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## Artists' Expression of Women's Unresolvable Internal Conflict

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# Artists' Expression of Women's Unresolvable Internal Conflict

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Submitted by

**Diedre Miles-Girod**

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## **Artists' Expression of Women's Unresolvable Internal Conflict**

### **Introduction**

The Victorian period (1837 to 1901) was a time of great change in the United States. The country was growing with the Louisiana Purchase and the addition of several states to the Union. Railroads were connecting together the vast lands. Unprecedented economic and manufacturing changes were unfolding; it was the time of the Industrial Revolution. This period also brought about a revolution for women by opening up new possibilities in many spheres of life. However, these new possibilities, ironically, exacerbated a timeless women's struggle of finding balance between their traditional roles as caregivers and their human need for self-expression.

This struggle was reflected in both the lives and works of women artists from the period. Women like author Kate Chopin, painter Elizabeth Nourse, and painter Ellen Day Hale were some of the first women to depict this struggle in their works. The struggle to meet societal expectations while remaining true to one's art afflicts all women artists. Women artists battle a potentially unresolvable internal conflict between their roles as caregivers, with the associated societal expectations, and dedication to their art. In the Victorian era, Chopin, Nourse, and Hale gave expression to that timeless struggle of the artist, through their lives and their revolutionary works.

### **The Conflict Defined**

All women artists suffer from a fundamental conflict. On one side is the need for self-expression and on the other side are powerful expectations to conform to visions of their roles as caregivers. The need for self-expression is inherently self-centered and demanding of selfish attention which puts it in direct conflict with caregiving. The battle for balance between these two forces is the conflict. To really understand it deeply requires exploring the roots of these two parts. The need to self-express is a universal human trait. All people have it, men and women alike. Oscar Wilde, a playwright of the Victorian period, said, "The purpose of life is self-expression. Expressing your essences entirely is what we live for." (Wilde)(Wilde 1) which captures the urgency of self-expression by comparing it to life itself. (Wilde 1) People will take extreme measures to satisfy their need for self-expression. They might quit a job, leave a spouse, go live in the wilderness, write a novel, or take a leap of faith parachuting. The drive to satisfy this need is grounded in the human desires for freedom and hope. Left unfulfilled the human spirit is crushed. Unhappiness and dissatisfaction are the least consequential results, and at the extreme, suicide is possible. The need for self-expression is powerful, and destructive if left unfulfilled.

On the other side of the conflict are expectations. Caregiver expectations are those rooted within the woman herself, and societal expectations are externally sourced. At their most fundamental level, caregiver expectations are biologically based. Women are born with a caregiver drive. (Noriuchi 415) This means they possess strong desires to love and be loved, to protect and nurture their families, and possibly to have children. The desire to have children is only a subset of a woman's broader drive to nurture – often described loosely as mothering –

and some women may have no desire for children while still possessing a strong mothering instinct. This is biology at its basic level.

Societal expectations are equally powerful, and significantly more complicated, coming to bear at different points in a woman's life cycle. In the Victorian era, societal expectations began early in life. As very young girls, training began by assisting their mothers with caring for babies, cooking, cleaning, sewing, and practicing other activities focused on caregiving and household maintenance. Even play activities were focused on "playing house" and caring for baby dolls. It was common that "the ideal woman hood was early imprinted upon young girls, who were trained to be obedient and exhibit great self-control." (Cruea 188) As the established roles of women were woven into the fibers of young girls, and young boys by extension, the cycle was assured to continue.

As Victorian era girls aged, the functional grounding of their activities did not change, although the activities themselves did. Recreational activities fell within a narrow band of what was acceptable which tended to be safe, indoors, and offering limited opportunity for self-expression. For example, acceptable activities were needlepoint, playing music, painting with watercolors, or drawing, but only involving appropriate subject matter. Young girls and women were discouraged from seriously pursuing education but were supported in their cultural endeavors. (Fishes 2) Furthermore, these recreational activities served a dual purpose. They projected an image of the family's success and showcased the girl's skills, which helped her attract suitors.

Getting married was the ultimate expectation for girls in the Victorian Era, and it was the basis for almost all subsequent expectations. The ideal wife was a woman who oversaw the

needs of the household and children, was religious and pure, and would be instrumental in unquestioningly promoting her husband's image. (Cruea 188) In more modern times, the 1960's to the present, women have other paths available to them as young adults. They may pursue higher education or a career. During the Victorian era, between 1837 and 1901, those options were simply unavailable to most women in America. Women could find jobs but it was thought to be "unnatural." (Cruea 187) Additionally, women's jobs were characterized by "low wages, the absence of upward mobility, depressing and unhealthy working conditions, which all made marriage a survival strategy." (Cruea 187) Marriage was viewed as nearly the sole vocation open to women. (Fishes 1)

Having children was the next big expectation. Motherhood was popularly viewed as the most fulfilling and essential of a woman's duties. "This view was communicated to young women through families, churches and schools, as well as periodical and popular literature, medical texts and etiquette manuals." (Cruea 188) A married woman without children bore a mild tarnish of failure, while a household with children projected a positive image as being a thriving and prosperous household. A woman's role was to groom the children to represent the family and in the future, to be the legacy of the husband's success. (Cruea 190) Thus, the success of the children promoted the household's legacy, which ultimately was the husband's trophy of success.

The physical household itself, apart from simply providing shelter, was a primary vehicle for promoting the family's image of prosperity. "The woman's role within the ideology was to serve as queen over her household, which was supposed to reflect her husband's wealth and success." (Cruea 190) This ranged from maintaining a physically beautiful and grand home to



attending to duties which elevated the family's social status. Such duties might include hosting guests or attending outside social functions. To shun such commitments would sully the reputation of the household, and thus the husband.

A woman's life was focused on presenting a household and family that represented the prosperity and accomplishments of her husband, usually at the expense of her own personal development and freedom. Author Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, "Man for the field, woman for the hearth, man for the sword and for the needle she; man with the head and woman with the heart, man to command and woman to obey; all else confusion." which encapsulates popular opinion of the time regarding a woman's position and purpose. (Tennyson) She should not have her own career, or own beliefs if they differed from those of her husband. The wife should be subjugated to her husband, and often treated as a superior servant rather than as an equal to the husband. (Fishes 2) These dissatisfying circumstances helped fuel the feminist movement, which ironically created a whole new set of expectations for women.

The women's movements of both the Victorian era and in the late 1900's created new opportunities for women, but also exposed them to judgment of failure when they did not fulfill expectations imposed by society or by themselves. Simply being a homemaker was not good enough anymore. A primary expectation was that a woman should have her own opinions, which should not simply be a mirror image of her husband's opinions. Further, a woman's opinions should be informed by education beyond domestic topics. She should have her own career and depend on no one for her financial security.

However, at their hearts, feminist movement have furthered our acknowledgement of the value of women as individuals. Feminism has helped evolve societal expectations and

helped women understand, express, and address their own internal conflicts. This is critical because, even with the evolution of societal thinking towards women, the internal conflict still exists. Consequently, all women go through their own awakening wherein they become aware of their conflict and may attempt to resolve it.

### **The Awakening Process**

The woman's conflict is potentially unresolvable. To appreciate why this is true, an understanding is needed of not only the conflict itself, but also the awakening process which is the evolution a woman goes through as she becomes aware of the conflict and attempts to cope with it. The process has five phases, as defined in this paper, which is discussed below.

The awakening process is reflected in the lives of artists and in their works, including Kate Chopin, and her novel *The Awakening* which was published in 1899. The novel articulates in great detail how women artists go through the awakening process to greater or lesser degrees and eventually realize they are conflicted. In some cases the conflict is resolved. In other it is not.

The awakening process begins with a state of blind acceptance. This phase tends to occur early in life when the woman is focused primarily on satisfying caregiver and societal expectations. She is accepting of the values implicit in those expectations, such as caring for family and supporting her husband's image and societal standing. Her quandary arises from an imbalance between serving the expectations, to the point of neglecting her own needs. She is unaware of that imbalance and has not recognized her own dissatisfaction.

Phase two is when a woman opens her eyes to see her own situation. She realizes that her life is consumed by commitment to others. It is not simply recognizing that her time allocation reflects an imbalance, but rather recognizing that an imbalance is even possible. This is a period of discovery, becoming aware of possibilities, options, and choices. Her awareness may be triggered by exposure to new people, experiences, cultures, or environments.

The third phase is a period of active exploration and self-discovery, assessing the world and collecting information on possibilities and the satisfaction they may offer. The exploration might occur through studying or engaging in a new subject matter, activity, or philosophy, or engaging in new human relationships. She is exploring life beyond the caregiver and societal expectations. This phase may be characterized by feelings of elation, pride, and budding confidence.

In phase four she has explored life's possibilities, and now she is finally able to clarify her own wants and needs, without regard to the implications. This is the "oh my God" moment when a woman first realizes that she has a serious conflict between satisfying caregiver/societal expectations and the need for self-expression. This clarification process may occur like a bolt of lightning, or may take decades to distill into something clearly discernable. Phase four may be characterized by a confusing array of emotions, such as anger and fear, which pose a strong contrast to the woman's sense of clarity and enlightenment. There may also be a heartfelt commitment to action, any action.

The final phase involves taking action. Potential actions could range from doing nothing to a complete lifestyle overhaul. Constraints often exist, and options may be limited. For example, opportunity for higher education may simply be unavailable. At the other extreme,

minimum needs must be met, such as food, shelter, and income. Striking a balance is usually the goal and painful trade-offs may be required. For a given woman, the ideal balance may shift over time. For some women, a balance may be extremely difficult or impossible to identify, and the conflict may persist without resolution.

### **Chopin's Artistic Representation of the Conflict and Awakening**

Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is one of the first and most famous artistic representations of the conflict and awakening process. Kate Chopin was born in Missouri to parents of Irish and French heritage. She grew up bilingual and bicultural, speaking English and French, and attended higher education at St. Louis Academy. Growing up, Chopin was mentored by several important women in her life, her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and a Sacred Heart nun who prepared her for life in the Victorian period. (Toth 34-44) She married Oscar Chopin from Louisiana, a wealthy businessman who dealt in cotton and other commodities. Oscar gave her everything that a wealthy family in New Orleans was expected to have, including traveling for the holidays to the Grand Isle, a resort with Creole influences. Kate mothered five boys and a daughter. Oscar Chopin died from malaria in 1882 and Kate was a widow at age 32. She would never remarry. (Clark 2016)

After her husband's death, Kate moved her family back to St. Louis for better schools and a richer cultural life. At the encouragement of a family friend, Kate began writing. She was a successful writer for over ten years, authoring novels, short stories, and articles in prominent magazines and newspapers. She fully supported the family with income from her writing, thus maintaining her independence. When her husband was alive, Kate had lived the traditional life

of a mother and caregiver, relying heavily on her husband for financial security and social standing. As a widow, she was given the opportunity to explore resolving her internal conflict differently. She chose independence and self-expression.

Kate Chopin wrote about what she knew – family, children, and women. *The Awakening* was no exception. It is the story of a young woman named Edna Pontellier who was a wife and mother of two wonderful children in the New Orleans community of the socially elite. Edna was rich, beautiful, and married to a highly successful businessman. What more could a girl want? Edna Pontellier ultimately wanted much more. Unsure of what she was seeking in the beginning of the story, she went through a long journey of self-discovery. Along the way she gave up trying to be the model wife and developed liberating emotions and artistic ambitions. The process was a trying journey for Edna since she had to step away from all that she had previously known – her husband, children, society, and deeply ingrained ideologies. Edna took the journey to resolve her internal conflict between balancing domestic mothering with her freedom of identity as an artist. *The Awakening* reflects and describes Edna's conflict and awakening process. Her awakening process culminated in Edna recognizing her own conflict, and attempting to resolve it.

At the beginning of *The Awakening*, Mr. Pontellier's perspective was introduced when he scolded Edna, his wife, about her being sunburned when she returned from the Grand Isle beach with the children. Chopin followed the comment by stating that Mr. P views his wife as a "valuable piece of property" which has been damaged. (Chopin 6) Edna being damaged reflected poorly on Mr. P in the public eye, as she was considered an extension of her husband. Edna made no remarks nor took any action in response to the scolding, and accepted her place

by doing nothing. Her acquiescence indicated that Edna was living her life as each wife was expected during this time and that she was blindly following a path what had been set before her as a caregiver. She was Mrs. Pontellier.

Later, Edna asked her husband if he would be home for dinner. The response which Mr. P offered was a simple shrug of the shoulders. He announced that he may or may not be home for dinner because he was joining the men for socializing, as they often did in the evenings. This response indicated that he could do as he desired and that there was no obligation for him to make any commitment to her. As head of the household, it was expected and understood that Mr. P had obligations outside the home and had no requirement to share details with his wife. With a gentle laugh and a nod good-bye, Edna accepted the answer without protest. Edna had a clear understanding of her duties and would act appropriately to meet them. (Chopin 7) The actions of both Mr. P and Edna were as expected, conforming to appropriate societal expectations. Just prior to Mr. P departing, he made an additional command to Edna that once she tired of Robert, a man of their age who was the property owner's son, to be sure and send him on his way. (Chopin 7) Mr. P was once again displaying his status by acting so confident in his wife's commitment to her husband that he had no concerns about leaving her alone with another man. The Pontelliers were of one mind.

When Mr. P returned from his late night of socializing with the men, he wanted to talk with Edna about his evening. Edna had already retired to bed for the night but he expected her to wake up and listen. She did as was expected, but gave few responses and the ones which she did give were brief. (Chopin 8) Edna did not protest, playing the wife's role by going through the motions and listening to what he said, even though she was not interested. This

type of interaction was common in their evenings. However, this time Mr. P “thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation.”(Chopin 8) He felt that she should treat him in the same manner. Mr. P was their world and he should be treated as such. This was a clear indicator of his expectations for his wife. She was an extension of him and she should support his beliefs. Edna lived in a patriarchal society, and Mr. P was the patriarch of her family.

Prior to going to bed, Mr. P looked in on his sons. One of his sons seemed to have a fever and he told Edna so that she should give him the proper care. Taking care of the children's needs and health was expected of a good caregiver and mother, so Mr. P expected that Edna would respond with the appropriate urgency. (Chopin 8) Edna's response was to tell Mr. P that their son was fine and did not need any attention. She was confident in her judgment until Mr. P strongly suggested that she had poor mothering skills and that she should be caring for their son, who in his opinion did have a fever. Edna then went to check on her son, while Mr. P simply went to bed without any further interaction with his son or Edna. Edna was not meeting the societal definition of mothering. The fact that she ultimately went to check on the child indicated the power of the societal expectations to overcome her apathy and even allow someone else's judgment to override her own. No one was present to witness this event, yet the power of the expectations were so great and so deeply ingrained in Edna's fibers that she ultimately did what was expected. Further, her imperfect caregiving strongly indicated that she had an imbalance in her life and was not completely fulfilled by caregiving alone.

After checking on her son, Edna returned to find Mr. P asleep. Overwhelmed by

unknown emotions, Edna began to cry all alone in the dark. (Chopin 9) This had happened many times before. Yet, this time felt different to Edna, although she did not know why the tears were flowing. Edna felt "an indescribable oppression," at a time when she was feeling heavily burdened and in an unjust position.(Chopin 9) She was consumed by anguish, restlessness, and sadness. In the end, Edna convinced herself that she just needed a good cry, when in reality her soul was longing for more.

During the week, the men, including Mr. P, returned to the city and work while Edna and her boys stayed on the Grand Isle. While Mr. P was in the city, he would often send his family a box filled with treats and bonbons. Edna would share this box of treasures with the ladies of the Grand Isle. (Chopin 10) Society saw Mr. P as a man of great generosity and the ladies of the Grand Isle declared him to be "the best husband". Edna could not deny this proclamation and, in fact, agreed that he was the best husband. (Chopin 10) Mr. P met and exceeded everyone's expectations. He truly epitomized the social expectations of a successful husband. Even so, Edna still had a feeling of unhappiness which could not be blamed on her husband. Mr. P was not the devil. Still, there was a flickering light of unhappiness in Edna, although she continued her commitment to being the best possible wife of a generous man.

Chopin summarized Edna's situation at this point telling the reader that Mr. P felt Edna was not exemplary in her duties as a wife and mother. (Chopin 10) Although Edna was not doing any one thing poorly nor neglecting any duties completely, Mr. P sensed that something was not right. His wife was meeting the basic needs, but there was no indication of desire or passion for caregiving. Chopin made it clear that Edna was not meeting the expectations laid out by society, or even by family or her husband. Being a woman often meant giving up one's



self and a good woman was supposed to efface herself while caring for others, which Edna found challenging. (Toth 62) Edna was doing what was needed to uphold the image that everything was as it should be, yet she was often quiet and reserved. She was closing herself off from society and living in a world within herself. Edna's unhappiness was brewing within her because she was finding that she did not fit the mold of the perfect caregiver and wife.

Chopin summarized Edna's situation succinctly as:

"In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels." (Chopin 10)

Edna was a wife and loved her children, but she also knew that something might not be quite right for her. She was not one of Chopin's "mother-women" who embraced and embodied all of the societal expectations around women and their roles as caregivers

Through these events, Chopin painted a clear picture of society, Edna's lifestyle, and her budding unhappiness. Edna was trying to conform but she was not wildly successful. Her husband could see the challenges she was having in meeting the societal expectations and had on numerous occasions pointed them out to her. Edna was not happy, but had not yet acknowledged it, much less faced it. This set the stage for her transition into phase two of her awakening.

The Pontellier family was part of the New Orleans community which had influences from Creole culture. The Creole community also had a prominent presence in the Grand Isle. "A Creole in the 1870's meant a white person, born in the New World, of pure French or

Spanish ancestry.”(Toth 63) All the Creole women knew each other and they felt like a big family on the Grand Isle. The women of this community had a different comfort level about things they read and spoke about. The Creoles had an “entire absence of prudery.” (Chopin 11) Mr. P was from the Creole culture but Edna was from a prominent Kentucky family. The Kentucky culture that Edna came from was very conservative and reserved in comparison to the Creoles on the Grand Isle. That summer was the first time for Edna to be completely engulfed by a group of Creole women. She was uncomfortable at first, as the women had a freedom of expression through literature and conversation which Edna found impossible to understand. For Edna, this was a new way of looking at and communicating about the world. (Chopin 11) Most of the time she sat quietly, observing the women and trying to understand this new culture. This was the beginning of exploration for Edna. The degree of self-expression exhibited by the Creole was unlike anything Edna had grown up with and she had rarely been exposed to such openness. It was a new world to her.

During the summer, the Creole women on the Grand Isle were reading a novel and then passing it along to the other women of the group to read. The women usually read the novel on the beach or on a porch where everyone could see. Chopin implied that the novel’s subject matter was somewhat racy for the times, and when it was Edna’s turn to read the novel she did so in secret and solitude. Edna found the novel to be “astonishing.” (Chopin 11) Yet, the Creole women had openly and freely discussed it. Edna was being exposed to new degrees and modes of self-expression by the Creole women. Eventually, Edna gave over being “astonished and concluded that wonders never cease.”(Chopin 12) Doors to new views and topics were just opening for Edna and women being willing to have discussion openly gave her a view into

the freedoms of self-expression.

To the daily gathering of women, Edna began bringing her sketchbook. Being around new people and activities had rekindled her interest in art. At that point, Edna was treating and thinking of her drawing like a hobby, a little something which served only to bring pleasure. While at the group, she drew a friend but was unsure of her skills and guarded about her results. The drawing was good but was not an exact likeness of the friend. Edna made a large dramatic smudge cross the entire drawing and crumpled it up so that no one would see. (Chopin 13) She was very insecure and felt that she lacked the ability to participate in this form of self-expression. Edna was rediscovering drawing for herself but she was still functioning as if her actions were born of societal expectations, and those expectations were not correlating with her desire to self-express. Robert encouraged Edna to keep drawing and try again after he saw her crumple up the paper.(Chopin 11) This was a time of rediscovery for Edna, rediscovering something which might bring her happiness through self-expression. She was searching.

Her searching continued one day during the usual daily gathering on the Grand Isle, when Robert invited Edna to go swimming for the first time. Edna did not know how to swim and made the excuse that she was tired and therefore could not go. However, Robert insisted and Edna ultimately agreed. She followed Robert blindly down to the sea without much thought to consequences or how it might reflect upon her or her family. (Chopin 16) She was not sure why she went, or why she was being completely obedient to Robert. Something was stirring in Edna. Although the notion of new possibilities was somewhat bewildering to Edna, she was becoming interested and excited about the possibilities represented by exploring new

activities and new places. The world was starting to call to Edna, revealing its opportunities. Edna did go down to the sea, but she did not enter the water.

Going to the sea with Robert helped to open Edna's eyes. Chopin told the reader that doors to new opportunities and possibilities existed for Edna and she was just beginning to look into that world. "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, — the light which, showing the way, forbids it. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her. In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her." (Chopin 14) Edna was realizing there was a spot where she fit into this world of vast dreams and possibilities, but she could not yet see her place. She recognized that there was more for her than caregiving, but what that was and where to find it was still a mystery.

The sea represented the future for Edna and it called to her to begin a new life, departing from the only life she had known since she was a child. The vast body of water enticed Edna to move forward and find new freedoms, but it also told her the journey would have many paths which would challenge her along the way:

"The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, and inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace." (Chopin 14)

To this point, Edna had walked through life following the plan which was predetermined for her, but now she realized that her soul was on a quest for more. What the "more" was, Edna had yet to discover, but she knew she must follow the sea's calling to find out. Edna's

awakening had begun. She needed to find her own way to self-expression, and thus to self-fulfillment.

For much of Edna's life she had kept a piece of herself from the world. She lacked confidence and feared what the world might do with her dreams. At a very early point in her life she learned to divide her life into that part which conformed and did as was expected and the other part which dreamed and wondered. (Chopin 14) To this point, her life had been consumed by the conforming part of her, yet the wondering part of her was calling for its time. Edna's life lacked opportunity for self-exploration and self-expression, and the self-confidence which might result.

On another day that summer, after Edna had heard the sea's freedom calling to her, Mrs. Ratignolle and she went to the beach. Mrs. Ratignolle, being the perfect caregiver, assumed the children would join them, but Edna convinced her to leave the children at the cottages and just the two of them would go to the beach.(Chopin 15) Edna's suggestion that the children not join them once again demonstrated that she did not have as strong a drive for caregiving as did most other women, like Mrs. Ratignolle. Edna had a voice within her which was crying out for freedom. She simply wanted to be with the sea. She went to the beach and sat there staring at the sea, dreaming and longing for more than caregiving.

At the beach, Edna and Mrs. Ratignolle talked and Edna found her mind wandering to her childhood. Mrs. Ratignolle listened while Edna, who was normally quiet, reminisced about her youth. Edna compared the Kentucky grass fields to the sea which was in motion in front of them. As she watched the sea, she felt the freedoms and desires that she had as a child back in Kentucky. It had been a long time. Edna spoke further about how much her Presbyterian

upbringing had really defined her life since she was twelve years old. She realized that since that time she had followed blindly the rules and life expectations of the church and society. She felt sadness wash over her and Mrs. Ratignolle reached out to console her by holding Edna's hand. (Chopin 16) This was the first time Edna received this gentle and consoling Creole caress and she felt uncomfortable by it at first. Physical consoling was unusual for non-Creole women. Edna accepted the handholding and realized that she appreciated the comforting. With only the two women present, Mrs. Ratignolle, the perfect mother and wife, shared that she understood Edna's challenges and her position in life, as well as her thoughts and desires, because she too had traveled the awakening journey. All women have the awakening, even Mrs. Ratignolle, who gave all appearances of being the perfect exemplification of caregiver and societal expectations. The entire beach experience brought many firsts for Edna and she was grateful. Her awakening was allowing her to rediscover desires she had harbored since she was a child.

As the women continued to sit on the beach talking, Edna shared a story from her youth which involved a young man about whom she was passionate. From an early age Edna had felt passion and dreamed of her desires, but she kept them private. She was a young girl in love with an older man who was engaged. (Chopin 17) Edna realized later that the man had followed his dreams while she felt hopeless and had no drive to follow her dreams. Her pattern of not following dreams and passion had been in place Edna's entire life and her recognition of it brought a great feeling of despair. What she would do about it she did not know, but having a frank conversation about her thoughts, which had been rare in her life, was a start. This time someone was listening, which encouraged Edna to open up.

While sitting with Mrs. Ratignolle, Edna thought back to when she had married Mr. P. She had met him shortly after her secret passion for the other young man who had married. Mr. P fell in love with Edna and pursued her hand in marriage. Looking back, Edna could see the reasons for her acceptance of his marriage proposal. Her heart was broken from her previous infatuation and Mr. P was absolutely devoted to her, although her family was opposed to him because he was Catholic. Her acceptance of Mr. P in spite her family's opposition foreshadowed her willingness to break free from expectations. Most importantly, however, she was not driven to marry for love or passion but for practical purposes and to put an end to her distracting feelings of discontent. "As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams." (Chopin 18) The moment Edna said yes to Mr. P, the door to passion and self-expression closed, at least temporarily. Edna had settled for something other than what she truly desired in order to satisfy the social obligations of being a dutiful wife and mother.

As Edna sat there with Mrs. Ratignolle on the beach, she thought to herself that she was so very fond of her children. She loved them with great passion and devotion, yet when her children were not with her, she did not miss them. Edna did not share these thoughts with Mrs. Ratignolle, the perfect "mothering-woman" (Chopin 6) who only saw her life in connection with her children and husband. Edna was still confused by her own conflicting emotions, and Mrs. Ratignolle, who embraced and epitomized the societal expectations, was not a safe confidant with whom Edna could explore her feelings.

Back at the cottages everyone would gather for evening entertainment, which most often was women or young girls performing music, recitations, and dance. It was a time when everyone could witness the success of the families they were staying with during the summer. For the girls, it was an opportunity to continue the cycle of marriage preparation and presenting themselves as women who would reflect well on a man once married. Yet, it also demonstrated to Edna that there were many avenues of self-expression available to women and it encouraged her to keep developing her passion for drawing.

During the evening entertainment, Mademoiselle Reisz, a professional pianist, was convinced to play but she stated that she was playing for Edna. The music she played brought out many feelings in Edna. The music was like the sea and had the same effect on Edna, revealing the freedom and vast possibilities in dreaming. While Edna listened, her feelings become clearer. As described by Chopin, Edna had longings which were overwhelming, and she had to find a way to express them:

“It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her.” (Chopin 24)

The awareness phase of Edna's awakening had come to fruition, and she was completely aware of her need for self-expression.

Edna and the other families also went to the beach frequently and Edna eventually tried to learn to swim. She had men, women, and children trying to help her and teach her how to swim. Yet, Edna was unsuccessful unless someone was physically supporting her. (Chopin 25)



The ocean represented the vast new opportunities which awaited Edna, but she was still fearful of the unknown. Edna was used to staying within the societal and family expectations and yet was consumed by a desire to explore beyond them. Swimming represented her battle to reach the new opportunities and to have something of her own.

Edna eventually attempted to swim by herself, and finally succeeded. She felt that a special power had come over her – freedom – and her body started to work. She was overtaken by emotion, feelings of excitement, accomplishment, confidence, “triumphant joy” (Chopin 25), and victory. Edna had broken through boundaries which had held her on the shores of the societal restrictions which she had always known. She had dreamed of this possibility and now it had been accomplished by her, just for her. This was a major turning point for Edna and she wanted to keep swimming, searching for new worlds beyond those which she has known. She realized that she had traveled a long way and wondered why it had taken so long for her to break through the fears and boundaries, as it seemed easy looking back. This new experience gave Edna pride and confidence, allowing her to not just dream, but to hope.

After being overwhelmed with exhilaration, Edna stopped swimming and looked back at the beach. Although she felt that she had gone far, she saw that it was not far at all. As she returned to the beach, she had to work extremely hard and it took all that she had just to return.(Chopin 26) Going backwards was difficult, in both her swimming and her awakening. She returned to what she had known, family, society, and her husband. Reality descended, and with it Edna's feelings of freedom faded. Her journey of self-discovery had begun and although

she had not yet traveled far from the established world for women, she knew then that it was a possibility for her.

Upon returning to the cottage after her swim, Edna was filled with such emotions and energy that she could not be confined within her cottage's walls. She sat on the porch reveling in the openness and freedom of the outside world. Mr. P came outside and insisted that she come inside to the warmth of the caregiving world in which she lived. Edna refused and made statements of defiance that she would be staying outside. (Chopin 28) Mr. P demonstrated his compassion and love for Edna by staying with her on the porch, but he found rationale for doing so which allowed him to save face in his position as head of the household. They stayed outside until Edna decided she was ready to enter and go to bed. Mr. P followed. In an as-yet rare event, Edna controlled the situation, exploring and relishing her new-found feelings of confidence, and did not submit to social pressures.

With her new confidence and excitement, Edna did not sleep most of the night and arose early in the morning. She went to where she expected to find Robert, but he was not there. So, for the first time, she sent for him to come to her. Edna had discovered a new sense of empowerment and was beginning to make her own decisions, exercising her ability to control her life. (Chopin 29) Upon Edna's request, she and Robert traveled to the island of Cheniere Caminada, which was a sailboat ride away. The water was a perfect place for Edna with her new sense of freedom and the water representing unlimited possibilities. "Sailing across the bay to the Cheniere Caminada, Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening— had snapped the night

before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails." (Chopin 31)

Upon their arrival on Cheniere Caminada, Edna and Robert attended a church service. Sitting in the service, Edna felt oppressed and filled with feelings she could not explain. She was compelled to leave the church abruptly and Robert followed. Robert suggested that she might need to rest and took her to a family friend's home so she could gather herself. As Edna lay there resting she heard the sounds of the ocean, the sounds of an unlimited new world calling to her. An unexplainable calm came over her and she slept for what she describes as a hundred years. (Chopin, 35) When she awoke, it was from more than just sleep; she awoke from an oppressive, controlled life which had been ingrained in her as normal and desirable.

When Edna and Robert returned to the Grand Isle, Mrs. Ratignolle informed Edna that one her sons were asleep but the other was being a bad boy who would not sleep. Edna immediately attended to him, pulling him into her arms, rocking and soothing him to sleep. (Chopin 35) Edna still had a strong need for caregiving and felt compassion for her sons. These feelings never went away and they were not in opposition to her desire to break free of societal expectations. Nevertheless, they competed for the space and time required to explore her need for self-expression.

Later that evening, Edna took time to review her memories and wondered what made this summer different. She realized that the Grand Isle and the people had not changed, that it was she who had changed. "That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect." (Chopin 35) Edna's awakening journey was well underway. The summer's

exploration had given her a new view of the world and she had little choice but to continue her journey.

Prior to returning to the city, Mrs. Ratignolle and Edna talked about caregiving and had different views on mothering. Edna was willing to give almost anything for her children, but not her entire self. "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. I can't make it clearer; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me." (Chopin 41) Edna tried to explain that no woman should give more than that, but Mrs. Ratignolle strongly disagreed. In fact, Mrs. Ratignolle believed that if you gave your life, then you cannot give anything more. Edna, however, was discovering that a woman could give much more than just her life; she could give up her soul, completely sacrificing her hopes and dreams. Although Edna saw that Mrs. Ratignolle had done just that, Edna realized that she herself could no longer make that sacrifice. It was clear to Edna that she needed opportunity to explore life and self-expression independent of her children and family. In fact, female author Alys W. Pearsall Smith comments that the chief impediments to self-expression and self-development are the family. (Davis 566)

Edna's journey continued when the Pontellier family returned to New Orleans from their summer cottage. The family was wealthy and held a high position in society. Mr. P had many possessions which advertised his success to society and business associates. His possessions were very important to him and everything had its place, including Edna. It was part of Edna's job as a wife to maintain these possessions and project all the social graces which were expected of a family of such status. As part of this obligation, Edna was to receive visitors

every Tuesday, and the Pontelliers typically had a great number of visitors due to their social standing. However, on the first Tuesday back, Edna chose to leave the house without explanation and did not receive any visitors, although many called and left their cards. Her behavior angered Mr. P, as it reflected poorly on their family. (Chopin 44) Edna was expressing her own feelings in a relatively safe passive aggressive fashion by simply neglecting her social duties.

Upon the conclusion of the argument about receiving visitors, Mr. P left in anger for the men's club. This pattern had occurred many times before, with Mr. P leaving for the club following an argument with Edna. Most times before, if Edna had been eating a meal, she would stop eating and busy herself with her other household obligations. This time Edna decided to finish her meal, eating deliberately, with confidence and determination. (Chopin 45) She had discovered her inner strength and was increasingly willing to exercise it.

Following dinner, Edna retreated to her bedroom, filled with rage. She was so consumed with anger and hopelessness that she tried to destroy her own belongings, including her wedding ring. Edna removed the ring, threw it on the floor, and tried to crush it. (Chopin 45) She was clearly not happy with her current way of life and was lashing out at its symbolisms, but she was still unclear about what she wanted and how to get it. A maid who cleaned up the mess handed the ring back to Edna. She accepted it and slid it back on her finger. (Chopin 45) This cycle of rebellion followed by temporary relapse into old ways was one which Edna would repeat many times. It evidenced her state of confusion and lack of vision about how to resolve her dilemma.

The morning following that disagreement and outburst, Edna was standing on the front porch as Mr. P left for work. She stood looking at her world and realized for the first time that she was not interested in it, and that she also had no interest in the world she came from as a child. (Chopin 45) She had moved beyond hating these worlds and was ready to look for whatever had been missing. She was looking for new possibilities.

Further testing her self-confidence, Edna sought assurance that her artistic skills were good enough for public viewing, and so she visited Mrs. Ratignolle with some of her drawings. Ironically, at this point in her awakening, Edna was still sufficiently constrained by societal expectations that she was concerned about how society would judge her via the very mode of self-expression which was helping to pry her away from those expectations. While Edna was at their house, Mr. Ratignolle joined the women for a meal. As Edna observed the Ratignolles' interactions, she saw a marriage perfectly conformed to societal expectations. Mrs. Ratignolle was so consumed by what Mr. Ratignolle talked about that she would actually stop eating to give full attention to her husband. (Chopin 48) Edna could see that the two of them were happy, but it only depressed her as she realized that this was not the life for her.

As Edna continued to evolve in her awakening, friction with Mr. P increased. In addition to ignoring Tuesday callers, Edna began to neglect other household duties. Mr. P initially allowed Edna to do as she pleased as long as she was quietly submissive when dealing with him, but eventually he became bewildered, confused, and ultimately angry. (Chopin 48) Mr. P reminded Edna of her duties as his wife. "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family." (Chopin 48) Edna summarily

responded that what she really wanted to do was paint. Mr. P told her she should paint, but to not let it interfere with her caregiving. He simply did not appreciate the depth of Edna's unhappiness and that it could not be remedied with trivial diversions. Chopin stated, "That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world." Edna was discovering what she wanted and who she wanted to be, and was increasingly unwilling to feign contentment, or even back away from confrontation, over her unfulfilled societal duties. Her needs clashed with the traditional relationship of husband and wife, and thus with Mr. P's world.

Meanwhile, Edna's commitment to her painting grew. She enlisted all the people in her household as subjects to paint. Edna was committed to this path of self-expression and found herself doing things that she had never done before in her painting. It was a time of discovery and dreaming and at times she was filled with a new found unexplainable joy. (Chopin 49) Yet, Edna found that she had times of unhappiness when the lighting was poor and she would shut down in a depression. Although her internal strength was growing, it was not yet sufficient to sustain her through darker times.

Edna's unwillingness to mask her true self became more apparent to others around her. Following her argument with Mr. P, she felt conflicted and confused, and sought Mademoiselle Reisz for guidance. On the way to find her, Edna ran into Mrs. Lebrun, whom she had met on the Grand Isle during the summer. Mrs. Lebrun also noticed that Edna was not the same quiet, insecure lady she knew from the summer. She commented about Edna to her son, "The city atmosphere has improved her. Some way she doesn't seem like the same woman." (Chopin 52) Not only did people notice that Edna had changed, but many viewed it favorably.

Edna found Mademoiselle Reisz in her apartment, which was quite unkempt as Mademoiselle was focused only on her music. Edna sought advice from Mademoiselle on how to be a dedicated artist and how to live Mademoiselle's life of independence. Edna was still searching for love, focus, dedication, and courage. Mademoiselle Reisz told her, "To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul." (Chopin 54) Clarity developed for Edna during this visit; she was unwilling to live within the social constraints and would attempt to live outside of them. She would try to enter "a space of unmediated reality beyond identity." (Ramos 149) Edna listened to Mademoiselle play music. Overcome by her feelings, the music, and uncertainty about her future, Edna found herself crying uncontrollably again, as she had the night Mademoiselle had played back on the island. Edna was overwhelmed by her own conflicting wants and needs, and the uncertain future.

Edna was not the only one confused by her awakening. Mr. P had no idea what was ailing his wife and became concerned for her mental stability. He described his concerns to a family friend and doctor, but the doctor was only confused by what Mr. P told him about Edna's behavior, as she appeared to be fine physically. The doctor was convinced that her odd behavior would pass because women were often "moody and whimsical." (Chopin 56) Mr. P left with instructions to let Edna do whatever she felt she needed to do and that this would pass. For Edna, the bonds which had held her were becoming increasingly loose.

Soon thereafter, Edna's father came to the Pontellier house for a visit, reanimating many of the traditional thoughts and expectations for Edna. While her father visited, Edna



allowed no one to attend to him except for herself. (Chopin 57) She embodied all the societal expectations of a daughter and wife. She shared with her father her newfound passion for the arts by having them attend concerts and displaying her own art for his review. However, she shared this glimpse into her new world as if the interests were something which only filled her free time, and not honestly as that which often fully consumed her thinking. During the visit, the doctor joined them for a dinner so that he could observe Edna. She gave all the appearances of being a dutiful wife and daughter, so the doctor saw no basis for Mr. P's concern. The presence of Edna's father had her reverting back to how she was raised and temporarily setting aside her need for self-expression.

Edna's regression was short-lived, however, as she and her father had a heated disagreement about Edna's decision to not attend her sister's wedding. Her father was quite angry, but Edna stood her ground. Following the doctor's instructions, Mr. P stayed out of the argument and let Edna do what she felt she needed to do. Edna's father, unhappy with the outcome, told Mr. P that he needed to get his wife under control and behaving like a proper wife. In spite of that strong pressure from her father, Edna had reaffirmed her commitment to depart from the traditional path of a woman. (Chopin 59) She would not attend a ceremony which she felt celebrated the position of woman as strictly a caregiver. Further, Edna refused to support or encourages her sister to enter into an arrangement which Edna viewed as the wrong path for her sister.

After the visit, Mr. P left for an extended business trip, intending to be gone for a long time. As his departure time neared, Edna behaved in the traditional manner of a wife, being attentive and "dear" to Mr. P. She even verbalized that he was "dear and a good friend."

(Chopin 60) The children also left to spend time in the country with their grandmother. Edna cried when Mr. P left and worried that she would become lonely, and at which time she might eventually join him in New York. After everyone had left, Edna was all alone in the house and found her emotions "interesting." "A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her." (Chopin 60) She was glad to be alone and found herself looking at the world around her with fresh vision and excitement. She had expected to feel lonely, but instead found herself comfortable and even at peace. She found joy in gardening and the house itself. She partook in domestic activities which were normally drudgery, but they seemed different when done for herself and not primarily for others. Perversely, she also found herself thinking of her children sentimentally. That portion of her which craved caregiving had not gone away.

Alone, Edna could focus on her art and found satisfaction in drawing and painting. She found that her moods often reflected the weather. If the weather was dark and she did not have proper light, she was often depressed and without ambition, and would not paint. If the sun was bright, she felt humor and sureness, and was inspired to work. (Chopin 63) This time alone was a turning point for Edna. She was becoming comfortable with her feelings and desires, and allowed them to dictate her activities. Edna was acting according to her own desires, without contamination from other people's expectations.

Edna's time alone also allowed her to leave the world of her house and partake of new people and activities. She attended the races frequently and people there are found her more approachable and different. Acquaintances listened respectfully when she gave her opinions about the races, and this gave her a sense of pride. Edna appeared to be filled with more joy and laughter. (Chopin 63) Her thoughts were focused on the excitement of new activities and

people. She spent a lot of time with one particular man from the races and found herself being reckless; breaking the social rules of what was acceptable, with little thought about consequences. This lack of concern for consequences, or possibly just a willingness to accept the consequences of her actions whatever they may be, were telltale signs that Edna was nearing the most frenetic point in her awakening process and would be willing to take drastic action to resolve her conflict.

One day, Edna went to visit Mademoiselle Reisz, seeking to calm herself in preparation for action. Mademoiselle Reisz always brought calmness to Edna which no one else could. "There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free." (Chopin 65) This calmness allowed Edna to clear her mind so that she could finalize her thoughts and ideas regarding what was to come next. Edna announced that she would move to a new home of her own, around the corner from the Pontellier family house, so that she could pursue her art. While announcing her future life changes, Edna carried a new confidence which was even reflected as masculine mannerisms. She drank her liquor and sat on the couch like a man, behaving like a woman who did as she pleased. She said that a house which was completely built with the money and direction of her husband did not feel like Edna's own, and she did not want to continue living there. Edna felt that by having her own household she could dedicate herself to the art and then share it with the world in her own way without input from anyone else. Edna had decided what she wanted her world to be like and was moving to make it a reality. She had committed to action with little concern for the consequences. Mademoiselle Reisz,

who also lived independently and according to her own terms, told Edna what it would really take to travel this road she had chosen. As Edna was leaving, Mademoiselle Reisz put her arms around Edna and “felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. ‘ 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.’ Whither would you soar?” (Chopin 69) Mademoiselle was completely honest about the life on which Edna was about to embark. It would be a life of aloneness, taking on the world, and requiring great strength. Mademoiselle Reisz was not convinced that Edna had the strength, but Edna was fully committed to her course.

Following her visit and the clarity it provided, Edna was excited to share her life plan with Mr. P. She wrote to Mr. P that night telling him she was moving to her own house and was hosting a farewell dinner. Edna once again was consumed by feelings of excitement and joy, and now also self-congratulatory brilliance about the letter she had just written. Later she began to wonder what kind of woman she was in the world’s view, but quickly realized she really did not care at that time.

“One of these days,” she said, “I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think— try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don’t know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can’t convince myself that I am. I must think about it.” (Chopin 68-69)

Edna was well aware that she was challenging many social expectations, and may therefore be viewed as wicked. Nevertheless, she was committed to her true inner feelings and was not going to ignore them anymore, regardless of other people’s opinions.

Edna hosted the farewell dinner party to announce her move, and to say good-bye to the people, the house, and that life she had known as Mrs. Pontellier. Edna was exhilarated preparing for her new life and she could not wait to begin it. Ironically, at the dinner Edna lapsed back into familiar feelings of being overpowered and hopeless. But her desires were strong enough to pull her through the evening without diminishment of her resolve. She was focused on herself the entire evening and did not even think of her children or husband. Edna said good-bye to all of her friends, the house, and her life, and then literally closed the door and went to her new house. When Edna arrived at her new life around the corner, she was cathartically exhausted and felt that her past life had truly ended.

When Mr. P received the letter from Edna informing him that she was moving, he immediately took action to protect his family's reputation. Mr. P wanted to make sure that he stopped any rumors which may have resulted from Edna's recent behaviors and her moving from the house. He was primarily concerned that people might think they were having financial troubles, and was less concerned with the appearance of possible indiscretion. To stop any rumors, Mr. P began remodeling the large Pontellier house, and even went so far as to announce the renovation to their community. (Chopin 77) Edna was impressed and admired how astutely Mr. P protected their reputation, although she continued to do as she pleased.

Edna was very pleased with her new home and life and enjoyed feeling lower on the social scale. She felt that her reduced social status brought a rise in her spiritual well-being. She was free to pursue her dreams without any interference from society. These feelings confirmed to Edna that she had made a good decision. After some time had passed, Edna went to visit her sons at their grandmother's house in the country. Edna gazed upon them with

“hungry eyes”(Chopin 78) and realized that she could not ignore her desires to be with her children. However, although she spent some time with them, she continued to leave them with their grandmother. Edna was saddened at first to leave the children, but the feeling soon passed and she was fine by the time she returned to the city. Edna still held caregiving desires and wanted to be a mother to her sons, yet she had developed the ability to set those feelings aside while pursuing her new life. She was alone, and increasingly comfortable in that position.

Back in the city, Mrs. Ratignolle had not seen Edna for quite some time and wanted to see the new house Edna was staying in, so she went to visit Edna. Mrs. Ratignolle commented to Edna that the house was not large enough for her husband and her two sons, and she was concerned over rumors which could damage the reputations of Edna and her family. “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life. That is the reason I want to say you mustn’t mind if I advise you to be a little careful while you are living here alone.” (Chopin 79) Mrs. Ratignolle encouraged Edna to focus on what was important, husband and family, and her views were in no way unique to the Creole community. “Edna does indeed dread being reduced to her biological function but this is not merely what the Creole culture does to women,” it is all cultures in America that are restricting women to this position of mother and wife. (Leder 95) Mrs. Ratignolle’s intentions were noble, effectively mothering Edna during what Mrs. Ratignolle saw as a time of need, but she was oblivious to Edna’s personal needs.

One morning Edna sat down for breakfast along with her letters to read and write. She read letters from several people and they all gave her pleasure. She loved hearing about her kids, how her husband’s business was doing, and enjoyed a letter from a man saying that he

was thinking of her. Edna was in control of her life and her feelings. "She answered her husband with friendly evasiveness, — not with any fixed design to mislead him, only because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference." (Chopin 85)

The consequences of Edna's decisions could be painful, such as when she had promised to assist Mrs. Ratignolle when she gave birth. When the time arrived, Edna did not wish to go but she followed through on her promise. After the delivery, as Edna was leaving, Mrs. Ratignolle pressed her cheek to Edna's and whispered, "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 90) The admonishment left Edna feeling tortured and uncomfortable. The mothering portion of her life had been set aside by Edna, but this event catapulted it to the front of her mind. Edna loved her sons and caring for them was still critical to her soul. The conflict between her needs for mothering/caregiving and self-expression caused profound confusion in Edna's mind and heart.

Following the delivery, the doctor offered to give Edna a ride home. Edna suggested that she just walk since it was not that far, but really she simply wanted solitude. The doctor insisted, as he wanted to speak with her about her current life. They discussed Edna possibly traveling with her husband instead of staying in New Orleans. Edna ultimately unleashed an unguarded outburst saying that although she was having some confusing thoughts about mothering and her two sons, she would not have anyone telling her how to live her life or what to do. The doctor responded with acknowledgment, understanding, and an astute observation:

"The trouble is," sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, "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." (Chopin 91)

The doctor acknowledged the challenges that Edna faced and knew that Edna really needed help, but that it was up to Edna to help herself. She was living a life out of balance and the consequences were building.

Edna was confused and struggling painfully to find a balance between her needs for self-expression and her needs for mothering. She knew that her choices might hurt others, including her sons. "But I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter— still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives." (Chopin 91) Although Edna felt some victory in her quest to find self-expression, any semblance of balance in her life was nonexistent. (Davis 566)

Seeking resolution to her conflict, Edna returned to the Grand Isle, the place where her awakening had begun. She laid awake all night going through her recent actions in her mind. She was despondent and confused. She concluded:

"There was no one thing in the world that she desired. 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. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them." (Chopin 93-94)

Edna knew that she would grow tired of people, of men, and could not escape her children or herself. She struggled to find a balance that she could live with, but that balance had eluded her and she was not strong enough to continue fighting forever. Edna could not live just for her children, and she could not live for just herself – her art. "Edna's search for such an



unrestricted, undefined and ultimately impossible state – a freedom from identity – ironically deprives her life of meaning.”(Ramos 147) The sea’s freedom called to her and she realized it offered another door to freedom. Edna walked into the sea completely naked and free of the world’s limitations, never to return. Edna lost the battle over her internal conflict between caregiving and dedication to her art. She lost the battle to herself, unable to find resolution in this world.

### **Other Artists' Struggles with the Conflict and Awakening**

The challenges confronting Chopin and Edna were faced by other women artists of the Victorian era. They had to choose between satisfying caregiver/societal expectations and dedicating themselves to art, their chosen form of self-expression. Two such artists were Elizabeth Nourse and Ellen Day Hale. The lives and works of these two artists provide ample evidence of the conflict between their powerful drives for both self-expression and caregiving. Through customs and societal expectations, aspiring women artists of their time faced many hurdles along the path of acceptance into the arts community. Surmounting those barriers often required such a high degree of commitment to their craft that they forsook marriage and childrearing. Nourse and Hale went through their awakenings as young adults, addressing their internal conflicts by fully committing themselves to their art, and never marrying. However, as evidenced in their lives and works, their caregiving desires persisted quietly, in contrast to their battles for self-expression and acceptance which were waged more openly.

Painter Elizabeth Nourse was one of the first American women artists to achieve international recognition for her work. She was known for her personal vision and technique

which she applied with conviction to her subject matter, notably of working women, depictions of motherhood, and beauty found in the simplest aspects of daily life. (Nourse) Born in Ohio into a family of ten children, Nourse and her twin sister were the youngest. Nourse's parents were descendants of pioneer New England families and they had a strong commitment to the Catholic faith. Religion was an important part of the Nourse family life and continued to have profound influence in Elizabeth's entire life. (Heekin Burke 3) Caleb Nourse, Elizabeth's father, was a banker but fell on hard times during the Civil War. Her parents then made it clear to their last three children that they should prepare to support themselves, and sent them to girl's schools to receive sound educations. It was unusual at the time to send women to school for the purpose of preparing them to become financially self-reliant. Elisabeth attended the School of Design in Cincinnati where she became consumed by painting and the arts. She focused heavily on drawing, painting, and sculpture, but also dabbled in woodcarving, china painting, and engraving.

Nourse graduated from the design school and was offered a teaching job at the school, but she declined. (Heekin Burke 3) She made the decision to not follow a woman's traditional path of teaching and possibly starting her own family. She committed herself to becoming a professional artist. Mary Allen Heekin Burke wrote about Nourse for the National Museum of art, "She was a Victorian lady with all the virtues we associate with them – she was religious, devoted to her family, patriotic and hard-working. Yet she was also independent, courageous and determined to make a successful career in a field where many men failed to earn a living." (Heekin Burke 15) Shortly after graduating, her parents died and to help support the family she began her professional art career, painting decorative panels carved by her sister. (NMWA 49)

Nourse was unlike many artists of her time, men or women. She did not have wealth or a teaching job for income. She was a professional artist from 1883 to 1938, earning a living from her art for fifty-five years and producing over seven hundred works of art. Nourse was the first American woman to be elected a member of the Societe Nationale des Beaux-Arts and she won many international expositions. She served as president of the American Women's Art Association of Paris and was widely respected by men and women alike for her artistic accomplishments. (Nourse 32)

Even though Nourse never married, she dedicated significant portions of her life to caregiving, particularly for women and children in need. Most Americans who were in Europe just prior to World War I soon returned to America, but Nourse chose to stay in Europe and help those displaced by the war. Later, she also joined the Third Order of St. Francis which required that their members perform acts of personal charity. Nourse took this calling seriously and became deeply involved in the lives of the peasants around her by feeding their children and helping the elderly and sick. She cared for them in numerous ways and shared in their lives. (Heekin Burke 8) Towards the end of her life, Nourse was recognized for her service to humanity by the University of Notre Dame by receiving the Laetare Medal. (Heekin Burke 8) Her strong caregiving needs also manifested in her art.

Nourse developed her own style of painting which challenged the academic painting style of most other recognized artists. While in Italy, Nourse joined the New Salon Group of artists, which included artists such as Puvis de Chavannes and Auguste Rodin who challenged the art world and its conservative standards, at great risk to her career. Her favored subjects were not the traditional views of beautiful women or landscapes. Nourse frequently painted

the routine daily tasks of country folk, women at work, or portrayals of mothering, and she painted portraits of Negro women and girls, which was very rare for the time. (National Museum of Women in the, International Exhibitions and Tufts) “She brought to her work a spiritual dimension that enabled her to express deep personal convictions about beauty and about the importance of the daily life and work of ordinary women, whom she portrayed with sympathy and respect.” (Heekin Burke 13) She gave her subjects a sense of humanness and dignity.

Early in Nourse's career she gravitated toward the theme of females in caregiving situations, yet she did not depict wealthy women. (NMWA 49) She focused on working class women who were consumed by caring for children. One example of this was in Nourse's painting *Happy Day* (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Nourse, Elizabeth. *Happy Days*, 1905.  
(Digital Image. Wikimedia Commons. Web. 28 Nov. 2013.)

Nourse captured a common domestic moment in the life of an average family. Depicted is a woman holding a toddler on her lap, while at the same time she works on her sewing. A

woman sewing was an accepted subject matter for the period. Nourse presented this common subject matter in her own manner and realism style.

In this painting, the woman is simultaneously taking care of her family's sewing, being compassionate to her baby, and teaching the oldest child to sew. The mother figure is softened to add beauty, but she is shown with rough hands and in light which reveals the realities of her existence. The mother figure is just one subject in the painting and could be considered a possession, as are all the other items in the room. She does not look at the viewer to establish herself as a person of standing or education. The mother is demonstrating her social role properly and gives no signs of questioning her position or dreaming of anything different. The young girl watches what her mother is doing. She too is adhering to the societal expectations, learning how to care for those around her.

Nourse presented a straightforward portrait of the life of this mother and her children emphasizing how the mother is tired and worn with her body positioning and the texture of her face and hands. The children are presented with soft tender appearances which serve to emphasize contrast with the mother. Nourse communicates respect and importance to the subject matter, and yet highlights the moment's realism. (SAAM) She acknowledges the power of the caregiver's own desires to nurture, but makes plain that they exact a toll on the woman's spirit. The woman embraces her life, but may also desire to break free of it.

The challenges of being a woman artist during the Victorian era were not lost on Nourse. As a Victorian woman she could not advance her career in the same manner as her male counterparts. Women artists had to prove they were professional painters to be taken seriously, since most women painters were merely considered "Sunday painters" who were

expected to eventually marry or become teachers. (SAAM) To be recognized as a professional she needed to demonstrate that she could produce unique high quality work which would be viewed favorably by the all-male juries of Salon and international exhibitions. Much of her acceptance had to be achieved within the all-male social settings and circles of which Nourse was not a part.

In America, a group of women artists came together as activists seeking new rights for women. These women were all highly trained and successful artists who dedicated their lives to their art, foregoing the traditional path of marriage and caregiving. Dubbed the “New Women” artists, they were a group of about twenty women artists who at one point agreed to paint self-portraits depicting their strengths and dedication. The self-portraits reflected one side of their internal conflicts between desires for caregiving and self-expression. In her self-portrait, Nourse wanted the viewer to know the position she held and how important she was as a professional painter (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Nourse, Elizabeth. *Self Portrait, 1892.*  
(Digital Image. Wikimedia Commons. Web. 20 July 2013.)

She depicted herself a studio, a traditional format, having her hands filled with an artist's instruments and in the act of painting. She used a large canvas, indicating that she was willing to tackle grand concepts, and the illumination of her facial features was intended to suggest intelligence. Further, Nourse featured just herself in the self-portrait, eliminating all non-essential elements which might detract from her statement. By placing herself in the foreground, the viewer is further focused on her as a person, rather than as an object for the viewer to behold. Nourse also painted herself staring at the viewer with a penetrating gaze, attesting to her keen intellect. (Connor 25-27) The message was clear; Nourse wanted to be viewed first and foremost as an artist. She did not want to be recognized specifically for being a woman or simply for excelling at the tasks in which women were expected to participate. Nourse even once told a friend "that she wanted to be judged as an artist, not as a woman." (Heekin Burke 8) She did however grow accustomed to a compliment which she heard while showing her art, "the strength of a man." (Heekin Burke 8) To be judged by this same standard was similarly a goal of other accomplished women artists of her era, such as Ellen Day Hale.

Hale painted and etched landscapes and religious murals, but was most well-known for her depictions of solitary women in domestic pursuits. She was born to a well-respected upper class family in Boston. Her father was a chaplain and later in his career became chaplain to the United States Senate, allowing Hale to assist her father with his church-related duties in Washington DC. Her father's strong faith was replicated in Hale, which influenced her entire life. However, her family was progressive and had several accomplished artists, including her brother and several other women. Hale's mother, who had great interest in the arts,

encouraged her daughters at young ages, and her aunt was a well-known watercolorist who gave Hale her first artistic instruction. Hale's brother and sister-in-law were artists, teachers, and art critics, which further encouraged her to pursue a life in the arts. (Angelilli 11) Hale also had other women relatives who were writers and artists known for their active roles in the women's suffragist movement and social reform movements. Her youth was characterized by this combination of both conventional and progressive influences, and gave her the opportunity to explore her passion for being an artist.

Hale began her formal art education in private lessons, since female students were still segregated from male students and thus did not have as many educational opportunities. Later, she attended school to study painting, along with forty other women in the Boston area. Following her schooling in Boston she attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for two years, where she was able to study human anatomy. Hale then traveled to Europe and studied in several locations, including Paris and London. She faced challenges which her male counterparts did not, such as schools not allowing women, or charging more for women when they did allow them. (Angelilli 13)

Hale became an Impressionist painter who was best known for her figure paintings, often portraits or depictions of women in domestic settings. Hale employed a forthright presentation with dark colors and confrontational images which used light to enhance the strength of her figures. She began showing works in 1876 when she exhibited at the Boston Art Club. She continued exhibiting with great success all over the world, including places such as the Royal Academy of Arts in London and Paris Salons, which were dominated by male artists, and venues in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. (National Museum of Women in



the, International Exhibitions and Tufts 14) Hale was able to live on the income from her painting, but she also supplemented her income by teaching, as was common for artists.

Hale never married but did help raise her seven younger brothers. Her mother became an invalid and Hale assisted the family by serving in the caregiver role when needed. Even after moving to Washington DC, Hale acted as hostess for her father when he served as chaplain to the Senate. Brittany Bosch wrote in *A Rebellious Tradition: The Life of Ellen Day Hale*, "Hale's responsibilities and obligation to her family became her primary concern and by moving to Washington, she lost passion for producing artwork." (Angelilli 15) Yet Hale's niece wrote that Hale did not lose her passion but simply was a dutiful daughter. (Hale 106) Her artistic ambitions were placed on hold so that she could satisfy the family's caregiver expectations, and yet she ultimately maintained her passion for painting. For the majority of her remaining life she dedicated herself to self-expression through painting and etching.

Hale's painting *Morning News* (see Figure 3) reflected her evolving vision of women as they gradually freed themselves from traditional expectations.



Figure 3. Ellen Day Hale. *Morning News*, 1905.  
(Digital Image. Wikimedia Commons. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.)

At that time, paintings of women reading the newspaper in domestic settings were common. Hale softened her style for this painting, giving an impressionistic feel to the strokes and overall appearance.(National Museum of Women in the, International Exhibitions and Tufts 52) The figure is soft and subtle in the foreground, but with the darker background common to her other works.

Her painting captures a traditional Victorian woman in the beautifully delicate manner which was much sought after in France. The subject matter has a calm, sophisticated air and gentle manner.(Fitzpatrick 14) The woman has an aristocratic tone and embodies strong feminine ideals, all of which were quite traditional. Yet, Hale included some unusual touches in the painting. For example, the woman is standing, when almost all other paintings of women reading newspapers had them sitting. Further, Hale excluded most background details so the viewer is focused more fully on the woman, rather than on her domestic setting. The woman appears calm and at ease, yet standing gives her the appearance of strength and confidence. By placing a pile of books next to her, Hale suggested that the woman is intelligent and educated. (Leibowitz 383) Using these subtle techniques, Hale gave her female subject a sense of importance, and did not portray her as merely another object in some idyllic domestic setting.

This work is considered one of Hale's most successful paintings. She demonstrated deeply rooted traditions, themes desired by the public, but also introduced the notion that women were intelligent and looking for more than simply the domestic worlds to which they were mostly confined. On the surface the woman is genteel and beautiful with subtle

indicators of strength and desire, yet she is isolated from the outside world, except via the newspaper and literature. To forget the internal conflict which women experienced as they slowly broke through the boundaries that generations of ideals had built around them is to miss seeing all that is present in the painting *Morning News*.

Like Elizabeth Nourse, Hale was part of the "New Women" artists of the late 1800's, and she too painted a self-portrait (see Figure 4).

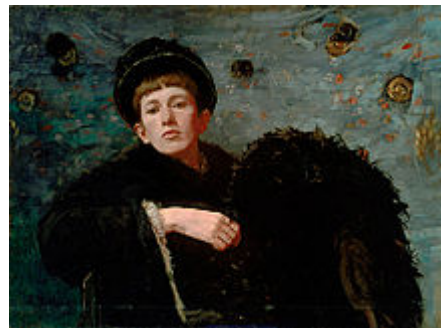


Figure 4. Ellen Day Hale. *Self Portrait, 1885.*  
(Digital Image. Wikimedia Commons. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.)

Hale is depicted in black with buttons, a fur collar, and a loose jacket. The ensemble was completed with a black hat and an ostrich feather fan. Her hairstyle, with bangs extending below her hat, was considered youthful at that time, but could also suggest promiscuity. (Fitzpatrick 30) These appearance choices aroused much discussion. Hale further challenged conventions with her pose. She is shortened by the frame, giving a distorted sense of perspective for her hand and head, which are emphasized by the use of light and shadows. There are also two other unusual things happening in the painting. First, it was extremely rare for an artist to portray themselves without anything in their hands to indicate their profession. Hale is holding nothing and has the hand simply limp, hanging over the back of the chair. This

could perhaps be in reference to the most essential tools of every painter, their hands. Yet her posture indicates that she is a self-confident and accomplished woman, and so it is the hand, herself, which is important, rather than her profession. Second, it was rare for a woman to represent herself looking resolutely out at the viewer. Hale confronts the viewer with a remarkable sense of confidence, as did Nourse in her self-portrait. Curator Erica Hirshler of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts makes the observation, "It's an amazing portrait for a woman to be that forthright and direct and determined-looking." (Lubow 79) When Hale exhibited this self-portrait for the first time, an art critic said that it reflected "a man's strength in the treatment and handling of her subject" which Hale found to be highly complementary. (Fitzpatrick 30) She knew her piece was unusual and might draw criticism, as she wrote to her mother, "Phil [her brother, artist Philip Leslie Hale] likes my picture very much; it is certainly original, but queer enough and frightfully difficult business." (Fitzpatrick 29) Her willingness and strength to take on the establishment with a "daring assertion of identity marks her approach to self-portrait as significant." (Fitzpatrick 30)

Nourse, Hale, and other women artists created these portraits to fearlessly present themselves as individuals willing to flout social codes and challenge the accepted ideas of a woman's place in society in the 1890's. (Connor 25) They had had their awakenings relatively early in life, and had elected commitment to their art. Yet, their personal lives and their works revealed that their caregiving desires continued to burn.

### **Final Comments on the Conflict and Awakening Process**

The conflict and awakening processes of women painters and authors were reflected in the lives and works of these three artists, Chopin, Nourse, and Hale. These artists achieved high degrees of professional success in literature and painting, which resulted in ample documentation about their lives, their awakening processes, and how they coped with their internal conflicts. Although other women artists almost certainly had similar experiences, lesser degrees of published analysis of their lives and works make it more difficult to study their journeys. Additionally, "until recently, art history and art criticisms were written by men about male artists making it extremely difficult to find substantial material on the life and works of women artists" and "they have rarely been the subject of one person exhibitions or reviews which would bring their work to public notice." (Heekin Burke 3) Fortunately, these three artists were successful despite their challenges, yielding a view into their lives and the struggles which women faced during the Victorian era.

However, the struggle is not unique to the Victorian era. All women artists, regardless of place or time, have had to confront a potentially unresolvable internal conflict between their roles as caregivers, with the associated societal expectations, and dedication to their passion, which is their art. In their lives and works, they demonstrate how each woman artist needs to find her own balance. Achieving the balance requires trade-offs and sacrifices, guaranteeing that the woman will be unable to completely satisfy others, and not even ensuring that she will find happiness. For some women the conflict is unresolvable, or even not survivable, as in the case of Edna Pontellier.

Every woman has her own awakening, but it may occur at different times in life, have different durations, and have different outcomes. In truth, it is not even unique to artists. It is a timeless conflict which all women face. And, yet it may be necessary. Kate Chopin said in 1899, "Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer; than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life." Chopin's legacy is that *The Awakening* will serve as a guide to inform, encourage, and inspire women forever.

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