

Title: Unbearable realism: freedom, ethics and identity in *The Awakening*

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The two most prominent critical readings of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* assert that Edna Pontellier's final actions represent either the mythical triumph of self over a restrictive patriarchy, or, contrarily, the tragic, inevitable defeat of a woman striving to combine motherhood with personhood. Challenging these readings, this paper argues that Edna's actions reveal the danger of withdrawing from all available social roles in favor of an identity-less, though ultimately elusive and destructive, freedom. This paper also argues that *The Awakening*, although traditionally aligned with realism and naturalism, implicitly questions the values associated with these modes of representation. Portraying identity as a social fiction one inhabits with a certain amount of willpower, the text complicates realism's insistence on the empirical; depicting women who wield significant power over their lives, as well as a protagonist who erroneously believes she has no say over her own, the novella undermines naturalism's tendency toward fatalism.

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Like the last lines of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the ending of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* seems always to be read in the context of gender inequality at the turn of the last century. Both texts repeatedly establish the extent to which the patriarchal pressures of that period posed severe obstacles for even the most privileged women. In regard to each text's ending, however, the same set of questions tends to arise: is Edna's suicide, like Gilman's speaker's descent into madness, a triumph--the best possible achievement of independence and agency under the circumstances? Or are her final actions a defeat--the fatal, inescapable result for any woman who tries to assert autonomy in the face of such debilitating, insurmountable patriarchy? Though critical responses have varied since *The Awakening* was first published in 1899--when the majority argued that Edna's ultimate fate is only cosmic justice for her moral deviation throughout the novella--most readings have fallen into either of these two categories. (1) There are, of course, a few slightly different readings; Robert Treu, for example, along with a few other critics, suggests that Edna's final swim does not necessarily lead to her intentional (or even unintentional) suicide (2000, 23). But for the most part, these two interpretations of the novella's ending remain the most enduring and prominent.

A third, though far less popular, reading of Edna's final actions insists they are inconsistent with her character and, as such, flaw the novella as a whole. George M. Spangler claims that *The Awakening*'s conclusion "undercuts the otherwise superb characterization of the protagonist and thus prevents a very good novel from being the masterpiece its discoverers claim that it is" (1970, 250). Strangely enough, even one of Chopin's staunchest defenders comes to this same conclusion--though from a slightly different perspective. Biographer Emily Toth has suggested that Chopin had Edna commit suicide in order to accommodate the moral demands publishers

and readers would place on a woman who committed such transgressions. (2) Such a reading necessarily implies that Chopin, succumbing more or less willingly to outside pressures, produced a compromised piece of literature.

But these seemingly different readings share a common view of the society a woman like Edna faced, for each inherently suggests that the patriarchal-social pressures forced upon such a woman were either inescapably deterministic or, somehow, entirely avoidable through a kind of mythical rebirth achieved through the act of suicide. Even critic Marta Caminero-Santangelo, whose book, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, argues against treating insanity or (presumably) suicide as a viable form of agency for women, makes the following concession regarding Chopin's (as well as Gilman's) text:

It is surely no coincidence that "The Yellow Wallpaper" ... and *The Awakening* ..., appearing within less than a decade of each other at the turn of the twentieth century, both depict female protagonists who retreat from a world of insurmountable obstacles into madness and suicide, respectively, nor that, in both cases, the retreat is highly ambiguous. (Caminero-Santangelo 1998, 181; my emphasis) (3)

Such readings, though problematic, are understandable. We care about Edna and feel justifiable sympathy for her plight. It's far easier to see her either as an innocent victim crushed by a merciless, absolute patriarchy, or as having the last laugh by ducking out of life's impassible and unfair obstacles. But these readings implicitly overlook the courage and discipline of women like Edna who did survive and rise above such pressures, including the very authors of *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper"; both women had families and successful writing careers, endured divorce or a spouse's death, and remained active public figures for most of their lives. According to the logic of these enduring critical readings, women like Chopin or Gilman appear to be accidental survivors who inexplicably avoided an otherwise inexorable fate, or--worse--women who lacked the courage to make the ultimate stand of killing themselves or going mad to elude the patriarchal society they faced. (4) There is no question that the social roles and practical agency for women like Edna and the speaker in "The Yellow Wallpaper" were limited: both texts make this point abundantly clear. The issue that merits further investigation, however, and one that *The Awakening* implicitly comments on, is what women could do, and who they could be, in the face of such restrictions.

I would like to suggest another way to read the ending of *The Awakening*, and that is as a subtle, but intentionally crafted, warning. In this reading, Edna's final actions serve as an example of what can happen to a protagonist whose unwillingness to continue dedicating herself to any of the available social roles leads her to abandon all of them in favor of an enticing yet ever-elusive freedom, the kind one associates with a tantalizing, idyllic childhood. We know that Edna's own childhood was far from idyllic, given her mother's early death and her father's stern personality, and this may have some relation to her life-long quest for such freedom. But Edna's search for such an unrestricted, undefined and, ultimately, impossible state--a freedom from identity--ironically deprives her life of meaning (and finally of life itself). Identity, as we know, is at base a social construction, a practical fiction one inhabits, more or less intentionally and with a certain amount of will. In many ways the definition of any particular identity seems arbitrary: how is one ever absolutely or inherently a mother or an artist, for example? At what point does an artist

identify herself as such--after her first painting? Her 700th? The choice seems entirely up to her. Even the apparently self-evident definition of motherhood seems to possess a certain amount of flexibility; wouldn't a woman who adopts, raises and nurtures a child have the same right to choose to call herself a mother? There are conditions one must face, of course, but one's decision to take on an identity is, in important ways, akin to believing in a kind of fiction, precisely because one's identity is so often unrelated to the physical, biological being.

But to take on an identity in this way, even if one were to modify it, must also involve confronting, and, ultimately, taking responsibility for the "real" effects and consequences of such a performance. This is especially the case when such a performance occurs in society, in relation to others. But this still leaves some room, even in an otherwise restrictive society, to willfully modify one's social role or identity. Historically in this country, this is precisely the way marginalized people have asserted their civil rights: by owning, and taking responsibility for, what social roles were available, and then by modifying, over time and in greater numbers, their boundaries. Take, for example, women who have, over time, and with effort, successfully modified the boundaries and definitions of the role of "mother" to include someone who works both inside and outside of the home. In other words, by taking control of the very means of representing or determining their social selves in a society that would otherwise determine or represent them, strong, dedicated women--like those in other marginalized groups--have overcome many of the social restrictions they faced (and, in many cases, continue to face). To take a conventional role available to women at this time and to modify it would be to achieve what Caminero-Santangelo means by "active creative transformation" (1998, 181). Edna's refusal finally to dedicate herself to an identity or creatively transform one for herself is a particular failure, one that ends in suicide. But this failure is not universal among all the female characters in Chopin's novella. Both Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle explicitly inhabit social identities available to them only to actively and creatively transform them. In doing so they implicitly demonstrate the options available to women of this time period, options Edna fails to exercise and sustain.

Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle certainly face limitations--economic, social, political--because of their gender; each has a limited set of socially acceptable identities to choose from: mother-woman, artist. But as I hope to demonstrate, Chopin's text also clearly illustrates the surprising amount of agency--given the novella's historical and regional setting--these two women create for themselves precisely because they have learned to use and modify these social identities. Because she's an artist, and recognized as such in society, Madame Reisz is not expected to marry. Furthermore, she does not act or appear "lady-like" or even polite: she speaks her mind, even in public. That is, Madame Reisz inhabits or occupies a social identity, the definition and social limitations of which seem arbitrary--even, as previously defined, fictitious. But she does so with "real" social consequences, within "real" conditions she must navigate. Yet, she is also able to inhabit this role in a way that modifies and extends its boundaries. Consider the way the reader is introduced to her:

She was dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby, which a nurse in the adjoining cottage was endeavoring to put to sleep. She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a

disposition to trample upon the rights others. ... She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair. ... [And yet] A general air of surprise and genuine satisfaction fell upon everyone as they saw [Madame Reisz] enter. ... Her playing had aroused a fever of enthusiasm. "What passion!" "What an artist!" "I have always said no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz!" "That last prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!" (Chopin 1988, 33-34)

So different from other representations of meek, self-effacing spinsters of this period, this woman here--an aging, un-married, impolite troublemaker--is not only tolerated but universally respected (Note that the last quote in the passage comes emphatically from a man). Of course it would be absurd to assume that Madame Reisz is absolutely free--in general, or from all the patriarchal pressures with which she must surely still contend. But here, at least, she manages to use her social identity in a very public way to navigate and even overcome some of the social restrictions one might assume to be in place at this time. It's also true that she lives alone, but Madame Reisz never appears lonely. (One could argue that Madame Reisz's character only demonstrates how absolutely art and family were incompatible for women at this time. But, again, the examples of Chopin and Gilman weaken this claim.) Madame Ratignolle, as I hope to demonstrate in greater detail, is also able to wield a significant amount of social power and agency, within and beyond her immediate domestic sphere. Edna, too, succeeds in creating a significant amount of agency for herself after she comes to realize, when she learns to swim, the extent to which identities are fluid and fictitious (a point I'll return to): she leaves her husband, seems free from a certain amount of childcare, and eventually earns money from her artwork.

Unfortunately, she is also prone to constructing certain fantasies of identity--involving herself and Robert as lovers completely secluded from the world, for example--that she both nurtures and refrains from acting on, in part because of the social constraints and limitations she must face in the world. More importantly, she lacks the will (and the belief) to commit herself to acting on these fantasies, even though they are no more fictitious than other, more conventional roles. Because these fantasies fail to become realized, the temptation, both for Edna and the reader, is to assume that no suitable identity for a woman like Edna is available. That is, Edna finally comes to believe that she cannot achieve individuality or personhood. Her least realistic or achievable fantasies of identity also involve the abandonment of particular roles she cannot bring herself to relinquish, motherhood being the most obvious.

Unable, because essentially unwilling, to realize such fantasies, Edna ultimately responds by attempting to live outside of all social constructions, beyond any workable, practical fiction, entering what she imagines to be a space of unmediated reality beyond identity--a space that can neither be inhabited nor endured--as she comes to reject in succession the various social roles available to her: whether that of wife, mother, woman of society, artist and/or lover. As the narrator states, "she had abandoned herself to Fate" (Chopin 1988, 137). But her desire to live outside of all socially constructed identities cannot be realized, precisely because such an existence, even if achievable, cannot be sustained. In such a chaotic state, circumstance and whim would determine one's existence, which would become akin to madness and, ultimately, would direct itself toward oblivion, toward self-annihilation. Chopin thereby illustrates the fatal

danger inherent in such a quest in which a woman/artist abandons all available social identities, what I am calling inhabitable social fictions. As William Bartley notes,

Chopin ... holds that any position on the best way to live is dependent upon what constitutes the best possible future--on what will always be a suitable [fictitious] image of an attainable future. Without such an image, anything that might count as 'the best way to live' would be as unthinkable, say, as the best possible vacation ... would be without ever imagining a destination. (Bartley 2000, 722)

It's important to remember, however, that Edna does make several radical life-style choices throughout the novella. In learning to swim, she experiences a moment of delicious joy and ecstasy, realizing that her potential is unlimited, that she is freer than she suspected: "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul" (Chopin 1988, 36).

However intoxicating, this sense of rejuvenation is a vital and necessary one. Throughout the first half of the novella, Edna takes advantage of the epiphany: she becomes an artist, begins to question and then defy Leonce's authority as her husband, moves out of the house, and develops romantic relationships with other men. Ultimately, however, her will flags, and she fails to sustain interest in, and dedication to, the new identities she has chosen. At the same time, she looks with increasing interest to Robert with whom she wants to experience a kind of hyperbolically romantic love affair, one she does not really think is possible or even, ultimately, worthwhile. Toward the novella's end, the narrator tells us, "There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him, would melt out of her existence" (Chopin 1988, 151). Believing that freedom is only a state of negation--a freedom from restrictions, rather than a freedom to take up and act on one's choices--Edna makes the decision to resign herself to an existence so particular to itself (i.e., beyond any constructed, fictitious identity) that it leaves her no room in which to negotiate the very social restrictions she seeks to elude.

As is the case with a similar reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," this interpretation asserts that Chopin's novel neither belittles nor underestimates the odds and obstacles facing women, even middle class Southern white women, at the turn of the century, but points instead to a life beyond fatalism, a meaningful life set against, and necessarily within, the constraints of nature and society (and suicide obviously would not be a viable option for such a life). (6) In other words, while *The Awakening* asserts that there is only a limited set of available social roles for a woman like Edna, it implicitly reminds the reader, at the same time, that the content of these roles--as well as their flexibility--is by no means completely circumscribed. As Edna herself comes to realize, she can exercise a certain amount freedom in choosing the kind of woman she wants to be. But this freedom is not enough: she must then act on and willfully sustain her choices in order for them to have any meaning beyond whim. This is essentially the way one lives an ethical life--acting on, and being responsible for, the choices one is more or less free to make. According to Chopin's novella, achieving such an implied ethical life (as opposed to a moral one) would be neither impossible nor immediate (nor simple) but would instead involve extraordinary strength, courage, and dedication. That Edna ultimately fails to sustain these qualities may mean

that she fails to uphold and live by what I am calling "ethics." (7) But I would add that such an understanding must also take into account that women (as well as other then-marginalized groups) were for the most part prevented from living ethically. That is, they faced imposing, but not absolutely determining, nor absolute, restrictions.

Critical readings of *The Awakening* have long pointed out the ways in which Chopin's novella incorporates aspects of several turn-of-the-century literary movements, including romanticism, realism, and naturalism. Such readings tend to emphasize the techniques of the latter two movements--realism and naturalism--and thereby remind us that Chopin's novella illuminates the socio-economic and cultural realities women like Edna faced, as well as the physical desires and social needs society denied them. In fact, *The Awakening* also performs a subtle but compelling critique of realism and naturalism by revealing the limitations of these modes of representation in order to point to (or construct) practical possibilities that exist outside their realm.

Acknowledging that realism and naturalism include, respectively, an exposition of empirical, social and political realities, as well as the belief that fate--biological, social, or institutional--absolutely determines one's destiny, I'm suggesting that Chopin's novel implies that in order for women like Edna to survive, the philosophical boundaries and consequences associated with these literary genres can and must be overcome. By illuminating the extent to which identities are mostly inhabitable social fictions, *The Awakening* complicates realism's insistence on the empirical; by presenting women who seem to have a modicum of agency and autonomy, as well as a protagonist who mistakenly comes to believe that she has no say over her own fate, it undermines naturalism's claims of determinism.

As such the novella does not fail to remind the reader that on some level Edna is responsible for her destiny--despite--and precisely because of--the enormous social limitations society has placed on a woman such as herself. Her self-defeating choices stem, in part, from the fact that she believes with increasing intensity that no favorable identity or social fiction is available to her. Rather than sustaining or modifying her identities--recently separated wife, artist, mother, lover--or only abandoning the ones that seem to her impossible to realize, Edna abandons all of them in favor of stark reality itself. It is not quite fair to say that she lacks imagination or a sense of reality; rather, Edna's chief flaw, the novella implies, is that she lacks the will to maintain and inhabit (and possibly modify) any of the social fictions available to someone like herself. Her ultimate surrender to the brutal, brutally "real" aspects of nature becomes inextricably tied to this lack of will power, leaving her helpless in the face of an insuperable, obliterating reality.

There is no question that the social roles available for someone like Edna to inhabit were limited in number. One is tempted to imagine that if Edna could be truly autonomous and free she would commence living a fulfilling life. That is, according to the enduring critical arguments already mentioned that focus on the novella's ending, Edna's suicide seems related not so much to her intimacies with others (however unfulfilling or impossible these might be) as to the insurmountable social, patriarchal restrictions she must face. Of course these may overlap, but the central problem, so the critics contend, stems from the social restrictions (the lack of freedom) institutionally imposed on Edna. As Joyce Dyer argues, "Society, as well as the conscience of Edna herself, offers no relief. ... Motherhood and selfhood were incompatible in Edna's century" (1993, 103). But again and again *The Awakening's* implication is that what Edna longs for is not so much freedom (which she discovers and to a certain extent pursues after learning to swim) as

meaning--which, increasingly for Edna, involves not selfhood but the unattainable yet always longed-for lover. Having left Leonce and her old house, having become a somewhat successful artist, having in other words become significantly, almost exceptionally, free from the restrictive drudgery of domestic duties, including (it seems) many childcare responsibilities, Edna nonetheless feels empty: "But as she sat amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which came upon her like an obsession. ... There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable" (Chopin 1988, 118). Can it really be Robert she longs for who, if only he would devote himself to her, would bring all meaning and spirit back into her life? With its allusion to the unattainable beloved, the passage reinforces the sense of Edna's lifelong inability to commit herself to anyone or -thing, the feeling of safety (albeit mixed with sadness) she feels in falling in love with unreachable, and therefore abstract, lovers. This is the person who, as "a grown woman," became infatuated with the face and figure of a tragedian, and who, without ever meeting the actor in person, much less consummating the relationship, takes her feelings for him to be "the climax of her fate" (23). This sense of infatuation and helplessness returns as she realizes that Robert may not reciprocate her feelings for him, and the text implies the difference in her age now seems to have no effect on Edna's ability to judge and act on her current emotions:

For the first time she recognized the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman. The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation by any suggestion or promise of instability. The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded. (Chopin 1988, 59)

Katherine Kearns, reading the text through Jean-Francois Lyotard's writings on the sublime, points out that Edna's quenchless desire here mirrors the feeling of sublimity she experiences when learning to swim or on first hearing Madame Reisz play the piano. According to Kearns, "The condition of sublimity is a pleasurable 'delirium' in which the ineffable is simultaneously felt and felt to be unattainable, but it is a pleasure that derives itself from pain. ... It is a masochism available to the initiates of the 'I' who may luxuriate briefly in the piquant pain of conceptualizing the unimaginable" (1991, 75). Ultimately, it is Edna's conviction alone--and not the novella's assertion--that the inaccessibility of "true" love for her, as with "true" art, is a symptom of how absolutely society prohibits her attempts at autonomy and selfhood. Kearns adds, "An unarticulated yearning for the ineffable may rise up like an ague and subside, but when Edna begins to learn the names of her oppression she discovers that the imagination cannot objectify a curative condition. ... On a more comprehensive level it is an ignis fatuus [that is, an illusion] which convinces Edna that there is no way" (76). According to Kearns, then, the novella's apparent subscription to the values associated with naturalism, including the belief that forces beyond the control of the self absolutely determine the self, seems to be Edna's alone, and such a view, Chopin's text implies, is finally erroneous and deadly. The novella indicates that somewhere between the imagination and the conditions of reality exists a space where women of

the nineteenth century with ambition, dedication and will might inhabit and sustain a social fiction that would provide at least a modicum of autonomy and selfhood. As both bildungsroman and kunstlerroman, *The Awakening* reveals the tragic failure of the life of a woman and an artist, though the fact that Edna ultimately refuses to perform the kind of hard work such a dual-identity requires should by no means incur our censure or blame. As a casualty, Edna compels sympathy, and her actions bespeak the terrific effort and endurance necessary for such a woman to survive in such a time and place.

Still, even as the novella invokes sympathy for Edna, it does not withhold its implicit critique of her final choices. Increasingly, Edna nurtures her infatuations, an easier, more tempting alternative to willfully maintaining her various social identities. Her feelings for Robert, like those for the tragedian and cavalry officer before, are ultimately a symptom not of realism but of romance, and one might be inclined to imagine that such romantic tendencies are the real cause of Edna's grief. But as Bartley reminds us, Edna's romanticism is of a particular kind. She longs for and imagines a future with these men, though in each case it becomes clear to Edna, almost immediately, that no such future is possible within the conditions of her reality. Still, one must imagine and therefore fictitiously create one's future, and this applies to everyone--characters in fiction, artists, and especially women in the nineteenth century who had to bear the brunt of societal pressures, laws, and institutions. Ethics, not morality, involves acting on personally chosen beliefs. To live ethically, then, is to choose, believe in and act on a fiction--though one can only do so against (and therefore, necessarily, within) the pressures, constraints, and conditions of one's existence. Bartley argues that such an understanding of ethics applies to Chopin's novella and necessarily undermines both of the most popular contemporary readings of Edna's final, suicidal action: as a necessary defeat before an all-powerful patriarchy, and as a kind of mythic triumph of selfhood over all conditions and limitations. As Bartley notes, "we are [and so, therefore, is Edna] something more than the helpless performers of socially scripted roles ... even as we fall short of the standard of sovereign self-authorship we find in Gilbert's account [in which Edna dies only to return as Venus]" (2000, 730-31). (8) That is to say, Edna is neither absolutely determined by patriarchy and its limitations, nor free from her social conditions and restraints--in any inhabitable, practical way--when she commits suicide. (9)

The problem Edna faces, the more pressing and essential issue, is not so much a matter of how many available roles there are to choose from, but of how to fight for and dedicate oneself to (and then modify) any of those roles in the first place. To ultimately reject all the available social roles, as Edna does by the novella's end, is not to live freely but to live chaotically and without meaning, is to eliminate the very identities Edna would otherwise inhabit and use to represent herself. Her rejection thus leads to a kind of despair in many ways akin to madness, for both (madness and a surrendering of the will) involve relinquishing the sole means of self-representation in a society that already limits and undermines women's ability to do so. As Caminero-Santangelo argues, referring to the relationship between madness in women and patriarchal societies, "insanity is the final surrender to such [dominant, patriarchal] discourses, precisely because it is characterized by the (dis)ability to produce meaning--that is, to produce representations recognizable as meaningful within society" (1998, 11). Contrary to the idea, then, that Edna's rejection of all the roles available to her--mother, lover, wife, artist, friend--might lead to freedom, her withdrawals only succeed in obliterating the social positions she might otherwise use to determine as much of her own life as possible. As even Adele Ratignolle tells



Edna, sensing that her quest for freedom fails to take into account her responsibilities and social conditions, "In some ways you seem to me like a child. ... You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (Chopin 1988, 127).

The implication in Adele's advice is not necessarily to stay married and have more children but to thoroughly investigate, live within, accept responsibility for (and possibly modify) a fictitious but practical role--in other words, to cease from being a child by taking the freedoms and responsibilities that come with adulthood seriously. Acting childishly in this way is something Edna does with more and more frequency: "She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (Chopin 1988, 42). Rather than being a determining factor imposed on her from without, however, this trait seems characteristic of Edna's refusal to maintain a certain amount of willpower, something Adele perceptively identifies. Certainly Madame Ratignolle is not the model of a modern free woman; she is, even as the novella points out, "the mother woman" absolutely bound by her domestic duties. Still, she does not seem unaware of herself. She seems both to know the limitations of her role and to embrace that role, nonetheless. In some cases, Adele is able to extend the very boundaries of her social identity: if her agency and control are limited to the domestic space, she nonetheless manages to push the boundaries of that sphere beyond her household. No one seems to dispute the social power she wields in her extended community, her ability to publicly flirt with and socially manipulate Robert and the other younger men who surround her. In fact, Kathleen Streater goes so far as to call Adele a feminist in her own right:

[B]y allowing Adele--a pregnant woman--to hint at a sexual identity, Chopin contests the boundaries of Adele's assigned gender roles: is she a mother? a femme-fatal? a saint? a wild woman? Chopin suggests Adele is all of them, and, in doing so, she reveals an identity that confuses, and thus belies, static stereotypes, and, importantly, she reveals Adele's ownership and authority of the mother-woman role beyond the male-prescribed definitions. It is a quiet revolution of sorts.  
(Streater 2007, 407-09)

Not only does Adele understand how fictitious the social identities or roles available to her are--with their fluid, contestable boundaries--she inhabits them in a practical way and thereby modifies the overarching identity the novel, perhaps a bit playfully, assigns for her: mother-woman.

Madame Reisz gives similar advice to Edna. When Edna tells her friend that she plans to be an artist, Madame Reisz does not tell her, cannot say, if this will become a reality. That is, the occupation and identity is, on one hand and on some level, something predetermined (and in this more closely aligned with nature, even fate): "one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts--which have not been acquired by one's own effort"; and on the other, as Madame Reisz warns, such an occupation requires strenuous willpower and action: "Moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul ... the soul that dares and defies" (Chopin 1988, 84). Yet, just moments before Edna confesses to Madame Reisz that she loves Robert, the narrator tells us that Edna "had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (106). After Edna confesses to loving Robert, Madame Reisz asks "what will you do when he comes back?" (note the verb in

the question), to which Edna replies "Do? Nothing except feel glad and happy to be alive" (108). For all of the older woman's attempts to get Edna to recognize the necessity of will and action in forming a meaningful identity--to be an artist and/or to go and love Robert, in any case to do something--Edna stubbornly refrains from actively choosing and dedicating herself to any single social role. "One of these days" she tells Robert, "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. ... I must think about it" (109).

Nonetheless, after Edna has freed herself from Leonce, from her roles as wife and woman of the house, including many of her child-care responsibilities, she still feels empty, feels her own life to be without meaning. "She answered her husband with friendly evasiveness, --not with any fixed design to mislead him, only because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference" (Chopin 1988, 137). It's not reality that has gone out of her life but "all sense" of it--as if reality can have meaning but only to the extent that one approaches it within certain meaningful roles or terms. Believing that her fantasies of running away with Robert and leaving her children behind cannot be realized within the conditions of her existence, Edna assumes nothing is left for her but stark reality, merciless as fate--existence without hope or will, unbearably real because unmediated by the social and practical terms one might otherwise choose, agree to, and live by.

Let me compare the passage quoted in the previous paragraph to another that comes from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Here we get a description of Augustine St. Clare, the good-hearted, apparently carefree Southern aristocrat whose paralyzing skepticism prevents him from acting on his true beliefs--one of which is that slavery is a sin against God. For St. Clare, life has become meaningless. This skepticism begins when he is prevented from marrying the woman he loves:

And thus ended the whole romance and ideal of life for Augustine St. Clare. But the real remained--the real, like the flat, bare, oozy tide-mud, when the blue, sparkling wave, with all its company of gliding boats and white-winged ships, its music of oars and chiming waters, has gone down, and there it lies, flat, slimy, bare--exceedingly real. Of course in a novel [my emphasis], peoples heart's break, and they die, and that is the end of it; and in a story this is very convenient. But in real life [my emphasis] we do not die when all that makes life bright dies to us. There is a most busy and important round of eating, drinking, dressing, walking, visiting, buying, selling, talking, reading, and all that makes up what is commonly called living yet to be gone through; and this yet remained to Augustine. (Stowe 2003, 152)

Admittedly, Stowe's novel comes from a different era. A mid-century work in a different set of genres--sentimental, Christian, domestic--*Uncle Tom's Cabin* promotes a kind of feminism, or proto-feminism, in so far as its female characters are morally stronger than the males because of their natural capacity for Christian sympathy. Yet such women are bound to, even if in control of, the domestic sphere. But this passage is significant, and not just because it strays from the novel's otherwise Christian, sentimental view of existence. Here we get the sense that reality, the real, in its most naked, unmediated manifestation is not liberating but imprisoning, an oozy chaos

without form or order; it is essentially that which cannot be taken up into a system of signification. (10) But the passage also illuminates the necessary connection between a certain amount of inhabitable, "livable" fiction and a meaningful existence. Implicitly set against the fiction-less, awful "real" is the kind of fiction one might use "in real life" (as opposed to an unrealistic "novel") in order to live--the kind of fiction St. Clare, despite being a character in this novel, seems to have lost and without which "all that makes life bright dies to us."

I would suggest that this fiction-less real is precisely what Edna finds herself up against by the novella's end. As such, *The Awakening*, for all of its realism, its literary mode of presenting the conditions of women at the turn of the century, is also making a subtle but compelling critique of realism, of the belief implicit in such a mode of representation that one might find in the open, texture-less freedom of an empirical reality beyond all (apparently inhibiting) social constructions a kind of practical, fulfilling agency. At least in the first half of the novella, Edna seems to have no problem choosing new identities; her gradual refusal in the second half to work towards sustaining such (fictitious) identities adumbrates a pattern, the logical end of which is suicide. But as Kearns points out, Edna seems to believe that the fictions themselves are impossible. Unlike Stowe's implication--that without certain (inhabitable) fictions which are essential for survival, existence itself takes on a hostile, hopelessly "real" quality--Edna's actions and feelings in the second half of the novella suggest a desire to shed all such fictions (having lost the will that is necessary to sustain them): "she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference." That is, Edna's life becomes as unbearably real and meaningless as St. Clare's, yet she cannot muster the same strength to simply endure or sustain her various new identities.

Set against Edna's agonizing hesitation and ambivalence, her in-action, are the anonymous, almost faceless but stable figures on the beach that come and go with the official regularity of a Greek chorus: the united lovers and the Lady in mourning. (11) These are "types"--romance stereotypes almost--people defined entirely by the roles they play, yet moving on, "playing" their respective parts. In terms of the literary techniques associated with realism, such types would be considered outside of the genre, or worse--as sloppy, too-intensely allegorical representations of reality. In light of my argument, however, such background-types actually serve as a contrast to highlight Edna's own unwillingness to play her own part or role. As such, the text performs a subtle critique of the values associated with realism by pointing (at the very level of language) to figures beyond realism's usual mode of representation--its places and characters portrayed in all their life-like details and particularities. Thus, the novella reiterates the sense that a certain amount of human individuality and agency can be achieved by women at the turn of the century, but these can only be expressed through the available social roles or identities that such women maintain, and possibly modify, by force of will. (The novella also takes a subtle but comical jab at the genre by lampooning Madame Ratignolle's high opinion of the realistic qualities of Edna's paintings: "and this basket of apples!" [gushes Adele, whose opinion in this matter Edna reliably considers "next to valueless"] never have I seen anything more life-like. One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one" (Chopin 1988, 73).)

If one admits that such figures as the lovers and the Lady in mourning, along with Adele Ratignolle and Madame Reisz, occupy one end of existence or experience--an identity more or less determined by some social, socially acceptable role, whether young lover, woman in

mourning, mother-woman, or woman-artist--one might see Edna's initial experience of learning to swim at night as occupying the opposite end of experience--that of the inspirational, and infinite, potential of the self. In learning to swim by herself, Edna first encounters what Emerson calls the soul or over-soul in herself: "She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (Chopin 1988, 36).

As we know, this begins Edna's search for individuality and freedom, for the transcendental power within that will give her life meaning while freeing her from the constraints and boredom of her current domestic roles. As previously mentioned, there are a few critics who read Edna's final actions as a desire to repeat this experience, to find in the cleansing salt water a return to her inner, infinite self. Some even suggest the possibility that her final actions do not lead to her drowning. I would argue that accepting this involves overlooking important passages in the final paragraphs. While swimming out, Edna thinks of Leonce and her children, and then we get the following lines: "How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! [as if ventriloquizing for Madame Reisz, Edna then tells herself] 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies'" (Chopin 1988, 152). Treu claims that Edna, in remembering Madame Reisz's words about the courageous artist, "feels the irony of her situation. This is a language of rebellion and renewal, although the line between suicide and survival can be razor thin" (2000, 30). His implication is that Edna is trying once again to find herself in the ocean, as she does earlier when she learns to swim. But if this were the case, neither Edna nor Madame Reisz would have any reason to mock such an attempt to discover and channel her inner-strength. In the final sentences, we get the following description:

[T]he 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. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister, Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks. (Chopin 1988, 153)

Treu suggests that this last sentence "with its unexpected reference to the fertile smell of pinks, is lyrical, and mysterious, suggesting the allurements that life on the shore still possesses for Edna" (2000, 30). But this is asking much; in effect, we must ignore this scene as a memory from Edna's distant (and therefore irrecoverable) childhood, and overlook the fact that Edna is turning, in the same passage, to the equally inaccessible, the always inaccessible yet ever longed for male figure--the distant father and, more immediately, the cavalry officer of her girlhood. Relying on textual evidence, then, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to read this final paragraph as depicting a triumph of autonomy or even a longing to return to the present on "the shore."

Edna ultimately fails to achieve the promise the initial experience in the ocean offers her, but the novella implies that such an achievement is not beyond possibility by suggesting that one might dream and live between the two aforementioned spheres or ends of experience--from inspiration and a knowledge of one's infinite potential to the ability to then commit oneself to (and modify) the social role or fiction, even if already constructed, one has chosen to live up to or within.

Unlike Edna, whose last name means "to bridge" in French, women like her might conceivably begin with an ideal and nevertheless make the necessary leap of practically inhabiting and sustaining it. Ultimately, Edna comes to see Adele and Madame Reisz as occupying opposite and mutually exclusive social roles, or points of feminine identity. But as Bartley and Kearns imply, the novella offers us glimpses of other (or slightly but significantly modified) social roles Edna might have chosen to live by and sustain, implicitly revealing that her sense of the practical, available social identities is erroneously and therefore tragically limited. As Bartley reminds us, Leonce must finally acknowledge and even accommodate Edna's departure from the house. It is true that he "speaks" her story by providing an excuse for Edna to their friends and family, but Leonce's fictional explanation for her leaving is nonetheless a sign that he is willing to renegotiate the old (and more conventional) terms of their marriage, including how much responsibility over childcare and childrearing Leonce might be willing to take on himself. Should marriage prove impossible for Edna, she might develop the friendship she has started with Adele, and/or Madame Reisz. Together all three might approach other women in similar circumstances and join a women's rights movement. There is also her artistic career, of course, and though it seems to have stalled, she might conceivably find a new, more fulfilling approach to her own artwork; she can also, for the present, make money at it (Bartley 2000, 738-40).

Each of these possibilities is implicit in Chopin's novella, reminding us that "The present moment is radically inconclusive. ... [B]ecause people are capable of creativity, because the past never exhaustively defines them, and because an unceasing dynamism exists between the individual and social milieu, there is potential for various outcomes" (Bartley 2000, 738). Had Edna fought off her sleepiness while reading Emerson, she might have come to the following passages from "Experience," a later essay, and understood that idealism (or fiction) and practical reality (and the willpower it demands) need not be--indeed cannot be--mutually exclusive if idealism is to serve our needs at all:

At Education Farm the noblest theory of life sat on the noblest figures of young men and maidens, quite powerless and melancholy. It would not rake or pitch a ton of hay; it would not rub down a horse; and the men and maidens it left pale and hungry. ... We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them. ... Since our office is with moments, let us husband them. ... We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry--a narrow belt. ... The mid-world is best. (Emerson 1981, 335, 336)

As Steater herself argues, "No matter how much Edna's absolute rejection of her conventional gender roles resonates with a sense of feminist triumph, it is a type of literary romanticism that can quickly dead-end in despair once the book-cover is closed: Edna's escape through death may feel freeing, but ultimately, she offers us no hope" (2007, 415). Given her knowledge of the author's biography and personal views, even Toth must finally admit "Chopin's own attitude toward women's suicide was more critical than sympathetic. (And of course, she was no suicide herself)" (1991, 121). The point is worth repeating: Chopin, like Gilman, faced social pressures and obstacles as an artist and a mother at the turn of century much like Edna's, without committing suicide or going mad. Nor did she ever endorse such methods of escaping patriarchy,

in correspondence or public writings. Edna and the speaker in "The Yellow Wallpaper" are pitiable figures whose fates remind us of the magnitude of the obstacles women like them faced. But their creators remind us--by their own example as well as that of other women and inherent possibilities within their stories--that such obstacles, though they demanded remarkable strength, creativity, discipline, and will, could ultimately be overcome.

## Notes

(1) As Robert Treu reminds us, interpretations for the most part either "come out of what Suzanne Wolkenfeld calls 'the feminist fatalism of presenting Edna as the victim of an oppressive society,'" or they come from those who see Edna "more positively ... as 'a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place on her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender'" (2000, 22). Or, as William Bartley notes, summing up the most popular (and apparently mutually exclusive) responses,

At one pole of critical consensus, then, is the judgment that Edna's suicide is the despairing act of a spiritually exhausted woman, defeated in her confrontation with patriarchal constraint. ... This response, or rather family of responses, is flatly contradicted by another: that Edna's suicidal swim is a heroic moment of self-creation and self-possession, even of mythic apotheosis in the high romantic mode. (Bartley 2000, 724)

(2) Although scheduled to give the key note speech at this event--the 2007 CEA conference in New Orleans--Emily Toth was in the audience and made this suggestion at a smaller panel on Chopin's *The Awakening*. She offered her own comments and opinions after the panelists had presented their papers.

(3) Caminero-Santangelo's book effectively and admirably argues against the notion that madness served as a form of social resistance and agency for women, a notion that reached the peak of its popularity among certain critics in the 1970s and 1980s. Except for her use of the term "insurmountable," which I emphasize in the passage, I agree with her assessment of both texts. (I also have no problem with the claim that both retreats, or endings, are ambiguous--provided this means both can be read in different ways and not that they must remain unreadable or beyond any particular reading.) Carminero-Santangelo goes on to insist, "Instead of privileging the retreat into madness [or, presumably, suicide], then, let us privilege the forms of agency, and of active creative transformation in all its forms, which women engage in. And in doing so, let us open an imaginative space for women to be able to escape from madness by envisioning themselves as agents" (1998, 181). Part of this paper's claim is that *The Awakening* implies this very argument, both by including women who, despite the restrictions of their social roles, actively wield a surprising amount of agency, given the limitations they face, and by showing, in the case of its protagonist, the consequences of attempting to escape all available social roles in favor of an unrestricted though ultimately elusive "freedom."

(4) Of course, Charlotte Perkins Gilman did commit suicide, but her decision to do so seems entirely related to being told that she had inoperable cancer, and that this would not only end her life but render her incapable of working or writing when the end drew near. Even if Gilman did

believe that the social, societal obstacles she faced were insurmountable, this seems to have had no bearing on her decision to end her life at the age of seventy-five. She writes,

I did not propose to die of [cancer], so I promptly bought sufficient chloroform as a substitute. Human life consists in mutual service. No grief, pain, misfortune or 'broken heart' is excuse for cutting off one's life while any power of service remains. But when all usefulness is over, when one is assured of unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one. (Gilman 1972, 333)

Although her husband passed away twelve years into her marriage, Chopin raised six children and had a successful writing career, publishing her work until just two years before her death (Toth 1999, 236).

(5) A more sophisticated though essentially similar argument comes from Jennifer Fleissner, who claims that Edna's Darwinian experience of the endless rhythms of existence leads to a sense that individuality is an illusion, that all is simply infinite multitudes swarming and rocking endlessly:

[Edna's] 'awakening,' then, appears much less as an ideal self-realization than as the terrible question of how to understand selfhood at all in the face of its radical negation. At its most powerful, The Awakening's romanticism takes the form not or a blissful transcendence but rather of freedom construed as the encounter with 'the unlimited' from which it is impossible to reemerge whole or satisfied. All the most serious rhythms at work in Chopin's text ... work neither to collapse humanity into nature nor to allow their differentiation; rather, they define being a person as the pitched confrontation with nature's meaningless endlessness, a sea that we enter and against which we can only pit our own peculiar rhythms. (Fleissner 2004, 242)

This quote makes it difficult to tell whether the critic implies such confrontation and epiphanies are Edna's alone, or all women's, or all persons' who exist. If we are only dealing with Edna as a particular fictional character with this particular experience of reality, then I have no problem with this reading: my argument is in relation to those who read Edna's experience and actions as typical or symbolic of most women like her at this point in history. If Fleissner has in mind more than just Edna (and the language in this passage leads me to believe that she does) then the questions become, "Why do we not get the same sense of futility from Mademoiselles Ratignolle and Resiz? Do they lack Edna's wisdom or sensitivity?" There is little evidence of this in Chopin's text. Furthermore, we are once again implicitly locked into one of the most enduring critical readings of the novella's ending--that faced with an accurate sense of life's futilities, Edna understandably makes the only choice she can: self annihilation.

(6) Bartley reminds us that living itself relies on fiction as a means of imagining what one should or could live for, what future one has in mind toward which to strive. If one acknowledges that ethics involves choice, as well as action, one observes that life and fiction mirror one another--

both require the imagination. In life, one must imagine (i.e., create fictitiously) a future one hopes to eventually inhabit.

We have only to think of an utterly familiar, quotidian turning towards composing fiction in the form of the hypothetical scenario (athletes, dieters, and people who try to quit smoking are accustomed to calling this 'creative visualization') as a ground for choice and action." But he also reminds us that "Our choices are of little consequence if these otherwise instrumental fictions fail to acknowledge deflections of circumstance that presumably motivate their composition in the first place. (Bartley 2000, 725)

In other words, for such fictions to be of any use, they must of necessity acknowledge and accommodate the real limitations and obstacles of our conditions. According to Bartley, therefore, Edna's failure comes from not being able to imagine a practical future: it is a failure of the imagination. But I would say that ethics involves acting on one's choices and beliefs, and that, ultimately, the will precedes the imagination in so far as one must choose to imagine before one imagines imagining. Edna's ultimate and critical failure, therefore, is more closely related to her lack of willpower, to her decision to quit dedicating herself to any vision of the future.

(7) Let me reiterate that "ethics" here differs from "morality." The former involves action based on personal choices and beliefs; the latter is usually associated with socially and/or religiously based ideals of "right" and "wrong" implicitly agreed upon in any given society. Clearly, the first critics of Chopin's novella found most of Edna's actions immoral. As clearly, the text does not seem to share this judgment. I am arguing that Edna's final actions represent an ethical surrender, not necessarily a moral one. Unlike Edna, both Chopin and Oilman lived ethical lives--that is, both lived and committed themselves to the life they chose.

(8) Sandra Gilbert's often cited article, "The Second Coming of Aphrodite," proclaims, "Defeated, even crucified, by the 'reality' of nineteenth-century New Orleans, Chopin's resurrected Venus is returning to Cyprus or Cythera" (1983, 58). But as William Bartley reminds us, such a farfetched post-narrative assertion "cannot have taken place in *The Awakening*--the text simply will not permit it" (2000, 729).

(9) A similar point can be made in reference to the ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Critics, as well as some of my own students, often read the husband's fainting at the story's end as further proof that the speaker's madness has allowed her to transcend all boundaries of the patriarchal structure that oppresses her. I like to ask such students if they've ever seen anyone suffering from clinical psychosis and then whether they think such people seem free. I also ask what they think the speaker, who most agree is mentally unhinged at this point, is going to do after the husband faints: will she become a successful writer? an independent business owner? a lawyer or doctor? Such professional women were rare in Gilman's time, yet the author made sure to include them in her other stories. In "Three Thanksgivings" and "Turned," for example, we see the kind of strong, assertive women who would never have agreed to Dr. Mitchell's rest-cure, who have arrived at their stations not through the liberating qualities of madness but because of their active will-power and defiance. I remind my students that unlike the speaker in her story, Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself actively and openly defied both doctor and husband when they demanded she follow their restrictive medical, professional advice. As she says in "Why I Wrote The



Yellow Wallpaper," "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy" (1913, 271).

(10) I'm grateful to Kenneth Dauber for pointing out in conversation the remarkable significance of this passage, in Stowe's otherwise sentimental/religious novel, this passage seems implicitly to contradict her absolute faith in and assertion of the bonds of sympathy and Christian duty. Here the author, speaking through parabasis, seems to imply that ethical actions are not automatically set in motion by sympathetic, Christian love and duty but are instead derived from social fictions maintained by will and intentionality.

(11) These nameless, faceless characters appear repeatedly throughout the novella: "The lady in black was reading her morning devotions in the porch of a neighboring bath-house. Two young lovers were exchanging their hearts' yearnings beneath the children's tent, which they found unoccupied" (Chopin 1988, 20); "The lovers were just entering the grounds of the pension. They were leaning toward each other as the water oaks bent from the sea. There was not a particle of earth beneath their feet. ... The lady in black, creeping behind them, looked a trifle paler and more jaded than usual" (27); "The lovers were all alone. They saw nothing, they heard nothing. The lady in black was counting her beads for the third time" (44); "The lovers were profiting by the general conversation on Mexico to speak in whispers of matters which they rightly considered were interesting to no one but themselves. The lady in black had once received a pair of prayer-beads of curious workmanship from Mexico ... but she had never been able to ascertain whether the indulgence extended outside the Mexican border" (55).

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