


Fall 2015

Edna the Oblivious Oppressor: An Intersectional Analysis of Privilege and its Lack Thereof in *The Awakening*

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Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Jessica L., "Edna the Oblivious Oppressor: An Intersectional Analysis of Privilege and its Lack Thereof in *The Awakening*" (2015). *Honors Theses*. Paper 264.

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English/Women's Studies Honors Senior Thesis

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The Awakening

Kate Chopin's American classic *The Awakening*, published in 1899 and recovered in the 1960s, is an iconic and groundbreaking feminist text. During its time of publication it was widely criticized and condemned for its scandalous content. When second-wave feminists rediscovered the novel in the 1960s Edna was regarded as a social construct-breaking hero. The second-wave feminist movement included middle to upper-middle-class educated white women and excluded working-class women and women of color. A second-wave feminist reading of *The Awakening* can easily sympathize with Edna and support her in her plight to obtain individual freedom from the oppressive patriarchal society that constrains her. In his 1969 biography, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, Per Seyersted exemplifies the second-wave feminist response to the novel and focuses on the fundamental seriousness of Edna's struggle. However, third-wave feminists like myself take issue with this interpretation because it excludes women of color's experiences from what it means to be a woman. Third-wave feminism is about intersectionality and the connections between race, class, and gender. In her 1992 book, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn of the 20th Century*, Elizabeth Ammons brings the women of color of the novel into focus and changes our opinion about Edna.

In her quest for freedom Edna believes she is dismantling the social constraints that oppress her and that she is discovering her true self. Second-wave feminist critics tended to agree with Edna's self-assessment. However, as Audre Lorde said in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*: "the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house." However, third-wave feminists asked new questions that focused on the intersections of gender and racial identities. These questions bring a different view of Edna into focus. In this view Edna's quest for freedom

coincides with her oppression of women of color. As my analysis, drawing on Ammons' insights, will show Edna ironically becomes the oppressor she wants to escape.

Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism began in the 1960s as a movement that was spearheaded by privileged white women. The issues these women were fighting against were largely different from the issues of women of color. The second-wave feminists fought for women's issues that were primarily exclusive to their white privileged backgrounds. In "Kate Chopin and the American Realists" from *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, Per Seyersted addresses the first-wave feminist audience of the 19th century, the "Iron Madonnas." Seyersted examines issues that primarily apply to these Iron Madonnas, such as female biology and societal forces. According to Seyersted, "Kate Chopin concentrates mainly on the biological aspects of woman's situation..." (204); a woman's biology was a driving force of the patriarchal society and kept women in the roles as wives and mothers. Seyersted acknowledges that Edna bravely questions the established order of society and the rules that govern her existence as a woman. For example, Seyersted looks at Edna's move to the pigeon house as a form of emancipation and assertion of independence. Seyersted articulates, "For Edna... emancipation means something quite different; as she moves to a smaller house, she has 'a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual.'" (204). In an Emersonian effort to simplify, this society woman hopes to rise from her position as angel of the house /mother woman to a higher more meaningful existence. The only way to obtain this more meaningful existence is to become her true self, which was quite a radical notion. Chopin reveals the intensity of Edna's depression and hopelessness as a result of being trapped in her role as wife and mother. According to Seyersted, "*The Awakening*, has a fundamental seriousness..." (205).

First-wave feminist women watched Edna break societal norms while searching for her true self with basically zero consequences; Seyersted comments on Chopin and women authors of the period as “unable to see their heroines as sinners. They braved public opinion by refusing to let the two [them] repent, and they had the further audacity to present their stories with no trace of moralism and without apology”(205). Edna makes the choice to defy conventions for a white woman of her social standing, with no remorse or social punishment occurring in the wake of her actions. She is totally unapologetic in her decision to be exactly who she is. Seyersted also comments on Adèle Ratignolle’s presence in the novel by asserting that this sensuous Madonna, as a woman delicious in her role as wife and mother; having children every two years and giving them and her husband every ounce of her energy, “represents everything that Edna opposes” Edna can’t imagine giving up that much of her true self to play a role for someone else. Seyersted points out Edna’s desire to “achieve the ecstasy of an all-encompassing love.” In addition to the labor pains Edna faces during the birth of her true self there is the agony of the unrequited love between her and Robert, but that is not the sole cause of her suicide. Second-wave feminists regard Edna’s suicide as a personal victory and final embodiment of true self – authenticity. According to Seyersted, for example, “When the apparently defeated Edna takes off her clothes, on the other hand, it symbolizes a victory of self-knowledge and authenticity as she fully becomes herself”(206). Edna’s rejection of societal restrictions places her on a victorious journey to selfhood, which she achieves when she swims out further than she ever has before. This reading of Edna’s glorious journey to selfhood is a widely accepted and common interpretation of the novel. We see Edna as a society-defying hero who fights until her death for her right to her self. However, when analyzed through a third-wave feminist perspective Edna’s journey to selfhood seems more like a solipsistic trip to nowhere.

Third-Wave Feminism

In her book, *Conflicting Stories American Women Writers and the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, third-wave feminist Elizabeth Ammons problematizes the second-wave interpretation of *The Awakening* by bringing women of color into focus and I will be adding to this work.

Third-wave feminists maintain an intersectional and inclusive approach to feminism. Third-wave feminism questions the ways race, class, gender, etc. intersect and create social oppression. All of these pillars of society influence each other because they all make up a person's identity. Edna does not recognize the privilege she owns as a white woman of society. Ammons argues that Edna's ignorance of her privilege allows Chopin to entertain her character's utopian notion that one can live completely liberated of all restrictions. However, this kind of freedom is based on domination of women of color. *The Awakening* is self-indulgent by nature but in between the lines of Edna's deepest and most personal realizations is social and racial oppression. The freedom and privilege white men enjoyed involves seeing others as less deserving of the freedom one is demanding and asserting as absolutely necessary to realize one's selfhood. Edna does not recognize her great privilege and takes her quadroon nursemaid, identified only by her assigned race and never by her name, for granted; she does not imagine that her servant is taking care of Etienne and Raoul instead of being at home with perhaps her own children.

An intersectional analysis of *The Awakening* would deconstruct Edna's actual role as mother and what actually goes into it. One would find that Edna's mothering cannot be separated from the black women who essentially raise her children and who are continuously oppressed by her, even though she thinks she's the one who is so oppressed. In addition to Edna's story being one of great pain, Ammons writes, "It is also one, it is important to recognize, of great privilege. Edna Pontellier is able to swim dreamily to her death for one very clear and highly political

reason: Black women will raise her children”(10). Black women, especially the quadroon basically do everything for her, all of the brunt work of mothering. Although Edna dismantles many notions about freedom she fails to dismantle the notion that she is in fact oppressing the quadroon in the same way she feels oppressed herself.

Edna was a “New Woman” and another one of the middle and upper middle class women who believed in breaking the social norm and having the same privileges as bourgeois men. In “Conflicting Stories,” Elizabeth Ammons writes, “The middle class black woman at the turn of the century was not busy casting off a constricting ideal of Victorian femininity. She had never been included in it in the first place”(7). Black women were not privileged enough to share in Edna’s frustrations about her social standing because they were not considered human beings in the same way. Through a third-wave feminist lens we can deconstruct Edna’s frustrations and realize that they are rooted in her great privilege. For whatever reason, Chopin chose to include women of color in *The Awakening* and through an intersectional analysis of their roles in white patriarchal society in juxtaposition to Edna’s we can see that Edna is actually an oppressor of women of color. Just as Léonce Pontellier is socially superior to Edna and therefore oppresses her, Edna is socially superior to the quadroon and as a result, oppresses her. She is unable to see that she is in fact the oppressor. As Ammons explains, “Though she does not see it, her freedom comes at the expense of women of other races and lower class, whose homelessness, facelessness, and voicelessness record a much more profound oppression in *The Awakening* than does the surface story of Edna Pontellier”(10). The complete silence of women of color is evident throughout but the awareness of the silence is repressed. The struggle of the New Woman is completely separate from the ubiquitous struggle for freedom of African Americans but the proximity of the two is shocking.

The novel itself is like a gestation period with its thirty-nine chapters. Black women are completely intertwined with white women's maternal experience and their experiences are subtly included in between the lines in each chapter. A second-wave feminist view of the novel is problematic because it disregards the fact that black women are woven into the fabric of the novel. Second-wave feminism looks at Edna's story as a universal representation of all women who desire to be liberated but it's not. This story could not be more personal and specific to Edna Pontellier. Ammons writes, "Cut off from the large, urgent, ubiquitous struggle for freedom of African Americans in Chopin's America, a struggle hinted at but repeatedly repressed in the text, the utterly individualistic and solipsistic white female fantasy that *The Awakening* indulges in can only end in silence- in death"(10). The only ending can be death because the gestation period of thirty-nine chapters is in fact an unproductive labor; Edna doesn't get anywhere. She desires the kind of individualistic freedom and privilege that men enjoyed. Edna's self-absorption blinds her to the oppressive weight she places on the shoulders of the quadroon. She feels trapped and oppressed within the constricting Victorian role of angelic wife and mother. During her awakening she comes to the conclusion that she will never again be anything that she is not or do anything she does not want to do. Edna longs for the same privileges as an upper-class white man, which is inherently problematic because the white man maintains his privileges by oppressing others.

When we bring black women into focus Edna takes a swift dive from the role of courageous hero to the oppressor. Edna is the center of consciousness for the third person limited point of view of the novel. Therefore, all the reader knows is through Edna's point of view. Chopin subtly brings women of color onto the scene and if we're attentive we can bring them into focus and change our view of Edna. Edna is not aware that black women provide the

background and foundation to make her role as wife and mother more comfortable. When we make black women the central focus we can see that Edna's frustrations stem from the fact that she has every comfort and privilege she could ask for. A second-wave argument focuses on Edna's desire for "more" out of her life and ignores the great privilege she already enjoys. Subjectivity edits and structures reality; how one interprets the world is going to dictate how one sees it. The construction of Edna's eyes does not allow her to see the quadroon as a person who might have the same needs as herself. The way Edna sees the world is flawed and third-wave feminists recognize that. A close reading of *The Awakening* will prove that although Edna has seemingly progressive ideas about freedom she is no less an oppressor than Léonce Pontellier.

Motherhood and The Quadroon

Building on the work of Ammon's an intersectional analysis and close reading of *The Awakening* will reveal the black women woven through the fabric of the novel and bring them into primary focus. When they are in the spotlight the second-wave feminist opinion of Edna evolves into a critical analysis of her privilege and the ways she is an oppressor rather than a victim of oppression. Motherhood is inextricably bound to women of color in the novel. However, the white mothers and fathers, which black women serve, are largely unaware of this crucial connection. Edna doesn't realize that her ability to mother at all is facilitated by the women of color who assist her. She doesn't regard them as human beings with the same feelings as herself and criticizes them for the neglect of their duties in the same way Léonce criticizes her.

Between Edna and Léonce there is a total disregard for the women of color who take care of their children. Léonce is completely blind to the quadroon's importance; not realizing how much she does to take care of his children while his wife is not attending to them. Chopin writes,

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children.

If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befall them (7).

Black women are written in between the lines in this passage. "If it was not a mother's place to look after children"; it was indeed the responsibility of their black help. Even when the women of color are not explicitly mentioned, their presence cannot be denied. From the very start of the novel readers know that Edna is not taking care of the children, but they're certainly not alone when she's not with them; they're with the quadroon. Chopin writes,

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. Tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices, which usually prevailed against the other mother-tots. The quadroon nurse was looked upon as a huge encumbrance, only good to button up waists and panties and to brush and part hair; since it seemed to be a law of society that hair must be parted and brushed (9).

The boys pick themselves up because their mother isn't there to pick them up. Their toughness seems to be a reflection of the care they receive from the quadroon. Although the quadroon is constantly giving her care and attention to the children she is still not regarded as a mother woman of, say, Adèle Ratignolle's caliber because of her race. Chopin writes, "The mother women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle"(9). Third-wave feminists would question

what it means to be considered a mother woman here and who is excluded from the Victorian ideal. This quotation disregards the real mother women, the quadroons of Grand Isle, who are the ones doing the brunt work of mothering. This type of Victorian motherhood is only possible through the assistance of women of color. The white mother women prevailed at the expense of the women of color who took care of their children. This is an example of the hierarchy of oppression and how the role Edna wanted, individual freedom, comes at the cost of oppression of women and others. When we deconstruct the “mother women” we can see the irony because the actual mother women did not prevail at all. This is an example of white feminism because it is not recognizing the experiences of all mother women and ignoring the integral role that women of color play in white women’s ability to be mothers. They wouldn’t even be able to be mothers without the help of a quadroon.

Almost an entire page is spent talking about how Adèle Ratignolle is so delicious in her role as a mother. Chopin writes, “Many of them were delicious in the role: one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving death by slow torture. Her name was Adèle Ratignolle”(9). The reason she is able to embody all of these womanly graces is because of her privilege. Also, the mother woman delicious in her role has an opposite. And the reason Madame Ratignolle embodies a state of angelic motherly purity is because of binary social constructs. According the social historian and literary critic Diane Roberts, “... white women themselves have such a stake in racial representations: the understanding of what it means to be a white woman in the United States, particularly in the south, is still largely predicated on what it means to be black”(5). Adèle has these graceful characteristics because she is safe, secure, and privileged in her role. The quadroon is not even introduced by name. Adèle Ratignolle has many admiring paragraphs about

her mothering skills but the quadroon is not given half as much attention. One way of mothering is praised and the “other,” the quadroon’s life as a practicing “mother woman,” is ignored. Motherhood is viewed through a single narrow lens throughout the novel. The reader can only imagine what is going on in the quadroon’s head because there was no way that Edna would be able to understand her experiences. Instances of black oppression occur throughout the novel and due to the third-person limited narrative we are not privy to what the quadroon is thinking. However, Chopin had a reason for including these descriptions of the black women in the novel, because if she were as oblivious as Edna she would not have included them. If we read closely and acknowledge the quadroon and other women of color we can begin to think about their struggle and the oppression they faced.

When Edna reflects deeply on her childhood in Kentucky she ruminates on an innocent crush she had growing up. While Chopin shows readers what it was like for Edna to feel this attraction for the first time she casually mentions a plantation: “At another time her affections were deeply engaged by a young gentleman who visited a lady on a neighboring plantation”(18). If the narration included a perspective from a person of color this symbol of slavery would mean something completely different to them than to Edna, a privileged white woman. Images of slavery and racism are embedded in her life and therefore she is blind to it; Edna fails to recognize her own privilege. Chopin writes, “Edna was a little miss, just merging into her teens; and the realization that she herself was nothing, nothing, nothing to the engaged young man was a bitter affliction to her”(18); this isn’t exactly an affliction and Edna never faces real affliction in the novel. It is ironic that she is talking about affliction and a plantation on the same page but she is not talking about the African American fight for freedom and the terrible past of slavery.

As Ammons asserts, she is simply unaware and cut off from the African American struggle for freedom.

Edna is fortunate enough to be in a safe and secure marriage, even though it is lacking in any sort of love or passion. She has the privilege to pick and choose the days she wished to be fond of her husband or her children or both. Chopin writes,

She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. The year before they had spent part of the summer with their grandmother Pontellier in Iberville. Feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to fee her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her (19).

She doesn't recognize that she is able to do this because of the quadroon she has to help her. Less privileged women do not have the luxury to decide to love their children impulsively and "forget them." They are not her first priority and they never have to be her first priority because there is someone else there to take care of their immediate needs. In addition to the aid from the quadroon, there is also the help of grandmother Pontellier, who fortunately loves Edna's children and can take care of them in Edna's absence. Edna is able to commit an act of suicide in the end because of her privilege. She is able to take her own life because women of color will be there to take care of her children and so will her mother-in-law. Edna has childcare and the luxury not spend every waking moment of her life taking care of them. She is under the impression that her life is completely meaningless and she has no purpose, but she doesn't see the agency she still

has. This passage subtly reveals that she doesn't spend that much time with her children and almost contradicts her claims about giving up her life for them. She doesn't *have* to take her own life for them but we know that ultimately they will be fine without her.

Edna feels secure in her position and this baseline state of security is something she takes for granted. It is no surprise that she feels "their absence was a relief"; this passage shows the inner workings of Edna's motherly mind and there is a clear disconnect where there should be a strong bond between her and her children. This passage glamorizes her deficiencies as a mother with flowery language and big concepts like fate. The reader naturally feels badly for Edna even though she admits to us that she lacks the ability to give her children one hundred percent of her love and attention. Yes, fate may have landed her in her current situation but it is a reality nonetheless and she has every comfort to ease the impact of her unfavorable circumstances. Edna's situation is simply unfavorable. It would be insincere hyperbole to describe it as something that actually interfered with her health, well-being, safety, or security. Edna's needs are being met, even beyond her basic ones.

The limited third -person narration of the novel keeps readers at a relative distance from the quadroon nurses. Everything readers know about them is through the perspective of a privileged white woman. There is no way Edna would be able to conceptualize what it was like to be a quadroon nurse. However, Chopin's narrator includes details about her that Edna otherwise does not notice. For example, she writes, "There were other children beside, and two nursemaids followed, looking disagreeable and resigned"(19). All the narrator can comment on is these nursemaids' outward expression and appearance because there is such a divide between them and Edna, the novel's center of consciousness. She is unable to see the connection that she too feels disagreeable and resigned about the same motherly duties. However, the quadroon

could appear disagreeable about caring for Etienne and Raoul for any number of reasons. For example, she might wish she was home raising her own children. The paradox lies in the fact that black women cannot be separated from white women's mothering but at the same time, they could not be more separate. They exist in two completely separate spheres that are essentially as different as those of men and women. However, in this case, Edna is in fact the dominant oppressor and the black women are subordinated.

Edna does achieve certain levels of freedom throughout the novel. For example, the freedom to indulge in art. The experience she has with Mademoiselle Reisz is a display of her privilege. She believes it is her right as a human being to foster artistic connections and have artistic experiences. However, the fact that she even has room in her head to think about such things and pursue such leisurely activities is a mark of a privileged person. The reason she has the ability to enjoy art in such a way is because of the position she occupies in society. Her status rests on the oppression of women of color and other minorities. Throughout the novel Edna has a certain transcendental attitude, but for all of her big ideas about life and the pursuit thereof she is exclusive about who has the right to do such things. She is oblivious to the individuality and freedom that is denied to women of color in order for her to obtain her own. Essentially she makes these great profound discoveries about life and personal freedom and it's ironic because she doesn't see the oppression she is exuding.

My third -wave feminist analysis of *The Awakening* asks: if Edna were a more intersectional feminist, would she have taken her own life? The novel wouldn't have ended in a stillbirth; it would have been a productive labor for thirty-nine chapters if Edna took her realizations to the next level. Feminism has come a long way since Chopin and *The Awakening* beautifully illustrated the inextricable bond between black and white women in Creole society

while simultaneously showing the distance between them in Edna's blindness to their intersections. Their proximal state is not reflective of a close relationship. For example, several times throughout the novel the narrator describes women of color as looking absent minded; their minds are elsewhere. This description reminds us that they are human beings as well, with lives outside of taking care of white women's children.

For example, Chopin writes, "The little negro girl who worked Madame Lebrun's sewing machine was sweeping the galleries with long, absent-minded strokes of the broom (32)." Chopin's description of the little girl as absent-minded humanizes her and acknowledges the fact that the little girl's thoughts are somewhere else. Perhaps she appears absent minded because she wishes she was outside playing like the white children but she is bored to be stuck inside sweeping. Nonetheless, a close reader could ask why Chopin includes these descriptions; wondering what is on this young girl's mind humanizes her and shows she just might have the same feelings and desires as Edna.

The presence of the quadroon is also taken for granted throughout the novel. It is expected that she will be there to attend to the needs of the children. Edna and Léonce seem to be under the impression that the quadroon is there to help the children rather than seeing she is actually doing their work for them. Chopin writes, "When Etienne had fallen asleep Edna bore him into the back room, and Robert went and lifted the mosquito bar that she might lay the child comfortably in his bed. The quadroon had vanished"(39); the detail about the quadroon is included because it is otherwise assumed that she will be there. The quadroon plays a role in the nightly ritual of putting the children to bed and spends those quiet moments with them before they close their eyes. It's significant that the last faces the children see before they go to bed are their mother, father, *or* the quadroon nurse. The children have a strong connection with their

nurse and she surely has a connection with them as well. Edna treats the quadroon almost like a child even though she is an adult and probably has children of her own; the nurse's treatment is basically at the discretion of Edna or Léonce, just like Raoul's and Etienne's. Chopin writes,

The little cottage was close and stuffy after leaving the outer air. But she did not mind; there appeared to be a hundred different things demanding her attention indoors. She began to set the toilet-stand to rights, grumbling at the negligence of the quadroon, who was in the adjoining room putting the children to bed... Then she went in and assisted the quadroon in getting the boys to bed (42).

The quadroon really can't win because if she were dealing with the toilet-stand then she wouldn't have been with the children and would therefore have been neglecting them. Edna's overall attitude towards the quadroon is spiteful. She blames her for her own incompetence; she says she went to help the quadroon put the children to bed but realistically the quadroon doesn't need any help at all. Whenever something isn't done Edna can say the quadroon had vanished or was neglecting her duties. The quadroon is basically a pawn that Edna can exercise power over. This passage echoes the way Léonce Pontellier criticizes Edna for neglecting her role as wife and mother and now Edna is doing exactly that to the quadroon. Whenever something isn't going correctly in her house she can blame the quadroon nurse, similarly to how Léonce blames Edna for any sort of discordance in his home. All the brunt work and all the blame fall upon the quadroon at the end of the day. Edna is no doubt a frustrated woman. She is frustrated with her meaningless life and she looks at the quadroon as someone she can take out some of these frustrations on. These minimal frustrations are reflective of her minimal problems. The irony is that while Edna blames the quadroon for the small things that happen within her household, she isn't even bearing the real brunt of her role as wife and mother. Yet she somehow can't cope.

The quadroon is putting her children to bed so she doesn't have to; she only has to tend to this motherly duty on certain occasions or when she feels like it.

Edna is also in a separate sphere from her children because of her position in society. The quadroon appears more connected with her children than Edna is. Chopin writes, "Edna tapped her foot impatiently, and wondered why the children persisted in playing in the sun when they might be under the trees, she went down and led them out of the sun, scolding the quadroon for not being more attentive"(45). Edna's behavior here echoes that of her husband's in the opening scene when he criticizes Edna for being "burnt beyond recognition" and we can clearly see how Edna occupies the role of oppressor. This is so ironic because she describes herself as the type of woman who doesn't fit the motherhood role. She doesn't believe she was cut out for the role she was dealt the day she was born and she is willing to rebel against it until her death. She acutely feels the oppression from her husband, yet she passes it to the quadroon. By virtue of this hierarchy the quadroon bears the brunt of the oppression, falling below Edna and into the background. If Edna so strongly doesn't believe in these strict roles then why is she pressuring the quadroon to be everything she herself cannot be? Therein lies the truth that Edna is the oppressor she so detests but doesn't see it.

One of the most iconic passages of *The Awakening* is when Edna declares that she will give up her life for her children but she will not sacrifice her selfhood. This passage sounds so beautiful and empowering to second-wave feminists. A woman rejects the position society gave to her and she declares she will not abandon her individual selfhood for her role. It is a powerful claim of individuality that certainly has inspired feminist readers. However, her claims are empty. Edna asserts, "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. I can't make it more clear; it's only something

which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me”(46). I’m not sure what world Edna is living in that her money and her life are not essential. If her money and life are not essential to her survival than what is? And as a woman who has never been without money it is foolish for her to say she would give it up because she has no real idea what it would be like to live without it as a lower -class woman. Her life and her money are her stability and the essence of her safety and comfort, yet she declares them unessential. Where would that leave her if she didn’t have money and a spare unessential life to give up? Her theory about living one’s own life and being nothing but one’s complete self is flawed. Her philosophy is contradictory in nature. Madame Ratignolle articulates, “ ‘I don’t know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential,’ said Madame Ratignolle, cheerfully; ‘But a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that- your bible tells you so. I’m sure I couldn’t do more than that’”(46). Although Madame Ratignolle is the embodiment of the wife and mother angel of the house she might have a more clear understanding of Edna’s philosophy than Edna does. Edna was so repressed that when she finally realized how tightly she was wound in her role she just melted in every direction and couldn’t get it back together again.

However, she is incapable of doing so and therefore goes on thinking she is battling alone against the universe, which is keeping her from becoming the Edna she was meant to be and the solipsistic plight continues. Edna exists in a separate sphere from the quadroon nurse and the children; no wonder she is so hopelessly lonely. She can’t be with her children with ease because she is not interested. She stands on her veranda and watches her children lightheartedly prance around and she doesn’t feel anything towards them; not even a criticism for the quadroon: “The boys were dragging along the banquette a small ‘express wagon,’ which they had filled with blocks and sticks. The quadroon was following them with little quick steps, having assumed a

fictitious animation and alacrity for the occasion” (51). Edna is very aware of the physical presence of the quadroon. The quadroon isn’t playing along with the children for her health either, so this image paints a clearer picture of the way Edna looks at the quadroon and how she doesn’t regard her as another woman who might just have some of the same hopes as herself. Chopin writes, “Edna looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic”(51). Edna’s whole demeanor is very dramatic. Chopin includes a list of all of the things that surround Edna Pontellier, including her children, placed in the same category as the fruit vender and the street. One would think that a mother would be more interested in her children than the local fruit vender but Edna can’t seem to choose which one interests her less. Not only is she uninterested in her life at present but she also feels like the world is alien and opposing her; she is self-absorbed. Edna begins to fully come into her own solipsistic glory when she decides to only do and feel as she likes. She completely indulges in the fantasy desire to do whatever she wants whenever she wants however she wants.

One of these desires is to paint and further develop herself as an artist. In order to exercise her skills she needs a model and after her children realize it is not amusing for them to sit still before their mother she employs her backup, the quadroon: “The quadroon sat for hours before Edna’s palette, patient as a savage, while the housemaid took charge of the children, and the drawing room went undusted”(55). Here, Chopin recognizes the patience it took for the quadroon to sit for Edna for hours while she paints. Chopin includes black women in the novel for a reason and certainly sympathizes with them more than Edna. The quadroon is sitting there “patient as a savage” because she doesn’t have a choice in the matter. Edna gets to make the

choice to paint and develop herself as an artist and in this moment, as she relishes doing exactly what she wants to do, she is infringing on the quadroon's right to do as she pleased by asking her to model for her. The quadroon appears patient as a savage perhaps because she is bored and would rather be doing something else. Or perhaps she is thinking about how she could be raising her own children but instead she is posing for the most immature member of the Pontellier family, not Etienne or Raoul, but Edna. Edna has different levels of household help; in order to paint at all she would need someone to watch her children. Edna wouldn't have anyone to paint if the quadroon wasn't there, and wouldn't be able to paint at all if it wasn't for the black women that take care of her children.

Chopin also incorporates the ubiquitous struggle of black women working as housemaids in between the lines of her text. For example, Chopin writes, "It was Victor who opened the gate for her. A black woman, wiping her hands upon her apron, was close at his heels. Before she saw them Edna could hear them in an altercation, the woman- plainly an anomaly- claiming the right to be allowed to perform her duties, one of which was to answer the bell"(57). This black woman declares her right to perform her duties in peace; Edna declares her right to not have to do anything she doesn't want to do. Edna has the privilege to say she won't do anything unless she has the most personal and pure desire to do so; juxtaposed with this black woman's situation, Edna sounds ridiculous. Edna believes it is her God-given right as a human being to be able to do whatever she wants to do; therefore Edna is oppressing the black woman by not considering her a human being with the same rights she claims for herself. The black woman barely has the right to do her own job at her place of work, never mind actually do what she wants to do in life:

Victor instructed the black woman to go at once and inform Madame Lebrun that Mrs. Pontellier desired to see her. The woman grumbled a refusal to do part of her

duty when she had not been permitted to do it at all, and started back to her interrupted task of weeding the garden. Whereupon Victor administered a rebuke in the form of a volley of abuse, which owing to its rapidity and incoherence, was all but incomprehensible to Edna. Whatever it was, the rebuke was convincing, for the woman dropped her hoe and went mumbling into the house (57).

This passage offers a glimpse into the lives of the women of color working as housemaids. The black woman here is not permitted to do her job in peace and is abused if she questions her boss. She has no sort of agency and control over the work she has to do because Victor is there looking over her shoulder, getting in the way of her duties, and, giving her orders when she finally gets a chance to begin another task. One can imagine a certain level of stress from being under someone else's watch all day long, in someone else's house, where one has no authority. The treatment of the black woman is completely up to the discretion of Victor or Madame Lebrun and how they are feeling that day. Edna does not notice the volley of abuse that he administers to the black woman and one could question what goes on behind closed doors that no one will ever see. Women of color were silenced and essentially were not noticed or regarded as equals whatsoever. The in-between-the-lines representation of black women in the novel is representative of how they were perceived in society. They were there as the flying buttresses of white family life, but were regarded as voiceless objects. Edna is deciding she is never going to do something she doesn't want to ever again and this black woman can barely make her own decision to get the gate when someone arrives at the home she supposedly runs.

Finally, Edna's oppression of women of color is evident within the language of the novel: But after all, a radiant peace settled upon her when she at last found herself alone. Even the children were gone. Old Madame Pontellier had come herself and carried them off to Iberville

with their quadroom”(69). Edna is incapable of relaxing around her children and looks at them as a constant burden and threat to her individuality. The quadroom is “theirs” and this possessive language is troubling. Edna can’t bear the fact that she “belongs” to Léonce and “belonged” once to her father, but in juxtaposition to the life of the quadroom, her grievances are problematic. Ultimately Edna desires first and foremost to be alone even though she claims to have a fierce attachment to her children; the quadroom doesn’t have a choice but to be attached to Edna’s children, even if she might prefer to mind her own children, if she has them.

Sexuality, Mariequita, and The Vera Cruz Girl

““Was her name Mariequita?” asked Edna. ‘Mariequita- yes, that was it; Mariequita. I had forgotten. Oh, she’s a sly one, and a bad one, that Mariequita!’ Edna looked down at Mademoiselle Reisz and wondered how she could have listened to her venom for so long. For some reason she felt depressed, almost unhappy”(47). This is a significant passage because a woman of color, Mariequita, is named. This is the only time in the novel that a white woman, Edna, relates to a woman of color. However, the only reason Edna is relating to her is because she envies her sexuality. She is jealous that Mariequita gets to have a body; she is earthy and physically dirty, with slime between her toes and all. Edna is too pure and pristine to be able to have a sexual body in the same way Mariequita is socially allowed to. In “The Myth of Aunt Jemima” Roberts explains this dynamic: “Representations of whites and blacks fuel a war over the body: the black body, the white body, the female body. The body is defined and circumscribed according to gender, race, and class”(2). Mariequita and her sexuality are a product of social constructs that render her the “jezebel,” completely opposite of Adèle Ratignolle. Besides Mariequita, the only other kind of sexuality Edna sees is in Adèle Ratignolle,

but her sexuality is contained within the constraints of her marriage. Adèle gets to be sensuous but she's locked in a marriage. Women of color get to have raw sexuality outside social boundaries because they're not included in that social scale or measured by the same standards. Adèle is the embodiment of sexuality within a circumscribed role and Mariequita is the polar opposite. Edna desires the sexuality but doesn't want to be the mother that comes with it and she glamorizes Mariequita's sexuality without noticing the oppression attached to it and the lack of autonomy women of color have over their bodies because of this social history. The women of color in this novel mainly reside between the lines and intertwined in the physical situations but they are not addressed by name and their thoughts are not addressed.

However, this is a significant passage because Mariequita, a woman of color, is humanized, even if it is problematic. Edna doesn't like what Mademoiselle Reisz says about Mariequita and goes as far as to call her words "venom." The tables are turned and Edna isn't the one looking up to the wise artist but looking down on her and condemning her for her words. However, the only reason Edna doesn't appreciate Mademoiselle Reisz's words is because they make her feel badly about her own sexual promiscuity. She wants to be like Mariequita but she certainly doesn't want to be like the quadroon. This relation between Edna and Mariequita, although brief, is important in the novel because it shows that women of color did have some of the same kinds of wants, needs, and desires as white women, even though white women regarded themselves as so separate from them. Edna cannot even imagine that the quadroon or Mariequita might also not want to be anyone else but herself either. If she made this simple realization that her wants and needs are not specific to herself maybe she would not feel so isolated and alone. In *Sex and Class in Colonial and Nineteenth-Century America*, Ann D. Gordon and Mari Jo Buhle assert,

Because the American ideal of femininity was so widely held, even minor deviations from the image, such as dress, carriage, speech, and manners, placed lower-class women outside the pale of respectability. For their part, working women had only one advantage: they alone retained a right to sexual fulfillment. Without birth control and general sexual freedom, this right constituted a negative differentiation. Lower-class white and black women became recognized as prime objects of sexual exploitation. Thus preserving the most precious virtue of the Fair Lady (291).

This virtue of the Fair Lady is what prevents Robert from consummating his relationship with Edna. She is the white and pure Madame and it is unthinkable that she should stray to the dark sexuality that her purity is measured against. Edna is envious of the woman from Vera Cruz that Robert mentions because she is allowed to be sexual, with Robert. Edna is intrigued by the sexuality of women of color and the only time she inquires about women of color in the novel she is prompted by her sexual curiosity. She asks Robert about this woman and wants to know more about her. Edna and Robert's conversation is as follows, "What was she like- the one who gave you the pouch? You must have known her very well.' 'She was very ordinary. She wasn't of the slightest importance. I knew her well enough.' 'Did you visit at her house? Was it interesting? I should like to know and hear about the people you met, and the impressions they made on you' "(96). Edna is fascinated by the events that occurred prior to the Vera Cruz girl giving Robert the "fantastic embroidered silk affair" and wants to know more about the woman with whom Robert chose to spend time when he was not with her. Robert tries to make light of the connection with the nameless Vera Cruz girl by implying her impression was not so lasting as the imprint of an oar on the water; however, when Edna asks him he reveals, "It would be

ungenerous to admit that she was of that order and kind.” It becomes clear that Robert and the Vera Cruz girl shared an intimate relationship even though he uses polite language so as not to offend Edna’s pure ears. He cannot see Edna in the same way as he sees the Vera Cruz girl; it doesn’t matter that Edna is in love with him because she is not allowed to be sexual like the Vera Cruz girl or Mariequita for that matter.

Edna and Robert would never be able to be together because of her position in society and his perception of that position. Edna is in love with Robert but he will never be able to see her as just Edna as long as she is Léonce Pontellier’s wife: “ ‘Why have you been fighting against it?’ she asked. Her face glowed with soft lights. ‘Why? Because you were not free; you were Léonce Pontellier’s wife. I couldn’t help loving you if you were ten times his wife; but so long as I went away from you and kept away I could help telling you so’”(102). Edna doesn’t want him to fight against his desires but he believes that behavior is not appropriate regarding her, even though it was regarding the unnamed woman from Vera Cruz. Edna’s relationship with Robert versus his relationship with the Vera Cruz girl illustrate the sexuality Edna desired but was not allowed to have. The Vera Cruz girl is perhaps the most humanized woman of color in the novel. Edna brings her into her focus but she doesn’t realize that her privilege is built on the fact that this woman is allowed to be sexual. As Ammons writes, “Also, Mexican American and Mexican women play crucial subordinate roles in *The Awakening*: taken together, all of these women of color make Edna Pontellier’s ‘liberation’ possible”(10). It is one of the elements that keep the white patriarchal society in place; a woman of color’s freer sexuality was a necessary opposite for the Victorian woman.

The Conclusion of the Novel and Edna’s Failed Quest for Freedom

By the time we enter the conclusion of the novel, the final stages of the gestation period, Edna has made it clear that she desires selfhood in the form of free sexuality and liberation from motherly duties. Edna ironically articulates how she will go about being free and independent while stating that Old Celestine will do her work for her, “I can live in the tiny house for little or nothing, with one servant. Old Celestine, who works occasionally for me, says she will come stay with me and do my work. I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence”(76). This small passage is altogether contradictory. She will enjoy this freedom and independence while suppressing Old Celestine’s freedom and independence. She thinks she is becoming self-sufficient in some way but in reality she still needs a servant even in the small pigeon house. Without the children and without Léonce I’m not sure exactly what work needs to be accomplished, but to Edna’s great relief, Old Celestine will be there to take care of such tasks. In her absence from her Children Edna decides to make a grand gesture to remind them of her love. Ironically, the gesture mirrors that of Léonce Pontellier’s attempts to show love to Edna and the children: “She stopped at a confectioner’s and ordered a huge box of bonbons for the children in Iberville. She slipped a card in the box, on which she scribbled a tender message and sent an abundance of kisses”(78). Edna also somehow finds the time to peel herself away from her pigeon house and spend time with her children in Iberville. She graces them with her presence and Chopin gloriously states, “She lived with them a whole week long, giving them all of herself, and gathering and filling herself with their young existence”(90). This is so absurd that Chopin writes that she gave “all of herself” because it goes to show that more often than not Edna wasn’t giving all of herself to her children. She is endlessly self-absorbed to the point that she is “filling herself with their young existence” but what is she doing for them to fill *their* existence?

Adèle's labor to deliver her baby coincides with Edna's labor to liberate herself: "The nurse had been with them at night for the past week, as she lived a great distance away"(104), it is expected that the nurse would be there during the culmination of the pregnancy. The delivery is the time Adèle needs the most support and the main supporter is the black nurse: "The nurse, a comfortable looking *Griffe* woman in white apron and cap, was urging her to return to her bedroom"(103). "Griffe" is a term used in the caste system of Louisiana to describe someone who was three fourths black and similarly to the quadroon she is not named. The tables are turned and the woman of color is in control of the situation- orchestrating Adèle's labor because she is most knowledgeable about childbirth. The nurse is comforting throughout the whole process and her presence is undeniably more important than Edna's: "The woman was possessed of a cheerful nature, and refused to take any situation too seriously, especially a situation which she was so familiar"(103). Chopin makes it clear that this woman is very familiar and relaxed assisting white women in labor. The scene is full of intimacy as she urges Adèle to have "courage and patience," which she has certainly had to do when she has gone through any sort of struggle herself. The childbirth scene shows the intersection of black and white women's worlds and the role black women play in white women's labor and subsequent mothering. It is ironic that Adèle requested Edna's presence to aid her in her labor because Edna is useless in the situation but the black nurse has all of the answers. This scene echoes Edna's way of "mothering"; it doesn't really matter if she is there or not because there is a woman of color present to take care of the immediate needs of her children or Adèle in time of need.

As soon as Doctor Mandelet enters the scene Edna and her feelings of uneasiness become the center of attention: "Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread. Her own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered"(104). It becomes clear that

Edna shouldn't be there with Adèle because she can't handle the situation. Edna is unable to put herself aside and put Adèle first.

Ultimately, Adèle reminds Edna of the consequences of the sexual freedom she desires and that is childbirth and mothering: "Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!"(104). These words are an example of Adèle understanding Edna even more than Edna understands herself. Adèle is showing Edna that her affairs with Arobin or Robert are not the way to escape her role as a mother, but they are a way to perpetuate this role. Her desires to be a sexual being will put her back in the same place she started, motherhood, and Edna begins to see this as a flaw in her liberation. Edna simply cannot have the sexuality she so desires, the kind she sees in Mariequita or the Vera Cruz girl, because of her white privilege and her position in society. Doctor Mandélet recognizes Edna's fragility and claims that she shouldn't have been there during Adèle's labor, Edna responds: "'Oh, well!' she answered, indifferently. 'I don't know that it matters after all. One has to think of the children some time or other; the sooner the better'" (105). Edna knows this to be true and also begins to realize she will never be able to do so. During this scene Edna sees the holes in her realizations about her own awakening and freedom: "'I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right- except children, perhaps- and even then, it seems to me- or it did seem' She felt that her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts, and stopped abruptly'"(105). Edna admits that her children don't even have the right to take her away from herself, but she reserves the right to take less privileged women away from themselves to take care of her needs.

However, she asks that she not be blamed for her actions. She has all of these grand requests of the universe to grant her the ability to live in an Edna-centric world but she doesn't hold herself accountable for her own shortcomings. Edna wishes to keep certain aspects of her

privilege in the areas of childcare and mothering but wishes to exchange her privileges of pristine repressed sexuality for that of the apparently free sexuality of working women and women of color. However, she does not see the vulnerability and exploitation that such sexuality brings with it. She almost comes to terms with her own oppressive nature and when she does she asks to not be blamed, which reveals her weakness of character. She is unwilling to own her realizations in full: "But 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- but no matter- still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives. Oh! I don't know what I'm saying, Doctor. Good night. Don't blame me for anything"(105). Edna clearly sees the flaws in her philosophy but doesn't own the fact that she *is* "trampling upon the little lives." Edna doesn't own this knowledge because she doesn't understand the extent to which she has trampled upon and oppressed all the lives she considers "little."

Robert's absence when Edna returns to the pigeon house cements the fact that Edna cannot ever have him. He will only have her if she is free of Léonce Pontellier and becomes his wife and property because of her status as a privileged white woman. She desires the sexuality of Mariequita but she certainly doesn't want the quadroon's job because she doesn't want anything to do with children.

All of Edna's realizations and internal awakening ultimately draw her back to the sea for the culmination of her unproductive labor. Edna dwells endlessly on all she cannot have instead of realizing all the privilege she owns. Ultimately her desire for full sexual freedom drives her to her suicide. The sexual freedom she so desires and the life she has are mutually exclusive of each other. She is more concerned with how difficult Etienne and Raoul's lives will be if she acts on her desires than she is with how difficult their lives would be if she were gone. As Edna walks

down the beach that night she thinks of her children, “ ‘To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier- but Raoul and Etienne!’ She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children”(108). By acting on her sexual desires she would be demonized for falling from her role as a “respectable” society woman and her children would have to suffer because of it. “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days”(108).

This passage is so problematic on so many levels and beautifully shows the extent to which Edna has completely lost it. Actually, one would have to “have it” in order to lose it and I don’t think Edna Pontellier ever had any sort of firm grasp on anything in her life. She is the epitome of “white girl problems” and endlessly dramatic. The language is especially troubling because she is comparing her comfortable secure life with two healthy children to slavery. How is there any sort of parallel between the life and struggles of Edna and slavery? There simply is not. She acts like these children suck the life out of her when in reality all they do is exist as normal children that she is fond of when she feels like it. When Edna makes these great realizations and decides her life is meaningless unless she is living it for herself it becomes clear that her children will suffer the consequences of her behavior. And the reason they will be able to suffer the consequences of her ultimate choice to take her own life is because of the role black women play. Edna’s selfish desire to live uninhibited by any sort of unfavorable burden, like her children, is small and petty in comparison to the unfulfilled desires of the black women all around her. The black women who will take care of her children instead of being at home with their own. The privilege to raise one’s own children is not granted to black women like the

quadroon in this novel and it is a privilege Edna does not recognize she has. She didn't kill herself for her children; she did it for herself and the only reason she could complete this selfish act is because of the black women that were the flying buttresses of patriarchal white families at that time. They would be there for the brunt work of maintaining a home and they would be there after Edna was no longer. In the culmination of the novel Edna's labor towards liberation ends in a stillbirth. Chopin writes, "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water"(108), Edna is this bird in essence. She has nothing left and her wings can no longer support her and the knowledge she now has about the true nature of her life. Her labor to liberate herself ended in death because she made a choice to live at the mercy of her desires or not live at all.

Conclusion

When we ignore the experiences of the women of color in the novel we are just as oblivious as Edna Pontellier. The limited third-person narrative takes readers through Edna's life through Edna's eyes. The subjectivity of her gaze tempts us to see the world the way she sees it, but an intersectional analysis shows how flawed her gaze is. Our opinion of Edna changes when we watch her in her role of the oppressor. However, we cannot see her from this angle unless we pick up on Chopin's subtle inclusion of women of color and bring them to the forefront of our gaze. Edna desires the freedom of a white man of the upper-class, the same force that oppresses her. She fails to understand the hierarchal oppression at play all around her and the role she plays in oppressing those who fall beneath her in this patriarchal structure. When we examine Edna's motherhood alongside the quadroon's care for her children and when we see Edna's sexuality juxtaposed to that of women of color, the evidence of her unproductive labor becomes clear in the conclusion of the novel. Desiring the freedom to be sexual like a woman of color, Edna

wishes to evade the biological consequences of that freedom and as well as the vulnerability, stigma, and exploitation that women of color must face. Edna aims to live completely for herself, outside of social constraints and as a result she must keep the quadroon *within* the constraints that bind her to Raoul and Etienne. Ironically, Edna's liberation depends on the continued oppression of women of color. By the end of the novel Edna is no less an oppressor than the patriarch himself, Léonce Pontellier.

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