KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*: THE NARCISSISM OF EDNA PONTELLIER*

Margaret Mitsutani†

A paper such as this one, which focuses on narcissism as the key to the interpretation of a novel, should begin with a discussion of the term itself, for the word narcissism has acquired misleading connotations in recent years. Narcissus, destroyed by his love for his own image reflected in a pool of water, has come to be seen as a metaphor for modern man, who in his obssession with his own self, has lost the ability to love others. The psychoanalytic concept of "narcissistic personality disorder" in the individual has been expanded into a prophecy of doom for modern society in Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978), in which narcissism is viewed as the blight of our time which has weakened, and may eventually destroy, the bonds that tie human beings together.

Obviously, however, Narcissus is not new with the modern age, and the continued fascination with his story since Ovid recorded it in *The Metamorphoses* would seem to indicate that it has not always been seen merely as a prophecy of doom. Perhaps the secret of Narcissus' endurance lies in his ability to show us a desire that exists within each one of us—the desire to turn our backs on society and return to the world of the self—along with the horror of self-annihilation that complete fulfillment of that desire must inevitably bring. Narcissus excites in us not only the dread of self-destruction, but also the admiration for one who has made a final and complete escape from the bonds of society.

In *The Heresy of Self-Love* (1980), which provides a healthy antidote to Lasch's pessimism, Paul Zweig sees Narcissus as "... a perpetual devil's advocate to the longing for community, an arch-heretic whose refusal to fit represents that aspect of human personality which resists

* This is based on a paper read at the 57th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan held at Komazawa University on May 18, 1985.

† Part-time lecturer at Tokyo Institute of Technology.

the social and has, presumably, always resisted it."[1] In Zweig's view, then, narcissism may be defined as a still, small voice within each of us that seeks to answer the demands of society with a resounding " no "; to refuse to play the role that society has prepared for us. Because this refusal to live according to society's plan ultimately threatens to create a fray in the social fabric itself, it tends to be met with a mixture of fear and contempt. This is precisely the response that Edna Pontellier's rejection of the role of wife and mother received when *The Awakening* was first published in 1899. In choosing to die rather than return meekly to her allotted position as her husband's most prized possession, Edna appeared as a threat to the bastion of nineteenth century American polite society—the home—and was rewarded accordingly with ridicule and scorn.

This adamant refusal to yield to the demands of society—to live the life of self-sacrifice that was considered fitting and natural for women in nineteenth century America—forms Edna's most basic link to Narcissus. In addition, however, I hope to show that this mythical hero, who casts his shadow here and there throughout the process of Edna's awakening, can also shed new light on the question of why it had to end in death. Keeping this question, which continues to provide a focal point for discussions of *The Awakening*, in mind, let us begin by briefly recounting Edna's story.

The Awakening opens on Grand Isle,[2] an island to the south of New Orleans, where Edna Pontellier is spending the summer with her husband Léonce and their two children Raoul and Etienne. With her marriage to Léonce Pontellier, Edna has entered an alien world. Brought up in a strict Protestant household in Kentucky (her father, we are told, coerced her mother into an early grave), her Victorian inhibitions make it difficult for her to adjust to the free, open manner of Creole society. The Creoles, the wealthy and somewhat aristocratic descendents of French immigrants who settled in Louisiana, created

[1] Paul Zweig, *The Heresy of Self-Love: A Study in Subversive Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968 and 1980), Preface (1980), p. ix. Zweig's criticism of Lasch in the 1980 Preface indicates that his decision to republish *The Heresy of Self-Love* was at least in part his personal response to *The Culture of Narcissism*.

[2] Grand Isle, which also provided the setting for Lafcadio Hearn's novel *Chita* (1889), is thought to have had an even more sensuous atmosphere than that of New Orleans. see Kamei Shunsuke, *America no Eve-tachi* (Tokyo: Bungei-shunju, 1983), p. 123.

what was in effect a pocket of French culture in an America that was still dominated by the " genteel tradition " and the puritanical attitudes which characterized it. It was considered natural for Creole women to drink wine with dinner and brandy afterwards, smoke cigarettes, and enjoy listening to the men tell risqué stories—all things that would have been unthinkable for a woman in the America in which Edna Pontellier was brought up. At the same time, however, the chastity of the Creole woman was above reproach, and her selfless devotion as wife and mother formed the mainstay of Creole society. As *The Awakening* opens, we find Edna in the process of discovering not only that her inhibitions prevent her from enjoying the freedom of the atmosphere which the Creole women create, but also that she lacks their utter devotedness to their husbands and children:

> In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.[1]

At the same time, Edna finds within herself a growing restlessness; an increasing dissatisfaction with being regarded as " a valuable piece " of her husband's " personal property " (p. 2). She is drawn to young Robert Lebrun, who provides a source of relief from her kind but thoroughly conventional husband. Lebrun is attracted to her as well, but fearing to tarnish her reputation, he flees to Mexico, leaving her with the discovery that she has fallen in love with him.

When the summer is over, and the Pontelliers have returned to their home in New Orleans, Edna lets the housework, in the words of her exasperated husband, " go to the devil," and concentrates on her painting, which had previously been a mere hobby. She also gives up her once a week " at-home " day which Léonce considers essential to the advancement of his career. Angered at first by his wife's anti-social behaviour, he finally decides to follow the advice of

---

[1] Barbara Solomon, ed., *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1976), p. 8. All quotations from *The Awakening* are taken from this text, and will be hereafter indicated by page number only.

Dr. Mandelet, an old family friend, and let her have her own way. When he leaves for New York on business, and the children are taken to stay with their grandmother in the country, Edna is left alone in New Orleans.

On the morning of her husband's departure, Edna cries and feels that she will soon grow lonely without him, but after he leaves, finds in place of loneliness "a radiant peace" (p. 77). In the absence of her husband and children, she alternates hours in the atelier with trips to the races, through which she becomes increasingly involved with Alcée Arobin, a pleasant young rake whose "attentions alone are considered enough to ruin a woman's name" (p. 103). Although she feels nothing for him, he satisfies her awakened sensuality, and she allows their relationship to become a physical one. She feels the reproachful eyes, not so much of her husband, who "... seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse" (p. 83), as of Robert. For Edna herself, however, the affair with Alcée has a different meaning that neither Léonce nor Robert would ever suspect—it has served as one more step on the way to her awakening:

> She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips. (p. 90)

With a small inheritance and the income from her paintings, which are beginning to sell, Edna moves out of the Pontellier's spacious residence to rent a small house around the corner, which she calls "the pigeon house." Here, she receives Robert Lebrun, who has returned from Mexico as suddenly as he left, and hears his long awaited confession of love. He has loved her since the previous summer at Grand Isle, but knowing that she was not free, escaped to Mexico in a vain attempt to forget her. Edna's response shocks him:

> "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take

her and be happy, she is yours, I should laugh at you both.' " (p. 116)

At that moment, Edna is called away to assist her friend Adèle Ratignolle, a paragon of mother-womanly virtue, at the birth of her fourth child. After witnessing Adèle's " scene of torture " and being reminded by her to " ' Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them! ' " (p. 119), Edna's own maternal responsibilities come flooding back upon her, and she becomes despondent. " ' . . . I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample on the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn't want to trample on the little lives,' " (p. 120), she tells Dr. Mandelet as they walk home together. But tomorrow will be soon enough to think of the children, for tonight, she will have Robert. When she arrives home, she finds that he has gone, leaving a note saying, " I love you. Good-bye—because I love you." The next morning, she returns to Grand Isle and, naked, gives herself to the sea.

Edna's suicide appears at first to be a somewhat too abrupt ending to her awakening, but a more careful reading reveals the fact that Chopin has been preparing the reader for it from the opening chapters of the novel. As a glimpse of his own reflection in a pool of water provided the impetus for Narcissus' awakening of self-love, so Edna's awakening begins in the sea, with her discovery of the hidden potential that lies within her. One night during the summer at Grand Isle, when Robert Lebrun suggests a midnight dip, Edna, who until this point has confounded the efforts of all her teachers, enters the water and suddenly begins to swim:

> . . . that night, she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence . . . A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the workings of her body and her soul. (p. 29)

As in the myth of Narcissus, however, the exultation of self-discovery is linked to the horror of self-destruction:

> A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land. (p. 30)

Edna's " vision of death " here clearly foreshadows the death that she will later choose for herself. This fact in itself, however, does not answer the question of why Edna's awakening had to end in death. The answers to this question which have been offered to date fall into two major categories. The first of these is represented by the feminist critic Elaine Showalter, who asserts that *The Awakening*, along with Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, depicts " . . . the futile struggle for consciousness."[1] In order to support this view, she tells us that " Chopin's Edna Pontellier thinks 'it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life'; but when her lover abandons her she drowns herself."[2]

But was Edna's struggle for consciousness really a futile one? As we have seen, Edna does not allow herself the illusion that there is love between herself and Alcée Arobin; neither does she delude herself into thinking that her love for Robert will last forever. " There was no human being she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone " (p. 123). When she walks to her death in the sea, Edna has clearly awakened from any illusions she might have previously entertained about the nature of sexual experience or romantic love. Edna does not, as Showalter suggests, choose death as the preferable alternative to the harshness of reality in a world without Robert's love.

Through his final abandonment, Robert has fully demonstrated to Edna both his concept of love and his view of women. In his mind, woman exists only as the possession of man, and a man's " love " for a woman is nothing more or less than the desire to make her one of his possessions. Having come to the realization that she can no longer bear a life as " one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions," Edna is not about to let herself become one of Robert's. Nor can she allow herself to accept the other alternative—to disassociate herself from the married state altogether and abandon herself to carnal pleasure with men like Alcée Arobin. Sensuality has acted as a catalyst in Edna's awakening, lifting the mist from her eyes, " enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life," but as she herself realizes, it is merely

[1] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 131.

[2] *Ibid.*

one aspect of a human being. Edna clearly needs to be regarded as more than either a body or a possession, but her experiences have led her to the conclusion that the men of her world belong to only two types; the Alcée Arobin-type, who cannot see beyond her body, and the Léonce Pontellier-Robert Lebrun-type, who see in her only a current or potential possession. Far from being the hysterical act of a foresaken lover, Edna's suicide is the rational decision of a woman who has determined that there is no other place for her to go.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, Linda Huf has suggested a third alternative that might have been open to Edna, had she had the courage to take it. Huf, who along with Patricia Allen, represents the second category of Chopin critics, contends that Edna dies "... not out of disappointed love, as so many uncomprehending critics have said, but out of concern that her unorthodox behaviour will destroy her children's chances for happiness."[1] In addition, she has provided a stimulating new reading of *The Awakening* as a *Kunstlreroman*, or artist novel.

The third alternative that Huf suggests for Edna appears in the form of Mademoiselle Reisz, a crusty old pianist whom all regard with awe because of the divine powers of her art, but who has little but contempt for anyone but young Mrs. Pontellier. It is Mademoiselle Reisz who tells Edna that "'... to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul ... The soul that dares and defies'" (p. 68) and, on a separate occasion that "'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.'" (p. 89). "The bird that would soar" is, of course, the artist, and the mythical image that Huf sees embodied in Edna is that of Icarus. When Edna tries to escape the prison of marriage "... on Icarian wings," Huf tells us, "she flutters, falters, and fails; her wings do not hold; their wax melts in the hot sun of awakened aspiration, and she tumbles to her death in the sea."[2] It is no coincidence that as she prepares to swim to her death, she sees a bird with a broken wing "... beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (p. 124). The bird is Edna herself, the failed

[1] Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman; The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1983), p. 75.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

artist " bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth."

Huf deserves credit for having brought the artistic aspect of Edna's awakening, along with the bird imagery that runs through the novel, into focus for the first time. Her point that Edna's situation at the beginning of *The Awakening* is similar to that of a caged green and yellow parrot which appears in the opening scene is certainly well taken. It seems to me, however, that art, like sensuality, plays the role of one more catalyst in the process of Edna's awakening, rather than being an end in itself. In response to her husband's charge that Madame Ratignolle, who " ' keeps up her music ' " but " ' doesn't let everything else go to chaos ' " is " ' more of a musician than you are a painter,' " Edna replies, " ' She isn't a musician, and I'm not a painter. It isn't on account of painting that I let things go.' " (p. 61). In the absence of her husband and children, Chopin notes that Edna has begun to work at her painting " . . . when in the humour, with sureness and ease," but then adds that " . . . being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work itself " (p. 79). This observation strengthens the impression that Edna is not pouring herself into an all-consuming struggle for artistic fulfillment—around this same time, the reader might remember, she is equally busy developing her affair with Alcée Arobin.

Total devotion to art, represented in the life style of Mademoiselle Reisz, would have been as impossible for Edna as total abandonment to sensual pleasure. Mademoiselle Reisz does, as Huf points out, exert an important influence on Edna, but her hermit-like—indeed, almost shaman-like—life style is not one that Edna could have adopted for herself. Supported only by her art, Mademoiselle Reisz, like the shaman, exists on the fringe of human society, and is regarded with an awe that is tinged with both fear and contempt. Her " divine art " carries with it an almost mystical power " . . . to reach Edna's spirit and set it free " (p. 84). It is she who senses Edna's love for Robert intuitively and, in his absence, acts as a medium between them, allowing Edna to read the letters he has sent to the pianist at her apartment, while she plays Chopin's Impromptu.

If Mademoiselle Reisz does, in fact, present a third alternative for Edna, like her other two alternatives—return to marriage and abandonment to sensual pleasure—it is one that she cannot take. Art has apparently served as a substitute for sensuality for Mademoisell Reisz,

but Edna, if she is to go on living at all, must have both.

The reason I have spent as much time as I have in delineating Huf's interpretation of *The Awakening* and my doubts concerning it is that Huf's conclusion provides "the other side of the coin" to my own. Huf's explanation of Edna's suicide is undeniably a far more plausible one than Showalter's:

> [Edna] . . . goes to her death in order not to have to renounce—for the sake of her children—her newly awakened self, including the newly awakened sensuality that has become an important part of her and without which she would be but a fragment of a complete human being.[1]

While there is much here that I can agree with, I cannot help questioning whether it is necessary to view Edna's death in the wholly negative terms of self-sacrifice ("Edna . . . gives up her very life for her children."[2]) and defeat. In viewing Edna's awakening in the light of Narcissus rather than Icarus, I have attempted to find a more positive meaning in its conclusion.

As we have seen, Edna's awakening begins in the sea, where she first discovers that she has the power "to control the workings of her body and her soul." Significantly, it is also the voice of the sea that calls forth her hidden sensuality:

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

The alluring voice of the sea draws Edna into a separate world, cut off from the restrictions both of her strict Protestant upbringing and of Creole society, which deems it natural that all women be fit into only one role—that of the "mother-woman." In this separate world, Edna is free to exercise her new found powers—"to control the workings of her body and her soul"—but when she tries to exercise these same powers on land, she must inevitably clash with the conventions of human society. On the night of her sojourn in the sea, Edna defies her husband for the first time. She is lying in the hammock

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

outside, and he orders her to come in at once. She refuses:

> With a writhing motion she settled herself more securely in the hammock. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feelings as she did then. (p. 33)

As the friction between Edna's growing sense of self and the demands of social convention increases in intensity, Léonce is led " . . . to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself " (p. 61). He has, of course, completely misinterpreted the change in Edna's behaviour. She was actually, Chopin tells us, " . . . becoming herself and casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world " (p. 62).

A key point in Edna's awakening is revealed through a conversation she has with her friend, the mother-woman Adèle Ratignolle. The two are having a heated argument about the nature of self-sacrifice and a woman's duty to her children, and Edna, in an unsuccessful attempt to explain her position, 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. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me. (p. 51)

Here we can see Edna's growing awareness that she possesses a self that is sacred—and that is to be sacrificed to no one, not even her children. When she is forced to the realization that if she is to go on living that self must be sacrificed, life itself becomes " the unessential," and she decides to give it up—paradoxically, in order to save the self that has awakened within her. As Huf has also pointed out, Edna " . . . would never sacrifice the essential; that is, her very being. She would never, and does not."[1] I differ from Huf, however, in that I see Edna's suicide as being as much an act of self-preservation as self-destruction.

Edna's awakening is the awakening of self-love. Her choice of

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

the sea as the place in which to dispose of "the unessential"—her life—is by no means a coincidence. She does not simply "tumble to her death in the sea." Having cast off the fictitious garment of the self imposed upon her by social convention, she now casts off "the unpleasant, pricking garments" (p. 124) that cling to her body and, consciously, deliberately, prepares to return to that separate world where she first caught sight of "the essential"—her self. The element of rebirth implied in the conclusion of *The Awakening* adds to the impression that Chopin did not intend Edna's death to have an entirely negative meaning:

> How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it has never known. (p. 124)

On the brink of death, Edna is reborn.

The avalanche of harsh criticism which *The Awakening* received on the eve of the nineteenth century proved a death blow to Chopin's career as a writer. In her native St. Louis, *The Awakening* was banned from library shelves, and its author denied membership in the Fine Arts Club. The official cause of death, which came five years later in 1904, was a brain hemorrhage, but one may well imagine that disappointment had taken its toll as well.

In making Edna's—and perhaps her own—intensely personal struggle for self-affirmation public, Chopin in effect hastened her own death. Yet if the drama of Narcissus is allowed to remain wholly private, the message he has for human society will be lost. In creating a heroine who, like Narcissus, turned her back on society and returned to the world of the self, Chopin was attempting to communicate a message that *was* lost on her own society. The resurrection of *The Awakening* in the 1960's, however, has given concrete meaning to Edna's "rebirth" at the close of the novel, as well as providing us with the opportunity to re-examine the meaning her story has for us today.

Nineteenth century America, misreading Chopin's message, interpreted Edna's narcissism as the idealization of sensuality and a condemnation of the family system. It should be clear to us now, however, that it was not the family itself that Chopin, who herself raised six children, objected to. *The Awakening* is the story of a woman who, in awakening to the world of the self, grew beyond the role of "moth-

er-woman" and, having done so, forfeited her place in human society. Through Edna's story, Chopin showed that marriage and motherhood do not, and should not, put an end to a women's growth. Her condemnation was directed not at the family, but at a society that expected women to stop growing upon reaching the status of motherhood, and demanded life itself from those who, like Edna Pontellier, willfully refused to do so.

In interpreting Edna's story in the light of the myth of Narcissus, I have proposed that she awakened *from* the illusions surrounding both carnal and romantic love, and *to* the world of the self. It might be argued, however, that I have not sufficiently clarified the nature of the "self" to which she awakened. The "self," in fact, is often said to be defined only through its relations to others. According to this view, a "true self" such as the one Edna sought to return to in the sea would be reduced to mere illusion. One critic who takes the view that Edna's "self" is essentially illusory is Larzer Ziff:

> The Creole woman's acceptance of maternity as totally adequate to the capacities of her nature carried with it the complements of a fierce chastity, a frankness of speech on sexual matters, a mature ease among men, and a frank and unguilty pleasure in self-indulgence. But this was not, ultimately, Edna Pontellier's birthright, and she knew it. She was an American woman, raised in the Protestant mistrust of the senses and in the detestation of sexual desire as the root of evil. As a result, the hidden act came for her to be equivalent to the hidden and true self, once her nature had awakened in the open surroundings of Creole Louisiana.[1]

While praising *The Awakening* as "a novel of the first rank"[2] and lamenting Chopin's premature silencing at the hands of angry reviewers as "... a loss to American letters of the order of the untimely deaths of Crane and Norris,"[3] Ziff is clearly somewhat skeptical about the notion of a "true self." Perhaps "true self" is indeed as slippery and difficult to grasp as the image of Narcissus, reflected in a pool of water.

It might be argued that Edna's awakening is, more than anything,

---

[1] Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890's: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 304.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 300.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 305.

a realization of what she is not. She is not suited to the life that society has prepared for her, because, unlike Adèle Ratignolle, she cannot sacrifice herself to anyone, including her husband and children. The one thing clear about Edna's self is that it is sacred, and not to be sacrificed. What it *is*, Edna is only on the brink of discovering when she swims to her death in the sea. Yet this fact in itself makes *The Awakening's* plea for a place in which women like Edna Pontellier can realize their full potential—complete the process of self-discovery—all the more poignant. I leave to the reader the task of judging whether or not we of the twentieth century have succeeded in answering this plea, thereby giving meaning to the sacrifice of Edna Pontellier, and of her creator, Kate Chopin.

Received September, 10, 1985