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Chopin's Bildungsroman: Male Role Models in *The Awakening*

ASSERTIONS THAT *THE AWAKENING* IS AN EXAMINATION OF REGRESSION ARE commonplace in scholarship about the novel. Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes Edna Pontellier's suicide as "a stripping away of adulthood" (257), while others explain the role of Adèle Ratignolle or of the sea in terms of Edna's quest to return to the womb. Edna is certainly a "modern alienated individual" (Papke 4), but in focusing myopically on her, critics have neglected Chopin's skillful use of other characters to explore Edna's situation. Five male characters—Edna's two sons, Victor, Arobin, and Dr. Mandelet—represent the four stages of childhood, adolescence, young manhood, and maturity. The influence these characters have on Edna follows a chronological progression through the natural stages of development of man, as might be encountered in a traditional, masculine narrative. Read against this background, Edna's awakening becomes a progressive, rather than a regressive, tale. Despite society's tacit demand that she play along with the others, Edna spends the last months of her life maturing beyond her socially-sanctioned state of arrested development. Rather than presenting the theme of awakening as a female alternative to the Bildungsroman, as Susan J. Rosowski suggests (313), Chopin deliberately launched her heroine into a masculine role of activity, self-reliance, and maturity, to show that women are capable of such growth.

Raoul and Étienne Pontellier play a dual role in the beginning of Edna's development. First, they serve as models of childhood, to which many of the adults are very deliberately compared. The first image of Léonce, in which he attempts to concentrate on his day-old newspaper, is echoed in his sons' reading of the comics he sends them. His parcels also align the women of the resort with his sons, and Chopin links the ladies who select bonbons "with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily" (528) and the Pontellier boys, who clamor for the sweets, "each holding out two chubby hands scoop-like, in the vain hope that they might be filled" (533). When Edna and Robert return from their day together, Chopin follows Adèle's concern for Étienne, who must be coddled, with the woman's assertion that she must return home, "for Monsieur Ratignolle was alone, and he detested above all things to be left alone" (566). The height of this childishness is perhaps reached at Robert's farewell dinner: when Robert announces he is leaving, the guests tell each other stories of Mexico, and the scene swiftly degenerates into shouting and name-calling, especially between Robert and his brother Victor. This "Bedlam" (568) is quickly followed by the "heated argument" Edna encounters when she returns to her sons from the dinner (570). Grand Isle is populated by adults who deliberately intend to enjoy the summer, spending their weeks in frivolous inactivity, and it is quite natural that the heroine's own children should be the standard against which these adults are compared.

More importantly, however, the boys serve as role models for their mother, and therefore deserve to be read carefully. The few glimpses the reader gets combine to create an impression of energetic, willful young boys. Their father thinks of them as "sturdy little fellows" (522), but a less sympathetic observer might call them brats. They order their long-suffering nurse to keep a "respectful distance" from them (533), they are demanding whenever their father leaves, knowing he will reward them with sweets, and they make "their authority felt" when sharing their spoils with the other children (546). These are boys who kick in their sleep; they are the antithesis of the "mother-tots" they often beat with "doubled fists and uplifted voices" (528), and the most significant aspect of their characters is their self-sufficiency. The description of each of them as "likely [to] pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing" (528) comes only a few paragraphs after the sulking and bemused Edna is described as "just having a good cry all to herself" (527), and wiping her tears on her sleeve. Edna would do well to be more like her boys at times like these, as, at one point, she was. Her mother died when Edna was still quite young and her "practical" (539) older sister took over the maternal role in their household. This turn of events denied Edna the opportunity to remain a "mother-tot" herself. Instead, she was an independent child, who "lived her own small life all within herself" (535) and chose friends who were also "self-contained" (539). Perhaps this summer is different for Edna because her boys, aged four and five, are now beginning to remind her of herself.

The importance of Adèle is tied to this dynamic between Edna and her sons. Much has been written about the relationship between the two women, Adèle frequently posited as a maternal figure for Edna. As the narrator states, out of the many factors that encouraged Edna to "loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her. . . . the most obvious was the influence of Adèle Ratignolle" (535). She is indeed presented as the ideal wife and mother, an almost unreal embodiment of perfection, at whom Edna gazes "as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (531). But this is not the only example of damning praise in Chopin's work. Adèle is important not because she offers maternal guidance, but because she disappoints Edna during their afternoon together on the beach. The two women are pointedly differentiated during this excursion, Adèle dressed in "pure white" with a "gauze veil about her head," and Edna wearing white with a brown stripe and her "big straw hat" (536). Edna is looking for something more substantial than her friend, in her "fluffiness of ruffles" and "draperies and fluttering things," can provide (536-37). Edna is determined to have a meaningful conversation, thinking through her memories and her feeling of being "unguided" (539). Adèle, however, insists it is "too hot to think" (538) before dismissing Edna's concerns by stroking her hand and saying "*Pauvre chérie*" (539). Edna's first reaction to this is confusion; she knows on some level that pity is not an appropriate response to her nascent feelings of freedom, and she will grow farther apart from Adèle from this point on. Her sons, who contrast so glaringly with Adèle's clinging brood, have reminded her that a mother is not necessary to her development.

The boys' influence on their mother continues after they all return to the city, most notably when Edna discontinues her Tuesdays at home. When Léonce upbraids her for the damage this might do to their reputation, Edna petulantly announces that she "was out, that was all" (579). During this exchange, the boys are upstairs, and the "patter of their bare, escaping feet could be heard occasionally, as well as the pursuing voice of the quadroon, lifted in mild protest and entreaty" (578). This is the last time any of the adult characters will be aligned with the Pontellier boys. Looking back the next day, Edna "could not help but think that it was very foolish, very childish, to have stamped upon her wedding ring and smashed the crystal vase upon the tiles"

(586). She will not be childish anymore; she is ready for the next stage of her development.

While Victor Lebrun is part of the main household at Grand Isle, he is different from the men around him. The scene in which he is introduced sets him very much apart from his brother Robert. The latter had retreated to his mother's attic room, where she instructs him to take a book to Edna for her, while Victor is setting off for an unknown location:

> Robert uttered a shrill, piercing whistle which might have been heard back at the wharf.
>
> "He won't look up."
>
> Madame Lebrun flew to the window. She called "Victor!" She waved a handkerchief and called again. The young fellow below got into the vehicle and started the horse off at a gallop. (545)

Victor is brash, impetuous, and energetic, dominating the dinner table and taking charge of the entertainments. More importantly, however, Victor does not follow the herd of guests back to the city when the season ends, but rather stays in his mother's house alone, "[keeping] the place in order and [getting] things ready for the summer visitors" (590). Victor's independence and activity are mirrored in Edna's art when she returns to the city. Having always dabbled with painting, she turns to it now as a focus for her life and as a source of some satisfaction. The energy she had once wasted in shopping with Léonce or arguing with the cook needs a more positive direction; as she tells Adèle, "I believe I ought to work again. I feel as if I wanted to be doing something" (584). While her ability to paint depends on her moods, which change with the frequency of an adolescent's, the attention she begins to pay her sketches is intricately linked with her "becoming herself" (587). Her sons had been intrigued by her work at Grand Isle, but they are now no longer interested; her art is becoming more serious and mature, just as she is leaving childishness behind. Edna is still in an intermediate stage of development, however. She becomes insolent when Léonce complains about her painting all the time, marking a further deterioration in their relationship. It is also at this point that Adèle loses her lingering influence on Edna. In an effort to break her feelings of ennui and frustration, Edna takes her pictures to Adèle, although she knows that the woman has no authority to give meaningful encouragement or advice. Having spent an afternoon in Adèle's domestic paradise, Edna is "depressed rather than soothed" (585). Crucially, Edna pities Adèle and her narrow life, "which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment" (585). After reaching this realization, Edna will pay no more attention to Adèle as a maternal figure than Victor heeds the concern or advice of his mother.

Victor seems to have a more direct impact on Edna's relationship with her father. When the two meet at his mother's house in the city, Edna and Victor quickly become "confederate[s] in crime," mocking his mother, and bantering in a way not quite respectable (590). Madame Lebrun, exasperated by her son, is convinced that his father would have straightened Victor out if he had lived, but Edna's experience with her own father casts doubt upon this assertion. The Colonel was an imposing man in his youth, who "coerced his own wife into her grave" (603), but his visit to New Orleans marks a turning point in Edna's view of him. The two have similar tastes in drinking and gambling, spending their days together as a father and son might; but as Edna's painting him shows, she is now taking a more objective look at the man. Doing so gives her "a new set of sensations" (599) and she feels for the first time "as if she were thoroughly acquainted with him" (600). The two finally quarrel, and when the Colonel leaves "with his padded shoulders" (603), which have already been mentioned twice in descriptions of him, it is clear that he is no longer an unquestionable authority figure in Edna's life. While she might not go so far as Victor, who claims that "old people with an established claim for making themselves universally obnoxious" should be drowned (568), Edna has now clearly reached the dangerously anti-authoritarian stance of her nineteen-year-old friend. Victor can see that she "doesn't seem like the same woman" who spent her summer at Grand Isle (591), and Edna, finding herself on this path of change, has "resolved never to take another step backward" (586).

Edna reaches the next stage of her development while in contact with Alcée Arobin. This "young [man] of fashion" (606) is first mentioned on Grand Isle, when Robert is careful to differentiate himself from the older man and the latter's dealings with married women. Arobin does travel in high social circles, and is at least nominally linked with a respectable law firm, but he is still a man to be kept at arm's length, and Dr. Mandelet hopes "to heaven it isn't Alcée Arobin" who is causing the changes he sees in Edna (602). Although Edna's father had also enjoyed the younger man's company, Arobin is superficial and frivolous, going through life "not overburdened with depth of thought or feeling" (606). He is genuinely taken with Edna, whom he had considered "unapproachable" before they met at the races, and it is no wonder that he now admires her "extravagantly" (606). Left alone by her children and husband, Edna has achieved a more even emotional keel by this point, with "a sense of restfulness . . . such as she had not known before" (605). When she goes to visit her sons she seems to find a new kind of pleasure in their company but does not miss them when she returns to the city. Edna begins to take the time to read, and her art "grows in force and individuality" according to her teacher Laidpore (613). Her art, combined with her inheritance, enables Edna to take the most decisive step in her development and move out of Léonce's house. In her unhappiness, Edna had long wanted "something, anything" to happen (608), and her increasing, if still modest, financial independence allows her to take control of her life and force something to happen. Taking only what is hers, Edna is now ready to leave home.

Edna also takes control of her relationship with Arobin. From the beginning, she sounds "like her father" when speaking with Arobin (606), laughing at his ignorance at the races. Although Edna clutches his wrist and clasps his head when they first kiss, it is Arobin who consistently clings to Edna. Arobin is "absolutely nothing to her" (610), his notes embarrass her, and she is distracted by thoughts of Robert or Mlle. Reisz while in his company. She tolerates rather than seeks his attention, and Arobin is nonplused by her attitude toward him after they first have sex. As the narrator points out, "If he had expected to find her languishing, reproachful, or indulging in sentimental tears, he must have been greatly surprised" (619). Edna does not take on this stereotypical female role; in fact, Arobin is feminized during their affair. In his attempts to help her removal to the pigeon-house Arobin dons one of Edna's dust-caps and takes down the curtains and ornaments that Edna and her maid had been collecting for the move. Edna watches him in amusement rather than admiration or gratitude. Instead of losing herself in him and making their affair the focus of her hopes, Edna takes what he has to offer at face value, becoming more, and not less, independent as a result.

Arobin is not the only character she distances herself from during this period, however. She grows tired of the ladies in her social set, whom Arobin calls a "stupid lot" (639), and Adèle complains that Edna has "neglected her much of late" (631). At her final dinner in Léonce's house, something about Edna suggests "the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (623). Her coup d'état that leads to her establishment in the pigeon-house raises her to what she considers the higher spiritual scale, placing her above and beyond her former peers. From this new vantage point she begins "to look with her own eyes" at the whole world (629), just as she had looked at her father. Retreating into Catiche's little garden, Edna becomes something of a flâneur, placing herself outside society's influence. Faced once again with Adèle's maternal concern, Edna tells her "You may say anything you like to me" (632); nothing anyone says is likely to have much effect on this newly independent and self-contained woman.

Having outgrown whatever authority her husband or father might have had over her, and having become the dominant figure in her relationship with her lover, Edna is now ready to be drawn closer to the novel's most mature character: Dr. Mandelet. Repeatedly referred to as "old," the doctor has retired from much of his practice, and his independent life lends him an air of detachment from society which Edna has by now come to mirror. Mandelet's house stands "rather far back from the street, in the center of a delightful garden" (595), while Edna's pigeon-house is "behind a locked gate, and a shallow *parterre*" (627). Both characters spend their free time alone, reading quietly. More importantly, however, the two understand each other and the world around them. When Léonce goes to Mandelet to complain that Edna is being disagreeable and withholding sex, the doctor very sensibly advises him to leave her alone. Just as Victor was impressed by the change in Edna, Mandelet found her to be the "picture of health" when he saw her in the street (596), and "radiant" at the dinner party, where she reminded him of "some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (601). Mandelet's reputation is for "wisdom rather than skill" (595), and it seems by this stage that Edna is becoming wise as well. Mlle. Reisz had warned her that art required a "courageous soul" (594) and that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (617). In these chapters, Edna gives every impression of having the strength to support herself in the world, and her affinity with Mandelet can only come about because she has developed in this way.

The distance Edna's growth has covered during this process is highlighted by Robert's return to the city. At Grand Isle, Robert was one of the adult characters most frequently linked to the Pontellier boys, who are "very fond of him" (525), as are the "troop of children" who followed him around the resort (541). He and Edna enjoy an "advanced stage of intimacy and *camaraderie*" (531) which was essentially childish at first, and Chopin links the two with the children quite explicitly:

> The sun was low in the west, and the breeze soft and languorous. . . . Children, freshly befurbelowed, were gathering for their games under the oaks. . . .
>
> . . . . [Robert and Edna] descended the steps, and walked away together toward the beach. The sun was low in the west and the breeze was soft and warm. (533-34)

This innocence is lost after Edna learns to swim, however, which constitutes a major step forward in her development. It is only after she realizes that she has wasted time "splashing about like a baby" (552) that she begins to desire Robert in a way that reminds her of her teenage infatuations. The link between this point and her adolescence is subtly made during their trip to the Chêniere. When Edna flees the church service, she hears the "voice of the sea whispering through the reeds that grew in the salt-water pools" (561), an image that recalls her memory of fleeing church in her youth, and "walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. . . . [throwing] out her arms as if swimming" (538). Given the childish state she had previously been in, her flirtation with Robert becomes artificially significant in Edna's eyes, so that she later feels that his glance "had penetrated to the sleeping places of her soul and awakened them" (634). Robert did indeed feature in Edna's picking up where her natural growth from a child into an adult had been arrested, and witness the beginning of the end of her stagnation, but he was destined to disappoint her. Robert was himself shaken out of his usual, trivial role of flirting with the married women at the resort, but he does not blossom as Edna does; she outgrows him while he is in Mexico.

The difference between the two is thrown into relief when they meet in New Orleans. Mlle. Reisz is perceptive enough to know that this will happen, as is shown when she asks Edna why she loves Robert. Edna can provide no concrete reason, because there is none, beyond her hope that they might "feel glad and happy to be alive" together upon his return (615). When they accidentally meet at Mlle. Reisz's apartment, Robert twirls on the piano stool like a child, and blushes at Edna's questions. It is she who leads him to her house, and she who makes him stay, while he tries to make "some excuse about his mother who expected him" (636). Robert deliberately keeps his distance from Edna, but instead of retreating into the stereotypical role of the desperate, slighted woman, she remains calm and distracts herself with sex with Arobin. Upon their second meeting, Edna remains in the dominant position, talking to Robert of her "unwomanly" tendency to speak her mind (643). She again leads him to her house, and it is she who leans over his chair to kiss him, just as Arobin had while she reclined upon a couch. Edna still insists that Robert awoke her from a "life-long, stupid dream" (646), but it is clear that he was not responsible for her development. Robert is scandalized by Edna's freedom, blanching when she claims she is no-one's to give; Edna had long since "resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (613), but Robert seems positively frightened in her presence. When Edna must leave, they kiss "with a degree of passion which had not before entered into [Robert's] caress," not because he is aroused by this independent woman, but because he knows that he will never see her again (646). Edna has gone too far, and Robert has no intention of keeping pace with her.

Dr. Mandelet is therefore the only character who can be truly in tune with Edna's situation by the end of the novel. As a family doctor, Mandelet has always seen the very harshest aspects of reality for women at the time. While Adèle has featured prominently as the embodiment of female, that is, maternal purpose, the birth of her fourth child highlights the price that must be paid for such domesticity. The scene is one of torture, and renders Adèle's "sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural" (647). Edna's reaction is to feel a revulsion "against the ways of Nature" (648), so that Adèle's plea that she "think of the children" (649) sends Edna into confusion. Even while living with her sons, Edna had sometimes forgotten all about them, or even felt that they were "part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (582). Adèle's exhortation to think of them thus forces Edna to consider her position in a different light. She has not made plans for what will happen when Léonce and the boys return, and Mandelet seems to understand the position this puts her in. She has found independence and growth, but only under the special circumstances of her family's absence; either her independent life or her family's future can be a success, but the two cannot coexist. Mandelet's talk of the "decoy [used] to secure mothers for the race" (650) indicates the way that society tricks women into considering "mother-women" to be "Madonnas," and the artificial elevation of Motherhood that trapped them in the domestic sphere. Mandelet sees that Edna is struggling with the fact that she has awaked to this reality, on the one hand, but must "think of the children" on the other. She only wants her own way, and to live by her own rules, but at the same time she "shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (650). Had she been a man, or reached this level of maturity before having had children, Edna might have been able to live her own life. As it is, this realization of her own self has come too late. The image of Edna standing on the beach makes this clear. Listening to music the previous summer, Edna had envisioned "Solitude" as a naked man standing on the seashore, watching a bird fly away from him. Before her final swim, Edna sees "A bird with a broken wing . . . beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (654), and the use of the word "solitude" in the same paragraph, as well as Edna's removal of her bathing suit, make the link with the earlier image all the more striking. As Edna had told Mandelet, it is better to awake, but the knowledge she has gained leaves her in a state of "hopeless resignation" (549), just as the man in her vision was.

This image is the crux of the novel. Edna's progression from one stage of development to another is perfectly natural, but there is nowhere in her society for her to go. While the male characters in the work can develop, and can figuratively fly, Edna has a broken wing: she cannot trample on the lives of her sons. Chopin uses the male characters to guide Edna's growth, but also to show what she can never have. The tone of the work is predominantly one of pity; exclaiming early on "How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning" (535), the narrator forges an alliance with the reader, creating a community of onlookers who are more advanced than Edna. She wanted to go where no woman had gone before, but as Mlle. Reisz says, "It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (617). By making use of the traditionally masculine Bildungsroman form, Chopin was able to focus on the flawed logic that separated men from women in her own society. Under the right circumstances, Edna is able to grow as naturally as her own sons will, but she can only go as far as her world will allow. There is no natural reason that Edna should fail thus; it is only as a result of what Mandelet calls the "arbitrary conditions" (650) of society that women are crippled. The work begins with an image of two male birds in cages, and ends with a heroine who has the strength to break free of the constraints placed upon her, but who is doomed simply because she is a woman.

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