Relationships and Ambiguous Feelings in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

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C-essay

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to investigate how personal relationships in a Creole society, including the one with art, might influence the main character Edna Pontellier’s search for personal freedom in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899). The essay discusses, on the one hand, Edna’s female relationships with Adèle Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz, and on the other hand, her relationships with the three men Léonce Pontellier, Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin. In the novel Edna struggles to be a “mother woman” like Adèle but also the opposite, that is to try to become an artist and an independent woman like Mlle. Reisz. Because of Edna’s different relationships she starts to question her life situation. This essay concludes that Edna has ambiguous feelings within herself and that these feelings derive from the different personalities that she socializes with.

Keywords: Creole society, feminism, influence, marriage, relationships, sexuality.
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1. Introduction

_The Awakening_ (1899) by Kate Chopin is, in its genre and era, one of the most scandalous novels written about a woman’s sexual and spiritual liberation and independence. In _The Awakening_, we are introduced to the main character Edna Pontellier from Kentucky during her summer stay at Grand Isle and her struggles in life as a young, married but unhappy woman. There are numerous books, articles and essays that deal with this novel because of its theme of female oppression and discrimination.

The Creole society is a closed society with strict norms and traditions. The larger family and house a man has, the more authority, respect and status he gets. Women must get married early and have many children. Furthermore, women should dedicate their lives to their husbands and children. Young men, however, do not have those demands on their shoulders. The traditions do not affect just Edna. In fact, the social limitations affect most of the characters in _The Awakening_. Society does not yet accept separation and divorce and moreover, it is too early for independence for women in general and for a mutual sexual standard for people in 19th-century America.

The thesis of this essay is that Edna, through her different relationships in a Creole society, questions herself through these acquaintances, individually or all together and therefore has ambiguous feelings about her life situation.

The next sections of the essay are a background on Kate Chopin and _The Awakening_ followed by short overview of the Creole society. Furthermore, a general survey of feminist theory and previous research will be given; these will later be applied in my analysis of Edna’s life situation in a patriarchal society.
1.1 Background on Kate Chopin

Born in 1851 into a literary family, Chopin began to write when she was thirty-six years old. According to the literary historian Per Seyersted, Chopin wrote from her own life experiences and background. Seyersted found out in his research that Chopin’s life “gives no hint of either literary talent or literary ambition” but she wrote and published many short stories (Seyersted 48-58). It was mostly Chopin’s upbringing in a female environment with her mother and her grandmother but also the beginning political winds from other parts of the country, for example women’s demands on rights to vote and to inherit that made her write about her opinions on idealism, moralism and the specific Southern problems (Toth 214). The stories gave her the epithet “local colorist” because she wrote about the Southern and the people’s physical and social environment. In this local color literature, she very clearly pointed out the local people's way of living and “its graphic descriptions and skilful characterizations” of Southern life (Seyersted 53).

It was primarily in the matter of sexual relations where Chopin disturbed the American readers. Chopin wrote about forbidden female sexuality combined with themes like love, marriage, passion and desire together with independence and freedom. Chopin focused on and debated problems of the male-dominate society in general and on women’s roles in particular (Toth 220; 223). In her stories, Chopin criticized both men and the institution of marriage but also how men disappointed women they said they loved by neglecting their wants and needs in life.

Chopin wrote in an era when Women’s Rights movement was beginning to appear in other parts of America than the conservative state of Louisiana where she lived. According to Seyersted Chopin's work indicate that she silently struggled with many of the problems that women experience as they try to find the equal rights with men (16-47; 73; 102) but she was never a feminist, that is, she never joined or supported any of the groups through which
women fought to get “political, economic and social rights to those of men”, although she belonged to a “pink-red” group of intellectuals (Toth 212). Chopin’s authorship about patriarchy, marriage, motherhood, woman’s needs and sexuality was definitely motivated by women and women’s domestic relationships with children, husbands and moreover with family and friends in her time and nowadays she has a place in the literary bookshelf as a feminist classic.

1.2 The Creole Society

According to the literary historian Harriet J Bauman the definition of a Creole is “a white person descended from the French or Spanish settlers of Louisiana /…/ preserving their characteristic speech”. Bauman writes on her web site article The Creole Society (2012, n. pag) about the historical background of Creoles in the USA. Bauman shows that during the 18th-century, there were classes that made up the Creole society in the Southern: White Creoles; inhabitants of European derivation primarily from Spain and France and Black people, descendants from slaves who because of the abolition now were free citizens. The social Creole structure also included immigrated people from Germany and Ireland but with the common denominator that they were given French names. Especially white Creoles, who could track down their wealthy and noble ancestors from Europe, considered themselves to be of the “highest class” within this society but also because the white Creoles were in majority in this part of America. Bauman also states that the Creoles have kept their multifaceted group and family structure throughout the early 1700 till present time (n. pag).

According to Bauman, the Creole norm is to have a large house as well as a large family. In a Creole family for example, Bauman argues that the father was dominant and his words were to be obeyed. Bauman also finds in her research, that the man was a loyal husband. Furthermore, Bauman states that single, young Creole men were allowed to amuse
themselves with women. They often had mistresses who were Black or mulatto, but they could not walk down the aisle with them. It was however an established tradition to have a mistress for the reason that marriages in a Creole society were generally business arrangements and the men anticipated their spouses to be dutiful and innocent lovers.

Moreover, young Creole women were treated as belongings in the Creole family. The tradition said that women had to marry before they were twenty-five years old. Bauman notes that to be able to get married they needed a dowry. Creole married women on the other hand could behave in a straightforward behaviour along with a lot of openness and flirtation.

1.3 Feminist Theory

_The Awakening_ has been considered a feminist classic since the 1970s, i.e. from the time of the Second Wave of feminism; first and foremost because of its representation of women’s liberation in general, but also because of the protagonist’s life situation and its portrayal of an unhappy marriage (Kelly Griffith, _Writing Essays about Literature_, 2011, 215).

Feminist theory is based on the idea that women should have freedom and equal rights in the society, i.e. political and social as well as economic rights. In _Key Concepts in Feminist Theory_, Professor Sylvia Walby illustrates women’s key decisions; choices mostly within the social area, for example whether to marry or not, to have children or not. She continues by saying that men, unlike women, actively build various institutions, associations and network around themselves, which favour their needs and wants. In contrast to women, men also have more engagement in the public sphere (3), on one hand traditionally through gender, on the other hand automatically through paid employment or other assignments (4). Walby states that women overall, then but also nowadays, are “constrained by social, in particular, patriarchal structures”, and moreover that women are excluded from society for
various reasons but also that patriarchal dominance as well as gender oppression limits or minimizes women’s possibilities to develop as individuals, which is a form of discrimination (2).

Feminist theory studies how people are oppressed and discriminated because of gender but also by race and therefore are excluded from privileges. Professor Ashcroft et al. note in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* that “gender /…/ oppression is the most important political factor in women’s lives” and that patriarchy limits and also dominates women’s choices to advance and develop as individuals (Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 102).

1.4 Previous Research

Two of the most significant studies on Chopin and *The Awakening* are written by the Norwegian literary historian Per Seyersted and the American Professor of Women’s Studies Emily Toth. Seyersted is the first literary historian to write about Chopin and her works. He is primarily interested in Chopin’s private life but he also focuses how Chopin depicts the people and the surroundings of the American South in general and the women in particular. Nevertheless, his work is not a feminist biography. However, with an extensive biography and a complete edition of Chopin’s authorship published in 1969, he brought Chopin into the modern era after years of oblivion and he also put Chopin on the literary map.

Professor Emily Toth’s research is focused on the feminist movements in the USA and around the world. With the help of Seyersted’s work about Chopin, Toth started her dissertation on Chopin’s authorship about white women within the field of women’s history in 1972. This was followed by more research on Chopin and on feminist theory during the 80s and the 90s. In *Unveiling Kate Chopin* Toth is exploring Chopin but also Edna and other characters in Chopin’s works from a feminist point of view. Toth is fascinated by Chopin’s
awareness of women’s wants and needs in the 19th century. Toth celebrates Chopin’s courage to write specifically about women’s domestic situations but also how Chopin highlights women’s actual living conditions. Today, Toth is considered to be one of the most acknowledged scholars on women’s studies.

Seyersted and Toth have achieved recognition of their biographies of Chopin and her works. These two critics are experts on Chopin and they are therefore the most quoted and referred to when it comes to Chopin’s life and writing. Seyersted and Toth agree that Chopin’s characters mirror the time they are living in, for example when it comes to the people’s living conditions in the American South.

Both Seyersted and Toth have studied *The Awakening* and analyzed Edna’s character on the one hand and her different relationships on the other hand. Seyersted however, discusses and analyses Edna’s female friends more thoroughly in his biography than Toth does. The focus in this section will therefore be more on how Seyersted has analysed these female characters.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin implicitly criticizes the norms and traditions of society. Seyersted argues that Chopin is questioning what it is like to be a woman in the late 1890s, particularly in a patriarchy like the Creole society (138). Edna is a young woman from Kentucky when she marries Léonce. She has grown up on romanticism, believing that marriage will fulfil her dreams. But a couple of years later and with two children, Seyersted argues that Edna is only an “American in this all-Creole /…/ group” (134). What he means is that Edna is not one of the Creole people yet and perhaps never will be. Seyersted refers to Chopin’s own life, and claims that Chopin’s marriage to a Creole man mirrors what she writes in the novel. Chopin views for instance through Edna, a young woman from another state, the difference between the French Creole and American traditions and attitudes toward the
women and the family. Edna makes a mistake when she takes Robert’s flirt to seriously (Toth 212). Because of Edna’s disappointment in love and passion, Seyersted claims that she revolts “against conventional roles as a wife and mother” (138).

Similarly, Toth writes that Edna seems to be a selfish wife and mother. She is not happy with Léonce but on the other hand she is happy with anything. Edna chooses adultery in the worst thinkable way – by taking a lover or two (209). Edna, however, is unaffected and unsympathetic when it comes to her lovers. Edna is somewhat aware that men continually disappoint and that the men want Edna’s attention, sometimes more sometimes less, but the bottom line is that their masculine egos still rule and affect her life in one way or the other (215). Edna does not want to be grateful for money, presents and a good husband. If it is stupid or evil or both, she does not care, according to Toth. Edna wants to rebel (209).

At the time of publication, critics of Chopin’s disapproved of the sexual openness including “women’s yearning for men who are not their husbands” but they were also, Toth notes, disturbed by the fact that Chopin makes no clear statement on Edna’s behaviour (97). She neither approves nor condemns. Edna’s sexual awareness and independence was “too strong drink for moral babes, and should be labeled poison”, as well as “immoral and scandalous” according to the reviews (Seyersted 174). The consensus was that respectable women do not commit adultery; they stay at home and take care of the house and children and they are definitely not into art. From this, Toth points out the fact that Chopin challenges and dares to write about women’s private desires, but also about discontented women in a male-dominated environment (97).

In conclusion, both Seyersted and Toth argue that Chopin writes about a life in oppression where Edna sacrifices herself by getting married, having children and participating in different social interactions but that she is also discriminated and excluded from non-female activities because of her gender. Edna however, wants to do other things in life with
no obligations to anybody but to herself. Through marriage she gets to know the Creole women and men, who encourage her but also give her possibilities to develop to an independent woman (Seyersted 138; Toth 209).

2. Analysis

This part of the essay intends to discuss Edna’s different relationships and analyze in what ways these relationships may influence Edna and her life. I will start with Edna and then continue with her female friends, Adéle Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz and briefly describe their social situation. I will also discuss Edna’s relationship with art. Thereafter, I introduce Edna’s romantic relationships including her husband and discuss their significance, with special reference to the Creole culture that they belong to.

Edna begins her exploration for personal freedom at Grand Isle, an island south of New Orleans, during the summer of her twenty-eighth year in the late 1890s. Edna, a young woman from Kentucky, is married to 40-year-old Léonce Pontellier, a Creole respectable man and has two sons, 4 and 5 years old but she loathes her life. Edna has many dreams and hopes for her life and for the future, but she is stuck in an unhappy marriage or as she expresses it "one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" with a man she does not love anymore (Chopin 66). She is beginning to feel that her husband and children have no meaning to her.

At Grand Isle Edna socializes frequently with two female friends, Adéle Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz, whom she compares herself with. Through her female friends she begins to reflect on her dreams and her life situation. She starts to question herself whether she is a good wife and mother or not, whether she has the ability to become an artist or not or if she is just a selfish person. Neither of her female friends has the life that Edna deep down wants to live. One is too devoted to family and the other one is talented and dedicated to her art but too lonely.
Furthermore, Edna meets two younger Creole men; Robert at Grand Isle who also teaches her how to swim and Alcée in town. Both will become her lovers. With these men she experiences passionate but also ambiguous feelings about love. Edna feels however strong and determined so when the summer is over, she moves out from the family house, leaving the two children with Léonce. Edna starts to change from a married woman into an independent female and she gets “some notions in her head concerning /…/ the rights of woman” (65). Edna’s actions are irresponsible and she defies the norms of society. Edna is however trapped in conventions, i.e. political and economic, about how a woman should live and behave and therefore she has to stay in a marriage that she is against.

2.1 Female Friendships

One of Edna’s female friends at Grand Isle is Adèle Ratignolle, born Creole, married to a Creole man and a mother of several children. Adèle is Edna’s “intimate friend”, which can be described as an emotional but also a spiritual friendship, that is, a true friend (8). She unconsciously helps Edna’s transformation by introducing her to the Creole way of socializing and enjoying life. By her free manner and communication, “withholding no intimate detail”, typical of Creole upper class women of the time, she represents an ideal that Edna is supposed to try to be like (9). Adèle acts as an inspiration to Edna’s earlier reserved and withdrawn nature. Edna opens up to her; telling her about things that bothers her, past crushes and the reasons for her marriage (18). Adèle inspires Edna’s indiscretions and influences Edna to live life demonstratively and extravagantly. Edna is perhaps confused by the Creole culture and how they are able to flirt openly with each other but she is also stricken by Adèle, who despite her “nest making” role, seems to live only through her family as a “mother woman” (Seyersted 134-135). She is a caring and devoted wife and she continues having baby after baby, something Edna considers to be “the scene of torture” (Chopin 110).
Edna however, admires Adéle for her willingness to expand the family but also cope with the responsibility for “a new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go” (100). It is with mixed feelings that Edna is looking at her and her seemingly happy family. Edna however, is a young woman from Kentucky with apparently different needs and wants; she is a mother but really without wanting to be one. Edna would like to be as devoted to her family as Adéle, but on the other hand she is not happily married. Edna feels most emptiness and longs for another life.

Another important relationship is Edna’s friendship with Mlle. Reisz, which starts at Grand Isle. This relationship, Seyersted points out, makes Edna reflect more on her social situation and her own artistry than her role as a wife and mother (139). In the Creole society Mlle. Reisz has status and respect. She has a profession but she is a lonely middle-aged woman who has chosen a life without husband and children. She struggles with her own female individuality on one hand and her artistic ability on the other and that seems to fascinate Edna (155). Furthermore, she does not know Edna’s “talent or temperament” to succeed (Chopin 63). Mlle. Reisz however, tries to guide Edna and encourage her to carry on with her art, that is, to develop as an artist and to take the first step to try to become an artist (Toth 215).

Edna’s struggle for an identity of her own is indeed inspired of and encouraged by Mlle. Reisz, but at the same time it causes a contradiction of Edna’s main obligations and responsibilities as a mother and commitments as a wife. Edna however, is still curious and wants to know more about how Mlle. Reisz lives. She asks Edna back: “But you have told me nothing of yourself. What are you doing?” (Chopin 63). Edna answers: “I am becoming an artist. Think of it” (63). Mlle. Reisz likes Edna’s pretensions and continues: “To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul”
Edna ponders if that kind of life is something for her to aim for or not. She has mixed feelings when it comes to living alone. Edna’s own career however and the seeking of recognition in her work is something she has not tried yet but would like to do. She wants the independency but on the other hand she might not be ready to live all by herself.

In addition, Edna has a relationship that influences her life and that is her great interest in art. She hopes that she can make a living out of her work as an artist. Edna does not want to spend all her time with the family and its obligations. Edna has courage; she rebels and she refuses to obey her husband and the rules that he makes. She wants to work. Instead of receiving Léonce’s business partners in their home, she takes long lonely walks to get inspirations for her paintings. The family thinks that she is neglecting her duties of a wife and mother but Edna thinks that she is entitled to spend time doing things for her own pleasure. She understands that it takes lots of hard work to become an acknowledge artist. She also wants everybody to take her seriously in her attempt to become an artist. Edna however hesitates and wonders if she has the skills and the endurance, but also if she is good enough. Edna hopes she is talented and has a “soul that dares and defies” (64). She would like to have the opportunity to have both her family and her painting.

2.2 Romantic Relationships

The three men in Edna’s life, Léonce Pontellier, Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin, are each one of them important for Edna in her search for independence but also in what way she discovers her feelings. All three men are Creole and they are brought up with the Creole society’s norms and traditions. Léonce is in his forties and much older than the other two. Léonce is however certain that their flirt with Edna and Edna’s response is nothing to worry about. Robert and Alcée are almost in the same age as Edna. These three men’s characters influence Edna, that is, she wants to have these men’s rights and also their opportunities to
live an independent life. In many ways Edna wants to live and act like a man far away from 
her own female obligations. The men affect her emotionally:

Firstly, there is Léonce, Edna’s impeccable husband. He owns a nice house and makes 
good money. Léonce is a self-centred businessman. “He /…/ has his hands full with his 
brokerage business” where he works and makes a living for his family (5). After an evening 
out gambling with his prominent business friends, he can take “a fistful of crumble bank notes 
and a good deal of silver coins” home to a lonely and sleepy Edna. But he is generous. He 
gives Edna plenty of money, sends her care packages, and by all means, spoils her (5; 53) “I’ll 
let Léonce pay the bills” Edna says, when she is asked about her financial status. (83). And 
Léonce indeed pays all bills without questioning his wife’s expenses because he makes a good 
living. In return he expects a picture-perfect wife that is, a woman who takes care of the 
children, and keeps up with the social demands that he believes necessary (Toth 221). What 
he likes is what the family can do for him in his business career and nothing more.

Léonce acts like Edna is his property. He thinks that he treats Edna well but when 
Edna starts asking for individuality; to be able to come and go and also to have her own 
interest, he complains (Chopin 13). Léonce also gets puzzled by Edna’s refusal to obey him. 
Léonce hopes that the family doctor is right when he says “the mood will pass, I assure you. It 
may take a month, two, three months – possibly longer, but it will pass; have patience” (67). 
However, Edna’s mood and behaviour are changing and he does not like it.

The sex is not very inspiring either because it is a marriage of convenience. In fact, the 
“marriage /…/was purely an accident” (18). But Léonce is caught up in his ideals that he fails 
to see his own failures as a husband as well as a father. He is away for long periods but 
Léonce does not accept Edna's lack of attention, and he attacks her the only way he can, 
through her children, by constantly complaining or being “far from satisfactory” about how
Edna takes care of them. (5). Although Edna is “fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way” (18), not even the children can link them together anymore.

“When is Léonce coming back”? “Quite soon. Some time in March” (111). Edna’s relationship with Léonce is like a brother and sister relationship or perhaps like a couple who are good friends. Léonce is away from the family for long periods and Edna learns how to take care of herself and after the birth of their two sons, Edna “wants to be alone” (111). However, because of Léonce’s business skills, Edna sees with her own eyes that making your own money also makes status and independence. Léonce is doing all that every day, year out and year in. Edna wants to do and have the same skills as Léonce. However, Edna must stay in an unhappy marriage without the possibility to demand her rights to support herself because that is a right reserved for the men. One thing she can do is to move out and live by herself and “without even waiting for an answer from her husband regarding his opinion or wishes in the matter, Edna hastened her preparations for quitting her home on Esplanade Street an moving into the little house around the block” (84) By this action, Seyersted states, Edna has hard times existing in a female role approved by the patriarchal (141; 148). Her marriage with Léonce however, is definitely about to go to pieces. It is impossible to stay without loving each other and it is impossible to be faithful.

Secondly, there is Edna’s love affair with Robert, which starts at Grand Isle. Robert feels free to court Edna. His background and upbringing in the Creole society allows him to associate with and mingle with both married and unmarried women. Robert is also a young friend of the family. Robert devotes himself to Edna the whole summer as her attendant and as her swimming teacher. “Robert had pursued a system of lessons almost daily” and when Edna learns how to swim she feels confident about herself (Chopin 27). With new acquired skill, Edna is able to swim further and further out, filled with confidence about her own capability. Edna feels that Robert brings out the best in her. Edna’s courage impresses Robert.
He might not know any Creole woman who can swim or dare to try to learn how to swim.

Edna is a mature and a very interesting woman. The fact that Edna comes from another part of the country makes her stick out of from the crowd. She opens up her feelings and also invites him to her home and it seems to fit his intentions of courting her. Seyersted claims that Edna’s relationship with Robert is her true romantic passion. The attraction between Edna and Robert is there and she is in love with him. He is also in love with her. With this mutual love, he influences her to show affection and he “unfolds her sensuality” (153). With Robert, “there was neither shame nor remorse” (Chopin 84). Edna allows herself to do things and Robert might realise that she is longing for love and affection. Toth claims, however, that it is an impossible love affair (211). They want different things: Robert wants marriage but he realizes that Léonce will never let her go. Edna on the other hand is honest of what she needs and wants when she says to him that she wants the ability to choose and decide for herself.

Edna however, feels happy and relaxed with Robert. He shows a genuine interest in Edna as a person and he is also kind and polite. When she swims, she starts to believe in herself. “How easy it is! /…/ why did I not discover before that is was nothing. Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby”, she says happily (Chopin 27). From here she begins to believe in her own capability of having an independent life. She knows that she can do the same things that men can. The most important part however, is that Edna discovers a psychological need within herself; she truly misses Robert when he is not around.

Thirdly, there is Edna's lover Alcée, who she meets in back in town. He is a true womanizer, charming “with perpetual smile in his eyes”, a charismatic Casanova with a playboy reputation. Alcée is always with an attractive woman and when visiting race tracks, clubs and parties (73; 74). To Edna he explains “with ingenuous frankness /…/ what a wicked, ill-disciplined boy he had been” (76).
Moreover, Alcée intentionally chooses women who are married, which leaves him with no responsibility for their lives or for that matter, their future. Alcée is, like the many single and unmarried Creole young men that Bauman writes about, a man who shares an intimate moment with a married woman or a mistress (n. page). Alcée is chasing conquests. It is as if he wants to live up to the reputation, to show that he can get what he wants. Toth claims that respectable women were supposed to be at home but because of Edna’s outspoken approach, Alcée openly courts her and Edna approves (96). He influences her to live out life without regrets or looking back.

In addition, Alcée comes and visits Edna like those times when she is painting his picture (96; 100). With Alcée, she becomes aware of her emerging independence and sexuality but also her desire for sex without shame. When he asks her “What about upstairs?” he waits for the servants to go home and then he seduces her (Chopin 91). Edna thinks: “it was no labor to become intimate with Arobin” (76). With Alcée she discovers a physical need within herself; she truly wants to have a sexual relationship with him. Edna’s first kiss with Alcée is the first kiss of her life that she can really reply to. He seems to give her what she needs.

Although she does not love Alcée, she has “a trivial affair” with him because Edna is attracted to him. She likes his company “and then there was scarcely a day which followed that she did not see him or was reminded of him” (78). Alcée also shares her interest in horse races and excitement to live independent. She feels respected, wanted, and loved. Alcée appears to like Edna’s visions, dreams. Alcée however, is only an amusement and a substitute for Robert but nevertheless, with Alcée Edna feels more alive than ever before. The best part is that she can do whatever she wants in her own house. Responsibly for her actions or not, she does not seem to care. She acts just like any other independent man in society. What Alcée can do, she can also do. Alcée, without doubt, wants the freedom to do what he wants.
Edna is looking for the same freedom outside her marriage. Alcée is financially independent. He does not have to work to have material belongings. Edna wants to make a living out of her paintings and get the same financially independent (76).

Edna’s relationships with her female friends and the three men and her interest in art influence her to think and do differently from the traditional norms and values. Edna is indeed trying to sort out her ambiguous feelings; Adèle is too much of a family person. She does not want anything except her family. Mlle. Reisz is a hopeless case because of her total dedication to music and also her age; it is too late for her to change life. Maybe Edna’s problem has to do with age and her dreams of becoming an individual. The fact that she is close to thirty, she is in a hurry to fulfil all the dreams she had before she got married. It is a fact that her marriage with Léonce is over. His age is one reason; they have nothing in common. Another reason; he wanted a young wife and a family and he got it. Edna however, thought that she wanted what every woman seems to be waiting for; Prince Charming to arrive, get married and have children. But it was nothing for Edna. Léonce is not the husband Edna is looking for or wants in her life. Moreover, her lovers are young. Edna does not want to have more babies. They want to get married and have children. She is, confused when she has to consider her romantic desire for Robert and that she is sexually intimate with Alcée. Edna fails in things that ought to matter to her as a woman in the 1890s, that is, marriage, motherhood. What if she could be a man instead of a woman? How would life be like then? Maybe she is just being selfish? She has no answers but because of her ambiguous feelings “…to-day is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me…” (115), she fails in having love affairs. However she cannot change the fact that she is a woman in a Creole society in the 1890s and therefore she has to pick out the best from these people’s different characteristics and qualities and incorporate them in her own life so that she does the best of her situation.
2.3 Limitations for Edna’s Development

Edna faces discrimination and oppression in her search for freedom. It is about injustice and inequity from a feminist perspective. Edna's gender, her artistic talent and her newfound sexuality are not within the tradition of the Creole society and she feels that she does not have control over her life. Edna is, because of her gender, without rights. In the society she lives in Edna is foremost a woman, a wife and mother. Her task is to devote herself to her husband and raising the children. She is without legal possibilities to decide for herself. She has therefore no chances to live a life of her own. If she tries to do so, it is not without negative consequences for her, such as exclusion from family, friends and the rest of the society. With no or minimal possibility to provide for herself or to participate in society in some other way than as an object without rights, patriarchal structure and dominance prevent Edna to take care of herself. Edna is by marriage a possession and therefore she is prevented from taking part in society on the same premises as men. In the novel Edna tries to upgrade herself as an individual and demand equal rights and opportunities as the men. She wants to obtain equality in law and love.

Edna’s choice of husband and her disappointment in marriage are devastating for her. As Seyersted points out, society is quick to criticise a woman who neglects her children “since she, rather than her husband is ‘intended by nature’ to take care of them” (103). She revolts against her conventional female role as wife and mother, which was unthinkable at the time (146). Edna also breaks the social institution of the Creole society by rebelling against its norms about what a wife and mother should be like. Seyersted points out that “as Mrs Pontellier develops, she accepts nothing that hinders her from exerting her own free will and making her own rules; she wants to be an absolute and create her own destiny” (138; 145). What Edna really thinks of, is how her decision will affect the children. But even if she is fond of and cares for her children, “she would sometimes gather them passionately to her
heart, she would sometimes forget them” (Chopin 18), it is more important for her to be an individual, an independent person, than to be a woman or at least a ”mother woman” (Seyersted 149).

Even though Edna loves Robert, she predicts that “one day he too would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (Chopin 115) and that is because she is a reprobate woman and a mother of two children. She makes an active decision by rejecting the thought of marrying the man she loves because she finds “the institution of marriage too constricting” (119). She wants to improve her talent in art. Her art will also occupy her life and time and no man, she knows of so far, can accept that. Creole men want a family and a dedicated wife. Sooner or later Robert will need a wife and family. Toth says that Edna has two choices; she can either have the traditional house wife life of Adèle or the lonely artistic reality of Mlle. Reisz (210). For Edna both alternatives are out of the question. She knows that she does not have the endurance of Adèle or the artistic skills of Mlle. Reisz; therefore, she will choose neither of the alternatives. Consequently, her ideas about how she should live her life and society’s approval of these ideas in the 1890s are in conflict with each other. Edna has ambiguous feelings and also she faces different limitations:

Firstly, there is a structure in the Creole society that is not familiar to her because she is from Kentucky however it holds her in control. Edna belongs to a Creole upper-class family but, “she is not one of us; she is not like us”, that is Edna is still not a member in this particular culture despite she is married into it (Chopin 19). In this culture difference she however senses a freedom. Edna she is able to do whatever she wants to do, for example go for a swim in the sea or like Adèle and the Creole women; she can “…walk in little groups toward the beach” and “talk and laugh” and socialize with anyone she wants when Léonce is not around (Chopin 27). Still, because of her gender, Edna is excluded from many activities that men by traditions and norms are allowed to do. When she upsets Léonce she says “I don’t
 blame him; he’d never be in a bad humor if it weren’t for me” (33). Furthermore, Edna together with a young attendant Alcée, is drinking alcohol and betting on horses, which is inappropriate behaviour.

Secondly, Edna’s marriage is a marriage of convenience and also an unhappy marriage. Toth argues that she is by law the property of her husband. Edna, as a woman, she is discriminated when it comes to economical and other legal rights (6). She is married and the wedding ring on her finger reminds her of her commitment to Léonce. As the wife of Mr Pontellier she is expected to serve him, and “if it was not a mother’s place to look after the children, whose on earth was it?” (5).

Thirdly, being a mother is not Edna’s free choice. In her limited and oppressed world children are an essential part of a women’s identity. In fact, having a family and showing unconditional love to your own children is natural, but she has trouble finding real love towards her children. She believes she has failed at being their mother and their caretaker and it creates a distance between them. Her two boys are also taken care of by nannies (7; 12). Additionally, she has no interest of having more babies, these, awful “agonizing moments” with “handkerchief sprinkled with cologne water” along with “the heavy odor of chloroform” (110). Edna does not care that the Creole society expects everybody to have a large family (9). She actually finds the children’s absence a relief (18). As Walby states in her article, she rejects the woman’s obligations of having more children because it is not her own choice or wish (9).

Lastly, Edna’s longing for individual freedom on the one hand and for an expression in her art on the other. Among her female friends, she finds a life and an existence that she really enjoys (Toth 210). They motivate her and she is attractive to men. She likes the attention but on the other hand says aloud: “I don’t want anything but my own way” (Chopin 112). However, this is serious statement in the 1890s for a woman to say; being married and
yet claiming an independent life. Toth argues that there are always voices to tell a woman that she is not doing enough for others – that she is selfish and mean and irresponsible. Edna is longing for both love and affection from a man. She also wants to work with her art. Toth claims that women are in conflict between responsibilities to others and responsibilities to oneself just like Edna. (244). However, she has to realise that it is very difficult to keep both.

3. Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed Edna’s different relationships with female friends and Creole men. I have also discussed her relationship with art and her half-hearted attempt of becoming an artist.

It is during her summer stay at Grand Isle and among friends that she begins to understand that she is influenced by her surroundings. Edna is a married woman in a Creole world where she has no rights. Basically, her duty is to obey and have babies. She has ambiguous feelings about her life situation. She wishes that she could have the qualities that her two closest female friends have; Adèle’s ability to adore husband and family on the one hand, but also have all time in the world to concentrate on her art and develop her talent like Mlle. Reisz on the other hand. However, Edna discovers that neither of them really lives the life she wants to live; these two influences collide because Adèle is too much of a family person compared to her and Mlle. Reisz is, despite her freedom, too lonely.

Edna’s ideas of life also depend on her success as an artist in the future without her husband’s support. Without money, she is trapped without any possibility to pursue and devote herself to her interest in painting, and therefore she has ambiguous feelings about her skills to pull it off.

Edna’s love affairs and lack of concern for her family on the one side and her thoughts and reflections on the other, are somewhat influenced by the two young lovers Robert and
Alcée. From Robert she is influenced by his way of showing love and affection and exploring his true emotions. This is something that she lacks but is longing for. Her relationship with Alcée brings excitement to her life. Together with Alcée she feels free to do non-female things. From Alcée she gets the courage to carry on and move on to a new life situation. Alcée might also support her rebellious personality; a woman who dares to challenge the norms.

In addition, Edna’s behaviour is challenging the 19th-century Creole society and she sticks out from the crowd of unhappy women by acting immorally or at least inappropriate. She is a disobedient and a lonely woman, who rebels and fights the limitations that both gender and society place upon her as a woman. She realizes, however, that there are no possibilities to feel free in a Creole society with its customs, norms and values. Edna’s husband and her two lovers will probably move on with their lives and perhaps live a satisfactory and happy life. Her desire for independence from her role as a wife and mother, however, forces her to take responsibility for her failures and shortcomings. She will admit her ambiguous feelings, being lonely and empty at heart. She will admit feeling unhappy in her marriage and with motherhood, but she will not accept the society’s idea that a woman’s only tasks and duties in life is to get married and have children.

Ultimately, within her different relationships, her female friends and the three men, she can find, in each and every one of them, something that can induce her to develop as the woman she truly is, that is a woman with a search for personal freedom. Through these relationships she can pick out the best from their different characteristics and qualities, and create an understanding about herself. Edna can also get support from these relationships in order to accept her ambiguous feelings.
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