# Contents

- **Context**: .......................................................................................................................... 2
- **Plot**: ................................................................................................................................. 2
- **Characters**: ....................................................................................................................... 4
- **Themes, Motifs and Symbols**: ........................................................................................... 6
  - **Themes** ............................................................................................................................ 6
  - **Symbols** .......................................................................................................................... 7
- **Explore the structure of The Awakening** ........................................................................ 8
  - **Gender focus of chapters**: ............................................................................................. 8
  - **Openings and endings**: .................................................................................................. 9
  - **Use of narrative dialogue**: ............................................................................................ 10
  - **Conclusion** .................................................................................................................... 10
- **The Effect and Purpose of Minor Characters in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening** ............ 12
- **The Rise and Fall of Edna Pontellier** .............................................................................. 15
  - **The Foreshadowing, and Preparation of Edna Pontellier** ........................................... 15
  - **The Use of Mademoiselle Reisz** .................................................................................. 18
  - **The Awakening of Edna** ............................................................................................... 20
  - **The Fall of Edna** ........................................................................................................... 22
  - **The Use of The Sea** ....................................................................................................... 23
- **Kate Chopin and feminism** .............................................................................................. 24
  - **Edna Pontellier and the Cavalry Officer**: ..................................................................... 24
  - **Edna Pontellier: The Man** ............................................................................................. 26
Context:

Genre: Bildungsroman - it is a novel of emotional, spiritual and sexual growth

Time and place written: Written between 1897 and 1899 while Chopin lived in St. Louis

Narrator: Anonymous: at times it appears to be Chopin's viewpoint and voice coming through.

Point of view: 3rd person narrative but clearly in support of Edna and what she is trying to achieve. Mostly objectively written but occasionally reveals support for the plight of women at the time.

Setting (time): Novel set in 1899, the Industrial Revolution and feminist movements were beginning to emerge but were still majorly overshadowed by prevailing attitudes at the time.

Plot:

The Awakening opens in the late 1800's on a summer holiday resort named Grand Isle which is popular with the wealthy inhabitants of the nearby city New Orleans. The main character Edna Pontellier is on holiday with her husband, Léonce Pontellier, and their two sons named Raoul and Étienne where they are staying in a house belonging to a native called Madame Lebrun who allows well-known Creoles to stay. Léonce is a relatively kind and doting father and husband but a large part of his life is devoted to his work and so this has a negative effect on their domestic life. As a result of this, Edna ends up spending a lot of her time with her close friend Adele Ratignolle, an elegant and charming Creole wife. It is through this friendship that allows Edna to begin to learn about how to express herself freely, unbound from society's restrictions. While staying on the Island, Edna's interactions with the Creoles (who speak of compromising situations such as childbirth in a very blunt and forward manner) free her from her prudish behaviour and begin to unlock repressed emotions and desires.

Edna's "awakening" and feelings of self discovery are instigated by her relationship with Adele and it is this spiritual and emotional journey which is the main focus of the novel. Very soon after the novel opens a character by the name of Robert Lebrun (the elder son of Madame Lebrun) is introduced and it is Edna's unique relationship with him that accelerates Edna's "awakening" process. Robert has a reputation among the denizens of Grand Isle of choosing one woman (usually a married woman) to accompany and entertain during their stay on the island. This time he chooses Edna as
the one he is going to interact with and so the two of them spend their summer days lounging around the island and talking by the sea.

To begin with their relationship is purely platonic: they swim in the sea (where Edna has her first true "awakened" moment which is akin to sexual pleasure as she frolics in the sea) and engage in idle chat. However as the summer progresses, the two of them grow closer and this sparks off some internal revelations in Edna which cause her to feel invigorated and so she begins to paint again like she used to when she was younger. Another result of this increased attachment to Robert are her feelings of depression whenever she is around her husband and her immediate joy when she is with Robert. In a sudden and unfathomable turn of events Robert suddenly announces that he is leaving to go and find work in Mexico and that he may never return leaving a confused and rather dismayed but undeniably changed Edna to return to New Orleans.

Back at New Orleans, Edna consciously pursues a life of painting and of fulfilling her own desires. She neglects and shuns all social responsibilities which leaves Léonce rather perturbed who seeks advice from their family physician named Mandelet. A perceptive and shrewd man, Mandelet suspects that Edna's newfound individualism is due to the fact that she has indulged in an affair, but he hides his suspicions from Léonce, instead telling him to give his wife as much space and freedom as she requires saying that she will return to normal in time. Léonce heeds the doctor's advice and lets Edna stay at home while he goes off on a business venture. However, it is doubtful whether Léonce suspected his wife would go so far as to buy a completely new house just for herself in which she can pursue all her own interests away from the view of society which is what she does. One of these new pursuits of hers is to engage in an extramarital affair with the infamous town seducer, Alcée Arobin, who she uses to sate her newly awakened sexual desires. All throughout the affair, Edna keeps herself emotionally distant from Arobin to maintain her freedom from male influence while also satisfying her more base urges.

Unfortunately for Edna she begins to feel the ennui which she has been feeling encroaching on her psyche again (previously she had felt it at a dinner party she had hosted at her new house with a select handful of her friends) and so she seeks out Mademoiselle Reisz. Reisz has already been encountered back on Grand Isle where she plays a piece on the piano which moves Edna to tears while the rest of the audience are hardly affected. Back in New Orleans, Reisz is a self sufficient and unconventional elderly pianist who could be seen as the catalyst for Edna's continual emotional change and "awakening". Reisz warns Edna of the necessary prices that need to be paid if one is to become an artist and Edna, who is moved by Reisz's emotive piano playing, visits her often to read Robert's letters that he has been sending Reisz concerning Edna. Reisz seems to be aware of the unspoken feelings between the two people and so encourages Edna to act upon her feelings.

Soon after, unable to stay away, Robert returns to New Orleans where he finally expresses his feelings of love to Edna. Despite this he admits that they could never be together as she is the wife of another man. Edna balks at this, explaining her newfound independence she has discovered and denies the rights of her husband over her. She attempts to convince him that they could live happily together but Robert appears reluctant.

Adele then undergoes a risky and difficult childbirth which Edna attends at her friend's behest, leaving Robert behind but she pleads with him to wait for her return. From all the time that they have spent together, Adele recognises a change that has undergone within Edna and knows that it
concerns Robert. She pleads with Edna to "think of the children" and advocates the life she once had by her husband's side. Doctor Mandelet is also concerned about Edna's mental wellbeing and requests that she come and visit him at any time to talk things through. Because of these two people, Edna begins to doubt herself and what she has done, thinking she has acted selfishly.

Edna returns to find Robert gone with naught but a farewell note left for her. Overwhelmed by a feeling of solitude, Edna realises that eventually she would have found even Robert unable to satisfy her constantly increasing desires and dreams so she is left alone in a world which she does not accept and does not want to conform to. Consequently, she returns to Grand Isle and the site of her first emotional, sexual and spiritual "awakening" and in a seemingly final moment she swims out to sea. Her final thoughts are of her children, her husband, Robert and her childhood before she begins to lose strength in the soft embrace of the sea. The ending leaves open the question of whether she is actually dead or not but it is generally assumed that she is, however the question that is raised in retrospect is whether her suicide was a cowardly surrender or a liberation for her.

Characters:

Edna Pontellier: The twenty-eight year old wife of a New Orleans businessman, the main protagonist of the novel and the character who undergoes her own spiritual and sexual "awakening" throughout. The novel shows her gradual shift of perspective from one of a typical 19th century housewife to an individual in her own right with all the freedom that entails. In terms of pure physicality Edna is described as "rather handsome than beautiful" with "thick and almost horizontal" eyebrows. This very masculine description may elicit a confused reaction because it doesn't seem like a very flattering description of the main protagonist of the story. However this confusion will dissipate when you read on in the novel and Edna becomes almost a 'man' in the sense that she ends up doing whatever she wants in order to satisfy her desires even if these desires are against society's social norms and expectations. At the beginning of the novel (and we assume up until the beginning of the novel) she acts as society expects her to: as a mother who ensures that the welfare of her and her husband's children is taken care of along with keeping up appearances to the rest of society when there was a "constant stream of callers" visiting their house on Esplanade Street. However she suddenly finds herself dissatisfied with her marriage and her lot in life which involves little other than being a suppressed "mother woman". Soon after she emerges as a new woman who is completely open to her emotional and sexual desires and through a set of very distinct "awakenings" becomes a very independent woman who lives completely separately from her husband and initiates an extramarital affair. Unfortunately these "awakenings" ultimately ostracise her from the rest of society, leaving her in total solitude.

Mademoiselle Reisz: Arguably the most important person in Edna's spiritual awakening as she appears to be the main catalyst behind Edna's dramatic transformation. She is unmarried and childless and devotes all of her time and effort into her passions and hobbies (the most obvious one being music.) An incredibly gifted pianist and a hermit of some degree, she is the embodiment of
personal independence and freedom and the one who Edna seeks out when the latter is unhappy with her life. She tells Edna that she must be brave and needs to have a defiant soul if she is to become a successful artist and seems to be the only one (apart from possibly Adele Ratignolle) who is aware of the strong feelings between Edna and Robert. She is the complete dichotomy of Adele who is the epitome of the socially acceptable woman of the late nineteenth century.

Adele Ratignolle: Edna's close friend, Adele represents the man's ideal wife of that time. She dotes on her children and appears to almost worship her husband with the whole of her life and her reason for living being centred around her family and family life. While her attitudes and lifestyle contradict Edna's she appears to be quite perceptive as she notices the increasingly strong relationship between Edna and Robert but is also an unwitting catalyst in Edna's journey for spiritual change.

Robert Lebrun: He is the twenty-six year old single man whom Edna falls in love with over the course of the novel. In contrast to Edna's husband Léonce, Robert is passionate and expressive and offers his affections in a humorous manner so not many people take his advances seriously. As his and Edna's relationship becomes more developed, it dawns on him that he has fallen in love with Edna but faces a difficult choice between the woman he loves and being accepted by the society they inhabit.

Léonce Pontellier: The forty-year old husband of Edna Pontellier, a father and a wealthy New Orleans businessman. He clearly loves his wife and his children but his job (and by extent, society) and his friends cause him to be away from them quite a lot of the time. He is incredibly concerned with outward appearances and desires Edna to carry out the practices expected of wives at the time despite her obvious disdain for them. Despite them being married and having two children together, their marriage lacks in any kind of passion or understanding.

Alcée Arobin: The resident womaniser, Arobin is the charming and very seductive man about town. He enjoys conquering married women and turns his eyes on Edna. While her husband is away on a business trip he engages in an affair with Edna and while Edna does not love him at all, only Robert, he satisfies her physical lusts while Robert is in Mexico. Edna is the one who maintains control throughout the affair as she is determined never to be ruled again by anyone apart from herself.

The Colonel: A former Confederate officer in the Civil War and Edna's father. A strict Protestant who believes that husbands should keep a tight rein on their wives and should coerce them into obedience. While he represents everything Edna despises, oddly enough she does have a fairly easygoing relationship with him and even begins to mirror him in some ways as she becomes more like a man in the sense of doing whatever she likes, whenever she likes.

The Lady in Black: A silent, but a minor character forever in the background of Grand Isle. She represents the bleak solitude that awaits women who no longer have husbands or never did in the first place. She is silent to help emphasise her role in the text as a symbol of the socially acceptable widow or husbandless woman.

The Farival Twins: A pair of fourteen-year old twins who are present when the novel is set at Grand Isle. They are often seen to be singing or dancing together very quaintly but Edna and Reisz
see through their routines as shallow and ones they perform repeatedly, not for the expression of the self but just to amuse and appear delightful to wider society.

**Themes, Motifs and Symbols:**

**Themes:**
*Is eventual solitude an acceptable price for independence?*

Edna Pontellier is an outsider in her own society. The expectations imposed by society on women coupled with actual laws in place at the time did not woman much manoeuvre space for individual expression or even any kind of liberties or independence. They were expected to be dutiful wives and mother and look after the affairs of the house and as a result their wants and needs often went unfulfilled and unnoticed. Edna first breaks away from these societal shackles when she takes her first swim in the sea but that is only the beginning. Her restarting of her passion for painting reawakens the pleasure of individual creation yet society will never allow such impulsiveness to go unchecked. She faces confusion and resistance from her husband who is bewildered by her new choices and so Edna soon realises that even though it is possible to achieve your own independence and liberty it is not always sufficient. She soon experiences "ennui" and a desire for more. This cycle of constant desire is what drives Edna to suicide at the conclusion of the novel as she realises she will always be wanting more.

**The results of Self-Expression**

During the course of Edna's "awakening" she learns three new ways of expressing her emotions and feelings. First of all when she interacts with and experiences the Creoles and their complete openness when discussing their feelings, while at first she is shocked and rather taken aback she soon revels in it and finds it liberating to be able to express herself so freely without fear of reprisal. Another way Edna expresses her feelings are through the medium of music which is helped by Mademoiselle Reisz on the piano. Whereas originally listening to music conjured up images in Edna's mind, Reisz's playing stirs up something far deeper and more meaningful: "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it. as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body." Reisz shrewdly notes that Edna is "the only one"..."worth playing for" and this leads to Edna starting to paint again in order to find an outlet for her emotions. Through Arobin, Edna discovers sexual awakening and a passion that had been lacking so far in her marriage to Léonce.

**Motifs:**

Music: Music is used throughout The Awakening by different characters to represent the degrees to which they are open to express what they truly feel and to show what they consider music's purpose to be. For Reisz it is the purist form of self expression, the ultimate way in which a person could show the world exactly what is going through their consciousness at a given point in time. Reisz's playing stirs something primitive within Edna along with previously unknown desires. In contrast, the music played by the Farival Twins is an incredibly shallow thing. They play music purely for the entertainment of the gathered company, not for any kind of self development or expression. Their
playing is entertaining but not thought provoking, pleasant but not challenging- it is the model for how women should be using art in that time from society's point of view.

**Houses:**

During the course of The Awakening, Edna resides in many different houses: the cottage on Grand Isle, Madame Antoine’s home on the Chênière Caminada, Léonce’s house back at New Orleans and her very own "pigeon house." Each house effectively serves as a kind of marker for the stages in Edna’s awakening. In the cottage on Grand Isle and Léonce's house in New Orleans she is expected to be the perfect "mother-woman" and social hostess- she is confined within those physical walls to play a role she desperately does not want to play. However the shift to Madame Antoine's house represents a major leap towards a completely awakened state as she is no longer within the confines of the cottage or the New Orleans house with the responsibilities that those entailed. She is in a completely foreign location where she is not expected to fulfill any kind of role. While, unfortunately, Antoine's humble abode is not Edna's home, she quickly finds a way to have her own place where she can act and do as she wishes but also serve as a home to her away from all of Léonce's possessions of which she feels one of in his house. However this newfound freedom does not last forever as she once again finds herself caged in a sense. She is truly at home nowhere as she is a both a prisoner and an exile.

**Symbols:**

**Birds:**

Throughout the novel, birds are used to represent Edna (and women to an extent) and her desire for freedom and independence, free from the bondage of being part of Victorian society. Caged birds serve as reminders of Edna’s entrapment but also the entrapment of women in general. Similar to the birds, women’s movements are limited by society (their cage) and they are unable to communicate very effectively with the world around them. Edna’s ‘flight’ from her husband and her responsibilities are a partial success but she ends up cooped up in another "pigeon house" just a short distance down the road and while she has more freedom in that house, there are constant reminders of the responsibilities she has everywhere she looks. Reisz tells Edna that "strong wings" are required so that the "bird...would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice...It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth." Which unfortunately is Edna’s fate by the end of the novel.

**The Sea:**

The sea symbolizes freedom and escape and is portrayed as an almost sentient entity which tries to tempt people with its "soft entreaties". The sensuous sound of the surf constantly calls and seduces Edna throughout the novel and she finds it impossible to resist. It is while swimming that Edna has her first true awakening moment and along with that she experiences a glimpse of her own position in the vast universe and of the size of reality itself. In addition, water is also heavily associated with cleansing and baptism so Edna’s swim in the sea could be seen as a fresh start- the birth of a new person because the person who comes out the other side is forever changed from the experience. It seems appropriate that Edna chooses to end her own life in the sea. Where she was created, she will go to end.
**Explore the structure of The Awakening**
Chopin’s fluid structure reveals a constant stream of contrasts between places, people and societal expectations, as well as a reliable and enlightening flow of information required by the reader to understand the many awakenings of the novel. *The Awakening* is a linear bildungsroman novel which consists of climatic moments throughout the text as Edna accomplishes certain stages of her awakening. Arguably *The Awakening* can be split into various sections or parts given large shifts in plot and personality. The first part is up to Chapter 17, when Edna leaves Grand Isle. This is where Edna has discovered the possibility of an awakening and completed the preliminary stages of her awakening and so recognised her own capability and apparent strength. This then leads to the second part, where Edna must put what she has learnt into new practice in the harsher and more rigid world of the city (New Orleans). She slowly, but surely, achieves her awakening but Chapter 30 brings her awakening to ennui. After the dinner part 3 starts – Edna realises that the awakening is not enough and that more is needed to fulfil whatever it is that she wants: enter Robert. But her newfound joy does not last long and so commences the last part of the novel, which entails Edna’s own reality shock, instigated by Madame Ratignolle, and her subsequent demise. Chopin uses narrative voice, chapter length and continuous or even spontaneous themes to structure her work.

**Gender focus of chapters:**
Certain chapters in the book are clearly written with a masculine focus, even if just for the opening. Whilst the rest are focused on Edna and her activities, as she is otherwise mentioned within the first few sentences of the Chapter. The chapters which I feel demonstrate a clear male dominance and focus are Chapters 1, 17 and 39.

The novel opens with Leonce Pontellier rather than his wife, which demonstrates his perceived superiority over the others at Grand Isle and control over the other characters, given his socio-economic status. Chopin does this to make the reader aware, from the beginning of the text that contextually Edna and all other women are living in a “man’s world”, since the way they act and live is moderated and supervised by their husbands, fathers or societal spies. When in Chapter 17, the Pontelliers return to the city, it is necessary for the reader and Edna to be reminded that, although her behaviour on Grand Isle may suggest otherwise, the social mores and expectations are still dictated by men and that she must revert back to her prior behaviour. Lastly the final chapter is opened to a typical young man in Victor, doing what men do best, controlling the situation, as a simple reminder and suggestion to Edna that men will always dominate society and that women will always be held captive by their biology and social expectations.

In order to contrast the more masculine chapters, Madame Ratignolle’s giving birth shows the other extreme of gender roles. Chapter x is essential, as it finally makes Edna realise the extent to which her behaviour will inevitably result in collateral damage to her family and herself. She is forced to recognise the fact, that as a woman, she is, especially given the time in which she lived, subject and slave to her biology. Chopin places this chapter perfectly between Robert and Edna’s rekindling of affairs and Roberts departure “because I [Robert] love you [Edna]”. Their relationship is not consummated and Edna realises that Robert has changed from the person he was at Grand Isle – he is becoming more and more like Leonce. If they were to continue their affair they would put under scrutiny his work prospects and her children and reputation. This would be inadmissible in the world they lived in.
Openings and endings:
The opening of the play chapter also introduces various minor characters, which each symbolise and symbolise different elements of society. These contrast greatly with Edna’s subtle and gradual entrance, as well as the fact that she is with Robert rather than her husband, not wearing her rings. This enlightens the audience as to the extent to which the contravention of conventional social mores is accepted on Grand Isle and foreshadows the relationships within the play. The first paragraphs introduce the parrots which represent both Edna and any other outsiders, and voice their opinions, what they say and do is out of the control of society and therefore, Mr. Pontellier. This foreshadows Edna’s awakening and lack of control over her and the situation. Edna is only introduced in the second chapter, which opens with a vivid description of her physical appearance.

Each chapter builds on the realistic and psychological principals and ideas of the previous chapter, which ensures that tension accumulates throughout the text. Eventually, the reader comes to a relatively long chapter, contrasting with previous chapters; this usually entails that Edna has achieved or is attempting a stage of her awakening. She is then brought back to reality and the relative ‘dullness’ of her life as another chapter begins, abruptly changing the atmosphere and disrupting the flow of the text. The way that tension is built up and then explodes climatically, only to be disappointed when reality sets in makes the reader aware of the complexity of the novel, which is never really explained, but alluded to so that the ‘realism’ is made evident. This is the case when Edna and Robert return from the Island to find Madame Ratignolle looking after Edna’s children. Edna accepts the fact that she must attend to her duties and comforts her son and leave behind the fantasy she was experiencing with Robert:

“When she and Robert stepped into Tonie’s boat, with the red lateen sail, misty spirit forms were prowling in the shadows and among the reeds, and upon the water were phantom ships, speeding to cover.

XIV

The youngest boy, Etienne, had been very naughty, Madame Ratignolle said, as she delivered him to the hands of his mother.”

The endings and beginnings of chapters are calculated by Chopin and rarely reveal who is involved in the new scene, apart from Edna, and when it takes place relative to the previous chapter. As is the case of chapter 8, the reader is not made aware of who first addresses Robert:

“‘Do me a favour, Robert’ spoke the pretty woman at his side”

Nor are we made aware of how long after the previous chapter it is set, however the way in which it is written enables the reader to assume that it takes place just afterwards, and that the woman with Robert is Madame Ratignolle, which is then confirmed later on in the chapter.

The ends of chapters often enlighten the reader of Edna’s or other characters’ psychological state and foreshadows a proceeding event. But in the case of the last chapter of the novel Edna arrives back at Grand Isle, the only place where her awakenings were accepted and permitted, in order to presumably kill herself. The ruin and chaos that Grand Isle is in shows Edna that not all that seems perfect is, which is the case of her awakening and love for Robert.
The end of the novel sees Chopin make the reader aware of the fact that Edna orders dinner before she goes out to the sea:

“‘I hope you have fish for dinner,’ said Edna, as she started to walk away; ‘but don’t do anything extra if you haven’t’”

This can be seen as Chopin’s way of suggesting that Edna did not in fact plan to go on to kill herself, however it could also be regarded as an attempt on Edna’s part to make it not look like suicide, but rather an accident, so that her family, and therefore her sons’ reputation would not be tainted.

**Use of narrative dialogue:**
The way in which Chopin moves from narrative to dialogue is fluid and allows the reader to immerse themselves within the novel. The use of free indirect speech also helps to achieve this as the reader is made aware of the characters’ thoughts and speech, which are embedded into the narrative. It could be suggested that dialogues build from prior conversations and the complexity of what is revealed to the reader is endless as it occurs both through this dialogue and through what is not said. The fact that the narrative is often relaying Edna’s thoughts and emotions of the action means that it also constantly comments on and foreshadows any rising action or climatic moments concerning her awakening. An example which encapsulates these varying forms of expression which Chopin uses is chapter 15 when Robert announces that he is going to Mexico that night, there is a flurry of communication which then flows into Madame Ratignolle’s opinions on Mexicans which is conveyed through free indirect speech. Lastly when Robert goes to personally bid farewell to Edna, he stops short mid-sentence, which conveys to the reader the sentiments which are not actually expressed. An equivalent scene is that of the dinner, where there are many different conversations going on at once, and therefore the use of free indirect speech and the omniscient narrator allows the reader to appreciate the grandeur of the event. As well as the sudden onset of ennui on Edna, who realises that what she has been working so hard to achieve is not what she really needs or wants.

**Conclusion**
*The Awakening* is structured so that Edna is able to achieve her awakening and come to realise its consequences. Her awakenings on Grand Isle and in the city have various similarities and reflect or reiterate their significance and necessity. For example on Grand Isle Edna has Robert who enables her to achieve sentimental or emotional enlightenment and in the city she has Arobin who allows her to explore her sexuality and physical awakening in greater detail. The two dinners reiterate Edna’s recently acquired distaste for society, which is presented through the parrots, when watching the Farival twins and Edna’s abrupt descent into ennui after contemplating her situation and the futility of her aim to achieve the awakening through social convention. The first dinner is contrasted with Mademoiselle Reisz’s music, which makes the reader aware of Edna’s profound understanding and appreciation for music, which is conveniently followed by swimming in the sea. And the second with Edna’s physical removal from Leonces house, into her own, therefore removing herself from male dictatorship. Both of these equivalent reactions to the insignificance of social interaction give Edna the mental strength and newfound empowerment to confront Leonce’s orders and succumb to her feelings for Robert and achieve her physical awakening with Arobin. By indulging in non-sentimental sexual awakenings in the city, Edna is able to explore her own talents, control and society. Ultimately, childbirth and Robert’s withdrawal from the relationship before consumption
force Edna to realise how deep she had got in the awakening and that she could not go back to how it was before her summer at Grand Isle. Therefore all she could do was return to where it started in order to confront the consequences once and for all.

Francesca Dier
18/01/12
1846 words
The Effect and Purpose of Minor Characters in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

James Wrycraft

Most characters in *The Awakening* serve as a means of comparison between the often expected roles of women in society in the nineteenth century and the personality and character of Edna Pontellier, who is the protagonist in this novella which undergoes a transformation into an ‘Awakened’ woman. It is because of this that we can consider all but Edna a minor character. They all serve a purpose which angles towards Edna, and, as there is no plot which specifically focuses on these characters, we can exclude them as protagonists.

Leonce Pontellier, Edna’s husband, is one of these characters which can be considered minor. In conjunction with Madame Ratignolle, he will often serve as a medium in which Chopin channels the expectations of women of the time, especially as a wife, and all the responsibility that joins it. A woman who is married to a man of business such as Leonce was expected to greet and entertain the wives of his business associates, though Edna does not believe this. After her experience in the sea some chapters back, she had become more defiant, and Leonce provided a suitable object to push away from to gather independence. During chapter 17, Edna and Leonce are talking:

(Edna) “Why are you taking the thing so seriously and making such a fuss over it?”

(Leonce) “I’m not making any fuss over it. But it’s just such seeming trifles that we’ve got to take seriously; such things count.”

It is through arguments concerning the duty of the wife such as this that we begin to see Edna begin to push away from Leonce and obtain independence, which as initially inspired by Mademoiselle Reisz.

Similarly, Ratignolle draws contrast between the ‘mother-woman’ aspect of a wife, and the independence that Edna wishes to obtain. It is clear from chapter 4 that Edna is not a mother woman, in which we immediately compare her with another mother present at the time, Ratignolle. Later on throughout the novella, this allows us to draw contrast the preferred, idyllic family life of the time, a happy family with many children, which we can see personified in Ratignolle’s figure, that ‘she was growing a little stout, but it did not seem to detract an iota from the grace of every step, pose, gesture.’ The stout implies that she was large, and it later implied that she has child bearing hips, a feature desired in mothers. But ‘Mrs Pontellier was not a mother-woman’, stating that Edna did not mesh with married life, and Chopin makes this clear from the outset, and uses Ratignolle as a clear contrast throughout.

Ratignolle’s character may also serve as a guide. Not in the method of which Chopin describes her, but in the way Chopin writes she behaves. Towards the end of the novella, Edna could be caught between her duty to the family, and the duty to herself. It is in this the Ratignolle attempts to guide her towards her family, and warn her of the impending danger if she were to
choose her independence, (which she does, because it would be anticlimactic otherwise), so Ratignolle tells her ‘think of the children! Remember them!’ It is in this she Ratignolle is trying to direct her into returning to the family for her two children’s well being. It is in this that it is conceivable that Ratignolle is there to show that there has to be a black and white, Edna cannot choose to be independent and intimately engaging with others, whilst maintaining her family life, and that she has to completely remove herself emotionally and physically from one of her lives. Whilst it could be thought that Edna has already solidly chosen her independence over her family, when she receives letters from her children and husband, it is clear that ‘all these letters were pleasing to her’, which suggests that she is still emotionally tied to them, whilst being physically tied to her independent life, especially in the Case of Alcée Arobin.

Arobin serves as a way for Chopin to push Edna into a more masculine role, as well as sullying her societal status of both herself and the Potelliers. By engaging in romance with Arobin, whilst not having any romantic attachment to him, Edna is portrayed as a more masculine character, as this was assumed to be a masculine form of behaviour. This might be seen as an attempt to emulate Reisz, who is shown to have a lived a life of an ‘awakened’ women, and is imparting her knowledge up Edna throughout the novella. In chapter 28, Edna is shown to not only have greater feelings of love for Robert than Arobin, (which could further suggest male behaviour, the act of romantic interaction for pleasure, rather than connection), but also a sense of irresponsibility and possibly disappointment in herself, shown when Chopin writes: ‘There was with her an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility’ and then proceeds to mention the possible reproach from Leonce and Robert. It is in this the Arobin could also serve as a medium in which Chopin portrays Edna’s conflict between her desire for independence and a masculine way of living, and her ties to her more feminine and emotive side, which connects her to her children and her husband. In this sense, Arobin reflects what many male minor characters’ purpose in *The Awakening*.

Similar to Arobin, her father, typically referred to as the Colonel, and Mrs Highcamp serve as tools for Chopin to emasculate Edna further. It is due to their influence that she goes to the races, and quickly proceeds to become a leading authority on them. This act clearly sets her in a greater status during the races as her father, who is not only her elder and male, but also known to gamble, (though he is rather poor at it). The Colonel also serves as a character which forces Edna away from her previous life while she was living with him, and could foreshadow the eventual abandonment of the Pontellier family.

Robert serves as both a catalyst in Edna’s journey to becoming an awakened woman, and also a factor which ultimately drives Edna to suicide. Firstly, whilst on Grande Isle, Robert serves as a companion for Edna, in which time she begins to develop loving thoughts for him, and begins to desire him as a partner. Robert becomes Edna’s focus throughout her time in New Orleans and he is what she strives for. However, towards the end of the novella, Robert states ‘I forgot everything but a wild dream of you someway becoming my wife’, to which Edna bluntly replies ‘your wife!’ It is clear that Edna has strived this whole time a create a relationship with Robert which ties neither one down to obligation or marital promises, and with one fell swoop, Robert has shown that he is not sufficiently developed to become involved with Edna romantically. It is to this that it might be thought that Robert’s purpose is to show that Edna may have elevated to a new, (or at least different to societal standards), state of being, (but, furthermore, whether this is advantageous or disadvantageous is open to discussion. The fact that it drives her to her suicide might suggest that it
is not necessarily a good thing), that few are able to compete with. One man who may be is in fact Alcée Arobin, due to his fickle nature involving courtship and relations, though it might be believed that Edna requires more sustenance in a relationship rather than just passion, which may be why Robert is in place. Similarly Robert and Arobin could be placed in such proximity in the novella, both during the event of the time, and periodically, that we can see the difference, allowing us to truly pinpoint the relationship that Edna desires, which is likely a non-committal relationship which holds both passion and meaningful relation to another.

However, Robert is not the only catalyst present in *The Awakening*. Mademoiselle Reisz. Initially a grouchy old woman initially, she then began to push Edna towards her personal awakening, (though later in the novella she still is grouchy). It could be conceived that beside Robert, Reisz is the most important minor character, and almost certainly the most influential. Besides the use of a catalyst, Chopin also writes Reisz in such a way that she delivers warnings, the most notable is when Reisz ‘glided from the Chopin into the quivering love-notes of Isolde’s song’. This provides a warning of the potential relationship with Robert, and the dangers to her well being, both physically and emotionally, it could bring.

While Reisz is present only a handful of times, her influence on Edna is considerable. It is the minor characters which shape Edna through *The Awakening*, and without them, it is fully conceivable that Edna’s personal awakening would never had occurred, resulting in a very boring book indeed.
The Rise and Fall of Edna Pontellier

An analysis of sensory imagery in Chopin’s “The Awakening”

Thomas Henebury

This essay examines the use of sensory imagery in Kate Chopin’s “The Awakening”. Through analysing the book, I have found the sensory imagery to directly tie into Edna Pontellier’s awakening. I will show how this sensory imagery is used to symbolise and foreshadow Edna’s “Fate” throughout the book. It will be broken up into five major parts. Firstly, The Foreshadowing and Construction of Edna Pontellier. Secondly, The Use of Mademoiselle Reisz. Thirdly, The Awakening of Edna. Fourth The Fall of Edna, and finally The Use of The Sea. These will be divided between sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste.

The Foreshadowing, and Preparation of Edna Pontellier

From the very off, Chopin subtly suggests Mrs. Pontellier is far beyond what meets the eye. I will begin, showing examples of how sight, sound, and touch, foreshadow events to come; sight and sound, ultimately link to her death, whereas taste relates to the break down in Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier’s relationship.

The very first part of Edna that the audience receive a description of, are her eyes. The description suggests they have power over people, and a secret power that lies within. The last statement is evident, as eyes are always used as a ‘window into the soul’. In the very beginnings of chapter two Edna’s eyes are describe as having “a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought”. The first of my above statements is made in her eyes’ ability to hold an object in place. This suggests she has the ability to stay the physical world about her; of course this becomes true. For example, Victor in chapter 39 is entranced by Edna as she walks past him and Mariequita. This of course means that Victor, in relation to her stature, becomes demeaned to an object: Edna simply infers she would like dinner, saying “I’m very hungry”, to which Victor replies “I’ll have it ready in little or no time”. The second point, the ‘secret power that lies within’ is based around the metaphor of an “inward maze of contemplation”. If Edna’s soul is described as a maze, it is presumably hugely complex; but one must also consider that there is a prize at the centre of the maze, something unknown, mysterious, deep within her. This of course, is the aura of her awakened self.

The first sound Edna hears appears natural, yet there is a foreboding sense behind this. At this point, there was “no sound abroad, except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak, and the everlasting voice of the sea… It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night”. The owl is a symbol of wisdom, and with or without the possibility the hooting is a warning, coupled with the voice of the sea which is a repeated theme throughout, and the ‘mournful lullaby’, even one who hasn’t read the book should recognise something is off, where there’s an oxymoron, between mourning/death, and lullabies, with connotations of children, and/or sleeping.

The first touch for Edna causes a paradox between the youth and beauty of her first actions, and the wisdom or age suggested by the latter actions, as she “slipped her bare feet into a pair of satin mules… where she sat down in the wicker chair, and began to rock gently to and fro”, the bare feet and beauty of the satin mules suggest youth, (she is only twenty eight), yet the action of rocking a wicker chair to and fro, positioned on a porch, suggests a somewhat reflective attitude, age, and
wisdom. In the very least, this suggested exterior beauty, and interior intelligence, showing she may be an outsider, due to an aged perspective of the world. Within the Creole society of course, she is an outsider.

That is the end of the foreshadowing by Chopin. She like any author, keeps the opening ‘open’, by generalising what makes the protagonist different, so she would later be able to develop Edna’s character however she wished. This technique is often expressed to give the author the ability to adapt or change the story/novel if they so wish. In the next part of this chapter, I will move onto what drives Edna to want to become more than she is, using the physical descriptions of Ratignolle and Edna, before continuing on to prove Adèle alone is not enough to awaken Edna.

Through examining the opening chapters, we notice the appearance of Mrs. Ratignolle occurs frequently, with much more description in her physical aspects and actions than the rest of the book. When describing Adèle Ratignolle for the first time Chopin uses the third person, so that both Edna and the reader examine Ratignolle’s description, claiming, “There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often picture the bygone heroine of romance and that fair lady of our dreams. There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two red lips pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. She was growing a little stout, but it did not seem to detract an iota from the grace of every step, pose or gesture.” Adèle described here becomes the inverse of personification, becoming a concept, transcending the human form; in the first sentence, only the old words can describe her, as some form of ancient heroine, suggesting there is something mythical about the beauty of this woman. There are ideas in her description, that clearly stimulate Edna; Ratignolle’s “flaming and apparent” beauty, presumably enraptures those watching her, as happens to the awakened Edna. Edna, much like Adèle’s golden hair, doesn’t wish to be confined or restrained. The sapphires are chosen, as they symbolise protection, suggesting Ratignolle is the perfect family mother, however she still retains sex appeal through her pouted red lips like cherries; possibly forbidden fruit. Chopin claims not an iota is taken from her movements, as her form remains pristine. This is the beginning of Edna seeing what she wants to become, the very first time she opens her eyes, and she sees Adèle beyond any of human deliberately, to firstly increase Edna’s drive to be like Adèle, and secondly break her down in chapter 38, where Ratignolle asks Edna to watch her give birth.

But what of Edna’s physical form? The first time it is described to the reader, there is nothing bad about it, it is simply different to Ratignolle. The third person is once again used here, however unlike the above, this is for the only the reader to know; it is not something Edna yet recognises in herself. “The charm of Edna Pontellier’s physique stole insensibly on you. The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it. A casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment, he would have recognised the noble beauty of its modelling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd.” Unlike Adèle, Edna is remarkably human, however on closer inspection it is evident there is something ‘hidden deep within’. The metaphor stole is chosen, to describe that the subject of this has no choice; it a fact one cannot avoid. Her body, unconsciously, falls into splendid poses, suggesting that behind her current
mannerisms there is a very natural attractiveness. By saying a feeling and discernment is necessary to find the noble beauty, essentially means, that underneath Edna’s exterior, lies a beauty similar to Ratignolle’s. All the above simply go to show there is something to be found inside Edna Pontellier, the final line of the quote directly says she is different; an outsider. In short, this extract claims that inside Edna, something is waiting to be awakened.

Of course Edna won’t awaken yet, and this leads us onto the taste of Victor’s cake. In chapter 9, Victor has ‘created’ a cake, which everyone claims to enjoy, yet no-one truly likes it. It is described as a “gold and silver cake arranged on platters in alternate slices; it had been made and frozen during the afternoon back of the kitchen by two black women under the supervision of Victor. It was pronounced a great success-excellent if it had only contained a little less vanilla or a little more sugar, if it had frozen a degree harder, and if the salt might have been kept out of portions of it. Victor was proud of his achievement, and went about recommending it and urging everyone to partake of it to excess.” Firstly, we notice that Victor didn’t make the cake; he simply watched two others make it. However we can’t claim he had no input whatsoever, as he clearly managed to make a terrible cake, but my point in this extract is that it was pronounced a great success. This social criticism by Chopin is used to show that Edna wouldn’t dare speak up against this, even with a general consensus on her side. This occurs after she aspires to be like Adèle, and clearly the want of aspiration alone isn’t enough to drive her to awaken, hence why Reisz is created. The cake is also entirely about image, and later, I will relate this to Edna’s party.

To summarise, the foreshadowing in the beginning of the story is used to repeatedly express something hidden within Edna Pontellier, and that something is slightly off about this character, whilst mildly expressing danger (through the sea and the owl) that is to come. She uses Adèle Ratignolle as the starting point to give Edna the wish to become more than she is, before Edna continues to grow and later fall. However to move on from this point, Edna needs to grow further, becoming the catalyst
The Use of Mademoiselle Reisz

In this chapter, I will continue from where we left off above in chapter 9, where Reisz is introduced to the reader. I will first explain how her coming is foreshadowed by what Edna can see around her, and then move onto her use of sound throughout the rest of the book, and how this demonstrates the changes in Edna.

The opening sentence of Chapter nine, “Every light in the hall was ablaze” suggests something spectacular is about to occur. The use of ablaze particularly holds connotations of passion, yet this is no grand opening to a chapter, as many entertaining and horribly flawed acts take the stage; such as the Farival twins. The above line could simply be a foreshadowing of Reiszs’ arrival, for when the true stage is set, Edna sits outside, “where she commanded a view of all that went on in the hall and could look out toward the Gulf. There was a soft effulgence in the east. The moon was coming up; and it’s mystic shimmer was casting a million lights across the distant, restless water” Firstly is the image of the restless sea, which obviously is a metaphor for seduction, as is repeated throughout the book. The sea is lit up by a million lights, derived from the moon, which have connotations of female sexuality and madness, of which Edna’s awakening can be seen as either or both. However Edna’s inner power is also suggested here once again, in that it’s her commanding the people within the hall; she has removed herself from the celebrations as she is bored, and such people are below her. These preliminary signs of awakening link to Mademoiselle Reisz, who is the catalyst for Edna, and provides her first emotional release.

At first, Edna considers herself a proficient musician, however she comes to realise that the music she listens to, may not be music at all. This is the first awakening of Edna, and introduces Reisz to the readers. Once playing the piano Edna names the song “Solitude.” When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him.” To summarise this quickly, as I wish to compare this rather than analyse this individually, the man could represent either Edna, foreshadowing her death as she follows the bird, metaphorical of freedom, or Reisz who stands left behind, unwilling to take the final step of awakening, whilst Edna is the bird, flying past toward her doom. This understanding of music changed when Edna “saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her.”. This is the first time Edna has a form of awakening in the story, something which touches her emotions, rather than her mind (forming a story). Clearly this is overwhelming for her, as she begins to choke and cry, as the sound acts as it were physically beating her. Even here, the seduction of the sea is calling her, and it is likely this is a conscious choice Reisz makes. Here, Chopin chooses sound as the sense to awaken Edna.

Later, during Chapter 21, when Edna has found Reisz, and Edna is reading the letters by which Reisz has been conversing with Robert in Mexico, Reisz takes the chance to play some pieces of music to “Edna [who] did not know where the Impromptu began or ended. She sat in the sofa corner reading Robert’s letter by the fading light. Mademoiselle had glided from the Chopin into the quivering love-notes of Isolde’s song, and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful poignant longing. The shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic-turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room. It floated out.
upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper
air.” Chopin directly chooses Isolde’s song, because it is a swan song, and herein lies one of the
strongest pieces of evidence that Reisz is a malign force, who foresees the death of Edna; of course,
this is foreshadowing Edna’s demise, and ultimate inability to be with Robert. This occurs during
Edna weeping, and the change in physical space of the room, as it reflects the pervading mood,
becoming darker, and smaller. This is an example of how Chopin directly changes the world around
her to reflect the mood.

Finally, for chapter 33, we remain in Reisz’s apartment. After Reisz leaves the apartment, Robert
appears, surprising Edna, who is conveniently placed on the piano stool; will full command of the
piano in front of. The piano is throughout used to release the emotions, such as the “clash of
discordant sound” in response to Edna realising he returned a day earlier, as her heart, presumably,
flutters. This is an example of how a writer, especially in short stories, will use a mundane object to
contain or in this case control an aspect of the character. Here Chopin does this to control the
release of emotion that is unsaid in the dialogue.

In summary, Reisz almost entirely uses sound (unsurprisingly) to stimulate and guide Edna’s
awakening, and in contrast to other forms of awakening (sexual), the piano represents an
intellectual side. Being so affected by music would usually show being at one with ones’ self. Chopin
follows a similar train of thought, in that it resonates with the raw emotion and passion inside Edna.
The Awakening of Edna

This chapter involves Edna’s awakening through the mediums of touch, and taste. Taste will concern a comparison between two examples where Edna eats food, and touch will be divided into the two parts of sexual awakening involving Alcée Arobin, and one part with Robert.

Between chapter 13 and 25, Edna undergoes a significant change, which can be shown in the food she eats. When she is with Léonce on Grand Isle she had taken “a piece from the brown loaf, tearing into it with her strong, white teeth.” and had “poured the wine into the glass and drank it down.” The food here is perfectly acceptable for a woman, considering what comes later, however the way in which she eats and drinks suggest a subtle form of awakening, in their masculinity. If we compare this to chapter 25, where she “rummaged in the larder and brought forth a slice of Gruyère and some crackers. She opened a bottle of beer which she found in the ice-box. Edna felt extremely restless and excited. She vacantly hummed a fantastic tune as she pokes at the wood embers on the hearth and munched a cracker.” The imagery has significantly changed. The way in which she eats, and what she chooses to eat, are entirely masculine. Only one who doesn’t care what he/she eats would rummage, and she ‘finds’ a bottle of beer, almost as if it had been lying around. It relates to her masculine side, as with her father. This masculinity within Edna’s awakening, could have been chosen to present Feminism in a Patriarchal society; that it may have been a man’s world, but women can also act as men, and in so being, become equals.

When Arobin attempts to kiss Edna’s hand for the first time, it simply causes Edna to feel aggravated. He presses “his lips upon her hand as if he wished never more to withdraw them”, and this is the first time she notices any warmth in a kiss “when was alone she looked mechanically at the back of her hand which he kissed so warmly”, and even though it is a social norm, she forces him to leave. Chopin uses this to show that Edna can now foresee parts of her awakening; of course Edna has a conscience like any other and doesn’t want to betray her husband, so is fearful; hence why she turns Alcée away.

In chapter 27, before they engage in sexual intercourse, there is a preliminary kiss which leads up to this. This kiss contains a lot of implications, in the way it is executed. Arobin “leaned forward and kissed her, she clapped his head, holding his lips to hers. It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire.” Initially, Alcée is the one taking charge, leaning in for the kiss, however, once they make contact, it is Edna who takes control, choosing the hard connotations of clasp. Since this is the first time Edna has kissed someone whilst awakened, naturally, it is a far stronger emotion, described in the metaphor as a torch which “kindled desire”. The metaphor directly links the connotations of fire and passion to an abstract noun, which alludes to a powerful creation, since it is intangible. This is used to show Edna’s sexual awakening, as she takes charge of the situation, and the strength of raw passion, which she quickly grows numb to.

Moving on to chapter 36, Edna is in the tea garden with Robert, where her command over a sexual relationship is further established, yet even this is described differently to Arobin, as care is shown to exist here. Edna “leaned over and kissed him- a soft, cool, delicate kiss, who’s voluptuous sting penetrated his whole being… She put her hand up to his face and pressed his cheek against her own. The action was full of love and tenderness. He sought her lips again.” The soft, cool, delicate kiss, contrasts with the voluptuous sting, creating an oxymoron, yet also gives Edna a weapon, making
her dangerous. However none of her kisses with Arobin have held “love or tenderness”, which suggests that, although she is seducing Robert, she does have genuine feelings for him. But in this case, one could argue she is acting as Arobin would, which is exactly why her friends said to stay away from him. Chopin places the return of Robert as her lover at this time, to evoke the reader with images of Edna at the beginning of the book, causing a massive contrast with the original Mrs. Pontellier. She is a new being.
The Fall of Edna

This topic comes entirely under sight imagery, where I will show examples of Edna’s awakening causing her more harm than good, which eventually leads to her suicide. My first point will cover the metaphorical breakdown of Edna and Roberts’ relationship, the second will be the decadence during Edna’s party, and finally Adèle giving birth before Edna.

In chapter 17, Edna cooks for Léonce, but he dislikes the food and rejects it, going to the club to retrieve his dinner. Of course this makes Edna angry, who “went and stood at an open window and looked out upon the deep tangle of the garden below. All the mystery and witchery of the night seemed to have gathered there amid the perfumes and the dusky and tortuous outlines of flowers and foliage. She was seeking and finding herself in just sweet, half-darkness which met her moods. But the voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness and the sky above and the stars. They jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid of hope.” The garden is a metaphor of Edna at this point, who is deeply confused as to whether she should be angry, following her awakened path, or should forgive Léonce, as she had presumably done before her. The dusky torturous outlines, most likely represent possible choices before her, however they are unclear, and arduous or painful. What's most odd, is that within the “mystery, witchery, dusky, and torturous” vegetation, Edna is finding herself. This suggests that whatever is ‘within herself’, could be as wild and unruly as below. The sky and darkness is omnipowerful and omnipresent, so could well represent God, whom she has now forsaken to become enlightened. Because of this, God would answer none of her promises and remove the hope from her life. Chopin uses this as a metaphor for their relationship breakdown, and is most likely down to Edna’s release.

Next is Edna’s party, where she had invited guests to join her for celebrating moving to a new home, however, little goes to plan, the party was bad, and most of the group were overly intoxicated. The party itself was overdone, with “massive brass candelabras”, and “full, fragrant roses, yellow and red, abounded.” Edna herself is wearing a golden shimmer of a satin gown, that “spreads in rich folds on either side of her”, which much like her aura (“suggested... the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone”) Edna soon discovers it’s superficial, (like Victor's cake), and means very little once everyone is drunk, and the pleasantries have disappeared. The party ends, “jarred like a discordant note, upon the quiet harmony of the night”. This is the first sense that Edna realises all her labours, and strivings for freedom have been for naught, since no-one else is with her to share the freedom with her. Chopin successfully places Edna as a role model, and pinnacle of society, whilst maintaining her as a social outcast.

Finally in chapter 37, Edna is asked to attend Adèle’s birthing. Ratignolle believes that by seeing the joy of childbirth, Edna will return to her own children and Léonce, becoming a perfect mother. However Adèle’s previous beauty is now shattered as “Her face was drawn and pinched, her sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural, all her beautiful hair had been drawn back and plaited. It lay in a long braid on the sofa pillow, coiled like a golden serpent.” Adèle of course was wrong in asking for Edna to come, as Edna now sees children as a way in which women are slaves to men, especially considering the productivity rate of Adèle, not to mention the obscure world Chopin writes whilst Edna observes the event. Chopin particularly uses the golden serpent to represent it’s control of Ratignolle, and drive fear into Edna, leaving her only one option...
The Use of The Sea
The sea is used throughout the awakening, foreshadowing Edna’s demise. I will break this up into two parts, the first concerning the use of the sea throughout, and the latter concerning Edna’s suicide.

The sea contains the most repeated language throughout the book, and interestingly, is one of very few things that possess a smell and is always described as an odour. The first smell which is described is the ocean “charged with the seductive odour of the sea.” Once again, by foreshadowing and maintaining a running theme, this becomes heavily prevalent for the reader. There are also other repeated words and ideas concerning the sea. The word sensuous is used to describe the sea, just after Ratignolle is described “like a sensuous Madonna”. If so does this provide an indirect link between what Edna aspires to be, and the sea? The sea is also described possessing a voice, “seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring” which Chopin gives an onomatopoeic like quality to reflect the soft sounds on the beach. There are also passages where Edna envisages the long blue Kentucky grass, such as chapter 25 where “the atmosphere of the stables and the breath of the blue grass paddock revived in her memory and lingered in her nostrils.” These, obviously, all build up toward the end of the book, where she realises her destiny with the sea.

When Edna dies however, the sea calls her in a different way. The seduction of the sea is diminished by her thought process. She becomes a “new-born creature”, where “foamy wavelets curl up to her white feet like serpents about her ankles”. The serpents could represent the inescapable fate for all women, like Adéle; temptation; or they could even be guarding true knowledge. There is a reference to the blue grass, which previously smacked her skin as she ran past, but other than that, the references don’t directly involve the senses, until the final line, her final thought and memory. I would imagine the hum, soft, and the odour, sweet.

Overall, sensory imagery is integral to the awakening of Edna Pontellier. Without the use of sensory imagery, the readers wouldn’t be subject to such graphic, and powerful metaphors. And it is in this level of subtext that the real book is written. Chopin uses descriptions of characters to stereotype them; Adéle, Edna, Reisz, all have descriptions which are integral to their character. Reisz acts both as a fairygod mother, and a medium for music within the book, whilst Ratignolle is the image of beauty. Without the vivid experiences, her awakening couldn’t contain the enthralling power within.
Kate Chopin and feminism

James Ringo Harley Foster

Kate Chopin’s The Awakening is often viewed to be an example of an early feminist novel. The novel’s narrative focusses on the awakening, sexually or otherwise, of its protagonist Edna Pontellier; Edna is thrust into the male dominated world of the late nineteenth century and is forced to evaluate her role, and that of women, within it. Throughout, Edna Pontellier wars with societal expectation, her own ideals and fantasies and her biology itself; Edna falls in love, falls out of love, has an affair, gambles, invests in property, makes bad portraits, listens to some music, goes for a swim and dies. Quite a journey: all before supper. The extent to which Chopin’s portrayal of Edna’s eventful journey of awakening is critical or supportive of feminist ideals shall be considered with particular reference to the characters Chopin surrounds her with: society is, after all, made up of people.

Edna Pontellier and the Cavalry Officer:

“Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism... Most women are moody and whimsical,” the stereotypical male perception of women spoken by Doctor Mandelet, the Pontelliers’ family physician no less, in chapter twelve of the novel. Mr Pontellier, like Doctor Mandelet, believes that “when ordinary fellows... attempt to cope with [women’s] idiosyncrasies the result is bungling,” unable to understand the emotions and feelings of his wife Leonce Pontellier elects to ignore them; his policy for dealing with her whims is purely reactionary and does not address root causes.

Edna Pontellier exists in a male dominated world and so it is apt that Chopin opens Chapter One of the novel with Mr Pontellier’s world view: Edna is his personal property; her stories and personality are incidental to her purpose. Mr Pontellier inspects her sunburnt form “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” and dismisses her relation of the day’s events as “some utter nonsense; some adventure out there in the water”; the sea will, as the novel progresses, become synonymous with Edna’s sexuality and awakening and Mr Pontellier’s dismissal of her story illustrates how she is not truly appreciated by her husband. Mr Pontellier’s promise to his children “to bring them back bonbons and peanuts” illustrates a superficial understanding of the requirements of children for a father, where gifts are more important than his presence, echoing his relationship with his wife where he keeps her as a pretty ornament, his appreciation falling short of her as a person.

Edna, after Mademoiselle Reisz’s rendition of Chopin within which “the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul,” decides to go for a swim. Mrs Pontellier’s “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its close embrace”, the use of the sensory imagery showing the manner in which the sea has touched her in a manner in which her husband never could. After Edna’s revelation where she becomes closer to her sexuality, her husband, who ought to be the person with whom she shares these sexual revelations, doesn’t understand. In response to her exhilarating brush with death “I thought I should have perished out there alone,” Mr Pontellier responds, utterly unconcerned “You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you.” Mr Pontellier does not congratulate her for swimming for the first time and instead shoots down her high mood by being utterly unappreciative of how important the experience was for her. Once again, Edna Pontellier is misunderstood and unappreciated by her husband.
Edna’s marriage to her husband is expressed as “purely an accident” and fell “in the midst of her secret great passion,” he was not the subject of it. Through Edna’s younger years she had these great fantasies, attractive men who were all ultimately out of her reach. Crucially, these men, since they were out of her reach, were always merely images to her and she never got the opportunity to be disappointed by their real natures. Robert, in this way, can be seen to be another one of Edna’s great fantasies. Robert is shown to be many of the things that Mr Pontellier is not; at the end of chapter two Robert contrasts with Mr Pontellier when, where Mr Pontellier abandons his children, Robert “amuse[s] himself with the little Pontellier children, who were very fond of him”, he is further contrasted in that in conversation between Edna and Robert “Each was interested in what the other said”, demonstrating him as being able to give Edna the understanding conversational partner she needs. This, early on, sets the stage for Edna developing feelings for Robert, but also that “He was always intending to go to Mexico”, foreshadowing his leaving towards the end of the first section of the novel.

As much as Robert Lebrun avails himself to Edna as the perfect man for her it seems the he too is somebody she does not get to know in any great depth. On Grand Isle Chopin makes character behave differently to how they act in the rest of the world. When Robert Lebrun goes to Mexico his role becomes Robert the businessman, Robert the man, whilst on Grand Isle Robert’s function is to be deeply flirtatious and to provide a distraction for the women: there is an understanding amongst the Creole women that flirtation and distraction is the limit. Edna, seeing Robert the flirt on Grand Isle forms an idea of him almost as a knight in shining armour; when Edna awakes from her church induced sleep she questions “How many years have I slept?” to which Robert replies “You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers” the language, reminiscent of fairy tales of princesses and knight guardians, shows the manner in which Robert plays along with her fantasy. Edna becomes deeply engrossed in her fantasy of Robert as the perfect man, (as Madame Ratignole tells Robert, “She is not one of us…. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously”) and chooses to believe her fantasy in preference to reality “She wondered why Robert had gone away and left her. It did not occur too her to think that he might have grown tired of being with her the livelong day” ignoring the fact that Robert has slowly gotten bored of her company.

When Robert returns to New Orleans from Mexico, he returns as Robert the man, not Robert the Flirt, and Edna discovers that even he does not fully understand her, Robert’s frantic confession “I forgot everything but a wild dream of your some way becoming my wife,” is met with almost disgust from Edna with “Your wife!” In this, the mention of marriage places Robert firmly within the society whose superficial contrived requirements Edna cannot abide: Edna’s dream view of Robert is shattered, her thoughts “He did not know; he did not understand.”

By way of conclusion for this section, Edna is unappreciated by the men in her world and this provides her with a void within herself that needs satisfying. Edna, both before and during her marriage fills this void with fantasies and dreams of the perfect man that will understand her truly and fulfil her totally, but these dreams were always unattainable and superficial. Upon Edna’s realisation of the truth behind her fantasy version of Robert Chopin shows us how she is dissatisfied with what she finds.
**Edna Pontellier: The Man**

Increasingly, as Edna awakens, she begins to emulate that which possesses power in the world: men. Whilst Edna is never described as being particularly feminine, she initially is shown to occupy a woman’s place in society and therefore is subservient to her husband. Mr Pontellier’s view in the first chapter of her as his personal property, as previously discussed, shows the relationship which Edna and Mr Pontellier possess at the beginning of the book. From a narrative point of view, the delivery is from Mr Pontellier’s perspective, Chopin choosing to open the novella as the world according to a man. Mr Pontellier, bored with his wife decides to go off to “Klein’s” to gamble and expresses to his wife that “perhaps he would return for the early dinner, perhaps he would not,” as a man Mr Pontellier does not require any excuses, nor does he offer any. A man is free to do what he pleases.

Edna’s first major awakening episode, as discussed in the previous section, was not appreciated by her husband, immediately after this Edna makes her first stand up against him. Potentially seen as childish (indeed Mrs Pontellier is later related to acting like a child), Edna’s first stand against her husband is her refusal to go to bed at his request. “Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire” but having just had her awakening experience Chopin shows Edna beginning to consider things she previously took for granted. Edna’s sexual awakening is very much an opening of her eyes to see, Chopin writes a woman who “would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience…. But unthinkingly” but a woman who now begins to question “the daily treadmill of life that has been portioned out to” her: why should she yield and sleep with a man who she possesses no passion for? Ignoring her husband’s entreaties she stubbornly refuses to go to bed and instead commands her husband “Leonce, go to bed”. Ultimately, Mr Pontellier wins and savours his victory with his cigar ascendant.

When Edna returns to New Orleans and Mr Pontellier at the advice of Dr Mandelet gives his wife some time to come to her senses, she begins to form a new persona, that of Edna Pontellier the man. Edna Pontellier the man gambles, holds banquets, holds his father to attention in front of his pencil, buys his own house and has sex with who he wants. Edna Pontellier’s wont to obey her desires without thought turns her increasingly into an Alcé Arobin like character. Edna the man is fatally flawed for two reasons: there is more the void within Edna than sexual gratification and secondly, Edna is a woman.

---

1 Mr Pontellier, the man, smokes cigars which are expensive and throughout the story they gain a phallic aspect and become a symbol relating to manliness. Mr Pontellier is successful and can afford cigars, Robert, in the second chapter “smoked cigarettes because he could not afford cigars…. He had a cigar in his pocket which Mr Pontellier had presented him with” immediately showing Mr Pontellier’s superiority as a man. Later, when Robert returns from Mexico, the fact that his business has not been overly successful is betrayed by the fact he still buy cigarettes (though he does have a better quality tobacco pouch). Success and power in the world is associated with the phallic cigar.

After Edna sleeps with Arobin she experienced “a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her”, here realising that there was more to the love that she was missing.
than mere physical desire. Her quest for true love and satisfaction however is prohibited by the fact that she is married to a man with whom she is not in love and her gender. Edna visits Madame Ratignole when she is pregnant and is immediately shocked by the sheer carnality of it all “With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture” when commanded to “think of the children” she realises that, if she continues along her way, with no effective contraception existing in that time period, that she will inevitably get pregnant and bring scandal upon her family. She cannot live with Robert as she is already married, Robert will not help her on her self destructive path and if she continues with Arobin she will bring scandal. Chopin has trapped Edna.

In conclusion, Chopin explores feminist themes through Mrs Pontellier’s dreams and fantasies and shows her growth throughout the novella. That Chopin comes to the conclusion that Mrs Pontellier cannot have her dreams of the perfect relationship and that her growth ultimately leads to her suicide seems to suggest that Chopin’s conclusion is that the world was not, at the time of the novella’s writing, ready for awakened women and that women such as Madame Ratignole, veritable factories of children, were those which society wanted. There is no sense that Edna can live and remain true to herself, there is no sense that she can fill the void within herself and live contentedly, women like her simply do not fit.