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"'Oh! to be able to paint in color rather than in words!': Portraits of Femininity in Kate Chopin's The Awakening."

Kate Chopin's The Awakening (1899) is infused with color. As one moves through her narrative of Edna Pontellier's awakening from the repression of social convention to an increased consciousness centered on her femininity, and her eventual suicide, one encounters numerous word portraits painted with images of color. Like a painter filling a canvas, Chopin has filled the novel with rich, sensuous imagery. These colorful representations of the feminine display meanings deeper than the colors with which they are portrayed. Analyzing the narrative using archetypal criticism to examine mythological portraits and color imagery can lead one to a greater understanding of Chopin's representation of womanhood. The color imagery is the key to Chopin's portraits of femininity. Just as paint is the painter's tool to color her work, Chopin uses color-filled language as her tool for creating a richly painted narrative. The symbolic meanings of the color invoke images of various facets of femininity. Chopin uses the copious color imagery to explore these various images, showing Edna's journey through life seeking an image to represent her own psyche. And as the reader journeys through the narrative, she is invited to examine the images that Chopin presents like an artist displaying portraits in an art gallery, like an artist painting with colors rather than words.

Throughout Chopin's narrative, the reader can find contrary images marked with color, such as a dessert of gold and silver cake, people posing as queens and gods

surrounded by gold and red, a colorful parrot screeching at children during a dinner party, twin girls perpetually clad in blue and white, and white sea foam in the shape of serpents. These eye-catching images stand out. Yet, these oppositions are clues that direct the reader to fuller symbols displayed by Chopin as portraits of femininity. In scenes filled like word portraits with sensory images, Edna journeys through her life as a socialite wife, develops a deep passion for a younger man (who leaves her for the sake of social propriety), has an affair with a known womanizer, moves out of her husband's home, rejects the wealth and artificiality that surround her conventional life, and embraces freedom at the cost of her own life. Chopin meticulously details the background colors and sensory images in each scene. Outdoor scenes tend to be set with orange trees and yellow flowers, with the sea and sky as the backdrop. Indoor scenes include descriptions of furnishings, colorful food and wines, dress and jewelry. Many of these colors carry general symbolic meanings of fertility, growth, and prosperity, and are used to set the scene and fill in the canvas.

The reader may wonder what all the rich, colorful backgrounds are meant to highlight. The sensory images that decorate each scene seem to evoke further images. If the orange trees, flowers, dresses, and furnishings constitute the background, then what are the primary images displayed in the foreground? As various primary images are evoked, one may question what Chopin is setting before the reader. Edna, as she searches for her identity, seems to pose for the reader. What are these poses Chopin is exploring, and why does she, through Edna, seemingly reject these poses at the novel's end? The Virgin Mary, Venus, a queen, a housewife, an adulteress, a socialite, and an earth goddess are some of the facades of femininity Chopin explores through Edna. Yet, one

by one Edna will reject these facades as she moves toward her ultimate definition of selfhood.

Perhaps the single most significant sensory image in The Awakening is the sea. A sea and water are symbolic of so many things, such as renewal, baptism, cleansing, and also life and death. Life is impossible without water, yet the sea in its magnitude and power can end life as easily as give it. The colors of the sea, blue, green, and white, have deep symbolic meanings. The sea carries the archetypal meaning of unconsciousness, since in its vastness, the sea represents the great unknown (Jung 174).

Carl G. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and student of Sigmund Freud, coined the term "archetypes" in the early twentieth century. Jung defined archetypes as "universal images that have existed since the remotest times" and further described an archetype as "a figure … that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested" (Dobie 56). Archetypes appear in rituals, characters, and narratives as nearly identical images and patterns that are recognizable by individuals from different cultures and eras and that cause these individuals to respond to the image in a particular way (Dobie 56). According to Jung, archetypes are "empty" and only "a possibility of representation" of a human experience and are impossible to represent in any tangible way. As such, representations of human experiences are not in themselves archetypes; rather they are archetypal images and these images can evolve and change, although they retain enough similarity between representations to appear static (Lauter 49). Jung has also stated that "no individual symbolic image can be said to have a dogmatically fixed, generalized meaning" (Jung 30).

Also according to Jung, a person achieves psychic growth through individuation, a process by which one must discover and accept the different parts of our selves (Dobie 57). The "shadow" is the part of one's self that one dislikes, the so-called dark side. The "persona" is the façade that one shows others. Jung also defined the terms "anima" and "animus" as "the soul image, the life force that causes one to act," appearing as an anima, or feminine image, in males and as an animus, masculine image, in females (57). When the shadow, persona, and anima/animus are accepted, psychic maturation, or individuation, occurs (57). Chopin's exploration of identity in The Awakening through Edna can be seen as the character's journey towards individuation. Both of these Jungian concepts, archetypal images and individuation, can be seen in the themes of the novel and are reflected in the sensory images employed by Chopin.

With the numerous sensory images contained in The Awakening, perhaps the most logical approach to exploring the feminine portraits of the novel is to look at the scenes roughly in chronological order. The chronology of the novel is also important since some of the symbolism changes and develops over the course of the narrative.

The first five words of the novel are, "A green and yellow parrot…" (The Awakening 22). This colorful parrot and a close-by mocking-bird, pets of Madame LeBrun, the owner of a vacation village in Louisiana's Grand Isle where the novel starts, are associated with Edna's husband, Léonce Pontellier. The parrot's colors, plumage, appearance of speech, as well as the mocking-bird's repetition, are signifiers of Léonce's materialism. The parrot appears to speak, to use language, but in reality is only repeating, while the mocking-bird repeats the whistles and singing of the parrot. The English word popinjay, a dandy, is a cognate of parrot. Likewise, the Spanish word for

parrot, papagallo, is a slang term for a man overly concerned with his appearance, a flashy dresser, a dandy. Léonce is always concerned with social appearances, not the truth of what lies underneath; he is cleverly signified by the parrot, a bird whose appearance, its plumage and mimicry are its best features. The reader never sees inside Léonce's mind, never sees beyond his exterior. This bright bird that begins the novel is a significant image showing Léonce's character. By associating the parrot and mocking-bird with Mr. Pontellier, Chopin starts the action of the novel with Edna's husband. Rather than beginning with Edna, the socially and sexually repressed wife, Chopin starts the novel on masculine terms, with the domineering, oppressive, and possessive husband. Léonce is a constant poser giving the appearance of being a devoted husband, attentive father, and man of prominent social standing. In reality, he treats his wife as chattel, neglects to bring his sons the treats he promised them, and places a notice in the paper explaining his wife's move out of his house as a temporary arrangement while the house is renovated. The novel begins from Léonce's perspective as a dominant male. However, the parrot and mocking-bird imagery make it clear that Chopin is setting the scene to show the state from which Edna will awaken, that is, showing the oppression of the husband from which the wife will escape.

Although the novel begins with a rainbow of colors, the most significant color used by Chopin is white. Edna is often portrayed with white imagery. White is the color that paints the portrait of Edna's awakening. For Edna, white signifies her movement toward an awakened state. Various white symbols are associated with each of the scenes in which she has some realization or draws some conclusion that raises her consciousness. Edna does not have only one moment of awakening, but several, and each one has certain

references to white attached. For Edna, white symbols change from objects, such as clothes, an umbrella, and handkerchiefs, to natural symbols like sand and flowers, then to corporeal symbols, such as hands, arms, and teeth. As Edna moves toward freedom and the rejection of social convention, the white objects associated with her also move from unnatural, artificial, man-made objects to elements of nature like flora and Edna herself. For Edna, white changes from wealth, artifice, and enclosure to natural, real, and free – clothes to body.

The first significant white symbol is the sunshade Edna and her friend, and eventually her object of affection, Robert LeBrun, are using as they walk home from the beach. Edna's husband is watching their approach from a nearby porch. Chopin describes the scene from Léonce's perspective, a man who sees his wife in terms of an object: "The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert LeBrun" (Awakening, 23). The pink lining and outer shell of the sunshade can be interpreted as womb imagery. The pink enclosure suggests an artificial womb. None of the objects in this scene that suggest the womb are natural objects; rather, they are artificial, man-made objects. Edna here is fully dressed, escorted by a male (Robert), protected from the elements, and delivered to her husband. In addition, Edna and Robert are walking away from the sea. In this scene, the sea carries the symbolic meaning of nature as the giver of life. Edna and Robert are symbolically walking away from nature. Edna in this scene is at her most unaware, socially conventional point in her life.

The white sunshade acts as an objective correlative for Léonce's possession of his wife. Along with the reader, Léonce sees the sunshade first and tracks its progress. We

are first introduced to Edna as a sunshade, rather than as a person. Secondarily, we are introduced to her as Léonce's wife/possession. Until she awakens to the consciousness of her self, and begins to see herself as a person, we know her primarily as "Mrs. Pontellier." While Léonce's clothing and body are never described with white, Chopin associates some white imagery with Léonce, such as his house, that signifies Edna as a possession in her unaware state, and thus represents the confinement of society. After her introduction through the white sunshade, the next several references to white attached to Edna are clothes, skirts, and the sunshade again.

Other main characters, Robert, Adèle Ratignolle, Edna's Creole friend, Edna's father, and Victor LeBrun, Robert's brother, also have white imagery associated with them. The color for these characters does not mean that their consciousness is being raised but that one of their actions or behaviors has led Edna to a further awakening. Nearly all of these realizations will lead Edna to see an image, an unseen side of her loved ones' personality, or a portrait of femininity that she will later reject.

In the first scene of the novel, the whiteness of Edna's skin is discussed. Léonce takes Edna to task for allowing herself to become sunburned. She does not fit his idea, and her society's idea, of white as a symbol of not just beauty, but beauty and wealth. Margit Stange contends that "sunburned hands, by indicating the performance of outdoor labor, would nullify Edna's 'value' as a sign of Léonce's wealth" (278). That wealth is reflected in Léonce's house which Chopin describes as "a very charming home….It was a large, double cottage … painted a dazzling white" (71). Chopin further portrays this stereotypical white/wealth connection with her description of the domestic servant characters in the novel. "A maid in a white, fluted cap," a nurse "in white cap and apron"

(72, 133). Chopin also describes a house boy, although not dressed in white, "in dress coat and bearing a diminutive silver tray" (72). That is, the white caps, collars, and aprons worn by the domestic servants in the novel are not symbols of wealth in themselves, but the fact that these objects are worn and used by maids, house-boys, and personal nurses symbolizes wealth. Chopin evokes the image of the stereotypical domestic servant dressed in starched, white clothing, servants only the wealthy can afford to employ.

The white/wealth stereotype is more strongly stated by Chopin in her description of the various servants themselves. Of all the servants identified by race, all are Negro or part Negro. Joe the house boy is a mulatto. The Pontellier's nanny is an unnamed quadroon woman whom they allow their sons to treat "as a huge encumbrance" (Awakening 29). The quadroon nurse must follow the boys "at the respectful distance which they required her to observe" (33). Although these actions may seem to be mere childish misbehavior, they also indicate that the Pontelliers allow their children to rule their nanny, an adult black woman. Madame LeBrun has "a little black girl" as a house servant (43). The LeBrun family gives a dinner party during the summer on Grand Isle at which the guests are served ice-cream that was made "during the afternoon back of the kitchen by two black women" (46). In a later scene, Victor LeBrun reprimands one of the family's maids for disobeying an order, explaining to Edna that "the black woman's offensive conduct was all due to imperfect training" (82). Adèle has a mulatto nurse and "a young black woman" as a maid (133, 77). Léonce's mother has a servant whose children are called by the narrator "Lidie's little black brood" (117). Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna's musician friend, has "a young black girl" to do her laundry (120). Notable

is the fact that, other than the mulattos, Chopin describes these servants as black rather than Negro, the term most commonly used to describe “persons of color” during Chopin’s lifetime. Presumably, Chopin used the term “black” to maintain the color imagery so prevalent in her narrative. This association of the blacks as the lower class and the whites as the upper class demonstrates that Chopin clearly was portraying the social order of the late nineteenth century. Although many white citizens were poor, almost no blacks were wealthy. Chopin employs the color imagery of white symbolizing the wealthy employers and black symbolizing the working class domestic servants as a portrayal of the archetypal conflict of the “haves vs. have nots,” the age-old struggle between the rich and the poor.

In contrast, Edna’s whiteness of skin is not a symbol of wealth, but rather of her casting off her artificiality and moving toward raised consciousness. Although Edna unquestioningly accepts the blacks’ status as members of the serving class, her racial prejudice seems more a matter of convention. While Edna is no paragon of diversity awareness, she instead seems to view her servants as more of a bother to her than a group of ignorant, offensive workers. Edna in her unconventional, pre-awakened state had, as a woman, hardly any more freedom than one of her servants. Chopin, through Edna, is subverting the wealthy, white wife stereotype. When Edna rejects her status as white woman, white wife, white socialite, she too rejects the stereotypical image of the white, wealthy, privileged woman.

In contrast, Edna’s friend and social peer, Adèle Ratignolle, is the model of society’s standard of grace, beauty, and sophistication with her “spun-gold hair,” “blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires,” and her white neck that “one would not have wanted…a

mite less full" (Awakening 29). Stange sees the color white associated with Adèle Ratignolle as a symbol of wealth, citing Adèle's clothes, hands, and body as examples (279). Stange asserts that Adèle's hands are used not to do productive work, rather, to "signify her consecration to her 'role' within the family, and they are marked with the gold of a thimble as Edna's are marked with the gold of a ring" (279). In addition to describing Adèle with white imagery, Chopin describes her in terms of jewels or rare fruit; "these words – 'gold,' 'sapphires,' 'cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit' – construct femininity as tangible property…. Adèle's 'excessive physical charm' is a kind of currency that makes her the 'embodiment of every womanly grace and charm'" (qtd. in Stange 280).

Adèle is also characterized as a Madonna. With her white clothes, arms and neck, her blue eyes, and her golden hair and thimble, and her consecrated role as mother, Adèle is associated with the colors and image of the Virgin Mary. In the space of two pages, Chopin describes Edna's attraction to Adèle in Madonna imagery: "Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (Awakening 32). Edna finds Adèle a tempting subject for a portrait as Adèle sits "there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color" (Awakening 33). Edna's admiration of Adèle starts Edna on her path to freedom, since the Creole culture is more relaxed than Edna's Calvinist background. Adèle serves as a role model of the socialite wife and mother, in her Madonna image. However, Edna later sees the negative side to that image and will eventually reject it.

Carolyn Osiek contends that the iconic image of Mary has become an impossible ideal, creating feelings of inadequacy in Catholic women (qtd. in Callahan 8). Further,

Osiek views as problematic the fact that "Mary's chief qualification for exaltation is maternity. Even for Mary, biology is destiny" (qtd. in Callahan 8). In connection to The Awakening, this is significant since Mary is the Great Mother, the ultimate maternal figure, but in contrast, "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (29). Edna "was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way" (40). While the children were visiting their grandmother, "their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (40). Edna could never live up to the maternal ideal set by the Madonna and promoted by her friend, Adèle.

Another key Madonna image is the wardrobe of the Farival twins, the teen-aged daughters of the Pontellier's Grand Isle neighbors, who are described as "always clad in the Virgin's colors, blue and white, having been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin at their baptism" (Awakening 45). Chopin was obviously aware of the Virgin Mary icon and its meanings, as demonstrated by the Farival twins' clothing and the image of Adèle as a Madonna. Chopin sets up a portrait of femininity as represented by the duality of the Virgin Mary in the form of both the Great Mother goddess as well a repressive role model for women.

The blue-and-white-clad twins are described in the scene of a dinner party held during the summer at Grand Isle, at which the girls are among the guests: "An unusual number of husbands, fathers, and friends had come down to stay over Sunday; and they were being suitably entertained by their families, with the material help of Madame LeBrun" (Awakening 44). It could be called unusual, but not abnormal, for the girls to always be dressed in blue and white in dedication to Mary. The iconic image of the

Virgin Mary, dressed in a blue cloak, symbolic of heaven, and white veil and dress, symbolic of holiness and purity, is so influential that it was, and still is, commonplace for children to be dedicated to Mary at birth. That is, the constant wearing of the Virgin's color is unusual, but the dedication to Mary would be a rather acceptable and approved practice. Yet, in the Farival twins' case, such deep devotional feelings on the parents' part have proved detrimental to the development of the girls' social skills. In the midst of a dinner party celebrating the gathering of families, Chopin portrays the twins as on a path to perpetual maidenhood under the oppression of their religion. Chopin describes the scene on the dance floor:

> Almost every one danced but the twins, who could not be induced to separate during the brief period when one or the other should be whirling around the room in the arms of a man. They might have danced together, but they did not think of it. (46)

The implication of this passage is that the twins will almost surely live their lives trying to attain an ideal of purity, rather than leading the life of real women. Chopin makes the twins a portrait of repressed femininity, of one-sided femininity rather than womanly completeness. Edna contrasts with this portrait because she is moving toward this womanly completeness. Edna did not become a repressed wife overnight; many influences effect a young woman's development from childhood to adulthood. Even as teenagers, the twins are repressed wives in the making, that is if they ever marry at all.

The Awakening has been analyzed from the Protestant perspective of Edna's religious background as a member of a puritanical Presbyterian church. However, the Catholic perspective also plays a part in the novel, not just because Kate Chopin was

Catholic, but because of the influence of the Catholic Church on all aspects of a Christian society (Awakening 4). Not only is this influence in Chopin's consciousness as a Catholic, but the author was correct in demonstrating that it would be in Edna's mind also, even though Edna is Protestant. Protestant women also would be influenced by the commonplace use of Madonna imagery. This viewpoint is brought into focus by the numerous blue and white images, the symbolic colors of the Virgin Mary. Because of the moral authority of the Catholic Church, the influence of this powerful icon affects all women in Christian societies, Catholic or not, and arguably, Christian or not. Edna, as a Protestant, would realize the symbolic significance of the twins' wardrobe.[1]

The description of the Farival twins occurs during the major awakening scene of the novel. The key scenes of awakening occur the night of August 28, after the LeBruns' dinner party for the vacationers, and the following day. There are a large number of color images and portraits generated in this section of the novel. At this point in the narrative, the complexity of the color imagery becomes apparent to the reader, along with the idea that the colors are much more than mere background. Along with the description of the twins, these scenes contain various other intriguing images of color.

The sensory imagery of the dining room itself is noteworthy. The palette of colors Chopin employs in the description of the LeBruns' dinner party sets the scene for the special experience Edna will have that night. The dining room is decorated with natural elements, "orange and lemon branches," the dark green of these branches standing out "against the white muslin curtains" in the windows (Awakening 44). The moon shines through the window, framed by the curtains and floral decorations. The murmuring of the sea heard outside the dining room adds its music to the festivities.

The parrot from the first scene makes its second appearance, shrieking an insult against the musical performance of the Farival twins. Again, the parrot signifies that things are different than they appear, since he "was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that summer" (Awakening 45). Another little girl performs a dance, her hair "artificially crimped," that is, not really curly as it appears to be, a detail that underscores the artifice of the dinner party (Awakening 45). Also at the party is Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna's musician friend and confidant, who appears for the first time in this scene. Mademoiselle performs a piece of music for Edna, who recollects her fondness of Adèle's piano playing. The narrator describes Edna's love of music: "Musical strains, well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind" (Awakening 47). Edna then recalls several of these pictures that Mademoiselle's performances have evoked, including one that appears to be an archetypal image of Edna's animus. While Edna listens to Mademoiselle's playing, she recalls a piece played by Adèle, renamed by Edna "Solitude." This piece of music evoked in Edna an image of a man standing naked on the beach with an attitude of "hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (Awakening 47). Edna is moved by Mademoiselle's playing, which the narrator describes in terms of the sea swaying Edna's body. This image foreshadows the final scene of Edna's suicide where Edna is herself standing naked on the beach, with her body soon to be swayed by the waves, watching a bird with a broken wing plummet into the sea. In this final scene, Edna can be said to attain self-hood in Jungian terms: the integration of her persona (social façade), shadow (the negative side to

a person's personality), and the acceptance of her animus. Edna will also recall Mademoiselle Reisz's artistic abilities as stands for the last time on the beach.

Mademoiselle Reisz's character seems to be prefigured by The Lady in Black, an unnamed, secondary character who disappears from the narrative about half way through. The Lady in Black is one dimensional, but when she does appear, she represents seriousness, is reminiscent of a nun, and is forbidding and dour. She represents the opposite of white. Not awakened, not free, The Lady is a symbol of repression. One of the most common of archetypes is that of the conflict between masculine and feminine life forces. In Jungian psychology, if a man feels that his mother had a negative influence on him, his anima will be negative. "In this guise, the anima is as cold and reckless as certain uncanny aspects of nature itself, and in Europe is often expressed to this day by the belief in witches" (Jung 179). Typically, a negative anima appears in literature as the female "Other" in the role of witch, old maid, hag, sorceress, siren, malevolent spirit, or femme fatale. They are signified by the color black. The Lady in Black does not play a large role in the novel, yet several references are made to her. A negative anima character, she is not a nun, yet she strolls about Grand Isle saying her rosary and her morning prayers or following a pair of young lovers, spying and watching them from a distance. The Lady represents the forbidding side of conventional religious values. In modern literature, the negative anima may be depicted as the artist or lesbian, the unconventional, socially unacceptable woman.

Similar to The Lady in Black, Mademoiselle Reisz is characterized as the feminine "Other," a possibly lesbian, unconventional, old maid artist; Mademoiselle's "characteristics would recognizably have been associated with lesbians in the 1890s"

(LeBlanc 238). She is "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young," self-assertive, homely, weazened, awkward, yet imperious, and "she had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets" in her hair (Awakening 46-47). Mademoiselle is also described as having a "natural aversion for water," a small cauldron in her apartment, and a laugh that "consisted of a contortion of the face and all the muscles of the body," all traditional signs that she is a witch or old hag (Awakening 70, 84). Together, Mademoiselle Reisz and the Lady in Black create a portrait of the negative anima. In fact, Mademoiselle contrasts with Adèle as a role model. Where Adèle is a paragon of the wealthy, conventional, wife and mother, Reisz is a model of the unconventional, socially unattached, unmarried, childless woman. In Jungian terms, Adèle can be seen as a representation of Edna's "persona" and Mademoiselle (along with the Lady in Black) of her "shadow." Adèle is the socially acceptable façade of femininity and Reisz and the Lady in Black model the aspects of femininity that tend to be disliked by society (Dobie 57).

This contrast between Mademoiselle and Adèle is underscored by their musical performances at the dinner party. Adèle, who is unable to dance (presumably because she is pregnant), politely agrees to play piano. She "was keeping up her music on account of the children," and "because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (Awakening 46). Her reasons for playing piano are very conventional and socially acceptable. Adèle uses her musical abilities to make a nice home for her children and husband, not for the sake of creating art through music. On the other hand, Mademoiselle Reisz, who was not at the party when it started, is entreated by Robert to come and play for the guests. Robert tells Edna, "I'll tell her

that you want to hear her. She likes you. She will come" (Awakening 46). Mademoiselle does come and plays the piano, specifically to please Edna. Her reasons for being a musician are purely artistic, and she plays for whom she chooses, not to be sociable. Unlike Adèle, Reisz's reasons for playing her music have nothing to do with social convention or politeness.

In the midst of these musical performances, the dinner party guests are served "gold and silver cake," and the moon, with a "mystic shimmer" shines through the window, signifying a special celebration (Awakening 46). The unnaturally colored cake underscores the artificiality of the scene inside the room. In contrast, the moon is like a special guest, a natural element involved in the party, reaching into the dining room. This special event appears to be the dinner, but is actually Edna's forthcoming awakening.

Later that night, at Robert's suggestion of a midnight bath, Edna has her first successful swim on a night Chopin describes as mystic. The color white is associated with Robert, in his clothing, to signify that he is a path to awakening. As with Edna, Robert's white clothes indicate a raised consciousness. In contrast, Léonce is never dressed in white clothes. Robert's white clothes signal that he has sparked a realization in Edna. She begins to see herself in a special way, perhaps as a sea goddess, as something more than a housewife. Robert sparks Edna's passion not only for him but also for her desire for freedom. Later in the novel, Edna acknowledges Robert's role: "It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream" (132). That process began with Robert's telling Edna a story about a sea spirit that:

> at the hour of midnight, and if the moon is shining … seeks some one mortal worthy… of being exalted for a few hours into realms of

> semi-celestials. His search has always hitherto been fruitless…
>
> But tonight he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell. Perhaps she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence. (51)

By telling this story and suggesting that Edna go for a midnight swim, Robert leads Edna to the "first-felt throbbings of desire" and her first major awakening (52). As with many of the images in the earlier parts of the novel, this scene is both a key scene and a foreshadowing of the novel's denouement.

Edna's awakening begins during this midnight swim, set against music, "the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms," the "white light of the moon… like the mystery and softness of sleep," and the sea breaking "upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents" (Awakening 49). These white foam serpents, one of the unusual color images of the novel, seem to be symbolic of more than their referent.[2]

The white sea foam serpents actually symbolize several things, including temptation. Edna is tempted both into her first pleasurable swim and into her passion for Robert. This connection with the sea and nature is Edna's awakening into a sensuous woman. These white serpents also symbolize transcendence. Edna is about to have a transcendent experience, as she awakens to a higher level of consciousness. A serpent is an archetypal symbol of transcendence "because it was traditionally a creature of the underworld – and thus was a 'mediator' between one way of life and another" (Jung 152). This scene also foreshadows her suicide upon her realization that not only has she attained a state of higher consciousness, but she also has gone beyond to a level of understanding that

makes her unable to live satisfactorily within her former lifestyle, yet unable to attain true freedom in her awakened state. Additionally, the serpents, ancient symbols of fertility, are used with the flower and fruit images as a background of fecundity. The moon, moonlight, sunlight, and flowers set the scene. The beach and sea is described with numerous white references, such as the moon, moonlight, and the white serpents, the first of three major serpent symbols.

The next day, Robert and Edna go with a group of vacationers to mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Church on the Chênière Caminada, a nearby island. During the service, Edna is overcome with a "feeling of oppression and drowsiness" and "her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air" (Awakening 57). Edna's feeling faint is a literary device in Chopin's modernistic inversion of traditional religion, as well as further evidence of Chopin's opposition, through her character, to the repressive Madonna image portrayed by Adèle and the Farival twins.

Robert suggests that they stop to rest at the home of Madame Antoine, a friend of Robert's who resides on the island. A church is not a place of comfort for Edna; her rest at Madame Antoine's house is closer to a religious experience for her. The hostess, who "had not gone to mass," welcomes Edna with "all the native hospitality" and "was all eagerness to make Edna feel at home and to dispose of her comfortably" (Awakening 58). Edna is surrounded by white as she lies in bed and awakens to her sexuality. Madame attends to Edna's rest, setting the mosquito netting over Edna as she sleeps and putting out towels and face powder for when she wakes up, in a way that suggests the arrangement of sacred items used for a sacrament or religious rite. Although Madame

Antoine could be in church, she is instead at home attending to Edna's nap as if it were a religious ceremony.

Madame Antoine's home is filled with white objects. The large bed, Edna's undergarments, her face powder, and the room are all white, signifying Edna's sexual awakening. Additionally, the scene includes an image of red, as Madame Antoine boils some "mullets over a few red coals in the fireplace" (Awakening 58). This little spot of red in the midst of all the whiteness can be seen as a symbol of passion. Edna has to come to terms with her own sensuality before she is ready to begin the kind of passionate relationship with Robert that she desires. The spot of red is the start of her burgeoning desire.[3]

While Edna's August 28 awakening to desire is the main one of the novel, other, smaller scenes of awakening follow, such as when Edna's father comes for a visit. Edna's father, called the Colonel, has white associated with him by his mustache, hair, and teeth. In this scene, white symbolizes a raising of Edna's consciousness. Spending time with her father leads Edna to an awakening centered on childhood memories, and the questioning of the repressive values taught her as a child. Edna felt her father's visit "was in the nature of a welcome disturbance; it seemed to furnish a new direction for her emotions" (Awakening 90). Edna begins to dote on her father and starts acting the role of a child taking care of her daddy, finding that "for the first time in her life she felt as if she were thoroughly acquainted with him" (91). Edna found "that he interested her, though she realized that he might not interest her long…. Her husband noticed, and thought it was the expression of a deep filial attachment which he had never suspected" (91). Of course, Léonce may have noticed the outward appearance of Edna and her

father's seemingly new relationship, but he would not have seen the reality under the surface, for Edna, as she predicted, did not remain interested in her father for long.

Edna's visiting the horse racing track with her father during his visit reminded her of the Kentucky bluegrass of her childhood home. In an earlier scene, Edna recounts to Adèle a memory of herself as a child, running through a meadow of Kentucky bluegrass so immense that it "seemed as big as the ocean to the little girl walking through the grass…. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water" (Awakening 37). When asked by Adèle where she was going, Edna responds that "likely as not it was Sunday, and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (38). This image is another foreshadowing of her death scene, when she will drown in the blue-green immensity of the sea. The portrait created here is one of a woman's role as the obedient daughter and wife, ruled by male-defined social, religious, and economic values, and the rejection of these patriarchal values

Edna and the Colonel had "a warm, and almost violent dispute upon the subject of her refusal to attend her sister's wedding" (93). Edna has refused to attend her sister's wedding, telling Léonce that "a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (89). Edna's father reacts to her refusal by telling Léonce that he is too lenient a husband, that "authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife" (94). Edna has by this time already begun rejecting the traditional patriarchal values of marriage and wifely obedience, as well as filial obedience. Upon the Colonel's departure, Edna "was glad to be rid of her father when he finally took himself off with his wedding garments and bridal gifts, with his padded

shoulders, his Bible reading, his 'toddies' and ponderous oaths" (94). Chopin employs the Colonel's visit to portray Edna in the role of the woman obedient to the men in her life, to examine this aspect of femininity, and to reject this image as unsuitable to represent Edna's psyche.

After rejecting her father's values, Edna chooses to move out of her husband's home, rejecting Léonce's values also. A further awakening occurs at Edna's twenty-ninth birthday party and farewell dinner, an event she hosts to celebrate her birthday and her move. Edna's lace shawl is described as being "the color of her skin" (Awakening 111). Now, instead of her skin matching the white of her clothes, her clothes match her skin. The white lace is a symbol of Edna's movement away from her husband's locus of control. However, the main colors of this scene are red and gold symbolizing royalty and wealth. Red is also an archetypal color of passion, while gold is an archetypal color of wealth and greed.

After dinner, Victor, Robert's brother, is dressed as a god, possibly Bacchus or Robert's invented sea spirit, by Mrs. Highcamp, one of the other guests. She weaves "a garland of roses, yellow and red" which she lays "lightly upon Victor's black curls," adding as a finishing touch "a white silken scarf" that she drapes "across the boy in graceful folds" (Awakening 112). Red and gold roses, red wine and golden champagne, diamonds, silver and china, and elegant evening gowns are the royal sensory images of the party. Gold is a goddess color associated with Aphrodite. The Ancient Greeks described Aphrodite's golden beauty (Bolen 233). The gold and red images invoke a queenly portrait of Edna: "There was something in her attitude, her whole appearance… which suggested the regal woman" (Awakening 112). In this scene, Edna is portrayed as

a queen, as well as Aphrodite/Venus, as through her Chopin examines these images of femininity.

At the farewell party, a secondary character, Miss Mayblount, brings a guest, Gouvernail. He is a man "of whom nothing special could be said, except that he was observant" (Awakening 109). Appropriately, he acts in the scene as an observer of the social pantomime of the guests. Miss Mayblount is described as always looking through lorgnettes. These opera glasses seem to be a dramatic lens through which she views the drama played out before her. As Mrs. Highcamp dresses Victor as a god, it is Miss Mayblount who comments "Oh! to be able to paint in color rather than in words!" (Awakening 113). It appears that Miss Mayblount represents the author's voice in this scene, just as Gouvernail acts as observer. Miss Mayblount speaks the theme of color imagery that Chopin weaves throughout her narrative. In reply to Miss Mayblount's remark, Gouvernail quotes lines from a Swinburne poem, "There was a graven image of Desire / Painted with red blood on a ground of gold" (Awakening 113). Victor then begins singing to Edna a song that Robert often sang. This reminder of Robert's absence so upsets Edna that she accidentally shatters her glass, spilling her wine. Stange cites this passage, asserting that the red blood, symbolized by the wine Edna spills, represents "the loss of the self in maternal bloodletting" and the "ground of gold" is Edna's desire (Stange 288). Victor's posing evokes an image of Edna's desire for Robert, a desire which she has not yet been able to fully realize because she has lost her selfhood in her role as wife and mother.

Edna can only have Robert under conventional terms. Her desire is painted - implying an image - with red blood on a canvas of gold wealth. The image of Edna as

the lover of Robert is a portrait of desire painted on a canvas of social convention. Whether the red represents Edna's maternal bloodletting, her desire for Robert, or her awakened passion for life, the image that the color red paints is one of a woman grounded in the social conventions of her upper-crust lifestyle. The color white signifies that Edna has come to this realization by Victor's pose. When confronted by her desire through Victor's song (and Victor himself, as a temporary stand-in for his brother), Edna feels frustrated by the realization that now that she has awakened to her passion for Robert, she cannot have him. He has left before their romance has started. Edna here presents a portrait of a woman forced to choose between what she wants and what she is allowed by society. This feminine portrait is of a woman who knows that as she moves toward autonomy, she may have no choice but to leave behind the best part of her former lifestyle – her object of affection, who is unwilling to commit adultery. Edna is frustrated by the geographic separation from Robert, as well as the emotional separation Robert has imposed by distancing himself for the sake of social propriety.

That night, after the farewell party, Edna and her lover, Alcée Arobin, make love for the first time. The affair, as with all other awakenings, is set in white imagery. Hands, arms, and passion like a flaming torch are white symbols of Edna's increased awareness of her sensual nature and her choice to change from "Mrs. Pontellier" to "Edna."
A few weeks earlier, the couple shared their first passionate kiss. This kiss "was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Awakening 106). The "flaming torch" implies that their passion is like an intense, white flame. Edna becomes aware of her sensuality but is unfulfilled by Arobin. She also realizes that she does not love Arobin, that "it was not love which had

held this cup of life to her lips" (Awakening 107). Just as Edna realizes her sensuality, she also realizes that Arobin is not the answer to her fulfillment, and ultimately, neither will Robert or any man be.

As their affair continues, the narrator of the novel describes Arobin's awakening Edna's dormant sexuality: "He had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom" (128). Just as in Chopin's short story "The Storm," the blossom takes on its fullest symbolic meanings of sensuality, fertility, and beauty. Yet, even from their first passionate kiss, Edna realizes that while her affair with Arobin is sexually fulfilling, their relationship does not add to her freedom or lead to a sense of psychic completeness.

This process of realization continues with Edna and Robert meeting at an out-of-the-way garden café, a place "too modest to attract the attention of people of fashion" (Awakening 127). Robert has returned from Mexico where he had ostensibly gone to find work, but in reality had gone to escape his passion for Edna. The scene is set in green, suggesting naturalness and the archetypal image of a garden paradise. Also, green can symbolize hope because of its association with nature, renewal, springtime, and new growth. Images of trees, plants, oranges, and green tables mix with pastoral images of milk, fresh country food, sunlight, and a friendly outdoor cat. Here in this garden, Edna feels innocent, free of the restrictions of her marriage and social conventions. She tells Robert, "I almost live here…. I am so glad it has never actually been discovered. It is so quiet, so sweet, here" (Awakening 129). One can see the garden café as the Garden of Eden and Robert and Edna as Adam and Eve, the first man and woman of Edna's new social order. Edna hopes to live a new life as her awakened self with Robert at her side.

However, this image of Edna as a new Eve is also unsuitable for her because she becomes too unconventional for Robert, and she knows she will eventually lose any man she gains.

If the garden café is suggestive of the Garden of Eden and a paradise, it also appropriately symbolizes The Fall, the point where Chopin begins to describe the decline of the feminine portraits. Although the rejection of the portraits does not strictly begin at this point in the narrative, it does roughly correspond with the novel's denouement that comes in the scenes immediately following the garden café meeting. After meticulously setting each portrait up, Chopin just as meticulously brings each one down.

After the garden café scene, just as Edna and Robert are about to make love for the first time, Edna leaves Robert to go to Adèle's side as she gives birth. Adèle's hair is described as lying "in a long braid on the sofa pillow, coiled like a golden serpent," the second of the novel's three major serpent images (Awakening 133). The golden serpent can be interpreted as both the archetypal symbol of wealth and of fertility. Adèle is a kind of Madonna of wealth, a Great Mother of the social elite. Edna associates gold with possession as well as wealth. In an earlier scene, Edna explains to Mademoiselle Reisz that she chose to leave Léonce's home because "'The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine'" (Awakening 102). Edna's thoughts continue: "whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (103). Along with seeing Adèle as a Madonna, Edna also realizes in the birth scene to what extent her friend is a possession. She has no freedom outside of her role as the perfect wife and mother image she projects.

The overturning of the Madonna image had begun earlier in the novel with Edna's visit to Adèle after her August 28 awakening, as Edna began casting off her conventional social visits. Edna sees Adèle's domesticity as "the colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment" (78). In this case, white is symbolic of banal, bland domesticity. The white imagery accompanies Edna's realization that Adèle's lifestyle is one "in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium" (78). This symbol is restated in the birth scene as the white and gold associated with Adèle move from the symbolic meaning of high social standing and convention to wealth as a repressive entrapment, the proverbial gilded cage.

The overturning of the Virgin Mary portrait continues during the birth scene, with Adèle described with white images. Adèle's white dressing gown, her handkerchief, her forehead, and her nurse's apron are white objects of Adèle's wealth, but also Edna's consciousness. Seeing her friend in her birth agony, "her sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural," Edna awakens to the idea that Adèle is no Madonna, rather a possession and model of wealth (Awakening 133). The naturalistic birth scene creates for Edna a portrait of Adèle as a baby-making-machine, rather than the glorious, golden Madonna she presented during her placid pregnancy.

Chopin's rejection of the Madonna model can be seen as an example of early feminist thought. The author, consciously or unconsciously, seems to have agreed with the rejection of the Virgin Mary as a primary role model for women. Many modern feminists, religious as well as secular, also reject negative Virgin images. The meaning of the archetypal images associated with Mary have changed over the centuries. While there is literary support for the depiction of Mary shown in the Virgin icon, both the

meanings attached and the use of these images have partly taken on a negative connotation. Some Christian feminists and religious leaders contend that this view of Mary as goddess has been detrimental to the plight of women in Christian cultures. Sidney Callahan cites Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong's contention that Catholic doctrines concerning Mary have been used by the Catholic celibate male priesthood to create a feminine ideal that would bring a universal sense of guilt to women (8). A similar view is Marina Warner's assertion that the misuse of Virgin Mary imagery has become "a tool of asceticism and female repression" (Callahan 8). Sylvia Brinton Perera finds both the Virgin Mary and the Ancient Greco-Roman goddesses inadequate role models for femininity, preferring ancient pagan goddesses that offer an "image for the goddess as Self" with a "full-bodied coherence" (qtd. in Lauter 141).

Chopin completes the inversion of the Virgin icon in the last scene. Edna's white body is metaphorically cloaked with the blue of the sky and sea. As Edna stands naked on the beach, "the foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles" (Awakening 138). These foam coils, the third serpent image, appear at Edna's feet, although she is not crushing them. This image contrasts with the image of the Virgin Mary crushing a serpent under her foot, symbolizing the crushing of evil as well as the alternative meaning of crushing of female sexuality. By placing the white serpents at Edna's feet, not under them, Chopin rejects the symbolic meaning of the serpent as feminine sexual evil. The author portrays Edna's acceptance of the serpents and their signification of feminine sexuality. Chopin uses this image in a modernistic inversion of traditional religion in favor of an ancient religion, moving backward into antiquity from Christianity to Ancient Greco-Roman mythology. However, the author

does not settle on the Ancient Greco-Roman goddess as a primary role model either. Edna becomes a kind of Madonna of Nature, a superior female figure, in this scene. This change is the beginning of Edna's formation of a new image as she moves closer to a portrait of her own Self. Jung has noted that in dreams, the Self may appear as a goddess of nature (Jung 196).

The next goddess portrait to be overturned is Aphrodite/Venus. Just before Edna arrives at the beach to take her final swim, Victor recounts to Mariequita, one of his girlfriends, how Edna looked like the "Birth of Venus" at her farewell dinner party. In short time, Edna stands with sea foam covering her feet, looking like Venus being born fully formed from the sea: "How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (Awakening 138). Venus' Greek name Aphrodite means roughly "from the foam of the sea."

Venus was, of course, the Goddess of Love in Ancient Roman mythology. Although married, with children, Venus was often unfaithful to her husband and was not generally considered a "mother goddess." Botticelli's famous fifteenth-century painting "Birth of Venus" depicts Venus arising from the sea on a seashell, and is generally considered one of the most beautiful paintings of its era. The Ancient Greeks considered Aphrodite/Venus the influence of the creative, sexual, and procreative impulses in women (Bolen 224). Aphrodite/Venus is a one-dimensional goddess. In Ancient Greco-Roman mythology, no one deity represented the full spectrum of human nature. Rather, each god or goddess covered a certain area of the human experience. Thus, in her one-sidedness, like the Virgin Mary, Venus is an inadequate role model for Edna.

The inversion of the Venus portrait leads to a critical debate of whether Edna is resurrected as the goddess or rejects the image. Sandra M. Gilbert interprets the ending of The Awakening as a recreation of the Venus myth (qtd. in LeBlanc 251). Yet, while Edna strikes a Venus pose in the novel's final scene, once she swims to her death, that image is overturned as well as all the other explored images. "Most likely," argues Cynthia Griffen Wolff, Edna's death "is a tragic inversion of the birth of Venus" (393).

Elaine Showalter cites Gilbert's view that the dinner party, in which Edna appears most like a goddess and a queen, is Edna's "most authentic act of self-definition" (218). The party celebrates her twenty-ninth birthday, "a feminine threshold, the passage from youth to middle age"; the party also marks the beginning of her new life in her own house, all sumptuously and regally symbolized with gold, silver, crystal, satin, china, and champagne (Showalter 218). However, Showalter continues, "Edna may look like a queen, but she is still a housewife. The political and aesthetic weapons" she uses "are only forks, knives, glasses and dresses" (219). That is, while Gilbert's assertion is compelling, Edna's self-definition in the dinner party scene is a portrait of her soon to be former self. If Edna is a queen and a Venus at the party, it is only because of Léonce's wealth. In fact, Edna and her guests are mocking Léonce by celebrating, at his expense, Edna's leaving his home. Edna's plans for the party call for "all my best of everything – crystal, silver and gold, Sèvres, flowers, music, and champagne to swim in. I'll let Léonce pay the bills. I wonder what he'll say when he sees the bills" (Awakening 108). As Stange says, Edna "both embodies and reigns over Léonce's riches" as queen of Léonce's money; so too is she Venus only at Léonce's expense (287). If the portrait of Venus is painted at the dinner party, then it is a portrait that becomes all about Léonce,

not a true self-definition for Edna. Both the goddess Venus and Edna's queen/Venus pose are male defined. It is Victor that describes Edna in the novel's final scene: "Venus rising from the foam could have presented no more entrancing a spectacle than Mrs. Pontellier, blazing with beauty and diamonds at the head of the board," with the other women present as attendant virgins (Awakening 136). Notable is the fact that Edna is seen again as "Mrs. Pontellier" while she is described as a male-defined ideal.

Yet another feminine image that has been evoked as a traditional interpretation of Edna's suicide is the archetypal fallen woman or unfaithful wife. Contemporary critics of the novel viewed Edna's suicide as the proper fate for an unfaithful wife. This interpretation is based on the archetype of an unfaithful woman having to be punished for her sins. The nineteenth-century literary tradition based on this archetype was drowning as the customary "fictional punishment for female transgression against morality" (Showalter 219).

In the case of Edna Pontellier, however, her reasons for drowning herself are ambiguous. One can interpret her suicide in many ways, and the idea that she killed herself as punishment for her sin is not the most compelling interpretation. The reader would have to question why Chopin would write a portrayal of a woman's transcendence to higher consciousness through sexual freedom, then end the novel with that woman killing herself as self-punishment because she committed the traditional sin of infidelity. One would have to question why Chopin would have Edna take steps to free herself of the social conventions imposed on her by her husband, primarily by moving out of his house and having an affair with another man, but in turn drown herself out of guilt for her perceived sin.

It would seem rather that the reasons for Edna's suicide are Chopin's inversion of the archetypal image of the fallen woman. Since Chopin tried and rejected various images such as dutiful wife, Madonna, Venus, queen, it would seem highly unlikely that the image she would settle on as an appropriate representation for Edna would be the archetypal image of the unfaithful, sinful wife.

Chopin left the ending of the novel open to numerous interpretations, including the possibility that Edna's death was accidental. For the purpose of this paper, however, Edna's death is interpreted as a suicide. One possible interpretation of her death is that Edna has made herself an objet d'art – not quite Venus, not quite Madonna, she turns herself into a feminine image of her own making. She invokes the memory of Mademoiselle Reisz's saying, "And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies" (Awakening 139). In Edna's mind, Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed and might have sneered if she knew of Edna's plan of suicide. However, in the actual conversation, that is set in Chapter XXI, Mademoiselle in fact did not laugh; rather, she was noncommittal as to whether Edna possessed the makings of an artist (86). And if Mademoiselle sneered at Edna's pretensions, she was only acting according to her tendency of sneering at everyone. Mademoiselle's statement appears more as a challenge to Edna to dare to become an artist. In a key scene set in Chapter XXVII, Edna relates to Arobin a second conversation she held with Mademoiselle in which the latter felt Edna's shoulder blades to see if her wings were strong. Mademoiselle told Edna, "'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth'" (106). Edna

and Arobin then share their previously discussed kiss that the narrator describes as a flaming torch, implying a depth of passion like the whiteness of an intense flame. This passionate kiss, for Edna, is a courageous, artistic act, seemingly prompted by Mademoiselle Reisz's encouragement of Edna to act with a courageous soul. As Edna stands on the beach in the final scene, we see her remembering Mademoiselle's encouragement with self-reproach. However, it is only in Edna's mind, not in Mademoiselle's actual words, that Mademoiselle sneered. In spite of her self-reproach, Edna goes forward with her act of suicide. In this way, the reader can see Edna's suicide as a courageous act, or an act of art, à la Mademoiselle's definition.

The Awakening is all about images. Edna models herself after a traditional religious image, finds it not right for her, then tries to model herself after an older model. But she cannot make herself into either image. Instead, she swims away, goes into the sea, her body never to be found, thus creating a new image for herself. Whether or not this new image could be called a success, she makes a valiant effort in creating it. This idea ties in to the interpretation that Edna has no other viable choice but suicide (Showalter 219).

Edna has, up to the point of her death, tried to pattern herself into an image created by other people but is not successful. Her painting of Adèle, set in Chapter V, can be seen as foreshadowing. Edna is talented, but when she tries to paint Adèle as the Madonna, the resulting image is good, but not quite right. Edna cannot paint someone else's ideas. She can only paint her own, which makes her a true artist, if not a successful one.

In some respects, Edna is successful in becoming an artist. Her effort is valid, but her practice of using another person's images is not. She is successful in recreating

herself according to her own image, but only if one accepts the interpretation that her suicide is an artistic, if not mythic, resurrection. If the reader does not accept this interpretation, then Edna is seen as a failure. Like all aspects of the novel's ending, the answer to this question is ambiguous.

In the final scene, the last white symbols of the novel are Edna's white ankles as she stands on the beach, the sea foam that forms serpents at her feet, and Edna's lifting her naked, white body into the surf. Edna is in her natural state, standing on the beach as if rising like Venus from the foam. "She cast aside the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air" (Awakening 138). This quote echoes Léonce's reaction to Edna's behavior shortly before she moved out of his house: "He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside the fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (79).

The last words of the novel describe the musky odor of the pinks Edna remembers from her childhood. This image of pungent pink flowers is also a womb image. The womb imagery of the first scene of the novel comes into play here. Edna's suicide can be seen as a return to the womb. This symbol incorporates the archetypal symbol of water, in this case the sea, as rebirth. The scene introducing Edna to the reader is inverted in the final scene. Instead of a male escorting "Mrs. Pontellier" away from the sea (as a symbol of life, birth, rebirth, cleansing), Edna stands alone and returns to the sea, or rather, the womb as symbolized by the pink imagery. The womb of the first scene is an artificial womb of wealth, social convention, and material goods. The womb of the final scene, the place of Edna's rebirth, is a natural womb, that is, made up of the sea and sky, and

reminiscent of birth from its allusion to the Venus myth. Here, Edna is alone and unprotected from the elements. She is not escorted by Robert, but Robert, by this time, is the only human being she would want around her. Yet, “she does not allow Robert or anyone else to dominate her thinking” as she goes for her final swim (Treu 30). She is going into the sea by her naked, white, Self. Edna herself becomes the white symbol, the objective correlative for her own consciousness.

The sea becomes Edna’s tomb. She returns to the womb/tomb of the sea. Chopin reiterates her use of Kentucky bluegrass as a sea image. Edna’s swim evokes her memory of running through the blue green field of grass, surrounded by a sea of color. Just as when she was a little girl, Edna is here in a sense running away from patriarchal oppression, represented by forbidding fathers, repressive husbands, and religion practiced “in a spirit of gloom” (Awakening 38). Edna as she swims is reunited with nature, with the blue-green sea as the giver of life. She is “home,” returned to the womb. This return reiterates the inversion of the artificial womb of the first scene. Additionally, the final words of the novel evoke the archetypal image of the womb – she is traveling back in time in her mind, and the last sensory image is that “the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (139). The musky odor is part of the womb imagery, mirroring the natural aroma of a woman’s genitals.

The return-to-the-womb and rebirth imagery may remind the reader that works of art freeze their subjects in time. The reader does not see Edna’s death. The last image of her is the inner workings of her mind as she swims into the sea. Whatever happened before or whatever happens after is pointless. This last image, like a portrait, shows Edna frozen in the frame like a painting. Her rebirth may quite possibly be a rebirth as a new

narrative, as a painting, as art. The only portrait truly of her own making, and therefore the only true self-defined, self-expressive image, is her image of Self before her death.

Wolff asserts that Edna seeks to create a "new narrative of ardent devotion" portraying her awakened self (393). However, upon Robert's rejection of her as too unconventional, "Edna had discovered no partner/audience with whom to construct her new narrative, and she cannot concoct one in solitude" (Wolff 393). While Edna has failed to write a new narrative, to overturn "the same stifling, potentially annihilating constructions of 'femininity,'" Chopin has "invented a powerful (and thus threatening) discourse for feminine sexuality" (Wolff 393). Robert Treu contends that since Chopin "could not point to an easy triumph for Edna because none was available in the world she knew," the author instead wrote a novel "in which the contradictions of her social world are shown for what they are, and the door opened for discussions of the future" (29).

As she takes her last swim, Edna has gained enough independence to take greater risks. She now has the strength to have laughed at Robert's marriage proposal and "can imagine a future in which she will not be dependent upon any man" (Treu 31). Swimming out and past the point of panic, she enters "a state something like … cold consciousness" (Treu 31).

Treu compares the ending of The Awakening to the Velazquez self-portrait, "Las Meninas":

> The painting shows Velazquez himself pausing, brush in hand, and looking out at whoever is viewing the painting. There is a canvas standing in front of the artist, but we see only its back. We can not see what, if anything, has been painted on it. The fact that the King and Queen of Spain are seen reflected

> in a mirror in the background invites speculation that Velazquez is painting them. Another possibility is that he is painting the viewer… a third possibility … is that the canvas is empty, and the painter as yet uncommitted to a subject, his wonderful smile a way of asking what we think. (Treu 31)

Edna's death, Treu continues, is much like this "mysterious canvas," reflecting either ourselves or something else entirely (33). By ending her novel open to artistic interpretation, rather than by closing her discourse, Chopin invites the reader to "contemplate possibilities rather than make final judgments" (Treu 33). Chopin does not settle for any borrowed image to represent Edna, giving the reader the artistic freedom to interpret the success or failure of Edna's self expression.

According to Jung, the psychic center of a person is the Self, which is both the nucleus and the totality of the whole psyche, much like a tree seed contains both the center of growth and the total of what the tree will become (Jung 160-161). Because individuation occurs involuntarily and naturally, it is frequently symbolized in dreams as a tree, since the growth of a tree follows a similar pattern (Jung 161). If one has attained individuation, one's unconscious appears in symbolic form as the Self. "In the dreams of a woman this center is usually personified as a superior female figure – a priestess, sorceress, earth mother, or goddess of nature or love" (Jung 196). Edna's progression from representation by borrowed image to representation by a superior female figure (goddess of nature) of her own making is a movement toward her self-portrait.

Yet another image in the final scene of Awakening is of Edna's standing on the beach while "a bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (138). This image can be compared to the

image in Chapter IX of the man on a beach watching a bird that Edna sees when she listens to Adèle play "Solitude." The bird in the final scene may be seen as either a symbol of Edna's failure, if the reader interprets her death as a failure, or a timely reminder of Mademoiselle's challenge to Edna to have strong wings for soaring above tradition and prejudice. In working toward her freedom and exploring her identity, Edna seems to have come to terms with her shadow and persona. The entire image of Edna on the beach with the bird nearby may be interpreted as Edna's accepting her animus, the man from her earlier dream, as part of the individuation process. Edna may now be represented by a symbolic portrait of her Self.

The last scene is Chopin's inversion of all the feminine images presented. Edna rejects each and every one as unsuitable to represent herself. She is no socialite, yet she is not able to live as a socially free, unconventional woman. She is no queen, yet she is no longer a housewife. She is no hag or witch, yet she is no feminist ideal. She is no Virgin Mary, yet she is also no Venus. Edna is not an infant, or a little girl, yet she is returning to the womb, moving toward rebirth. Edna is no longer anyone except her own Self. No image created by any other man or woman fits Edna's psyche. She cannot describe herself either in color or in words as anyone else's invention. The only image suitable to represent her is the one of her own making. Although Edna fails at living her life, she does not fail in her search for identity. She just cannot find a livable image with which to represent herself; this is why the final, colorful self-portrait of Edna is the most compelling of the novel.

Notes

[1]The Catholic Church, it is generally believed, has deified Mary to make up for the lack of a feminine deity in Christianity. Nearly every deity-centered religion has both male and female deities to represent the balance between the masculine and feminine aspects of humanity. Since Christianity is the rare exception to this rule, many believe that Mary has been made into a demi-goddess by Catholicism to fulfill the role of feminine deity. Another theory behind the Virgin icon is that the deification of Mary is a holdover from pagan religions. As people converted to Christianity, they retained their tradition of worshipping a Great Mother goddess in the figure of Mary (Callahan 9).

The depiction of Mary with as a Great Mother goddess has a biblical and literary basis in a passage from Revelation 12:1. The woman described in this passage, with the moon under her feet signifying her status as a goddess, is associated with Mary because she gives birth to a son, a ruler of nations, identified with Jesus, and as the woman gives birth, “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan,” tries to capture and destroy the woman and her child, but is unable to because mother and child are protected by God (Rev 12:9).

The largest and most obvious use of blue and white symbolism in The Awakening is the blue sea and sky and the white sand. Blue and white are archetypal colors used in depicting the Virgin Mary. Additionally, gold as a royal color may be associated with Mary, symbolizing her as the Queen of Heaven. The most common icon of Mary shows her standing on a crescent moon and stepping on a serpent holding an apple in its mouth.

The serpent, of course, is another well-known archetypal image, as is the crescent moon as a signifier of a goddess (Lauter 58).

[2]As noted in the body of the paper, archetypal images and their meanings are not unchanging, not indicative of any one fixed meaning. In the same vein as the Madonna imagery, the Christian Catholic view of the serpent warrants discussion. The basis for the iconic image of Mary crushing a serpent can be found in Genesis 3:15, in which God curses the serpent for luring Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15). Based on this passage, and the Catholic title of Mary as the New Eve, Mary is pictured crushing the serpent which holds the forbidden fruit in its mouth.

The Early Christian and the Catholic Churches have gradually changed the meaning of the serpent archetypal image from evil and sexuality to sexual evil, or rather, they have shifted the balance from general evil to specific evilness of sexuality. The serpent archetype that is so closely connected to Christianity has come to mean not only sexuality, but also "the horror that both the actual serpent and sexuality uncontrolled have inspired in generations of men" (Bodkin 236). In light of the sexual repression of women that has existed for generations in Christian societies, if not worldwide, the serpent, in other words, can be symbolic of the perceived evil of women's sexuality.

The icon of the Virgin Mary depicting her crushing the serpent under her foot has, through the misuse of this image, taken on a new meaning, not just of the crushing of evil, but also the repression of female sexuality.

[3] Chopin mirrored this scene in her later short story, "The Storm." The white imagery Chopin used in The Awakening is intensified in her short story. "The Storm" is a story of sexual awakening, extending to transcendentalism. The protagonist's name is Calixta, derived from the word calyx, the outer envelope of a flower. Flowers in this story are a major symbol of sexuality, fertility, and femininity. Calixta is home alone as a strong rain storm starts. Her husband and son are at the market in town when Calixta's former lover, Alcée Laballiere, arrives at her home to take refuge from the storm. The pair make love during the course of the storm, in a scene set with white imagery.

In a manner reminiscent of Hindu tantric philosophy, Calixta reaches a higher level of consciousness, symbolized by the color white. In Hindu tantric yoga, sexual intercourse can be used as a tool to increased consciousness. Tantric yoga uses the five forbidden objects of wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and sexual intercourse as "devices for discovering what is inside the mind" (Coward 111). Such discovery begins with an awakening of opposite powers, a union of these forces, and then a transcending of them (Coward 113). Jung's approach to the raising of consciousness is similar in theory, although different in practice and likewise focuses not on the reality of the objects of meditation, but the objects' function "as constructs of mental experience" (Coward 110-111). Calixta's transcendental moment is described by the passage, "Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world" (929). Chopin seems to be forwarding the idea that such an awakening to a higher consciousness is well suited for women who wish to escape the confines of traditional society. That is, that the sexual repression of women in the late nineteenth century was an unnatural denial

of a feminine birthright. White images include the bed (couch), bedroom, neck, breasts, the lightening as a kind of white fire, and passion like a white flame taking both to a depth of nature "that had never yet been reached" (Complete 929). This scene is an embellishment of Chopin's portrait in Awakening of Edna's transcending to a higher level of consciousness.

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