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# Fine Southern Gentlemen: The Three Beaux of Edna Pontellier

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**Fine Southern  
Gentlemen: The Three  
Beaux of Edna  
Pontellier**

Keli Masten

After its rediscovery, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has been heralded as a masterful work which appeals to concepts of feminism, individuality, naturalism, and as a snapshot of Creole culture in southern Louisiana at the very cusp of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> This was not always the case. The novel was initially considered distasteful and was virtually crucified by the literary critics of the time who disregarded the delicate construction of prose and metaphor and simply saw it as a sex book, fiendishly seeking to dismantle the moral code of society.<sup>2</sup> Only recently have scholars come around to appreciating the complexity of the work and the messages woven within it.

Understandably enough, much of the literary criticism has focused upon the main character, Edna Pontellier, and her journey of self-discovery, but the surrounding cast is rich with personalities as diverse and enlightening as Edna's own. While most of the characters seem clearly defined as to their values, desires, and how they reconcile any dissonance they might face, and Edna Pontellier might seem like the only character suffering the torment of this discord, each character is negotiating a careful playing field replete with rules, regulations, and strict penalties if one is to run afoul. In seeking an alternate route to understanding this masterful work, I intend to explore the function gender roles play with regard not to the women in the story, but to the men. In reviewing the circumstances

surrounding the events which take place in this upper middle class, Creole, white community, I seek to explain how the sociocultural demands and expectations placed upon the men are equally as divisive as those placed upon the female characters of the same social status.

The novel takes place in two parts, the first upon Grand Isle and the second in New Orleans, Louisiana. The protagonist, Edna Pontellier, first referred to as Mrs. Pontellier and only later shifted to the more intimate Edna, is a woman on the verge of discovery who comes to realize that her Kentucky Presbyterian roots have ill-prepared her for life among the sensuous Creole culture to which her husband is so well-adapted.<sup>3</sup> In vacationing on Grand Isle, she is continually surprised and often amused by the difference between her own background and the rules of play followed by the men and women around her.<sup>4</sup> She is struck by how the ladies have an "entire absence of prudery" while also maintaining "a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (12). Despite this surprising contrast in their nature, Edna feels at home among them and has no trouble forging relationships with the ladies which blossom into highly influential friendships, especially between Edna, Madam Ratignolle, and Mademoiselle Reisz. Although the women are opposites, they each appeal to the different aspects of Edna which are

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<sup>1</sup> Marlene Springer relays the process by which Kate Chopin's writing returned to the public consciousness around 1969 with the publication of Per Seyersted's *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* and experienced a resurgence in critical interest, mainly due to its feminist themes, authentic Louisiana regionalism, and the subtle means by which the stories are told.

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Allen traces the critical responses to *The Awakening* published from 1956 through 1971, by George Arms, Werner Berthoff, Kenneth Eble, Lewis Leary, Per Seyersted, George M. Spangler, Edmund Wilson, and Larzer Ziff, discussing common themes explored among and between the critics' published works.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Toth and Per Seyersted quote a letter from Chopin defending her novel in the face of harsh

criticism, saying: "Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing, I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late" (296).

<sup>4</sup> Describing the use of free indirect discourse by Kate Chopin, Xianfeng Mou illustrates how Chopin "is concerned with representing the emotional, battling against prevalent cultural norms of wifehood, motherhood, romance, seduction, and conventions of female writing" (104).

struggling to break to the surface of her psyche. In this way, Madame Ratignolle represents the mother-woman side of Edna and her matrimonial, familial and motherly responsibilities, and Mademoiselle Reisz represents the warring notion of self-reliance and independence from domestic drudgery.<sup>5</sup> Together, the three women create an intricate triangle of feminine values which cannot exist in harmony without some violation of societal norms.

The women of the island of course do not exist in a vacuum, and their male counterparts are equally as impactful in the 'awakenings' Edna experiences.<sup>6</sup> In the first scene, Edna and Robert Lebrun are walking slowly up a path together as Léonce Pontellier watches them approach. It is understood that Robert intends to amuse and entertain Edna as he does each year for a female resident in his mother's rental cottages. Feeling no jealousy, but instead a sense of ownership, Mr. Pontellier chastises his wife for risking her beauty by allowing herself to become "burnt beyond recognition" as a "valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (3). Edna is later introduced to Alcée Arobin, the lover who is often credited for sparking the fire which ultimately consumes her. There are several additional male characters such as Dr. Mandelet, Mr. Highcamp, and Robert's brother Victor, but the former three are the primary influences felt by Edna throughout the novel. The power they hold over her shifts in various and interesting ways before she commits the ultimate act of

reclaiming ownership of herself, and thus emancipates herself from any demands which might be placed upon her.<sup>7</sup>

These are the generally accepted conditions under which the novel takes place. There is a very definite divide between the world of men and the world of women which has very specific cultural circumstances under which the two groups might interact. The Creole society in which the novel is placed is very typical of the time. Nancy Walker explains that Creoles may have had diverse economic conditions, "but all were bound by Catholicism, strong family ties, and a common language (French) into a cultural subgroup which has little in common with – indeed, was often in conflict with – Anglo-American society" (97). It is no wonder that Edna suffers from feelings of displacement despite the warm welcome she receives and the appeal of exotic difference. However, Walker continues, "by succumbing to the sensuality of the Creoles, [Edna] is denying what she has been raised to believe, so that in some ways the novel deals with the clash of two cultures" (99). Indeed, this clash of cultures is what begins to nudge Edna's slumbering subconscious into life, constantly making comparisons between who she was when she arrived on Grand Isle, and who she will be when she leaves it.

### **Southern Hospitality**

In this setting, Chopin seems to be at her most confident and illustrative. Having lived among Creoles in St. Louis, Missouri and later in Natchitoches, Louisiana with her French-Creole husband, Oscar Chopin, she

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<sup>5</sup> In her article "The Nullification of Edna Pontellier," Katherine Kearns states that "Reisz, playing Chopin, frees from the [piano] a sublime music for which there is no embodiment, teaching Edna the golden rule of masculinist art and life: that what she must value is exactly that which is unattainable by a woman" (82).

<sup>6</sup> Otis B. Wheeler suggests that Edna actually undergoes five separate awakenings related to the stigmas attached to physical love and sex by Victorian culture: a sense of personhood, a sense of true love as self-consecrating, the awareness of sensuality independent of love, the discovery that love is only a

biological trap, and existential despair – the conclusion that there is no exit but self-destruction (123).

<sup>7</sup> In his "The Awakening: A Partial Dissent," George M. Spangler lauds the literary mastery which was the force behind the novel but pursues a much more critical response to Edna's final act of self-destruction, saying "Mrs. Chopin asks her reader to believe in an Edna who is completely defeated by the loss of Robert, to believe in the paradox of a woman who has awakened to passionate life and yet quietly, almost thoughtlessly, chooses death" (254).

has been lauded as a skilled naturalist in her depictions of the people and their traditions. Within these traditions is an unspoken, unwritten set of rules which are inherently known by insiders but must be learned and acclimated to by newcomers such as Edna Pontellier.<sup>8</sup> With the region's deep roots in French and Spanish conventions, many of their practices seem uncommonly intimate when compared to the relative frigidity of Anglo Protestantism. The idea of self-restraint is abandoned in the confines of this sultry, isolated little strip of land at the southern coast of Louisiana, only to be replaced with Creole gentility and warm camaraderie. In this context, Edna becomes intoxicated by their embracing of experience in lieu of discipline or distance, "living for the day in the Creole manner. And like that of a new convert, her devotion to this way of life is often extreme" (Walker 102).

Among the expectations for decorum are vastly different rules of engagement between men and women. Throughout the novel, Edna reflects upon the nature of the women who surround her, observing their various coquetry, acquiescence, and the ways in which they interact with one another. She is particularly bemused by her friend Madame Adèle Ratignolle's behavior as she selflessly devotes herself to her family, husband, and

children, and the ideals of motherhood in its most elevated forms.<sup>9</sup> She claims to suffer from a "condition," which Edna observes is "in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation" (12). All of this exceeds the boundaries of femininity which Edna can realize, but she admires her friend anyway, seeking to please her and basking in the womanly glow of her affections. To her, Adèle Ratignolle is the ultimate mother-woman, emblematic of all the Creole pride in heritage and delicate grace and an exemplar all women should seek to follow.<sup>10</sup> However, Edna also believes that her friend is trapped; trapped by her husband, confined by her children, and deprived of a real sense of self with so much of her shared between the many recipients of her love. How can a heart so divided continue to beat with any real strength left in it?<sup>11</sup>

The men of Grand Isle adhere to a similar series of constructs which dictate how they expend their efforts for maximum return of investment, in Wall Street parlance. For instance, although Léonce Pontellier is a worldly 40-years old, he observes many Creole social conventions, including defining his personal worth by the prestige of his home life, wife, and children, and by the wealth which he can accumulate and display for public

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<sup>8</sup> Paula A. Treichler provides an informative analysis of the different forms of linguistic ambiguity on the part of the characters in the book as well as those made in the narrative comments. This absence of specificity presents Edna as existing in a state of active passivity evidenced by her "profoundly ambivalent" final act of suicide.

<sup>9</sup> Ivy Schweitzer's "Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" compares the novel to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* exploring the love of self versus the maternal love of a child, stating that "Motherhood and individuality seem mutually exclusive; thus, Edna's struggle for autonomous selfhood entails a rejection of her responsibilities as mother, an interpretation the text itself advances" (162).

<sup>10</sup> In her article on "Southern Women in Fiction," Marie Fletcher touches on the permanence of the gendered notions of femininity in the south, indicating

that "Mrs. Chopin's heroines are seldom drawn from the plantation aristocracy of the Old South... yet even the women and girls in her fiction who are poor... follow the same ideals of faithfulness, loyalty, and chastity honored by the ladies of wealth and social prominence in the sentimental and historical fiction of pre-war days. They are indications of how thoroughly Southerners of all classes, past and present, have usually agreed on things" (130).

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Kane Rooks argues that "the provocative nature of *The Awakening*, in terms of persistent Victorian discourses of motherhood and women's sexuality, lies in its acknowledgment that the figure of the Madonna is merely an extension of the Great Mother archetype, that this paragon of virtue cannot exist in such flawless illumination except in relation to her dual aspect, the Terrible Mother," and so Edna is likely to be interpreted as falling into the latter category, despite the impossibility of attaining the former (124).

observation on the island and in his home of New Orleans. For Mr. Pontellier, public perceptions are incredibly important, and he is willing to do anything to avoid the shame of critical public scrutiny. This point of view is shared by Robert Lebrun, who flees from the escalation of amour between himself and Edna by disappearing to Mexico where he seems to hope he will escape from the complications an actual affair might cause. For Robert, the weight of public perception even exceeds the satisfaction of true love.

Only Alcée Arobin possesses the wherewithal to reject public opinions, scoffing at them even, and operating to satisfy his own desires regardless of the consequences. He embodies the most radical of Creole notions in truly living for the day, come what may, and taking full advantage of opportunities to entertain women who share his rash outlook. Edna becomes caught up with him largely due to his air of abandon and her subconscious desire to reject all the restrictions of her former life in favor of absolute independence and fullness of experience. Although the culture does encourage a certain reckless flirtatiousness, there are boundaries involved which are understood by those who grew up with them. Unfortunately, as an outsider, Edna shares no such understanding. Instead, she becomes lost, out of control, and finally disintegrates under the weight of her desires.

With all the factors listed here at play within the narrow confines of Grand Isle, and later New Orleans, a scene is set to observe the results of cultural integration gone wrong.<sup>12</sup> Due to their own personal limitations, the men

with whom she interacts do not fully comprehend the extent of Edna's state of mind, and they lack the ability to respond to her in any way other than that which they have chosen. To adhere to the strict social conventions in which they operate is mandatory, yet they, too, may yearn to break the boundaries of acceptance in favor of greater personal satisfaction. However, none of them quite measures up to their own ambitions.

### **The Husband**

A man of taste and sophistication, Léonce Pontellier outwardly seems to be the ideal husband for any young woman. He has a handsome income from his profession as a stock broker, and he provides a home of sumptuous comfort for his wife and two sons. In selecting his wife, he has carefully chosen the woman he felt would best accentuate his success and best represent his values to the world through her grace and beauty.<sup>13</sup> Little care seems to be given to the substance of the individual if she represented what he felt was most important to be publicly displayed. Introduced as a man of forty who "wore eye-glasses" was "of medium height and rather slender build" and who "stooped a little," he is hardly the image of a spontaneous, passionate lover, but more emblematic of a solid, dependable married man (1).

When first confronted with his wife's want of interest in domestic matters, he tries to reach out to her. Lacking the language to express himself, he instead accuses his wife of inattention to their sons:

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<sup>12</sup> In Lewis Leary's *Southern Excursions: Essays on Mark Twain and Others*, he posits that if the novel "seems to inevitably invite questions, these are subsidiary to its purpose, which is to describe what might really happen to a person like Edna Pontellier, being what she was, living when she did, and where" (174).

<sup>13</sup> According to Hugh J. Dawson, Pontellier has failed miserably in his endeavors to choose a suitable wife who will aid in his lofty aspirations of societal greatness, instead selecting Edna, "a headstrong personality whose growth has been sadly stunted, but

much more by her own unacknowledged choices as by others' decrees. Having adamantly refused to be roused from her childhood dreams, she feels unequal to the less-than-onerous demands of her adult situation" (17). This opinion is hotly disputed by Joyce Dyer who claims that *The Awakening* "recorded with bold truth what one woman's attempt to join the twentieth century would entail, and it anticipated the journeys of the millions of other women, real and fictional, who would follow her" instead positioning Edna as a woman before her time (13).

Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after. Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it.

Mrs. Pontellier was quite sure Raoul had no fever. He had gone to bed perfectly well, she said, and nothing had failed him all day. Mr. Pontellier was too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken. He assured her the child was consuming at that moment in the next room.

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, who's on earth, was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way. (7)

Although it would seem more effective to reach out to his wife in a gentler fashion, Mr. Pontellier is under the distinct impression that she is mother to her children first, Mrs. Pontellier second, and only herself, Edna, in the third place. He never makes it past his own perceptions of who she is to isolate the real issue, and in this way, he cheats himself out of the domestic bliss he so genuinely craves.<sup>14</sup>

Léonce Pontellier is incapable of thinking outside of the parameters of understanding he holds on the female condition. He believes himself to be the leader of the family, the provider, and the patriarch to a lineage which bears the imprint and esteem of his own father's name. He "has the polished and distanced demeanor of a sophisticated proprietor" and considers his family members

among his wares (Jacobs 82). Completely at a loss on how to deal with his wife's bizarre transformation, he seeks guidance from (shockingly) another man, to determine the best way to handle her. Dr. Mandelet, he of great middle ground who "bore a reputation for wisdom rather than skill," accurately points to Edna's discontent, seems to understand both the male and female perspectives and the gendered demands placed upon them, and advises Pontellier to leave his wife alone (87). Nancy Walker posits that "The Creole doctor embodies his culture's acceptance of human peculiarity, and Léonce agrees to follow his advice" (100). By advising him within the confines of his own comfort zone, the doctor puts Pontellier's mind temporarily to rest.

Soon, Edna brings their relations once again to a head. She has determined to rent the smaller "pigeon house" around the corner from their palatial home, and live alone inside it. Completely at a loss for this turn of events and scrambling to retain his public persona in the eyes of the neighborhood, Léonce Pontellier makes another tragic misstep. Instead of attending to the root of his wife's bizarre behavior, he continues to operate on a purely surface level:

he immediately wrote her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance. She had given reasons which he was unwilling to acknowledge as adequate. He hoped she had not acted upon her rash impulse; and he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say. He was not dreaming of scandal... He was simply thinking of his financial integrity. It might get noised about that the Pontelliers had met with reverses, and were forced to conduct their ménage on a humbler scale than

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<sup>14</sup> In her article "The Woman's Novel Beyond Sentimentalism," Elizabeth Nolan states that "Symbols of entrapment abound, and the novel's demarcation of gendered spaces serves merely to provide a series of

boundaries for its transgressive heroine to exceed. Edna is often found in the liminal space of the porch, a site from which she mounts small rebellions against her husband's authority" (575).

heretofore. It might do incalculable mischief to his business prospects. (125-126)

So instead of seeking to resolve the problems which have arisen in their home, Pontellier is most concerned with the profitability of his business and the impact it might have on the future. This may seem cold-hearted, but when one considers a man's role at the time, his concerns are very real ones. His success as a businessman is the only thing keeping his family off the street. He has no precedent for a wife to earn her own living, and so Pontellier is understandably alarmed at the prospect of suffering financial reverses because of what he considers to be a temporary malady on the part of Edna.

Pontellier believes that if he can maintain a respectable façade, he will eventually outlast his wife's impulses and return to the state of domestic tranquility which he has enjoyed for several years.<sup>15</sup> His actual response to his wife's intended action is to fabricate a home renovation. This will save his reputation and create the impression that their wealth is such that even the splendor of their current home is insufficient and demands refining. In the same mailbag which carries his letter to Edna, Pontellier also sends off "the most minute instructions" on the remodeling of their home to a well-known architect (126). He is confident that his own cleverness and business acumen will put an end to the disruption caused by his wife's revolt. He is too limited in insight to realize that maintaining appearances is the last thing Edna values, and

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<sup>15</sup> According to Joyce Dyer, in *New Orleans*, marital relations were regulated under the "Louisiana Code" established in 1808 which was still followed at the time the Pontelliers were living there. This set of laws "established the husband as the head of the family" and stated that "married women, along with babies and the mentally deranged, were declared incompetent" and thus reliant upon the husband/father figure to make their decisions for them (10-11). At a loss of how to proceed, Léonce Pontellier elects to "wait and see" how best to instruct his wife.

so again, he misses the opportunity for a reconciliation in favor of adhering to the strict gendered code of conduct he knows so well. Although succeeding by popular opinion, he fails in his own, far more personally significant, domestic sphere and loses his wife entirely.

### **The Companion**

From the moment he is introduced, Robert Lebrun is portrayed as a very different sort of man from Léonce Pontellier. He is seen lounging about and giggling with Edna rather than taking Pontellier up on his offer of a trip to the men's club he so frequents. Instead, "Robert admitted quite frankly that he preferred to stay where he was and talk to Mrs. Pontellier" (3). With the growing closeness of the two and Edna's apparent preference for the younger man, the contrast between Pontellier and Robert grows more striking. Chopin even refers to them variously as "Mr. Pontellier" and "Robert" throughout the book, creating a formality surrounding the former and a casual familiarity of the latter which the reader cannot help but espouse as well. Even Edna is not referred to exclusively by her Christian name until near the end of the novel. But despite their differences, they are both products of their time and environment and may be more similar than it seems at first glance.

Robert Lebrun is nearly as ambiguous a character as Edna herself.<sup>16</sup> He prefers and seeks the company of women, but those women are often unavailable romantically. Rather than spending his time in the pursuit of eligible young women, he instead showers attentions on those who have no possibility of reciprocating in any meaningful way. This is

<sup>16</sup> Although he ultimately does love her, Xianfeng Mou indicates that "Robert does not understand Edna. He is fortunate enough only to be around to witness her tumultuous changes. But Edna mistakenly transfers her awakening onto Robert and falls in love with him," which he is unable to fully comprehend or manage according to the social constructs surrounding them (110). For Robert, it is necessary to remain aloof or face the societal consequences.



puzzling. There seems to be no shortage of marriageable women, but nobody questions Robert's motivations in disregarding them. It is even discussed openly how he had pined after the Madonna-like Madame Ratignolle, but only because his previous *objet d'amour*, Mademoiselle Duvigne, had died suddenly. As they sit together talking one day, Robert bemoans the offenses of Adèle Ratignolle against his own tender, smitten heart, "Could anyone fathom the cruelty beneath that fair exterior?... She knew that I adored her once, and she let me adore her" (14).

Watching this "serio-comic" display is Edna, who "never knew precisely what to make of it; at that moment, it was impossible for her to guess how much of it was jest and what proportion was earnest. It was understood that he had often spoken words of love to Madame Ratignolle, without any thought of being taken seriously" (14-15). Since she has now apparently surpassed her friend in Robert's esteem, Edna cannot help but attempt to make sense of the differences between them as well as the differences between Robert and herself. However, this is extremely difficult due to the social norms adhered to in that place at time.

Referring to the code of conduct adhered to by middle-to-upper-class Creole men at the turn of the twentieth century, there was an expectation of a certain amount of chivalrous treatment of women by men in society. In addition, although perfectly forthright in their discussion of certain matters otherwise considered taboo, such as Madame Ratignolle's relaying the nitty-gritty details of her *accouchements*, it was considered far less acceptable regarding matters of the heart. Any open discussion of their feelings for one

another, or the lovelorn feelings Edna was trying to sort through personally at the time, would have been problematic to say the least.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Robert is so distressed by the situation, that he leaves for Mexico with hardly a moment's notice to his family and friends on Grand Isle. Edna, ever the outsider, takes this as a personal affront, and grieves for the inexplicable loss of her companion. A good deal of pain has been suffered due to the extreme restraints placed upon communication between the sexes<sup>18</sup>.

If relations between men and women are fraught with peril, consider also those which occur exclusively between men. Robert is just as unlike any other man in *The Awakening* as he is from Léonce Pontellier. He has a certain misfit quality which manifests itself in several different ways. With Madame Ratignolle he is the jester, with Mr. Pontellier he appears more reserved. With Edna he is attentive and kind, and with Arobin his manner is stiff and withdrawn. In the presence of his mother, he is in every way the doting, affectionate son, but with his brother, Victor, his manner is puritanical and harsh, "ready to thrash any amount of reason into him that he's able to hold" (29). Who is Robert Lebrun, really?

One explanation for the strange behavior on the part of Robert is that he might not actually be interested in women at all, but rather that it is the companionship of men that he seeks. Through attaching himself to unattainable women, Robert also makes himself unavailable to those who are marriageable, thereby relieving himself of the responsibility of actual courtship. In her acclaimed book on Kate Chopin, Emily Toth

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<sup>17</sup> Although he loves Edna, Robert cannot help her through the various changes of heart she is experiencing. Described by Maria Anastasopoulou as "rites of passage," Edna ultimately fails in her efforts to complete the passage from a man's property to an independent woman of her own.

<sup>18</sup> Donald Pizer indicates that "Robert realizes that his relationship with Edna will soon shift from that of a

permissible flirtation with a married woman to that of an impermissible affair with a married woman – permissible and impermissible, that is, within the Creole code of a gentleman, which is Robert's operative code. He therefore precipitately departs for a lengthy stay in Mexico to signal clearly to Edna that he is not prepared to violate this social code" (8).

explains this point of view regarding the events following Robert's return from Mexico:

[Robert] has a pouch embroidered by – he says – a girl in Vera Cruz. But homosexual male Americans frequently went to Mexico for sexual alliances with boys (“Vera Cruz” is an easy pun on cruising). Robert may very well love Edna, but when she grabs him aggressively in their last scene together, her gesture tells him that he will have to perform sexually, as a man with a woman. And so (at least according to modern queer readings), if Robert is a gay man, recognizable to other Creoles as gay, he must run away. (213)

This is a very interesting supposition when one considers the reticence with which anyone falling outside the norms might be received by their peer group. If Robert were to reveal himself openly as a gay man, he would be met with outright hostility, maybe even personal danger. But in this there is also an element of hypocrisy, since it is Robert's very “harmlessness” which allows him to spend so much time with other men's wives. If he is gay, that harmlessness would not be dissipated in the least, and yet his rejection would likely be absolute, perhaps even on the part of the women whose company he so enjoys.

This prevalence of things understood but rarely voiced adds to the complexity and ambiguity of Robert's character. If he is a straight man, why does he avoid meaningful female contact? If he is a gay man, why does he

not align himself with another man of similar mind? It is too easy to dismiss him as an enigma without really considering all the facts given by Chopin. It seems more likely that Robert is not gay, but he suffers from a similar sense of displacement which he cannot reconcile with any of the acceptable masculine cookie-cutter solutions available to him as an up-and-coming Creole man in society. He obviously does not care to pursue a career in business like Mr. Pontellier, but he is above such disreputable pastimes as the profitable horse-racing of which Arobin, and later Edna, are so fond. It is alluded to that he is pursuing opportunity in Mexico, but the details are vague and never pan out over time.

Robert is adrift as a man who does not fit in. In many ways, he is referred to as a child might be, drifting about with Edna or socializing with other friends on Grand Isle. He is a man of spirit and wisdom, but often seems more thoughtful and introspective than he really is. Edna attributes much of her awakening to her love for Robert, believing that there is something uniquely powerful in him which has elicited this kind of response in her cold, slumbering consciousness.<sup>19</sup> But ultimately, this emotion has been summoned in error, and Robert is perplexed how their intimacy had gotten so out of hand so quickly. He had been merely following the established mode of behavior to which he had adhered for so long, but with vastly different results. The rush of affection which follows frightens him, and he is ill-equipped to deal with the passion of a suppressed heart.<sup>20</sup> Although he never fully possesses Edna's body as well as her soul, there is an undeniable power which is being

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<sup>19</sup> In the words of Donald A. Ringe, rather than focus upon the relationship she is cultivating with Robert, it would behoove Edna to instead look to “the relation of the individual self to the physical and social realities by which it is surrounded, and the price it must pay for insisting upon its absolute freedom” to weigh the benefits and consequences of the decisions she is to make (588).

<sup>20</sup> In his pivotal work on Chopin and *The Awakening*, Per Seyersted observes that Edna “cannot give up

Robert, and while realizing that he might consider her ‘unwomanly,’ she takes the initiative toward him when they next meet, giving him the voluptuous kiss which sets him on fire. Refusing to be what she regards as the inessential adjunct to man, she has something of the emancipated woman who wants to play the man's role as a taker. It is not his role *per se* that she wants, however, but only those aspects of it which make the creation of one's own essence” (143-144).

exercised over both and which plagues Edna to her dying day.

Why couldn't their love be perfect? Was it really love at all? As she approaches the fateful beach where she will spend her last moments, Edna reflects sadly 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" (154). Was it really Robert that she loved, or the social façade that he adopted to navigate the treacherous waters of male-female relationships? Did the Robert she loved even exist? It is impossible to be sure, since the opinions held by those around him vary in so many ways. Like Edna, it is difficult to understand what drives him, and so he remains difficult to truly know. It is entirely possible that Robert is even more false than he appears, and his dalliances with women each summer are not as harmless as they outwardly appear. Who is to say that he has not feasted upon the pleasures of the flesh more often than anyone might expect, including the exotic and earthy Mariequita whom Robert and Edna encounter on their ferry ride? With all the mystery surrounding him, it could turn out that the animosity between brothers is really evidence of Victor's superior understanding of Robert's true character. In any event, the possibility remains that Edna's high opinion of Robert is not warranted, or at least not based entirely in reality. After all, she is swept up in a sea of troubles of her own, fighting desperately to stay afloat and gain the wisdom necessary to move forward.

### **The Lover**

If ever there were a man put on this earth for the simple art of seducing women, Alcée Arobin is that man. His name is first bantered about by Robert when he is speaking to Madame Ratignolle, "and he related the story of Alcée Arobin and the consul's wife; and another about the tenor of the French Opera, who received letters which should never have been written; and still other stories, grave and gay" (27). He seems to be the most

legendary cad alive, and when Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier have shared a delightful day together in his company, Léonce fears that he may be the cause of Edna's sudden change of character, muttering to himself, "I hope it isn't Arobin... I hope to heaven it isn't Alcée Arobin" (95). This is a rather shocking turn of events, as Chopin has told us earlier that "the Creole husband is never jealous; with him the gangrene passion is one which has become dwarfed by disuse" (14). Taking this popular opinion into consideration, Arobin's presence can certainly expect to be followed by a disturbance of the peace.

But when Edna accompanies Mrs. Highcamp to the races in Arobin's drag, she is surprised by what she finds. In contrast to both Léonce and Robert, Arobin is a young man about town, "a familiar figure at the race course, the opera, the fashionable clubs. There was a perpetual smile in his eyes... His manner was quiet, and at times a little insolent. He possessed a good figure, a pleasing face, not overburdened with depth of thought or feeling; and his dress was that of the conventional man of fashion" (99). While all of this is certainly appealing, it is the way he "admired Edna extravagantly" which ultimately caught her attention (99). As she attempts to work through the sudden change in her feelings and the flattery she receives from Arobin, the absent Robert remains at the back of her mind. She sees her friendship with Alcée as a greater threat to her relationship with Robert than that with her husband. The lines of reality have become blurred, and Arobin contributes greatly to the discord inside of Edna, with his worldly ways of dealing with women. She is no match for his experience, and his guile in obtaining his desires "was so genuine that it often deceived even himself" (104).

However contemptible Arobin might seem from the outside, he has a clear sense of who he is, and he follows a set of rules of his own devising. Abandoning social conventions and scoffing in the face of public opinion, Alcée Arobin is the one man in the novel who disregards society and instead pursues his own

interests. He has complete freedom from the social constructs which so relentlessly bind other men. Having a keen insight into the mind of his auditor, “He sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first and brought the crimson into her face; in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (105). Finally, Edna has met her match in a man who has the same disdain for modern society and wishes to defy the authority of the public eye while also enjoying all the pleasures that life has to offer. Dorothy Jacobs describes Arobin as “gracefully accommodating yet skillfully exciting... never demanding” (85). Rather than stiffly attempting to make sense of Edna’s actions like her husband, or eliciting romantic impulses with no intention of carrying them through as Robert does, Arobin takes possession of Edna, body and mind, although he cannot seem to capture her heart. But this is not his objective. He prefers to remain the ideal lover, always available when he is wanted, but never oppressing her with his own needs.

Just as Edna might be considered cold and unfeeling toward those she “should” love best, so, too, does Arobin remain comfortably outside of the accepted norms of love where Robert dares not tread. When Robert and Edna finally admit their love for one another in her little house, his only understanding of how to be a man with a woman is to possess her. When he confesses that he “forgot everything but a wild dream of [Edna] some way becoming my wife,” Edna is shocked (144). Obviously, he did not understand that she didn’t mean to fall into the same trap from which she was already

struggling to free herself.<sup>21</sup> Arobin makes no such demands upon Edna. Rather, “he had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature’s requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom” and he was content merely to enjoy the moments they shared together without bothering over what might come next (140). He understands that it is not he who has caused the change inside of Edna, but rather that he could help contribute to that change by creating an awareness of herself which Edna had heretofore been denied. Although looked down upon by society, Arobin sets her free in ways that other men would only use to confine her, and thus he emerges in unlikely ways as the worthiest recipient of her affection.

### **The Opening of Doors**

While the condition of Edna Pontellier is in no way ideal, she shares her plight with the men who appreciate her. Southern men are also lost in the attempt to realize an ideal version of themselves, whether through financial success, adherence to a gentlemanly code of chivalry, or through the pursuit of earthly delights.<sup>22</sup> The same rigorous code of conduct looms over them all, creating a maze they must navigate to earn and maintain the esteem of those whose opinions matter.<sup>23</sup> The Creole culture especially valued family, and maintaining the honor of the family name was extremely important, especially to men. That was the name that they would bestow upon their sons, and their sons’ sons, into perpetuity, and if that name should suffer some blight... Perish the thought! The honor of the family name came only slightly above a gentleman’s

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<sup>21</sup> Maria Mikolchak believes that, “For Edna, marriage is out of the question” and that “Edna is, in fact, able to foresee that marriage to Robert will deprive her of her newly found autonomy, something that other adulterous heroines only learn by trying it out” (36).

<sup>22</sup> John Glendening uses Darwinian Evolutionary Theory to examine the motivations of the characters in the novel, especially Edna Pontellier, and carefully scrutinizes their state of mind and psychology while making comparisons to Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, a recent predecessor to *The Awakening*

which also received mixed criticism due to its questionable subject matter.

<sup>23</sup> In her book *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, Susan Koppelman Cornillon observes that “Those of us who mistake our transformed selves for our real Self are destined to a schizoid experiencing of life, destined to perpetual and intensifying disappointment in our situations and in our relationships. We constantly feel cheated and deprived. Our lives are never real to us when we mistake a cultural stereotype for our self” (118).

own honor, which should proudly be protected at all costs.

When a man falls in the estimation of his male peers, it casts a powerful blow to the man himself. Sociologist Catherine Taylor asserts that

Given the importance of masculinity, its tenuousness, and its relationship to social status, men are likely to be wary of what might be called *the stigma of failed manhood*... Men who fail at manhood are: labeled and associated with negative stereotypes; set apart from others; experience discrimination and loss of status; and aversion to the stigma of failed manhood serves the function of norm enforcement. (52)

The fear of breaking the “man code” serving as the gender police is certainly nothing new, but it is often overlooked as a serious source of frustration for the men who experience it. Indeed, if men color outside of the lines, so to speak, they run the risk of being labeled and rejected by their male counterparts as weak, feminine, or gay. Their sense of self-worth is highly involved in their understanding of what it means to be a man and the rigidity with which they observe their adherence to that standard.

In the environment where the novel takes place, the men are very concerned with their families and how they are perceived by society. They are aware of specific rules of discourse which have clear boundaries toward intimacy and restraint. They are aware of consistent gendered expectations of the ways

in which men and women should behave. Into this mix is thrust Edna Pontellier as a catalyst for change when she is unable to function according to rules she does not know.<sup>24</sup> Léonce and Robert attempt to interact with her while also maintaining their own sense of decorum and preserving their male pride. It is this dividing of their attention which ultimately causes them to suffer the loss of the woman they adore. Particularly in the southern states, “masculinity in the U.S. is associated with status, power and competence” (Taylor 57). Léonce and Robert cannot meet Edna on her own level without abandoning their masculine pride, and they are not willing or able to break the rules of decorum to make things right.<sup>25</sup> They don’t understand that there is any other way to behave; it is ingrained in their minds. Just as a man might instinctively open a door as a woman passes through it, so, too, will he adhere to other social norms as though they are not just expected, but required.

The only male who seems to have a clear handle on the truth of the entire situation is Dr. Mandelet. Although not a main character in the book, he is the man other men turn to for advice (accepted as a valid male peer), but he is also able to step outside of himself to empathize with the feminine situation in a way no other man appears able to do (accepted as an advisor to females).<sup>26</sup> The doctor is confident in issuing his advice to Léonce Pontellier to “let your wife alone for a while. Don’t bother her, and don’t let her bother you. Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism... And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling” (89).

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<sup>24</sup> This position of a woman as lost or behaving counter to societal norms was a strong theme in nineteenth century American literature, and Maria Mikolchak compares *The Awakening* to other contemporary works, such as Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857), Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1876), and Theodor Fontane’s *Effi Briest* (1895) to examine their common themes.

<sup>25</sup> In the words of Katherine Kearns, the characters in the novel have become “caught in the labyrinthine walls of a codified (essentially masculine) subjectivity

which poses as cause and effect” effectively trapping them all and hindering their movements, regardless of their personal desires (69).

<sup>26</sup> Manfred Malzahn reminds us that on Edna’s final walk down to the beach, “Only the thoughts of her beloved Robert and the sympathetic adviser Dr. Mandelet reawaken her for a moment, reintroducing the possibility of salvation, if not through love then through understanding” (35).

Pontellier respects Dr. Mandelet and values his opinion, so he follows this advice and allows Edna to continue to moon about without too much intervention. While Léonce seems unable to connect with his wife on a higher plane, at least his willingness to no longer seek to obstruct her designs is a step in the right direction for the salvaging of their marriage. He may not be perfect, but he is at least trying as hard as he can to understand and make things work.

Later, in their final scene together, Edna meets Dr. Mandelet as she is walking home from the Ratignolles. She is obviously flustered and struggling to explain to the doctor how she is feeling and what she is thinking, but with little coherency. Intuiting her meaning, Dr. Mandelet tells her that “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, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost” (149). This grabs her attention and she sputters a reply, attempting to agree with him and elaborate further, but her mind is spinning so fast that she can’t properly express herself. The whirlwind of her thoughts, of Robert, her children, Léonce, Mademoiselle Reisz, Arobin, and Adèle Ratignolle have overtaken her means of expression, and she is stifled by the sheer volume of what she feels. Sensing this internal cacophony, the doctor murmurs to her soothingly, “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” (149-150). And he is right. In this Creole culture of high-society in the American south, there are very few who possess the strength to

look outside of what they understand to be true, and seek to better inform themselves.

### Final Thoughts

Many readers of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* will agree that it tells the tragic story of a woman who has attempted to express herself and understand herself outside the boundaries of commonly accepted social norms.<sup>27</sup> Her complete rejection of her role as a wife-mother or mother-woman was nearly unheard of at the time of the publication of the novel, and it created a stir not just for the characters within it, but in contemporary society as well. Chopin’s career was nearly destroyed by admitting that women like Edna did exist and that their worth was just as valid as that of women who chose to conform to the rigidly established gender norms.

However, there is another tragedy taking place. That is the condition of the men Edna is close to. They are equally as trapped in a quagmire of often unrealistic and unachievable gendered norms for behavior and decorum which inhibit their growth and flourishing. If only Robert could act in ways that were natural to him, that he dictated and felt comfortable following. Whether straight or gay, conforming or nonconforming, he deserves to live a fulfilling life without the need to posture and pose as something he is not. The same is true for Léonce Pontellier. Although he is much older than Robert, he is none the wiser. In fact, his entrapment in social expectations and demands is far greater than any other man we see in the novel, constrained to the point where he feels entirely out of control of his domestic situation and instead is only able to focus on the superficial opinions of those who matter little to him in the big scheme of things. He cannot keep his wife because he cannot even manage himself properly without encroaching on Edna’s rights or treating her as an owned object.

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<sup>27</sup> Seyersted comments that Chopin “seems to have realized that in the patriarchy, man would not willingly relinquish the role of the conqueror, nor woman that of the conquered. To her, man’s instinct of mastery, and

the ‘contestant rebuff’ which a man feels if a woman lacks ‘the coquettish, the captivating, the feminine,’ as she expressed it in a story, were enduring realities” (148).

The last act of the tragedy is only alluded to and follows the end pages as one closes the book. That is the plight of Raoul and Etienne Pontellier. Throughout the story, Edna is variously attentive and inattentive, as is their father. They are largely overseen by a lady quadroon, and spend much of their time visiting with Léonce's mother. While often alluded to, they are seldom seen, although eventually they inhabit a large part of the thoughts rushing through Edna's mind. What does their future hold? Edna has made the ultimate, final choice for herself, leaving her boys behind to be raised by their father who clearly loves them but struggles to make any real connections with another human being. In addition, if all Léonce knows is how to replicate the harsh structure of societal gender norms, this cycle will repeat itself ad infinitum.

While the ideas behind *The Awakening* speak to the strong undercurrents of feminism and realism, it is the latter which stands out as the most elegant, poignant, and powerful effect upon the reader. The conditions which existed on Grand Isle that fateful summer were being fostered within several of the southern United States as the culture stood on the very cusp of the twentieth century and the change that Chopin herself could foresee on the horizon. The shackles which constrained men and women, particularly the Creole folks with whom she interacted most, were being stretched to their limits, and it was only a matter of time before they shattered under the stress of social progress. This novel is an important benchmark in the timeline of America both for its depiction of southern Creole values, but also the delicate balance of the gender binary which was about to be disturbed by the Women's Suffrage movement. By challenging this limiting status quo, Chopin proves a keen observer of the harm resulting from these restrictions and the liberating quality of their abolition. In the words of Chopin's most ardent biographer, Per Seyersted, Edna's "basic existentialist quest is as modern now as it probably will be in a still patriarchal tomorrow" (163). And so, it is.

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