

CHAPTER III

FROM FABLE TO REALITY

III

Chopin began writing At Fault in 1889 and published it herself in 1890 after only one publisher had rejected it. This was Chopin's first novel. It features a veritable collection of interesting characters. The female characters especially display most of the different possible roles into which the author evisions women moving as they become less secure in the traditional view that "the woman's place is in the home". yet like many of her short stories, its major theme is marriage and the challenges it faced in the late nineteenth century. In dealing with the conventional man-woman relationship, she presents her male-female characters in various roles: the incurable coquette, the virtuous widow, the rejected suitor who quickly degenerates, the deserted wife, the repentant husband and even the forbidden subject of divorce.

Therese Lafirme, is a thirty-five-year old creole widow who successfully manages the plantation Place du-Bois in Natchitoches Parish of central Louisiana. She has inherited the plantation from her late husband, Jerome, three years after the railroad has come to Natchitoches. With the railroad arrives David Hosmer from St. Louis to establish a saw mill adjacent to her property. Hosmer is "a tall individual of perhaps forty, thin and sallow, "a man of little seeming charm, who seldom smiles."¹ His face is lined by premature lines left there by care. He has come from St. Louis, to offer money for the privilege of cutting timber from Therese's land for a given number of years. Even though he is brusque and grasping, his gruff manner attracts the handsome Creole widow: a color comes to her cheek, "like the blush in a shell",² as they discuss the turning of her forest lands to cash.

Therese and Hosmer are on the verge of romance when Hosmer's sister Melicent, pays them a visit. She is an emancipated "new woman", very much capable of taking care of herself. But, unwittingly Melicent reveals to Therese that her brother has been divorced two years earlier. Despite the explanations that Hosmer gives, Therese sees only moral cowardice in his actions and urges him to try again. She sends him back to

¹ Chopin, Kate

AT FAULT from The Complete Works of Kate Chopin

Edited by Per Seyested. Boston Rouge, Louisiana

State University Press. (First Published 1890) p.743

² Ibid

p.743

St. Louis to remarry Fanny, his alcoholic ex-wife. Because he loves Therese, Hosmer consents. He remarries Fanny and brings her back with him to Therese's plantation.

Fanny, used to bright city lights, finds life on a plantation very difficult. She is lonesome for the city and her city friends. She responds to the kindness and the doggedly stimulated attentions of Hosmer. But this pleasant state of affairs does not last for long. Fanny cannot overcome her weakness for the bottle and finally once again she takes to drinking. She is ready to bribe, beg and steal for the alcohol her body demands and matters move from bad to worse for all concerned. Fanny, now hopelessly in the power of drink bribes her negro boy who makes her morning fire, to bring a daily bottle. One day when the boy fails to appear, Fanny goes in search of alcohol. Unfortunately, her addiction becomes the cause of her death, as she is swept away by the turbulent river. After a decent interval Therese and David marry.

The subplot of the novel pairs David's sister Melicent with Therese's nephew Gregoire Santien in a love affair as tragic as that of the protagonists. The climax occurs, when Gregoire catches an Acadian soundrel named Jocint setting fire to David's mill and kills the arsonist on the spot. Melicent deserts Gregoire without a word. As a result he goes wild and is finally killed in gunfight.

Thus, Chopin once again presents her women characters--Therese, Fanny and Melicent ---in roles where they do not feel that they belong or contribute

meaningfully to life. Neither do they have a satisfactory sense of continuity in their lives. One of the reasons contributing to this is perhaps the fact that unlike the nineteenth century women characters they do not enjoy the state of motherhood to occupy their attention or give them a sense of fulfillment. They resemble more in a sense the twentieth century heroines of the age of leisure, technology and uselessness.

As a woman Therese Lafirme is a figure of order and tradition. Her feminine appearance belies her business ability. A handsome widow, she looks and acts as the complete woman, who knows what she wants and where it belongs. Her sense of morality is rooted in her Southern culture and Catholic religion. Human relationships are very important to her. They stand for inviolable contracts and obligations. In her relationship with Hosmer too she is willing to make personal sacrifices in order to help others to do what she sees as right. And obligation to others is inevitably the right thing for her. When she learns about Hosmer's divorce she is shocked. Her immediate concern is not for the man she loves but for the damaged social contract and Fanny, the woman he detests.

Any person who thinks she or he knows all the answers to life's complexities can cause others to suffer, no matter how grand his or her intentions be; and Therese certainly feels confident of her own answers. The moment Hosmer mentions that he has divorced his wife she demands that he not mention again his love for her. "There are some prejudices which a woman can't afford to part with Mr. Hosmer, she said a little

laughtily, 'even at the price of happiness.'³ She insists however, that her "prejudice" is not in any way the result of her religion. She is interested in Hosmer's story and promises, not to misjudge him. Yet, on the completion of his tale she judges Hosmer's character quite harshly. In a withering tone she speaks, "... I hate to believe that the man I care for, would deliberately act the part of a cruel egotist."⁴

Therese the independent woman little realises at this juncture that it is her own egotism as well as her self-righteousness that is forcing her to make an assessment of Hosmer's marital problems. By applying her own moralistic formula she feels, she can solve everyone's problems; but actually she is only satisfying her own sense of autonomy and conceit by directing Hosmer to remarry Fanny.

Hosmer "always thoroughly the business man" is always engaged in the world of figures, finance and superficial business connections. He never has any place for deep personal relationships. Nor is he able to judge a female character well.

Ofcourse, this abandonment in the eyes of Therese is a violation of the commitment of marriage and the social structure itself. But Hosmer acknowledges in a complacent manner his inability to understand human relations and emotions. He regards these as

³ Ibid p.766

⁴ Ibid p.768

the province of women. It is therefore no wonder, that he believes his infatuation with Fanny a proper basis for marriage. An association of just two short weeks is enough to urge him to propose to Fanny. At twenty she is "all pink and white and merry blue eyes and stylish clothes."⁵ She has a magnetic charm that keeps her constantly in David's mind.

But marriage and a deep relationship between man and woman cannot be built up on mere beauty and youth. These are transient factors. Fanny is a sociable person with a lot of friends but the unfortunate point is that her friends and her husband did not enjoy the same amusements or each others company. It is natural that husband and wife drift apart. Their interests are no longer common and Fanny on her part as a wife makes no attempt to understand David or help him to adjust to a society he has hitherto been unused to. The business for David becomes a 'being' capable of fulfilling his needs for place and autonomy. As he becomes busier with his business, it is not surprising that David considers his only obligation towards Fanny to be financial. He provides generously for her material needs and comforts, unaware of the factor that as a woman she needs his love and understanding, his companionship. He overlooks the fact that a sound marriage is based on mutual love and sharing of joys and sorrows. Material gains or comforts are secondary, rather unimportant.

⁵ Ibid

Thus within a year their marriage is on the rocks. Fanny begins to feel as if she is of no consequence to David. A sense of futility overcomes her being. But the birth of a child --a boy, is a god sent opportunity for both David and Fanny to come back from the cross-roads of life. And the state of motherhood, to some extent redeems Fanny's sense of "uselessness" for some time. The child and their love for him becomes a common bond between the two. This is a strong enough basis to build up their marital harmony once again. But Fanny is a "restless" woman. Motherhood cannot interest her for long and to make matters worse, the child dies when he is three years old. For Fanny there is no looking back, the road now plunges only downhill. In their grief husband and wife cannot console each other, the division becomes wider. Fanny seeks refuge in drink, while David plunges into his business to deaden the grief of his 'sorrowful memories' of his beloved child.

As a man, Hosmer seeks relief from an "unpalatable" alliance by divorcing Fanny. In a manly act of kindness he even doubles the alimony, so that she will not want for anything. In taking this step, Hosmer behaves as a man and does not think as a husband. He should have realized that Fanny without him will go to pieces, and that as a husband he has some moral responsibility towards her. But the truth is that Fanny's sheer human weakness serves as an obstacle to achieving moral integrity. Hosmer in fighting for his personality is justified in his struggle for individual survival. Life is one big struggle and each man has a right to his own existence.

Therese loves Hosmer, but her self-righteous mind rejects divorce. She insists that Hosmer can "do what is right" only in remarrying Fanny. She is ready to make a personal sacrifice, but she fails to recognise her own limitations in comprehending what ultimately produces the common good. Thus, Therese and Hosmer, with their narrow view of responsibility are both at fault.

Fanny, who has long since surrendered control of herself to alcohol is now an extremely sick woman. She greets David's return with "peevish resistance to the disturbance of his coming"⁶ and is reluctant to resume their marriage. But, David overcomes her reluctance, and soon the marriage takes place. But the situation is irksome to both. Hosmer is unable to love the woman he has come to despise, and moreover his emotions are now involved elsewhere. Fanny, a weak and silly woman is neither capable of self-redemption nor deserving of Hosmer's love. Therese too learns the limitations of her desire to do what is right. For the first time she feels the pangs of jealousy, when she realizes that Fanny actually cares for her husband. She has misgivings about her own contribution in bringing the two together. She wonders if Fanny, and "her own prejudices, as she sees them now are"⁷ worth the sacrifice which she and Hosmer made. She is now uncertain even about her moral ground. She is now a woman in love, feeling the emotional and sexual urges that love brings. She even

⁶ Ibid p.778

⁷ Ibid p.808

confesses to Hosmer that she sees herself at fault in directing him. But what she did is what she considered to be the truth and the 'right'. Hosmer's response to the fact of human finitude is also Chopins :

"The truth in its entirety isn't given to man to know--such knowledge, no doubt, would be beyond human endurance. But we make a step towards it, when we learn that there is rottenness and evil in the world, masquerading as right and morality --when we learn to know the living spirit from the dead letter".⁸

David's answer does not deny the powerful truth that the bond of love and commitment is one by which humans support one another in the struggle to do what is right.

After Fanny's death, Therese and Hosmer marry after a decent interval, each reconciled to life as it must be. Hosmer continues to manage the intrusive sawmill, while Fanny carries on old traditions in working the plantation as they give dignity and beauty to life and provide her with a meaningful occupation.

Melicent Hosmer is David's attractive, flirtatious, romantic and capricious sister. Fifteen years David's junior, her face is "awake with an eagerness to know and test the novelty and depth of unaccustomed sensation."⁹ Always conscious of herself she presents life as a stage and herself as the star performer.

Melicent is David's sister in looks alone. She is too selfish to feel any sisterly affection for her brother. She shows no compunction about depending upon David financially and refuses to "burden herself with the suspicion" that David could be having financial problems, since she finds the idea distasteful. She resents being told not to be a spendthrift. She is too headstrong to obey anyone, leave aside her brother. She is an independent woman, but she refuses to accept responsibility. At first she eagerly keeps house for her brother, but soon the novelty of housekeeping quickly pales and she is bored. Her relationship with her sister-in-law Fanny has never been congenial. She always regarded her brothers' marriage a "mesalliance". Now that David has remarried Fanny, Melicent at first makes a hysterical refusal to "see" her sister-in-law, but later embraces her with an effusive embrace and greeting of "poor dear Fanny".

Melicent is always conscious of the impression she makes upon others. She knows well how to attract men, but whenever a man tries to get close to her, she rejects him. She has just such a strong effect on Gregoire. She makes use of him as it pleases her.

When she is in a flirtatious mood she sits close beside him talking sweet nothings, but otherwise she keeps him at arms length disdainfully. For Melicent, Gregoire is an 'object' of enjoyment. She lacks genuine feelings for the men she flirts with. What she really loves is only a romantic image of love and an explicit understanding of her relation with Gregoire that "nothing could come of it."

Finally, when Melicent learns about Gregoire's death, she remembers his kiss. Her only emotional response is "a little tremor" that brings color to her cheeks. That she is the cause of this tragedy does not even occur to her. Had she not deserted Gregoire without a word, he would not have gone on his wild spree. But Melicent is too wrapped in herself, to give the dead man a second thought. She dons mourning, happy with the new role she has adopted. For a month or so she would not be bored. So with a capricious and selfish character, Melicent is incapable of enjoying or satisfying any of the basic drives for love, place, or autonomy. Therese alone finds a way to satisfy her needs as well as maintain her autonomy. This is perhaps because she accepts the inevitability of change and accommodates herself to it. Whether the change is external, as happens with the intrusion of the North into the South --the setting up of the saw-mill on her plantation, or within herself, she seeks something meaningful in it. Yet at no point does she sacrifice those traditions and values which add warmth and beauty to life. Thus, by exercising control over herself she achieves for herself a sense of a discrete individual in control of her own life.

At Fault launched Kate Chopin as a fiction writer. Her second novel The Awakening was both the peak and the termination of her literary career. In her stories and At Fault she creates a whole bevy of women who feel restless and displaced in their various roles and in modern society. But in The Awakening she creates one tragic heroine --- Edna Pontellier, who refuses to settle for less than a full and satisfying answer to Lear's question: "who am I?".

In her stories like "A shameful Affair" and "The Respectable Woman" we see her women characters stepping beyond the traditional confines of conventional behavior and marriage in trying to assert themselves in a new identity. "Wiser than God" speaks of a woman who seeks something beyond the natural man-woman relationship. Paula's independence is more precious than love and the security of a marriage. Similarly, though Edna is married, has comfort and security, once awakened to her new self, she tries to transcend her relationship with her husband and lovers. What she seeks is love but not possession. She wants to belong and yet be free. This is her dilemma. Chopin very subtly and with warmth studies Edna's efforts to find a new place in society where she can be accepted as a unique individual and fulfill her needs for both love and autonomy.

Edna Pontellier is a Kentuckian married to a New Orleans businessman, Leonce Pontellier, who is about twelve years older than she. They have two beautiful children whom Edna loves in an "uneven, impulsive way". Leonce is an ambitious money-maker

with his brokerage business. He is fond of his wife and family and provides them with all the comforts that money can provide. At weekends ~~he~~ leaves his business to join his wife and children on Grand Isle where they are vacationing.

Edna inefusive by nature has never learned to show her affections. Also she is not at home in the all-creole catholic group to which her husband belongs as she is the only 'American' there. She adjusts herself to the 'lofty chastity' which is inborn in a Creole woman, but their lack of prudery is beyond her understanding. Like David Hosmer she is an outsider.

There is little contact between Edna and Leonce; who spends most of his time in the clubs. This leaves Edna in a very vulnerable position. From girlhood she had "apprehended instinctively the dual¹⁰ life--that outward existence which conforms the inward life which questions." She is at first bewildered by the attentions devoted to her by Robert Lebrun, the son of the hostess, of the hotel where she is staying but then the first vague stirrings of love take place within her. Through Robert Edna tentatively experiences the possibility of venturing beyond the set routine of her life.

¹⁰ Chopin. Kate

The Awakening : Ban (First Published in 1899)

Bantom Classic Edition. October 1981

Washington D.C., p.18

Adele Ratignole is the conventional "mother woman" who befriends Edna during the vacation. She is like 'a sensuous Madonna' making the most of her rich luxuriant beauty. Her marriage with Alphonse is nearly perfect as her feminine beauty. Both husband and wife understand each other perfectly. Adeles whole universe revolves around her brood of children and her man. She reaches her apex of perfection in motherhood. She is perfectly happy to allow her family to "possess her, body and soul", little realizing that in the process her own "individuality has become extinct.

But Edna is a valiant woman. Stimulated by unknown feelings, she is like Chopin's 'animal' in "Emancipation". She blindly follows whatever impulse moves her, stumbling and seeking self expression. She is vulnerable, yet she refuses to seek the 'security' she has always had with Leonce. Music rouses her in a new manner and her first successful swim with Robert arouses throbbings of desire within her. She is not only aware of Robert besides her, but of her own body and dormant will. It seems to Edna as if she is awakening from a dream for the first time.

Edna returns to New Orleans, after the vacation, but she is aware of the lack of a sense of satisfaction provided by her usual social and domestic relationships. For six years Edna has been a devoted wife to Leonce who worships her. It is with dignity that she has filled the role of his wife in his house. Yet, like many couples they have very little to converse. Leonce spends much of his time at the club, where he gets 'suitable' company. But he is very attentive in sending gifts to his wife and children when they

are away from home. His possessiveness is evident in his words and actions. When he looks at his sunburned wife it is as if he is "looking at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage".¹¹ When he returns late at night from Klein's hotel in high spirits, because he has been winning at billiards, he expects the sleeping Edna to get up and show interest in his conversation. He even frightens her into thinking one of the children may be ill in order to rouse her from her deep sleep. Once she is wide away, he reproaches her for inattention and her habitual neglect of the children and then goes off to sleep.

Edna sits all alone in the rocker and cries. Perhaps at that moment, she feels a bit like 'Athenaise' who does not hate her husband but does "detest and despise" being married. Such experiences are not uncommon in a marriage, but for the first time Edna senses the true nature of her husband's regard for her. An indescribable oppression begins to rise up in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness. This "mood" which has begun like a mist is bound to grow into a fog, and engulf Edna completely in the end.

Once Edna's consciousness of herself as an individual has begun to stir, her relationship with Leonce deteriorates. Although he believes he loves his wife, although he is a kind and generous man, although he seeks and follows the best advice he can

¹¹ Ibid

get in his marital confusion. Leonce's immersion in the culture that idolizes the "mother-woman" prevents his ever understanding his wife's awakening need for autonomy. If that awakening were merely sexual, Leonce might have understood it; indeed, it might even have improved their marriage. But all the thought patterns of his forty years, his entire way of looking at life, blind him to the fact that a woman may properly have a "position in the universe as a human being" apart from her place as wife and mother.

Edna finally learns to swim, after having attempted all summer to do so. Elated and exhausted, she sits with Robert while waiting for Leonce to come home. Unknown emotions seem to engulf her in the silence of the night. Not comprehending, Edna begins to awaken sexually:

"No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire".¹²

For many days she has been disturbed by the 'seductive voice of the sea'; the 'shadowy anguish' that followed her earlier quarrel with Leonce. But now, she feels physically

He remains there patiently smoking one cigar after another, until Edna is ready to come to bed. But Edna accepts all this in a sort of indifferent manner, in the course of her wifely duties. She feels her passion for Robert increasing everyday. In no way does she see any conflict between this emotion and her love for Leonce, because the sentiment she feels for Robert is unlike what she feels or has felt for her husband. A reserved woman, she has always harbored her thoughts and emotions without voicing them. She is all the more convinced that they belong to her alone and no one else has a right to them. However, her rising feelings can no longer be suppressed or kept a secret.

Edna's growing awareness of the inadequacy of her existence leads her into rebellion. She changes even the set routine of her social and domestic relationship. She gives up her "reception" days, severs her contacts with her husband's business associates, renews an old interest in painting, pursues the new friendships begun during the summer, and discontinues sexual relations with her husband. Leonce finds the situation with his wife beyond his understanding. When he questions Edna about her behavior the only reply he gets is "I simply felt like...."¹⁵ On earlier occasions, quarrels with Le'once have made Edna miserable causing her to lose her appetite and to study better ways to please her husband. But she is no longer the same Edna now. Instead, she enjoys a solitary meal and then sits looking out of the window into the

mystery and darkness of the night searching primarily for all of herself----seeking an answer to Lear's question "who am I?".

But Edna's situation is hopeless and the darkness jeers her helpless state. Edna's frustration drives her to distraction. Taking off her wedding ring, she flings it on the carpet and stamps her heel on it to crush it. When she fails to make a mark on the glittering circlet, she seizes a glass vase and flings it on the hearth. The crash and clatter seem to her to destroy those powerful imprisoning forces represented by the traditional wedding ring. All familiar things, part and parcel of her secure domestic world have become antagonistic. Even the company of the Ratingnolles with their domestic harmony does not give her regret or a sense of longing. Instead a pity for the colorless existence which never uplifted her being beyond the region of blind contentment visited her soul.

Edna's marriage disintegrates. Leonce has been a courteous husband so long as he met "facit submissivness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered and shocked him. Her disregard of her duties angers him and he becomes rude. Edna grows insolent and refuses to step back"¹⁶. Dr. Mandelet, their family physician advises Leonce to leave Edna alone to get over this passing whim in

her own time. And so Leonce goes off to New York on business, regarding his wife's rebelliousness simply as illness or insanity.

Once alone Edna heaves a big, genuine sigh of relief. An unfamiliar but delicious feeling ~~over~~ comes her. She walks all through the house, from room to room, as if inspecting it for the first time. Just as Edna becomes a different person, so the house seems to take on a different character in the absence of Leonce. Later, Edna decides to move out of Leonce's mansion to a small house she can finance independently. "The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine"¹⁷ she says to her friend and confidante Madame Reisz a pianist. ~~Ofcourse~~ it is not yet clear to Edna herself, what she means by these words. But, somehow instinct prompts her to set aside her husband's bounty, so that she can cast off her allegiance to him. She seeks to escape not from the pride of Leonce owning her, but from Leonce's very ownership of herself. To him, she is essentially "a valuable piece of personal property," whom he expects to listen to his talk, to make love when he is aroused, to assist him socially in keeping up the "procession", to supervise his servants and his children, and generally, like the clerks in his office, to function efficiently and quietly toward his well-being and satisfaciton.

Such activities have become empty and meaningless for Edna, like ill-fitting clothes. Gradually she discards the pretence and turns now to Robert for fulfillment. But both Leonce and Robert are the product of the same creole catholic culture and hence Robert understands Edna no better than her husband does. At first Robert avoids her, and then he confesses that he dreams of asking Leonce to set her free to marry him. Edna's answer shocks him deeply :

"You have been a very, very foolish boy.
when you speak of Mr. Poutellier setting me
free! I am no longer one of Mr.Poutelliers
possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself
where I choose....."¹⁰

The fact that Edna is confused by the new urges of passion and romance rising within her is well expected considering the social taboos that nineteenth century women had to face. Taught "that passion is disgraceful", respectable women could only label their inevitable sexual urges as "love", and thus became unable to distinguish affection from mere physical attraction. They remained emotional adolescents. Edna herself realizes that sexual desire strongly colors her affection for Robert when suddenly he announces that he is going to Mexico and bids her farewell. In his absence Edna

recognises once again the symptoms of infatuation felt as a child and now as a young woman. But gradually her personality begins to emerge and her passion for him grows apace.

An emphatic surge in her sexual feelings accompanies her developing autonomy. Unable to satisfy this newly felt sexual need through her husband, whose possessiveness is responsible for its earlier repression and equally unable to satisfy it through Robert, Edna "gives herself where she chooses"---to Alcee Arobin, a roué. Edna recognises the purely sexual nature of his attraction and she knows well before the event that she will "give herself" at least her body, to Alcee. But she also knows that " Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her."

On the evening after Edna learns that Robert is coming back Alcee consummates the seduction. He kisses her:" It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire".¹⁹ Edna's reactions following her first sexual fulfillment are both ambiguous as well as honest and powerful like Mildred of " A Shameful Affair".

"Edna cried a little that night after Arobin left her.

It was only one phase of the multitudinous

emotions which had assailed her. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret..... because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips".²⁰

Now Edna becomes aware of herself as an individual human being, as one who possesses "life that monster made up of beauty and brutality". Although, contradictory emotions are born within her, she accepts them with honesty, recognizing her own "brutality" in reaching out for the "beauty" of sexual fulfillment.

Unfortunately Edna's demand to be recognized as an autonomous individual is doomed to tragic hopelessness. After the seduction Alcee assumes a proprietary air as authoritative as Leonce's. He comes uninvited to her house, where he reads the newspaper and smokes cigars as though he owns the place. When she demands that he leave, he merely continues to caress her, till she submits to his sexual desire. Even Alcee Arobin, who "was absolutely nothing to her," believes that he owns Edna.

In her maternal role too, Edna encounters resistance to her desire to become a fully developed human individual. The same culture that deems woman to belong to man

also demands her subordination to his offspring. Edna's society, therefore, abounds with "Mother-women", who idolize their children, worship their husbands and consider it a privilege to efface themselves as individuals. But Edna does not belong to this category. Even Leonce believes that she fails somehow as a mother. But the truth is that Edna does not neglect her children. She neglects only her mother-women image.

Edna confesses her feelings towards her children to Adele once. "I would give up the unessential. I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself..."²¹ Edna expresses greater warmth toward her children when she feels happy and confident. When she has had a happy time with Robert on a nearby island she is very tender with her boys. But after Robert goes to Mexico, she is impatient with the boys and their maid. She regards the children as "part and parcel of an alien world which has suddenly become antagonist". After moving into her own small house, she goes to visit her children, vacationing with their grandmother. She realizes the fact, that her children do not need her as a mother, but they are glad to see her. When she leaves them after a week, she carries with her the sound of their voices and the touch of their cheeks. But by the time she regains the city, she is alone once again. Edna leaves her children, but she does not confuse her own life with theirs. She now begins to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. Robert, Leonce, Alcee and the children all appear before her like antagonists, who seek to overpower

²¹ Ibid

her and drag her into ~~soul's~~ slavery. But she knows a way to elude them--"The touch of the sea is sensuous as it enfolds the body in its soft, close embrace".²²

Thus woman's existence, first and last, intertwines with her maternal nature. Edna's sense of herself as a complete person makes impossible her role of wife and mother as defined by her society; yet she discovers that her role of mother also makes impossible her continuing development as an autonomous individual. So her thoughts as she walks into the sea reflect profoundly on the identity problems Chopin believes that women face. Edna thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. Hence, unable to have a full human existence, Edna chooses to have none at all. Edna Pontellier's life as portrayed by Kate Chopin thus turns out to be a tragic progression from the fable of fulfilling love in a male dominated society to the reality of self-chosen death.