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The "Lady in Black" in Chopin's *THE AWAKENING*

In *The Awakening*, all of Chopin's main characters—Edna, Robert, Léonce, Adèle, Arobin, Mademoiselle Reisz—face an age-old ontological problem: how to simultaneously have, despite the obvious insurmountable contradiction, conscious identity (reason, mind) and emotional physicality (eros, body). Thus, unlike Edna Pontellier, who until the very end painfully struggles and fails to unify these two sides of Being, Mademoiselle Reisz has sought to resolve the problem decisively, however spuriously, by siding primarily with mind-as-artist, denying the mind-absorbing passionate body in herself, and then unconsciously arranging to repossess passion vicariously through the young and sensuously beautiful Edna (Church 21). Interestingly, Chopin addresses this same ontological difficulty in some of the novel's minor characters, especially in the almost surreal "lady in black" and "the lovers." This shadowy, unnamed woman appears several times in the novel, usually engaged in religious activity (telling her beads, clutching her prayer book, concerned about an indulgence) and most often juxtaposed with a pair of lovers, themselves unnamed. Like Mademoiselle Reisz, this woman dresses in black, does not enter the water, and apparently devotes herself to higher forms. But just as the pianist involves herself deeply in the lives of lovers (Robert and Edna, and particularly the latter) for the purpose of appropriating the sensual being she denies in herself, the "lady in black" anxiously, even voyeuristically, keeps near the lovers. Accordingly, we learn that as the lovers make their way toward a tryst, "the lady in black, with her Sunday prayer-book, velvet and gold-clasped, and her Sunday silver beads, was following them at no great distance" (32), and that as they continue, "shoulder to shoulder" (33), behind them hurries "the lady in black, gaining steadily upon them" (33). In "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," Donald A. Ringe concludes that Chopin uses this trio of minor characters to contrast their subsuming self-absorption with Edna's insistent independence:

[T]he two lovers are indeed so lost in each other as to be almost completely oblivious to what is going on around them. There is surely no self-assertion here. Nor does there seem to be any in the lady in black who, in praying to God, is surrendering herself to the Deity. Both the couple and the lady in

black represent a strong contrast to Edna, who never really achieves the loss of self in love for another, and who is never portrayed as submitting herself to worship God in communion with others. (225)

We argue that the lady in black, however unconsciously, works to avoid subsumption in otherness and seeks to maintain her bodily being by trying vicariously to appropriate the embodied sensuality of the lovers, just as Made-moiselle Reisz attempts to do principally with Edna, and the younger woman with Robert. It is to the point that, as Kenneth Eble notes in “A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” when Robert leaves for Mexico—effectively dividing Edna from an element of herself, one that finally cannot be sustained—the “lady and lovers depart together” (190), disappearing from Chopin’s novel.

Most readings of *The Awakening* emphasize social and psychological issues and generally neglect the novel’s more philosophical reflections and the wisdom they afford. Chopin’s rendering of the “lady in black” helps us understand the author’s interest in an ontological conundrum: the impossible simultaneous requirement for defining identity and freedom from definition. We see this dilemma dramatized in her main characters and in her minor ones. We conclude that Kate Chopin worried over this predicament in herself.

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Individualism in O’Connor’s A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

In Flannery O’Connor’s short story “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” the main character, Mr. Shiftlet, asks a primary philosophical question, “What is a man?” (O’Connor 175). Like the other characters in O’Connor’s