edna leads what Chopin calls a "dual life—that outward existence which conforms and the inward life which questions" (893). Because Edna's sense of self is so fully identified with the expectations first of her father and then of her husband, she has not been able to accept her own intuitions and impulses as valid sources of concern. From Chopin's readings in psychology, sociology and the natural sciences, she learned that people take for granted the validity of their conventions until they encounter another set of conventions that are as fully sanctioned as their own (Seyersted 49, 84–5). Thus Chopin uses a change of setting to enable Edna to justify her feelings by values that are different from those to which she is accustomed.[1] Only such an awareness of the relativity of manners and morals can produce the emotional struggling that Edna does not allow herself in New Orleans. Edna's vacation on Grand Isle offers her the possibility of a radically different perspective on her life.

The self-awareness Edna gains on Grand Isle arises out of two separate causes. First, the conditions of her vacation free her to a large extent from the roles of wife and mother and force her to see herself as Edna as well as Mrs. Pontellier. Second, the openness and vitality of the Creoles free her of her Kentucky Presbyterian reserve and allow her to reveal her hidden thoughts and feelings.

On the island Edna is freed from her children by the quadroon, from her husband by his work in the city, from her household duties by Madame Lebrun, and from the demands of fasionable society by her distance from New Orleans. In this setting, Edna also meets Mademoiselle Reisz, who provides her with the model of a woman whose definition of self comes from her own talents as a musician rather than from her identification with a husband and children. Unlike the dependent, self-effacing mother-women, Mademoiselle Reisz is independent and "self-assertive" (905). The night that Edna learns to swim, she gains a

similar self-confidence, as well as independence from friends who had been teaching her to swim. This action is symbolic of her attempt on Grand Isle to discard the mother-woman role, "to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (893).

While Edna's liberation from her role as wife and mother gives her an awareness of herself as an individual apart from social roles, her close association with the Creoles on Grand Isle gives her an awareness of the person she is beneath her social mask. Growing up in a strict Presbyterian household, she learned to be reserved and modest. Edna discovers in the Creoles an unfamiliar "freedom of expression" and an "absence of prudery" (889). Thus Edna is confused when Adèle touches her and even more apprehensive when Robert does. Nor is Edna used to hearing sexuality discussed in public, such as the talk of Adèle's pregnancy or the gossip Robert delights in. Initially shocked by the Creole behavior, she finds herself "growing accustomed to like shocks" (889).

The aspects of Edna's personality that made her a sinful Presbyterian when she was young—rebelliousness and sensuality—and that make her a negligent mother—impulsiveness and lack of concern for the future—are behaviors apparently accepted by the hedonistic Creoles. By responding to their sensuality and expressiveness, Edna discovers similar traits in herself. For the first time she tells the secrets she has kept hidden because disclosure would reveal her inability to be a perfect mother-woman: her rebellious streak, her uneven love for her children, her passionless attachment to her husband and her youthful romantic longings for unattainable men. Edna's decision to express these thoughts to Adèle is the first step toward freedom to act on them.

On Grand Isle Chopin has Edna discover the self beneath the veneer of civilization, the instincts that manners have disguised and the impulses that socialization has checked. Then Chopin removes her to an even more remote island, Chêniére Caminada, thereby allowing Edna to violate social taboos with impunity. Edna skips church and spends the day with Robert. Chopin makes their sojourn on Chêniére Caminada an enchanted moment at the heart of the novel. Time is suspended, and the weather is forever lovely. Social rules fall away, and they are free to live their fantasies. Life seems like a fairy tale. When Edna awakens after napping, she is Sleeping Beauty and Robert is Prince Charming: "You have slept

precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers" (919). The stories Madame Antoine tells them haunt their imaginations and color their world. Edna hears the whispering voices of dead men and the click of pirates' gold. She and Robert speak of the future in the language of legends—of finding buried treasure and sailing away. Chopin gradually mixes fantasy with reality until their sail back to Grand Isle merges with the legends of the Baratarians: "When she and Robert stepped into Tonie's boat, with the red lateen sail, misty spirit forms were prowling in the shadows and among the reeds, and upon the water were phantom ships, speeding to cover" (970).

Within days of their return to Grand Isle though, Chopin tests the potential of Edna's emerging consciousness by returning her to her old world. After the freedom and spontaneity of the islands, Edna finds the regularity and restrictions of her old life stifling and confining. In an attempt to escape these feelings, she impulsively goes out on a Tuesday, the day set aside for receiving callers. She breaks out of her social confinement by ignoring the temporal and spatial boundaries that limit her existence. Her decision to ignore such social contracts is a manifestation of her choice to live for the moment and to live for herself. She resumes her vacation behavior: "going and coming as it suited her fancy, and, so far as she was able, lending herself to any passing caprice" (939). She leaves the shelter of her home to take long walks in unfamiliar parts of the city, an activity clearly unthinkable for a lady. In breaking her physical bounds she breaks her mental ones, just as she did in the islands: "I always feel so sorry for women who don't like to walk; they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole" (990).

Chopin underscores the effect experiencing a new environment has on Edna's perspective by making repeated references to her sight. On Grand Isle, Chopin describes her as "seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment" (921). When she returns to her home on Esplanade Street, everything looks different: "She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (935). Later Edna looks with different eyes not only at her environment but at herself as well when she thinks of her physical

attraction to the roué Alcée Arobin while she awaits Robert's return from Mexico: "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" (966). The ability to see herself other than as society sees her helps Edna transcend society's viewpoint and dismiss Adèle's concern for her reputation: "She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her" (978).

With her new perspective, Edna is free, in Mademoiselle Reisz's terms, to "soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" (966). She is less inhibited and more spontaneous. As a result, she appears more aggressive, more independent and more lively. Ironically, the doctor whom Léonce urges to visit this new Edna finds her not ill but healthier than he has ever seen her, "transformed from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life" (952). He finds "no repression" (952) in her looks or gestures, a condition which had been present as a "contradictory subtle play of features" (893) when Edna unconsciously and unsuccessfully juggled the demands of her public and private selves.

To the long repressed Edna, the permissiveness of the Creole society is a license for absolute freedom. Edna, however, not fully understanding their customs, misreads their gestures. The misunderstanding begins with her relationship to Adèle. Although Edna mistakes her candor for broadmindedness, Adèle, in spite of her sensuality and outspokenness, is the epitome of a mother-woman. The misunderstanding continues with her relationship to Robert. The married Creole women are used to flirting with single men like Robert Lebrun and having neither party think anything of it. Their coquetry is coupled with a "lofty chastity" (889), a disciplined and quite proper expression of sexuality. Edna, however, is unfamiliar with the play of the Creole adults and "almost devoid of coquetry" (951); it is impossible for her to guess how much of the flirting is in jest and how much is in earnest. When Robert begins to play "devoted attendant" to her "fair damsel" (890), Edna, unlike everyone else, believes he is in earnest. It is just this possible response that prompts Adèle to warn Robert that "she is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (900). The variation in the accustomed behavior creates confusion for both Robert and Edna. Tired of

being regarded as a "feature of an amusing programme" (900), Robert wants to be taken seriously by a woman. But coming to believe that his actions with the married Edna Pontellier are more those of a roué than a gentleman, Robert leaves for Mexico to protect both his and Edna's reputations and to spare their feelings. Edna, who thinks of Robert as a lover rather than a flirt, is bewildered by his departure. Ironically, when he returns, she chastises him for not being a gentleman. Edna does not understand Robert's motives because she has not been playing by the same social rules.

The misunderstanding between Robert and Edna intensifies upon his return to New Orleans because Robert continues to view her in a traditional way even though she has overthrown the traditional roles. He returns with the thought of marrying her, of asking Mr. Pontellier to free her, but Robert is unable to defy his code publicly, the way he did privately for a day on Chêniére Caminada, far away from family and business associates. Edna, who is willing to defy the code to be with Robert, is not willing to marry him and fall back into the role of mother-woman with its connotations of dependence and self-effacement. Because Robert knows of no other legitimate role than wife for a woman who loves a man, he cannot understand Edna's behavior.

Thus while Edna's vacation in the islands causes a rich development of her inward life, it causes problems in her social life. No one understands her. Not wanting to be around people who want to possess her, like her husband and children, Edna allies herself with people like Alcée Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp who deviate from society's norms, but who hide their unconventional behavior behind the conventions of their society. Weary of hypocrisy, Edna is striving for a new kind of legitimacy, and although she escapes the role of mother-woman, she finds herself in the company of hypocrites rather than kindred spirits. And Edna, unlike Mademoiselle Reisz, is incapable of being alone.

The confusion that results from Edna's exposure to another way of life in the islands and her resulting attempt to redefine herself arises not only between Edna and the people around her but within Edna as well. Though the discovery of Creole customs awakens Edna to her emotions and senses, the experience does not totally erase her old patterns of behavior. Her body reveals her new self, only to be checked by old habits of mind. Such a problem is most evident in Edna's dealings with Arobin in

New Orleans. Often her new sensuous self provokes a confrontation with him only to have her old self refuse to deal with the consequences. She cannot understand the position she finds herself in—sexually attracted to a man she does not love. Neither her life with the Kentucky Presbyterians nor the Louisiana Creoles has equipped her for such a situation. When her accustomed ways of acting and thinking draw her in one direction and her newly awakened body and senses in another, Edna, like those around her, does not know who she is.

Although Edna rejects the old patterns of behavior expected of a mother-woman, she is not able to free herself of her old habits of mind. She has moved around the corner but not out of New Orleans. No longer in a cage, she is still in a "pigeon house." Rather than defining herself in new ways, such as through her painting or her knowledge of horse racing, she still defines herself through the men in her life. Rather than ordering her own life, she, like the mother-women, requires thoughts of a man to give her life stability. Thus when she loses Robert, Edna no longer has a reason for living. Her freedom from family ties and social constraints does not free Edna to stand alone or to glory in her individuality.

In her description of Edna's awakening, Chopin shows that it is easier to adopt an identity, such as Adèle does, than to form a consistent and convincing identity on one's own. No longer constrained by the traditional roles that had ordered her life, Edna is free to give her life a new structure. But she never actually creates a new identity. As Chopin ominously indicates on the night that Edna learns to swim, establishing an identity is difficult: "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!" (893). In following her feelings, Edna neglects her thoughts. Although she says, "one of these days I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am" (966), she never fulfills this goal.

But Edna's confusions only mirror her creator's own ambivalence, a reaction that becomes obvious when we look at Edna through the filters of the different settings in the novel. While Kate Chopin's journal entries express approval of societies where "the affections, the impulses are not so habitually crushed or disguised" (Seyersted 23), her readings in psychology validated her suspicion that selfishness is man's primary motivating

force and that social conventions are necessary to disguise this tendency (Seyersted 90). Thus at the same time that Chopin creates a character who acts without inhibition, she does not wholeheartedly approve of Edna's actions. What seems to be the realization of some truer self on the islands looks like self-indulgence and selfishness in New Orleans. Because Chopin cannot reconcile her own ambivalent feelings about manners and social roles, her perspective on Edna changes as Edna moves from Grand Isle to New Orleans. This ambivalence is clearly seen in Chopin's use of the imagery of animals and children to describe Edna's awakening. Both are primitive creatures: animals are uncivilized and children are unsocialized. The connotations of Chopin's imagery change, however, as Edna moves from primitive islands to complex city, from self-centered vacation activities to communal relationships. In the islands, the references to animals and children make Edna seem more in touch with her emotions and her body and therefore more alive. In New Orleans such references make Edna seem unthinking, somewhat out of control and rather immature.

Chopin uses Edna's sailing trip to Chêniére Caminada to show the extent of her transformation from civilized lady to sensual woman. For Edna everything connected with this trip is instinctual. Desire prompts her to summon Robert for the first time, and once on the island she allows impulse to rule her behavior. Feeling drowsy, she leaves in the middle of the church service to nap; feeling hungry, she plucks an orange from a tree. She eats with animal-like relish, biting "a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong white teeth" (918). There are no linen napkins, no silverware, and no fine bone china to distract attention from her voraciousness. As Edna indulges her senses, paying attention to the animal half of her nature, she becomes aware of her body for the first time. Chopin describes Edna's new awareness as that of a preening animal: "She bathed her face, her neck and arms. . . . She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other" (917–18). Having thrown off the conventions which restricted her behavior and dulled her vitality, Edna reminds Dr. Mandelet when she returns to New Orleans of "some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (952).

While Chopin's use of animal imagery makes Edna appear more sensual

and natural in the islands, her use of the same imagery to describe Edna's behavior in the drawing rooms of New Orleans sometimes produces a different effect. For example, when Arobin appeals "to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her" (961), Edna yields to her desires, forgetting both her husband and Robert, despite her determination to do otherwise. Here Chopin suggests that without the constraint of social conventions, Edna behaves instinctively, like an animal, with little control over her own behavior.

Similarly the connotation of Chopin's description of Edna as a child changes from childlike to childish as Chopin takes her from Grand Isle to New Orleans. Egocentric behavior and thought are expected in a child as she gains a sense of self and an identity separate from her parents. The feelings of pride, independence and achievement that Edna gains on Grand Isle from learning to swim, Chopin equates with a baby's learning to walk: "That night 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-confidence" (908). But a child's over-confidence comes from not knowing her own limitations or the complexity of forces ranged against her. Edna's summer on the gulf gives her a feeling of expanding horizons and of unlimited possibilities, a feeling that Chopin significantly has her equate with her childhood environment, the expansive Kentucky bluegrass meadows.[2]

Edna's longing for the freedom of her childhood, a feeling she experiences once again in the islands, contains the potential for both expansion and destruction. A feeling of expansiveness can enable a woman to fulfill her potential, but it can also fill her with anguish over unattainable goals, a duality that is mirrored in Edna's alternating feelings of hope and despair. In the morning, with unlimited possibilities before her, Edna feels hopeful; in the evening she looks back on goals unattained and feels despondent. Edna's childlike confidence on Grand Isle produces a desire "to swim far out where no woman had swum before," but at the same time Edna overestimates her strength and has a "quick vision of death" (908), a foreshadowing of her suicide. Edna similarly overestimates her ability to defy society and its roles and traditions. Mademoiselle Reisz checks Edna's shoulder blades to see if her "wings were strong" because "the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (966); however, the bird that flies overhead when Edna pays

her last visit to Grand Isle has "a broken wing" (999) and falls into the sea—Chopin's clue that Edna, though daring, is not strong enough. It is appropriate that Edna commits suicide by drowning and that it takes place on Grand Isle because it is the expanse of the sea and the liberation of the vacation setting that have awakened her to possibilities but to dangers as well. In awakening from the confinement of social roles, Edna, like a child, thinks her possibilities are unlimited.

After the illusion of freedom during her vacation on Grand Isle, Edna reacts with childish and unproductive tantrums to disappointments in New Orleans. To ameliorate the feeling of constriction in her marriage, she does not talk to Leonce, but breaks a vase and stamps on her wedding ring. At the farewell dinner to her husband's house, to her marriage and to her fictitious self—a dinner that should have been her apotheosis—Edna loses control when Victor Lebrun sings a song that reminds her of Robert. She shatters not only a wine glass but the harmony of the evening, and her guests leave immediately.

Chopin suggests that Edna's impulsiveness results in a lack of consideration for others and for the effects her acts may have on them. For example, when she decides to move into the pigeon house, Edna does not think of her children. This move causes Adèle to say, "In some way you seem like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in life" (979). When forced to think about the future, Edna thinks in terms of a storybook world. She tells her children that "the fairies will fix it all right" (978) when they grow concerned about where they and their father will sleep in her pigeon house. Such romanticizing does not seem harmful on Chêniére Caminada, but in New Orleans Chopin makes Edna's fantasies seem rather adolescent, an escape from, rather than the discovery of, reality. To quiet her feelings of despair, Edna tells herself stories, weaving "fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood" (940) and to quiet her feelings of despair. She escapes from her home to Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, high above the city overlooking the river, to dream of Robert. In the city Edna fills her time with memories of the islands. With a sound or sight or smell, Chopin evokes the vacation setting whenever Edna feels depressed. Indeed, a vision of summer in the islands is the daydream that haunts both Robert and Edna. When he returns from Mexico, they each explain the emotions they experienced while apart in terms of place: "I've been seeing the waves and

the white beach of Grand Isle; the quiet grassy street of the Chêniére; the old fort at Grande Terre" (984). Because Edna is unable to incorporate her island vision of self-fulfillment into her life in New Orleans, she loses her hold on reality and her desire to live. Her difficulty is compounded by the conventional society in which she lives and by her own socially ingrained habits of mind.

Kate Chopin must end Edna's story with suicide because of her own inherited notions. She cannot reconcile her own ambivalent feelings about the traditional view of woman's role in society with the modern view of the individual personality. She herself did not take up writing as a profession until after her husband's death, even though she had written stories before her marriage. In 1899 when Kate Chopin wrote *The Awakening,* she was both looking back on the Victorian period, when a woman's self-fulfillment was said to be found in self-effacement and motherhood, and looking forward to the modern era, when self-fulfillment is said to be found in self-assertion and independence. Seeing the advantages and disadvantages of playing the traditional roles of wife and mother and of liberating oneself from such roles, Chopin is drawn in both directions.[3] The two settings she chooses for *The Awakening,* New Orleans and the islands in the gulf, allow her to evaluate both the Victorian woman, whom she sees as repressed, and the modern woman, whom she depicts as a victim of her impulses. The change in settings enables Chopin to expose not only the confusion that arises when a woman experiences a new place, but also the way in which a social setting controls thought and determines identity.

NOTES

[1]Pearson and Pope have identified several narrative vehicles a writer can use to enlarge a character's perception: experience, introspection, memory and fantasy.

[2]See Ringe for another approach to Chopin's use of setting.

[3]As scholars have noted, *The Awakening* reflects Chopin's ambivalence at every level—structure, characters, narration and language. See especially Sullivan and Smith, and Fox-Genovese.

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