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Love vs. Independence 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 women to represent Edna's struggle to choose between a life centered around maternal love and domestic duty, or a life centered around independence. Through Edna's discovery that neither of her friends' lifestyles are truly what they are esteemed to be, Edna chooses to reject both standards of femininity that society has asked her to pick between.

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 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. Reisz is like a mockingbird in the way that she mocks and disapproves, just like a mockingbird does, of the "mother-woman" that Edna is forced to portray through her marriage to Leonce. Reisz understands that Edna must imitate the concept of the mother-woman, much like a parrot must imitate what it hears. 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. At the end of the novel, Edna views herself as truly trapped in society's standards of her, as she witnesses "a bird with a broken wing... beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin 132). Reisz's allusion to birds once resonates with Edna on multiple occasions, and Edna recognizes her own oppression through the lessons and metaphors that Reisz teaches her

throughout the novel. Reisz also reminds Edna that she must “possess the courageous soul... the soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 74) in order to truly become an artist and find meaning and value in her life. The 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 independence.

While Reisz shows Edna the possibilities and limits of self-autonomy, Adele Ratignolle shows Edna the possibilities of pursuing love and dependence on others. Adele 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. Adele shows that love is still possible despite the lack of autonomy that Adele may have in her relationship with her husband, in sharp contrast to Mademoiselle Reisz, who has barely any relationships with the people

around her and instead lives in solitude. A life of tradition can actually be appealing, Edna discovers, if she chooses to love the right man.

Along with showcasing love, Adele also represents society's standard of women that Edna feels the need to live up to. She is the perfect 'mother-woman' that Edna is pressured to be. 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 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). This woman who minister to the people around them is the exact opposite of Mademoiselle Reisz's disposition. Rather than living a life outcast from the rest of society, Adele is at the service of the people around her. Adele represents an alternative to solitude, and Edna witnesses the beauty that can be experienced as a mother-woman, despite what Reisz wants her to believe.

Edna also recognizes the adverse effects of clinging to the traditional role of a women, 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 women show the complexities, the good and bad aspects, that Edna has to choose between. However, Edna chooses to reject both of these lives at the end of the novel. Heartbroken with the fact that her love is not reciprocated by Robert, Edna rejects the life of seclusion that Reisz proposed to her. Additionally, as Edna is reflective of her family ties and how she is oppressed by them, she rejects the life of tradition that Adele presents to her in the novel. As Edna chooses to end her life, she realizes that "there was no one thing in the world that she desired" (Chopin 132) which Reisz or Adele could offer her. Rather than settling for one of the two lives that she was posed with, Edna accepts the "exhaustion [that] was pressing upon and over-powering her" (Chopin 133) and chooses to be at peace with herself through her suicide.

Edna's death allows her freedom that extends beyond tradition and beyond isolation, and she leaves Adele and Reisz behind her.

Both Reisz and Adele show the positive aspects and the negative aspects of the social pressure on women during the time of Chopin's novel. Ratignolle is beautiful yet oppressed, and Reisz is independent yet unloved. The two women are Edna's lens into the possible worlds that Edna can follow. In the end, Edna makes her own decision regarding full autonomy or tradition, which is to reject both of these ideals and seek out what truly makes her feel free. Even though Edna decides to live a life that is unlike both of her friends, Edna would not have been able to make the decision without their advice and presentation of the feminine struggle. These two friends of Edna allow her the knowledge through which she can make her own decision. Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz are the channels in which Edna can explore the two realms of social obligation and of independence, and eventually make the decision to leave the two realms behind.

Works Cited

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