

01. The Subversion of The Concepts of “The Angel in The House” and “Mother-Woman” in *The Awakening*¹

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Abstract

Although “The Angel in the House” was first introduced as a concept through Coventry Patmore’s poem of the same name, the ideal image of the Victorian woman had already been widely accepted. Even before Patmore’s poem, numerous literary works, including poetry, novels, and artworks, had depicted women in this manner. The cyclical relationship among social discourse, norms, and literature—where each influences and reinforces the other—ensured the persistence of this pattern. As the concept suggests, these “angels” were confined to their own sphere, the domestic realm, further solidifying the conventional image of women during the Victorian era. The belief that a woman belonged solely to the domestic sphere became so ingrained that even female writers of the time internalized it. However, with the emergence of feminist movements, critics such as Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter critically examined and sought to dismantle this symbolic figure. Grounded in feminist criticism, this study investigates how the discourse surrounding The Angel in the House extends beyond literature, becoming a reflection of women’s struggle for social freedom and professional agency. The core of this concept—motherhood—was later explored through a different lens by American writer Kate Chopin in her 1899 novel *The Awakening*. In this work, Chopin engages with The Angel in the House through the idea of the “mother-woman,” a term she introduces to describe the conventional maternal figure. While Adèle Ratignolle embodies this ideal, the novel’s protagonist, Edna Pontellier, subverts it. Within the rigid Creole society and her marriage, Edna rejects the prioritization of her husband and maternal duties, instead embracing her sexuality, individuality, and personal freedom. Through a feminist critical lens, this study examines how Chopin, through the character of Edna in *The Awakening*, challenges the long-standing traditional female archetype in literature and constructs a new model of womanhood.

Keywords: The Angel in The House, Mother-Woman, *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin

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“Evdeki Melek” ve “Anne-Kadın” Konseptlerinin *Uyanış*’ta Yıkılması³**Öz**

Her ne kadar The Angel in the House (evdeki melek) kavramı ilk olarak Coventry Patmore’un aynı adlı şiiriyle ortaya atılmış olsa da, Viktorya döneminin ideal kadın imgesi bu tarihten önce dahi geniş ölçüde benimsenmişti. Patmore’un eserinden önce pek çok edebi metin —şiir, roman ve sanat yapıtı— kadını benzer biçimde tasvir etmişti. Toplumsal söylem, normlar ve edebiyat arasındaki döngüsel ilişki, bu temsil biçiminin kalıcılığını sağlamıştır. Kavramın da ima ettiği üzere, bu “melekler” kendi alanları olan ev içi dünyayla sınırlandırılmış; böylece Viktorya döneminde kadının geleneksel konumu daha da pekişmiştir. Kadının yalnızca ev içi alana ait olduğu düşüncesi o denli kökleşmiştir ki, dönemin kadın yazarları dahi bu anlayışı içselleştirmiştir. Ancak, feminist hareketlerin yükselişiyle birlikte Virginia Woolf ve Elaine Showalter gibi eleştirmenler bu simgesel figürü eleştirel biçimde sorgulamış ve yıkıma uğratmayı amaçlamışlardır. Feminist eleştiri kuramı temelinde şekillenen bu çalışma, The Angel in the House kavramı etrafında gelişen söylemin edebiyat sınırlarını aşarak kadınların toplumsal özgürlük ve mesleki öznellik mücadelesinin bir yansımasına dönüştüğünü irdelemektedir. Bu kavramın özü olan “annelik” teması, Amerikalı yazar Kate Chopin tarafından 1899 tarihli *Uyanış* romanında farklı bir perspektiften ele alınmıştır. Chopin, bu eserinde The Angel in the House’u, geleneksel anne figürünü tanımlamak için kullandığı “mother-woman” (anne-kadın) kavramı aracılığıyla yeniden yorumlar. Adèle Ratignolle bu ideali temsil ederken, romanın başkahramanı Edna Pontellier bu ideale karşı çıkar. Katı Kreol toplumu ve evlilik kurumunun baskısı altında Edna, kocasını ve annelik görevlerini önceliklendirmeyi reddederek cinselliğini, bireyselliğini ve kişisel özgürlüğünü benimser. Feminist bir bakış açısıyla, bu çalışma Chopin’in *Uyanış* adlı eserinde Edna karakteri üzerinden edebiyattaki geleneksel kadın arketipine nasıl meydan okuduğunu ve alternatif bir kadınlık modeli inşa ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Evdeki Melek, Anne-Kadın, *Uyanış*, Kate Chopin

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Framing Femininity: The Angel in the House and the Mother-Woman

Similar to many other clichés and concepts that gained prominence during the Victorian era, “The Angel in the House” emerged as a widely favored characterization among writers. As Sağiroğlu asserts, social discourses arise as reflections of societal structures and respond to prevailing needs. Furthermore, such discourses confer significant social power upon the privileged groups (2023, p.227). Consequently, The Angel in the House has functioned as a literary mirror that defines the social role of women during the era, while simultaneously contributing to the reinforcement of women’s societal position through a didactic narrative.

The Angel in the House emerged in nineteenth-century England as a poetic ideal defining womanhood and femininity. First articulated in 1854 by Coventry Patmore as a tribute to his wife, the poem celebrates her devotion, humility, and selflessness—qualities that came to epitomize the Victorian ideal woman. With the consolidation of rigid gender roles during the period, such virtues confined women to the domestic sphere, portraying them primarily as moral guardians and caretakers within the household.

However, the poem’s vision extends beyond a mere glorification of feminine virtue. In *The Angel in the House*, Patmore intertwines philosophy, poetic language, and structure to form a unified moral and spiritual vision. The work envisions a cosmic order in which marriage stands at the center of both human and divine harmony. Within this framework, everyday life is endowed with spiritual significance, suggesting that submission to moral and social convention—though seemingly restrictive—leads to true peace, joy, and freedom (Moore, 2015, p. 58).

Despite its apparent veneration of idealized femininity, the poem’s underlying concern lies in the construction of Victorian masculinity. It reinforces women’s subordination by positioning them as instruments of male moral and emotional fulfillment rather than as autonomous beings. As Carol Christ (1980) observes, *The Angel in the House* may not be an exceptional poem artistically, yet it remains culturally significant for the way it defines sexual ideals and exposes the masculine anxieties that underlie them (p. 147).

This masculine-centered framework of womanhood—where female virtue exists primarily to affirm male identity—became a dominant ideological pattern throughout the nineteenth century. The angelic wife embodies purity, devotion, and obedience, existing not for herself but as a moral complement to man. It is precisely this restrictive construction of femininity that later female authors sought to interrogate and subvert. Within this context, the concept of the angel in the house finds a clear parallel in the notion of the “mother-woman” introduced by Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* (1899), both reinforcing comparable social expectations. The angel is expected to remain detached from the corrupting influences of the external world, dedicating herself solely to her husband. Although regarded as an asexual being, her sacred duty throughout life is to bear children (Hoffman, 2007, p. 265).

Patmore’s social discourse, deeply embedded within the ideological framework of the Victorian period, finds a significant extension in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* through the articulation of the mother-woman concept. Early in the novel, Chopin delineates this image with remarkable precision: “They were 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” (Chopin, 1899, p. 10). The representation of this ideal is conveyed not through the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, but through her

foil, Adèle Ratignolle. Before Adèle’s introduction as the embodiment of the ideal, the narrator explicitly distinguishes Edna from such women. Adèle functions as the quintessential manifestation of the traditional matriarchal figure—an exemplar of domestic devotion and self-effacement. As Edna herself observes, Adèle evokes the image of the Virgin Mary, embodying a sanctified model of femininity. Through her reverent performance of maternal and marital duties, she becomes the living symbol of the patriarchal ideal that Edna ultimately rejects (Aldrich, 2023, p. 3). In this respect, Patmore’s construction aligns with Chopin’s portrayal of the mother-woman, both reflecting ideological frameworks that define femininity through self-sacrifice, moral virtue, and domestic submission.

A comprehensive understanding of Chopin’s engagement with this ideal requires an examination of its origins within Victorian social and literary discourse. The nineteenth century constituted the period in which the domestic sphere was most rigidly codified for women. Marriage was positioned as the ultimate aspiration for young women, and social conventions were structured to sustain this expectation (Maika, 2011, p. 85). The exaltation of marriage and the confinement of women to the domestic domain found profound resonance in contemporary literature. Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* not only shaped prevailing cultural perceptions of womanhood but was also reinforced by them, generating a cyclical relationship between social ideology and literary representation. Long before Patmore formally articulated this concept, however, the domestication of women had been a recurring motif in British literature. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) encapsulates this cultural preoccupation with marriage in its oft-quoted opening line: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen, 1813/2012, p. 3). Similarly, Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) presents Agnes Wickfield as a distinguished embodiment of the angelic ideal whose moral integrity, domestic virtue, and emotional constancy secure her role as the protagonist’s moral counterpart. As a male author, Dickens frequently constructs a binary framework of female representation, contrasting the virtuous domestic angel, exemplified by Agnes, with the fallen woman, represented by Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, whose tragic demise functions as a moral admonition.

This idealization of domestic virtue, however, reveals the inherent limitations of the so-called ‘woman’s sphere.’ As Stensell (1987) contends, while this ideology appeared to grant women a degree of moral influence within the home and charitable work, it effectively confined them to the private sphere, denying them access to the public and professional realms. Such confinement, she argues, did not foster genuine female empowerment but instead reinforced an illusion of moral ascendancy that diverted women’s attention from crucial social and political concerns such as economics and governance (p. 467). Consequently, the moral and domestic ideals celebrated in both Victorian society and literature functioned less as a means of female elevation and more as a mechanism of control, ensuring women’s subordination under the guise of virtue and devotion.

In her essay “Professions for Women,” derived from a speech in 1931, Virginia Woolf critically engages with the concept of the angel in the house. Having written extensively on the expansion of the female sphere, Woolf, in this work, attempts to metaphorically ‘kill’ these domestic angels, whose image had become deeply ingrained in cultural consciousness. In doing so, she acknowledges the women writers who preceded her, emphasizing the relative ease of following the path they had courageously paved. In this regard, Woolf also alludes to sisterhood, one of the key concepts of first-wave feminism. At the beginning of her speech, which was later transformed into an essay, Woolf informs her audience that she was inspired by Coventry Patmore’s poem. While writing a critique of this poem, she resolved to kill the angel in the house. She describes these women as follows: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She

sacrificed herself daily” (p. 3). For Woolf, these spectral angels, whispering to her as she wrote, urging her to depict women as softer, more passive, and utterly selfless, had to be eradicated. Dismantling a concept that had been entrenched in literary tradition for over a century was, for Woolf, an obligation—particularly as a woman writer. As she asserts: “But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was bound to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the angel in the house was part of the occupation of a woman writer.” (p. 4) Woolf, placing her trust in the female pen as an instrument of intellectual resistance, pays homage to the pioneering women writers before her. Many of them, through their literary works, crafted female characters that actively challenged the dominant societal discourses of male authorship, effecting a significant shift in the trajectory of literature. Furthermore, Woolf and her contemporaries defied this oppressive ideal not only through their writings but also through their very existence as intellectuals. These women possessed a keen intellect that they were not expected to exert in the realm of creativity, critique, or the arts—yet they did so, in direct opposition to the expectations imposed upon them.

Virginia Woolf’s idea of killing the angel in the house would later exert a profound influence on feminist scholar and American literary critic Elaine Showalter, who revisited the metaphor in her essay of the same title. Showalter contends that even Woolf—despite her reputation as a daring and experimental writer—remained constrained by the literary traditions imposed upon women until the death of her father. Only after achieving complete personal and financial independence did Woolf produce her most innovative and forward-thinking works. Inspired by Woolf’s determination to liberate female creativity, Showalter turns her critical gaze toward her own contemporaries, observing that many women writers still struggle to escape the inherited boundaries of patriarchal literature. She remarks that “other women writers manifest more ambivalence; the struggle to keep in touch with ‘taboo’ but significant psychic levels of feeling and energy, and simultaneously search for covert, risk-free ways to present these feelings” (Showalter, 1992, p. 211).

Nevertheless, Showalter distinguishes the pioneering women writers of earlier generations from such ambivalence, emphasizing the limitations that shaped their literary production. It would be unjust, she suggests, to expect women whose lives were confined to the domestic sphere to write about experiences they were never permitted to have. As she observes, “Women, it is argued, never go anywhere or do anything; they have less experience to write about than men. But with so little opportunity for experience...” (p. 213). Like Woolf, Showalter pays homage to those women who, despite ridicule, marginalization, and censorship, expanded the boundaries of literary expression. Among these figures stands Kate Chopin, whose *The Awakening* (1899) challenged the moral codes of her time so radically that it remained banned for nearly eighty years. In this novella, Chopin transforms Woolf’s angel in the house into the equally constraining image of the mother-woman, exposing how both ideals reduce women to their domestic and reproductive roles. Through the deconstruction of this figure, Chopin anticipates the emergence of the New Woman—an embodiment of self-awareness, sensuality, and intellectual freedom.

As soon as the author introduces the concept of mother-woman to the reader she emphasizes that Edna is not one of these women. Throughout the novel, Chopin explores why Edna neither is nor ever will be a mother-woman, ultimately deconstructing this image. While Chopin is the one who introduces this concept, she does not invent it; rather, she merely renames an identity imposed on women by the era’s societal expectations. The almost-identical social structures and norms of Victorian England and America highlight the traditionalism of Grand Isle and the Southern states, where the novel is set (Schaffer, 1986, p.44). This contradictory conservatism led to a culture of discretion regarding women’s

health issues, including conditions that significantly impacted, and even endangered, their lives, as well as complications during childbirth. As a result, the majority of women were left to address their physical or psychological ailments on their own, often relying on secretly obtained handbooks. Since pregnancy and the postpartum period were cycles not every woman could complete ‘successfully,’ only those who managed to do so and continued to fulfill this role properly were revered with a Madonna-like virtue. Starting in the mid-century, society strongly emphasized the value of having children by idealizing motherhood to an almost reverent degree. On the other side of the sanctification of pregnancy and motherhood lies the shame that accompanies the visible signs of pregnancy. This physical transformation inevitably exposed the fact that a woman had engaged in sexual intercourse, making pregnancy both a mark of success and a source of embarrassment (Wertz, 1989, p.79).

One of the most prominent concepts within the Victorian women’s sphere, motherhood, served as a crucial medium for women to assert themselves. Women who bore enough children and fulfilled their maternal duties could attain a certain degree of influence or, at the very least, derive a sense of self-worth through their roles as mothers. By the nineteenth century, motherhood and childbirth were no longer perceived merely as biological realities but rather as indispensable components of a woman’s spiritual and moral identity (Auerbach, 1978, as cited in Jeremiah, 2002, p. 10). Consequently, throughout the novel, Edna’s acts of defiance are consistently met with criticism centered on her role as a mother. Motherhood, deemed the core of a woman’s identity, was expected to be carried out to perfection. This expectation also becomes a major source of conflict between Edna and her husband, Léonce, who repeatedly weaponizes her maternal role against her whenever she resists societal norms. As a result, Edna gradually begins to perceive her own children as antagonistic forces in her life.

Since Edna functions as the anti-hero in contrast to the mother-woman ideal, this role is instead embodied by the character of Adèle Ratignolle. Adèle, who adopts the mother-woman identity as effortlessly as she puts on her daily attire, epitomizes the perfect nineteenth-century woman. So much so that even within the Creole society, she is regarded as the ideal woman, and in Edna’s own mind, she becomes the very representation of feminine virtue. Thus, whenever Edna refers to Adèle, she aligns her with the archetype of motherhood, calling her a “faultless Madonna” (p. 13), drawing a direct parallel between Adèle and the sacred figure of the Virgin Mary. Throughout the novel, Adèle Ratignolle undergoes no character development; instead, she remains steadfast in her singular identity as a mother, which is reinforced in the reader’s mind through the childbirth scene near the end of the story. However, it is not Adèle but the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, who steadily subverses the concepts of the mother-woman and thus, the angel in the house.

Subversing The Concept of Mother-Woman In *The Awakening*

Kate Chopin defied the clichés imposed by patriarchal society, challenging conventional narratives of womanhood and motherhood. As a single mother, she portrayed motherhood in a way that neither restricted individual autonomy nor required the abandonment of personal aspirations. While Edna’s pursuit of selfhood in *The Awakening* occasionally disrupts the expectations placed upon her by her children and loved ones, she ultimately emerges as a powerful voice for the women of her time and a symbol of liberation for future female writers. Chopin not only engaged with the existentialist philosophy of her era but also reinterpreted it through the lens of a married woman with children, offering a perspective rarely explored in contemporary literature. Moreover, she subverted the idealized notion of motherhood, directly challenging the entrenched belief that a woman’s sole purpose should be unwavering devotion to her children and husband. Chopin presents a woman’s epiphany as she awakens

from a mechanized existence, despite the looming threats of societal alienation, the loss of the material comforts provided by her husband, the separation from her children, and even the ultimate sacrifice of her own life. Edna articulates this defiant assertion of selfhood in the novel: “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.” (p. 60). The notion of individualism embedded in these lines predates many of the seminal feminist works of the 20th century, such as Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. *The Awakening* was far ahead of its time, and for this very reason, it was perceived as a potential threat to future generations and banned when it is first published.

One of the defining traits that sets Edna apart from the usual women in the novel—and ultimately isolates her from her community—is her perceived ‘defective’ motherhood, particularly her emotional detachment from her children. From the very beginning, her husband continuously questions her maternal instincts, portraying her not only as an inadequate mother but also as lacking in artistry, devotion, wifehood, and femininity. However, it is her perceived failure in motherhood that garners unanimous disapproval. Léonce Pontellier openly reproaches Edna for what he sees as her neglect of their children: “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?” (p. 7). Ironically, as he ponders his wife’s supposed shortcomings when their son falls ill, he merely lights a cigar, believing his concern alone is sufficient to affirm his role as a father. Through this, Chopin satirizes the double standards surrounding motherhood and fatherhood—while Léonce is uncritically revered as the ideal husband, father, and household authority for no substantial reason, Edna is judged according to rigid, hypocritical expectations. The societal bias in favor of Léonce is further reinforced by the women around Edna: “And the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better” (p. 9). In this passage, Chopin exposes the performative nature of patriarchal praise, which elevates men effortlessly while holding women to unattainable standards.

The double standards of a society that denies mothers the right to individual autonomy serve as a central concept that Chopin seeks to dismantle throughout the novel. A woman who has never been allowed to exist for herself can only engage with her children out of obligation rather than authentic emotional connection, resulting in inherently fragile maternal bonds. What distinguishes Chopin as one of the rare writers of her time is her refusal to cast this emotional detachment as the mother’s personal failing; instead, she presents it as an inevitable consequence of societal oppression. Chopin seeks to portray a woman whose journey toward self-sufficiency and self-awareness remains incomplete, ultimately rendering her unable to nurture another individual successfully. Simone de Beauvoir directly addresses this issue in her discussion of motherhood: “When a mother cannot achieve transcendence in other fields, she may well resort to dominating her child, trying to make the child into her double.” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 569). During this period, many so-called devoted mothers, having been denied the opportunity to cultivate a sense of self beyond their roles as wives and caregivers, raised children who were overly dependent and lacking in confidence (Stone, 2017, p.128). In contrast, Edna’s assertion of individuality and pursuit of self-reliance contribute to the development of her sons as independent and resilient individuals. “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” (p. 9).

When the novel was first published, Edna’s indifference toward her children led to harsh criticism not only from men but also from women. Moreover, she was considered too unconventional and

unsympathetic for the women of her time. The dilemma lies in the fact that Edna is neither depicted as the angelic, nurturing mother figure by the author nor by herself. Edna represents the New Woman engaged in a journey of self-discovery, deliberately portrayed as a woman entitled to make mistakes in motherhood, companionship, and love, just as men are. While the imperfection of human nature is reflected in many literary characters, a woman’s failure as a mother or wife is often interpreted as a moral defect rather than an expression of her humanity. In addressing this controversial maternal image, Chopin refrains from portraying Edna with shame or moral reproach. Instead, she offers the reader an alternative perspective that prevents the protagonist from being reduced to an antagonist, allowing her complexity and individuality to emerge without judgment (Mikolchak, 2004, p. 39).

Edna’s perceived flaws in motherhood and femininity, which are consistently scrutinized by society throughout the novel, are also mirrored in her physical appearance. Having internalized the Creole community’s standards of womanhood, Edna unconsciously measures herself against these ideals, which find their fullest expression in Adèle Ratignolle. Adèle’s perfection in motherhood and domestic virtue is reflected in her external beauty; she thus becomes the living embodiment of Patmore’s symbolic “angel” within Chopin’s narrative. Described as an “angel” and a “fair lady” reminiscent of chivalric poetry, Adèle is portrayed as “the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm,” and “her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent” (Chopin, 1899, p. 10). In contrast, Edna’s physical features lack this idealized delicacy. Her appearance is described in more austere and traditionally masculine terms: “Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful” (Chopin, 1899, p. 4). This characterization, however, does not suggest that Edna fails to embody womanhood simply because she lacks conventional femininity. Rather, it underscores the novel’s thematic opposition between two symbolic figures—Adèle as the representation of idealized, socially sanctioned femininity, and Edna as the figure who resists and redefines it. As Langland (1987) observes, Adèle may be regarded as a distinctively feminine construct, designed to re-create the ideal of womanhood and thereby reinforce the contrast with Edna’s refusal to conform to such norms (p. 382).

Edna, in contrast to Adèle, is a woman who consistently defies established norms and social discourses. Her sharp gaze and angular physique mirror the internal dissonance that defines her character—an image that Chopin renders with deliberate precision. As Schweitzer observes, within the framework of Victorian tradition, true womanhood was intrinsically tied to sexual passivity. A woman of Edna’s social standing was expected to embody the traits of a caregiver and derive fulfillment from her fertility and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, the construction of female identity during this period was largely determined by limited social interactions within the domestic sphere. Within such a framework, passion, sexuality, and freedom—concepts deemed improper for respectable women—were redirected toward expressions of care and affection for one’s husband and children. For Edna, however, this dynamic functions in reverse. Within the confines of marriage, she experiences only dissatisfaction and emotional desolation. As she embarks upon her journey of self-discovery, she redirects her passion and desire away from domesticity and toward the new people and experiences she encounters, expressing them with a fervor that defies convention (Schweitzer, 1990, p. 169). Edna’s awakening from the role of the ideal wife, and her pursuit of sensual fulfillment even within the sanctity of marriage, fundamentally destabilize the traditional matriarchal order and endow her with a distinct and autonomous identity (Mikolchak, 2004, p. 31).

In the novel, actions and dialogues are relatively limited; however, the reader gains deeper insight into the characters, particularly Edna, through their inner voices. It is not only her appearance and

unconventional way of living but also her unguarded thoughts that reveal her true nature, painting a more vivid portrait of her character. Edna’s nonconformity not only sets her apart but also subtly prepares both the Creole society and the reader for the novel’s controversial ending. While Adèle remains preoccupied with domestic patterns and knitting new winter clothes for her children, Edna’s detachment from traditional maternal concerns is evident: “Mrs. Pontellier’s mind was quite at rest concerning the present material needs of her children” (p. 11). Adèle’s portrayal as the epitome of feminine perfection is so glorified in the novel that many readers and critics might easily assume that, like Patmore’s *Angel in the House*, Chopin is offering praise for the mother-woman. However, it becomes evident that Adèle serves male archetypes and exists as a puppet in an illusory life.

As the embodiment of both the mother-woman and the angel in the house, Adèle Ratignolle exemplifies the woman molded to please and serve men. Her existence revolves around sustaining male approval, fulfilling her prescribed duties as a wife and mother, and upholding the moral expectations imposed by Creole society. These socially sanctioned roles define her identity and secure her admiration within a community where patriarchal structures regulate women’s choices and delimit their agency. Within this framework, men exercise economic and social authority that enables them to control women’s lives and assign their roles, leaving little room for autonomy or self-definition (De Palencia, 1947, p. 177). Adèle thus becomes the ideal female subject fashioned by patriarchal ideology—obedient, ornamental, and compliant. Her conformity extends beyond conduct to physical appearance; she embodies conventional standards of beauty and desirability shaped by male perception, serving as the visible manifestation of patriarchal fantasy rather than an autonomous self.

The dynamics underlying this representation parallel what Laura Mulvey later conceptualized as the male gaze in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Within this framework, the female body is positioned as an object of visual pleasure and passive desire within patriarchal systems of representation (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 6–8). Although formulated within film theory, this notion aptly illuminates Chopin’s literary portrayal of Adèle, whose identity is constructed through the perceptions and expectations of the men around her. She thus emerges not as a self-determining figure but as a reflection of male desire, an embodiment of idealized femininity sustained by patriarchal vision.

The concept of the male gaze is not confined solely to cinema and the visual arts; it also permeates literature, where similar patterns of representation can be traced. The portrayal of women as passive subjects to be observed by the active male gaze reinforces the structural hierarchy of representation, further perpetuating the ideological framework dictated by patriarchal systems (Mulvey, 1975, p. 13). Although Laura Mulvey’s critique primarily addresses the sexualization of the female body through a psychoanalytic Freudian perspective, her theoretical insights illuminate the mechanisms by which women in literature are similarly objectified. Within this context, Adèle Ratignolle—whose sexuality is never overtly depicted—becomes fetishized through her poetic beauty, unwavering devotion to her husband, and her idealized embodiment of maternal virtue. These traits construct her as the quintessential image of the angel in the house and the mother-woman, both of which glorify female self-effacement and moral purity as the highest feminine virtues.

However, Chopin’s narrative purposefully destabilizes these ideals through Edna Pontellier’s awakening. By juxtaposing Adèle’s passive conformity with Edna’s growing self-awareness and rejection of prescribed gender roles, Chopin exposes the oppressive nature of these archetypes. Edna’s refusal to define her worth through motherhood or wifely submission subverts the Victorian constructs of womanhood that demand emotional restraint and domestic servitude. In doing so, Chopin not only

dismantles the symbolic authority of the angel in the house and the mother-woman but also reclaims female desire, autonomy, and subjectivity as legitimate forms of existence beyond patriarchal definition.

Within this framework, Edna Pontellier may be read as an early literary embodiment of feminine self-awareness and resistance to patriarchal idealization. She represents what can be described as the female gaze—a perspective that stands in direct opposition to the traditional male gaze by rejecting women’s objectification and instead emphasizing their emotional complexity, agency, and subjectivity. The female gaze redirects attention toward women’s inner lives, allowing them to define their own narratives rather than exist as passive objects of male desire. Through her awakening—rooted in self-exploration, sexuality, and individuality—Edna subverts the domestic ideals personified by Adèle Ratignolle and anticipates a more autonomous conception of womanhood that transcends societal expectations.

Adèle, by contrast, functions as the moral and ideological counterpoint to Edna, embodying the patriarchal ideal of maternal devotion and moral propriety. Her position as the antithesis of female autonomy becomes especially evident when she pleads with Edna not to elope, invoking the image of her children as chains binding her to duty and self-sacrifice. In doing so, Adèle assumes the role of moral authority—acting as the voice of conscience both for Edna and for Robert Lebrun. Whether her intervention stems from genuine concern or from her internalized obligation to fulfill the role of a self-effacing mother, she remains deeply entrenched within the patriarchal system that venerates her conformity. Adèle is idealized by those around her—by husbands, wives, and her own family—as the perfect embodiment of womanly virtue, whereas Edna’s defiance exposes the restrictive nature of such ideals.

In this contrast between the two women, Chopin dramatizes the opposing models of motherhood that Mary Wollstonecraft articulated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft asserts that “to be a good mother, a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers...” (p. 335). Adèle embodies the meek, dependent wife whose virtue lies in submission, while Edna, through her awakening, seeks the intellectual and emotional independence that Wollstonecraft deems essential to genuine motherhood and selfhood.

Edna’s awakening and her subsequent acts of defiance unfold in a sequential manner. As Virginia Woolf later argues in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), a woman must first have financial independence and then a space of her own. Although Woolf refers specifically to women engaged in fiction writing, Edna’s artistic devotion lies in painting. Despite receiving no support from those around her—especially from her husband—she clings to this passion as a means of resistance against the domestic confinement that increasingly suffocates her. She often locks herself in her room for hours, immersing herself in painting, ignoring external demands, only to be accused by Léonce of neglecting her children. As always, the Creolesociety and Léonce compare her to Adèle: “There’s Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn’t let everything else go to chaos. And she is more of a musician than you are a painter” (p. 73). Even in her artistic pursuits, Adèle conforms to societal expectations, whereas Edna is isolated as an outcast the moment she begins to act for herself. The issue at stake is not her motherhood but rather the realization that she is transgressing the boundaries imposed upon her—an unsettling prospect for Léonce, who senses the growing threat to his authority. Indeed, Edna’s passion for painting marks the beginning of the dissolution of the Pontellier household. As Mademoiselle Reisz asserts; “A true artist must possess a courageous soul” (p.81). For the first time, Edna embraces an identity beyond that of a wife and mother, fully committing herself to a pursuit that grants her personal fulfillment. When

this last refuge—her art—also faces compromise, she recognizes the necessity of fulfilling Woolf’s first condition: financial independence. Selling both the small inheritance from her family and her own paintings, she secures the second necessity—a space of her own—by purchasing the pigeon house. Here, she not only deepens her artistic engagement but also discovers a newfound sense of self, one that exists outside the roles imposed upon her. The pigeon house becomes not merely a sanctuary for her art but also a symbol of her sexual autonomy as a woman. Heilmann examines Edna’s progression as a journey marked by dissatisfaction and despair, which, in turn, foster a mental and sexual resistance. This resistance manifests in physical detachment, ultimately leading her to acquire the pigeon house, a space where she can assert control over her life and sexuality. Furthermore, Heilmann interprets Edna’s public announcement of her move to the pigeon house on her twenty-ninth birthday as both a celebration of her newfound autonomy and a manifesto of her anarchic spirit. Consequently, this act serves as a definitive rejection of the traditional wife archetype, affirming her transformation into a liberated woman (2008, p.95).

At this point, Edna begins to see Alcée Arobin, a notorious womanizer, and even engages in a physical relationship with him. Without any romantic expectations, she continues the affair solely for her own physical gratification. Having already defied the conventional mother-woman archetype, Edna shows no hesitation in moving into a separate home or engaging with other men, despite the inevitable scrutiny of society. She remains unbothered by public censure, even when her dear friend Adèle disapproves of her actions and ceases visiting her. As expected, however, the moment Edna secures the bare minimum requirements for her independence, she begins to think about her children, longing for them. This shift reveals that Edna does not fundamentally reject motherhood or her children; rather, her struggle is with the restrictive roles imposed upon her. On the contrary, Edna resists both societal expectations and the notion that seeks to reduce her to a mere doll’s house figure by idealizing the concept of the ‘exclusive mother,’ as Simone de Beauvoir suggests. She asserts that “The child ought not to be the limit of his mother’s horizon” (1949, p. 582). Accordingly, Edna’s perspective, along with that of many female characters shaped by feminist theory, underscores the idea that a mother’s personal fulfillment is just as essential to her children’s well-being as her presence itself. She rejects those who attempt to dictate how she should mother, sacrifice, and dedicate herself entirely to her children. In other words, as Edna broadens her perspective—replacing the withered remains of obligation with the fresh bloom of personal renewal—her attitude toward her children also softens and becomes more affectionate.

As we reach Edna’s death—often regarded as tragic—what stands out is her unwavering commitment to her beliefs and her refusal to compromise her sense of freedom. While some may perceive her suicide as a tragic and futile end, it ultimately signifies the fulfillment of her fundamental objective. As she had previously told Adèle, she remains steadfast in her declaration that she would sacrifice neither herself nor her autonomy for anyone: “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” (p. 60). Having tasted the forbidden fruit of freedom, Edna experiences a moment of realization during her final conversation with Robert. She recognizes that, like Léonce and her children, Robert, too, desires to possess her. In that instant, her vision of a liberated existence dissolves—returning to her family would mean surrendering once again to the chains she has worked so hard to break. Robert, unable to offer her an alternative, ultimately abandons her once more.

Moreover, in a rare moment of introspection and self-criticism, Edna acknowledges that life no longer holds any meaningful promise for her:

"There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone" (p. 148).

Her suicide is not an act of surrender. As she herself proclaimed, the one thing she could never relinquish was her own self—and she never wavers in this conviction. To continue living would mean betraying everything she has fought for, forfeiting the freedom she has earned. In contrast, her death allows her to reclaim an unburdened existence, stripped of all the constraints that society has imposed upon her. Rather than enduring a life filled with compromises and failures, she returns to the most untamed, primal version of herself. In her final moments, all that remains in her memory is the pure, untainted joy of running through the meadows as a child. In the end, she surrenders her body for the very freedom she has lived for.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in relation to the Victorian-era concept of the angel in the house, specifically through its manifestation in the novel as the mother-woman figure and its subsequent subversion by the author. During the period in which the novel was written, the angel in the house ideal was frequently reinforced in literary works as a moral lesson for female readers, denying women a role in the outer sphere and compromising their individual identity. However, in *The Awakening*, Chopin challenges this ideal through the lens of motherhood, a central theme in contemporary discourse. Chopin presents this critique through the contrasting characters of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, and Adèle Ratignolle, who represents the conventional mother-woman. The most striking aspect of Chopin's portrayal, however, is that Edna—who explicitly rejects the mother-woman role—is not demonized. On the contrary, Chopin emphasizes the uniqueness of female experience by exploring themes of female sexuality, economic independence, and creative self-expression. Rather than positioning Edna as an antagonist within the conservative and traditional Creole society, Chopin presents her as an expressive individual who exists beyond the confines of motherhood. In reclaiming her freedom, Edna does not act passively but instead exhibits a highly reactive defiance—rejecting not only her husband's physical and psychological dominance but also the restrictive and hypocritical norms of motherhood imposed upon her. Although her death may leave readers in a moral dilemma, when viewed through the lens of female emancipation and individuation, it becomes evident that her choice is not a contradiction of her character arc but rather a final assertion of her autonomy. Edna does not renounce her existence; she relinquishes her life without compromising her sense of self. Regardless of whether one interprets her ending as tragic or liberating, *The Awakening* ultimately presents Edna's struggle as a solitary act of resistance against the mother-woman and angel in the house ideologies. Through this defiance, she attains her own sense of freedom, solidifying her role as a subversive figure in the literary canon.

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