'The Awakening': A Refusal to Compromise

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[In the following excerpt, Bogarad assesses The Awakening as a classic Bildungsroman, or "novel of development."]

[Kate Chopin's The Awakening presents the basic conflict in the Bildungsroman of the twentieth century: the heroine experiences sexual initiation in a struggle for self-assertion and identity. As a consequence of growth, the central character—almost always an aspiring artist—becomes profoundly alienated from traditional roles required by family, country, church, or other social institutions and is unable to reconcile the desire for connection with others with the need for self-expression. In novels written by men the hero finally chooses an apostasy which promises both personal and artistic fulfillment... Almost always in novels written by women, however, the same struggle ends in madness or suicide. This significant difference between male and female images in literature reflects and reinforces the cultural roles which men and women assume.... Kate Chopin's The Awakening, though placed in the highly structured New Orleans Creole Society at the turn of the century, is still the clearest statement of the feminine dilemma that we have. I contend that it is an early and central statement of a developing twentieth century literary tradition which gives apt phenomenological description to female experience and presents a break from the male tradition which Lawrence and Joyce, among others, have defined....

Before the republication of the novel [in 1963], critics viewed Edna Pontellier as a woman, like Emma Bovary, who gets caught in a web of romantic illusion which she has spun for herself. Consequently, they argued that she should pay for her sins with her life; for she fails both her family and her society.... I would describe The Awakening in diametrically opposite terms....}
Even though Kate Chopin was forced to renounce her positive attitudes toward her novel and for Edna specifically, we can now see that she intended Edna as a courageous woman who wants both union and freedom and gets crushed in a lonely effort to be lover and artist.... What remains to be understood now is the exact nature of Edna's self-discovery and the motivations for her final defeat.

I want to argue that Edna's awakening is a double one. The first is her awareness that she wants autonomy as a human being.... At the same time, however, she also conceives of a kind of union with a lover that would provide emotional connection and intimacy and permit external validation in support of her search for an authentic self. This initial awakening takes the form of a growing awareness of the conflict between her life as a conventional wife and mother and her emergent sense of self, and its consequences are rebellion and hope because she conceives of a choice. However, at the point of Edna's move to the Pigeon House a second awakening begins; and its consequences are despair and death. At first her decision to reject her traditional marriage seems to free her to love another and to be loved in return. However, her candidates for lovers are bound by the same categories she seeks to reject. Arobin clearly adheres to the double standard and Robert seeks to save her honor by leaving her. Since she is defining not only a new self, but also a realization of what is possible to her through living as an autonomous person, she is again rebuffed....

At first Edna's decision to begin a new life as artist seems to free her, but she learns that she cannot be both a sexual person and a successful person.

Edna realizes that the human possibilities opening to her ought to permit a reconciliation of the contradiction that she exists as an "either-or": either self or other, lover or artist, lover or wife, angel or whore. However, the men she meets, upon whom she becomes emotionally dependent for her sense of herself as lover, themselves reimpose the conflict. Thus, the second awakening is the knowledge that the first awakening is illusory—at the least, forever elusive, that the radical choice she has conceived is untenable and that she is unwilling to compromise, either through isolation as Mlle. Reisz does or through connection as Adele Ratignolle does. Therefore, her only resolution is suicide.

Edna Pontellier begins her awakening at Grand Isle during the summer of her twenty-eighth year. At that time she has already been married for ten years, and she has two children. This
situation is very different from male characters in novels of development, for they are almost always unmarried, and they never have to face the complications of marriage and parenthood in the process of achieving self-determination....

[If we see Edna] as a woman who has held her feelings in check for twenty-eight years, who has chosen friends and a husband who have reinforced her reticence, then we can understand her ripeness and intensity when she does begin to allow herself to feel and to act on those feelings. We can also understand her vulnerability. On the one hand, her reserve is a strength because she is not accustomed to have others affirm her and this provides a base for self-determination. On the other hand, because she has lived so long without real warmth and connection with others, she is unable to conceive of giving up the desire for community once she opens to it.

Edna's first real moment of openness comes during her walk to the beach with Adele Ratignolle.... When she touches Edna as they sit on the beach, Edna suddenly opens and begins to talk of her childhood “sea of grass” memories.... Edna’s first awakening is two-fold: she experiences personal rebirth, and she opens to others. For the first time, she risks genuine connection. Strange that Adele who represents all that Edna is trying to rebel against—the oppression of having her life defined by her husband and children—should be the one who gives her the first real moment of liberation. Adele serves both as contrast and catalyst. She understands Edna well enough to reach her deepest feelings, to warn Robert to be careful, and to support her efforts to become an artist; but she does not understand well enough to encourage Edna's actions which run counter to her own presuppositions about a home-centered life.

Edna Pontellier's second moment of emotional release comes from the music of Mlle, Reisz. An unpleasant, quirky, spirited woman, Mlle. Reisz knows that Edna is the only person on Grand Isle who understands and appreciates her music. Therefore, she plays only for Edna who responds to the music with direct intensity....

The "mystic moon" swim suggested by Robert is the central event in Edna's emotional growth. Touched by the music and by Robert's presence, she finally learns to swim, an art she has longed to master. Like the bird/flying images in the novel, swimming also represents rebirth, freedom, and wholeness to Edna—it requires overcoming the split she feels between her mind and her body, between thought and feeling, between conception and acts....
The union of body and soul that comes with her oneness with the sea gives Edna courage and a sense of independence; and her dormant sexuality is finally awakened when she feels the power of her own body. Finally she permits herself to acknowledge her attraction to Robert.

Her first effort to assert herself, her first act of rebellion is to refuse to make love to her husband for whom she has never felt desire. This action, I think, shows integrity; finally she begins to connect idea and feeling; and she is unwilling to violate herself or another person by doing something she does not feel.

Edna's constructive efforts to open herself to others with honest emotion prove that the comparisons made by critics to Emma Bovary have distorted our view of Edna's awakening. Too much emphasis has been placed on her sexual experience and not enough attention has been paid to her other efforts to become a person in her own right.... To assume that the expectation of loving someone who returns that love is a belief in “great romantic passion” is the ultimate cynicism. Edna's desire for the first time in her life is directed at someone who returns it and who has been fulfilling her emotional needs. She finally has evidence from the way Robert has been treating her and from her own emerging sense of self that she might choose to live in a more meaningful, constructive and active way. She does not lose her sense of responsibility; she redefines it.

Unfortunately, Robert cannot fully return the love which Edna gives him. Creole, with a strong sense of honor and duty, Robert feels free to love Edna only when there is no risk involved.... He loves Edna; but given the narrow confines of his social code, he cannot conceive of consummating that love. Robert is clearly not a courageous person; Edna is....

[Just] as Edna develops a new sense of sexual awareness and integrity when she refuses to sleep with her husband, she also changes her social responsibilities—I think the change is constructive. First, she decides to become a serious artist. Since her painting fulfills her need for creative expression and since the sale of her sketches helps her to become economically independent, this decision is wise....

Kate Chopin obviously realized that women have difficulty becoming professional artists; yet she characterizes two women in her novel who manage to receive recognition for their achievements. Like Edna, Mlle. Reisz achieves independence through her art. But her freedom is not without a price. As a pianist, she is seen as a performer of great excellence. As a person,
she is seen as an eccentric, unpleasant “old maid.” The presuppositions behind her isolation are apparent: 1) She is a pianist because she is unsuitable as a mate. Any woman should choose love instead of artistic expression. 2) The only way to be a true artist is to give oneself totally to Art.... Mlle. Reisz embodies all of the myths we have created about art and artists—myths which have excluded women or forced them to choose between art and connection with others—like Mlle. Reisz and Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Edna attempts to demystify all of these myths, and this struggle is partially responsible for her final defeat.

As a contrast to Mlle. Reisz, Adele Ratignolle represents another way which women have succumbed to myths about the expression of their creativity.... Her talent is only important to her in the context of her roles of wife and mother. She has no way of conceiving of herself as a separate person—indeed, she rarely is a separate person because she is always pregnant....

[Neither Adele nor] Mlle. Reisz provide an adequate model for Edna. Because she is in the midst of a total awakening, she cannot accept a view of art or self as isolating and consuming. The new life energy which gives her motivation and courage to paint is the same energy which propels her into the world of feeling; she needs to be both whole and connected with others. Thus, she is an artist and woman in a society with no adequate models to follow. Yet she manages to conceive of a way of life which would reconcile the contradictions. This is the completion of the first awakening....

[When Edna kisses Alcee Arobin] she has an insight about sexuality—she realizes that sex and love can be separated. Until she meets Robert, she has repressed her sexual responses or lived them in fantasy; her love for him brings her the first open and total feeling of her life. Arobin, who she knows is a man-about-town, rekindles the desire which emerged the night she learned to swim.... The explosion of life energy which she feels is triggered by the release of her sexuality; she begins to hope that she might have her own physical and emotional needs met for the first time.

However, when she kisses Alcee Arobin, she initiates a new fragmentation of her being. She separates her sexual need from her feelings for Robert in order to have an outlet for all her pent-up desire....

Originally Edna chooses to be wife and mother at the expense of identity and real love. Her relationship with Arobin represents another kind of denial—she chooses sexual connection at
the expense of identity and real love. Either way she has no opportunity to be free or whole. Because she does not understand that her affair with Arobin is not and cannot be emotionally satisfying, depression continues to plague her.... Because she is unable to identify her pain, she keeps searching for ways to express herself. She remains unsatisfied because all of the choices available to her are destructive....

By the time she decides to move out of Pontellier's house, she has already begun to fragment herself sexually. Therefore, her chances for success are diminished before she starts her new life. The dinner party is a central symbolization of the danger. The decor of red and gold represents the lush sensuality which has awakened in Edna and which will split her from her love for Robert.... [Edna] had hoped that her friends would help her move with strength and happiness; instead she feels alienated and alone. The group of people she has invited form an odd company, and no one really connects with anyone else. The party is a disaster; a shadow on her present, a bitter omen for the future. Here begins the second awakening.

Edna's belief that she can define an authentic self and love another in support of that definition begins to crumble. Edna enjoys the company of Arobin because he is a charming man, attentive, amusing, a person of the world. He is a sexual partner who does not ask for, expect, or give love. Consequently, Edna need not feel that she is compromising him because she loves another. What she slowly discovers is that there is no way to separate what the body does from what the mind or heart is feeling without creating a violation of self.... In reality, the men in her life split her—Robert sees her as the angel, and Alcee sees her as the whore....

[Because Edna] has cast aside traditional roles and broken Creole social and religious custom in order to define herself, she cannot find others who understand and support her. She has chosen not to live for others, but she refuses to choose to live without others. She views such isolation as an unacceptable compromise of her emotional needs.

These iconoclastic actions place Edna on the periphery of her society. Robert leaves to save her; Leonce is only interested in saving face; her children are visiting their grandmother; Adele only offers limited and traditional answers to her problems; Mlle. Reisz does not know how to be intimate except through music; and Arobin cannot in some final measure be trusted.

When Robert returns, he provides the one hope she has for real connection in the world. Her love for him has helped to get her through the profound loneliness inherent in her radical
departures from Creole life. Yet Robert, whose social and personal belief is Creole, can hardly be expected to choose Edna. He loves and wants Edna, but he cannot bring himself to join her in rebellion against the sacrament of marriage. Worse than that, he does not understand her.... Robert cannot understand or believe that she can assume power over her own life. When Edna finally admits that her first assessment of Robert's ability to love and accept her as an autonomous person is mistaken, the second awakening is complete....

When Edna concedes to herself that she cannot achieve either autonomy or connection with others, she surrenders and stops struggling. “Nor was there hope when she awoke in the morning.”... When she moves from what Chopin calls “despondency” to indifference, her life takes on a new feeling of unreality. She has awakened to consciousness from “a life long dream” only to find her reality a nightmare. Consequently, she finally retreats from her second conscious awakening—first through withdrawal and then through suicide. Because she is so totally alone at the end, because no one understands her desire to redefine herself outside of traditional societal roles for women, because no one is meeting her newly felt needs, because she is unwilling to compromise, because she has not yet had time to develop inner resources to sustain her through such alienation, she is defeated and returns to the womb-like embrace of the sea, “the consummation of her passion....”

What really are her alternatives in her historical moment? Chopin has shown the only ones available—the consuming life of Adele Ratignolle or the lonely existence of Mlle. Reisz. For Edna these choices are equally impossible; they are compromises of the radical vision she has conceived. She has not the patience or masochism for the former or the ascetic discipline for the latter. In male novels of development the hero is expected to make the stoic choice which Mlle. Reisz has accepted; in female novels of development the heroine is expected to come to her senses and return to the cycle of marriage and motherhood which she has rejected. Edna will choose neither of these alternatives, and that is precisely the point of book.

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