

Trapped Between Subsumption and Isolation: Women's Lives in Chopin's "The Awakening"

Michael Salib

May 18, 2002

In Chopin's "The Awakening", Mme Ratignolle and Mlle Reisz represent alternative pathways for women in society. Mlle Reisz is completely independent, but also cut off from everyone. Mme Ratignolle has given so much of herself to others, she's hardly a person anymore. Edna refuses both paths because she feels that she's been ensnared in Mme Ratignolle's path against her will and now that she's attached to her family, she can't go back. In other words, Edna comes to see that Mlle Reisz's path is only an option if you're starting from scratch. We'll explore each of these ideas in detail and conclude with a new interpretation for Edna's apparent suicide.

We begun by considering Mme Ratignolle, who is first described as "the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (7). While Mme Ratignolle's "excessive physical charm had first attracted" (7) Edna, it was the "the candor of the woman's whole existence" (7) that captivated her. Unlike Edna, with "her own habitual reserve" (12), Mme Ratignolle is completely transparent. And yet with all her candor, Mme Ratignolle has nothing to

say except what others want to hear. Edna knew that “Madame Mme Ratignolle’s opinion would be next to valueless but she sought the words of praise and encouragement” (54). Mme Ratignolle’s candor is merely an artifact of her willingness to assume whatever shape society asks of her. She is the ideal wife and mother, having subsumed the whole of her identity in the service of husband and children. Her devotion is so extreme, that she “did not leave the house, except to take a languid walk around the block with her husband after nightfall” (73). Even at dinner, she would rather serve than eat, “laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth” (54). Thus we see the consequence of perfecting “the fusion of two human beings into one” (54) is a marriage where one partner’s entire being is completely disintegrated in favor of the other’s.

This rather asymmetric merging leads to a parent child relationship between the two partners. One cannot completely take on another person’s being without sacrificing their own identity as an adult. Consequently, Mme Ratignolle behaves like a child in some ways. For example, she speaks with childlike innocence, feeling no shame. Edna comments on this, noting that “Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her accouchements, withholding no intimate detail” (8). Or consider her behavior when ill; the narrator’s description sounds more appropriate for a petulant child than a mature woman.

”This is too much!” she cried. ”Mandelet ought to be killed! Where is Alphonse? Is it possible I am to be abandoned like this-neglected by every one?”

”Neglected, indeed!” exclaimed the nurse. Wasn’t she there? And here was Mrs. Pontellier leaving, no doubt, a pleasant evening at home to devote to her?

And wasn't Monsieur Ratignolle coming that very instant through the hall? And Josephine was quite sure she had heard Doctor Mandelet's coupe. Yes, there it was, down at the door. (108)

If we find her childish, we can be certain that Mme Ratignolle would disagree, since she tells Edna, "In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna" (93). Even more ironic is the notion that Mme Ratignolle, the pinnacle of motherhood, is trapped in a perpetual infancy. This assertion begs the question, if being a good mother means never growing up, what happens to women who do grow up? Edna's suicide is one answer, while Mlle Reisz's life is another, which we shall examine presently.

Mlle Reisz represents an alternative path for women to follow. She is a gifted pianist and completely self sufficient. Yet she quarrels with everyone she meets, complains incessantly, and seems incapable of speaking without disparaging someone. Mlle Reisz's grocer offers a representative opinion, saying that "he did not want to know her at all, or anything concerning her—the most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street. He thanked heaven she had left the neighborhood" (54). We can see that Edna fared little better with Mlle Reisz, since on their second meeting, she, "looked down at Mademoiselle Reisz and wondered how she could have listened to her venom so long . . . she felt depressed, almost unhappy" (47). Despite her bitterness, "the woman seemed to echo the thought which was ever in Edna's mind; or, better, the feeling which constantly possessed her" (44), thereby demonstrating both a rare insightfulness into Edna's heart and a tender love for her wellbeing. In fact, their relationship developed to the point that "there was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz.

It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (76).

Mlle Reisz may be many things, but, unlike Mme Ratignolle, she is clearly not a child. Her insistence on being treated like an adult may underly some of her interpersonal difficulties while her unwillingness to accept the status quo may account for her continuous berating of others. Yet she may still share some common ground with Mme Ratignolle. Both women suffer from a kind of arrested development; Mlle Reisz seems trapped in a contrarian stage, not unlike a pouting toddler. She must reject everyone in order to maintain her individuality. She has concluded that, in her society, emotional contact is poisonous to her individuality. Consequently, Mlle Reisz accepts relationships only on her own terms. Her relationships with Edna and Robert serve as good examples: they're both marked by honesty, straightforwardness, and an element of deference to Mlle Reisz herself.

Confronted with such appealing choices as these, why then does Edna choose to end her own life instead? Edna kills herself simply because neither option is open to her. She cannot move forward to join Mlle Reisz and cannot fall back to join Mme Ratignolle. Edna indicates that she sees Mme Ratignolle as being only barely alive when she says "she was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle – a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium" (55). In Edna's mind, such a fate is the ultimate goal and result of her family; near the end, "she thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (114). The narrator further drives this

point home by saying “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them” (113). After leaving Mme Ratignolle’s home for the last time, Edna concludes that her children are slowly killing her, “she meant to think of them; that determination had driven into her soul like a death wound” (110).

If her present situation is untenable, that only begs the question, why can’t she create a new life with Robert? The answer is that there is no difference between Robert and her husband. He too, for all his devotion, is incapable of seeing her as much more than a child. Consider their meeting in the garden cafe where “he looked at Edna’s book, which he had read; and he told her the end, to save her the trouble of wading through it, he said” (105). His parting note demonstrates his incomprehension of Edna’s awakening where he writes, “I love you. Good-by—because I love you” (111). In those few words, Robert hammers home the point that Edna is not fit to make decisions about the direction of her own life; such a task must fall to a thinker, an adult, like himself. Finally, as the end draws near, Edna concludes that no matter how strong her feelings for Robert might be, they are transitory, and thus fell into despair. She thought that “there was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (113).

In order to evaluate the path Edna chose for herself, we need to consider the context in which she acted. Suicide is a rational decision if the inevitable alternative is worse than death; Edna realized her situation was untenable – she was at that point bonded so closely to her children that the only way she could go on living would be to become Mme Ratignolle.

At the same time, she knew that a life with Robert would only be more of the same; he wanted to possess her just as her husband did. To return to sleep, to become another Mme Ratignolle, would bring about the death of herself as an individual, death to a life that she had strived so hard to birth in the past summer. Given the choice between dying a quick death on her own terms versus the prospect of killing herself anew everyday, she chose a more merciful suicide.

Alternatively, we can understand her suicide as the one act of defiance available to her against a hostile world in which she was forced to dissolve her personality under the guise of love. One cannot hope to fight against forces as large as those described by Doctor Mandelet when he says “youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences” (110); all one can do is deprive the world of that precious life it worked so hard to twist and subvert. Edna may lose her life, but if it was lost already she may as well ensure that Nature will not profit from it. In this sentiment, there is something of the old, uniquely American adage, “better to die on your feet than to live on your knees”.

This is not to completely exonerate Edna; Her decision is only rational given the assumption that her husband (or Robert) was incapable of change, was so wedded to the traditional woman’s role that no amount of arguing and pleading could ever convince him. Chopin has given us the antithesis of “Sleeping Beauty”; instead of princess woken from a cursed sleep with a kiss, we have a woman doomed because her kisses can’t awaken her husband. This is not a story about how love conquers all, but about how impotent love is in the face of a stubborn people. Nevertheless, if she had made some attempt to communicate to her

husband the substance of her awakening, her suicide would be easier to accept. But she did not. Edna Pontellier had such absolute faith in her husband's inability to accept his wife as a true partner, that she was willing to die for it. Her unwillingness to believe in his capacity to change is not unlike her perception of his unwillingness to believe in her change. That bitter irony suggests that, in the end, a woman awakened is all too similar to a man asleep.