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Love vs. Self-Autonomy in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier undergoes a metamorphosis of her identity by breaking gender barriers and seeking to release herself from society's standards and regulations placed on her femininity. As Edna begins to explore the different ways in which she can find her own sense of being and power, she meets Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle, two women who display different aspects of femininity. By using Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle as foils to each other, Chopin uses these two women to represent Edna's struggle to choose between a life centered around love, or a life centered around autonomy.

As Edna Pontellier becomes increasingly tired with her everyday obligations to her husband and to her children, Mademoiselle Reisz is able to hold solidarity with her. Edna lacks a sense of belonging with her husband, and cannot find a sense of independence from him. Her and Mademoiselle Reisz's struggle for self-autonomy is shown through the two birds presented at the beginning of the novel. While Edna is with her husband, a parrot and the mockingbird are used to symbolize Edna and Reisz's actual thoughts towards Edna's husband. Both of the women are trapped within their own gender norms, alongside the birds who are stuck in cages. The parrot, used to represent Edna, is constantly repeating "Allez vous-en! Sapristi!" (Chopin 3) at Leonce Pontellier. This phrase is French for "Go away! For Heaven's Sake". Although Edna is not speaking these words to her husband, the parrot is vocalizing her internal dialogue. Mademoiselle Reisz is incorporated in this scene, as Edna's internal dialogue is described by Chopin as "a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on

the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (Chopin 3). The mockingbird represents Reisz in relation to Edna, and how Reisz understands Edna’s struggle, despite the rest of society’s inability to understand why a woman would not love her husband. Both birds share a lack of independence, and they communicate with each other through their shared struggle.

Besides being able to recognize Edna’s resistance to the social tradition of women, Reisz also serves as a mentor for Edna to learn about her own autonomy. Edna frequently visits Reisz to hear her play piano, and Reisz advises her to seek out her own freedom. Reisz tells Edna that “the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (Chopin 96). Reisz encourages Edna to stay strong and to break past the conventions that society has set for her as a woman. Reisz uses the reference to birds as a representation of each stage of freedom that women undergo. Women can either be stuck under the chains of social convention, or find the strength and ability to fly above and follow their own path. This independence that Reisz describes is the same independence that Reisz possesses, and Edna is inspired to search for her own strength to pursue freedom.

Despite showing Edna the great possibilities of being an independent woman, Reisz also showcases the negative aspects of becoming too self-reliant. Reisz shows Edna what it is like to be independent, but Edna notices the flaws that come along with being completely isolated from others. Reisz’s character is described as “a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (Chopin 30). Chopin shows that too much independence can

lead to an unhappy life, and there are aspects of Reisz's life that Edna chooses not to reflect in her own quest for self-discovery. A complete lack of love in Reisz's life is not completely perfect, and Chopin uses Edna's perceptions of Reisz and Adele Ratignolle to show that there remains a balance between dependence on love and one's own autonomy.

While Reisz shows Edna the possibilities of self-autonomy, Adele Ratignolle shows Edna the possibilities of pursuing love and dependence on others. She is married to her husband and their relationship is said to be filled with love and care for each other. Chopin states that "the Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (Chopin 65). This shows the positive side that marriage and dependence offers to Edna, and it shows that love is still possible despite the lack of autonomy that Adele may have in her relationship with her husband. This is a sharp contrast to Mademoiselle Reisz, who has barely any relationships with the people around her and instead lives in solitude.

Along with showcasing love, Adele also represents society's standard of women that Edna feels the need to live up to. Adele is said to have "no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (Chopin 11). By being compared to a heroine of romance and of dreams, Adele represents the concept of beauty and the tradition of true love and motherhood. Edna understands that Adele is the perfect example of the type of "women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 11).

Edna also recognizes the adverse effects of clinging to the traditional role of a woman, through Ratignolle, as she witnesses the suffering that Adele has become accustomed to in her life. Adele is the mother of many children, and is pregnant for the fourth time when Edna begins to wonder about her role as a woman. Recounting one of Adele's previous pregnancies, Edna claims to "never... forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating... the harrowing story of one of her accouchements, withholding no intimate detail" (Chopin 13). Despite her belief that her family ties are of the upmost importance and goodness, Adele is constantly in pain from childbearing and her labor is described as a "scene [of] torture" (Chopin 127) by Edna. Though her husband and her children bring Adele joy, there is still a sense of pain and suffering that she must go through as a traditional woman in her society.

Along with trying to continue the womanly tradition of the time by convincing Edna to follow in her footsteps, Ratignolle also directly tries to sequester Edna's independence by creating a barrier between Edna and Robert LeBrun. As Edna begins to fall in love with Robert, Ratignolle tells him to "Do me a favor... let Mrs. Pontellier alone" (Chopin 24). Despite seeing the connection that Robert and Edna have, Adele favors tradition rather than Edna's own freedom. Adele wants to keep Edna away from exploring her passions for the sake of keeping the tradition of a patriarchal marriage afloat. Adele may favor love, but only when it is pursued in accordance with the social standards set for it. This favoring is again displayed at the end of the novel when Edna seeks to find Robert and pursue him. Adele warns her not to, telling her to "think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 127). This statement is used as a means to tie Edna back to her womanly obligations, and to restrict Edna from truly seeking out her own happiness. Tradition reigns over autonomy in Adele Ratignolle's mind.

Both Reisz and Adele show the positive aspects and the negative aspects of social pressure on women. Ratignolle is beautiful yet oppressed, and Reisz is independent but unloved. In the end, Edna must make her own decision between autonomy and tradition, but her two friends give her the knowledge through which she can make her decision. Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz are the channels in which Edna can explore the two realms of social obligation and of freedom.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2005.