

Kate Chopin's Narrative Techniques and Separate Space in *The Awakening*

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In this essay, I approach Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) from the perspective of Chopin's narrative techniques, especially her dexterous use of free indirect discourse.¹ Through this approach, I disentangle the elaborate methods Chopin employed to make her novel fascinating and puzzling. More importantly, I argue that Chopin's purpose behind her techniques was to deliver the first modern American female artist onto the American cultural landscape. By definition, free indirect discourse is a technique that involves "a mixture or merging of character and narrator" in a single utterance (Martin 138–139).² An author chooses free indirect discourse to represent what a character is thinking or speaking while simultaneously indicating the narrator's attitude toward the character. For instance, when describing Edna's relationship to her husband Léonce, Chopin's narrator first relates what Edna thinks, then adds her authorial comment: "[Edna] fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, *in which fancy she was mistaken*" (Chopin 62; emphasis added). The first half of this statement describes Edna's belief that she and her husband share similar thoughts and tastes. In her opinion they are very compatible. The second half reveals the narrator's opinion that Edna's perception is quite wrong. Chopin uses similar techniques extensively throughout the novel.

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Chopin uses free indirect discourse because she is concerned with representing the emotional, spiritual, and artistic awakening of a female artist battling against prevalent cultural norms of wifedom, motherhood, romance, seduction, and conventions of female writing. By separating what Edna is thinking from the narrator's comments, Chopin shows the changing distance between the narrator and Edna, which enables the reader to see Edna's gradual development over a series of conversations along the plotlines of the novel. During the process, Chopin also allows Edna to approach closer and closer to the narrator's opinions. Through these subtle techniques, Chopin charts Edna's remarkable journey of growth both as a woman and as a female artist. Edna's growth and its artistic meaning can be illustrated by looking at seven representative passages through which Chopin develops a female quest for a separate spiritual and artistic space. She embodies that idea in Edna's voice, letting Edna talk with representative voices of the era, sometimes more than once, including Léonce Pontellier, Robert Lebrun, Madame Ratignolle, Alcée Arobin, and Mademoiselle Reisz. Chopin thus offered Edna as the first modern American female artist, at the same time giving birth to herself as an artist.

Critical literature on *The Awakening* reflects a gradual shift in literary scholarship—a moving away from interpreting thematic contestations to evaluating Chopin's artistry at creating fiction, most recently separating Chopin's authorial discourse from the characters' discourses. I roughly categorize the readings into four groups. Since its publication in 1899, the novel has been read on four major levels, all of which have enriched our understanding. The first level, also the most accessible, focuses on Edna's sexual awakening. For instance, in 1994 one critic thinks Edna acts only for "her own pleasure" (Dawson 6), which presumably refers to sexual pleasure. The second level goes deeper and takes the cultural approach, focusing on Edna's quest for a feminine mode of subjectivity. These critics believe that Edna is negotiating a difficult position between the abject mode of a mother-woman and the masculine mode of an assertive artist. Critics conclude that Edna is dissatisfied with both choices but that she cannot find a third way out because the American society does not allow a "symbiotic" world of power at that time (Schweitzer 161–191). The third level goes still further and deals with women's relationship with language. It examines women's right to discourse and analyzes Edna's quest for independent thinking and self-consciousness through self-articulation. Patricia Yaeger, for example, points out that the novel gives conflicting

signals. She believes that Edna's struggles illustrate that American women largely lack the language to express themselves at the end of the nineteenth century. Jacqueline Buckman, however, reads the novel more optimistically, believing that Chopin has managed to "make the unsayable manifest" by choosing alternative discursive strategies (55–57). The fourth level examines Chopin's artistry in creating the narrative in terms of literary traditions and breakthroughs. Here scholars also reach conflicting conclusions. Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith declare the novel an artistic failure at characterization because they believe Chopin has failed to resolve her narrative tensions: "*The Awakening* portrays neither the feminist's heroine nor an impulsive, somewhat shallow self-deceiver; it portrays both in unresolved tension" (157). Elaine Showalter, however, disagrees with Sullivan and Smith's relatively static view. She thinks the novel shows a process of transformation instead. Showalter praises Chopin's departure from "conventional techniques of realism to an impressionistic rhythm of epiphany and mood" (72).

Many other critics also notice Chopin's transition in her narrative techniques and characterization, but they interpret the process differently and accord different degrees of positivity to it. Patrick Shaw thinks that Chopin shows Edna is incapable of bringing lessons from her past to bear on her present and future (220–221); Maria Anastasopoulou has also noticed Chopin's tensions at characterization, but she believes Edna has ultimately failed to grow into a female artist because Edna is "unable to make the passage from the world of domesticity . . . into the . . . world of adulthood, responsibility, and creativity" (28). Of all these critics, Buckman and Showalter affirm Chopin's achievements the most because they read the novel more optimistically. However, the strongest affirmation Chopin has ever received comes from her biographer Emily Toth, who is a pioneer among Chopin scholars and a staunch champion for Chopin. Toth declares that "[Chopin] would be her own priest, her own conscience, and her own judge" (251), showing the highest degree of confidence in the author. These readings prompt me to examine carefully how Chopin discursively encodes the process of Edna's awakening through dialogue.

Here I draw upon Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of novelistic discourse as dialogic in order to examine how Chopin carries out dialogues with prevalent ideas in her cultural context. I wish to consider how Chopin, through using free indirect discourse, orchestrates the characters to interact with one another as well as how Chopin talks with

her characters. When an author chooses double-voiced discourse, she uses someone else's utterance and imposes her layer of meanings or emotions onto it. But the utterance still retains the original articulator's own meaning. As a result, a single utterance contains two intentions encoded in two voices and the two voices enter into a dialogue with each other. It is the intense interactions between those two voices (sometimes more than two) that bring out the author's possible intention (Vološinov 197). Another closely related concept is Bakhtin's "hero," which does not refer to a person at all, but an idea, an opinion, which is a living thing embodied in a human voice (Bakhtin 17). In simplified terms, the hero refers to an idea and the changes that the idea experiences in a human being as reflected through the words he or she expresses. Writers make embodied ideas interact with each other to see how one idea negotiates its meaning and position with other ideas.

An analysis of free indirect discourse shows that early in the story Chopin is distant from her heroine Edna. When Edna first talks with her husband Léonce, Chopin selects the double-voiced technique of "narrator's narration" to put the greatest distance between Chopin and her characters. She wants to let the reader see Edna's need to recognize her own subtle suppression and estrangement from Léonce. When the scene opens, Léonce has just returned home from his club late at night to find Edna asleep and inattentive to his words. He goes to the children's room, comes back, and tells Edna that their son Raoul has a high fever.

Mrs. Pontellier was *quite sure* Raoul had no fever. He had gone to bed *perfectly well, she said*, and nothing had ailed him all day. Mr. Pontellier was *too well* acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken. He *assured her* the child was *consuming* at that moment in the next room. He reproached his wife with her *inattention*, her *habitual neglect* of the children. (48, emphasis added)

Here Chopin employs what Bakhtin calls "narrator's narration" and "parody" because at this point Edna remains unconscious of her powerlessness in her husband's mind. In narrator's narration, the author keeps a character's utterance in the narrator's words by using "reported speech" to signal distance between the characters and the narrator. By definition, "reported speech" is "speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also *speech about speech, utterance about utterance*" (Vološinov 115). The text describes the couple's ideas but relates them in the narrator's voice. She softens Edna's tone with "quite sure," "perfectly well," and "she said" to show Edna's lack of discursive power. In contrast,

the narrator uses very assertive words for Léonce, including “too well,” “assured,” and “consuming.” Such phrases admit no room for ambiguity or argument, which reflects his implicit power and authority as a husband in the late-nineteenth century (Muirhead 44).

Chopin’s narrator keeps her distance from Edna and an even greater distance from Léonce. The narrator is distant because Edna, as an acculturated woman in the strange Creole culture into which she has married, vaguely starts to feel something is not quite right in her relationship with her husband. But Edna has not realized why Léonce reproaches her. She lacks the ability to think through the matter clearly. But the narrator keeps an even greater distance from Léonce because she parodies his desire for intimacy against his inability to express it. He uses Edna’s insufficient maternity as his excuse for waking her. By definition, parody involves “the presence within one utterance of two not only different but opposed, clashing intentions” (Vološinov 198). Parody, in this context, means that two voices exist simultaneously within one utterance, but the two voices clash with each other. Chopin uses good-humored parody to poke fun at Léonce. He wants his wife to wait up for him but finds it difficult to say this, so he invokes her insufficient motherhood as an excuse.

Chopin chooses a new double-voiced technique, what Bakhtin calls “stylization,” for the important moment when Edna half-consciously reveals the history of her romantic fantasies to Madame Ratignolle. Chopin’s choice of stylization to represent Edna’s romantic history is significant on two levels: thematically, stylization enhances Edna’s status as an incipient consciousness and enables her to taste the power of speaking for the first time; aesthetically, it narrows the distance between Edna and the narrator from the previous use of narrator’s narration. When an author stylizes, she utilizes another person’s point of view, together with its original linguistic styles, for her own purposes. Stylization derives “its *tone* and *word order* from direct discourse and its *verbal tenses* and *persons* from indirect discourse” (Vološinov 142, original emphases). Compared with narrator’s narration, stylization preserves a higher degree of the utterance’s original intention and linguistic styles. With stylization, the narrator both identifies with the characters and maintains her distance from them.

Chopin uses stylization primarily to preserve Edna’s emerging speaking voice while keeping the narrator’s distance from her. For the most part, Chopin lets Edna remember and tell her own life story. But instead of allowing her to use the first person pronoun “I,” Chopin keeps the third person pronoun “she,” as in “[Edna] remembered that *she* had been

passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visited her father in Kentucky” (61–62, emphasis added). Chopin’s use of stylization allows readers access to Edna’s innermost fantasies, which only she can relate. In this way, Chopin shows authorial respect to Edna and lets Edna partly speak for herself, thereby artistically preserving Edna’s emerging voice.

Aesthetically, Chopin’s embrace of stylization also indicates the narrator’s subtle distance from Edna, for Edna does more thinking than talking at this particular moment. Furthermore, through stylization Chopin indirectly reinforces Edna’s alienation from her husband since she is talking to a friend, not to him. Chopin alerts the reader of her distance from Edna through narrative switches like “Edna did not reveal so much as all this to Madame Ratignolle that summer day . . . But *a good part of it escaped her*” (63; emphasis added). With that, Chopin signals that Edna is just thinking aloud, almost to herself. Between Edna and Léonce, Chopin comments, “[Edna] fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, *in which fancy she was mistaken*” (62; emphasis added). The dialogues between Chopin’s authorial interventions and Edna’s narration demonstrate that Edna still remains unconscious of her true position in relation to her husband and her alienation from him. In this episode, Chopin liberates Edna to some degree, allowing Edna to engage in unconscious and random discourse.

After Edna’s first swim, the most crucial moment in her awakening, Chopin adopts the double-voiced strategy of “a rejoinder to a dialogue” to enable Edna to deliver her thoughts with directness and force, signifying her emotional, psychological, and discursive awakening. For the first time in her life, Edna assumes the position of a powerful speaking subject. For the first time, she tastes the liberating power of going beyond her psychological boundary as well as the sudden vision of fear and death associated with her crossing. Her powerful speaking position also makes her realize that she cannot communicate with Robert Lebrun, the young man who sparks her romantic feelings at the summer resort. After Edna returned to the shore, she started walking back to her cottage. Chopin represents Edna’s dialogue with Robert thus. I have italicized the key points of failed communication between them in the passage:

Edna had not traversed a quarter of the distance on her way home before she was overtaken by Robert.

“Did you think I was *afraid*?” she asked him, without a shade of annoyance.

“No; I knew you weren’t *afraid*.”

“Then why did you come? Why didn’t you stay out there with the others?”

“I never thought of *it*.”

“Thought of what?”

“Of *anything*. What difference does *it* make?”

“I’m very tired,” she uttered, complainingly.

“I know you are.”

“You *don’t know* anything about *it*. Why should you *know*? I never was so exhausted in my life. But it isn’t unpleasant. A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night. I don’t comprehend half of them. *Don’t mind what I’m saying; I am just thinking aloud*. I wonder if I shall ever be stirred again as Mademoiselle Reisz’s playing moved me to-night. I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one. It is like a night in a dream.” (75; emphases added)

Chopin chooses the double-voiced technique of a rejoinder to a dialogue to highlight Edna’s powerful emotional, psychological, and discursive awakening. At first glance, a character’s rejoinder to a dialogue may appear to have no distance from the authorial discourse, but in fact the words in the rejoinder possess “a sideward glance at someone else’s hostile word” (Bakhtin 196). Chopin deliberately lets Edna talk to Robert because she intends to show, through their failed dialogue, that he, as another consciousness representing liberal male perceptions about women, not only fails to understand Edna, but also, consciously or unconsciously, tries to play down the importance of her first successful swim. Through Edna’s reference to the pianist, Chopin hints that Robert is not the genuine reason behind Edna’s emotional awakening. When Edna opens the conversation, she anticipates Robert’s sympathetic understanding of her tumultuous feelings—confidence and fear and visions of death—after her first successful swim. That’s why she does not at all feel annoyed when she asks him, “Did you think I was *afraid*?” He wants to impress her with his sympathy, so he replies, “No; I knew you weren’t *afraid*.” But she further questions him, asking why he has come if he really thinks she was not afraid. His answer “I’ve never thought of it” implies many shades of meanings, especially the reifying word “it.” “It” may refer to the reason for his coming, and his answer proves that he has not thought about the reason, so he does not understand Edna’s emotions but pretends he does. Alternately, “it” may refer to Edna’s first

successful swim and its significance. The fact that he uses the reifying word not only objectifies and trivializes Edna's achievement, but also makes his meaning ambiguous. However, Edna presses for a clear answer in her follow-up question—"Thought of what?" Instead of specifying "it" as reasons behind his coming or her successful swim, Robert again chooses to conceal his thoughts with the general term "anything." His next utterance, "What difference does it make," displays his intentions more clearly. He either hasn't thought about anything at all, or he does not think her swim important or worth thinking about. Instead of congratulating and encouraging her, which sympathetic people usually do under similar circumstances, he either evades the subject or plays down her success.

After a few rounds of unsuccessful dialogue, Edna, sensing that Robert really does not understand her, changes the subject of their conversation to her exhaustion and, when he pretends again, refutes Robert with her forceful direct speech. Her long direct speech indicates that she is emerging from her mental sleep, seeing around herself, thinking for herself, and speaking for herself for the first time. When Robert again feigns sympathy and understanding, Edna, greatly annoyed this time, categorically refutes him. In her long direct speech, she also uses the word "it," but for emphasis. She clarifies the "it" as her groundbreaking swim, the exhilaration, fear, and independence—all her complex feelings associated with her emotional, psychological, and discursive awakening. Edna's growth must be measured on those dimensions, never on physical distance. It is the divine power of the pianist's music that has awakened her into a new realm of existence. Through this dialogue, Chopin primarily shows the power of art and secondarily the fact that Robert does not understand Edna. He is fortunate enough only to be around to witness her tumultuous changes. But Edna mistakenly transfers her awakening onto Robert and falls in love with him.

However, in this scene, Chopin may be talking in opposing directions simultaneously—showing how aggressive Edna has become after her complex awakening and how slow Robert the supposed lover is in comparison. Chopin shows that Edna has two faces. Edna has an unknowing face, which Chopin uses to act as Edna's social disguise for social approval. Edna has a knowing face, which Chopin uses to show her rich interiority. Throughout the novel Chopin simultaneously shows Edna's two contrasting faces, a practice common to women writers to represent women's existence.

Apart from Edna's two-way talking, Chopin does not show an obvious gap between the narrator's voice and Edna's voice, for the narrator adopts Edna's aggressive discourse hidden beneath her narrative ambivalence. When Edna says, "Don't mind what I'm saying; I am just thinking aloud," it is possible that she does not completely understand the scale of her awakening yet. However, her utterance also contains Chopin's voice, which uses that professed uncertainty as a mask to disarm readers, for Edna this time expresses her thoughts clearly and forcefully. Chopin will repeatedly resort to the same disguising strategy in later scenes, for the best way to disarm unsympathetic and even hostile readers is for Chopin to voluntarily tell them she does not know when in fact she does not want them to know that she knows. My reading agrees with Jacqueline Buckman's finding that Chopin's alternative narrative strategies have disrupted the masculine discourses represented by Robert and Léonce:

These disruptive undercurrents suggest an alternative system of representation to the logical, masculine tongue, and threaten to destabilize it by bursting its partitions and codes. The resulting ambiguity produces a flickering in the text that renders meaning unstable and challenges the reader to question the ideological implications of [Chopin's] hermeneutic strategy. (Buckman 58)

Buckman believes the conflict between the feminine language Chopin has encoded in Edna's development and the normative masculine language represented by Léonce and Robert challenges the reader to think carefully about why Chopin juxtaposes Edna's unknowing and knowing faces. Edna's emotional, psychological, and artistic awakening—embodied in her alienated speaking voice—is what Buckman refers to as the "flickering in the text." That's why I find it hard to accept Yaeger's interpretation of Edna's swim: that Edna's journey toward self-articulation is "finally diminished and divided, reduced in the romantic stories that she is told and the romantic stories she comes to tell herself, to a simplistic narrative that falsifies the diversity of her awakening consciousness" (439). I both agree and disagree with Yaeger. I agree with her because she is intensely dissatisfied with the romance plot the unresponsive Robert has sustained with Edna, because that plot has constricted and reduced Edna's powerful multi-layered awakening to a fleeting romance. But I disagree with Yaeger because she sees that as Chopin's failure in designing the narrative. Rather, Chopin uses the romance plot as her narrative decoy to sustain the reader's interests in her narrative design until

later, when she deliberately collapses the romance plot, as Robert departs from Edna a second time. In other words, Chopin must first rely on the romance genre to indirectly tell a story of spiritual awakening. Aesthetically speaking, Chopin infuses a note of irony into Robert's discourse because every time Robert says he knows about Edna's bravery or exhaustion, it turns out that he either does not know or chooses to hide if he happens to know. Therefore, in clashing with Robert's consciousness, Edna opens her eyes to her alienation from the outside world and to her emotional, psychological, and spiritual independence.

After the failed dialogues between Edna and Léonce, and between Edna and Robert, Chopin again chooses a rejoinder to a dialogue to show Edna that she cannot communicate with Madame Ratignolle, the mother-woman who represents a traditional female perspective. Chopin directs Edna to talk with her regarding their subject position to their children, for Chopin aims to let Edna see that her quest for a separate spiritual space is incomprehensible even to women. Chopin opens the conversation with Edna:

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

"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. (97; emphases added)

Chopin again uses a rejoinder to a dialogue to respect Edna's increasing power to speak directly about her search for a separate emotional space. She contrasts Edna's intense love for her children and her dissatisfaction at being monopolized by her love with Madame Ratignolle's conventional understanding about love, especially when Edna declares in the last sentence that she could do more for her children than dying for them. She differs from Madame Ratignolle, who does not understand how deeply love enslaves and threatens a person's separate sense of identity, especially that of an artist, for whom a separate space is essential. Madame Ratignolle complacently believes, since she takes her husband and children as the center of her universe, that she must love them. She believes she would be nothing without them. Chopin's novel parodies such women for

their self-effacement: they “idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (51). Edna knows that genuine emotions are monopolizing and lethal whereas Madame Ratignolle does not know. In this dialogue Edna expresses for the first time her belief that she would sacrifice her life, her sexuality included, but not herself—her independent selfhood and her separate space—for her children. Madame Ratignolle reads the Bible only on the literal and physical level, whereas Edna reads it on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. Therefore, Edna pursues an independent space and self on multiple levels, not merely the physical self that Madame Ratignolle occupies.

While keeping a candid distance from Madame Ratignolle, Chopin’s narrator speaks along with Edna and fully endorses Edna’s position to possibly test out a woman’s quest for a separate physical and spiritual space in the society to see how it would react. Once again, Chopin suggests Edna’s inability to articulate—“I can’t make it more clear”—to indicate the difficulty in expressing what Edna wants to express and as a possible rhetorical strategy to avoid shocking the author’s contemporary readers. The fact that Madame Ratignolle cannot understand Edna proves the difficulty that the idea of a woman’s separate space poses to society, but that difficulty does not mean that as a writer Chopin cannot find a way, albeit elusive, to represent it. The dialogic tensions between the two friends’ divergent attitudes toward love and spiritual space through their children highlight Chopin’s emphasis on women’s spiritual and emotional space. That’s why Yaeger’s conclusion that women lack the language to articulate their needs in late-nineteenth century America does not fully convince me.

Chopin chooses another double-voiced technique, which Bakhtin calls *skaz*, to give Edna a chance to showcase her power at artistic creation, when she and the men tell stories to amuse themselves after dinner. The technique *skaz* is generally associated with “oral speech, or rather, the illusion of oral speech in the narrative of a literary work” (Vološinov 191). When an author chooses *skaz*, her goal is to keep the aura of oral storytelling and to retain the tellers’ points-of-view and evaluations that are valuable to the author. None of the men understands Edna’s story, but they are all mesmerized by it. That male fascination indirectly attests to Chopin’s self-referential signature in the text alluding to her “ambitions as an artist”³ because Edna’s story foreshadows and provides meta-commentaries on her design of the novel (Showalter 75–76). Chopin uses Edna’s story to tell the reader how she has created *The Awakening* and

how it should be read by providing subtle clues in this scene. Chopin hints at Edna's status as a female artist, here a female storyteller. The other participants include Léonce, the Colonel, who is Edna's aristocratic father, and Dr. Mandelet the family doctor.

Chopin subtly parodies the men's stories, which are all about the past,⁴ and contrasts them with Edna's story, which imagines a story about the future and represents the artistic vision Chopin herself embraces as a female writer. Chopin preserves Edna's narrative to affirm and celebrate the sustaining power of women's open artistic imagination by contrasting Edna's story with the men's points of view to parody their immaturity, fake heroism, myopic perspective, and narrative closures. Chopin uses "amusing" to comment on Léonce's stories, which are idle boyhood adventures like thrashing pecan trees. With "little sense of humor" and "always formed a central figure," Chopin intensifies her humor at the Colonel's Civil War stories, in which he always casts himself as the heroic savior. The doctor, since he is invited by Léonce to observe Edna, tells stories about women's extramarital affairs and their usual returns to their husbands. He loads his stories with double intentions: to amuse the listeners and to suggest a proper course of action for Edna.

Besides giving Edna a chance at artistic creation and providing interpretive clues, another purpose Chopin has in designing this scene is to warn readers against reading the story as an extramarital affair. William Bartley suggests that Mandelet has already framed Edna's quest for a separate physical and spiritual space into an extramarital affair, and that Mandelet desires to appropriate and write Edna's future story (732–733). The doctor's sarcastic narration, using phrases such as "one of the *old, ever new and curious* stories" and "one of the many *little human documents*," bears out Bartley's argument. With those words, Chopin adamantly refuses to let the men chew Edna's multi-layered awakening as one little and sordid extramarital affair. She certainly does not fit Mandelet's version of her future. Instead, Edna tells her own tale of boundless imagination, about a woman who swims away with her lover to a remote place and never comes back. Her story looks into the future. Her ability to compose her own story marks "an oral landmark in her personal history that she is shaping as never before" (Dickson 41). As Nancy Walker observes, Edna's primary dilemma is to "construct a story for her own life" (154). Edna's transformation—from starting to think for herself, to speaking with her own voice, and to composing her own story—indicates she has registered remarkable progress.

Chopin's narration remains very close to Edna's discourse in this scene with a subtle yet discernible distance to warn readers that Edna's imaginative vision isn't keyed to reality. Although the narrator and Edna almost speak in one voice, Chopin adds the following signals after Edna finishes her story: "It was a pure invention. [Edna] said that Madame Antoine had related it to her. That, also, was an invention. Perhaps it was a dream she had had" (124). In this sentence alone, Chopin has stressed three times that Edna's story is purely imaginative. Through those subtle signals, Chopin warns her readers that she creates Edna imaginatively to test out a woman's quest for a separate space. Under no circumstances shall the story be understood as a realistic depiction of contemporary life. Nonetheless, both Edna's mini-story and Chopin's *The Awakening* sound convincing and real. Chopin winds up the episode with the open-ended unknown future of Edna's feminine narrative. This episode simultaneously foreshadows Chopin's strategy to usher *The Awakening* into a boundless, open infinity at the end of the novel.

In the following episode, Chopin uses stylized dialogue between Edna and Alcée Arobin to create a frame around female artistic achievement. She strategically places Edna near Alcée, the famous womanizer whom Edna has kissed, for Edna to achieve self-consciousness as a woman but more importantly as a female artist. Then Chopin leads their conversation to Mademoiselle Reisz, the accomplished female pianist, because Chopin wants to use both the seduction and Edna as her cover-up to hide and protect her soaring ambitions and astounding achievements. She also warns against reading the story as seduction. The dialogue goes as follows:

"One of these days," [Edna] said, "I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, *I don't know*. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am *a devilishly wicked specimen* of the sex. But some way I *can't convince* myself that I am. I must think about it."

"Don't. What's the use? Why should you bother thinking about it when I can tell you what manner of woman you are."

...

"Do you know Mademoiselle Reisz?" she asked irrelevantly.

"The pianist? I know her by sight. I've heard her play."

"She says *queer* things sometimes in a *bantering* way that you don't notice at the time and you find yourself thinking about afterward."

“For instance?”

“Well, for instance, when I left her to-day, 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.’”

“Whither would you soar?”

“I’m not thinking of any extraordinary flights. I only half comprehend her.” (138; emphases added)

In this passage, discourse becomes even more complicated as Chopin infuses three voices, not two, into Mademoiselle Reisz’s utterance regarding artistic bravery and autonomy. Previously, Reisz used the image of a brave bird soaring above the level plain to talk metaphorically to Edna about artistic courage. Chopin does not let Mademoiselle Reisz speak directly. Instead, she moves the utterance to this scene and allows Edna to retell it. Reisz epitomizes a female self that is maimed in its quest—the single woman who has rejected marriage or childbirth by committing herself to art. Chopin does not completely endorse this choice. Yet she stylizes Reisz’s words and makes them stand out in quotation marks, so she both agrees and disagrees with the pianist (Showalter 66). Chopin agrees that artistic originality and daring is vital to a female artist, but she disagrees with the idea that a female artist has to be radical in order to achieve meaningful originality. In this novel, Chopin’s art is situated in intimate engagement and dialogue. Therefore, Chopin infuses Edna’s single rejoinder to Arobin’s question with three voices—that of Reisz, of Edna, and of Chopin the woman writer.

Chopin uses a double strategy. She does not want to scare off her readers by directly giving Edna a separate physical, spiritual, or artistic space. She writes cryptically, shepherding Edna until Edna comes to understand artistic creation and courage. Similarly, because she wants to avoid the limitations of the romance genre, she carefully arranges for Robert to leave Edna a second time. Therefore Edna’s final test comes with this final departure of Robert, who has sustained the reader’s illusion of Edna’s romantic awakening. He leaves only a brief note, “I love you. Good-bye—because I love you” (172), thereby frustrating the long-awaited romantic climax. Robert leaves for three possible reasons. He thinks Mr. Pontellier would never set Edna free. He is scared of her passion and agency, especially when she declares she should laugh at the two men if they think they can exchange her (167). Most importantly,

Robert's departure signals that Mademoiselle Reisz rather than Robert has awakened Edna to her complex awakening. I argue that Robert serves as Chopin's textual decoy because Chopin does not intend to write a romance.

What does Chopin intend to write, if not a romance? This brings us to the novel's ending, my final example of free indirect discourse. Whether readers interpret Edna's final swim as an ending or a beginning determines their primary feelings toward the entire story. At the end Chopin gathers the most significant voices—that of Léonce, Mademoiselle Reisz, Doctor Mandelet, and Robert—together for them to hold a grand symphony of dialogues in Edna's consciousness. I have italicized the narrator's comments on each one:

She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could *possess her, body and soul*. How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, *if she knew!* "And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies."

Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her.

"Good-bye—because I love you." He did not know; he did not understand. *He would never understand*. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood *if she had seen him*—but that was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone.

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then *sank again*. (176; emphases added)

Chopin gathers the techniques of free indirect discourse she has used, including narrator's narration, stylization, parody, and rejoinder to a dialogue, to recapitulate the journey she has enabled Edna to traverse in achieving her current understanding about art and life. Most readers see the ending as Edna's suicide, but I believe Chopin does not intend it to be, for three reasons. Edna's after-dinner story, which Chopin uses as a coded sign, has an open ending. The woman leaves with her lover. Here Edna leaves by herself. Chopin has reinstated the pianist's belief in artistic bravery. However, she immediately refutes the pianist's anticipated misunderstanding that this ending resembles a suicide. With that Chopin tells the reader she actually means the opposite. Lastly, Chopin also mentions Edna's old terror from her first swim has flamed up, but this time it has sunk. Therefore, despite the multiple narrative closures that

have been offered, along with Paula Treichler and Robert Treu, I am convinced that Chopin has designed an open ending, symbolizing a threshold to a new beginning. Treichler observes that the novel marks Edna's gradual coming into consciousness in her "growing mastery of the first-person singular, and that when this 'I' has been created, the book has successfully completed its mission and comes to an end" (Treichler 308). Treu also agrees that Chopin wants the reader to "contemplate possibilities rather than make final judgments" (34).

Chopin's exquisite use of free indirect discourse reveals that she has reached artistic maturity. Through Edna's dialogues with representative voices of her era, Chopin engages, parodies, and refuses all the cultural and literary norms these ideas represent. Chopin has simultaneously featured and pushed to near perfection a new theme (spiritual awakening), a new technique (free indirect discourse), and a new fiction-crafting technique (using intra-textual and meta-fictional commentaries). Amazingly, Chopin uses Edna's cultural and aesthetic journey to represent two journeys of her own. Through Edna's birth as a female artist, Chopin charts her own cultural and aesthetic journey of becoming the first modern American female artist. For an artist, to have completed the journey is already a rare feat; to successfully represent that journey for the reader is a feat rarer still.

NOTES

1. I express my sincere thanks to Professor Charles S. Ross, who has read the paper as the first main chapter in my dissertation, and who has also worked with me extensively. Professor Howard Mancing also provided useful suggestions. My sincere thanks also go to the anonymous readers at *The Southern Literary Journal*, whose suggestions I have followed closely for my revisions.

2. Free indirect discourse refers to ungrammatical narration. Mikhail Bakhtin calls it "double-voiced discourse" or "free indirect style/discourse." It must be differentiated from expressions where one speaker loads his or her words with double intentions, such as puns. Free indirect discourse has two speakers and two voices whereas the latter has only one speaker, regardless of how many layers of meaning are evoked.

3. Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 75–76. I extend Showalter's observation of Kate Chopin's self-referential pun on Chopin the composer. Showalter argues that Chopin the writer uses Chopin the composer as a code word to allude to "an intimate, romantic, and poignant musical *oeuvre* that reinforces the novel's sensual atmosphere." I extend the analogy to Edna the composer of stories in this scene to Chopin the composer of the novel.

4. I am indebted to Professor Robert Lamb for pointing this out.

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