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Articulation and Artistry: A Conversational Analysis of *The Awakening*

by Marion Muirhead

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, the ways in which the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, articulates her feelings about her social position indicate that access to discourse is an important issue to consider in determining the causes of Edna's conflict. Edna's attempts to use language to reposition herself socially, especially in relation to the men in her social circle but also in relation to female characters, demonstrate the importance of language in defining social position. The discourse analysis technique of Norman Fairclough's *Language and Power* helps to illustrate the ideological aspects of language in the text, and Michael Toolan's conversational turbulence model, presented in "Analysing Conversation in Fiction," elucidates power struggles within conversations. Edna's failure to articulate her feelings and to gain access to discourse contributes to her demise, as does being denied access to her chosen profession of painting, another form of self-expression.

Norman Fairclough suggests that dominant ideologies become "naturalized" in society; that is, a system of values and subject positions comes to be accepted as natural, obvious, or correct, or as Fairclough puts it, as "common sense":

> Conventions routinely drawn upon in discourse embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere "common sense," and which contribute to sustaining existing power relations. . . . "The familiar common sense world of everyday life," [is] a world which is built entirely upon assumptions and expectations which

> control both the actions of members of a society and their interpretation of the actions of others. Such assumptions and expectations are implicit, backgrounded, taken for granted, not things that people are consciously aware of, rarely explicitly formulated or examined or questioned. (77)

In *The Awakening*, the subject position of women as wives and mothers is part of the dominant ideology and is taken by the characters to be the most natural of assumptions. For an upper- or middle-class woman to work is a threat to her husband's social status and self-esteem. Lower-class women work because they need to, while upper-class women entertain and run the household. For a woman of Edna's social status to work would imply that her husband is not successful.

It follows, then, that a point of conflict in Edna's marriage is her desire to paint. Fairclough raises the issue of "access" in social practice. The "dominant bloc" in a society has easiest access to "cultural capital," including discourse types and professions. In the terms of Chopin's text, the dominant bloc is male (and white); therefore, Edna is denied freedom of choice regarding her productivity. She is not allowed to take painting as her main activity, nor does she have access to the type of discourse that would give her kind a position of power against the dominant ideology that defines her social position. This lack of access lowers her "publicly acknowledged status," and of course the status of women compared to that of men generally is an access issue (64).

Dr. Mandelet asks Edna's husband, Léonce, whether Edna is associating with a feminist group that he refers to as "pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings" (86–87). Mandelet's description represents what Fairclough refers to as "overwording," which "shows preoccupation with some aspect of reality—which may indicate that it is a focus of ideological struggle" (115). Mandelet's classification scheme for women is euphemistic yet patriarchal. Women are "pseudo-intellectual," not possessing the higher education or capability to be truly intellectual. Feminists are "super-spiritual"—above religious tradition. (This may refer to the spiritual connotation of the bird metaphor of Mlle. Reisz.) Feminists are also "superior beings," not quite human or natural. His euphemism refers to otherness, difference, and alienation from male ideology as represented benignly by the doctor.

When Edna begins to question her subject position as wife and mother, conflict ensues between Edna and her husband. Both characters, having accepted the dominant ideology before, now find the situation unresolv-

able. Part of the problem, at least, is their lack of a discourse to communicate their perceptions of the situation. A discourse for the redefinition of female roles does not exist in the traditional Creole society of Léonce Pontellier. Neither Edna nor Léonce can "explain" what occurs in their marriage. Both characters reiterate their confusion in conversations with others, and the other characters also lack a helpful discourse for clarifying the issues of Edna's repositioning.

An early attempt at repositioning occurs when Edna first becomes disobedient to her husband. Léonce returns home late at night to find Edna outside in the hammock instead of in bed, as he expected. He begins questioning her. His use of grammatical questions suggests a relational value in Fairclough's terms, one of authority over her. His requests for information are, more accurately, implied criticisms or directives. He begins by asking, "What are you doing out here, Edna? I thought I should find you in bed," implying that she should be in bed at that hour (40). He follows with, "Do you know it is past one o'clock? Come on," another more direct question followed by a directive. His question, "What folly is this?" represents a more obvious criticism posed as a question, followed by, "Why don't you come in?" (40). By this time, Léonce has become obviously irritated and is no longer making his commands as politely, but all along he makes his self-asserted authority clear and expects obedience. By resisting his directives, Edna attempts to assert her will and position herself as an autonomous subject.

In the terms of Michael Toolan's conversational analysis, designed to explicate power struggles within discourse, Edna's silences in this passage are "challenging moves," turns intended to block the topic of conversation introduced by her husband. Edna resists Léonce's directives and implied criticisms by not responding to his commands. Then, she denies that it is cold and that there are mosquitoes, challenging his reasons for her to come in. When Léonce overcomes his irritation to some extent, he reinstates politeness and attempts a more intimate approach with his use of the word "dear" (41). He softens his tone from command to request, but this approach is short-lived, for his next turn, after Edna's refusal, includes a direct command: "You must come in the house instantly." Fairclough suggests that "'must' signals obligation" (127). Léonce's authority is implicit in his role as husband in nineteenth-century society, and his use of the modal auxiliary verb "must" signals the explicit power relations between husband and wife—relational modality in Fairclough's terms—that Edna is attempting to alter. By the end of the passage, it is Edna who

questions Léonce, by asking him if he is coming in. She does not, however, command him as he did her.

In a conversation with her lover Alcée Arobin, Edna attempts to come to terms with potential social repositioning. Edna states, "One of these days . . . I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of woman I am" (109). Her metaphor of pulling herself together, as if she were fragmented, refers to the textual presupposition that human nature is dual, both spiritual and socially constructed. Edna implies by the metaphor that her dual nature should become one, that her social position should not conflict with her nature or her soul. Edna does not feel she is wrong for defying social codes. Arobin's response to her is that she has no need to think for herself, for he can tell her what type of woman she is—the type he likes to seduce.

Edna mentions Mlle. Reisz at this point, and the older woman makes remarks that Edna does not fully understand about her repositioning. Edna is not fully aware of her situation and its implications, so Mlle. Reisz's metaphorical speech is indistinct to her. Arobin suggests Mlle. Reisz is demented, and Edna rejoins that she seems "wonderfully sane," a comment that indicates Edna prefers the older woman's unconventional ideology to the conventional dominant ideology. Otherwise, Mlle. Reisz's conversation is remarkably direct, even blunt, compared to conventional politeness. "Candor" normally pleases Mlle. Riesz, yet she speaks figuratively about Edna's repositioning (82). She may be trying to encourage Edna to articulate her feelings more, to think things through with more effort, so as to achieve a more substantial and enduring comprehension. Fairclough states that "the speaker or writer is a product of her words"; this means that Edna's ability to articulate is crucial to her positioning as a subject. Articulation is required to help Edna determine her position and its implications. The metaphorical usage of bird imagery is relevant in the opening lines of the novel when a trained parrot is described articulating words it does not understand. Edna moves from her parrot-like position as an acculturated woman as her awareness and control of her situatedness unfolds.

What Edna does articulate is that she will not continue to be a possession. Her comment to Robert that she would laugh at both Robert and Léonce if they chose to treat her as an article of exchange startles Robert:

> "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dis-

> pose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both."
>
> His face grew a little white. "What do you mean?" he asked. (142–143)

Edna "foregrounds" commonsense ideological assumptions here, as elsewhere (Fairclough 106–107); for example, she moves out of her husband's house and refuses to attend her sister's wedding, saying, "A wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (87). These actions challenge commonsense assumptions about marriage and the status of women as chattel and foreground the need for female autonomy. This conversation resonates with other passages where articles are exchanged between characters, such as when Léonce gives Edna her rings to put on (3) and when Léonce gives Robert a cigar (4). Significantly, just before the above conversation, Edna asks Robert about a cigar he has with him, joking that someone must have given it to him.

Autonomy is at stake when Edna resists Arobin's attempts to be with her too often, for she fears losing her new-found independence from her husband to another man. Arobin wants to see Edna daily, but she must keep him at arm's length. Their conversations can be elucidated by Toolan's concept of conversational turbulence. Toolan's different types of moves help to demonstrate how topics can be carried forward or suppressed in conversation. He lists five types of conversational moves that are useful in analyzing fiction. A "move" is roughly equivalent to a "turn" in conversational analysis, usually concurrent with speaker change. An opening move introduces a new topic. A supporting move concurs with the previous move and sustains the topic, while a challenging move suppresses the topic under discussion. A bound-opening move enlarges upon the topic under discussion, and a reopening move reinstates a topic that has been challenged.

Within a move, four different possible types of acts may occur. An elicitation is realized by a question. Its function is to request a linguistic response, but occasionally it may be realized by a command requesting a linguistic response; for example, "What time is it?" or "Tell me the time." An informative is realized by a statement whose sole function is to provide information. The appropriate response is the giving of attention and indication of understanding. A directive is realized by a command, and functions to request a non-linguistic response. An accusation is realized by a statement, question, command, or moodless item; its function is to request an apology or a surrogate excuse (Burton 157).

When Arobin asks, “Will you go to the races again?” the question would be classed as an elicitation of information, but it acts as an invitation. Edna challenges his move to open the topic of the races with a direct “no” and two excuses. One excuse is her work, her painting, and Arobin rejoins by reminding her that she promised to show him her work and asks if he may come to her atelier the next morning. At this point it becomes obvious that the real topic Arobin has opened and Edna tries to suppress is their next meeting, not the races or her painting. Arobin turns her excuse into a new opportunity to see her in private, which from his standpoint is even better than going to the races.

Edna suppresses Arobin’s topic with a flat “no” twice, as he asks “tomorrow?,” “day after?,” and begins to beg, “Oh, please don’t refuse me” (101). He offers his advice on her work. Edna refuses again, says good night, and asks why he does not leave, an elicitation that functions as a directive representing an opening move to introduce the topic of parting. Edna’s voice reaches a high pitch at this point. According to Brown and Levinson, high vocal pitch can indicate deference (268). Edna’s voice also betrays excitement, and her implication of deference is not intentional. She is not fully used to telling men what to do, and her voice indicates her uncertainty in a position of authority. Edna is afraid of not being taken seriously, perhaps partly because she is lying when she tells Arobin she does not like him. The description of Edna’s vocal quality is an indication of her uncertainty following from her social repositioning.

Arobin rejoins by making informatives that are apologies, followed by elicitations for information as to how he has offended her and what he can do to correct his mistake: “I’m sorry you don’t like me. I’m sorry I offended you. How have I offended you? What have I done? Can’t you forgive me?” (102). But in so doing, he is challenging her topic of parting, and Edna’s response is a reopening move. She makes more excuses and reinstates her topic: “I wish you to go, please.” Arobin makes a challenging move with “a moment or two” of “impressive silence” that resists her request for him to leave. His rhetorical strategy is to put himself in the wrong, to apologize and make himself vulnerable, then to beg for leniency. He seems to support her move by claiming he is leaving, yet at the same time he reopens the topic of seeing her again. Edna makes “no response” to this reopening move; her silence functions as a challenging move.

Arobin’s next reopening move is to send Edna a note of apology. Her uncertainty and confusion appear again in her reaction to his note; she feels foolish for having overreacted and allows him to see her, now taking the view that the issue is trivial. Edna’s confusion stems from her lack of

realization that the issue is autonomy: she should be in control of her own life, not controlled by the whims of others in her circle, especially men. She is confused about what the important issue is. In subsequent struggles with Arobin, in chapters thirty-one and thirty-nine, Edna gains control of this situation and begins to see it as a game which she can win.

As Edna repositions herself in relation to the men she knows, she also searches for her place in relation to other women. Two other female characters, Adèle Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz, represent oppositions in the binary of female subject positions in nineteenth-century society. Adèle Ratignolle is defined as a "mother-woman." She is entirely devoted to husband and children, playing the piano only to enrich the cultural ambiance of the home. Every second year Adèle gives birth to a child; she is obsessed with her "condition" while pregnant, yet terrified of the ordeal of birth. Edna finds Adèle's position unbearably limited in life experience and passion. Despite that, Adèle considers herself happy and content. She reminds Edna of her responsibilities as a mother and the effects her affair could have on her children. These reminders contribute to Edna's feelings of being trapped.

Mlle. Reisz is an accomplished pianist, but a single woman despised in any community in which she lives. Mlle. Reisz is ugly, old, and rude, the opposite of Adèle's passive femininity. In being an artist she chooses self-alienation, it seems, for to be a female artist is to exist outside the naturalized dominant ideology. She resists being pressed into the mold of the compliant woman by behaving in an abrupt, hostile manner on most occasions. Mlle. Reisz is recognized as a superb musician, yet she has no career as such, for she barely subsists. Yet despite the unpopular disposition of Mlle. Reisz, Edna seeks her out for companionship for she is perhaps Edna's only access to a feminist discourse of any kind. Edna relates the incident of Mlle. Reisz's feeling Edna's shoulder blades, explaining that "the bird that would soar above the level plain of traditions and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (10). At the time of Edna's drowning, a bird with a broken wing falters in the sky above the beach where Edna takes her last swim (152). Mlle. Reisz considers Edna pretentious; she bears Edna no malice and even appreciates her audience, but she does not see sufficient stability in Edna's character, knowing the arduousness of a female artist's life in her society.

Mlle. Reisz's use of metaphor has multiple implications for Edna's situation; she questions Edna's fitness for repositioning herself in a society prejudiced against women. Her statement has what Fairclough refers to as

experiential value: she has suffered as an individual who challenges the dominant ideology. Edna is prone to depression, perhaps a sign of learned helplessness in an oppressive situation. The word "bird" has connotations of freedom and spirituality; it may represent the soul, a concept Chopin uses to refer to the pre-social inner being of an individual. Fairclough comments upon this view of human nature:

> It is I think partly that people are not conscious of being socially positioned as subjects, and standardly see their own subjective identities as somehow standing outside and prior to society. Such ideological misperceptions are the basis for various idealist theories of human society which are built around the "individual" as pre-social, and which try to see societies as emanating from (properties of) the individual rather than the other way round. (105)

Fairclough suggests, "The socialization of people involves them coming to be placed in a range of 'subject positions,' which they are exposed to partly through learning to operate within various discourse types." The multiplicity of subject positions is a more comprehensive schema than the duality of private/public or natural/cultural presupposed in the text, yet still involves fragmentation of the individual.

Mlle. Reisz's bird metaphor has spiritual associations (with the Christian Holy Spirit, for example), but also has naturalistic connotations. Edna is figured in terms of different animals (as being catlike with strong white teeth, for example) and these naturalistic assumptions lend a deterministic caste to her plight. Edna is guided by her instincts and cannot resist her predetermined development, and perhaps this contributes to her failure to articulate. Fairclough suggests examining the relationship between alternative metaphors as a means of discovering "different ideological attachments" (119). Figuring the wife/mother as a beast of burden, such as a horse or an ox, or a provider of sustenance, such as a cow or a chicken, would greatly change the value of Edna's potential in the text. These domesticated animals rarely survive in the wild but are well equipped to serve basic human needs. The bird suggests suppressed potential beyond the bounds constructed by society; it suggests undeveloped inner riches, that if Edna were strong she might attain her goals and become, more than wife and mother, an artist. But figuring Edna as an animal indirectly implies a lack of access to discourse; a bird may sing or even speak words, but it does not understand its position in society and the social structure that keeps it in place. The animal is driven by instinct and limited

by environment and anatomy. The trained parrot described in the opening passage articulates words that express nothing but training, habit, and repetition.

Dr. Mandelet offers Edna an opportunity for discourse. The doctor is semi-retired, performing counseling services for families within his social circle. He expresses kindliness and sympathy towards Edna, yet she refuses his offer to engage in discourse regarding her situation with her husband. Dr. Mandelet holds Edna's hand, calls her "my dear child," and states, "I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not many who would—not many, my dear" (147). He states his appraisal of her unconventional situation, referring to her separation from her husband. Referring to her as "my dear child" indicates his patriarchal status; women are considered childlike and treated as possessions. The use of the word "penetration" to describe the doctor's gaze suggests an invasive intelligence with ideological connotations of possession and control, as well as the more obvious social acuity and insight.

Edna responds, "Some way I don't feel moved to speak of things that trouble me. Don't think I'm ungrateful or that I don't appreciate your sympathy" (147). Edna expresses her hesitancy to articulate her conflicts and engage in discourse, but part of her motivation may be her perception of the doctor as a patriarch, indoctrinated in the dominant male medical ideology. She prefers to seek out the unconventional and less charming Mlle. Reisz. Mlle. Reisz's use of metaphor may represent an underdeveloped "anti-language," a "conscious alternative to the dominant or established discourse type" (Fairclough 91).

The doctor's classification scheme for women is influenced by science, in the sense that it refers outside the text to concurrent ideologies of social Darwinism and Freudianism. Fairclough suggests that "the classification scheme constitutes a particular way of dividing up some aspect of reality which is built upon a particular ideological representation of that reality. In this way, the structure of vocabulary is ideologically based" (115). Mandelet refers to "woman" as an "organism," an object for scientific scrutiny, like an animal species. This indicates that woman is "other," not like "ordinary fellows" such as the doctor and Léonce. Fairclough suggests that pronouns may indicate aspects of relational modality, and the doctor uses "you" and "me" or "I" to refer to Léonce and himself and "them" to refer to women. Traditional science, in the guise of objectivity, legitimizes the existing social order by demonstrating how men and women are naturally designed to fulfill their prescribed social roles.

Mandelet goes on to describe to Léonce how women are "peculiar," "delicate," "sensitive," "highly-organized," "moody," "whimsical," and "idiosyncratic." Such euphemistic adjectives can be replaced through "rewording" (Fairclough 113) with more negatively-valued adjectives that do not change the referents of the words, such as "hyper-reactive," "over-emotional," "unreliable," "irresponsible," "illogical," and "neurotic." The replacement adjectives refer to the same stereotypical female attributes, but represent the attributes in more negative expressive values and remove the euphemistic tone.

Fairclough postulates that "text producers often adopt strategies of avoidance with respect to the expressive values of words for relational reasons" (117). Dr. Mandelet avoids negative expressive values through the use of euphemism in order to gloss over potential marital conflict. He uses the imperative mode; his directive to Léonce is not to "bother": husband and wife should not bother each other, and a husband should not "bother" trying to understand a wife's problem, for it will pass insignificantly away without affecting the social order:

> "Pontellier," said the Doctor, after a moment's reflection, "let your wife alone for a while. Don't bother her, and don't let her bother you. . . . It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with [women]. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. . . . This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone. Send her around to see me." (87–88)

Dr. Mandelet is fairly certain that the cause of the problem is an affair on Edna's part; however, the affair is more accurately a symptom than a cause. Edna and Léonce share little in common, and Léonce is not a passionate man. Mlle. Riesz's music is just as much a catalyst to Edna's awakening as Robert, Edna's passionate and chivalrous lover. The old woman's recital evokes visual parallels in Edna's mind that represent her predicament, for example, a naked man on a seashore with an "attitude . . . of hopeless resignation . . . a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (33). Nine months later, Edna sheds her clothes, representing her social role as leisure-class wife and mother, to stand naked on the beach herself. The bird represents her failure to attain freedom, for the bird, this time, has a broken wing.

Edna is at a point in her life where she begins to realize that the romantic mythology surrounding marriage and motherhood is an ideological device functioning to entrap women into accepting an unfulfilling and limited role in society. As the doctor intuits, "Youth is given up to illusions . . . a decoy to secure mothers for the race" (147). Edna is unfulfilled in marriage and motherhood alone and requires artistic expression in order to become a complete person, but in her society this is unacceptable, and she cannot be free of her family obligations. Her inability to articulate her feelings and analyze her situation results in her act of suicide in the final scene of the text. An oblique reference to the myth of Philomel occurs in the final pages, with mention of her cooking ("And if you can stand Philomel's cooking," Victor comments [150]). The myth of Philomel is one of articulation and artistry; this reference resonates with the opening description of the trained parrot with its suggestion of the theme of articulation.

The myth of Philomel illustrates, in grotesque detail, the suppression of the female voice in patriarchal society and the potential subversiveness of female artistry. Philomel was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus, and her tongue was removed to prevent her from accusing him. She circumvents this silencing by creating a tapestry illustrating Tereus' crimes to his wife, Philomel's sister Procne. The two sisters take their revenge when they prepare a dinner for Tereus which contains, as the main ingredient, the remains of his son whom they had reluctantly murdered; Tereus consumes his own young unknowingly. Ovid describes the violence and mutilation committed by Tereus against Philomel: "He grasped her tongue with a pair of forceps, and cut it out with his cruel sword. The remaining stump still quivered in her throat, while the tongue itself lay pulsing and murmuring incoherently to the dark earth. It writhed convulsively, like a snake's tail when it has newly been cut off and, dying, tried to reach its mistress' feet" (Innes 147–153). The story ends with Tereus and the two sisters changing into birds and flying away. The metamorphosis into birds resonates with Chopin's bird motif signifying freedom or metamorphosis (as in the title), but the story of Philomel also helps to explain the serpentine imagery associated with the sea.

The language describing the sea in *The Awakening* makes frequent use of sibilance: "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (152). The wounded bird suggests

failed metamorphosis; the sibilance suggests a serpentine presence or consciousness in the sea, here described as "murmuring," like the incoherent sounds of the suppressed female voice as represented by Philomel's severed tongue. The wavelets reach to twine around Edna's ankles as she stands on the shore, just as Philomel's tongue struggled to regain its place: "The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (152). Here, the combined effects of sibilance and the mention of the snake-like wavelets refer not only to Philomel's plight, but to Edenic myth. The outcome of Edna's awakening, her newfound knowledge of good and evil, is that she is cast out of the garden; she has gained self-awareness and may no longer take shelter in the animal bliss of simple reproduction and motherhood as she did when she first came to the island in the summer. This description of the sea resounds throughout the novel, whenever Edna's awakening progresses (17).

The issue of female artistry in the myth of Philomel refers to Edna's predicament; her painting is subversive because it interferes with her prescribed social duties and it acts as a substitute for verbal discourse. It also points to the subversive nature of Chopin's text in 1890s society. The myth indicates that the function of denying access to discourse is one of control and exploitation. The myth also suggests the disadvantages of denying a social group's access to discourse (or professions) for the purpose of domination when violence results from oppression. Chopin approaches these controversial issues indirectly through mythical allusion in an attempt to avoid alienating her nineteenth-century readership.

The lack of access to discourse and to her chosen profession leads Edna to struggle unsuccessfully to become a complete individual. The fact that she has believed the dominant mythology of marriage and motherhood for most of her life makes the realization that she is unfulfilled in her social role a dilemma with which she is ill-prepared to cope. Edna has awakened from her animal existence as wife and mother only to find that in her society she cannot be recognized as a complete person. She cannot return to her former animal state: she must continue to grow or fail to thrive. The discourse analysis theory of Norman Fairclough helps to explain Edna's predicament of being denied access to discourse, and the conversational analysis of Michael Toolin focuses her attempts to reposition herself socially in a way that would allow her to grow and develop as an autonomous subject.

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