

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

UST Research Online

English Master's Essays

English

Summer 2018

Resisting Patriarchal Domination: The Female Gaze and Medusa Figures in THE AWAKENING

Keelia Estrada Moeller

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_engl_mat



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Resisting Patriarchal Domination: The Female Gaze and Medusa Figures in *The Awakening*

By

Keelia Estrada Moeller

A Master's Essay submitted to the faculty of the Graduate Program in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

University of St. Thomas

Saint Paul, Minnesota

August 2018

To my father, who watches from above.

To my husband, who looks to the future.

To my mother, who sees the grand scope of things.

Together, we see all possibilities.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores patriarchal standards and the male gaze in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, specifically the impact of these standards on Edna Pontellier. It examines how Edna resists the standards placed upon her despite constant surveillance from the male gaze, and also analyzes the ways Edna resists the patriarchy; she distances herself from her role as a wife and mother and develops her own authoritative female gaze. Edna's female gaze becomes more authoritative through sexuality, silence, and elements of cinematography, and her character can ultimately be interpreted as a Medusa figure who embodies a direct threat to patriarchal standards because she can see what the male gaze is incapable of seeing. And in the same way Medusa is slaughtered or tamed in popular legend, the male gaze consistently seeks to discredit the authority of Edna's female gaze, explaining her resistance away as either folly or madness.

For decades, literary scholars have framed Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*¹ as a response to the oppressive gender roles that were so prominent during the time it was written.² While these gender roles are damaging for both men and woman, I'll be focusing on constraining societal standards for women in the novel.³ These societal standards are enforced and policed by a male gaze, which emerges as an ultimate form of authority and domination. The male gaze is easy to see in Chopin's novel; the men who enforce this gaze—including Edna Pontellier's husband Léonce, Robert, and her father—control and monitor Edna's actions and behavior. But Edna rejects the societal standards that have been placed upon her in several ways; she pushes away from her role as a watchful mother, she has multiple affairs, she resists her husband's commands, and she even moves out of her husband's house. Edna also takes this resistance one

¹ Kate Chopin originally called the manuscript "A Solitary Soul," but the title was changed to *The Awakening* upon publication.

² For an exploration of Edna's complex variations on traditional assumptions about gender and sexuality, see Mary Biggs, "'Si tu savais': The Gay/Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Women's Studies* 33.2 (2004): 145-81. For an examination of Edna's selfhood in relation to her family, musical romanticism and other constraints, see Nicole Camastra, "Venerable Sonority in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *American Literary Realism* 40.2 (2008): 154-66. For a juxtaposition between Edna and her, other identity, identified in this case as the "lady in black" in relation to conscious identity and independence, see Joseph Church, "The 'Lady in Black' in Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Explicator* 66 (2008): 196-97. For a Foucauldian feminist approach to *The Awakening*, with a focus on the oppression of upper-class white and Creole women, see Zoila Clark, "The Bird That Came Out of the Cage: A Foucauldian Feminist Approach to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Journal for Cultural Research* 12.4 (2008): 335-47. For a close examination of bird symbolism in *The Awakening*, and how it relates to women's entrapment in marriage and society, see A. Elizabeth Elz, "*The Awakening* and *A Lost Lady*: Flying with Broken Wings and Raked Feathers." *Southern Literary Journal* 35.2 (2003): 13-27. For an exploration of hegemonic institutions for women in the nineteenth century in *The Awakening* in relation to human identity, see Jennifer B. Gray, "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and *The Awakening*." *Southern Literary Journal* 37 (2004): 53-73. For a reading of *The Awakening* as a realist and naturalist text that legitimates a "masculinist" version of the universe, see Jarlath Killeen, "Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Religion and the Arts* 7.4 (2003): 413-38.

³ Because I'll be discussing constraining societal standards for women in this essay, it seems relevant to bring up Kate Chopin's biography. Chopin's desire to present others with an alternate path is reflected in her life and in her writing; she was known as a writer of local color fiction set in Louisiana, presenting readers with a glimpse at unknown parts of the nation that were deemed "exotic." Her youth was defined by dichotomies, but she was exposed to divergent expectations of female social roles in her matriarchal family, headed by her grandmother and her mother. Already conditioned to fulfill this matriarchal role, she was able to raise six children even after her husband passed away and left her a widow. For more on Chopin's life, see the introduction in the Broadview edition of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening and Other Writings*, edited by Suzanne L. Disheroon, Barbara C. Ewell, Pamela Glenn Menke and Susie Scifres.

step further, developing and utilizing her own authoritative female gaze and establishing herself as a Medusa figure who resists patriarchal domination. Her gaze also sees that which the male gaze is incapable of seeing—specifically, she sees the vastness of the ocean as a path towards self-discovery, while the male gaze only focuses on what it can control. In this essay, I'll explore how Edna's female gaze functions in relation to her other forms of patriarchal resistance, along with how it differs from and rejects the male gaze. I argue that the novel uses elements of imagery and cinematography to further the authority of Edna's female gaze, which ultimately links Edna's all-seeing gaze to Medusa—a figure that embodies a direct threat to patriarchal standards.

Coined by critical Laura Mulvey in the early 1970's, the male gaze is said to have emerged “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance” where there has been a “split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 62). Mulvey examines how the male gaze functions through scopophilia in cinema and film, but subsequent scholars translated the male gaze into literature and other areas of research. The term has been defined by other scholars as well. For example, Victorian literature specialist Patricia E. Johnson links the gaze back to Foucault, arguing that the gaze is ultimately something “connected to power and surveillance: the person who gazes is empowered over the person who is the object of the gaze,” (Johnson 39). Johnson also links the male gaze to an omniscient narrator along with an all-powerful cultural gaze—both of which are implicitly male—moving beyond Mulvey's perception of cinema. Craig Saper notes that the gaze emerges as “part of a Symbolic structure” that “cannot be read positivistically, because it does not stay in place” (Saper 36). In this case, this “Symbolic structure” is the patriarchy, and the gaze changes as the patriarchal structure changes.

The gaze is also associated with psychoanalysis; for example, Laura Mulvey points out that the gaze sees women as pleasurable in form, but “threatening in content” (Mulvey 61-2) because she “connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure” (64). The male gaze functions as one which seeks to control the female form in order to alleviate symptoms of castration anxiety. In other words, the male gaze sees the female form’s lack of a theoretical penis as a direct threat of castration. As a result, the male gaze objectifies and controls every element of the female form in order to keep itself safe from harm. The male gaze itself, because of its authoritative nature, produces dominating and controlling male behavior. In short, the male gaze takes on a form of scopophilia that objectifies the female form so as to control its agency. Women are seen as objects to be controlled, rather than beings who hold agency, and the very idea of the authoritative female form threatens the existence of the male gaze. For the male gaze to remain powerful, whatever it surveils must remain subservient. As a result of this constraint, the female gaze emerges as a sign of resistance; that is, subjected female bodies develop their own female gaze in an effort to take back the authority the patriarchal male gaze consistently seeks to eliminate.

Edna is constantly subjected to the male gaze in *The Awakening*. As a result of his own male gaze, Edna’s husband Léonce monitors her behavior, and those around her encourage her to conform to societal standards. Modern feminist Christina R. Williams has pointed this out before: “In addition to Léonce, other male characters reinforce the male gaze; Victor Lebrun purposefully seats himself ‘where he commanded a view of Edna’s face,’ (Chopin 58) and Chopin’s linguistic choices clearly indicate the masculine dominance” (Williams 55). I agree with Williams here; several male characters do reinforce the male gaze in the novel, but for me,

Edna's husband Léonce is the most direct representation of this male gaze. He watches her at all times, and doesn't hesitate to point out when Edna isn't fulfilling her societal duties as a wife and a mother. For example, he tells Edna that their son Raoul is showing symptoms of a fever, convinced that he "was too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken" (Chopin 5). Edna insists that she is "quite sure Raoul had no fever. He had gone to bed perfectly well, she said, and nothing had ailed him all day" (5). Léonce doesn't believe her, and instead "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business" (5). Here, Mr. Pontellier clearly demonstrates his perception of what Edna ought to be doing; she's a mother, and it's "a mother's place to look after children" and monitor them at all times. He sees her insight about Raoul's health as invalid. Additionally, he believes he shouldn't be responsible for these kinds of things because he has "his hands full with his brokerage business." Léonce reproaches Edna, seeing her as "inattentive" and "habitually neglectful" simply because she doesn't see things in the same way that he does.

Léonce also believes he's in charge of Edna, and sees her as personal property. He sees Edna sitting outside, exclaiming that it's absolute folly "to bathe at such an hour in such heat" (2). He goes on to tell her "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (2). Here, we see Léonce perceive Edna as a "valuable piece of personal property" that he sees as "damaged" due to a sunburn. However, he says nothing about Robert, who happened to be sitting outside with Edna as well, illustrating that Léonce's dominating male gaze holds influence over and surveils women rather than the men in this novel. In a similar situation, Léonce finds Edna sleeping outside rather than in bed, again dismissing her independence as folly: "'You will take

cold out there,' he said, irritably. 'What folly is this? Why don't you come in?'" (31). When Edna refuses to come inside, he again states "'This is more than folly,' he blurted out. 'I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly'" (31). Edna resists his commands, and "With a writhing motion she settled herself more securely in the hammock" (31). Again, we see Léonce as someone who aims to control and surveil Edna's actions; he refuses to "permit" her to stay outside, and orders her to "come in the house instantly." He more than once labels her rejection of his orders as "folly" and doesn't see her decisions as either logical or valid. When Edna resists, Léonce becomes angry, leading him to "blurt out" a reiterated version of his commands. He is used to controlling her every move, and her resistance unsettles him.

It's also clear that Léonce expects to know what Edna is doing and where she goes at all times, and yet this same standard doesn't hold true for him. For example, after Edna asks if he will return for dinner, he thinks to himself, "He did not know; perhaps he would return for the early dinner and perhaps he would not" (3). By contrast, Léonce obsesses over knowing where Edna goes, and fully expects her to have a specific reason to be anywhere except for at home. After Edna tells him that she was out for the day, he replies "'Out!" exclaimed her husband, with something like genuine consternation in his voice as he laid down the vinegar cruet and looked at her through his glasses. "Why, what could have taken you out on Tuesday? What did you have to do?" 'Nothing. I simply felt like going out, and I went out.' 'Well, I hope you left some suitable excuse,' said her husband, somewhat appeased, as he added a dash of cayenne pepper to the soup" (51). While Mr. Pontellier can easily go out with no specific intentions or plans in mind, Edna needs to have a "suitable excuse" for leaving the house (and thus leaving her role as a wife and mother who stays home with the children). Léonce expresses "genuine consternation" at the

idea of Edna's leaving home without reason. He interrogates Edna for no other reason than the fact that she was out when she typically wouldn't have been out: "What could have taken you out on Tuesday? What did you have to do?" Here, we see the male gaze function in a way that works to conform Edna to patriarchal standards and keep her under control; Léonce sees Edna's going out as out of place, and as something that potentially threatens his status in Edna's life. As a result, he becomes frustrated, policing Edna's behavior and discouraging her divergence from the norm.

Despite being constantly surveilled by the male gaze, Edna resists the confining societal standards around her. Most noticeably, Edna doesn't take on the role of the ever-watching and affectionate mother who also dotes upon her husband. That is, she is not a "mother woman", a word which is embodied through Adele Ratignolle's character, and is described in the novel as meaning "Women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (8). Edna does not constantly watch her children as they play, and as readers, we can see how this impacts her children, making them more self-sufficient: "If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing" (7). In this sense, her children know that their mother isn't going to coddle them if they fall down, and thus "pick [themselves] up" and "go on playing." Edna also states that "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me" (47). This is noteworthy because Edna refuses to give up her own identity—the one thing she sees as essential—for her children. For her, her life

as a mother is independent from her identity, and her role as a mother is only worth giving up unessential things, such as “money” or even “life.”

Edna also distances herself from her role as a dutiful and faithful wife; she has affairs with both Robert and Alcée, and even lives separately from her husband—a move Léonce tries to conceal or explain at all costs. After receiving a letter from Edna announcing her decision to move into a small house, Léonce immediately devises a plan to explain why she would be moving away from home. He sends Edna a disapproving letter that also includes detailed instructions about how to explain the situation to those around them. He devises a plan about “a well-known architect concerning the remodeling of his home, changes which he had long contemplated, and which he desired carried forward during his temporary absence” (93). Léonce also publishes a notice in one of the daily papers “to the effect that Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier were contemplating a summer sojourn abroad, and that their handsome residence on Esplanade Street was undergoing sumptuous alterations, and would not be ready for occupancy until their return,” and as a result of this planning, “Mr. Pontellier had saved appearances!” (94). While Edna doesn’t work to actively dispute these explanations, she has no interest in “saving appearances” in the way that Léonce does. She simply wants to live on her own and gain independence while distancing herself from her societal role as a wife who stays at home with the children. For Léonce’s controlling male gaze along with society’s expectations, however, this behavior is so shocking that it must be explained and disregarded at all costs, even if it means developing a complex lie such as this one.

After being oppressed for so long, Edna ultimately begins resisting her husband’s watchful gaze and realizing her own individuality. We see this in a scene we explored earlier as she sits outside at night. Léonce orders her to go back inside, and “With a writhing motion

[Edna] settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had” (31). In a “writhing motion” Edna’s resists Léonce’s order for her to return inside, as if her body is uncontrollably fighting the urge to comply with every fiber of its being. In this moment of resistance, we see her as having a “will” that is both “stubborn and resistant.” She no longer submits to her husband’s commands, despite the fact that she once would have done so. In fact, her urge to resist becomes so uncontrollable that “she could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted.” She suddenly becomes aware of the fact that her husband had “spoken to her like that before” and remembers that, at one point in time, she would have “submitted to his command.”

While many scholars have said Edna resists patriarchal standards, I’d like to focus on the way she develops her own female gaze as part of this resistance. As she uses her female gaze, Edna takes on more masculine or dominating characteristics that females during her lifetime were forced away from. The female gaze first emerged within film theory as a response to Laura Mulvey’s male gaze. It’s been used to reflect perspectives of female filmmakers (as opposed to dominating male filmmakers), or any perspective that differs from the male gaze itself. Feminist cinematographer Zoe Dirse, for example, explores the term to look at representation (or lack thereof) of women in film as cinematographers, arguing that “the masculine point of view is prevalent simply because men control the industry” (Dirse 436) which in turn silences female perspectives. Dirse is interested in what happens when the viewer, along with the object, are both female. She links the female gaze to feminism, arguing that the female gaze must examine the way power structures are distributed in and function within texts. For Dirse, when it comes to

making the female gaze present in dominant culture and subverting patriarchal assumptions about gender, “the challenge is to change the patriarchal way of looking by imposing the female gaze on our cultural life” (446). In this sense, the female gaze emerges as a direct resistance to patriarchal standards and the male gaze, and can see that which the male gaze overlooks.

Christina R. Williams also notes that “in contrast to the effect of her male counterparts’ objectification, Edna herself objectifies the men in her life with the same reliance on visual perception, demonstrating her own masculinity. Indeed, sight and perception are recurring themes throughout the novel,” (Williams 56). I agree with Williams’ sentiments here, and I recognize that Edna visually objectifies Robert and Alcée with her own female gaze. However, Edna also objectifies Adele Ratignolle with this same “reliance on visual perception” in an effort to “demonstrate her own masculinity.” Edna’s gaze shifts to nature as well, specifically the sea, and through this connection to the sea, her gaze sees insights towards self-discovery that the male gaze cannot gain access to.

Edna rests her female gaze on Adele Ratignolle a few times—not in a way that seeks to control Adele’s body, but instead in a way that appreciates Adele’s beauty and awakens sexual desire within Edna. Edna’s attraction to Adele emerges right away as she lays eyes upon her for the first time: “The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty” (Chopin 14). Immediately, Edna’s gaze fixates on Adele’s “excessive physical charm” and her categorization of Adele as a “Creole” indicates that Edna is actually pushing Adele into an othered category so as to separate Adele from herself. Edna sees Adele as a sensuous beauty—that is, as something she is particularly “susceptible to.” We see this again when Edna sees Adele sitting outside: “She had long wished to try herself on Madame Ratignolle. 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” (11). Here, we learn that Edna has “long wished to try herself” on Adele, and we see her immediate attraction to Adele emerge. She visually objectifies Adele’s body, seeing her as a “tempting subject” and a “sensuous Madonna” who possesses a “splendid color.” Edna describes Adele as a painting that must be looked at, taking the agency of a male gaze and transforming it into a female gaze that seeks pleasure, rather than control.

The same phenomenon emerges again later in the novel when Edna sees Adele in her home: “Madame Ratignolle looked more beautiful than ever there at home, in a negligé which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the rich, melting curves of her white throat. “Perhaps I shall be able to paint your picture some day,” said Edna with a smile when they were seated” (11). Again, we see Edna gazing upon Adele as one might gaze at a portrait; she focuses on the “melting curves of her white throat” and sees her arms which are “almost wholly bare.” She again is drawn to painting Adele; “Perhaps I shall be able to paint your picture some day.” Edna employs her female gaze by looking upon Adele as a beautiful image that ought to be rendered into a painting, but her gaze does not seek to control Adele in the same way the male gaze controls Edna. Edna’s eye gazes at beauty rather, and doesn’t look for faults: “Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna” (10). Although Edna likes to “sit and gaze” at Adele, she sees her as a “faultless Madonna” and only gazes at Adele’s beauty. By contrast, the male gaze that follows Edna around seeks to control her actions, and find fault in her efforts of resisting societal standards.

Edna also rests a sexualized and authoritative female gaze upon Alcée Arobin. We see this in one of Edna’s encounters with Alcée, as the two share a rather intimate moment: “He stood close to her, and the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew

all her awakening sensuousness. He saw enough in her face to impel him to take her hand and hold it while he said his lingering good night” (76). Here, the look in Edna’s face actually “impels” Alcée to take her hand and hold it, as if she seduces him and not the other way around. This is noteworthy because Alcée has a reputation for womanizing, and yet he is the one becoming infatuated with Edna; she draws him in and her gaze impels him to act in specific ways. In addition, Edna is described here in “all her awakening sensuousness,” and her newfound authority and power over others literally repels “the old, vanishing self in her.” In this case, Edna’s old, vanishing self is the self who once complied to society’s expectations of her.

Edna’s female gaze also functions outside the realm of sexuality, and she uses her gaze as a form of silent surveillance over those around her. But while Edna uses her gaze as a form of surveillance, she again differs from the male gaze in that she only looks to see what’s going on around her, and doesn’t seek any form of control. We see Edna gaze upon everyone as she sits at a party: “After Mrs. Pontellier had danced twice with her husband, once with Robert, and once with Monsieur Ratignolle, who was thin and tall and swayed like a reed in the wind when he danced, she went out on the gallery and seated herself on the low window-sill, where she commanded a view of all that went on in the hall and could look out toward the Gulf. There was a soft effulgence in the east. The moon was coming up, and its mystic shimmer was casting a million lights across the distant, restless water” (24). This passage is noteworthy for a number of reasons; for one, Edna dances with her husband, Robert, and Monsieur Ratignolle; the wording of the phrase puts Edna in control, rather than the three men, and Edna even describes Monsieur Ratignolle as a “reed in the wind” who “swayed” when he danced. Her gaze fixates upon him and perceives him as an object to be looked upon, much like she did with Adele. She also goes out to the gallery to sit on the window-sill, strategically positioning herself to “command a view

of all that went on in the hall” while being able to “look out toward the Gulf.” Here, Edna’s gaze sees everything going on inside, but her all-seeing eye also sees the mystical nature of the outdoors; she sees the moon coming up, and also sees “its mystic shimmer casting a million lights across the distant, restless water.” Those at the party are unaware of Edna’s surveillance, and yet she takes on a position of authority as she silently gazes upon those around her.

Edna also uses this authoritative and silent surveillance on Robert. Robert stays outside with Edna until Léonce comes back home, initially making it seem as if he is the one watching over her. But when Léonce and the others finally arrive, Robert leaves, thinking she is sleeping: “When the voices of the bathers were heard approaching, Robert said good-night. She did not answer him. He thought she was asleep. Again she watched his figure pass in and out of the strips of moonlight as he walked away” (30). Robert believes that Edna “was asleep,” and says goodnight to her. As readers, however, we see that she “did not answer him” because she is using her female gaze as a form of silent surveillance: “she watched his figure pass in and out of the strips of moonlight as he walked away.” The word “again” also implies that Edna has done this before. Léonce and the other bathers don’t see Edna watching Robert, and Robert himself is unaware that Edna is watching him because she intentionally pretended to be asleep.

It’s relevant to note here that Edna’s gaze may not be a perfect example of the female gaze as defined by scholars, but it would be unfair to expect this kind of perfection. Kate Chopin’s novel demonstrates forms of female resistance through Edna, but we also must consider the fact that both Edna—and even Chopin, for that matter—are still operating under a multiplicity of societal constraints that prevent this resistance from entering into the realm of perfection. That is, Edna is still embedded in a historical moment where she can’t have complete freedom, so given her circumstances, this is as far as her female gaze can develop. And while her

gaze functions in a sexual nature and surveils in a similar way as the male gaze, there's still a way to distinguish Edna's gaze from the male gaze while acknowledging its complexity. Earlier, I mentioned that dominating male behavior emerges as a result of a dominating male gaze. That is, Léonce sees Edna's body as something to be both surveilled, controlled, and manipulated to behave in a certain way, according to certain standards. By contrast, Edna gazes up subjects like Adele simply to examine them; she sees them as they are, describes them as they appear in the world and explains how they might be perceived by others, but doesn't use her gaze in a way that leads her to dominate or control their bodies.

Edna's female gaze gains even more authority through Chopin's use of cinematographic elements. The creation of cinema had coincidentally just started at the time *The Awakening* was published. Between 1896 and 1897, American cinema was designed to "transform many aspects of American life and culture—and to have an impact on photographic practices, screen practices (the illustrated lecture, the magic lantern, and so forth), theatrical culture, the newspaper, politics, art, religion, sports, and the nature of representation itself" (Musser 45-6). That is, the visual nature of cinema became an effective way of presenting alternate views along with different aesthetic and ideological perspectives of the world so as to appeal to audience members.

Chopin's novel incorporates several visual elements of cinematography as well, and these elements ultimately work to strengthen Edna's female gaze. For example, Christina R. Williams points out that Chopin's imagery leads the reader to focus on sensuality and the self: "The importance of imagery also reveals a novel centered less on feminism and more on the discovery of sensuality and the self beyond gender constructs. The overriding ocean metaphor, for example, illustrates Edna's awakening as one of sensual self-discovery and not of women's

social liberation” (Williams 61). While Williams attributes this overriding metaphor of self-discovery to imagery alone, I believe this imagery is particularly effective because of its cinematographic nature. Much like you might see in a movie, the vastness of the ocean becomes a symbol for Edna’s self-discovery: “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 13). Here, we see the ocean as a voice that “invites the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” and “lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.” It speaks directly to the soul itself, providing a means of self-discovery through inward contemplation.

The ocean and its link to self-discovery provides Edna’s gaze with an ultimate form of agency because the male gaze cannot gain access to its vastness. Edna’s gaze constantly shifts towards the water regardless of what else she might be looking at. When she is with Adele, for example, Edna’s eyes wander towards the ocean: “Edna Pontellier, casting her eyes about, had finally kept them at rest upon the sea. The day was clear and carried the gaze out as far as the blue sky went; there were a few white clouds suspended idly over the horizon” (15). After “casting her eyes about,” the one thing that fixates Edna’s gaze is the sea, and the sea actually “carries” Edna’s gaze “out as far as the blue sky went.” With such strong imagery, the reader is able to perceive just how vast the ocean is; it carries out “as far as the blue sky” and into “the horizon.” Edna later explains to Adele why she loves looking at the ocean so much: “First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at” (16). Here, the ocean “stretching so far away” against “motionless sails” captivates Edna’s gaze to the point where she sees the image as

a “delicious picture” she wants to sit and look at all day. This is similar to an “eyeline match” in cinematography—which begins with a character looking at something off screen, followed by a cut to what the character is looking at. An eyeline match strives to help the audience see exactly what the character is seeing. Earlier, I discussed how cinema was used to represent different aesthetic perspectives in the world by shaping the way a viewer perceives something. This moment in the novel emerges as one of those moments which affect the readers’ perception; it captivates the reader. We find ourselves drawn to imagining this expansive image, and Edna paints a picture for us that we can just sit and look at as well. While no work has been done on Chopin’s *The Awakening* and its relationship to cinematography, this is an area of research that could offer great insights into the female gaze.

Even when Edna strategically positions herself to look upon everyone at the party, she finds herself looking out toward the Gulf, where she sees the moon’s “mystic shimmer” as it casts “a million lights across the distant, restless water” (24). Here, Edna’s gaze describes the vastness of the sea to the reader again; it’s “distant” and “restless” and so large that “a million lights” from the moon’s “mystic shimmer” can reflect across it. In another moment, Edna’s gaze wanders from Robert, back to the ocean: “Her glance wandered from his face away toward the Gulf, whose sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty” (12). Here, the ocean’s “sonorous murmur” speaks directly to her “like a loving but imperative entreaty.” No one around her hears the ocean’s call, but Edna’s thoughts, along with her gaze, are constantly called toward the sea, and thus towards self-discovery.

The male gaze that controls Edna, however, never wanders to the vastness of the ocean and instead focuses on what it can control. As Edna learns to swim, and swims further out than she ever has before, “A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import

had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (27). But as Edna experiences this moment of exultation, triumph, self-discovery, and strength, the male gaze (those on the shore) focus only on themselves: “[Edna’s] unlooked-for achievement was the subject of wonder, applause, and admiration. Each one congratulated himself that his special teachings had accomplished this desired end” (27). Once Edna gets back to shore, Léonce even tells her ““You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you”” (28). Here, the controlling male gaze focuses on its “desired end” and “congratulates himself” on what it’s done to achieve this end. It surveils Edna in her moment of self-discovery, and tells her that she was “not so very far.” This insinuates that, had Edna been further out, the male gaze could have brought her back because it was “watching her.” On the contrary, however, Edna’s ability to gaze upon the vastness of the ocean, and turn its endlessness into a path toward self-discovery, makes her female gaze stand out as one which can comprehend, see, and feel that which the male gaze cannot. Furthermore, the imagery that describes to the reader just how vast and expansive the ocean is make’s Edna’s access to it seem even more powerful and authoritative.

Many scholars have linked Medusa to the female gaze. By linking Edna’s female gaze to that of Medusa, we see just how resistant and threatening Edna’s female gaze really is, and we realize its ability to see that which the male gaze cannot see. After Poseidon rapes Medusa, Athene punishes her even further because she believes Medusa has desecrated her temple—demonizing Medusa “with snakes for hair, making her stare petrify beholders into stone” and bringing her head into battle with her for protection (Alban 166). As a result, Medusa’s gaze was “made monstrous by patriarchy, [...] and her very monstrosity now comes full circle in her triumphant female gaze” (167). Susan Bowers further explores the idea of the female gaze in

relation to Medusa, employing a feminist reading of Medusa to “reveal that she is actually the icon of the female gaze, that powerful expression of female subjectivity and creativity” (Bowers 219). Bowers goes on to explain that Medusa, along with the female gaze, ““sees with an immediate "is-ness" that finds pretense, ideals, individuality and relatedness, irrelevant” and “Bore[s] into the soul to find the naked truth, to see reality beneath all its myriad forms and the illusions and defenses it displays” (63). That is, Medusa not only serves as an icon of patriarchal resistance, but actually diverges from the typical function of an authoritative gaze. Since Bowers’ article on the female gaze and Medusa, scholars have adopted this concept in a multiplicity of ways.⁴

We see this clearly through Edna’s character; she sees with this “is-ness” as she gazes upon Adele and the ocean simply to see beauty and vastness. We see her gaze fixate itself on the sea of self-discovery that “bore[s] into the soul to find the naked truth” and see “reality” as it is. And while the authoritative male gaze seeks to see things as they ought to be, and control things so as to maintain these standards, Medusa’s—and thus, Edna’s—authoritative female gaze sees things as they truly are. It seeks the truth, and serves as an immediate threat to the male gaze’s obsession with possession and control. That is, Edna sees Adele not only as a beautiful image that meets aesthetic standards, but also picks up on the idea that she’s perceived as a “faultless Madonna” by society as well. Adele is a mother woman, and according to society’s standards, she’s doing everything she ought to. But as a result, she’s become a figure who people—including Edna—look upon as the embodiment of perfection and passiveness, rather than as an

⁴ For some interesting uses of the female gaze and Medusa, see Thomas Albrecht’s work, who applied “The Medusa Effect” to representation and epistemology in Victorian aesthetics, or Derek Conrad Murray’s work, who uses the female gaze to discuss the implications of selfies, social media, and the specific positioning of young women and teens. The female gaze has even been applied by Shih-Chen Chao to examine eroticism in male homosexual romances specifically written for heterosexual females in the Greater China area.

individual with emotional depth. In short, she highlights what the patriarchy has done to Adele's identity and sees what no one else can see.

In addition, Bowers points out that the Medusa figure and the female gaze emerge directly as an "antidote to the male gaze" and also notes that "one avenue to women reclaiming their own sexuality, is the female gaze: learning to see clearly for themselves, thus reconstructing traditional male images of women" (Bowers 218). In other words, the female gaze not only serves as a rejection on the male gaze; it allows women to explore their own sexuality, and it gives them insight to their own individuality, allowing them to "see clearly for themselves." Medusa, for example, sees clearly for herself in that she "petrifies the enemy" but also works toward "avenging maternal justice" (Alban 164). The Medusa gaze not only takes on sexual agency, but simultaneously becomes terrifying to the patriarchy because it disrupts standards of power. Similarly, Edna's sexuality is awakened as she gazes upon both Adele and Alcée, and her awakened sexuality disrupts Alcée's status as a womanizer who consistently seduces women and suddenly leaves them, instead seducing him and then distancing herself.

The Medusa figure is historically slaughtered in common legend, and according to Bowers, the "sacrifice of Medusa-women enables the male communal expression of anger and violence that female eros and power provoke. Whereas Medusa's slaughter is symbolic, and no actual blood is spilled, the impact of her symbolic murder is profound for both women and men since it demonstrates the attempted destruction of real female power" (Bowers 225). In other words, the Medusa figure is struck down and disregarded by the patriarchy because she represents female power, and the presence of this power serves as a castration threat. The male gaze also fears being objectified by Medusa's female gaze, leading them to discredit her authority at all costs. And just as Medusa is slaughtered in common legend, or constantly turned

into a victim figure to discredit her agency, those around Edna dismiss her independence and resistance as sickness.

For example, Edna's husband sees the way she's been acting and we see his chain of thought as he wonders what's been going on: "It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier's mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (Chopin 57). Here, we see that Léonce sees his wife's newfound independence as her being "a little unbalanced mentally" and rather than interpreting this independence as a part of her identity, he believes that "she was not herself." As readers, we know that "she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self," but Léonce cannot see this; instead, he can only interpret the identity that Edna was forced to have according to patriarchal standards as her true self, and sees any divergence from this identity as a sickness.

In fact, Léonce becomes so convinced that Edna's new behavior is a form of illness that he eventually consults Doctor Mandelet, and the following conversation ensues: "'Madame Pontellier not well?' marveled the Doctor. 'Why, I saw her—I think it was a week ago—walking along Canal Street, the picture of health, it seemed to me.' 'Yes, yes; she seems quite well,' said Mr. Pontellier, leaning forward and whirling his stick between his two hands; 'but she doesn't act well. She's odd, she's not like herself'" (66). The doctor has actually seen Edna recently, and interpreted her at the time as "the picture of health" because he doesn't know the difference between how she's been behaving recently, and the way she used to behave. Without any context on her personality change, the world (including Doctor Mandelet) sees nothing wrong with Edna, and instead sees her as a vibrant, healthy woman. And Doctor Mandelet isn't the only one who

sees Edna in her changed state as the picture of health; we see this again after Edna visits Madame Lebrun and her son: “‘How handsome Mrs. Pontellier looked!’ said Madame Lebrun to her son. ‘Ravishing!’ he admitted. ‘The city atmosphere has improved her. Some way she doesn’t seem like the same woman.’” (61). Again, from an outsider’s perspective, it appears to everyone that “the city atmosphere has improved” Edna, even though she “doesn’t seem like that same woman.” She appears different in a good way, not in a way that suggests she is either mentally or physically unwell, and yet her husband remains convinced that she needs help from a doctor.

After Léonce asks Doctor Mandelet his opinion on Edna’s behavior, the doctor dismisses her changed state as a whim: “‘This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn’t try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone. Send her around to see me’” (67). Just as Léonce dismissed Edna’s resistance to his orders as “folly” earlier in the novel, Doctor Mandelet believes that Edna is only different because her change in behavior is caused by a “passing whim” that’s “due to some cause or causes which you and I needn’t try to fathom.” In other words, the doctor seems to dismiss Edna’s behavior as passing whims of a silly woman that men (him and Léonce, that is) don’t need to bother themselves about. After Léonce leaves, we learn that Doctor Mandelet believes Alcée Arobin is actually the cause of Edna’s altered state of mind, rather than considering that she may just be coming into her own individuality: “‘I hope it isn’t Arobin,’ he muttered to himself as he walked. ‘I hope to heaven it isn’t Alcée Arobin’” (71). In short, the male gaze only sees three possible causes for Edna’s newfound independence: mental instability, impulsive whims, or another man. Léonce and Doctor Mandelet don’t even consider independence and

individuality as reasons for these changes, perhaps because they are so accustomed to the patriarchal structure they live in that it's impossible for them to fathom anything else.

Edna Pontellier rebels from the patriarchal standards she's been confined to all her life. She distances herself from her role as a dutiful wife and mother, she lives on her own, she refuses to obey her husband's commands, and she no longer conforms to meet society's expectations of her. Despite being constantly objectified by a controlling male gaze, Edna establishes her own female gaze; as she gazes upon Adele, Alcée, and Robert, she is able to see things as they are, awaken her own sexuality, and silently surveil. As Edna focuses on the vastness of the ocean, detailing out its expansiveness through detailed cinematographic imagery, her gaze forges a path towards self-discovery that the male gaze cannot access. Her all-seeing gaze gains the ultimate form of agency, serving as a direct threat to the male gaze. And although the male gaze attempts to bring Edna down, the novel ends with Edna surrendering herself to the ocean, attaining full independence from the male gaze: "She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (115).

- Alban, Gillian M.E. "Medusa as Female Eye or Icon in Atwood, Murdoc, Carter, and Plath." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 163-182.
- Albrecht, Thomas. *The Medusa Effect: Representation and Epistemology in Victorian Aesthetics*. SUNY Press, 2010.
- Biggs, Mary: "'Si tu savais': The Gay/Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Women's Studies* 33.2 (2004): 145-81.
- Bowers, Susan R. "Medusa and the Female Gaze." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, pp. 217-235.
- Camastra, Nicole. "Venerable Sonority in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *American Literary Realism* 40.2 (2008): 154-66.
- Chao, Shih-Chen. "Grotesque Eroticism in the Danmei Genre: The Case of Lucifer's Club in Chinese Cyberspace." *Porn Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016.
- Church, Joseph. "The 'Lady in Black' in Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Explicator* 66 (2008): 196-97.
- Chopin, Kate. "Introduction." *The Awakening and Other Writings*. Edited by Suzanne L. Disheroon, Barbara C. Ewell, Pamela Glenn Menke and Susie Scifres, Broadview Press, 2011.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York, Dover Publications, 1993.
- Clark, Zoila. "The Bird That Came Out of the Cage: A Foucauldian Feminist Approach to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Journal for Cultural Research* 12.4 (2008): 335-47.
- Dirse, Zoe. "The Gender of the Gaze in Cinematography: A Woman with a Movie Camera." *Women Filmmakers Refocusing*. 2002, pp. 433-446.
- Elz, A. Elizabeth. "*The Awakening* and *A Lost Lady*: Flying with Broken Wings and Raked Feathers." *Southern Literary Journal* 35.2 (2003): 13-27.
- Gray, Jennifer B. "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and *The Awakening*." *Southern Literary Journal* 37 (2004): 53-73.
- Johnson, Patricia E. "The Gendered Politics of the Gaze: Henry James and George Eliot." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1997, pp. 39-54.
- Killeen, Jarlath. "Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *Religion and the Arts* 7.4 (2003): 413-38.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Macmillan, 1989.
- Murray, Derek Conrad. "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media." *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 2015.
- Musser, Charles. "1896-1897 Movies and the Beginnings of Cinema." *American Cinema*. Rutgers University Press, 2009.
- Saper, Craig. "A Nervous Theory: The Troubling Gaze of Psychoanalysis in Media Studies." *Diacritics*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1991, pp. 32-52.
- Williams, Christina R. "Reading Beyond Modern Feminism: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 53-65.