

The Body Bound and the Body Unbound:  
Rebirth, Sensuality, and Identity  
in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Andre Gide's *L'Immoraliste*  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

Self-awareness and liberation often start with an analysis of the relationship between individual and society, a relationship based on the delicate balance of personal desire and responsibility to others. While societal structures, such as family, tradition, religion, and community, may be repressive to individuals, they also provide direction, identity and meaning to an individual's life. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* the protagonists are faced with such a dilemma. Often informed by gender roles and socio-economic class, the container or filter that society offers to shape and mediate human experience is portrayed in both novels as a fictitious self donned for society's benefit —can seem repressive or inadequate. Yet far from being one-dimensional stories of individuals who eschew the bonds of a restrictive society, both novels show that liberation can lead to entrapment. Once society's limits are transgressed, the characters face the infinitude and insatiety of their liberated desires and the danger of self-absorption. Chopin and Gide explore these issues of desire, body, and social authority in order to portray Edna's and Michel's search for an authentic self. The characters' search for authenticity allows for the loosening of restriction and embrace of desire and the body, phenomena that appear to liberate them from the dominant bourgeois society. Yet, for both Edna and Michel, an embrace of the body and individual desire threatens to unsettle the balance between individual and society. As Edna and Michel break away from society's prescribed path, both struggle to find themselves. Edna and Michel become aware of themselves in a variety of different ways: speaking and interacting with others, observing the social mores of those around them and engaging in creative activity, such as, for Edna, painting and planning a dinner party, or for Michel, teaching and writing. Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening* and André Gide's 1902 novel *L'Immoraliste* explore the consequences of individual liberation from the constricting

bonds of religion, society, and the family. In depicting these conflicts, the authors examine the relationship between individual and society, freedom and restraint, and what an individual's relationship to his or her community should be.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Gary and June McCulla. I am grateful for their love, support, influence and example. I am lucky to have such intelligent, independent-thinking parents who have encouraged my education and self-development.

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## INTRODUCTION

Published in 1899 and 1902, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Andre Gide's *L'Immoraliste* explore similar themes of identity, sexuality and liberation from conformity. Written on opposite sides of the Atlantic, *The Awakening* and *L'Immoraliste* depict societies thrown into turmoil by modernity and divided by many of the major issues of the day: sexuality, the role of women, and the place of religion in public life. Kate Chopin's original title for her novel, *A Solitary Soul*, emphasizes the melancholic and isolating aspects of Edna's story, yet her publisher felt that *The Awakening* was a more appropriate title. The renaming of Chopin's work does suggest male appropriation of a female text, yet the new title demonstrates an awareness of nineteenth-century American life and contemporary religious debates that the original lacked. Throughout American history there were two "Great Awakenings," a series of revivals in the 1730s, and the Second Great Awakening of the 1850s. Leaders of these religious revivals sought to induce a fundamental change in the life of the newly converted and to counteract the growing threat of secularization. By using a word with strong religious associations, Chopin troubles the expectations of a largely Protestant audience and proposes that readers view the personal and highly secular transformation of one woman as seriously as they regard religious awakening.

*L'Immoraliste*, also a title with religious implications, implies a world view that is in opposition to and in rebellion against conventional morality, a move that captures much of the social and religious tension of the Belle Époque. Although separation of Church and state had been one of the goals of the 1789 Revolution, tense relations between government and Church continued throughout the nineteenth-century. Dechristianization, a campaign against the Catholic Church as a public entity with privileged political influence, finally found its realization in the law of 1905.

*L'Immoraliste*, published just a few short years before this legislation, explores a society in transition. Religious truths that had fortified and undergirded French culture for centuries were losing their influence, and the vacuum of waning religious power invited a reevaluation of religion's role in public life. In its depiction of Michel's struggle to define himself apart from the institutions and social mores of his day, Gide's novel asks what part Michel, a man whom many would view as "un cas bizarre," can play within society (10).

Religion is only one force against which Edna and Michel rebel; sexuality and gender also play pivotal roles in both novels. The subtle blasphemy of Chopin's title was not lost upon reviewers and readers who viewed the novel as immoral, "vulgar," and "repellant" (qtd. in Culley, 166-169). Reviewers' disgust for Chopin's novel stemmed from Edna's blatant disregard for sexual mores and gender conventions. Women authors of the fin de siècle wrote stories that challenged conventional gender roles and flouted traditional morality. These New Woman writers were the cultural and literary wing of first-wave feminism. Chopin, however, did not participate in any feminist groups and she disliked the use of literature as a political tool for social change (see Toth Chapter 8). Although the didactic tone of much popular New Women literature would not have appealed to her, Chopin's fiction reveals that she shared similar political goals. In her works she sought to "create a truthful representation of femininity" (Heilmann, 92). In *The Awakening*, although Edna Pontellier's defiance of marriage implies a sexual agency not available to women of her era, Chopin does not eschew difficult or shocking themes. Edna's bold declaration in chapter thirty six—"I give myself where I choose" (102)—not only shocks bourgeois morality, it contradicts established medical opinion of the era which made clear distinctions between "male *sexual* and female *reproductive* desire" (Heilmann, 90).



Mainstream medical opinion perceived women's sexuality as essentially maternal, yet men were also limited in their sexual choices; male homosexuality was viewed as deviant, and as Oscar Wilde's 1895 trials demonstrated, European society could not accept sexual renegades. Frank discussions of sexuality outside of the male heterosexual norm were uncommon, but as Foucault observes there was still plenty of medical and scientific talk about sex (Foucault, *History*, 17). None of this sexual discourse illuminated or explained sexuality; yet, "by speaking about it so much, by discovering it multiplied, partitioned off," the result was a "screen discourse" that obscured sexuality more than ever (53). Like a smokescreen or a fun-house mirror, the "scientific" discourse of the era blocked honest discussion and distorted sexuality into a "pornography of the morbid" (Foucault, 54). At the turn of the century, the Decadent homosexual man and the sexually liberated New Woman were major targets of this "pornography of the morbid." Both figures blurred gender categories and advocated for sexual freedom in a way designed to upset conventional society. *L'Immoraliste* breaks from this fin de siècle mode of provocation and with the artifice of fin de siècle art. Michel, while no doubt a shocking figure for many, represents a step away from the Decadence of Wilde and Huysmans toward Modernism, vitality, authenticity and health. Resisting the idea that his writing is strange or his hero "un cas bizarre" (10), Gide compares himself to Shakespeare, Goethe and the writer of Genesis. Furthermore, the "drame" that the novel recounts, the story of Michel's search for identity, cannot remain "circonscriit" in Michel's "singulière aventure" (10).

Edna Pontellier and Michel strive for authenticity and the power to define themselves against the conformity of their respective cultures. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin remarks that Edna Pontellier had at "a very early period apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which

questions” (14). *L’Immoraliste* also explores the “dual life”: Michel, the main character, must free himself from what he considers the restrictions of society in order to discover his real self, yet like Edna his liberation from conformity does not follow a straightforward path. The goal of this thesis is to analyze this process of rebellion against restriction, the discarding of the old self, and the creation of a new self, the self’s relationship to the body, and finally how Edna and Michel decide what is part of the “l’être authentique” and what is part of the social body—that mass of knowledge and culture that they must shift through to uncover the true self (Gide, 62). Michel seeks to destroy the social self, whereas Edna tries, unsuccessfully, to find a social self or role that would allow her to integrate her private self and desires into society.

Balance between individual and society is a key theme of both novels. Stifling the voice of the self and hiding behind prescribed roles results in alienation. The novels begin with alienation, the characters immersed within their social roles and estranged from themselves. As both novels progress, Edna and Michel come closer to their authentic selves, but teeter dangerously near a different kind of alienation: absorption within the self at the expense of social interaction. The characters’ intense absorption in their own thoughts and desires often leads to a morbid sense of paralysis and stagnation as well as a disregard for the rights and feelings of others. On the other hand, to tune out the din of social expectation can provide an opportunity for self-knowledge. Michel and Edna believe that society is vapid, artificial, and bourgeois, and that they are different, apart, and better than others. Believing this may be self-serving and self-absorbed, but it is also the first crude step toward the formation of identity: Edna and Michel are aware of themselves not as independent, self-sufficient beings, but as they exist in opposition to others.

An oppositional mentality plays a key role in the formation of Edna and Michel's characters. Oppositions clarify meaning, and the juxtaposition of various characters in both novels demonstrates the choices and roles available to Edna and Michel. Nevertheless, the reader should resist the urge to demonize characters such as Madame Ratignolle, Monsieur Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Marceline in *L'Immoraliste*. To view these secondary characters as the enemies of the protagonists detracts from the richness of the novels. Marilynne Robinson remarks how opposition can easily become ridiculous if such a complex novel as Chopin's is caricatured and misrepresented. Warning the reader against such facile readings, she states: "it is bizarre to treat all differences as oppositions, as if those at home in society and those who crave other satisfactions should be thought of as warring camps" (ix). Such an assertion may be true, and Edna and Michel are not beyond criticism, yet the fact remains that society's discontents, Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening* and Ménéalque in *L'Immoraliste*, are tolerated as peculiarities, exceptions to the rule. To live on the margins, as these characters do, requires fortitude and a strong sense of self. In addition, mainstream society fails to benefit from these people's contributions. Edna's and Michel's relationship to Mademoiselle Reisz and Ménéalque elucidates their relationship to the dominant culture, just as their relationships to more mainstream characters suggest the need for change. Dominant culture as it is presented in the novels has become hardened and inflexible; if individuals fail to fit into the mold available to them, they have fewer opportunities for fulfillment and happiness.

Faced with the choice of conforming or finding a way to be themselves, Edna and Michel struggle to achieve freedom. Chopin and Gide reveal awakening and liberation as dangerous pursuits, with potentially devastating effects: "But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly

disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!” (14). The tumult that Chopin’s narrator describes is a struggle for the power of Edna and Michel to define themselves in ways that reflect their experiences and desires. Yet even as they engage in a battle against society, Edna and Michel are not innocent, nor are their actions motivated by any sense of social justice; they are self-driven and at their worst self-absorbed. Just as they are victims of the time and place in which they find themselves, they are also aggressors, who in their confusion and zealous desire to be free and realize their own desires, mistreat, hurt and trample over others. Michel, in his avid devotion to his own health and bodily well-being, neglects his wife and disdains those whom he considers weak. Edna falls into listless self-absorption and bouts of melancholy, from which she cannot escape. At the end of *L’Immoraliste* Michel may be free, but he is isolated, listless, and shaken by the death of Marceline. Edna is faced with a nightmarish Darwinian vision of nature, stripped of all its social veils. Liberation from conformity is a difficult journey, and freedom, with the compromises and sacrifices it entails, presents its own complications. Liberation costs Edna her life and Michel finds himself so changed that he struggles to balance his newly awakened desires with the demands of society.

Chopin and Gide dramatize the need of their characters to find balance and carve a place out for themselves by illustrating the confusion and frustration that Edna and Michel encounter as they try to free themselves from the forces that restrict them. Much of Edna’s frustration arises from her relationships with two women: Madame Ratignolle, a more traditional character who embodies her culture’s expectations of womanhood and maternity, and Mademoiselle Reisz, an independent spinster and artist. Chopin’s description of Edna as a new kind of woman who is not yet entirely defined even to herself, yet is nonetheless different from other women, suggests a criticism of society and

its ideology of womanhood. Gide portrays Michel in opposition to the other characters in the book, but also in relationship to his former self that was, in part, formed by his long dead Huguenot mother. Michel begins to develop his oppositional attitude when he spies upon the child Moktir stealing Marceline's scissors. It is as if this child's transgressive action awakens Michel's rebellion and authorizes his subsequent immoral acts.

As Chopin and Gide are aware, culture is selective; the immoral act holds such fascination for Michel because it represents the forbidden. Society encourages certain values, attitudes and desires—Madame Ratignolle, Monsieur Pontellier and Marceline are the preferred models of behavior whereas Ménélaque and Mademoiselle Reisz remain marginalized. In a kind of alchemy, culture domesticates and transforms the gross material of nature into something it considers better, higher, less dangerous or threatening. In *The Awakening*, Creole culture incorporates the seductive call of the sea and of nature into the sensuality of everyday life. Edna finds herself in a civilization that “embodies and performs the great gulf's dangerous and irresistible behests as in a kind of sympathetic magic, acting out sensuousness and infidelity while practicing a perfect restraint” (Robinson, xvi). Perfect restraint is also a quality Michel experiences on his Norman farm. Restful and domesticated, the farm landscape implies a sexual economy in which nothing is wasted; there is perfect order and harmony, qualities which Michel experiences as oppressive. The landscape of the farm suggests someone else's visions of how nature should be ordered: a relationship to the natural world that emphasizes fecundity, tranquility and calm order—all of which Michel begins to associate with the repose of death and with woman. Similarly, Edna rejects much of Creole society because she finds it inauthentic and stifling. In quasi-aristocratic New Orleans, courtly love behavior funnels sexual tensions into mock courtship and flirtation. Nonetheless, the lines of acceptable behavior remain clearly drawn: extra-marital passion is unacceptable

and motherhood and maternity remain sacrosanct. Just as Michel rejects domesticated nature, Edna rejects this performative, filtering quality of Creole society, desiring instead the immediate and more intense passions of the sea and of music. In both societies, culture reshapes the impulses of “nature,” and in reforming them controls them.

The word culture suggests both codes of behavior as well as the cultivation of the land and domestication of nature. Plant imagery, recurrent in Gide’s works, hints at this tension between nature and culture. Just as certain crops are encouraged and cultivated, and other plants are considered weeds, certain values, desires, behaviors, beliefs and ideas are encouraged whereas others are not. The cultures in which Edna and Michel find themselves favor the conformity of a monoculture rather than the rich diversity existing in nature. Excluded from the garden of culture, these other plants, Edna and Michel, grow wild in the margins. Gide compares *L’Immoraliste* to a “fruit plein de cendre amère.” It is “pareil aux coloquintes du désert qui croissent aux endroits calcinés et ne présentent à la soif qu’une plus atroce brûlure, mais sur le sable d’or ne sont pas sans beauté” (9). Growing against the gold of the sand, from soil charred by the sun, these bitter apples provoke only a sharper thirst. Their strange beauty suggests Michel’s thirst and desire for what he is not sure, but for something new, for new horizons, for something different than the dusty past he spent his youth studying. He, like Edna, seeks an unmediated relationship with reality; both characters seek to experience life for themselves rather than through the eyes of history or cultural tradition. Yet unmediated experience is difficult; culture serves a regulating function; it provides the characters with a grid through which to see. In addition to ideology through which people experience reality, culture provides codes of behavior, and to fling away its constraints leaves one to the vicissitudes of desire. Although it may feel natural—especially to those comfortable in society—culture is a human creation subject to revision and protest.

## Chapter One: The Body Bound

Edna and Michel experience the effects of cultural restriction not only as a pressure to conform, but also as physical confinement. Possession of a female body or a male body culturally determines how one is treated and expected to act. An analysis of Edna and Michel's struggle for freedom and self-definition must take into account the body and the social reality of gender differences. The ideologies limiting personal growth and freedom are played out upon the flesh because the body is a site of social control, a place where nature and culture collide. It is natural for the human body to feel the jolt of instinctual drives, yet to live in a community with others is to curb one's impulses and conform to certain codes of behavior. These codes of behavior or social identities mark and circumscribe the body, limiting Edna's and Michel's freedom. Social identities and social mores affect the way Edna and Michel think about and experience their bodies. I will analyze social control upon the physical beings of each character through an analysis of limiting ideologies of gender which are represented by clothes and landscapes, and finally the characters' relationship to maternity or maternal figures. Edna and Michel's desire to cast off their social garments and to defy the mother-figures in their lives demonstrates not only a desire to be free, but a longing for a radical kind of freedom where all mediating figures and boundaries are cast aside. As we will see, social identities, of which clothing is one example, both restrict and protect. Landscapes like the sea and the desert echo the limitless desires of the novels' protagonists, just as images of houses, farms and gardens evoke social order and limitation.

The image of the body constricted by too small, too tight clothes or by inhibiting physical environments occurs in both *The Awakening* and *L'Immoraliste*. Both writers frame their protagonist's struggle for self-realization in terms of physical restriction. Mocking Michel's domestic life, his "calme bonheur du foyer," his friend Ménéalque

reminds him that “Le bonheur ne se veut pas tout fait, mais sur mesure. [...] j’ai tâché de tailler ce bonheur à ma taille” (123). Michel declares that he too has tailored his happiness to size: “C’est à ma taille aussi que j’avais taillé mon bonheur, [...] mais j’ai grandi; à présent mon bonheur me serre; parfois j’en suis presque étranglé” (123). Michel’s clothes—his social being, the role he has assumed, no longer fit his body, nor do they correspond to his desires. Chopin uses similar imagery to illustrate Edna’s struggle for freedom against a kind of *prêt-à-porter* happiness. After Edna’s trip to Grand Isle, the narrator remarks that Edna’s husband is blind to her transformation, but this is only because “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” (55). The “fictitious self” cloaks the body, projecting a false image of compliance and docility, locking the individual into a certain mold or role. As her various veils, hats and gloves disappear, Edna begins to shed away layers of false being. Taking off her clothes is an attempt to escape the constraints of gender and class, the social fictions that circumscribe her growing self-consciousness. Far from being a frivolous concern, clothing and fashion remain essential to understanding the ideological restraints upon Edna’s body and self. In fact, a comparison of dress between the various characters shows a difference in character. Indeed “fashion lies at the boundary between the naturally appearing animal and the socially constructed lady,” and to rid one’s self of this clothing suggests an attempt to break down the barrier between self and nature (Joslin, 79). Biographer Emily Toth remarks: “Edna sheds more and more veils, physically and spiritually until at the end she is naked” (Unveiling, 219). Just as clothing masks the body, it can also mark it as belonging to a specific class or gender; this designation entails certain behavior, a social identity from which Edna and Michel flee. Although it



is true that dress can heighten sexual allure, in the situations of Edna and Michel clothing masks the body and its desires, marks it socially, and designates a code of behavior.

In the novels, clothing symbolizes the restrictions ideology imposes upon the body. These ideological restrictions limit freedom and wall the subject off from direct experience, imprisoning the characters in conformity and frustration. Edna and Michel associate the mother with domesticity, conformity and restraint that blocks freedom. Although Edna desires the beauty and sensuality she perceives in Adèle Ratignolle, she rejects the bourgeois tradition that Madame Ratignolle embodies. Similarly, Michel finds rest and healing in Marceline's maternal care, yet he begins to view maternity as domesticated nature, artificiality, and a reminder of his own weakness. In her essay "Motherhood According to Bellini," Julia Kristeva writes about the maternal as a mediating figure between nature and culture who, like a reassuring landmark in a stormy sea, ensures safe passage through dangerous waters; she guarantees psychological stability and continuity by embodying contradictory aspects of human experience. The mother brings together the experience of "biology [that] jolts us" together with the sense "that *everything is*, and that it is representable [...because] mamma is there" (238). The unrepresentable, the jolt of "unsymbolized instinctual drives," becomes "settled, quieted, and bestowed upon the mother in order to maintain the ultimate guarantee: symbolic coherence" (238). The result, in Kristeva's theory, is the association of the mother with biology and drives as well as control and representation of these drives.

Kristeva's ideas of the maternal function and the maternal body inform my analysis of the novels in two ways. Edna's and Michel's rejection of social regulation and their insistence upon spontaneity and the immediacy of experience recall the actions of adolescents, who, eager to live their lives on their own terms, no matter the cost, rebel against all authority. They reject mother figures because they associate them with

authority, domesticity and mediated experience; for Kristeva, the maternal functions as a kind of “filter,” a “thoroughfare, a threshold where ‘nature’ confronts ‘culture’ ” (238). In addition to the mother as a figure who frames and makes sense of life, Kristeva’s description of the maternal body and of pregnancy alludes to a kind of subjectivity which elucidates Edna and Michel’s conflicted experience of their bodies. According to Kristeva, subjectivity resembles the pregnant woman’s experience of her body: “‘It happens, but I’m not there’” (237). Gestation occurs “within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other” (237).

This “other” inside the body, the fetus, suggests also the unconscious. Neither the mother nor the baby is in control of gestation. Likewise the presence of the unconscious questions the very notion of a stable Cartesian subject. According to Kristeva, human beings embody both “nature” instinct, drives and “culture,” social norms and laws. Edna and Michel reject the social norms they associate with the mother, and in loosening the binds of culture, they unleash the unconscious: Michel lives “comme fait l’animal ou l’enfant” (60), and Edna begins “to do as she liked and feel as she liked [...] lending herself to any passing caprice” (54). As I will demonstrate in chapter two of this paper, this instinctive mode of existence can be very fruitful because desire can reveal the self and lighten the dark places of the self. Yet as Kristeva says, although the maternal function need not necessarily be a female being, there should be someone in this filter between “nature” and “culture” [...]because [...] if there were no one on this threshold, if the mother were not, [...] then every speaker would be led to conceive of its Being in relation to some void, a nothingness, a permanent threat against, first, its mastery, and ultimately, its stability” (238). Without the maternal filter, then the subject remains confused, threatened by void against which it defines itself.

Without a way of understanding, of making sense of the body, without someone or something in this “filter” between “nature” and “culture,” experience becomes unintelligible and difficult to communicate. On a larger scale, this notion of a filter between nature and culture, of a being or presence that anchors society, can be seen in the nineteenth-century idea of the “angel in the house,” or as Chopin describes her, “the mother woman.” Without the reassurance of the “angel” or mother-woman at home the world of capitalist industrialism becomes cheap, an amoral jungle where the rich oppress the weak. The domestic sphere balances out and gives meaning to its opposite, the public sphere. In France, England and America the idea of woman as domestic angel or Madonna coexisted uneasily with images of woman as prostitute and whore. The domestic angel, or as Victorian poet Coventry Patmore described her, “the angel in the house,” occupied a separate sphere, the home. Strictly opposed to the world of business, the home— a sphere in many ways created by the Industrial Revolution— was intended to be a haven, a place of solace where men could escape the ugly world of business. Although the home could be a kind of prison for women (and often for men too), it gave meaning and stability to the more chaotic social realm of business, child labor and capitalism. As Virginia Woolf notes in her essay entitled “Professions for Women,” the angel was “intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily.” Furthermore she “was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure” (Woolf).

While they might not have referred to her as the “angel in the house,” Chopin and Gide were well aware of the separation between the male public sphere and the female private sphere. Madame Ratignolle in *The Awakening* and Marceline in *L’Immoraliste*

represent mother figures that stand in the way of Edna's and Michel's freedom and personal development. For Edna and Michel, who lost their mothers at an early age, the mother is a figure who looms large: Michel associates his reserve and austerity with his traditional Protestant mother, and while he does love his wife Marceline, for him to be free from the influence of bourgeois femininity and the tradition and control it represents, Marceline must die. She is his "filter" between culture and nature; she separates him from experience—all the things he so desperately wants to feel and see for himself. Virginia Woolf also articulates this impulse in her essay. The "angel in the house" had to die for her to be able to write without lies, charm and conciliation. These aspects of traditional femininity would have "plucked the heart out of my writing." In his study of Lawrence and Gide, Richard Driskill suggests something similar of Gide: Gide as well as many of his literary alter egos was dominated "by women conforming, ironically to models of femininity self-servingly created by a male-dominated culture" (2).<sup>1</sup> The passive, maternal model of female behaviour ultimately hurts women much more than men. Michel feels the pressures of a bourgeois ideology inhibiting his journey to self-realization, yet it is Marceline who is the victim of these patriarchal ideas. Michel has internalized an ideology of restraint, a "pudeur," that seems to wrap around the body like the shawl he wears when sick. This puritanical reserve he learned from his mother prevents him from speaking openly. He must cast away the shawl, just as he must escape Marceline, the reminder of this limiting ideology.

Although Michel finds his mother's teachings, her farm, and Marceline's presence repressive, he initially relies upon Marceline's soothing maternal presence and

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<sup>1</sup> Gide's mother was not necessarily a passive figure in his life. As Pierre Masson notes, in his youth, Gide exhibited two contradictory impulses, the desire for travel and pleasure as well as "le besoin du réconfort maternel." Interestingly, Masson also notes that while the young Gide had few memories of his father, "sa mère fut la fenêtre ouverte sur le monde, ce fut par elle presque exclusivement qu'il prit contact avec la réalité" (Masson, 16).

care in order to recover from his illness. If his new self is reborn in Africa, it is nurtured in Normandy on his mother's farm. Michel loves Marceline, but after he has recovered from his illness, her maternal character, and even her very presence, irritates him, and reminds him of his own weakness. Edna, too, initially experiences Madame Ratignolle's sympathy and affection as positive. Chopin writes that there exists between the two women "a subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love" (15). Adèle perceives that Edna is in need of affection and sympathy, and that she is in a foreign culture she does not entirely understand. In one of the last scenes of the book, Edna's attitude, which has already begun to change, takes a marked turn. She watches her friend give birth and recalls her own childbirth experiences: "an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odour of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go" (104). Tethered to a patriarchal ideology of self-sacrifice and domesticity, the maternal body of Adèle does not soften Edna's resistance toward maternity and the sacrifice it entails, but rather triggers feelings of deadness and indifference. This reaction to both her own and Adèle's deliveries indicates that for Edna maternity—that is the birthing and caring for others—is a dead-end. Similarly, Marceline's miscarriage underlines the impossibility of (re)birth through traditional means. When he hears of his wife's miscarriage, Michel throws himself against Marceline's bed sobbing. He experiences a kind of loss of meaning and balance: "Le terrain céda brusquement sous mon pas; devant moi n'était plus qu'un trou vide où je trébuchais tout entier" (127). The death of this child conceived in Africa threatens Michel; it reminds him of death and in doing so threatens to undo or plunge into chaos (the "trou vide") his newly awakened body. For Michel, an escape from the mother-woman body is an escape from not only tradition and conformity, but flight from a

harmonious, peaceful, death-like stasis. Edna flees the reproductive maternal body in favor of first erotic love, then finally the seductive void of the sea. A body that derives its function solely in relationship to others (as mother or wife) cannot support or give birth to Edna or Michel's newly awakened self.

## Chapter 2: The Body Unbound: Un Etat de Vacance

Edna and Michel experience social pressure as physical limitation. Both characters struggle against a socially inculcated reserve, that prevents them from speaking about themselves. They cast off the old restricted body in favor of a newly awakened body that nurtures the new self. Bound to old ideas of restraint, tradition and conformity, the old body is marked by culture. Weighed down by social expectations and coverings, both Edna and Michel find freedom in removing their clothes—outward symbols of restrictive ideologies. However, it is important to note that the liberation of the body does not uncover or lead to the discovery of some monolithic, natural or essential body. Bodies vary as do the people who inhabit them, and while the body itself is a material reality that can be seen and touched, its abstract reality is produced by desire, thought and feeling. Indeed thinking is not separate from the body at all, but rather “implicated in the passion, emotions and materiality that are associated with lived embodiment” (Ahmed, 3). To awaken the body from the sleep of tradition, to unharness the memories triggered by new sensual experiences decenters the subject and leads him/her to question his identity. In my analysis of the body, I hope to show that what I call physical awakening momentarily unsettles the traditional Cartesian model of mind over matter to create new energy which gives the individual access to old memories and new desires that might help fuel new awakenings. When the traditional balance of mind over body is disrupted, tradition and convention are in abeyance. In this state of turbulent new sensation and emotion, there is danger of confusion, loss of self. Changing desires,

thoughts, and feelings thus have the power to change the way an individual views her body, trigger lost memories and reveal secrets about the self. These changes are the first steps toward awakening.

Physical awakening occurs through a disruption of daily activity, tradition and social norms that cause an individual to experience new sensations. Travel, for instance, results in a removal of the subject from his or her surroundings as well as a momentary suspension or even total effacement of socially inculcated norms and values. Both Edna and Michel experience a geographical displacement from north to south—Michel from France to Africa, and Edna from New Orleans to Grand Isle. Edward Said has noted that many late nineteenth-and early twentieth- century writers, both French and English, wrote of travel and *dépaysement*. For the European subject, the Orient offered a realm of freedom apart from the institutions and mores of Europe. Its exoticism signified not only freedom, but “the freedom of licentious sex” (190). The Orientalist traveler or reader sought an escape from the “increasing *embourgeoisement* of nineteenth-century society” (190) and the institutionalization of sexuality and gender roles. Orientalism, of course, is less about understanding the cultures of Africa or the Middle East, than about using the exoticism and difference of these milieux to explore the difference within the self. Michel’s travels, for instance, do little to enlighten the reader about the Maghreb, but instead give a fascinating account of another “dark continent,” Michel’s character and unconscious desires. Given the myriad obligations sexuality entailed and the strictly defined gender roles imposed upon both men and women in the Western world, travel to an exciting, disorienting new place could allow for the discovery of not only a new self, but a new sexual identity—an identity impossible to realize at home.

While the Orient was a popular setting for European writers escaping the moral strictures and limitations of European society, the lush Gulf Coast and murmuring of the

ever-present sea are no less exotic for Edna, a Protestant American in a society of Creole Catholics. The novel opens at Grand Isle, an exclusive resort on the gulf coast for upper-class Creoles. Women spend their time sewing, flirting and bathing in the warm gulf while the men return to the city during the week for work and the children are tended to by black nurses. Edna is astonished by the “entire absence of prudery” that she encounters in Creole society, and at first has difficulty reconciling it with the “lofty chastity in the Creole woman [that] seems to be inborn and unmistakable” (10). Sensuousness and beauty are combined with an easy restraint, yet for Edna beauty and sensuality trigger abandon and rebellion. The beauty of Creole society combined with the natural surroundings of Grand Isle, an environment which is “charged with the seductive odor of the sea” (13), leads Edna not only to slough off her reserve and prudery, but also to transgress the boundaries of the new society in which she finds herself.

The seascape of the Gulf Coast stands in contrast with the Pontellier’s home in New Orleans. The latter is a symbol of Edna’s containment, while the former suggests infinite possibility. Just as the call of the sea in Chopin’s novel stands in contrast to society, nature in American literature and history has often been juxtaposed with civilization, portrayed as a potentially destructive, “other” force which must be subdued and dominated. Cotton Mather thought of the New World as a kind of undisturbed devil’s playground of which God’s people must be careful; to venture out of the enclaves of community and into savage nature as Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” was to invite sin and destruction. Melville and Dickinson did not see nature in such simplistic terms as did early Americans, but perceived in nature something of the sublime, the uncontrollable and the majestic, even the terrible. Chopin’s portrayal of the sea owes much to these literary predecessors. Nature in *The Awakening* is like Edna’s own first



pangs of awakening; it is “chaotic,” “tangled,” “disturbing” (14). Maternal, exotic, and sensuous, the natural world seems to promise both freedom and entrapment. The call of the sea echoes through the novel like a refrain “whispering, clamoring, murmuring” (109); it seems to suggest all that Edna cannot articulate—the full, passionate existence that is forbidden to her.

*L’Immoraliste* also uses landscape as a kind of matrix from which Michel’s healing body draws its strength. The novel describes a continuous opening up from the small room in Biskra where Michel begins to recover to the myriad walled and open gardens and finally to the vast expanse of desert where Michel lives alone in a house without windows. This opening of space mirrors Michel’s journey toward a more open and free form of life and finally toward the infinity of the desert, which like the ocean in *The Awakening* represents desires unbounded by society and its constriction. Finally at the end of *L’Immoraliste*, Michel has rid himself of the confines of the social being as well as the ideologies constricting his flesh. While he has no intention of giving up his quest for self-discovery, at the end of the novel he is weighed down by not only his experiences, but by a sense of lassitude. In this land of persistent azure, he sleeps in the middle of the day just to “tromper la longueur morne des journées et leur insupportable loisir” (180). While he is not “fatigué de [s]on crime,” his awakening from tradition and his break from society, he has lost something. He has called his friends to him so that he can regain a part of the social structure he has lost.

By travelling south, away from their prospective civilizations, Edna and Michel experience a new freedom that allows “un état de vacance, un manque à être” (Canovas, 67). The words *vacation* and *vacance* derive from the Latin *vaccare*, or emptying. Vacation, then, is not just travel, but a voyage that allows the jolt of the new to shake the foundations of the old. Separated from familiar surroundings and comfortable social

structures, a traveler might experience a “manque à être,” or a loss of self where he or she begins to think, act, and feel in ways that would be impossible in his or her native culture. Further, new environments encourage the birth of a new being. As received ideas, restrictions and old social selves recede and begin to disappear, Edna and Michel begin to discover more authentic selves. Yet before Edna and Michel can begin to form new selves, they must experience their bodies, the sensations both pleasant and unpleasant that have been denied them. As both novels unfold, the social structures and the ideologies suffocating the characters’ personal development fall away like the clothes Michel sheds to sunbathe or the bathing suit that Edna abandons at the end of the novel. It is as if the body has been encased in a sort of strait-jacket of social expectations that constricts the breath and limits free movement and independent thought.

This is not to say, however, that independence is easily gained or that by disrobing one achieves self-awareness; rather, the body is a site of social control and to be free one must lift the taboos that alienate the subject from his/her body. Travel and vacation are one way to rediscover the body and shake off the constraints of society, but swimming, illness, sexual desire, experience of nature, and music are also potential destabilizing activities. Michel’s bout with tuberculosis jolts him into an awareness of his body and his mortality and prompts him to question his sedentary, intellectual existence. Although he begins to live rather than read, and experience rather than analyze, as he strengthens his sickly body he begins to see himself and others differently. Because his body nearly failed him, he must cultivate a new, stronger body to support his newly awakened, questioning self. Similarly, Edna’s burgeoning attraction to her friend Robert and her newly-acquired ability to swim awaken her rebellious, artistic spirit. An awareness of the body either through illness, sexual desire, or learning to swim forces a shift in self perception. The old self, which Michel describes as “[l]’amas sur notre esprit

de toutes connaissances acquises,” is revealed as merely a shell, the markings of social order inscribed upon the individual body (62).

### Chapter Three: the new self, sacrifice and confession

Although Michel and Edna find their prospective societies limiting, living in a community around and with others provides order, structure and meaning. Desire, longing, memory, impulse—although these phenomena provide new energy and even impetus for change, they alone are not enough upon which to build a self. In addition to their physical awakenings, both Edna and Michel embark upon a series of experiments, rejections, and revisions where they try on the various social costumes available to them. In the novels the characters come to a clearer sense of themselves in three ways: looking, speaking, and acting/creating. In chapter three, I call these three stages: illusion and gaze, confession and friendship, and self and sacrifice. An analysis of the phases of emerging selfhood shows the differences between Edna’s and Michel’s position in society and the possibilities available to them, and it demonstrates that desire for freedom and illicit sexual experiences is a recurrent problem in the characters’ lives. As Michel says at the beginning of his narrative: “Savoir se libérer n’est rien; l’ardu c’est savoir être libre” (17). Edna has liberated herself from the responsibilities of motherhood and domesticity, yet she remains firmly caught in the illusion of conventional romantic love.

Unlike more realistic novels, *The Awakening* “is a book about sleep and dreams and their relation to reality, and like many other fictional works of the late nineteenth century it reverses the customary exaltation of the real at the expense of the imaginary” (Gilmore, 74). This exaltation of dreams and the imaginary, however, thwarts Edna’s progress in self-development. The events of August twenty-eighth, Edna’s first swim and her first experience of Mademoiselle Reisz’s music change Edna and awaken her body, but they also unmoor her from the realistic mindset that she adopted when she married

Léonce: “As the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality” (19). Edna sees marrying Léonce as a mark of maturity, and she closes “the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (19). However, her repressed romantic longings return and they are a major source of frustration and discontent. After witnessing Adèle’s terrible delivery, she imagines Robert as a balm for frazzled nerves: “She could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one” (106). Edna’s insistence upon romantic love as the apex of bliss, an experience central to her newly awakened life, prevents her from balancing her dreams and desires with reality and becoming the independent woman she imagines herself to be.

While less subject to illusion than Edna, Michel often deceives himself and others. Frightened to share his new thoughts and ideas with Marceline, he presents a false image of himself in order to “*préservé de son jugement ma pensée*” (71), and after he has his beard shaved, he feared that “*on voyait à nu ma pensée*” (70). Michel prefers to keep his authentic self hidden until he is comfortable displaying his true self in public, yet Gide offers the reader an early glimpse of Michel’s thoughts and motivations, albeit in a circuitous manner. The scene where Michel watches Moktir steal Marceline’s scissors advances the reader’s understanding of Michel’s quest in three ways. First it establishes the mode in which Michel will relate to many other characters; he watches from a distance, jealously, coveting their freedom. About the workers on his farm whom he sees as models of vice he says: “[*je*] *surveillais amoureusement leurs plaisirs*” (133). Second, Michel approves of Moktir’s theft, which indicates that vice and transgression are an important part of Michel’s self-discovery. By doing what he should not—poaching, leaving his wife in the middle of the night—he finds who he is. Third, Michel himself is tricked because he does not realize the child knew he was watching until

Ménalque tells him. Rather than the “aveugle érudit” that Ménalque believes him to be, Michel is beginning to see with new eyes, yet he needs Ménalque’s help because he does not yet understand himself.

While looking at others and studying their behavior as Michel does assists in his self-knowledge, conversing with others helps Edna and Michel to understand themselves because it forces dialogue and the recognition of differences. Edna, for instance, experiences an “unaccustomed taste of candor” when she begins to talk of herself; it is “a first breath of freedom” (19). In her relationships with Adèle Ratignolle, who embodies conventionality, and Mademoiselle Reisz, who represents independence and freedom from morality—Edna is able to speak about herself. Her relationship with Adèle, for instance, allows genuine dialogue because it is built on difference tempered by sympathy and acceptance. Edna benefits from Adèle’s motherly affection; both women accept the other as they are and cultivate a relationship based on acceptance of their differences. On the other hand, Mademoiselle Reisz encourages Edna’s anti-social emotions and passions; she is the anti-mother who encourages rebellion and independence. Yet Edna finds she is caught between two extremes, neither of which offers her a model for the kind of freedom she seeks. Although Edna casts aside her “mantle of reserve,” her friendships do not mitigate her solitude. Instead Edna’s constant companion remains, not the “beloved” she seeks, but her daydreams, desires and solitary musings.

Confession and friendship play a much more productive and positive role in *L’Immoraliste*. Uncomfortable with himself and only vaguely aware of the true self he claims to seek, Michel dissimulates and lies to Marceline and the people he encounters. Nonetheless, in order to discover the authentic self he wants, he must overcome his “invincible pudeur” and talk about himself and his life. The majority of the novel is Michel’s confession, his narrative preceded by Gide’s preface and a letter from Michel’s

friends. According to Foucault, “Western man is a confessing animal” because the structures of society, law, religion— even the dynamics of relationships— push us to talk and to tell the truth. (59). Confession encourages a need for secrets even as it encourages people to tell them. Confession focuses not on “what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of confession” (Foucault, 66). This labor of confession also functions via an interesting power dynamic. The relationship is servile: the confessor is obligated to tell his story to a higher authority, yet it is also a power relationship where the truth comes from the bottom up. Certainly Michel’s friends do not force his confession and they are presumably his equals, yet the scenes at the beginning and the end of the novel portray a hierarchal and oppositional relationship between Michel and his three friends. Michel’s friends are ambivalent, even judgmental, yet he has called them to Africa because he needs them to listen to his story. Unlike a sinner who desires forgiveness from trespasses, Michel only seeks to better understand himself by relating his experience. Although he risks the judgment of the “trois amis de Job” he has the opportunity to talk freely, to tell his own truth. Gide illustrates Foucault’s notion of confession and depicts how confessional discourse and personal narrative undermine the very structures of power that demand the confession in the first place. Michel feels compelled to relate his experience and doing so rescues him from his “liberté sans emploi,” yet his friends are disconcerted by his confession; they are “presque complices” (179). Furthermore, speaking has led to a hesitant acceptance of his sexuality, yet more importantly it indicates that Michel can relate to others in an honest and authentic way.

Chopin and Gide interrogate the nature of liberty, and Michel and Edna must ask themselves how much they are willing to give up to pursue their desire for the self. Freedom, both writers suggest, involves not only self-awareness, independent thought,

and an awareness of one's body, but also sacrifice. As Chopin's narrator remarks in chapter six, "the beginning of things, of a world especially is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing" (14). As both protagonists grope toward a new understanding of themselves, there is a possibility of sacrificing others to continue the quest of personal realization. Michel sacrifices Marceline in order to be free, yet barely survives the shock of her death, and he must call upon his friends for help. Michel is a man obsessed with physical health and independence, and he is humbled by his search for liberation. He finds "au seuil de l'empire de l'au-délà," not a super-human creature independent and above suffering, but a "simple mortel qui veut être sauvé et vivre" (Halévy, 79). Alone in a vast desert, living in a house with gaping holes like sightless eyes for windows, Michel has reached an impasse. He has gone as far as he can alone, and now he must reenter social communion by way of confession and storytelling. Michel has friends he can call on, whereas Edna feels herself irremediably alone. She refuses to sacrifice herself for her children in daily devotion to a life she does not want. Paradoxically, in killing herself she saves herself from what she refers to as "the soul's slavery" (108). Her realization of a Darwinian, desacralized universe, where mothers are dupes of nature and dreams and desires are but illusions in order to secure the continuance of the species, crushes her. The erotic/romantic relationship in which she put so much hope now appears fleeting, and not worth the importance she has placed in it. In Chopin's novel, awareness is a state of disillusionment and despair. Knowledge offers only a horrible vision of meaninglessness and violence, and Edna finds this freedom and the sacrifices demanded of her intolerable.

While *L'Immoraliste* ends upon a note of hope and hesitant acceptance, *The Awakening* ends with Edna's suicide and the troubling realization that only death offers the transcendence Edna seeks. As she steps naked into the water, Edna feels that no one

understands her; she is forever alone. Despite this ending, the images and sounds Edna experiences as she drowns suggest life and fertility: “The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was a hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (109). Edna remembers the cavalry officer with whom she was once infatuated, and the twin image of buzzing bees and musky flowers suggests desire, fecundity, and fulfillment. In the watery, seductive, womb-like world of the ocean, symbol of limitless desire, Edna can finally be free of social entrapment. Encouraged by Adèle to “think of the children,” and Mademoiselle Reisz to be “the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (61), Edna is frustrated and exhausted; she can see no way to live the life she craves. Portrayed as an elusive source of beguilement, beauty and longing, the ocean also suggests transcendence, yet in a world ruled by Darwinian principles, the ocean is a void, a restful oblivion into which Edna sinks. Yet the ocean and the images of desire and fecundity upon which the novel ends suggest something else: the emerging of women’s freedom, and the birth of social change. Long associated with nature, materiality, and the body, woman was often denied a voice and kept out of the social sphere. The persistent voice of the sea that echoes throughout the novel hints at untapped possibilities and excluded voices. Described as different, “in between,” and a misfit, Edna represents many women’s struggles to be free. Within the context of late nineteenth-century American society, she suggests a new kind of woman unlike the motherly Madame Ratignolle or the spinster Mademoiselle Reisz. Similarly, Michel’s story is “the struggle of a man, representative of a collective, to shed the guilt and constraints accumulated since his childhood, reflective of a strictly enforced and monolithic morality” (Fagley, 81-82). This “monolithic morality” that Edna and Michel rebel against alienates the individual from himself and suppresses the energy of the body. As I will show in the following chapter of this thesis, society’s drive to suppress and



control creates out of the infinite diversity of nature a garden of sameness that will soon dry up and wither away without the energizing “sécrétion” of difference (Gide, 106).

## CHAPTER 1

### THE BODY BOUND: CULTURAL RESTRICTION AND REPRESSION

#### INTRODUCTION

*The Awakening* and *L'Immoraliste* portray the flight away from restrictive morality and conformity toward authenticity and individuality. Authenticity and individuality prove difficult, however, within the context of a morality that is not only restrictive, but inculcated into the very fabric of being. This social self, “that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world,” (Chopin, 55) covers and suppresses the real self, what Michel in *L'Immoraliste* calls “l'être authentique” (Gide, 62). Self-awareness and liberation often begin with an analysis of the self and the individual's relationship to societal structures such as the family, community, and tradition or cultural practice. In the case of Edna and Michel, the characters focus their struggle for freedom on the body and the ways in which gendered norms of social behavior limit their freedom. The characters try to fit a prescribed mode of behavior contrary to their desires and personality, and they feel circumscribed, claustrophobic, as if they were wearing clothes that were too small. In *The Awakening*, Edna is caught “between social demands and personal yearnings, between repressive order and chaotic freedom” (Giorcelli, 145). The ocean, a recurring motif in the novel, echoes Edna's longing for freedom, while life in her husband's house on Esplanade Street frustrates her and reminds her of her domestic obligations. Michel in *L'Immoraliste* experiences a similar “bourgeois crisis;” he is caught between “duty toward others and right toward [him]self” (Giorcelli, 145). Upon his return from Africa, he finds life in Paris vain and empty, intellectual life flat and uninspiring. Accustomed to “une vie plus

spacieuse et aérée,” Michel becomes more aware of the discrepancy between his desires and the repressive social order that limits his burgeoning individuality (105).

Because their travels have changed them, Edna and Michel feel alienated in the societies in which they had formerly been comfortable. By comparing the lives that Edna and Michel led before their travels to their feelings of frustration when they return, I will highlight the cultural norms that circumscribe the body and limit Edna and Michel in their quest for authentic identity. I have divided my analysis of social control and the body into three categories: cultural and gender norms represented in section one by clothes, the relationship between cultural norms, the body and nature in part two, and finally Edna and Michel’s relationship to motherhood and maternity in part three. The theory of culture and nature that Michel advances after his first trip to Africa informs my analysis of both novels. According to Michel, culture and nature exist in close symbiotic relationship. Culture must maintain a close rapport to the vitality of nature or cultural institutions fossilize, becoming rigid, and life diminishes and hardens into a “forme gaine où l’esprit gêné languit et bientôt s’étoile, puis meurt” (106). The word “gaine,” meaning rind, mold, or girdle, is crucial to my analysis; it denotes an envelope which protects and encloses an object, in this case “l’esprit.” Chopin and Gide offer various examples of clothes, landscapes, or buildings which either enrich or confine the protagonists. The environments and the clothes in which the protagonists find themselves limit their desires and individuality, but also illuminate the gender norms of bourgeois morality that circumscribe the characters’ freedom. Chopin speaks of Edna’s “mantle of reserve,” (14) whereas Michel describes his alienation from his body as an “invincible pudeur” that prevents frank communication between him and his father. Edna had never been “a woman given to confidences” (19), and the use of the word *mantle* suggests that her reticence has a physical component. Her body is statue-like and falls into “splendid

poses” (15), and Edna is lost in contemplation, her body frozen and rigid. Pudeur and reserve are socially inculcated qualities that affect the characters’ ability to speak about themselves and realize their desires; Chopin and Gide’s imagery, however, also implies a physical phenomenon of extreme reserve that covers and masks the body.

Maternal figures play a large role in the development of Edna and Michel’s characters and their rebellion from social norms and tradition. Although motherhood is a role regulated by custom and tradition, it is more than just a role that Edna tries to escape and Michel defines himself against; it is an experience, and Edna’s experiences of maternity and Michel’s responses to it are incongruous with society’s maternal image. In *The Awakening* and *L’Immoraliste*, society’s maternal image is one of self-sacrifice and conformity. While mothers like Madame Ratignolle and Marceline are supposed to put aside their own desires—as Adèle warns Edna, “think of the childre,”—they also embody bourgeois feminine values of tranquility, order, and chastity. Viewed as naturally modest, women were the guardians of propriety and civilization. Yet conforming to bourgeois society and enacting traditional feminine values is inauthentic, and Edna cannot do what Adèle has done: bridge the gap between “the image and reality of motherhood,” outwardly conforming to the image despite her inner misgivings (Schweitzer, 170).

Although Edna’s social class affords her many privileges, as a woman in late nineteenth-century New Orleans, her choices are limited. In upper-class Creole society, where men make money and women care for children and the home, motherhood remains not only women’s primary responsibility, but also a central aspect of their identity. The narrator states that motherhood is a “responsibility which she had blindly assumed and which fate had not fitted her” (19). The other women at Grand Isle, whom the narrator ironically dubs “mother-women,” are women “who esteemed it a holy privilege to efface

themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (9). Edna feels herself incapable of this all-consuming devotion and self-sacrifice that would tie her to her children and the home. Womanhood and motherhood were inextricably linked to the domestic sphere. The presence of the woman at home undergirds the public sphere by offering a comforting refuge from typically masculine pursuits such as business and politics. According to the bourgeois ideology of Creole New Orleans, femininity and maternity are “inseparable.” Maternity, in Edna’s society, “is crucial to the maintenance of patriarchal and laissez-faire capitalism, but incompatible with female desire, autonomy or independent subjectivity” (Schweitzer, 169). Such an ideology confines women to the realm of the home, and their thoughts and aspirations to the domestic. Encouraged to think of herself only in terms of her relationships to others, she fails to develop her own identity. Because Edna views motherhood and individuality as mutually exclusive, her “struggle for autonomous selfhood entails a rejection of her responsibilities as mother” (Schweitzer, 162).

Michel’s struggle for freedom also entails a rejection of the home and the family. Although nineteenth-century men were free to move between the domestic and the public sphere, bourgeois male identity was linked to women, family and the home. The reality of separate spheres encouraged a sexual ethos of corresponding opposites, where gender roles developed in relation to each other, and sexual harmony resulted in reproductive success. Manly virtues of honor, strength and courage contrasted with feminine qualities of weakness and dependence. According to Nye, in nineteenth-century France “honor was *embodied* in bourgeois men as a set of normative sexual characteristics and desires that reflected the strategies of bourgeois social reproduction” (10). The modifier *social* implies that biological reproduction is closely tied to the enhancement of social image. To maintain an image of power and success, a man fathered children to prove his social

and biological prowess. Deviation from these sexual norms or failure to perform them adequately was considered deeply shameful. Men could only fulfill their socially sanctioned role of father, provider and protector in relation to women, who were considered natural mothers and wives. As the novel progresses, Michel becomes increasingly uncomfortable in the domestic sphere. While he cultivates masculine virtues such as strength and independence, he is anxious to reject materialism, domesticity and bourgeois morality.

Michel associates order, tradition, conventionality, and weakness with femininity. As he cultivates his strength and independence he starts to distance himself emotionally from Marceline. He struggles not only with the role he is expected to fulfill, but culture itself : “ Et chaque jour croissait en moi le confus sentiment de richesses intactes, que couvraient, cachaient, étouffaient les cultures, les décences, les morales” (158). The morals, culture and sense of decency that Michel alludes to are embodied in his wife, Marceline, the Norman countryside, and his memories of his mother, an austere and religious woman. As the novel progresses, he begins to associate Marceline, his wife, with his deceased mother. In Normandy, he sits on the bench with Marceline where “jadis j’allais m’asseoir avec ma mère” (83), and the relationship between Marceline and Michel resembles that of a mother and son, rather than that of two newlyweds. Michel associates maternity and femininity with the domestication of nature and all that is “effeminate, delicate, passive, fanciful.” (Driskill, 23). He rebels against the “symmetrically ordered world” of culture” (Driskill, 23), and instead of this feminine, artificial world, he prefers the authentic, vital realm of nature. The “richesses intactes” covered by culture and tradition suggest childhood, its memories buried beneath the obligations and social mores of adulthood.

It is not surprising that while in Africa, Michel enjoys the lively company of children; he wants to recapture the vitality of childhood and he feels Marceline blocks his way. Like the “gaine” that mediates the relationship between the individual and nature, maternity, according to Kristeva, acts like a “filter” between nature and culture (Kristeva, 238). The mother embodies social norms and communicates them to her children; in Michel’s case Marceline monitors him, attempting to shield him with her shawl and protect his sickly body. The shawl blocks Michel from direct experience of nature, but when he is sick it protects him from the elements. The safe cocoon of the shawl and of Marceline’s maternal care recalls Michel’s remarks about his youth: “La vie trop calme que je menais m’affaiblissait et me préservait à la fois” (21). Michel’s youth, although calm, was marked by the austerity of his Protestant mother. He has retained the spirit of these teachings although not the lessons themselves, and they have kept him in ignorance of himself. Motherly influence has ordered Michel’s life, and he continues to live according his mother’s ethos of discipline and rigidity until illness shakes him physically and emotionally.

Essentialist gender norms provide Edna and Michel with a predetermined path, a sort of treadmill of socially approved and mandated behavior. *The Awakening* dramatizes one woman’s quest to become free from being an object, a possession defined by others. In order to discover her identity and desires, Edna seeks to escape the domestic sphere and the confining role of motherhood. As she discards the codes of behavior and thought to which she used to adhere, Edna begins to experience a disparity between her body, its desires, and the social reality which designates her flesh as a maternal, chaste vessel. Michel also notices a discordance between his experience and the codes of his society. After his stay in Africa, he cannot stand Parisian society or the vapidness of salon conversation. Among all his old acquaintances he sees himself as “contraint par eux de

jouer un faux personnage, de ressembler à celui qu'ils croyaient que j'étais resté, [...] je feignis donc d'avoir les pensées et les goûts qu'on me prêtait" (103). While Edna and Michel have been like sleepwalkers, wandering listlessly through their respective environments; travel and illness have jolted each of them into a tentative and initial awareness of the incompatibility of their desires and the possibilities available to them.

## Part 1

### LA GAINÉ: CLOTHING, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND THE BODY

Clothing contains the body and marks it socially by designating class and gender. Within the context of Michel's theory of civilization and the imagery of the novels, clothing contains the body in a social casing that limits behavior. While clothing can enhance sexual allure by adorning the body, in Edna and Michel's situations, clothing symbolizes cultural norms and societal restraint. Far from being mere examples of local color, the descriptions of women's clothing in *The Awakening* are crucial to an understanding of the dynamics of gender and material culture in late nineteenth-century America. The details of a character's clothing articulate not only the wearer's social and gender identity, but removal or change of clothing indicates abdication or repudiation of socially defined roles. In *The Awakening* Chopin uses descriptions of clothing to question two main values of late nineteenth-century American culture: materialism, and the husband's possession of his wife, values which limit Edna's freedom by locking her into a rigid role. As Carolyn Matthews remarks in her study of *The Awakening* and the fashion of the era, "women's clothing signalled immobility and their lack of self-ownership. [...] the lady's gown, sewn from over twenty yards of fabric and worn over multiple "skirts," hand-embroidered drawers, a corset, and undervests, weighed nearly twenty pounds" (Matthews). Under Louisiana's version of the Napoleonic Code, married



women had few rights; their destinies were determined by their husbands. Upper class women's elaborate costume demonstrated their husband's wealth and status but it also highlighted the wife's status as property. Heavy gowns and constricting undergarments limited her mobility and enhanced her value as an ornamental creature of leisure.

Although the women of Grand Isle dress simply and more comfortably while on vacation, city garb was much more elaborate, requiring different dress for morning house dress, afternoon visits, evening engagements, and dinner. The extensive and time consuming toilette of the upper class lady resulted in a costume that conveyed the values of her class: propriety, motherhood, and refinement; "understated, tasteful attire like Edna's identified wearers as respectably middle class" (Matthews). Clothing in Edna's milieu so closely correlated with social function that it is not surprising that Mr. Pontellier notices that Edna did not "wear her usual Tuesday reception gown; she was in ordinary house dress" (48). Normally on Tuesdays, Edna, clad in "a handsome reception gown" would "remain in the drawing-room the entire afternoon receiving her visitors" (48). Upon hearing that Edna has abandoned her Tuesday responsibilities, Léonce grows angry: "we've got to observe *les convenances* if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession" (49). Mr. Pontellier's use of the word "procession" indicates that maintaining and advancing one's social and economic status requires not just an observance of social convention, but an orderly, ceremonious progression where image matters just as much as substance. Far from an undignified "rat-race" or conspicuous grasping for money and power, Mr. Pontellier's image of economic advancement is masked in a veneer of respectability and elegance. Edna is the domestic arm of her husband's business enterprise and responsible for enhancing the elegance and beauty of this veneer. As overseer of the domestic realm, she is required to entertain the wives,

daughters and sisters of Mr. Pontellier's friends and business associates: "You can't afford to snub Mrs. Belthrop. Why, Belthrop could buy and sell us ten times over" (49).

Edna's refusal to don the reception dress indicates her rejection of her role as society hostess and wife. The descriptions of the big house on Esplanade Street place Edna's repudiation within the context of subordination and ornamentation. Edna has not only failed to observe her Tuesday reception day, but she has neglected to properly manage her staff. Mr. Pontellier says of the cook who has scorched the fish: "They need looking after, like any other class of person that you employ" (50), implying that Edna is an the manager of the house just as he is the manger of his office: "Suppose I didn't look after the clerks in my office, just let them run things their own way; they'd soon make a nice mess of me and my business" (50). He takes this same managerial attitude toward his possessions: "Mr. Pontellier was very fond of walking about his house examining its various appointments and details, to see that nothing was amiss" (48). Chopin's introduction of Edna and Léonce's quarrel in chapter seventeen with a description of the house and Mr. Pontellier's attitude toward his possessions points to a correlation between possession and wife. The description of Mr. Pontellier's adored objects conveys a sense of immobility: "a painting, a statuette, a rare lace curtain" are objects to be contemplated, carefully arranged, and displayed (48). Léonce likes all his possessions in their place and his wife at home on Tuesdays wearing her uniform, "a handsome reception gown" (48). Like Michel who detests Parisian social customs because they force him to "jouer un faux personnage," (103) Edna refuses to perform a role that she sees as artificial and meaningless. In chapter nineteen, the narrator remarks that Léonce was unaware that his wife was "becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment to appear before the world" (55). Here and in the instance of the reception

gown, clothing functions as a social garment that veils the body, obscuring the authentic self behind a mask of social obligation and ritual.

In *The Awakening* dress signifies social responsibility, yet Chopin also uses dress and descriptions of Mademoiselle Reisz's and Madame Ratignolle's clothing to examine Edna's propensity for "reserve" and to indicate the female roles available to her. The body of each woman represents a way of being that Edna eventually rejects. Each woman represents not only a different feminine role in society, but a different relationship to the body. If Adèle is a mother figure who urges conformity and domestic happiness, Mademoiselle is the anti-mother, encouraging rebellion and independence. The narrator uses descriptions of each woman's body in order to elucidate the starkly opposed, yet gender-coded roles available to Edna. Beauty draws Edna to Adèle Ratignolle, a woman who is "delicious in the rôle" of mother-woman (9). Edna enjoys looking at her friend who is described in terms of cliché. As Giorelli notes, Edna's body and character are "marked by an essential state of 'inbetweenness'. She can be defined mainly by approximation" (112), a fact first demonstrated by the color of Edna's clothing and her physical description. Edna's hair and eyes are a yellow-brown and the narrator describes her as more handsome than beautiful. While Mademoiselle Reisz wears black, Madame Ratignolle, and the other Creole women wear white, Edna wears a white muslin dress with a line of brown running through it. She is neither blonde nor brunette, or wearing white or black, but she is between these two opposites, as if Chopin were implying that Edna is faced with a black and white choice between mother-woman and spinster. Furthermore, the color brown associates Edna with the earth, vitality and bodily pleasures, whereas white signals purity, and black suggest solemnity.

Clad always in black, Mademoiselle is "strikingly homely" with a "small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed" (25). Mademoiselle is "disagreeable" and

“self-assertive,” her glowing eyes indicate not just her tenacious intensity, but her strange witch-like charm (25). Her appearance suggests dryness and a complete disregard for fashion: she always wears “a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair” (25). As she plays the piano, “her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave the appearance of deformity” (59).

Mademoiselle’s lack of fashion and “deformed” body mark her as an outsider in a society where image and fashion communicate acceptance of social mores. Her “unnatural curves and angles” imply a “deformed” relationship to women’s “natural” role of mother and wife. It is as if she has de-formed her body and reformed it to suit her “unnatural” vocation: independent artist. Like Ménélaque in *L’Immoraliste* who seeks to challenge Michel’s thinking, Mademoiselle Reisz attempts to reform Edna’s concepts of a woman’s place by telling her that the artist must possess “the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (61).

If Mademoiselle represents a perverted relationship to societal norms, Madame Ratignolle is the picture of compliant conventionality; she is a “surface of clichés” (Schweitzer, 169). Just as Edna’s indeterminate physical description reflects an uncertainty about her life and her role, the more vivid description of Adèle and the reliance upon cliché links her to tradition. Adèle Ratignolle exemplifies the narrator’s idea of a “mother-woman,” and her sensual appeal is undeniable: “there are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and fair lady of our dreams” (9). Adèle looks like the heroine of a story should look; she is clothed in the time-worn words of romance. Because Edna represents a new kind of woman and a new kind of heroine, her image and character are hard to picture. She has yet to define herself and has not identified herself definitively with a role, and her discomfort with motherhood and domesticity suggest a burgeoning new woman

heroine. In contrast, Adèle is described with “old words.” She is the “fair lady” of the courtly romance, but also “a faultless Madonna” (11). The use of the “blason du corps” to describe Adèle’s beauty reinforces her as object of desire and makes the role of motherhood sensual, enticing and “delicious:” Adèle’s beauty is “flaming and apparent.” Her “spun-gold hair” cannot be tied back, her blue eyes “were nothing but sapphires” and her pouting lips are like cherries “or some other delicious crimson fruit” (9). While not as feminine or matronly as Madame Ratignolle, the lines of Edna’s body are “long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it.” Her body has a “noble beauty of [...] modeling” and a “graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd” (15).

Where descriptions of Adèle are steeped in stereotype, descriptions of Edna are suggestive. Like the first clumsy sketches she makes, these descriptions imply her potential as they outline only briefly her appearance. Edna’s silhouette is “long, clean and symmetrical,” signs of health and athleticism. The “noble beauty,” words more often used to describe men, implies dignity, and self-possession, while “severity of poise and movement” suggests sharpness, an almost statuesque impenetrability and reserve (15). It is Edna’s reserve that initially sets her apart from the women at Grand Isle. She is often “lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought” (15). This absorption in her inner world causes the body to freeze into those “splendid poses” while the day dreamer, lost in thought, ignores the material world and her own physicality. As Edna begins “to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” she awakens to her body and the world around her. Adèle’s influence upon Edna helps her to cast off this mantle. Edna is attracted by her beauty, but also “the candor of the woman’s whole existence, which everyone might read” (14). Madame Ratignolle is, in a sense, free. She

appears to harbor no thoughts, secrets, or feelings that could contradict her image of mother-woman. Her movements appear natural and fluid because she is comfortable in her role and her skin.

Unlike Edna, Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz are not burdened by “the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (14).

Mademoiselle is dynamic, quarrelsome, and in opposition to social mores in both dress and behavior, whereas Adèle seems to conform effortlessly to her role of mother-woman, possessing the “grace and majesty which queens are sometimes supposed to possess”

(13). The juxtaposed descriptions of Edna’s and Adèle’s bodies demonstrate Edna’s conflict between her inner reality that questions and her outer self that conforms. Such a conflict creates severity and rigidity in her movement which suggests the rigid outer

covering Michel describes in his theory of civilization. Edna’s reserve leads to reticence, which is like a hard shell separating her from her body. As Edna and Adèle sit by the beach, Edna drifts into reverie. Adèle notices Edna’s face “arrested by the absorbed

expression which seemed to have seized and fixed every feature into a statuesque repose”

(16). Entranced by her thoughts, Edna features are fixed like those of a statue. In

contrast, Madame Ratignolle’s movements and body seem harmonious and fluid, if a

little languorous: “She was dressed in pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles that became

her. The draperies and fluttering things which she wore suited her rich, luxuriant beauty

as a greater severity of line could not have done” (15). Fluffiness, ruffles and “fluttering

things” suggest femininity, softness, but also the froth of the sea. Having lost her own

mother very early, Edna is at first uncomfortable with Adèle’s motherly affection and

sympathy, “yet she lent herself readily to the Creole’s gentle caress” (17)—just as she

later yields to the caress of the sea.

While Chopin's narrator speaks of Edna's "mantle of reserve," a metaphor that evokes images of an invisible shell-like covering that maintains Edna's reticence and introversion, Gide refers to Michel's "invincible pudeur" (19). In the letter that begins the novel, one of Michel's friends remarks upon the change in Michel's comportment after his time in Africa: "Ce n'était plus le puritain très docte de naguère, aux gestes maladroits à force d'être convaincus, aux regards si clairs que devant eux souvent nos trop libres propos s'arrêtaient" (14). Michel is learned, but as the word "docte" indicates, his intelligence was narrow and pedantic. The phrases "aux regards si clairs" and "gestes maladroits" depicts an earnest young man, whose innocent conviction in his beliefs leads him to develop his mind at the expense of his body. Just as Edna's reserve and intense introspection causes her to be frozen and statuesque, Michel's puritanical attitude makes him physically clumsy and disconnected from his friends. Physical isolation also informs Michel's relationship with his father. Although not as austere as his mother, Michel's father is very reticent about personal and religious matters. Michel never discussed his father's lack of religious beliefs with him because of a kind of "invincible pudeur" (19). Father and son share this "pudeur" and it isolates them from each other. This reluctance to talk of personal matters could be due to the time period and the temperaments of Michel and his father, yet the language suggests something more. "Invincible" implies something insurmountable, but also in its Latin root it means that which cannot be conquered. In this respect, the word "invincible" evokes an image of an impregnable fortress. The word "pudeur" means modesty, but it implies not just moderation of speech, but also a deeply-rooted chastity and shame toward the body and sexual matters. It is as if Michel's pudeur, like Edna's reserve, is so strong that it walls him off, separating him from himself, others, and physical experience. Like a thick fortress

surrounding and encasing the body, Michel's "invincible pudeur" protects him even as it weakens him.

As he recounts his story, Michel realizes that his mother's austerity and father's "invincible pudeur" formed his personality and his attitude toward his body. Whereas his father's "invincible pudeur" isolates him from his body, Ménéalque's ideas of individuality and bodily freedom offer him a tantalizing counter-influence. In fact, Pierre Masson calls Ménéalque an "anti-père." Arguing against influence, yet all the while attempting to influence Michel, Ménéalque, like Mademoiselle Reisz, has a strange diabolic appearance: Ménéalque is elegant : "d'énormes moustaches tombantes, déjà grises, coupaient son visage de pirate; la flamme froide de son regard indiquait plus de courage et de décision que de bonté" (116). When he explains this notion of freedom from a repressive society to Michel, Ménéalque uses the metaphor of a "patron," or pattern: "Chacun se propose un patron, puis l'imité; même il ne choisit pas le patron qu'il imite; il accepte un patron tout choisi" (117). Ménéalque's use of the word "patron" recalls the scissors that Moktir stole in Africa, and it anticipates his discussion with Michel about the importance of tailoring one's happiness to fit the body. Ménéalque offers himself as the counter-example to society's approved image : "Je ne prétends à rien qu'au naturel, et pour chaque action, le plaisir que j'y prends m'est signe que je devais le faire" (117). By contrast, conventional people "pensent n'obtenir que par la contrainte ; ils ne se plaisent que contrefaits" (117). Ménéalque is arguing against bourgeois values of restraint, discipline, and self-denial that stifle the pursuit of self-knowledge and self-invention. Because of what Ménéalque calls societal "laws" of imitation and fear, people do not invent themselves; they are afraid of appearing as they are before their neighbors: "C'est à soi-même que chacun prétend le moins ressembler" (117). Ménéalque refers to this phenomenon as "agoraphobie morale"—a word choice that hints at the necessity of a



public role that corresponds as closely as possible with the authentic self. To be “contrefaits,” as conventional society requires, demands that an individual follow a predetermined path rather than find his own way.

When Michel visits him the third and final time, Ménéalque continues questioning Michel, tempting him with his vision of freedom. Ménéalque’s opinions on happiness disconcert Michel: “je ne puis rapporter ici toutes ses phrases ; beaucoup pourtant se gravèrent en moi, d’autant plus fortement que j’eusse désiré les oublier” (125). Although he states that Ménéalque has taught him nothing new, what he says reveals Michel to himself: “[ses phrases] mettaient à nu brusquement ma pensée; une pensée que je couvrais de tant de voiles ; que j’avais presque pu l’espérer étouffée” (125). To describe the act of repression, Michel speaks of covering and laying bare, vocabulary that alludes to Ménéalque’s image of the pattern and clothing. According to Ménéalque, to hide the true self is to imitate a pattern not of one’s choosing, whereas Michel views honesty as nudity, a state where all social coverings are discarded. Yet within the context of Ménéalque’s imagery clothing, or the shape the individual gives to his experience, is necessary; clothing makes the naked human body a part of society, giving the individual a place and a purpose. Unlike the conforming public who merely follow a pattern they do not choose, Ménéalque is the tailor of his own experience. He tells Michel there are “mille formes de la vie [et que] chacun ne peut connaître qu’une” (123). For this reason, “Le bonheur ne se veut pas tout fait, mais sur mesure. [...] j’ai tâché de tailler ce bonheur à ma taille” (123). Happiness is not ready-made, or socially produced, but a garment that each individual tailors to fit his own body—a fact Edna understands when she refuses to don her Tuesday reception gown. Michel proclaims that he too tailored his happiness to fit, “mais j’ai grandi; à présent mon bonheur me serre; parfois j’en suis presque étranglé” (123). After his time in Africa, where he experienced “une vie plus

spacieuse et aérée” (105), Paris, the clothes he wears and the roles he plays make Michel claustrophobic and restless.

The verb *tailler*, however, signifies more than just *to tailor* ; it also means *to cut* and alludes to Marceline’s stolen scissors. That Michel observes Mektir stealing the scissors is undoubtedly important, yet the scissors themselves symbolize self-invention. According to Norma Halévy, the scissors establish “le lien entre Michel, Mektir et Ménalque et [...] ‘coupent le fil’ qui les attache à leur véritable propriétaire, Marceline” (74). The scissors, small, delicate sewing scissors, represent femininity and domesticity. While Marceline’s scissors were small, no doubt used for a lady’s needlework, Ménalque uses the word *tailler*, a word with masculine connotations: a “tailleur” makes clothing specifically for men. In the nineteenth-century, women often sewed, but the image Halévy introduces of scissors that cut the thread (“couper le fil”) suggests the mythical Fates. In Greek mythology, a group of three women, the Moirae, controlled the destiny of humankind, and when a person’s apportioned time was over, one of the Fates would cut his thread of life. Marceline has acted as a mother-nurse figure for Michel; in caring for him, she has life and death power over her weaker husband. Within the system of Gide’s images, tailoring, scissors, cutting, and patterns, Michel’s approval of Mektir’s theft implies a desire to take back from Marceline power over his life and to cut the thread that binds them. The scissors “détiennent le pouvoir magique de révéler à Michel la connaissance de soi ” (Halévy, 74), yet he does not fully understand that they signal his desire to fashion his destiny.

Ménalque demonstrates his ideas of freedom in terms of haute couture, and he reawakens in Michel the desire for freedom by juxtaposing Michel’s “bonheur calme du foyer” with his own more adventurous lifestyle. The verbs that Michel uses to describe his “happiness,” “*serrer*” and “*étrangler*” (123), evoke an image of a straight jacket that

prohibits movement, growth and change; scissors offer an escape, a way to cut away the clothes that encase the body. Ménéalque's ideas about freedom, however, do not suggest that clothes—the fabric of an individual's social self—be cut away, but that their form change. When Ménéalque shows Michel the scissors they are hardly recognizable and have become: “quelque chose d'informe, de rouillé, d'épointé, de faussé” (110). The word “faussé” recalls Ménéalque's remark about “milles formes de la vie ;” the original shape of the scissors made their function clear, yet their new shape hints at Michel's unformed desire to escape the strictures of domesticity for a new, still undefined form of life. The scissors have been deformed, twisted into a rusty metal object Michel keeps hidden in the pocket of his waistcoat. Like the desires and thoughts he keeps carefully concealed from Marceline, the scissors remain veiled by his false social self.

## Part 2

### LANDSCAPE, NATURE AND THE BODY

Just as *L'Immoraliste* uses images of clothing and scissors to illustrate the pressure of conformity and the need for self-creation, *The Awakening* employs fashion to similar ends, primarily to question gender norms. Physical environments serve a similar function in both narratives. Like old clothes that are too tight, physical space both natural and cultural, confines and limits the characters' individual growth. About *L'Immoraliste*, Maougal writes that the places in the novel are like “matrices” that play “un rôle déterminant” in Michel's growth and rebirth (239). The word “matrices” which means “mother” in Latin, implies that environments frame and complement Michel's behavior. Similarly, in *The Awakening* places and space embody and express ideological norms, yet Edna's mood defines how she sees spaces: nature may be maternal and caressing, and

alternately full of “mystery and witchery” (Chopin, 50). While outside in Grand Isle or walking along the streets of New Orleans, Edna feels unconfined. But “when not outdoors, [she] is at pains to create her own private space, a ‘room of her own,’ like her attic studio, where she can experiment with identities other than that of wife and mother” (Heilmann, 93). Her husband’s house on Esplanade Street is a thoroughly domestic realm where her roles are wife, mother, housekeeper and society hostess. Inside her home, Edna often feels anxious, frustrated and despondent. For instance, just after her quarrel with Léonce about her missed reception day, Edna responds by throwing her wedding ring on the ground and breaking a vase.

This destructive reaction illustrates her frustration and claustrophobia, not just inside her home, but within her role as wife and mother. In an attempt to calm her feelings Edna returns to her room after the argument. The room is large and beautiful, “rich and picturesque in the soft dim light” (50), yet material beauty does not assuage Edna’s frustration; it confines her: She “walk[s] to and fro down [the] whole length” of the room “without stopping, without resting” (50). In her frustration, she takes off her wedding ring, flings it to the carpet and “stamp[s] her heel upon it, striving to crush it,” but “her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the glittering circlet” (50-51). The glittering band, symbol of not only her marriage but the matrimonial institution, is impossible to break, just as the bonds that tie Edna to her home, her husband and her children are iron clad. Because she cannot destroy her wedding ring, or what it represents, Edna “seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear” (51). While breaking the vase is adolescent, destruction is an attempt to release her feelings and assert control over her situation. Nature, rather than destruction, often serves as the balm for Edna’s frustration, yet on this occasion she has found “the deep

tangle of the garden below” her window far from comforting. The “outlines of the flowers and foliage” are “dusky and tortuous” and the “voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness [...] They jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope” (50). Instead of a natural world full of seductive beauty like the sea at Grand Isle, she encounters a garden infused with a hostile, alien fecundity.

Michel’s journey to Normandy with his wife also places him in contact with a fecund beautiful land that is alien to him and hostile to his interests. If Africa is associated with the body and Paris the mind, Normandy represents a domesticated, maternal landscape where even health seems spiritual and intellectual. Michel refers to himself as an “esprit plein de santé” (17), whereas in Africa he abandons his mind to cultivate his body. The “lieu de l’enfance et de la première éducation protestante rigoureuse reprend ses prérogatives de façonnage et de modelage de l’être” (Maougal, 239), and the sexual economy of the maternal landscape captivates Michel. Following the example of the Norman farm, Michel takes pleasure “à régler et ordonner toutes choses” (95). Normandy represents a domesticated body and a domesticated countryside where Michel’s newborn self can rest, cradled by the feminine landscape. On the farm, Michel is at first enthralled by the fertility and the order of the land and his role as dominator. Hélène Cixous associates masculinity with property and dominance: “masculine value systems are structured according to an ‘economy of the proper’. Proper—property—appropriate: signaling an emphasis on self-identity, self-aggrandizement and arrogant dominance” (Moi, 109). Property, dominance, and the appropriate roles of landowner, husband and father-to-be—these words depict Michel’s relationship to the Normandy farm. He is offered the role of proprietor, *paterfamilias* and domesticator. If one follows Cixous’s logic, it is for men to possess, buy and dominate, whereas women like Edna and Marceline must submit to the will of their husbands, like

the land to the plow of the farmer. Edna's husband, Léonce, represents a perfect example of Cixous's theory of masculinity: "He greatly valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his" (48). Léonce derives genuine pleasure in contemplating fine art and furniture "no matter what—after he had bought and placed it among his household gods" (48). In the beginning of the novel, he comments upon Edna's sunburn and looks at her like "a valuable piece of property that had suffered some damage" (4). Mr. Pontellier, a businessman who admires order and a certain kind of domesticated beauty, appreciates a smoothly run household and becomes upset when he does not meet "a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife" (55). This role holds less appeal for Michel. He recognizes proprietorship as the burden it is. While he first appears to thrive on the farm, he becomes uncomfortable with the kind of masculinity the farm offers him.

In contrast to the masculine role that the farm invites Michel to play, the Norman countryside is beautiful and feminine. Found in "le pays le plus ombreux, le plus mouillé" (81), the farm is a green, shady countryside filled with glens and a large valley stretching to the sea. These glens are "étroits et mollement courbés" (81). There is no horizon and the sun is low in the sky, whereas in Africa the sun and the heat are ever-present and harsh. The undergrowth and woods are full of mystery, and the slope of the pastures is soft ("molle"). The repetition of the adjective "molle" evokes a sloping, curving countryside that suggests the female body. Further, the countryside is wet, brimming with water "dans chaque creux" (81). The wetness of the countryside is the opposite of the dry, forbidding climate in Africa. According to Cixous, in a traditional gender binary, the masculine is hard and dry and rational, while the feminine is wet and soft and emotional. Gide uses this characterization of femininity to talk about the Norman countryside and frame it as a feminine place of "abondance ordonnée" (84).

The first days on the farm are fluid and seem to melt one into the other in a kind of “uniforme bien-être où le soir s’unissent au matin sans saccades, où les jours se liaient les uns aux autres sans surprise” (83). This fluid sense of time contrasts sharply with Michel’s stay in Africa where time is punctuated with moments of discovery and ephipany. Gide emphasizes the soothing rapport between Marceline and Michel. Michel remembers sitting with Marceline on a bench “où jadis j’allais m’asseoir avec ma mère” (83). As they sit on the bench, Marceline has just told Michel she is pregnant and “plus voluptueusement se présentait à nous chaque instant, plus insensiblement coulait l’heure” (83). The pairing of Marceline and Michel’s mother is indicated by the bench, and the use of the word “voluptuous” hints at the kind of physical well-being a child experiences with his mother. While his own mother may have been austere, the maternal countryside (and Marceline) is soothing, calming and seems to provide a pleasurable, if uneventful sense of well-being. In this countryside where “tout s’appête au fruit” Michel takes up his work again. In surveying the logical domestication of the countryside, he feels that this land should have an excellent influence upon him. Michel hints that his body resembles the unruly land that he must tame. As he begins his work, he feels “calme, dispos, sûr de sa force, regardant le futur avec confiance et sans fièvre, la volonté comme adoucie, et comme étouffant le conseil de cette terre tempérée” (83).

The “terre tempérée, like the embrace of the mother, soothes and calms the unruly child, yet Michel finds later that the embrace holds him too tight. In fact, the words “adoucie” and “étouffant” anticipate Michel’s words for his “tailored happiness:” “serrer” and “étrangler.” His will has been stifled, and he wonders “Où s’enfonçaient, où se cachait alors mes turbulences de la veille ?” (84). Michel uses the word “ferveur” to describe his former pre-Africa self, whereas here he looks to the future without “fièvre.” It is as if the land itself domesticates him, and under its influence he seeks to domesticate.

Michel appreciates the harmony of “cette abondance ordonnée [...] cet asservissement joyeux, [...] ces souriantes cultures” that “l’effort savant de l’homme” has subdued (83-84). Agricultural dominance of savage nature implies another sort of dominance: the Cartesian domination of mind over body. Hélène Cixous notes that the body/mind dichotomy is one of the many binaries that stands in for the ultimate binary: man/woman. Other such binaries include culture/nature, reason/emotions, activity/passivity, sun/moon. Analyzing Cixous’s work, Toril Moi writes: “each opposition can be analyzed as a hierarchy where the ‘feminine’ side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance” (Moi, 102). By purposely depicting the countryside as feminine, Gide shows Michel’s growing dissatisfaction with traditional masculine roles of domination and proprietorship. While descriptions of the countryside may appear natural, Gide reveals the Norman farm as a fecund, ordered world dressed in the clothes of conventional gender roles.

In addition to gender roles, the Norman countryside allows Gide to explore nineteenth-century ideas of sexuality. Momentarily enthralled by the Norman countryside, Michel slips into a dream of ideal fertile lands: “où toutes forces fussent si bien réglées, toutes dépenses si compensées, tout échanges si stricts que le moindre déchet devînt sensible” (84). Michel does not name these “forces”, but the entire discussion implies a strictly regulated sexual economy where everything that is spent is compensated. “Dépenser” implies an expenditure of (individual sexual energy), and in such a controlled economy this expenditure would not be wasted, it would result in abundance and fecundity. In the bible, homosexuality, masturbation and *coitus interruptus* were decried because it was believed that these activities entailed a waste of semen. Similarly in the nineteenth-century, mainstream medical advice condemned masturbation because it was thought to be dangerous, an unnecessary waste of a man’s finite sexual energy. In his studies of nineteenth-century sexual health guides, Nye notes



that the ideal sexual economy was based upon this notion of limited male energy: “‘moderate’ expenditures of (sexual) energy were most consonant with health and with reproductive fertility. Extreme expenditures of this vital force (in masturbation and coitus) were functionally pathological and led to impotence, sterility or both” (61). Reproductive sex was the ideal, a perfectly balanced activity where a man’s loss of semen would result in the compensation of offspring.

Michel loves Marceline, yet he cannot continue to participate in a sexual economy that does not suit him. Soon, he becomes tired of his obligations and his dominating, domesticating role. Upon his arrival in Normandy, he ponders the fertile countryside and the apple trees heavy with fruit: “je rêvais sous quelle riche charge de fruit allaient bientôt ployer leurs branches” (83). The burden seems rich with possibility, but later as autumn comes to the farm, Marceline, who is heavily pregnant, walks “languissamment et pesant à mon bras” (98). Like a ripe, heavy piece of fruit, Marceline weighs on Michel’s arm. Their relationship is still close, yet enveloped in silence. The depth of Marceline’s love provokes anxiety and fear in Michel. It is as if autumn signifies not just the death of the old year, but the beginning of the end of Michel’s love for Marceline. He strives to suppress his growing discomfort with his marriage and his place, and in an image that mirrors Michel’s situation, Gide portrays the ducks on the farm. They flapped their wings “sauvagement” and “avec de grands cris” fly “dans un vol tapageur” around the farm (99). Confined to La Morinière, place of rest, repose and *la mort*, the ducks stay close to home—their savage energy controlled and confined, yet come winter, they are shut away, forbidden to follow their instinct and migrate.

As the image of the ducks illustrates, the Norman farm represents domestication and confinement. The calm of the farm connotes not tranquility but, as the name La Morinière suggests, *la mort*. The world of Parisian salons is similarly confining. While

Michel characterized his life in Africa as “plus spacieuse et aérée” (105) Paris is like a stuffy, closed room, filled with vain social interactions. So similar are the artists and intellectuals that “Quand je parle à l’un d’eux, il me semble que je parle à plusieurs” (104). Content with the appearance of life, “ils vivent, ont l’air de vivre et de ne pas savoir qu’ils vivent”(103). Untouched by illness and death, these thinkers distance themselves from “la troublante réalité” because unlike Michel, “Aucun n’a su être malade” (104). The contented ignorance of these thinkers suggests an intellectual culture that promotes conformity at the expense of individual thought, a system that no longer helps people understand themselves and their culture. According to Michel, these intellectuals speak of “divers événements de la vie” but “jamais de ce qui les motive”; they offer him no insight into humanity (104). Illness has awakened Michel, knocking him off his socially sanctioned path— unlike most intellectuals Michel encounters in Paris, who he feels follow cultural dictates without thinking.

Culture’s depends upon nature and the relationship is cyclical: culture is born of life (nature) and, without the renewing force of nature, kills life. The artists and intellectuals that Michel criticizes belong to a stage of civilization that is antagonistic to life and nature. Michel describes the process of civilization, birth and life in this way:

A propos de l’extrême civilisation latine, je peignais la culture artistique, montant à fleur de peuple, à la manière d’une sécrétion, qui d’abord indique pléthore, surabondance de santé, puis aussitôt se fige, se durcit, s’oppose à tout parfait contact de l’esprit avec la nature, cache sous l’apparence persistante de la vie la diminution de la vie, forme gaine ou l’esprit gêné languit et bientôt s’étiole, puis meurt. Enfin, poussant à bout ma pensée, je disais la Culture, née de la vie, tuant la vie. (106).

Gide’s use of scientific vocabulary like “sécrétion” focuses the discussion about culture on the body. A secretion is a substance that the body produces, like hormones, mucus, bile, stomach acids, or sebum (*Petit Robert*). To compare artistic culture to a secretion portrays art as natural expression that flows from human beings; it is an excess of life that

seeks an outlet, yet the process of life and death is a cycle. At first these secretions indicate a plethora, a superabundance of blood—the first definition in the dictionary for “plethora” is “excès de sang”. About his first voyage to Africa, Michel speaks of a fresh influx of “un sang plus riche et plus chaud qui devait toucher mes pensées, les toucher une à une, pénétrer tout, émouvoir, colorer les plus lointaines et secrètes fibres de mon être” (63). He is no longer the sickly being that his “morale précédente tout rigide et restrictive” had made him (63). This description implies balance: new blood is coloring and revivifying his thoughts and all the secret fibers of his being.

Michel’s notion of new blood infusing his thoughts implies balance between body and mind, a balance that Michel has not reached. He realizes that during his first trip to Africa he was not thinking of himself or examining his situation. It is only at the time of narration that he conceives this idea, yet the mention of “un sang plus riche et plus chaud” recalls its opposite: the black clot of blood that Michel coughs up earlier in the novel. The incident where Michel spits up a “vilain sang presque noir, quelque chose de gluant, d’épouvantable...” (35) is certainly metatextual; it mirrors the difficulty Michel has in speaking about himself, yet more simply it illustrates his attitude toward his body and the effects of his former sheltered life. While his “premiers crachements” on the coach left him calm, here he is filled with fear and horror—he spits out this “gros affreux caillot” with disgust and after inspecting it covers it in a handkerchief. Within the context of Michel’s theory of civilization, this dark black blood clot hints at death and stagnation, its black color indicating that it has been in the body a long time. Unlike Bachir’s “rutilant” blood, or the warm, rich blood Michel imagines as he tells his story, the black blood is dull and viscous. Bachir’s blood runs freely—it demonstrates bodily health, whereas Michel’s blood indicates stagnation, immobility, and illness.

As Michel watches Bachir lick his wound, his initial horror gives way to a sense of “jouissance esthétique mêlée de désir devant un sang qui est l’indice d’une vie pleine, cette plénitude se trouvant renforcée ici par l’idée de l’animalité” (Rivalin-Padiou, 11). Bachir’s animality, evident in his “dents très blanches” and “sa langue [...] rose comme celle d’un chat” (Gide, 34), identifies him with health and nature. He displays a joyful attitude toward his own body and laughs at the accidental cut, while Michel recoils in disgust at the sight of his own blood. As Rivalin-Padiou puts it: “Bachir lèche avec plaisir son sang, il l’absorbe, tandis que Michel le dégurgite, le rejette; d’un côté un corps qui se remplit d’un sang signe de vie, de l’autre, un corps, qui refuse le sang porteur de la maladie et de la mort” (Rivalin-Padiou, 12). As an animal-like child, Bachir is closer to nature and is thus more vital and alive, whereas Michel, who spent his early life under the influence of his father’s pudeur and his mother’s austerity, falls sick easily, his body threatened by death and decay. The clot symbolizes these old decayed ideas and traditions that he has swallowed and made a part of his life. By spitting up the clot, it is as if Michel is resisting “the diminution of life” and attempting to become more like Bachir: vital, authentic and sensual.

Michel’s expulsion of the black blood indicates a break with a rigid, moralistic society. According to Michel’s theory, rigidity of thought occurs because the fruits of civilization, created by an interaction of mind and nature, become institutionalized, rigid and inhuman, hardened into convention and tradition. Like the scholars and artists Michel encounters in Paris, life continues but it wilts and languishes. The mind is enclosed within a “gaine” a mold or shell that makes the mind uncomfortable, claustrophobic. This “gaine” recalls the “invincible pudeur” that separated Michel and his father from one another. Originally intended to protect, the “gaine” has grown too small, yet it is also used in French to refer to a girdle. The gaine is an ideological

constraint, a social or gender role, that prohibits development and evolution. A continued constriction of “l’esprit” inside its societal casing causes it to waste away and die.

Michel’s use of the word “s’ététioler” links the mind to nature and the material world. Just as a plant eventually needs new soil to feed and nourish it, so does the mind. If the body becomes hardened and dead, the mind will dry up and shrivel.

Just as a plant needs to soil or it will die, so does the mind need new sensual experiences. Without the influx of the new, the mind will stagnate and die. Michel identifies this malaise in his own society, and believes that he has the antidote. Because of his illness and his travel, his body and his experiences are different from the norm, and the infusion of his experiences into society could revitalize it. Michel concludes that culture born of life ends by killing it. The capitalization of the word “culture” suggests that Michel does not just mean late nineteenth early twentieth-century French culture, but the human phenomenon of culture. Etymologically culture refers to the cultivation of plants and animals, and biologically it can refer to an environment or a group of organisms of which there are many sorts: tree culture, cereal culture, flower culture, etc. In reference to humans, culture indicates a body of knowledge used for the development of the mind. By consulting a body of knowledge, one can develop judgment, taste, and a critical mind (*Petit Robert*). The body of knowledge that one consults determines what thoughts, tastes and judgments one develops. While nature favors variety, Michel’s and Edna’s cultures value conformity. Conformity is a form of stringent domestication, resulting in the “weeding out” of certain species and a weakening of civilization as a whole. Just as a society chooses to cultivate certain plant and animal species, it also chooses to permit certain desires and bodies to flourish and banishes others. In his insistence that he is different, Michel implies that culture should embrace different

bodies, desires and ideas. As Ménélique remarks, there are “milles formes de la vie” each one suitable for a different organism (123).

### Part 3

#### MOTHERS AND THE MATERNAL BODY

Ménélique’s notion of “milles formes de la vie” clashes with the bourgeois ideology of Edna and Michel’s societies. This bourgeois ideology relies upon a separation of spheres where men control the public sphere of business and politics and women are relegated to the domestic sphere. For instance, Edna’s society considers women to be natural mothers and wives, more emotional and less sexual than men. *L’Immoraliste* also depicts traditional gender roles. Marceline illustrates feminine ideals of sacrifice and maternal love, which Michel views as constricting and reminders of his dependence. Because gender roles were considered natural, before Edna and Michel have even begun to discover themselves, they are already caught in a web of domestic obligation. In the novels, domestic obligation centers around the family, specifically the mother. Edna and Michel view motherhood and mother figures negatively, as figures that block and prevent their freedom. Both seek unmediated experience apart from social norms and conventions, not realizing that maternal characters also provide them with stability and balance. In the nineteenth century, the home was a private sphere that offered tranquility, rest and order, but for Edna it is a place of servitude. Just as Edna feels restricted and claustrophobic in her home in New Orleans, domesticity confines Michel in the person of Marceline. Motherly and self-sacrificing she reminds him of his weakness and dependence, and she symbolizes a world of delicateness and order similar to the order and austerity Michel learned from his mother. Michel’s mother both

facilitates and stifles the development of his personality. The austere spirit of her teachings gives his early life a disciplined structure; later as he begins to rebel against his childhood and his society it gives him a strong opposition against which to fashion himself. Marceline, the woman Michel's father chooses for him, plays a similar role. Michel depends upon her care while he is sick, even though he finds her burdensome and a reminder of conventionality. Similarly, Edna begins to view Madame Ratignolle as boring and conventional, yet their conversations contribute to Edna's growing self-awareness and her questioning of societal norms. An analysis of the characters' childhoods, societal views of motherhood, and a comparison of the childbirth scene in *The Awakening* with the miscarriage scene in *L'Immoraliste*, I show how maternity and maternal characters both define and restrict the physical and intellectual freedom of the characters. They also show that Edna and Michel's rejection of maternal figures leads to very different outcomes: Michel begins to find freedom, whereas Edna becomes mired in a swamp of nihilism.

In her essay "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," Julia Kristeva describes the maternal function as a "thoroughfare, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture' " (238). The maternal ensures psychological stability because it brings together contradictory aspects of human experience. Adèle, for instance, is delicious and seductive in her role of "mother-woman," but she is also frightening and Medusa-like before she delivers her child. Edna's glimpse behind the mask of Adèle's mother-woman image unsettles her. She relives her experience of childbirth through Adèle's, but instead of feeling closer to her own mother as Kristeva suggests, she feels a sense of deadness. Edna lost her mother at an early age and is the middle child between Margaret, who according to Edna's husband, "has all the Presbyterianism undiluted," and her younger sister who "is something of a vixen" (63). As a "solitary soul," who "even as a child had

lived her own small life all within herself" (14), Edna's refutation of societal rules leads to confusion and suicide. Unlike Michel, whose childhood was structured by the austerity of his mother's lessons, Edna has no recollection of her mother. She is alone, with no one to guide her.

Neither strongly religious nor carefree and rebellious, Edna is deeply introverted and retreats into fantasy and daydream. Early in the novel she tells Adèle of an experience in childhood: she was walking through a meadow of tall grass "that seemed big as the ocean" (17). Her "sun-bonnet obstructed the view" and she "could see only the stretch of green before me" (17). This experience resembles her time on Grand Isle; she feels "as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (17). Michel has Marceline as a reminder of tradition and conformity from which he rebels, but Edna is "unguided" and impressionable. After Robert, Edna's admirer, leaves Grand Isle, Edna is listless: Robert had left "a void and a wilderness behind him" (45). This image of wilderness, coupled with Edna's recollection of the grassy meadow suggests that nature, for Edna, retains an untamed and strange otherness. While I will explore the role of Edna's romance with Robert in chapters two and three, the image of Robert as a figure that leaves a void suggests Edna lacks what Kristeva calls the maternal filter that would allow her to make sense of her experiences. While Michel seeks to understand his experiences in a more philosophical or intellectual manner, Edna relies upon sensation and desire, phenomena that undermine her role as mother-woman, but remain inadequate tools in the development of her self-awareness and identity. Indeed, Edna's reliance upon the narratives of romance and adultery only undermine the potential of her initial awakening.

Edna's society expects mothers to care for children and ensure the smooth running of the domestic realm. The institution of motherhood, however, differs markedly



from Edna's experience. She feels a disconnect between the image of motherhood, represented by Adèle Ratignolle, and her own experience, which is one of frustration and disappointment. Adèle represents an ideal that Edna cannot fulfill. She fails and disappoints her husband, even though he cannot communicate how or why: "It was something which he felt rather than perceived" (9). The narrator does not seem to be able to explain Edna's lack of maternal feeling either. After a description of the Pontellier boys, she abruptly concludes: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (9). As the narrator wittily describes them, the mother-women "idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (9). Mother-women seem like large, ridiculous mother hens "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings" ready to shield their "precious brood" from any harm "real or imaginary" (9). Mother-women flutter around after their children in hopes of becoming angels and transcending their earthly selves. Edna, too, is compared to a bird, but she is no earthbound, clucking hen. While in her flight from social control she may soar too high and plummet back to earth like Icarus, she tastes something of freedom, yet as Mademoiselle Reisz explains "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (79). Edna does not yet know what type of woman she is or whether she would soar, only that she does not fit this mother-woman role.

Creole society considered self-effacing mothers to be natural and women not caring for the company of their children unnatural. The following excerpt from a contemporary advice book reflects a culture-wide obsession with self-sacrificing motherhood, and it is this self-sacrifice which *The Awakening* challenges:

Many otherwise excellent women find the nursery a prison and the care of their own children irksome, simply because they have a perverted mother sense. The mother should have proper relief from the care of her children, but if she has the true mother-heart the companionship of her

children will be the society which she will prefer above that of all others  
(qtd. in Culley 123).

Found in a popular advice book intended for young husbands, this excerpt suggests that a woman not preferring the company of her children is ill. A woman of right heart and right sense would never neglect the “all important duties of motherhood” (123). The “true mother-heart” –the capacity for self-effacement—was considered natural. A sense of identity apart from husband and children and a desire to cultivate this identity were not considered to be part of the normal and natural female body. The “duties of motherhood” were considered enough to define her, and any other activity (such as painting or piano playing) was merely decorative. Furthermore, Edna’s society considered women’s sexuality to be reproductive in nature; they appear to have no physical self or sensuality, but exist merely as “ministering angels.” Although the tone is mocking, the religious vocabulary that the narrator uses suggests the importance with which Creole society viewed these roles; these were not only natural roles, but God-given responsibilities.

Confinement to the home or the nursery, as the self-help book advocates, might be extreme, but even a less restrictive situation could be limiting. As Dorothy Dix, a contemporary of Chopin and an advice columnist for *The Daily Picayune*, writes of women’s inferior position in society, “one may be bound just as securely and as fatally with silken cords as with iron fetters” (qtd in Culley, 148). That upper-class *fin de siècle* New Orleans is beautiful, and that life at the vacation resort on Grand Isle is relaxed, should not lead one to smooth over the political realities of women’s position. Under Louisiana’s version of the Napoleonic Code, women had little legal standing or control over property, and divorce could result in social ruin. While it is true that upper-class Creole women in the novel are comfortable and privileged, and society differs from the staid Protestant world of Edna’s upbringing, there are still parameters of accepted behavior, and conflict occurs when Edna transgresses them. As the narrator remarks,

“Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife.” And “her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him” (55). Indeed Dix’s comment about “silken cords” seems all the more apt; rather than iron fetters, silken cords only become apparent once one begins to struggle against them. It is with the silken cords of beauty, maternity and friendship that Edna finds herself bound.

Whereas Edna is bound with the silken cords of motherhood and marriage, Michel feels limited by the spirit of his mother’s teachings. Although his mother is long dead, Michel makes the connection between his calm, ordered, scholarly existence and his mother’s austerity. Although “le grave enseignement huguenot” had long since vanished from his memory, the spirit of his mother’s teachings molded his mind and temperament (19). The language Michel uses to describe his mother’s influence is almost physical: “cette première morale d’enfant” masters (*maîtrise*) him and leaves “folds” (*plis*) in the mind (19). His mother left him with the taste (*goût*) for austerity when she instilled in him her principles. As Michel explains, he transferred all of his mother’s austerity to his studies (19). He devoted himself to his work with a “ferveur singulière” (20). Austerity and fervor seem incompatible, yet together the words suggest a kind of religious or spiritual passion. Austerity implies strict rules and puritanical denial of the body, whereas fervor could indicate spiritual or physical passion. Michel’s passion is not for religion as his mother’s was, but for study. The use of the word “ferveur”, however, implies not only intensity, but that Michel’s physical passions are funneled into his study (“je la reportai toute à l’étude” 19). While Michel was learned enough to write his father’s last book, his erudition comes at the expense of his health and knowledge of life: “j’atteignis vingt-cinq ans, n’ayant presque rien regardé que des ruines ou des livres, et ne

connaissant rien de la vie” (20). In addition, he is unaware of his delicate health, and he believes that “la vie trop calme que je menais m’affaiblissait et me préservait à la fois” (21). Because of his mother’s austere influence, Michel has cultivated spiritual passion while neglecting his physical self.

Whereas Michel is weak at the beginning of his narrative, Marceline “semblait robuste” (21). From the beginning of the story, Gide links Michel’s and Marceline’s bodies, as if Marceline were a new sort of mother against whom Michel must rebel. Like a small child who depends upon his mother, the sickly Michel needs Marceline to survive. Yet as he becomes more self aware, her motherly affection becomes a heavy burden binding him to domesticity, country, and bourgeois values. The second part of the novel, set in Normandy, acts as a transition between Michel’s rebirth and awakening in Africa and his questioning of society in Paris. Gide evokes the domestic realm and the mother-child relationship in the descriptions of Michel’s mother’s farm. There, in Normandy, Michel sits with Marceline on a bench “où jadis j’allais m’asseoir avec ma mère” (83). Aware that she is pregnant, he wonders : “Il me semblait [...] que je lui dusse des soins nouveaux, qu’elle eût à plus de tendresse” (83). Under the influence of the fecund land and Marceline’s soothing presence, time slows down and blurs : “tout s’y mêlait, s’y fondait un uniforme bien être, où le soir s’unissait au matin sans saccades, où les jours se liaient les uns aux autres sans surprises” (83). The description evokes an image not of two spouses, but rather of a mother rocking her baby. Gide presents the mother-child relationship as tranquil, one in which there is no boundary between mother and child; everything melts into well-being—an image that is quite different from the radical, aggressive individuality that Michel later adopts.

This period of maternal affection and well-being, however, is short-lived, and Michel becomes aware of Marceline not just as a mother-figure for himself, but as the

mother-to-be of his child. He becomes weary, feeling that Marceline is a burden and that their restful existence resembles death: “De combien de silence déjà savait s’envelopper notre amour!” (98). Marceline’s love is “plus fort que les mots pour le dire,” and Michel feels “parfois presque angoissé par cet amour” (98). Michel expresses his emotions cautiously, yet the word “*angoissé*” belies the tentativeness of the words “*presque*” and “*parfois*.” In fact “angoisse” indicates worry or panic. Mingled with his worry is a fleeting happiness that Michel senses slowly slipping away from him: “j’ai voulu dès lors le retenir, comme on veut retenir dans ses mains rapprochées, en vain, une eau fuyante” (99). Yet his happiness combines with death, it colors “bien mon amour, mais comme colore l’automne” (99). As Marceline begins to “écoutait frémir une nouvelle vie,” Michel experiences feelings of loss, panic and death.

Gide illustrates these feelings of panic and death that Michel cannot fully express in the image of the ducks on the farm. Their nature is to migrate when the weather cools: “Les canards [...] battaient de l’aile; ils s’agitaient sauvagement; on les voyait parfois se soulever, faire avec de grands cris, dans un vol tapageur, tout le tour de La Morinière” (99). Before they can migrate, they are shut away, bound to the land and forbidden from following their nature. Although Michel and Marceline leave for Paris at the end of October, the image of the ducks circling the farm, restless to migrate, suggests both Michel’s desire to pull away from Marceline, the emblem of bourgeois values and domesticity, and his inability to quit the maternal farm. The birds circle the farm just as Michel continues to circle uneasily, sometimes at the periphery, around the maternal realm represented by Marceline. Gide’s use of the maternal farm in Normandy emphasizes the link between the maternal and the land, yet woman as symbol of patriarchal tradition is also evidenced in the fact that Michel’s father arranges Michel’s and Marceline’s marriage.

The marriage demonstrates Michel's tacit acceptance of tradition and his obligation toward his father: "Je l'avais épousée sans amour, beaucoup pour complaire à mon père, qui mourant m'inquiétait de me laisser seul" (18). According to Pierre Masson, marriage binds Michel to home and tradition, even as he travels: "Le mariage est ainsi présenté comme un tentacule supplémentaire que lance sur le fils la famille paralysante, le moment redoutable d'enraciner définitivement un prodigue : même s'il repart, il devra emporter cette racine avec lui" (78). Marceline is the "racine" of which Masson speaks. Even in Africa, she brings French bourgeois values with her. She attends mass to pray for Michel and cares for children whom Michel finds "faibles, chétifs, et trop sages" (54) because they remind him of his own weakness and dependence upon his wife. He does not want Marceline to pray for him because "Je n'aime pas les protections" (39). He rejects God's (and Marceline's) help because "Après il aurait droit à ma reconnaissance. Cela crée des obligations" (39). Domesticity and domestic values are not rooted in the home, but rather in Marceline, and her maternal protection both preserves and limits him.

Marceline's maternal protectiveness is apparent in the shawl she gives to Michel, a garment which both spouses wear when sick. This garment functions not only as a symbol of illness and dependence, but of a motherly protectiveness that Michel finds burdensome. His first experiences in the garden in Biskra represent a transition between his social self and his authentic self and thus highlight the values that Michel is trying to escape. According to Halevy, the shawl is a feminine garment that functions as a kind of "enveloppe ou couverture" (70). It is a "couche protectrice" (70) guarding Michel from nature and sensuality. (Gide, 43). The presence of the shawl, the children, and Marceline in the garden scene highlights the mother/child dynamic that exists between Michel and Marceline. Toward a small child who is "si malingre et d'aspect chétif," Marceline is

“maternelle et caressante” (45-46). Unlike Michel, who no longer needs such care, “le petit” leaves Marceline’s care “tout réchauffé” (46). Michel, on the other hand, is like a child annoyed by the presence of an over-protective mother, he states: “j’étais gêné par sa présence. Si je m’étais levé, elle m’aurait suivi; si j’avais enlevé mon châle, elle aurait voulu le porter ; si je l’avais remis ensuite, elle aurait dit : ‘Tu n’as pas froid ?’” (43). In Marceline’s presence Michel is embarrassed and cannot enter “l’univers des enfants, univers qui envoûte Michel et finit par éveiller en lui le désir de régresser afin de revenir au monde de l’enfance” (Halévy, 71). The universe of childhood that Halévy describes has nothing, nonetheless, to do with the children Marceline protects. Michel prefers the mischievous children like Moktir and Bachir because they represent the anti-social, rebellious, and energetic existence he seeks for himself.

The vital energy that Michel sees in the children also occurs in nature. Just as he cannot interact with the children in Marceline’s presence, he cannot fully experience nature with the shawl. The shawl, once a protective covering, also works to hide the body. The first of the many garments that Michel sheds throughout the novel, the shawl represents the maternal care and protection he no longer needs. Without it, Michel delights in the natural elements of the garden. The odor of the cassia blossoms “me semblait entrer en moi par plusieurs sens et m’exaltait” (46). Disdaining Marceline’s over-protective care, Michel seeks his own cure in the natural world, and he finds that the sensations he feels in the garden are so strong that they bypass thought and provide an alternative more immediate way for Michel to experience reality: “Il me semblait avoir jusqu’à ce jour si peu senti pour tant penser” (47). Yet in the garden, sensation predominates : “ma sensation devenait aussi forte qu’une pensée” (47). His senses, “réveillés désormais, se retrouvaient toute une histoire, se recomposaient un passé” (47). His senses link him to his childhood : “car du fond du passé de ma première enfance se

réveillaient enfin mille lueurs, de mille sensations égarées” (47). By shaking off the maternal protection of the shawl, Michel begins to discover his authentic self buried beneath the layers of convention and learning. The words “passé” and “histoire” suggest that the senses tell a story different from the narrative of convention and conformity.

Despite Michel’s revelation in the gardens of Biskra, he remains under the influence of Marceline and convention. Not only has she saved his life, but she is pregnant with his child, a fact which makes him extremely anxious. Masson views Marceline’s maternity as “un vivant rappel, pour Michel, de sa responsabilité envers cette maternité ; le sacrilège devra être puni, et Marceline mourra par où elle a péché, même si ce n’est pas elle le vrai responsable : son avortement, en l’affaiblissant, devient prétexte à l’emmener à la poursuite d’une santé qui n’est pas la sienne” (112). Marceline’s pregnancy reminds Michel of his domestic responsibility, but it also horrifies him because Marceline miscarries and falls ill. Masson views Marceline’s pregnancy and resulting illness as a “sacrilege,” a sin against Michel’s new doctrine of health and independence. Indeed after her miscarriage, Michel views Marceline as a tainted object: “La maladie était entrée en Marceline, l’habitait désormais, la marquait, la tachait. C’était une chose abimée” (129). Whereas Marceline had formerly been a reminder of domesticity and a mother figure that nurtured and cared for Michel, pregnancy and miscarriage have made of Marceline a ruined, contaminated thing from which Michel must distance himself, as if her illness were contagious. In fact, when he realizes that Marceline has miscarried, his reaction is self-centered: “je me jetai contre le lit, en sanglotant. Ah! subit avenir! Le terrain cédait brusquement sous mon pas; devant moi n’était plus qu’un trou vide où je trébuchais tout entier” (127). Although Marceline’s pregnancy causes Michel extreme anxiety, he experiences a loss of meaning when he realizes his wife has miscarried. While his wife was pregnant, Michel saw his future as a



bourgeois father and husband all too clearly, yet Marceline's miscarriage annuls that possibility without presenting another alternative. Thus far, Marceline has functioned as a symbol of domestic order and maternal care, yet her miscarriage signals the possibility that Michel's new self could falter. Just as Marceline's body nurtured and sheltered the growing fetus, so too Marceline cared for and mothered Michel. The loss of the child both threatens Michel's new-born self and changes his view of Marceline; his wife is no longer the frame of reference that she was, but rather a tainted object. Relying on oppositions in order to know himself, Michel feels, without Marceline's presence as a symbol of convention, that he is falling into a void.

Marceline's miscarriage threatens Michel's tenuous sense of himself as a healthy, independent man, and he feels as if he is falling into a hole of emptiness. Edna experiences a similar sense of emptiness when she witnesses the birth of Adèle's child. Edna feels overwhelmed by what she feels is the unrelenting fecundity of nature. Edna's rebellion calls into question not just her society's social norms, but the assumptions about nature and womanhood upon which these norms are based. Chopin describes Edna's revolt against maternity as a revolt against nature: "With an inward agony, with a flaming outspoken revolt against the ways of nature, she witnessed the scene [of] torture" (104). Edna "revolts" against childbirth because the physical subordination of a woman's body to nature and the species is a reminder of the self-effacement and sacrifice inherent within nineteenth-century attitudes about motherhood, where the female body was seen as an asexual vessel and a site of suffering and submission. By summoning Edna to be present for her delivery, Adèle hopes to remind Edna of her true role in society, yet her actions have the opposite effect: Edna does not become convinced of her role in society, or the meaningfulness of motherhood; she is persuaded of its ultimate emptiness. As Edna witnesses her friend's labor, she watches the woman she once gazed upon as a "faultless

Madonna” subject to the torture of childbirth. Her face was “drawn and pinched”, her blue eyes “haggard and unnatural” and her golden hair is pulled back and braided, “coiled like a golden serpent” (103). Adèle appears dangerous, sinister, and with her snake-like braid she seems an unnatural Medusa who paralyzes Edna. “Uneasy”, “seized with a vague dread,” Edna recalls her own experiences: “an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a new little life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go” (104). For a character that delights in sensuality and newness, maternity offers only a kind of death in deadened sensation and weary acceptance.

The violence of the scene shocks Edna; as if she had gazed upon a horrible Medusa, she is stunned, unable to move, and becomes very much like the Edna at the beginning of the novel who often sat unmoving, engrossed in her own thoughts. She returns home and stays there, awake and unmoving until morning. As Kristeva notes, culturally the mother is viewed as “the ultimate guarantee: symbolic coherence” (238), yet the comforting notion of coherence masks the reality of the maternal body which is “the place of splitting” (238). Edna struggles to see in Adèle “symbolic coherence;” she even tries to paint her friend and becomes upset when she cannot capture her likeness. When Edna encounters the split between gentle mother-woman and the physical reality of childbirth, she cannot synthesize these opposites into a comforting image of symbolic coherence. According to Kristeva, this fantasy of the mother is necessary because in giving birth, the woman-subject is a kind of “filter [...] a thoroughfare, a threshold where ‘nature’ confronts ‘culture.’ To imagine that there is *someone* in that filter—such is the source of religious mystifications [...] Because if, on the contrary, there were no one on this threshold, if the mother were not, [...] then every speaker would be led to conceive of its Being in relation to some void, a nothingness asymmetrically opposed to this Being,

a permanent threat against, first, its mastery, and ultimately, its stability” (238). Kristeva also explains that childbirth allows “the woman-mother” a “reunion” with “the body of *her* mother” (239). As she witnesses Adèle’s delivery Edna experiences no reunion with her mother or sense of kinship with Adèle, only a terrible, isolating emptiness. Because Edna lacks a mother, she remains the unguided child wandering in the field of grass. In Kristeva’s terms she conceives of her being in relation “to some void,” the sea. Although enticing and sensuous, the sea offers only death and a false sense of transcendence.

Edna’s embrace of desire, sensuality and romance appears to offer some kind of freedom, but her inability to accept the maternal as “split subject” (Schweitzer) undermines the stability of her being. Edna responds to the call of the sea and its ultimately destructive force because of a deep sense of emptiness and loneliness. While her final swim does suggest a metaphorical “reunion” with the body of the mother (Schweitzer, 175), Edna’s suicide is an act of desperation without transcendence. Her struggle with her own desires and the image of woman represented by Adèle coupled with Robert’s abandonment leave her unable to continue. She had hoped to console herself and escape the memory of Adèle’s delivery by returning home to Robert; she could imagine “no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one” (106). When that bliss is denied her, she realizes that desire is ephemeral and unreliable. The structures of her society, family, maternity, and patriarchy, although oppressive have something solid and enduring about them. By contrast, desire is restless and ever-changing and Edna can imagine a time when she will no longer want Robert. Edna refuses the maternal body, the site of submission and suffering. She refuses to make the bridge between nature (childbearing) and culture (mother-woman). Edna’s attempt to fashion an identity for herself based upon desire and rebellion fails because she lacks the ability to create for herself a viable identity and role.

Although Edna remains in a reactive, critical position *vis à vis* the ideology of her society, her predicament offers a valuable critique of late nineteenth-century Southern American values. The ideology of the body that she rejects has cemented women's social identity to their biological ability to bear children. Madame Ratignolle tells Edna "to think of the children" yet when Edna thinks of them she sees only "antagonists who had overcome her and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (108). Published some thirty years after the Civil War, *The Awakening's* use of the word 'slavery' is striking. The physical bondage of pregnancy and maternity wounds her soul. The narrator mentions that Edna's determination to think of her children was driven "into her soul like a death wound". Unlike Adèle who is "delicious" in her role, Edna refuses to decorate and make inhabitable a body that can only bring death and submission. For Edna, freedom of expression and nineteenth-century roles of motherhood and womanhood cannot coexist. Edna is marked by inbetweenness. While she refuses to bridge the gap between nature and culture and decorate her servitude, her character represents the possibility of another kind of bridge: the bridge between an "old" kind of woman like Madame Ratignolle and the new woman that Edna represents. But her potential to bridge does not just relate to women's status or independence. Despite the gender-specific forces that denied Edna freedom, her character illustrates a theme important to modernity: the balance of individual desires and social obligations as well as the balance of reason and desire. Edna suggests a possible bridge between the body, Madame Ratignolle, and the mind and spirit, Mademoiselle Reisz. Society's idea of a female, maternal body is an inadequate container for Edna's desires and passions. Alone at the beach, she decides to abandon her bathing suit: "she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her" (108).

Like the social strictures that have so long bound her body, the suit is “unpleasant” and “pricking.” Finding no other clothes—that is, no other social identities—to fit her body, she stands naked “like some new-born creature” under the sky.

Completely free and alone, Edna has rejected society, the garments and the buildings that contained and defined her and the mother-figures who tried to help her. Similarly, Michel seeks to cut the ties binding him to Marceline, Paris and Normandy. Under the influence of Ménalque, he finds the pattern and clothing of his current identity do not suit his body, but rather they are reminders of the web of domestic obligation that binds him. Edna does not fit into the role of “mother-woman”, and Michel cannot reconcile his desire for vagabond freedom with bourgeois social codes. Formerly content as a provincial intellectual who experienced life through books, Michel’s newly awakened sensibilities do not allow him to experience Parisian intellectual life as anything but stale and repetitive. Edna cares for her friend Madame Ratignolle, her children and husband, yet she begins to find domestic life uninspiring and boring. Michel feels burdened by Marceline; as her condition worsens the differences between her and Michel widen: “Ce qu’elle appelait le bonheur, c’est ce que j’appelais le repos, et moi je ne voulais pas me reposer” (164). Edna and Michel experience domesticity as slavery, as death-like repose that prevents them from living to their fullest potential. The tragedy of such strict social norms that alienate the subject from his body lies in awakening: when Edna and Michel begin to question the social mores of their respective societies, when they discover their true desires, they are already entwined in a web of emotion, friendship, and love that ensnares them in obligation and responsibility.

While words like *maternity* and *gender* seem abstract, they imply interpersonal relationships like the ones Edna and Michel seek to escape; they also represent ways of understanding and shaping experience. Although the clothes may not fit properly, the

garments of conventionality offer a concrete role in society, something that neither Michel nor Edna achieves. Throughout *The Awakening* Edna violates her society's customs of dress and behavior. She sheds a variety of constricting garments, yet in the last pages of the novel, she is naked and ready to drown herself in the ocean. Stripped of all social confinement, she is isolated and irremediably alone. Ménélique counsels Michel to find a pattern that suits him and tailor it to fit his body, not to cast off all social forms as Michel and Edna do. Gide and Chopin's critiques of conformist societies allow them to explore the tension between individual and society. Society should be more flexible and open to difference, they suggest, but, at the same time, the characters need social roles and social selves because a place in society provides meaning.

Michel's theory of civilization seems to reject the notion that society can provide meaning to the individual. In his theory, the "gaine" is a rigid outer layer that suffocates "l'esprit", the mind or the self, and it protects to the point of stifling. However, through use of biblical allusion, Gide subtly critiques Michel's theory and suggests that the "gaine" is something other than an encumbrance separating the individual from life. One night before he leaves Biskra, Michel, frightened by the immobility of the shadows in the courtyard, opens a book at random and stumbles upon a phrase from the Bible: "Maintenant tu te ceins toi-même et tu vas où tu veux aller; mais quand tu seras vieux, tu étendras les mains" (59). The verb "se ceindre," to gird oneself, anticipates Michel's later use of the word "gaine." Gide uses a quote from the New Testament to allude to a society where individuals are reliant upon each other. The quote from the Bible not only frightens Michel, who fears dependence, but also highlights the importance of the very social ties that Michel seeks to shake off. While it would be easy to view this quote as merely representative of Michel's fear of dependence, the arrival of Michel's friends at the end of the novel in Africa reinforces the importance of community and social ties, and

as Michel states at the beginning of his narrative: “Savoir se libérer n’est rien; l’ardu c’est savoir être libre” (17). Michel’s and Edna’s journeys toward authenticity and individuality entail the rejection of constricting social norms and relationships, yet society, community, and friendship also offer avenues for self-discovery and awakening. In the next chapter, I will explore the way in which sensual experience jolts entrenched morality and gender roles, causing Edna and Michel to seek out new ways of understanding and thinking about their bodies and themselves.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE BODY UNBOUND: AWAKENING DESIRE, UN ETAT DE VACANCE

#### INTRODUCTION

Edna and Michel struggle against societal restrictions such as gender and the bourgeois family. Symbolized by clothing and environments like Edna's home in New Orleans and Michel's farm in Normandy, gender, social class, and familial ties shape the characters' attitudes toward their bodies and sexuality. Maternal figures also influence the way Edna and Michel relate to their bodies. For instance, the austerity Michel learned from his mother and Edna's lack of maternal affection lead to physical and emotional isolation. Combined with Edna's and Michel's inculcated sense of reserve, social structures like community, family, maternity and social class make it difficult for the protagonists to break out of the roles given to them. Destabilizing phenomena such as travel, illness, swimming, and music knock Edna and Michel off balance, and as the bounds of social constraint begin to loosen, the characters begin to question the roles of mother, dutiful child, husband, and wife. Edna and Michel experience a physical awakening through a disruption of daily activity, tradition, and social norms, which cause them to feel new emotions and new sensations that clash with the conventional view of the world and themselves. This chapter argues that a break from societal roles entails a reclaiming of the body and that a growing awareness of the body causes each character to feel more comfortable in his or her skin, yet more uncomfortable in society. The jolt of awakening caused by illness, sexuality, swimming, and travel infuses the characters with new physical energy that allows them to take a tentative step forward to examine their situations. I divide this second chapter into three parts: an analysis of destabilizing activities/states, the discovery and search for an authentic body and self, and, third, places of liberation such as gardens, the sea, and the desert.



Edna has never been entirely comfortable in her role of mother, bourgeois wife, and hostess; the narrator explains that “[a]t a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (14). Edna’s discontent has churned beneath the surface of her everyday life, and as she learns to swim, and listens to Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano, she experiences new emotions and feelings which push her misgivings to the forefront of her thoughts. The current title of Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, alludes to the religious revivals of the nineteenth century. Edna’s rejection of her former life has the force of a total spiritual and physical revivification. Yet Edna’s awakening, unlike a religious conversion which offers the newly converted a structure of beliefs and community, leads to isolation. Chopin’s original title, *A Solitary Soul*, emphasizes this negative, alienating aspect of Edna’s change, yet it also indicates an existential shift in nineteenth-century views of women. Often thought of as relative being, defined by her relationships to her husband, family, and children, the image of woman that emerges from Chopin’s work questions this idea of woman as a relative being: “Kate Chopin has given her female protagonist the central role, normally reserved for Man, in a meditation on identity and culture, consciousness and art” (Robinson, ix-x). Although awakening does not always lead to freedom, Edna begins to become aware of her body and desires; she begins to see how her new desires are incompatible with the restrictions of society. At the end of the novel Edna attributes her awakening to conventional romance, but it is music and swimming that spark Edna’s rebellion against domesticity and bourgeois values.

Just as Chopin depicts the conflict inherent in Edna’s “dual life,” Gide illustrates the discrepancy between “l’être authentique” that Michel seeks and the conformity demanded of him by his society. While Edna’s awakening to her physical being occurs quickly and has the force of spiritual revelation, Gide shows Michel’s change to be a

process punctuated by brief moments of epiphany where Michel feels exultant and alive. During his travels Michel becomes aware of the disparity between society's mold that he is expected to fill and his own emerging sense of difference. The word "découvrir," to discover or uncover, characterizes Michel's discussion of "l'être secondaire" and "l'être authentique" and explains his desire to uncover his body. While the "secondary being" is thrust upon him, a false covering that "l'instruction avait dessiné par dessus" the "authentic being" is "un texte très ancien infiniment plus précieux" (63). Michel's comparison of himself to a palimpsest illustrates this discrepancy between the self society has imposed upon him and his authentic self. Throughout the novel Michel attempts to bridge the gap between his social, secondary, self and his authentic self, just as Edna seeks to reduce the distance between the "inward life" and the outward life. The characters seek to bridge this gap through an intense focus on the body and individual desire.

New sensual experiences such as travel, illness, and swimming allow Michel to begin to discover his "être authentique." In *L'Immoraliste*, Michel remarks that the sensations he experiences in Tunis "s'émouvaient telles parties de moi, de facultés endormies, qui n'ayant pas encore servi, avaient gardé toute leur mystérieuse jeunesse" (24). Michel's senses have been awakened by his travels. He had expected only to be interested in the Roman ruins, but his surprise at finding that there is more to see and experience awakens his body. The "mystérieuse jeunesse" that Michel evokes suggests a kind of newness and wonder where each sensation seems to glow with meaning and feeling. Michel's sensual awakening occurs almost like an intense memory: he realizes an older, more authentic being beneath the artificiality of his secondary, social being. *The Awakening* communicates a similar "mystérieuse jeunesse" of the senses: "that the world has a numinous life that is addressed to human perceptions and that it has a

meaning humankind is competent to interpret, at least for those whose senses are open, whose perceptions are not dulled by the demands of conventional life” (Robinson, xxi). Unaccustomed to the new physical sensations of travel and swimming, shaken out of their conventional perceptions, Michel and Edna are able to experience for the first time a sensuality that is startling, even dazzling in its intensity. This sensuality, however, leads to new feelings and thoughts, but also to confusion and isolation because their emerging selves put the characters in opposition to the mores of society.

*Dépaysement*, the sense of disorientation one feels in a new and strange place, fuels Michel’s sensual awakening. According to Edward Saïd, for nineteenth century writers, readers, and travelers, the “Orient,” which evoked exoticism, freedom, and sexuality contrasted sharply with rigid, bourgeois European society. Allowing for the abeyance of habits, customs, and morals associated with the mother country, travel as well as illness shake Michel and unmoor him from conventional attitudes about religion and individuality. As he recovers from his illness, he tells his friends at the beginning of chapter three, part one: “Je vais parler longuement de mon corps. Je vais en parler tant, qu’il vous semblera tout d’abord que j’oublie la part de l’esprit. [...] Je n’avais pas de force assez pour entretenir une double vie” (40). This “double life” that Michel speaks of is the life of the mind and the life of the body. In Africa, he only has the energy to concentrate upon his physical self, but also his illness as well as the newness of travel have created a kind of vacancy. It is as if when he spit out the “gros affreux cailloux” (35) he began to rid himself of not only illness, but his former stagnant, weak life; new sensations and feelings have rushed to fill this void, but Michel has not yet begun to understand them. For Michel, Africa represents the body and freedom, just as Paris symbolizes the dullness of a stale intellectual life and Normandy epitomizes a routine family life regulated by a confining procreative ideology. Gide associates the places and

landscapes Michel explores with Michel's awakening sensuality; the descriptions of Maghrebian gardens and deserts both mirror Michel's change and voyage of self-awareness. The novel employs the physical world to describe the change in Michel's body and mind. The continuous unfolding and growth of Michel's desire can be seen in the multiplication of gardens that he visits in Africa. Manfred Kusch remarks that "Michel's initial situation in Biskra is in many ways that of a newborn. Confined to his bed in an unfamiliar room, he appears to be ignorant both about his past and his situation in the present" (Kusch, 208). Indeed he arrives in Biskra almost dead, and he slowly makes his way out of this solitary room to the terrace, to the gardens below, and finally to the openness of the infinite desert, his final destination and the place where he recounts his story to his friends.

Travel, illness, erotic attraction, music, and learning to swim awaken Edna's and Michel's desire to live and to discover the self and body that has been repressed and denied by society. Chopin and Gide portray their characters' need to discover the self and body in a very literal way: both Edna and Michel remove excess clothing, or excess layers of self. Edna sheds the roles of mother and dutiful wife. The narrator states that Edna "was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (55). Michel, too, is in the process of becoming and discovering himself. What he calls "l'être secondaire" resembles Chopin's "fictitious self," yet Gide takes the notion of layers much further. The secondary being is what "l'instruction avait dessiné par-dessus" (63). Yet this top layer "s'écaille comme un fard et par places, laisse voir à nu la chair même, l'être authentique qui se cachait" (62). Peeking out from beneath a chipped and flaking cover, the flesh is equated with authentic being, whereas clothes (and other layers like Michel's beard, and his role of dutiful husband) are associated with artificiality and conformity. Edna and

Michel seek to liberate themselves from constraints which are imposed upon them and to sort out the authentic self from “[I]’amas sur notre esprit de toutes connaissances acquises” (62), all that they have been taught and forced to read. In this description of the secondary self, Michel seems to view the body as superior, more authentic to learning and culture.

While the body’s immediacy and tangible presence gives it the appearance of reality and authenticity, its reality is produced by desire, thought and feeling, and for Edna desire, thought, and feeling are difficult to disentangle from the dominant culture which produces the very structures of thought that allow her to think about herself in the first place. For Edna, the loosening of social restriction and the embrace of the desire lead to freedom, but also to entrapment because as she frees herself from the social fictions of marriage and motherhood, she falls into the equally limiting trap of adulterous love. Michel adopts more of an intellectual approach in his pursuit of authenticity than does Edna: he makes comparisons between his life and history; he develops a theory of art and civilization, yet he too deceives himself. He wants to escape the bourgeois conformity his gender and social class destine him for, yet as he pursues his desire for health and authenticity, he neglects Marceline and contributes to her death. Michel throws himself into recovery with the zeal usually reserved for study: “Pour un temps, seule ma guérison devait devenir mon étude; mon devoir c’était ma santé” (37). He vows to fight against illness, the “ennemi nombreux, actif, vivait en moi” (36). Michel escapes the austerity and “pudeur” of his childhood and he achieves a robust physical health, but at the end of the novel, although he has not relinquished his quest for authenticity and freedom, he is isolated and suffering. By embracing the body and sensuality, Michel feels he has lost something of his former self: “J’avais, quand vous m’avez connu d’abord, une grande fixité de pensée, et je sais que c’est là ce qui fait les vrais hommes; -

-je ne l'ai plus" (180). In late nineteenth-century France, a "real" man, a conventional man, was still concerned with conformity, honor and his familial lineage. Michel's embrace of sensuality and the body leads him down a new, and yet unexplored path.

## Part 1

### AWAKENING DESIRE, DESTABILIZING ACTIVITIES

Edna's awakening begins in the body: the physical sensations of listening to music, learning to swim, and her burgeoning erotic attraction to her friend Robert spark a change in Edna. In the revealing and foreboding chapter six, the narrator remarks that the world Edna is awakening to is "both within and about her" (14). Throughout the novel Edna becomes aware of sensation and her body, but she also must learn to manage the "world" within—her feelings provoked by these physical stimuli. The narrator also notes that the beginning of a world is "vague, tangled, chaotic and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!" (14). This "world" that the narrator evokes is Edna's world: both the physical sensations that she experiences and her interactions with others. "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" (14). The prepositions in this last phrase express the multi-faceted potential of Edna's awakening. Although the word "within" simply depicts Edna's inner emotional world, the word "about" is more evocative: it can signify the world around Edna, her surroundings, but also a world of ideas, customs, and beliefs fabricated *about* her. The narrative of self-sacrificing motherhood, explored in the first chapter of this thesis, presents one idea with which Edna struggles; the ideology of romantic and adulterous love, which I will explore

in chapter three represents another. Central to the novel are questions of illusion and authenticity. To what extent do the loosening of social and moral restrictions and the embrace of desire and the body lead to freedom for Edna? What are the effects of Edna's rejection of social roles and the prioritizing of desire and personal freedom? Desire and sensation, both physical aspects that seem so personal and physical to Edna are often most influenced by society. Just as Michel's choice of "immoralism" still positions him within a dominant discourse of morality, albeit in contradiction, so too does Edna's choice of adulterous romance place her in opposition to the bourgeois married world. Nonetheless, I argue that Edna's awakening prompts many discoveries and self-realizations about her place in society: her marriage, her motherhood and her (lack of) independence. As the narrator observes, awakening is dangerous: "necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing" (14).

"Vague, tangled, chaotic," and "disturbing:" these words describe the effect of Mademoiselle Reisz's music on Edna. Awakened from the comfort of bourgeois tranquility, Edna is disquieted and aroused by Mademoiselle's music; she is forced to recognize her erotic fantasies and repressed desires. On the night of August twenty-eighth, the vacationers at Grand Isle have gathered for a night of music, ice cream and dancing. Most of the night's activities are predictable: recitations and performances everyone has heard before. As the narrator notes the parrot who "shrieked" outside the door "was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performance for the first time that summer" (23). Chopin contrasts Mademoiselle Reisz's more serious and emotional music with the pleasant, light music of Madame Ratignolle and the Farival twins. The difference in the music Mademoiselle Reisz performs and the music Madame Ratignolle and the twins perform indicates the difference in the women's roles in society and different views of art. The

light, frivolous music played by the twins and Adèle decorates domesticity. Madame Ratignolle “was keeping up her music on account of the children [...] she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (24).

The Farival twins, mother-women in training and “girls of fourteen always clad in the Virgin’s colors, blue and white,” perform the overture to “The Poet and Peasant”—a rather mawkish, melodramatic piece that they have played several times already that summer. They also play a piano version of the overture from “Zampa”—a piece whose main theme is upbeat, happy and a bit repetitive. Writing about Creole women, Mary L. Shaffter, a contemporary of Chopin and a journalist, wrote that although Creole women are often “musically gifted, they prefer a gay *chansonette* to the intricate passages of one of Bach’s fugues” (qtd. in Culley, 139). Shaffter’s use of the word “*chansonette*,” literally a little song, indicates that although talented, Creole women preferred frivolous, less demanding music because it decorated the home and contributed to a soothing, entertaining atmosphere. Music and domesticity are linked not only in Creole culture, but in the nineteenth century. The piano itself constituted an important part of nineteenth century bourgeois identity. Music had, since the eighteenth century, been associated with femininity (Leppert), but the piano in particular was thought to be an instrument suitable for women. It was seen as a “marker of family position and accomplishment” (Leppert, 153). In the Victorian home, the piano was a kind of metaphor that “functioned in sound and sight alike as an analogical referent to social harmony and domestic order” (Leppert, 139). Piano music “served as the aesthetic metaphor simultaneously connecting and justifying the connections between public and private life [...] between men and women in their social relations, and [...] between bourgeois desire and erotic capacity, on the one hand, and their sublimation [...] on the other. (Leppert, 139). Song was an analogy for



the “socio-cultural construction of an idealized, harmonious Victorian life” (139). Musical performance helped tie together, even as it separated, the public and private, men and women, and desire and sublimation, with balance and harmony being the ultimate goal. Madame Ratignolle’s domestic music illustrates this kind of social balance and domestic harmony, whereas the music Mademoiselle Reisz plays—Chopin—has passionate, “avant-garde connotations” (Giorcelli).

Mademoiselle Reisz’s performance signals a break from pretty, domestic art in favor of passionate, demanding music. The “gay chansonette” or the waltz that Madame Ratignolle performs represents a conventional, bourgeois mode of being, whereas the dramatic Music Mademoiselle performs suggests the opposite: strong emotion and unconventionality. Mademoiselle’s arrival upon the scene, her awkward appearance and “small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed,” suggests that something strange and different is about to happen (25). Before Mademoiselle Reisz plays, the reader encounters two different examples of sound: the pleasant, domestic music of the twins and Madame Ratignolle, and the discordant squawking of Madame Lebrun’s parrot. These two examples of sound point to two different kinds of bodies: the docile body—represented by Madame Ratignolle—that is “free” to make harmonious, domestic sounds and the caged body of the parrot that interrupts and disrupts the harmony with its antisocial discord. When he interrupts the Farival twins, the narrator describes the parrot as a vicious being with his own opinion. He “cherished up and hurled against the twins in [...] one impetuous outburst” “the whole venom of his nature” (24). Lynda Boren observes, “[t]he voice of the parrot is a transforming device; it translates the human voices of Grand Isle into a meaningless composition of haphazard sound. Lacking this human element, the parrot’s screech, musically considered, is atonal, mechanical, and discordant; intrusive; noisome and irritating” (Boren, 184). Music, like the waltzes

Madame Ratignolle plays, becomes a symbol of domesticity, the harmonious running of society and the smooth integration of the individual into the community.

Pleasant, but not too emotional, this bourgeois music is a stark contrast to the “atonal” and intrusive screech of the parrot. A symbol of dissent and unpleasantness that has been pushed to the margins of society, the parrot is similar to Mademoiselle Reisz: she and the bird share a hatred of the Farival twins and they are both characterized as unpleasant. In chapter seventeen, Mademoiselle remarks that the summer has been “rather pleasant, if it hadn’t been for the mosquitoes and the Farival twins” (47).

Mademoiselle’s wry association of the twins’ music with the annoying incessant buzzing of an insect subverts the usual hierarchy of sound. For Mademoiselle, the twins’ music typifies the banality of bourgeois society rather than the relaxation of summer. Yet Chopin’s association of Mademoiselle with the parrot also suggests their shared status on the margins of society. Although the “disagreeable little woman,” disdainful of children and convention, clearly prefers her place on the margins of society, she is one of the few alternatives to bourgeois convention. The other alternative to the “gay chansonette” of bourgeois society is the atonal, senseless squawking of the parrot. The introduction of the parrot into the evening of August twentieth-eighth presages Edna’s inability to find a voice and a language for her awakened desires.

As Edna listens to Mademoiselle Reisz’s piano solo, she sits on a “low window-sill, where she commanded a view of all that went on in the hall and could look toward the Gulf” (25). Positioned in this liminal zone between sea and society, Edna is open to new possibilities and ready for change. Her position at the window also suggests Madame Bovary, another famous literary adulteress, who also sat by the window, longing for some change in her monotonous existence. The description shifts from the hall to the “distant, restless water,” just as Edna will shift away from her community and toward her

own restless thoughts and desires (25). This is the last time in the novel where Edna truly seems to be balanced between her own desires and her community. On the window sill, she can observe what is going on in the hall, but she is still contained within the building: the structures and mores of her community. The open window suggests a view of nature (the possibility of another space) and the Gulf that is moderated by civilization where she can hear both voices at once: the murmuring and clamoring of the sea (which suggests her own thoughts and desires) and the voices of the people around whom she lives. Just as the *soirée* incorporates both the domestic music of the twins and Madame Ratignolle, the open window allows the “voice” of the sea to be heard in addition to the voices of the people. On the other hand, the fact that she sits on a window-sill also implies passivity: at this point in the novel Edna is still an observer. Mademoiselle Reisz’s music primes her for action, new emotion and change. The “soft effulgence in the east” and the rising mystic moon suggest transition and imply the incommunicable, mysterious character of Edna’s awakening.

As a painter, Edna’s imagination is visual, imagistic. When she listens to Madame Ratignolle practice, the music evokes images. By making visual representations of the sounds she hears, Edna is experiencing the music indirectly through her imagination. Instead of being shaken or moved by what she hears, Edna uses the emotions of the music as inspiration in the creation of her own images: “Musical strains well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind” (25). According to Marilynne Robinson, the society in which Edna finds herself is artificial because it employs this same kind of distancing. It is “rich in allusion, emotional suggestion, aesthetic pleasure. These things are distanced through art, allowing the experience of dangerous emotions and powerful attractions without guilt or harm or peril” (xvii). Art, then—whether it be the shocking book everyone on the island reads, or Robert’s flirtations with Edna and

Adèle—serves a cathartic, civilizing purpose. However, when Edna listens to Mademoiselle play, she experiences the emotions evoked in the music directly. Instead of “pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair” the music stirs up “the very passions themselves” (26). Sending a “keen tremor down [...her] spinal column,” the music makes her cry, tremble and catch her breath. “[A]roused within her soul,” the passions “sway” and “lash” it “as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body.” While this is not the first time that 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” (26). The events this summer—the music, her growing ability to speak her mind, her blossoming attraction to Robert—have shaken Edna out of her habitual reserve and readied her for change. Change comes suddenly like the tremor she experiences at the first chords of Chopin. Edna’s passions are awakened in the soul, yet the soul is likened to the body buffeted by waves, and the physical effect the music has upon Edna implies sexual pleasure. The beating of the waves “upon her splendid body” suggests strong emotion as well as the turmoil and upheaval of passionate desire. Even though her emotions seem to be set free by the piano music, her body is now subject to the crashing waves of desire. Chopin’s use of water imagery presages Edna’s suicide. Unable to navigate the deep waters of her own desire, Edna loses herself in the Gulf and in her unlimited desire.

Although music awakens Edna’s body to passion, the inspiration she finds in listening to Mademoiselle Reisz complicates the question of Edna’s independence and authenticity. It is as if the music has marked Edna, revealed to her something fundamental, intense and passionate; when Edna first hears Mademoiselle, the narrator states: “it was the first time [...] her being was tempered to take the impress of the abiding truth” (26). This “truth” runs counter to the ideologies of conventional feminine

sexuality which teach maternity and sexual restraint. After listening to Mademoiselle Reisz's performance, Edna is filled with emotion: "A feeling of exultation overtook her," and a "thousand emotions have swept through me tonight" (27, 28). Yet she quickly begins to worry that she may never feel the same again: "I wonder if I shall ever be stirred again as Mademoiselle Reisz's playing moved me to-night. I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one" (28). Edna seeks to recapture the emotions she experienced the night of August twenty-eighth. In taking music as an inspiration for life, in seeking the emotions she experiences in music in life, Edna is challenging the filter separating reality and art. Yet as she seeks out passion and fulfillment, Edna steps over into the realm of art, and her emotions and experiences not only begin to feed off the music she consumes, but mirror the stories within it. For example, when she visits Mademoiselle Reisz in New Orleans, she listens again to Mademoiselle play, and the music has a similar, destabilizing effect: "the music penetrated her whole being like an effulgence, warming and brightening the dark places of her soul. It prepared her for joy and exultation" (77).

The music clarifies, brightening her soul, making her aware of parts of herself she had not known. However, the music does not give her joy; it prepares her for joy and readies her to seek the emotions she experiences in music. The use of the verb "prepared" coupled with the almost erotic effect Mademoiselle's music has upon Edna suggests that the music prepares Edna for sexual pleasure. Rather than prompting passive reverie as Madame Ratignolle's domestic music does, Reisz's performance of Chopin stirs up antisocial, rebellious emotions. Chopin further illustrates the connection between music and adulterous desire by Mademoiselle's choice of music. When Edna visits Mademoiselle in New Orleans, she reads the letter Robert has written Mademoiselle Reisz, and the pianist plays "the quivering love notes of Isolde's song" (61). Isolde's

song in Wagner's opera is the *liebestod*, or love-death. Tristan and Isolde's adulterous romance ended in death and tragedy, a fact that seems to foreshadow Edna's suicide. Yet while music undoubtedly stirs listeners' emotions, it is a representation of passionate emotion in sound, and the expectation that life mirrors music's passions or "prepares" one for fulfillment proves, for Edna, disappointing. Although in love, or so she thinks, with her friend Robert, Edna first experiences physical passion with another man, Alcée Arobin: "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (80). When she realizes that sexuality and love are often separate things, Edna "feels a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips" (80). Chopin's use of religious imagery, "the cup of life," an image which recalls the Christian practice of communion, indicates the importance Edna places upon physical passion and the fact that new life and new sensation can bring regret and despair.

After listening to Mademoiselle Reisz perform and learning to swim, Edna notices a change: "A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night. I don't comprehend half of them" (28). After returning from the beach, she sits outside alone with Robert, and the two fall into an erotically charged silence. Neither speak: "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbing of desire" (30). The turbulent events of the evening have roused Edna and awakened her passions, and when Robert attempts to mythologize and explain Edna's experience to her, she brushes off his explanation: "Don't banter me" (29) preferring instead to mediate on her experiences alone. Robert tells Edna: "a spirit that has haunted these shores for ages rises up from the gulf. [He...] seeks some one mortal worthy to hold him company. [...] Tonight he found Mrs. Pontellier" (29) Edna risks making her own life merely an echo of an illusion. Much

less impetuous and more thoughtful than for instance, Flaubert's Emma Bovary—another female character who finds herself awakened by art— Edna prefers to examine her situation before merely acting upon awakened desires. Despite Edna's lucidity and determination to examine her situation, her sensuality and propensity for daydream, represented by the recurring voice of the sea, threaten to overwhelm her, just as the music "aroused the very passions themselves" in her soul, "swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body" (26).

Michel's experiences in Africa lead him to reject virtue and restraint in favor of abandon and sexuality, yet Gide also depicts the danger inherent in change and awakening. Michel's shift from a static, protected existence to a life of growth, discovery and change endangers his relationship with Marceline, a constant reminder for Michel of what he seeks to abandon. Michel's close brush with death so alters him that he is unable to continue "la vie trop calme," the uneventful, bourgeois life he led as a younger man (21). As he recovers from his illness, he becomes awakened to the physical world around him and vows to make of his life "la palpitante découverte" (31). The adjective *palpitante* suggests movement and life, qualities which contradict his previous description of a life that is "trop calme," while the word *découverte* implies a continual search for the authentic, a goal that places Michel in opposition to rather static bourgeois existence he has led. For instance, Michel explains to his friends that at twenty-five, he knew nothing of life: "j'atteignis vingt-cinq ans, n'ayant presque rien regardé que des ruines ou des livres, et ne connaissant rien de la vie" (20). He also states that "[l]a vie trop calme que je menais m'affaiblissait et me préservait à la fois" (21). His early life has been a sort of incubator that has maintained his life but prevented any growth or evolution.

Travel forces Michel out of his comfort zone: it tests his weak body and forces a change in his perception of himself, and the physical world around him. Michel remarks that before travelling he was hardly aware of his body: “Une autre chose que j’ignorais, plus importante encore peut-être, c’est que j’étais d’une santé très délicate. Comment l’eussé-je su, ne l’ayant pas mise à l’épreuve?”(21). “L’épreuve,” or test, that Michel speaks of is travel, the stress of which brings Michel’s weak body to his attention (21). Although Michel has travelled before, he admits to his friends “c’étaient des voyages d’études” (22). Unlike the short trips he took with his father in Europe, his voyage to Africa with Marceline not only awakens his senses, but changes his preconceived ideas about northern Africa. He tells his friends: “Je vous confesserai ma sottise: rien dans ce pays neuf ne m’attirait que Carthage et quelques ruines romaines. [...] je voulais que rien d’ici là ne fût digne de m’occuper” (24). Despite Michel’s desire only to see the monuments he has read about, Africa awakens him sensually and surprises him : “Pourtant Tunis me surprit fort. Au toucher de nouvelles sensations s’émouvaient telles parties de moi, de facultés endormies qui, n’ayant pas encore servi, avaient gardé toute leur mystérieuse jeunesse” (24). Here, he recognizes that there are other parts of him (“facultés endormies”) that have been buried, that he has ignored. Michel’s experiences in Tunis have sparked an awakening in his sensual faculties, which remain, at the beginning of his voyage, mysterious and unexplored.

The first rustlings of Michel’s sensual awakening are ignited by his travels, and his travels exhaust his already frail body. Indeed, in terms of Michel’s awakening, illness functions similarly to travel: it disorients Michel, shaking him out of his habitual mode of perceiving the world, allowing him to recover buried parts of himself. After remarking upon his “nouvelles sensations,” in the very next paragraph, he states that “[m]a fatigue cependant devenait chaque jour plus grande [...] Je toussais et sentais au haut de la



poitrine un trouble étrange” (24). Michel’s sensuality begins to emerge just as his body begins to fail him; this interesting overlap between sensuality and illness points out the necessary conditions for Michel’s physical awakening: first, illness is a liminal state of the body, between sickness and health, life and death; it is a physical state that has the power to reinvigorate Michel’s sensual awareness, a sensual awareness that he had not been able to access as a young man protected by his “vie trop calme” (21). Second, travel is also a liminal phase where the traveler exists apart from the norms of his home country, but at the same time he is a stranger in the country he is passing through. The sense of strangeness and mystery introduced at the beginning of part one when Michel first visits Tunis is echoed physically in Michel’s “trouble étrange” that he feels “au haut de la poitrine” (24). He pushes aside worries about his health, yet the disorienting strangeness of his illness returns as he travels by stagecoach through the cold desert.

The scene on the stagecoach where Michel first coughs blood allows Gide to illustrate the change occurring in Michel’s body, and in doing so, explore Michel’s experience of sensuality merged with illness. This scene also introduces one of the main tensions in the novel: the conflict between hiding and revealing. The movement of the stagecoach coupled with Michel’s worsening cough creates a strange jolting, irregular movement. He arrives in El Djem “extenué par les cahots de la voiture, et par une horrible toux qui me secouait encore plus” (25). On the second coach trip, he feels himself tossed around as if on the sea: “Je me crus sur mer de nouveau, et le bruit des roues devenait le bruit de lame” (27). This impression of turbulence and movement suggests Michel’s changing sensations; just as he is tossed about by the coach, he vacillates between pleasure and disgust and shame and the pressing need to speak of what has occurred on the coach. Michel’s sense of being on the sea also implies the foreignness of his surroundings as well as his distance from others; Marceline is asleep,

and they pass through the desert at night. As Michel begins to spit blood, his first sensation is not disgust, but pleasure:

je crachais ; c'était nouveau ; j'amenais cela sans effort ; cela venait par petits coups, à intervalles réguliers ; c'était une sensation si bizarre que d'abord je m'en amusai presque, mais je fus bien vite écœuré par le goût inconnu que cela me laissait dans la bouche. Mon mouchoir fut vite hors d'usage. Déjà j'en avais plein les doigts. Vais-je réveiller Marceline?... Heureusement je me souvins d'un grand foulard qu'elle passait à sa ceinture. Je m'en emparai doucement. Les crachats que je ne retins plus vinrent avec plus d'abondance. J'en étais extraordinairement soulagé. C'est la fin du rhume, pensais-je. Soudain je me sentis très faible; tout se mit à tourner et je crus que j'allais me trouver mal. (26-27).

Canovas remarks that Michel's use of demonstrative and indefinite pronouns such as "ce," "cela," and "en" create "une distance entre ces pronoms et leurs antécédents (le sang, les crachements)" (230-231). Words such as "goût inconnu" and "nouveau," and "sensation si bizarre" further enforce this impression of distance; Michel is experiencing something strange and new and by referring to the phenomena by non-specific words such as "ce," "cela" and "en" he maintains a sort of distance between himself and the experience— he is reluctant to associate the sensations he feels with himself. Still tentative about this experience, Michel states "je m'en amusai presque." For a passage that, on the surface, recounts the beginnings of Michel's tuberculosis, the description is oddly positive. The scene, for instance, at the end of the novel where Marceline vomits blood is terrifying and dramatic, and the scene where Michel spits blood in Biskra is far from pleasurable; the blood is "épouvantable." Canovas writes that "[a] travers la

description de la ‘maladie’ de Michel, il nous semble que cet épisode révèle, pour ces lecteurs attentifs, cette autre ‘maladie’ qu’est l’onanisme” (231).

Just as Chopin uses music to describe Edna’s sexual awakening, Gide uses descriptions of Michel’s tuberculosis to suggest masturbation. To write openly and without moral censure about masturbation in 1902 was not possible; therefore Gide attempts to discuss in a coded way a phenomenon that was thought to harm a man’s health and cause shame and dishonor. Exploring masturbation in this way allows Gide to avoid the religious, moral, and medical negativity associated with the activity. As already mentioned, travel and illness place the body in a liminal zone between one location and another, between life and death. In the above excerpt, the body itself is not strange or repulsive, but the experiences which destabilize it are disquieting, new and different. Words such as “inconnu,” “nouveau,” and “sensation bizarre” are neutral, even positive words for the body and masturbation, which implies that the body and its pleasures are a new site of discovery, as well as sources of pleasure, even knowledge. Canovas explains that these adjectives are “façons de nommer l’innommable, ce qui ne se dit pas” (231). What is not said or discussed on a cultural level is masturbation, but the unnamable also refers to Michel as an individual. He has not begun to discover himself, his body or his mind. One erroneous analysis of Gide’s coupling of pleasure and illness is that Gide hopes to show that Michel’s body is “strange” or “sick,” and that Michel takes delight in what is depraved. This is quite far from truth. In the preface to the novel, Gide states that he hopes to avoid the notion that his novel is “l’exposé d’un cas bizarre” and that Michel is “un malade” (10). Rather, Gide’s goal appears to be similar to Michel’s: to rescue the body from hypocrisy and repression. When Michel first begins to spit blood, it comes easily: he spits “sans efforts” and later, the blood comes “avec plus d’abondance.” Here, Michel describes a simple physical process: “Je m’en amusai

presque.” It is not until later when he sees the blood on the scarf and his handkerchief that he wants to hide it from Marceline.

By combining the genesis of Michel’s sensual awakening with his illness, Gide depicts the way in which out of the ordinary experiences (illness, sexuality, travel) force Michel to view himself and the world differently. The reader can see many of these changes throughout part one of the novel which relates Michel’s first travels through Africa. I analyze here just a few of the immediate effects of Michel’s travels, yet it is important to remember that even as Michel’s new experiences force a dramatic change, Michel responds to these changes ambivalently. “Vais-je réveiller Marceline?” he wonders, when he first begins to spit up the blood. This question both reveals Michel’s hesitant response to his new experiences and the dynamic that informs the rest of the novel: does Michel reveal or conceal what he has just discovered? How will he present himself to Marceline? After the coach ride, his “première pensée fut de cacher ce sang à Marceline” (27). He rushes to his room to “laver, faire disparaître le sang” (27). Rivalin-Padiou remarks that the desire to hide the blood from Marceline reveals “un refus, une honte et une hantise de la maladie” (9). Indeed after he has finished spitting blood, Michel feels weak, and he feels threatened by this weakness which he calls “abandon par faiblesse”: “(J’ai gardé, je crois, de mon enfance puritaine la haine de tout abandon par faiblesse; je le nomme aussitôt lâcheté)” (27). Not only does Michel dread illness, but he despises feeling weak and out of control, the sense that “tout se mit à tourner et je crus que j’allais me trouver mal” (27). Michel’s evocation of his “enfance puritaine” and his “haine de tout abandon” contrasts markedly with the first descriptions of the blood which indicate Michel’s receptivity to and tentative pleasure in this almost sensual experience.

Michel’s puritan childhood characterized by the “grave enseignement huguenot de ma mère” and the “invincible pudeur” (19) of his father encourages discipline, duty,

rigidity of principles and a hatred of abandon, qualities which Michel abandons in favor of receptivity to sensual experience. After the stagecoach ride and Michel's confession to Marceline about the blood, he believes himself to be on the verge of death he states: "Vous l'avouerais-je? Je n'eus pas un sursaut. J'étais las. Je m'abandonnai, simplement" (29). Here, Michel lacks the energy to move or fight his weakness; he abandons himself to it: "Après tout, que m'offrait la vie? J'avais bien travaillé jusqu'au bout, fait résolument et passionnément mon devoir. Le reste... ah ! que m'importe ?" (29). Interestingly, when Michel abandons his "devoir," he immediately begins to see differently. In a change of tone that is almost humorous, Michel states : "Mais ce dont je souffrais, c'était de la laideur du lieu. 'Cette chambre d'hôtel est affreuse'" (29). Although he states that "je n'aimais pas assez la vie pour avoir pitié de moi-même [...] la laideur de ce lieu me gênait" (29). It is as if the repressive legacy of Michel's childhood is momentarily obstructed by the extraordinary changes that have occurred in his body. He no longer has the strength to maintain his usual sense of duty, discipline, or self-composure. Instead, he yields to an appreciation of Marceline's beauty: "presque avec volupté mes yeux se reposaient sur elle" (29). The word "volupté" indicates strong physical or sexual pleasure, whereas the word "presque" suggests the weakness of Michel's response, a frailty that he suggests again when he says of Marceline "j'eus comme un confus sentiment de tout ce que la vie pouvait être, de son amour à elle, la vague vision de si pathétiques beautés" (29). As he looks upon Marceline, he has hope for life and love, yet the vision is vague and indeterminate. The adjective "pathétiques" resembles "volupté" in its meaning of intensity and passion— emotions and sensations that Michel cannot entirely experience because he is too weak.

Words like "intensity" and "passion" characterize Michel's new ethos. Before travel Michel's perspective shows a lack of flexibility. He arrives in Africa with fixed

ideas about what he cares to see and what merits his attention: “rien dans ce pays neuf ne m’attirait que Carthage et quelques ruines romaines” (24). Physical awakening, however, creates a shift in Michel’s perspective. After his first days in Biskra, Michel explains that “[I]’important, c’est qu’il devînt pour très étonnant que je vécusse, c’est que le jour devînt pour moi d’une lumière inespérée. Avant, [...] je ne comprenais pas que je vivais” (31). The man whom his friends formerly characterized as a “puritain très docte,” (14) yields to the idea that life should be a “palpitante découverte” (31). The combination of the words “puritain” and “docte” suggest a severe, abstemious individual who is primarily concerned with intellectual pursuits at the expense of other modes of being. On the other hand, “palpitant” implies movement, life, and excitement. A “découverte,” meaning both a discovery and an uncovering of something preexistent, represents a more humble, individual approach to experience. Michel’s new mode of being is a discovery of and through the body. Realizing that he has a second chance on life, he hopes to find himself and uncover what has been hidden by his culture and his puritanical attitude. The change from duty to “palpitante découverte” suggests a more direct relationship with life. “Palpitant” implies movement, a beating heart: something “palpitant” is trembling and pulsing with life whereas duty indicates fixity of thought and determination.

## Part 2

### DISCOVERY AND THE AUTHENTIC BODY, THE EFFECTS OF AWAKENING

Just as water represents a clamoring, ever-present, potentially overwhelming desire, swimming indicates, for Edna, a mastery of the body and ability to navigate an unknown force, the sea. Edna has overcome her “ungovernable dread” of the water and becomes like a “tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence.” (27) While

comparing Edna to a child just learning to walk communicates all that is new and startling about her awakening, it also indicates danger. Previously she had relied upon others to keep her afloat in the water, but she now has control of her own body. Confident, but still inexperienced, she exults in her own ability to lift her body to the surface and maneuver through the water. The night Edna learns to swim there are “rare odors abroad”: the “tangle of sea smell,” the scent of “weeds and damp, new-plowed earth” and “the heavy perfume [...] of white blossoms” (27). The odor of blossoms and new-plowed earth suggest vitality, growth and rebirth, but also confusion and the undomesticated “tangle” of nature. Nature is restorative, yet at the same time it has a strange, hypnotic, physical effect upon Edna. In sloughing off the skin of civilization and society, Edna is at the mercy of nature, just as she was as her “splendid body” was at the mercy of the waves of music. She experiences emotions and passions directly through music; she seeks out a fulfillment of these passions aroused by music. Nature’s “amoral seductive potency” only sharpens her desire for fulfillment (Robinson, xv).

The night Edna learns to swim, Chopin depicts the dark seductive powers of nature in order to portray the ambiguous nature of Edna’s awakening. The sea is calm and waves do not break “except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents” (27). Waves like white serpents suggest the serpent in the Garden of Eden who embodies knowledge of sexuality and sin. Chopin’s lighting of the scene creates a soft, slumbering effect: “The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like the mystery and the softness of sleep” (27). Chopin’s insistence upon sleep even as she is describing one of the key events in Edna’s awakening emphasizes the nature of Edna’s change. Hers is not an awakening that causes her to abandon dream, desire and the unconscious urges of her soul in favor of a “realistic” appraisal of her place in society. Although Edna’s understanding of her position does grow, her awakening is first

framed in terms of her body and her burgeoning desires. She listens more closely to her desires and turns a deaf ear to the demands of her husband and society. The repetition of the word “mystic”—Robert suggests a bath “at that mystic hour under that mystic moon” foreshadows Edna’s isolation as well as her inchoate, incommunicable experience of awakening.

Even as Edna delights in her new ability to swim, her experience in the water disorients and confuses her. Walking alone from the water, she lets her arms hang “limp, letting her white skirts trail along the dewy path” (28). Edna’s thoughts are “elsewhere—somewhere in advance of her body, and she was striving to overtake them” (28). The gap between body and mind accounts for many of Edna’s impetuous actions. It is as if by flinging herself into new situations and “blindly following whatever impulse moved her” (29), Edna is trying to catch her thoughts. Yet Edna’s experience in the water provides a moment of transcendence, a brush with death that both confuses and invigorates her. She swims far out; she desires to swim “where no woman had swum before” (27). Out alone in the sea, Edna turns “her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude” (28). Moonlit sky meets and melts into sea. Edna apprehends this solitude, this melting of boundaries with an “excited fancy” (28). As she swims “she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (28). As she marvels at the vast expanse of sky and water, she realizes how far she has swum and “a quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses.” This vision of death foreshadows her suicide, but it also evokes the precarious nature of Edna’s awakening. Her awakening, her rebirth, is tinged with death. A growing self-consciousness and sense of physical well-being is shadowed by the possibility of self-extinction in the “unlimited,” as well as the extinction of her old conforming self. She first experiences the merging and melting of sea and sky with an “excited fancy,” but soon she is



overwhelmed, frightened she may drown. Just as Edna seems to have found herself and gained a sense of her own body, she seeks to lose herself. As Sandra Gilbert notes, Edna's swim represents a kind of baptism: "swimming immerses Edna in an *other* element—an element, indeed of otherness—in whose baptismal embrace she is mystically and mythically revitalized, renewed, reborn" (51-52). According to Gilbert, what Edna swims away from, what she is reborn from, is her old life: "For in swimming away from the beach where her prosaic husband watches and waits, Edna swims away from the shore of her old life, where she had lingered for twenty-eight years, hesitant and ambivalent" (52).

Indeed her experience in the water and at the musical *soirée* makes her more selfish and increases her confidence and independence. It is as if "some significant import had been given her soul." (27) Her soul gains permission to try new things, to break away from her community, which comes in the form of self-assertion and willful rebellion. The night after her swim Edna insists upon staying outside in the hammock after her husband demands that she go inside. While this incident seems unimportant, it marks a change in Edna's body and temperament. Another time "she would, through habit, have yielded to his desire" (30). Yet her deference to her husband's wishes would have been "unthinking" just as "we move, stand, go through the daily treadmill of life which has been portioned out to us" (30). The treadmill image implies a listless, somnambulist life where the sleeper plods along his predetermined path, never questioning or daring to take another road. Here, when she is told to go inside, "her will [...] blazed up, stubborn and resistant." The verb "blaze" evokes anger, passion and a quickly sparked irritation at her husband's attempt to treat her like a child. That Edna did not "yield to his desire" to come inside also hints at a sexual advance. Newly-awakened to her body and her desires, Edna does not wish to perform her conjugal duties. Indeed,

when Mr. Pontellier complains to Doctor Mandelet in New Orleans, he states that “[s]he’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and—you understand—we meet in the morning at the breakfast table” (63). Presented as a typical Creole of his era, Léonce Pontellier represents for Edna “reality”: when she married him she put away her infatuations; “she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever upon the realm of romance and dreams” (19).

The change Edna has experienced the night of August twenty-eighth causes her not only to reject her husband’s advances, but to do as she wishes when she wishes. Chopin describes Edna’s awakening as a break from society. Images in chapter twelve focus upon rupture and the growing sense that Edna is unmoored, cut off from responsibility and society. The night after the concert Edna wakes early. She immediately calls for Robert and suggests a trip to the Chênrière Caminada. She sleeps feverishly, disturbed by “intangible dreams” that leave the faint impression “of something unattainable” (31). She does not quite know what she wants only that she is freed from convention. Chopin writes that Edna “was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul from responsibility.” Although the morning air is invigorating, she does not seek “refreshment or help from any source, either external or from within” (31). She is independent, yet to be free from responsibility does imply that a burden is lifted, yet when she escapes the obligations of responsibility she is given over to the vicissitudes of impulse. The “alien hands” she delivers herself to suggest not only desire, but the unconscious mind, which like the ocean, is unlimited.

Kate Chopin may not have been familiar with Freudian psychoanalysis, yet with its descriptions of dreams and impulses, the novel invites such an interpretation. By

disrupting the Cartesian domination of desire and impulse by reason and law, Edna has cut herself away from the regulating forces of her society. Desire, impulse are in a precarious balance with reason. As Edna and Robert sail across the bay toward the Chênrière, “Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, [...] leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails” (33). Although the tone in this passage is joyous, the language is troubling. True, an anchor can hold fast, but it also steadies a ship, keeping it from blowing away. To be free to drift seems pleasant when the weather is fine, but when it is not, a boat could easily be destroyed in dangerous waters. Indeed “Edna whom Chopin uses as the ostensible heroine of her romance, is meant to illustrate how easily the woman artist might fall victim to her own unlimited and unlimiting desire. Edna is the creative will without form, a voice cut off and ultimately smothered in its infancy” (Boren, 181). Boren is correct that Edna is a “creative will without form” and a “victim of her own unlimited and unlimiting desire,” but rather than just a symbol of an artist, she also typifies many nineteenth-century women: seeing few outlets for her passions and energy, Edna turns to daydream and love, finding passion “in the only manner which seems safely available to her” (Wolff, 451).

After her vacation in Grand Isle, Edna is filled with new physical energy and a new desire for life and experience, yet the full passionate existence that she wants is unarticulated. For instance, after she visits the Ratignolles in New Orleans she feels pity for her friends. Domestic harmony is not “a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui” (54). She looks down on Madame Ratignolle and feels “a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have a taste of life’s delirium” (54). Edna doesn’t know

what she means by “life’s delirium;” the expression “had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous impression” ( 54). This thought, vague and mysterious even to Edna herself, indicates her desire for something different, something new. As she first learns to swim, it was “as if some power of significant import had been given her soul” (27). Edna’s awakening has imbued her with power and energy, but it has also left her adrift and with means of expression.

On Chênrière Caminada, the day after the concert, she and Robert have escaped a dreary, stifling mass and they go to Madame Antoine’s so that Edna might rest. In a move that suggests the loosening of moral restrictions, Edna loosens her clothes and removes the greater part of them. Like a small child who has just become aware of her body, “[s]he looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it was something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh” (36). Here, she is recognizing her youth, her health as well as her strength. As the narrator emphasizes, Edna is not a “supercilious or an over dainty woman” (29). The night of the concert after her swim she reclines in the hammock “and when she did so it was with no cat-like suggestion of voluptuous ease” but rather “with a beneficent repose that seemed to invade her whole body” (29). “Cat-like” and “dainty” implies a woman who plays at and acts out femininity for the benefit of some onlooker, just as Madame Ratignolle pretends to grow faint although “the rose tint had never faded” from her cheeks (13). Edna’s body is authentic—she does not act out voluptuous, melting ease, but rather sleeps when she is tired and eats when she is hungry.

Authenticity, and the authentic body appear in both novels and the imagery Chopin and Gide use is strikingly similar. When Mr. Pontellier goes to Dr. Mandelet because he worries that Edna is not herself, the narrator writes that Léonce could not see

that, in fact Edna “was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (55). Edna had never truly been a “mother-woman” and she begins to fully abandon the pretense. She abandons her Tuesdays at home and does not visit those that have called upon her: “she made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household *en bonne ménagère* going and coming as it suited her fancy, and, so far as she was able, lending herself to any passing caprice” (54). Her husband is angered because Edna’s actions have real consequences for their social standing. If they are to keep up with the Joneses, Edna must do her part to “contriv[e] for the comfort of her family” (55). She vows to follow her desires, rather than the path laid out for her by her husband and the rest of her community. As the imagery of the “fictitious garment” implies, social sanctions are inauthentic and constricting, yet at the end of the novel, Edna stands alone and naked, having cast away the “unpleasant pricking garment” of her swim suit; she is “at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and waves that invited her” (108). She is free, yet it is a terrifying stark freedom. Chopin suggests that a radical liberty, totally free from obligations or social roles, leaves Edna vulnerable and alone. Yet Chopin’s portrayal of Edna challenges previous depictions of women who have challenged the conventions of marriage, such as Flaubert’s illustration of Emma Bovary. Flaubert’s character “never attains [Edna’s] level of self-awareness and inner independence” (Heilmann, 88).

As he recovers from his illness, Michel seeks independence, and his self-awareness begins to grow, yet Michel’s frail constitution colors his emerging sensuality; he remains marked by his illness: he retains his “sensibilité malade” (41). Allowing Michel’s body greater sensitivity to temperature change, this sensibility, now that he is healthy, is a source of pleasure: “Je gardai cette sensibilité, la garde encore, mais aujourd’hui, c’est pour voluptueusement en jouir” (41). Indeed, Michel explains that

“[t]oute sensibilité très vive peut, suivant que l’organisme est robuste ou débile, devenir, je le crois, cause de délice ou de gêne” (41). “Sensibilité” in the above quote refers to physiological sensitivity, or sensation. If an organism has a predilection for certain kinds of sensations, in Michel’s case sensitivity to temperature, the sensation can be felt as either pleasurable or uncomfortable. In both novels the characters experience new physical sensation as joyous; new sensation leads to the flourishing of the body and a change in the self. After learning to swim, Edna becomes more self-assertive and refuses to go inside and with her husband. Physical awakening urges her toward self-assertion and rebellion. Similarly, Michel’s illness changes his perception of his body and forces him to reconsider even the most basic aspects of his life, such as his eating habits: “Manger beaucoup était, de toutes mes résolutions, la première” (37). Michel’s desire for health and wellness causes him to develop a disciplined, even obsessive attitude toward his health: “Pour un temps, ma guérison devait devenir mon étude; mon devoir c’était ma santé; il fallait juger bon, nommer *Bien*, tout ce qui m’était salubre, oublier, repousser, tout ce qui ne guérissait pas” (37).

Michel’s determination to reject everything that threatens his health and embrace everything that encourages his recovery causes him to reject many aspects of his former self, including, Marceline. The adjective “salubre” refers to what is healthy, but it also refers to the word “salut” which means salvation or rescue from danger. Here, the reader can discern the intensity with which Michel hopes to escape death and sickness. He calls his recovery “une affaire de volonté” (37). Through the strength of his will, he seeks to deliver himself from illness and death. Yet this ardent desire to live causes him to fear and dread death, an attitude that paradoxically makes him more vulnerable. Ruins, which Michel once enjoyed studying and reading about, appear to him as dead objects: “Mon érudition qui s’éveillait à chaque pas m’encomrait, empêchait ma joie. Je ne pouvais

voir un théâtre grec, un temple, sans aussitôt le reconstruire abstraitement” (61). The ruins that he sees “me faisait me désoler qu’elle fût morte; et j’avais horreur de la mort” (61). As Michel realizes this he is in Italy, a sort of middle ground between France and Africa, a place where Michel appears to achieve some balance between mind and body. His erudition has awakened, but his awareness of his body is still growing, a fact which prevents Michel from returning to his studies. He states that he could not “me replonger comme jadis dans l’examen minutieux du passé, je découvris que quelque chose en avait, pour moi, sinon supprimé, du moins modifié le goût; c’était le sentiment du présent” (61).

“Le sentiment du présent” and his new taste (goût) for a mode of being that allows him to explore his body and desires cause Michel to momentarily abandon his studies. While they were once his duty and reason for being, his studies seem only to have an accidental and conventional relationship with his life: “Je me découvrais autre et j’existais, ô joie! en dehors d’elles (ses études)” (62). Exhilarated to find that he exists outside of being a scholar, Michel is still not certain if he knows himself as a man. He uses the word “autre” which demonstrates that not only is he other than he had originally thought, but that he is different from others, at least other Europeans like the intellectuals he encounters in Paris. How his body and desires are different he does not exactly know, but just as Edna casts off the “fictitious garment” of her responsibilities and roles, Michel seeks to reveal the body which he associates with “l’être authentique”: “L’amas sur notre esprit de toutes connaissances acquises s’écaille comme un fard et, par places, laisse voir à nu la chair même, l’être authentique qui se cachait” (62). Michel’s image of a palimpsest evokes a different kind of archeological study: instead of immersing himself in history and language in order to uncover the truth in a ruin, he decides to explore himself, to delve beneath the layers of “toutes connaissances acquises” until he discovers his authentic self.

Michel's convalescence shares an important quality with his illness: it is characterized by reversals and sharp changes in his philosophy: "Après que l'aile de la mort a touché, ce qui paraissait important ne l'est plus; d'autres choses le sont, qui ne paraissaient pas importantes, ou qu'on ne savait même pas exister" (62). Illness stifles Michel's erudition, suppressing the analytical and intellectual aspects of his being that block his sensuality; his recovery reveals to him what is important; it sweeps away the inessential, "l'amas sur notre esprit de toutes connaissances acquises" (62). Yet this mass of acquired knowledge "s'écaille comme un fard"—it is beginning to flake. Meaning cosmetics or artifice, the word "fard" anticipates Michel's image of the palimpsest. "L'être authentique" has been suppressed by everything "autour de moi, livres, maîtres, parents" and even himself (63). He decides that "[i]l fallait secouer ces surcharges" (63) in order to reveal the authentic being underneath. By mentioning "livres, maîtres, parents" Michel reveals that he intends to shake off ("secouer") his entire epistemological structure, which he refers to as "surcharges," words written on top of other words (63). Michel compares himself to a palimpsest, a manuscript where the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing. In this comparison, Michel rediscovers "la joie du savant, qui, sous les écritures plus récentes, découvre, sur un même papier, un texte très ancien infiniment plus précieux" (63). Yet Michel feels joy in discovering himself, not in the close study of an ancient document.

Indeed he realizes that he is no longer "l'être malingre et studieux à qui ma morale précédente, toute rigide et restrictive, convenait" (63). He feels that in Africa and Italy "il y avait plus qu'une convalescence; il y avait une augmentation, une recrudescence de vie, l'afflux d'un sang plus riche et plus chaud qui devait toucher mes pensées, les toucher une à une, pénétrer tout, émouvoir, colorer les plus lointaines, délicates et secrètes fibres de mon être" (63). Here, Michel illustrates the link between



thought and body. Physical energy brings new blood to the mind and its delicate, secret fibers. Furthermore, the construction of the self has its foundation in the body: “Car, robustesse ou faiblesse, on s’y fait ; l’être, selon les forces, se compose” (63). It is as if the self draws upon the energy of body to construct itself; weak bodies make weak selves, just as strong bodies make strong selves. Certainly this notion contributes to Michel’s disregard and disdain for weakness, but it also illustrates his obsession with health and illness as well his striving for transcendence. Michel sees in the body a possibility for transcendence that he does not quite understand: “mais qu’elles [les forces] augmentent, qu’elles permettent de pouvoir plus...” (63). These last two words, “pouvoir plus,” suggests Michel’s desire to know more, be more and do more, but what he is not yet sure. He admits that in Italy “je ne pensais point, ne m’examinais point; une fatalité heureuse me guidait.” He fears that examining himself too closely would “déranger le mystère de ma lente transformation” (63).

Michel’s transformation is slow, giving him time to deliver himself “voluptueusement” to himself, “au tout qui me parut divin” (64). He leaves his studies in abeyance: “Laissant donc mon cerveau, non pas à l’abandon, mais en jachère” –his mind is a field that he has left fallow (64). The recurrence of agricultural imagery anticipates Michel’s theory of civilization illuminated in part two of the novel, but it also suggests that Michel is becoming healthier. A fallow field is left cultivated so that the land can rest, and recover from a season of planting. Similarly, Michel ignores his mind to concentrate on another field in need of cultivation, his body. In Amalfi, Michel is inspired by the healthy bodies of some peasants working the fields: “La vue des belles peaux hâlées et comme pénétrées de soleil, que montraient, en travaillant aux champs quelques paysans débraillés, m’incitait de laisser hâler de même” (66). Manual labor produces bodies that are tanned and fit, whereas Michel feels that his “trop maigres bras”

and rounded shoulders are shameful in comparison (66). However, he hates his pallor the most: “mais surtout la blancheur ou plutôt la décoloration de ma peau [...] m’emplit de honte et de larmes” (66-67). Pallor suggests death or illness, but in nineteenth century Europe and America it also implied a life lived indoors, a feminine, upper class, protected life. Michel prefers the freedom and vitality of the working classes, and as he offers his body to the sun he feels free: “Bientôt m’enveloppa une cuisson délicieuse; tout mon être affluait vers ma peau” (67). The verb “affluer” normally refers to liquid. In Gide’s image Michel’s being is the blood that rushes to his skin to meet the sun. He returns to the rocks each morning to take his “cure,” and he finds that once he shed his “excès de vêtement” he is healthier: “mon épiderme tonifié cessa de transpirer sans cesse et sut se protéger par sa propre chaleur” (67).

Michel believes that his toned, healthy body is more capable of regulating his temperature, yet this description of his body also indicates his growing independence from societal protections. The shawl that he wore earlier in the novel protects his weak body from the changes in temperatures; he no longer needs that protection as his body has begun to produce its own heat. Liberated from the protections he sought while ill, Michel is free to discover himself. While sunbathing by the rocks he finds “une source claire [qui] coulait” (67). Water suggests baptism and purification—one should recall the water Michel uses to wash the blood from his hands and handkerchief earlier in the novel. Before he jumps into the water, Michel stays on the edge, “plein de soif et plein de désirs,” as if he were contemplating his new-found health and freedom (68). Finally on his fourth day in Italy, Michel jumps into the water and stretches out “sur l’herbe au soleil. Là, des menthes croissaient, odorantes; j’en cueillis, j’en froissai les feuilles, j’en frottai tout mon corps humide mais brûlant. Je me regardai longuement, sans plus de honte aucune, avec joie. Je me trouvais, non pas robuste encore, mais pouvant l’être,

harmonieux, sensuel, presque beau” (68). Michel refers to his tanning as “ma cure,” and his immersion into the cold spring produces another kind of cure. As if the water had cleansed away all traces of illness, Michel gazes at himself approvingly, with love. He feels joy and confidence in his body; this new-found physical confidence allows him to look at himself without shame and to imagine when he will be robust and handsome.

### Part 3

#### LANDSCAPES OF LIBERATION

From early in the novel Chopin has linked the sensuality of the sea to Edna’s emerging self consciousness. In chapter six, the sea is seductive, “never ceasing” (14). Like a siren, it whispers, clamors, murmurs, “inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation” (14). The sea touches as well as whispers: “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (14). Murmuring and whispering like a lullaby, the sea is soothing, promising a soft, almost maternal embrace. While the sea suggests solitude as well as the maternal embrace, it also suggests romantic love and physical passion and Edna’s vulnerability and solitude. In the opening chapters of the novel the sea invites her, beckons her soul, summoning her to lose herself “in mazes of inward contemplation” (14). The sea compares to the infinity of the desert in *L’Immoraliste*. Both places echo the infinitude of desires to which the protagonists awake and the possibility of delving too deep and withdrawing too much into the self. As Edna becomes disillusioned with love and desire, she turns to the sea and its comforting, enveloping embrace. Michel, on the other hand, calls his friends to him and hopes for no

other help than to talk (Gide, 17), whereas Edna feels herself irremediably alone—nobody can understand her, even Robert.

Caught between memory and desire, Edna finds that her moods are ever-changing. Léonce notices the change in his wife and begins to wonder if she “were not growing a little unbalanced mentally” (55). Dr. Mandelet echoes Mr. Pontellier’s thoughts when he tells him that “most women are moody and whimsical” (64). However, Edna is not moody because she is a woman. She is moody because she has nothing stirring to do, nothing that is outside of herself and her own dilemmas. Newly awakened to love and her own sensuality, Edna new energy turns to frustration with her role and with her place in life. Despite her visits to Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle, Edna spends her time alone, wandering the streets, thinking of Robert or painting. Haunted by their time together, while she paints she sometimes sings the song Robert sang “*Ah si tu savais*” and a “subtle current of desire pass[es] through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn” (55). Edna’s memory is sensual; she recalls the “ripple of the water, the flapping sail” and “the glint of the moon” the night she and Robert rowed back to Grand Isle. The memory of desire has made her sad and restless. Some days she is happy and focused on the present: “she was happy to be alive and breathing” (56). She feels “her whole being” is one with the sunlight and the luxuriant warmth. On other days, she is unhappy without knowing why, and “life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation” (56).

When she is unhappy, life seems devoid of meaning and all human action seems chaotic and senseless. Eventually Edna is overcome by meaninglessness. Her shifting moods and conflicting desires may have kept her agitated, but desire focuses on the future; it is a kind of hope. Paralyzed by the horrific scene at Adèle’s and stunned by

Robert's abandonment Edna stays awake all night, "never uttering a sound" and never moving from the sofa (106). And, in the final scene in the novel, when Edna stands alone on the seashore, she is still despondent; the mood "had come upon her there in the wakeful night and had never lifted" (108). No longer full of life and new energy, her desire has turned to despair: "There was no one thing in the world that she desired" (108). A complete lack of desire indicates a spiritual death, yet Edna's vigil also suggests bodily death. Unmoving and unspeaking she lies on her sofa like a statue, her body once again rigid and posed.

Several readers have commented upon the images and sounds Edna experiences on her last suicidal swim. It is tempting to analyze this last chapter as a kind of defeat or regression, and indeed Edna fails to find a place for herself in society and she cannot resolve her feelings and desires with the paths open to her. Yet, Edna's suicide is a deliberate action that ensures she will not be subject to maternal or domestic slavery and that she will not compromise her vision of freedom. As Sandra Gilbert remarks "Edna swims, as the novel's last sentences tell us, not into death but back into her own life, back into her own vision, back into the imaginative openness of her own childhood" (57). She hears her father's voice and her sisters Margaret's, "the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was a hum of bees, and musky odor of pinks filled the air" (109). The novel ends upon an image of fertility and new life, of humming bees and pink flowers. The maternal element of the ocean mixes together and blends two very different groupings of imagery: images of authority and restraint, her father, her sister, the dog, and images of desire and fertility, the cavalry officer, the bees, and flowers. These last images that melt together in the watery world of the sea suggest a different kind of

society, one not based upon restriction or repression. Nevertheless, Edna experiences this kind of world only in death and on Chênrière Caminada with Robert.

Just as the ocean represents Edna's unbounded inner world of dream and desire, the desert represents for Michel total freedom, unbounded by society and tradition. Yet, his journey to freedom begins in his sick room in Biskra. Later, he moves outside this small room to the gardens outside, and then from the gardens, to other gardens and finally to the immensity of the desert. The garden in Biskra offers Michel a quasi-domesticated environment in which to experience his first "bégaiements de santé" (42). When he is not afraid of losing his breath on the stairs, he descends from his bedroom and terrace and ventures into the garden. The garden is a social, communal place divided linearly by canalled rivers and carefully arranged trees. He feels "un singulier frisson" that seizes him "quand j'entraï dans cette ombre étrange" (42). Otherwise, he does not seem to be impressed by the garden, only irritated by Marceline's presence. He wishes to be alone on the park bench, free to wait for "le hasard d'une rencontre heureuse" (45). Although he meets two children on his second trip to the garden, the third trip is the most interesting because Michel is all alone and able to experience the light and sounds of the garden without interruption. The day is beautiful and the blossoms of the cassia trees fill the air with "cette sorte d'odeur légère inconnue qui me semblait entrer en moi par plusieurs sens et m'exaltait" (46). Susceptible to nature's beauty, Michel inhales the scent of the flowers. It is as if the scent has entered into him, almost revivifying his body. His connection to nature recalls his theory of civilization where he posited a direct relationship between the body and natural world. Intoxicated, he sits on a bench and notices that "l'ombre était mobile et légère; elle ne tombait pas sur sol, et semblait à peine y poser" (47). Unlike his first trip where the shadows were strange and heavy and

caused him to shiver (42), here even the shadows seem light and airy, so luminous and fresh is the garden.

Michel delights in the sight, sound and even the touch of the garden. The bark of a bush seemed so strange that he can't help but to touch it: "Je la touchai comme on caresse; j'y trouvais un ravissement" (47). He is carried away by wonder and the excitement of first discovery. Impatient to get well and dazzled by nature, he asks: "Etait-ce enfin ce matin-là que j'allais naître ?" (47). Alone in the garden he forgets the time and wonders how he could have spent so much time thinking and so little feeling. The atmosphere of the garden, the light, the scent of the cassia trees and the touch of the tree have brought this realization to the surface, and he is amazed that "ma sensation devenait aussi forte qu'une pensée" (47). He has neglected sensation and its reality startles and dazzles him. Indeed, "gradually the garden becomes [...] a space of personal and sensual immersion, a luminously shady closure within which Michel descends through the layers of his 'inauthentic being' to make contact with the deepest (and, therefore, truest) level of his personality (Kusch, 209). Making "contact with the deepest [...] truest level of his personality," allows Michel to recover a sensual past. Since his early childhood, "mille lueurs, de mille sensations égarées" had awakened in him (47). These sensations make up "toute une histoire" and, in fact, they have always existed even during his years of study when they took on "une vie latente et rusée" (47). An intense concentration and immersion in the present moment allows Michel to rediscover his latent senses.

As Michel continues to concentrate on his health and his body, his senses and desires become more evident and less disguised. Despite his physical renaissance, however, he concentrates only on his body and neglects his mind and his studies. After leaving Biskra he states that "[d]epuis le début de mon mal, j'avais vécu sans examen,

sans loi, m'appliquant simplement à vivre, comme fait l'animal ou l'enfant. Moins absorbé par le mal à présent ma vie redevenait certaine et consciente" (60). If his life has become again certain and conscious, his time in Biskra is governed by uncertainty and the unconscious mind (desire). Gide portrays the rebirth of Michel's desire by way of the orchards in Biskra. In contrast to the structured line of the public garden, the path in the orchards appears curving and maze-like: "[Marceline] me précéda dans un chemin bizarre et tel que dans aucun pays je n'en vis jamais de pareil" (49). Between two high earthen walls the path

circule comme indolemment; les formes des jardins, que ces hauts murs limitent, l'inclinent à loisir ; il se courbe ou brise sa ligne ; dès l'entrée, un détour vous perd ; on ne sait plus ni d'où l'on vient, ni où l'on va. L'eau fidèle de la rivière suit le sentier, longe un des murs (49-50).

The path curves indolent, forcing the walker to loiter and pause without rushing along. The line of the path, which is curved and broken suggest the possibility of an unexpected change around the bend. Soon the walker is lost, not knowing which way he came or which way he goes. Michel walks "dans une sorte d'extase, d'allégresse silencieuse, d'exaltation des sens et de la chair" (50). Buoyant with ecstasy and his senses exalted, Michel follows the sinuous path as if in a spell. They enter the garden through a gap in the wall. As Kusch notes, "the central generating concept determining the spatial structure" of the orchard is "*la ligne brisée*" (211). The broken line is also evident in the "brèche" (the break) through which Marceline and Michel enter into the garden. Furthermore, one function of the orchard and its broken line is "the affirmation of the positive value of discontinuity—i.e. the valorization of a present nourished not by teleological past, but rather by a fundamental truth which reveals itself in an ahistorical encounter between man and nature in the accommodating seclusion of the garden" (211). Kusch's analysis of the orchard recalls what Robinson said of *The Awakening*. That Michel and Edna are both capable and sensitive to the experiences of nature is key to



their change and rebirth. The fact that both have difficulty translating the sensations experienced in nature back into the physical world is due to the discontinuous nature of their experiences.

Lacking sequence and coherence also describes Michel's experiences inside the garden. Indeed "the dominant mode of relating to the world is that of unmediated sensation rather than the linear mode of *la pensée*" (Kusch, 211). Discontinuity, however, also suggests the nature of desire: desire dies off, resurfaces and lacks coherence. The sinuosity of the path and the river resemble Chopin's description of the sea "inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (14). In fact both the orchard path and Chopin's "mazes" suggest the indolent wandering of desire, the path of a walker not following a straight line—the shortest way between two points—but rather the trail of a wanderer led along by curiosity, the scent of flowers, the play of sunlight on the palm or the "chant de flûte" just around the break in the wall. The song of the flute too is discontinuous: "[il] coulait encore, cessait par instant, reprenait" (51). In this atmosphere Michel thinks of nothing; he only feels and experiences: "je ne pensais à rien; qu'importait la pensée? je sentais extraordinairement" (51).

In addition to allowing Michel the experience of sunshine, music and breeze the orchards also permit Gide to discuss desire in terms of thirst. Michel returns to the orchards the next day without Marceline and the goatherd tells him of the water and the canals. All the canals do not run every day. Instead the water is "sagement et parcimonieusement répartie, et satisfait à la soif des plantes, puis leur est aussitôt retirée" (51-52). At the end of the novel when he recounts his story to his friends, he complains that pleasure comes too quickly after desire. Here, the plant has a taste of water, then to prevent the decay and rot of the root that can sometimes occur with desert plants, the

water is taken away. In order to “*mâîtrise l’eau [et] l’amène[r] où la soif est trop grande*” there are basins built at the foot of each tree and an ingenious system of sluices (“*écluses*”) which direct the water to where it is needed. The notion of giving plants just enough water implies a teasing relationship toward desire. If the plant were “*ivre d’eau*,” which is what happens after the February rains (56), desire would die. The stems of the plants are “*lourdes, molles et gonflées d’eau*” (56). The spring is “*forcené*” and Michel feels the same. He burns with a kind of “*fièvre heureuse*” (57). In Italy, however, he is able to take a step back from his animal existence. He realizes that has been living “*sans loi*,” and tries to “*rattacher [s]on présent au passé*,” but realizes that because he has changed he cannot do this (60). To live like an animal or child, implies a life focused on the present, on desire, on the body. To do so, is healthy, even necessary, but Michel realizes the need for evaluation and understanding as well as bodily well-being and sensuality.

At the end of the novel, Michel seems to have forgotten his desire to “*rattacher [s]on présent au passé*.” He does summon his friends to hear his story, but he is nearly overcome by a sense of lassitude. The description of the house and the desert that the writer of the letter gives evokes openness and freedom, but also desolation and emptiness. In his attempt to strip away the layers of civilization, Michel has isolated himself in the far, remote corner of the world. At the beginning and end of the novel he is stranded, almost ship-wrecked in this desert. The sunshine is monotonous—“*pas une diminution de soleil*”—and the sky is an “*azur parfait*” (13). For both the writer of the letter and Michel, the climate has a disorienting effect. For the writer the climate fills him with an “*exaltation très vague*” that is perhaps happiness (13). For Michel, the effect is more serious: the azure of the sky discourages thought. His mind is dulled because “*ici toute recherche est impossible, tant la volupté suit de près le désir. Entouré de splendeur*

et de mort, je sens le bonheur trop présent et l'abandon à lui trop uniforme" (180). Desire still exists, but it is nearly snuffed out by the excess of pleasure. Desire sharpens and invigorates the mind and body, but too much satisfaction ("bonheur trop présent") is boring and deadening. Michel finds the length of the days gloomy and monotonous and his leisure unbearable.

Michel's house reflects the emptiness of his existence. Although poor and bizarre, it is not without charm, yet there are no window panes, no windows, only "vastes trous dans les murs" (14). The gaping holes in the house provide no protection from the wind and the elements; they stand for the "perfect contact" of mind with nature that Michel wished for when he elucidated his theory of civilization. In Paris, Michel notices his taste for life has changed. In Africa and Italy, he has had a taste of "une vie plus spacieuse et aérée, moins contrainte et moins soucieuse d'autrui" (105). At the time of the letter and the time of his narrative, however, his spacious, airy life that allows him to be less concerned with others has become constricting. The big holes in the side of the house suggest the emptiness of his days, and Michel is left open to the vastness of the desert. The house also dominates the countryside, and from the terrace, "la vue à l'infini s'étendait" before them (15). Infinitude, the vastness of the view from the terrace, suggests the more open life Michel used to desire. But without limits, Michel experiences a crippling lassitude.

Desire and physical awakening shake Edna and Michel out of their conventional, listless lives. A rediscovery of the body leads to joy, sensuality and increased self-awareness, but it also brings an awareness of death. Michel becomes hyper aware of his health and terrified death. One night in Biskra, he awakens to the calm, stillness of the night and he is frightened: "rien ne semblait dormir; tout semblait mort" (58). In a panic, he realizes that "un jour viendra—pensai-je, --un jour viendra où même pour porter à mes

lèvres même l'eau dont j'aurai le plus soif, je n'aurai plus assez de forces..." (58). The water Michel speaks of is not the water of religious salvation (baptism), but the water of life, the terrestrial, revivifying water he describes in the gardens. The possibility of death, his own and later Marceline's, shadows Michel's awakening. He fears a time when he will no longer be independent and his newly-awakened body will fail him. That night in Biskra, he chooses a book haphazardly and reads in the Bible: "Maintenant tu te ceins toi-même et tu vas où tu veux aller; quand tu seras vieux, tu étendras les mains" (59).

Death also shadows Edna's awakening. Learning to swim and being moved deeply by music push Edna off of the "treadmill" that she had unthinkingly been following, but the narrator also remarks, as Edna sails away to the Chênière Caminada that "Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—[...] leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails" (33). Indeed, Edna's escape from society to the island of Chênière Caminada is joyous, yet as the narrator emphasizes awakening can be dangerous: "tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. [...] How many souls perish in its tumult!" (14). Just as Michel wishes to be free of the girding ("se ceindre"), restricting power of society, Edna is glad to escape the anchoring chains of her community. An escape from these chains allows her to discover herself. Beneath her roles of mother-woman, wife and upper class society woman, her own thoughts, feelings and desires have lain dormant. Similarly, Michel recognizes that his sensual being has always been present; his senses and desires were merely hidden under his studious, intellectual "secondary being." When Edna and Michel cast aside the "fictitious garment" of the "être secondaire," they are, independent, yet vulnerable and alone. Ridding themselves of responsibility and the false mask of the social self may be exhilarating and necessary, yet the discovery of the self

and the body requires a momentary abeyance of tradition and societal dictate, not a complete eradication of the social self, as Edna attempts. As Michel says at the beginning of his narrative: “[s]avoir être libre, n’est rien; l’ardu est savoir être libre” (17). This quote indicates that Michel believes that the process of liberation is not nearly as difficult as knowing how to be free—that is knowing how to live a fulfilling life that corresponds to his values and desires.

To know how to be free requires not only awakening and a realization of one’s needs and desires, but the knowledge of how to be free: an awareness of one’s place in society. When the old roles are discarded—mother-woman, husband, wife, daughter, son, dutiful scholar—other roles and identities must take their place. Michel recognizes that something of his former self has died: “J’avais, quand vous m’avez connu d’abord, une grande fixité de pensée, et je sais que c’est là ce qui fait les vrais hommes;—je ne l’ai plus” (180). Yet fixity of thought, immovable principles, duty, and discipline are precisely the qualities that kept Michel in ignorance of his body and himself. By embracing a mode of being that values flexibility, and the capacity to yield to sensation, Michel has killed his old self—the man surrounded by a wall of “invincible pudeur,” and separated from himself by his taste for austerity (19). The writer of the letter that precedes Michel’s narrative is fully aware of the change in Michel and stresses the fact that Michel must find a place in society: “En quoi Michel peut-il servir l’Etat? [...] Hâte-toi. Michel est dévoué: il l’est encore: il ne sera bientôt plus qu’à lui-même” (12). Despite the fact that Edna and Michel seek independence from the restrictions placed on them by others, they also begin to realize themselves in relationship to others. As I will show in chapter three, identity can be formed by interaction with others (looking and speaking) and meaningful work. However, desire, even as it reveals the body, it also clouds the eyes, making it difficult to see the self, others and what is illusion and reality.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE NEW SELF: CONFESSION, ILLUSION AND IDENTITY

#### INTRODUCTION

Sensuality jolts the body, awakening Edna from habit and routine. Because the emotions she experiences while on vacation—passion, desire, satisfaction in autonomy—differ from her domestic circumscribed life, she is forced to reevaluate her place. Vacation not only implies freedom, a time away from responsibility, but also an emptying. To be on vacation, as Michel is in Africa, is to move out of the mindset of regular day to day activities. Once the mind and body are removed from the quotidian, new impressions and new sensations can rush in to fill the void. While in Africa Michel discovers his body and senses that have lain dormant throughout his sedentary youth. Travel and illness awaken his body, causing him to seek a more authentic self beyond culture and learning. Whereas Michel seeks to reevaluate his new experiences with his body and create a new system and philosophy through which to understand them, Edna turns to painting and begins to focus more upon her summer flirtation with Robert. And as Edna's romantic and erotic desires are awakened she begins to rebel from her roles as mother and dutiful wife. Owning her body makes her less docile to the demands of authority, her husband's and her community's. Similarly, Michel seeks to abandon and escape the constrictions of society: the false social selves that have alienated him from his body and his true self.

Yet recognition of the body and the senses is only the first step in the formation of identity. As Edna and Michel rediscover their bodies, they begin to think about themselves in new ways. For Edna to claim her body as her own is very radical considering her position as a Creole woman. As she says to Robert at the end of the novel: "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give

myself where I choose” (102). Viewing their romance in patriarchal terms, Robert has fantasized about Mr. Pontellier setting his wife free, not realizing that Edna has changed and no longer recognizes the authority her husband has over her. While Edna must struggle to assert power over her own body and freedom, Michel, as a man, already possesses himself in a way that Edna does not. Whilst Michel is subject to the control of others and the limiting ideologies of bourgeois identity, marriage does not mean the same thing for him as it does for Edna. Sensing that there is something undiscovered about himself, he struggles with the definition of man. He senses that there is something more, something that has not been said: “Qu’est-ce que l’homme peut encore? [...] Ce que l’homme a dit jusqu’ici est-ce tout ce qu’il pouvait dire ?” (158). Finding little that he can relate to in history or literature, he becomes extremely interested in the lives of the people on the farm and the children in Africa and in others whom he considers to be lower class or potentially criminal. By finding out some secret about them, he hopes to better understand himself.

In this third chapter, I argue that as a part of Edna’s and Michel’s physical awakening, each character begins to explore new ways of being, and as they begin to reject their old identities, new identities and new modes of being begin to arise. Even as both characters reject the restraints of society, in the novels it is evident that identity is, in part, produced through interactions with others. Indeed, the characters come to a clearer sense of themselves in three ways: speaking, looking and creating. However, these three activities could imply a non-reciprocal relationship, and even as Michel and Edna attempt to escape the restrictions of society, their actions exist within a framework of societal interaction. Therefore, in my analysis, speaking, looking, and creating are compounded and enriched by three complementary phenomena: the difficulty of confession, illusion, and sacrifice. Looking at and observing others or oneself as both Edna and Michel do,

entails the risk of self-deception and illusion. Because the way in which each character sees is, to some extent, determined by his/her individual tastes and desires as well as his/her society, the reality perceived by the senses may or may not be reliable. Edna, for instance, becomes awakened to sensation and desire, only to discover, at the end of the novel that her erotic fantasies are “a decoy to secure mothers for the race” (105).

Obsessed with health and fearing the boredom and listlessness of bourgeois society, Michel refuses to see the reality of Marceline’s illness and his own fragility and need for community. At the end of the novel, he finds himself isolated and bored.

Speaking to others is not often considered of great importance, but Edna and Michel engage in a certain kind of discourse, that of confession. According to Foucault, confession focuses not on “what the subject wish[es] to hide, but with what [is] hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of confession” (Foucault, 66). In other words, it is through speaking and interacting that the confessing person begins to know himself or herself. *L’Immoraliste* is a confession, and in fact the reader can see that confession functions according to an interesting power dynamic. Although, the novel is framed with an authoritative sounding letter, the truth comes from the bottom up, from Michel, not his listeners who are, unlike Michel, a part of society. *The Awakening* employs confession to a lesser extent, but Edna still confesses her thoughts to Adèle, and in doing so she begins to see herself more clearly.

The third part of this chapter, creation, is counterbalanced by its opposite sacrifice and death. Death and annihilation have shadowed the characters’ awakening from the very beginning: As soon as her senses are awakened, Edna begins to lose herself in music. While swimming for the first time, she feels invigorated and alive and then a “quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses” (29). The ocean that calls to her and awakens her senses also beckons her to



her death. As Edna becomes more aware of her position as a mother and a wife, as she begins to paint and listen to music, she realizes, albeit dimly, that her life is one of slavery, and she prefers to take her life, rather than sacrifice it to a patriarchal order in which she has no place. Michel emerges from life-threatening illness, only to be confronted again with death and decay. Although his theory of civilization and his new ethos of health enable him to begin to understand and define himself, he cannot handle his wife's illness. Threatened and terrified by Marceline's deteriorating health, Michel distances himself from her, and finally sacrifices her in order to preserve his own wellbeing and gain his own freedom. Birth, or in the words of Chopin's narrator, "the beginning of things, of a world especially is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic and exceedingly disturbing" (14). The path to freedom entails pain, suffering, and sacrifice.

## Part 1

### SPEAKING AND CONFESSION

While Chopin emphasizes that Edna is not a mother-woman, she does not clarify what kind of woman Edna is. Edna vows one day to "pull myself together for a while and think [and] try to determine what character of woman I am; for candidly, I don't know" (79). Yet, when she looks at herself through the lens of conventional ideology, she sees herself as flawed: "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" (79). By her own account, Edna is a different, possibly new kind of woman, a fact which Chopin illustrates when she depicts Edna in relation to other characters. In the above quote, Edna speaks to Alcée Arobin. It is not Arobin, however, her lover, or Robert with whom she is infatuated, that prompt Edna to thought, but rather Madame Ratignolle. Arobin is a seductress, not unlike Roldolphe in *Madame Bovary*,

and Robert ignites Edna's sense of romance and play when the two visit Chênrière Caminada, and Arobin's kiss enables Edna "to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (80). While Arobin and Robert, allow Edna to understand desire and romance, her interactions with other women force her to think.

At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator emphasizes that Edna "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 around her" (14). The narrator continues: "This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman" (14). The use of the words "ponderous," "seem" and "perhaps" indicate a disdain toward those in society who might not believe a woman competent to assume "the central role, normally reserved for Man, in a meditation on identity and culture, consciousness and art" (Robinson, ix-x). Such weighty knowledge might be too dull and difficult for such a young woman of twenty-eight. That the wisdom Edna obtains is more "than the wisdom the Holy Ghost" usually allows any woman is subtly blasphemous; it suggests that Edna's wisdom does not come from the Holy Ghost, but from direct experience with the chaotic, fallen world.

Edna's awakening prompts her to seek out sensual experience in the material world of nature and human relationships. Experiences such as these broaden the narrow, Victorian perspective normally allotted women. As Edna says herself "I always feel sorry for women who don't like to walk; they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole" (101). Edna's experience walking around New Orleans catching "rare glimpses of life" indicates a growing awareness of her position in the universe, but it is also an acknowledgement of her

position in the social universe. Indeed there are three kinds of relationship hinted at in the narrator's comment: first, the position of the individual to the universe—this suggests human questions of an existential nature—second, the individual's relationship to her own private world of dream and fantasy, and third her relationship to the world of social reality. As the novel progresses, Edna becomes much more immersed in her private world of dream and fantasy, yet her friendships with two very different women Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz contribute to her awareness of herself and the formation of her identity.

Having always been reserved and self-contained, Edna begins “to cast off her mantle of reserve” as she interacts with Adèle Ratignolle. “Even as a small child she had lived her own small life all within herself” (14), and she had never been “a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature” (14). Attracted to the beauty and candor of Madame Ratignolle, Edna begins to talk of herself and her experiences. In fact Adèle's candor “which everyone might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve” attracts Edna (14). Contrast allows Chopin to more clearly depict Edna emerging self. Still unsure of herself, Edna begins to talk with Adèle and the contrast of their viewpoints makes Edna more aware of her situation as well as herself. Nevertheless, Chopin indicates that Adèle and Edna have a close relationship: “Who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the subtle bond which we call sympathy which we might as well call love” (14-15). As Michael Worton notes, “their friendship grows mysteriously out of difference—which makes possible a genuine dialogue and sympathy” (115). Edna confesses her experiences to Adèle because she feels at ease around the beautiful and candid Creole, and Adèle is presumably drawn to Edna because she is “different from the crowd” (14).

Before Edna and Adèle begin talking, however, the narrator mentions the lady in black and the lovers—the three allegorical figures that often follow Edna at Grand Isle. The lady in black is reading her morning devotions and the lovers are “exchanging their hearts’ yearnings” (16). One is a woman in black, absorbed in her thoughts and her rosary; the others, two lovers engrossed in their private conversations. None of the three figures ever speak, nor are they named, but they suggest the passions to which Edna is drawn: contemplation and withdrawal into the self, and an obsessive, exclusive, interaction with the beloved. Both passions suggest loss of the self: in the transcendence of meditation or the passion of love. Just as the woman in black and the lovers represent Edna’s intense passions, they also suggest Edna’s solitary nature. Edna is already an outsider in this community; she has married into it, and therefore does not know its customs. Edna’s and Adèle’s conversation is unique in the novel; it presents Edna in dialogue with another. This interaction with another character depicts Edna’s character more clearly than do the narrator’s descriptions of her solitary musings. Just as the woman in black and the lovers represent Edna’s intense passions, they also suggest Edna’s solitary nature. Edna is already an outsider in this community; she has married into it, and therefore does not know its customs. As the two women settle themselves on the beach, Edna, lost in thought, looks out at the water. After Adèle rouses her from her reverie, Edna cannot immediately remember what she was thinking, only that “the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at” (16). The hot wind in her face makes her think

without any connection that I can trace—of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. (17).

Edna's memory offers valuable insight into the way her mind works as well as into her childhood. As she speaks to Adèle she does not yet see the connection, only that the waving green grass resembles the blue ocean in its movement, its infinity. That the beautiful image of the blue water and white sail conjures a childhood memory for Edna suggests that her mode of thinking is not only stream of consciousness, but also that she is artistic. As a painter, she thinks in terms of images. Watching the ocean evokes the childhood memory of the grass and allows her access to her feelings.

After describing the green field to Adèle she understands the connection between the grass and the ocean. She confesses to Adèle "sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (17). That summer day she walked through the grass in Kentucky, she wandered "just walking diagonally across a big field. My sun-bonnet obstructed my view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it" (17). This memory foreshadows Edna's first swim where she thrills at the idea of swimming "far out, where no woman had swum before" (27). Swimming, however, frightens her, while in the grass field she doesn't "remember whether I was frightened or pleased. I must have been entertained" (17). Wandering alone in a field of green, Edna can only see grass, her gaze obstructed by her sun-bonnet, a detail that suggests concentration and solitude, but also a limited, obstructed view. Edna's walk through the grass also suggests the world of inner contemplation conjured by the sea, which invites the soul "to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (14). Nonetheless, perhaps the most interesting detail in Edna's memory is the fact that she has run away "from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (17). Outside of organized religion, Edna finds a wide, open field to wander and let her thoughts wander, yet when Madame Ratignolle

teases her about running from her prayers she dismisses her experiences as those of a “little unthinking child [...] just following a misleading impulse without question” (17). Despite the fact that “she must have been entertained” she can only translate her experience to Adèle in rather negative terms: Edna characterizes her flight away from the gloomy church service as misguided and reassures Adèle that at another time in her life, “religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until—until—why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it—just driven along by habit” (17).

Chapter seven in the novel, one of the longest in a novel of very short, almost episodic chapters, offers the most information about Edna’s past, and this is the same chapter in which Edna shares memories from her childhood. The chapter begins with this description of Edna: “Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. Even as a child she had lived her own small life within herself” (14). Furthermore, Edna’s withdrawn reserved personality has led to a kind of split in herself: “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, inward life which questions” (14). Throughout the novel, as I will show, Edna does make progress in closing the gap between the questioning inward life and the conforming outward life, yet her early life has had profound effect upon her identity. Cynthia Griffin-Wolff sees Edna’s dual self as an attempt to combine the extremes present in her family dynamic. Her older sister Margaret is “matronly and dignified” (17) and “has all the Presbyterianism undiluted” (63), whereas the youngest sister Janet “is something of a vixen” (63).

According to Wolff, “the attempt to internalize this contradiction combines with other of Edna's psychic needs to produce an "identity" which is predicated on the conscious process of concealment” (451). Indeed concealment appears to have been a coping technique for Edna. She has retreated inward out of fear of judgment, and

“provides the passion she needs in the only manner which seems safely available to her—through daydreaming” (451). In the past Edna has been “very little open to sustained relationships because those elements of character that she might want to call her ‘real’ self must remain hidden, revealed only to herself” (451). Yet her conversation with Adèle is liberating. While Edna had had “the occasional girl friend, [...] they seemed to have been all of one type—the self-contained” (17). Adèle is calm, soothing, and encourages Edna to talk. Edna tells Adèle about wandering unguided in the tall grass and doing so allows her to see the connection between the present summer and her childhood. In both instances, Edna realizes, impulse is freed from rules, supervision, and authority: “I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question” (17). Yet, the very act of talking is also liberating: “She had put her head down on Madame Ratignolle’s shoulder. She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (19).

The narrator equates freedom to candor, yet the taste is “unaccustomed” and it muddles and intoxicates Edna. On the other hand, Creole women such as Madame Ratignolle are more accustomed to candor. At first their candor shocks Edna; she is impressed by their “entire absence of prudery” (11). Although their “freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her [...] she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable” (10). While Edna has no difficulty “reconciling” Creole women’s freedom of expression with their unassailable chastity, she has difficulty bridging that gap herself. For Edna, freedom of expression means freedom to express her feelings and desires, to act upon them and realize her identity. As an outsider, she begins to see what are to her, contradictions in Creole society, and unlike the other women she refuses to embody

them. Madame Ratignolle's candor, sympathy and maternal demeanor soothe Edna and help her to drop her "mantle of reserve," yet unlike Adèle, Edna cannot sublimate sensuality into motherhood. The narrator notes that Adèle is "delicious in the rôle" of mother-woman, "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm" (9). Although the modern reader rightly recognizes Adèle "as a surface of clichés," (Schweitzer, 169) for Edna she is "delicious," comforting and soothing, very unlike the only mother-figure Edna has ever known: her elder sister Margaret who was "matronly and dignified." Margaret is "practical" and not at all "effusive" (17). Madame Ratignolle's effusive nature draws from Edna more than Edna perhaps expected to share.

Her children's absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. Edna did not reveal so much as all this to Madame Ratignolle that summer day when they sat with faces turned to the sea. But a good part of it escaped her.  
(19).

Despite their conversation, however, Adèle does not draw from Edna her biggest secret: Edna dislikes the responsibilities of mothering. According to Schweitzer, there is often a "split between the experience and image of motherhood" (170). In the novel this split "is most clearly evident in the course of Adèle's 'labor,' in which she performs the physical labor of birthing a child and cultural labor of maintaining the requisite image" (170). As the reader will recall, at the beginning of the novel, Adèle complains of "faintness" due to her pregnancy despite the fact that her condition is not visible and "the rose tint had never faded from her face" (Chopin, 13). Edna, however, refuses to perform this "double labor [that] most women perform to bridge the gulf between the image and reality of motherhood" (Schweitzer, 170).

Realizing that Edna is "not one of us [that] she is not like us," Adèle warns Robert to leave Mrs. Pontellier alone. The women's conversation on the beach serves two purposes: it introduces Edna to the "taste of candor" (19) and it warns Adèle (and



the reader) that Edna has not learned the complicated dance of sublimation and artistic distancing characteristic of Creole society. Summer flirtations and platonic romances offer a safe way for Creoles to experience romantic desire, but Adèle rightly notices that Edna is far too earnest to handle such a play romance. Creole society entices Edna because it is more sensual and beautiful than her Presbyterian background, yet it is also repressive to independent female desire outside of marriage. Edna is faced with two extremes: a kind of freedom in Creole society: candor, the voluptuousness and sensuality of motherhood or the austere and disagreeable body of Mademoiselle Reisz. Freedom, in the example of Mademoiselle Reisz would necessitate that Edna abandon her sexual desires and, do, as Mademoiselle seems to have done, fuel them into her art. The Victorian cult of true womanhood omits the reality of female desire, and it also confines women's self-fulfillment to interpersonal relations: "They are meant to discover their identity through intimate relationships of interconnection, rather than through independence, autonomy, and the self-definition of work. That is their desire should not be directed toward themselves but always toward others, children, husbands, the romantic double" (169).

With the exception of Edna's talk with Adèle on the beach none of the other exchanges in the novel are as intimate or as honest. Edna's flirtation with Robert creates a kind of fairytale romantic play-world that the two of them can imagine together: "I'll take you some night in the pirogue when the moon shines. Maybe your Gulf spirit will whisper to you in which of these islands the treasures are hidden—direct you to the very spot, perhaps" (34). Yet this tale of utopia, freedom and romance that Robert spins is ineffective in the building of Edna's burgeoning identity and consciousness. Although Robert's words stir Edna's desires and imagination, his words are a distraction, an escape from the more pressing issues raised in Edna's talk with Adèle: marriage, children,

freedom, and authority. Toward the end of the novel, Edna resists dialogue entirely. After Adèle's difficult childbirth, Doctor Mandelet attempts to speak with Edna who is shocked and traumatized by the difficulty of Adèle's delivery. A "great reader" and a man known for his "wisdom rather than skill," (62) the doctor appears in the novel as more of a spiritual advisor and a confessor than a medical doctor: "He knew his fellow-creatures better than most men; knew that inner life which so seldom unfolds itself to unanointed eyes" (68). Although his "paternalistic and positivistic outlook forces upon her an evaluation of reality that smothers her imaginative flutterings" ("youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race" ), he offers sympathy and invites her confidence, albeit in a paternalistic way (Giorcelli, 111). Calling her "my dear child," the doctor holds her hand, telling her "you seem to be in trouble. I am not going to ask for your confidence. I will only say that if ever you feel moved to give it to me, perhaps I might help you. I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not so many who would—not many, my dear" (105).

Doctor Mandelet, the secular replacement for a priest in this modern, desacralized fictional universe, has unique insight: his eyes are anointed, and unlike others who would misunderstand and condemn Edna, he offers genuine sympathy. Giorcelli notes that the doctor's name, Mandelet, "sounds like and contains a pun on 'Mandalay,' the mystic bay of Burma, a symbol of Eastern wisdom" (Giorcelli, 112). Chopin emphasizes the doctor's wisdom and kindness; "we will talk of things you never dreamt of talking about before. It will do us both good. I don't want you to blame yourself, whatever comes" (105). Given these kind, non-judgmental words, it seems unlikely that the doctor represents another form of patriarchal oppression, as some readers would view him. The problem, however, remains not with the doctor—a sympathetic and fairly accepting character—but with the process of talking and

confession itself. At the end of the novel, Edna avoids all uncomfortable conversations. She tells the doctor: “Some way I don’t feel moved to speak of things that trouble me” (105). Edna avoids talking of herself because doing so reminds her of her situation and that she cannot change it. What Doctor Mandelet offers is catharsis in speaking and the sympathy of another human being who understands her feelings.

Though Edna appreciates his sympathy, she admits that “I don’t want anything but my own way” (105). Words and sympathy are useless because what Edna seeks is transformation. In fact, it is as if discussing herself would trap her in a mode of interaction in which she is ill-suited to express herself. As a painter, Edna experiences the word sensuously and she responds to it in an indirect imagistic manner. One of the most revealing images Edna visualizes when she listens to Madame Ratignolle’s music is “a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him” (26). Edna entitles this image “Solitude,” a title that echoes Chopin’s original title for the novel, *A Solitary Soul*. The image suggests Edna’s situation, the man’s nudity echoes her own vulnerability and aloneness, whereas the man’s location near a “desolate rock” implies isolation, and the distant bird flying away from him indicates lost opportunity and regret.

Images return to Edna as she swims into the ocean to lose herself in the “close embrace” of the sea (109). Patricia Yaeger states that “even in death Edna is seeking (as she sought on the beach) a path of emancipation; she is seeking a register of language more her own” (289). The images she hears and the sounds that echo in her ears as she drowns are those of childhood: “the spurs of the cavalry officer,” “the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks,” her father’s and her sister’s voices. Childhood images and sounds offer an authentic, if fragmented, account of Edna’s experiences; they are not

Robert's tales of romance or Doctor Mandelet's views on nature and sexual desire, but the stuff of Edna's life—not ideas about her life. These last images bring the narrative back full circle to the experiences Edna related to Adèle, a time on that hot summer beach where Edna was encouraged to follow her own mode of thought, to “unpack” the evocative images she created and meditate upon their meaning.

While confession and speaking only offer Edna glimmers of awakening and a faint sense of her own identity, confession in *L'Immoraliste* is an essential mode through which Michel discovers himself. In the *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses “the labor of confession” (56). He believes that Western man is “a confessing animal” and that the structures of civilization encourage secrets just as they encourage us to tell those secrets (59). This “labor of confession” allows the subject to reveal by speaking what was hidden, even from himself, and as the subject speaks these secrets come to light gradually. During Michel's first days in Africa, Gide focuses on orality, the blood that Michel coughs up and the blood that the child Bachir licks from his wound. According to Rivalin-Padiou, “les deux personnages s'opposent de manière radicale sur un point qui renforce la différence de nature et de significations de leurs sangs respectifs : Bachir exhibe son sang, tandis que Michel avait comme premier réflexe de le dissimuler” (11). Like words, Michel's blood comes from his mouth, and he is ashamed of it and hides it from Marceline, just as in the past he was reticent, preferring not to talk of himself or personal matters. As the novel continues, Michel becomes more like Bachir, he exhibits his body, casting off the coverings of illness and civilization, yet he also exhibits his words rather than concealing them behind a mask of conformity.

The second time Michel coughs blood he is horrified by “un vilain sang presque noir, quelque chose de gluant, d'épouvantable” (35) ; this “gros affreux caillot” represents Michel's “labor of confession” (Foucault, 56). The blood fills his mouth, yet

he rejects it spitting it out “avec dégoût,” as if he has just wrenched from himself secrets he is ashamed of. Furthermore, the “gluant” quality of the blood clot indicates the unformed, indeterminable aspect of Michel’s identity. This is an identity, however, that begins to form and take shape as Michel speaks to his friends. It is interesting that although Michel is gripped with an irrepressible urge to speak, explain, clarify and evade, the first words of the novel are not his. His story is introduced by a letter written by a friend to another man, an unknown “Monsieur D.R. Président du Conseil.” Michel first confesses his experiences to his friends, then as if that were not enough, his story must be passed on to another (higher) authority to be further legitimized. Even as Gide’s preface seeks to discourage the reader from viewing Michel as peculiar, the letter does the exact opposite. The writer is hesitant, even alarmed: “mais à l’instant de l’envoyer, j’hésite encore, et plus je le relis et plus il me paraît affreux. Ah ! que vas-tu penser de notre ami ?” (12). While the writer of the letter does state that “il en est plus d’un aujourd’hui, je le crains, qui oserait en ce récit se reconnaître,” his words do not have the same inclusive effect as Gide’s preface (12). The writer of the letter seems to think that, sadly, there are others who would dare to recognize themselves in Michel’s story, and presumably this identification should not be allowed to occur. A group of men with similar preferences would, perhaps, be much harder to marginalize and dismiss as frightful. By calling Michel’s narrative awful, he situates Michel outside of the bounds of acceptable society and seems to designate Michel’s body and self as frightening and troublesome. Yet, he also fears what the president will think of “notre ami.”

Yet even as the writer of the letter expresses his fear about Michel and his experiences, it also announces one of the main questions of the novel, Michel’s place within society. Although Michel’s narrative is dangerous, highly secretive, and possibly corrupting, his friend is concerned for his freedom. The writer asks “En quoi Michel

peut-il servir l'Etat?" (12). This question is one of the central ideas of the novel and it introduces the idea of marginality versus a life in society. In raising this question and depicting Michel at the end of his narrative as desperate and lost, Gide hints that it is as part of society that an individual finds happiness and fulfillment. The letter writer begs the president to find Michel an occupation because he knows Michel needs a place in society: "Hâte-toi. Michel est dévoué : il l'est encore : il ne le sera bientôt plus qu'à lui-même" (12). The word "dévoué" is important because it indicates Michel's devotion to his own ideas and own doctrines, but also his capacity and desire to play an active role in the public life of his society. The writer of the letter is suggesting that there is a window of opportunity: there may still be time to save Michel from self-absorption and rebellion. Indeed, the writer has serious doubts about whether Michel can serve the state, or if despite his intelligence he has "droit de cité"—a place in public life. If, however, Michel were left alone, banished to the margins, he would only become more and more focused upon himself and resistant to society's norms and attitudes.

Michel begins to tentatively reenter society when he speaks with his friends. Indeed they are the support and help that he needs to "gird" himself against the solitude and dehumanizing infinity of the desert. He finds himself at the end of the novel not an independent superhuman who is always strong, but a lonely man who seeks solace and conversation of his friends. He wants to be rescued: "Arrachez-moi d'ici à présent, et donnez-moi des raisons d'être" (180). Presumably Michel will leave Africa with his friends and return to Europe, yet the escape from his solitude exists in his narrative, the confession of his experiences that he has just given to his friends. According to Foucault, confession reverses the power dynamic, allowing the truth to arise from the bottom up, from the person confessing. Although Michel and his friends are ostensibly equals, there exists a subtle power dynamic between them. In the letter, the writer states "[p]uis nous

montâmes sur la terrasse d'où la vue à l'infini s'étendait, et tous trois, pareils aux trois amis de Job, nous attendîmes, admirant sur la plaine en feu le déclin brusque de la journée" (15). The writer makes a distinction between "nous," "[les] trois amis de Job," and Michel who only begins speaking after the sun has set, a detail which suggests the secretive and immoral quality of his narrative. The setting sun likened to fire recalls the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as the end of Michel's former life.

Gide employs another biblical reference in order to illustrate the gravity of Michel's situation. The letter writer's comparison of himself and his two friends to Job's friends implies ambivalence. In the Bible, Job's friends travel a long distance to comfort him and stay with him, but they also insist that he has done something wrong to deserve his bad fortune; they tell him to confess his sins. Michel's friends also travel to be with Michel, and although supportive they are also hesitant and little judgmental. Michel's confession was precipitated by a "mystérieux cri d'alarme" summoning his loyal friends to Africa to listen to his story (13). Yet if Michel's initial request for company was a "cri d'alarme" he tells his story "sans un tremblement dans la voix, sans qu'une inflexion ni qu'un geste témoignât qu'une émotion quelconque le troublât" (179). The narrator, or perhaps the writer of the letter, is alarmed by Michel's calm manner. After recounting his story he is quiet and without apology; this silence unsettles the narrator ("étrange malaise"). He exclaims with concern: "Il nous semblait hélas! qu'à nous la raconter, Michel avait rendu son action plus légitime. De ne savoir où la désapprouver, dans la lente explication qu'il en a donna, nous en faisait presque complices" (179). Because of the flow and logic of Michel's story, there was not an opportunity for the listeners to object or disapprove—or if there was an opportunity, interestingly none of them took it. In fact, the mere act of recounting a personal story makes the subject of the story more lawful or justified ("légitime") because the listener cannot help but sympathize with a

fellow human being In the few passages that exist from the friends' point of view, Michel's listeners appear to be panicked and extremely unsettled. Despite himself, the narrator of the letter feels sympathetic to Michel and he tries desperately to hide his sympathy behind false concern and condemnation.

Confession, Foucault believes, allows for truth to emerge through interaction, but Gide shows how confession could also allow for the construction of a new identity. Despite his biblical allusions, Gide's use of confession resembles not biblical precedents or religious rituals, but Jean Jacques Rousseau's use of confession. In *Les Confessions*, Rousseau attempts to draw "le seul portrait d'homme, peint exactement d'après nature et dans toute sa vérité, qui existe et qui probablement existera jamais" (Rousseau, 28). Despite its Augustinian religious roots, confession serves a secular, individual purpose, and indeed human beings in the west have learned to take pleasure in the confession of and the revealing of secrets. Although Foucault is discussing sex and the confession of sexual secrets, what he writes is true in regards to speaking about the self as well: there is "pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret of luring it out in the open" (71). Whilst at the end of the novel Michel is stranded and lonely, he does, throughout his narrative, take pleasure in knowing himself and discovering his authentic self. He delights in seeing his own naked body that grows stronger each day, and he takes joy in revealing it the warmth of the sun's rays. His confession captivates and captures his friends, enmeshing them in the fabric of his narrative, rendering both himself and them more human.



## Part 2

### LOOKING AND ILLUSION

When Edna visits Chênrière Caminada with Robert, she rests at Madame Antoine's house, and before she sleeps she examines her body, delighting in her youth and health. She removes most of her clothes and "[s]he looked at her round arms as she held them straight and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine firm quality and texture of her flesh" (36). She awakens, however, to a fairy tale world that she and Robert create: "How many years have I slept? [...] The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics" (37). Edna's allusion to both "Sleeping Beauty" and possibly "Rip van Winkle" suggest her desire to enter into a fantasy world with Robert and to construct a narrative that runs counter to the conventional narrative of marriage and family. The stories Edna and Robert create are not dangerous in and of themselves— after all summer flirtations for married women were considered normal in Creole society. What is troubling about Edna and Robert's stories lies in Edna's susceptibility to influence, her earnestness and her ability to invest deeply in false images. After she awakens at Madame Antoine's Edna "looked at herself closely in the little *distorted* mirror which hung on the wall above the basin. Her eyes were bright and wide awake and her face glowed [*italics mine*]" (36). This distorted mirror suggests the romantic stories through which Edna attempts to know herself. She is bright-eyed and awake, but the image reflected back to her is an illusion, a distortion of her true self.

After Edna awakens from her nap and she and Robert stay for a while on Chênrière Caminada, and they listen to Madame Antoine, who "had been talking all the afternoon, and had wound herself up to the story-telling pitch" (38). Edna is enchanted

by Madame Antonine's stories of pirates and gold, and as she reflects upon her time in Grand Isle she understands that this summer has been different from other summers, but she does not know how: "She could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self." She does not see, however, "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 suspect" (39). The narrator indicates that Edna's dreams and desires ("the acquaintance of new conditions in herself") have begun to affect the way in which Edna relates to reality; these new conditions change her view of reality—a fact which she is not aware of. I will argue that although Edna's embrace of fantasy and desire are liberating to an extent, these illusions also prove detrimental to her liberation.

While many might ignore Chopin's mentions of dreams, daydreams, sleeping and awakening and dismiss them as purely descriptive, this would be a mistake; *The Awakening* is not a realistic nineteenth-century novel in the style of *Madame Bovary*, for instance. Michael Gilmore writes that "*The Awakening* is a book about sleep and dreams and their relation to reality, and like many other fictional works of the late nineteenth-century it reverses the customary exaltation of the real at the expense of the imaginary" (74). The "imaginary" refers to the inner world of dream and desire to which Edna's awakening opens her. Before her marriage, the doors leading to Edna's imaginary, her dreams and desires, had been firmly locked closed: "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" (19). Edna takes a cultural environment that favors dutiful marriage as her supreme reality, rather than the reality of her own desires. Furthermore, "her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which

masquerade as the decrees of Fate. [...] He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken” (18).

In just these few sentences, Chopin lays bare many of the myths people hold about their most intimate relationships. The discourse of romance would weave a story of a love that was meant to be, a narrative to reinforce the lover’s desires and assuage any misgivings, to blind them to the fact that “there was no sympathy of thought and taste between them.” Edna avoids some of the disappointment that the narrator associates with marriage—indeed she actively seeks out a marriage free of romance. Edna leaves behind dreams of the tragedian, the cavalry officer and the engaged young man and finds “herself face to face with realities. She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (19). Perhaps aware of the ephemeral nature of erotic desire, Edna chooses a husband toward whom she feels no passion or “fictitious warmth,” yet this “realistic” choice also allows her to keep her fantasy world intact. An imperfect husband for whom she cared passionately would inevitably threaten her daydream images of the “sad-eyed cavalry officer” and the “great tragedian,” the latter of whom Edna keeps a photograph: “When alone she sometimes picked it up and kissed the cold glass passionately” (18). When she marries, Edna firmly shuts away her romantic desires: “The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world” (19). The narrator’s use of the phrase “in this world” implies that in Edna’s life there are two worlds: the world of reality and “the realm of romance and dreams” (19). Yet Edna’s repressed romantic desires return, and bleed over into the world of reality; they are unleashed by her summer experiences on Grand Isle, and like the seductive call of the sea, they threaten to destroy Edna.

As a young woman Edna's infatuation with the great tragedian appeared to be "the climax of her fate"(18). His face and figure "began to haunt her imagination and stir her sense. The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness of it colored it with the lofty tones of a great passion" (18). As a young woman, Edna is already enthralled to a romantic narrative where any passionate experience appears to be the apex of fervor, the height of her existence. Cristina Giorcelli states that "Edna's cognitive process is [...] based on *fiction*; she approaches reality through a potentially rich but dangerously indirect method. She yearns for abstractions, for illusions created by her 'mythical' impulse: 'the abiding truth,' 'the unlimited in which to lose herself,' 'life's delirium,' 'the unattainable'" (Giorcelli 121). While Edna recognizes the restricting narratives of marriage and maternity, she fails to see the pitfalls of romance. After lunching with Madame Ratignolle and her husband in New Orleans, Edna is saddened by her friend's domestic existence; she sees it as "a colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment" (54). This is a state in which "no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. Edna vaguely wondered what she meant by 'life's delirium'" (54). As Giorcelli recognizes, Edna is unsure of what she means, and her critique of her friend's happy marriage appears disingenuous and overly romantic. Unsure of what she desires, Edna only knows she seeks intense emotion and passion; she turns to romance instead of art, one of the few outlets available to her as a woman in late nineteenth-century America.

Edna's relationship to Robert begins innocently, yet the sensuality to which Edna has awakened changes her relationship to Robert. Robert had been "devoted" to many other ladies in summers past. His devotion is a kind of chivalric "relic of courtly society" that like the "frank conversations" and "shocking books" are "permitted by the

presumption of a final innocence, prescribed by honor and good form” (Robinson, xiv). Indeed summer flirtations were “a recognized institution.” (qtd. in Culley 148). A temporary relationship with “no reckless promises” and “no scenes,” these flirtations were “a game played on top of the table between evenly matched players” (qtd. in Culley 148). Much like Fin’ Amor in medieval society, this play acting serves a social purpose. It restrains excess erotic energy and funnels it into a socially acceptable friendship. Summer is a time for sentiment and frivolity and for women weighed down by obligations and the monotony of married life, a brief, platonic flirtation could give them a taste of romance and excitement without the sin of adultery. Edna’s flirtation with Robert also allows older men like Mr. Pontellier the freedom to spend his time with other men gambling and talking business in the knowledge that his wife is safe, her virtue untainted.

Rather than being a hindrance to the smooth running of the social apparatus, summer flirtations actually support and prop up marriage and family life. In transgressing the wide boundaries set out for them, Edna and Robert transgress the boundaries of their society. They only meet by accident in secluded places away from the noise and crowds of the city. In a society with strictly defined spheres for men and women, Robert is allowed access to the female sphere because of his youth, single status, and good reputation. The “lofty chastity” (Chopin, 10) of the Creole women ensures that young men like Robert will remain merely “*blagueurs*,” entertaining “jack-in-the-boxes” who act out the conventions of courtly love (20). Were he to act differently, like Alcée Arobin for instance, he would be shunned and in Madame Ratignolle’s words, “unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you” (20). In a world where appearances count and gossip is heeded, Arobin’s “attentions alone are enough to ruin a woman’s name” (91). Yet if Edna’s position is precarious, Robert’s seems equally

so. In Creole society, social connections count in the business world as well as in the social. To be excluded from all “decent” female company would ruin Robert’s chances of marriage and advancement in his career. On the other hand, it is unclear whether Arobin works very much at all. His name appears upon a building and the letterhead for a law firm, but he tells Monsieur Ratignolle at the dinner party: “There are so many inquisitive people and institutions abounding [...] that one is really forced as a matter of convenience these days to assume the virtue of an occupation if he has it not” (84).

Witty and urbane, Arobin is a diversion for Edna. Yet as he insinuates himself into her life, she responds to his overtures: “the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her” (74). Furthermore, when Arobin actually kisses her lips, “it was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (80). That she can experience lust separate from love depresses Edna. For a nineteenth century woman encouraged to cultivate sentiment and emotion, purely sexual desire is disconcerting. After she kisses Arobin, she feels “an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility” as well as “the shock of the unexpected and the unaccustomed” (80). It is interesting that Edna could feel irresponsibility as overwhelming, after all she has been continuously freeing herself from responsibility. Yet in freeing herself from her responsibilities as wife, mother and her social obligations as hostess, she has devoted herself to her love for Robert. In kissing Arobin she feels that she has somehow betrayed her love for Robert. She feels her husband’s reproach looking at her from the objects surrounding her, but she feels Robert’s reproach “making itself felt by a fiercer, more overpowering love” (80). She does not experience shame or remorse, however, only regret “because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips” (80). Viewing *The Awakening* in terms of Darwinism, Bert Bender notes that Edna becomes depressed by “the meaninglessness of love in natural history”:

Realizing by 1897, that love has no claim to constancy, that it beats in self-assertion to the evolutionary time of sexual selection, Chopin had come to feel that the human spirit had been denied its place not only in a Christian universe but also in the more limited sphere of human courtship and love. (463).

As Bender remarks, Chopin's readings of Darwin left her with the sense that what religious authorities as well as humanists had come to define as "human" was being challenged by science and this new theory of evolution. Interested in the enigma of the human species, Chopin read deeply in biology and anthropology. Bender remarks that despite her interest in Darwin, her work indicates a quarrel with his theory of sexual selection. She contests his ideas of female modesty and male aggression.

Indeed Darwin's *The Origin of Species* itself is a kind of "respectable Victorian novel" in that it perpetuates gender stereotypes (qtd. in Bender, 463). Darwin believed that "civilization had evolved largely because woman's modesty curbs the male's eagerness to couple" (462). Edna challenges this notion, and selects her own mate, Robert, but she also finds herself attracted to Arobin and responsive to his kiss and caress. Adopting this typically male role, however, causes her anguish because it forces her to realize that desire, unlike her view of love is inconstant and unreliable. Edna's sense of desire as changeable and unreliable continues to grow throughout the novel. Just before she drowns herself in the Gulf, she thinks of Robert whom she still desires: but she "realized that the day would come when he too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone." Love will not last and desire is an inadequate replacement: "Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else" (108).

Although Edna's final thoughts on love and desire demonstrate not only her disillusionment but her extreme weariness, nowhere is desire depicted more vividly and more frighteningly than at Edna's dinner party. While much of the dinner party scene is not relevant to the current discussion, the quotation of Swinburne's poem "A Cameo" as

well as the Dionysian scene created by the guests exemplifies the dangerous, ugly side of sexual desire. Mrs. Highcamp places her garland of roses upon Victor Lebrun's black curls, transforming "him into a vision of Oriental beauty" (86). To complete her "picture," Mrs. Highcamp drapes her white scarf over him to hide his black evening dress. In this makeshift toga and with his black hair and cheeks "the color of crushed grapes," Victor, Robert's wilder, more flirtatious brother, resembles Dionysus. Dionysus, the god of wine and agriculture, embodies two conflicting, human impulses: the fertility of nature and cultivation of crops, as well as the desire for frenzy and destruction. These two impulses are linked and unified in Dionysus's central image: wine. The grape is a product of agriculture and civilization, yet crushing and fermenting it results in an intoxicating beverage that has the power to alter human behavior. Creation and destruction arise from the same source just as passion and desire can be both creative as well as destructive.

The guests at the dinner, however, seem to be unknowingly creating a tableau vivant of animalistic desire. Victor's smile shows "a faint gleam of white teeth"—a hint of danger and aggression. Normally talkative and friendly, Victor stares with "narrowing eyes" at the play of light on his glass of champagne (85). The guests wonder if he is paralyzed or posing, and one recites a few lines of Swinburne's poem: "There was a graven image of Desire/Painted with red blood on a ground of gold" (85). Victor represents this graven image, yet his statuesque demeanor also recalls Edna's poses and transfixed gaze in the first part of the novel. A graven image implies not only worship and obsession, but also Michel's theory of civilization. When a society distances itself too much from nature, it becomes fixed and hardened, killing the human spirit within. Edna's love is not for Robert, but of the image she has of him; Chopin's use of Robert's brother Victor to symbolize desire, suggests that Edna loves only a version of Robert, not



the man himself. Furthermore, Victor's pose as Dionysus suggests the danger of obsessive desire. As the image of desire—that is the image of his brother—he is paralyzed, just as Edna's constant thoughts of Robert threaten to fix him and make him into an abstraction of sentimental longing, like “the sad-eyed cavalry officer” she had loved as a girl and the “great tragedian,” –the latter whose picture she sometimes picked up and kissed (19).

In presenting an exaggerated tableau vivant of Edna's longings, Chopin indicates that Edna's desires have caused her to retreat again into her own daydreams. Although her awakening gives her sexual confidence—she says to Robert at the end of the novel “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (102)—she still fixates upon love and eroticism to an alarming degree. On Grand Isle, after Robert has left unexpectedly for Mexico, she felt like “her whole existence was dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing” (44). Chopin's use of clothing imagery, imagery that she uses in other places to discuss identity and social roles, implies that romance is also a role, a role for Edna that brightens existence, making it worth living. Romance also appears to organize and domesticate Edna's existence, giving it meaning. Robert “had gone away [...], leaving a void and wilderness behind him” (45). While Edna's attraction to Robert provides gives shape to her existence on Grand Isle, making the wilderness a delightful place full of story and dream, love and sexuality are often not the same thing, a fact which Edna realizes when she kisses Arobin and that is illustrated by the Swinburne poem.

The rest of Swinburne's poem that is not quoted although morbid and brutal, depicts an animalistic frightening desire—the specter of which Edna experienced when she kissed Arobin. Desire is surrounded by other allegorical figures Pleasure, Pain and Satiety. This last figure, “insatiable Satiety” clasps Desire by the wrist to indicate that

desire will never be sated, will never be free; it is kept prisoner by its own hungry nature. These figures are followed by a dehumanized group of beasts characterized by their lips and teeth that bite. Death, the last figure, stands aloof, behind a grate “Upon whose lock was written Peradventure.” The word “peradventure” means chance or possibility—the chance that desire will change and find a new object. The fact that it is Robert’s brother who poses as the image of Dionysian desire hints at just this possibility. Indeed in what seems to be a drunken mockery of Edna and her attraction to Robert, Victor looks right at Edna and sings the song Robert sang at Chênrière: “Ah, si tu savais!” Upset by this song that comes from the mouth of desire, not the mouth of love, Edna places her hand on Victor’s mouth and he kisses her palm, and the sting of his lips his pleasing. She places her glass on the table so impetuously that she breaks it, spilling wine on Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp. Spilt wine evokes the paint of the image, the blood on the ground of gold—the color of Edna’s dress. While Edna’s desires do not actually spill blood or cause Dionysian frenzy or destruction she is caught and entrapped by the enthralling image of desire.

While Edna is entranced and enthralled by art, Michel prefers to observe the people around him, hoping that their actions will display a hint of their inner, hidden self. By observing the children around him in Africa and the workers on his farm in Normandy, Michel becomes inspired and excited by their immoral behavior. He ceases to be “cet aveugle érudit, ce liseur” that Ménélique had thought he was (109). His eyes are open to what he calls “la troublante réalité,” and jealous of the children’s and the farmers’ freedom, he watches them greedily hoping to gain insight that will help him understand himself. By contrast, he is disappointed by the intellectuals and artists in Paris who “causaient habilement des divers événements de la vie, [mais] jamais de ce qui les motive” (104). These scholars are like the “algébriste” who is interested only in

“l’existence des quantités qu’il mesure” (104), whereas the workers on the farm impress him, they trigger “un émerveillement continué” (132). Insisting that he does not interact with them because he is not interested in their thoughts or words, Michel explains “j’assistais à leur repas, j’écoutais leurs plaisanteries, surveillais amoureusement leurs plaisirs” (132-133).

Michel looks lovingly upon their pleasures because he considers these workers to be more authentic, robust, and less constrained than his predictable friends that have come to visit him on the farm. Around the workers, he feels “une sorte de joie” and “une sorte de sympathie” (132-133) because he imagines that they possess secrets that he does not: “je prêtais à chacun d’eux un secret que je m’entêtais à désirer connaître” (133). The words Michel employs to talk about the peasants “désirer” and “amouusement” imply sexuality, and indeed Michel’s gaze is voyeuristic. Seeing and hearing about the peasants “immoral” behavior gives him the courage to explore his own immoral side. This allows him to challenge his upbringing as well as the normative behavior of his society. He is able to begin to build a counter discourse of immoralism which he will use to explore himself. The most famous incident in the novel involving Michel’s gaze occurs in Africa when he watches the child Mektir steal Marceline’s scissors. Yet in watching the child steal the scissors, Michel himself is tricked. He pretends to read and thinks Mektir does not see him, but the young boy confesses later to Ménélique who interrogates him on the matter that he saw Michel watching him in the mirror.

When Michel introduces the episode he emphasizes the act of looking and gazing; in fact the verb he uses is “surveiller,” the same word he used when speaking about the peasants. This verb implies an official position of authority, as if Michel were a prison guard or school teacher charged with the duty of managing and watching over his inferiors. He states that “[u]ne curiosité que je ne m’expliquais pas bien me faisait

surveiller ses gestes” (54). Michel studies the child in attempt to learn something of himself; when he describes the event he says “[u]n matin j’eus une curieuse révélation sur moi-même” (54, emphasis mine). As he watches the theft, Michel cannot, despite many “plus sages raisonnements,” find in himself any feelings of disapproval—in fact what he does feel as he watches the child steal is joy. This strange reaction becomes logical when one considers that Michel has, in the preceding days, begun to feel sick again. Due to the cold January rain and his difficulties breathing, Michel is confined in doors by the fire. Seeing Moktir commit such an immoral act revivifies Michel and gives him courage to begin to consider a mode of being opposed to the conformity of his society. Nonetheless, Michel’s new-found courage is hesitant; when confronted by Ménalque about the scissors, Michel becomes nervous and ashamed under his friends piercing gaze: “Racontez sans me regarder” (110). The scissors are hardly recognizable; they are “quelque chose d’informe, de rouillé, d’épointé, de faussé” (110). This strange new object suggests that Michel desires to steal back his life from the authorities, religion, society, Marceline, and remake it and transform it into something new.

### Part 3

#### CREATION AND SACRIFICE

The narrator of *The Awakening* emphasizes that Edna is 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” (14). As I have mentioned, the word “about” implies ideas that other people have about Edna—the world of reality, the “world about her” which contradicts with her own inner desires and feelings. Edna rejects many of these other “worlds:” maternity, marriage, and attempts through painting, story-telling and experimenting with the social roles available to her to invent an authentic self which corresponds to her inner desires. She succeeds in this respect; however, the identity she

creates has no place in the world in which she finds herself. At the end of the novel, when she becomes aware of the ever-changing nature of desire, that love and sexuality are not always the same thing, she loses her desire to live. Yet, at the same time, Edna clings tenaciously to her freedom; she refuses to subject herself to an unfulfilling domestic life. She refuses to bow to the pressures of maternal sacrifice.

Edna's self-creation, however, is complicated by her status as wife. Under Louisiana's version of the Napoleonic Code, she has no control over her own property or money, and no public life apart from her husband. While not precisely an object or a possession, Edna's mind and body were, in a very fundamental way, not her own. She exists within a culture that denies her independent status as an individual. As a mother and wife, she is a relative being, forced to define herself in relation to either husband or children. Furthermore, Edna does not appear to speak the language of the culture in which she finds herself. She does not understand the artistry and sublimation of Creole culture and that the courtly love should not be taken as authentic. As Patrician Yaeger remarks "Robert Lebrun has served as a kind of iconic replacement for that which Edna cannot say; his name functions as a hieroglyph condensing Edna's complex desires—both those she has named and those which remain unnamable" (290) Edna substitutes her attraction to Robert for an exploration of her own desires. At the end of the novel, she even gives him credit for her awakening: "It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long stupid dream" (102-103). This explanation falsifies Edna's experience, reducing it to merely a story of adulterous love; it gives her experiences "the gloss of coherence, of a continuous narrative line" (Yaeger, 289). In fact, Edna's beginning experiences are much more confused and discontinuous.

Chopin employs the parrot "who spoke a language which nobody understood" to portray both an alienated voice. This creature who speaks Spanish, French, English and

the unknown language suggests the confused nature of Edna's nature of Edna's discourse and self-creation. As a parrot, he merely repeats the words he has heard around him, just as Edna, to a certain extent reproduces her society's version of romantic love, yet the bird also speaks an original, yet unidentified language, just as Edna occasionally shows sparks of originality. As the caged birds at the beginning of the novel suggest, Edna is not free, but like many of the characters at Grand Isle, stuck in a "parrot-like reproduction of discourse" (Schweitzer, 169). Yet there are two birds, at the beginning of the novel, the parrot, but also the mockingbird who whistles his "fluty notes" with "maddening persistence" (3). The mockingbird does not even produce intelligible, logical speech—rather he makes music which suggests a counter, illogical and emotional discourse, similar to the music that so entrances Edna. The "language that nobody understood" suggests Edna's isolation; in a world of conformity, marriage and children, she longs for a life of passion and art. Yet, the unnamed language is outside of the official (parroted) discourse, which is not promising: it is unintelligible to the social world and locked away in a cage.

The alienated, discontinuous aspect of Edna's experience becomes evident in her painting of Adèle. She becomes frustrated at her inability to depict her beautiful friend, (who elsewhere in the novel is described in terms of cliché) adequately: "The picture completed bore no resemblance to Madame Ratignolle. She was greatly disappointed to find that it did not look like her. But it was a fair enough piece of work, and in many respects satisfying" (13). It is not surprising that Edna fails at realistic representation because she has begun to realize the incongruity between her experience of motherhood and the requisite societal image. Indeed, "Edna's disappointment at her failure to produce a mimetically accurate image of her friend suggests her desire to get beyond the entangling roles which separate image and reality" (Schweitzer, 173). Despite the fact

that Edna desires a more realistic representation—“After surveying the sketch critically she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface and crumpled the paper”—there is something in her art that allows her access to the truth beyond role and image. Indeed, painting provides Edna with the “satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (12). She “handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came, not from long and close acquaintance with them, but from a natural aptitude” (12). Yet, when Edna shows her sketches to Adèle again in New Orleans, the lady remarks of a sketch of a basket of apples “never have I seen anything more lifelike. One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one” (53).

Edna does not trust Adèle’s opinion on the matter, but is nonetheless pleased with the praise. Looking for encouragement, she states “I believe I ought to work again. I feel as if I wanted to be doing something. [...] I might study for a while with Laidpore” (53). Two important aspects emerge in this exchange: that Edna has continued to draw realistically and that she is displeased with her drawings, and that she wishes to study with a painter named Laidpore. No such painter was known to exist in New Orleans, and perhaps Chopin invented him to be satirical (Culley, 53). In fact, the French word “laid” means ugly, a fact which implies that the artist might not be helpful in Edna’s artistic exploration. Edna works “with great energy and interest, without accomplishing anything, however, which satisfied her even in the smallest degree” (55). She paints everyone in her household, including servants, yet although Edna’s flirtation with Robert gives her new energy, it also distracts her and invades her consciousness. As she worked, she sings the song Robert sang to her sailing back from Chênrière Caminada, “Si tu savais” (55). The song “moves her with recollections. [...] A subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn” (56).

Edna's painting and her discussion with Adèle on the beach show Edna's burgeoning and emerging sense of self, yet ultimately Edna's art and the insights she gained during her conversation with Adèle remain unexplored; they are overwhelmed by the louder, ultimately more compelling narrative of romance. Edna works without producing anything that satisfies her, but artistic process necessitates such false starts, and the energy of work and creation alone prove satisfactory for Edna: "She had reached a stage when she seemed to be no longer feeling her way, working when in the humor, with sureness and ease. And being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work itself" (70). Her lack of ambition demonstrates her need for her art; for Edna the act of creation provides her with something essential, yet there are times when her ability to work is threatened by disappointment and regret: "it seemed to her as if life were passing her by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled. Yet there were other days when she listened, was led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth held out for her" (70). The joy that Edna takes in life, the physical beauty she finds in both people and Nature speaks to her, seems to offer her something, a new life of freedom and passion. On the other hand, life sometimes "appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation" (56). On days such as this, "she could not work [...] nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood" (56). Edna depends upon stories and daydreams, and when they fail her she loses her desire to create, and later in the novel, her desire to live.

Edna's inner world of daydream and desire are extremely important to her, and she guards her privacy jealously. Indeed she refuses to relinquish the inner world: "She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves" (46) These thoughts and emotions "had never taken the form of



struggles. They belonged to her and were her own and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself” (46). The above quote occurs in chapter sixteen, after Robert has left for Mexico. Edna prods her husband for information about Robert, and the narrator explains that it did not seem “grotesque that she should be making Robert the object of conversation” because the “sentiment which she entertained for [him] in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt or ever expected to feel” (46). Chopin places this description of Edna’s reserve just before a flashback of a conversation Edna and Adèle had on the beach about motherhood and sacrifice, and at first the two situations appear not to go together. The two women engage in “a heated argument,” and they “did not appear to [...] be talking the same language” (46). Refusing to sacrifice herself for her children or anyone, Edna says “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” (46). Not understanding that Edna values her self and her identity more than she values her life, Adèle tells her “a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so” (46). Unlike Adèle, who subscribes to an ideology of self-sacrificing motherhood, Edna believes strongly that there is a part of herself—the thoughts and emotions that she shares with no one—that belongs to her and her alone. Edna refuses to sacrifice her inner, private world, the only place where she can truly be herself.

At the end of the novel, after witnessing Adèle’s difficult childbirth, Edna feels her inner world threatened by her children. Adèle reminds Edna: “Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (104), a plea meant to recall Edna to her responsibilities and make her aware of the effect her actions could have on her children. As she talks to Doctor Mandelet, Edna realizes that being free means “tramp[ing] upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others” and she statutes “I

shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (105). Edna chooses suicide because she cannot reconcile her responsibilities as a mother with the private inner world she so values, much like Michel who is torn between his sexual desires and his love for Marceline. Before she commits suicide, she imagines her children as "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" (108). She realizes that Léonce and the children "were part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul" (109). Edna sees no way to be free, and she feels that her most prized possession, her private inner world, has been invaded and colonized by the overwhelming ideology of the "mother-woman" (9). In the end, she is susceptible to Adèle's plea; she cannot "trample upon the little lives" of her children (105). Rather than submit her soul to what she feels is slavery, she chooses instead to sacrifice her life (what she calls the unessential) because she cannot sacrifice her soul on the altar of motherhood.

*L'Immoraliste* also portrays freedom as a stark, difficult choice that involves sacrifice and suffering. Terrified by the declining health of his wife Marceline and yearning for a new kind of life apart from the bourgeois world of conformity, Michel is faced with the choice between the freedom he craves and the wife he loves. Michel chooses himself, and neglects Marceline. Michel's intellectual pursuits, his theory of civilization and his readings in Roman history provide a complementary example to the conflict he faces. Indeed, his changed thoughts on history, art and museums demonstrate his altered view of life. Despising what is fixed and frozen because it reminds him of death, Michel prefers art that is flexible, alive and fluid. Having abandoned the virtue of restraint, he embraces an ethos of abandon and sensuality.

While Edna at first takes art as a kind of reality, Michel is aware of this artificiality and disdains it for its distancing effects: “Je méprise ceux qui ne savent reconnaître la beauté que transcrite déjà et toute interprétée” (170). He insists upon viewing the Arabs as noble savages: theirs is a “terre en vacances d’oeuvres d’art” (170). Instead of works of art, immobilized in some museum, “le peuple arabe a ceci d’admirable que, son art, il le vit, il le fixe point et ne l’embaume en aucune œuvre” (170). Like Edna, he is drawn to music. He speaks of the Arabs singing their art and many of the Arab boys he spends time with play flutes. Music is immaterial and abstract, and for a piece of music to come to life, a human being is necessary to perform it. The experience of music involves looking as well as listening and is more immediate than reading or viewing a painting, which requires the intermediary of signs, symbols and images. Michel’s remarks about art and music correspond with the ideas in his theory of civilization. In late Roman society he sees art as “montant à fleur de peuple, à la manière d’une sécrétion” (106). Art arises naturally, organically from people. He explains that great artists capture the beauty in natural things, allowing us to wonder : “Comment n’avais-je pas compris jusqu’alors que cela aussi était beau?” (170). According to Michel, beauty is that which is natural, arises organically from human beings, but is also that which awakens the senses, allowing us to see beauty in the unexpected.

Michel’s correlation between beauty, art, and the body suggests a new ethos, a philosophy of life in opposition to a bourgeois attitude of restraint, restriction and virtue. Driskill observes that this new ethos finds virtue in abandon (27). Discussing these differing attitudes toward the body, Driskill associates Michel’s former bourgeois philosophy with the North, restraint, virtue, and religion. Marceline is “the virtuous maiden of the North,” whereas the Arab prostitute who seduces Michel at the end of the novel is “the luxurious seductress of the South” (Driskill, 27). Driskill describes the

geometric lines of Marceline's body, her rigidity as she struggles against death, and compares them to Michel's letting go and submission to the Arab woman. Before she dies, Michel forces himself to stay by Marceline's side until she falls asleep: "Par un dernier semblant de vertu, je reste jusqu'au soir près d'elle. Et soudain je me sens comme à bout de forces moi-même" (176). Michel attempts to do the right thing and stay with his wife, but her failing health seems to threaten his strength (à bout de forces moi-même) and he must escape. Unable to look her in the eye, he stares at "les trous noirs de ses narines," powerless to look away from these black holes of emptiness and death. It is as if these black holes threaten to devour and swallow up his newly-won health and well-being.

The description of Michel's time in the Arab café is characterized by a sense of easy abandon, an almost involuntary yielding as if Michel were simply swept away on a wave of new experiences. Moktir is outside waiting and takes him away ("il m'emmène"), "Je me laisse entraîner par lui" (177). In the café the women dance in a "monotone glissement" (177), and Michel finds himself being led by the hand "dans l'étroite et profonde chambre où l'unique meuble est un lit... Un lit très bas sur lequel on s'assied" (177). Michel yields easily: "Cette femme m'attire à elle, et je me laisse aller à elle comme on se laisse aller au sommeil" (177). According to Driskill, this scene employs a description of space and horizontal followed by downward motion in order to stress the effortless descent into sensuality: "the eye follows the descent from walking and dancing to 'deep room,' 'bed,' 'very low bed'" (Driskill, 27) and finally the prostitute pulling Michel down to her as if "au sommeil" (177). Michel's supine, yielding pose contrasts sharply with Marceline's tense, upright position: "Marceline est assise à demi sur son lit; un de ses maigres bras se cramponne aux barreaux du lit, la tient dressée; ses draps, ses mains, sa chemise, sont inondés d'un flot de sang" (178). The

words used to describe Marceline's body, "se cramponne," "dressée" and "assise à demi" indicate struggle and tension. Driskill sees Marceline's position as emblematic of her "uprightness;" her vertical position associates her with Northern Europe, spirituality, and virtue, whereas Michel has adopted an ethos of the body and of the South, where virtue means abandon, and effort and struggle are to be eschewed.

The opposition of the sensual to the spiritual appears throughout the novel, and as he begins to change and awaken; Michel rejects not only art and painting, but his former study of history, which he classifies as a spiritual, intellectual passion. However, it is not that Michel rejects history itself, but rather he now disdains his "examen minutieux du passé" in which he learned facts for the sake of learning facts (61). Instead, he recognizes in himself "le sentiment du présent," the desire to taste and experience life without burden of his "erudition qui [...] à chaque pas m'encombrait, m'empêchait ma joie" (61). The study of the past conjures up images for him of the courtyard in Biskra and "l'immobilité de la mort" (61). History seems like "les plantes d'un herbier dont la sécheresse m'aidât à oublier qu'un jour, riches de sève, elles avaient vécu sous le soleil" (61). Plant imagery reoccurs throughout the novel and in Gide's oeuvre, and they symbolize the body connected to the earth and in tune with natural cycles. An "herbier" is a collection of dried plants organized and analyzed according to species. While such a collection would be of great use to botanists, the herbier only provides dry, dead objects to analyze, and Michel is terrified of death: "j'avais horreur de la mort" (61). Instead, Michel prefers to approach history in a more personal way: "depuis ma maladie, la connaissance abstraite et neutre du passé me semblait vaine" (77).

In Italy Michel becomes interested in the historical figures of the sixth century, a period that Gide uses to reflect Michel's situation. This transitional period between the classical age and the medieval period reflects Michel's in between status: he is not quite

fully awakened and aware of himself; in fact as he speaks of this period, he is neither in France nor in Africa, neither north nor south, but in Italy. The figures of Théodoric, Cassidore, Amalasonthe, and above all the young king Athalaric possess a “sauvage grandeur” and “noblesse” that appeal to Michel. The story of the young Athalaric functions as a *mise en abyme*, or self-reflexive embedding, a technique that Gide coined in his diary and that he uses here to comment upon and reflect the story as a whole. Athalaric is a young king under the authority of his mother, Amalasonthe, who acts as regent. Athalaric revolts against his mother, “regimber contre son éducation latine, rejeter la culture comme un cheval entier fait d’un harnais gênant” (77). The young king casts off the yolk of civilization in favor of “la société des Goths impolicés” and “une vie violente voluptueuse et débridée” (77). Although Michel finds in Athalaric’s story “un état plus sauvage et intact,” he also sees a warning: Athalaric died young and Michel persuades himself that “il fallait lire une leçon” (77-78). Yet there is also an aspect of which Michel is not aware: the similarity between his familial situation and that of Athalaric. The young king rebels against his mother and the order and virtue of his society, just as Michel rejects his mother’s strict Huguenot teachings, and just as he will later reject the virtue, responsibility and maternal care of Marceline.

Michel rejects Marceline because he comes to associate her with his mother, weakness, illness, and the conformity of European civilization. Above all Michel refuses the weakness that sees inherent in Christianity. He tells Marceline not to pray for him because her prayer would create obligations, to God, religion, and one imagines to her. Instead of submitting to the will of God and praying for recovery Michel adopts an aggressive and determined approach to his illness. After reading the brochures on tuberculosis sent to him by a friend, he vows : “Pour un temps, seule ma guérison devait devenir mon étude; mon devoir c’était ma santé” (37). He views his tuberculous as a

battle: “un ennemi nombreux, actif, vivait en moi. [...] Je ne vaincrais pas sans lutte” (36-37). Indeed determination would be essential in fighting a deadly illness, yet Michel retains his single-minded, self-absorbed approach to his health throughout the novel. His new virtues are those of strength, independence and single minded determination, and these virtues do not include a place for the sick or the weak. He calls his fight against tuberculosis “une affaire de volonté;” he vows to “juger bon nommer *Bien*, tout ce qui m’était salutaire, oublier, repousser tout ce qui ne guérissait pas” (37).

Because he has rejected his own capacity for weakness, he cannot tolerate it in others. Michel’s new doctrine of health and strength paradoxically leaves him vulnerable. His last night in Biska he wakes in the middle of the night and is struck by a vision and a sensation of death: the courtyard is “sans plus de couleur ni de vie semblaient immobilisés pour toujours [...] rien ne semblait dormir, tout semblait mort” (58). He finds the calm horrifying and feeling it invade him, he grabs his hand, touches his forehead and his eyes and eyelids to affirm, that in contrast to the still, calm night, he is alive. Grabbing the nearest book which happens to be the Bible, Michel reads “[m]aintenant tu te ceins toi-même et tu vas où tu veux aller; mais quand tu seras vieux, tu étendras les mains” (59). These words from the Bible haunt Michel and foreshadow the end of the novel where he asks his friends to take him away from his solitude. Yet, the reflexive verb “se ceindre,” which means to gird oneself, recalls Michel’s use of the word “gaine,” which can also mean a girdle or corset. As Jesus’s words to Peter indicate, a healthy individual can support himself and walk where he wants to go unaided, but the time will come, when the individual will reach out his hands for help; the body alone will stumble and falter. Therefore, Michel’s theory of civilization, flowering, and decline that he introduces in Paris is incomplete. Perhaps a “gaine” (106) does not have to be like Michel’s “invincible pudeur”—constricting and limiting. It is this blindness, coupled

with his desire to be free, that leads him to neglect Marceline. In his new ethos of independence and strength, there is no possibility for death, weakness or other people. In this respect, Michel adopts a philosophy that resembles his former one: he maintains his sense of duty, discipline and virtue, even as the ideas that he has embraced have changed.

Michel remarks to his friends at the beginning of his confession: “Savoir se libérer n’est rien; l’ardu, c’est savoir être libre” (17). In *L’Immoraliste* Michel tackles the first part of this sentence and succeeds in liberating himself from the shackles of obligation, society, and marriage. When his friends find him in the desert, living alone he has only just begun to try to live free. To truly “know how to be free,” he must reenter society and carve out a place for himself. Edna’s search for identity separate from that sanctioned by society is complicated by many fictions. Indeed to be a subject also puts her in the position of managing or falling victim to others’ narratives. A sense of Edna’s identity begins to emerge in her conversation with Adèle on the beach. She begins to speak and finds herself liberated as she breaks her habitual reserve. In speaking to the character that most represents maternity (Adèle), Edna comes to articulate her opposition to self-sacrificing maternity. Edna’s relationships to men also provide opportunities for the reader to examine Edna’s relationship to romantic love, yet these relationships do not have the clarifying effect that her relationships with women have—they entangle her in a dangerous game of adulterous romance that ultimately deceives Edna about the nature of love and desire. As much as Edna’s position in the novel is typically male—that is she inhabits the place normally reserved for a male character and she contemplates her position in the universe and society and tries to break away from structures of power that limit her freedom—her obsession with love and her longing for the beloved, however, seems decidedly old fashioned in contrast to her more independent ideas. Although Edna appears feminine in her longing for a beloved, her frank acknowledgement of her sexual



desires and her independent actions such as gambling, painting, and moving out of her husband's home seem more masculine. The social narratives for female independence are few. Rejecting the asexual marginalized example of Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna finds no other example, no other path to follow in helping her construct a non-alienating social identity. Although Michel does not move beyond a reactive and oppositional relationship to society, his cultivation of immoralism gives him a structure that allows him to begin to construct an identity, whereas Edna relies upon something illusory, romantic love and desire, phenomena that do not provide her with a way to find a place in society.

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