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This Just In, Women Have Desire: How Edna Pontellier Bashes Gender Stereotypes in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Kate Chopin uses Edna Pontellier's character to break free of the stereotypes held for women in the 19th century in her novel *The Awakening*. Chopin, a long-time rebel of gender stereotypes herself, uses Edna to depict the captivity of a patriarchal society and how she herself pushes expectations to the wayside. In this essay, I will argue, using examples from the novel, how Edna Pontellier chooses not to follow the expectations set for her as a woman in 19th century society. Despite beginning the novel comfortable in her marriage and unaware of her own feelings and ambitions, Edna's desires for music, art, sexual satisfaction, and freedom awaken with the people she meets at Grand Isle. Whether it be in the way that Edna finds solace in the free-flowing and emotional piano music of Mademoiselle Reisz, or in discovering her sexual urges, Edna disregards gender stereotypes of the time that women desire nothing except domesticity by discovering her desires for passion and freedom.

In the beginning of *The Awakening*, Edna is just another housewife who desires to meet society's expectations, but Edna finds desire for something else in the musical performance of Mademoiselle Reisz, a desire for freedom and passion. Edna is caught between two potential paths in her life, the life she is living and the life she desires, both of

which are demonstrated by her two friends. The first path is represented by Madame Ratignolle who plays music simply as another element of perfect domesticity and, "because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (Chopin 46). The role of a woman was also to be a means of brightening a home and making it attractive in the 19th century, so Madame Ratignolle's music is representative of the life Edna has been trapped into by her marriage and could continue to live if she chose to. This path is the life Edna has lived for a long time, without passion and without any desires for anything else. The other path Edna could take is represented by Mademoiselle Reisz who plays music purely to experience the art and the freedom the music allows. Edna does not describe her music as demure or pretty, but rather, "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her," (Chopin 47-48). Mademoiselle's playing with its "swaying" "lashing," and "beating" lack all of the pretty and predictable characteristics of domesticity, and represents freedom from Edna's domesticity with its "passions." Mademoiselle Reizs' passionate music wakes Edna from the slumber of her domestic life and arouses her desires for passion and freedom.

Edna desires passion in her life after hearing the passion with which Mademoiselle Reisz plays her music, disproving the idea that women desired nothing but perfect domesticity. Barbara Welters describes this standards ideal that women were held to in the nineteenth century in her essay "The Cult of True Womanhood":

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged her- self and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four

> cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and do- mesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achieve- ment or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power (Welters 152).

Welters' claim that women were "promised happiness and power" with true womanhood, and would desire nothing else, reflected the mindset of the time in which Edna Pontillier lived, but Chopin challenged this mindset in *The Awakening.* Women were expected to only strive for perfect domesticity, yet over the summer at Grand Isle, Edna develops a desire for passion. This desire of hers is a quality lacking in her marriage with Léonce, which she regards as having "no trace of passion... thereby threatening its dissolution," (Chopin 40). Edna desires Robert and his love, but since she does not have access to him, she decides to go in search of this missing passion upon her return to New Orleans. The first place Edna finds the passion she desires is in Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performances, which with their "soulful and poignant longing," (Chopin 86) stir up great emotions in Edna and only increase her desire for passion even further. Edna's days at the racetrack serve the same purpose of seeking passion. Edna becomes intoxicated by her success at betting on the horses, and is reluctant to come back to her domestic life at home. Edna's desire for passion does not stop at meaningful music or exciting races, though, and her search eventually leads to her meaningless but sexually charged affair with Alcée Arobin. While Edna has no romantic feelings for Alcée, she feels a physical attraction to him, satisfying her need for passion. Chopin uses Edna's affair with Alcée Arobin to challenge the stereotype of the time that women did not have passion or sexual desires. According to Barbara Welters, "Purity [is] considered as a moral imperative,"

(Welters 156) and “the purity of women is the everlasting barrier against which the tides of man's sensual nature surge (Welters 156). In this section of her essay, Welters is describing the common thought of the time that men were the only gender that experienced sexual desire, but Chopin uses Edna to demonstrate that this is simply not the case describing Arobin, “his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand acted like a narcotic upon her,” (Chopin 100). Chopin uses this scene to emphasize that Edna, and all women, have desire and that “women’s sexual apathy was not an innately feminine attribute but rather the result of prudery and repression,” (Showalter 208). By depicting Edna as seeking passion through music, betting, and an affair, Chopin breaks the common stereotype of the time that women desire nothing but perfect domesticity.

Along with a desire for passion, Edna also has a desire for freedom, which further puts her outside of the sphere of domesticity. In Edna’s time, it was thought that a woman should not "feel and act for herself" because "’when, next to God, her husband is not the tribunal to which her heart and intellect appeals-the golden bowl of affection is broken.’ Women were warned that if they tampered with this quality they tampered with the order of the Universe,” (Welter 159). Edna goes against this gender expectation that women must yield to their husband’s authority by disobeying Léonce and making her own decisions. Upon hearing of Edna’s intention to move out of the house, Léonce “wrote her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance… He hoped she had not acted upon her rash impulse; and he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say,” (Chopin 116). Despite Léonce’s wishes that she not carry on with her plan and society's expectation that she abide by the demands of her husband, Edna carries on with her plans to move into the

pigeon house because of her desire for freedom. Along with allowing her to disobey her husband, Edna's desire for freedom causes her to furth break gender stereotypes by encouraging her to discard her motherly duties. In Edna's mind, "Motherhood and individuality seem mutually exclusive; thus, Edna's struggle for autonomous selfhood entails a rejection of her responsibilities as mother" (Schweitzer 162). This separation of motherhood and individuality is what inspires Edna to leave her children with their grandparents despite her desire to be with them. Edna feels that by being a mother, she is sacrificing herself for her children, and herself is the one thing she vowed she would never sacrifice for her kids. Edna's suicide the end of the story is caused by her contuining desire for freedom not satisfied by disobeying her husbands desires or neglecting her motherly duties. Edna's desire for freedom from her domestic life disproves gender stereotypes of the time that women only desired perfect domesticity and true womanhood.

By desiring passion and freedom, Edna breaks stereotypes surrounding her gender. Edna discovered her desires through the passionate music of Mademoiselle Reisz. She then goes against the expectation that women should stick to the domestic sphere with betting, music, and an affair in search of passion. Along with passion, Edna discovers a desire for freedom and puts aside the expectation that she be a dutiful wife and mother by disobeying her husband and putting off motherly duties. With her desires for passion and freedom, Edna shows that women do indeed have desires other than to be a true woman and domestic wife, and with these desires, she flys "above the level plain of tradition and prejudice," (Chopin 106).

Works Cited and Abstracts

Abstracts

1. Schweitzer, Ivy. "Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin's the Awakening." *Boundary 2*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1990, pp. 158–186. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/303221.

Ivy Schweitzer focuses on the romance genre written by female authors including *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Awakening.* She discusses several topics such as Edna's role as a mother as compared to her "virgin birth" at the end and the significance of the bird symbolism in the novel.

2. Showalter, Elaine. "Tradition and the Female Talent: The Awakening as a Solitary Book." *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, 2000, pp. 202–221.

Showalter describes how Kate Chopin went beyond what any writer before her time had done by writing about women's sexual and personal emancipation. In the beginning of her career, Chopin followed the literary example of authors before her, but by the time she wrote *The Awakening,* she believed that literary success came from defying tradition. This change closely resembles Edna's attempts to stay a domestic woman in the beginning of her story and then casting off of those duties as the story progresses.

3. Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151–174. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2711179.

In "The Cult of True Womanhood," Barbara Welter claimed that a domestic or true woman should possess four cardinal values: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Piety is valued among a woman because, unlike intellectual pursuits, it does not remove a woman from her "proper sphere," the home along with controlling any desires. A woman must maintain her purity until marriage and must remain committed to her husband. Women are to remain submissive to their husbands as stated by God, and a woman's rightful place was in the home doing domestic work which included cooking, tending flowers, and needlework. If a woman upholds these cardinal values she is an "ideal woman" and is frail and feminine.