

Fairy Tale  
Archetype

"Into the Realms of Semi-Celestials": From Mortal to Mythic in *The Awakening*  
by Angela Hailey-Gregory

option (138). Chopin's skill in using the archetypal images of women and love does more than characterize Edna's doomed task of finding a perfect expression of love on earth; precisely these same images (or illusions, as Batten calls them) plant the seeds of the tragic flaw which Seyersted denies. Edna's romantic notions of love, sown in her as a child, blossom into the overwhelming sense of passion that she is unable fully to achieve. She is a mere mortal trying to achieve something available only to the gods.

\*

114 W.

Chopin sketches in Edna the perfect vessel for depositing the Victorian cultural myths of fairy-tale love and fantasy, what Seyersted calls "the Victorian American decorum, which banned many facts about human nature from speech and writing, partly to spare the Iron Madonna" (140). These cultural myths work both for and against Edna's search for self. Edna describes herself as a young girl as "a little

\*

The fact that this scene alludes to both Snow White and Sleeping Beauty signifies the transition between pre- and post-adolescent behavior for Edna. When Edna leaves the sea, she is still an infant. She has now graduated to the sexually mature, but still virginal, fairy tale princess. The question remains whether she will continue on the path to sexual awakening and keep her independence, as Sleeping Beauty and Snow White did not. The Snow White allusion also evokes what can go awry when a woman steps out of societal boundaries. Snow White, like Eve before her, bites an apple, suffers grave consequences, and must be rescued by a prince (or evicted from the garden). When Edna emerges

\*

irony here, of course, is that the god of tragedy is singing the song of Edna's tragic flaw: "if you knew." If Edna took the time to reflect upon her life and her choices, instead of allowing herself to be caught up in the play, in the fairy tale, she might have been able to escape her fate or at least have understood the consequences of her choices. Once

\*

Edna, like Icarus, does not foresee the price of flying too close to the sun until the very end, after she has enjoyed the sun's rays for too long to give them up. Edna is granted the gift of sight, by which she can see how myopic her existence had been prior to her transformation. With each new awakening she finds herself more and more exultant with the possibilities that present themselves, but unlike Madame Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz, Edna cannot see the final awakening, when the gods will exact payment from her for the journey granted. In her final awakening,

### **Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*** **By Donald A. Ringe**

As symbolic figures, they cannot perhaps be assigned precise meanings. But the two lovers are indeed so lost in each other as to be almost completely oblivious to what is going on around them. There is surely no self-assertion here. Nor does there seem to be any in the lady in black who, in praying to her God, is surrendering herself to the Deity. Both the couple and the lady in black represent a strong contrast to Edna, who never really achieves the loss of self in love for another, and who is never portrayed as submitting herself to worship God in communion with others (7).

\*

Edna, moreover, is hardly consistent in her behavior, for she is unwilling to allow others the same freedom she demands for herself. Though she insists that she will not be possessed by anyone (p. 282), it is clear that she wishes to possess Robert (7).

\*

Unlike the transcendentalists, however, Kate Chopin allows her character no limitless expansion of the self. She presents her, rather-in terms suggesting Melville-as a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender. Chopin herself makes no explicit comment on Edna Pontellier's actions. She neither approves nor condemns, but maintains an aesthetic distance throughout, relying upon the recurring patterns of imagery to convey her meaning. It is not the morality of Edna's life that most deeply concerns her, nor even the feminist concept so obviously present in the book. It is, rather, the philosophic questions raised by Edna's awakening: the relation of the individual self to the physical and social realities by which it is surrounded, and the price it must pay for insisting upon its absolute freedom (10).

my f/w

**The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire**  
**Author(s): Sandra M. Gilbert**

Edna can think of only one way "to elude them," to assert her autonomy, and to become absolutely herself, and that is through her much-debated suicidal last swim. Once again, however, our interpretation of this denouement depends on our understanding of the mythic subtextual narrative that enriches it. Certainly if we see Edna's decision to swim into the sea's "abysses of solitude" as simply a "realistic" action, we are likely to disapprove of it, to consider it-as a number of critics have-"a defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate to the limitations of reality." But though this may appear almost perversely metaphorical, I think it is possible to argue that Edna's last swim is not a suicide-that is, a death-at all, or, if it is a death, it is a death associated with a resurrection, a pagan, female Good Friday that promises a Venusian Easter. Certainly, at any rate, because of the way it is presented to us, Edna's supposed suicide enacts not a refusal to accommodate the limitations of reality but a subversive questioning of the limitations of both reality and "realism." For, swimming away from the white beach of Grand Isle, from the empty summer colony and the equally empty fictions of marriage and maternity, 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 childhood (57).

Illusion and Archetype: The Curious Story of Edna Pontellier

Author(s): Wayne Batten

my no

visions made fascinating by the archetype.

But Edna's "veil," woven of dream, fantasy and folklore, gains a still deeper archetypal reference through a set of images applied to her, images which associate her with both Venus and Psyche. Recalling Mrs. Pontellier's last dinner party in her husband's house, Victor Lebrun says that "Venus rising from the foam could have presented no more entrancing a spectacle than Mrs. Pontellier, blazing with beauty and diamonds at the head of the board" (p. 186). This appearance of seductive, god-like self-sufficiency ironically belies what Edna is feeling at the party, when she simultaneously longs for Robert and is overpowered by a sense of the unattainable. Victor's description does, however, accord with Robert's earlier conjecture that Edna "will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence." The divine aura, the effulgence of reified archetype, actually makes the woman fragile. The perilous cross between mortal and divine is the subject of the myth of Psyche, in which Eros himself serves as *animus*, holding Psyche captive in his sumptuous palace, visiting her bed



nightly, but adjuring her never to look upon him.<sup>14</sup> At first it is Venus who, angered by the tributes paid to Psyche's merely mortal beauty, represents the malignant power of archetype; when Psyche brings forth her concealed lamp and discovers the beauty of Eros, he punishes her by taking flight, leaving her so bereft that her first impulse is to fling herself into a river to die.<sup>15</sup> This crucial phase of the myth is the subject of "Psyche's Lament," one of Kate Chopin's early poems. The second stanza

O sombre sweetness; black enfolden charms,  
Come to me once again!  
Leave me not desolate; with empty arms  
That seeking, strive in vain  
To clasp a void where warmest Love hath lain.<sup>16</sup>

expresses a passionate longing for the lost Eros, with no suggestion that he might be recovered. Here, in contrast to the myth, the "cursed lights" have only destroyed a sensual paradise, not opened the way to conscious love. The ambivalence of this moment is central to Edna's tragedy. Arobin's is "the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (p. 139). The light of Psyche's lamp transforms Eros from the serpent she expected to the most ravishing of lovers; after intercourse with Arobin, Edna "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" (p. 140). Edna cannot "imagine herself in love" with Arobin, however, and therefore the light, figurative and literal, cannot survive Robert's farewell note. After receiving it "She did not sleep. She did not go to bed. The lamp sputtered and went out" (p. 185). The narrator's images of illumination from torch or lamp reveal Edna to be a type of Psyche thwarted. In the brief chapter which introduces the incantatory personification of the sea, the narrator has warned: "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her—the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (p. 25).

Myths

## Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* Author(s): Cynthia Griffin Wolff

Thus Edna's final act of destruction has a quality of uncompromising sensuous fulfillment as well. It is her answer to the inadequacies of life, a literal denial and reversal of the birth trauma she has just witnessed, a stripping away of adulthood, of limitation, of consciousness itself. If life cannot offer fulfillment of her dream of fusion, then the ecstasy of death is preferable to the relinquishing of that dream. So Edna goes to the sea "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" (p. 301). She is a child, an infant again. "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 had never known" (p. 301). And with her final act Edna completes the regression, back beyond childhood, back into time eternal. "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace"

## The Awakening and the Failure of Psyche

Author(s): Rosemary F. Franklin

Another episode which should warn Edna about her fantasies is her birthday party. Her sexuality has fully flowered with Alcee, and now, as she celebrates her coming of age at twenty-nine, she anticipates her move to the Pigeon House, a symbol to her of individuation and of her new freedom to choose. In terms of the Psyche and Eros myth, this moment may mark the awakening from the palace of darkness to a life of growth and suffering. But as Edna sits in pride among her guests, "the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone," the subconscious mood of despair descends on her: "she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed. There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable" (p. 972). Edna has garbed and girded herself, like Psyche, for a journey to the underworld, though she is not aware of the magnitude of the ordeal ahead of her: the "wails" from the dark cavern are hints only. The challenge of this labor is to face the reality that the "longing" she feels for the "unattainable" beloved is the source of her hopelessness and depression as well as the motivation of her life to this point. Chopin now wishes us to see that Edna has a crucial choice to make: either to accept the fantastic nature of romantic love and continue on her solitary journey to self, or to refuse to acknowledge romantic love's transient nature and embrace death.

The paradigm of Psyche reveals Edna's exploit as heroic, but it also shows where she fails to finish her task and is dragged down by fear of a long and lonely period of change. The final scene of the novel recalls Psyche's despair at trying to steal the golden wool from the rams, symbol of the dangerous masculine forces. Edna stands naked "at the mercy of the sun," exposing herself for the first time and the last time to the brunt of this power (before, she bathed at shadier times of day). She watches a bird with a broken wing fall down into the water. Psyche's element is earth and air; Aphrodite's is sea and sun. Edna is obviously overcome by numinous forces, and it is only ironic that she feels like "some new-born creature, opening its eyes" (p. i,000). She goes down to darkness, absorbed in a regressive illusion-that she is wading into the bluegrass meadow of her childhood.

# Naturalism

## Evolution, Narcissism, and Maladaptation in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* Author(s): JOHN GLENDENING

When she married him she erred, the narrator says, in thinking "there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them" (18). The novel implies that this is a commonplace sort of mistake when culture takes over the once solely instinctual business of sexual selection and new, sometimes antipathetic social expectations enmesh innate dispositions within the individual. Because the novel understands these dispositions to constitute an essential, original identity, for Edna the self is an entity to be discovered before it can be developed.

\*

She hungers for the blissful sufficiency of a fully unified and capable self-identity. To some degree she is like most of us in this search, but the intensity of her dissatisfaction and longing become extreme. She wants not only to recover a secure, original self but to transcend it. And yet, as she half recognizes, transcendent reality, associated with the lost mother and the vastness of the ocean, is never to be had except maybe in death. Throughout much of her life it is the powerful ideal of romantic love that shapes these intricacies of Edna's longing, an ideal that, because of its dependence on metaphysical concepts and ethereal emotions, can seem at odds with Darwin's theory of sexual selection and the materialistic-biological grounding of human existence.

\*

Chopin sometimes connects fate to the Darwin-influenced idea that Edna lacks survival instincts relative to her environment, cultural as well as natural. Edna feels that she is poorly adapted to a maternal and domestic role in life, a view that Chopin expresses by stating that Edna "was not a mother- woman" (9). (43).

\*

One can also say that Edna faces cultural necessity and biological constraints. She must validate her significance culturally, as she tries to do with her dinner party, but such attempts fail because of the biological limits on life and on the amount of sensual gratification it can afford someone intent on avoiding the omnipresence of death. Increasingly, Edna cannot avoid perceiving an existential or alienated universe, one to which she is "nothing, nothing, nothing"—her feeling as an adolescent loving a man for whom she scarcely existed (65).



naturalism

Edna requires a romantic universe where the individual merges with the whole, where life transcends death; what she believes in but strives to evade is a mechanistic Darwinian nature that requires much death for life to exist, where death continually and necessarily shadows life (65).

\*

And yet Edna imaginatively tries to escape failure with a final illusion: she constructs her death as a return to her origins, to her mother embodied in the embrace of the sea. This consummation is possible because death, in the form of suicide, is the final evasion, one that cannot be challenged. She enters the water naked, a reversion to the environment of the womb.

### **Kate Chopin on the Nature of Things** **By Kate Simons**

It is not, finally, society that infringes on her autonomy and individuality, but the very forces of nature and the very existence of her children. Edna rebels against "the biological imperative a woman feels to care for her children,"<sup>12</sup> an imperative that she has never felt until now. Edna does indeed dread "being reduced to her biological function," but this is not merely what the Creole culture does to women, as Priscilla Leder suggests.<sup>13</sup> Her "position in the universe" is that of a sexual being capable of procreation. Nature does not care whether or not "Fate" has "fitted her" to be a mother (Chopin, p. 20); she is one, and her awakened sexuality practically guarantees that she will become one again.

\*

The final irony is that Edna has come to be associated with the very force which has reduced her life to chaos. To Victor, she is a love-goddess. But Edna leaves behind the mating rituals which Victor and Mariequita are enacting on the shore and swims out into the ocean. She would rather be dissolved by nature than defined by it. She would rather die than live without a soul. Yet, even on the threshold of the void, Venus is there, in the "hum of bees" and the "odor of pinks."