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Filling in the Gaps with Parallels Between Pregnancy and Chopin's *The Awakening*

When children are first learning to read, one of the first comprehension skills they learn is inferencing. Children are encouraged to draw inferences about the story that is not explicitly in the text as well as making connections to other texts, events, or the reader's own life. By filling in the gaps through Reader Response, a reader is building upon some of their earliest reading skills. This approach "encourages and expects readers to negotiate and construct meaning through interaction between their background knowledge and the text" (Ghaith & Madi 14). Essentially, it is up to the reader to fill in the gaps of what the author has not explicitly said with the text. This form of literary criticism is similar to New Criticism in that the critic looks closely at the text and "the critic must give meaning to memory" (Logan 252) and the text. Reader Response differs, however, in that it requires the reader to create meaning and respond by reading between the lines. Since a reader has perfected the inference skill having worked with it from their earliest comprehension days, they can be more critical and focus on what is not being said in the text in any work they read, including Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

By reading Chopin's *The Awakening* through a Reader Response critical lens, a reader can come to the conclusion that the forty chapters do not end in Edna Pontellier's death, rather that the novel ends with Edna giving birth, as women do after forty weeks of pregnancy, suggesting that the forty chapters rather parallel the forty weeks of Edna being with child. While

the text itself suggests that Edna drowns and meets her demise, a reader who is reading between the lines can perhaps conclude that the water is a symbol for birth. Throughout various religious traditions, water is used as a means of baptising an individual because “water became synonymous with the concept of the birth of life by means of the earth’s emergence from the life creating water” (Lockwood 11). Edna being one with the water of the gulf at the end of the novel allows a reader to reflect on their prior knowledge about Christian symbolism and fill in the gap. It is never explicitly stated in the text that Edna is drowning. When reading between the lines, a reader can just as easily relate Edna’s exhaustion and hallucinations to the efforts and pains of labor. Even the reference in the text that “it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone” (Chopin 137) can be applied to the conclusion of Edna’s pregnancy. By reading between the lines, one can assume that the shore is not actually the physical shore, rather a symbol for Edna’s former life. Now that she is giving birth to her third child she must once again submit to being a mother as babies depend on their mothers more than her older sons. She is giving birth as the water is giving life to her new child while also giving a new life to Edna, or rather taking the old life of the Edna who despised motherhood.

Although water is a religious symbol for life, in some ways Edna’s life is ending through the birth of her third child. There are several instances throughout the novel, however, that suggest that Edna is unfit to be a mother, which could in turn describe why she felt “an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, fill[ing] her whole being with a vague anguish” (Chopin 7). While not completely sure of her pregnancy during this third chapter (or third week), Edna is beginning to be aware that she must further commit to her matronly duties, something that she has not been comfortable

with and could do without in her life. Edna herself reflects on her role as a mother, thinking that her children “were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul.” (Chopin 137). Edna has never been comfortable with the idea of being a mother and the expectations that came along with it. The reader can fill in the gaps surrounding Edna being unfit to be a mother and relate that to the lack of recognition the pregnancy gets within the text. Why would a person unfit to be a mother be excited about another pregnancy and therefore another child that she will be a failure to?

Edna never mentions explicitly the pending birth of her third child, which can be connected to a decreased mental state as the result of hormones and being further forced into a role she is unfit for. There have always been “dominant ideologies of perfection associated with motherhood” (Henderson et al. 512). The aforementioned ideologies are shown through the character of Adele Ratignolle, who is the symbol of the perfect mother in her white flowing dresses and madonna persona. Edna could never compare to the perfection that Adele encompasses. Adele is proud of being a mother and has no shame in sharing stories of her accouchements or childbirths with everyone and anyone as they are important to her identity as a mother (Chopin 11). As the novel progresses it is explicit that Adele is indeed with child once again. This is included in the text and not left for the reader to infer because Adele is proud of her motherhood status and pregnancies while Edna’s is left to be filled in by the gaps because of her hesitation toward motherhood as a whole.

It is around the sixth week of Edna’s pregnancy journey when she first began “to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 15). Edna would have definitely realized by now that

she is indeed with child. Edna has to come to terms with the fact that her position in the universe is as a mother, a title that she cannot rid herself of. Once one becomes a mother, that will always be a part of their identity, no matter how unfit they are to deserve such a title. What is especially interesting when reading between the lines is that Edna's relations as an individual to the world within her are referenced. Motherhood is within a person when they are carrying a child within their uterus.

There are also various pregnancy symptoms present throughout the book. In Chapter 13, Edna looked at herself in the mirror and noticed that "her eyes were bright and wide awake and her face glowed" (Chopin 44). During pregnancy, a woman glows. It is not obvious from the text itself why Edna is glowing and so awake in this moment in time, but through reading between the lines and filling in the gaps with knowledge about what happens to a woman's skin during pregnancy, a reader can infer that Edna's radiating beauty as she looks at herself in the mirror is actually the result of a pregnancy symptom. In Chapter 14, Edna "could only realize that she herself--her present self--was in some way different from the other self" (Chopin 47). It is up to the reader to fill in the gap as to who the other self is that Edna is referring to. Edna's self in her pregnancy is changing and therefore different from the woman she was before her pregnancy. She is no longer able to run away from motherhood with the pending arrival of her third child so she has been changing both physically and mentally in regards to pregnancy. In chapter 15, Edna's appearance "suggested a rich, rare blossom" (Chopin 48). Blossoms are a part of flowers and flowers through symbolism suggest sexuality. During this fifteenth week of her pregnancy, Edna's sexual drive has been reawakened, hence the sudden influx in her sexual desires toward Robert. If one just looks at the text it appears that Edna is having a random

attraction to a man who is not her husband. By filling in the gaps, however, the reader is able to connect Edna's sexual desires to her pregnancy, thus making the attraction less random as it has an explanation when paired with carrying a child.

By reading between the lines and filling in the gaps as suggested by Reader Response, a reader can read a completely different story than if they had just read the text in front of them. Inferencing is especially interesting when reading Chopin's *The Awakening* as the story is completely different if one implies that Edna was actually pregnant the entire time, thus explaining many of her outbursts and changes throughout the novel that upset her husband and had her friend's concerned. Through the symptoms and symbolism throughout, reading between the lines is just as important of a skill now as it was when we first began reading, thus validating the importance of the Reader Response Criticism when it comes to reviewing English literature.

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