

# Awakening: the role model

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In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier continuously struggles with breaking the social norms that are imposed upon her by the people around her including her own friends and husband. Throughout the novel, Edna is able to detach herself from the lifestyle that society appoints her by emulating Mademoiselle Reisz, an independent woman who has lived her life without conforming to society. Mademoiselle Reisz is not only a model for Edna's awakening, but she also represents the freedom and individuality that Edna wishes she could attain.

Through imitating Reisz, Edna realizes the woman she is capable of becoming, but later learns that she cannot truly be an independent woman because of her differences from Mademoiselle Reisz. The relationship between Edna and Reisz is constructed on the artistic connection between the two characters. Edna, a painter, is very fond of Reisz's musical talent. Edna specifically likes one of Reisz's songs that she calls "solitude." Chopin writes, "The name of the piece was something else, but she called it 'Solitude. When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (38). This is what the relationship between Edna and Reisz is built on. Not only is it the artistic connection, but it is also the desire to be an individual that brings the two together. The song portrays an almost a vivid painting in the mind of Edna, the form of art that she enjoys.

This particularly touches her because even though it is a different form of art, Edna still is able to understand and interpret it. In her mind, Reisz's song

leaves her with the sensation of being alone and free, a feeling that Edna longs to have for herself. The sea, which resembles freedom and knowledge throughout the novel is placed as an obstacle for the man who can only look at the bird that can go the other way and fly over the water.

The “resignation” that the man and Edna feel are both in response to the way that they cannot free themselves completely from the land they are on, which can be understood as society itself, unlike the bird that they have to watch simply fly the other way. From this interaction between the two, it is apparent that Edna’s relationship with Mademoiselle Reisz is based on the two understanding each other through them both being artists. Alongside of their artistic connection, Edna Pontellier looks up to Mademoiselle Reisz as the woman she aspires to be.

Edna wants to be an independent artist that is a maverick among the conventional people in the society just like Reisz is. This is evident in how the two characters interact. Chopin writes, “When Mademoiselle Reisz came and touched her upon the shoulder and spoke to her, the woman seemed to echo the thought which was ever in Edna’s mind; or, better, the feeling which constantly possessed her” (69). Edna is figuratively and literally touched by Reisz in this moment. Edna wishes to be free and give up the all of the responsibilities she has as a woman.

She does not want to be in the “habit” of doing all the social responsibilities that are placed upon women. Reisz echoes the freedom that Edna wishes she had by touching her and almost giving her that independence she yearns for. We can see how Edna struggles on the inside with wanting to be free and independent from how the narrator refers to it as a “feeling which

constantly possessed her. ” The possession shows how Edna does not have control over this feeling and she will always want to be a free individual.

Reisz communicates to Edna that it is possible break the social standards by touching her and telling her that it is possible to be different because Reisz has done it herself. The connection between the two in this passage is one that is very much one that is mutual and close. Mademoiselle Reisz provides Edna with enlightenment that “ possesse[s] her,” while Edna gives “ the most disagreeable and unpopular woman” a true friendship in a society that is bias against independent women who defy the social convention. Reisz once again touches Edna similarly to how she had earlier on in the novel.

Chopin writes, “ She put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. ‘ 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” (p. 127). Similar to the man from the song that wishes that he had wings like the bird to be free. Edna’s wings that she can use overcome the tradition and prejudice of society are being checked by Mademoiselle Reisz to see if she is strong enough to fly on her own. In addition, Edna s reached out to by Reisz and is comforted by her knowledge on how to be an individual. Edna wants to be free and is happy to relieved by the fact that Reisz is there to help her. Although Reisz is there to help Edna, Reisz also does think it is a shame if Edna were to fail in obtaining her independence. Mademoiselle Reisz calls it a spectacle which makes those who fail look ridiculous or like a fool. She is also telling Edna if she doesn’t succeed that she will make herself a

spectacle that the entire tradition on the ground, society, is going to see her fall as she makes herself look like a fool.

We can also see that Edna does enjoy the presence of Reisz although it may be hard on her at times. Chopin writes, “ There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna’s senses as visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (p. 120). At this point, Edna Pontellier feels as if the personality of Reisz, which she seems to envy because of its complete freedom, is the only thing that “ reach[es] Edna’s spirit and set[s] it free. Edna’s world that is filled with struggle to be independent can only be calmed by the presence of her role model and deity, Mademoiselle Reisz. Since the relationship between Edna and Reisz is clearly one based on being independent women in a society that is prejudice against those whom that contravene the societal laws, the Edna’s life and suicide can be understood with more lucidity. Edna’s life through the novel is incontrovertibly a mimic of the life of Mademoiselle Reisz. Since Reisz is the independent and free woman Edna strives to be, Edna simply follows all the things that Reisz does.

Edna returns back to painting {what does she want from painting}, she no longer “ go[es] through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us,’ and she no longer let’s society command her what to do. Even though Edna is a free and independent woman by following the lifestyle of her counterpart, Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna struggles to be completely free. She still has to deal with the return of her husband and

most importantly living with her children. This struggle makes the seemingly independent woman, Edna, ultimately commit suicide.

Although Edna is fulfilled by her ability to initially take flight, gain freedom, Edna is just like “ weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (p. 127). Because Edna’s wings are weak she is unable to fly and be free. This is because of the burden on her placed by her family. With Robert’s return, Edna again begins to feel the societal pressures that were absent while Robert was in Mexico. Edna is pressured into falling back into “ the daily treadmill of life” because of her husband. This is one reason that she decides to discontinue her life.

Unlike Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna has a spouse whereas Reisz does not have a spouse that pressures her into conforming to society. Therefore Edna’s independence is challenged in her own home unlike Reisz whom is free to do as she wishes. Alongside of not having a spouse, Reisz does not have to worry about children dissimilar to Edna. This is key in understanding Edna’s suicide because of the extent to which her children were a major component in her deciding to give up her life. Reisz does not have to worry about children so she is much more capable of being a free woman. On the other hand, Edna has to take care of her children.

This makes a major difference for Edna because her children will most likely be affected by society’s thoughts and opinions on their mother. Her children, the only people who should be able to love her unconditionally, will have to ultimately ostracize their mother if she was to be an independent woman. Edna also gives her life because she does not want to burden her own offspring with society’s judgement and beliefs of their own mother. In

conclusion, Edna is weak considering that she is unable to remain an independent woman and that she decides to end her life instead of taking power over her life.

By submitting to death, Edna loses to society and ends her life for the interest of her children. Because she conforms in the end to what society wants her to do, take care of her children, Edna's death can be considered as a defeat. Mademoiselle Ratignolle, the prime example of someone that conforms to society expectations and beliefs, says that women should give their lives for their children. Edna does exactly that and therefore is not only weak, but dies as a woman with no independence or freedom.