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Self-Expression  
in  
Kate Chopin's The Awakening

Joy Mapp

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, August, 1991.

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Joy Mapp

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## Introduction

Kate Chopin designed as the setting for her novel, The Awakening (1899), Creole society in and around New Orleans. As her protagonist, she created Edna Pontellier, a Kentucky-born woman accustomed to the Victorian way of life. These two essential aspects of Chopin's novel come together to show how a woman such as Edna discovers her identity. Creole society is partly a catalyst for Edna's search for herself since it is in their society that she first senses the longing to know herself and exert herself in diverse ways. More specifically, it is Adele Ratignolle, the ideal Creole wife and mother and Edna's closest friend, who exists as the primary catalyst for Edna's awakening, which constitutes Edna's progression from ignorance to awareness of self.

The Creole experience as expressed in Kate Chopin's novel is crucial to the understanding of Edna's identity search. In the midst of these sensual, family-oriented people, Edna learns the joy of freedom as well as the destructive and painful feelings of restriction. It is the Creole environment with its unlimited use of language and art as well as its limitations upon the self that awakens Edna to freedom and frustration. According to Priscilla Leder, "Creole culture restricts Edna even as it liberates her--a paradox which is most clearly exemplified by the character of Adele Ratignolle" (97). In the examination of the changes that Edna experiences as she attempts to reach for her true identity, the character of Adele Ratignolle cannot be overlooked. Adele is the major catalyst for Edna's growth

(despite the fact that she does not intend to be), as well as the representative of a society which suffocates. In her innocence and simplicity, she helps to save and destroy Edna. Furthermore, she is the quintessential Creole woman. According to Mary L. Shaffter in an article entitled "Creole Women" published in 1892, "Creole women are artistic by nature; they paint and play and sing" (120). Furthermore, states Shaffter, they are beautiful, loving, economical, industrious, accomplished, non-progressive (120-121). Edna has much to live up to from the examination of this list of attributes. However, Adele's influence upon the protagonist is actually a challenge for Edna to discover her identity before she becomes someone else's "ideal Creole wife." Longing to express her own identity opposite that of the mother-woman image, Edna Pontellier immerses herself in three forms of self-expression: speech, art, and sexuality, which includes sensuality, physical activity, and sex. The examination of such types of self-expression reveals the significance of Adele's role as Edna's antithesis, Edna's loss of reserve as a result of Adele's influence, and ultimately the journey toward a new self.

Although the novel does not place these three forms of self-expression in a consistent order, there does exist a progression from one to the other which exhibits Edna's gradual loss of reserve in character. Expressing herself to prove that she is not a mother-woman like Adele, Edna begins her journey with freedom of speech. Speech seems to be a logical form of expression with which to begin since Edna's purpose is to voice her true self. One way to accomplish that particular goal is to

speak. Adele's relation to this form of expression involves her influence upon Edna in the area of speech. As we see it in the novel, Creole speech, even Creole women's speech, is uninhibited to a certain extent. According to Chopin's The Awakening, it is acceptable in the Creole society to discuss pregnancy, sexually suggestive literature, and even flirtation and or intimacy as long as a comic rather than a serious tone is attached to it. As Edna observes Adele, she notices the ease with which her Creole friend speaks of these subjects, and realizes that she herself has been too reserved for too long. Consequently, she begins to talk more freely. However, she takes her free speech further than Adele does. As the novel progresses, Edna gradually becomes more outspoken with both male and female companions. Many times her speech does take a serious rather than a comic tone because she is not fully aware of the nature of Creole behavior. At any rate, freedom of speech begins her journey. Furthermore, as she speaks more freely, she acts more freely as well, as can be seen in her expression of art and sexuality.

Art follows speech as the second significant expression of self. Passionate about both music and painting, Edna finds an emotional and spiritual satisfaction, which certainly contrasts with the Creole woman's attributes; passion for the arts is not included in the Creole's list of feminine qualities. Realizing that art is not important to Adele as a way to express herself, Edna uses art to rebel against society's limitation of women and to voice herself as an individual. Some of the ways Edna displays her passion with the arts include the emotions she expresses towards music and her growing desire to paint. In some



ways art succeeds in satisfying Edna's need to express her personhood and supports the belief that she belongs to no one but herself. However, art cannot satisfy the most basic aspect of Edna's personhood--her sensual nature.

Losing her reserve in the areas of speech and art, she cannot help but acknowledge her physical needs, and one of those needs is, of course, sexual satisfaction, which she does not receive from Leonce since she did not marry him for love. As the narrator states, "Her husband seemed to her . . . like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse" (77). As stated before, various sections in the novel display Edna's growing physicality/sexuality--her swim at the beginning, desire for Robert following the swim, desire for Arobin closer to the end of the novel. However, the end of the novel focuses on physicality/sexuality rather than speech or art signifying the importance of sexuality to Edna's awakening.

The most important aspect regarding sexuality is the sea because the sea represents, as Adele does, a mother-figure for Edna. Elaine Showalter states in "Tradition and the Female Talent: The Awakening as a Solitary Book," "In some respects, the motherless Edna also seeks a mother surrogate in Adele and looks to her for nurturance" (45). The sea, too, nurtures and provides security for Edna. Feminist critics have pointed out that there seems to be some connection between the sea and the idea of the mother-figure. For example, in the French language the words for sea and mother possess similar sounds and spelling: "mer" (sea) and "mere" (mother). This idea seems to suggest that

as a mother is protective, nurturing, and life-giving, the sea is protective, nurturing, and life-giving. Furthermore, the sea is established in the novel as a savior and destroyer. As a savior, the sea makes Edna aware of life, energy, and vitality very early in the novel with the first swim. As a destructive force, the sea sets Edna up for failure. Awakening her to her own sexuality, the sea contributes to Edna's frustration and oppression since it becomes clear to her that female sexuality is limited by society. Realizing that she is limited in every way, as the narrator states, "She abandons herself to Fate and awaits the consequences with indifference" (103). Her Fate is her suicide by drowning, her final statement to the world concerning the effects of the demands that society places upon women.

Because the sea represents a mother-figure, Edna's drowning resembles a return to the womb since her last thoughts concern childhood memories. Describing Edna's last thoughts, the narrator states,

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 calvary officer clanged as he walked across the porch.  
(114)

However, her fate is one which occurs spontaneously and without deliberation. In rejecting life, she rejects the self; therefore, her suicide is a negative response because it ends her awakening with, as the narrator states, "her acceptance of her fate" (58) which is, for Edna, permanent stagnation and immobility or, rather, death.

Edna Pontellier awakens first to the self and then to the fact that society neither accepts nor acknowledges a woman's desire to expand or express that self. Adele represents the kind of woman Edna refuses to become. Although she contributes to Edna's loss of reserve, Adele does not support Edna in her goal to destroy her role as mother-woman. Adele warns Edna at the end of the novel to "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (109). However, Edna cannot be a mother-woman. As Priscilla Leder states, "Edna dreads being reduced to her biological function" (97). Consequently, she expands herself by expanding upon her expressions of speech, art, and sexuality. Edna moves beyond Creole culture, which assigns women the role of mother-woman, to individuality in which she, herself, not society, makes choices for her life.

## I

### Speech as Self-Expression

Until recently, within the last twenty to thirty years, women had not earned the right to speak their minds. The fight began one-hundred and forty years ago when women first fought for the right to vote--a form of speech itself. With Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in charge, the women's movement fought for equality for women socially, civilly, and religiously. In her novel The Awakening (1899), Kate Chopin depicts a nineteenth-century woman's personal fight for individual liberty beginning with freedom of speech, a basic right most men take for granted. Chopin's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, learns to express herself through speech in a society, the Creole society, which actually promotes women and free speech. Understanding the importance of speech through the examination of Adele Ratignolle's role in the novel, and more importantly, in Edna's search for selfhood is essential to understanding the novel itself. Speech as discussed here involves communication in relationships--that is, conversation. Relationships depend on communication, and although there are many ways of communicating with one another, The Awakening deals essentially with voice and speech and how verbal communication leads to power and action. According to Amelia Barr in her "Conversational Immoralities," published in 1890, "Words are realities," and furthermore, "they have the power to evoke ideas which shall evoke facts. . ." (458). In this novel, words evoke for Edna freedom of

a new kind, but one not supported by the Creole culture. Speech is essential to Edna's awakening. Furthermore, according to Kathleen Lant in "The Siren of Grand Isle: Adele's Role in The Awakening," "It is with Adele that Edna begins her awakening" (167). Coming to the realization that the social customs of Creole culture involve freedom of verbal expression, Edna draws on that freedom as a way to voice repressed thoughts. As the narrator states, "She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves" (47). But, with Adele as a model in the social realm, Edna learns intimacy through speech and begins her transformation toward a new self.

Before Edna's introduction to Creole life-style, she had been accustomed to the very verbally reserved, non-sensual life of nineteenth-century white Southern America. One example provided early in the novel may lead us to this conclusion. Chopin's comment that Edna "was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or others" (18) reveals the reason for Edna's confusion with Creole behavior. As Edna realizes, this apprehension of affection, both verbal and physical, is partly due to the fact that she had neither relatives nor friends during her childhood with whom to relate on the intimate and personal level. The narrator states,

Edna had had an occasional girlfriend, but whether accidentally or not, they seemed to have been all of one type--the self-contained. She never realized that the reserve of her own character had much, perhaps

everything, to do with this. (18)

Furthermore, society itself is responsible as well for Edna's reserved nature. An excellent example of the way women were expected to behave in mixed company in Edna's culture is provided by Amelia Barr, Chopin's contemporary: "pure, refined language is one of the many charms of noble womanhood" (460). It is a well-known fact that women in Edna's culture were taught to avoid such subjects as romantic love, pregnancy, and sexuality because society felt they were "improper" subjects of conversation for women. Consequently, at the beginning of the novel, Edna is shocked and embarrassed not only when she overhears a childbirth story told by her Creole friend, Madame Ratignolle, but when Robert attempts to advise Adele in her eating habits during her pregnancy. As the narrator states, "Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her . . ." (12). Although she is uncomfortable with intimate conversation at the outset, Edna becomes attracted to the Creole ways of conversing because she interprets freedom in the intimacy expressed by her friends. As she is "thrown intimately among them" (11), she discovers the ease with which the Creoles discuss the facts of life, and even sexually suggestive literature. They have no trouble conversing with one another about any subject. According to Priscilla Leder, ". . . the openness of the Creoles reveals to [Edna] the narrowness of the Kentucky Pres-byterians" (97). Although it is not in her nature to share "confidences," Edna Pontellier is coming to realize that the restrictions of her own culture, the Kentucky Presbyterian culture, are responsible for her restlessness and even boredom. Taught to refrain from intimate

conversation, Edna longs for the freedom of expression her Creole companions so cherish. Edna's transformation begins, then, with her desire for freedom of speech.

Restriction in speech is just one of the many ways society renders women powerless. Freedom of expression is the key to power--hence its importance as the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution. If women are kept from speaking out, they have no control either of themselves or the world around them. Men become their caretakers and even their oppressors, allowing no opportunity for liberation which leads to power. More specifically, freedom of speech itself gives way to action; action then gives way to power. Since females are not considered power-people especially in Edna's culture, they must speak the language of submission. According to Robin Lakoff in Language and Woman's Place, ". . . the overall effect of 'women's language'. . . submerges a woman's personal identity by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly . . ." (7). In other words, women are given another language by society, a feminine language which creates feelings of subordination, dependence, insecurity. Women are encouraged to "talk like ladies," in other words, to refrain from cursing, screaming, discussing subjects like sex or intimacy. They are consequently, says Lakoff, "denied access to power. . . ." (7). After being taught that women's language is much more delicate than men's language, Edna, like all women of her time, believes that she herself is delicate, weak, and less intelligent until, says the narrator, she "realizes her position in the universe as a human

being and recognizes her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (14-15). Although women are seen as the lesser sex in Adele's culture as well as the Kentucky Presbyterian culture, they are given at least in the former the freedom of speech. Realizing this, with the influence of Adele Ratignolle, Edna begins to experiment with new ways of speaking.

But exactly how does Adele influence the protagonist if Edna has been taught, then, strictly to remain aloof in the presence of men and even women when it is warranted? It is an irony that Adele, the ideal "mother-woman," should be the major influence upon Edna. Perhaps one answer may be found on the first page of the novel. The narrator begins by introducing two birds--a parrot and a mockingbird. We are told little about the birds. The green and yellow parrot, we are told, keeps repeating "Go away" in French. We also learn that he "speaks a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood . . ." (3). The mockingbird, on the other hand, desperately tries to make himself heard. The narrator states, ". . . it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence" (3). Compared to the bright-colored, fluent parrot, the mockingbird hasn't much to show for himself; furthermore, the mockingbird must imitate songs of other birds rather than creating one of his own. Like the mockingbird, Edna as yet has no song of her own, no individuality. However, states the narrator,

That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her.

There may have been--there must have been--influences



both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways, to induce her to do this; but the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignolle. (15)

As the mockingbird must borrow musical creations from other birds, Edna must borrow language from Adele and other Creoles since she has no real language of her own to voice. According to Joan Zlotnick, in "A Woman's Will: Kate Chopin on Selfhood, Wifehood and Motherhood," "Edna Pontellier is a caged animal--caged by husband and children, Creole culture, and Tuesday afternoon receptions" (2-3). The one freedom that Creole society allows is freedom of speech; however, as we will see later, Edna cannot separate language and action, thus she is confused when Adele and Robert talk as they do. They seem to talk one way and act another. At any rate, Edna's cage is Creole culture which promotes family and community rather than the individual. Edna is at this point very vulnerable. As the narrator points out, "at a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (15). All her married life she has been living the life of two different people. One conforms to society on the surface, while the other rebels against society on the inside. The selves begin to conflict with one another and to pressure Edna to acknowledge one, thereby destroying the other.

Much of Edna's stay at Grand Isle is spent with her friend Adele. The time spent in the Creole culture would lend itself to Edna's learning Creole ways, much as a person with one accent in his/her speech might speak with another accent after spending a

substantial amount of time in the company of those with a very distinct accent. It must be stated, too, that Edna's quiet reserve lends itself to a very observant nature. The narrator observes,

Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright; they were yellowish brown, about the color of her hair. She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought. (5)

In her close relationship with Adele, Edna notices traits and mannerisms about the woman, which seem to suggest freedom of action as well as freedom of speech. According to the narrator, "Then the candor of the woman's whole existence, which everyone might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve--this might have furnished a link" (15).

One reason that Edna is so easily influenced by Adele exists in the fact that she admires Adele and feels close to her. Close friends have a way of influencing one another in a way that family cannot, and the novel supports this conclusion. One instance of this influence occurs early in the novel when Edna and Adele spend an afternoon at the beach together. Engaging Edna in conversation, Adele finds that Edna seems to have been running away from something all her life. Says Edna about a summer day in Kentucky, "I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it" (18). Edna is deeply affected by Adele's affectionate manner and confidence during their time together. Adele provides Edna an affirming place for her to share her

innermost thoughts. Upon sharing part of her life story with Madame Ratignolle, Edna senses a refreshing feeling of freedom. The narrator states, "She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom" (20).

Adele's major influence occurs at times such as that just mentioned--in their visits together away from other guests and friends. But Adele exerts influence when she is among others as well. One example provided by the novel, a visit with Robert, reveals Adele's behavior in mixed company. Early in the novel we see Edna, Adele, and Robert spending an afternoon together on Grand Isle. In the course of the conversation, Robert, who makes it a habit to lavish affection upon one particular woman, usually a married woman, each summer, refers back to the summer when he was Madame Ratignolle's admirer. Says Robert to Adele who calls him a "troublesome cat," "You mean [I was] an adoring dog. And just as soon as Ratignolle appeared on the scene, then it was a dog" (12). Robert continues his confession. The narrator states,

Meanwhile Robert, addressing Mrs. Pontellier, continued to tell of his one time hopeless passion for Madame Ratignolle; of sleepless nights, of consuming flames till the very sea sizzled when he took his daily plunge. (12)

Edna keenly notices these antics, for she is unaccustomed to such conversation. She is taken aback when she witnesses the scene

between Adele and Robert. His tone with her married friend is intimate and affectionate, but playful, not completely serious. To an outsider such as Edna, such behavior must seem tasteless, too intimate perhaps. As the narrator states,

[Robert] never assumed this serio-comic tone when alone with Mrs. Pontellier. She never knew precisely what to make of it; at that moment it was impossible for her to guess how much of it was jest and what proportion was earnest. (13)

As the passage declares, Edna is not quite experienced with Creole culture to understand how to relate to such people as Robert. According to Priscilla Leder, "She can only withdraw into embarrassment or a kind of automatic denial when Robert makes his extravagant professions to Madame Ratignolle . . ." (99).

As she observes them, Edna admits to herself that Robert's behavior would be "unacceptable and annoying" if directed towards herself (13). But as Priscilla Leder points out,

The relationship which develops between Edna and Robert makes that last phrase ironic, and the stiffness of the language suggests that it expresses a morality which Edna practices but which has never become a part of her. (99)

What is important about this situation is Adele's response to Robert. She plays along with him, jokes with him, doesn't take him seriously. Never does Edna see Adele and Robert express, either openly or covertly, serious intimate feelings for one another. But Edna assumes that because their language is

uninhibited, their actions are liberal as well. Adele confirms this fact when, following this scene in the novel, she warns Robert to stay away from Mrs. Pontellier.

Edna does not truly possess any conviction regarding morality in behavior, either social or sexual. Even as she admits to herself that Robert's behavior would annoy her, she is incorporating the scene into her long-term memory as a model for her actions later. She is not conscious of the situation's impact on her, but the audience is well aware of its influence. Several chapters later, on the night she learns to swim, Edna experiences her first intimate talk with Robert, the first male character with whom Edna shares herself. As they walk back to the house together, Edna confides in Robert her inner feelings concerning the experiences of that particular evening, the self-expression, we are to assume, she has never shared with Leonce, her Creole husband. She says,

A thousand emotions have swept through me tonight. I don't comprehend half of them. I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one. It is like a night in a dream. (30)

Edna truly does not comprehend her own emotions. She is not yet sure what is happening to her because she has never felt quite so intensely before. She believes Robert cannot understand even though she continues to share her thoughts with him. But, we are told, he does understand. As the narrator states, "He could not explain; he could not tell her that he had penetrated her mood and understood" (30). Robert is, then, speechless, without

speech, as he listens to Edna speak from her heart. But finally, responding to her confidences with a kind of spiritual fortune-telling, Robert unknowingly foreshadows Edna's journey towards new self-definition. He says,

With its own penetrating vision the spirit seeks  
some one mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy  
of being exalted for a few hours into the realms  
of semi-celestials. (30)

Robert's response to Edna, with its sense of intimacy and spiritual quality, will prove to lead directly to Edna's sexual awakening. Once the two finish speaking, there is a silence--a silence more meaningful than all the words Edna will ever speak.

Edna's language with Robert is different from Adele's language with the young Creole. Although both women assume an openness with him, Edna, upon experiencing the exhilarating feeling of freedom in speech, moves one step beyond her inhibitions towards speech that invites affection and renders the silence following it, as the narrator states, "pregnant with throbbings of desire" (31). Hers is more than just intimate discourse; it is sexual and seductive, just like the "voice of the sea." While Adele's language is unrestrained, it neither suggests nor invites sexual intimacy. But, Edna's voice becomes like the voice of the sea in its tone, its language, and its urging. The narrator has this to say about the sea: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (15). Edna is the student surpassing the teacher. Although Edna is

influenced by Adele, she cannot be like her. According to Kathleen Lant, "Edna can admire Adele's charm and can be stimulated and moved by it, but Edna cannot be Adele" (171). Edna is, then, discovering her true self, while at the same time destroying her false self, the one which conforms.

In the scene following Robert's visit, Edna reprimands her husband for the first time. We are told that she had obeyed her husband at all other times preceding this incident, but when Leonce demands that his wife do something regardless of her own wishes, she resists. The narrator states, "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted" (32). Part of her reason for feeling this way stems from the opportunity she has taken to express herself with Adele and Robert. She has experienced a letting-go feeling, a release of inhibitions. Edna senses the power that accompanies the freedom to speak one's mind, and is, then, able to defend her rights and her personhood.

From this point on, Edna begins to exercise her right to feel, think, speak, and act as she wishes, and more importantly, she begins to relate her freedom of speech to freedom of sexuality, which will be discussed shortly. Although Adele is the catalyst for Edna's growth toward new speech, she ceases to be Edna's model in the area of speech. Once Edna attains vocality, her speech becomes her own--a language much unlike Adele's language. Later in the novel the narrator states, "the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be

talking the same language" (48). For Adele, freedom of speech is the custom--the sole reason Adele speaks as freely as she does. For Edna, freedom of speech is the key to the freedom of personhood--mind, body, and soul. Their purposes for free speech are vastly different. Furthermore, the incident with Robert, where their intimacy leads to desire, firmly establishes the connection between speech and sexuality in Edna's mind. This connection will be seen as well with regard to Victor Lebrun and Alcee Arobin later in the novel. Edna's attainment of voice does in fact lead to freedom of action. The caged bird finds her own song, sings it, and acts upon it, destroying the bars that surround her.



## II

### Art as Self-Expression

As power exists in speech, so too does power exist in the creative imagination. Says Mademoiselle Reisz, "To succeed the artist must possess the courageous soul . . . the brave soul . . . the soul that dares and defies " (63). In her expression of and response to the arts (painting and music), Edna speaks out about women and the creative imagination. According to Susan Gubar in "'The Blank Page' and Female Creativity," "Our culture is steeped in such myths of male primacy in theological, artistic, and scientific creativity" (74). Moreover, states Gubar, men are considered creators, women, the creation. Not only do men decide who is allowed freedom of speech, but they also assume the role of creator, a role that brings with it omnipotence and power. Men speak freely and create freely, while women such as Edna are only graced with the opportunity of experiencing their language and creations secondhand. But what Chopin (a female creator herself) does with her novel is to show that women, too, have the ability to create art, to experience art. However, the novel is not only a commentary on the arts, but more importantly it depicts art as a means of self-expression especially for women. In the characters of Adele Ratignolle and Edna Pontellier, Chopin depicts two philosophies of art: utilitarian art and romantic art, respectively. The two women are at odds in purpose. Where Adele uses art to entertain and

educate her children, Edna makes art an extension of voice, a vehicle towards power in the freedom of self-expression.

As Edna progresses through speech toward individuality, she progresses through art (music and painting) toward individuality as well. Seeing that part of herself which suggests submissiveness and death depicted in Adele, Edna attempts to destroy that self through her response to music and, later her expression of visual art. According to Kathleen Lant, "For such a self-effacing role [the role of mother-woman], Edna declares herself eminently unsuited" (171). Edna has attempted to live the kind of life Adele leads, but unsuccessfully. Throughout the novel, the narrator provides scenes of Edna in her home with Leonce, and much of that time she is found to be unhappy. Such scenes occur especially when Leonce is remonstrating with Edna for her lack of attention to household duties. As the narrator states early in the novel, "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (8). Thus, her response to music and, more importantly, her desire to paint solely for her own enjoyment and self-expression allow Edna to destroy the mother-woman image that Creole society demands of her, just as Mademoiselle Reisz with her music has successfully avoided her own mother-woman image.

Before examining Edna's response to music, the first type of expression Edna responds to, it is important that we examine Adele's philosophy of music; for, in the area of artistic creation and expression, Adele serves as a distinct contrast to Edna. Art, and specifically music, according to Adele and most

Creole women, serves only one purpose: to benefit the family recreationally and educationally. The narrator tells us, "She [Adele] was keeping up her music on account of the children she said: because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (25). Cultural attainments, then, are regarded with little value in and of themselves; thus, Adele is not the "true artist," according to the statement made earlier by Mademoiselle Reisz. The true artist "dares and defies." In other words, the true artist defies society for art. According to Peggy Skaggs, "Although she 'keeps up her music,' Madame Ratignolle lacks the capacity to distinguish between genuine and pseudo art" (348). Furthermore, states Skaggs,

. . . the Ratignolles entertain every two weeks with a "soiree musical," where assorted friends perform on various instruments; but significantly, the one genuine musical artist Adele knows, Mademoiselle Reisz [who does defy society] is never invited. (348)

Madame Ratignolle does not possess the "courageous soul" in Mademoiselle Reisz's book. The old musician says to Edna at one of the soirees when the young woman expresses her emotion provoked by the music, "You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!" (27).

Adele is one of "those others" who cannot appreciate genuine music, but Edna knows a "true artist" when she hears one and can appreciate genuine art. Furthermore, as Carole Stone states, ". . . Edna has the capacity for self-criticism . . ."

(26). She possesses the ability not only to criticize or judge others' art, but to criticize her own as well, as evidenced in the scene where she crumples in her hands a drawing of Adele which bears no resemblance to her. Adele has not that capacity. While Adele's creativity exists in the creation of children, Edna creates more masculine types of art. Rather than continuing to be a catalyst, then, Adele becomes just a model for the mother-woman--something Edna refuses to become. In art, she is Edna's double leading a life Edna cannot, and will not, live. In other words, Adele's life reflects what Edna's life is becoming. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss the idea of doubles in The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination devoting a chapter to the character of Bertha Mason as Jane Eyre's double (see pp. 359-362). The Awakening is one of many nineteenth-century novels which portrays characters who exist as doubles where one character represents the conventional self (Adele) and the other represents the rebellious self (Edna). Adele's purpose for and understanding of art exist also as a double and clearly conflict with Edna's ideas regarding such art as music.

Early on the reader discovers that Edna paints pictures in her mind when emotionally attuned to music. According to the narrator, "musical strains well-rendered had a way of evoking pictures in her mind" (26). For example, early in the novel in a piece played by Adele that Edna herself entitles "Solitude," she envisions the figure of a naked man standing along the shore with an attitude of "hopeless resignation" (27). This particular image reflects her own inner turmoil--the battle between the two selves

that rages within her, a battle that ends with, among other things, the rejection of art. Not only does this image reflect Edna's emotional state, but it foreshadows the conclusion of the battle which culminates in Edna's suicide by drowning. At any rate, the evidence of these mind-pictures shows Edna to be wonderfully imaginative and sensitive to the ideas and impressions art may evoke. However, it should be noted that because Edna is experiencing a transformation which is revealing her true self, Edna does not always create pictures when she hears music; this is only one type of response. Since the transformation is gradual, every day introduces some new force which may either provoke a change in attitude or even a new type of response. As the narrator states, "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" (33).

As a prime example, on the night of the Ratignolle soiree on Grand Isle, Edna experiences her first crying bout provoked by music. Mademoiselle Reisz is at the piano playing Edna's favorite, Chopin's "Impromptu." Upon hearing the piece Edna is unable to create pictures from the music; instead, what she experiences are "the very passions themselves" (27). States the narrator, "It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth" (27). Although Edna is not musically inclined, she is able to express herself through her response to music. According to Peggy Skaggs, "In this way, the author relates

Edna's esthetic responsiveness, which continues to deepen, and her search for identity" (349). Mademoiselle Reisz confirms Edna's "esthetic responsiveness" when she states that Edna is "the only one worth playing for" (27).

Music becomes an integral part of Edna. The voice of music, like the voice of the sea, speaks to Edna about the world and her relation to it, urging her to act upon such feelings as her desire for liberation from family. Even Robert's renditions of songs affect her. His version of "Ah! si tu savais," a song he sings to her as they cross the bay to the Cheniere, plays in her mind, and she takes it up remembering Robert's voice. Says the narrator, "Robert's voice was not pretentious. It was musical and true. The voice, the notes, the whole refrain haunted her memory" (41). Urging her to act upon her sexual desires, both Robert's song and Mademoiselle Reisz's "Impromptu" will continue to haunt her throughout the rest of the novel.

Although music is essential to Edna's self-expression, she never pursues it actively as a way to express herself. More and more she begins to use it as a vehicle through which she may release her inner feelings. For example, once she returns to New Orleans, Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz. These visits usually occur when she is plagued with a sense of the hopeless. According to the narrator, "There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz" (78). Her music is soothing to the soul even if her personality is not. According to the narrator, "It was then in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (78).

Although we are not completely sure whether Edna is musically inclined, there are two possible reasons why Chopin did not cast her as a musician. One reason exists in the characters of Adele Ratignolle, the non-self-expressive mother-woman and Mademoiselle Reisz, the alienated, non-physical, temperamental musician. Both entertain their musical abilities, but for different reasons. As already stated, Adele uses her music for utilitarian purposes, while Mademoiselle Reisz devotes herself to her talent because it is all she has. Edna is aware of the reasons for their devotion to music, but strangely enough she has an affection for both women, which is complicated by the fact that the two women refuse to associate with one another. Adele refuses to invite Mademoiselle Reisz to any of her soirees knowing full well that the old woman would contribute immensely to the entertainment. At any rate, Edna, though affectionately personable with both women, sees their lifestyles for what they truly are: limited sexually and spiritually. As stated before, Edna realizes Adele's life is without self. What Edna sees in the old musician's life is as unattractive as what she sees in Adele's life. Although the old woman lives for and expresses herself in music, she seems to have no life at all--no passion (except for art), no energy, no sexuality. She is without love. As Lant observes, "She does not swim, does not immerse herself in experience, and she is without appetite and desire" (172). Edna wants individuality, but she wants to experience life as well. Thus, one reason Edna attempts to become an artist rather than a musician relates to the sense of imprisonment visible in the

lives of her two friends.

Secondly, unlike music, where both Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz presumably play someone else's creation, painting allows Edna to invent her own creations, to be a creator, and therefore, in control. Susan Gubar states that "certainly women's limited options . . . have shaped the art they create" (79). Evidence of Gubar's statement exists in the novel both in the characters of Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz and in Edna. With Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, music is the one art with which they are allowed to express themselves. With Edna, individuality does not enter her painting until she discards her family later in the novel. Because all are trapped in a suffocating society that allows them few outlets in the way of self-expression, they create either what society approves of, as in Adele's case, or they attempt individuality in their art and grow discouraged, as in Edna's case when she makes a genuine effort to be an artist. However, Edna maintains her goal of pursuing genuine art despite the fact that society disapproves of women, especially married women, becoming true artists since the commitment to their art would disrupt the family unit. Furthermore, Edna knows no female painters from whom she might seek guidance; thus, she steps out alone in this "venture," proving once again that she is an individual and a non-conformist.

Another point needs to be made in light of Gubar's theory of women and art. Gubar explains further that since women in the nineteenth century could not train themselves to paint or sculpt, they resorted to other means of creation--the body (79). Women devoted themselves instead to physical beauty and music--



qualities that are both found in the character of Adele Ratignolle. However, Chopin's Edna Pontellier contests this point raised by Gubar just as she contests the validity of Adele's lifestyle. According to Gubar's statement above, painting was considered a man's art in the nineteenth century, and it is true that there are very few significant female painters recorded in the history books. However, in Chopin's novel, Edna Pontellier chooses to paint and makes a commitment to stay with her chosen art. Although there are days when Edna senses no creative inspiration, for the most part she approaches her art with vigor and stubborn determination. In that sense, too, she is an atypical woman. She is not the fainting, indecisive, flighty woman that seems to characterize the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, the novel seems to emphasize the fact that she chooses a "man's" art. According to Whitney Chadwick in Women, Society and Art, "The qualities which defined the artist-- independence, self-reliance, competitiveness--belonged to a male sphere of influence and action" (16). In the novel, we find two or more female musicians and only one female painter. Other characters acquainted with painting are male (Arobin and Laidpore). Thus Chopin casts Edna as a painter in order to establish the idea that women should be given the opportunity to choose their own expressive talents and even livelihood if they wish. By choosing a "man's" art, then, Edna assumes the role of creator and controller just as she does in speech. Ultimately, however, Edna does not succeed as an artist since she does reject

art at the end of the novel. At any rate, as Edna continually searches for power in the ways she chooses to express herself, she exerts more visible devotion to painting, her one means besides speech through which she actively expresses herself. As the narrator states, "She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her" (13). In art, in painting, she finds the most powerful creative and individual freedom she has ever experienced.

Chopin creates in Edna a character with an acute and intense imagination as revealed in her response to music and abilities in painting. Through Chopin's depiction of Edna, it is evident that Edna's purpose for expressing art reflects the philosophy of the Romantic age. According to M.H. Abrams,

The Romantic period . . . was also an age of radical individualism, in which both the philosophers and poets put an immensely higher estimate on human potentialities and powers. (12)

In art Edna seeks beauty and truth of self as did the Romantic poets and artists. Edna could be considered, then, a Romantic artist for two reasons. She is, first of all, an individual and a non-conformist; Romanticism promotes the individual and believes the mind of the artist precedes the art itself. Because Romanticism is associated with expressive theories of art, and because Edna finds satisfaction in a type of art that is considered "romantic"--that is, art which expresses a higher form of existence, she could be considered a Romantic artist. According to Georg Hegel in his essay "Introduction to the Philosophy of Art," "The romantic type of art seizes upon

painting . . . " (355). In her romantic art, Edna seeks a different kind of beauty and truth, that which expresses the essence of the self.

In relation to The Awakening, the idea of beauty is represented by the character of Adele. The narrator states at the beginning of the novel, "There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there flaming and apparent . . . " (10). Edna finds herself drawn to physical beauty and attempts to capture it in her painting. As the narrator states, "Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (12). This particular character trait reflects the Romantics' philosophy that natural beauty leads to understanding of human nature and should be captured in art. Adele's beauty captures Edna's senses and awakens her to the physical forces of life. Unfortunately, Adele also represents a stereotype which Edna does not wish to become. Adele is beautiful but imprisoned by society, and, therefore without individuality. However, Edna does not reject her "susceptibility to beauty"; instead, she allows herself to be drawn even more to the natural forces of life as seen in her expression of sexuality, which will be discussed shortly. Her art, a higher form of expression, leads to her expression of the natural self.

Close to the beginning of the novel, we find Edna ardently observing Adele in an attempt to paint a portrait of her friend, but she fails. Why? The answer lies in Edna's self-definition: she cannot paint what she cannot become. She cannot depict,

represent, envision, or be a person without a self, as Adele seems to be. Although Edna is not yet aware of it, the life that Adele leads is not truth. According to Lant, "While Adele's sensuousness awakens Edna's sense of self, Adele is without a self; she gives it up to become a 'mother-woman'" (172). Edna cannot paint the portrait of a mother-woman nor be a mother-woman. She must live and be able to express the essence of herself though it means sacrificing physical beauty for truth. She must search, then, for a different kind of beauty that depicts truth as well.

Gradually, Edna is discovering the essence and the truth about herself. Tired of living the "dual life," her self is unable to continue to conform on the outside while rebelling on the inside. Consequently, she paints. When she immerses herself in her painting once she returns to New Orleans, what she is really doing is searching for her own truth of self. And again, she turns to Adele, the least likely person to contribute any truly constructive criticism, "to help her put heart into her venture" (55). Soon after Edna returns to New Orleans, she seeks out Adele for advice concerning her art. In this particular scene in the novel, Adele is a paradox in character. Even as she praises and encourages Edna in this "venture," she is at the same time, by way of her lifestyle, sending a message to Edna regarding women's true purpose in life. Just after Edna shares her sketches with her Creole friend, she takes the opportunity to eat dinner with the Ratignolles where she gets a "little glimpse of domestic harmony" (56). Says the narrator, "It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but

an appalling and hopeless ennui" (56). It is not Adele's praise, but her lifestyle which motivates Edna to paint. For the first time Edna experiences what life is like in the Ratignolle house. The message Adele sends is that women are to make babies and care for them--in effect, live for them. Displaying or performing one's artistic ability in public conflicts with this universal purpose according to Adele. Edna begins frantically to paint so that she will not become like Adele, a mother-woman with no life and no individuality. As the narrator states, "She was working with great energy and interest . . ." (57). Furthermore, she tells Leonce during one of their many heated arguments, "I feel like painting. Perhaps I shan't always feel like it" (57). Needless to say, Mr. Pontellier is confused about Edna's attitude; she has never acted in this manner before. According to the narrator, ". . . he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (57). Edna pays less attention to household duties, creates a studio in her own house, and insists that her family and employees pose for her. It is clear to the audience that Edna is serious when "she resolves never to take another step backward" (57).

But is she really serious with her art? Mademoiselle Reisz does not seem to think so. She says, "Ah! an artist! You have pretensions, Madame" (63). She then proceeds to define the "true artist." If Edna does indeed possess the qualities of a true artist, why does she ask for criticism from Adele rather than

from an artist whose opinions are of real worth such as Laidpore, her teacher? Even Mademoiselle Reisz, who is a pianist rather than a painter, possesses the ability to judge art. Edna is fully aware that Adele's opinions are next to valueless, and, furthermore, that she has no "esthetic responsiveness" to art. As Skaggs states, "Adele clinging tenaciously to her partial identity is not open to this sort of reception [response to art]" (349). Perhaps Edna turns to Adele because she realizes that she cannot be the true artist anymore than she can be a mother-woman, but Edna persists in becoming an artist despite the old musician's skepticism regarding her commitment. Through her own art which allows her to be a creator, and which conflicts with both Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna attempts to discover and express the truth about herself. It is not just free expression that she desires; it is free expression which communicates truth, and neither Adele nor Mademoiselle Reisz provides truth for Edna's life.

One of the ways Edna contributes to her growth as an individual is to move away from home, or rather Leonce's home. The more she feels threatened in Leonce's house, the faster she works to move into the "pigeon-house" so that she may be able to work at her art in peace. Without the pressure of her husband, who owns their present house and practically everything in it, Edna is able to devote herself more to painting, which progressively enables her to feel a sense of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and confidence in herself. On the simplest level, Edna desires to take care of herself and supply her own needs and wants. As the narrator states, "Instinct had prompted her to put

away her husband's bounty in casting off her allegiance" (80). Now that she has decided to express her true self and to "cast aside that fictitious self," she feels the need to completely discard all dependence on her husband. She determines to support and take responsibility for her individuality. The narrator states, "She had resolved never to belong to another than herself" (80). In order for her to succeed in this "venture," and furthermore to prove to Mademoiselle Reisz that she can make it as a true artist, she must live alone. Following her explanation of Laidpore's praise of her work in its growing "force and individuality," Edna admits to Mademoiselle Reisz her desire for freedom. She states, "'I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence" (79). Only in solitude is she capable of feeding her creative imagination, which contributes to the growth of her true self.

On a deeper level, then, Edna is contributing to the expansion of that true self, the self which refuses to conform to societal conventions. As an artist she attempts to find her own "voice"; however, the only way she can discover that voice is to escape the one person who seems to have imprisoned and limited her: her husband. Furthermore, because she is making the attempt to free herself from constraint, she feels like a guest rather than a member of her own home. As the narrator states,

Within the precincts of her home she felt like one who has entered and lingered within the portals of some forbidden temple in which a thousand muffled voices bade her begone. (83-84)

The house acknowledges Edna's decision to rebel against society, and resists it, forcing her, with Leonce's possessions and evidences of his control over her life, to leave. This motivation is similar to her motivation in painting. The more she becomes aware of Adele's imprisonment by society, the more she attempts to become an "artist." Furthermore, this new house is all a part of Edna's artistic achievements. Following Edna's move, the narrator states that "she began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her" (93). As stated earlier in connection with Gubar's idea regarding women's creations and their options, freedom from a life that discourages individuality leads to one's freedom of creativity. In other words, as she creates art, she creates options for herself, and as her options expand, her art expands. According to the narrator,

There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. (93)

In addition, her commitment to freedom of expression is showing up clearly in her work. As Edna tells Mademoiselle Reisz in a discussion about her plan, "Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality" (79). As she continues to free herself, she becomes more and more creative. Her inner self is blooming not only in her speech, but in her art as well. In addition, one of



the ways Edna plans to support herself is to sell her works, a rare occurrence for a woman in Edna's time. To sell anything or be involved in any type of business especially for money was practically a scandal. In reference to women selling their art, Whitney Chadwick has this to say: "Art reviews from the period are full of charges that aspiring women artists risk 'unsexing' themselves" (167). Edna is going out on a limb, taking a risk, but she is moving forward and expanding herself-- something that neither Adele nor Mademoiselle ever does. They are static characters, and although Edna may be capricious at times, she changes and grows into a character fully aware of who she is becoming and how she is different from other women. Edna takes action--she does succeed in moving out, thereby expanding that self that has always existed but never before been expressed.

As Edna becomes more committed to her art, she becomes increasingly aware of the difficulties of being a female artist in the nineteenth century. According to Whitney Chadwick, "Women artists existed in contradictory relationship to the prevailing middle-class ideals of femininity" (166). In other words, women were caught between the desire to create genuine art and the belief that to do so would destroy their femininity. Edna finds less satisfaction in her art once she makes a decision to commit herself to it. As the narrator states, "She was working with great energy and interest, without accomplishing anything, however, which satisfied her even in the smallest degree" (57). Perhaps, she realizes that to be the true artist, one must

sacrifice even the basics of life, the natural forces of life. Edna finds that Mademoiselle Reisz was correct, after all, and that even persistence is not enough to qualify one as a genuine artist. Furthermore, Edna realizes that to be the true artist, one must relinquish everything, an action Edna refuses to accept. As she cannot give up herself for her family, she cannot give up herself for art. Although art allows her individuality, and a certain amount of power, as does speech, it eliminates the very forces, the natural forces, for which she lives. Edna perceives that the commitment to art means giving up the time she might spend satisfying her instinctual needs--something she rarely sees Mademoiselle Reisz, the genuine artist, do. Earlier in the novel, Edna is taught to swim--an example of physical expression. Because Mademoiselle Reisz refrains from participating in such physical activity, Edna comes to view art as an obstacle rather than an opportunity. Therefore, she eventually rejects art. It should be noted that Edna begins to commit herself to art only when Robert leaves. She does, of course paint, and express her feeling for music when Robert is on Grand Isle; however, it is only when he departs to Mexico that she decides to "become an artist," as she tells Mademoiselle Reisz (63).

Art, then, is not only a form of self-expression awakening Edna to her artistic nature, but a substitute for her romantic intrigue with Robert as well. In fact, the last time she paints occurs just before her unexpected meeting with the young Creole on his return to New Orleans. She never returns to her art because it does not fulfill her either physically or emotionally as Robert's companionship had fulfilled her on Grand Isle. In

effect, art cannot fulfill her need for love. Robert has aided in awakening Edna's instincts as a woman and a human being--her desire for physical and emotional love. She must, then, find another type of self-expression which, in fact, requires the expression of the natural--sexuality--to fulfill her need for intimacy and again to destroy that misconception that she is a mother-woman who has neither sexual needs nor desires.

### III

#### Sexuality as Self-Expression

We have seen Edna's transformation in the areas of speech and art from a reserved lady of refinement to a woman on the verge of complete liberation. Edna Pontellier's final journey toward self-knowledge exists in her expression of sexuality--the culmination of her self-expression through speech and art. Edna has gained two voices--speaking voice and artistic voice--to express the inner self. She has been awakened, then, to her individuality through self-expression. However, for Edna, the ultimate voice is her own sexuality which she chooses to express in increasingly intimate ways. It is bodily expression--physical affection, swimming, and the sexual act itself--which she chooses as a form of self-expression as she attempts to destroy the mother-woman image. According to Peggy Skaggs,

Edna's sexual awakening then follows her awakening to her own individuality, rather than the other way around, illustrating perhaps the impossibility of a woman's experiencing a full sexual awakening without first achieving some sense of selfhood. (352)

In other words, sexuality cannot stand alone as the expression of self, but it does exist as the ultimate expression of self. Chopin suggests that sexuality must be accompanied by knowledge of the self, and that is why Edna's sexual awakening exists as one of the last phases in her journey. It is the instinctual

part of herself to which Edna must awaken and acknowledge in order to express her individuality. Although Edna's awakening to physical self-expression is a positive step in that she becomes more attuned to the needs and desires she had suppressed all her life, her ending negates the self. Upon realizing her "Fate" established by society, without realizing why she heads toward the sea, Edna chooses her own time and manner of death. By rejecting the self, which is a negative step, Edna believes she saves herself from society's entrapment. Edna realizes she is living a physical death since society has enslaved women. Physical self-expression, then, destroys Edna even as it awakens her since it must destroy her life in order to destroy the mother-woman image. Edna comes to know physicality/sexuality through two forces: Adele and the sea.

As in speech, Edna's awakening to physicality, as we see it in the novel, must begin with Adele. Although Edna is married and has two children, she is neither physically affectionate nor aware of the physical as a way to express her feelings. Since she did not marry Leonce for love, she has no understanding of the relation between physical affection and love. It is with Adele that Edna begins to give and take physical affection, the first step in understanding her sexuality. According to Elaine Showalter, ". . . it is Adele who belatedly initiates Edna into the world of female love and ritual on the first step of her sensual voyage of self-discovery" (45). Furthermore, it could be stated that Adele is a kind of mother-figure for Edna. As Showalter points out, "Adele provides maternal encouragement . . ." (45). One way Adele awakens Edna to the physical

exists in her persistence in discussing her health, and as Peggy Skaggs states, "her physical body in general" (348). Early in the novel Adele displays her "preoccupation with her 'condition'" (348). As the narrator states, "Her 'condition' was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation" (11). As stated in the chapter concerning speech, Adele's uninhibited language on such subjects influences Edna to free her own speech. Furthermore, Adele's conversation on such subjects as pregnancy influences Edna to become aware of the physical. In this way speech and sexuality are directly related.

Adele represents an excellent example of Peggy Skaggs' statement regarding sexuality and self-hood. Possessing no "sense of self-hood," Adele refrains from being open sexually. Her talk is unreserved, but her actions are not--an essential characteristic of the quintessential Creole woman. As the narrator states, "[The Creoles'] freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to [Edna], though she had no difficulty reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (11). Adele's "sexuality," like her art, is purposeful. Sexuality exists for reproduction only. As the narrator states, "Madame Ratignolle had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one" (11). Again, Adele contrasts with Edna in purpose. Edna desires self-expression, not the formation of a new life, from sexuality. She does not focus on the physical as Adele does; rather, she

awakens to it as a means of self-expression. As Peggy Skaggs states, "Edna never becomes preoccupied with her physical body, and even after she falls in love with Robert Lebrun, she seems never to consider using her body as a lure" (353). Yet Adele's unreserved speech and physical affection lead Edna into a world of unreserved sexuality. Thus Adele is (in the narrator's words though not in reference to Adele) "the light which showing the way forbids it" (14). Another way in which Adele contributes to Edna's physical awakening exists in her affectionate manner. Following an intimate conversation concerning Edna's past, Adele offers a loving gesture by placing her hand over Edna's. The narrator describes Edna's reaction concerning the gesture: "The action was at first confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself to the Creole's gentle caress" (18). Edna is unaccustomed, not only to free speech, but to physical affection as well. As evidenced a few scenes earlier in the novel where Adele, Robert, and Edna are seated together, Edna gently repels Robert as he attempts to show affection by leaning his head on her arm. However, as stated in the chapter concerning speech, Adele has great influence over Edna; thus, the young woman accepts the Creole's show of affection and even returns that affection. For example in the same scene, Edna rests her head upon Adele's shoulder--a similar action performed by Robert for Edna earlier in the novel. Adele provides for Edna an affirming place, which encourages the expression of physical affection. It is evident, then, that Edna desires to accept the Creole ways of speaking and behaving since she readily accepts and imitates Adele. However, the reader must remember that it is the custom for Creoles to be

openly affectionate as it is the custom for them to speak freely. For Edna this kind of affection is only the beginning; however, she will carry physical affection as well as speech over into sexuality.

Edna's first sense of her sexuality occurs the night of the Ratignolle soiree on Grand Isle. The most important event of this particular evening is Edna's first swim, which represents another type of physicality. The narrator states,

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out where no woman had swum before.

(28)

The words applied to this scene describe the feelings Edna possesses--"exultation," "power," "daring," "reckless"--and connote characteristics of sexuality. However, sexuality itself is not suggested until Robert visits her following her swim. As she confides in him, as he listens and consoles, desire for sexual intimacy develops for the first time. The narrator states, "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (31). In the same evening, Edna is awakened not only to "esthetic responsiveness," as stated in Chapter Two, but more importantly, to physical pleasure through swimming and sexual desire. These two physical, natural responses/acts--swimming and sex--represent the two ultimate types of self-expression as Edna continues to express her individuality.



The Awakening establishes the sea as a life-giver (mother) and a destroyer, awakening Edna to both sexuality and suffocation of her sexuality by society. Obviously, then, the sea is a sexual symbol through which Edna is awakened to her own body. The sea, as well as Adele, contributes to Edna's sexual awakening but with different results than what Adele obtains. Throughout the novel the sea is described in sensual terms, recalling three of the five senses. For example, the narrator refers to the "seductive odor and voice of the sea" and of the sensuous touch of the sea (15). Such descriptions of an aspect of nature personify that aspect and establish its importance to the succeeding actions of the protagonist. These particular characteristics of the sea awaken Edna to the existence of the natural, the body, but more specifically to the body as it can express sexuality. In relation to self-expression, sexuality refers to Edna's expression of her own natural instincts, both physical activity and sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, sexuality exists as that instinctual aspect of a woman that desires intimacy, both verbal and physical, drawing her to the opposite sex especially, but, more importantly, to that which acknowledges the self as a sexual being. Edna's sexuality is drawn out by the sea. Regarding Edna's first swim, the narrator states, "She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water" (28). As Edna loses reserve in speech, she loses bodily reserve as well, and even more so when she is suddenly absorbed in the "soft, close embrace" of the sea (15). Whereas Adele influences Edna only in physical affection, the sea contributes to her sexual release. The sea, then, becomes

the instrument through which Edna expresses the most significant type of physical release.

Early on the reader senses the importance of Edna's first swim. Because Edna desires to "swim far out," it is evident that swimming has allowed her a release of inhibitions as speech has allowed her a release. The narrator states, "She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone" (29). Again, Edna steps out alone where her individuality is not suffocated either by domineering husbands or, as in this case, obstructive swimmers. She requires "space and solitude" for acknowledgement of identity. According to the narrator,

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. (29)

In many instances of Edna's self-expression, "space and solitude" are the two essential ingredients. In her expression of sexuality through swimming, the sea naturally provides both. Her first swim, then, ironically foreshadows her last "swim" as she seeks escape from societal convention. Furthermore, her fear of drowning in this scene might foreshadow her fear of the danger of exploring her own sexuality later in the novel. What is different about the sea and Edna's other forms of self-expression is that the sea, because it is a natural force,

provides Edna more opportunity, in effect, entreats her to express herself. As the narrator states, "Her glance wandered . . . away toward the Gulf, whose sonorous murmur reached her like a loving imperative entreaty" (14). Consequently, when Edna actually does gain control over the sea by swimming, she senses the power that accompanies such vital, physical self-expression and thus embarks on her journey toward uninhibited physical expression, not just affection as taught her by Adele, but action as taught her by the sea. Swimming is the beginning of Edna's unrestrained expression of sexuality, which reveals to her the most basic aspect of her self.

Following her first swim, Edna experiences several intimate visits with Robert. In fact, because Robert teaches Edna to swim, he introduces her to her own sexuality without realizing it. It would seem then that this first swim has actually encouraged Edna's expression of her feelings of infatuation, and possibly love, for Robert. For instance, the day following this swim, Edna sends for Robert (for the first time) to take her to the Cheniere. As the narrator states, "She had never sent for him before. She had never asked for him. She had never seemed to want him before" (33). Her ability to swim provides her with physical power as her ability to paint provides her with creative power, and she is then able to exercise her freedom of choice. Sending for Robert begins Edna's expression of sexual freedom. The sea has aided in loosening Edna's body. Once she asserts herself physically, Edna will then be able to assert herself sexually (but with Alcee Arobin rather than Robert) in an attempt to express her individuality. As Edna exclaims after her first

swim, "I never was so exhausted in all my life" (30). Earlier in the novel Edna is described as possessing "noble beauty" and "graceful severity of poise and movement" (16). But, following her first encounter with the sea, Edna "[walks] alone with her arms hanging limp, letting her white skirts trail along the dewy path" (30). Thus the sea, upon loosening the tension of her body and eliminating the poise and severity, leads Edna to emotional and sexual desire. As the narrator states,

Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening--had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails. (35).

That "anchorage" refers to society which discourages freedom of sexuality. The sea has loosened the chains, bestowing upon her the desire and opportunity to express those innate feelings such as sexual desire and infatuation.

Again, the self that rebels attempts to usurp the self that conforms. Edna's former self would never have acknowledged such a desire as stated by the narrator concerning Robert: "Edna had no difficulty admitting her feelings for Robert. As they crossed over to the Cheniere together, she mused upon the fact that she would like to be alone with him on Grand Terre" (35).

Furthermore, she recognizes her infatuation with Robert. As the narrator points out, "The sentiment which she entertained for Robert in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel" (47). Obviously,

Edna did not marry Leonce for love. As the narrator observes, "Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (19). Clearly, Edna falls in love with Robert as they spend a generous amount of time together acquainting themselves with one another. Furthermore, Robert satisfies some significant part of Edna which Leonce has ignored--the romantic side of Edna. According to Kathleen Lant, "Robert stirs Edna's romantic longing. He offers attention, flattery, and protestations of undying devotion" (173). However, Edna does not respond to these "protestations," experience feelings of infatuation, or even love until she takes her first swim--an act that helps her to gain confidence and bodily flexibility.

Edna's sexuality continues to grow even after Robert, who upon the advice of Adele, leaves Grand Isle (because of the developing intimate relationship between himself and Edna). His early departure foreshadows his departure at the end of the novel. In both instances Robert leaves unexpectedly. Thus, he is willfully unsuccessful in satisfying Edna sexually since, in both instances, just when Edna is sexually vulnerable, he leaves. According to Kathleen Lant, "As a flirtatious, romantic intrigue, [Edna] does not threaten him, but as a sexually demanding woman, she is formidable, more than he can cope with" (173). However, Robert's absence does not diminish Edna's sexual desires; rather, her sexual longing increases. If anything, her sexuality develops because she must discover another way to satisfy her "awakening sensuousness," as the narrator refers to her

sexuality. After Robert leaves, Edna finds her outlet in the sea. As the narrator states, "She spent much of her time in the water since she had acquired finally the art of swimming" (46). The sea provides her with the powerful energy that is associated with sexuality. One particular incident following Robert's departure clearly exemplifies the powerful effect of the sea upon Edna. Before examining this particular incident, it is important to note that the protagonist's state of mind reflects her bereavement over Robert's leave-taking. As the narrator states, "Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything" (46).

Who or what does Edna turn to in her time of loss? She turns neither to her husband nor to Adele; instead, she turns to the sea. With Robert's absence, Edna is forced to find another way to express her sexuality: swimming. Initially, the sea serves, then, as a substitute for Robert. As evidenced in the scene where Mademoiselle Reisz questions Edna on her feelings concerning Robert's departure, Edna's answer is reflected in the description of her swim. The narrator states, "Edna plunged and swam about with an abandon that thrilled and invigorated her" (49). Edna's swimming reflects the violent emotions she experiences as a result of the loss of her intimate friend. Such physical activity, which sometimes follows loss, allows for the release of emotional pain. In order for the sea to develop as an essential force in Edna's awakening, her expression of individuality through sexuality must begin with the loss of Robert.

The sea, however, does not serve only as a substitute for Robert. More importantly, the sea serves as one of the forces through which Edna may express her individuality. The narrator states that the sea "afforded her the only real pleasurable moments that she knew" (46). In other words, the sea provides her with physical satisfaction--a satisfaction which will leave her yearning for complete liberation in order to obtain it. The swim following Robert's departure is also the final swim before Edna's return to New Orleans. Furthermore, this particular swim establishes Edna's need for physicality in which to express her individuality since New Orleans provides her with few outlets for expression. The narrator states,

She felt no interest in anything about her. The street the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic.

(54).

Having been awakened to her own physical energy, Edna finds discontent in her life in New Orleans. While in New Orleans, she attempts to concentrate on her art, which does indeed reach the spiritual part of her; however, she continues to feel unfulfilled. Periodically she returns to more physical activity in the midst of her commitment to art. She expresses her restlessness and discontent by engaging in increasingly physical activities. For example, following an argument with Leonce, she flings her wedding ring from her and stamps upon it. Obviously, this particular action suggests her aching desire to be free from

marriage. In addition, Edna purposely smashes a glass vase. As the narrator states, "She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear" (53). Clearly Edna grows more expressively physical. Her vitality, furthermore, becomes more visible to those around her. Victor remarks that "some way she doesn't seem like the same woman" (61). And Alcee Arobin, a young flirtatious man Edna encounters in New Orleans, finds her sexually attractive. As the narrator states,

He observed [Edna] attentively . . . and noted a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment seemed palpitant with the forces of life. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful sleek animal waking up in the sun. (70).

Edna's increasing physical activity foreshadows one of her more significant acts of self-expression--sex itself. By expressing her physicality, Edna rejects art since it cannot satisfy her physically and emphatically denies the self that conforms--the mother-woman image--while accepting the self that rebels against society.

Edna's return to New Orleans introduces another phase in her awakening--physical infidelity. With Robert gone and the sea behind her, she has no means of physical self-expression since these particular aspects of her life at Grand Isle have had a tremendous transforming effect upon her. Consequently, she turns



to Alcee Arobin, who has a reputation for sexual promiscuity. According to Kathleen Lant, "If Robert offers love and romantic illusion without physical passion, Alcee Arobin, the devastatingly attractive libertine, offers sexuality without affection" (173). Another type of self-expression, which later becomes self-negation because it is destructive, is offered her, and she attempts it. Several outings with Arobin lead to an intensely intimate relationship with him. The narrator states, "Her talk grew familiar and confidential. It was no labor to become intimate with Arobin. His manner invited easy confidence" (76). Again, Edna begins her physical intimacy with verbal intimacy. Gradually, Arobin is able to seduce Edna, and he begins with intimate talk. One evening following a day at the races, Edna senses her first intimate feelings for Arobin. The narrator states, "He stood close to her, and the effrontery of his eyes repelled the old vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness. He saw enough in her face to impel him to take her hand while he said a lingering good night" (76). Again, Edna is rejecting the conforming self, while accepting the rebellious or independent self, and by doing so, her sexuality becomes visible enough for someone such as Arobin to take advantage of an opportunity for intimacy and later, sexual pleasure. It is important to note that Edna believes early on that she is committing an act of infidelity, not against her husband, but against Robert Lebrun. At the beginning of her affair with Arobin, however, she only vaguely contemplates it. Thus, Edna acts upon her desire. As the narrator states, "Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his

manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her" (77).

The most significant moment with Arobin is, of course the seduction following several more of his visits. On this particular night, Edna shares an important discovery with Arobin, which reveals Edna's attempt to express herself through sexuality. She tells Arobin, "By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am" (82). She says, in other words, that according to laws of society, she is a "fallen" woman, but in her own mind she is neither wicked nor evil. She is, rather, a woman expressing her individuality. And she expresses it that night as she allows Arobin to seduce her. As the narrator states, "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (83). It is self-expression that motivates her to involve herself with Arobin, for following their love-making, she feels, as the narrator states, "neither shame nor remorse" (83). What she does experience, however, is the "dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips" (83). It is not love that moves her to become intimate with Arobin but desire for physical self-expression, and she realizes that love should be and is a stronger motivating force behind sexuality; however, the one to whom she could give her love will not have her. Her affair with Arobin, then, is even less satisfying than Robert's lack of sexual response.

The significance behind Edna's relationship with Arobin exists in the fact that she chooses to have sexual relations with him. Choice is a significant part of Edna's expression of individuality. By choosing to see Arobin on an intimate level, Edna expresses her right to freedom of choice, especially sexual. According to Kathleen Lant,

Edna wishes . . . to make choices based upon what she discovers to be her own needs. She wants both the freedom of thought to know herself and the freedom of choice to act upon her knowledge. (170)

Realizing that individuality means freely choosing a satisfying lifestyle, Edna chooses to feed her desires. Elaine Showalter states in "Tradition and the Female Talent: The Awakening as a Solitary Book," ". . . Kate Chopin's heroine is a robust woman who does not deny her appetites" (43). Upon entering Creole culture, Edna Pontellier begins to speak and act as she likes. She expresses the fact that, as an individual and an adult, she possesses the right to choose how she lives. She tells Dr. Mandelet just before her final swim, "I'm not going to be forced into doing things" (109). Society has attempted to force her to live a stagnating life as a mother-woman where she is completely devoid of self, completely stripped of choices. Later during this same conversation with the doctor she says, ". . . I don't want anything but my own way" (110). However, even as she desires a life that signifies complete freedom and individuality, she realizes the impossibility of having it in her own lifetime. Consequently, her final act of rebellion against society exists

in her final swim that ends in suicide.

Edna's suicide, her final act of physical self-expression follows two important incidents: Adele's pregnancy and Robert's second departure. Both incidents signify society's perspective on women. The birth of Adele's child, which she witnesses, recalls the memory of her own labor experiences. As the narrator states,

She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go. (109)

Little hope in childbirth is conveyed in this particular passage. According to Lant, Edna perceives that "giving birth is the ultimate sleep, the final giving up of will" (174). Furthermore, states Lant, ". . . because Adele exposes her to the ultimate reality of femininity, Edna awakens to the horrible knowledge that she can never, because she is female, be her own person" (175).

Robert's last departure supports the idea that Edna will always belong to someone other than herself. Just before Edna leaves him to sit with Madame Ratignolle, Robert explains that he refused her because she belonged to another. He states, ". . . you were not free, you were Leonce Pontellier's wife" (106). Robert leaves because he, too, sees Edna as an object, someone else's possession. Truly, Robert is a product of society. Upon discovering Robert's note, "I love you. Good-by-- because I love

you," (111) Edna contemplates, motionless and in silence on the sofa the entire evening. As the narrator states, "She had done all her thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning" (113). Adele's torturous childbirth and Robert's leave-taking drive Edna back to the sea. Again the sea serves as her refuge. If she cannot be her own person, she will not "be" at all.

Standing naked in the open air on Grand Isle, Edna proceeds toward her final act of self-expression. Rather than talking freely with someone such as Doctor Mandelet, who, in fact, invites her to confide in him, or returning to her art, which reaches her spiritual nature, as a way to express her individuality, she turns to the sea for her last expressive act--the last "swim." Neither freedom of speech nor artistic creation can satisfy her after she realizes that she can never be an individual. Society will always stereotype her as a mother-woman whether she claims that role or not. Furthermore, society will not allow her any other role than the one she accepted when she married Leonce Pontellier. Although Creole society has awakened her to some privileges, ultimately, Edna Pontellier is limited verbally, artistically, and sexually. Her final swim represents her final statement to society concerning its oppression of women. Except as a means to project her toward a deeper part of the ocean--deep enough that she will have no energy to return--this swim is actually no expressive swim at all. According to the narrator, "She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end"

(113-114). When she finally reaches the point where she can neither proceed nor return, she stops completely. The narrator observes, "Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her" (114). Throughout her journey she has worked to become increasingly active so as to express her individuality, but now, in order to save that individuality, to save herself, she must not act. She must return to the passive. Rejection of physical movement exists as the only way to free herself from the society that refuses to acknowledge her as an individual. At the same time, however, she rejects the self she has worked so hard to discover and express. According to Peggy Skaggs, "Tragically unable in her milieu to have a full human identity, Edna--unlike Adele the mother-woman and Mademoiselle Reisz the artist-woman--chooses to have none at all" (364).

Her suicide by drowning, then, is not only a statement to society that only she may choose what is right for her, but a form of self-expression that negates self-expression through speech, art, and sexuality since she chooses immobility once she reaches what she considers the "point of no return." Because Edna is treated as a child by society in the sense that she is not allowed to make her own choices, she returns to her childhood in death. Hearing the voices of her father and her sister Margaret, "the hum of bees" and "the musky odor of pinks," Edna gives her body to the sea, which embraces and enfolds her. The narrator repeats at the end of the novel, "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft close embrace" (113). The sea is not only sexual, but nurturing, and represents, then,

a mother-figure.

Because suicide itself is an ending, and because it is the last form of self-expression to which Edna resorts in her attempt to be a non-conformist, it is the most powerful form of expression existing in the novel. By taking her own life, Edna claims her life as hers and hers alone. She chooses death over life as if to say that freedom is non-existent in the physical world. Her most powerful voice is her death. Edna Pontellier becomes the "bird with a broken wing . . . beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (113) that she sees on the beach as she approaches the water.

A passive woman at the beginning of her journey, Edna Pontellier awakens to movement, physicality, sexuality, only to realize that she is still imprisoned despite the fact that she moves and acts freely. Society sees her in her assigned role as mother-woman and refuses to see her as an individual. According to Peggy Skaggs, "Edna's sense of self makes impossible her role of wife and mother as defined by her society; yet she comes to the discovery that her role of wife and mother also makes impossible her continuing sense of independent selfhood" (364). In other words, society will not abandon the importance of the mother-woman image as Edna cannot abandon her sense of self, and neither one can compromise because being a mother-woman and possessing a sense of self is not possible. According to Kathleen Lant, ". . . Edna realizes that there is one self she cannot refuse, for this self is the product of her physical being; the only way to renounce biology is to renounce the physical self" (175). Although she chooses her fate once she

reaches the ocean, and although choosing is active, her choice is a passive one. Lant observes that in order for Edna to destroy the image of the mother-woman, "she must lose the self; she must not swim" (175). Physically, she is exhausted from swimming and from fighting society. She chooses, finally, not to act.



## Conclusion

Edna Pontellier's awakening is a journey toward a woman's sense of selfhood in which exists a progression toward freer self-expression through speech, art, and sexuality. Elaine Showalter states, "As its title suggests, The Awakening is a novel about a process rather than a program, about a passage rather than a destination" (44). Although no formal division among the three types of self-expression in which Edna engages exists in the novel, a progression through these forms of expression toward self-realization can be found.

Beginning with freedom of speech, Edna begins to find a voice. Observing Adele Ratignolle, who is the novel's quintessential Creole woman, Edna imitates Creole speech until she is able to find her own language, which reflects her personhood. Edna becomes increasingly outspoken as the novel progresses, voicing her true self even to Leonce, Robert, and Arobin. It is freedom of speech which leads her to voice herself through art and sexuality.

Art in the novel (music and painting) represents Edna's esthetic awareness and need for a higher form of self-expression. In other words, expression of an ability all her own contributes to Edna's perception that she is more than just a mother-woman. That it is possible for Edna to be a woman and an artist is one

of the ideas set forth in the novel. Considered to be a traditionally masculine form of expression, art and Edna's commitment to art represent a woman's need to express the non-maternal side of herself--that self which is divorced from the biological aspect of the self. In some ways, Edna successfully fulfills that goal since she expresses her feeling for music in several instances throughout the novel and increasingly commits to her own talent, painting. However, art is unable to satisfy Edna's need for love and sexuality, which are aroused only after she takes her first swim. Although this swim occurs before her commitment to art, Edna finds that the more physical she becomes, the less art can fulfill her. It seems that Edna tries desperately to become a genuine artist by, for example, isolating herself in the pigeon-house as Mademoiselle Reisz isolates herself in her own apartment. It is as if she attempts to replace the physical, to replace sexuality, and ultimately love with aesthetic interests, with art itself. However, as stated in the novel,

There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why,--when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her impulses or warm her blood. (58)

Edna is too physical a woman to shut herself away from life and vitality, from the physical pleasures of life such as swimming

and sexuality. She must, then, reject art and her plan to become a genuine artist in order to satisfy other significant needs in her life.

In her expression of physicality/sexuality, Edna realizes that despite the fact that she is a woman, her instinctual needs must be met just as a man's instinctual needs must be met. Again the idea that a woman possesses similar needs as a man exists in the novel. According to Peggy Skaggs, "[Edna's] sexuality is . . . an integral part of her whole self" (355). Up until now society has instilled in Edna and other women the idea that women are not to feel, express feeling, or enjoy physical activity much less intimacy or sexual intercourse. Although Creole society allows free verbal expression, actions which might reflect free speech such as sexual intimacy have no place in their society. However, two forces contribute to Edna's sexual awakening. Ironically, one of those forces is Adele Ratignolle, who is more maternal than sexual, although in some ways these two aspects of the self go hand-in-hand in the novel. By expressing physical affection, Adele teaches Edna to be less reserved physically. The other force is the sea, which symbolizes sensuality and sexuality. With regard to sexual expression, both forces lead Edna to a world of freedom, a world of oppression, and finally death.

Once Edna finds freedom in self-expression, she realizes that society will not allow her to live that freedom because she is, after all, female. Edna Pontellier discovers that being female does not necessarily mean inferiority or lack of capability in other areas besides motherhood. In her expression

of speech, art, and sexuality she has attempted to show that she can be more than a wife and mother and that she would rather be outspoken or be an artist or express physical or sexual pleasure than be a mother-woman who has no identity.

Edna Pontellier's awakening is an awakening not only to her personhood, but to the limitations society places on the desire to express one's personhood. What is evident is that nineteenth-century American society, and specifically Creole culture, encourages a certain amount of verbal, artistic, and physical freedom, but at the point where it crosses over to what was then considered more masculine attitudes and actions, the freedom ends. There is the existence in the novel of what Elaine Showalter calls the "double standard of ladylike privilege and oppression of women in southern society" (50). Adele is an example of this double standard. She invites Edna to become a part of Creole culture when she shares confidences, encourages Edna's art, and expresses physical affection; however, as we see in her own life, Adele is submissive, conforming, angelic. She does not pass beyond the accepted role of mother-woman, and she expects Edna to refrain from crossing that boundary as well. However, Edna cannot ignore the discoveries she makes while in the Creole culture. She cannot return to the self which conforms. Her last resort, then, is her suicide--an action or lack of action which expresses the impossibility of living in a society which will not acknowledge or make the discoveries she has made. In fact, Edna finds that society has not yet discovered what she has about women and their capabilities, desires, and needs.

Society is still asleep as she had been asleep. As Edna ends her life, she realizes that society's awakening is not yet come.

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