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ANN HEILMANN

The Awakening and New Woman fiction

that night she was like a little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its power and walks for the first time alone ... She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as ... she lifted her body to the surface of the water.

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before.

(908)

Edna Pontellier's euphoria at learning to swim pinpoints the conceptual, and feminist, dimensions of Chopin's complex metaphor of a turn-of-the-century woman's 'awakening' to her ability to 'control the working of her body and soul'. Compared as it is to a toddler's first independent walk – a first step in the development towards adulthood – Edna's midnight swim is much more than a victory of physical coordination. It establishes her sense of self-ownership, physical, mental and spiritual, which in turn triggers two fundamental insights that determine her progression from disengaged wife to autonomous subject: in control of her body, she becomes aware of its potential for pleasure and learns to claim her right to self-determination. The novel begins with Mr Pontellier's assertion of his ownership rights: his act of 'looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property' poignantly reminds her of the wedding ring she gave into his safe-keeping when she went for her sea-bath (882). It ends with the newly born New Woman Edna's declaration of economic and sexual independence: 'I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose' (992). Edna's proclamation of rights is the equivalent of Chopin's claim to independence in her choice of subject matter, as is the desire to venture 'where no woman had swum before'. This essay argues that in its quest for female self-determination, *The Awakening* aligns itself with nineteenth-century female traditions of writing, in particular the Anglo-American fiction of the New Woman.

Chopin's frank treatment of female sexuality broke new ground at a time when married women held no legal rights over their bodies¹ and when few other female or feminist writers hazarded openly to explore women's sexual desire. Unsurprisingly, therefore, many contemporary reviewers considered the author to have violated the dominant codes of moral propriety no less than had her heroine.

The storm of moral outrage at Chopin's 'unutterable crimes against polite society'² quickly overshadowed appreciation of her 'flawless art'.³ Though acknowledged as a 'brilliant piece of writing',⁴ this was 'not a pleasant story'⁵ nor a 'healthy'⁶ or 'wholesome'⁷ book, critics warned, condemning *The Awakening* as 'essentially vulgar',⁸ 'morbid',⁹ 'repellent',¹⁰ even 'nauseating' and 'gilded dirt'¹¹ that left one 'sick of human nature'¹² (a sentiment echoed as late as 1932 by Chopin's first biographer).¹³ Even Willa Cather, soon to embark on her own exploration of female independence in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), deplored that Chopin had 'devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme'.¹⁴ To many critics, the local colourist had strayed perilously close to reprehensible European movements in art and literature: the 'yellow' English decadence of an Aubrey Beardsley¹⁵ or the French naturalism of an Émile Zola.¹⁶ Notwithstanding her dismissal of Zola's 1894 *Lourdes* as inartistic and over-didactic (697–9) and her no more flattering pronouncements on Thomas Hardy's 1895 *Jude the Obscure* (714), Chopin, influenced as she was by European literature and dismissive of censorship codes, appeared 'one more clever author gone wrong'.¹⁷

The influence of European and, in particular, French literature on Chopin cannot be underestimated: an admirer of the strong-minded heroines of Madame de Staël's and George Sand's early nineteenth-century novels, she named her daughter after the latter's *Lélia* and between 1894 and 1898 translated eight of Guy de Maupassant's *fin-de-siècle* stories; two of these, 'Solitude' and 'Suicide', bear direct relation to themes she explored in *The Awakening*, originally entitled 'A Solitary Soul'.¹⁸ Anglo-European literature, rather than the 'Provincialism' (691) of the Western Association of Writers, was the intellectual and cultural context in which she located her ideal 'group of readers who understand, who are in sympathy with [her] thoughts or impressions' (705) and in which *The Awakening* is often placed. Dubbed a 'Creole Bovary',¹⁹ Edna has been compared to the protagonist of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a novel tried, and acquitted, of obscenity charges in 1857. A disenchanted wife with expensive tastes who takes two lovers and, threatened with bankruptcy, swallows arsenic, Emma Bovary bears only superficial resemblance to Edna Pontellier and never attains her level of self-awareness and inner independence. *The Awakening* could be seen as a late-century feminist response to Flaubert, just as Mary Braddon's

The Doctor's Wife (1864) was its mid-Victorian equivalent in the genre of female sensation fiction. Other male-authored heroines of the European adultery novel did not fare much better than Emma Bovary: Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina (1877) completes her journey from unhappy wife to mistress and social outcast by throwing herself under a train, her re-enactment of the suicide she witnessed at the outset of the novel indicating her lack of any choice even in death; and Theodor Fontane's Effie Briest (1895) succumbs to depression and a wasting disease. Edna's suicide, by contrast, is a passionate assertion of her new-found identity and unconditional refusal to accept compromise: a rejection not of herself but of a social world that imposes moral imperatives on human desire, a celebration of this desire within a natural context that knows neither boundaries nor limits.

So, influenced by, yet resistant to, the male-authored novel of adultery, *The Awakening* is closely affiliated to a female and feminist tradition of women's writing. The 'revolution in female manners',²⁰ demanded by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792 and practised in the new century by Madame de Staël, George Sand and Margaret Fuller, was adopted as a literary paradigm by the Brontë sisters in the mid nineteenth century and the female sensation writers in the 1860s, before becoming the trademark of the 1890s New Woman movement. The 'most alarming revolution of modern times', Margaret Oliphant lamented in 1855, was the emergence of a new type of heroine in women's writing; in the wake of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), passion, sensuality and aggressive self-assertiveness had replaced the more angelic and forbearing qualities of the protagonists of previous times: 'No one would understand that this furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the "Rights of Woman" in a new aspect.'²¹ At the height of the Anglo-American New Woman debates of the 1890s, critics still acknowledged Charlotte Brontë as the founder mother of contemporary heroines' individuality, 'unusual experiences and singular temperaments',²² but were rather more condemnatory of the modern 'erotic-sensational novel' and the 'Tommyrotics' of female sex-writers who in their eyes 'deserve[d] unqualified anger and disgust'.²³ This response was in part due to the association of the New Woman novel with the earlier genre of sensation fiction. New Woman writers frequently employed sensational plot elements (cross-dressing, prostitution, syphilis, madness) in exploring feminist themes (the social construction of gender, the sexual exploitation of women, the perils of marriage). Less explicit in their feminist intentions, sensation writers like Louisa May Alcott, Mary Braddon and Wilkie Collins nevertheless created strong-willed, single-minded and resourceful heroines who, like the later New Woman characters, chafed against the restrictions imposed on their lives but, unlike them, sought to address inequities covertly, through cunning and imposture, plotting

adultery, bigamy and murder in the heart of the family. Predominantly female-authored, both genres caused major literary sensations with their bold exploration of unconventional gender identities and the explosive questions they raised about the (im)morality of marriage, motherhood and sexuality, and both spoke to a popular readership primarily composed of women on whom they were thought to have a corrupting influence.²⁴ Female authors and heroines alike were charged, often simultaneously, with sex antagonism (hostility towards men) and sexual intemperance; with having both too much sexual knowledge and too little sexual tolerance.

It is in the context of what one contemporary reviewer called the ‘over-worked field of sex fiction’²⁵ that much of the adverse reception of Chopin’s novel needs to be placed. Its ‘disfiguring leer of sensuality’²⁶ proved too much for some readers: ‘would it have been better’, the *New York Times* pondered, ‘had Mrs. Kate Chopin’s heroine slept on forever and had never had an awakening?’²⁷ Advanced thinkers who admired the ‘delicacy of touch’ and ‘[c]omplete mastery’²⁸ of the author’s ‘subtle and brilliant’,²⁹ sensitive, indeed ‘unique’³⁰ treatment of a woman’s ‘full awakening of the entire human nature’³¹ pointed out that the book was ‘for seasoned souls [...] who have lived’. As such, it was never intended for a young readership (the moral watermark for literature at the time), ‘not because the young person would be harmed by reading it, but because the young person would not understand it’.³² This is implied by the novel itself with its married mother of two who reaches the age of twenty-eight before her intense physical response to a man who is ‘absolutely nothing to her’ in emotional terms (960) awakens her to a realisation of her own sexually passionate nature, prompting the insight that love and sex do not necessarily coincide in the same object of desire. An experienced womaniser, Alcée Arobin excites and imparts a sexual pleasure which years of marriage have been unable to arouse: his ‘was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire’ (967). The novel was ‘remarkable’, one critic stressed, for its consciousness-raising qualities: ‘in studying the nature of one woman [it] reveals something which brings her in touch with all women – something larger than herself.’³³

There is no doubt that Chopin captured a moment of transition in the cultural and medical conceptualisation of female sexuality. Established medical opinion differentiated sharply between male *sexual* and female *reproductive* desire: ‘a modest woman’, the leading British physician William Acton declared in 1875, ‘seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband’s embraces, but principally to gratify him; and, were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions.’³⁴ Child-bearing and rearing provided plenty of sexual gratification for

women: this medical stereotype is reflected in Madame Ratignolle's ecstatic family planning but, importantly, Chopin also offers glimpses of a physically fulfilled marriage (938), suggesting a sensual satisfaction that is entirely absent from Edna's marital life. With the rise of sexology in the 1890s, the old doctrine of the inherent absence in women of sexual desire was being challenged. Thus, Edward Carpenter wrote in 1896 that sex-passion was 'a matter of universal experience' and that to 'find the place of these desires, their utterance, their control, their personal import, their social import' was 'a tremendous problem to every youth and girl, man and woman'.³⁵ While Edna grapples with the conflict between her romantic and sexual impulses, both urging her towards adultery, her husband appears blissfully unaware that she might have any such desires. *The Awakening* issues an implicit warning to male readers to gain an understanding of and become attentive to their wives' sexual needs. It is Alcée, not Léonce, who 'detected [Edna's] latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive bloom' (988–9). Dr Mandelet, who has a good grasp of the situation, counsels Léonce to leave Edna alone for the time being; but as a contemporary reader, posing as a doctor, pointed out, Léonce would have needed to be enlightened about his wife's 'passional being' in order to learn how to relate to her sexually and emotionally.³⁶

This is a lesson which Chopin's British counterpart George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne) incorporated into her sexually explicit short fiction. Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894) scandalised critics for their 'neurotic'³⁷ subject matter and captured the *fin-de-siècle* mood of decadent New Womanhood. A reviewer, mistaking Egerton for a man, advised the author to tone down his 'appeals to the sexual sense' in order to avert the potentially injurious effects on young and excitable male readers.³⁸ In 'A Cross Line', Egerton's most notorious story, satirised in *Punch* as 'She-Notes' by 'Borgia Smudgiton',³⁹ the heroine entertains an adulterous affair with a stranger met at a riverside but dispatches him when she discovers that she is pregnant (a scenario explored differently in Chopin's 'Athénaïse' in 1896). Her husband, while erotically more knowledgeable than the clueless Mr Pontellier, is blinded to 'the problems of [woman's] complex nature' by the 'conservative devotion to the female idea he has created': few men, the heroine muses, have had 'the insight to find out the key to our seeming contradictions. [...] They have all overlooked the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman.'⁴⁰ As in Chopin's 'The Storm', the woman's adulterous affair eases the tension in, thus helping to consolidate, the marital relationship. Egerton offers a good point of comparison with Chopin.⁴¹ Both had a keen interest in exploring women's inner lives, emerging consciousness and awakening

sensuality, in language and imagery that prefigured modernist techniques; both used music as a structuring device; and both had a conflicted relationship with contemporary feminism. Though considered the quintessential New Woman (a *Punch* cartoon of the New Woman as ‘Donna Quixote’ in April 1894 even carried her facial features), Egerton took pains to distance herself from social and political feminism and emphasised her writerly preoccupation with the truthful representation of femininity.⁴² Chopin occupied a similarly ambiguous position.

If the transatlantic New Woman movement is conceived as the cultural and literary arm of first-wave feminist activism, with the underlying objective of many writers being the use of literature as a political tool for social change, Chopin was certainly not a straightforward New Woman. Unlike Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, Sarah Grand, Elizabeth Robins and other British and American New Woman writers, she never assumed an active role in any feminist organisation.⁴³ As a writer, she was strongly opposed to didacticism: ‘Thou shalt not preach’ was her eleventh commandment, she wrote in an autobiographical piece of the 1890s;⁴⁴ the propagandist tone of much of New Woman fiction would not have appealed to her. The protagonist of her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), learns only after the object of her misplaced moral reformism has died that ‘constant interference in the concerns of other people [might] be carried too far at times’ (807). Female social-purity fervour in particular was apt to become the target of Chopin’s satire: in a diary entry of 1894 she mocked the smug pretentiousness of an acquaintance who ‘wants to work to make life purer, sweeter, better’ but whose good intentions always amounted to nothing,⁴⁵ and her 1897 story ‘Miss McEnders’ attacks the moral priggishness and hypocrisy of female philanthropists. Nor did she express any appreciation of ‘the present craze for the hysterical morbid and false pictures of life which certain English women have brought into vogue’;⁴⁶ a reference probably to social-purity novels like Sarah Grand’s best-selling *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) or Emma Frances Brooke’s *A Superfluous Woman* (1894), which castigated army officers and aristocrats as carriers of venereal disease and advised women to investigate the sexual health of prospective husbands before committing themselves and future generations to an uncertain fate. Chopin had read Grand’s novel and rather cryptically commented on a friend’s conviction that it was ‘a book calculated to do incalculable good in the world: by helping young girls to a fuller comprehension of truth in the marriage relation! Truth is certainly concealed in a well for most of us.’⁴⁷

However much she looked askance at social-purity feminism, in other respects Chopin shared many features of the New Woman: she liked smoking and enjoyed going for solitary urban walks; on her honeymoon she assured

one of the Claflin sisters (possibly the later Victoria Woodhull: women's rights activist, stockbroker and proponent of 'free love') that she would not 'fall into the useless degrading life of most married ladies'.⁴⁸ In her short stories she frequently engaged with the themes of New Woman fiction: the importance of female independence, tomboyish heroines who refuse to be feminised, women's conflict between art and love, unconventional marital arrangements, marital oppression, prostitution and congenital syphilis.

The Awakening revolves around the key concerns of New Woman fiction – marriage, motherhood, women's desire for a separate identity and bodily autonomy – and reconceptualises these through the metaphors of gestation, awakening and sensual-spiritual epiphany. 'The Woman Question is the Marriage Question', Sarah Grand proclaimed in *The North American Review* in 1894;⁴⁹ the woman question was indeed inextricably tied up with marriage at a time when wives held limited rights to their children, property, income and bodies. 'In discussing the right of woman', Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared in 1892, 'we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual'.⁵⁰ The answer was, not much: in 1890s Louisiana, a married woman, while entitled to any inheritances received before marriage, could not legally control any possessions or earnings acquired during marriage without her spouse's consent. She was legally bound to reside with her husband, who was the guardian of the children, and could not initiate a lawsuit or appear in court. Divorce, though more readily available than in other states, was highly disreputable in a predominantly Catholic environment.⁵¹ Was it any wonder Charlotte Perkins Gilman asked in *Women and Economics* if, 'in reaction from this unlovely yoke [...] women choose not to marry, preferring what they call "their independence," – a new-born, hard-won, dear-bought independence'?⁵²

Filled with a sense of 'indescribable oppression' (886) at the outset of the novel, Edna undertakes progressive steps to establish this independence. One of the reasons for Edna's great attraction to the sea is surely its limitless expanse, which offers welcome release from her feeling of domestic confinement. When she is not outdoors, Edna is at pains to create her own private space, a 'room of her own',⁵³ like her attic studio, where she can experiment with identities other than that of wife and mother. Her quest for independence, culminating in her move to a small house of her own rented with the proceeds gained from betting and the sale of her paintings, is at best precarious, however, given that her husband is legally entitled to intervene at any point. He does intervene when Edna moves out of the marital home, albeit – in line with Dr Mandelet's advice to humour her – as a face-saving rather than disciplinary measure: by instructing an architect to undertake building work and advertising the planned alterations and the Pontelliers' prospective

summer vacation abroad in the local papers, he firmly reinstates himself, at least outwardly, as the controlling force in the household.

The few rights the law does grant Edna, such as access to her mother's estate, are dependent on the goodwill of male guardians; it is 'by driblets' that her father makes available the money which is legally hers (963). Small wonder perhaps that she does not wait for a written answer from Léonce before finalising the arrangements for her removal (967), and that she refers to the dinner party which will seal her independence at her husband's expense as a '*coup d'état*' (969), a political act of insurrection involving the overthrow of a government. This insurrection is couched in feminist terms – 'she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself' (963) – and the form it takes represents a feminist adjustment of the law that dispossessed women of their most basic rights: 'whatever was her own in the house, everything which she had acquired aside from her husband's bounty, she caused to be transported to the other house' (968). Edna is laying claim to her possessions even though in strictly legal terms they are still under her husband's control.

This also and particularly applies to her repossession of her body. The right to self-ownership, in sexual and reproductive terms, was a key demand of the nineteenth-century women's movement. A wife had no legal entitlement to refuse sex to her husband; nor, in the absence of legalised contraception, could she determine if, when and how many times she became a mother. The feminist claim to sexual self-ownership therefore came to be closely associated with 'voluntary motherhood', the right to birth control.⁵⁴ With their two sons aged four and five to the Ratignolles' four children in fewer than seven years, the Pontelliers appear to practise contraception. In other respects, however, Edna's desire for self-ownership and privacy is a constant source of friction. Exercised about her 'inattention' and 'neglect' (885), Léonce devises strategies to reaffirm his control: when, half-asleep, she displays a lack of interest in his conversation, he makes her get up on the pretext of one of their son's imaginary illness, and when on another occasion she refuses to come to bed, he insists on joining her outside. In the early stages of the novel, Edna engages in passive resistance, evading and side-tracking Léonce where she can, but not making her flight from his physical presence explicit. In Chapter XI, after her spiritual and physical arousal to music and swimming, she becomes, for the first time, overtly defiant of her husband's demands: 'her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She [...] denied and resisted' (912). In the course of her feminist awakening, her challenge to Léonce's power becomes progressively more determined and outspoken. After an ineffective fit of temper, when his objection to her unorthodox handling of her reception day prompts her to stamp on her wedding ring, 'striving to crush' but entirely failing to 'make an indenture' (934) on the authority of a husband who is not

even present to witness her anger, she embraces open rebellion: 'she began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked [...] When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward' (938–9). She starts withholding herself from him sexually, claiming her right to self-determination; as Léonce complains to Dr Mandelet, 'She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and – you understand – we meet in the morning at the breakfast table' (948). Her staunch refusal to attend her sister's wedding completes this process of externalised feminist rebellion, for it calls into question not simply her own marriage but the very principle of marriage. A wedding, Edna asserts, 'is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth' (948): a statement evocative of the grim series of grotesque weddings that dissuade Sue and Jude from legalising their union in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and resonant also with Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) where a bride is compared to a sacrificial lamb.⁵⁵ Chopin's novel thus traces Edna's progressive development from dissatisfaction and depression, through mental and then sexual resistance, to physical withdrawal to a house, life and sexual-ownership rights of her own.

The carnivalesque feast with which Edna celebrates her freedom on her twenty-ninth birthday stages a symbolic over-enactment of the anarchic spirit that distinguishes the 'free woman' from the wife. Edna presents her guests with a carefully arranged spectacle of *fin-de-siècle* decadent splendour: the dinner table is decorated with a 'cover of pale yellow satin', candles in brass candelabras and 'yellow silk shades', 'full, fragrant roses, yellow and red'; a play of colours reflected in her own pale yellow attire, the 'golden shimmer of the satin gown', which is offset by a lace shawl 'the colour of her skin' (970–2). The visual and culinary delights of the feast are further intensified by aural and olfactory effects, the 'splash of a fountain' and the 'heavy odor of jessamine' drifting in from the garden (972). The quasi-Dionysian crowning of Robert's younger brother Victor with a garland of roses, performed to a recital of Charles Algernon Swinburne's 'A Cameo', completes the association with the 'New Woman', 'decadent' and 'androgynous' (with her 'long, clean and symmetrical lines' [894] Edna is as androgynous in appearance as Victor). Exuding an air of boyish degeneracy, Victor evokes Aubrey Beardsley, to whose decadent style the novel was compared.⁵⁶ In contemporary debates, the New Woman was often coupled with that other 'Literary Degenerate' and 'sexual anarchist', the decadent aesthete: in their challenge to marriage, their blurring of gender boundaries and their unorthodox sexual identities and politics, New Woman and decadent man were in equal measure perceived to pose a threat to bourgeois society.⁵⁷ The promise of an alliance of sexual anarchists, however, fails to be realised when Edna, provoked by

Victor's choice of song (a reminder of Robert), aligns herself with romantic sentimentality rather than decadence. The garlanded gauntlet flung across the room signals the end of the potential coalition between New Woman and decadent man and confirms Edna in her solitary quest for identity.

Although Edna divests herself of her old self, consolidating her break with the past with her affair with Arobin, she has no new identity that would constructively enable her to strike out on an independent life effectively and permanently. Instead, she experiments with two contrasting female roles exemplified by Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz – the passionate mother and the artist – but ultimately rejects both. The two women are catalysts of her sensual awakening: Adèle with the splendour and charisma of a 'sensuous Madonna' – an image Edna vainly attempts to capture on canvas (891–2) – and Mademoiselle Reisz with her inspirational renditions of Chopin. Both act as surrogate mothers to Edna, whose own mother died in her childhood. Edna is instantly captivated by Adèle, electrified by the frankness with which daring French books and bodily functions are discussed by the Creole community she heads (an experience that enables her to open herself up to Adèle in her turn) and is mystified by her maternal exaltation and 'kittenish display' of femininity in the company of men (951). Edna herself is at best an unenthusiastic mother; with not altogether adverse effects on her sons, who have learnt to be self-sufficient from an early age (887). The over-solicitous care of stereotypical 'ministering angels' (888), Chopin suggests, may not be in the best interests of the child (a point also made by Gilman).⁵⁸ But Edna is more than a semi-detached mother. Her emotional volatility is reflected in the unpredictability with which she treats her sons with indifference or affection, the latter usually coinciding with moments of sensual excitement (as when she cuddles Étienne on her return from the Chênrière in Chapter XIV: there is a sense in which her maternal effusiveness acts as a displacement of her romantic feelings for Robert). Her relief at her children's periodical absences (899) indicates a reluctant, 'compulsory' motherhood, the very opposite of Madame Ratignolle's radiant maternity. That Edna does not, in speech or thought, address her sons by name until half-way through the novel, in Chapter XXIV (it is Léonce who first names Raoul in Chapter II, and it is Adèle from whom the reader learns Étienne's name in Chapter XIV) may hint at her difficulty in conceiving of them as individuals; rather, they appear a collectivity representing a duty. In the course of her self-liberation, however, Edna starts relating to Étienne and Raoul in individual and affective terms. The change is most marked after her move. As the narrator explains, 'Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual' (978), enabling her to perceive others in an individual light too. Clearly, the absence

of moral injunctions encourages ‘voluntary motherhood’, an affection no longer dictated by custom but imparted freely and willingly. In the process of reclaiming herself as an individual, Edna finds genuine pleasure in the thought of her children and, for the first time in the novel, seeks out their company: ‘How glad she was to see the children! She wept for very pleasure [...] she lived with them a whole week long, giving them all herself, and gathering and filling herself with their young existence’ (978). In conversation with Adèle in Chapter XVI, Edna had declared that she ‘would give up the unessential’ for her children – her money, even her life – but ‘I wouldn’t give myself’ (929); here, for a brief period, she does give herself, precisely because it is a voluntary – and also, of course, temporary – arrangement.

The juxtaposition of ‘compulsory’ and ‘voluntary’ motherhood in Chopin’s novel has affinities with other New Woman texts. In Caird’s *Daughters of Danaus*, Hadria pointedly ignores her two (unnamed) sons, the product of an unhappy marriage, but, to make a point about ‘free’ motherhood, adopts an illegitimate girl, Martha, whom she takes with her when she abandons her family to set out on a pianist’s and composer’s career in Paris. Caird and Chopin both draw analogies between the imposition of motherhood, social expectations of maternal self-sacrifice and the conventional demands made on women’s time and energy. One of the most serious arguments in the Pontellier household arises over Edna’s reception day. Irritated by its futility she starts to ignore it, but even after her move, female acquaintances keep calling for brief visits (980). Similarly, Hadria finds her working life in Paris disrupted by well-meaning friends: ‘Even here, where she seemed so free, the peculiar claims that are made [...] on a woman’s time and strength began to weave their tiny cords around her.’⁵⁹ Derived from women’s maternal role, these claims, and motherhood itself, Hadria declares, are a strategic device to ensure women’s subjection to a lifetime of domestic confinement; children thus become

the unfailing means of bringing women into line with tradition. Who could stand against them? [...] An appeal to the maternal instinct had quenched the hardest spirit of revolt. No wonder the instinct had been so trumpeted and exalted! Women might harbour dreams and plan insurrections; but their children – little ambassadors of the established and expected – were argument enough to convince the most hardened sceptics. Their helplessness was more powerful to suppress revolt than regiments of armed soldiers.⁶⁰

Indeed, it could be argued that Adèle’s passionate plea that Edna ‘[t]hink of the children’ (995) ends any dreams Edna might harbour even before she finds Robert’s farewell note: ‘She meant to think of them; that determination had driven into her soul like a death wound – but not to-night’ (997). This night is to bring romantic fulfilment, but the reference to death suggests that Edna is

already considering a suicide made to look like an accident as a means of remaining true to herself while not harming her children through public scandal. The next day, as she prepares for her final swim, '[t]he 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. But she knew a way to elude them' (999).

If Madame Ratignolle has a profound impact on Edna, so does Mademoiselle Reisz. It is the latter's musical genius that prompts an overwhelming experience of sensual and spiritual epiphany in Edna: 'The very first chords [...] sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column [...] the very passions themselves were arranged within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body, she trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her' (906). Associated with the elemental force of the sea, Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performance renders Edna speechless while making her body come into its own. It is as a direct result of hearing her play that Edna, who 'all summer' had felt an 'ungovernable dread' of the water, is now ready to abandon herself to it and learns to swim (908). Edna is so overcome by her body's awakening that she mistakes its 'first-felt throbbings of desire' (911) for romantic love, interpreting her intense attraction to Robert as a stronger, more powerful version of her childhood and adolescent passions for a cavalry officer (a memory so strong that it resurfaces on her final swim), a neighbour's fiancé and an actor. In New Orleans, her visits to Mademoiselle Reisz serve the purpose of feeding her sensual passion with the double stimulant of Chopin and Robert's letters (946). Under the influence of Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna begins to take her own artistic endeavour, previously conceptualised as 'dabbling' (891), more seriously and draws strength for her personal liberation from the maxim that the true artist must 'possess the courageous soul [...] the soul that dares and defies' (946, 1000). But Edna is not so much an artist proper as drawn to the physical work for its sensual potential: 'being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work itself' (956). While she is pleased to find her painting a source of income, a professional artistic career in the footsteps of Mademoiselle Reisz is no viable alternative for her. Indeed, while punning on her own authorial persona in her choice of composer,⁶¹ Chopin makes the figure of the woman artist singularly unappealing. Introduced to the reader as 'a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarrelled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others' (905), Mademoiselle Reisz is a caricature of the 'ugly spinster' with more than a hint of the lesbian predator to her – 'She raved much over Edna's appearance in a bathing suit' (931). The 'appearance of

deformity' (946) created by her undersized body seems to hint at her perversity of mind. A Svengali-like character,⁶² she exerts mesmeric power over Edna and is continually 'creeping up behind' her (927) intent on prying into, probing and whipping up her emotions. If Edna visits her to indulge in daydreams about Robert, Mademoiselle Reisz gains her own voyeuristic gratification from these occasions: 'I should like to know how it affects her' (945) she muses as she prepares to perform Chopin's 'Impromptu'. Edna's object of desire, Robert, promptly materialises the next time Edna drops by at Mademoiselle Reisz's flat.

Neither the romantic lover (who turns out to be another conventionally minded male shocked at female sexual self-governance) nor Mademoiselle Reisz's and Madame Ratignolle's female communities of sinister artists and coquettish mother-women offer Edna an adequate model for an alternative existence. And so she (re)turns to the maternal embrace of the sea, whose 'everlasting', seductive voice has been calling her from the beginning (886). The 'feminine' element of the sea, with its sensual touch and cyclical periodicity, both inscribed into the novel's highly patterned, lyrical use of language and rhythmic structure, acts as the pivotal metaphor of Edna's awakening to her sexuality. Chopin's text here resonates with *fin-de-siècle* invocations of female desire in New Woman fiction. While male writing of the turn of the century and beyond often drew on the image of the untamed, heaving garden or other nature scenery to explore characters' libidinal drives (as in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*), women writers developed a multifaceted feminine imagery of seascapes which operated as a complex set of metaphors encoding the female psyche, the feminine body and women's sexual desire.

The sea as an emblem of female passion was figured in ambiguous terms in women's fiction, as a site of sensual fulfilment but also as an elemental force driving women towards self-destruction. George Eliot's mid-Victorian *Mill on the Floss* (1860) combines both elements in Maggie's reunion, in death, with her estranged brother. In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's artist novel *The Story of Avis* (1877), the sea represents a treacherous domain, the burial ground of women's dreams of artistic achievement. In a series of symbolic encounters with the sea, involving a near-death experience in which the protagonist is rescued by the man she loves, while the bird she was attempting to salvage dies in his protection, Avis's determination never to marry in order to concentrate on her artistic career is eroded. Her failure to realise her professional aspirations, sacrificed to marriage and motherhood, is associated with drowning: 'sometimes, sitting burdened with the child upon her arms, she looked out and off upon the summer sky with a strangling desolation like that of the forgotten diver, who sees the clouds flit, from the bottom of the sea.'⁶³

Phelps's mournful diver is evocative of Chopin's naked 'figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore' in an attitude of 'hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging in flight away from him' (906). This, arguably, is an image prompted by Madame Ratignolle's piano performance: viewed from Adèle's perspective, the outcome of Edna's trajectory can only be tragic.

Gloom and despondency are also the keynotes of Mona Caird's *Wing of Azrael* (1889). Trapped from childhood in an oppressive environment, Viola is forced to marry a man she loathes, and, with the tide, she rushes to her doom. The sea here represents the inexorable power of patriarchal society as well as the heroine's resignation in the face of her condition: 'Her intense love of the sea [left] an indelible mark upon her character. Her instinctive fatalism might have been the lesson of unresting tides, of the waves, for ever advancing and retreating, blindly obedient, in spite of their resistless power and their vast dominion.' Provoked beyond endurance, she kills her violent husband and is last seen on the moonlit cliffs, presumably about to throw herself into the sea. The sea is her only refuge and an element with which she has felt the greatest kinship all her life: 'If only she could reach the sea she would not be lonely any more.'⁶⁴ In its promise of release and a return to the oceanic mother, the ambiguous ending has affinities with *The Awakening*.

A further point of contact with Chopin's sea metaphor arises from Sarah Grand's writings: here the sea – rather unexpectedly for a writer notorious for her social purity stance – encodes spiritual transcendence combined with sensual arousal and sexual fulfilment. In *Ideala* (1889), the protagonist tells two versions of the same story about the forbidden love of a married woman and a monk (a variant of Edna's own wish-fulfilment story of two lovers in Chapter XXIII): in one version they part on the seashore and are engulfed by the incoming tide; in the other the waves orchestrate their passionate embrace. In both cases, death by drowning represents an erotic consummation of desire. This is also invoked in *The Beth Book* (1897), when the teenage heroine and her young lover narrowly escape drowning at their first meeting on the beach. Beth is a creature of the sea who draws erotic and social energy from her experience; thus, a sea bath with other girls leads to her being elected the leader of a quasi-feminist society. Most importantly, the sea is the site of spiritual and auto-erotic epiphany:

The tide was coming in. The water [...] was [...] bright dark sapphire blue, with crisp white crests to the waves [...] [I]ts voice called to play, rather than to that prayer of the whole being which comes of the contemplation of its calmness; it exhilarated [...] and made her joyous [...] The sweet sea-breeze sang in her ears, and braced her with its freshness, while the continuous sound of wind and water went from her consciousness and came again with the ebb and flow of her

thoughts. But the strength and swirl of the water, its tireless force, its incessant voices [...] invited her, fascinated her, filled her with longing – longing to trust herself to the waves, to lie still and let them rock her, to be borne out by them a little way and brought back again, passive yet in ecstatic enjoyment of the dreamy motion.⁶⁵

In Grand, as in Chopin, the sea is a source of orgasmic fulfilment, a fulfilment that threatens the dissolution of self. Beth almost proceeds to her death when '[t]he longing became an impulse. She put her hand to her throat to undo her dress – but she did not undo it – she never knew why. Had she yielded to the attraction, she must have been drowned.'⁶⁶ Unlike Edna, Beth is facing no domestic or romantic crisis; it is desire, not desperation, that attracts her to the water. The appeal of the sea is irresistible, and irresistibly erotic. In her exploration of Edna's oceanic desire, Chopin was drawing on a vibrant metaphor in New Woman fiction:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the sea. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (893; also 999–1000)

That Edna's walk to the beach is accompanied by a 'bird with a broken wing' (999) might suggest her defeat in conventional terms; but, once she has stripped herself of her clothes (her old identity), her resurrection as a Venus⁶⁷ (997) invokes a Phoenix-like transformation: 'She felt like a newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known' (1000). In a realistic sense, of course, Edna is about to swim to her death; symbolically, however, she triumphs over her condition the way Gilman's narrator does at the end of 'The Yellow Wallpaper': having broken free from the patriarchal structures of marriage, both women have 'got out at last' and, whatever might happen to their physical entities, in spiritual terms they 'can't [be] put [...] back'.⁶⁸ Like the eternal self-renewal of the sea, Edna's rebirth marks a return: to childhood, to the 'blue-grass meadow' with 'no beginning and no end' from which she had gained so much pleasure as a young girl, to the 'oceanic maternal space' of the womb.⁶⁹ Edna's suicide, if that is what it is, is a homecoming.

NOTES

1. It was not until 1978 (in UK law 1991) that rape in marriage was made a criminal offence in a US state (New York).
2. Review in the *St Louis Republic*, 20 May 1899, quoted in Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Woman* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 59.

3. C.L. Deyo, 'The Newest Books', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 May 1899, in Janet Beer and Elizabeth Nolan (eds.), *Kate Chopin's The Awakening* (London: Routledge, 2004), 56.
4. 'Literature', *Congregationalist*, 24 August 1899, in Margo Culley (ed.), *Kate Chopin: The Awakening*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1994), 173.
5. 'Books of the Day', *Chicago Times-Herald*, 1 June 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 166.
6. 'Notes from Bookland', *St Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, 13 May 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 163.
7. William Morton Payne, 'Recent Fiction', *Dial* 37, 1 August 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 172; see also 'Literature', *Congregationalist*, 173.
8. 'Fiction', *Literature* 4, 23 June 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 168.
9. 'Notes from Bookland', *St Louis Daily Globe – Democrat*, 163.
10. 'Novels and Tales', *Outlook*, 3 June 1899, in Beer and Nolan, *The Awakening*, 58.
11. 'Books of the Week', *Providence Sunday Journal*, 4 June 1899, in Beer and Nolan, *The Awakening*, 58.
12. Frances Porcher, 'Kate Chopin's Novel', *Mirror* 9, 4 May 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 163.
13. Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932), in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 184.
14. 'Silbert' [Willa Cather], 'Books and Magazines', *Pittsburgh Leader*, 8 July 1899, in Beer and Nolan, *The Awakening*, 59.
15. 'Fresh Literature', *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 25 June 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 169.
16. 'Books of the Week', *Providence Sunday Journal*, 58.
17. 'Recent Novels', *Nation* 69, 3 August 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 173.
18. Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 147. For Chopin's translations see Thomas Bonner, Jr., *The Kate Chopin Companion* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).
19. 'Sibert', 'Books and Magazines', *Pittsburgh Leader*, 59.
20. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 132.
21. Margaret Oliphant, 'Modern Novelists' (1855), in Harriet Devine Jump (ed.), *Women's Writing of the Victorian Period 1837–1901* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 90–5, 93.
22. 'The New Heroines of Fiction', *Harper's Bazaar*, 1 January 1898, in Beer and Nolan, *The Awakening*, 23.
23. Amelia E. Barr, 'The Modern Novel', *North American Review* 159 (November 1894), in Beer and Nolan, *The Awakening*, 20; Hugh E.M. Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 157 (1895), 833–45.
24. Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1992); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1984), 153–215.
25. 'Books of the Day', *Chicago Times – Herald*, 166.
26. 'Fresh Literature', *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 169.
27. '100 Books for Summer Reading', *New York Times*, 24 June 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 169.
28. Deyo, 'The Newest Books', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 56.

29. Lucy Monroe, 'Chicago's New Books', *Book News* (March 1899), in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 161.
30. Deyo, 'The Newest Books', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 58.
31. 'Books and Authors', *Boston Beacon*, 24 June 1899, 4, quoted in Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 348.
32. Deyo, 'The Newest Books', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 56.
33. Monroe, 'Chicago's New Books', *Book News*, 161.
34. William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1875), in Sheila Jeffreys (ed.), *The Sexuality Debates* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 57–73, 62.
35. Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming of Age* (London: Methuen, 1914), 2.
36. 'Dr Dunrobin Thomson' to 'Lady Janet Scammon Young', 5 October 1899, in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 177–8. For details see Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 358–360.
37. Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', 835.
38. T.P. Gill to 'Ardrath', 10 March 1893, in Terence de Vere White (ed.), *A Leaf from the Yellow Book: The Correspondence of George Egerton* (London: Richards Press, 1958), 24.
39. 'She-Notes', *Punch* 106 (1894), 109, 129.
40. George Egerton, 'A Cross Line', *Keynotes* (1893), in Sally Ledger (ed.), *Keynotes and Discords* (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2003), 9.
41. See Charlotte Rich, 'Reconsidering *The Awakening*: The Literary Sisterhood of Kate Chopin and George Egerton', *Southern Quarterly* 41, 3 (2003), 121–36.
42. George Egerton, 'A Keynote to *Keynotes*', in John Gawsworth (ed.), *Ten Contemporaries* (London: Ernest Benn 1932), 57–60, reprinted in Ann Heilmann (ed.), *The Late-Victorian Marriage Question* (London: Routledge Thoemmes, 1998), Vol. V.
43. Chopin briefly (1890–2) was a member of the St Louis's Wednesday Club, where she met local feminists and women's suffrage activists (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 207–10).
44. Chopin, 'Confidences', 702; redrafted as 'In the Confidence of A Story-Writer', 703, and published anonymously in 1899 (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 295).
45. Chopin, "'Impressions": Kate Chopin's 1894 Diary', 2 June, in Emily Toth and Per Seyersted (eds.), *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998), 185–6.
46. Chopin, 'Impressions', 12 May 1894, 181.
47. Chopin, 'Impressions', 2 June 1894, 185.
48. Chopin, 'Diaries', 13 June 1870, in Per Seyersted, with Emily Toth (eds.), *A Kate Chopin Miscellany* (Natchitoches, La.: Northwestern State University Press, 1979), 69. For the Claflin sisters see Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 102–3.
49. Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', *North American Review* 158 (1894), 270–6, 276.
50. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 'The Solitude of Self' (1892), in Miriam Schneir (ed.), *The Vintage Book of Historical Feminism* (London: Vintage, 1996), 157.
51. Margo Culley, 'Editor's Note: Contexts of *The Awakening*', in Culley, *Kate Chopin*, 120; Jessie J. Cassidy, 'The Legal Status of Women', *Political Science Study Series*, 2, 4, (March 1897), in Beer and Nolan, *The Awakening*, 42.
52. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), 91.

53. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth, 1929).
54. Margit Stange, 'Female Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*', in Nancy A. Walker (ed.), *Kate Chopin: The Awakening* (Boston, Mass.: Bedford Books, 1993), 201–17, 203.
55. See Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989), 249.
56. 'Fresh Literature', *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 169.
57. Janet E. Hogarth, 'Literary Degenerates', *Fortnightly Review* 57 ns (1895), 586–92; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 169; Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 94–100.
58. Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 85.
59. Caird, *Daughters of Danaus*, 322.
60. Caird, *Daughters of Danaus*, 65.
61. See Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 76.
62. In George Du Maurier's bestselling novel *Trilby* (1894), the Jewish musician Svengali takes hypnotic possession of an artist's model, turning her into an internationally celebrated opera singer.
63. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Story of Avis* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1877), 194.
64. Mona Caird, *The Wing of Azrael*, 3 vols. (London: Trübner, 1889), Vol. I, 5; for previous reference, see Vol. III, 156.
65. Sarah Grand, *The Beth Book* (London: William Heinemann, 1898), 324–5.
66. Grand, *The Beth Book*, 325.
67. See Sandra Gilbert, 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite', Introduction to *The Awakening and Selected Stories* by Kate Chopin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 31.
68. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892, London: Virago, 1981), 36.
69. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Kate Chopin's Awakening', *Southern Studies* 18 (1979), 276.

@inproceedings{Arnutu2015TheAW, title={The Awakening within "New Woman" Fiction}, author={Maria-Viorica Arnăutu}, year={2015} }. Maria-Viorica Arnăutu. The purpose of this article is to analyze the modernist and feminist aspects of "New Woman" identity and thought entailed by the portrayal of one of Kate Chopin's female protagonists: Edna Pontellier. Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) reflects the authoress's regional flavored writing style and her preference for local-color fiction. Kate Chopin was a modernist before her time, but, apart from being a proto-modernist, she is also appreciated for her role in the development of New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain, UP of Florida, 2006. Save to Library. Download. While the New Woman is located in the debates concerning the "crisis in gender" or "sexual anarchy" of the time, the period also saw an upsurge of new technologies of communication, transport and medicine. As this monograph demonstrates, literature of the time is inevitably caught up in this technological modernity: technologies such as the typewriter, the bicycle, and medical technologies, through literary texts come to work as freedom machines, as harbingers of female emancipation. Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening' is difficult to classify, as the novel is structured around themes from different literary genres, such as romanticism, transcendentalism, literary realism, naturalism, New Woman fiction, and modernism (Nolan 119). The animalist and Darwinist themes are decidedly naturalist. However, a naturalist reading of the novel makes the ending problematic, as Edna's suicide is not brought on by fate, and neither is it merely the inevitable consequence of her own actions (Malzahn 37). 'The Awakening' is definitely no deterministic novel, as Edna Pontellier ends with the newly born New Woman Edna's declaration of economic and sexual independence: 'I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose' (992). Edna's proclamation of rights is the equivalent of Chopin's claim to independence in her choice of subject matter, as is the desire to venture 'where no woman had swum before'. Related content. Chapter. Sensation and New Woman fiction. Lyn Pykett. Published online: 05 October 2015. Chapter. Kate Chopin, Edna Pontellier, and the Predicament of the Intellect The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating or self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. [Richardson and Willis, xii]. The New Woman phenomenon found an interesting re