

Bloom's Literature

Renewal and Rebirth in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

As its title suggests, Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is a book about renewal and rebirth. Edna Pontellier, its central character, is a young wife and mother whose life and outlook transform while she spends a summer vacation at Grand Isle, a resort off the coast of Louisiana, not far from New Orleans. During that vacation, she meets Robert Lebrun, an attractive and attentive young man whose mother owns the resort where Edna is staying with her middle-aged husband, Léonce, a staid and conventional businessman, and their two small boys. Thanks to her contact with Robert and also to the influence of her changed surroundings (including, especially, the impact of the seductively beautiful ocean), Edna begins to realize how dissatisfied she has become with her married life, which she finds increasingly predictable, constraining, and oppressive. With Robert's help she learns to swim, and as she finds herself more and more attracted to him, she also becomes more and more frustrated with—and resistant to—Léonce's influence on her existence. Just as she begins to realize that she has fallen in love with Robert, however, he departs abruptly for Mexico. He fears his own deepening feelings for her and the destructive impact that his growing closeness to Edna may have on her relations with her husband and children.

Edna's dissatisfaction with her old way of life, however, continues to grow even after Robert leaves and she returns to New Orleans with Léonce and their boys. She begins to neglect her social obligations, she devotes herself increasingly to her interest in painting, and she grows obviously distant from Léonce, both emotionally and sexually. When he departs for New York City on an extended business trip, she not only begins an affair with a notorious rake named Alcée Arobin but also moves out of the imposing home she and Léonce have shared. Establishing herself in a small cottage nearby, she enjoys her newfound independence but also keenly regrets Robert's absence. When she unexpectedly discovers him in New Orleans one day, they briefly resume their earlier emotional intimacy. When Robert once again quickly departs because he is convinced that Edna can never be his wife, Edna impulsively returns to Grand Isle, walks down to the beach, strips off her clothes, and swims into the Gulf of Mexico, from which she never emerges.

Clearly Edna, in some senses, is renewed and reborn during the course of this novel, but just as clearly her renewal and rebirth are complicated and perhaps even ironic. Edna, after all, is either a drowning victim or a woman who commits suicide; thus whatever "renewal" she undergoes leads to her physical destruction, and whatever "rebirth" she enjoys also results in her literal death. The final chapter of the book, in fact, has always been highly controversial; many of Chopin's contemporaries condemned the ending as morally scandalous, and more recent critics have often strongly disagreed about the significance of Edna's death. At the end of the book, many questions remain unanswered: Is Edna a weak-willed, deluded, and even selfish woman who ignores the real virtues of her husband while also neglecting her genuine obligations to her children in order to pursue a romantic fantasy that leads to pointless self-destruction? Is Edna a courageous individualist who refuses to be bound by society's strictures and whose death is a valuable affirmation of individual freedom? Is Edna, in short, genuinely renewed and reborn in spite of (and perhaps even through) her eventual death, or is her death merely the inevitable culmination of a life that has grown increasingly foolish, selfish, and self-deceived? Does Edna undergo a metaphorical rebirth at the end of the book, or does her watery demise abort any potential rebirth? Such difficult questions without easy answers comprise great works of art.

The book is compelling in part because it is so morally and artistically complex, and Edna's character, like the significance of the final chapter, is especially difficult to interpret. In one passage after another related to Edna's transformation, Chopin gives us language open to various understandings and makes meaning often hard to pin down. Edna can be—and has been—interpreted either as a daring seeker of existential freedom or as an increasingly self-centered romantic whose death is the predictable result of a lifelong indulgence in unrealistic and irresponsible fantasies. Chopin's subtle, frequently ambiguous language often makes it difficult to decide how, exactly, to respond to Edna's thoughts, feelings, and behavior; this sort of ambiguity helps make the novel a work of art rather than a simple propagandistic tract for either side of the moral debate the book has inspired.

One of the earliest passages showing Edna's growing dissatisfaction with her life is in Chapter 3. Léonce has just come back to their resort cottage after a night of gambling with his friends, and he awakens Edna. Annoyed that the still-drowsy Edna seems to pay him little attention, he accuses her of neglecting the health of one of their boys, who Léonce claims is suffering from a fever. After rising from bed and assuring herself that their son is fine, Edna is suddenly left alone with her thoughts and emotions (since Léonce has already fallen asleep):

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry to herself. (9)

Most readers will likely sympathize with Edna at this point in the book. Léonce's behavior *has* just been boorish and thoughtless, and few people would begrudge Edna her feelings of frustration and annoyance. Admittedly, Chopin does imply here that Edna seems to lack complete self-understanding and may be subject to shifting moods, but few people are immune to these shortcomings, and so, at this point in the text, Edna's reactions seem unobjectionable and are hardly extraordinary. Already, though, Chopin has begun to prepare us for the apparent death of Edna's old self and the birth of her new persona.

This emphasis on Edna's transformation becomes especially apparent near the close of Chapter 6, in paragraphs that are among the most important in the entire book:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.

But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult! (16)

The effect—or, rather, the *effects*—of these paragraphs cannot easily be assessed or described. At first Chopin seems to credit Edna with insight and understanding: She begins to "realize" and "recognize" her status in life, but Chopin never makes clear what that status is or how Edna understands it. The language of realization and recognition then gives way to phrasing that suggests revelation. With words that recall the biblical annunciation, in which the Virgin Mary is told that she has become mysteriously pregnant with her own future savior, Chopin implies that Edna has been granted a special "wisdom." However, the effect of the phrasing is complicated since the narrator describes this "wisdom" as resembling a "ponderous weight." Thus, on the one hand Chopin seems to suggest that Edna has been blessed, but on the other she implies that the revelation may prove to be a crushing burden. Mary's annunciation was a joyous event, but Edna's may not be—partly (it is implied) because Edna, unlike Mary, may be incapable of bearing the weight that is descending upon her. This ominous undercurrent is then highlighted and emphasized in the next paragraph, where each sentence becomes increasingly troublesome and literally "disturbing." These two paragraphs perfectly epitomize the method of this entire ambiguous, ambivalent novel: Realization and recognition, which at first seem like things to be celebrated, are later treated as potentially dangerous threats. Like childbirth itself, the process of Edna's rebirth—if that is what is indeed has begun to occur—will not be an easy one. It may produce something valuable and precious, but it will almost certainly involve pain and may result in serious risk or even death. Chopin could easily have written a more cheery, optimistic book, just as she could easily have written one more full of obviously heavy gloom. Instead, she chose the more difficult path of trying to portray both the promise and the risks as well as the rewards and the costs of Edna's transformation.

Chopin even implies, at various points, that Edna is not truly being reborn or renewed at all but may instead merely be repeating tired, stale patterns from her past. We discover in Chapter 7, for instance, that as a young girl and adolescent Edna had a habit of becoming infatuated with seemingly attractive but ultimately unattainable men. Once, for instance, she became "passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visited her father in Kentucky," but he soon "melted imperceptibly out of her existence" (20). At another time, "her affections were deeply engaged by a young gentleman who visited a lady on a neighboring plantation," but the "realization" (an interesting word) that Edna meant "nothing, nothing, nothing to the engaged young man was a bitter affliction to her," so that "he, too, went the way of dreams" (20). The exaggerated and repetitious language ("nothing, nothing, nothing") suggests Edna's literal immaturity at that time, but Chopin notes that Edna had become:

a grown young woman when she was overtaken by what she supposed to be the climax of her fate. It was when the face and figure of a great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses. The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness of it colored it with the lofty tunes of a great passion.

Edna kept a framed picture of this actor on her desk, and when "alone she sometimes picked it up and kissed the cold glass passionately" (21). It was not long, though, "before the tragedian had gone to join the cavalry officer and the engaged young man and a few others; and Edna found herself face to face with realities" (21). By this time she had married Léonce Pontellier, partly because "his absolute devotion flattered her" (21), and partly to spite her father and elder sister, who disapproved of any alliance with a Catholic. Both in her multiple infatuations, then, as well as in her marriage, Edna had been motivated mainly by romantic impulsiveness and a desire to have her own way.

Are her growing feelings for Robert any different? Is Edna, in other words, being reborn and renewed through her increasing attachment to Robert, or is she merely reverting to earlier patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior? As usual, Chopin provides evidence that can be understood in both ways, and sometimes it is the same evidence that can thus be diversely interpreted. At one point, for instance, as Edna starts to assert her independence from Léonce in an increasingly forthright manner, the narrator notes that Edna nevertheless "began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul" (36). The "dream" mentioned here is, presumably, the dream of a life free from her current marital and maternal responsibilities—the dream of a life in which she might enjoy, untrammelled and unhindered, her newfound relationship with Robert. Yet that dream, however "delicious" it may momentarily appear to her, also seems "grotesque" and "impossible." Thus, while the language of awakening is often used in this novel to describe a rebirth to the possibility of a new kind of life, here that same term is used to describe an awakening to harsh and inescapable "realities." The passage is therefore typical of the way Chopin provides multiple and often conflicting perspectives on Edna's supposed rebirth and renewal through her developing relationship with Robert.

When Robert suddenly announces his intention to leave Grand Isle—and, indeed, to leave even New Orleans itself—in order to venture off to Mexico, Edna is devastated: For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman. The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation by any suggestion or promise of instability. The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded. (51)

Edna knows that at this point she may have fallen into a pattern in her relationship with Robert. This pattern merely replicates the futile infatuations of her youth; this awareness offers "no lesson which she *was willing* to heed" (italics added). She feels that her "being" has been "newly awakened," but this supposed awakening may simply be a reversion to patterns that have led nowhere (and to nothing) in the past. If genuine rebirth implies a true openness to profound change and a sincere willingness to grow and develop, this passage suggests that Edna is awakening in some ways while remaining asleep (or confined to the past) in others. Here as so often in this novel, Chopin's phrasing cuts both ways.

No wonder Léonce is confused by Edna! Interpreting her changes is at least as hard for him as it is for Chopin's readers. Thus the narrator notes that once the couple has returned to New Orleans and once Edna has begun to reject the patterns of respectable middle-class behavior that previously defined her life, it "sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier's mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could plainly see that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (64). At first glance this passage seems typically double-edged ("He could plainly see. . . . That is, he could not see"), but the phrasing is even more complicated, on reflection, than it appears on an initial reading. Edna is, in fact, becoming "unbalanced mentally," at least by the standards of the "normal" world of her day; yet what does it mean, precisely, to say that she is also "becoming herself"? Is she achieving a deeper and more admirable integrity? Is she undergoing the sort of rebirth, renewal, and transformation we should respect and celebrate? Or is she simply returning to the kind of immature, self-indulgent "self" she had once been before her marriage to Léonce led her to adopt her current "fictitious self"? And was that earlier "self" any more "real" or any more commendable than the self she is now "casting aside"? At first glance, this passage seems to critique Léonce's shortsightedness and to endorse Edna's transformation, but, on second or third glance, the significance of the passage is far less clear.

Few, if any, of the other characters in the novel are wholly sympathetic to the changes Edna begins to exhibit. Certainly Léonce is not, but his skepticism can partly be discounted because those changes challenge his own self-interests and his desire for control. (Even Léonce, however, is hardly a simple villain; Chopin could easily have made him a far less attractive character than he really is.) Edna's two most important women friends—Adèle Ratignolle (a conventional but intelligent "mother-woman" [10]) and Mademoiselle Reisz (an unconventional and often shrewdly perceptive artist)—both express misgivings of one sort or another about Edna's supposed rebirth. Even Robert, the man who ignites the transformation, twice turns away from the changes he has helped unleash. Practically the only character in the book who

seems entirely pleased by Edna's new self is Alcée Arobin, the local playboy who obviously stands to benefit sexually from her newfound freedom from the straitlaced standards of middle-class morality. Yet even Edna realizes that Alcée does not truly love her, nor does she even truly love him; their relationship is rooted in mere physical desire, and Edna longs for something deeper—something more real, more meaningful, and more permanent.

The one character in the novel who seems truly capable of understanding, appreciating, and nurturing the sort of rebirth Edna desires, Doctor Mandelet, the elderly family physician, functions partly as a general practitioner, partly as a family psychologist or counselor, and partly—and this fact is especially significant—as an obstetrician. Mandelet supervises the delivery of Adèle Ratignolle's latest child near the end of the novel, and Mandelet first seems to intuit the profound alterations that appear to be taking place in Edna. He notes "a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life" (77). Mandelet also first suspects (accurately, as it turns out) that Edna's latest infatuation is with Alcée Arobin (79). Finally, Mandelet, as the novel draws to a close and after he has assisted in the birth of Adèle's newest baby, also offers to assist in the safe, supervised rebirth of Edna's personality:

"It seems to me, my dear child," said the Doctor at parting, holding [Edna's] hand, "you seem to me to be in trouble. I am not going to ask for your confidence. I will only say that if ever you feel moved to give it to me, perhaps I might help you. I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not many who would—not many, my dear." (123)

He invites Edna to "come and see [him] soon," and he promises her that "We will talk of things you never dreamt of talking about before" (123–24). Edna, however, refuses both his invitation and his offer, not only then but also later. She explicitly justifies these refusals: "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" (123). Of course, Chopin immediately (and typically) complicates the impact of this apparently selfish statement by having Edna instantly add that she nonetheless doesn't "want to trample upon the little lives" (123). Yet the fact remains that Edna explicitly rejects the assistance of the one character in the book who possesses the sort of intelligence, insight, and compassion that might have helped her achieve a successful rebirth, a genuine awakening. And she rejects his offer of help because she doesn't "want anything but [her] own way." One response to this exchange with Mandelet, therefore, is to argue that Edna continues to be stuck—and indeed *wants* to be stuck—in the immature patterns of her youth. Mandelet might have been able to assist her in making a smooth transition to a new kind of life or at least to a new kind of self-understanding. Mandelet has the depth of experience, the breadth of wisdom, and the sort of tolerance and sympathy that might have made it possible for Edna to be reborn and awakened without suffering a disastrous miscarriage. Edna, though, rejects his offer of help, and, by rejecting that offer, she also rejects the one obvious and realistic possibility that she might have achieved genuine rebirth and renewal.

Without Mandelet's assistance (or, indeed, assistance from anyone, which she never seeks), Edna is unprepared to cope with the shock she discovers when she returns to her little cottage: Robert, to whom she has recently pledged undying love, has disappeared again, leaving a brief note that simply reads, "I love you. Good-by—because I love you" (124). It was only hours earlier that Edna had declared to him, "I love you . . . only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long stupid dream" (120). The extravagance of her language, however, suggests once more the possibility that Edna may not have truly awakened from the kind of romantic infatuation that had bedeviled her youth. Indeed, when Edna often declares herself fully awake and completely changed we must wonder most intensely if she may still be in the grip of old delusions. The same kind of paradox may be involved in Chopin's description of Edna's response to Robert's note: "She did not sleep. She did not go to bed. The lamp sputtered and went out. She was still awake in the morning" (124). Physically Edna is indeed still awake, but her restless night has probably made her less truly awake—less fully alert—than she needs to be at this crucial juncture in her life. She has stayed awake physically, but that very wakefulness has left her mentally (and perhaps morally) clouded.

Thus, when Edna shows up unexpectedly at Grand Isle the next day, the narrator reports that she "walked on down to the beach rather mechanically, not noticing anything special except that the sun was hot. She was not dwelling upon any particular train of thought. She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning" (126). Here, as so often elsewhere, however, the phrasing seems fundamentally ambiguous. Has Edna *really* done "*all* the thinking which was *necessary*" (italics added)? Alternatively, does this very phrasing invite us to consider the possibility that she has failed to engage in deep, considered thought? Perhaps she has done only the thinking that she cared to do or was capable of doing. In any case, what conclusions has "all" her "thinking" led her to? Is she planning to commit suicide? Shortly before heading to the beach, she had told Victor Lebrun (Robert's brother) that she was very hungry, and she had promised to return from her swim "before dinner" (126). Were these

statements a consciously planned ruse, or does Edna not plan to kill herself? Does she, perhaps, merely succumb to physical and mental exhaustion after she has swum out too far to return to shore? Like so much else in this book, the final paragraphs seem ultimately inscrutable: Edna's death can be interpreted either as a deliberate act or as an unfortunate accident, and the very same evidence can be used to support either argument. Likewise, her death can be viewed either as a defeat (as the end of any possibility of genuine renewal and rebirth) or as a victory (as the very achievement of a symbolic renewal and rebirth through a grand assertion of metaphysical freedom). It is part of the artistic greatness of *The Awakening* that Chopin, by opening up the possibility of both of these interpretations, finally sanctions neither. The novel is at least as puzzling and provocative in its final paragraphs as it has been anywhere else, and so we can never, ultimately, be sure whether Edna, as the novel ends, is reborn or merely stillborn.

Further Information

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