

Representations of Love and Female Gender Identities in
Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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English Philology
Pro Gradu Thesis
May 2004
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Tampereen yliopisto
Kieli- ja käännöstieteiden laitos, englantilainen filologia
HYTÖNEN, HELI: Representations of Love and Female Gender Identities in Kate
Chopin's *The Awakening*
Pro gradu -tutkielma, 92 s. + lähdeluettelo 5 s.
Toukokuu 2004

Tutkielmani tarkoituksena on selvittää, kuinka erilaiset rakkauden representaatiot kytkeytyvät naisten sukupuoli-identiteettiin amerikkalaisen Kate Chopinin romaanissa *The Awakening* (1899). Analyysini kohdistuu erityisesti romaanin päähenkilöön Edna Pontellieriin. Edna ei löydä paikkaansa yhteiskunnassa, jossa naisen ainoa rooli on olla kuuliainen vaimo ja uhrautuva äiti, vaan hän etsii ulospäisyä järkiavioliitostaan ja viktoriaanisista käyttäytymisnormeista rakkaussuhteista.

Tutkielmani lähtökohta on amerikkalaisen filosofin Judith Butlerin ajatus sukupuoli-identiteetistä ja sukupuoli-identiteetistä. Hänen mukaansa identiteetti rakentuu arvoympäristössä, joka perustuu sukupuolen kahtiajakoon. Tässä binaarisessa järjestelmässä identiteetin rakentuminen edellyttää niiden normien omaksumista, jotka kussakin historiallisessa kontekstissa määrittävät maskuliinisuuden ja feminiinisuuden rajat. Normien sisäistäminen uusintaa ja lujittaa järjestelmää. Sukupuoli-identiteetit luonnollistuvat ja näin muodostuu yleinen käsitys siitä, millainen naisen (tai miehen) tulee olla.

Analyysissäni osoitan, että viktoriaanisen yhteiskunnan essentialistinen naiskuva vaikuttaa Chopinin romaanissa esiintyviin rakkauden representaatioihin. Vaimon ja äidin rooliin kuuluu kyky rakastaa: naisen tehtävä on antaa rakkautta miehelleen ja lapsilleen, ja koska hän hoivaa perhettään juuri rakkaudesta sen jäseniä kohtaan, hän ei tarvitse muuta merkitystä elämäänsä. Binaarisessa sukupuolijärjestelmässä kaikkia ihmissuhteita säädellään hierarkkisine sukupuolisuhteina, jotka määrittävät naisten olemassaolon miehiä varten. Tässä heteroseksuaalisessa matriisissa myös rakkaus näyttäytyy binaarisena sukupuolisuhteena, jossa suvunjatkaminen rakkauden päämääränä korostuu.

Romaanista on löydettävissä ainakin kolme eri rakkauden representaatiota, jotka olen nimennyt viktoriaaniseksi rakkauskäsitykseksi, romanttiseksi rakkauskäsitykseksi ja schopenhauerilaiseksi rakkauskäsitykseksi. Viktoriaaninen käsitys korostaa velvollisuutta yhteiskuntaa kohtaan. Rakkaus näyttäytyy kumppanuutena, joka ylläpitää perheinstituutiota ja tuottaa uusia kunnan kansalaisia. Romanttinen käsitys korostaa yksilöllistä, intohimoista tunnetta, mutta idealisoi rakkautta avioliitossa. 1900-luvun lopun Yhdysvalloissa tämä tarkoittaa naisen täydellistä alistumista ankariin avioliittolakeihin. Näin molemmat käsitykset sitovat naisen epätasa-arvoiseen asemaan avioliitossa. Schopenhauerilainen käsitys perustuu saksalaisen filosofin Arthur Schopenhauerin ajatuksiin rakkaudesta. Hänen mukaansa rakkaus on vain elämän tahdon ilmentymä, joka saa ihmiset jatkamaan sukua. Näin schopenhauerilainen rakkauskäsitys tyrmää romanttisen yksilöllisyyden ihanteen ja korvaa velvollisuuden yhteiskuntaa kohtaan velvollisuudella luontoa kohtaan, mikä naisen kohdalla molemmissa tarkoittaa sitoutumista suvunjatkamiseen.

Omaksumalla schopenhauerilaisen rakkauskäsityksen Edna itse asiassa uusintaa viktoriaanista naiskuvaa. Vaikka hän ymmärtää naisen aseman vaatimukset historiallisiksi konstruktioiksi, hän ei pysty irtautumaan essentialistisesta näkemyksestä, jonka mukaan biologia on naisen kohtalo. Butlerin mukaan samalla kun normien toisto lujittaa binaarista sukupuolijärjestelmää, se samalla myös paljastaa aukkoja ja säröjä. Kapinallaan ja viimein kuolemallaan Edna kyseenalaistaa jäykän essentialismin, joka sitoo sukupuolet heteroseksuaaliseen matriisiin.

Avainsanat: Kate Chopin, feministinen kirjallisuudentutkimus, sukupuoli-identiteetti, rakkaus

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1. Introduction

The Awakening is nowadays probably the most popular and widely read of the works of American author Kate Chopin (1850-1904). There is irony in the fact, for at the time it was published, the novel received harsh criticism and it is a long lasting belief that it destroyed Chopin's already well established literary career. Contrary to the popular view, however, Chopin's reliable biographer Emily Toth argues that the novel was never banned or withdrawn from libraries.¹ In fact, Chopin continued to write even after *The Awakening*, only it is due to her declining health rather than devastating criticism that she did not manage to publish anything since.²

Chopin was already at her middle age when she started to write, apparently in order to make some extra money for her family of six children, the father of whom had died. She began her career by writing short stories to local papers but soon gained larger audience through contributions to such well known national journals as *Vogue* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Albeit short, her career was productive: over a dozen years she wrote nearly a hundred short stories, three novels of which *At Fault* was published in 1890 and *The Awakening* in 1899 (the third, *Young Dr. Gosse*, written in 1890, was never published), a play entitled *An Embarrassing Position*, numerous poems as well as essays and reviews. She also composed music.³

According to Alice Hall Petry, Chopin was appreciated by contemporary critics for her stylistic skills, her technical expertise in constructing her stories in favour of her subject matter rather than the plot and her unsentimental description of the South. However, Hall Petry argues that due to her simplistic categorization into "local colourists," a literary movement that by the end of the 19th century was losing respectability, as well as the exclusion of female writers from the literary canon that was being formed at the time,

¹ Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) 227.

² Alice Hall Petry, Introduction, *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996) 5.

³ Hall Petry, 1-4.

her work became largely forgotten. Occasional studies were made on Chopin's work during the first half of the 20th century, but it was Per Seyersted's biography on Chopin and his edition of her works in 1969 that brought Chopin to the attention of the critical community.⁴ Elaine Showalter notes that *The Awakening* was soon embraced by the feminist movement and it became one of the most popular feminist literary texts of the second wave's early years.⁵ Today, Chopin's works are widely appreciated and they enjoy continuous serious scholarly attention, feminist or otherwise. Much of Chopin criticism is concentrated on *The Awakening*. Hall Petry accounts it to Chopin's rich and varied reading and general knowledge of culture as well as her heavy use of imagery and symbolism that the novel continues to offer fertile ground for study⁶ from many different angles: language and narration, sexual politics, gender and race, female psychology, economics and power, etc.

When I first read *The Awakening* I was immediately hooked by the story of Edna Pontellier, who awakens into realizing "her position in the universe as a human being."⁷ Her life is rather comfortable with her well-to-do husband and two sons, but it is not a life of her own. It is as if she is only another valuable possession in her husband's collection and not an individual human being. Among her family and society she feels lonely and starts to look for love to fill in the hole left by her marriage of convenience. Love, however, is not enough to give her life a new meaning when she is looking for independence. Refusing to sacrifice her individuality, she ends up drowning herself in the sea. The ambiguous ending of the novel that does not give much explanation for Edna's actions did not release me from its spell and I was compelled to start to think about what the meaning of love is in the novel, and more precisely, what it is for a woman.

⁴ Hall Petry, 1.

⁵ Elaine Showalter, "The Feminist Critical Revolution," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986) 5.

⁶ Hall Petry, 16, 19.

⁷ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 57. Further references to *The Awakening* are cited parenthetically by page.

For the purpose of the thesis, my ponderings formed into a more precise study question: how do the gender identities available to Victorian women affect the way love is represented in *The Awakening*? In the historical context of the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, love seems to function in two ways: the purpose of the woman is to love, and as she loves, she does not need any other fulfilment in life. In this sense, love, and especially the institutionalization of love in marriage, appears a powerful tool in binding women in their role of a wife and mother. On the other hand, the understanding and “usage” of love depends on the way love is represented or constructed in society. I have divided different representations of love in *The Awakening* into three concepts: the Victorian concept of asexual and passionless love found in a committed companionship of marriage, the Romantic concept of passionate love leading into a fusion of two persons into one in personal fulfilment, and the Schopenhauerian concept of love as a sexual urge to propagate the species. As different as these concepts may seem at first, for Edna Pontellier they all mean the same end: a woman’s function is to get married and have children.

I find it useful to study the representations of love in *The Awakening* from the point of view of gender. In Victorian America, woman’s position was strictly regulated and Edna Pontellier is shown resisting those restrictions. Frustrated by her position, she decides to leave her husband and strives for independent living. Furthermore, literature written at the turn of the nineteenth century, or the *fin de siècle*, as it is called, is especially fruitful for gender criticism, for, as Showalter states, the period has been described as that of sexual anarchy, with the New Woman and the decadent dandy transforming the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.⁸ As the symbol of the first wave of feminism, the New Woman, by challenging the institutions of family and marriage, also

⁸ Elaine Showalter, “The Rise of Gender,” Introduction, *Speaking of Gender*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Routledge: 1989) 9.

establishes a historical and literary context for Edna in her attempts to reinterpret womanhood.

Gender criticism in the connection with *The Awakening* is, of course, nothing new—after all, the novel is a feminist classic. Even love has been discussed by many critics as it is a prominent theme in the novel. However, more often than not previous studies have concentrated on revealing a single view on love that the novel might promote, or love has been discussed as a somewhat universalistic concept that we all share. According to my study, there is no single coherent view on women or love in the novel. Instead, I have been able to detect several views that the novel explores. In fact, I find the novel written over a hundred years ago corresponding surprisingly well with the postmodernist relativist notion of truth, questioning fixed essences and world views.

The theoretical perspective of this thesis derives from poststructuralist feminist theory. I find it helpful in analyzing Edna's search for identity and the meaning of love as she struggles between the views of 'natural' and 'appropriate' behaviour—between essentialism and constructionism. According to poststructuralist feminism, the oppression of women is the result of the presumed difference between women and men, an opposition set up between masculinity and femininity that relies on some assumed and repressed system of values. This system is not stable, but difference is constructed and performed through time. In the analysis of the novel, I will draw especially from Judith Butler's views on sexual difference and gender identity. Butler rejects the essentialist binary model of sexuality that assumes a rigid division between the masculine and feminine; instead, she promotes difference between individuals. Women (or men) do not form a coherent group but modalities such as ethnicity, class or historical context intersect with gender. In the matrix of binary and heterosexualized relations, however, the only beings that are granted an identity are those who conform to the matrix. Those who do not, are denied of

subjectivity.⁹ In *The Awakening*, Adèle Ratignolle, a perfect wife and mother, represents a subject with a coherent identity in the Victorian heterosexual matrix of the Catholic Creole Louisiana, and Mademoiselle Reisz, a hermit spinster, the necessary other to the coherent identity, trapped in the conservative and self-satisfied environment. An American Protestant from Kentucky, Edna Pontellier does not fit in the Creole female gender identity. Edna tries to balance between the two positions her friends represent and is looking for subjectivity on her own grounds, challenging the matrix. Since legitimate human relations are being defined in the matrix, these women have access to love only within the norms of the matrix.

The questions about love and identity intertwine in the debate between nature and culture. The debate is present in the discussion of woman's role, where the appropriate behaviour of a dutiful wife and mother masquerades as the 'natural' behaviour of a 'true' woman. It is also present in the discussion of love in whether it is a biological drive or a construction regulated by its social context. Butler argues that the norms by which bodies become materialized as male and female are affected by the historical context of the process.¹⁰ Similarly, I will argue that the norms by which love is present in human relationships in *The Awakening* are affected by the historical context where the characters of the novel are being created. That context is marked by the same debate between nature and culture, as American Victorian intellectuals were trying to preserve the national identity by turning to Darwinist principles of survival in the fear of losing the nation's vital contact to nature after the closing of the Western frontier. The debate continues in the nineteenth-century literary traditions, where realism, naturalism and transcendentalism try to solve the relation of art to nature and naturalness. Therefore I find it necessary to study the historical context, literary and social, of *The Awakening* in this thesis. The examination of historical details is done in search of gaps in the Victorian world view. For it is in the unveiling of

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990 (New York: Routledge, 1999) 6, 22-3.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 1.

inconsistencies in the heterosexual matrix that *The Awakening* is able to challenge the regimes of power and give meaning to Edna's death.

2. Nature vs. Culture: Theoretical Approaches

Western philosophy has been occupied with the relationship between matter and form since the days of Plato. Despite centuries of debate, the problem has not disappeared, for, according to J. P. Roos, there is a heated debate going on in today's scientific world between social constructionists and evolution theorists on explaining human behaviour. In its extreme form, social constructionism explains human behaviour as a cultural product, as a social construction that is wholly determined by the environment an individual lives in. At the other extreme end, fundamental evolution theorists claim that genes form human nature and it cannot be affected by environmental situations. In today's science, biological principles are invading social sciences in the form of sociobiology and evolution psychology—a trend that has attracted violent resistance among social constructionists.¹¹

As clear-cut as these opposites seem, it is not always easy to see what the two opponents are fighting for or against. Biologists base their theories on the observation of 'nature.' Social constructionists explain phenomena as the results of 'culture.' However, Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton note that these terms are not that easily defined and thus they are often misunderstood and misapplied. The term 'nature' is usually connected with situations where lawlike relationships (such as gravity) exist between phenomena. However, in everyday language people often use the term 'natural' to refer to 'normative.' What is at stake here, note Abramson and Pinkerton, is not the laws reigning in nature but laws which are the products of human societies and which become the norm of those societies. The concept of 'culture,' on the other hand, remains so multifaceted or even "chimerical" so that there is no established definition for the term.¹²

¹¹ J. P. Roos, "Kaikkea ei voi selittää kulttuurilla—muttei kyllä geeneillääkään," *Helsingin Sanomat* 18 Jan. 2003: C16.

¹² Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton, "Nature, Nurture, and In-Between," Introduction, *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, eds. Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 1, 3.

Luce Irigaray argues that the Western philosophical fixation on binary oppositions of form/matter, culture/nature also lays the premise for the interpretation of sexual relationships, where human bodies are divided into male and female sexes. In this division, femininity is associated with nature and masculinity with culture. Further, femininity associates with passivity, matter that can be formed actively by masculinity. In this system oppositions have a hierarchy, where terms associated with masculinity (such as: good, light, right) are valued, whereas terms associated with femininity (the opposites of the previous: evil, dark, left) are regarded as a corruption of and subordinated to the masculine.¹³ Loaded with associations of value and hierarchy, this reduction of phenomena to binary oppositions is problematic. Judith Butler argues that if constructedness and materiality are accepted as necessarily oppositional notions, power structures that are behind the division remain invisible.¹⁴

The contradiction between nature and culture is also a prominent theme in American history. According to Michael T. Gilmore, the United States of the late 19th century prided itself on being “nature’s nation.” Based on Frederick Jackson Turner’s study “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” the belief in the importance of the physical environment in shaping national character gained popularity. The history of the United States, according to Turner, was marked with the confrontation of humanity with nature. Arriving at a vast area of ‘free’ land and settling this wilderness was the source of strength to Americans. In the late 19th century, however, the advance westward had ceased, thus marking the closing of the Western frontier. Gilmore argues that the lack of land left to conquer awakened doubts whether the American way of life was to survive now that the contact to nature was lost. The society was mobilized to preserve this contact in order to prevent the nation from descending into a state of decay: President Theodore Roosevelt

¹³ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1974, trans. Gillian G. Hill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 28.

established nature reserves, the arts promoted realism, Darwin's ideas of the survival of the fittest were applied to various fields in society.¹⁵ Even gender issues were subjected to serve the 'natural' order of things. Women were good for the reproduction of citizens who would uphold the real American spirit, and that role should go before anything else. Women who insisted on their right for a life of their own were considered unnatural. Towards the end of the century, however, these women became more numerous than ever. These New Women were seen as an alarming symptom of the crisis of the nation and therefore needed to be suppressed.

In *The Awakening*, the protagonist Edna Pontellier challenges the restrictive view on women in a way similar to New Women. She revolts against the society that confines her into marriage and motherhood and searches for independence and other meaning in life. She escapes her restrictive role as a wife and mother into affairs, trying to reinterpret her position and identity through love. After all, a passionate affair seems to offer something totally different from her marriage of convenience. But love is not any freer a concept from the confining norms of society, for love, as well as identity, is regulated in the binary system of hierarchical heterosexualized relations.

In this chapter, I will establish a theoretical framework for my study on *The Awakening*. I will base my discussion of gender identity on Judith Butler's ideas on sexual difference. According to Butler, binary hierarchical relations between the sexes are consolidated by identity formation that requires internalization of the regulatory norms of a society and conforming to them. Then, I will discuss love as a binary sexual relationship by placing it in the nature/culture continuum. Finally, I will contextualize the novel in the literary traditions of the 19th century and discuss briefly how *The Awakening* takes its stand in the relation of nature/culture debate through literary movements of realism, transcendentalism and naturalism.

¹⁵ Michael T. Gilmore, "Revolt Against Nature: The Problematic Modernism of *The Awakening*," *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 70-2.

2.1. Sex and Gender

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier does not recognize herself in the gender identities offered by the Victorian society. The society is split along gender lines without a possibility of transgression. The society's gender constructions are legitimized by 'natural' law that declares biology as women's destiny. The Victorian construction of gender was materialized in a specific time and place for purposes of creating a hierarchy of power. In order to find grounds for the Victorian restrictive gender system, I will discuss the historical context of the *fin-de-siècle* American society more closely in Chapter 3. Next, I will briefly explore the regulatory norms that materialize sexual relationships in historical contexts in general.

2.1.1. Human Is Male

Until the 18th century, states Marianne Liljeström, human body was thought to be formed from one basic structure, which was male. This one-sex model recognized woman only as an anatomically imperfect man. Differences between men and women were based on the fact that women gave birth, whereas men did not. Still, it was believed that all the elements found in the male have to be found in the female, otherwise woman would not be a human at all. Therefore the womb, which ultimately defined a woman, was considered an inner penis.¹⁶

Separation of the human body into two sexes took place during the 18th century. The difference between male and female genitals was considered so great that they formed opposites to one another. Since those days science has tried to find the factor that ultimately determines sex. In the early 19th century, the detection of ova became to define

¹⁶ Marianne Liljeström, "Sukupuolijärjestelmä," *Avainsanat: 10 askelta feministiseen tutkimukseen*, eds. Anu Koivunen and Marianne Liljeström (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1996) 118-9.

female biological existence. Along with the development of genetics, Y-chromosome was proposed to determine sex in the early 20th century.¹⁷

Determination in strengthening the binary sexual difference seems, according to Butler, to “issue from the social organization of sexual reproduction through the construction of the clear and unequivocal identities and positions of sexed bodies with respect to each other.” This difference is also given a hierarchy as “the male body is usually figured as the active agent” in the framework of sexual reproduction.¹⁸ Historian Gerda Lerner agrees by stating that through time, biological sex differences have offered a basis for the implication of “a ‘natural’ separation of human activities by sex, and the further assumption that this leads to a ‘natural’ dominance of male over female.”¹⁹ In the way sexual reproduction is still organized in our society of today, the home forms the nucleus of society and women’s function as mothers is considered essential to the survival of the society.²⁰

2.1.2. Sex/Gender System

According to Liljeström, in the 1960s and 1970s, feminists started to challenge the dominance of biology. American anthropologist Gayle Rubin introduced her sex/gender system that soon became the cornerstone of feminist theory and reigned feminist discussion for decades. Rubin thought it was necessary to differentiate the need and ability to procreate from the ways women were oppressed. She wanted to show how biology was socially constructed and harnessed to reiterate the norms of the gender system. Every society, she argues, has a sex/gender system where “biological sexuality,” the capacity for reproduction, is transformed into social relationships.²¹

¹⁷ Liljeström, 119.

¹⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 141.

¹⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 169.

²⁰ Lerner, 6-7.

²¹ Liljeström, 113.

In sex/gender system, a person's sexual identity is being formed by three concepts: sex, gender and sexuality. While a person's sex refers to one's biological existence as female or male, gender is used to refer to what constitutes the social, cultural and psychological meaning that is imposed upon this biological sexual existence. Sexuality is a person's sexual orientation. Thus, in trying to define what it is to be a man or a woman, it is necessary to differentiate what are biologically 'natural' characteristics of each sex and what is socially and culturally expected behaviour of each gender. A human being is born biologically male or female, but concepts of masculinity and femininity vary within different societies and historical periods.²²

2.1.3. From Construction to Materialization of Sex

In the 1990s, many feminists started to question the division into biological sex and culturally constructed gender. While the idea of gender construction was adopted in order to challenge the notion that a woman's biology is her social destiny, it also entails a problematic dissociation of gender from material bodies. Moreover, feminists were able to show that biological 'realities' are not eternal and unchanging but they are affected by historical conditions in the way of other constructions. As Liljeström already pointed out above, the way biological sex is defined has changed over time and, in fact, it is still under discussion. Nevertheless, biology and medicine still base their studies on the existence of two separate sexes. Scientific findings are reflected to the prior division of sexes and thus that representation of sex is being repeated and produced again and again.²³ This is why, argues Butler, it is impossible to differentiate between material, natural and 'real' bodies and culturally constructed representations of them, as those material bodies have already been labelled as being of one or the other sex.²⁴

²² Showalter, "The Rise of Gender" 1-2.

²³ Liljeström, 118.

²⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 11.

Moreover, according to Butler, models of gender construction presuppose a relation between nature and culture where nature is seen as a passive surface. Nature itself has no value, as it assumes its value only when it is culturally constructed, which means the moment “nature relinquishes itself as the natural.” As gender “consists of the social meanings that sex assumes,” sex itself, in fact, becomes unnecessary: it is absorbed and replaced by the social meanings it takes on. Thus, sex becomes some kind of fiction which is accessible only by means of its construction.²⁵

Butler argues that feminists promoting gender construction did not succeed in liberating women from their biological destiny, because masculine and feminine genders are still built or constructed upon bodies marked as male and female. This view allows a little possibility for choice and difference as essential biological views on women. Instead, Butler prefers a view where gender is not seen as a fixed essence of a person but a variable that changes in different contexts through time. Inspired by speech-act theory and Michel Foucault, Butler argues that gender is a performance. As within the speech act theory, “a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names,”²⁶ gender identity is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results,”²⁷ i.e., by expressing in one’s behaviour the norms that constitute gender in a given context. Working in a performative fashion, identity, argues Butler, is always gendered. In fact, one only becomes a subject with an identity through conforming to “recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” that are set up in a certain cultural context. Identity, therefore, is more like “a normative ideal” rather than “a descriptive feature of experience.”²⁸

Redefining gender, Butler calls for the return to the notion of ‘nature’ or ‘the body.’ Instead of the problematic construction of a passive surface, she proposes “*a process*

²⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 4-5.

²⁶ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 13.

²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33.

²⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 22-3, 180.

of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.”²⁹ According to this view, what constitutes the body is fully material, but materiality has to be “rethought as the effect of power.” Following Foucauldian ideas of power, Butler argues that the body is materialized through regulatory norms and once sex “is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm.” Thus sex is not simply a characteristic one has but “it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.”³⁰

According to Butler, the regulatory norms of sex work performatively to materialize sexual difference and maintain the heterosexual imperative. In order to become viable, a ‘human,’ in a cultural context, one has to identify oneself with the normative idea of ‘sex’ that is at offer in that context. As one has internalized the requirements of one’s sex, one becomes a subject. To identify with a set of requirements means to exclude other features. Thus, the forming of a subject produces a domain of abjection, “a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge.” These abject beings form the necessary outside to the domain of the subject.³¹

In order for the regulatory power to work, the norms need to be reiterated. Butler argues it is through reiterative or ritual practice that “sex acquires its naturalized effect.” However, this process by which sex is produced is temporal and instable, and opens up gaps and inconsistencies in the notion of sex. The same process that stabilizes sex can also be used to destabilize it. Here the position of the outside becomes crucial. The system can be questioned not by subjects who have internalized their position but from the outside of

²⁹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 9. Emphasis original.

³⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 2.

³¹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 2-3.

hegemonic positions. These outsiders have a “possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of ‘sex’ into a potentially productive crisis.”³²

2.2. Nature and Culture of Love

The discussion of love in this thesis is restricted to a relationship between two adults that in the Western tradition would be described as romantic. It excludes *agape*, Christian love of one’s neighbour as well as parental or filial love. In the Western context, romantic love is almost always sexual. As Thomas Gregor points out, it is easy for us to imagine sex without love, but “it is more difficult to imagine romantic love between adults without sex, or at least the yearning for sex.”³³ Therefore ideas of sex and sexuality are connected to this discussion. In order to set up a basis for discussion of the Victorian, Romantic and Schopenhauerian concepts of love and their relation with the gender identities in *The Awakening*, which will take place in Chapter 4, I will discuss love in the context of nature/culture continuum in the following.

2.2.1. Love as a Biological Drive

If it is biology that matters, environmental influences are insignificant. According to this view, the origins of human behaviour can be traced back to genes. Human life does not differ from animal life in its basic premise, which is survival. If a whole species is to survive, the most important aim of its individuals is to propagate their genes and reproduce. Darwin’s highly influential theory of evolution has made its impact on the scientific world to the extent that Abramson and Pinkerton note that interpreting human sexuality in terms of reproduction is also a pre-eminent view in today’s scientific discourse. The roots of the importance of reproduction can also be found in the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western societies. Concentration on populating the earth, however, has made it

³² Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 10-12.

³³ Thomas Gregor, “Sexuality and the Experience of Love,” *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, eds. Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 334.

difficult to disentangle other functions that human sexuality may have, such as seeking for pleasure.³⁴

In survival of the fittest, love has a minor part to play. According to this view, love would be a biological drive that makes people look for a suitable mate in order to propagate the species. If a couple feels some kind of bond between them, it is only to secure the safe upbringing of the child. One of the early advocates of this view is philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, even though during his time genes were still an unknown issue. He developed his metaphysics of love before Darwin came up with his evolution theory. Bert Bender quotes Darwin's contemporary David Asher, who stated in *The Journal of Anthropology* in 1871 that Darwin's theory proved Schopenhauer's speculations "to be well grounded" and to have "a quite natural basis."³⁵

2.2.2. Love as a Social Construction

At the opposite end of the nature/culture continuum is the claim that human behaviour is wholly culturally or socially constructed. According to the constructivist view, note Abramson and Pinkerton, there is no ideal form of behaviour, only temporally and spatially limited behavioural interpretations. In constructionist thinking, the whole culture becomes interpretation. There is no natural behaviour, as 'natural' is only another label in culturally constructed terminology. On the contrary, the valuation of one mode of behaviour over another is only a feature of one particular culture.³⁶ Interpretation also means that humans are not passive recipients of the conditions of their environment. Robert J. Sternberg

³⁴ Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton, Preface, *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, eds. Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) xii.

³⁵ Bert Bender, "Kate Chopin's Quarrel with Darwin before *The Awakening*," *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996) 115.

³⁶ Abramson and Pinkerton, "Nature" 2, 4.

argues that people use their cultural framework to actively construct their perceptions of the world. Human society is actively engaged in determining what is “right” and “wrong”.³⁷

According to Sternberg, there is no universal experience of love, only different interpretations. Love differs across cultures “because the experience of love is partially dependent on external factors, which are defined by the culture.” Different cultures may give social approval to different kinds of relationships, which then guides the behaviour of individuals. The conception of love a particular culture adopts, argues Sternberg, provides means for an individual to understand his or her relationship. It is like a prototype with which they can compare their feelings and decide whether they are in love.³⁸ Victorians could serve as an example of a society that adopts a very distinct concept of love with strict rules regulating the behaviour of the individuals.

2.2.3. Interactionalist View of Love

It seems that between these two opposites there is too much ground left only to be disregarded. Thus, Abramson and Pinkerton argue that setting up categories of “the biological” and “the cultural” is illusory, and it needlessly sets up a conflict between essentialism and constructionism.³⁹ For, they argue, both nature and culture matter. The actions of genes necessarily unfold within particular environments that affect these actions, and humans can also themselves cultivate their environment.⁴⁰ Nature and nurture work interactionally, “there can be no behavior without biology; but no less significantly, the behaviors of interest require a cultural milieu to give them meaning, much as a seed requires fertile soil to express its genetic potential.”⁴¹

³⁷ Robert J. Sternberg, *Cupid's Arrow: The Course of Love through Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 60-1.

³⁸ Sternberg, 64-5, 71

³⁹ Abramson and Pinkerton, Preface xii.

⁴⁰ Abramson and Pinkerton, “Nature” 1, 11.

⁴¹ Abramson and Pinkerton, “Nature” 5-6.

For humans or animals, the fundamental function of sex may be the propagation of genes and therefore reproduction. As Abramson and Pinkerton point out, however, in everyday life the yearning for sex is not consciously understood as the genetic call for reproduction. Rather, the motivation for engaging in sex is usually the pursuit of pleasure, as, claim Abramson and Pinkerton, “the desire for pleasure is a universal human imperative.”⁴² Preferring other motivations to reproduction would also allow the expression of homosexuality.

Universal or not, sex as a source of pleasure is differently restricted in different cultures. As Thomas Gregor points out, in Western culture it is love that justifies sex. It is often believed that sex “achieves the physical union that love seeks emotionally and spiritually.”⁴³ In Western Christian societies, love has been institutionalized in marriage and marriage has for long been regarded as the ideal, and even the only legitimate state for love to exist, thus limiting love in the heterosexual realm. Partly because of the long tradition of marriage, love, according to Gregor, is often seen as “culture-bound emotional experience” that is “limited only to Western traditions and finite historical periods.”⁴⁴ Contemporary Western ideas of love are based on the romantic tradition that originates in the 12th-century French courts. Gregor admits that love is more easily found in cultures that facilitate its expression. Some characteristics of such cultures are “the autonomy of the nuclear family, emphasis on the conjugal bond and freedom of adolescents.” However, Gregor is convinced by recent anthropological evidence that love “may be experienced by at least some individuals in every culture.”⁴⁵

In many cultures where love is not institutionalized in marriage, the expectation of love is unusual. Gregor believes the reason for this is that the inhibition of love is almost as universal as the repression of sex. Gregor also argues that many similar devices repress

⁴² Abramson and Pinkerton, “Nature” 10.

⁴³ Gregor, 334.

⁴⁴ Gregor, 332, 337.

⁴⁵ Gregor, 337-8.

both. These devices are of two kinds: those that create institutional barriers to love and those that erect psychological barriers within the individual:

Among the most widespread of the institutional barriers are arranged marriage, harem polygyny, gender inequality, unequal age at marriage, seclusion of women and chaperonage, obsession with virginity, descent systems that create primary allegiances to parents rather than spouses, clitoridectomy, the men's-house complex, association of women with impurity and contamination, totalitarianism that subverts family loyalties, and patterns of sexual promiscuity that undermine enduring relationships. Operating within the individual, psychological barriers also prevent the formation of loving relationships. ... [I]dealization of the love partner depends on warm, consistent, and enduring bonds between children and their parents. In a pattern typical of many small-scale cultures, children are a focus of intense parental attention only until a new sibling is born, at which point they are abruptly separated from the mother.⁴⁶

Despite these barriers that many cultures set up, Gregor has found love between individuals living in these cultures, a fact that for him proves love is a universal. Or, to put it in an interactionist way: a human being has genetic potential for love, but cultural influences play a crucial role in shaping the manner in which lovingness is expressed.

I have no intention to deny Gregor's romantic idea that love is a wonderful thing, but I cannot share his implicit wish that love could be institutionalized in every culture. Marriage institution not only facilitates the experience of love but the fomentation of a certain type of love as an ideal condition facilitates the existence of the marriage institution. In the Western tradition, the experience of love is still associated with reproduction rather than pleasure in a way similar to the practice of sex. This is because gender in our culture is divided into binary oppositions. Butler argues that intelligible gender identities are constituted according to "laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the 'expression' or 'effect' of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice." Desire is heterosexualized in "the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male'

⁴⁶ Gregor, 338.

and ‘female.’” This “compulsory heterosexuality” also places women under “masculinist domination” where women exist only for men and in relation to men.⁴⁷ In the domain of intelligible, coherent genders, there is no room for homosexual love or any other expression of love that conflicts with the establishing heterosexualizing laws.

In the binary system, all human relations are regulated as hierarchical sexual relations. Romantic tradition of love can to a certain extent be seen as a way to make it easier for women to accept and internalize their oppression. For, as Marianne Liljeström notes, women’s ritualistic practices in preparing themselves for romance, proposal, marriage and finally family life function as normative and institutionalized practices that maintain the stability of sexual relationships.⁴⁸ These rituals for their part form the norms that materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of naturalized and complementary relationships between the sexes, or what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix.⁴⁹ This is also something Edna Pontellier is starting to realize when she thinks of her husband as “a person whom she had married without love as an excuse” (p. 132).

2.3. “A Language Which Nobody Understood”: *The Awakening* and 19th-Century Literary Traditions

The Awakening received mixed response at the time and sunk into oblivion soon after its publication. While some critics praised the novel for its clever treatment of the delicate issue of women’s position, many declared it an unhealthy book written in a language not fit for publication—primarily because the protagonist Edna refuses to conform to the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood.⁵⁰ I am inclined to think that the controversial response of the novel is at least partly due to its uneasy relation to the nineteenth-century literary traditions. Priscilla Leder notes that Chopin incorporates in *The Awakening* elements of the major literary and intellectual movements of her century, such as realism, naturalism

⁴⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23, 180.

⁴⁸ Liljeström, 132.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 155.

⁵⁰ Hall Petry, 9-11.

and transcendentalism. She does not content herself with only experimenting with them but at the same time demonstrates their limitations.⁵¹ Chopin is looking for a mode for self-expression in relation to the social and cultural conflict between nature and culture as oppositional notions present in the contemporary American society much in the same way as Edna tries to reinterpret the notions of womanhood and love. Not conforming to the traditions, Chopin, like the parrot described in the opening scene of the novel, perhaps seemed to the critics to communicate in “a language which nobody understood” (p. 43). It is also through these literary movements that Edna starts to challenge the ‘reality’ and ‘realism’ of the Victorian marriage, the romantic idea of transcendent love and to revolt against the naturalist view on women. Next, I will briefly outline some characteristics of each movement and their relation to *The Awakening*.

2.3.1. Realism and Local Colour

Realism in American literature (1860-1890) developed as a reaction against Romanticism. Developments in biology and other sciences offered a new perspective in life that rejected romantic fantasy and emphasised fidelity to nature. The aim of realist art was to show life as it is. In addition to verisimilitude, realist literature praised commonplace details, ordinary rather than “dramatic” events and it often depicted characters of a lower social class,⁵² although it equally often promoted middle-class values. In the United States, notes Michael T. Gilmore, leading proponents of realism such as William Dean Howells and Mark Twain saw life-likeness as marking the value in literature. An aspect in *The Awakening* that gathered objection among realists was voiced by Willa Cather in her review of the novel. She found the way passion in love was treated in the novel exaggerated. According to the realist thought, Edna Pontellier’s behaviour was romantic and unnatural. However, argues

⁵¹ Priscilla Leder, “Land’s End: *The Awakening* and 19th-Century Literary Tradition,” *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996) 237.

⁵² Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Darwin in America: The Critical Response 1865–1912* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976) 174.

Gilmore, for this school of realists, ‘natural’ actually meant ‘appropriate.’ Howells had manifested already in 1891 in his *Criticism and Fiction* his disapproval of depicting adultery in fiction. According to him, infidelity as a subject for fiction was infidelity to the standard of nature.⁵³

Yet during her early career, Chopin was considered a realist writer, especially when it comes to an offshoot of the realistic movement, local colour. Before *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin had already published two collections of short stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897) that were labelled by many of the contemporary critics as realist local colour fiction. According to Alice Hall Petry, both books were generally well received. Critics of the time praised Chopin’s skill in sketching a colourful picture of the rural South and its “bayou folk.”⁵⁴ A case in point is a contemporary review published in *New Orleans Daily Picayune* that praises *Bayou Folk* as a “charming work” that contains “sketches, delightful pictures, every one of Creole life and character.” Besides its “fluent, easy style,” “the great charm of the book” is “the tender appreciation of the people of whom it treats.” Finally the critic pronounces the tales “very pleasant to read” and “delightful in themselves, [even] if they had no meaning but what they carry on their face.”⁵⁵ However, Chopin was already dealing with serious topics, “saying very frank things about the power of men to limit and punish women,” as Emily Toth puts it. Placing her stories in an exotic locale perhaps prevented critics from seeing these deeper undercurrents, but at the same time she deflected criticism that would have come to her had she chosen the setting differently. Toth argues that male publishers and reviewers in the Northeast “would never have permitted such frank criticism of patriarchy in their own back yards.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Gilmore, 60, 69.

⁵⁴ Hall Petry, 8.

⁵⁵ *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, “The New Books,” Rev. of *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996) 42.

⁵⁶ Toth, *Unweiling* 150.

According to Leder, Chopin was conscious of her reputation as a local colourist when she was writing *The Awakening*. She was dissatisfied with its limitations, however, as local colour and realism on the whole emphasized only the particular and did not reflect or create a coherent world view.⁵⁷ In her October 1894 review of local colourist Hamlin Garland's essay collection *Crumbling Idols* she declares that "social problems, social environments, local color and the rest of it are not *of themselves* motives to insure the survival of a writer who employs them." Social problems, the very theme of realist literature, were only mutable and did not last, whereas "human impulses do not change and can not so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began." For Chopin, lasting value in literature is found in the understanding of these immutable human drives, including "such primitive passions" as love and hate.⁵⁸

Even though Chopin uses techniques found in local colour fiction, such as detailed description of characters, dialect, customs and settings, *The Awakening* attempts to transcend this tradition. According to Leder, one of the features that illustrate Chopin's dissatisfaction with realism and local colour is Edna's painting.⁵⁹ To her husband's annoyance Edna starts to paint in order to find something fulfilling to do. In one scene she brings some of her sketches for her friend Adèle Ratignolle to review. Adèle is impressed by the realistic quality of the paintings:

"Surely, this Bavarian peasant is worthy of framing; and this basket of apples! never have I seen anything more lifelike. One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one." Edna could not control a feeling which bordered upon complacency at her friend's praise, even realizing, as she did, its true worth (p. 106).

⁵⁷ Leder, 238.

⁵⁸ qtd. in Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, 1969 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 86-7. Chopin's emphasis.

⁵⁹ Leder, 239.

The true worth of Adèle's praise, as Leder points out, is that the ideal for verisimilitude in the context of the Victorian society is not worth striving to.⁶⁰ As a perfect Creole wife and mother, Adèle is part of the social conventions Edna has already started to reject. Adèle is a perfect example of the domesticated woman, something that local colour women writers often glorified in their fiction. Elaine Showalter notes that writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sarah Orne Jewett celebrated the female bond set in the tender matriarchal sanctuary of the house with the kitchen as its womb and the garden as the Edenic paradise in contrast to the surrounding harsh male world.⁶¹ Contrary to local colourists' sentimental nostalgia of preserving a past way of life, Edna is seeking something new. She does not content herself with the 'realist' view of the woman's position, not even of its elevated form in the women's local colour fiction, since that 'realism' is laid upon an environment hostile to female autonomy. When she is searching for love outside her marriage, she, in fact, as Gilmore points out, is not defending infidelity in marriage as such but is questioning fidelity to nature praised by Victorian society. For as it has been discussed above, and as Gilmore aptly puts it: "nature is seldom an objective or neutral category: Much of what passes for the natural in a given culture's self-definition is in reality social, the social masked as the inevitable."⁶²

2.3.2. Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism (1836-1860) started as a religious movement in the United States that advocated a pantheistic view of God. Contrary to realists, transcendentalists' perspective on nature was romantic: they looked to nature to provide them with a symbolic incarnation of divinity.⁶³ One of the most influential transcendentalists was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). For Emerson, a human being was the centre of the universe, and "the noblest

⁶⁰ Leder, 239.

⁶¹ Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 68.

⁶² Gilmore, 70.

⁶³ Russett, *Darwin in America* 3.

ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it.”⁶⁴

Emerson placed society in opposition to nature. The individual, nourished by nature, was superior to his society. Intuition came before reason, as the self was the straight source of moral goodness. Society appeared to estrange a person from its pursuit,⁶⁵ for nothing “is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.... the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong is what is against it.”⁶⁶

Emerson is also a writer mentioned by name in *The Awakening*. As Leder points out, in the course of her awakening, Edna seems to adopt Emerson’s virtue of self-reliance and seems to follow his dictates in living according to her inner self rather than to social conventions.⁶⁷ She is “becoming herself” (p. 108) when she abandons her duties as the lady of the house and declares to Dr. Mandelstam that she only wants her “own way” (p. 171). Another transcendentalist writer, Walt Whitman, is often considered having greatly influenced Chopin’s writing. According to Bert Bender, Chopin loved the transcendental celebration of life and sexuality in Whitman’s poetry.⁶⁸ *The Awakening* certainly seems to be full of direct references to Whitman: the imagery of the sea, the bird, for example, reminds us especially of his poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”

However, while reading Emerson, Edna grows sleepy (p. 127). The transcendentalist view of the world is too broad and distant from the everyday life, as Leder argues,⁶⁹ in order to give Edna a new direction in life. Despite her attempts, her failure to define herself as an individual and finally her death illustrate “the disturbing

⁶⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” *The Best of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays, Poems, Addresses*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Toronto: D. van Nostrand, 1941) 107.

⁶⁵ Russett, *Darwin in America* 83, 85.

⁶⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *The Best of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays, Poems, Addresses*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Toronto: D. van Nostrand, 1941) 123.

⁶⁷ Leder, 245.

⁶⁸ Bert Bender, “The Teeth of Desire: *The Awakening* and *The Descent of Man*,” *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996) 117.

⁶⁹ Leder, 246-7.

evanescence of transcendentalism,” as Leder puts it.⁷⁰ When in the end she stands naked on the shore, surrounded by divine nature, her insisting on her own constitution dissolves in the boundlessness of the sea, the voice of which is “seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (p. 175). At the moment of her death she is thinking of a transcendental image of “the blue-grass meadow” through which she used to walk idly and aimlessly as a child, “believing that it had no beginning and no end” (p. 176), ultimately merging with nature.

2.3.3. Naturalism

Naturalism in American literature (1890-1910) has been described as realism plus determinism. It was not a coherent movement, however, as there were several levels of naturalism applied in literature, ranging from the simple use of animal metaphors to the full acceptance of a philosophy of determinism. The influence of science was shown in the use of clinical physical details and scientific terminology in literature. Some writers applied themes straight from Darwin or deterministic philosophy.⁷¹ For example, naturalistic novelists such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Jack London wrote fiction celebrating the Darwinian struggle for existence.⁷²

Kate Chopin read new natural history and applied its theories in her writing. Based on the study of Chopin’s early works, Per Seyersted argues that Chopin was familiar with Darwin as early as 1869. Seyersted suggests that the new view of a human being as a higher animal was not a shock for Chopin and she accepted the basic premises of the theories by Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley and Herbert Spencer.⁷³ As much as she accepted Darwinian thought, she also quarrelled with its creator. Bender suggests that Chopin’s whole literary career is meditation on the meaning of humanity in dialogue with

⁷⁰ Leder, 248.

⁷¹ Russett, *Darwin in America* 174.

⁷² Gilmore, 72.

⁷³ Seyersted, 84-5.

Darwin. Although she never doubted the validity of natural selection, she chafed at Darwin's views on women. According to Bender, she could not accept his views on the inferiority of women and their passivity as creatures without desire.⁷⁴

These same limitations Chopin saw in the naturalist movement in literature. One of the aspects where Chopin differs from the naturalists such as Crane and Theodore Dreiser is her treatment of female sexuality. Leder argues that although she depicted, in a naturalist way, sexual desire as a basic instinct, she goes beyond the naturalist tradition. When the Pontelliers' family doctor Mandelet defines Edna "a very peculiar and delicate organism," (p. 119) he, according to Leder, adopts a view of many naturalist novelists. As a biological creature, Edna is granted her sexuality. To be a "peculiar" creature, however, places her outside the male norm of sufficient reason and reduces her to a bundle of drives out of her control. Edna, however, recognizes her sexual desire as intrinsic. She acts herself actively upon it (when seducing Robert, for example) and does not fall a prey to male control.⁷⁵

I agree with Seyersted, Bender and Leder on Chopin's criticism of naturalism. Watching her friend Adèle Ratignolle's childbirth, Edna revolts "against the ways of Nature" (p. 170) and in the end rather dies than sacrifices herself to nature. However, Chopin was also fascinated by naturalist literature. According to Seyersted, Chopin's favourite writer was French Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), and she translated many of his short stories into English. In Maupassant's naturalist fiction, she seemed to find truth in life instead of artificial plots.⁷⁶ Even Edna's realization of truth seems to conform to the naturalist dictates, for it is exactly in Edna's belief that she can escape her biological destiny only in death that she cannot fully disentangle from the naturalist and essentialist views on

⁷⁴ Bender, "Kate Chopin's Quarrel" 99-100.

⁷⁵ Leder, 243.

⁷⁶ Seyersted, 51.

women. Still, in my opinion, Chopin ventured to go a degree further from the naturalist ideology in seeking the truth.

2.3.4. A Novel in Transition: Towards Modernism

In its skilful and artistic way of probing timeless questions about identity and meaning of life, *The Awakening* appears strikingly ‘modern.’ In 1962, it was declared “a very odd book to have been written in America at the end of the nineteenth century.”⁷⁷ According to Gilmore, this oddness has to do with the novel’s rejection of the ideology of representation offered by the realist and naturalist literary movements. In doing that, the novel “violates contemporary aesthetic standards both in what it dares to say and how it tells its story.”⁷⁸ Gilmore argues that *fin-de-siècle* American arts lagged behind movements in Europe, where modernism already started to emerge. Chopin was not only familiar with cultural tendencies in America, but, partly thanks to her French environment, knew also European and particularly French culture.⁷⁹ This enabled her art to be ahead of her time.

According to John Barth, modernists (1898-1945) differentiated themselves from Victorian bourgeois morality and the nineteenth-century hierarchical and orderly society. They saw art as a self-referential construct instead of as a mirror of society or nature.⁸⁰ In modernist literature, state Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin and Robin Parmar, reality and the pursuit of realism were recognized as conventions, as full verisimilitude between the signifier and the thing it represents is impossible. Keep et al argue that the realist novel is structured around an opening enigma that is solved in the end, much like a classic detective story. The solving of the problem reestablishes harmony in the value system shared by the reader and the author.⁸¹ *The Awakening* is also loaded with dilemmas that need

⁷⁷ Edmund Wilson, qtd in Leder, 237.

⁷⁸ Gilmore, 68.

⁷⁹ Gilmore, 60.

⁸⁰ John Barth, “The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction,” *The Atlantic* Jan. 1980: 68.

⁸¹ Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin and Robin Parmar, “Realism and the Realist Novel,” *The Electronic Labyrinth*, 2001, University of Virginia, 11 Feb. 2004 <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0254.html>>.

to be solved: What is the meaning of life? Is there love? Does a woman have the right for self-fulfilment? Truth is sought by rejecting old views but Chopin does not seem to arrive at a final solution. Gilmore argues that the modernism of *The Awakening* lies exactly in its failure to solve these dilemmas and establish a coherent value system, a truth of life, upon which to build its arguments.⁸²

However, as Gilmore refers to the “problematic” modernism of *The Awakening*, I also abate from claiming the novel fully modernist. Some aspects of Edna’s questioning of the Victorian objective discourse and bourgeois morality conform to modernist ideology, especially to the early modernism of the New Woman fiction. Showalter notes that New Woman writers, such as Olive Schreiner and George Egerton, innovatively modified the model of realist novels in order to explore “a hitherto unrecorded female consciousness.” They called their new fictional forms “allegories” or “dreams,” where they could experiment with the freedom not traditionally available to women.⁸³ Gilmore argues that *The Awakening*, too, shows inclination towards modernist aesthetics in its emphasis of individual consciousness. Edna turns inward affirming her own personality, freedom of individuality and self-expression instead of conforming to the Victorian social conventions.⁸⁴ However, the novel does not adopt modernist radical break from the nineteenth-century traditions. It does not explore subjectivity in a manner of stream-of-consciousness writing, for example, or turn into self-reflexivity by making reference to the codes of literature it employs. Similarly, even though the novel through Edna’s rebel challenges the realist thinking about representation, as it was argued above, it does not show modernist radical experimentation of fragmented, non-chronological form. Further, despite certain ambiguity especially towards the end of the novel where there are no straightforward reasons given to Edna’s death, the novel does not yield to elitist obscurity

⁸² Gilmore, 84.

⁸³ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 69.

⁸⁴ Gilmore, 64-5.

that would make it inaccessible to the common reader—something that many modernists, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, for example, were accused of.⁸⁵ As Gilmore points out, trying to transcend Victorian reality, the novel not quite succeeds in embracing modernism but remains somewhere between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century traditions.⁸⁶

Despite her revolt, it is finally Edna that clings to the old ways of thinking, falling back to essentialism by giving up in the front of the invincible nature. However, at the height of this awakening, Edna dies. I will argue in my analysis that Edna's death is the death of the single, universalistic truth. Drawing from Butler's poststructuralism, I will argue that rather than reestablishing harmony in the contemporary value system, the novel destabilizes it. It both repeats conventions and shows their gaps and inconsistencies. In this sense, as Leder notes, Edna's suicide can be seen as both a failure and a triumph: the failure of Edna, who cannot fully get rid of the confines of both her society and biology, and the triumph of Chopin, who by her protagonist's death succeeds in illuminating the constructions that prohibit her success. *The Awakening*, therefore, is at the same time part of the nineteenth-century literary traditions and looking beyond.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Comparison based on the characterization of modernism by Barth, 68.

⁸⁶ Gilmore, 65.

⁸⁷ Leder, 248.

3. Victorian Construction of Womanhood

As, according to Judith Butler, “sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time”⁸⁸ and gender systems are therefore historical and changeable, I will here examine the premises on which Victorian womanhood was constructed. In their restriction of women, Victorian intellectuals came up with the Cult of True Womanhood, which, as Audre J. Brokes notes, required piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness from women. However, True Womanhood applied only to middle- and upper-class women; non-white, poor and working-class women were excluded from the notion of femininity.⁸⁹ As the main characters of *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz are middle-class women, I will concentrate here on the construction of the middle-class cult of womanhood in order to set up a basis for my analysis of female gender identities in the novel.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg states two Victorian “eternal verities” that were needed to maintain social order: gender complementarity and male dominance. They were of course not Victorian inventions but gained new vigour and justification from the revelations of science. Smith-Rosenberg states that by the 1840s and 1850s medicine and science rivalled religion for ideological supremacy and the old gender ideology was being expressed in a new language of science.⁹⁰

Advances in biology culminated in Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. His *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, placed human beings in the same descent line with the apes, among other animals. This was shocking to the Victorian audience and seemed to nullify everything they had held true before that. From a separate creation “just a little less exalted than the angels” human beings came down not so different from any beast in the

⁸⁸ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 1.

⁸⁹ Audre J. Brokes, *Seminar in Feminist Theories*, 9 Feb. 1999, Dept. of Philosophy, Saint Joseph’s University, 10 Feb. 2004 <<http://www.sju.edu/~brokes/29h.htm>>.

⁹⁰ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 178.

woods. In the new situation, as Cynthia Eagle Russett points out, “a human hierarchy of excellence was needed more than ever.” The model was already there, since “[w]omen and the lesser races served to buffer Victorian gentlemen from a too-threatening intimacy with the brutes.”⁹¹

Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, published in his work *The Descent of Man* in 1871, was used for this purpose. The principle of natural selection and the “survival of the fittest” is well known, and sexual selection is a specific form of that principle. It “depends on the success of certain individuals over others of the same sex in relation to the propagation of the species.”⁹² Darwin found two kinds of sexual struggle which take place between individuals of the same sex. In the one, individuals, generally of the male sex, try to drive away or kill their rivals in order to win a partner, the females remaining passive. In the other, individuals, again generally males, try to charm those of the opposite sex, and thus the role of the females is not passive any longer, but they have the power to select partners for themselves.

According to Darwin’s study, however, usually “the male is the more active member in the courtship of the sexes.”⁹³ The female is less eager, even “coy, and may often be seen endeavoring for a long time to escape from the male.”⁹⁴ Darwin argues that this eagerness and passion in the male is natural and even necessary, since “the acquirement of such passions would naturally follow from the more eager leaving a larger number of offspring than the less eager.”⁹⁵ Male activity would certainly be true among human beings, where, according to Darwin, men had “gained the power of selection” because they were “more powerful in body and mind” than women.

⁹¹ Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 14.

⁹² Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man; and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd Ed (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998) 638.

⁹³ Darwin, 229.

⁹⁴ Darwin, 230.

⁹⁵ Darwin, 231.

Darwin believed that sexual selection has a highly important part to play in forming differences between the sexes. Woman is more tender and unselfish, owing to her maternal instinct, and her mental powers are based on intuition, rapid perception and imitation. Man, on the other hand, owing to his active part in the sexual selection, is competitive and ambitious, which often leads to selfishness. Having developed his skills in the combat against rivaling males, he has attained greater eminence in deep thought, reason, imagination and in using his senses and hands. Thus, declares Darwin, “man has become ultimately superior to woman.”⁹⁶

It is not difficult to see some fatal flaws in Darwin’s reasoning of female inferiority (e.g. if female mental powers are inferior due to passivity, would not allowing a more active part in life fix that?). Nevertheless, Darwin’s theory of natural and sexual selection impressed the Victorian intellectuals by its scientific approach. The theory seemed to explain and legitimize certain tendencies already present in the nineteenth-century American society. Darwin’s theory was soon applied to every aspect of society from arts to economics and became transformed into Darwinism, a set of principles promoting biological determinism.⁹⁷

In the works of one of the most influential Victorian intellectuals, Herbert Spencer, the study of society was seen as “a social extension of biological principles.”⁹⁸ Society worked in the same way as a biological organism. According to Spencer’s theory, in order to an organism to become perfect, it must develop from independent like parts to mutually dependent, highly differentiated parts that are specialized to different tasks needed to maintain its functions.⁹⁹ Victorian scientists came to the conclusion that the sexes were also complementary and not meant to compete with each other. The sexes seemed to have fundamental differences and the aim of the society was to further develop these separate

⁹⁶ Darwin, 585.

⁹⁷ Russett, *Darwin in America* 7.

⁹⁸ Russett, *Sexual Science* 137.

⁹⁹ Russett, *Sexual Science* 132.

sexual functions. Hence came the idea of sexual division of labour, a principle that Spencer heartily accepted and helped to develop.¹⁰⁰

According to the division of labour, men provided the bread to the table whereas women provided love and nurturance to the family. Nature's lesson was mutual interdependence where man's technical superiority granted him the leading role and woman with her more tender abilities served as a balancing and humanizing virtue for her master.¹⁰¹ Everyone was supposed to have a free choice of any occupation they saw themselves fit. However, women were not considered fit for anything else than wifehood and maternity. Victorian interpretation of 'nature' resulted in the application of the sexual division of labour to men as individuals and to women as a group.¹⁰² It was meant to reduce competition but, instead, as Wendy Martin argues, division of labour resulted in social and psychological fragmentation and increased tension between the sexes.¹⁰³

For the Victorian scientists, woman's biology was her destiny.¹⁰⁴ Along with the various applications of the evolution theory, another principle of at least equal importance in condemning women into their destiny was the law of the conservation of energy. This law states that the energy of a system remains always constant. Furthermore, as the amount of energy is limited, the system, whether a steam engine or a human being, could fully concentrate on completing one task at a time. Therefore energy should be spared and one should always be mindful of not constraining oneself too much and have enough rest.¹⁰⁵

Of all human activities, brain work drained most the limited energy supplies. For women, this fact was crucial. In addition to all the normal drafts of bodily energy shared by both sexes, women had to develop and maintain their reproductive functions. Adolescent girls were often taken from schools in order to concentrate on the development of their

¹⁰⁰ Russett, *Sexual Science* 146.

¹⁰¹ Russett, *Sexual Science* 144, 148.

¹⁰² Russett, *Sexual Science* 151, 154.

¹⁰³ Wendy Martin, Introduction, *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 17.

¹⁰⁴ Smith-Rosenberg, 178.

¹⁰⁵ Russett, *Sexual Science* 106, 116.

reproductive systems at home and women were supposed to avoid strenuous work during their fertile years. This was important not only for the health of women but also for the existence of the entire human race. Energy spent in other activities was lost to reproduction and, at worst, intense brain work would lead to sterility.¹⁰⁶

This climate of “sociocultural apartheid based on sex,” as Russett calls it, was a product of its time. The assumption that the separate sexual natures of men and women was of more importance than their shared human nature had roots in a pessimistic attitude of the late nineteenth-century scientists about humanity in general. This particular mood has been called *fin de siècle*. A prominent sociologist of the time described its manifestations as “naturalism in fiction, ‘decadence’ in poetry, realism in art, tragedy in music, scepticism in religion, cynicism in politics, and pessimism in philosophy.” Important factors causing this anxiety were a growing awareness of the social costs of industrialism and the disturbing revelations of science.¹⁰⁷

Nature practiced no democracy, as there was only violent survival of the fittest by any means necessary. This model also seemed to sanction the most violent aspects of contemporary society, such as warfare and *laissez-faire* in economics that left the strong ones to rule. Civilization appeared as nothing more than a thin veil covering the savage inside all people.¹⁰⁸ Scientists had given up the view that environment had any effect on human behaviour. There were the insane and alcoholics as well as criminals and the poor still living in society despite social reforms. There seemed to be no logical explanation other than that there was something elementary wrong with these people, some hereditary flaw against which there was no cure.¹⁰⁹

Against this background, notes Russett, a “human hierarchy of excellence” was more than necessary. There were more women than idiots and, contrary to savages, they

¹⁰⁶ Russett, *Sexual Science* 113-9.

¹⁰⁷ Edward A. Ross, qtd in Russett, *Sexual Science* 194.

¹⁰⁸ Russett, *Sexual Science* 195.

¹⁰⁹ Russett, *Sexual Science* 198.

lived within the Victorian society, so it was their otherness that served to boost masculine superiority.¹¹⁰ Science introduced specific details of female inferiority in a new language that did not contradict the old doctrines. It served to maintain the established social order where women did their duty for the benefit of the race. It was the last desperate clasp to certainty and “eternal verities” in the fear of the opening modern world view of uncertainty.

In order for a Victorian woman to have an identity, she had to conform to a hierarchy of power where men were given the power of definition and women were seen as necessary opposites who are made available to (and placed under control of) men through strict marriage laws and codes of conduct. As it was already argued in Chapter 2, the inclusion of a set of features in an identity requires the exclusion of others. Butler argues that in addition to subjects conforming to the normative ideal, there are numerous beings who are denied of an identity because they fail to conform to the ideal.¹¹¹ In the latter half of the 19th century, however, the excluded began to become visible. They were called New Women, and they became the symbol of the first wave of feminism. They rejected their mothers’ destiny and asserted their right to a career, to visible power and sexual autonomy. White and middle-class, they were college-educated and professionally trained. They were capable of earning their own income and few ever married.¹¹² Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby argue that this first wave of feminism can be seen as Foucauldian reverse discourse as it challenged the normalizing and naturalizing powers of medicine and science.¹¹³ Following Butler, I would say it was a serious attempt to put “the consolidation of the norms of ‘sex’ into a potentially productive crisis.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Russett, *Sexual Science* 205.

¹¹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23.

¹¹² Smith-Rosenberg, 176.

¹¹³ Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, Introduction, *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) xi-xix, 26 March 2004, <<http://www.thefoucauldian.co.uk/feminism.pdf>>.

¹¹⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 10.

According to Emily Toth, in the United States of the 1890s, a greater number of women stayed single by choice than ever before.¹¹⁵ That did not go unnoticed by Victorian intellectuals. A sexually autonomous woman who ignored gender restrictions was considered ‘unnatural’ and seemed to destroy the Victorian social order. According to Smith-Rosenberg, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards “woman had become the quintessential symbol of social danger and disorder” that needed to be controlled.¹¹⁶

In the United States, fertility rates among middle-class women declined throughout the 19th century and the trend accelerated towards the end of the century. Infant mortality declined somewhat later and less dramatically.¹¹⁷ Especially among those women who left their homes for college education, the birth rates were low. Many of them did not even marry, and those who did may not have had children at all, the average number of children being only around 2 per married woman. These figures seemed to confirm the Victorian beliefs that intellectual work resulted in sterility.¹¹⁸

From the standpoint of Victorian male biological ethics, a woman defining her own rights and duties was considered selfish. By refusing to become a birth-giving automaton—or by insisting on the self-development to the degree she became sterile, as the argument went—she had “taken up and utilized in her own all that was meant for her descendants.”¹¹⁹ Measures were taken to prevent this. Toth states that after 1873, it became illegal to disseminate birth control information in magazines or newspapers. Abortion also became illegal—for the first time in the United States.¹²⁰ The whole human race appeared to be in danger, as scientists warned that any change in the nineteenth-century sexual and social order “necessarily induces a perturbation in the evolution of races.”¹²¹ Women, as

¹¹⁵ Toth, *Unveiling* 111.

¹¹⁶ Smith-Rosenberg, 181.

¹¹⁷ Lerner, 176.

¹¹⁸ Russett, *Sexual Science* 120-3.

¹¹⁹ G. Stanley Hall, qtd in Russett, *Sexual Science* 120.

¹²⁰ Toth, *Unveiling* 70-1.

¹²¹ Paul Broca, qtd in Russett, *Sexual Science* 27-8.

Russett points out, seemed to have no right to self-fulfilment that could “stand for a moment against the claims of society of their wombs.”¹²²

Chopin’s text offers a fertile ground for examining Victorian female gender identities. In *The Awakening*, Edna mirrors her own search for identity to the role models offered by her friends. Adèle Ratignolle conforms to the normative ideal of the Victorian society being a perfect wife and mother. Mlle Reisz belongs to the sphere of the incoherent and excluded. Unmarried and independent, she has no position in the society and she is only able to express herself through her music. Edna rejects both these models and is looking for a way to combine autonomy and a social position.

3.1. Adèle Ratignolle: A Conventional Role Model

In *The Awakening*, the summer resort of Grand Isle is described as a place where “mother-women seemed to prevail.” They were “women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (p. 51). Many were “delicious in the rôle” (p. 51), but one of them was above them all. That woman was Adèle Ratignolle, “the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (p. 51).

In the nineteenth-century America, states Ann Douglas, motherhood was idealized in a way that formed into a cult of motherhood in the 1840s and 1850s. During this time, a perpetual Mother’s Day was established and biographies written on mothers of great men gained popularity.¹²³ In the conservative and Catholic Creole society, a woman’s role as a wife and mother was considered perhaps even more holy than elsewhere. Mary L. Shaffter wrote in *The Chautauquan* in June 1892 about Creole women who are “without superiors” as wives, as they are “loving and true” and “they seldom figure in domestic scandals.” They have large families and regard every child as a treasure. In every respect

¹²² Russett, *Sexual Science* 123.

¹²³ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 1977 (London: Papermac, 1996) 74.

they seem content in their position, as for them, women's rights are "the right to love and be loved, and to name babies rather than the next president of city officials."¹²⁴ According to this account, the idea of gender complementarity reached its perfection in the Creole society.

Adèle certainly seems content in her role, as she seems to succeed in drawing meaning in her life from the domestic female world. Her time is occupied by domestic affairs since, even though they have servants, she wants to take care of every little detail in the household. Her home is her pride and she is devoted to its management and especially to her children. In that world she has a status, an identity that she performatively consolidates by constantly drawing attention to her pregnancy, for example. She makes herself visible by reiterating the traditional Victorian view of women, like when she pretends a spell of faintness so that others need to gather around her in order to revive her or when she makes a self-sacrificing spectacle of herself, insisting on bearing her baby "with a thousand endearments" in her arms, even though, "as everybody well knew, the doctor had forbidden her to lift so much as a pin" (p. 56).

Smith-Rosenberg argues that nineteenth-century women indeed drew strength from the domestic female society. She paints almost an idealistic picture of women's culture where hostility towards other women was discouraged and mutual nurturing existed. A network of friends was a safe net in the male dominated world where women with low status in the public sphere were highly esteemed and valued by other women.¹²⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert describes Grand Isle a kind of oasis of this feminine culture, a "female colony," as she calls it. The place is run by Madame Lebrun, a beautiful widow, and it is occupied by women and children, whose husbands and fathers visit the place only on

¹²⁴ Mary L. Shaffter, "Creole Women," *The Chautauquan* 15 (1892): 346-347, College of the Sequoias, 29 Jan. 2000 <http://zeus.sequoias.cc.ca.us/Language_Arts/Johnston/creolewomen.html>.

¹²⁵ Smith-Rosenberg, 63-4.

weekends.¹²⁶ In this environment, Adèle Ratignolle is the “faultless Madonna” (p. 54) of women’s culture. By her friendship with Edna, she also tries to socialize Edna into it, as in the scene where she succeeds in persuading somewhat uninterested Edna to participate in planning a baby’s winter wear (pp. 51-2). However, to gain strength from the women’s culture and to build a coherent identity requires conforming to the Victorian gender intelligibility, the rules of proper feminine conduct. This is something Adèle knows when she, concerned of Edna’s attempts at an independent life, thinks that Edna acts “without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” (p. 153). But what Adèle does not see is that Edna is trying to overthrow that very necessity, since, by its emphasis on the feminine, the self-regulating women’s culture serves to consolidate the binary system of hierarchical sexual relations.

Despite Adèle’s resistance, Edna’s quest proves to be important as the novel develops, for, as much as the above account gives an impression of a uniform society conforming to common rules, the term ‘women’ does not denote a common identity, not among Creoles or elsewhere. Butler argues that gender is not always constituted coherently, because genders appear in different historical contexts, and because “gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.”¹²⁷ Women are dispersed throughout the population in every group and class in society. Even Gerda Lerner, who is trying to establish a special women’s history, states that women have more common and closer relationships with men sharing their own social standing than they have with women of other classes or races.¹²⁸ At Grand Isle, the work of black and quadroon servants goes almost unnoticed by their white, middle-class matrons. For these invisible women, the summer resort is certainly not an oasis of women’s culture of mutual nurturing. Uniform Creole gender identity is a deception that promotes impossible and

¹²⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert, “The Second Coming of Aphrodite,” Introduction, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, by Kate Chopin, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 25-6.

¹²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 6.

¹²⁸ Lerner, 170.

unnecessary essentialism, leaving numerous beings within the society outside the domain of subjectivity.

Another deception of Creole culture is women's "freedom of expression" and their "entire absence of prudery" (p. 53). Edna is awed by the Creole liberty that allows women read French naturalist novels and smoke cigarettes. The open way with which Adèle talks about her pregnancies in the presence of men makes Edna blush. Still, she has "no difficulty in reconciling" their behaviour "with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (p. 53). As Lawrence Thornton points out, their seemingly liberal and approved standing is solely gained through marriage. The society's praise of the mother-women is an anachronism that exemplifies the "society's vision of woman's function"¹²⁹ as an oppressed creature, whose whole existence is, in fact, regulated in relation to men in the heterosexual matrix.

Besides to produce children, the function of the Victorian middle-class lady was to display her husband's wealth by consumption in a manner of a true status symbol. Industrialization had created a flourishing middle class that widened the financial gap to the working class. This new prosperity enabled middle-class women to turn into 'ladies,' a status that was formerly available only for the upper classes. Ladies did not have to work and they could also have some of the domestic work done by others. Homemaking was developed into a potent ideology with "scientific nutrition and hygiene, modern methods of child-rearing, home decoration and entertaining according to the 'lady-like' standards."¹³⁰

This aristocratic way of life was not available to the middle class without some adjustments. Victorian economist Thorstein Veblen argued in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899 that as the middle class did not have the financial resources of the aristocracy to provide leisure for both sexes, activities of work and leisure had to be divided along gender

¹²⁹ Lawrence Thornton, "The Awakening: A Political Romance," *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996) 86, 92.

¹³⁰ Lerner, 132-3.

lines. Thus the husband produced the wealth that enabled the wife to consume the goods and services traditionally available to the aristocracy. The leisured lady was idealized as a “true woman,” and became the model of American femininity in the Cult of True Womanhood. It was a social construction that, argues Wendy Martin, prevented women from participating in the activities of the public sphere. It was “a cultural representation of the confinement of female energy,” designed to keep women in their proper sphere.¹³¹

In addition to the economic practice and social custom, the woman’s place was also regulated legally. Because of its French heritage, the legal system of Louisiana is still today based on Roman civil law as opposed to British common law that is applied in other states of the United States.¹³² At the turn of the century, this Napoleonic Code, as it is called, confined women in marriage with little possibility for self-determination. Martin states that according to this law, a “wife and everything she possessed, including her clothes” was defined as her husband’s property. In Catholic Louisiana, divorce was rare: in 1890 there were only 29 divorces per 100,000 inhabitants. It was a scandalous event, and disgraced the wife so deeply that the custody of children was automatically given to the husband.¹³³

In *The Awakening*, all this goes without saying in the marriage of the Ratignolles, where Adèle has internalized her position. In the household of the Pontelliers, on the other hand, these details start to take shape in the narrative. Edna, a daughter of a Protestant family from Kentucky, is accustomed to a slightly freer position of women. For example, she has, contrary to Creole wives, inherited money from her mother—money that is her own, even though the income is controlled by her father, who sends the money to her “by driblets” (p. 134). The power relations that subordinate women as their husbands’ property start to become visible because Edna, an outsider, is there to question them.

¹³¹ Martin, 24-5.

¹³² La-Legal.com, “How the Code Napoleon Makes Louisiana Law Different,” 21 Jan. 2004 <http://www.la-legal.com/history_louisiana_law.htm>.

¹³³ Martin, 17.

Edna's Creole husband Léonce appears in the text to be very particular about his property. He has a habit of strolling around his "very charming" (p. 99) house and examining the expensive furniture and ornaments he has acquired to decorate his home. He gives high value to his possessions, "chiefly because they were his" (p. 99). This is how he treats Edna, as well. After a sunny day spent on the beach of Grand Isle, Mr. Pontellier objects to Edna's sunburnt skin, "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (p. 44). The luxurious setting of the female confinement makes it easier to accept the situation. Even Edna enjoys the leisure of her standing: she likes money "as well as most women," and accepts it "with no little satisfaction" (p. 50). When in the city, Mr. Pontellier often sends generous gifts to his wife at Grand Isle. Edna likes to share the delicacies found in the gift boxes with other ladies, who declare Mr. Pontellier "the best husband in the world." Even Edna is "forced to admit that she knew of none better" (p. 50). With due respect paid to the irony of the previous sentence, it is, after all, easier to try to accommodate to the normative ideals, identities and roles at offer in one's context than to challenge them.

However, inside "that outward existence that conforms" Edna has developed "the inward life which questions" (p. 57). In this she differs from Adèle who, having internalized her status, does not even seem to recognize her oppression. Elaine Showalter notes that if Edna was to take Adèle's example, Edna would "give up her rebellion, return to her marriage, have another baby, and by degrees learn to appreciate, love, and even desire her husband," following the plots of "many late-nineteenth-century novels about erring young women married to older men."¹³⁴ Indeed, Chopin created something of a kind herself in her short story "Athénaïse," where a run-away wife returns happily to her husband when she learns she is pregnant. But Edna cannot turn back, not after she finally awakens. For Adèle, the embodiment of true womanhood is, after all, only a "bygone

¹³⁴ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 76.

heroine,” for whom there are no words left to describe her “save the old ones” (p. 51), when Edna is looking for something new.

3.2. Mademoiselle Reisz: An Alternative Role Model

A total opposite to Adèle Ratignolle’s matronly character is Mademoiselle Reisz, a great pianist who is portrayed as a disagreeable spinster, living alone in her little apartment “up under the roof” (p. 113). She is “no longer young” and has “quarrelled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (p. 70). She openly disregards proper feminine behaviour, for example when she is found in her cottage “objecting to the crying of a baby” (p. 70).

In Butler’s terms, I would argue that Mademoiselle Reisz is one of “those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings” “who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined.” According to Butler, these beings are denied of an identity as they do not conform to “the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality” and they break the established “connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice.”¹³⁵ The narrative of *The Awakening* mirrors the Creole gender intelligibility as it builds up a sharp contrast between Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz in the physical description of the two characters. While Adèle, a perfect woman, is praised for her beauty, Mademoiselle is described as a “homely woman, with a small weazened face and body,” one who has “absolutely no taste in dress” (p. 71). If not exactly Charlotte Brontë’s madwoman in the attic, Mademoiselle Reisz is nonetheless so far from the intelligible Victorian feminine identity that Edna’s lover Alcée Arobin calls her “partially demented” (p. 138). There is also a hint of Mademoiselle Reisz’s possible homosexual orientation when she raves “over Edna’s appearance in her bathing suit” (p.

¹³⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23.

99) and tells Edna she is “a foolish old woman” whom Edna has “captivated” (p. 116). A passionate woman, as Thornton points out, she has had to learn to sublimate her forbidden passion to music.¹³⁶

Mademoiselle Reisz is laughed at because of her avoidance of water. People at Grand Isle joke it might be “on account of her false hair, or the dread of getting the violets wet,” (p. 97) the artificial flowers she wears in her hair. Rosemary F. Franklin suggests that the shabby lace of Mademoiselle Reisz’s dress and the violets indicate her twisted expression of femininity when compared to the norms of Creole society.¹³⁷ She is ‘false’ and ‘artificial’ because she differs from the norms of ‘true’ and ‘natural’ womanhood. In her otherness, she constitutes the necessary outside to the gender intelligibility, without which coherent gender identities cannot exist. It seems that Creole Mademoiselle has also herself acquiesced in her position as the necessary other. Although she violates social conventions and shows no desire to conform to them, she is used to living in the world governed by them, thus contributing to the existence of that world.

Even though she is trapped in the matrix of Creole social norms, Mademoiselle’s excluded position seems relatively independent when compared to Creole mother-wives. Her passionate music, “her divine art,” also seems “to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (p. 133). Following Mademoiselle’s example, Edna starts her independent life through art. She spends long days painting in her atelier and neglects her duties as a housewife. Mademoiselle Reisz, however, is somewhat concerned when Edna utters her desire to become an artist. She reminds Edna that an artist must possess a courageous soul “that dares and defies” (p. 115) in order to “soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (p. 138). And it seems Edna does not have strong enough wings to do that. In cloudy weather Edna cannot work: she needs “the sun to mellow and temper her mood to the sticking point” (p. 127). She even admits to her husband that her art is not much better

¹³⁶ Thornton, 89.

¹³⁷ Rosemary F. Franklin, “*The Awakening* and the Failure of Psyche,” *American Literature* 56 (1984) 521.

than Adèle's piano playing for enlivening the home: "She isn't a musician, and I'm not a painter" (p. 108).

Despite its tempting independence, Edna does not want to meet Mademoiselle Reisz's fate of living in isolation. Mademoiselle's story suggests, as Showalter points out, that Edna will lose everything in her life but her art and pride,¹³⁸ and she is not ready for that.

3.3. Edna Pontellier: "A Devilishly Wicked Specimen of the Sex"?

The first glimpse of Edna Pontellier in the novel is given through her husband's eyes. Léonce Pontellier watches his wife's figure advance from the beach "at snail's pace" (p. 44). Edna's development from a supposedly simple organism into a complex person starts appropriately at the beach, as all life. At Grand Isle, a "certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (p. 57). She starts to develop from a mere object and her husband's personal property into a being claiming her subjectivity on her own grounds, "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" (p. 57). At the end of the novel, when Edna returns to the beach alone for the last time, she has turned her back to her husband's watching eyes and to the whole patronizing and patriarchal society, standing on the shore "like some new-born creature ... in a familiar world that it had never known" (p. 175). But, as the narrator warns us, "the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!" (p. 57)

Edna, though married to a Creole, is "not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles" (p. 52). At Grand Isle, she feels herself a bit of an outsider, even more so as all the

¹³⁸ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 76.

other Creoles know each other “like one large family” (p. 52). Although she is accepted in the crowd, her friend Adèle recognizes that she is “not one of us; she is not like us” (p. 64). To Edna, the “whole manner of living” of Creoles seems “very French” and therefore “very foreign” (p. 105) from every day customs to the very language they speak, French being Creole mother tongue. However, it is from her outside position that Edna is able to see the constructedness of the ideal Victorian Creole female gender identity.

Joyce Dyer compares Edna’s position with the position of the black servants in the novel. Outsiders to the white, middle-class society, even reduced to the outskirts of the narrative, these servants indicate the larger restlessness lying below the surface of American society caused by the “pervasive ... absence of freedom.” Like Edna’s quadroon nurse who attends the Pontellier boys with “a fictitious animation and alacrity” (p. 104) and leads a life of compulsory servitude due to her race, so is Edna herself expected to devote her life to others due to her gender.¹³⁹ In the Creole society of former slave owners and chivalric attitude towards women, the dependence of these positions is even more pronounced than elsewhere. However, the positions are as fictitious as the nurse’s attendance to the boys because they are presented without alternatives: instead of having been dictated by a biological necessity or the essence of their holders’ beings, they are constructions that exist in the matrix of white male supremacy.

Edna’s difference from the Creole women shows most clearly in her attitude towards motherhood. Edna has two sons, Raoul and Etienne, but, contrary to other women at Grand Isle, she is “not a mother-woman” (p. 51). She is fond of her children but motherhood seems to her like “a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (p. 63). Edna’s repudiation of the cult of motherhood stands out in the Catholic Creole society. As Seyersted notes, the Virgin Mary is the Christian

¹³⁹ Joyce Dyer, “Reading *The Awakening* with Toni Morrison,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 35.1 (2002) *Project MUSE*, 22 April 2004 <<http://muse.jhu.edu>> 143-4.

feminine ideal, and in the Catholic cult she is deified as the Goddess Mother.¹⁴⁰ Not a very religious person (as a child she used to run away from the Presbyterian service, “read in a spirit of gloom by [her] father that chills [her] yet to think of” [p. 60]), Edna nonetheless decides to go to the mass at Chênrière Caminada. In the little Gothic church of Our Lady of Lourdes, a “feeling of oppression and drowsiness” (p. 82) overcomes Edna during the service. The “stifling atmosphere of the church” (p. 83) that almost suffocates Edna parallels to the stifling atmosphere of the Creole society with all its social, legal and religious norms confining women into the restricting sanctity of motherhood.

In the society of women idolizing their children Edna starts to realize she does not fit into the gender identity at offer for women. When the Pontelliers return to the city in the autumn, Edna seems changed. Back home in New Orleans, she abandons her reception days, does not care to conduct the household and starts to come and go as she likes. Mr. Pontellier is shocked and angered by her “absolute disregard for her duties as a wife” (p. 108). Due to her ‘unnatural’ behaviour, Léonce fears Edna is going insane. On the contrary, Edna protests against the performance to keep up her artificial position by “daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (p. 108). Turning slowly away from the domain of gender intelligibility in favour of her own feelings and thoughts, she starts to see her environment as “an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (p. 104).

Her children gone to their grandmother and her husband to a business trip, Edna enjoys her newly acquired freedom. Determined not to give it up, she resolves “never again to belong to another than herself” (p. 135). As a manifestation of her determination, she moves into her own home. Her servant calls the new home a “pigeon-house” (p. 140). Bert Bender argues the name is an explicit reference to Darwin’s description of female pigeons

¹⁴⁰ Seyersted, 140, 148.

who refuse to submit to any given males in *The Descent of Man*.¹⁴¹ The same triumphant defiance is heard in Edna's words when she declares to her lover Robert Lebrun: "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (p. 167).

Making arrangements for a life of her own adds to Edna's "strength and expansion as an individual:" "She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her" (p. 151). In other words, she starts to comprehend her position as a wife as an effect of regulatory power, of norms which she no longer wishes to consolidate by conforming to them. Now she wants to make her own rules, to build an identity that meets her own needs, not those of the society. Before moving into the pigeon-house, Edna gives a grand party to her friends in her husband's house with her husband's money. Arobin calls Edna's party a *coup d'état* (p. 141), and it certainly seems like the final act in claiming her independence. When she sits among her guests, there is "something in her attitude" that suggests "the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (p. 145).

Edna seems to revolt against the old social conventions in a way New Women did. Like them, she dismisses the world of mother-women as restrictive, an ennui.¹⁴² In order to make an independent living in her own house, she sells her paintings. Even though Kate Chopin did not identify herself as a feminist,¹⁴³ her creation resembles heroines in New Woman fiction. According to Linda Dowling, the New Woman saw herself unfit in the contemporary culture, she was "precociously modern" and "out of

¹⁴¹ Bender, "The Teeth of Desire" 125-6.

¹⁴² Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 68.

¹⁴³ According to Seyersted, Chopin was not politically active and felt alienated from 'bluestockings.' She never joined or even supported any organization demanding equal social rights with men. 102

phase” with her own time.¹⁴⁴ Rejecting bourgeois morality, she was an early modernist. Similarly, feeling alienated from her time, Edna muses to Arobin: “By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can’t convince myself that I am” (p. 138). By Victorian codes she certainly is the opposite of the feminine ideal of the Angel in the House, as she, in her husband’s words, lets “the family go to the devil” (p. 108) and becomes a ‘fallen woman’ by her engagement in extra-marital sex. Like the New Woman, however, she believes in her right cause. Quarrelling with the established Victorian culture, Edna shares the New Woman desire to be “freed from the hateful constriction of sexual identity.”¹⁴⁵

Like the New Woman, Edna emphatically expresses her quarrel through sex. Sternberg states that Victorians considered sex a necessary evil in marriage: it was permissible only for procreation and best consummated infrequently. Good women were believed to have no sexual needs. In fact, it was common to think they were incapable of experiencing sexual pleasure and the act of sex was performed in self-sacrifice in order to have children.¹⁴⁶ Edna defies this view by taking Alcée Arobin as her lover. She does it in order to satisfy her “nature’s requirements” (p. 163) and enjoys her sexuality in non-procreative sex. Like the New Woman, she wants to reinterpret sexual relations in a way that brings sexuality back to the realm of the natural and, in turn, throws away the Victorian moral conventions as a mere façade and the borders of masculinity and femininity as artificial.¹⁴⁷

If the aim of the Victorian intellectuals was to make a man more manly and a woman more womanly, the aim of the New Woman was the opposite. Erin E. MacDonald refers to Edna’s androgynous behaviour in the novel: she looks somewhat boyish, “rather

¹⁴⁴ Linda Dowling, “The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890’s,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33 (1979) *The Scholarly Journal Archive*, 20 March 2003 <<http://www.jstor.org>> 445.

¹⁴⁵ Dowling, 453.

¹⁴⁶ Sternberg, 63.

¹⁴⁷ Dowling, 440-1.

handsome than beautiful” (p. 46), is attracted to Adèle’s beauty, fails to conform to the role of a mother-woman, takes an active role in her relationship with Robert and often forgets the rules of proper feminine conduct. MacDonald argues that Edna is progressively seeking a female identity other than wife or mother and tries to transgress the confinements of her sex through androgyny.¹⁴⁸ Still, she does not fully achieve independence.

Edna is already a mother and cannot cancel her marriage. Divorce is not really an option, either, as Léonce would do anything to prevent the scandal and save appearances in the same way when he makes Edna’s moving out of the house look like a necessary manoeuvre in order to have the house renovated. Struggling between her ambitions and social conventions, Edna’s character remains somewhat evasive. She wonders to Alcée Arobin “what kind of a woman” (p. 138) she is and it seems that in the end she cannot decide. Thus, at the height of her independence at her dinner party,

she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed. There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable (p. 145).

¹⁴⁸ Erin E. MacDonald, “Necessarily Vague: Kate Chopin’s Gender Awakening,” *Domestic Goddesses*, 24 May 1999, ed. Kim Wells, 23 Feb. 2004 <<http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/macdonald.html>>.

4. Three Stages of Awakening: Victorian, Romantic and Schopenhauerian Concepts of Love

The Awakening shocked the Victorian public by its frank treatment of sexuality. What made the novel especially shocking was the fact that it was written by a woman. Elaine Showalter notes that previous works by American women writers often ignored female sexuality altogether or “spiritualized it through maternity.” *The Awakening*, on the other hand, is thoroughly sexual, even explicitly so, as the protagonist gradually becomes aware of her sexuality and is ready to act on the sensations it awakens in her body.¹⁴⁹ The novel develops into “the celebration of female sexuality,” as Wendy Martin puts it, but at the same time it explores the tension between erotic desire and the demands of a traditional society, where a woman is defined through her husband and children.¹⁵⁰

An aspect that has perhaps not been studied with equal thoroughness is the treatment of love in the novel. Edna Pontellier’s sexual awakening is merely a side product of her journey into herself. Through that journey, she starts to ponder “what kind of a woman” (p. 138) she is, mirroring her own experiences to the Victorian gender identities. In the Victorian social system, woman is the source of love and nurturance for the rest of the family. The capability to love, therefore, is a major feature defining Victorian female identity. Before Edna can arrive at self-definition, she needs to see through the representations or constructions of love that bind her to the Victorian gender roles.

Chopin expressed her own views on love when *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* asked her and two other society women to answer the question “Is Love Divine?” The column was published on 16 January 1898, at the time Chopin was writing *The Awakening*. There she says: “One really never knows the exact, definite thing which excites love for any one person, and one can never truly know whether this love is the result of circumstances or

¹⁴⁹ Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 72.

¹⁵⁰ Martin, 1.

whether it is predestination. I am inclined to think that love springs from animal instinct, and therefore is, in a measure, divine.”¹⁵¹ It seems that Chopin has adopted a somewhat interactionist view on love. She believes that love originally “springs from animal instinct,” but it is affected by “circumstances.” She does not even leave out the Romantic possibility of “predestination.” Perhaps more than telling anything new or interesting on Chopin’s views on love, the column reveals something of a society where a question like that needs to be asked. While Chopin remains detached and analytical, the other two answers emphasize the True Woman’s duty to love.¹⁵²

My aim here is to study different representations of love in *The Awakening*. I have chosen to discuss the experience of love from three standpoints, namely Victorian, Romantic and Schopenhauerian. These concepts have also validity in the larger historical context, as they correspond to the literary movements of realism, transcendentalism and naturalism. They serve as three stages of awakening for Edna Pontellier, as she recognizes the constructedness and artificiality of the restrictions of the Victorian marriage, starts to dream about Romantic love and finally awakens into Schopenhauerian pessimism about love. The three concepts seem to approach love very differently, but I will argue that underneath all of them lies the heterosexual matrix that binds love to reproduction.

The Victorian concept of love represents a view restricted to a definite cultural and social context. In defining the concept, I try to paint a picture of social conditions that formed the love life of the American late-Victorian middle-class woman. In this context, ‘Victorian’ refers to the prevailing ideological atmosphere of strict social rules at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, it must be noted that in that historical period, other representations of love also coexisted with the Victorian concept of love. For example, the romantic tradition was still strong in the Victorian age. A word that perhaps best describes

¹⁵¹ Emily Toth, “Kate Chopin on Divine Love and Suicide: Two Rediscovered Articles,” *American Literature* 63 (1991) 118.

¹⁵² Toth, “Kate Chopin” 118.

the Victorian concept of love is repression. The repression of passionate feelings turns Victorian love into a hierarchical comradeship, where the relationship between a woman and a man is, in fact, not personal any longer, but where both partners have their own duties to fulfil for the society. Edna Pontellier finds herself imprisoned in her marriage of convenience with duties she does not feel her own. In order to liberate herself from Victorian restrictions, she escapes into Romantic passion.

Romantic love can be said to have originated in the 12th century in the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was a time when troubadours sang love songs to beautiful maidens or matrons of the castle.¹⁵³ This tradition of courtly love has evolved through time, but ideals of romantic love, the idealization of the beloved one and the dreams of a perfect match, are still here with us. In this chapter, I concentrate on the concept of love of the Romantic period in the 19th century. When referring to this specific Romantic period I capitalize the word 'Romantic' in order to differentiate it from the longer romantic tradition that has lasted for centuries. In contrast to the Victorian repression, Romantic love is passionate and emphasizes the intimate bond between lovers. The lovers are everything to each other and need nothing but their love to reach fulfilment in life. In America especially, Romanticism expressed itself in transcendentalism that emphasized the individual against the confinements of the society. This is something Edna Pontellier yearns after years of repression and what she imagines to find in Robert's love.

The Schopenhauerian concept of love represents a naturalistic approach to the experience of love where enduring love is an illusion covering the fact that a relationship between a woman and a man only aims at reproduction. Although philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was not a naturalist in a strict sense of the word, his metaphysics of love anticipated the theories of Darwinian scientists. I have chosen Schopenhauer over Darwin because the despair Edna feels at points in the novel better corresponds to Schopenhauer's

¹⁵³ *The Trouble with Love*, Adoring Women, YLE TV1, 14 March 2003.

pessimistic ideas of humanity. It is quite possible that Kate Chopin was also familiar with Schopenhauer's philosophy.¹⁵⁴ Even if she did not read Schopenhauer's works herself, she would have become exposed to his world view through Maupassant, who was a great admirer of Schopenhauer.¹⁵⁵ Towards the end of *The Awakening*, Edna dismisses Romantic love as fantasy and is seized by Schopenhauerian pessimism.

4.1. Victorian Concept of Love

Queen Victoria ruled Britain 1837-1901. She gave her name to a set of values that today are connected with decency and stiff morality. The first half of the 19th century saw the rise of new Puritanism in Britain. Queen Victoria was brought up according to strict moral codes and her counsellors had decided that she would become a model for morality as a Queen. Victorian values were a product of well considered politics. The morality of the Queen was a striking contrast to the sexual court of King George IV, which was a constant topic of joking in the papers. The Queen's marriage to Prince Albert was considered an ideal marriage. They had nine children and their companionship was set as an example for all subjects to strive to.¹⁵⁶

All this also affected the American society, in fact to the extent that Ann Douglas describes nineteenth-century America even "more Victorian" than other countries to which the term is applied, bringing forth "the worst, the most sentimental aspects of the Victorian spirit."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer's "The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes" in *The World as Will and Idea* was first available in the USA in translation in 1888. Bert Bender believes that Chopin indeed was familiar with Schopenhauer's work. Bender argues this becomes evident in the scene in *The Awakening* where Dr. Mandelst and Edna discuss the illusion of love, Nature's "decoy to secure mothers for the race" (p. 171). Bender, "Kate Chopin's Quarrel" 115.

¹⁵⁵ Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 382.

¹⁵⁶ *Victorians Uncovered: The Perfect Marriage*, YLE TV1, 23 Feb. 2003.

¹⁵⁷ Douglas, 5.

4.1.1. Adèle Ratignolle and the Ideal Victorian Love

The Victorian American society was divided into male and female spheres of different interests, which left men's and women's worlds separate of each other. Smith-Rosenberg argues that this was so because gender roles were rigidly differentiated within the society, as within the family.¹⁵⁸ The public sphere of law, politics and economics was men's arena and women acted only in the private sphere of domestic life. The division of separate spheres was due to the supposed psychological differences of the sexes: men were associated "with reason, objectivity, the law; women with emotion, subjectivity, and ritual."¹⁵⁹ Victorians believed these separate spheres were determined "by the immutable laws of God and nature," which left little option for ordinary people to change them. Hindered by this God-given barrier, contacts between men and women were formal and stiff.¹⁶⁰

In the Victorian nineteenth century, love between men and women existed legitimately only in marriage, where it could be harnessed for the benefit of the society. Men did their duty by working in the public sphere, whereas women served the society by providing nurturance to the family and producing good citizens. As Gerda Lerner points out, women's ultimate purpose in life was to love, as wives and mothers, and to devote their lives to their families.¹⁶¹ Ideal love was committed companionship which did not include passionate feelings. Passion, as Robert J. Sternberg points out, was only directed towards God; there was no place for that emotion in the secular relationships between humans.¹⁶² Moreover, it was believed that deep emotions drained heavily on the limited bodily energies and were therefore to be avoided.¹⁶³

An ideal Victorian marriage in *The Awakening* is pictured in the union of Alphonse and Adèle Ratignolle. Mr. Ratignolle owns a drug store, a prosperous trade that allows a

¹⁵⁸ Smith-Rosenberg, 60.

¹⁵⁹ Martin, 16.

¹⁶⁰ Smith-Rosenberg, 60.

¹⁶¹ Lerner, 162.

¹⁶² Sternberg, 63.

¹⁶³ Russett, *Sexual Science* 114.

comfortable living for his family. He is highly regarded by the Creole community for his “integrity” and “goodness of heart” (pp. 105-6). Madame Ratignolle is a beautiful, “feminine” and “matronly” (p. 58) mother of three children expecting a fourth one to be born towards the end of the novel. She is so perfect in her role that her husband must “adore her;” if he did not, “he was a brute, deserving a death by slow torture” (p. 51).

After seven years of marriage, the Ratignolles are said to understand “each other perfectly” (p. 106-7). In their committed companionship, no trace of passion can be found that for a moment could shake the equilibrium of their domestic life. The emotion between the couple is unquestionable love that lies solely in the chastity of the wife: “The right hand jealous of the left! The heart jealous of the soul! But for that matter, the Creole husband is never jealous; with him the gangrene passion is one which has become dwarfed by disuse” (p. 54). This has allowed Adèle to receive “words of love” (p. 54) from Robert Lebrun in the past, and still allows her to coquet with Edna’s father “in the most captivating and naïve manner” (p. 121) at one of the *soirées musicales* at the Ratignolles, as none of it is meant to be taken seriously. Victorian love, especially in the Creole society, is a strictly regulated social contract, the terms of which everyone is expected to follow in order to maintain the sanctity of the marriage institution.

The Ratignolles fulfil the ideal of gender complementarity in that Mr. Ratignolle is occupied in the public sphere and his wife is engaged in the domestic sphere. She lives for her children and husband and enjoys all the joy of life through them. She is the source of inexhaustible love that the other members of the family consume. As Mr. Ratignolle comes home for dinner, she is “keenly interested in everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth” (p. 107). Mr. Ratignolle returns his wife’s affection not by being particularly interested on what she might have to say but by talking “a good deal on various topics, a little politics, some city news and

neighborhood gossip” with “an animation and earnestness that gave an exaggerated importance to every syllable he uttered” (p. 107).

In other words, Adèle has internalized the feminine requirements of Victorian female identity, acquiesces in her position and experiences love accordingly. For Edna Pontellier, however, this is alien and she even despises the seeming domestic harmony of the Ratignolles:

It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium (p. 107).

Edna thinks there has to be something more, something better in life than sacrificing one’s whole life to the service of others—even though she only “vaguely wondered what she meant by ‘life’s delirium’” (p. 107).

4.1.2. Edna Pontellier and the Other Side of the Victorian Marriage

Edna’s own marriage to Léonce Pontellier conforms outwardly to the Victorian conventions but does not fulfil the ideal in the inside. Like in the case of the Pontelliers, many Victorian marriages as well as other relations between men and women lacked emotional intimacy. Smith-Rosenberg states this is due to the fact that men were “segregated into different schools, supported by their own male network of friends and kin, socialized to different behaviour, and coached to a proper formality in courtship behaviour.” Young women referred to their fiancés as “friends” or formally with “Mr.” and a surname. Marriage meant adaptation to a life with a husband with a completely different world view.¹⁶⁴ This is certainly true for Edna, who ends up marrying a man from a different region, of a different religion and brought up according to different social customs.

¹⁶⁴ Smith-Rosenberg, 68-9.

Edna's marriage is described as "purely an accident," which, in fact, in this respect resembled "many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (p. 62). From the very start, their relationship is described without illusion of harmonious and everlasting love. When Mr. Pontellier met Edna, he simply "fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing" (p. 62). Edna knew she was not in love with him, but he "pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her." She fancied there was "a sympathy of thought and taste between them" although she later realized that in this "fancy she was mistaken" (p. 62). As a daughter of a devoted Presbyterian family, her father and sister opposed violently to her marriage to Catholic Mr. Pontellier. Apparently eager to leave the coercive rule of her father, this was the last push for Edna to accept him for her husband.

Mr. Pontellier is a well-to-do stock broker. His time is mostly spent at work or in the clubs with other gentlemen. He is seen at home with his wife and children only short periods of time. In fact, he and Mrs. Pontellier have nothing in common in their everyday life. There is no sign of the supposed happy complementarity of the sexes found in the union of the Ratignolles. For Mr. Pontellier, the luxurious home with the beautiful wife and children is only needed to maintain the appearance of a successful businessman. Edna does not miss her husband and seems to be rather contented to be separated from him. When Adèle regrets that the Pontelliers do not spend more time together, Edna rejects the idea: "What should I do if he stayed at home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other" (pp. 121-2).

The Pontelliers are separate not only mentally but also physically. Edna and Léonce have only two children. For Edna that is more than enough already and she knows how to avoid more to come. Léonce complains to the family doctor Dr. Mandelet about Edna's behaviour: "She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and—you understand—we meet in the morning at the breakfast table" (p. 118). Edna refuses sex because she feels awkward in her role as a mother and does not

want to surrender to the traditional role of a wife. She does not want to end up a birth-giving automaton without autonomous will like Adèle. Edna is disappointed with her position to the extent that she refuses to go to her sister's wedding declaring that "a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (p. 119).

In short, Edna is unhappy in her marriage. It is not that Léonce abuses her or neglects her: as Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, Léonce is not an evil man, the villain of the story.¹⁶⁵ On the contrary, it is said that "Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife" (p. 108). Léonce may not be coercive and he sometimes genuinely shows concern of his wife's well-being. However, he, as so many other Victorian—and especially Creole—husbands, expects total surrender to the traditional role of the wife and mother. A case in point is the scene where Mr. Pontellier comes home late at night from a club and tries to have conversation with her wife who is fast asleep. Not receiving satisfying reply, he "thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (p. 48). Frustrated, he rushes into the children's bedroom and returns claiming that one of the boys has fever and accuses his wife of neglecting their children. Edna has to get up and check the children only to find there is nothing wrong with them. While Léonce falls asleep, Edna starts to cry without actually knowing why: "Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood" (p. 49).

The problem is that the whole way of the marriage is supposed to be self-understood. It is a social contract the terms of which Edna was not fully aware of when

¹⁶⁵ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *The Awakening: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993) 238.

subscribing to it. The terms regulate a proper conduct in marriage that is being naturalized in the Creole reality. By her refusal to conform to the terms, the requirements of femininity, Edna cannot feel comfortable in her marriage or find emotional nourishment from the concept of love it has to offer. She questions the ‘realism’ that is grounded on following a certain set of rules. Like the two young lovers who are frequently seen leaning to each other at Grand Isle, looking for privacy out of the reach of watching eyes to exchange “their hearts’ yearnings” (p. 59), Edna gradually starts to look for her own feelings and emotions:

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood (p. 49).

3.1.3. Adèle and Edna: Pure Sexless Love between Women

For women, the family was the whole world and their actions were restricted to the domestic circle. In this domestic environment, the relationships between mothers and daughters developed especially intimate. The education of a young girl to womanhood was done by mothers and other older female members of the family in a kind of apprenticeship system. In addition, the biological realities of women’s lives, such as frequent pregnancies, nursing and menopause bound women outside the family together. According to Smith-Rosenberg, this social framework contributed to the building of intimate single-sex or homosocial networks.¹⁶⁶ Even though relationships between men and women were restricted, intimate same-sex relationships were, states Smith-Rosenberg, socially approved. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women built highly integrated networks of relatives and friends where everybody knew each other. Friends also helped each other whenever a domestic crisis developed, sickness or death, for example.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Smith-Rosenberg, 65, 60.

¹⁶⁷ Smith-Rosenberg, 61-2.

According to Smith-Rosenberg, often women formed friendships that were so intimate they can be called sensual love relationships. Even though these relationships were not sexual, they included kissing and caressing each other. Friends avowed their love to each other in diaries and letters, something they would not do to their husbands. Still, they were friends and not lovers.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, these relationships were only approved if they did not replace heterosexual relationships with their expected consequences: marriage and children.

Sternberg argues love and sexuality were dissociated in the Victorian thought. Love was idealized as pure and spiritual, whereas sexual desire was considered animal. Women were seen to be capable of love which, in contrast to sex, was an ennobling experience. It was believed that by loving, women could, and, in fact, should civilize men and render them moral.¹⁶⁹ Because of men's amoral nature that they apparently could not help, it was women's duty to uphold morality for both sexes. With their capability to give love, women, according to Showalter, were viewed as "the purer and more spiritual sex" and "morally superior to men."¹⁷⁰ Wendy Martin adds that women were compared to angels and praised for their ethereal purity.¹⁷¹ Showalter argues that the acceptance of the idea of female passionlessness also created sexual solidarity among women. Women considered their own homosocial love relationships being of higher character than heterosexual relationships because they excluded male carnal passions.¹⁷²

Orphaned of her mother at an early age and not having given birth to a daughter, Edna has not experienced that kind of maternal bonding described above. She did not even have very close relationships with her two sisters. Nor did she ever have an intimate network of female friends as she "was not a woman given to confidences" (p. 57). In other

¹⁶⁸ Smith-Rosenberg, 71-3.

¹⁶⁹ Sternberg, 63.

¹⁷⁰ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 13.

¹⁷¹ Martin, 16.

¹⁷² Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 13.

words, Edna has not been properly socialized into being a woman according to Victorian standards, let alone those of the Creole society, where, notes Mary L. Shaffter, the upbringing of the girls is especially “the object of much solicitude” of their mothers.

That summer among the outspoken Creoles at the Grand Isle pension, Edna makes intimate friends for the first time in her life. Through Adèle Ratignolle’s friendship, she begins “to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (p. 57). Edna, who has “a sensuous susceptibility to beauty,” first notes Adèle’s “excessive physical charm” (p. 57). As Showalter points out, this first attraction is erotic in nature.¹⁷³ Adèle’s “outward and spoken expression of affection” (p. 61) which Edna is not accustomed to is an intoxicating experience to her, as, notes Showalter, it is the first of the kind she ever has had. At the beach warmed by hot summer sun, Adèle’s caresses muddle “her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (p. 63). Adèle’s fondness of Edna is depicted as maternal and womanly. All this leads to an intimate friendship between the two women, a bonding which, according to the narrator, “we might as well call love” (p. 58).

Although this kind of friendship was not unusual in Victorian female communities, it comes too late for Edna to give its socializing effect. For a woman gradually recognizing her discontent with her position under the bind of marriage, Adèle’s love is not enough to draw Edna to the bosom of the women’s culture with its celebration of female bonding and domesticity. On the contrary, it serves as a trigger to an awakening from the Victorian reserve to the experience of sensual love. However, in order to release her awakening passion, she needs a male object.

4.2. Romantic Concept of Love

Romanticism as an intellectual and artistic movement began in Germany and England in the 1770s, where it soon spread to other parts of the world and continued to influence the

¹⁷³ Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 74-5.

arts and politics throughout the 19th century. A reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Romanticism emphasized emotion. According to Maurice Cranston, of all the emotions celebrated by the Romantics, love was considered “an all-consuming feeling,” as great as life itself.¹⁷⁴ Paul Brians notes that while in the classical world love was identified with sex and in the medieval world romantic passion was considered more or less a fatal disease, Romantics celebrated love as “the natural birthright of every human being.” This Romantic conviction sounds familiar, and, indeed, much that shapes today’s Western thinking about love originates from the Romantic period. For example, Romantics were the first to consider love the necessary foundation of a successful marriage.¹⁷⁵

Although Romanticism started to diminish towards the end of the nineteenth century, Cranston argues that the Victorian Age was still highly influenced by the Romantic thought.¹⁷⁶ When it comes to love, it certainly seems that Victorians not so much invented a brand new concept of love than concentrated in controlling the excessive emotion of Romantic love in order to come up to what they believed was the best for the society. Far from Victorian repression, Romantic love was distinctly sexual and full of passionate emotion towards one’s beloved. Although Romantics also idealized married love, they emphasized the individual fulfilment of the union rather than the benefits to the society. According to Irving Singer, Romantics believed that every man and woman, regardless of their social position, had a possibility for perfect love. Everyone could find a person that was a perfect alter ego of oneself: “a man or woman who would make up one’s deficiencies, respond to one’s deepest inclinations, and serve as possibly the only person with whom one could communicate fully.”¹⁷⁷ That person could be almost any individual, as love made social barriers crumble. A king could love a servant. Outer things did not

¹⁷⁴ Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 15.

¹⁷⁵ Paul Brians, “Romanticism,” *Humanities 303: Reason, Romanticism & Revolution Course Materials*, 21 Sept. 2000, Dept. of English, Washington State University, 19 March 2004, <http://wsu.edu:8080/~brians/hum_303/romanticism.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Cranston, 149.

¹⁷⁷ Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love*, Vol. 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 4.

matter since alone human beings were imperfect, only in their union the two became complete. Love meant fusion of two into one ideal entity: “As a child is an organism that results from the fusing of male and female biology, so too Romantic lovers become in their totality a new and higher form of life.”¹⁷⁸ However, at least one barrier still erect restricting the choice of a lover was the sexual barrier, as the perfect lover could only be of the opposite sex. Thus Romantic love presupposes the constitution of gendered subjectivity.

Before her marriage to Léonce Pontellier, Edna had experienced passionate feelings of love. As a child she had been “passionately enamored” (p. 61) of a sad-eyed cavalry officer who had visited her father in Kentucky. A little older, a girl in her early teens, her “affections were deeply engaged” (p. 62) by a fiancé of a young lady on a neighbouring plantation. Despite the impossibility of the men ever returning her love, her emotions were strong and it was a bitter realisation that she was “nothing, nothing, nothing to the engaged young man” (p. 62).

At the time she married Mr. Pontellier, Edna was again hopelessly in love with an unattainable man. He was a great tragedian, a framed picture of whom stood on her desk. The hopelessness of the situation enforced her passion but also assured Edna that the “acme of bliss” which a marriage with the tragedian surely would have been was “not for her in this world” (p. 63). On the contrary, by marrying Mr. Pontellier she could “take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (p. 63). In time, she grew fond of her husband but did not imagine to love him. “[W]ith some unaccountable satisfaction” she realized that “no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (p. 63). For as passionate as her love to the tragedian had been, it soon faded and “melted imperceptibly out of her existence” (p. 62) in the way of all the earlier infatuations.

¹⁷⁸ Singer, 16.

These were Edna's first romantic experiences that she, however, dismissed as impossible dreams when she chose to enter the reality and 'realism' of Victorian marriage and accept the duty-oriented relationship with her husband. Although repressed, these experiences have not disappeared. Deep down there is still the "undefined sense of longing," as Lawrence Thornton puts it, that is starting to surface at the beach of Grand Isle, along with her growing dissatisfaction of her choice.¹⁷⁹ Her longing, as Thornton notes, is symbolized by the sea that surrounds the summer resort of Grand Isle, the voice of which "speaks to the soul" and the touch of which "is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (p. 57). And the sea, according to Donald A. Ringe, is a powerful romantic symbol.¹⁸⁰

4.2.1. Robert Lebrun as a Romantic Lover

The owner of the summer pension of Grand Isle, Madame Lebrun, has two sons. The older son, Robert, devotes himself every summer to the service of one woman he finds especially interesting. That summer the woman was Edna Pontellier. They spend the summer together and enjoy each other's company so much that Madame Ratignolle warns Robert to leave Edna alone, since: "She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (p. 64). However, it is only after Robert leaves abruptly for Mexico that Edna starts to feel deeply for him: "For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman" (p. 94). She is in love and, again, the object of her love seems unattainable because she is married and he is out of the country.

In the ideological atmosphere of unquestionable female passionlessness and chastity no one (except perhaps for Adèle who recognizes Edna as an outsider) expects a love affair between Edna and Robert. Donald Pizer notes Creole social relationships

¹⁷⁹ Thornton, 87.

¹⁸⁰ Donald A. Ringe, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Literature* 43 (1972): 582.

between married women and unmarried men were freer than elsewhere in the Victorian America as long as everything was done in a way that did not endanger her marriage.¹⁸¹ So Edna and Robert, a known gentleman, spend time together openly. His earlier attentions to ladies at Grand Isle never resulted in a scandal, as the women regarded Robert more or less as an adoring pet, and Robert accepted his role of a hopeless admirer. Nor would it now, as he flees before anything would happen. However, everyone expects Edna to miss Robert greatly, as they were, after all, very good friends.

Robert's company is something very different from what Edna ever has experienced with Léonce. Her feelings towards him "in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel" (p. 96). If the world of Mr. Pontellier is the Victorian reality, the time spent with Robert is a romantic fantasy. As Thornton points out, Edna's relationship with Robert starts to gain fantastic features at the night when Edna learns to swim.¹⁸² For Edna, that night seems "like a night in a dream," as if there were "spirits abroad" (p. 75). And there is, in fact, a Gulf spirit invented by Robert that finds in Edna "one mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of the semi-celestials" (p. 75). Still pondering on the "mystic spirit" (p. 81) of the Gulf, Edna sails with Robert to attend a mass at Chênrière Caminada the next day. During the service, she starts to feel ill and goes to take a nap at Madame Antoine's, a hospitable inhabitant of the region. When she wakes up, after "precisely one hundred years" of sleep, as Robert puts it, the "whole island seems changed" for Edna, as if a "new race of beings" has sprung up (p. 85). After years of Victorian repression and trying to conform to the Creole feminine ideal, Edna is awakened by Robert into a new world in a way of a fairy-tale princess. Contrary to formal Catholicism, her initiation to Romantic love

¹⁸¹ Donald Pizer, "A Note on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Naturalistic Fiction," *The Southern Literary Journal* 33.2 (2001) *Project MUSE*, 6 April 2004 <<http://muse.jhu.edu>> 12.

¹⁸² Thornton, 89.

feels like a transcendental divine experience that unites her directly to the divinity of nature, without restrictions the society places upon individual.

Shortly after their trip to Chênrière Caminada Robert leaves for Mexico in order to escape his feelings. Edna cannot understand why he should leave her so unexpectedly as she has grown accustomed to his company “just as one misses the sun on a cloudy day without having thought much about the sun when it was shining” (p. 73). However, the absolute absence of Robert makes Edna miss him more and more. The more she tries not to think of him, the more his image dominates her thought. It is “like an obsession, ever pressing itself upon her” (p. 104). Edna’s love for Robert is only kindled and intensified when he is not there to receive her love. According to Irving, for Romantics, the “mere occurrence of love itself creates a new objectivity that mediates with no preceding reality and needs nothing but its own intrinsic value to be justified.”¹⁸³ Robert’s presence is not needed as Edna creates her own image of love:

It was not that she dwelt upon details of their acquaintance, or recalled in any special or peculiar way his personality; it was his being, his existence, which dominated her thought, fading sometimes as if it would melt into the mist of the forgotten, reviving again with an intensity which filled her with an incomprehensible longing (pp. 104-5).

In this Romantic sense, Edna loves for love’s sake and needs no other justification for her love. In fact, as the previous encounters happened in the world of fantasy, Edna now creates her own romantic fantasy of her love for Robert in the same way as she did with her childhood infatuations. Finally the image of love seems more real than the real Robert, as after his return Edna feels “some way he had seemed nearer to her off there in Mexico” (p. 161).

In the end, it is easy for Edna to fall into these Romantic dreams. As Per Seyersted points out, she has grown up on exalted ideas of Romantic love, dreaming all her

¹⁸³ Irving, 20.

childhood of the “acme of bliss” that a union with the beloved one would bring.¹⁸⁴

Romantic ideas of love were still cherished during the Victorian period, even though Edna, in a Victorian way, dismisses them as dreams in order to take her place in the world of realism “with a certain dignity” (p. 63). Disappointed with what that world has to offer, Robert appears a fresh promise of the bond between lovers that Romantics, according to Singer, considered “ecstatically consummatory.”¹⁸⁵

Frustrated in her marriage of convenience, Edna, in a way of romantic transcendentalists, rejects the society’s demands on her and starts to look for personal meaning and fulfilment in her life. As Priscilla Leder points out, Edna sees Robert as a kind of personification of the summer paradise of Grand Isle with which to unite herself. Robert’s love in the exotic nature of Grand Isle triggers the awakening of her emotions and her search for herself.¹⁸⁶ It is that environment she longs for when she needs sunny days to paint back in New Orleans. She builds her new identity on the Romantic idea of unification and the maintaining of that identity depends on the support of love. Thus, as Ringe notes, in her Romantic passion, Edna rather selfishly wants to own Robert, almost denying him a right to free will.¹⁸⁷ “her senses kindled afresh in thinking of Robert’s words, the pressure of his arms, and the feeling of his lips upon her own. She could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one” (p. 172).

But if an identity is created through a fusion or a desire of fusion with another, it surely cannot lead to independence. In opposition to her wish to be freed from the confinement of her marriage, Edna aims to bind herself with another man. Governed by the Victorian marriage laws, her position would not be much different in a relationship with Robert. For Romantic love, through its emphasis on heterosexuality, ideally leads into marriage and therefore having children. Marriage is also the only condition Robert can

¹⁸⁴ Seyersted, 138-9.

¹⁸⁵ Singer, 4.

¹⁸⁶ Leder, 38.

¹⁸⁷ Ringe, 585.

imagine himself with Edna. Thus, Robert turns pale when Edna declares herself free to give herself where she chooses. Fundamentally a Victorian gentleman, he is not ready to grant that much freedom to Edna.

4.2.2. Mademoiselle Reisz as the Messenger of Romantic Love

Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening* is a character caught between Romantic and Victorian ideals. Portrayed as a disagreeable spinster, she, interestingly enough, becomes an important mediator in Edna's love affair with Robert. Not only is she the only person Edna can talk freely with about Robert but her apartment also serves a place for them to meet after Robert's return from Mexico.

At Grand Isle, Edna acquaints with Mademoiselle Reisz when Robert asks her to play the piano at one evening of entertainment. Mademoiselle's music rouses Romantic passion in Edna for the first time. Singer argues that the music of the Romantic period is thoroughly erotic and sexual:

While music of the Middle Ages presents sound patterns similar to visual designs—beautiful objects to be contemplated as a courtly lover contemplates perfection in the person he loves—Romantic music deters us from turning sounds into objects of any sort. It employs an apparent formlessness that stimulates enjoyment of life as it is immediately felt, just as the Romantic lover cultivates the affective potentialities in mere experience. In medieval music one listens with the eye; in Romantic music one listens with the entire body.¹⁸⁸

Similarly, Adèle's conventional way of playing her easy pieces evokes pictures in Edna's head: a young woman dancing, children at play. One of the pieces Edna had entitled "Solitude," as the music made her imagine "a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore." The man in his "hopeless resignation" seems to parallel Edna's dreams of freedom as he looks "toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (p. 71). Through Mademoiselle's interpretation of Chopin's preludes, however, "very passions

¹⁸⁸ Singer, 11.

themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body” (p. 72), setting free the passion that was earlier repressed.

In New Orleans, Edna sometimes goes to see Mademoiselle Reisz in order to seek refuge from the oppressive social codes and confirmation for her new way of life. There she also learns about Robert’s experiences in Mexico, as Mademoiselle lets Edna read his letters. During Edna’s first visit at Mademoiselle’s, the pianist plays Chopin’s “Impromptu” for Edna, as it is Robert’s favourite and he asked her to play it if Edna ever visited her. As Thornton points out, Chopin’s music with its “soulful and poignant longing” (p. 116) becomes the symbol of joyful and living romance. Mademoiselle Reisz, however, sees beyond romantic promises. “Impromptu” changes into Wagner’s “Liebestod” and back again, as if she could foresee the disastrous ending of the romance.¹⁸⁹ In Mademoiselle’s little apartment, the music fills the room and grows “strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” (p. 116). Edna bursts into tears and leaves the apartment in agitation.

In her solitude, Mademoiselle Reisz exemplifies the impossibility of the Romantic ideal of love. Ringe describes the hermit pianist as the extreme example of the consequences of transcendental insistence on the self alone.¹⁹⁰ That is something that Victorians certainly would not approve—at least not in a case of a woman. In spite of her apparent pride in her independence, Mademoiselle Reisz is not entirely happy with her hermit life. Edna’s friendship seems to be something exceptional for her and she enjoys the occasion. Mademoiselle has not found her perfect soul mate despite the Romantic insistence on that possibility for everyone. Considering the Romantic ideals, it certainly does not even seem an easy thing to do. For Romantics, argues Singer, the highest love could be attained by means of heroism. For men it meant “self-sacrifice in the interest of humanity, the nation, a revolutionary cause, the demands of one or another art.” As men

¹⁸⁹ Thornton, 88.

¹⁹⁰ Ringe, 584.

could become worthy of love through heroism, this capacity also developed as a result of woman's love. Giving him an opportunity to love, she believes in his cause and strengthens him in the pursuit of his achievement. Sometimes a woman could sacrifice herself for her lover's pursuit. In addition to fidelity, that was the usual mode of heroism for women.¹⁹¹

This ideal is in Mademoiselle Reisz's mind when she tries to find out whether Edna really is in love with Robert:

“If I were young and in love with a man ... it seems to me he would have to be some *grand esprit*; a man with lofty aims and ability to reach them; one who stood high enough to attract the notice of his fellow-men.... I should never deem a man of ordinary caliber worthy of my devotion” (p. 136).

One could interpret Mademoiselle Reisz's words so that she did not find any man worth her love as she ended up living alone. Bearing these Romantic qualifications in mind, the task certainly would be difficult: as Mademoiselle hints, not even Robert comes up to the high standard. On the other hand, the Romantic concept only allows love between a man and a woman. In the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality, it is equally difficult, if not impossible, for Mademoiselle Reisz to find love if she is a lesbian. She is only left with her music to express her passion.

Through her music, Mademoiselle Reisz shows the potential destructibility of Romantic love. The Romantic emphasis on heroic sacrifice meant that to love was also to suffer. According to Singer, the Romantics joyously accepted suffering as an ideal condition—even though it could mean the annihilation of the lovers. Death became an idealized, even desirable, bitter-sweet part of the love experience. This joyful suffering Romantics named *Liebestod*, love-death.¹⁹² The same Romantic melodrama of suffering can be seen in Robert's goodbye note for Edna before running away from her once again: “I love you. Good-by—because I love you” (p. 172). And in the end as it happens, Edna does die. In fact, her drowning while swimming is made possible through her very initiation to

¹⁹¹ Singer, 14-16.

¹⁹² Singer, 30-1.

Romantic passion, since she only learns to swim after she has heard Mademoiselle Reisz play for the first time.

Singer argues that Romantic love does not presuppose much knowledge about one's partner as it strikes for its own reasons. For Romantics, love was God and lovers carried out the "dictates of divinity" in their oneness. The divine merging of two people has little to do with personalities of a particular man and woman.¹⁹³ This seems to be the case with Edna and Robert as well. Although they spend time together, they do not really know each other. Singer rightfully asks whether the Romantic ideal can be called mutual and reciprocal love at all.¹⁹⁴ As Edna loves only men she cannot get, Romantic love appears a fantasy, an impossible illusion. Equally out of reach is the transcendental world view. Individuality built on the evanescent divine unity with nature is not enough for Edna to fight the confinements of the Victorian society, as it was not enough for Mademoiselle Reisz, either.

4.3. Schopenhauerian Concept of Love

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a famous pessimist. He developed his philosophy on the basis of Kantian distinction between what is, the "noumenal" world, and what is rationally knowable, the "phenomenal" world. The phenomenal world is, as Richard Taylor puts it, "comprised entirely of one's own sensations and his rational interpretations of these." These meditations of the surrounding world exist only within every individual's brains and account to the world individuals believe they live in. Without these thoughts there is no existing world for us. According to Schopenhauer, this world in our thoughts is an idea, considered independently of any world of reality. Therefore the phenomenal world is essentially nothing. Although the noumenal, the world that is in itself in reality, is not rationally knowable, human beings are

¹⁹³ Singer, 4, 26.

¹⁹⁴ Singer, 26.

aware of it. For Schopenhauer, that is because each individual is in his or her true nature a part of the noumenal. The noumenal within an individual Schopenhauer calls will. Human thoughts and bodily activities, as well as all the phenomenal world, are the expression of the will that is the innermost nature of human beings. Thus Schopenhauer's basic philosophical principle reads, according to Taylor: "We know what reality is, as will, because we are ourselves not merely the expression of will but identical with that will that underlies all phenomena."¹⁹⁵

According to Schopenhauer, the human individual, or any other being for that matter, is the embodiment of the will to live. This will is a blind striving of survival which necessarily leads to disappointment, frustration and suffering. For everyone must die in the end, it is a tragedy present in our lives destined in birth.¹⁹⁶ It is possible, however, to be freed from this endless suffering, to conquer one's self-will. Schopenhauer argues that a deep understanding of the essential nothingness of individual's own life will liberate this individual from "thralldom to that will to live of which this whole world of illusion is manifestation." Very similar to Buddhist Nirvana, this state can be attained by the denial of the most imperious demands of one's will: food, drink, sex, comfort, worldly goods.¹⁹⁷

Schopenhauer's ideas on love conform to the same line of thought that shapes his whole philosophy. Love, as the whole phenomenal world, is an illusion. It is comprised in the human brain and as such seems true to us, although in the reality it is simply nothing but mere sexual desire aiming at reproduction. In *The Awakening*, this view is starting to take shape in the story Edna tells at dinner with Mr. Pontellier, her father and Doctor Mandelet. It is a romantic tale of "a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back" (p. 123). It was Edna's own invention but "every glowing word seemed real to those who listened" (p. 124). They could see every little detail before

¹⁹⁵ Richard Taylor, Introduction, *The Will to Live: Selected Writings of Arthur Schopenhauer*, ed. Richard Taylor (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1962) x-xi.

¹⁹⁶ Magee, 219.

¹⁹⁷ Magee, 221-2.

their eyes as if it had really happened, but, in the end, as much as Edna would wish it could become true for her, it was a product of Edna's imagination and "subtle fumes" (p. 124) of cold champagne.

4.3.1. Alcée Arobin and Edna's Awakening Sexuality

In order to a new being to be brought into existence, an act of sexual intercourse is needed. According to Schopenhauer, it is in the intercourse that the will to live achieves life. Therefore sexual desire is the most powerful of the will's demands. As soon as individuals have secured their own existence, they aim for the propagation of the race. No other pleasure can account to the power of sexual desire, and individuals are ready to do anything to accomplish its demands. Schopenhauer goes as far as stating that a human being is a "concrete sexual impulse" and "this impulse alone perpetuates ... his phenomenal appearance."¹⁹⁸

As Bryan Magee points out, it is not to wonder that sexual desire is of vital importance for Schopenhauer. For what is at stake in sexual intercourse is the constitution of the entire human race. For one thing, it is important that new beings are born into the world in order to secure the race. More importantly, the coupling parents also decide specifically what kind of individuals are born, as "any given individual can be the offspring of two given parents only, and not of any other couple." However, Schopenhauer does not try to say that the mating couple is conscious of their role as the creators of the future generation. On the contrary, sexual actions as any other bodily activities are driven by the unconscious will.¹⁹⁹

Under the influence of Adèle Ratignolle's caresses and Robert Lebrun's affection, Edna starts to explore the sexuality within her that earlier was repressed. Contrary to the Victorian feminine ideal, she finds herself a being with sexual drives and wants to defend

¹⁹⁸ Schopenhauer, qtd in Magee, 216.

¹⁹⁹ Magee, 217.

her right to sexuality. As Showalter points out, Edna's awakening sexuality is evoked through images and scenes. Showalter especially mentions two scenes: Edna's midnight swim and her nap at Chênrière Caminada.²⁰⁰ Edna has been trying to learn to swim all summer, but one midnight she finds herself swimming effortlessly. There is like magic in the air and Edna becomes "intoxicated with her newly conquered power" (p. 74). For the first time she feels autonomous to control her own body—the body that had been asexualized and placed under male control by Victorian social norms. It was also the night when she felt "the first-felt throbbings of desire" (p. 77) in the presence of Robert. At Chênrière Caminada she rests in a bed provided by Madame Antoine. She observes her body; enjoys the touch of her hair and limbs "as if it were something she saw for the first time" (p. 84). However, Edna's experience of the autonomy of her body is only temporary, as it will turn out later on (discussed in Chapter 4.3.2). For, although the Schopenhauerian view frees sexuality from the social confinements, its naturalism binds the body under the control of 'biology' or 'nature'—the will in the Schopenhauerian terminology. And, as it was already noted in Chapter 2, these terms are never value-free but their content is defined in the prevailing power structures. Consequently, as it is Robert who teaches Edna to swim, fundamentally her whole awakening happens in the realm of the heterosexual matrix.

Not yet conscious of these limitations on her body, Edna meets Alcée Arobin back in New Orleans, a young fashionable man with a reputation with women. He had known her before and admired her "extravagantly" (p. 128) but only now, in the midst of Edna's sexual awakening, is he able to approach her. As their relationship develops, Edna seems to lose the rest of her "mantle of reserve" (p. 57) as "the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness" (p. 131). Arobin has detected Edna's "latent sensuality" (p. 163) and knows how to exploit it. He

²⁰⁰ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 72.

caresses her with the touch of his “soft, magnetic hand” until “he could feel the response of her flesh to his touch” (p. 149). The scenes with Arobin are openly erotic, although, as Showalter points out, the actual seduction takes place not in the text but between chapters.²⁰¹

Even though Arobin, a successful womanizer, knows what to do to get into a bed he wants, Edna is not passively seduced by him. There already was sexual longing in Edna, awakened in the sensuous embrace of the sea (pp. 57, 176), that was looking for a way to be expressed, and Arobin appealed “to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (p. 133). Fulfilling the Schopenhauerian demands of the will, she needs to satisfy her “nature’s requirements,” (p. 163) and Arobin is conveniently at hand for this purpose. Arobin certainly fulfils the requirement for sexual awakening: “It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (p. 139).

Yet Arobin is “absolutely nothing” to Edna (p. 132). Even after a delicious seduction she does not imagine to love him. As Showalter points out, Edna becomes aware of her sexual passions that can exist without feelings of love:²⁰²

Above all, there was understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips (p. 139).

Edna feels the will’s demand as sexual desire but is neither conscious of its end in propagating the species, nor ready to give up love entirely. At this point, Edna still believes in love even though Arobin is not the one. Edna’s sexual awakening makes her feel “quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love” for Robert (p. 139) still in Mexico.

²⁰¹ Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 72.

²⁰² Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 78.

4.3.2. Doctor Mandelet and the Vanishing Illusion of Love

According to Schopenhauer, sexual desire in general represents the general will to live. On the other hand, sexual desire towards a definite individual is the will to live as a “definitely determined individual.”²⁰³ For Schopenhauer, this desire towards a definite object equals the feeling of love. Like Edna’s desire for Robert, it is “nobler and more sublime” than the mere sexual impulse, as it is directed to a definite individual and “arises at the special order of the species.” General sexual desire, like that Edna feels for Arobin, is ignoble, because “without individualisation it is directed to all, and strives to maintain the species only as regards quantity, with little respect to quality.” It is “the being, the *existentia*” of future persons that is “conditioned by our sexual impulse generally,” and “their nature, *essentia*, is determined by the individual selection in its satisfaction, *i.e.*, by sexual love.”²⁰⁴

The process of falling in love is unexplainable for Schopenhauer. Sexual love is the agency whereby the noumenal enters the world of phenomena, and as the noumenal is not rationally knowable, it is not possible to understand its workings by reason. Therefore it is not possible to explain why a particular individual falls in love with another, either. That would be to explain why a particular person exists in the world as it is “the future generation in the whole of its individual definiteness which is pressing into existence” by falling in love and finally copulation of a particular couple. In fact, argues Schopenhauer, the will-to-live of the new individual “is itself already astir in that far-sighted, definite, and capricious selection for the satisfaction of the sexual impulse which is called love.”²⁰⁵

Falling in love evokes a great passion towards the beloved one. A person chooses a partner according to definite qualities that he or she finds especially appealing individually. After finding such a partner, a person is ready to do anything to fulfil his or her desire: to marry foolishly, to have a disastrous love affair, or to commit a crime such as

²⁰³ Arthur Schopenhauer, “The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes,” *The Will to Live: Selected Writings of Arthur Schopenhauer*, ed. Richard Taylor (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1962) 73.

²⁰⁴ Schopenhauer, 72, 90.

²⁰⁵ Schopenhauer, qtd. in Magee, 218.

adultery or rape. According to Schopenhauer, a person is ready to act “contrary to all reason” in order to serve the species, even if it is done at the cost of the individual’s “own happiness in life,” as it is not the reason of the individual but “the will of nature” that is sovereign everywhere. Although an individual may think so, couples do not get together by a person’s own selection of his or her partner but nature “implants [instinct] wherever the acting individual is incapable of understanding the end, or would be unwilling to pursue it.”²⁰⁶ This is something that Edna understands when she declares her love for Robert to Mademoiselle Reisz: “Why ... do you suppose a woman knows why she loves? Does she select? Does she say to herself: ‘Go to! Here is a distinguished statesman with presidential possibilities; I shall proceed to fall in love with him’” (p. 136). She rejects the Romantic standard as well as any rational reasons for falling in love for their artificiality. According to Schopenhauerian principles, she has fallen in love with Robert by instinct that is not explainable:

Because his hair is brown and grows away from his temples; because he opens and shuts his eyes, and his nose is a little out of drawing; because he has two lips and a square chin, and a little finger which he can’t straighten from having played baseball too energetically in his youth (p. 137).

The primary function of falling in love is to secure “the production of an individual of a definite nature.” Therefore, argues Schopenhauer, “the essential matter” in falling in love is “not the reciprocation of love,” but actually “possession,” “the physical enjoyment” of the beloved one.²⁰⁷ This view is present in Robert’s words when he explains Edna the reason he left for Mexico. Loving Edna and the possible reciprocation of that love is not enough as Edna is already married. He returns from Mexico in the hope that Mr. Pontellier would set Edna free—to be possessed by Robert. Similarly, Edna dreams of the possession of Robert. When she returns from attending Adèle’s childbirth and expects to see Robert:

²⁰⁶ Schopenhauer, 79.

²⁰⁷ Schopenhauer, 73.

She could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one. His expression of love had already given him to her in part. When she thought that he was there at hand, waiting for her, she grew numb with the intoxication of expectancy (p. 172).

However, the thought that the possession of a particular lover would be the source of excessive happiness is, according to Schopenhauer, “a voluptuous illusion.” After desire has been fulfilled in the arms of the beloved one, what is left is the experience of “marvellous disillusion” and the realization that it was nothing more than “every other sexual satisfaction” that could be experienced with anyone.²⁰⁸ The illusion made an individual believe that the ideal lover chosen by the will of nature for the benefit of the species was ideal for the individual as well. Schopenhauer argues that this rarely is the case. As the will of the species has attained its end, the deception vanishes and the “spirit of the species which took possession of the individual sets it free again,” leaving the individual disappointed with the experience. The individual realizes that he or she has been “the dupe of the will of the species.”²⁰⁹

Doctor Mandelet in *The Awakening* is semi-retired from his medical occupation. He is a “great reader” (p. 117) and bears “a reputation for wisdom rather than skill” (pp. 116-7). In the novel, he appears as a naturalist and as a true believer in the Schopenhauerian concept of love. When Adèle gives birth towards the end of the novel, he is there to take care of her. Adèle has also made Edna promise to come and attend her childbirth. In the middle of passionate love vows she finally exchanges with Robert after his return from Mexico, she is called to the occasion. She leaves Robert pledging for her not to go. Watching Adèle’s labour she realizes it was a mistake to come. The Romantic fantasy world she has tried to build starts to shake by an intrusion of brutal nature that is far from transcendental divinity. An “inward agony” growing, she witnesses this “scene of torture” with “outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature” (p. 170). At her leave, Adèle

²⁰⁸ Schopenhauer, 79-80.

²⁰⁹ Schopenhauer, 98.

whispers exhausted from her labour: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children!” (p. 170).

Having used chloroform, Edna only faintly remembers her own like experiences. It is as if she is only now awakened from that stupor to understand ‘facts of life,’ wondering that she, too, has “added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go” (p. 170). Adèle’s labour finally awakens her to understand the Schopenhauerian end of sexual desire masked as love: the propagation of the species. It is a painful but necessary realization: “The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (p. 171). Dr. Mandelet understands what Edna is experiencing and tries to give her advice:

The trouble is ... 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 (p. 171).

But Edna is still dreaming of love when she walks home and thinks of Robert waiting for her. As Showalter points out,²¹⁰ it is only after she finds that Robert has left her that she finally understands that “the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (p. 175).

As Dr. Mandelet points out, Edna is surely trapped between the ‘arbitrary’ conditions of society and her ‘natural’ sexuality, if she intends to continue her life as a fully sexual woman. As a fallen woman in the Victorian context, she would have to give up the status marriage has given her. In this situation, she would be totally dependent on her lover and his love towards her—a condition that is actually idealized in Romantic love, as the lovers are supposed to be everything to each other. However, love in the Schopenhauerian world is only an illusion and offers yet another bind on women, namely that of reproduction. As much as Edna despises the Victorian restricted role of a wife and mother,

²¹⁰ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 78.

Romantic and Schopenhauerian concepts of love offer only similar cages by different names which bind her to a man and children.

According to Schopenhauer, the intensity of love felt towards a definite individual “can reach so high a degree that without its satisfaction all the good things in the world, and even life itself, lose their value.” An individual is ready for any sacrifice and if the desire for some reason is not fulfilled, the situation may lead to madness or suicide.²¹¹ It is a popular belief among many critics that Edna commits suicide exactly because of the loss of Robert’s love. However, Edna has already awakened into Schopenhauerian pessimism of love. Love affairs would not lead to “life’s delirium” (p. 107) she once dreamed of, and killing oneself for nothing seems a useless thing to do. Edna realizes love is not the cure for her “ennui,” but, unfortunately, there does not seem to be any other means available, either. Through her Schopenhauerian awakening, Edna, who rejects the Victorian social norms that construct womanhood, as Donald Pizer points out, seems unable to resist the biological hold of motherhood. Believing in the invincibility of ‘nature’, she embraces the naturalist world view.²¹² However, from this inability grows Edna’s ultimate statement that challenges the narrow outlook of naturalism. Even as she resigns oneself to naturalist dictates, she revolts against them, since, for Schopenhauer, suicide is a strong “assertion of self-will,” a rejection of “the terms on which [life] is being offered.”²¹³

4.4. Suicide Is Not a Solution

Edna Pontellier has been compared to Emma Bovary²¹⁴ in her search for love. However, she sees beyond the romantic fantasy that enthralls Emma to the very end of her life. She also differs from another notoriously promiscuous woman in world literature, Anna

²¹¹ Schopenhauer, 90.

²¹² Pizer, 7.

²¹³ Magee, 222.

²¹⁴ Willa Cather was probably the first to call *The Awakening* a “Creole Bovary.” Hall Petry, 14. Gustave Flaubert published his *Madame Bovary* in 1856.

Karenina,²¹⁵ as she does not feel shame as Anna does of her liaison. What is common to these women, however, is that they all die in the end.

The end of *The Awakening* is ambiguous and has invited various interpretations by critics. Many regard it as failure (of Edna, unable to do anything useful with her life, or even of Chopin on the grounds that she could not develop Edna's character) while others see it as a heroic act of asserting Edna's self-will against the confinement of her society. When it comes to treatment of love, a popular view²¹⁶ is that after the illusion of romantic fantasy has vanished, she dies because she cannot bear a world without love. This view grants at least some growth in the protagonist as she starts to comprehend the world and her place in it, but others²¹⁷ let Edna die simply because of the loss of the beloved Robert. Suicide at the end of the novel does not easily turn into a positive reading. However, Sandra M. Gilbert argues in "The Second Coming of Aphrodite" that Edna might not even die but is reborn as the goddess of love Venus/Aphrodite defying the patriarchal society.

Edna's suicide is perfectly valid for the nineteenth-century literary tradition. As Showalter points out, drowning was often used as a punishment for women in fiction who dared to transgress contemporary moral codes.²¹⁸ Chopin, however, dared to transgress this tradition and squeeze in a more complicated message.

Edna is striving to find love and independence with equal force. At first, passionate Romantic love seems to be the way out of Victorian reserve. The Victorian gender identity of a True Woman denies passion and female sexuality. Like the lady in black who is frequently seen "creeping behind" (p. 66) two young lovers in *The Awakening*, Victorian society chaperones attempts of transgressing barriers. Concentrated on her prayer-book and counting her prayer-beads, she does not notice Edna's indisposition in the

²¹⁵ Leo Tolstoy published his *Anna Karenina* in 1870.

²¹⁶ For example, Bert Bender in "The Teeth of Desire: *The Awakening* and *The Descent of Man*" and Lawrence Thornton in "*The Awakening*: A Political Romance," although they arrive to the conclusion from different perspectives.

²¹⁷ For example Donald A. Ringe in "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*."

²¹⁸ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 81.

church at Chênère Caminada. Nor does the Creole conservative society concern itself with the needs of an individual woman, when it binds all women as a group into their mutual destiny. Pale-faced and always dressed in black, the lady becomes the omen of death for those who do not conform to the norms of the society.

Edna escapes the stifling Victorian confinement in Romantic fantasy, she wants to forget that instead of enjoying herself she “should [be] dignified and reserved” (p. 113). Defying conventions, she enjoys her awakened sexuality with Arobin. As Bert Bender points out, she starts to explore her sexuality with the animal innocence Walt Whitman celebrates his “body electric.”²¹⁹ At the same time she fantasies about Romantic fusion with Robert. These fantasies hold her back, as fusion denies independence.

However, Adèle’s childbirth awakens Edna to see beyond that Romantic fantasy. When she comes back from Adèle’s, Robert and the illusion of love is gone. She is alone, much like characters in Guy de Maupassant’s short stories, as Bender points out. Protagonists in his short stories are prisoners of their bestial instinct to couple. They escape their loneliness in sexual intercourse masquerading as love only to find that their lot is hideous solitude.²²⁰ Women, on the other hand, are by nature “sacrificed to that abominable law of reproduction which turns the normal woman into a mere machine for bringing children into the world,”²²¹ as a character in Maupassant’s short story “Useless Beauty” says. At the same time as the naturalist view liberates sexuality, it denies the possibility of enduring love and reduces women as slaves of their—and men’s—animal drives. As Bender points out, there is no “Female equally with the Male” of Whitmanian transcendental romance²²² for Edna, not as long as love and marriage are linked only to bind women into reproduction.

²¹⁹ Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric,” qtd. in Bender, “Kate Chopin’s Quarrel,” 100.

²²⁰ Bender, “The Teeth of Desire” 120.

²²¹ Guy de Maupassant, “Useless Beauty,” *The Literature Network*, Jalic LLC, 16. March 2004, <<http://www.online-literature.com/maupassant/293>> ch. 3.

²²² Walt Whitman, “One’s-Self I Sing,” qtd. in Bender, “Kate Chopin’s Quarrel” 101.

Through her awakening, Edna experiences moods that immobilize her: “It was not despair; but it seemed to her as if life was passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled” (p. 127). She feels Schopenhauerian agony of the meaninglessness of life, where life appears “to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation” (p. 109). Yet she revolts against the view and does not achieve Schopenhauerian nirvana.

Instead, she keeps searching for her place in the world, which aim she also fails to achieve. As MacDonald points out, her “new assertiveness will not be enough to shield her from the difficulties of her changing life.” Her most radical act of rebel is to move to her own house, which, as MacDonald notes, is only “two steps away” (p. 134) from her old home. She has no plan to carry out her *coup d'état*, she only vaguely thinks that everything will work out with her husband. Instead of taking her actions far enough, “she [abandons] herself to Fate, and [awaits] the consequences with indifference” (p. 162). The futility of her effort is shown in the scene where she flings her wedding ring upon the carpet after a quarrel with her husband: “When she saw [the ring] lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (p. 103). Patriarchal gender identities institutionalized in marriage are not so easily destroyed, as MacDonald points out, and Edna’s small efforts do not shake these institutions. Edna is not an “apostle of social apocalypse”²²³ as the modernist New Woman wanted to be, and, as MacDonald notes, she fails to “forge a new hybrid identity that is neither traditionally masculine nor feminine.” Even her androgyny reduces to a mimicry of masculine manners in the same way when she talks about horses “like her father” (p. 128) in the races with Arobin. As Edna, while listening Adèle play, imagines a man as a symbol of her desire for freedom, she seems unable to see a woman in that position.

²²³ Dowling, 447.

For Edna's excuse it has to be granted that her aims are very difficult to achieve with her children. Edna insists on her right for self-determination when she says to Doctor Mandelst: "I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others" (p. 171). However, she sees the consequences of her actions in a society where reputation is everything, as she continues: "still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (p. 171). After Robert has left her, she thinks about children, as Adèle requested. She concludes that her new way of life "makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Léonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne!" (p. 175). Thornton suggests that this is one of the reasons she decides to commit suicide. Now that she has awakened, she cannot go back to her old life, but, in a world governed by social conventions, her way of life would destroy her children.²²⁴ Earlier, Edna has made clear she is not ready to compromise in her cause and would not sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (p. 97). She sees her children as "antagonists," dragging her "into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (p. 175) and obstructing her way into independence.

But, as the narrator tells us, Edna knows "a way to elude" her children (p. 175). She is weary of Victorian rules when she utters in the exhaustion of giving her party: "I feel as if I had been wound up to a certain pitch—too tight—and something inside of me had snapped" (p. 149). After a summer and a winter of self-search, Edna returns to Grand Isle once more. As she casts "the unpleasant, pricking garments" (p. 175) from her, she stands naked on the shore at the mercy of the sun without the pretensions of the society: "She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (p. 175). For Edna, the sense of freedom is possible only for this passing moment. Standing on the shore of her new life, Edna, instead of a free bird "winging its flight away"

²²⁴ Thornton, 97.

(p. 71), soaring “above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (p. 138), sees a “bird with a broken wing ... beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (p. 175). As Gilmore points out, Edna commits suicide because “she can find no room for her newly awakened self in the present social system.”²²⁵ However, as Gilbert notes, rather than merely expressing a refusal to accommodate to the system, her death questions the premises of the reality and the ‘realism’ of the system.²²⁶

With the help of romantic dreams, Edna started to build an alternative world to Victorian reality and to see Victorian conventions as changeable constructs. However, love is not an all-powerful force, it is not enough to transcend the obstacles society sets up for a woman with autonomous aims. Fundamentally nothing changes, if Victorian restraint is replaced by Romantic passion. She starts to see love as an excuse to bind women in marriage and reproduction. In the Victorian context of declining birth rates and the anxiety about the survival of the nation and the race, this claim is persuasive. Women are conditioned to love, which in the Victorian context is used to obscure their subjection to the marriage institution where masculinist rules prevail. Adopting Schopenhauerian pessimism, however, Edna goes a full circle back where she started. She started her self-search by trying to relieve herself from the duty the society places on women but ends up with a view of nature placing the same duty. She cannot disentangle herself from the naturalist view on women, where children, present or future, define woman’s life. In its essentialism, the view, in fact, does not differ from the Victorian construction of womanhood in its premises. The ‘eternal verity’ of the Victorian gender complementarity is only replaced by another unchangeable ‘truth’ of a woman’s function.

Still, Edna revolts against essentialism. Her ultimate revolt, her death, illuminates the untenable conclusion of her awakening. If life according to the naturalist dictates is not worth living, it cannot be the truth. By her death, Edna challenges the legitimacy of the

²²⁵ Gilmore, 62-3.

²²⁶ Gilbert, 31.

heterosexual matrix, even though she fails to conquer it. MacDonald argues that in “the context of this transitional period in women’s history, total success is an impossibility, partly because the goal itself is not yet established.” Feminist movement was only beginning to form and positive role models were still few. Therefore Edna feels as if she is walking through her life “unthinking and unguided” (p. 61).

Despite the novel’s feminist reputation, some critics have questioned its feminist content. For example, Nancy Walker argues that the novel does not promote women’s liberation or equality since, except for Edna, the other married women in the novel seem quite happy in their condition.²²⁷ It is true that *The Awakening* does not offer any positive alternative to the traditional woman’s role. I would still argue that the novel rejects traditional views. This rejection is possible from the outside position of Edna, as she does not conform to the norms of the Creole society, and the outside position of *The Awakening*, as the novel, through the protagonist’s revolt, does not conform to the contemporary literary traditions.

Nineteenth-century literary traditions of realism, transcendentalism and naturalism do not give room for Edna’s development, for they conform to the Victorian social order, antagonistic towards female autonomy. Similarly, through heterosexualizing human relationships, Victorian, Romantic or Schopenhauerian concepts of love do not give room to equal, loving relationships between individuals but contribute to the consolidation of the binary system of sexual relations. In order to transgress these traditions, the novel attempts a leap towards less orderly and hierarchical world view of modernism. Rejecting bourgeois morality, Edna tries to establish a brand new way of life for herself. However, the text, still clinging to the nineteenth-century traditions, does not allow Edna to succeed, as she does not quite achieve the early modernism of the New Woman.

²²⁷ Nancy Walker, “Feminist or Naturalist: The Social Context of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *Southern Quarterly* 17 (1979), qtd in Hall Petry, 24.

Nevertheless, through the reiteration of Victorian social norms and contemporary literary traditions, *The Awakening*, in fact, destabilizes Victorian social order. Showing the obstacles Edna has to face, the text unveils power relations that prohibit her from achieving her aims in the Victorian historical context, thus turning into a social critique of the time. However, *The Awakening* does not discuss what Edna should have done in order to avoid her tragic end. Rather than being the ultimate punishment for a fallen woman, a solution to a dilemma, Edna's suicide prohibits the novel from arriving at a final conclusion. Thus, the essence of truth remains unsolved in the novel. Chopin herself appeared reluctant of propagating any one way of living. She once said the eleventh commandment should read: "Thou shalt not preach."²²⁸ Instead of preaching of yet another essentialist, universalistic truth, Chopin, by demonstrating the limitations of the Victorian world view, showing gaps and inconsistencies in the naturalized regimes of power in *The Awakening*, opens up doors for others to try and find their own individual solutions.

²²⁸ Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 71.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, my aim was to discuss the connection between different representations of love and female gender identities in *The Awakening*. My conclusion is that an essentialist view on women prevailing in the Victorian society affects the representations of love in *The Awakening*. Human relationships are heterosexualized, and the system is maintained through strict division of the sexes into separate spheres in society. By their heterosexualized nature, relationships between the sexes aim at reproduction. This leads to a reproductive view on love as well. The Victorian concept of love emphasizes duty towards society. The family being the basic unit of society, love is committed companionship aiming at producing good citizens. The Romantic concept of love emphasizes intimate passionate emotion but idealizes love in marriage. It is distinctly heterosexual and, in the social context of the late nineteenth century, means total surrender of the woman to marriage laws. Thus both function to bind the woman in an unequal position in marriage. The Schopenhauerian concept of love denies the Romantic ideal of individuality and replaces the duty towards society with the duty towards nature. Anything else that in people's minds may be connected to love is an illusion, for love is nothing more than the urge to reproduce. This, however, is not where the meditations on the meaning of love in *The Awakening* end.

The Awakening starts as a search for "the abiding truth" (p. 71). Through her awakening, Edna starts to see the constructedness of Victorian society and its norms. The restricted position of a woman as the Angel in the House is only one of the "arbitrary conditions" (p. 171) that are created to maintain a certain social system, the norms of which become naturalized and legitimized through reiteration. She looks for relief from restriction in love. However, even love turns out to be a construction. Nothing changes even if Victorian restraint is replaced by Romantic passion. Edna adopts Schopenhauerian

pessimism on love, seeing it as “a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race” (p. 171). She feels enslaved by her children and sees no future for herself other than be slowly consumed by them.

Walking down the beach to her death Edna revolts against this naturalist view. She thinks about her husband and children: “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (p. 176). Nor would Edna need to. By adopting Schopenhauerian view on love she, in fact, reiterates the very Victorian norms and the essential view on women that sees biology as women’s destiny. Reiteration, however, reveals also gaps and inconsistencies in the value system. This becomes clear when we consider *The Awakening* in the context of the nineteenth-century literary traditions. Edna, who does not feel at home among Creoles after several years of marriage, seems to have equal difficulties in fitting in the role of a heroine in realist, transcendentalist or naturalist fiction, as these traditions conform to the Victorian social order she is fighting against. She attempts a leap towards the less orderly and hierarchical world view of modernism, but she does not turn out to be rebellious enough to lead the modern way of life of the New Woman. Instead, Edna’s ultimate revolt against the limited view on women present in the traditions of realism, transcendentalism and naturalism, as well as in the whole Victorian society, is her suicide, her refusal to go on according to the given terms. In this context, Edna’s death not only challenges the matrix of binary sexual relations but it becomes to symbolize the death of the single universalistic truth of the Victorian world view. As *The Awakening* succeeds in unveiling power relations that bind women into the heterosexual matrix, Edna’s death is not the end but a new beginning in putting “the consolidation of the norms of ‘sex’ into a potentially productive crisis.”²²⁹

Now that the work is done, I feel relieved from the spell. This is not to say my interest in Chopin would have diminished in any way. On the contrary, it would be

²²⁹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 10.

fascinating to study representations of love in Chopin's less studied short stories, where she discusses love in an ironic manner that seems even more radical than in *The Awakening*. In "The Story of an Hour," for example, Mrs. Mallard, after hearing about her husband's accidental death, sums up their married life: "What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!"²³⁰ The sanctity of the marriage institution is discussed in "At the 'Cadian Ball,'" where Alcée and Calixta are attracted to each other but marry separately their own partners out of a whim—ending up in an affair in the sequel of the story, "The Storm." After this adulterous affair, the narrator laconically comments: "So the storm passed and every one was happy."²³¹ It is there and in many other stories that the mystery of love intrigues the mind for finding individual solutions.

²³⁰ Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour," *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 215.

²³¹ Kate Chopin, "The Storm," *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 286.

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