

Chopin's sea: maternal or mystical?

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In *The Awakening*, author Kate Chopin offers a tale of self exploration and fulfillment in protagonist Edna, who finds herself at odds with the warped society that is her reality. Taking place primarily in Louisiana islands, the Gulf of Mexico is perhaps, the second most important character in the piece. There are countless aquatic descriptions, but they are difficult to analyze as a whole. Depending on the perspective you lend yourself, the sea could seem predominantly male or predominantly female. Given the feminist nature of the novel, I choose to adopt the latter view. That isn't necessarily enough of a limitation, though. Given the setting and Chopin's dedication to regional writing, it's unlikely that she was not influenced or at least exposed to stories of Louisiana witchcraft or maritime witchcraft. While the sea mother characterization is more obvious, the witch helps account for the more sexual, phallic and alluring depictions of the water. Both personifications will be explored in this paper.

The scent of the sea comes up a few times in the book, as does the ocean breeze. Early references to the breeze coincide with discussion of the sensuous aroma of the sea, which could tempt an interpretation of the sea lover characterization. The following evidence is more suggestive of the female embodiment of the water. "The sun was low in the west and the breeze was soft and warm" (1262). The gentleness and warmth of the breeze is clearly maternal. The time of day at the status of the sun could imply a more mystical entity. The twilight is not something that the reader would likely associate with the sea mother figure, but instead with the sea witch.

Next, the sea is given a voice, another trait that continually entices Edna to take a swim and distracts her from her domestic obligations. “ Her glance wandered from his face away toward the Gulf, whose sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty” (1262). The act of murmuring has always seemed more feminine than masculine to me. And historically and culturally, the diminished volume of a murmur would also align itself more easily with the expected behavior of women. Of course, the varied definitions of “ sonorous” complicate this reading of the sentence a bit. Despite that, this sentence is reminiscent of the maternal, with a caring and important request. Descriptions of the voice continue. “ The voice of the sea is 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” (1263). This quote, which returns at the novel’s end, shows how the seductive properties of the sea – though primarily thought of as indicative of a male lover – could be more a nod to a witch figure. Sirens, aquatic witches of sorts, have nearly always been portrayed as seductresses with beautiful voices used to lure sailors to their deaths. There are shared qualities in *The Awakening*. The sea, personified with a voice and seductive characteristics, is eerily similar to the classic siren description. While it is not a witch per se, the siren interpretation does correspond to a darker, mystical reading of the feminine sea. As we read on, there is another alluring description of both the sea’s voice. “ The voice of the sea speaks to the soul” (1263). Many of the supporting quotes used in this paper have been quite ambiguous in their abilities to be interpreted as relating to the male lover, mother, and witch personifications of the ocean. This snippet seems to only

really clearly align with the mystical. Something which connects to the soul in a transformative way and is struggled to be understood could suggest a paranormal power.

In the following two excerpts, Chopin portrays the sea as a reflective and mysterious thing that commands attention. First, “ The moon was coming up, and its mystic shimmer was casting a million lights across the distant, restless water” (1272). This idea is repeated at the novel's end, “ The water of the Gulf stretched out before her gleaming with the million lights of the sun” (1343). This could be interpreted in many ways, though there are really only two perspectives in which I am interested. One, this is simply another way in which Chopin chooses to make the sea seem more enticing, luring Edna into its grasp, which is fairly evident. However, this focus on the water's surface and its reflective properties combined with the novel's awareness of self-fulfillment may not be coincidental. These two ideas are not mutually exclusive. The author could be forcing Edna's attention to the sea so that the sea can teach her something about herself.

The fundamental reason that I struggle to read Chopin's sea as strictly maternal is the repeated simile comparing wave crests to serpents. “ The sea was quiet now, and swelled lazily in broad billows that melted into one another and did not break except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents” (1274). This is seen at least twice in the novel. Serpents and snakes are generally ominous and, when described through the gender binary, phallic and therefore male. However, snakes often have significance in witchcraft, both in voodoo and other practices. The

juxtaposition of sea and serpent also reminds me of the Hans Christian Andersen classic, *The Little Mermaid*. There, the sea witch is assisted and protected by sea snakes. Medusa, an icon of Greek mythology, also shares water and snake imagery. According to the myths, she lived on an island, had snakes for hair, and also had wings. Birds and wings are frequently employed as metaphoric tools in *The Awakening*.

The second to last page of the story is ominous. “ All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (1343). While this could simply be a foreshadowing tool to hint at Edna's fate, the mangling of the bird and its attraction to the water being indicative of its imminent death again offer a darker, more sinister look at the sea. Also, birds were frequently used in voodoo practices in Southern Louisiana. Simply the use of an omen argues a mystical influence that does not fit with the sea mother ideal.

On the final page of the novel, there are aquatic references that are suggestive of both the sea witch and the sea mother characterizations. Again, the reader sees the more sinister and mystical snake imagery. “ The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles” (1344). This bewitching description is followed by the more welcoming mother evocations. After Edna strips away her clothes, there is a strong set of neonatal – maternal descriptions. “ She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (1344). Here we have Edna, the newborn babe, naked and vulnerable. “ The

touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (1344). The softness and embracing nature of this sea offers a far more maternal disposition to Chopin's sea. Once again, the water's “enfolding” combined with the two aforementioned features suggests a safe, womb-like place for Edna to surrender herself to.

The *Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, offers a fascinating look at gender dynamics and expectations in coastal Louisiana in the late nineteenth century. While the primary issue of the novel is the self-discovery of Edna Pontellier, the ocean plays a crucial role in that journey and the protagonist's demise. A close reading of the descriptions of the sea demonstrates that the sea is certainly not there merely for scenery, but as a personification of something, or someone. Many believe it to be an idealistic male lover, but a reading more focused on the feminine shows that it could personify a female entity. However, with a mixed bag of maternal imagery and similarities to darker myths, it's difficult to determine what the intended nature of this character is.