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Edna's Character

The society of Grand Isle places many expectations on its women to belong to men and be subordinate to their children. Edna Pontellier's society, therefore, abounds with "mother-women," who "idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it to a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals". The characters of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz represent what society views as the suitable and unsuitable woman figures. Mademoiselle Ratignolle as the ideal Grand Isle woman, a home-loving mother and a good wife, and Mademoiselle Reisz as the old, unmarried, childless, musician who devoted her life to music, rather than a man. Edna oscillates between the two identities until she awakens to the fact that she needs to be an individual, but encounters the resistance of society's standards to her desire.

Kate Chopin carefully, though subtly, establishes that Edna does not neglect her children, but only her mother-woman image. Chopin portrays this idea by telling the reader "...Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-woman seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle". Edna tries on one occasion to explain to Adele how she feels about her children and how she feels about herself, which greatly differs from the mother-woman image. She says: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money; I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me." This specifically contrasts the mother-woman idea of self-sacrificing for your husband and children. Also, the "something . . . which is revealing itself" does not become completely clear to Edna herself until just before the end, when she does indeed give her life, but not her self for her children's sake. Although Edna loves her children she does not confuse her own life with theirs.

Similarly to Edna's relationship with her children is that with her husband, Leonce. The Grand Isle society defines the role of wife as full devotion towards their husband and to self-sacrifice for your husband. Edna never adhered to the society's definition, even at the beginning of the novel. For example, the other ladies at Grand Isle "all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world." And "Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit she knew of none better". By using words like "forced" and "admit" Chopin illustrates Edna's true feelings towards Leonce. That she married him not because there are none better, but because there are also none worse. Edna's leaving Leonce's mansion is another important detail when considering her rebellion against the mother-woman idea. By moving to her own residence, Edna takes a colossal step towards autonomy, a direct violation of the mother-woman image. Throughout *The Awakening*, Edna increasingly distances herself from the image of the mother-woman, until her suicide, which serves as the total opposite of the mother-woman image.

Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, the two important female subsidiary characters, provide the two different identities Edna associates with. Adele serves as the perfect "mother-woman" in *The Awakening*, being both married and pregnant, but Edna does not follow Adele's footsteps. For Edna, Adele appears unable to perceive herself as an individual human being. She possesses no sense of herself beyond her role as wife and mother, and therefore Adele exists only in relation to her family, not in relation to herself or the world. Edna desires individuality, and the identity of a mother-woman does not provide that. In contrast to Adele Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz offers Edna an alternative to the role of being yet another mother-woman. Mademoiselle Reisz has in abundance the autonomy that Adele completely lacks. But Reisz's life lacks love, while Adele abounds in it. Mademoiselle Reisz's loneliness makes clear that an adequate life cannot build altogether upon autonomy. Although she has a secure sense of her own

individuality and autonomy, her life lacks love, friendship, or warmth.

What Edna chooses for her identity is a combination of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. More honest in self-awareness than Adele, more dependent on human relationships than Reisz.

In *The Awakening* the woman's existence intertwines with her maternal nature. Edna's sense of herself as a complete person makes impossible her role of wife and mother as defined by her society; yet she discovers that her role of mother also makes impossible her continuing development as an autonomous individual. So her thoughts as she walks into the sea comment profoundly on the identity problems that women face: "She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul". Unable to have a full human existence, Edna chooses to have none at all.

