

“Oh! To be able to paint in color rather than in words!”: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Impressionism

Julieann Veronica Ulin

In a late conversation in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier asks Robert Lebrun to tell her of his experience in Mexico and particularly of the women there: “I should like to know and hear about the people you met, and the impressions they made on you” (96). Edna’s question is motivated less by a desire to better understand the women in Mexico than to better understand Robert through his perception of them. Robert’s reply is significant for its emphasis on the subjective nature of impressions. “There are some people,” Robert tells her, “who leave impressions not so lasting as the imprint of an oar upon the water.” Robert’s use of water imagery here underscores the fluidity and the flux of impressions. When Alcée Arobin joins their conversation, he points out that impressions reveal the difference in perception. When he was in Mexico, he tells Edna and Robert, the girls “made more of an impression on me than I on them” (96). The discussion among the three participants in the novel’s erotic triangle foregrounds the multi-perspectival nature of subjectivity, an assumption at the core of the artistic movement known as impressionism.

In *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999), Emily Toth locates the inception of the novel that would become *The Awakening* in Kate Chopin’s conversations with the French artist Edgar Degas. Prior to his visit to New Orleans in 1872, Degas regularly attended the weekly soireés in Paris hosted by two artistic sisters, Berthe and Edma Morisot (Pfeiffer and Hollein 290). The Morisot sisters were trained by Geoffroy-Alphonse Chocarne, Joseph Guichard, and Camille Corot, and the sisters went on *en plein air* (open air) painting expeditions with Corot. While Berthe Morisot would become a well-known impressionist painter, an ambitious artist who would be among the first French women to make a career in art, Edma’s 1869

marriage to Adolphe Pontillon “occasioned the end of her artistic career.” Edma would later write to her sister that “[I] wish that I could escape, if only for a quarter of an hour, to breathe that air in which we lived for many long years.” In 1872, Degas spent five months in New Orleans, living in the city of his mother’s birth with his uncle on Esplanade Street at the edge of the French Quarter, and Toth speculates on his meeting with Chopin:

There are more than a few clues that Degas met Kate Chopin—also a solitary stroller—during that short time. Both his uncle and his brother, René De Gas, belonged to the Cotton Exchange with Oscar [Chopin], and his uncle’s office was next door to Oscar’s on Carondelet Street. But certain other factors make it apparent that Edgar Degas gossiped with Oscar’s wife with some depth and intensity. (Toth 73)

These “clues,” Toth claims, may be found in the names of *The Awakening*’s Léonce and Edna Pontellier:

In her New Orleans years, [Chopin] learned from Edgar Degas about his friend Berthe Morisot and her sister Edma, the painter who gave up her art when she married Adolphe Pontillon in 1869, a year before the Chopins arrived in New Orleans. Edma Morisot Pontillon regretted that sacrifice for the rest of her life. (215)

Toth links Degas’s circle to the character name of Léonce in *The Awakening* as well. On April 13, 1878 his brother René De Gas ran off with América Durrive Olivier, the wife of Léonce Olivier (Benfey 252-257). According to Toth, Chopin chose the name for the abandoned husband of *The Awakening* based on this New Orleans scandal, just as she adapted the name of the female artist silenced in marriage for Edna Pontellier. “For the mismated spouses in *The Awakening*, then, Kate Chopin combined the real-life names that she must have heard, first, from Edgar Degas: (Edma) Pontillon and (Léonce) Olivier . . . Enda and Léonce Pontellier” (Toth 75). The similarities between the names, Toth argues, “cannot possibly be coincidental” (74).

In addition to the influence of Degas, Toth suggests that Chopin's style was influenced by his fellow impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, whose controversial *Modern Woman* mural adorned the Hall of Honor in the Women's Building of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Toth singles out Chopin's short story, "A Lady of Bayou St. John," and Madame Ratignolle in *The Awakening* as influenced by Chopin seeing Cassatt's work at the World's Fair:

By 1893, for the Chicago fair, the Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt had produced 'Modern Woman,' a gorgeous mural with madonnalike female figures—much like the form of Madame Ratignolle in *The Awakening* . . . When she came back from the fair, Kate Chopin wrote a story using the shimmering colors and sunny pastels of the Impressionists. (Toth 138)

In her analysis of Cassatt's use of an impressionist garden scene as the setting for her mural, Griselda Pollock writes that the mural altered the representation of women through presenting an alternative perspective that challenged the representation in Genesis:

To superimpose, therefore, a joyful and celebratory plucking of the Fruits of Knowledge and Science on the modernist landscape of suburban pleasure, country holidays, and recreation associated with Impressionist new painting is at once to find a way to signify the 'new' women's guilt-free claims to education and intellectuality as well as to propose modernity's supersession of the age-old definitions of Women created in the Biblical condemnation of Eve. (Pollock 43)

Despite these connections between the impressionists and the author of *The Awakening*, there have been few attempts to consider the result of these intersections between Chopin and the impressionists beyond matters of biographical interest. Despite its title, Christopher Benfey's *Degas in New Orleans: Encounters in the Creole World of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable* keeps the three title figures with "interwoven lives" largely separated in his study (Benfey 5). His discussion of *The Awakening* focuses primarily

on illuminating the textual presence of the Civil War. Whether the nominal correspondences between the names of Chopin's artist-woman constrained by her marriage and of her abandoned husband come from Chopin's encounter with Degas (if such an encounter ever occurred) or if the portrait of Madame Ratignolle is indebted to Cassatt, there can be little doubt that the revolutionary impressionist aesthetic with which Morisot, Cassatt, and Degas are associated pervades Chopin's 1899 novel.

The world of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is one of fading light, softening focus, and melting instability; when Edna Pontellier awakens, it is to an impressionist landscape with all of its attendant possibilities and perils. *The Awakening* presents settings in which there are no clear demarcations, a fact that Edna will gradually perceive to offer possibilities for change. In choosing impressionism as the artistic palette for her novel, Chopin foregrounds perception to depict a self and the concept of identity in flux. While the descriptive language of the novel locates us in the impressionist aesthetic from the opening, Edna's own artistic endeavors begin in her unsatisfactory participation in the realist tradition before surrendering mimetic art in favor of a more revolutionary style. Ultimately, the impressionist realm of consistent change and unfixed contours proves too overwhelming for Edna, offering not only aesthetic possibility, but personal inconstancy. With the return to a world of strict lines finally impossible, she sees no choice other than to submerge herself within sensory perception in the novel's final scene. Though Edna Pontellier's aesthetic journey toward impressionism—not unlike her possible namesake's—is incomplete when compared to the journeys of Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot, or Mary Cassat, Chopin's use of impressionist techniques throughout the novel fulfills the artistic promise that her protagonist leaves unfinished.

In her study of literary impressionism, Maria Elisabeth Kronegger writes that "Life exists for the impressionists only where there are colors, sounds, the outdoors, and the sun" (Kronegger 39). At the heart of impressionism is the "erosion of contours, the fragmentation of form and matter" (26). From the opening of her

novel, Chopin immerses the reader in an impressionist landscape of bathers carrying “sunshades,” gardens, and mother and child figures (4, 5). Edna first appears as a blur through the cigar smoke and sun glare of a Grand Isle summer. Her husband watches her “white sunshade . . . advancing at a snail’s pace from the beach” (4). From the start, Chopin’s depictions of mental and physical spaces are awash in the language of impressionism, in descriptions that highlight the irresolute blending of forms and colors: “the gulf looked far away, *melting hazily* into the blue of the horizon” (emphasis mine, Chopin 4). Chopin describes the path to the beach on Grand Isle as an intrusion of growth and intoxicating scents:

The walk to the beach was no inconsiderable one, consisting as it did of a long, sandy path upon which a sporadic and tangled growth that bordered it on either side made frequent and unexpected inroads. There were acres of yellow chamomile reaching out on either hand. Further away still, vegetable gardens abounded, with frequent small plantations of orange or lemon trees intervening. The dark green clusters glistened from afar in the sun. (15)

As Edna walks toward her first solitary swim after hearing the music of Mademoiselle Reisz, she is greeted by “a *tangle* of the sea smell and of weeds and damp, new-plowed earth, *mingled* with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms” (emphasis mine, 27). Chopin continually erases the lines of demarcation between sea and sky. “The night sat lightly upon the sea and the land” as Edna first swims alone in a sea of “broad billows that *melted* into one another and did not break” (emphasis mine, 27). Chopin designates this territory as *terra incognita*, a new and possibly dangerous world: “But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning!” (14). Edna’s increasing willingness to submit herself to her impressions signals the start of a revolutionary awakening that Chopin emphasizes through the aesthetic revolution of impressionism.

In her repeated use of the word “impression,” Chopin foregrounds subjective sensory perception over a fixed and solid

presentation of reality. Kronegger writes that “impressionist artists started from perception. They rejected the traditional emphasis upon order, thought, and clearness. Through sensory experience, the impressionist opens a new relationship with the everyday world. Its stimulus affects the senses; the senses affect the mind” (Kronegger 35). Chopin uses the same language of melting and fading to depict shifts in Edna’s mental landscape, emphasizing how the same aesthetic techniques apply to memory and perception. Chopin repeatedly shows Edna’s vulnerability to impressions in a manner that foregrounds her perception. The verbal absence of prudery among the Creoles is “a characteristic which distinguished them and which *impressed* Mrs. Ponteller most forcibly” (emphasis mine, 10). Edna’s troubled dreams leave “only an *impression* upon her half-awakened senses” (emphasis mine, 31-32), but the more she awakens, the more she becomes subject to impressions. In her first solitary swim, Edna chooses to alter her gaze, in order to achieve an alternative perspective:

She turned her face seaward to gather in an *impression* of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, *meeting and melting* with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. (emphasis mine, 28)

The passage not only creates an impressionist landscape, in which clear limits and solid boundaries give way to a “meeting and melting” fluidity, but indicates that Edna is “reaching out” to lose herself in “an impression.” After leaving the sanctuary of domestic bliss at the Ratignolles, Edna feels not envy but:

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 the soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium. Edna vaguely wondered what she meant by ‘life’s delirium.’ It had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous impression. (54)

This new Edna, subject to each “unsought, extraneous impression,” is a departure from her past self. Edna has always been “self-contained” (17). The lines of her body “were long, clean and symmetrical” (15). In her growing rejection of the mimetic art for a revolutionary aesthetic that encompasses change and movement, Edna transcends not only the hard lines of her body, but the Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin’s expectation that she produce decorative art that copies. Her growing voice and power intoxicate her and change her composition. As she talks with Madame Ratignolle on the beach, the sound of her own voice “muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (19). She begins to feel the very opposite of self-contained: “her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day” (56). But it is in the novel’s final use of the word “impression” that Chopin underscores Edna as uniquely subject to the influence of impressions. In the penultimate chapter, Doctor Mandelet criticizes Adèle for allowing Edna to witness the childbirth: “There were a dozen women she might have had with her, unimpressionable women” (38). The Edna who returns to Grand Isle to swim into “the unlimited” has been medically diagnosed as impressionable (28).

While the descriptive relationship between Edna and impressionism would seem to indicate her potential as an artist, Chopin regularly uses the techniques of impressionism to suggest the instability of Edna’s fortitude. As a child, Edna was enamored of a cavalry officer until he “melted imperceptibly out of her existence” (18). As for Robert, Edna’s love for him ebbs and flows in a manner that Chopin describes in the language of impressionism:

It was not that she dwelt upon the details of their acquaintance, or recalled in any special or peculiar way his personality; it was his being, his existence, which dominated her thought, *fading sometimes as if it would melt into the mist* of the forgotten, reviving again with an intensity which filled her with an incomprehensible longing. (emphasis mine, 52)

She grows “melting and affectionate” toward her husband though she loves Robert (69). Edna’s resolve to behave indifferently to Robert “melted when she saw him” (100). This technique, in which Edna’s mental landscape is rendered in the identical terms used to depict the surrounding land and seascape, unites the aesthetic of impressionism with Edna’s development as an individual and as an artist, while simultaneously warning of the threat posed to her aesthetic potential by her irresolute character.

Edna’s growing immersion—one might say submersion—into the realm of impressionism follows her experience listening to the music of Mademoiselle Reisz and is aligned with the loss of “material pictures” (26). Of this moment, Chopin writes “perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered *to take an impress* of the abiding truth. She waited for the *material pictures* which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain” (emphasis mine, 26). What follows this “impress” of truth is no easily categorized painting of a still-life, a demure woman with a cat, or the mythic Daedalus and Icarus, but instead a solitary immersion within a sensory and emotional experience: “the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body.” Chopin’s language here unites Edna’s new state (her awakening to impressions) with the loss of the conventional “material pictures.”

Edna Pontellier’s rejection of the rigid constraints of social custom in favor of “becoming an artist” parallels the impressionists’ subversion of the established schools of painting, and Edna’s art in the novel shifts closer toward impressionism with each painting. Edna is attracted to images and mental pictures, in which the lines are blurred, movement is captured, and space is not fully resolved. Remembering a walk in a meadow in Kentucky when she was a girl, Edna recalls the “meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now!” (17). On the one hand, Edna here “sees

the connection” between the seascape she is looking at and the Kentucky memory, which she experiences. But on the other hand, we might interpret this recognition of a connection as the reason that impressionism, rather than mimetic or realist art, attracts Edna: it allows for recognition of the connection between disputed spaces. Edna’s “self-contained” character begins to break down in a growing recognition of “her relations as an individual to the world within and around her” (17, 14).

As she develops an increasing individuality as an artist, Edna faces a number of the same critiques that the “savage, irreverent, undisciplined and heretical” impressionists did (Pfeiffer 145). In her study of the reception of women impressionist painters, Ingrid Pfeiffer notes that “impressionist art was accused of being *capricious*, nervous, irresolute, superficial, imitative, unfinished, naïve, weak, ephemeral, and of no lasting value—all attributes that were generally reserved for women” (emphasis mine, Pfeiffer and Hollein 15). In his 1880 criticism of the impressionist Berthe Morisot, whose sister Edma (Toth argues) is the inspiration for Edna, Paul de Charry asked: “Why, given her undeniable talent, does she not take the trouble to finish her pictures? . . . *Morisot is a woman and therefore capricious*. Unfortunately, she is like Eve, who bites the apple and then gives up on it too soon. Too bad, since she bites so well” (emphasis mine, Pfeiffer and Hollein 16). When she abandons the others on the beach following her first solitary successful swim, Edna elects to command her own path. This leads to an exchange that resonates with the language used above:

She started to walk away alone. They called to her and shouted to her. She waved a dissenting hand, and went on, paying no further heed to their renewed cries which sought to detain her. “Sometimes I am tempted to think that Mrs. Pontellier is capricious” said Madame Lebrun. . . . “I know she is,” assented Mr. Pontellier; “sometimes, not often.” (Chopin 28)

As Edna begins to take her art more seriously, she progresses from a mimetic and domestic style, so often associated with females in art history, to a more imaginative form of creation. The first artistic

endeavor that we witness Edna undertaking is Adèle's portrait on Grand Isle. In her opposing descriptions of Edna and Adèle, Chopin signals the division between the traditional portrait and the impressionist portrait. Adèle cannot be described except by "the old [words] that have served so often" (9). She has "nothing hidden or subtle about her charms," and her features are easily described and categorized: for example, her "spun-gold hair," her "blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires," and her two lips "so red one could only think of cherries" (9). Even when she claims to feel faint, the "rose tint" does not fade from her cheeks (13). Adèle Ratognolle not only functions as the epitome of the "mother-woman," but she can be described in a portrait style that limits and controls interpretation and preserves conventions. Fittingly, we meet Adèle as she is sewing an "impervious" Eskimo-like garment designed to protect her children from the intrusion of the outside world into the sacred space of the home: "They were designed for winter wear, when treacherous drafts came down chimneys and insidious currents of deadly cold found their way through key-holes" (10). Edna, by contrast, will actively invite the outside world into the private space of the house. She herself is a blend, an "American, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution" (6). She has eyes and hair of a "yellowish-brown," a merger of two colors that aligns her with the melting colors of impressionism (5).

Prior to beginning Adèle's portrait, the narrator tells us that Edna "dabbled with [art] in an unprofessional way" (12). Edna is drawn to paint Adèle less because of her appeal as a subject than because of the specific way that she is transformed through light: "Never had that lady seemed a more tempting subject than at that moment, seated there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color" (12). At the moment when Edna desires to paint her, Adèle is in a transitional phase; both sensuous woman and Madonna figure, her easily identifiable features now enriched by "the fading day." As Kronegger notes, light is "the soul of impressionist paintings" (Kronegger 42). In *The Awakening*, there are over forty references to light sources and Chopin depicts the effect of changing light not only on seascape and landscape, but

on mood and personality. Edna is “tempted” to paint Adèle because of how Adèle’s conventional figure is transformed by light. Edna’s effort, in so far as she wishes to create a likeness to Adèle, is a failure, and Adèle, who continually identifies with traditional representative art, shows her disappointment:

The picture completed bore no resemblance to Madame Ratignolle. She was greatly disappointed to find that it did not look like her. But it was a fair enough piece of work, and in many respects satisfying. Mrs. Pontellier evidently did not think so. After surveying the sketch critically she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface and crumbled the paper between her hands (13).

However, the narrator flags Edna’s technique in a manner that suggests why her painting is a disappointment as a copy. As a painter, Edna “handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came . . . from a natural aptitude” (12). This characterization of how Edna holds her tools suggests a more fluid style and may serve to explain the distinction between the narrator and Adèle’s assessment of the work. In terms of achieving “invisible execution and the dominance of line over color,” Edna’s art seems to have failed (House 146). The ease with which Edna holds her brushes, however, suggests that her aptitude lies in more subversive art forms: “the visible colored *touche* was a marker of the rejection of academic shackles and demonstrated the painter’s concern to translate personal visual experiences into paint” (House 146). Edna’s strength does not lie in producing mimetic art in its historically “female” forms. Nonetheless, the narrator emphasizes her talent. As Edna begins to think of her art as “work,” she moves from realistic to more imaginative art, thus abandoning the constraints of the traditional form.

After her return to New Orleans, Edna looks upon her art with an entirely new degree of professionalism and gradually forsakes copying for more imaginative subjects. Chopin tells the reader that “Edna spent an hour or two in looking over some of her old sketches. She could see their shortcomings and defects” (Chopin 52). Nonetheless, she takes them to Adèle’s house and announces, “I believe I ought to work again. I feel as if I wanted to be doing

something” (53). Edna once again wishes to paint Adèle, this time because of her “rich, melting curves,” yet Edna’s first paintings include a Bavarian peasant, likely copied from another painting, and a basket of apples (53). Adèle exclaims over the apples in a manner that suggests the temptation posed by such a realistic style: “Never have I seen anything more lifelike! One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one.” If still life tempts Edna, she successfully avoids giving in, instead donating the mimetic art to the Ratignolles.

In aligning Edna with the impressionist school, Chopin casts her as a rebel against tradition, a role that seems all the more promising as Edna’s art improves. Soon after she announces to Mademoiselle Reisz that “I am becoming an artist,” she becomes more attuned to the instability of light and form, characteristics of the impressionist movement as well as a clear revolt from her realistic art (61). Significantly, Edna’s artistic mentor Mademoiselle Reisz is also associated with a breakdown of clear lines and the blending of musical forms: “She sat low at her instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity. Gradually and imperceptibly, the interlude *melted* into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin impromptu.” Even Robert is described in a manner that suggests his affront to clean, classical lines. Edna’s reasons for being in love with Robert include his inability to fit the classical ideal; his hair grows out from his temples, his nose is “out of drawing,” and he has a “little finger which he can’t straighten” (78). Edna is impressed with figures that shift, melt and bleed, and it is these forms and this music that inspires her.

As Edna becomes more independent, walking alone and neglecting her Tuesday callers, her art acquires more power, and she gradually abandons mimetic representations. Initially, Edna remains focused on portraits, painting her sons, the quadroon, and the housemaid. The quadroon sits for hours, indicating that Edna wishes to copy her likeness exactly, and Edna paints the housemaid because she “perceived that the young woman’s back and shoulders were modeled on classic lines, and that her hair, loosened from its

confining cap, became an inspiration” (55). Edna’s work still recalls the classical and the traditional, but there is also a stronger element of sensuality in her depiction of the housemaid, and the tension appears in this portrait. When she paints her father, however, her artistic tools are equated with weaponry: “Before her pencil [her father] sat rigid and unflinching, as he had faced the canon’s mouth in days gone by” (65). This description indicates a shift in control. If Edna appears to be transitioning from mimetic art to an art form that creates a space for the subjective, her abandonment of photographs, on which to base her paintings, suggests that she wants to inhabit the realm of the imaginative and the subjective. When Robert questions a picture of Alcée Arobin in Edna’s new home, and she remarks, “I tried to make a sketch of his head one day . . . I have a great many such photographs . . . They don’t amount to anything,” we may well believe that she has abandoned such mimetic art altogether (94).

Edna’s final painting is never finished, and its promise and its incompleteness align it with the impressionist aesthetic. Edna “had worked at her canvas—a young Italian character study—all the morning, completing the work *without the model*; but there had been many interruptions” (emphasis mine, 91). This appears to be Edna’s most advanced piece, the first time she works primarily from imagination. Robert’s return to New Orleans, and the events that follow, interrupt the painting. One of the chief criticisms leveled at impressionist painting was that the finished work looked incomplete. The impressionist vision is one “in which everything stable and coherent is dissolved and assumes the character of the unfinished, the fragmentary” (Kronegger 39). Contrasting impressionism with what preceded it, Ortega y Gasset writes:

Nonimpressionistic painting, superior though it may be in other respects, suffers from one shortcoming: that it represents its objects altogether finished, mummified and, as it were past. That actuality, that existence in the present tense, which things possess in impressionistic pictures is irremediably missing. (Kronegger 52)

Fitting, then, that Edna’s painting remains unfinished, and therefore present.