

Jasmin voigtlander

Sociology, Women



Jasmin Voigtlander CRE Final Draft May 04, 2012 Eng 2H; Pd 4 Mrs. Holland

Barred Individuality: Breaking Free of Relations in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

In the 1800's and for many years prior, women were born with an already accepted and expected role in society. Women were not permitted to work and were limited to the home, and domestic duties. They were expected to dismiss their wants and/or needs, and to put their families' before themselves. Though faced with so many restrictions, many women did not, in fact, feel as if they were under any restraints. There was nothing to question, for this was the societal norm and they had never known otherwise. Once this inequity was realized many women's rights groups were formed. Many novels written in these times of conflict shared " a concern for women's escape from confinement in all spheres in her life. And escape from confinement is the overriding theme of *The Awakening*" (Toth 2). In *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, the author demonstrates how relationships restrain individuality. This is displayed through Chopin's diction and her imagery of birds and the ocean. Chopin displays relationships' restraint on individuality through her diction. Edna Pontellier's relationship with both her husband and children serve as restraints from her individuality. Marriage is even directly stated as " one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (Chopin 67). Chopin's use of the word " lamentable" depicts marriage as a sad and mournful event; an event in which one compromises one's identity for union. After Edna's decision to move into the " pigeon house (Chopin 86)", she resolves to have a small celebration in her home prior to the move in commemoration of this event. That night "[t]here was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the

high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (Chopin 90). Chopin's inclusion of the last phrase "who stands alone" emphasizes not only that Edna's transformation is made alone, but that being by oneself is necessary to "rule" and therefore serves as a necessary factor of her transformation. While Edna's relationship with Leonce leaves her trapped from any form of individualism and puts her in a state of confinement, Edna's awakening develops not only through her newly realized yearning to escape the confinements of both society and her relationships, but through the actual separation. Edna's relationship with her children also constrains her individuality, and her dismissal of her children marks the start of her awakening. When Edna tells Madame Ratignolle, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my children but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin 48), she emphasizes that a truly loving relationship between a mother and her children requires the mother to give up her identity and fully devote herself, physically and mentally, to raising her children; therefore making a mother's relationship with her children a "hindrance to her freedom" (Jones 1). By stating that she will not give up "[her]self" for her children, Edna is refusing to dismiss all that she is. She will not let herself become another person, even for the sake of her children. Edna "refuses to sacrifice her 'self', " hence, her "children[,] who are supposed to give significance to [her] life[,] [become] antagonists she must elude, to avoid 'the soul's slavery' (Chopin 116)" (Toth 2). The mention of "the soul's slavery" is an allusion to selling one's soul to the devil. By submitting her soul to "the soul's slavery, "-and therefore giving up

"[her]self" -Edna would be willingly giving up her choice to make her own decisions. She would need to dismiss herself as an individual in order to become like all the other mothers of her time; making all decisions purely for the good of their children or husbands. Furthermore, the phrase displays the children's role as a sort of slave owner; with their mother serving as a slave to their needs. By leaving her children in Madame Ratignolle's care, Edna manages to be left in solitude and momentarily free of any binding relationships.

The imagery of birds throughout the novel stresses the restraint of human relationships on individualism. At the near start of the novel, women were described " fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They ... idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 8). Women's fierce need to protect and take care of their children brings to mind the image of birds zealously protecting their young. However, this incomprehensible superior-subordinate relationship between a mother and her children or husband leads women to undervalue themselves as individuals and " efface" or disregard all personal feelings and/or opinions. Chopin also uses birds to symbolize Edna, herself. In the first line of the novel "[a] green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door" (Chopin 1) is described. The parrot " could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood" (Chopin 1). This parrot is undoubtedly a symbol of Edna Pontellier. Just like the parrot, Edna is in confinement; the parrot confined within a cage and Edna confined within her own society and its

bounds. While Edna desires to live independently and self-reliantly, she finds that society offers no path for women to live this way. As a woman, society provides her with no path to travel down but one. And just as the parrot, "who seems able to communicate, but is not" (Wolff 1), while Edna views herself-or is able to view herself-as her own individual, she is unable to voice this notion and declare herself such. Once Edna begins her separation from her husband, Leonce, and essentially from any and all relations she holds, the image shifts from one of a caged bird to one of a flying bird. Near the beginning of the novel Leonce and Edna hold a gathering in their summer home in Grand Isle. Listening to Mademoiselle Reisz's piano solo, Edna pictures a scene of a man on the seashore. "His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (Chopin 26). This scene symbolizes Edna's flight from her marriage's restrictions. The man on the seashore signifies Leonce, and the bird signifies Edna. Another scene that relates Edna to a bird is at one of Edna's many visits to Mademoiselle Reisz's home during Leonce's absence on a business trip. Mademoiselle Reisz "put her arms around [Edna] and felt [her] shoulder blades, to see if [her] wings were strong, [saying], 'The bird that would soar about the level plain of tradition and prejudice but have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see weaklings bruised, exhausted fluttering back to earth.' Whither would you soar?" (Chopin 84). Chopin likens Edna to a strong winged "bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" because that is exactly what Edna is striving to do. Her break from her relationships strengthens her "wings" and her will. Mademoiselle Reisz goes on to say that it is "a sad

spectacle to see weaklings bruised, exhausted fluttering back to earth" for once Leonce returns, and Edna's relations are repaired, Edna will have to " flutter back to earth; " back into confinement. The last image is of a wounded bird with a broken wing " beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin 116). This bird is, again, a symbol of Edna. Once Leonce returns, Edna will be left with broken hope; just as the bird is with a broken wing. Likewise, just as the bird " circl[es] disabled down, down to the water, " Edna swims farther and farther out into the water as a final act of freedom and drowns. Chopin's imagery of the ocean depicts nature, the simplest escape from one's relations, as liberating and as an outlet for individualism. Chopin describes the sea's voice as " 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" (Chopin 13). This suggests that to achieve inward contemplation, one must reside by the ocean. The " voice of the sea" is inviting and " speaks to the soul. " " The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 13). The sea is a symbol of the womb, of rebirth; of the awakening stirring up within Edna. Just as a baby lives in " abysses of solitude" in the womb, the ocean is an "[abyss] of solitude. " And just as the womb " enfold[s] [a baby] in its soft, close embrace" the ocean " enfold[s] the body in its soft, close embrace. " More cases of sea imagery are evident throughout the novel. When speaking with Madame Ratignolle, Edna recalls a scene from her childhood. Running away from prayer service and her father, she runs into a " meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the

grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water (Chopin 16)". Just as this grassy field represented freedom to Edna as a young child, the ocean is a symbol of the freedom she is fighting to attain. When Edna swims, she feels as if she is "reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (Chopin 28). To Edna, swimming represents rebirth, freedom and wholeness (Bogard 2). It is something she learned independently of her husband and Edna chooses to die swimming as a final escape from her restricting relationships and as a final attainment of freedom. Edna is "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" (Chopin 35). The anchor symbolizes her relationships and the old ideas she conformed to, which "had held her fast"—keeping her in place and in conformity. When the anchor snaps, Edna is set free to establish herself as an individual. The break-off of Edna's relationships marks the start of her rebirth. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin proves relationships to limit one's individuality. In the world we live in today, there is much more emphasis on the individual. Unlike America in the 1800's, individualism is celebrated and taking a stand is honored. "Be yourself" is a much repeated motto. Speaking one's thoughts is encouraged and gender is of no matter. Gaining success in life through one's own effort is also a point extensively emphasized in today's society. Unlike the 1800s, in which women were entirely reliant upon their husbands and their husbands' occupations in order to have money, food, and shelter, both

women and men are now encouraged to receive an education to be able to provide for themselves later in life. Kids are taught to be independent at a young age, and again, at no matter to gender. It must be remembered that “ somewhere along the way, someone is going to tell you, ‘ There is no “ I” in team.’ What you should tell them is, ‘ Maybe not. But there is an “ I” in independence, individuality and integrity’” (George Carlin). Works Cited Bogard, Carley Rees. "'The Awakening': A Refusal to Compromise." *The University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies* 2. 3 (1977): 15-31. Rpt. In *World Literature Criticism, Supplement 1- 2: A Selection of Major Authors from Gale's Literary Criticism Series*. Ed. Polly Vedder. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. Literature Resource Center. Web. 24 Feb. 2012 -----> Carley Rees Bogard argues that Edna goes through a double awakening, that is, that her awakening has two stages. First, Edna becomes aware of her need for independence and it takes form as a “ growing awareness of the conflict between her life as a conventional wife and mother and her emergent sense of self” (Bogard 1). After this stage of awakening, Edna starts to rebel and pushes the borders that she never even came into close vicinity with before. The second stage of Edna’s awakening begins with her move into the Pigeon House. In this stage she comes to acknowledge “ that the first awakening is illusory—at the least, forever elusive” (2). After this realization, Edna must compromise in order to fit in to society, “ either through isolation as Mademoiselle Reisz does or through connection as Adele Ratignolle does” (2). Essentially, Bogard argues that Edna’s suicide was due to her refusal to compromise. Carlin, George. “ Quotes about Individuality. ” Goodreads. Goodreads Inc. n. d. Web. 27 Apr 2012. < <http://www.goodreads>.

com/quotes/show_tag? id= individuality> Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. St. Louis: Herbert S. Stone and Co., 1899. Print. Jones, Emma. "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Literature-study-online*. n. p. April 2003. Web. Apr 2012.

-----> Jones presents Edna as a woman before her time; a "prototypical feminist" (Jones 1). By comparing Edna to the female protagonists in other novels of Chopin's time, Jones emphasizes how revolutionary *The Awakening* was. In *The Awakening*, Edna is depicted as the opposite of what would be considered an ideal woman at the time. She does not possess the assumed qualities that a truly reputable woman should carry. Jones recalls a scene from the novel in which Edna states that while she would not hesitate to give her life for her children, she would never give up herself. This touches upon the idea I am currently considering for my thesis. This scene presents Edna's children as a hindrance or deterrence from maintaining her individuality. This idea interests me particularly because it is such an unexpected stance to take when brought up hearing the clearly contrary public opinions of the time. Toth, Emily. "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Feminist Criticism." *Southern Studies* 2. 3-4 (Fall- Winter 1991): 231-241. Rpt. In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 127. Detroit: Gale, 2002. Literature Resource Center. Web. 29 Feb. 2012. Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Un-Utterable Longing: The Discourse of Feminine Sexuality in *The Awakening*." *Studies in American Fiction* 24. 1 (Spring 1996): 3-23. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 127. Detroit: Gale, 2002. Literature Resource Center. Web. 3 May 2012. Bibliography Brown, Pearl L. "Awakened Men in Kate Chopin's Creole Stories." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13. 1 (Mar. 1999): 69-82. Rpt. In *Twentieth-Century Literary*

Criticism. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 127. Detroit: Gale, 2002. Literature Resource Center. Web. 29 Feb. 2012. Church, Joseph, and Christa Havener. "The 'lady in black' in Chopin's *The Awakening*." *The Explicator* 66. 4 (2008): 196+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 29 Feb. 2012. -----> Joseph Church and Christa Havener compare Mademoiselle Reisz to a relatively minor and commonly overlooked character, the " lady in black". They argue that both Mademoiselle Reisz and the " lady in black" have attained balance between the mind and body and that they maintain that balance through " trying vicariously to appropriate the embodied sensuality" (Church, Havener 1) of those of tender age; Mademoiselle Reisz through her contact with Edna and the widow through her " stead[y] [gain] upon" (Chopin 33) the young couple (I have a different explanation for the widow's " gain upon" the young couple). There are also other similarities to be observed between Mademoiselle Reisz and the " lady in black". Both women "[dress] in black, [do] not enter the water, and apparently [devote themselves] to higher forms)" (Church, Havener 1). Elfenbein, Anna Shannon. " Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: An Assault on American Racial and Sexual Mythology." *Southern Studies* 26 (1987): 304-312. Rpt. In *Twentieth- Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 127. Detroit: Gale, 2002. Literature Resource Center. Web. 24 Feb. 201 -----> In her critical essay, Anna Shannan Elfenbein stresses how ground-breaking Chopin's novel was. Never before had a white woman been written about who possessed such passion and sexual desires. Preceding the publication of *The Awakening* sin had only been depicted present in women of color. Elfenbein also speaks of how Edna's inability to " escape [the] patriarchal imperatives regarding sex and women's place" (Elfenbein 4)

is partially due to colored women's interference with her aims. Edna's small acts of defiance -such as throwing her wedding ring or attempting to shatter a vase-are interrupted by her colored maids who silently steer her back into position. Elfenbein also introduces what I thought to be a very interesting idea. She claims *The Awakening* is a realist rather than romantic novel. By realistically representing women in the sexual, as well as, racial aspects of life, Chopin breaks down the barriers between black and white women. The essay also includes a recollection of Mademoiselle Reisz playing Edna's favorite piano solo; a piece she refers to as " Solitude. " By including this scene in the same paragraph she mentions that *The Awakening's* original title was *Solitary Soul*, Elfenbein implanted an idea in my head. I liked the idea of solitude or isolation as the central theme of *The Awakening*. Though Elgenbein's essay had not directly been translated into my essay it was still a large step in the development of my thesis. Mathews, Carolyn L. "

Fashioning the hybrid woman in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Mosaic* [Winnipeg] 35. 3 (2002): 127+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 24 Feb. 2012. Ramos, Peter. " Unbearable realism: freedom, ethics and identity in *The Awakening*." *College Literature* 37. 4 (2010): 145+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 29 Feb. 2012. Simons, Karen. " Kate Chopin on the Nature of Things (1)." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 51. 2 (1998): 243+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 3 May 2012.