

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*
in the Cultural Context:
Edna's Awakening between Cultures and Settings

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Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* provoked a storm of hostile criticism when it was published, and the book was almost forgotten for about half a century until the rediscovery in the 1960s⁽¹⁾. Since Per Seyersted rediscovered Chopin, a considerable number of studies have been made discussing *The Awakening* from numerous viewpoints. Most of them argue about Edna's awakening and eventual suicide in some way; however, many analyze Edna's awakening and suicide ignoring the cultural context. John R. May suggests that "A local color novel is one in which the identity of the setting is integral to the very unfolding of the theme."⁽²⁾ Though we do not need to discuss here whether *The Awakening* is a local color novel, cultural backgrounds and settings should play key roles to throw light on Edna's awakening and suicide in the text which includes two different cultures and various different settings. From this perspective we will analyze Edna's awakening and her eventual suicide.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Edna's awakening and the reason of her

(1) Emily Toth, "A New Biographical Approach," *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening*, ed. Bernard Koloski (New York: MLA, 1988) 60-66; *The Awakening*, ed. Margo Culley, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1994) 118-9.

(2) John R. May, "Local Color in *The Awakening*," *The Southern Review* 6 (Fall 1970): 1031-40, rpt. in *The Awakening* 216.

suicide by a cultural approach. In *The Awakening* there are two cultures, the Creole culture and the culture of Edna's background with their contrasts emphasized throughout the text. Although we tend to notice only these contrasts, a close observation makes us aware of their similarities. As it helps us understand Edna's awakening and her suicide, we first will confirm the common ideas and then we focus on the differences between the two cultures and Edna's awakening in the Creole society. Moreover, the differences among the Creole culture are also deeply connected to Edna's awakening. The differences in the culture are brought about with the transition of the three settings—Grand Isle, Chênère Caminada and New Orleans. We will also inquire into the connection between the transition and Edna's awakening.

I Common Ideas about Women between Two Cultures

The differences between Edna's background and the Creole culture make Edna reveal her inner and true self. However, before drawing a distinction between them, we have to acknowledge the common ideas about women in the two cultures and Edna's maladjustment to them, which will lead us to a better understanding of Edna's eventual suicide. Edna is "an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution,"⁽³⁾ and the Creoles are far more French than American. In order to inquire into the similarities between the two dissimilar cultures, I will compare some concepts about women, which were prevalent in nineteenth-century America, with the attitudes in the Creole culture and consider Edna's inadequate adaptation to the concepts, which will be the key to her suicide.

Barbara Welter explored the phrase True Womanhood and explains the traits of

(3) Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, ed. Margo Culley, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1994) 6. All further references to *The Awakening* are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

it as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”⁽⁴⁾ In nineteenth-century America, women were judged by this concept, which should have been widespread in Edna’s hometown, too. Similarly, the following discussion will prove that the idea of True Womanhood also applies to the Creole culture, and that Edna has the potential to resist it. Piety, the first trait in the four detailed attributes of True Womanhood can be seen among Creole women in the text: “They [the Farival twins] were girls of fourteen, always clad in the Virgin’s colors, blue and white, having been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin at their Baptism” (23). Judging from the above, it seems that Creole girls are educated to be pious Catholic women. Moreover, Adele Ratignolle refers to the Bible when she talks about the sacrifice for children. All these things make it clear that piety is the essential quality for the ideal woman among the Creoles. On the contrary, there is good evidence to show that Edna, though she grew up under the ideal of True Womanhood, escapes from being pious.

“Likely as not it was Sunday,” she laughed; “and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of.”

“. . . during one period of my 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)

In nature Edna is far from being pietistic; nevertheless, she has hidden her impiety under the habits of True Womanhood.

Second, purity is also one characteristic of an ideal Creole woman. The Creole’s notion of purity can be seen in two ways; their esteem for female chastity, and the Creole woman’s inability to be exposed to danger. To consider their esteem first, it is useful to quote from Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s reference to southern chastity:

(4) Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 152.

“. . . southern society placed as high a premium on female chastity. . . . The sexuality of upper-class white women—like its reverse, their chastity—constituted the visible and sacred prize of upper-class white men”⁽⁵⁾ Southern women’s chastity upholds their purity and the Creole women are no exception. There is “a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable”(10). Also, Robert considers chastity as an indispensable attribute to women and feels obligated to leave Edna when he realizes that he is attracted by her. The Creoles protect their code of chastity, which proves the purity of Creole women. Another trait of purity portrayed in the text is the Creole women’s fearfulness of putting themselves in danger. This is pointed out in Mary L. Shaffter’s “Creole Women”:

. . . they know nothing of the beauty and development that come from physical culture. They train the little feet to dance bewitchingly, but are horrified at the suggestion of a thick-soled, broad-heeled boot and a five-mile walk.⁽⁶⁾

A close attention to the Creole women in the text reveals that “The Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperiling her health”(21). When Alcee Arobin sees Edna mounted upon a high stepladder, he begs her to come down saying, “Do you want to kill yourself?”(81). Accordingly, Creole women keep themselves in safety and men regard this as female virtue, female purity.

As women were regarded as submissive and meant to be under the control of their husbands in the nineteenth century, they had to render good service to husbands. This submissiveness applies to the Creole wives in the text. At the early part of the story Edna finds the women who worship their husbands prevailing in Grand Isle. As the story goes on, Edna meets many submissive wives, but here we

(5) Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “*The Awakening* in the Context of the Experience, Culture, and Values of Southern Women,” *Approaches to Teaching Chopin’s The Awakening*, 38.

(6) Mary L. Shaffter, “Creole Women,” *The Chautauquan* 15 (June 1892): 346-47, rpt. in *The Awakening* 137.

will focus on two women. One is Adèle Ratignolle, typical of a beautiful Creole woman. In Grand Isle, she spends much of her time with Edna; however, she gives the highest priority to being with her husband: “She would not consent to remain with Edna, for Monsieur Ratignolle was alone, and he detested above all things to be left alone”(39). In New Orleans, Adèle’s devotion for her husband makes her stay home, for which she has little opportunity to meet others. Mrs. Highcamp, another example, is the woman who is thought a nuisance in the Creole society. Unlike Adèle, she goes out with Alcée Arobin to watch races, but when she goes back to her house, she goes back to the role as a submissive wife and serves her husband.

Mrs. Highcamp was full of delicate courtesy and consideration toward her husband. She addressed most of her conversation to him at table. They sat in the library after dinner and read the evening papers together under the drop-light (71)

On the other hand, Edna is a misfit in her nonconformity to the submissiveness accepted by Creole as well as American women. “As a devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality”(19) when she married Léonce. Yet she refuses to answer her husband and perceives that her will has “blazed up, stubborn and resistant” (31).

When we observe domesticity, the last characteristic, it is useful to quote from Richard A. Wells’s treatise on etiquette, which explains the duties of domestic wives.

On the wife especially devolves the privilege and pleasure of rendering home happy.

Never let your husband have cause to complain that you are more agreeable abroad than at home; home whether a palace or a cottage, is the very centre of her being—the nucleus around which her affections should revolve, and beyond which she has comparatively small concern.⁽⁷⁾

(7) Richard A. Wells, *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* (New York: Union Publishing House, 1886) rpt. in *The Awakening* 122.

Similarly, these traits are the ideal virtues of the Creole women though they lead aristocratic lives leaving servants the household works. Adèle takes her sewing everywhere when she goes out at Grand Isle. She looks “more beautiful than ever there at home” (53) when Edna visits her house in New Orleans. In contrast, Edna’s undomestic nature is described in the early part of the story.

. . . she [Edna] could not see the use of anticipating and making winter night garments the subject of her summer meditations. But she did not want to appear unamiable and uninterested, so she had brought forth newspapers which she spread upon the floor of the gallery, and under Madame Ratignolle’s directions she had cut a pattern of the impervious garment. (10)

She hides her true self and pretends to be the domestic type. A contrast between domestic Adèle and undomestic Edna can be best made in their views on art. While Adele “was keeping up her music on account of the children . . . because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (24), Edna is absorbed in art *for herself*.

For a time she [Edna] had the whole household enrolled in the service of art. The boys posed for her. They thought it amusing at first, but the occupation soon lost its attractiveness when they discovered that it was not a game arranged especially for their entertainment. (55)

For Adèle, art is within the domestic field; for Edna, in contrast, it is beyond that sphere.

As we have confirmed the female characteristics common between the Americans and the Creoles, let us now look deeper into the treatments toward women in Presbyterian thought, on which Edna’s background is based, and also how women are treated under the Creole’s Catholicism. Presbyterian exegesis of women rests on Calvin’s understanding of biblical teaching concerning women in church and society:

Presbyterian doctrine poised the subordination of women and the supremacy of man in the structure of human relationships as ordained and established by

God. . . . man was given the prerogative of the exercise of authority and leadership, while woman was assigned to be an aide and helpmeet to man. In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin concluded that since the order of nature implies such a role, "women should study to keep this divinely appointed order." Although insisting that female subordination was not degrading, Calvin nevertheless defined the female *imago dei* as being "in the second degree," that is, under the dominion of males by God's creational ordinance.⁽⁸⁾

We can easily imagine that women were confined to the cult of True Womanhood under the Protestant doctrine. Next, James J. Kenneally argues that the Catholics in America followed the attributes of True Womanhood.

To many American Catholics this [True Womanhood] was not only an acceptable model but a familiar one, resting in part on a Christian tradition that held that such a pattern was designed by God, exemplified by the Virgin Mary Furthermore, it was reenforced by biological differences and supported by a historical tradition proclaiming the supremacy of man. Consequently numerous Catholics believed in distinct spheres of activity for each sex. Woman's centered around her position as perpetuator of the race and nucleus of the family.⁽⁹⁾

Hence, all these things make it clear that the ideals of True Womanhood are accepted both in Edna's hometown and the Creole culture.

While women are submissive and passive in the domestic sphere, men are required to have the authority over their wives and to perform their part in the male-dominated public sphere. The first trait, supremacy of men is described in the attitudes both of a Creole Léonce and Edna's Presbyterian father. Léonce

(8) Louis A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Quest for Status* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983) 91.

(9) James J. Kenneally, "Eve, Mary and the Historians: American Catholicism and Women," *Horizons* 3/2 (1976); *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (U of Pennsylvania P, 1980) 191.

reproaches “his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children”(7) in Grand Isle and tries to be authoritative also in New Orleans. In addition, seeing that Léonce has no authority over Edna, the Colonel, Edna’s father, tells him how to manage a wife: “Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it” (68). In the nineteenth century, the system of male authority and female submission was taken for granted. As the second trait, even though the Creoles are aristocratic, Creole men hold their public sphere where business is the topic of conversation. At the beginning of this story, Léonce appears reading the newspaper at Grand Isle where the Creole women and children spend their summers. He feels uneasy there and spends his time not with Edna but at Klein’s hotel where there are “a good many New Orleans club men”(6). Furthermore, he is looking “forward to a lively week in Carondelet Street”(8), the place for business. Moreover, when he knows that Edna will move, he is “simply thinking of his financial integrity”(89). As another example, we notice that Robert accepts the sphere ideology even though he has spent his summers with women at Grand Isle:

Robert spoke of his attention to go to Mexico in the autumn, where fortune awaited him. (6)

Quite cheerful, and wholly taken up with the idea of his trip, which Mr. Pontellier found altogether natural in a young fellow about to seek fortune, and adventure in a strange, queer country. (45)

In the field of business, Robert is seeking his chance. As we have seen in the two examples, men hold their sphere outside of the home while women are restricted inside of the domestic sphere.

In the previous study, we have compared the concepts of True Womanhood with the attitudes of Creole culture and confirmed the similarities. Now, let us turn to another role required of women in nineteenth-century America. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg mentions, with True Womanhood, the role of the Ideal Mother, that is “expected to be strong, self-reliant, protective, an efficient caretaker in relation to

children and home.”⁽¹⁰⁾ This role, in fact, is argued in an etiquette book at that time: “What the child needs pre-eminently . . . is *the presence and influence of mother*. . . . [Other duties] can only be secondary to the discharge of the all-important duties of motherhood.”⁽¹¹⁾ In the nineteenth-century American society, Ideal Motherhood was the important concept for women as well as True Womanhood. Also, we recognize Ideal Motherhood among the Creole women in the text: “The mother-women . . . were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (9). As a model of the mother-woman, Adele carries around her sewing for her children. Besides, she has a baby about every two years. According to Marie Fletcher, to “satisfy her [a Creole woman’s] strong maternal instinct, it was assumed that a woman should by all means have children to complete the family.”⁽¹²⁾ In this point, therefore, Adele no doubt embodies an Ideal Mother. On the contrary, Edna is “not a mother-woman” (9), the reason of which is noted as follows:

She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. . . . she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (19)

Edna cannot adjust herself fully not only to the ideals of True Womanhood but to Ideal Motherhood; in other words, Edna is completely contrasted with Adèle. This contrast can best be seen in their conversation about the sacrifice for their children:

(10) Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman: Sex Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Social Research* 39.4; *Disorderly Conduct* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 199.

(11) Sylvanus Stall, *What a Young Husband Ought to Know* (Philadelphia: Vir Publishing, 1897) 293, rpt. in *The Awakening* 123.

(12) Marie Fletcher, “The Southern Woman in the Fiction of Kate Chopin,” *Louisiana History* 7 (Spring 1966): 117-32, rpt. in *The Awakening* 195.

“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. . . .”

“. . . a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I’m sure I couldn’t do more than that.”

“Oh, yes you could!” laughed Edna. (46)

For Adèle, her children are more precious than herself; however, Edna chooses herself rather than her children.

Lastly, we must draw attention to the New Woman, whose traits contrast with those of the True woman and the Ideal Mother. With a great deal of social changes in the late nineteenth century, the situation of women had been transformed. During the period, many American women realized the limitations of True Womanhood. As Welter observes, “some of them blamed themselves, some challenged the standard, some tried to keep the virtues and enlarge the scope of womanhood. Somehow through this mixture of challenge and acceptance, of change and continuity the True Woman evolved into the New Woman.”⁽¹³⁾ Women got out of their sphere which had restricted them for a long time and began to attend college, enter professions previously barred to them, to form women’s organizations and to better their lot.⁽¹⁴⁾ However, Welter also points out that “the stereotype . . . of what woman was and ought to be persisted.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Now, let us look into the text to find the New Woman. Although she is not completely the woman described above, Mademoiselle Reisz is in fact the New Woman, if defined as the liberated woman. As she is fully separated from the sphere of True Womanhood or Ideal Motherhood, she can say anything she wants. She is, unlike other women, not passive but active, not an object but a subject. The Creoles take the reaction against the New Woman Mademoiselle Reisz, quarrel with her and exclude her in “some distance away”⁽⁵⁶⁾ from them in the city. Yet, Mademoiselle Reisz does not

(13) Welter 174.

(14) Margo Culley, “Editor’s Note: Contexts of *The Awakening*,” *The Awakening* 119-120.

(15) Welter 174.

take it seriously because she has “the courageous soul that dares and defies”(109) and is freed from the female ideals. Next, we will consider Edna’s view of Mademoiselle Reisz. At first, she thinks her to be hard to deal with as do the other Creoles. As the story goes on, however, she grows to be on close terms with Mademoiselle Reisz and tries to go out of the women’s sphere. Though she wants to become a liberated woman, she cannot fully get out of the cult of True Womanhood. After all, she seeks help from Robert, that is, she doesn’t have “the courageous soul that dares and defies.” Therefore, Edna cannot be the New Woman; she, in the end, is deeply affected by the prevalent concepts of True Womanhood and Ideal Motherhood.

In the nineteenth century, people viewed women basically in the same way. Women belonged to any of these types: the True Woman, the Ideal Mother or the New Woman. However, Edna belongs to none of these categories. Edna has, in nature, characteristics that go against True Womanhood and Ideal Motherhood. As there are the similarities between the Creoles and the Americans, the reason of Edna’s awakening to her true self lies elsewhere.

II The Differences between Two Cultures and Edna

Edna’s nature does not conform to the ideal qualities for women in her time. Although she has become vaguely aware of her nature, she has kept it private and followed the habit of the society: “Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions”(14). It is the traits of the Creole culture that make Edna reveal her inner self and escape from the role she has followed. Therefore, we first focus on the various facets of Edna’s background and the Creole culture in detail, and then examine the dissimilarities between the two cultures related to Edna’s realization of self as a human being.

Edna’s background is based on the Presbyterianism: “She comes of sound old

Presbyterian Kentucky stock. The old gentleman, her father . . . used to atone for his week-day sins with his Sunday devotions”(63); for which the knowledge about the Protestantism, especially the Presbyterianism, will help us to understand the features of Edna’s family and Edna herself described in the text. Theologically, Presbyterians adhere to the views of John Calvin. They put stress on the sovereignty of God, the priesthood of all believers, the work ethic and the sinfulness of humans.⁽¹⁶⁾ Under these emphases, the sinfulness of humans in particular, one made it a thing more personal in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, “the Protestant mistrust of the senses” and “the detestation of sexual desire as the root of evil”⁽¹⁷⁾ fostered their rigidity and the inhibited selfhood. As Nancy Walker argues, the Southern Protestants became conservative in the mid-nineteenth century, which means that the severity and inhibited selfhood that characterized their religious beliefs were accentuated:

. . . beginning in the 1830s northern criticism of the South—especially of the system of slavery—caused an increasing conservatism among southern Protestants that eventually led to the splitting of most denominations into northern and southern branches. “A great resurgence of religious orthodoxy began to regiment thought to protect Southern vested interests Liberalism brought threats to the *status quo*; therefore, Southern reaction was conservative in religion as well as in politics” (341).⁽¹⁸⁾

Walker also points out that Edna’s father is the one “directly affected by this intense conservative trend,”⁽¹⁹⁾ which more or less has an influence on Edna.

(16) William B. Williamson, “Presbyterians,” *An Encyclopedia of Religions in the United States: One hundred Religious Groups Speak for Themselves*, ed. William B. Williamson (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992) 266-267.

(17) Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (1966; New York: Viking Press, 1968) 304.

(18) Nancy Walker, “The Historical and Cultural Setting,” *Approaches to Teaching Chopin’s The Awakening* 69. In this argument, Walker quotes from John Samuel Ezell, *The South since 1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

(19) Walker 69.

One characteristic of the Southern Protestant, inhibited self can be found when we read about Edna's sister Margaret. She is "not effusive" and manages her responsibilities in a matronly and housewifely manner. Furthermore, the Protestant conservatism in the mid-nineteenth century is reflected on "the violent opposition of her [Edna's] father and Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic"(18). Moreover, we can notice another trait, a severity when Edna's father comes to New Orleans. He is described as a man who takes "the whole matter very seriously"(65) :

Before her pencil he sat rigid and unflinching, as he had faced the cannon's mouth in days gone by. He resented the intrusion of the children When they drew near he mentioned away with an expressive action of the foot, loath to disturb the fixed lines of his countenance, his arms, or his rigid shoulders.
(65)

As he is serious, he doesn't have the "sense of humor and of the fitness of things"(67) among the Creoles. Next, we have to look closely into how the traits of Edna's background have influenced her. One attribute of her background, an inhibited self-hood, can be seen in the text. At the early part of the story, Edna is contrasted with Robert for the reason: "Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young, and did not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason"(6). Because of the Protestant abhorrence in sexual desire as the root of evil, this inhibition makes Edna hide her romantic predisposition, which is well expressed in the following example of her childhood:

The picture of the tragedian stood enframed upon her desk. Any one may possess the portrait of a tragedian stood without exciting suspicion or comment. (This was a sinister reflection which she cherished.) . . . When alone she sometimes picked up and kissed the cold glass passionately. (18)

As she has concealed her feeling, she feels, among the Creoles, "not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection"(17). The characteristics of Edna and her family described in the text can be explained under the Protestantism and the Presbyterianism. These traits are far removed from those of the Creoles such

that Edna changes and reveals her inner true self as she keeps company with them. Now, let us leave Edna's background and turn to the attributes of the Creole culture.

The Creoles in the text are the descendants of French people, so that their culture is far more French than Anglo-American. Shaffter observes that "The Creole woman entertains beautifully. Her salon, her toilet, show the refinement of her taste."⁽²⁰⁾ The Creole women carefully select their personal belongings and never show a lack of grace around them. The description of Edna's house, though the selection is due to her husband, indicates how the Creoles decorate their possessions:

Within doors the appointments were perfect after the conventional type. The softest carpets and rugs covered the floors; rich and selected with judgment and discrimination, upon the walls. The cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask which daily appeared upon the table (47-8)

A wife's consuming some goods leads to the reputability of the household and its head in the leisure class. While the Creole wives consume goods and decorate their houses for the reputation of their husbands, Léonce, a Creole husband whose wife is not like the other wives, embellishes his house for himself. Moreover, because of their aristocratic temperament, the Creoles never show a lack of elegance. When Edna visits Adèle in New Orleans and finds her "engaged in assorting the clothes which had returned that morning from the laundry," she at once stops her occupation and says, "'Cité can do it as well as I; it is really her business" (53). The pride as the aristocrats makes the Creoles conscious of their external appearances. Shaffter also points out that the Creoles ". . . possess what money cannot buy—the chivalry of their men. . . ."⁽²¹⁾ We can find this trait in Robert's chivalrous role in Grand Isle: "Since the age of fifteen, which was eleven years before, Robert each summer in Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted

(20) Shaffter 138.

(21) Shaffter 137.

attendant of some fair dame or damsel”(11). As it is recognized as one attribute of the Creole culture, “for that matter, the Creole husband is never jealous”(12), and no one thinks anything to see Edna and Robert stay together all day. However, while the chivalrous love between a young man and a married woman is commonly accepted by the Creoles, they never take it seriously under their belief in the code of chastity.

The sensuousness is the element which distinguishes the Creoles from the other parts of the country. They play hard, and are “passionately fond of gambling, lotteries, and dancing.”⁽²²⁾ Walker points out that their playfulness “seemed almost sinfully sensuous”⁽²³⁾ to the other Americans and “What appeared to some to be a hedonistic way of life . . . gave New Orleans a reputation as a sinful city.”⁽²⁴⁾ The Creoles in the text, as they prove the reputation, indulge themselves in pleasures. In Grande Isle, they play the piano, sing and dance together at the dinner party, while a great deal of men from New Orleans are absorbed in gambling at Klein’s hotel. In New Orleans, the Ratignolles entertains “their friends once a fortnight with a soiree musicale [an evening of music], sometimes diversified by card-playing” (52). What is more, the beauty of the Creole women is one of the qualities of the Creole culture. The beauty is characterized as red lips, white teeth, glossy black hair, lighter complexion and graceful hands.⁽²⁵⁾ Edna loosens her reserve, impressed by these characteristics of a Creole woman Adèle:

There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. (9)

(22) Clement Eaton, *A History of the Old South* (New York: Macmillan, 1949) 196.

(23) Walker 70.

(24) Walker 70.

(25) The qualities of the beauty are based on those mentioned in Shaffter 137 and Eaton 189.

Her hands, contrasted with Edna's "strong, shapely hands"(4), are depicted as exquisite. Furthermore, she is more careful of her complexion"(15) than Edna. Next, the Creole "freedom of expression" is the quality different from other cultures. In the open surroundings of the Creole culture, people freely express their feelings. For example, the book, the kind that Edna wants to read secretly, goes round and is openly criticized, freely discussed at table. Even though Edna is surprised at the familiarity of the Creoles and often flushes, their openness attracts her. For Edna who has brought up under Protestant rigidity, the Creole openness is exceedingly affective and she begins to reveal her inner true self.

Hurled into the different society, Edna is contrasted with the Creoles and isolated among them. The open expression of the Creoles makes her surprised often. She is not accustomed to the subject common among them, so that she blushes her face, which always results in Robert's stopping the talk. Also, it is described that Edna an American feels isolated in the society composed mostly of the Creoles. Walker points out the fact that the Creoles despised the Protestant Americans, especially those who came from Kentucky:

... the Creoles, who had developed a highly sophisticated society, were notably hostile toward the backwoods "Americans" who poured into this major port city To the refined Creole, these hunters and farmers seemed crude, dirty, and socially backward, and although they came down the Mississippi from a variety of states, Kentuckians must have seemed particularly offensive, because the Creoles called all these outsiders "Kaintocks" (Chase 80).⁽²⁶⁾

Although Edna lives in this Creole society, she appears to be an outsider to those who do not know her; nevertheless, by the characteristics of the Creole culture she gradually realizes her nature in the deep inside, and it begins to appear in her behavior. When she is asked by Robert to go to the beach, she feels that she follows

(26) Walker 69. In this passage, Walker refers to John Churchill Chase, *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children, and Other Streets of New Orleans*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979) 80.

“in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her”(14), that is, the chivalrous love has opened her hidden romantic self and made her aware of it. Furthermore, it is the influence of Adele’s physical beauty and her frankness that has loosened Edna’s inhibited character. Edna is freed from the Protestant rigidity by degrees, and thus reveals her inner self. Moreover, because of the Creole sensuousness and playfulness, Edna realizes her passion, her instinctive nature. At the Creole dinner party she, for the first time, listens to the piano by mademoiselle Reisz and feels the passions “aroused within her soul”(26) and she notices her true desire swimming in the sea after the dinner: “A feeling of exultation overtook her She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before”(27). Edna, so affected by the Creole characteristics, begins to reveal her nature that she has concealed from others and even from herself. However, though she is attracted by the Creoles and makes herself open to their influence, her openness appears to be her selfishness when she is in New Orleans. This shows that Edna’s realization is brought about by the differences between settings—Grand Isle, Chênrière Caminada and New Orleans—as well as those between the two cultures.

III The Transition of Settings and Edna

In *The Awakening* there are three settings—Grand Isle, Chênrière Caminada and New Orleans. Grand Isle is a summer resort for the Creoles, an island in the Gulf of Mexico about fifty miles away from New Orleans. New Orleans often suffered from yellow fever because of its “drainage of the unpaved streets was in open sewers after the mediaeval fashion.”⁽²⁷⁾ To escape from the yellow fever, the Creole wives and children spent their summers in Grand Isle, where Edna begins to reveal her true nature through her relationship with the Creoles. In Grand Isle, there are many features which make Edna’s realization possible, even though they are

(27) Eaton 189.

different from the features in New Orleans. As it is described that Madame Lebrun's cottages are filled with the Creoles, Grand Isle is dominated by the Creole culture. In this environment, Edna has contact with more attributes of the Creole culture than in New Orleans. Next, Edna is attracted by the female-dominated society in Grand Isle. The resort is filled with the Creole women and children except for Sundays. Moreover, Leonce, Edna's husband goes to Klein's hotel although he comes to Grand Isle on weekends. In the environment Edna feels freed from the duties for her husband and spends her time for herself. In addition, this female culture is characterized by the chivalrous love. The text shows us that the chivalrous love is generally accepted by the Creole women; however, it also shows that the love is accepted only in Grand Isle. When Edna tells her plan to meet Robert in the city, he blurts, "So was I"(41), but cannot go on with his answer because he knows that the summer flirtations are unacceptable in New Orleans. Yet, through the distance from her husband and the closeness to Robert, Edna revives her romantic self. The third important aspect of Grand Isle is its open environment as a summer resort. Considering the historical facts noted above, the Creole women have no anxiety about the epidemics in New Orleans. Furthermore, Grand Isle releases women from the social restrictions in New Orleans. Nurses look after children as substitutes for mothers and Madame Lebrun is busy doing the domestic work in place of the Creole wives at her cottages. They are freed from various social conventions, which leads to their familiarity. Lastly, by the summer qualities in Grand Isle Edna begins to reveal her nature. Edna is attracted by the excessive physical beauty of Adèle which is much exposed in summer. In addition, the sea acts as the important place for her realization. It is described as inviting and attracting, and makes Edna realize her ability by swimming in it. As we have seen above, many aspects in Grand Isle are favorable to the expansion of Edna's stifled nature, Edna's desire that has been hidden in herself. As these elements are contrasted with those in New Orleans, however, Edna's desire leads to the final despair.

Chênrière Caminada is set further from New Orleans than Grand Isle. Away even from the Crêolès in Grand Isle, Edna feels more released: "Sailing across the bay to the Cheniere Caminada, Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening . . ." (33). In the mystic environment, we notice that the fairly-tale aspect and Edna's instinctive nature are accentuated. With the mystic spirit drifting in the setting, we feel as if invited into the world of fantasy. As Suzanne W. Jones suggests that Edna is Sleeping Beauty and Robert is Prince Charming,⁽²⁸⁾ Edna asks: "How many years have I slept?" and Robert answers: "You have slept precisely one hundred years . . ." (37) in the fairly-tale environment. Also Jones indicates that Edna and Robert "are free to live their fantasies,"⁽²⁹⁾ yet it is only Edna that is fascinated with the fantasy because Robert blushes when he talks to her. While he appears to speak bashfully, Edna becomes romantic indeed under these circumstances, and intensifies her love toward Robert. In Chênrière Caminada Edna has a chance to be alone in a house of Madame Antoine. Her solitude gives her an opportunity to reflect on herself; she observes her arms for the first time, and realizes her "fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh" (36). She begins to behave instinctively after realizing her body: "Edna bit a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong, white teeth. She poured some of the wine into the glass and drank it down" (36). The instinctive nature of her sleeping and eating shows that Edna has realized a deeper nature. In Chênrière Caminada, Edna's romantic qualities and her instinct are intensely described. By this journey she regains her romantic will hidden in herself and discovers her instinctive needs and desires. Before going to New Orleans, these realizations at Chênrière Caminada put Edna on a firm footing. She goes on pursuing her place in New Orleans as an individual.

New Orleans was founded in 1718, and was the only metropolis in the South at

(28) Suzanne W. Jones, "Two Settings: The Island and the City," *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening* 122.

(29) Jones 122.

the time of this story. In New Orleans at that time, two different cultures, the American and the Creole, existed and there seems to have been some tension between them, which resulted in the conservative and exclusive attitudes among the Creoles. Furthermore, although New Orleans was reputed to be a sensuous, sinful city by the other parts of the United States, the place described in the text is different from the sensuous, open environment of Grand Isle. Unlike the open and free Creole society at Grand Isle, the restriction is rather conspicuous in New Orleans. Women are restricted to and by their duties as wives, mothers and mistresses. They have to look after their children, make plans for meals, teach their servants and fulfill their duties in the fashionable society. When Edna neglects her duty by leaving her house on reception day, Léonce, in reaction, states the importance of being obedient to customs in the society: “. . . we’ve got to observe *les convenances* [social conventions] if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession.”(49). People respect their conventions and require women to be True Women and Ideal Mothers. In addition, as there is a different culture in New Orleans, the Creoles become more exclusive and their society is limited to a small group. Mademoiselle Reisz, for instance, is excluded from the society and lives at a distance from the Creoles. In contrast with the female-dominated society in Grand Isle, New Orleans is depicted as a male-dominated society and the confined situations of women are emphasized. Edna has to live in the house which Léonce greatly values as his possession. Adèle, because of her pregnancy, seldom appears in New Orleans. Among the women who appear in the text, the description of Madame Lebrun best shows the restricted situation. Her house in New Orleans looks like a prison from the outside “with iron bars before the door and lower windows”(57). She complains “that it was so dull coming back to the city; that she saw so few people now”(58). In New Orleans women are confined to their houses while men, who are confined to the hotel at Grand Isle, are active in society.

Even though the situation of woman in New Orleans is utterly different from that in Grand Isle, Edna behaves herself as if she is still there. As she still wants to be

free, she manifests herself against the tradition and selfishly tries to escape from her role as a wife, mother and True Woman. In the society which is completely different from Grand Isle, everything that has been around her becomes a nuisance to her. Moreover, for Adèle she 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 the taste of life’s delirium”(54). Once she has moved to New Orleans, her desire, which has been accepted in the open environment, turns to be her selfishness.

From what has been argued above, we can confirm that New Orleans has the qualities quite opposite to those at the summer resort. There are duties and restrictions there especially for women, who are freed from them only at a summer resort. Once they come back to their daily lives in the city, they accept their situations as wives and mothers. However, Edna continues to pursue romance and freedom of women in the city, whereas they are the virtues impossible to get there, accepted only at the resort place. Since she has found her desire through the relationship with the Creoles in Grand Isle, she continues to feel free as if she were at a summer resort even after she returns to the society. This neglect of her surroundings results in her eventual suicide.

IV The Awakening

Multitudes of essays concerning *The Awakening* discuss Edna’s suicide and her awakening. As these two themes are closely related to each other, the eventual suicide makes critics argue about whether Edna has awakened or not. Though they are divided in opinion on the subject, this difference occurs only because their opinions depend on their values of the word “awakening.” If we just define the word as realizing or being aware of something, Edna’s awakening can be found in the text; however, the text also shows us that Edna has not awakened in some aspects. Without the distinction between what Edna has awakened to and what Edna has not awakened to, we can neither discuss Edna’s awakening in detail nor her suicide.

Before examining Edna's awakening, it is important to keep in mind that Edna acts on impulse throughout the story, which makes Edna's awakening more complicated. We can see it through the reaction of other characters in the story. When Edna asks Robert abruptly to go to Chênère Caminada, it is described that he is aware of her impulse: "She [Edna] had not thought . . . of anything. He [Robert] told her he had often noticed that she lacked forethought"(32). Furthermore, Adèle points out Edna's childish impulse in New Orleans: "In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life"(91). In the second point, Edna's impulse can be seen in her behavior. Edna's behavior becomes mutable because she gives way to her impulse, as we can see in the following:

There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. . . . She liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested.

There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why she could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood. (56)

In addition, she confesses her impulsive inclination, when she is asked by Mademoiselle Reisz why she moves to a pigeon house, saying, "It is a caprice"(76).

Edna, through the relationship with the Creoles in a summer resort, has awakened to her nature—her romantic nature and the nature which collide with the tradition of her society. Also, she awakens to her desire—her desire to pursue her nature, that is, her desire for romantic love and her freedom from the tradition. On the contrary, Edna has not awakened to several key ideas, namely, the common ideas on women in Edna's background and in the Creole society, the differences in women's attitudes according to where they go, and, what is more important, Edna's own ability.

First of all, Edna has not awakened to the ideals about women in the Creole

society. As we have confirmed, the ideas on women are common in Edna's background and the Creole society. Edna plays a role as a wife and mother under the ideals; however, once she has awakened to her nature through the Creole characteristics, she takes no notice of the social concepts on women and tries to transcend the domestic sphere. What is more, she does not awaken to the fact that Robert also belongs to the society where the sphere ideology is prevalent. She contradicts her desire to transcend the sphere; in other words, she wants to escape from the society while she seeks refuge with Robert, who is a member of the society. As a final point, Edna has not awakened to the fact that she herself occasionally follows the social ideals on the spur of the moment even after she has awakened to her nature. In New Orleans Edna sends letters to her husband and her children at regular intervals as a wife and mother. Furthermore, she sometimes remembers that she is Léonce's wife even though she dislikes being a wife. After Arobin kisses her, there is "her husband's reproach looking at her from the external things around her which he had provided for her external existence"(80). In addition, she expresses her delightful feeling when she meets her children after a long absence. Although Edna awakens to her nature and tries to escape from her required role, she herself returns to her role on impulse.

As we have analyzed, Edna has not awakened to the different conditions of the Creole women according to their place. Edna has awakened to her nature in a special environment. In Grand Isle women are liberated from husbands by their work in New Orleans, from children by the nurses and from the household duties by Madame Lebrun. Furthermore, Grand Isle is characteristic of the chivalrous love, by which Edna is attracted. In the environment Edna awakens to her romantic nature and nature to be free, for there is a situation that accepts her nature and gratifies her desire. On the contrary, the situation for women is completely changed in New Orleans; women are restricted to the domestic sphere, far from freedom and chivalrous love. Although the distinction is clear enough, Edna has not awakened to it and continues to pursue her romantic inclination, and

her freedom from her role in the domestic sphere.

Most important of all is that Edna has not awakened to her ability, her limits as a New Woman, but only to her desire. This is hinted at in her swimming in the sea at Grand Isle:

Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance—that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. (28)

Through her awakening to her nature and the relationship with Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna intensifies her desire to be free like a New Woman and tells Mademoiselle Reisz that she will become an artist as a way to be liberated from dependence on her husband. Mademoiselle Reisz suggests that it is difficult to be an artist, a liberated woman out of their sphere in the society: “. . . . To be an artist includes much; one must possess the courageous soul The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies.” (61). Without comprehending Mademoiselle Reisz’s warning, Edna gradually gains her skill in painting and confidence in it; however, Edna lacks the crucial thing for an artist, that is, the brave soul that dares and defies and the strong wings to neglect the prejudice and the social tradition. While Edna desires to be independent, she always depends on someone. Edna seeks for help to be an artist and independent New Woman. Even though she knows it valueless, Edna expects Adèle’s praise of the painting. Because she is in an insecure position, she seeks “the words and praise and encouragement that would help her to put her heart into her venture”(53). She also seeks refuge with Mademoiselle Reisz to keep her desire for freedom when Edna feels uneasy. She lacks the courageous soul and the strong wings as an artist. Furthermore, Edna leans on men one after another as if she follows the ideal role as a dependent woman. When Edna’s father comes to New Orleans, she renders him any services that she can; however, after heated words are exchanged between them and Edna’s

father leaves home, Edna turns to doing her best for her husband: "As the day approached when he was to leave her for a comparatively long stay, she grew melting and affectionate, remembering his many acts of consideration and his repeated expressions of an ardent attachment" (68-9). When her husband leaves her alone, she feels released from her restrictions, but she soon becomes on good terms with Arobin and leans on him. However, all these men are only the substitutes for one man Robert; once he appears before Edna, she begins to depend on him. Thus, Edna's desire for independence is based on her dependence on others. Secondly, though Edna desires to be liberated from the required role of women, her desire occurs on impulse and she does not have the strong will to be a liberated woman. For example, when she tells Mademoiselle Reisz to move to a pigeon house, her will to be liberated completely from her husband is described: "Instinct had promoted her to put away her husband's bounty in casting off her allegiance"(76). On the contrary, when she talks about a dinner party with Arobin, she says, ". . . I'll let Léonce pay the bills. . ."(81). She wants to escape from her role as a mother and wife, yet she sometimes plays the role. As is explained in the text, she does not act with her own strong will to be free, but she follows her impulse and depends on it: "she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference"(98). Edna has awakened only to her desire, and she has not awakened to the fact that she cannot entirely escape social custom, that she acts on the spur of the moment, and that she does not have the ability to be a New Woman.

We have studied that Edna has awakened to her romantic nature and her desire for freedom from the required female role. We have also analyzed that Edna has not awakened to the female ideals common in her background and the Creole society, the specialties on women at the Creole resort, and her own ability. All these things are related with each other and lead to Edna's suicide. Thus, we will consider why Edna commits suicide and how the reasons are related to Edna's nature. Two events unexpectedly stimulate Edna to awake to what she has not and

draw her to suicide. First, the scene of Adèle's delivery changes Edna entirely all of a sudden. When she is shown that Adèle, an embodiment of female beauty, acts on instinct without any refinement and says in an exhausted voice, "Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!"(104), Edna is suddenly brought back to her place as a mother. Through this experience, she awakens to the fact that the Creole women and the women of her background are same, at the deeper part of nature, as mothers. In addition, she awakens to the fact that she can never be liberated from the domestic sphere as long as she is a mother of her children. Adèle's delivery keeps Edna restricted under the domestic sphere and proves to Edna that she can not gratify one of her desires, a desire to be free. Next, although Edna cannot gratify the desire, she, still on impulse, turns to the other desire, her romantic love with Robert, the result of which disappoints her expectation. As soon as she goes into the house, she finds the piece of paper with the words "I love you. Good-by—because I love you"(106). Again, Edna suddenly awakens to the fact that their romantic love is not accepted in the society but only at Grand Isle, and that Robert has no choice but to leave her under the norms in the society to which he belongs. These two events make Edna awaken to herself in the social tradition, to which Edna has closed her eyes. After her contemplation, Edna awakens clearly to the fact that she is never released from children in this society, and the romantic love between a young man and a married wife is impossible under the prevalent code of chastity. Also, Edna realizes that she cannot return to the restricted life and she can "never sacrifice herself for her children"(108), as she has once awakened to her nature. Therefore, Edna chooses to commit suicide as the only way to elude children, escape from restriction and save herself.

Hurled into the culture that appears to be completely different from her Kentucky background and into the setting which is entirely new to her, Edna awakens to her nature and desire. As she misjudges the attitudes of the Creole women in Grand Isle, she desires to transcend the domestic sphere, neglecting the

fact that the ideals placed on women are common in the two cultures. Yet, Edna awakens only to her nature and her desire, and she goes ahead with them without realizing that she does not have the courageous soul needed to be a liberated woman. After her awakening to her present situation-she is, after all, only a wife and a mother, there is no choice for once awakened Edna but to go into the sea to save herself. Walker points out that "she is a woman who does not belong to her time, but it is equally important to realize that she does not belong to her place."⁽³⁰⁾ However, we also bear it in mind that Edna is made to realize her nature by the Creole culture, and that the differences in the two cultures and the settings produce the situation in which Edna neither belongs to her time nor her place. Edna is the woman who is at the mercy of cultural differences.

⁽³⁰⁾ Walker 72.