

Melancholia and the Infinite Sadness¹: Chopin's Daring Revelation of Depression in *The Awakening*

Interpretation of Kate Chopin's Novel

Seminar in Liberal Studies

By Kelly Williams

November 14, 2011

¹ Melancholia and the Infinite Sadness is a word play on the *Smashing Pumpkins* 1995 recording "Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness", oddly enough a piano melody. Corgan, Billy, Byrne, Mike, Fiorentino, Nicole, Schroeder, Jeff, *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, Virgin Records US, October 24, 1995, compact disc.

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is a daring exploration of the suffering of depression by women when such a diagnosis was just developing. Before the 19th century, from antiquity into modern times, the common term to define a depressive disorder was *melancholia*.² This broad term encompassed a number of psychological disorders and, according to Gerit Glas, the debate over "mood disorders" lasted well into the 20th Century.³ Through the character of Edna Pontellier, the novel contains several typical symptoms of the disorder as we recognize it today: sadness or unhappiness, crying spells for no apparent reason, thoughts of death, restlessness, frustration, excessive sleeping or insomnia, slowed thinking and a loss of interest in normal activities.⁴

One of the most common pieces of advice to an author is to write what you know. Chopin may not have directly experienced the dilemma's experienced by her character Edna, but the author's past suggests that she had a great deal of insight into the issues contained within the text. Nancy A. Walker discusses these points in her introduction to the novel.⁵ Chopin's environment in childhood as well as adulthood bred a woman who was ahead of her time. Her mother "told her stories that emphasized the role of strong women in her maternal ancestry" and made sure her daughter was well educated.⁶ Much like her character Edna, Kate was not in love with the upper middle class society she was part of, nor the limitations it provided young women.⁷ Also like her character Edna, she married a man that would provide a sensible match

² *Melancholia*, the build up of black bile in the system, which gives the sufferer a sense of despondency or mania. Glas, Gerit, "A Conceptual History of Anxiety and Depression," in *Handbook of Depression and Anxiety*, ed. den Boer, Johan A., Kasper, Siegfried, Sitsen, J.M.A., (New York: Marcel Dekker Inc.: 2003), 3-4.

³ (Glas, 5, 16).

⁴ Depression (Major Depression), Mayo Clinic, last modified February 11, 2010, <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/depression/DS00175/DSECTION=symptoms>

⁵ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 3-21.

⁶ (Chopin, 3).

⁷ *ibid.*, 5, 35.

and happened to be a mercantile businessman.⁸ Kate lived in New Orleans for several years and experienced greater freedom than most women of her time.⁹ In her thirties, she was known to be attached to a noted womanizer.¹⁰ Walker then comes out and directly states that much of what she experienced ended up in her fiction.¹¹ With much of what she knew, first or second hand, filling up her work, it is highly likely that knowledge of depression (then Melancholia) was within her repertoire.

The popular publication “The Ladies’ Home Journal” was in wide circulation at the time of Chopin’s writing and was in a habit of publishing items on women’s suffrage and health as well as literary pieces by eminent writers.¹² Walker suggests that such journals would have been read or well known to Chopin in her New Orleans crowd.¹³ But it was not just this journal that discussed women’s health, more precisely mental health. Richard L. Golden discusses the interest in his paper “William Osler’s ‘The Nervousness of American Women’.”¹⁴ He quotes the letter to Dr. Osler from the Journal’s editor:

“one fact stands out prominently: Not a single man seems to see the situation clearly, and where he does his observations are confined to discussion at medical conferences and published in medical journals which are never seen by the lay public.”¹⁵

Though the journal approached Dr. Osler to write on the topic several years after the publication of *The Awakening*, the piece was not actually published in the journal, due to professional

⁸ Ibid., 5, 39-40.

⁹ Ibid., 7, 11, 23, 87.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11, 42, 119.

¹¹ Ibid., 7

¹² Golden, Richard L., “William Osler’s ‘The Nervousness of American women’,” *History of Psychology* 11, No. 1 (2008): 1

¹³ (Chopin, 9).

¹⁴ (Golden, 3).

¹⁵ Ibid.

concerns of Osler.¹⁶ However, Chopin, being a woman and one who experienced a woman's life, could discuss the issues of depression in her earlier narrative. Although critics panned the work, the notions Chopin held about issues current to her time were still sought out and she had made quite an impact with the novel.¹⁷ Negative press is still press and people did read the book.

The author's history aside, proof of depression is in the details of the narrative. Linda M. McMullen writes about the usage of language by women who are being treated for depression in her piece "Metaphors in the Talk of 'Depressed' Women in Psychotherapy."¹⁸ McMullen notes a similarity of linguistic imagery used by those suffering one or more of the forms of depression (some examples are a sense of descent or being pressed or held down).¹⁹ In reviewing the notes about the patients, there existed a commonality among them in that they felt a need to set aside their personal needs to care for their husbands or lovers, often excessively.²⁰ They also felt that whatever it was they did was not good enough or would somehow be damaged if they attempted it.²¹ This culminates in the women perceiving themselves as deficient and the author suggests it is due to the status of women in society, a sentiment echoed by Osler.²² McMullen teaches us that the words women use "in their social contexts" can show us "the particular state of being we call 'depressed'."²³

Moving to Chopin's narrative let's explore Edna's language and see the evidence of her suffering. Chopin writes, "Robert talked a good deal about himself" and conversely "Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself." We see here that Edna is repressing herself, allowing

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ (Chopin, 15-19).

¹⁸ McMullen, Linda M., "Metaphors in the Talk of 'Depressed' Women in Psychotherapy," *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne* 40, No. 2 (1999): 102-111.

¹⁹ (McMullen, 103).

²⁰ Ibid., 105-108.

²¹ Ibid.

²² (McMullen, 109) and (Golden, 6).

²³ Ibid., 102.

Robert to dominate the conversation.²⁴ This is not such a condemning example until the other examples of her behavior and words are considered. Later that evening, Mr. Pontellier returns from his outing and chides her for not paying him any attention. Edna fails him as a wife and he makes her feel it. She sits alone and cries.²⁵ Though her husband's actions seem to be reason enough to burst into tears, the narrative tells us that she does not in fact know why she cries.²⁶ She also cries when Madame Reisz plays the piano for her.²⁷ This scene is full of images McMullen would easily include in her research if Edna was among the women of her study. Chopin describes Edna's reaction to the music with words such as plaintive, minor, and hopeless resignation. Edna waits for images of "solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair" and is subsequently disappointed.²⁸ However, she is "lashed" by emotions that make her cry.²⁹

Following that instance, the party moves down to the ocean and we are shown Edna struggling to swim and finally accomplishing her goal. Despite her enthusiasm for the accomplishment, she disparages it by saying "It is nothing" and "think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!"³⁰ It reminds us of when she tore up her sketch of Madame Ratignolle, although it was viewed positively by those around her, finding it unacceptable herself.³¹ She also thinks of her art as dabbling, dismissing it noncommittally.³²

Another scene that describes Edna's suffering is where she goes to the beach with her friend Madame Ratignolle. Edna remains silent and gazes out to sea blankly. When questioned

²⁴ (Chopin, 25).

²⁵ Ibid., 27, 29.

²⁶ Ibid., 28.

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

³¹ Ibid., 33.

³² Ibid., 32, 96.

by Ratignolle on what she is thinking, she responds “nothing.”³³ Then, she backtracks, excusing her response and slowly attempts to piece together a reasonable answer.³⁴ This slow response is one of the symptoms of depression that the staff at the Mayo Clinic list under their description of depression.³⁵ Further evidence of Edna’s depression can be found in her distant interactions with her children. Both her husband and her friend Madame Ratignolle notice this.³⁶ However, Edna is not oblivious to the strangeness of her motherly emotions. She thinks on her feelings toward her children, wondering at her ambivalence.³⁷ Much like one of McMullen’s participants, Edna reflects on her thoughts and actions as if they belong to another person.³⁸

On several occasions the act of sleep is mentioned. For instance, we have the night when her husband disrupts her rest, the night of her swim, after church, after she has been with Arobin and the lack of it when Robert leaves.³⁹ Other symptoms make themselves known in her restlessness in moving about town, out of her home and throwing the dinner party.⁴⁰

More blatant language is used to leave the reader with no question as to Edna’s suffering with Depression. “When the weather was dark and cloudy, Edna could not work. She needed the sun to mellow and temper her mood to the sticking point.”⁴¹ Edna is restless and dark weather exacerbates this, much like seasonal depression disorders. She also mentions the depression as if a physical entity, “the shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she abandoned herself to tears.”⁴² She describes herself as “one who awakens gradually out of a

³³ Ibid., 37.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Depression (Major Depression), Mayo Clinic, last modified February 11, 2010, <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/depression/DS00175/DSECTION=symptoms>

³⁶ (Chopin, 26, 29, 69, 134).

³⁷ Ibid., 134.

³⁸ (McMullen, 105).

³⁹ (Chopin, 26, 54, 57, 59, 101, 136).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 87, 105, 107, 109-114.

⁴¹ Ibid., 96.

⁴² Ibid., 34.

dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities *pressing* into her soul.”⁴³ She also blames herself for her husband’s bad humor, in line with McMullen’s study.⁴⁴ Edna describes “a feeling of oppression and drowsiness” when she attends church service.⁴⁵ In her final conversation with Doctor Mandelet, she openly admits her issue, telling him, “there are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me.”⁴⁶ However, this conversation and admission takes place far too late. The final bit of language used to describe Edna’s state of mind is during a scene that is generally accepted as her suicide. “Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her.”⁴⁷

But, it is not just through Edna that we experience the symptoms of her depression. Her husband complains of her change to Doctor Mandelet and his confusion over what it is.⁴⁸ The Doctor is very understanding, expressing his experience in such things and we later see him try to approach Edna to come to him with her problem.⁴⁹ Madame Ratignolle also sees the change in her friend. She warns Robert that Edna is taking him seriously and that it can only end badly.⁵⁰ She also tries to remind Edna that she has children to care for, perhaps to give her something substantial to focus on.⁵¹ All of this was about Chopin using language to permit the reader to view Edna’s suffering and gain a clear picture of her illness.

Themes throughout the novel reflect the accepted assumptions of the psychology of women and emotions during the late 19th century. To understand those assumptions, let us return to Dr. Osler’s unpublished work. Dr. Osler refers to the condition as *nervousness*. He attributes

⁴³ Emphasis mine, *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 134-135,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

the cause of nervousness to heredity and environment.⁵² His words are not as sophisticated as today's doctors, but the ideas of genetic predisposition can be seen flowering out of his ideas. The doctor also suggests that environment can have a great affect on one's nerves. By this he means interpersonal relationships as well as factors such as pollution.⁵³ (Several of his examples are given in analogy to horses, which is amusing if not startling when compared to the text of Chopin's work. Edna comes from a horse family.) Dr. Osler would have pointed to Edna's reflection on her childhood.⁵⁴ He would have suggested that the death of her mother, quarreling with her high strung sister and subsequent shortening of her childhood was a contributing factor.⁵⁵ Also, her high strung angry father would have made her more sensitive.⁵⁶

Edna's environment was one of oppression. The society she kept required her to fit her personality into one of three clearly defined archetypes of womanhood. Her friend Madame Ratignolle represents the mother, the absolute ideal of "womanly grace and charm."⁵⁷ Next, Chopin gives us the second acceptable role of woman in Madame Riesz. Mme. Riesz is the clinical spinster. She is the irascible woman who could not find an agreeable match, choosing an art or other womanly diversion to throw her life into instead. Though this role is acceptable, Chopin shows us that those around Riesz find her disagreeable.⁵⁸ She is described as plain if not ugly, bitter and somewhat unbalanced.⁵⁹ She is maligned for her choice in lifestyle. However, she is not so maligned as the third figure which can be found in the young Mariequita.

⁵² Golden, 8.

⁵³ Ibid., 9-11.

⁵⁴ (Chopin, 37) and (Golden, 9).

⁵⁵ (Chopin 38).

⁵⁶ (Golden, 9).

⁵⁷ (Chopin, 29).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 46-47, 81.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 47.

Mariequita presents us the free spirit and harlot. She chooses to do as she wants, both sexually and otherwise. She is described as young and pretty, but also poor.⁶⁰

Edna is expected to choose from one of the three archetypes presented her. She embarks on journey through each door, simultaneously at times. In her journeys, she finds that she does not fit into the roles presented her and this forces a realization of the cage that contains womanhood at her time. Dr. Osler would not be surprised by this treatment. Golden quotes the doctor's comment on a book about women's achievements up to his time, "It's a pretty bad record, but it is not surprising when you consider how they have been treated for centuries."⁶¹ The turn of the century, despite the nostalgia we may feel looking back, was a repressive age for women. While men went about their business with abandon, women were expected to hold to a model of decorum that bordered on impossibility. The frustration they felt could easily have led to depression, especially when it was written off as silliness.

Stephanie Shields discusses this in her work "Passionate men, Emotional Women: Psychology Constructs Gender Difference in the Late 19th Century." She states that the terms used to describe expressed emotions greatly varied by gender; positive for men and quite negative for women.⁶² Likewise, McMullen mentions the shift from attributing Melancholia with noble beauty (men) to a boorish ugliness (women).⁶³ This belief was used to enforce social boundaries and hierarchies.⁶⁴ This is something Chopin would have been an expert in. Being a member of the upper middle class, she was well versed in decorum.⁶⁵ Walker also reminds us

⁶⁰ (Chopin, 55.)

⁶¹ (Golden, 6.)

⁶² Shields, Stephanie A., "Passionate men, emotional women: Psychology constructs gender difference in the late 19th century," *History of Psychology* 10, No. 2 (2007): 92-110.

⁶³ (McMullen, 102).

⁶⁴ (Sheilds, 93).

⁶⁵ (Chopin, 5).

that she was not pleased by that society and this may have been her way of exposing some of the issues she felt needed to be addressed in that society.⁶⁶

Chopin was by no means an expert on psychology. She was an author of literary works. However, she was a product of her time. During her time, the psychology of emotions was dominated by male-centric thinking. Defying convention made the work daring and helped to put a light on terrible disorder that has plagued humanity for centuries.

Works Cited:

Corgan, Billy, Byrne, Mike, Fiorentino, Nicole, Schroeder, Jeff, Mellon *Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, Virgin Records US, October 24, 1995, compact disc.

Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000).

Glas, Gerit, "A Conceptual History of Anxiety and Depression," in *Handbook of Depression and Anxiety*, , ed. den Boer, Johan A., Kasper, Siegfried, Sitsen, J.M.A., (New York: Marcel Dekker Inc.: 2003), 1-48.

Golden, Richard L., "William Osler's 'The Nervousness of American women'," *History of Psychology* 11, No. 1 (2008): 1-14.

Depression (Major Depression), Mayo Clinic, last modified February 11, 2010,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/depression/DS00175>

McMullen, Linda M., "Metaphors in the Talk of 'Depressed' Women in Psychotherapy,"

Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne 40, No. 2 (1999): 102-111.

Shields, Stephanie A., "Passionate men, emotional women: Psychology constructs gender

difference in the late 19th century," *History of Psychology* 10, No. 2 (2007): 92-110.