A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Suicide in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) has been subject to controversial interpretations, often arousing hostility and disregard among both critics and readers. Particularly, the protagonist's suicide has been largely debated, being considered as the failure of Edna's awakening and of the attempt to claim her individuality. However, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that her death is not a failure, but rather a triumph: it is the only way Edna finds to freely express herself against any social constraint and break all the chains that limited her will. Starting from Kristeva's concept of the 'abject' first introduced in *Powers of Horror* (1982), Edna's ultimate gesture will be analyzed from a psychoanalytic point of view—through the reading of Freud's most significant writings, *The Ego and the Id* (1922), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In short, it will be argued that Edna's awakening, resulting from the traumatic confrontation with the evils of Nature, is what will actually lead her to suicide, interpreted as the liberation of the deepest drives of Edna's unconscious.

Keywords

The Awakening; Edna Pontellier; Psychoanalysis; Feminism; Suicide; Trauma; Abjection.

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Introduction

Set in the familiar Creole Louisiana of the late nineteenth century, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) explores themes such as marriage and the subordination of women, the construction of one's own individuality, the analogy between inner feelings and natural landscapes, suicide, and especially the eternal conflict between social constraints and the need for individual freedom.

Although *The Awakening* made Chopin well known at the time of its publication, it also aroused negative criticism based on how Edna Pontellier showcased extreme sentimental and sexual freedom, and defied moral boundaries by killing herself. In fact, the novel was censured and completely forgotten for almost sixty years after its second edition in 1906.

Only after 1960 was literary interest in the novel renewed, leading to a third edition in 1964. In particular, the novel was brought to light by Feminist critics who saw Edna as a forerunner of some Feminist heroines. Thanks to the Feminist revival of *The Awakening*, "Chopin has been hailed as an early advocate of women's rights" (Wolff 449), and, among the most impressive Feminist studies, it is worth mentioning Emily Toth's works—in particular her biography—, in which she analyzes Kate Chopin's life and works from a multilayered perspective.

Notwithstanding this, Feminist criticism may present only a partial reading of the novel, mainly starting with and focusing on the assumption that "women's rights activists were in search of having the same rights with men as regards property and suffrage rights" (Taş 414). Moreover, what Feminists of all time also aspired to was to join an organized political and social movement, which does not occur in *The Awakening*. In other words, Edna's needs have hardly to do with the right to property or gender parity. As further explored in the second section of this paper, they rather remain the manifestation of an isolated, individual spirit.

A second wave of criticism was due, instead, to a re-emergence of studies about the American Renaissance and Transcendentalism (Bloom 2007), which has also been recently associated with English Romanticism and Gothic undertones (Băniceru 2019). Emersonian philosophy encouraged self-determination through non-conformity and exalted the privileged divine relationship between men and Nature, which is particularly evident in the novel in the recurrent analogy between Edna's inner feelings and the description of the sea. Besides, the attempts to escape from social constraints and all conventions that conceal diversity, as well as the nostalgic feelings towards childhood, are central themes in the novel and they constitute the engine that will put Edna's actions in motion.

However, the Emersonian exaltation of individuality and individualism may be in conflict with Edna's choice to kill herself, because she seems to have actually failed in affirming her individuality both in life and in death. Moreover, at the end of chapter XXV, Edna, alone in her house, is reading Emerson's works

until she falls asleep. This gesture seems to reflect an awareness that has emerged directly from Edna's need "to start anew upon a course of improving studies, now that her time was completely her own to do with as she liked" (Chopin 71).

In other words, what Edna learns from Emerson is the idea that books are not as useful as direct experience and that she would rather go beyond, precisely "upon a course of improving studies" (Chopin 71), using her time to do what she liked; this is exactly what Edna is putting into practice, marking actually an overcoming of Trascendentalist assumptions. In fact, the protagonist's suicide, in both Feminist and later new-Transcendentalist criticism, appeared as the culmination of the failure of Edna's attempts[1] to claim her own individuality. Therefore, both approaches proved insufficient to further explore the implications of the ending of the novel from a convincing point of view.

As Bai puts it, "the analysis of Edna's death is of great significance to understand the ending of the novel," as well as the novel as a whole (Bai 846). And Mahon writes that "the focus of the novel is Edna, and what Edna learns, and what we learn about Edna as she does" (Mahon 228). In light of these considerations, more recent critical approaches have introduced psychoanalytic interpretations of Edna's suicide. Nevertheless, further investigation is still needed in this field because previous studies have shown the limits of interpretation as regards her ultimate gesture, mostly read as the failure of her psyche.

In short, *The Awakening* can actually be read as a *bildungsroman* (see Mainland), portraying the pursuit of an individual who is looking for her identity and for a way to claim it, notwithstanding all the difficulties she may encounter. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to re-interpret Edna's suicide through a psychoanalytic approach and to demonstrate that "Edna Pontellier's death is neither a punishment nor an escape, but a triumph" of an individual whose path culminates in the outburst of the overwhelming inner drives to which she eventually decides to abandon herself (Bai 846). In Chopin's words, "at a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin 13). What Edna is actually searching for is a way to answer her inner questions and to live accordingly.

However, Edna's suicide, although central to the analysis of the whole novel, is the final destination of a long, uphill path littered with many obstacles and challenges, along which Edna climbs and stumbles. For this reason, this article is divided into two parts: in light of what has been claimed above, it proves necessary to first analyse in depth, and from a Feminist point of view, Edna's path of individuation from the beginning of the story. In the second section, Edna's character and the reasons that will lead her to the point of her—somehow unexpected—triumphal death, are analysed and interpreted in light of Julia Kristeva's concept of the *abject*, as well as through the Freudian structural model

I. Edna Pontellier: Character Analysis

A green and yellow parrot...

The opening line of the novel, "[a] green and yellow parrot which hung in a cage outside the door [...]," introduces a significant image. As Clark highlights, "in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, avian vocabulary and imagery are used extensively, and these are an important tool for understanding women's oppression and possible liberation" (Clark 336). Bird imagery is not atypical in Feminist writings, and Chopin's novel exemplifies this, demonstrating why *The Awakening* is now considered one of the most powerful proto-Feminist novels of American literature.

The very first lines emphasize the importance of bird imagery with the image of a parrot that can only speak a few words in an unknown language and cannot communicate with the mockingbird in the cage in front of it. This already creates a strong analogy with Edna's own isolation and impossibility of communication. Edna's attempts to speak up for herself—and to be understood by the people around her—miserably fail and she eventually decides to stop trying. In her words, indeed, the reader apprehends that "no multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence" (Chopin 29). Edna is *A Solitary Soul*, to quote the title that Chopin put on the first draft of her novel.

Apart from the parrot, in the novel there are at least three other instances of bird imagery thereof. Particularly eloquent is the white-bird with broken wings, which crosses the peaceful sky above when Edna drowns herself in the ocean. Hereby the author creates a beautiful and yet sad analogy between Edna and a mutilated bird, that is not strong enough to fly high and eventually falls into the abysm of the dark sea. From a Feminist point of view, Edna is not able to resist social constraints and the roles society imposes on women. She cannot understand "how to fight for and dedicate oneself to (and modify) any of those roles in the first place" (Ramos 154). Therefore she surrenders.

As will be extensively considered below, there has been a debate among critics about which episode of Edna's life should be associated with the titular *awakening*. Is it her first swim in the sea, or her first adultery? Is it perhaps her decision to move to another house, leaving her family?

What I will argue here is that both options are incorrect and that Edna will actually awaken only when she confronts the evils of Nature during Adèle's difficult childbirth, right before her mental breakdown. However, before getting there, it is worth analyzing the way Edna is first introduced in the novel and which episodes of her life actually determine her process of individuation and, eventually, her path towards her final decision.

Despite being the heroine, Edna is not the first character to be introduced in the novel. Before her arrival, the reader acknowledges that Mr. Pontellier, her

husband, is on the porch of Lebrun's cottage at Grand Isle, watching over his children, Raoul and Etiènne, playing together not too far away. Therefore, what readers know first about Edna is that she is a *wife* and a *mother*. She is not just 'Edna,' she is *Mrs. Pontellier*. Her commitment to her family is further highlighted when Edna, coming home from the beach, receives the wedding rings back from her husband.

Edna always had a good opinion of her husband. In the novel, "all declared that Mr Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better" (Chopin 7). Even when he deals with Edna's so-called mischievous attitude, Mr Pontellier never complains about her, but on the contrary he even encourages her artistic desires and gives her space when she decides to move out to the Pigeon-house alone. Notwithstanding, Mr. Pontellier remains a huge presence, a man in flesh and blood with a concrete appearance, with his own freedom to speak and move. Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, resembles a far-away, ghostly apparition. Unlike her husband, her body is deprived of materiality and becomes part of the landscape:

> The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. (Chopin 2)

What is also important to highlight about Edna's introduction in the novel, is her association with the image of the sea and its sublimity, as well as the presence of Robert Lebrun, who has been trying to teach her to swim. Sea imagery is a constant in Edna's path towards individuation. When she finally learns to swim, "Edna then starts her own flight to freedom little by little when her body is in contact with water, and she achieves an awareness of physical pleasures and bodily control through swimming" (Clark 337). To this respect, Chopin's words are quite eloquent:

> [A] feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (Chopin 27)

Therefore, in her description of Edna's first bath in the sea, Kate Chopin explicitly claims that Edna's knowledge of her soul and her body has actually always been there, as a latent knowledge ready to explode—when the external world becomes oppressive— and explode—willing to liberate itself from this oppression. However, she had never been aware of it, and she does not know yet how to name this feeling, or even how to bring it out. As readers of the novel, I may suggest that we are asked to become psychoanalysts in order to bring it all out.

The Model-Woman

There are two major female characters at Grand Isle alongside Edna: Madame Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. They represent models for Edna as they "implicitly demonstrate the options available to women of this time period, options Edna fails to exercise and sustain," namely, the *mother-woman* and the *artist-woman* (Ramos 148).

Although Adèle is Edna's best friend, they seem to have very little in common. For instance, while "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" and "would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone," Adèle, conversely, was like those women who "idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 46). Unlike Adèle, Edna's priority is not—or at least is not only—taking care of her husband and children.

Mr. Pontellier, although ironically, often reproaches her "with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (Chopin 5), asking her and himself, "if it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (Chopin 5). However, Madame Ratignolle's influence on Edna is strong, even though it eventually proves vain, and sometimes "the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language" (Chopin 5).

Edna realizes that she is not comfortable with the role that the society expects from her and, hence, she needs to do something to free herself. The first attempt to find a new model seems to be realized when she meets Mademoiselle Reisz and asks her to play a song at the piano:

> The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. (Chopin 25)

From this moment on, Edna's "rite of passage" begins and she "undergoes a change of consciousness that is designated by the concept of the awakening in the title of the novel" (Anastasopoulou 19). In this process, Mademoiselle Reisz undoubtedly produces a significant change in Edna's consciousness, providing—as anticipated above—a counter-model, that of the *artist-woman*. In other words, "Mademoiselle Reisz is someone through whom Edna could develop relational autonomy and work out a counterstory that highlights the moral agency of her decision" (Smith and Wilhelm 111).

Nevertheless, Mademoiselle Reisz represents a challenge for Edna because the typical *artist-woman* is an outcast. Particularly, Reisz is described by Chopin as "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone" (Chopin 24). Her rejection of and from society is shown

since "she entered the home with [Robert] during a lull in dance," showing her bad manners, as "she made an awkward, imperious little bow as she went in," and her complete lack of taste (Chopin 24).

In short, while Adèle Ratignolle embodies the role of the perfect mother and wife, and all her energies are addressed to her family in a satisfying way, Reisz is not completely accepted within the society, and she lives as an outsider. To this respect, we soon acknowledge that isolation is something that Edna cannot sustain.

Thanks to Mademoiselle Reisz's example, Edna decides to pursue her happiness through art.[2] She starts painting believing in the possibility to reach freedom through the exploration of her artistic ambitions. Moreover, she decides to do it on her own in a rented house that she starts referring to as the "Pigeon-House," following the suggestion of her maid, but which will eventually turn into Edna's cage.

Nonetheless, Mademoiselle Reisz is quite skeptical and tries to warn her when Edna seeks for other people's approval. Reisz, in fact, realizes early on that Edna is pursuing something impossible: the free expression of her individuality *within* the society of the time. Edna does not know yet that the path she has chosen is insidious and dark and the pianist tries to warn her several times: "be careful," she says, "the stairs and landings are dark; don't stumble" (Chopin 63). As Stone points out, it is almost a paradox the way in which Reisz dissuades her from her artistic expectations, while Adèle encourages and praises her talent (28-29). This is probably because Reisz knows the social implications and consequences of such a decision, whereas Adèle considers it as a hobby, another way to learn something to teach to her children someday.

At the end of the novel, Edna comes to refuse both models: she can neither live *inside* nor *outside* of society. In the first case, she would be unable to renounce her freedom, in the second case she could never stand "solitude, a condition necessary for liberation" (Treu 30). What becomes clear throughout the novel is that Edna is not just trying to reject her role as wife and mother and identify herself with the alternative model socially accepted at that time.

Moreover, what she does (and eventually fails to do) is take "drastic actions to elude the ideological system into which she is born" (Gray 54), trying to rewrite "her social narrative [...] creating a new narrative about herself and about the role women can choose to (or not to) adopt" (Cuffs 335). As Smith and Wilhelm have pointed out, "when she swims [...] Edna isolates herself" (110), although this "might help Edna to revise her self-conception temporarily, it prevents her from challenging dominant narratives about her actions, which she fails to realize" (111).

In order to explain the process that will eventually lead Edna towards her mental breakdown, it is important to underline that "her desire to live

outside of all socially constructed identities, cannot be realized, precisely because such an existence, even if achievable, cannot be sustained" (Ramos 150). In short, she can neither be a mother-woman nor an artist-woman. What she wants to be is something else; namely, a *free-woman*. However, this model is impossible to embody, because Edna is incapable of renouncing her connection to society, her love for Robert, and the expression of her free sexuality (see Gray).

Sea Imagery

As anticipated above, another connection that is worth taking into consideration to better understand all the implications of Edna's collapse and subsequent suicide, regards the association of Edna's interiority with the power and vastness of the ocean. Sea imagery is used extensively in *The Awakening*. The sea is personified and becomes a central character of the story. In particular, Chopin writes:

> 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. The voice of the sea speaks to soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (Chopin 12)

To this respect, Abbasi has suggested an analogy between the sensuous and powerful touch of the sea and the masculine sexuality. Thus, he underlines that Edna's desire to freely express herself corresponds to the attempt to embody a masculine role.

However, "the maleness of Edna's notion of freedom" (Hildebrand 204) is not obvious since she is scared of the sublimity of the sea, as well as masculine domination. In point of fact, when Edna can finally swim on her own, she metaphorically understands what real freedom is like and, she later wonders "if any night on earth will ever be like this one" (28), because she knows that she cannot renounce that feeling anymore.

Therefore, the seductive force of the sea seems not to be the allegory of the masculine force. It is rather the projection of the infinite ways in which Edna can flee from that domination and express her individuality giving voice to and following her deepest impulses. At the same time, the sea still represents a seductive, sexual force. It comes to reflect the expression of Edna's own sexuality and of the possibilities to claim her own sexual freedom as a woman.

Nevertheless, if "the awakening is a sensuous one [...] it is important, however, not to accept this term as an exclusively or even primarily sexual one" (Wolff 458). The sea is the wilderness opposed to the civilization: the space where Edna can liberate her deepest urges—her unconscious. It becomes the allegory of her inner awakening not just as a woman, but as an individual trying to express herself in all her shades.

In chapter IX, Adèle Ratignolle asks Robert to ignore Edna, because his attitude could be misunderstood by a woman who is not like them. Edna is not Creole by birth—indeed, "Edna navigates two cultures" (Smith and Wilhelm 107) since she is from Kentucky. Within the Creole matriarchal society, Robert is still considered a *boy* and it is common that his "flirtations are not taken seriously" (Franklin 514). Moreover, Creole women, as portrayed in the book, are completely satisfied with their roles as wives and mothers. Adultery would never occur to them and their husbands would never be affected by jealousy.

On the other hand, Robert's answer to Adèle is upsetting: he will not leave Edna because he is in love with her, which is exactly why he knows that *she* would eventually hurt him. He already senses that Edna is looking for something that he cannot give her, because it does not only pertain to love or sex.

To this respect, another crucial moment occurs when Edna decides to spend time with Mr. Arobin, after confessing to Mademoiselle Reizs that she is actually in love with Robert. As Arobin complains that "I'm jealous of your thoughts tonight. They're making you a little kinder than usual; but some way I feel as if they were wandering, as if they were not here with me" (81), one might be led to believe that Edna's thoughts are directed towards Robert.

On the contrary, the reader learns that what she is concerned about is actually related to Mademoiselle Reisz's words earlier that morning:

> "Do you know Mademoiselle Reisz?" she asked irrelevantly. "[…] when I left her today […] she said the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings[3]. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to heart." […] "I've heard she's partially demented," said Arobin. "She seems to me wonderfully sane," Edna replied. (81)

At this stage of her process, Edna is already conscious of the fact that her individuality cannot be expressed solely through free love. Although sentimental liberation has allowed her to break the chains that would keep her tied to a prototypical social role, she senses that something else inside of her is still to be explored. Edna's sexual awakening has not strengthened her wings, meaning that her awakening, at this stage of her life, is not complete. She is still unable to fly by herself because she has not reached her total liberation yet.

When Kate Chopin writes: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 12), it becomes clear that associating Edna's awakening only to her feminine liberation, her sexuality, or her adulteries is rather reductive. On the contrary, Wolff has underlined that

> [t]he importance of Chopin's work does not lie in its anticipation of "the woman question" or of any other question; it derives from its ruthless fidelity to the disintegration of Edna's character. Edna, in turn, interests us not because she is "a woman," the implication being that her experience is principally important because it might stand for that of any other woman. Quite the contrary; she interests us because she is human because she fails in ways which beckon seductively to all of us. (450)

In short, one must admit that the sea is not the reflection of the masculine force, nor is it only Edna's desire to express her sexuality freely. Rather, it has to do with the liberation of the unconscious of an individual. Thus, this is why psychoanalysis plays a significant role in the interpretation of the novel, without which Edna's actions cannot be fully understood.

In her article, Stone suggests an alternative, interesting interpretation of the connection between sea imagery and Edna's femininity. The sea is associated with two fundamental themes: birth and creativity. The word *creativity*—as explored above—represents Edna's artistic expression, the way she *creates* her life and acts freely. Subsequently, the sea stands for the infinite possibilities of an individual to express himself/herself and to be finally able to stand against social constraints. On the other hand, the concept of *birth*, or rather re-birth, associates the sea with the life-giving power of Nature, and consequently of women. Thus, it is the generation and re-generation of life. This is represented in a cathartic moment when Adèle Ratignolle delivers a child with some complications that put both the mother's and the child's life at risk. This crucial episode has a twofold implication. On the one hand, it traumatizes Edna and triggers her mental breakdown. On the other hand, it represents the point of departure for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel.

II. The Sea, the Awakening, and the Suicide: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation

Edna's Psychic Breakdown

Approaching the final chapters of the novel, Edna firmly believes that her awakening has already taken place. "I have got into a habit of expressing myself" (Chopin 103), she confesses. Moreover, when Robert admits that he is ignoring her because of her status as a married woman and that he would never possibly marry her, Edna is quite indignant: in her eyes, Robert suddenly reverts back to be a boy, and subsequently, she firmly claims her status as a free woman. Notwithstanding the incompleteness of her awakening, at this point of her process, she is actually aware of her potentialities as a human being and she has been trying to live accordingly. This notion is reflected in her words:

> "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If

> he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both." (106)

At some point, Robert definitively closes his relationship with Edna, hastily writing "I love you. Goodbye—because I love you" (110) on a piece of paper. Edna will read the message only after a few crucial hours during which she helps Adèle with her complicated childbirth. This traumatic event actually represents Edna's epiphany: "Edna's compulsion to be with Adèle at the moment of delivery is [...] a need to view individuation at its origin" (Wolff 470); the evilness of Nature manifests in Adèle's suffering and Edna is forced to confront it. Therefore, the illusory life she has been living breaks apart, causing "a significant psychic trauma" (Wolff 470).

This is when Edna's awakening definitively takes place: "with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene's torture" (Chopin 108). In short, at this point of the novel all the reasons why Edna eventually decides to drown herself have been presented; in Treu's words, "Edna's witnessing of her friend's suffering during childbirth, the memory of her own similar suffering, along with the timing of Robert's decision to break with her, have all been cited as motivation for Edna's suicide" (28).

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva marks a turning point in Feminist psychoanalytic studies, thanks to her interpretation of what 'abjection' means. The term 'abjection' has a double connotation, since it represents at once the rejection of what disturbs and threatens the symbolic order, although remaining a part of it, and the human reaction against this perceived internal threat.

In other words, Adèle's childbirth represents a threat against Edna's current status. Moreover, it puts her in front of something that she perceives as improper and unclean. It resembles "[a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries [her] as radically separate, loathsome" (Kristeva 2). The fluids coming out of Adèle's body are repulsive, they defile her body and, as a result, woman's body in general. Not only do they remind Edna of her own childbirths and the act of procreation which women were mostly relegated to, but the scene also points back to the latent awareness that "abject and abjection are [Edna's] safeguards. The primers of [her] culture" (Kristeva 2). More specifically, "[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (Kristeva 3). Adèle's body becomes in Edna's imagination the emblem of human decay, and in particular of female suffering.

Although Edna has lost her mother, she has not a concrete memory of her death. Adèle survives the childbirth, but the possibility of her death forces Edna to cope with and to revive her own mother's death. She is upset by the "wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay" (Kristeva 3). She associates Adèle's battered body with a corpse, or at least this is what she

sees in that crucial moment. The fact that Edna is not actually confronted with a corpse does not mean that the perceived threat of death is not true for her. This is what determines Edna's fall once and for all. In short, "[t]he corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance" (Kristeva 3). More specifically,

> [t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva 4)

Furthermore, going back to the core of Edna's process of individuation, Kristeva's words are again enlightening: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). On the one hand, what Edna has been trying to reject is that part of her that she does not want to adapt to. In other words, the "[f]ear of the archaic mother"—a role embodied in the novel by the mother-woman model par excellence—"turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden to subduing" (Kristeva 77).

Edna rejects the role that society has imposed on her and that in some way has become part of what she is and the kind of role she has embodied for most of her life. On the other hand, Edna remains an in-between being, who is unable to fit in any of the categories accepted by the social order. To this respect, Kristeva's words may highlight and help interpret Edna's reaction in terms of what she acknowledges: the impossibility to live the life she has imagined for herself, the impossibility to be a free-woman. In short, she is not just an individual whose real identity is disturbed by the imposed social order. She is, actually, the abject, because she disturbs the existing social order, becoming what is being rejected.

This whole episode is a turning point in the novel. It is the crucial moment in which Edna finally awakens from her dream, from a life of illusions, only to find herself in a terrible nightmare. Witnessing the cruelty and hostility of Nature, she realizes that there is no place in the world for her and her aspirations. Under no circumstances can she actually express herself freely. The horror Edna's faces is generated from within the social order and has the power to unsettle it through its repulsive aspect. The individual tries to escape from this horror, giving birth, as in Edna's case, to self-hurting actions escalating into suicide. In short, with her death, Edna seems to give voice to Kristeva's aphorism, "[t]o each ego its object, to each superego its abject" (2).

A Freudian Interpretation

Expressing an interesting point of view, already proposed by Wolff in 1973 and cited above in the Introduction, Taş argues that "it is obvious that Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and her protagonist Edna Pontellier have hardly to do with the theory of Feminism and women's right. It is rather a novel that has been 'strongly misread'" (413).

The basis for such a statement lies in the assumption that, "[Feminists] were not in search of a complete freedom of their impulsive feelings" (Taş 413), or at least they were not primarily in search of it, as occurs, conversely, in Edna's case. As a matter of fact, one of Kate Chopin's best achievements has been her ability to lend a voice to the deepest forces living inside every human being's unconscious.

In particular, Chopin's—more or less explicit—psychoanalytic awareness is manifested through a lesser and yet significant character in the novel, Dr Mandelet, a friend of Mr Pontellier's, who is asked to help with Edna's recent 'strangeness' and who seems to embody the modern figure of the psychoanalyst:

> "The trouble is" sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, "that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost." [...] "It seems to me, my dear child," said the Doctor at parting, holding her hand, "you seem to me to be in trouble. I am not going to ask you for your confidence. I will only say that if ever you feel moved to give it to me, perhaps I might help you. I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not many who would—not many, my dear." (Chopin 109)

On the one hand, the doctor firmly believes that Edna's attitude is the consequence of a love affair, maybe of a love disappointment, and this unequivocally confirms the limits of his intervention. On the other hand, he represents a crucial character in the course of the story for two main reasons. As is illustrated in the passage above, he is willing to listen to Edna, and his help will be somewhat essential in bringing out her inner feelings and fears because he becomes Edna's friend and confidant. Besides, the doctor is the only one to understand that the trigger for Edna's collapse is actually the disillusion of Nature coming from its cruelty.

In the light of Freudian studies on the human psyche, two concepts are relevant in the reading of the novel's ending: the return to the *oceanic state* and the eternal conflict between the *Ego* and the *Id*. As regards the latter, in *The Ego and the Id* (1922), Freud outlined the structural model of the human psyche, distinguishing what is conscious from what is unconscious, and introducing, as is well known, the three parts of the human psyche, the *Ego*, the *Id*, and the *Super-Ego*. In *The Awakening*, the Id stands for Edna's personal (repressed) ambitions, while the Super-Ego is represented by the social constraints she tries to challenge,

in general, and by the rigid education imposed by her father, in particular. In between, Edna's *Ego* struggles to reconcile the two parts.

At the moment of her confrontation with the evils of Nature, manifested in Adèle's suffering, her Ego collapses: Edna is deprived of the ability to mediate between her inner drives and the outside world and this leads her towards a difficult—definitive—decision, which is her suicide, drowning herself at Grand Isle. She is forced to choose between living the life and role that society expects her to embody—and, in doing so, ignoring all her desires—or surrendering completely to her deepest (unconscious) drives. To some extent, Edna's suicide can be read as her response to the latter: she liberates the impulses of her Id and lets her deepest drives take control of her body and soul.

While the infant lives accordingly to what the Id suggests, with the emergence of the Super-Ego as the child grows up, the pleasure principle, driven by the impulse of the immediate satisfaction of one's desires, is replaced by the reality principle which aims at postponing the gratification of one's instincts according to the conditions imposed by the Super-Ego. The primordial drives are hence repressed deep down in one's soul, manifesting, as in Edna's case, through hallucinations and dreams, until the moment they explode and the individual cannot help but let them take control. In the act of Edna's suicide, indeed, the pleasure principle re-manifests overbearingly because she can no longer postpone the satisfaction of her desires and returns to a primordial, instinctual stage of life in which inner drives are not repressed by the Super-Ego.

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting what Romain Rolland—in a letter to Freud in 1927—has defined as the 'oceanic feeling'—or 'oceanic state'—that feeling that Freud had previously described vaguely and which would be further explored in 1929 in his following essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Taylor and Fineman, in reference to *The Awakening*, have defined the Freudian oceanic feeling as "a period of early childhood when the infant, unaware of the boundaries between her own body, her mother's, and her environment, identifies erotically with all three" (35). The oceanic feeling is also connected with the period preceding the birth, when the child is safe in the maternal womb[4].

Taylor and Fineman have also pointed out that there is a very significant moment early in the novel that seems to exemplify the concept of 'oceanic state': Edna is thoughtfully looking at the horizon at Grand Isle[5], and something starts spinning fast in her mind. Edna "forget[s] the point of departure and find[s] [herself] removed to a secondary universe" (Kristeva 12). She experiences the "sublime," described in Kristeva's words as the object which "dissolves in the ruptures of a bottomless memory" (Kristeva 12).

> [T]he sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an

> impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination. (Kristeva 12)

Next to her, Adèle interrupts the flow of her thoughts and asks her what she is thinking about. Edna's hasty answer is "nothing" (Chopin 15). However, as the memory makes its own way in Edna's mind, "the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly" (Kristeva 12).

On second thought, Edna says, "let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can trace my thoughts" (15). What emerges, then, is a very suggestive association:

> The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seems 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. (Kristeva 15)

In this passage, Edna recalls an episode of her thoughtless childhood, in which the connection between the sea and the meadow, which appears meaningless to Edna, becomes crucial in the course of the story. In particular, the association has two important implications: not only does it create an analogy between Edna's present life and her childhood, but it underlines that, as a child, Edna's drives had not been repressed yet and—like every human being according to Freud—she was not yet overwhelmed by social constraints and all the implications derived from the emergence of the Super-Ego. Therefore, back then, she could live freely, expressing herself in all her shades.

Facing the cruelty of Nature, Edna's—until then repressed—inner forces explode, and she cannot help but let them out. At this point, Edna starts identifying the metaphorical sea of her untamable instincts with the actual waters of the Gulf. In short, Grand Isle and the ocean—as analyzed above—become the reflection of a timeless and spaceless interiority, an actual physical place where her drives can finally be released—in Foucauldian terms, a heterotopia (see note 5).

The sea also points to the idea of purification and the generation of life, which makes Edna think of her mother, but also of her own childbirths. Her mother's death marks a fundamental step in Edna's growth, which is the definitive repression of her Id, and the emergence of the Super-Ego, in the novel embodied by her father and the imposition of his rigid (patriarchal) education.

The forced separation from her mother causes a trauma which, as psychoanalytical studies show, can affect the normal psychic and sexual development of a child. Edna prematurely experiences the moment in which she is asked to separate herself from the mother in order to be something else,

the other. In Kristeva's words, she is actually forced to recognize the existing boundary between the mother and the other, and acknowledge "the (m)other."

Therefore,

> [a]bjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence in which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be—maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. (Kristeva 12)

In conclusion, it can be claimed that Edna's suicide appears like an—albeit extreme—attempt to return to the pre-birth oceanic state. In Chopin's words,

> [s]he felt some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. […] She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. (Chopin 112-13)

To this respect, Edna's act is not necessarily an act of regression, rather a catharsis—a moment of regeneration, of birth and creation (see Stone). Indeed, when Edna is confronted with the power of the sea for the last time, she is actually and symbolically naked, as a new-born creature.

Conclusions

With her return to the oceanic state, Edna is not going back to a life previous to her awakening. It is impossible for her to to return to the life she was forced to live, as she has become acquainted with a different kind of life which, although impossible to embody, is also impossible to renounce. The only way out is a reconciliation with the sea to recreate the sense of symbiosis with Nature that had been ruptured before.

In point of fact, through her personal decision, "she discovers that she has power over the sea. The change signals a significant psychic event: a reunion with those forces the sea symbolizes" (Taylor and Fineman 41). In the moment she confronts the hostility of the outside world, she cannot help but abandon herself "mechanically" (Chopin 112) to the only place where her Id can materialize[6]. In short, the suicide becomes the only means through which she can affirm her individuality.

Lahiri states that Edna is "not a vanquished rebel, who having failed desperately seeks refuge in death. She is an explorer of newer spaces and the proposer of a new alternative woman—the alternative of noncompliance, non-subjugation, and bold defiance" (70). Moreover, "in death, she symbolically enters

the realm of Nature as she wades into the sea" (Gray 72). Therefore, since Edna is aware of the double Nature of her soul—the one which conforms and the one which questions—in Freudian terms, she is tormented by the eternal fight between the Id and the Super-Ego. At the same time, there is no trace of the Ego in her—after her *awakening*—that is able to solve this internal conflict.

The absence, or rather the rupture of the Ego, transforms Edna into a patient—a human being affected and afflicted by an incurable illness. The dialectic conflict between the Id and the Super-Ego creates a tension that eventually leads her to liberating herself from those suffocating forces. It seems to Edna that there is only one way out of this tension: death. The death drive hunts her body and soul. In Edna's case it assumes the shape of suicide as all the anger and rage are turned towards herself.

However, Edna's act of self-destruction cannot be read as a regression or a degeneration of her illness. It is rather the ultimate possibility to free her real being. This is the reason why Edna's suicide is a *triumph*. It is the triumph of her Id—her unconscious—because these are the forces that she eventually abandons herself to as she drowns herself in the sea. It is her moment of re-generation—her catharsis.

Notes

[1] Edna's attempts can be summarized in three topical moments: the discovery of her artistic aspirations; her choice to leave her house and her family to go and live alone in the pigeon-house; her romantic affairs with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin. Besides, it is worth mentioning that a kind of emancipation may be evident as soon as she refuses to take care of the house and the children, and she stops attending Mr. Pontellier's dinners with the neighbors every Tuesday.

[2] It is interesting to highlight Edna's artistic aspiration as one of "[t]he various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—[which] make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellance called art" (Kristeva 17). In other words, Edna seeks in art a way to purify what she acknowledges to be the horror inside of her, in order to abject it and free herself from what has been defiled. This aspect of Edna's process of individuation, with all its psychoanalytic implications, will be widely discussed in the second section.

[3] As noted by Smith and Wilhelm, at the moment of Edna's suicide (see Bird Imagery, p. 5) "Chopin includes a wounded bird reeling on the water" to point back to this moment when "the metaphor Mademoiselle Reisz used earlier [conveys] Edna's lack of courage to defy social convention" (112). In Freudian terms, in the second section it will be demonstrated that Edna's Ego is not strong enough to mediate between her unconscious (the Id) and the social conventions (the Super-Ego).

[4] Kristeva's semiotic concept of Chora. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), the chora (a term borrowed from Plato's Timaeus) is introduced as an ambivalent concept; it represents on the one hand "the body of the not yet-subject and that of its [mother]," and at the same time "the beginning before 'the Beginning,' the mobile origin 'before' the imposition of 'the Word'" (Margaroni 79). In other words, it corresponds to the pre-lingual stage of development, when the individual is overwhelmed by a mix of feelings perceptions, and inner drives. It is also the stage in which the infant is closest to the mother and does not perceive the physical and psychic separation between them.

[5] Grand Isle from here on becomes the reflection of Edna's interiority, what can be defined as—in Foucauldian terms (1986)—heterotopia: a timeless inner space (the Id) that is identified with a physical real, and yet idealized space and with which it forms a unique lieu deprived of any kind of real or imaginary boundary.

[6] See heterotopia (n. 5).

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Biography

Fabiola Mazzola (MA, North-American Literature, magna cum laude, 2019) lives in Naples where she graduated with honors at the University of Naples "L'Orientale." Her undergraduate thesis focused on American author Kate Chopin, presenting a feminist and Freudian reading of suicide in her novel *The Awakening* (1899). In December 2019, her graduate thesis, supervised by Professor Donatella Izzo and Professor Vincenzo Bavaro, was entitled "Detecting Ethnicity, History, Psyche, and Gender in Lucha Corpi's *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992)" and offered a multi-layered approach to contemporary multicultural detective fiction in the United States, with a focus on its relation to the Chicano Movement also from a feminist point of view. The thesis was awarded with the national prize Lombardo-Gullì by the Italian Association of North-American Studies (AISNA) in September 2020, and an excerpt was published as an independent article in the n. 32/2021 of the RSA Journal. She is now working as a secondary school teacher of foreign languages.