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Drowning the Constraints of Freedom: Schopenhauer's *Freedom of the Will* in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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ABSTRACT
Although the overarching metaphor of ***The Awakening*** *is the sea, it cannot be said that Edna's victory lies in her death by drowning; instead, it lies in what she has made of her life. The novel tracks the evolution of her will. The will is the element of human nature that German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer calls the "thing-in-itself," that which strives successfully against those constraints imposed by society. Edna desires to break through the chains of convention and constraint as she moves toward new freedoms—physical, intellectual, and moral. Edna's victory lies within her ungrounded will, which in turn, wills itself to be free. My essay demonstrates that at the end of the novel it is Edna's body that succumbs to exhaustion and eventual death, but not her will. Her will has steadily moved toward indomitable triumph.*

Most 19th-century reviewers and some 20th-century critics have considered *The Awakening* to be a novel about female sexuality and adultery. Even though Chopin firmly illustrates Edna Pontellier's efforts to defy society's constraints, especially those that impair moral, intellectual, and physical freedom, she has not created a protagonist who is explicitly seeking the illicit. In fact, she is quite contemporary in her use of sexuality as a means of searching for ultimate realities. Through Edna, Chopin portrays a 19th-century world that resembles uncannily the world striving toward freedom at the end of the 20th-century. Furthermore, Edna is an upper-class revolutionary who transcends all societal norms in order to align her internal world that is free with her external world that keeps her in bondage. Like Chopin, Edna is a thinker who strives for the ungrounded "thing in itself," a phrase used by the 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer to define the concept of will which is independent of appearances, space, causality, and time in his 1841 essay *Freedom of the Will*.

Earlier studies of the novel demonstrate the influence of the philosopher's work. Gregg Camfield's 1995 essay "Kate Chopin-hauer: Or, Can Metaphysics Be Feminized?" finds the author to have started with but moved beyond Schopenhauer's Idealistic "aesthetic of renunciation"(3) and into an ambivalent mode borne of her mutual attraction to the things of this world and the consolations and transcendent possibilities of art (5). Penelope LeFew's "Edna Pontellier's Art and Will: The Aesthetics of Schopenhauer in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" (1992) also demonstrates Schopenhauer's influence to be at work in the novel, but LeFew focuses on Edna's artistic efforts, on the spell that Mademoiselle Reisz's music casts upon her, and on the inferences to be drawn from Edna's drowning. All of

these illuminate for LeFew Schopenhauer's definition of the will and "everything in the physical world is mere representation of this will" (76). And for Schopenhauer the will insists *ad infinitum* that each individual continue "to strive, search, and desire" (76). Chopin's fiction definitely shows the influence of the philosopher's best-known work, *The World as Will and Representation*. In fact, Chopin refers to Schopenhauer explicitly in her early novel, *At Fault*. More than with her other protagonists, however, Chopin defines Edna as a character with a will of her own:

> I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (Toth 224)

According to Schopenhauer every person has a distinct nature with intellect always secondary to the character because it is the will that gives each person distinction. Also character and motive cause actions to exist within a human being's consciousness, and that means that there is not freedom of the will because all actions are determined. Therefore, striving of the will for Schopenhauer is meaningless suffering, and Edna illustrates this suffering through each constraint from which she frees herself. Each time, however, she finds that her will is once again moving into conflict with yet another constraint. Thus, Edna's freedom is won in increments, but it is also not static as it moves toward incessantly arising new constraints. Consequently, Edna observes that determinism acts as a cause and effect in the chain of grounded human events as she often reflects upon her own past in relation to her present situation. If acts and choices are determined, then free will is an illusion, according to Schopenhauer. In order, then, for Edna to have free will, she must break the chains that are determined, especially societal chains. This would relieve Edna of determinism, but in order to obtain the "thing in itself," she must be free of any grounds that determine something else. In other words, Edna must be free to act and choose on a ground that is determined by nothing at all. According to Schopenhauer, it does not mean that determinism should create a sense in Edna "that the truth of determinism does not make us any less inclined to feel responsible for our actions - a fact which he rightly says still requires an explanation" (Janaway 93). Consequently, those explanations do surface, but first Edna must use as evidence the consciousness of her internal self and the consciousness of the external world to attain freedom. However, truth of determinism will not free us from a sense of responsibility because in effect it creates a feeling that we cannot hide from it. Therefore, the need arises for Edna not only to understand herself, but also the world.

In the beginning of the novel, Edna is forced to face in the presence of the other Grand Isle vacationers the fact that she cannot swim, but eventually she frees herself from this constraint by willing herself to learn how to swim and beginning to swim in the sea every day. This is an indication that Edna is no longer physically hindered and therefore is able to exercise a force relative to her will. Edna achieves physical freedom, which, according to Schopenhauer, must be absent of material barriers in the exercise of physical force (*Freedom 3*). But Edna's new freedom is met with other constraints, and as Leonce Pontellier's wife, she is expected to adhere to those constraints.

It is during this time that Edna entertains and encourages a relationship with a younger man, Robert Lebrun. Robert provides kindness, support, and affection for Edna. They also have shared interests in literature and conversation. The Creoles of Grand Isle are open and often share books and discuss the contents with one another. Edna finds this "too open" because she is unfamiliar with such an intellectual openness and especially since one book that went around was quite risqué, according to Edna's Kentucky Presbyterian sensibilities. Yet she manages to transcend this uneasiness and eventually enjoy conversation and books quite openly with other people on the island. According to Gunther Zoller in his introduction to Schopenhauer's *Freedom of the Will*, "intellectual freedom is the absence of intellectual impairment in some cognitive force or incognition" (xxi). Edna's prior intellectual impairment was that she was not aware of the world outside of Presbyterian society. However, due to Catholic/Creole openness on such subjects as affection, history, business, pregnancy, and childbirth, Edna eventually moves away from cognitive constraints into intellectual freedom. If religion is an intellectual constraint, the Grand Isle Catholic/Creole society was a society historically known to have refused the construction of a Catholic church, forcing it to be built on Cheniere Caminada. Furthermore, the people of Grand Isle represent an exotic mixture of ethnicities. An 1888 article by Eugene Smalley for *St. Nicholas Magazine* provides this description of area residents: "three kinds—white, colored, and black. All of mixed blood are called colored. These three sorts of inhabitants associate together in the most friendly way, except at parties" (Evans 58). In contrast to New Orleans, society life on Grand Isle is quite lax.

Edna befriends Adele Ratignolle. Adele is the mother-woman to whom Leonce refers when he speaks of other women whom Edna should pattern herself after

as mother and wife. Edna "gazes at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (11). Edna shares events of her childhood with Adele and speaks of the relationship she had with her father who was once a Presbyterian minister, a colonel, and a plantation owner. She relates to Adele how she felt about those experiences by implying that she had a need to run from religion, the military, and slavery into an open field much like the sea. It is this repeated feeling of wanting to move away from the known and toward something unknown that has brought forth a need for Edna to transcend once again societal constraints. Through rational deliberation Edna becomes conscious of her father's oppression. She realizes that her father's harshness had caused her to marry a Creole Catholic whom she did not love. This becomes a motive for freedom when Edna wills the "thing-in-itself." To Schopenhauer, every character's action has a motive, and every action is direct whereas the workings of the conscience is indirect. Edna realizes through indirect action of the conscience that she has married Leonce for "show." This type of show, which Schopenhauer discusses in his 1851 essay "On Women," is the same type of show that he sees in the aristocratic woman, and thus Schopenhauer dismisses such women as Philistine (Schopenhauer 127). The motive behind her marriage is the cause that becomes the effect that produces unloved children who are always fighting with other children. It also produces a loveless marriage. Leonce is never available, and when he is available, he is critical and demanding. In social appearances he produces a kiss, chocolates and nuts, hugs for his children, money, and jewelry; however, behind closed doors the relationship with his wife consists of an 11 o'clock-in-the-evening berating of her care of their two young boys after he has been at a club for supper and recreational gambling and had no thought of spending that time with his sons. And it is that evening that Edna first perceives a will of her own: "her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied or resisted" (Chopin 31). Leonce is of the opinion that she is not like all the other mother-women on Grand Isle. Even though it is Edna who is criticized for attempting to transcend "show," it is her husband who promotes "show." And it is this sort of show that Chopin abhorred, referring in her diary to people with such priorities as "that class which we know as Philistines" (Toth, *Private Papers* 127). Both Schopenhauer and Chopin use the word *Philistine* to indicate class-conscious notions of showiness which both found offensive.

Leonce is the external model of the "old world," and he is the 19th-century man unable to hear the "thing in itself" as he drowns in a sea of decorum. During the week he is in New Orleans working on the stock exchange; on the weekends he recreates on Grand Isle, where his wife and sons are located for the entire summer. At one time, Leonce's family owned plantations, but his success now relies upon the business district. He owns a beautiful home in New Orleans and has money to spare. On the other hand, Robert is not rich, yet he is financially responsible for his mother and brother. His financial circumstances are unlike those of other men of Grand Isle because he has to work for his living as an independent entrepreneur whose interests are global, not national. Unlike Leonce, it is Robert who listens attentively to Edna even though the Grand Isle atmosphere is at most times busy and noisy and makes focusing difficult. It is Robert whom Edna moves toward as she moves away from Leonce. Although Robert travels from Louisiana to Mexico in search of entrepreneurial opportunities, he writes to her with letters addressed to the musician Mademoiselle Reisz. But he does not declare his love. Consequently, during his absence Edna forms an adulterous relationship with a known womanizer, Alcee Arobin, who provides the lustful element of her awakening for which the critics often condemn Edna as a married woman. Even at the opening of the novel, however, Edna confesses to past infatuations with a series of "unavailable" men prior to her marriage to Leonce and concludes that she has never had romantic feelings toward Leonce himself. Alcee arouses in her a feeling of being sexually attractive, and a relationship ensues that Chopin portrays as natural, animalistic, and undeniably human.

Edna is a human being who receives little empathetic understanding. An exception is Adele, who touches her hand. Edna acknowledges being unfamiliar with such affection. Edna accepts Adele's touch as well as the affection she gives and receives from her children. Later, Leonce in conversation with Dr. Mandelet informs the doctor that he and Edna are having marital problems. His confession that they meet every morning for breakfast hints at their lack of physical intimacy but does not betray his unfeeling tendencies toward her, which are demonstrated in several ways, such as his lack of concern for Edna when she first learns how to swim. Edna states, "I thought I should have perished out there alone," and in response to Edna's near-death experience, Leonce replies, "You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you" (Chopin 28). But the nature of Leonce's real feeling is ambiguous. Edna provides an insight that the marriage has long lacked sensuality:

> She heard him moving about the room; every sound indicating impatience and irritation. Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, thought habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of sub-

> mission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us. (Chopin 30).

In hindsight, Edna never provides a sense of having received affection from her father because she describes him as a patriarchal authority type. The colonel demonstrates this authority when he notices that Edna does what she pleases and does not follow either Leonce's wishes or his own that she attend her sister Janet's wedding. Father and son-in-law begin to have no authority over Edna, and the colonel berates Leonce for having been too lenient with Edna: "Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it!" (Chopin 68). But Leonce in turn thinks to himself that "the colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave" (Chopin 68). The fact that the colonel may have caused his wife's death by denying her even a modicum of free will is an insight into the personal knowledge that Leonce has of Edna's childhood, especially the relationship between Edna's father and mother. With this in mind, it is possible to understand Edna's motives and actions toward Alcee. Edna's relationship with Alcee begins after Robert leaves Grand Isle for Mexico.

Soon afterward, Edna and her children return to New Orleans. In New Orleans Edna is subjected to the societal constraints of meeting people every Tuesday who wish to pay a formal call. These kinds of visits are socially expected and planned; therefore, it is imperative that each female member of Creole society keep that day open for the wives and sisters of business associates. Edna, however, is no longer interested in acting as Leonce's helpmeet. She has begun to believe that each constraint she resists establishes a new freedom and thus now considers her time to be *her* time, not belonging to anyone else. Furthermore, this gives her the opportunity she needs to paint, to begin to take herself seriously as an artist.

Because they are back in the city, Leonce is now home every morning and evening, and consequently, his demand for her time has to be met. He makes it clear to Edna that Tuesdays belong to other people, specifically the female satellites of his professional contacts. This leaves Edna bound to a loveless duty that causes her to shun all visitors out of rebellion and to neglect all societal and household responsibilities. This enrages Leonce, but Edna's will is no longer bound by the physical or the intellectual. She does, however, see herself as still morally bound to Leonce and the children even though the love she acknowledges to be internal belongs to Robert. According to Schopenhauer, moral freedom is the highest freedom because it is absent of motivational hindrances, and the choice of love over show expresses Edna's will to detach herself from determinism.

The overarching metaphor of the novel is the sea. The sea itself illustrates such a ground that is free from any other ground. Even though exhaustion begins to overtake Edna, she has moved out of a grounded position into a still oppressive grounded society, and in swimming out to sea, she contemplates yet again those societal constraints that she has broken through:

> She looked into the distance and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to a sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was a hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air (Chopin 109).

The chained dog, the cavalry officer, the minister-father, the obedient sister, and the production of children are all chains of society—the father chained to religion, Margaret chained to her father, the cavalry officer chained to the military, the dog chained to the sycamore tree, and all of them chained to mankind. In the words of Schopenhauer:

> Supposing that a given human being's character remained unalterable on the one hand, and on the other, the circumstances whose influence we had to undergo were necessarily determined thoroughly and down to the smallest detail by external causes, which always enter with strict necessity and whose chain, consisting entirely of links just as necessary, runs back to infinity—supposing all of this, could the past course of such a human being's life turn out, even in the small particular, in any event or scene, differently from the way in which it did?—No is the consistent and correct answer (*Freedom* 53).

Through Edna, Chopin expresses the trap that acting upon our own free will sets for us: "There was her husband's reproach looking at her from the external things around her which he had provided for her external existence. There was Robert's reproach making itself felt by a quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love, which had awakened within her toward him. Above all, there was understanding" (Chopin 80). This newfound insight links directly to the closing moments of the novel. As Edna swims into the Gulf and away from the constraints that had chained her, it is, in fact, the sea of free will that Edna embraces ad infinitum.

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