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## Tragic Pursuit

Individualism, though a seemingly beautiful characteristic at first glance, is often interpreted as a destructive trait in a uniform society. Within Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, "... every individual has an 'identity' ..." (Richter) that is constrained by the parameters of the novel. Ultimately, a woman is raised to be a doting wife and mother, and a man is raised to be the household's courageous breadwinner, as discussed in an outside article on the Creole lifestyle (Bauman). The societal norms of gender determine individuals' identities, but Edna Pontellier, the novel's protagonist, yearns for more in life than is available to her. As she discovers her true emotional desires, sexual needs, and social capabilities, she is left at a loss as she no longer blends with her world. Edna's "awakening" is her search for independence in a world of conformity and structure, and this tragic path yields few options outside of death or, in exchange for submission to the norm, a loss of true independence.

Chopin illustrates Adele Ratignolle as the epitome of the novel's woman; as discussed in an abstract on *The Awakening*, this image of "nineteenth-century society required women to be objects in marriage and motherhood, existing as vessels of maternity and sexuality, with little opportunity for individuality" (Gray). In context this interpretation of "sexuality" is similar to "femininity," rather than being physically sexual in nature; Adele represents the delicacy of a woman without delving into desire or passionate pursuits associated with "shame and secrecy" for women (Figs 117). During this time gender provoked the molds into which individuals were expected to fit; men and women had specified roles, and women especially were expected to follow these designs. As Arshi Hashmi points out in her book review, "The Place of a Woman," "... women are instrumental ... and not recognizing this ... is a tragedy of [the] time" (Hashmi).

Through this, Hashmi delineates that in not acknowledging unique aspects of feminine nature, society is inherently pitted against individuality. In the novel, Edna lives her early adulthood similarly to how Adele does. Edna prioritizes her children and her husband but constantly feels as though there should be more to her life, though she does not know what that "more" would be. As Edna begins her interest in independence, she often confides in Adele. Because of Adele's ultimate propriety and devotion to her own family, she consistently advises Edna to remain devoted to her family and her life as a homemaker. In the time and culture of *The Awakening*, "Good women are supposed to be weak and obedient, while bad women are ... strong and independent ... [and] are not to be admired by a conservative and traditional society" (Hashmi). Adele never crosses the boundary of turning Edna's thoughts into reality; Adele lives out her life as a "good" woman and strives to serve her husband and family. While she witnesses Edna's surrounding temptations and changing ideals, Adele remains restrained within her societal boundaries (Figs 114), never going beyond the hypothetical discussions and instead maintains the image of the ideal woman of the time period. Though the flirtations and occasional glances may be socially acceptable, actions are not. Even though Edna's dreams give Adele the opportunity to desire a different lifestyle, Adele lives her life of service and submission to cultural norms, never being truly independent.

The Creole culture that is highlighted in one of *The Awakening's* main conflicts is based on the idea that men were expected to stay single rather than marry during their early adulthood. As portrayed in the article on Creole lifestyle, "... it [is] the Louisiana Creole that Chopin [writes] about in her novels. Their freedom, appreciation of art and music and isolation from other members of society [are] present in Chopin's novels" (Bauman). These Louisiana Creoles,

though culturally similar to the French Creoles, are comparably more modernized. Edna's love interest within the novel, Robert Lebrun, is a model Louisiana Creole man who lives out his early adulthood flirting with and entertaining women but never consummating their interests. When Edna and Robert meet, they realize true feelings of love; however, the two lovers are doomed to never go beyond verbal or slight physical embraces, as Edna is already a married woman. Her feelings grow, and as stated in a literary criticism on the prevalence of identity within *The Awakening*, Edna's "love for Robert has awakened her to the needs of her own nature. She is not a 'mother-woman' like her friend Adele Ratignolle and recognizes different desires in herself that cannot be satisfied by the round of social obligations and everyday routines required by her status and the traditions of Creole society" (Richter). Although these flirtations surface newfound desires within Edna, Robert exercises control expected from a man of his stature. Edna outwardly begins renouncing her life and searching for customarily inappropriate experiences, such as having an affair with another man in the town—a non-Creole man known for his physical relations with women (Chopin 123)—in an effort to fill the newly discovered void in her life. Robert does not pursue these damned characteristics; he is fearful of ever breaching these physical and emotional boundaries set in place by the culture. He instead continues living a life of conformity and even flees the country in an attempt to end his temptations of Edna (Chopin 75). Encountering a feeling he has never experienced before, Robert has the option of going outside of societal boundaries or preserving his current lifestyle, and to Edna's disappointment he chooses the latter.

Edna, "... tormented by the strict rules ... of Creole society ..." (Bauman) and the rejection of her lover, turns to another woman within the novel for guidance. Contrasting the motherly

character of Adele, Chopin illustrates Mademoiselle Reisz as an exotic woman to whom Edna strives to be similar. Initially, the two women bond because Edna spoke "... a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door ..."

(Chopin 5). Reisz is that "mockingbird," and the lost language the two share is independence, though their preferences of such vary greatly. Society values Reisz for her music while it values Edna for her physical appearance, though they both suffer from confinement and oppression throughout the novel. Upon meeting Reisz, Edna is under the impression that she lives out her life contentedly and independent of society; her character serves as the inspiration for Edna within the novel as Reisz lives out her life without a husband or family. Unfortunately for Edna, though, her expectations of individuality are not epitomized in Reisz. Reisz rejects Adele's lifestyle in favor of being free and sufficient on her own. Similar to Edna, Reisz faces judgment from others; however, unlike Edna, she is not looking to alter anyone's point of view; she is an individual within society, but she is not looking to change others within that society. As Edna begins her journey of self-discovery, her greatest hope is to eventually be with Robert, no matter how socially unacceptable that dream might be. Whereas Edna dreams of changing Robert's and society's perspectives, Reisz is content without spreading her individuality. Basing most of her dramatic character changes off of Reisz, Edna finds herself initially at a loss as to how she could reach her full potential while remaining in this world of conformity. At first, Edna's hopes of independence are epitomized in Reisz; she realizes, though, that being the only character representing true independence is not satisfying within her life. Edna delineates to another character within the novel that "The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find .... perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even

to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (Chopin 184). Edna illustrates her newfound confidence in her ideals, concluding that she would rather suffer overall downfall than be blind to true independence in life. Within their lives, Adele and Robert are "sleeping," as they choose complete conformity to societal norms over their desires and opportunities for independence. Reisz, on the other hand, is "dreaming;" even though she lives as an individual, she does not separate herself from this society. From Edna's perspective Reisz continues living her life in a haze; she believes herself to be independent but does not strive to share this with the conformed society. Edna, apart from both of these versions of people "dupe[d] to illusions," has resigned herself to "waking up" and never submitting to conformity, even if it means pain or sacrifice. As Edna's passionate nature awakens and is driven by her desire for identity, her desire to adjust societal norms separates her from Reisz.

Edna suffers within the novel because this self-awareness she has discovered has made her incompatible with the social roles "offered her by nineteenth-century society;" however, "Edna experiments with two roles in particular, embodied by central female characters in the novel, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz" (Gray). Edna cannot create her own role within society, and she simply does not mesh with any of its preset standards. Although Edna initially does not feel as though she can be a woman without a man in her life, she discovers her ability to "possess" herself or command her own life. Eventually, Robert does return, but Edna has the striking realization that even though she is willing to give up societal acceptance for Robert's love, he is not willing to do the same for hers. Described in a literary criticism on suffering due to a lack of control over one's life, Edna's "... quest for freedom [is] compromised by the inevitability of death; [she is] a trapped and desperate woman, briefly awakened and then

driven to her doom" (Meyers). Ultimately, Edna comes to the conclusion that her search for independence yields one option in order to save her newfound identity: death. Edna's lack of independence and want for control over her own life motivates her demise. Paralleling this motivation, a modern study shows that rationales for suicide exist beyond depression (Popik). Edna bears a greater commonality with this newfound reasoning than with depression, for her suicide most directly originated from "loss of independence in future, loss of dignity ... and worry about loss of sense of self" (Popik), all of which are apart from depression. Depression in no way plays into her Edna's suicide; suicide was not even a consideration of hers before she begins her search for independence. Edna is not clinically depressed; she is looking to take back control of her life. Society does not accept her as her new, individual self. Her discovered emotional and physical wants are not representative of a proper woman, and rather than submit to the culture surrounding her and lose this independence, Edna kills herself to preserve her identity. Because of societal norm, she sees death as her only option for making decisions for her life and being truly independent. Although she holds slight regrets, such as her children or Robert, Edna ignores these thoughts and forces herself to choose her independence over the expectations of others. Edna chooses death not out of sadness or a want to no longer continue living; she dies in order to leave no chance of conforming to society. Once she finds her individuality, she refuses to let it go in exchange for acceptance by the norm.

Though her ending is melancholic, Edna's search for independence leads her to end her life rather than submit to societal expectations. Edna's "own soul ... invite[s] her" to die and "exchange social approval for spiritual integrity" (Richter). Following small realizations and inspirational thoughts such as vowing to never view herself as a possession again, Edna finds



that there is no true option for independence in her life, and the only way she can save her identity is to die. These newfound emotional desires, sexual needs, and social capabilities cause Edna to stand out apart from her society. Due to how she has changed within the novel, Edna cannot simply return to her previous lifestyle; societal conformity and independence are mutually exclusive. Ironically, even her reasoning for suicide does not conform to the societal norm. Edna chooses death for reasons outside of social expectations of suicide, leaving even her death unique and effectively cutting herself off from society eternally. Her "awakening" has yielded independence within a world of structure and semblance, an aspect that does not fit within her society. This pursuit of independence in this world of conformity leaves her with death as the only freedom she can enjoy.

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