**Female Self-Sacrifice in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*: Conflict and Context**

by William Davis Jr.

THE opening chapter of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* offers the novel’s first—and possibly only—instance of successful, positive communication between protagonist Edna Pontellier and her husband Leonce. Significantly, the moment is one of *non*-verbal communication. After a day at the beach—and following Leonce’s upbraiding of her for getting sunburned—Edna examines her hands. ‘Looking at them reminded her of her rings’, notes the narrator, ‘which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm’ (45).[1](http://nq.oxfordjournals.org.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/content/58/4/563.full%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn-1) Interestingly, the novel’s first paragraph offers a complementary moment on the difficulties of *verbal* communication with the mention of the parrot who ‘could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood’ (43). As readers have long recognized, the difficulty of verbal communication represents a main theme in *The Awakening.*[2](http://nq.oxfordjournals.org.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/content/58/4/563.full#fn-2)

The juxtaposition of verbal and non-verbal communication underlies the primary disagreement between Edna and her friend Adele Ratignolle concerning female self-sacrifice in Chapter 16. The topic of their brief argument in this chapter resurfaces later in the novel during Adele’s delivery scene, and the same issue of self-sacrifice informs Edna’s last thoughts as she swims out to sea and to an apparent suicide. The initial argument with Adele, which is recounted after the fact, points to the problems that arise when the unspoken becomes the spoken: [Edna] had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself. Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument; the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language. Edna tried to appease her friend, to explain. ‘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’. ‘I don’t know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by unessential’, said Madame Ratignolle, cheerfully; ‘but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I’m sure I couldn’t do more than that’. ‘Oh, yes you could!’ laughed Edna. (96–7) In this passage we learn that a ‘heated argument’ results from the two women not ‘talking the same language’ about female self-sacrifice. Edna then offers an attempt at explanation—more language—but her explanation, while it seeks to distinguish ‘essential’ and ‘unessential’ parts of the female self, fails to clarify the issue for Adele. Adele does not know what Edna means, and she evinces little or no interest in exploring the distinction. Indeed, her response goes directly to conventional moralities and sounds more like a dismissal. The conversation ends with Edna’s final comment, and her laugh seems to be not just a good-natured gesture to end the disagreement but a knowing laugh. Edna knows something.

What might Chopin have known when she wrote this scene and several succeeding ones referencing self-sacrifice? It may interest readers to learn that Edna’s ‘thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves’—and here we may include her ideas about female self-sacrifice—were actually being voiced in the periodical press just a few years prior to the publication of *The Awakening*.[3](http://nq.oxfordjournals.org.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/content/58/4/563.full#fn-3) In 1894, a young Quaker woman named Alys W. Pearsall Smith, who in the same year became Bertrand Russell’s wife, wrote and published an essay entitled ‘A Reply from the Daughters’ in *The Nineteenth Century*. Smith’s essay was written in response to two essays, both entitled ‘The Revolt of the Daughters,’ by B. A. Crackanthorpe and Lady Mary Jeune and published in *The Nineteenth Century* and the *Fortnightly Review*, respectively.[4](http://nq.oxfordjournals.org.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/content/58/4/563.full#fn-4) These essays address many of the issues that marked discussions of the New Woman phenomenon of the 1890s:[5](http://nq.oxfordjournals.org.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/content/58/4/563.full#fn-5) the war between mothers and daughters, the ‘disease’ of rebellion, the nature of women, the sanctity of marriage and other conventional moralities, female independence and self-development, the ‘tyranny’ of the family, female ‘Life’ knowledge, the value of education, the dangers presented to the status quo by New Women and the writers who supported them, etc. The means of inquiry are mainly personal observations and references to the discussion of the New Woman in the periodical press and in current literature. The tone of the pieces is usually one of reason and argument, but each piece offers plenty in the way of emotional pleading as well.

The source of Smith’s personal observations is especially noteworthy: Among all the girls I know there is scarcely one who is not especially interested in something outside the family life, and who is not longing to be allowed a little time to devote to it. One would like to study botany, another wants to do literary work, another longs to be allowed to paint, while another is secretly preparing for the higher local examinations, and, to do her work, is obliged to get up at five every morning. From the fear of seeming selfish, or in dread of the opposition they will be sure to meet, none of these girls have as yet dared to insist on their own personal rights; and I doubt if their parents even so much as suspect that their daughters have any real interests or pursuits of their own at all. (271) One paragraph later, Smith refers—somewhat enigmatically it turns out—to the stories of several college women whose situations she has come to know: Some years ago a friend of mine was among a company of girls who were studying in one of the earliest colleges for women, and it occurred to her to ask them whether they had had the sympathy of their families and friends in their college career. Almost without exception each girl present said that she had had to fight for her liberty to go to college every inch of the way, and that all her family and friends had looked upon her as a monster of selfishness for persisting in carrying out her purpose. And I know at this moment any number of girls who have failed in a similar fight, from want of courage to resist the opposition by which they were confronted, and who have lived disheartened lives ever since. (271) What Smith does not say here is that she herself had in the late 1880s attended Bryn Mawr College, ‘the youngest American college for women’, as she noted in an earlier essay,[6](http://nq.oxfordjournals.org.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/content/58/4/563.full#fn-6) so the reference to ‘a friend of mine’ may actually be a veiled self-reference. In the essay about Bryn Mawr, Smith notes that ‘ “At homes” have been instituted for every evening from nine to ten, each student taking her turn in opening her room for the purpose, and preparing some light refreshments’ (922). These young women, then, provide the basis for Smith’s 1894 essay. At the mid-point of ‘A Reply from the Daughters’, after directing an emphatic statement to the parents of a daughter who has ‘wasted’ her life because she was forced to do so—‘Your daughter wants herself’, notes Smith (272)—the essay turns in earnest to the subject of female self-sacrifice.

Smith’s introduction of the subject immediately connects self-sacrifice to its opposite, selfishness, and we may note an interesting connection to the character of Edna Pontellier as well: A great deal is said about the duty and the beauty of ‘self-sacrifice,’ and as it is mostly said to the female part of creation, it is not to be wondered at that a conscientious girl feels herself to be a monster of selfishness if she ventures for a moment to assert her right to live her own life in her own way, should that way differ in the least from the ways of those around her. (273) Edna, as noted in the passage quoted earlier, feels that she too has a ‘right’ to her thoughts, but unlike Smith’s ‘conscientious girl’ she does not ‘venture’ to share them, until, that is, the scene with Adele. Significantly, Edna does not think herself a ‘monster’ either in this scene or elsewhere in the novel.[7](http://nq.oxfordjournals.org.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/content/58/4/563.full#fn-7) Smith states, both here and in a passage quoted earlier, that the typical nineteenth-century woman *does* view herself as a monster for speaking out loud about ‘her right to live her own life in her own way.’ Edna, awakening but not fully awakened, is in this respect actually ahead of some of her real-life counterparts.

Edna says when trying to define and distinguish the ‘unessential’ for Adele, ‘I can’t make it more clear’. Interestingly, Smith’s purpose in writing about female self-sacrifice is to clarify for her readers a very similar if not identical distinction. In place of the essential/unessential split offered in *The Awakening*, Smith presents a to/for distinction between two types of self-sacrifice: Self-sacrifice *to* is very different from self-sacrifice *for*. When a man throws himself before the Juggernaut car and is crushed to death, he has sacrificed himself ‘to’ an idol; when he loses his life to save the life of another, he has sacrificed himself ‘for’ that other. The wrong self-sacrifice is where we sacrifice ourselves ‘to’ the whims or fancies or passing pleasure of those around us. The right self-sacrifice is where we find it necessary, for the best good of ourselves and others, to sacrifice ourselves ‘for’ their and our highest good. The wrong self-sacrifice is often easier at the passing moment than the right, but in the long run it is sure to become a yoke of dreadful bondage. It is often easier for a sister to sacrifice herself ‘to’ her selfish brother, by giving way to his selfishness, than it would be to sacrifice herself ‘for’ him by withstanding it. But by choosing the easier way she increases his selfishness, until it destroys all respect and affection. To help those we love, we must sacrifice ourselves not ‘to’ but ‘for.’ Present attentions or services are not always the test of the truest devotion. There is a self-abnegation that is only a magnified selfishness, and there is an apparent selfish regard to one’s own character and development that is in reality the truest unselfishness. (273–4) Later in the same passage Smith identifies the phrase ‘those around us’ as ‘the home circle’ (274), noting, as does Edna, that the chief impediment to self-expression and self-development is the family. But the passage shows us much more than this: Smith capably delineates and explains what Edna Pontellier is ‘only beginning to comprehend.’ What is ‘revealing’ itself to Edna is revealed certainty to Smith, certainty that she can demonstrate with examples, reasoning, definitions, and assurance. Edna has not let her ideas become ‘struggles’ yet—though the struggles begin soon enough—while Smith seems to have been through her own struggles, witnessed those of others, and learned from them. Barbara Ewell writes of the centrality of struggle and selfhood in Chopin’s works: ‘For Chopin, writing was a means of exploring and articulating what she saw—life—particularly the life of women and their struggle to achieve selfhood, the “sacred integrity” that Emerson and others saw as essential to the American Dream’ (159–60). Ewell goes on to say that Edna achieves some measure of victory in her struggle, a struggle that I would add receives one of its critical articulations in the argument with Adele: ‘Clearly, Edna is defeated in her quest for a self’, writes Ewell, ‘but just as clearly, she is victorious. She does achieve and preserve a self—the essential, which women are categorically denied—and she *is* a woman who acts selflessly in giving up her life for her children’ (164). As we see in the above passage, loss of life, whether metaphorical or actual, is part of Smith’s paradigm. In Smith’s terms, Edna gives herself ‘for’ her children and not ‘to’ them. And in her own terms, Edna gives the ‘unessential’.

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