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MARY BIGGS

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“*Si tu savais*”: The Gay/ Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

MARY BIGGS

The College of New Jersey

Robert Lebrun, a young and handsome but girlfriendless courtier of (usually) married women, who spends every summer vacation with his mother, and Mademoiselle Reisz, a celibate, misanthropic pianist, who refers to *The Awakening*'s attractive Edna Pontellier as “beautiful woman” and “my queen,” especially admiring her appearance in a bathing suit, cry out almost audibly for the critic's interrogation of their sexuality. Encountering Robert and Reisz as real people in daily life, many of us would have little question about their sexuality. It is not a wholly original point,¹ but has not usually been so baldly asserted, has not been supported with as much detailed evidence as Chopin actually provides, and has not been placed within the context of a fuller gendered analysis.

Yet holding these two characters up to the sexual orientation spotlight only begins to illuminate Chopin's radical, gendered social critique. I will examine her complex variations on traditional assumptions about gender and especially about sexuality, focusing on Edna, Robert, and Reisz, and mentioning also some minor characters usually overlooked by critics: Madame Lebrun, Tonie, and the Farival twins.

Address correspondence to Mary Biggs, The College of New Jersey, P.O. Box 7718, Ewing, NJ 08628, USA. E-mail: mbiggs@tcnj.edu

“THE BOOK IS ABOUT SEX”

“Quite frankly, the book is about sex,” famously wrote Kenneth Eble, “rediscoverer” of *The Awakening*, in 1956. “Not only is it about sex, but the very texture of the writing is sensuous, if not sensual, from the first to the last” (189). “[It] is insistently sexual,” Elaine Showalter agreed decades later, “explicitly involved with the body and with self-awareness through physical awareness” (43).² *The Awakening* begins with a yammering green and yellow parrot (1)³; ends with Edna “delicious[ly]” naked in the “soft, close embrace” of the “sensuous” sea, recalling “the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks” (39); and is suffused with colors, odors, sounds, and smells; with heat and coolness; light and dark; eating, drinking, and smoking; dizziness, drowsiness, and wakefulness; human caresses; and, overwhelmingly, the rhythm and “touch” of the sea. Most accurately, it is about sense response, about the necessary integration of personality with fleshly person—though this interpretation can be overextended to ignore the commonality of *spirit* that Edna seeks and, with Robert, believes she has found; to underestimate the subtlety of her insights; and to slight her needs for privacy, self-determination, chosen work, and disciplined self-expression.⁴ The book is no more *about* sex than Edna’s long final swim to exhaustion is *about* Robert’s abandonment or her family’s demands. Sex, however, is a bright, inseparable strand in the complex weave of Edna’s awakening and in the book’s larger perspective, its sweeping scrutiny of her society. That perspective includes awareness of autoeroticism, homoeroticism, and homosexual sex.

Before examining the novel more closely, however, it is important to consider Chopin’s style of writing, strategy of revelation, and likely scope and means of sexual knowledge.

HOW CHOPIN WROTE

Kate Chopin wrote only a few poems, none of them distinguished by fresh images or ideas, although one—“The Haunted Chamber,”

written shortly after *The Awakening*—is remarkable for telling the story of a “fair, frail, passionate” fallen woman in the ironic voice of a clubman musing with a friend over cigars and a bottle. Yet several of her fictions, and especially *The Awakening*, resemble poems in their economy, their imagery, their mastery of metaphor and symbolism, and their careful unity of language and form. In keeping with her society’s view of a woman writer’s proper priorities, she fostered a public image of herself as a spontaneous storyteller who often valued housework above creative work, sent manuscripts out unrevised, and “[had] not the writing habit.”⁵ A 1992 discovery of a cache of early drafts belied this image,⁶ but, at least after 1899, it was never credible, anyway.

Every line of *The Awakening* is intentional; every image, every action, every conversation, every description, every figure of speech, refers forward and usually backward in the text, following and reinforcing the cyclical rhythms of the novel’s core themes: sleeping and waking, growing up and reliving youth, creating and re-creating life and self, and the timeless, unceasing, undulating ocean and all that it represents. The care with which this novel is shaped is most evident when the “voice of the sea” paragraph in chapter 6 repeats verbatim in chapter 39, just before Edna dons, then sheds, her bathing suit and swims to her death. But this is only the most conspicuous example of how nothing is extraneous or accidental, and nothing of importance occurs only once. Everything is repeated, but in a different context or in a different way and with a new or intensified meaning—like the alternately repeating lines of a villanelle or the echoing end-words in a sestina. *The Awakening* is also poetic in its elisions and deliberate ambiguities. What is not stated but only implied is more important, overall, than what is told directly. The lack of “closure” that often frustrates naïve readers intentionally leaves them space for imagining, for invention and interpretation, and for an enriched understanding of life beyond the novel through the questions that the novel forces.⁷

Also, of course, Chopin was an artist of indirection and pregnant omission partly because her subject matter was often so daring and her times so conservative. One gets a sense of what she *might* have written if she *could* when reading the metaphorically entitled short fiction, “The Storm,” a rare work which she didn’t even try to publish. Undoubtedly, she knew that its graphic depiction of an ecstatic, guiltless, adulterous one-evening stand (“her lips seemed in a manner free to be tasted, as well as her round, white throat and her whiter breasts” [594]) would never be accepted. To say that *The Awakening* is not about sex exclusively, or even primarily, is not to say that sex is unimportant. The full range of the senses, the full gender-transcending range of personal possibility, and the full range of means of sexual expression were understood by Chopin and are intermingled in her fiction.

This brings me to the question of what a Victorian, convent-educated St. Louisan, resident of New Orleans, 1870–79, and of Cloutierville, Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, for another five years, could have known and would have believed about homosexuality. Having considered this, I will return to where I started, with Robert Lebrun.

WHAT CHOPIN KNEW

First of all, Chopin would certainly have known that homosexuality existed, contemporarily and among “normal,” or at least visible, people. The 1890s had seen two widely publicized homosexual trials.⁸ The St. Louis literary “salon,” which she established in the early 1890s after becoming a published storywriter, must have attracted some gay attendees; in fact, her most recent biographer, Emily Toth, sees a resemblance between Robert Lebrun and Charles L. Deyo, a self-centered, purposeless, young “confirmed bachelor” who frequented the salon and lived largely through books (184).⁹ These literati, who “rave[d] about the latest books,”¹⁰ would surely have discussed the intriguing new theories

of “inversion.” Also, although Kate and her husband settled in the “American” section of New Orleans, her father-in-law lived in the French Quarter, and *The Awakening* demonstrates detailed knowledge of its architecture, streets, and ways of life. The Quarter was so alive with crime and “vice”—prostitution, narcotics, heavy drinking, gambling, brutal prizefighting, cockfighting, thievery, and murder (not to mention a tradition of mixed-race women not-so-secretly “kept” by Creole family men)—that within two decades of Chopin’s moving away, the mayor gave up on eradicating it and instead tried containing at least some of it within a small zone where prostitution was effectively legal: the colorful and quickly notorious Storyville. Every sort of “sin” was known, and every flavor of sex was sold and indulged, in the nineteenth-century French Quarter.

Chopin also encountered gay characters in the literature that she read. She “marvelled” at the French storywriter Guy de Maupassant, “who,” she noted approvingly, “had escaped from tradition and authority”¹¹ and whom Per Seyersted, her first biographer and one of her soundest critics, judged to be “probably [her] strongest literary influence” (129). She must, then, have known his story in which an inexperienced young man named Paul drowns himself after discovering his mistress *in flagrante* lesbian *delicto*,¹² and she must also have been familiar with the lesbian prostitute characters created by other French authors whom she read and admired: Émile Zola (*Nana*) and Alphonse Daudet (*Sappho*), who will reappear in my discussion of Robert.

Chopin’s favorite of her fellow American writers was Walt Whitman¹³ and like Maupassant, known for shocking sexual candor. Lewis Leafy detects relationships between the rhythms and ambience surrounding the sea in *The Awakening* and those in Whitman’s poems, especially “Song of Myself” and “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” while Bert Bender has constructed a captivating argument for the influence of section 11 of “Song of Myself” on Chopin’s obviously significant repetition of the number twenty-eight (121–22).¹⁴ Whatever her literary uses of Whitman’s

poetry, we can certainly assume that she read *Leaves of Grass*. Attuned as she was to fleshly desire, she must have noticed the homoeroticism of “Calamus,” and fond as she was and remained of Whitman, she must not have disapproved.

But what would she have called him? Her intriguing association of the words “gay” and “queer” with Robert, of “queer” with Reisz and Robert’s mother, and of neither word in any other context,¹⁵ raises this question, but the answer is unclear. Because the first term probably originated as a sort of subterranean subterfuge and the second as slang opprobrium, pinpointing the birthdate of either is impossible. The French *gaie* as a synonym for what would come to be called *homosexual* may have originated as long ago as the sixteenth century or even earlier,¹⁶ but if so, it migrated in that guise to the English-speaking world very slowly indeed. In any case, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) documents a 1637 association of *gay* with dissipation and immorality, which evolved into a euphemism for sexually promiscuous and, by the 1800s, was used to refer to female prostitution. Over approximately the same period, *queer* came to mean not only peculiar, but abnormal, to be avoided, of dubious character. The *OED*’s second edition traces the first published use of *gay* as *homosexual* to a 1935 dictionary of underworld and prison slang, and the first such use of *queer* to a 1938 issue of *The American Mercury*.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, though, both terms were oral slang long before the *OED* caught up with them, and even if they weren’t, given their undisputedly common nineteenth-century connotations, their use by Chopin would still be significant, especially in light of what else she tells or implies about Robert and Reisz.

Having acknowledged and named gay men and lesbians, how would Chopin have conceived them? How would she have imagined their behavior and appearance, assuming she was at least partially influenced by the perceptions current in her society? Over the past quarter-century, several excellent historians of sexuality have provided expansive treatments of these questions and need not be paraphrased here.¹⁸ Gay men had formed

subcultural contacts and societies throughout history, a virtual impossibility for women—except, perhaps, for Sappho’s pupils (!) and for some prostitutes—until the founding of female colleges in the nineteenth century and the escape of many women from economic dependency and near-compulsory marriage in the twentieth. The Victorian notion of female asexuality was oppressive in the sense that it misrepresented women’s nature and could punish mercilessly the inevitable deviations, but it contradictorily offered some women a measure of freedom. Same-sex “smashes” (we would call them “crushes”), passionately “romantic friendships,” and committed “Boston marriages,” all of which would be demonized as lesbian in the twentieth century, were perceived as innocent and were not only tolerated but encouraged in the nineteenth. Some of these relationships were surely genitally sexual, some surely were not, and in most cases, no one alive knows. It is likely that sex without a penis would not even have been recognized as sex by many of these women. But physical affection and emotional intensity expressed in florid language characterized them in any case, enjoining caution on a twenty-first-century interpreter of the women’s letters, journals, and, of course, literary depictions.

By the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, psycho/physio/sociologists, to be called “sexologists,” were formulating theories that would label, scientize, and polarize sensuality and sexuality as never before. One dominant theory held sexual orientation to be “congenital” and inseparably associated with gendered appearance and behavior, so that the “masculine” woman and “effeminate” man were assumed to be homosexually inclined. Reinforcing this association was women’s ever more strident insistence upon expanded rights. Their behavior was considered gender-inappropriate, and homophobia stoked anti-feminism, anti-feminism homophobia—as would happen again in the 1960s and ‘70s, when feminists were routinely vilified as lesbians (or, in code, as “man-haters”).

It is likely, then, that Chopin was familiar with: the tradition of physically demonstrative but genitally innocent romantic friendship

between women, especially as she may have enjoyed such a friendship herself¹⁹; the existence of homosexual behavior as public sensation, as a component of artists' lives and subject matter, and even as a choice or interest of her acquaintances; "congenital" theory and the hypothesized correlation between homosexuality and gender, especially as the sexologists' work was more widely known throughout western Europe than in America, and she read French publications²⁰; the association of lesbianism with female independence and the women's rights movement—a movement which she disavowed politically, but whose goals she surely understood on a deeper level; and slang usage of the terms "gay" and "queer" to signify sexual immorality, on the one hand, and abnormality on the other, if not homosexuality *per se*.

ROBERT LEBRUN

Lucy Monroe, a rare contemporary reviewer favorable to *The Awakening*, pronounced "the men in the book [...] capital, with the exception perhaps of Robert, who is a bit wooden." She was not alone in her judgment. Readers have had trouble warming up to Robert, and critics have given much less attention to him than to Edna's female intimates. Chopin seems never to get him in focus, and this is because it is impossible. Unresolved as a person, he is defined by characteristics and surrounded by images that mystify rather than clarify. A hazy personality cannot be brought into focus, or, more accurately, when in sharp focus he remains hazy. This demonstrates skill, not failure, in the author's depiction of character.

First of all, Robert is so fluently trilingual that he earns his living thereby. He seems to be the only character who can communicate readily with everyone on Grand Isle, site of his mother's resort: in English to Edna and in Spanish to the sulky, lascivious Mariequita. Most intriguing is his Sunday with Edna on Chênrière Caminada. After rescuing Edna from a near-faint caused by the

"stifling atmosphere" of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, he takes her to the home of Madame Antoine, mother of a youth named Tonie, to rest. After first disrobing partially, bathing her face and arms, inhaling the "sweet country odor" of the bed, and then admiring and stroking her own flesh, Edna falls into a long nap. Meanwhile, Robert has a private encounter with Tonie, who shyly avoids all women except his mother. Edna overhears the two men speaking together normally at first and then, much later, after she awakes, in "hushed" tones; she cannot understand their French. When she leaves the bedroom, Tonie is gone (13). Robert takes Edna home and, without explanation, departs that evening earlier than usual (14). A few days later, he shocks her by announcing to the vacationers that he will be leaving immediately for Vera Cruz (15). Like Edna, the reader cannot know what Robert says to Mariequita or Tonie. Is he a different person in each relationship, as symbolized by language, or is he consistently the person seen by Edna? But who, exactly, is that?

As well as speaking three languages, Robert is a man of two or three generations. At twenty-six, he's fully grown and self supporting, but he stays with his mother summer after summer even though her preferred child is his younger brother Victor, and even though most bachelors would seek a summertime adventure or romance. Still somewhat of a mother's boy, he also still enjoys playing with children. While Tonie avoids women who are not his mother, Robert is drawn to them, but none of his infatuations seems to have blossomed into a frank affair or continued through the seasons, and "as often as not" his object has been married (5). When Adele Ratignolle, one of the wives to whom he has paid court in the past, warns him that Edna "might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously," he is childishly defensive: "Am I a comedian, a clown, a jack-in-the-box? [...] Am I always to be regarded as a feature of an amusing programme?" Implicitly, she answers yes and admonishes him for "speak[ing] with about as little reflection as we might expect from one of [the] children." He grumbles petulantly that it isn't

“flattering” or “pleasant to have a woman tell you . . .” What? We don’t know, because he breaks the thought and moves on to contrast himself with Alcée Arobin, a cynical seducer of married women, and to tell tales first about Arobin “and the consul’s wife,” then “about the tenor of the French Opera, who received letters [from a person of undisclosed sex] which never should have been written, and still other stories, grave and gay” (8). My implication is obvious; if it seems unlikely that Robert would recount same-sex scandal to the chaste, maternal Adele, we must remember her ripe sensuality and sexual worldliness, confirmed by her choice of Daudet, a chronicler in fiction of French low life, for Robert to read to her (5). He ends by apologizing for his rude response to her advice, by assuring her that Edna will never take him seriously, and by going to another building to prepare bouillon for Adele, then serving it in a “dainty Sèvres cup, with a flaky cracker or two on the saucer.” She calls him a “good boy” and sends him on his way.

With characteristic economy, Chopin has taken only two pages to establish Robert’s eleven-year reputation for sexual harmlessness; his defensiveness about that reputation; his conflicting desires to be taken seriously as a threat to married women’s virtue and to distinguish himself from a man who really *is*; that he’s a gossip who tells tales that are scandalously sexual and possibly homosexual; that he assumes Edna, like his previous summers’ favorites, takes his flirting lightly; that, as seen by Adele and also shown through his dialogue, he is childlike, even childish; and that he is expert at the “feminine” task of fixing refreshment for a woman friend and presenting it daintily.

Leaving Adele’s cottage, Robert briefly encounters “the lovers.” This couple forms a recurring and somewhat mysterious motif. They appear seven times, a number which is, of course, significant biblically and in myth and magic. One of these appearances is in “the children’s tent” (7), from which they are displaced when Robert arrives with a group of actual children; once they literally seem to be moving on air, without foundation (8); and once they are “creeping” (a verb usually used, including

biblically, to describe animals) while being followed by a nameless "lady in black" who is "gaining steadily upon them." This lady, possibly a mourning widow, soon begins to say her rosary (12). The lovers are not named or differentiated in any way: not by personality, not by appearance, *not by sex*. Nor do we ever hear them speak; even at the dinner table, they converse only with each other and only in whispers which are inaudible, and on topics which are probably of no interest, to their fellow diners (15). One person other than the lady in black is associated with the lovers; one person manages to separate them physically; one person may possibly speak to them (though this is uncertain). That person is Robert.

Taking the vacationers on a moonlit swim, an activity depicted in *The Awakening* as empowering, erotic, and risky, he falls behind with the lovers, who have "betrayed" throughout the summer "a disposition to linger and hold themselves apart. He walked between them, but whether with malicious or mischievous intent was not wholly clear, even to himself" (10). Later, the naïvely uninhibited Mariequita will ask him whether they are married. "Of course not!" he will laugh. "Of course not," she'll agree (12).

Most obviously, the couple plus the lady in black symbolize the heedless bliss, self-involvement, and fated destruction of romantic love, and they may foreshadow Edna's end. Yet they are not associated with Edna and Robert as a couple. They are introduced in a scene I will discuss later, where Edna reclines on the beach with Adele, and otherwise are linked only to Robert. Why is this? And why does he feel compelled briefly to abandon his "own" group and either come between the lovers, figuratively as well as literally or, somehow, merge with what they represent? We don't know his precise motive because we are not told, and we are not told because *he* doesn't know. Furthermore, what is laughable about the notion of their being married? Robert may seem to be mocking marriage as if romance can never be found there, but he doesn't take this attitude at any other time, and

indeed, in their intense mutual absorption, the two *seem* like newly-weds. The only other interpretive possibility is that the lovers obviously *cannot* marry. But if they were too young to marry, they wouldn't be vacationing alone. If one had African blood ("miscegenation" was illegal in nineteenth-century New Orleans), this would surely be noted, given the racial and ethnic consciousness of the rest of the novel.

Is it possible that they are gay? This could explain why they isolate themselves so completely; why they can vacation together freely though unmarried; why we never see them actually kissing or embracing, but only lost in words and sighs and gazes, at most "leaning toward" or "on" each other (8, 12); why no character except Robert and Mariequita discusses them as lovers (and even they do not use that word; only the novel's narrator does); and why we're told so little about them. Even about the lady in black, who is also unnamed and symbolic, we know *something*: her sex, the color of her clothing, her religion and piety, and the fact that she once owned a pair of Mexican prayer-beads (15).

In any case, Robert as sexual being is fuzzy throughout the Grand Isle chapters. Some see significance in his role as frequent instigator and companion of Edna's ocean "baths." However, he (like the others on Grand Isle) has been unable to teach her to swim, though he has tried "almost daily." When at last she succeeds, her first thought is not to show him her new skill, but "to swim far out [alone], where no woman had swum before" (10). If this has any sexual meaning at all, it is surely autoerotic or, following Elizabeth LeBlanc's reading, homoerotic. The closest Robert comes to making an advance is when he twice rests his head on Edna's arm while she paints, she twice pulls away, and he does not apologize (5). This seems oddly unlike him until we are given the moments' narrative echo two chapters later when Edna, a motherless daughter, rests her head on the shoulder of "mother-woman" Adele. This gesture, with its whisper of a referent back to Robert, may be the best evidence that the two women have a more maternal than erotic connection—though most

Victorians would have understood that, if one granted erotic feeling to women at all, the two sensations could not be fully separated.²¹

Having lived through the Clinton Presidency, we find cigar symbolism irresistible, but in the case of *The Awakening*, at least, we do not overreach. While Edna’s husband Léonce (Creole society’s model husband, as Adele is its model “mother-woman”) smokes cigars, Robert says that he finds them too costly and satisfies himself with “light puffs from his cigarette.” Given a cigar by Léonce, he saves it for later, which “seemed quite proper and natural on his part” (2). But months later, following his sojourn in Mexico, Robert produces a cigar for his afterdinner smoke. Finding this funny, Edna laughs and asks who gave it to him. He replies that he “reckless[ly] [. . .] bought a whole box,” his tone of voice sufficiently injured that she determines “not to be personal again and make him uncomfortable.” As he smokes the cigar, Robert strokes a cat on his lap (36), unconsciously acting out one of Edna’s most sensual (and masturbatory) music-borne fantasies (9). Robert’s touchiness is reminiscent of his defensiveness with Adele and even less understandable: how offensive, really, is Edna’s laugh, how “personal” a question about where he obtained a cigar? This is, after all, a woman with whom he recently whiled away hours each day, talking about himself. But once again, he may think that his masculinity is in question and by extension his virility and heterosexuality. One wonders what changed, what happened in Mexico, that led him to buy “a whole box” of cigars? His fortunes did not improve (20, 33). Aside from that, we know only that someone embroidered a silk tobacco pouch for him: “a Vera Cruz girl,” he tells Edna, of “not the slightest importance” (34), and puts the subject abruptly to rest. As Toth points out, gay men frequently enjoyed assignations or affairs with young Mexicans (though her speculation that “Vera Cruz” is a pun on “cruising” is facile and historically suspect²²) (213). He may have bought the pouch, though he denies it. An “unimportant girl” may indeed have made it, though the handiwork is so elaborate, so time-consuming to produce, that passion must have guided the fingers,

and Robert's insulting dismissal of the "girl" is belied by the very fact that he carries the pouch. Nothing is more unwelcome or more quickly thrust aside than an inappropriately extravagant handmade gift from someone who cares too much. The pouch seems more likely to have been the labor of a lover Robert won't acknowledge, but with whom he flourished sexually and was transformed into a purchaser of virile smokes.

Perhaps most significant are the husbands' reactions to Robert and, in particular, Léonce's. Though Creole husbands are reputedly immune to jealousy, their friendly tolerance of Robert does seem remarkable. While they conduct business in New Orleans throughout the summer workweeks, coming to Grand Isle only on weekends, the young, handsome, unattached Robert spends all day every day with their wives. Neither Léonce nor Edna nor Robert himself seems to perceive him as a true sexual threat. (Nancy Walker notes that the entire Grand Isle community of vacationers takes the couple's relationship for granted, and Léonce actually supports it.) During their unplanned full day together on Chênière Caminada, Edna wonders aloud whether her absence will make Léonce uneasy. "Of course not," Robert says simply; "he knows you are with me" (13).²³ After Robert leaves for Mexico, Léonce expresses "regret" at his departure and asks Edna how she "get[s] on without him," then proceeds to describe their chance meeting in the city just before the young man left for that "strange, *queer* country." "How did he seem—grave, or *gay* . . .?" Edna queries, echoing the two words that Chopin used earlier to describe Robert's gossipy tales. "Quite cheerful," Léonce answers, that is, *gay* (16). The adjectives I have italicized are doubly provocative in the context of conversation between a husband who is oddly confident of Robert's sexual benignity and a wife who sees nothing "in the least grotesque" about their discussing him because "the sentiment which she entertained for Robert in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel" (16).

Several critics have characterized Edna’s longing for Robert as based in fantasy, in absence, in impossibility: much like her hopeless girlhood infatuations with an infantry officer and a famous tragedian.²⁴ (Indeed, one questions whether Edna is capable of remaining romantically entranced by the imperfect real. Unusually “[susceptible] to beauty” [7], she is also unusually repelled by deviations from it. She seems disgusted by the “sand and slime” between Mariequita’s bare “brown toes” [12], and even the old dueling scar on Alcée Arobin’s wrist “agitates and sickens” her [25].)

But Robert’s feelings, also, to the extent that we (and he) know them, depend upon their being inexpressible. He abandons Edna at the very brink of carnal consummation. When she insists that he confess his love, he calls her “cruel”: “[...] you seem to be forcing me into disclosures which can result in nothing; as if you would have me bare a wound for the pleasure of looking at it, without the intention or power of healing it” (36). That Edna lacks the “intention” may refer to her supposed unavailability as an already-married woman (but when she turns out to *be* available—romantically and sexually, though not matrimonially—Robert flees), yet he says that she also lacks the “power.” She *cannot* heal the “wound” she opened with her “unfortunate” last-summer’s “blunder,” even should she be willing, and the only imaginable reason why, given the couple’s mutual physical attraction and consanguinity of soul, is her sex. In this interpretation, Robert considers marriage to Edna just a “wild dream” because, although he responds to her, “[seeking] her lips again” after she kisses him, he cannot find with her complete fulfillment of his most compelling real-life sexual desires. He had attempted, unsuccessfully at first, to draw her close by whispering the fantastical Gulf Spirit story (10).²⁵ Their Chênrière Caminada idyll concluded magically with Madame Antoine telling marvelous legends about “the whispering voices of dead men and [...] gold,” images that inspired in Edna ghostly visions, provocatively recalled Robert’s and Tonie’s voices murmuring under the shed,

and foreshadowed the profusion of shades of gold that would overwhelm Edna's dinner party.²⁶ However, it was Tonie's boat that bore them home—under a sail of red, a color then as now associated with promiscuous, marketed, or forbidden sex (13).

THE TRANSGENDERED "TWINS"

As radically interpreted as Robert is in gender, so too is Edna. At times, they seem to meet and merge into what might once have been called a "third sex," today perhaps a "transgendering." Numerous critics have noted the "masculine" language and imagery with which Chopin establishes Edna's character as comparatively androgynous.²⁷ Here I will summarize only a few provocative points. She is frank but emotionally self-contained and "not given to confidences" (7). She is "almost devoid of coquetry" (23). Her face is repeatedly described as "handsome," never as "pretty" (an adjective applied to both Madames Ratignolle and Lebrun); and her body, though "splendid," is "strong," "firm," and "different," rather than soft and "maternal." She has no interest in shopping for household goods, overseeing servants, or performing domestic chores and is happier in a tiny, simple home than a luxuriant "double cottage" paid for by Léonce. She understands horseracing, courts risk, bets high, and wins—even staking her Kentucky Colonel father, who also wins (23). She resumes her painting not as a hobby but as a business, acquiring an agent, selling pictures, and displacing her accustomed wifely work. She has a voracious appetite; drinks brandy like a man (26); and at one point eats like an animal, wolfishly "tearing" a brown (unrefined?) loaf of bread with her "strong, white teeth" (13). Though loving her children and in a sense her husband, she seeks an identity apart from her life as mother or wife. Stunningly, in an era that developed a rhetoric of female asexuality, she is not only lusty, but has her lust stimulated and satisfied by a notorious womanizer whom she knows superficially, doesn't respect, and barely likes—this, in her

first flush of falling in love with someone else. Even today, passionately enjoyed sex-without-love conforms to a stereotypical notion of how men act and women do not, a notion many times more prominent in the Victorian era.²⁸

In important ways, then, Edna seems more masculine than Robert and he more feminine than she. Chopin uses comparison and, more subtly, the metaphors of autoeroticism and twinning to dramatize their gender transcendence and resemblance, and also the irresistibly magnetic pull of same-sex love.²⁹

Edna and Robert look rather alike, and neither is said to look like anyone else, although Edna's appearance, like her father's, is "distinguished" (23). Their similar complexions are emphasized by Robert's "clean-shaved face" (2); his hair, worn "waved back from the temples" (33), is the color of hers, an unusual yellow-brown; hers, too, is waved, although close to her head (7). We meet them for the first time in each other's company; seen from afar by Léonce, they approach us slowly through his eyes, which emphasizes his, and our, distance from them and their kindred understanding. Both seeming somewhat fatigued, they sit facing each other on the top porch step, each leaning against a post, like mirror images or mirror twins. Wordlessly, she laughs and he smiles at a small shared adventure that loses its amusement when they try to tell Léonce about it, then regains it when he leaves the porch. Even more than he, we the readers remain distanced, as we are never told the story at all (1).

When Robert and Edna are together, their easy intimacy may exclude others, but they too are excluded from their community. "She is not one of us," Adele tells Robert, "she is not like us" (8), but there is no true "usness" for Robert, either, until he meets Edna. Their joined exclusion is symbolized by their mutual closeness to the novel's only social pariah, Mlle. Reisz, and by their improbable chance meeting at a little-known suburban café run by a *mulâtresse*, or mixed-blood woman. Although she knows that Robert, just back from Mexico, has been avoiding her, and although it is "the last place in the city where [Edna]

would have expected to meet anyone she knew,” she recognizes in him a fellow exile from convention and is “not greatly astonished to see” him. It turns out that before leaving Louisiana, Robert had “drop[ped] in [at the café] very often,” and as for Edna: “I almost live here” (36).³⁰

Ironically, they seem closer than any other couple in the book except the Ratignolles, whose “fusion [...] appalls” Edna (18). Edna’s and Robert’s multiple unique likenesses and bonds make their parting and its consequence the more wrenching, the more tragic, the more inevitable. Twins are not lovers, yet like lovers, they cannot imagine surviving alone. At Grand Isle, the fourteen-year-old Farival twins always wear blue and white, the Blessed Virgin’s colors, for they were “dedicated to [her] at their baptism.” On a musical Saturday night, “almost everyone” dances except the twins, “who could not be forced to separate during the brief period when one or the other *should be* whirling around the room *in the arms of a man*. *They might have danced together, but they did not think of it*” (9, emphases mine). To be bound to one’s likeness is to be fated for virginity. To be sexually consecrated to one’s likeness is masturbatory: a woman stroking not a lover, but a cat’s fur, as Edna imagines while listening to Mlle. Reisz play music; a woman disrobing, lying alone in bed, and stroking not a lover, but her own bare arms, while nearby, her beloved turns to another man; and, perhaps most strikingly, a man stroking not the woman who is present and yearning, but the fur of a cat *nestled in his lap while he simultaneously smokes a cigar*. And to require lovers of one’s own sex is, of course, to be homosexual. I have argued that Robert is, despite his genuine attraction to Edna Pontellier, which confuses and torments him and misleads her. But the most persuasive evidence of this appears near the end of the novel.

Robert’s abrupt leavetaking must be explained, and no other theory explains it satisfactorily. Donald Pizer believes that he cannot accept Edna’s refusal to be a “possession,” but if anything, this *stokes* his passion, which is most urgent during their last kiss. What strikes the reader with greatest force in this scene is

Robert's strange terror of Edna leaving. He pleads with her desperately, although she has promised to return soon, and he knows that her errand is to attend their mutual friend, Mme. Ratignolle, at childbirth. He also knows that her feeling for him persisted summerlong and through all the months of his absence. When she and the reader last see him, Robert is "enthralled [...] deprived of every impulse but the longing to hold her and keep her." A heterosexual Victorian man thus obsessed might be disconcerted by Edna's independence, but hardly to the point of leaving before their long-simmering desire could be consummated. Everything she has said and done confirms that this event is imminent, that Robert's love *and passion* are fully reciprocated. A heterosexually confident man might even expect consummation to disarm her! Robert, however, knows that if they do not seize this moment of his thralldom, it will pass, and other, stronger, "impulses" will overtake him. It may seem to him that Edna represents his one route to the "normal" manhood that he so stubbornly and unpersuasively asserted when Adele Ratignolle chided him.

Critics and other readers more commonly assume that Robert holds back because Edna is married.³¹ But if that is the case, why did he insist upon his sincerity as suitor when challenged by Adele at a time when Edna was apparently happily married? Now that Edna has left Léonce and moved into her own house, and he and their children are out of town, Robert should be less, not more, inhibited. He comes from a conservative Creole Catholic tradition, so reading outside the text, one might hypothesize that he fears Edna, originally a Kentucky Presbyterian, will demand marriage. But here, one would be venturing *too* far from what Chopin wrote. Edna has just implied that she doesn't seek a second husband, and in any case, Robert exclaims that: "Religion, loyalty, everything would give way if only you cared." She does care, and what gives way is Robert's resolve—or his pretensions. He is afraid. Of what? Apparently, of facing both himself ("Don't go, don't go! Oh! Edna, stay with me") and her ("Goodbye—because

I love you” [38]) in her transformed state as available, desirable, and desirous: a flesh-and-blood, sexually aggressive woman, rather than an amusing partner in a game of inconclusive flirtation.

“*Si tu savais*,” if you knew, Robert sings to Edna as they return from Chênrière Caminada; his voice is “true” and, along with “the notes, the whole refrain,” will “[haunt] her memory” (14). Much later, his flamboyantly heterosexual younger brother will sing the same words at Edna’s dinner party, but Victor will continue on to the next line—“*Ce que tes yeux me disent*” (What your eyes say to me)—and “caress” Edna with his eyes and kiss the palm of her hand (30), whereas Robert never completes the thought, or the song. *Si tu savais* what? Robert himself remains a question without answer, not to be categorized by sexuality, gender, or culture, venturing everywhere, belonging nowhere. Edna’s last view of him on the magical 28th of August, when she first swims and first feels sexual desire, is as a figure passing “in and out of the strips of moonlight as he walk[s] away” (10)—now visible, now invisible. It is our truest image of Robert Lebrun.

MADAME LEBRUN

The complexly gendered portrayal of a socially marginalized Robert echoes in his mother, the only person to whom he is permanently committed. Aline Lebrun, a middle-aged widow, is self-sufficiently “bustling” in her business on Grand Isle, where she is first seen, shouting orders to the help (1). Although she speaks often of her long-dead husband, his importance to her seems mostly symbolic. Certainly, she shows no symptom of active grief. However, she has chosen independence, refusing to marry Montel, the man who loves her. She reads Goncourt, the French author of naturalistic novels steeped in decadence and misery, and describes him in terms that lead Edna to ask to borrow a volume (8)—surprising literature for ladies of the time to be sharing.³²

According to Mlle. Reisz, Mme. Lebrun "worships" and "lives for" her gorgeous younger son Victor (16), a libertine who "greatly resembles" his mother (20). He is pleased to be garlanded with roses and draped with a feminine silk scarf at a dinner party, as prelude to yielding sexually to a married woman of his mother's age who has a daughter of his age (30). In fact, the reader is tantalized with doubt about the legitimacy of Victor, who is so unlike his older brother and is treated by his mother as special in the way that "love children" sometimes are. Montel's "vain ambition and desire for the past twenty years [has] been to fill the void which Monsieur Lebrun [...] left" (8), but Victor is only nineteen. Of course, he may have been conceived before, and born after, Lebrun's death, but the timing is still provocative.

Four images serve most vividly to delineate Mme. Lebrun's quixotic personality and relationship to her society: a photograph; the caged birds whose squawking opens the novel; her room in Grand Isle; and her house in New Orleans. As approached by Edna, the house resembles "a prison": its door and windows equipped with aged, and now unnecessary, iron bars; its garden enclosed by a high fence; the gate-door to the street locked (20). While in the city, then, where she does not command and women do not dominate (as they do in numbers, though of course not in familial or economic power,³³ in Grand Isle on every day except Sunday), Aline needs or wants to shut herself away from her society. Yet even in her "own" Grand Isle, she is separate: when not at work, she stays in a hard-to-reach room "at the top of the house, made up of odd angles and a queer, sloping ceiling," with windows that gaze at the Gulf (8).³⁴ And in that room, Edna finds a perverse photograph of Robert at five, wearing a kilt and "long curls and holding a whip in his hand" like a miniature dominatrix (16).

Mme. Lebrun and Mlle. Reisz are the only two independent women in the novel, but Lebrun is superficially the more successful, having had the good fortune to marry, be widowed early, inherit, and have significant work to do. She is also domestic, personable, pretty, feminine in dress, and the mother of sons, so she remains

beneath the gossips' radar. But her choices are quietly rebellious, she is aloof physically, and her constructions of gender and sexual morality are perverse. She is the first woman character we meet, and she is in control: her birds, reasonably believed by many critics to symbolize Edna, "have the right to make all the noise they wish" and drive Léonce from his chair (1): on Grand Isle, at least, Madame Lebrun holds dominion over Chopin's prime representative of patriarchy. And she liberates and protects, but also owns, the voice that represents Edna and, thereby, resistance to patriarchy and conventional gendered enclosures. But the parrot and mockingbird, like Lebrun herself, must be kept high above ground and locked in, else they would escape and be destroyed—as Edna is when she escapes, and as Mlle. Reisz warns that she may be.

MLLE. REISZ

In a book centered on characters who are defined by either their difference (Edna, Robert) or their conformance (Léonce, Adele), Mlle. Reisz is the most eccentric of all and, from many critical perspectives, perhaps the most mysterious. Her harsh Germanic surname and its incongruity with the euphonious French "Madoiselle" establish her from the start as an unbeautiful cultural misfit; her lack of forename, which is unique among the novel's featured characters, signals that she cannot be intimately known. She adorns her hair with "a batch of rusty black lace," as if still in mourning for something lost or buried long ago: not another individual, but something unforgettable and irreplaceable, perhaps the most precious part of herself.³⁵

Attached to the lace is "a bunch of artificial violets," which tempts a straightforward lesbian interpretation that should probably be resisted. Today, violet and lavender are associated with gay and lesbian culture, but Chopin herself wore "orchid and purple,"³⁶ and in 1894, she had translated Maupassant's "Un cas de divorce," about a husband who is sexually obsessed with orchids, finding

them "open for love and more tempting than all women's flesh."³⁷ Nonetheless, the violets are suggestive. The color purple (as well as gold, also important in *The Awakening*) is a recurrent image in the scant surviving poetry of Sappho,³⁸ and, as Maupassant's perverse character recognizes, the shape of orchids suggests female genitalia. Immediately after Edna tells the pianist that she is moving out of the family home, she draws Reisz down on the couch, pulls a pin from her own hair, and uses it to secure the violets, which have pulled loose (26). Soon, Edna will give her a fresh batch of violets and lace to wear to the dinner party (30).

I have said that one of the connections between Robert and Edna is their mutual regard for Mlle. Reisz, but to the cantankerous pianist herself, only Edna matters. Robert is merely an instrument that helps her chart a route to Edna's soul. Some commentators have hedged their judgments of Reisz's sexuality, but such caution strikes me as cowardice or naïveté; certainly, it is not hard-headed analysis. From first to last, she is shown as one who has compressed all of her emotion, warmth, kindness, and sensuality into her music, which has become her safely wordless voice. Through her music, she gains her only social esteem ("What an artist!" "I have always said no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz!"), and only through her music does she make love, a fact which her listeners, "aroused" to "a fever of enthusiasm," do vaguely perceive. "What passion!" one cries (9). But in this summer, which is an awakening also for Reisz, she will begin to play with only Edna in mind. Knowing that she cannot appropriate Edna's feelings for Robert, she manages to insinuate herself into their relationship by revealing that Robert has written to her and mentioned Edna repeatedly, but then she torments Edna by refusing to let her read his letter. After having reduced her to "entreaties," Mlle. Reisz finally relents (as she surely always meant to do: the letter is ready at hand, "topmost" on a pile) and later allows her also to read each new letter as it arrives: "[...] you begged for them," she explains. "Can I refuse you anything?" Reisz interrogates Edna about Robert and thus becomes the first

person to whom the younger woman confesses her love; seated on her piano stool, the diminutive musician looms above Edna, who is on the floor, and bends down to cup Edna's face between her hands (26). It is a posture that as surely signifies aggression and control, as will Edna's stooping from above Robert to initiate their first kiss.

Robert has written asking Mlle. Reisz to play Chopin's "Impromptu" for Edna if she should visit, and so she does, while Edna reads his letter in the "fading light" of evening. But Reisz varies the piece, interpolating her own message through "improvisation" and the addition of "quivering love notes" from the German-composed song of Isolde, Isolde and Tristan being tragically doomed heterosexual lovers. The "soulful and poignant longing" of the early measures of the "Impromptu" build to the "strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty." The shadows deepen as the music fills the room, "float[s] out upon the night [...] losing itself in the silence of the upper air." Edna is "sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her" (21). This is the most graphic sexual scene in *The Awakening* and certainly Edna's most fulfilling experience of passion with Robert! Mlle. Reisz has managed to make herself not only its medium, but its co-creator.

There are numerous other metaphoric proofs of Reisz's obsession with Edna, the wittiest and most obvious being the recalcitrant fire that is only "indifferently" warming her apartment when Edna appears for a visit. "Ah! here comes the sunlight!" Mademoiselle exclaims in delight and ceases "poking" the fire. It is at this point that Edna secures the pianist's slipping violets. Soon, for no apparent reason, the fire is "roaring," the stove "redhot," and a pot of chocolate is "sizzl[ing] and sputter[ing]" for their refreshment; chocolate, which Reisz has fed Edna once before is, of course, the food of love (26).

But Mademoiselle declares herself inescapably, and most poignantly, in her last action that we or Edna ever see. At the dinner

party, comparatively dressed-up in her new lace-and-violet ornament, she must be propped on cushions like a child in order to reach the dining table, and like a child, she doesn't hold her wine well.³⁹ Bidding Edna "*bonne nuit, ma reine; soyez sage,*" she kisses her naked lace-encircled shoulder (30). No more than one hour (and one chapter) later, Alcée Arobin will commence a seduction of Edna by also kissing her shoulder. She will yield to his "entreaties," as Reisz did to hers when she pled for Robert's letters, and as she did to the "entreaty" of Reisz/Chopin's music (31, 21). As I stated earlier, nothing in this novel happens only once, and everything that happens has purpose.

EDNA, AT LAST

At last, we are left with Edna herself. Is she a lesbian? One cannot reasonably say so. Her three youthful infatuations were with men, and in adulthood, she is awakened erotically and emotionally by Robert,⁴⁰ sexually by Arobin. But breaking away from twentieth-century post-sexologist polarities, one may speak of her as having a sensibility that integrates and transcends categories not only of gender, but of sexuality—or, as Elizabeth LeBlanc astutely writes, of being a "metaphorical lesbian." Still, it goes deeper than metaphor (if *anything* goes deeper than metaphor).

First, we must remember the nineteenth-century association of gender with sexual orientation. At the very least, Chopin must have realized that her transgendering of Edna would raise the question of lesbianism, and rather than defusing this question, she fuels it. Edna warms to the touch of the lovely Adele Ratignolle, who is motherly (indeed, pregnant) but hardly mistaken by Edna for her own barely remembered mother. Although she gazes at Adele as at a "faultless Madonna," she sees her also as a "sensuous Madonna" (5): "The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty. [...] Who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the

subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love.” (The omission of a question mark is Chopin’s.) Arm in arm, then, the two women descend to the beach, Adele dressed in pure white but Edna in white “with a waving vertical line of brown running through it,” presumably representing an uncertain, uncommitted, or already contaminated purity. They sit down together. Edna removes her collar and opens her dress at the throat; a wind rises, and the two fight to keep their skirts from blowing up and their hair from blowing down. Edna then confesses her sense of “walking [...] idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided,” and Adele, murmuring “*pauvre chérie*,” strokes her hand. Although a physically reticent person might be *discomfited* or *embarrassed* by this, only someone who did not know how to interpret its motivation or her own response to it would be *confused*. Because Adele is the quintessential “mother-woman” and her touch is accompanied by a maternal “poor dear,” it clearly is meant to be comforting, yet Edna is “confus[ed] [...] but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole’s gentle caress” (7). Only a very stubborn homophobic insistence can transform this into a non-erotic reaction.⁴¹ Later, Edna will leave Robert because of her promise to attend Adele’s labor (though the wise and trusted Dr. Mandelet will be there to deliver the baby).⁴² They seem to be at the brink of the sexual consummation that she has awaited for months, and he pleads with a force of desperation that the reader can hear, thus so should Edna. Nevertheless, she goes to her friend. Edna’s reasons for going are not sexual, but reasons of sex and romantic love aren’t enough to stay her.

This recalls an earlier, more muted episode when, in the midst of the foreplay with Arobin that results in her first adultery, she “irrelevantly” asks if he knows Mlle. Reisz. “She says queer things sometimes,” Edna continues, “[...] that [...] you find yourself thinking about afterward.” That afternoon, according to Edna (we’re not witness to it), Reisz had reached around her body in what seemed an embrace (“she put her arms around me”), not to hug her but to feel her shoulderblades and warn her

that she must have “strong wings” to “soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (27). Because Reisz is portrayed as almost purely a musician, this tends to be interpreted as her statement about the artist’s need for fortitude to withstand societal pressures to conform, but Edna does not associate it with either Mlle’s music or her own painting, and she recalls it when she is being romanced. Clearly, it was spoken by Reisz as a woman who has defied traditions and experienced prejudices that transcend her choosing to play the piano and live alone. And because her words haunt Edna, they seem to provoke thoughts, or at least plant seeds of thoughts, that lie beyond the rather obvious, for example, leaving Léonce may expose her to crushing criticism. “Why have you introduced her at [this] moment?” Alcée asks. It’s a good question.

Edna Pontellier is not an active lesbian, but she is capable of responding physically to a woman and of loving women; her loyalty to both Mme. Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz seems a higher value than obedience or loyalty to any man or institution or convention. (It is not commonly mentioned, but seems important, that Edna betrays both her marriage vows *and* her heart when she has sex, on three occasions, with Arobin; in consequence, she experiences some negative emotions, but never guilt.)

The meaning of one key symbol seems beyond debate: bird as Edna. She is the caged, angry parrot whose language is only partially understood, and she is also the mindless caged imitator and “mocker.” She is the bird in the Pigeon House who, seeking independence, displays a fatal homing instinct, a tragic failure of courage and imagination, by moving just around the corner from the life she seeks to leave. She is the bird who, Reisz warns, will need “strong wings” and the bird who, at novel’s end, turns out not to have them and “circl[es] disabled down, down to the water” (39). And so she must certainly be the bird her own mind conjures in chapter 9 while listening to Reisz play the piece that she, Edna, calls “Solitude”: a bird flying away from a “hopelessly resign[ed]” man standing naked “beside a desolate rock on the

seashore.” Unnamed, he is no specific man (indeed, at this early stage of the story, what man would she imagine as both naked and resigned?), but rather the male *sexual principle*. Both the man and the bird are alone, but the choice has been the bird’s and, leaving him, she is free.⁴³

In her perceptive analysis of the language of *The Awakening*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff refers to Edna’s “un-utterable longings,” and LeBlanc believes that she “cannot connect or make sense” of her dawning perceptions “while locked within the confines of the old [language]” (295). Patricia S. Yeager sees the novel’s “most radical awareness” as Edna’s habitation of “a world of limited linguistic possibilities, of limited possibilities for interpreting and reorganizing her feelings, and therefore of limited possibilities for action” (274). “A thousand emotions have swept through me tonight,” Edna tells Robert on August 28, “I don’t comprehend half of them” (10). By the end of the novel, she has boldly violated three social taboos by committing adultery, leaving her husband, and establishing a career—yet she still does not comprehend half of her emotions, as shown by her uncharacteristically inarticulate speech to Dr. Mandelet (38) and her inchoate last thoughts, which finally circle backward and lodge in her childhood, a fixed thing, and in the purely animal sphere of the senses (39). She is forever traversing an overgrown field, taking the longest and least usual route, unable to see where she’s going (7); forever walking Canal Street, the New Orleans thoroughfare that divides cultures and belongs to neither (22). She is a Kentucky Presbyterian in Creole Catholic society, even her children bearing French names; a woman whose feelings and choices straddle, and challenge, gender roles; a heterosexual woman whose deepest loyalties lie with other women and who is in love with a man who resists her in direct proportion to her availability—who can approach her only through sterile flirtation, myth, legend, and a “wild dream.”

As in her best short fiction, Chopin refuses easy equations; she will not give us “closure” when her characters haven’t found it, and she rejects categories that distort and oppress human

nature. Whether or not any of her characters can be categorized as gay—and I think some can be, and also that for many or most people, once “awakened,” this is a mutable category—she writes from a subtle, sensitive, integrative, radical perspective on gender and sexuality that I have termed a “gay/transgendered sensibility.”

CHOPIN'S ETHICS AND MISSION OF AUTHORSHIP

Many readers' and critics' denial of gay themes in literature is so strong that they assert heterosexuality no matter how far-fetched while demanding ironclad proof of homosexuality: a smoking genital, as it were. Their denial seems to assume one or more of four things: that it is better to be straight than gay, so a character should be assumed heterosexual until proven homosexual; that a gendered interrogation of a literary text proceeds from an objectionable “political agenda”; that homosexuality was invented in the late 1960s—or perhaps in ancient Athens and then skipped eighty generations—and so the imposition of a contemporary gay interpretation on an earlier text is wrongly revisionist; that a person is gay OR heterosexual OR, perhaps, bisexual and thus sexual love, unlike any other type of love we know—parental, filial, neighborly, romantic—can be, to borrow an expression of the gay poet Hart Crane, appropriately “baked and labeled [...]/Divided by accepted multitudes.”⁴⁴ At the same time, any careful reader will acknowledge that evaluating Edna as a mother, Léonce as a father and husband, or even Dr. Mandelet as a friend, is a complicated task sure to yield an ambiguous judgment.

Is it overreaching to suggest that Kate Chopin may have steeped her text in gay and transgendered imagery, ideas, and characters? On the contrary, it is the logical conclusion. The evidence is in the text, but it is supported by her life: her reading, who she knew, where she lived, and the insistently sexual/sensual themes of her other fictions and the ones she chose to translate.

Asked by Mlle. Reisz why she is in love with Robert, Edna replies, “Because his hair is brown and grows away from his temples; because he opens and shuts his eyes [...]” and so forth. “Because you do, in short,” laughs Mademoiselle (26). Fifteen months before *The Awakening* was published, Kate Chopin was asked by a newspaper interviewer whether love is “divine.” She replied:

One never really knows the exact, definite thing which excites love for any one person, and one can never truly know whether this love is the result of circumstances or whether it is predestination. I am inclined to think that love springs from animal instinct, and therefore is, in a measure, divine. One can never resolve to love this man, this woman or child, and then carry out the resolution unless one feels irresistibly drawn by an indefinable current of magnetism. [...] true, pure love, is an uncontrollable emotion that allows of no analyzation and no vivisection.⁴⁵

Five years earlier, ridiculing the conservatism of a Midwestern writers’ group, Chopin had pointed out: “There is a very, very big world lying not wholly in northern Indiana, nor does it lie at the antipodes, either. It is human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it.”⁴⁶

It is the artist’s responsibility to tear off that veil, Chopin believed, and she did: more decisively and daringly than has yet been fully realized.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Toth (212–13), on Robert Lebrun; and LeBlanc (298–300), Seidel (1993), and Showalter (46–47) on Mlle. Reisz. LeBlanc uses Bonnie Zimmerman’s notion of the “metaphorical lesbian” and Adrienne Rich’s of the “lesbian continuum” to interpret Edna. In her reading, the sea becomes Edna’s metaphorical woman lover. While Pontuale does not label Edna bisexual, he says that “She is not afraid of bisexuality” and that her “character makes room for [it].”
2. However, see Simon’s perceptive argument that sexuality is entangled with fecundity throughout the book, in its imagery as well as in its female characters’ lives and options, and that fecundity is, if anything, the more heavily emphasized, sexuality being important chiefly as its agent.
3. Chapter numbers, rather than page numbers, will be provided for quotations from *The Awakening*. The chapters are short, allowing easy location of quotations,

and the novel is available in numerous editions, variously formatted, which reduces the utility of page numbers.

4. Seidel (1996) provides an illuminating discussion of Edna as artist. See also Stone.
5. “On Certain Brisk, Bright Days,” 1899 (721–22).
6. Toth (166–68).
7. This sort of ambiguity, leading to multiple reader interpretations (and frustrations for the literal-minded), appears in many of Chopin’s stories as well. Examples include “Désirée’s Baby,” as reinterpreted by Bauer in 1996, and “The Storm,” less persuasively but interestingly re-examined by Berkove in the same year.
8. The trials were in Tennessee in 1892, of Alice Mitchell for killing her lesbian lover Freda Ward, both of whom were only in their teens—and in England in 1895, of Oscar Wilde for “gross indecencies” with men.
9. Interestingly, it was Deyo who wrote the famous *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* review that judged *The Awakening* “sad and mad and bad, but [. . .] all consummate art” (56).
10. Toth (1999, 183–84).
11. 1896 (700–1).
12. “Paul’s Mistress.” Faderman puts an entirely negative construction on this story (1981, 283–84), but it can be interpreted differently. The lesbians in the story lead quiet, harmless, domestic lives and seem to share genuine affection, in sharp contrast to the decadent heterosexuals who are horrified by them. The ending of the story implies that “Paul’s mistress” will be better understood by her woman lover than she ever was by Paul.
13. Seyersted (86); Toth, quoting Chopin’s friend, Sue V. Moore (1999, 160).
14. That is, Edna is twenty-eight throughout most of the novel; it is on August 28 that she can finally swim, is told the Gulf Spirit story by Robert, and has “the first felt throbbings of desire” for him (10); and chapter 28 is the dramatic one-paragraph chapter that immediately follows her first adulterous sex and the “lifting” of the “mist [. . .] from her eyes.” Treu, however, believes that her use of this number is a tribute to Goethe, whom she is known to have read and whose home she visited (Seyersted, 25, 34, 90). August 28 was the birthdate of both Goethe himself and his suicidal character, Werther. On the Whitman-Chopin connection, see also Delbanco (96); and Petry (16–17).
15. In other works, she uses “gay” in an obviously conventional way, e.g., in “Désirée’s Baby” (149).
16. Cory (358); Boswell (43, n. 6). If the term is French in origin, this may be significant, as Chopin read French with ease.
17. See also Chauncey’s discussion of terminology in his splendid social history, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (13–23). Interestingly, Ware’s extremely thorough cultural study of Greenwich Village, 1920–1930, which was published in 1935, uses only three terms to designate a gay person: homosexual, Lesbian, and pansy. However, much evidence confirms that by the 1930s, homosexual men were routinely calling themselves and one another “gay” and “queer”, e.g., Cory (338); Chauncey (17–19).
18. See, for example, Bullough (530–631); Faderman 1981 (147–294) and 1991 (11–61); Smith-Rosenberg; Greenberg (347–433); Chauncey (2–63); and Mondimore (21–51).

19. Kitty Garesché, the “best friend” of Chopin’s girlhood, took a very different path, remaining in St. Louis as a Sacred Heart nun—but their relationship endured for life. Chopin’s last poem was written for Kitty’s fiftieth birthday (“To the Friend of My Youth,” 1900). See Toth (1999, 15–29, 175, 238).
20. German psychiatrist Westphal published a clinical study of lesbian attraction in 1869; Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, also German, published several tracts on homosexuality between 1865 and 1875; Krafft-Ebing brought out the enormously influential *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1882; and in 1897, Havelock Ellis published the English-language *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*.
21. On this point, see Wolff (1997, 184–87) and Showalter (37).
22. The second edition of the *OED* locates a 1904 association of “cruisers” with female streetwalkers. “Cruising” to mean searching for homosexual partners is dated only as far back as the early 1940s. Of course, the word could have entered oral slang parlance earlier than that.
23. Robert is, however, mistaken, as Léonce is “very uneasy at first” and calmed only by the assurance that *Tonie* will bring Edna home (14).
24. See Simon, for example. Edna herself is aware of this: “For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman” (15).
25. See Yeager’s interesting analysis of this scene (275–30).
26. Perhaps the most overproduced small dinner party in literature (or life)—there are only ten people at table—it features, among other splendors, a pale yellow satin tablecloth, “massive brass candelabra” with yellow silk candle shades, yellow roses, golden tableware, and champagne that appears amber when held up to the light. Edna wears a gown of shimmering golden satin.
27. See, for example, Delbanco and Giorcelli.
28. Here, it is interesting to compare “Charlie,” an entertaining long story that Chopin published the year after *The Awakening*. Charlie, short for Charlotte, is a “robust,” short-haired, pistol-packing, noisy, hungry, bossy, and astonishingly sweaty teenager who rides a “big black horse.” She owns no dress, wearing instead a modified bloomer costume (“trouserlets”) “of her own devising” and a pair of dusty boots (639). She can chop cane, hoe, whittle, and shoot, and when her father falls ill, she runs the family plantation in his stead—all this in contrast to her six gender-conventional sisters. Hoping to win the heart of a new man in town, Charlie transforms herself into an ornamentally dressed, soft-skinned “lady,” even attending boarding school to gain the feminine “accomplishments” (piano, dance, etc.). But her beloved selects her eldest sister and Charlie reverts to self, settling happily for Gus, an old friend who has always loved her as she is and will treat her as an equal.
29. Four years earlier, Chopin had published “Fedora,” a startling story in which the sensible and repressed 30-year-old spinster protagonist becomes sexually obsessed (or, one might say, is awakened) by a 23-year-old man who is oblivious to her feelings. Fedora meets the man’s sister, who resembles him physically, and, after addressing her in an “elderly fashion” as “dear child,” puts her arm around the girl and gives her “a long, penetrating kiss on the mouth.” Though clearly a homosexual displacement of a heterosexual passion, the moment still

- bears on the present analysis, as does the story's theme of male/female physical similarity. For a discussion of “Fedora,” see Dyer.
30. On Edna's and Robert's shared “state of inbetweenness,” see also Giorcelli (116–19).
 31. See, for example, Pizer, and Taylor and Fineman.
 32. Chopin doesn't specify the book that Aline has promised to lend. In the 1860s, the brothers Edmond and Jules Goncourt coauthored several naturalistic novels, but probably the Goncourt loaned to Edna is one of the novels that Edmond wrote in the 1870s and 1880s after Jules's death. These, like the ones they wrote together, are rife with female degradation and unhappiness.
 33. On this point, see LeBlanc (291–92). In her fascinating study of Edna as Aphrodite, Gilbert refers to Grand Isle as “a sort of parodic Lesbos” (49). LeBlanc rightly disagrees (291–92).
 34. One other character lives “up under the roof” with windows that look out upon water, though in her case it is a river thronging with commercial ships. That character is Mlle. Reisz, whose New Orleans address Edna obtains from Mme. Lebrun (21).
 35. Green and Caudle gathered a number of fascinating documents into their scholarly edition of Chopin's first novel, *At Fault*. Among them are social historian Lou Taylor's chart of “Recommended lengths of family mourning, 1876–1897.” The very longest period is 2½ years, recommended for a new widow (contrast with the three months recommended to a new widower!). But Lady Constance Howard, in 1885, prescribed *feeling* as the proper guide to longevity of mourning: “When widows have lost all this world holds for them of love and happiness [. . .] they very often mourn and wear ‘widow's weeds’ to the end of their lives, and quite right that it should be so” (275).
 36. Toth (1999, 87).
 37. Toth (1999, 159–60).
 38. See the poems numbered 13, 15, 21, 34, 42, 43, and 83 in Barnard's translation.
 39. Like Robert, she is not sexually mature or, at least, sexually resolved; both she and he, and only they, are compared to children.
 40. However, one could take the view that this in itself challenges her heterosexuality. Especially in the days when most homosexuals tried to “pass,” or, particularly in the case of women, did not correctly identify their own feelings, it was not unusual for gay men and lesbians to be drawn to one another and to marry. They often did not acknowledge their sexuality to each other or, sometimes, even to themselves. This point is also important to remember when considering the character of Robert.
 41. Pontuale is among the few critics who have judged this scene frankly erotic. In an important essay on the novel, Showalter focuses on the scene, making some of the same points about it that I have, even acknowledging that “Edna's awakening [. . .] begins not with a man, but with Adele Ratignolle.” Yet the only adjective she is willing to apply is “maternal” (45). See also Toth (1999, 211–12).
 42. See also Wolff's (1994, 238–29) and LeBlanc's (300–1) discussions of Edna's decision to go to Adele at this moment.

43. Lawrence Thornton makes an interesting, but tortured, argument that the *man* represents Edna (88). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese agrees: "At the novel's close, Edna herself, perched on the edge of the ocean, will shed her clothing and recreate this picture" (261). However, the naked Edna is, first of all, female; she is exuberant and feels "new-born," not hopelessly resigned; no stone is mentioned in her scene; and the bird is disabled and circling downward to its death, not flying away (39).
44. Crane, 26.
45. Quoted in Toth (1999, 201).
46. "The Western Association of Writers," 1894 (691).

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