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**A Comparative Analysis of the Motives behind the Female  
Suicides in King Lear by William Shakespeare and  
The Awakening by Kate Chopin**

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## **Abstract**

This work sets out to study the spoken words of Gonerill in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* written by American writer Kate Chopin in 1899. The aim of this paper is to examine the motives for the two characters' suicides. The project uses literary theory for this purpose. The techniques of deconstruction are used to reveal the forces at work beneath the text. Feminist literary criticism provides the mental framework for processing the findings. The results are used to compare the causes for female suicide at the turn of 17<sup>th</sup> century England to those of affluent women at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in New Orleans. The degree to which women's issues have remained the same over this period of time is the main question being asked by this study.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The Origins of the Project

The first ideas for this project stem from the fact that the part of this degree which I have most enjoyed has been literature. I found particularly interesting the post-structural processes of deconstructing texts which help us get to meanings that are not immediately apparent and that often lie in the region of the subconscious. Deconstruction gives us interpretations of texts that go beyond what an author may have intended. Deconstruction can in effect take away an author's control over their work and then go on to reveal social forces at work in society at the time of writing.

Two works of literature on our syllabus that made a great impression on me are William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin.

*King Lear* seemed like the work of a mad genius and indeed was written by Shakespeare when he was at the height of his powers. Much of the action takes place during a raging storm and there is a monumental clash between two worlds, one a feudal and simple world, the other of market forces and rationalism. It is an exhilarating play and comes to a brutal and unforgiving end, so distasteful and disturbing that it has often been altered and given a happier conclusion.

In *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin it is easy to see why she quoted Guy de Maupassant as one of her main influences because the story is steeped in irony without being misanthropic and full of the sensual joys of existence. To this delicious mix is added a story of great courage; that of a woman struggling to find fulfilment in a stifling and dull patriarchal society.

At this point I then asked myself if there could possibly be any link between a Jacobean play written by a man and a proto-feminist story written three hundred years later. Although I had thought of deconstruction as a tool for analysing modern texts, I realised it might well serve as a way of archeologically delving into *King Lear*, in order to find out what was going on in Shakespeare's time but in modern terms. I found in *Lear* another woman fighting for freedom. This is Gonerill. Gonerill would toward the end of the play perpetrate evil acts but I wondered what could have driven her to such extremes. If I studied her words closely, I could find out what forces were at work. Then, most obviously, a binding event between the two texts is the final fate of these two extraordinary women: suicide.

## 1.2 A Brief Introduction to Female Suicide in Literature

According to Dr Elise Garrison (2000), in classical literature, female suicide would be caused by one or more of the following situations: abandonment; fear; frustration; grief; incest; loss of kin; madness; rape; self-sacrifice; shame and unrequited love

In the Ancient World, mythological women could take their own lives by hanging themselves, jumping into water or onto the ground from a great height, stabbing themselves, jumping into fire or less frequently by taking poison.

**Table 1 Comparison of Methods & Motivations for Female Suicide in Literature**

STABBING	MOTIVATION	DROWNING	MOTIVATION
Gonerill <sup>1</sup>	Madness, shame for murdering her own sister out of jealousy, grief for her dead lover and unrequited love	Edna Pontellier	Frustration, emotional exhaustion and unrequited love
<b>IN THE ANCIENT WORLD</b>			
Lucretia	After being raped	Hippo	To save her chastity
Deianeira	Grief from having caused her unfaithful husband's death who had first raped her before later marrying her.	Iro	Grief for her dead lover
Thisbe	Grief at the death of her lover	Vritomartis	To escape King Minos
Dido	To avoid a political marriage	Hero	Grief for her dead lover
Amphinome	Grief at the killing of her husband and son; to avoid her own murder, she committed suicide at a sacred place	Alkyone	Grief for her dead lover
Canace	Suicide after committing incest with her brother		
Pelopeia	On discovering she had been raped by her own father.		
1 Gonerill took her own life with a poisoned dagger			

According to Caroline F. Whelan (1993), when comparing motives for suicide among women in literature from the Ancient World to those from the modern era, it is essential to take into account their different collective mindsets. The modern cultures of North America and Western Europe are individual-oriented and our wellbeing is centred around individual achievement and a fear of personal failure. Individuals are

introspective and psychologically motivated. By contrast, in ancient times, the self-image was formed by feedback from important others, such as family members, rulers, priests and society in general. These ancient societies were agonistic, which is to say the highest attribute for any individual was to be seen to be an honourable person. This difference is succinctly illustrated by Whelan in her comparison of guilt with shame. Guilt is a modern concept. It is an internal reaction to external events. It did not exist for the Ancients who instead could feel shame. Shame is generated by others as a reaction to events which effect an individual. Shame can be avoided whereas guilt cannot and one way to avoid shame for the Ancients was suicide. In modern societies, suicide is nearly always a catastrophe. For the Ancients it could be considered as an honourable way to avoid shame. According to Van Hoof (1990), a third of all female suicides in the Ancient World are about “death before dishonour”. A most famous case is that of Lacerian (see Table 1), who was greatly admired for committing suicide after having been raped in order to conserve her personal honour. To the modern mind, this is a double tragedy.

Some parallels may be drawn between Gonerill and Deaneries (see Table 1). Deaneries rejects an arranged marriage and Gonerill has no interest in her husband The Duke of Albany. Gonerill takes her own life after her failure to control the man she really loves, Edmund, bastard son of the Duke of Gloucester.

At another level, both Gonerill and Edna Pontellier are involved in an individual struggle to make their own way in worlds controlled by men. For Gonerill, the punishment for daring to try to do this is madness which leads to her to acts of evil. Her end is horrible. Edna Pontellier is a woman trying to be free in a patriarchal society but who finally fails to be understood. She is defeated and deprived of the will to carry on. She seems to go through Kübler-Ross's five stages of dying: denial; anger; bargaining; depression and acceptance.

Moving on to Renaissance England, we see suicide in literature taking on new meanings. Since St Augustine's treatise on suicide in the fifth century in his work “In the City of God”, Christian doctrine regarded suicide as self-murder and blasphemous. Fascinatingly, this view becomes blurred in Renaissance England with the translation of many classical texts into English which introduced other views on suicide such as that concerning Lucretia, as mentioned above and most notably held by the Stoics who saw suicide as an honourable way out of a shameful situation. In Renaissance plays, suicide was also used for dramatic closure and there seems to

be an element in this attributable to both Gonerill and Edna's suicides. Other functions of suicide in Renaissance tragedies, according to Richard K. Sandevson (1992) were self-punishment, which is applicable to Gonerill, and a desire for oblivion, which seems to fit with Edna's frame of mind moments before her passing.

## **2. The Rationale and Main Conceptual Themes for the Investigation**

### **2.1 General Objectives of the Work, Key Questions and Hypotheses**

The general objective of the work is to use literary theory in order to shed light on the motives behind the suicides of Gonerill and Edna Pontellier, who were two wealthy women high up the social scales of their times. Despite being strong, independent, rational and thinking characters, they were nevertheless driven to take their own lives.

#### **Key questions include:**

How can literary theory help us to understand more clearly the driving forces behind these two female characters?

What does marriage mean to these intelligent and ambitious women?

What are the economic forces at work and how do they affect and influence Gonerill and Edna and what roles do they play in their respective tragedies?

How much had women's place in society advanced from Shakespeare's time to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which are the 300 years which separate the two works? (Although King Lear is set in the Dark Ages, Shakespeare's works reflect the issues of his own time).

To what extent are King Lear and The Awakening ahead of their times?

How do these works reflect on our own times of wage inequality and glass ceilings where parity between the sexes has still not been convincingly achieved.

## Hypotheses

1. King Lear and The Awakening clearly show that women's issues in late Victorian England were entirely distinct from those of the Jacobean era.
2. A close reading of King Lear by Shakespeare and The Awakening by Kate Chopin indicate that women in the late Victorian era were still under the yoke of a patriarchal society and did not have the freedom to live their own lives.

## 2.2 General Approach or Methodology

The main methodology of this work will be that of **deconstruction** as set out in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*. One important question was how to select text for analysis in the two large works. I decided only to include **direct speech** by both Gonerill and Edna. This would give a more meaningful, as opposed to a more random, approach to selecting text for analysis. It both reduced the expanse of text to be studied and limited the research to the same mode of speech. I will collect the lines spoken by Gonerill from the play and then I will analyse them according to Barry's three stage process which consists firstly of a **close reading**, then of what he calls the **textual stage** and thirdly the **linguistic stage**.

I will follow the same methodology for Edna Pontellier's own words in *The Awakening* and finally I will make a comparative analysis of my findings from the two works.

After having discussed my findings, I will then attempt to make a feminist criticism that may expose mechanisms of patriarchy.

## 2.3 Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism is a philosophical standpoint concerning knowledge or "what we know", which first came into being in France during the latter half of the 1960s. Its principles are based on the writings of **Jacques Derrida** and **Roland Barthes**. They challenged contemporary thought on the theories of knowledge because they rejected the idea of the existence of absolute truths and transcendence or knowledge which is objective. As Michael Ryan (2011) explains in his book on literary theory *Literary Theory A Practical Introduction*, Derrida states as you can never get outside of time and space, then there can be no transcendence. In other words, everything is contingent rather than absolute. He goes on to claim that all



knowledge is historical and therefore “spatially located and differential”. This then means that there are no solid facts. All we have are interpretations and we can know nothing for certain. This uncertainty creates anxiety about language and this is where post-structuralism becomes relevant and exciting for literary theorists. For the post-structuralists we live in a decentered universe where reality is textual and there is opposition between speech and writing. Speech is of the mind but writing is a graphic representation external to the mind constructed by linguistic processes. As Peter Barry explains (2009), “How we see, is what we see.”

## 2.4 Deconstruction

The radical linguistic scepticism toward knowledge associated with the later post-structuralists meant that literary texts could be destabilized at a touch and any author becomes a mere sum of social and linguistic forces. Hence the famous claim by Roland Barthes that the author is dead or that any work is radically independent of its creator. The application of post-structuralism to the analysis of literary texts is called **deconstruction** and it involves processes of destabilizing text to get at the subconscious workings going on behind it. Michael Ryan (2011) explains that deconstruction begins with the search for “ideals of truth”. For the post-structuralists, these ideal truths represent the fault lines of any literary text. This is because they contest their worth and posit that truth is a mere product of signification and conventionality, which harks back to how Saussure defines all words: words are arbitrary signs which derive their meaning or signification from their physical differences to other words.

Peter Barry (2009) provides a framework for deconstructing texts which is detailed in Table 2 below. This will provide the methodology for this project.

Ryan (2011), when discussing deconstruction, brings us to the works of Shakespeare, which are celebrated for their treatment of universal truths concerning human existence. In *Literary Theory. A Practical Introduction*, Ryan deconstructs King Lear and he details the conflict between truth and signification. Gonerill, Regan and Edmund act like post-structuralists who challenge the transcendence of moral virtue as represented by Cordelia. He focuses on the role and impact of letters within the play, demonstrating that it is in the letters where the conflicts between oppositional forces such as loyalty and betrayal are spelled out with most clarity. These three characters vehemently challenge their own identities, Edmund as

bastard and Gonerill and Regan as women in a patriarchal world, and they violently refuse to accept their respective difference and derogation.

Deconstruction has been applied to Shakespeare's works on many occasions and was at one time considered to be a real breakthrough in literary theory and to reveal new insights into Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. It began in the early 1970s and reached its peak in the mid-eighties with the publication of a series of essays by Atkins and Bergeron called *Shakespeare and Deconstruction*. Deconstruction has also been applied to feminist literary criticism.

**Table 2 The Techniques of Deconstruction**

<b>TASK</b>	<b>FINDINGS</b>
<b>STAGE 1: THE VERBAL STAGE OR CLOSE READING</b>	
1-Studying the <b>etymology</b> of key words	Revelation of contradictory meanings with destabilizing effect e.g. "Guest" has the same etymological source as "hostile". This can attribute unreliability and slipperiness to a text.
2-Finding <b>paradoxes</b> and <b>contradictions</b> within phrases.	These may seem deliberate or accidental and again challenge apparent meanings.
3-Picking out the <b>binary oppositions</b> e.g. black and white	For post-structuralists, binary oppositions help establish a parallel universe to the presupposed one.
4-Identifying <b>metaphors</b>	Metaphors often exert very strong influences on text, perhaps going well beyond the intentions of the author and out of their control.
<b>STAGE 2: THE TEXTUAL STAGE OR OVERALL VIEW</b>	
<b>LOOKING FOR SHIFTS AND BREAKS IN CONTINUITY</b>	
1-Shifts in focus or person and <b>points of view</b>	Instabilities of attitude and a lack of a fixed position.
2-Shifts in time, pace and tense	Lack of chronological progression and aspect.
3-Unusual <b>omissions</b>	The silent points in a text will hint at purpose and meaning both conscious and unconscious.
<b>STAGE 3: THE LINGUISTIC STAGE OR SEARCHING FOR QUIRKS</b>	
1-Inadequacy of language	Saying that something is unsayable
2-Misrepresentation	<b>Exaggeration</b> and the disguise of true worth are evidence that not all is as it would seem.
3-Metaphorical constructs or <b>conceits</b>	Conceits are often difficult to control and can result in leading the text off into unexpected meanings.
4- <b>Aphoria</b> or knots in the text	Self-contradiction in the text which reveal the clash of different forces at work

## 2.5 Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism is very closely tied to the emergence of the Women's Movement which started in the 1960s. The reason for this is that the analysis of literary texts is a very effective way of exposing unfair and sexist beliefs and positions present in everyday culture. Thus it helps to change attitudes for the better and so help in the long fight to attain equality between the sexes. This happens because literature generates role models for society and so feminist criticism is able to reveal the sexist mechanisms of patriarchy at work. Two important terms to bear in mind here are **conditioning** and **socialisation**. Conversely, it is also able to promote literary works with fairer values which deal with the many issues women face in a male dominated society. In this vein, feminist literary criticism has been able to establish canons of feminist literature and bring to light talented women writers who had been previously ignored.

For this project, feminist literary criticism is immediately useful, if not essential, as it provides a plethora of terms and definitions for understanding the issues at stake. For example, Elaine Showalter (1999) describes texts as either **androtexts** (written by a man) as is the case of King Lear and **gynotexts** such as The Awakening, written by a woman. Showalter also defines three distinct phases of feminist criticism: 1840-1880 The Feminine Phase; 1880-1920 The Feminist Phase and 1920+ The Female Phase. This allows us to place The Awakening into the Feminist Phase.

Peter Barry (2009) describes three schools of feminist literary criticism which are The American School, The British School and The French School. For this project, the French School seems to be of great relevance as its proponents, namely Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, are considered to be post-structuralists. Indeed, these theorists, to quote Dale Spencer (1981), refer to **man made language**, which means to say that language is a male instrument through which patriarchal values are expressed. The feminist theorists then give rise to what Hélène Cixous terms **écriture féminine**. This defines women's writing as being in eternal opposition within a male-construed writing system which women writers fight against by being less cohesive, less rule-bound and less restricted by male demands on rationality. This is a controversial claim to make but is further supported by the ideas of Julia Kristeva who sees male writing as symbolic and female writing as semiotic. This semiotic approach is perhaps another way of breaking the shackles

and finding the freedom to female expression within the confines of a man made language. Most interestingly, this should generate more of what post-structuralists are looking for within texts e.g. slippage, accidents, random connections and more ways to the unconscious parts of any text. The comparative analysis of *The Awakening* and *King Lear* may or may not bear this out.

## **2.6 An Introduction to King Lear by William Shakespeare**

The play *King Lear* was first performed on Boxing Day (26<sup>th</sup> December) 1606 by Shakespeare's company The King's Men at Whitehall Palace in the presence of the British monarch King James I.

The story is based on an old European folk tale called *Love like Salt* which Shakespeare turns into one of his masterpieces. It is about an old king in Ancient Britain who, having no son and heir, decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, Gonerill, Regan and Cordelia. He asks each of his daughters to declare how much they love their old father with the idea of allotting them land according to the strength of their love for him. When his youngest and dearest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to play his vain and silly game, the King is infuriated and she is immediately disinherited and effectively banished to France.

It is generally thought that Shakespeare was writing to the interests of King James who was the first British monarch to be both king of England and Scotland and that the play served as a warning about the consequences of breaking up the country.

King Lear's plan is to spend his retirement between the palaces of his daughters Gonerill and Regan, along with his entourage of one hundred knights. His daughters soon tire of this arrangement and they disown him. This rejection drives the king to madness. There is a parallel plot concerning the King's advisor the Earl of Gloucester who has one legitimate son called Edgar and a second bastard son called Edmund.

Gonerill is married to the Duke of Albany and Regan to the Duke of Cornwall. However, both women are in love with Edmund. Meanwhile, Cordelia is now married to the King of France and invades Britain with a French army with the idea of restoring old King Lear to the throne. Edmund accuses his father, the Earl of Gloucester, of being a part of this plot and as a consequence, Regan and Cornwall

gouge out Gloucester's eyes. Cornwall is mortally wounded by a servant who was enraged by Cornwall's torturing of Gloucester.

Gonerill feels only disdain for her husband the Duke of Albany and is in love with Edmund. Now that her sister Regan is widowed, she feels she may lose Edmund to her.

Lear is reunited with Cordelia and recovers his sanity but Edmund, Albany, Gonerill and Regan now engage their armies with the invading French forces and defeat them. Edmund orders the execution of Cordelia, then changes his mind but the order comes too late to save her. Lear dies of a broken heart with his dead daughter in his arms. Edgar, in disguise, accuses his half-brother Edmund of treason and slays him in a duel. A letter reveals that Gonerill has planned the murders of both her husband Albany and her sister Regan. She commits suicide. In the earlier version of the play, known as the Quarto, Albany becomes the new king of England. In the later collection of Shakespeare's plays called the Folio, it seems that it is Edgar who becomes the new British king.

The stories which provided the source of King Lear all had happy endings but Shakespeare's ending is without precedent, without mercy and utterly disturbing. No one is redeemed and no one escapes a miserable end. Interestingly the play was at one time bowdlerised or given a happy ending most notably by Nahum Tate, as Shakespeare's ending was considered too upsetting.

The play has several themes such as the futility of ambition and the idea of a godless, uncaring universe filled with nothingness. The idea of people thinking that love can be measured also runs throughout the play; family as a source of cruelty and the desire for land are also in the play. The themes of aging and the fear of madness are also present amid a storm of violence, hatred, betrayal, murder, power and lust. No one is left indifferent by Shakespeare's *True Chronicle History of the Life and Death of King Lear and his Three Daughters*.

## **2.7 An Introduction to The Awakening by Kate Chopin.**

The Awakening is a short novel which was first published in the United States in 1899 to mixed reviews which are now attributed to its being ahead of its time, as it is now considered to be a work of great importance.

The Awakening is a tragedy about a young married mother named Edna Pontellier who lives in New Orleans and has a very strong desire to lead a fulfilling life and refuses to be just one of her husband's many beautiful possessions.

The story begins with the family's summer holiday on the resort island Grand Isle in Louisiana, where many well-to-do families from New Orleans spend the hot summer months. Edna is described as an 'American woman' from Kentucky but her husband Léonce and the society in which she now lives is Creole. From the very beginning of the novel we are shown that their marriage is having problems, as Léonce Pontellier comes home late from gambling at a hotel and chides her for not looking after the children. On the Grand Isle she receives the adoring attention of the eldest son of the resort manager, Robert Lebrun. She also becomes close to Mademoiselle Reisz, a bad-tempered and unmarried woman and a consummate master of the piano. Her other great friend is Madame Adèle Ratignolle who is perpetually pregnant. Adèle loves Edna to the core but does not understand her artistic and emotional restlessness. She implores her to think of her children.

Edna and Robert fall in love and Robert moves to Mexico to try to get over Edna. Back in New Orleans, Léonce goes away on a business trip to New York and sends their children to stay with his mother in the meantime. Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz and reads her letters from Robert. She works on her skill as an artist and rents her own house and moves out of the family home. Léonce thinks that a trip to Europe will help Edna over what he sees as her crisis. Edna begins a love affair with the local rake. Robert returns from Mexico and Edna and he confess their love for each other, although Robert refuses to go through with it. Adèle calls for Edna during childbirth and in her pain implores Edna to think of her children. Edna is in despair at Robert's decision and loses her will to keep going. She returns to the Grand Isle alone, the place where her awakening took place, and drowns herself in the sea.

The novel does not make for a depressing read. In fact, it is suffused with a wry humour and Edna herself is very witty. This in itself makes Edna's suicide

particularly shocking and unexpected, especially as she is saying how hungry she is and fancies fish for lunch within an hour of her taking her own life.

The story is told from the third person omniscient point of view but there are times when this seems to cross over into Edna's own thoughts. This, from Chapter XXXIII, "So he had come back because the Mexicans were not congenial". These are the narrator's thoughts but they sound like Edna's. The writing is deliciously sensual and full of smells and sounds and has an adroit love of existence all of which make *The Awakening* a delight to read.

### **3. Analysis 1: Deconstructing Gonerill**

#### **3.1 The Verbal Stage or Close Reading**

##### **3.1.1 The Etymology and Frequency of Key Words**

Gonerill uses forms of the word **fool** seven times throughout the play. An examination of the etymology of 'fool' may give us some insight into the character of Gonerill.

The word 'fool' comes from the Old French word 'fol' meaning crazy person, ignorant person, jester, wind bag and also lewd person. The word can also refer to a type of custard related to trifle.

DI D MY FA THE R S TRI K E MY GE NTLE MA N F OR C HI DI NG OF HI S FO OL ? ( I . III 1 - 2 )

This use of 'fool' by Gonerill encompasses meanings of court jester (hence the capital F), wind bag, idiot and also of the idea that the use of violence for such a trifling matter is out of proportion.

NOT ON LY , S I R , TH I S Y OUR A LL - LI CE NS E D FO OL  
BUT OTHE R OF Y O UR I NS OLE NT RE TI N UE ( I . IV 196 )

Again there are layers of meaning to the use of 'fool'. This time the F of 'fool' is written in the lower case, pulling us away from the meaning of court jester and perhaps towards something like licentious person.

( TO THE FOOL) YOU , S I R, MORE K N A V E T H A N F O O L, A F T E R Y O U R M A  
S T E R ! ( I . I V 310 )

There is opposition here between 'knave' and 'fool', where 'fool' would mean idiot and knave a naughty person in full command of their senses.

A F O O L U S U R P S M Y B E D . ( I V . I I 27 - 29 )

To 'usurp' means to use wrongly or without permission. Here Gonerill criticises her husband, the Duke of Albany, for being either unable to sexually satisfy a woman perhaps by being a bungler in bed or of having sex with her against her will.

W I T H P L U M È D H E L M T H Y S T A T E B E G I N S T O T H R E A T ,  
W H I L S T T H O U , A M O R A L F O O L , S I T S S T I L L A N D C R I E S ( I V . I I 57 - 58 )

Again we hear the fury and disdain that Gonerill levels at her husband for lacking the qualities she sees as essential to manliness i.e. a weak person lacking courage. We can also see that her values are from a pre-Christian time, where the idea of turning the other cheek seems laughable to her.

N O M O R E ; T H E T E X T I S F O O L I S H . ( I V . V I I 36 )

To use a cliché, we see that Gonerill is not a person who suffers fools gladly and we see that she could be considered as 'an iron lady'.

**Dotage** is an uncommon word that Gonerill uses on three occasions. 'Dotage' can refer to a weakening of the mind due to old age or senility or alternatively to excessive and foolish affection or infatuation toward someone. It has its root in Old German where it meant foolishness.

N E V E R A F F L I C T Y O U R S E L F T O K N O W M O R E O F I T ;  
B U T L E T H I S D I S P O S I T I O N H A V E T H A T S C O P E  
A S D O T A G E G I V E S I T . ( I . I V 287 - 290 )

Gonerill is referring to her father, King Lear, as a senile old man. Her intolerance of fools is again brought to the surface by close reading.

H E M A Y E N G U A R D H I S D O T A G E W I T H T H E I R P O W E R S  
A N D H O L D O U R L I V E S I N M E R C Y . – O S W A L D , I S A Y ! ( I . I V 319 - 324 )

There seems to be a mix of meanings here, combining Lear's senility with his excessive fondness for his one hundred knights. The suggestion is that his dotage



toward his small army will serve to help him get his own way when dealing with Gonerill and Regan.

### 3.1.2 Paradoxes and Contradictions within Phrases.

THE BEST AND SOUNDEST OF HIS TIME HATH BEEN  
BUT RASH. ( I . I 295 - 296 )

This is a deliberate paradox uttered by Gonerill as an insulting remark toward her father. She is saying that Lear's reign was never good, despite his having held his kingdom together and bequeathed a large part of it to Gonerill herself. Ingratitude is the tone of this utterance.

IDLE OLD MAN ,  
THAT STILL WOULD MANAGE THOSE AUTHORITIES  
THAT HE HATH GIVEN AWAY! ( I . I I I 17 - 18 )

'Idle old man' perhaps indicates to us some degree of unfairness on the part of Gonerill when judging her father, as old men are by definition retired from work. However, she highlights the contradiction within Lear of apparently relinquishing his powers of state while wishing to retain them but without the responsibilities of a ruler.

WHILE THOU, A MORAL FOOL, SITS STILL AND CRIES  
'ALACK, WHY DOES HE SO?' ( I I I . V I I 52 - 59 )

One of the meanings of fool is a licentious person and so moral fool seems to be something of a contradiction in terms. It is in effect an especially snide and cutting jibe toward Gonerill's husband, The Duke of Albany, for his unwillingness to act against the French invasion of Britain. In Gonerill's eyes, Albany is in effect a coward.

### 3.1.3 Binary Oppositions.

#### NIGHT AND DAY

BY DAY AND NIGHT HE WRONGS ME . ( I . I I I 4 )

Apart from the obvious meaning of continuance, Gonerill may be thinking that her father wrongs her both in front of her face and also behind her back.

## TRUST AND FEAR

SA FE R THA N TR US T TOO FA R.  
LET ME STILL TAKE AWAY THE HARMS I FEAR,  
NOT FEAR STILL TO BE TAKEN (I.IV 326-329)

This perhaps gives us a glimpse into Gonerill's psyche. She operates more on the grounds of what she fears rather than according to values, morals or trust. And fear will lead to anger, anger to hatred, hatred to evil and finally from evil to madness.

## MAN AND WOMAN

O, THE DI FF E RE NCE OF MA N A N D MA N!  
TO THE E A W O M A N ' S S E R V I C E S A R E D U E ; ( I I I . V I I 27 - 28 )

Throughout the play, one of Gonerill's main themes or concerns is to do with what makes a man a true man. For her, Edmund is the epitome of what a man should be and her husband The Duke of Albany is entirely unmanly and unworthy of any self-respecting woman.

### 3.1.4 Identifying Metaphors

LE T Y O U S T U D Y  
BE TO CO NTE NT Y O U R L O R D , W H O H A T H R E C E I V E D Y O U  
AT FO RTU NE ' S A L M S . Y O U H A V E O B E D I E N C E S C A N T E D ,  
AN D W E L L A R E W O R T H T H E W A N T T H A T Y O U H A V E W A N T E D . ( I . I 278 - 281 )

Gonerill tells her sister Cordelia in no uncertain terms that she has been lucky to have been born to a royal family and has been foolish in the extreme not to play along with her father's silly game. As far as Gonerill sees it, Cordelia is entirely to blame for her own exile. Once again, we see how Gonerill has, at the beginning of the play, a very rational view on life and is very quick to spot anyone who has, in her opinion, been a fool.

H O L L A , H O L L A !  
T H A T E Y E T H A T T O L D Y O U S O L O O K E D B U T A S Q U I N T . ( V . I I I 73 - 74 )

Gonerill is telling her sister Regan that she is wrong in thinking she has won the affections of Edmund and she says it with humour. She is capable of saying something funny even as things are about to end very badly for her. This says something of her defiant spirit.

## 3.2 The Textual Stage

### 3.2.1 Shifts in Attitude

#### Shift in attitude toward her father

##### From Act I Scene 1

SIR, I LOVE YOU MORE THAN WORD CAN WIELD THE MATTER

##### From Act I Scene 1

AND WITH WHAT POOR JUDGEMENT HE HATH NOW CAST HER OFF APPEARS TOO GROSSLY

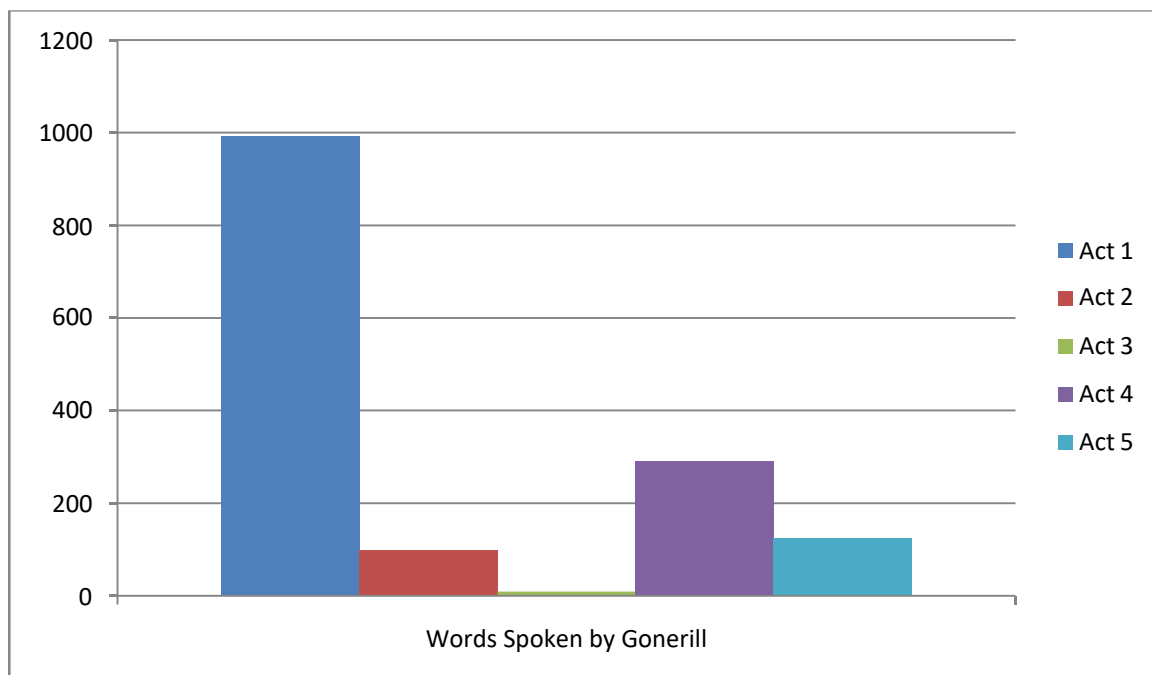
##### From Act I Scene 3

EVERY HOUR HE FLASHES INTO ONE GROSS CRIME OR OTHER

Within a very short space of time, Gonerill's attitude toward her father changes radically from loving daughter, to seeing his actions against her sister Cordelia as foolish and unfair and finally one of utter disdain and seeing him as behaving like a criminal. We see Gonerill assessing what she witnesses with rapidity and impatience. She quickly becomes unforgiving toward Lear once he has refused to reduce his retinue from one hundred knights to a handful of just the very old ones.

### 3.2.2 Shifts in Time and Pace

Graph 1 Number of words spoken by Gonerill in each act.



If we take Gonerill's word count as a measure of her activity, we can see from the graph above how important she is to the events unfolding in Act I. As our deconstruction process is revealing, Gonerill helps us to form our opinions of the other characters in the play with her sharp and quick intelligence.

Having practically dropped out of the play in the second and third acts, she regains some of her former prominence in Act 4 where she is fighting both to stabilize the kingdom of Britain and to win the affections of the man she really loves and sees as a true leader, Edmund.

In the final act, her words are cut short as indeed is her life along with many of the other characters of the play.

### 3.3 The Linguistic Stage

#### 3.3.1 The Inadequacy of Language

SIR, I LOVE YOU MORE THAN WORD CAN WIELD THE MATTER, ( I . I 55 - 56 ) A

LOVE THAT MAKE S BREATH POOR AND SPEECH UNABLE; ( I . I 60 )

We have seen that these sentiments are insincere. Gonerill is hiding her true feelings and uses the idea of the inadequacy of language in order to keep her true feelings hidden by not expressing them.

E RE LONG YOU ARE LIK E TO HEAR,  
IF YOU DA RE V ENTURE I N YOUR OW N B E HA LF, A  
MIS TRE S S ' S CO MMA N D . W EA R TH I S ;  
( GIVING A FAVOUR ) SPARE SPEECH. ( IV . II 19-20 )

The French army has invaded. Gonerill is organising the defence of Britain with Edmund. The situation is urgent. She overrules her personal motive of wanting to form a romantic bond with Edmund and puts a swift end to the dialogue with the order to 'spare speech.' She is being expedient. This is the behaviour of a commander.

NO MORE ; T HE TE XT I S F OOLI SH . ( IV . II 36 )

Gonerill cuts short her despised husband's criticisms with this retort. Again, it could be a mechanism to shield herself from the truth about the sort of person she really is. On the other hand, it might well be that she is simply not prepared to listen

to the complaints of a man she considers weak and whose response to the French invasion has been feeble. This could signal Gonerill as the competent commander of her forces and defender of Britain, a patriot no less.

### **3.3.2 Misinterpretation, especially exaggeration.**

( AS I DE ) I H A D R A T H E R L O S E T H E B A T T L E T H A N T H A T S I S T E R  
S H O U L D L O O S E N H I M A N D M E . ( V . I 18 - 19 )

Having been a highly intelligent woman with the capacity required for ruling a kingdom, we see now how disturbed she has become. It seems she would now sacrifice the many lives of her loyal soldiers to win the favours of Edmund, the man she loves.

### **3.3.3 Metaphorical constructs or conceits.**

N O W , B Y M Y L I F E,  
O L D F O O L S A R E B A B E S A G A I N , A N D M U S T B E U S E D  
W I T H C H E C K S , A S F L A T T E R I E S , W H E N T H E Y A R E S E E N A B U S E D .  
R E M E M B E R W H A T I H A V E S A I D . ( I . I I I 20 - 23 )

Gonerill is effectively saying that sometimes you need to be cruel to be kind. Comparing her father to a baby brings with it connotations of love and affection. It would seem that at this point she is still trying to find a kind solution to the situation.

T H I S K I S S , I F I T D U R S T S P E A K ,  
W O U L D S T R E T C H T H Y S P I R I T S U P I N T O T H E A I R .  
C O N C E I V E ; A N D F A R E T H E E W E L L . ( I V . I I 12 - 25 )

This is Gonerill 'talking dirty' to the man she desires. She comes across as a great commander with an equally unequivocal sexual appetite. She can defeat the French and bed her lover with the same force of will. 'Kiss', 'stretch... up' and 'conceive' are the force behind this sexual conceit.

There are two metaphorical conceits that occur over the length of Gonerill's discourse. Her discourse is peppered with food-related words such as 'taste', 'distaste', 'epicurism' and 'tart'. This could be indicative of her great appetite for life which includes taking control of Britain and her love life.

Her husband, the Duke of Albany, is frequently associated with cows and milk. She refers to his 'milky gentleness' and, as her distain for him grows, as a 'milk-

livered man' and to the 'cowish terror of his spirit'. She sees her husband as the antithesis of all things manly and an utter turn-off.

### **3.4 Results and Conclusion**

Following the techniques of deconstruction has allowed us to build up a profile of the character of Gonerill and to map out her descent into evil, madness and finally suicide. Not only that, we get a clear picture of the forces she was up against, the same forces that distort her character and finally overcome her.

#### Aspects of Gonerill's character

1. She is willing to be sycophantic if it is in her interest.
2. She can make fast and shrewd evaluations of people and situations.
3. She is unhappy about being stuck in an unsatisfactory marriage.
4. She wants a sex life.
5. She is prepared to use violence to get what she wants.
6. She is organized and very intelligent.
7. She is brave and defiant, especially when dealing with patriarchal prejudices.
8. She will do anything for love, including deception and murder.
8. She has a sense of economy and dislikes extravagance and debauchery.
7. She is a natural commander and very able to deal with national security threats.
8. She is a patriot.

## 4. Analysis 2: Deconstructing Edna Pontellier

### 4.1 The Verbal Stage

#### 4.1.1 The Etymology and Frequency of Key Words.

The first analysis of the key words of Edna's discourse revealed a frequent usage of the words shown below.

**Table 3 High Frequency Key Words in Edna's Discourse**

Key Word	No. of Occurrences
work	7
money	7
alone/lonely	6
asleep/sleep/sleeping	5
dream/dreaming	5
tired	5

This information gives us a first impression of what kind of themes particularly concerned Edna. Money was something she took very much into account and proved very adept at managing. She regarded her painting as work, as a means to independence. Loneliness was something she often felt combined with the feeling that nobody understood her. For example, her best and very dear friend, Adèle Ratignolle, could not understand her ambitions and dreams. Edna's often frustrating fight to become her own woman frequently produced in Edna exhaustion and the need for rest.

An unusual word that Edna utters is 'unwomanly'. The word 'woman' comes from Old English and means wife-man or female servant. "Womanly" refers to having the traits some societies consider appropriate in a woman, such as modesty and motherliness.

I SUPPOSE THAT IS WHAT YOU WOULD CALL UNWOMANLY; BUT I HAVE GOT INTO A HABIT OF EXPRESSING MYSELF. IT DOESN'T MATTER TO ME, AND YOU MAY THINK ME UNWOMANLY IF YOU LIKE.(CHAPTER XXXVI)

We can see that Edna is well-aware of what the society in which she lives expects of her but is in utter defiance of that. She will not be shut up or stopped by social niceties. Edna is a strong woman with her own mind and views.

#### **4.1.2 Paradoxes and Contradictions within Phrases.**

I WOULD GIVE MY LIFE FOR MY CHILDREN; BUT I WOULDN'T GIVE MYSELF. (CHAPTER XVI)

This apparent contradiction is crucial to understanding Edna. It stops the reader in their tracks. What does she mean exactly? She has a rich inner life which not even her children are allowed to access and she would rather die than give it up. Sadly this utterance turns out to have a prophetic quality and starts to give us some clue as to why she finally kills herself.

I HOPE YOU HAVE FISH FOR DINNER BUT DON'T DO ANYTHING EXTRA IF YOU HAVEN'T. (CHAPTER XXI)

Edna's banter with Victor on her final visit to Grand Isle is one of the most fascinating episodes in the story. She sounds happy and genuinely looking forward to a pleasant supper. But, if her intention was to kill herself immediately, then all this talk is merely to disguise her sad intention. Or was Edna's suicide decided on the spur of the moment? In this quote, it seems like she is using her feminine wiles with her usual efficient skill i.e. she really does want to have fish for her dinner. All this adds to the poignancy of her decision to allow herself to be taken by the sea.

#### **4.1.3 Binary Oppositions.**

##### **FRIGHTENED OR PLEASED**

I DON'T REMEMBER WHETHER I WAS FRIGHTENED OR PLEASED. (CHAPTER IX)

Her recurring image of running across a grassy field is directly connected to her experiences of learning to swim on Grand Isle. Edna continually reflects back on her childhood, trying to make sense of her present through her past. As with the sea, she feels both elation and fear in this flight of hers from things which oppress her, whether it be going to church with her father or being stuck in a loveless marriage.



## LIFE AND DEATH

ALL THAT NOISE AND CONFUSION AT THE TABLE MUST HAVE UPSET ME AND MOREOVER, I HATE SHOCKS AND SURPRISES. THE IDEA OF ROBERT STARTING OFF IN SUCH A RIDICULOUSLY SUDDEN AND DRAMATIC WAY! AS IF IT WERE A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH! NEVER SAYING A WORD ABOUT IT ALL MORNING WHEN HE WAS WITH ME. (CHAPTER XV)

With hindsight, we can see the irony in this utterance. It seems that Edna has not realised just how in love with each other she and Robert are. Robert has abandoned the island out of despair at the impossibility of their affections. This truly would be in the end a matter of life and death.

## EXTRAVAGANCE AND PRUDENCE

YOU ARE TOO EXTRAVAGANT. I DON'T BELIEVE YOU EVER THINK OF SAVING OR PUTTING THINGS BY. (CHAPTER XVIII)

This exchange highlights for us just how different the world views of Edna and Léonce are. Her husband loves to make money and enjoys spending it. Edna is very careful not to spend too much and eschews opulence. She prefers to live in a pigeon house instead of a palace. She values other things, like peace and quiet and having time to think and be reflective.

## LOSING AND WINNING

I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THE RACES. I DON'T WANT TO LOSE ALL THE MONEY I'VE WON. (CHAPTER XXV)

Edna has put her knowledge of horses from her Kentucky upbringing to good purpose. She has won a lot of money from betting at the races and unlike most gamblers, she knows exactly when to stop. This shows her to be a woman of great initiative and courage with a cool rational approach to money.

## HOT AND COLD

CATICHE'S COFFEE IS ALWAYS HOT. I DON'T KNOW HOW SHE MANAGES IT, HERE IN THE OPEN AIR. CELESTINE'S COFFEE GETS COLD BRINGING IT FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE DINING-ROOM. (CHAPTER XXXVI)

The relationship between Edna and Robert runs hot and cold throughout the story. The hot coffee signals the return to their relationship at its best. It is the scene where Edna drops her stance of being naïve and offended and returns to truly enjoying the company of the man she is in love with. Their relationship is now as hot as Catiche's delicious coffee.

#### 4.1.4 Identifying Metaphors

YOU USED TO THINK THE COOK WAS A TREASURE. ( CHAPTER XVII )

This is a barbed remark Edna aims at Léonce. Her husband also used to think that Edna was a treasure. The marriage is not working and Léonce always finds an excuse to leave the house every evening and goes off to his club.

JOE IS WORKING OVER AT THE 'PIGEON HOUSE'. ( CHAPTER XIX )

Edna's servant Ellen nicknames her apartment the pigeon house because it is so small and humble. It is in absolute opposition to the family house which is large, grandiose and full of ornament. We can also sense the connotation of being as free as a bird.

## 4.2 The Textual Stage

### 4.2.1 Shifts in Attitude

IT WILL BUY A HANDSOME PRESENT WEDDING PRESENT FOR SISTER JANET! (CHAPTER III)

At the beginning of the story, Edna expresses her enthusiasm for the upcoming wedding of her sister. Suddenly, however, she decides she will not attend. Neither her husband nor her father can persuade her to change her mind. Weddings are often occasions for family reconciliations. Edna does not explain her decision perhaps because her motives are too radical. She may well see marriage as a form of captivity for women and therefore can not bring herself to endorse it by attending.

YOU ARE THE EMBODIMENT OF SELFISHNESS. YOU SAVE YOURSELF SOMETHING – I DON'T KNOW WHAT – BUT THE RE IS SOME SELFISH MOTIVE, AND IN SPARING YOURSELF YOU NEVER CONSIDER FOR A MOMENT WHAT I THINK, OR HOW I FEEL YOUR NEGLECT AND INDIFFERENCE. I SUPPOSE THAT IS WHAT YOU WOULD CALL UNWOMANLY; BUT I HAVE GOT INTO A HABIT OF EXPRESSING MYSELF. IT DOESN'T MATTER TO ME, AND YOU MAY THINK ME UNWOMANLY IF YOU LIKE.

I'M SPOILING YOUR DINNER, ROBERT; NEVER MIND WHAT I SAY. YOU HAVEN'T EATEN A MORSEL.

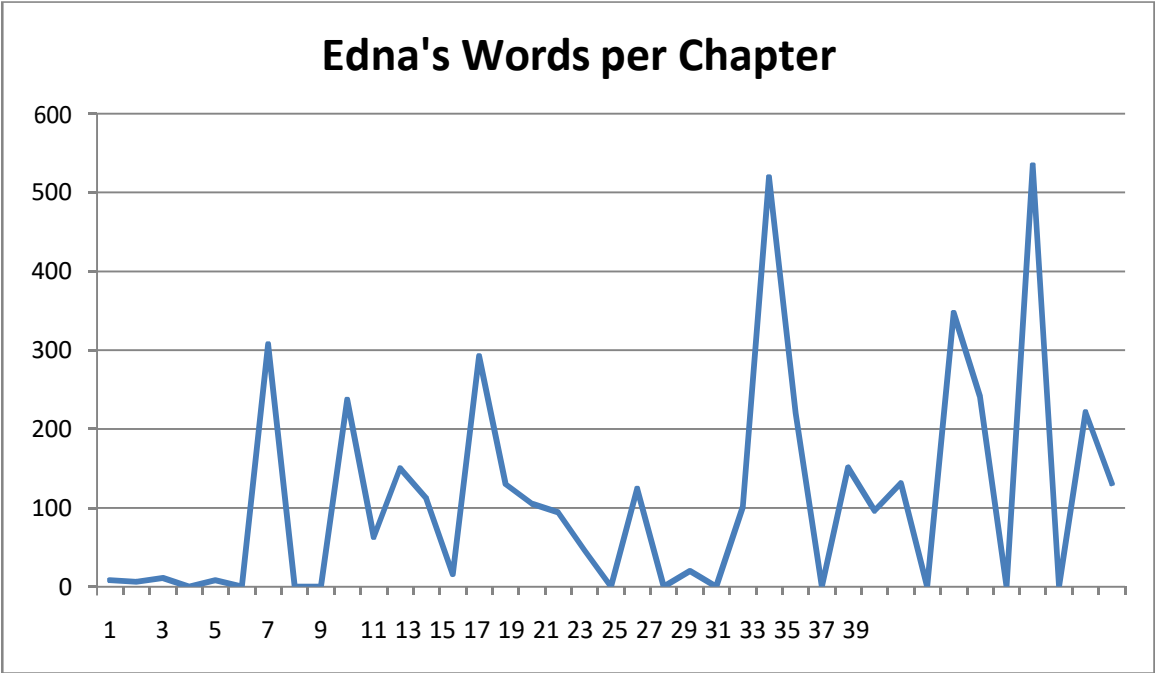
ISN'T THIS A DELIGHTFUL PLACE? ( CHAPTER XX XVI )

At the chance meeting between Edna and Robert at Catiche’s restaurant, we witness a complete turnaround in Edna’s attitude towards Robert, the man she really loves. In mid-flow she realises her remonstrations against Robert are hurtful, unjust and motivated out of a kind of childish anger or pique. She suddenly realises this and says ‘I’m spoiling your dinner, Robert.’ At this point their relationship is restored and reaches maturity and will give them their only shot at happiness.

**4.2.2 Shifts in Time and Pace**

The story follows a strict chronological order although Edna frequently thinks back on her childhood experiences and tries to relate them to her current situation. She returns to Grand Isle at the end of the story, to the place perhaps where she had been happiest.

**Graph 2 Number of words spoken by Edna in each chapter.**



We do not get to listen to Edna until chapter 7 when she is relaxing at the beach on Grand Isle with her beautiful and voluptuous friend Madame Adèle Ratignolle. They are close friends and Edna is thrilled by the natural intimacy and physical contact her Creole friend shows her. Edna shares with her her nostalgic reminiscences of her Kentucky childhood. We learn that Edna’s mother died when

she was very young and and we have the recurring image of running through a green field half in terror, half in joy in her attempt to escape the harshness of her patriarchal surroundings.

The middle of the book sees a dip in her activity due largely to her having little to say either to her father or her husband. The next big peak at chapter 26 refers to her friendship with Madam Reisz, a difficult person but a brilliant pianist whom Edna becomes fond of. The fact that Mademoiselle Reisz receives letters from Robert and also the fact that she leads the life of a true artist, are what draw Edna to her.

The last and most intense burst of activity occurs in chapter 36 when Edna and Robert are reconciled in Catiche's restaurant as discussed above.

## 4.3 The Linguistic Stage

### 4.3.1 The Inadequacy of Language

NO. I ' V E H A D E N O U G H O F T H E R A C E S . I D O N ' T W A N T T O L O S E A L L T H E M O N E Y I ' V E W O N , A N D I ' V E G O T T O W O R K W H E N T H E W E A T H E R I S B R I G H T , I N S T E A D O F – ( C H A P T E R X X V )

This breaking off of speech by Edna comes at the beginning of her acquaintance with Alcée Arobin. It is at the time when she is working hard to launch her career as an artist. Her friendship with Arobin is on the point of becoming an affair and there is an internal struggle going on inside her. She is sexually attracted to him but emotionally he is irrelevant to her. At the point of her 'instead of – ', she is not quite ready to fully admit to herself that she is going to get a sex life for herself. She does not want to hear it, not even from her own lips.

### 4.3.2 Misinterpretation, especially exaggeration.

A THOUSAND EMOTIONS HAVE SWEEPED THROUGH ME TONIGHT. I DON'T COMPREHEND HALF OF THEM. DON'T MIND WHAT I'M SAYING. I AM JUST THINKING ALOUD. I WONDER IF I SHALL EVER BE STIRRED AGAIN AS MADEMOISELLE REISZ' PLAYING MOVED ME TO-NIGHT. I WONDER IF ANY NIGHT ON EARTH WILL EVER AGAIN BE LIKE THIS ONE. (CHAPTER X)

Edna is enraptured. She has been overwhelmed by Mademoiselle's rendition of Chopin's Impromptu. She has been awakened to new possibilities and

excitements and has sensed that life can be magical. Her exaggerated language springs from these emotions.

IF IT HAS TURNED TO STONE I WILL STILL EAT IT. BUT REALLY, WHAT HAS BECOME OF MONSIEUR FARIVAL AND THE OTHERS? (CHAPTER XIII)

Tiredness is a constant theme with Edna. On her trip to the *Chênrière*, she falls into a long sleep and does not wake up until many hours later. When she at last awakes, she is famished and does not care that lunch has gone cold. She will eat it anyway. When Edna exaggerates it is a sign that she is feeling very happy.

BY ALL THE CODES WHICH I AM ACQUAINTED WITH, I AM A DEVILISHLY WICKED SPECIMEN OF THE SEX. BUT SOME WAY I CAN'T CONVINCED MYSELF THAT I AM. I MUST THINK ABOUT IT. (CHAPTER XXVII)

Edna is entirely aware that her fight for being able to finally be herself comes at a heavy price. Her actions will be condemned. And yet she remains convinced about her new found convictions.

#### **4.3.3 Metaphorical constructs or conceits.**

AND IN A DAY WE SHOULD BE RICH! I'D GIVE IT ALL TO YOU, THE PIRATE GOLD AND EVERY BIT OF TREASURE WE COULD DIG UP. I THINK YOU WOULD KNOW HOW TO SPEND IT. PIRATE GOLD ISN'T A THING TO BE HOARDED OR UTILIZED. IT IS SOMETHING TO SQUANDER AND THROW TO THE FOUR WINDS, FOR THE FUN OF SEEING THE GOLDEN SPECKS FLY. (CHAPTER XII)

Edna is happy when she speaks these words and she gives free reign to her imagination. She feels carefree and revitalized. Her time with Robert at Grand Isle is really like having found pirate gold.

WELL, FOR INSTANCE, WHEN I LEFT HER TODAY, SHE PUT HER ARMS AROUND ME AND FELT MY SHOULDER BLADES, TO SEE IF MY WINGS WERE STRONG, SHE SAID. 'THE BIRD THAT WOULD SOAR ABOVE THE LEVEL PLAIN OF TRADITION AND PREJUDICE MUST HAVE STRONG WINGS. IT IS A SAD SPECTACLE TO SEE THE WEAKLINGS BRUISED, EXHAUSTED, FLUTTERING BACK TO EARTH.'

I'M NOT THINKING OF ANY EXTRAORDINARY FLIGHTS. I ONLY HALF COMPREHEND HER. (CHAPTER XXVII)

This brings to mind Icharus who flew too close to the sun and so has something about it of a premonition. The conceit was used by Mademoiselle Reisz who was concerned about what could happen to her newly awakened friend Edna.

I FEEL AS IF I HAD BEEN WOUND UP TO A CERTAIN PITCH – TOO TIGHT – AND SOMETHING INSIDE OF ME HAD SNAPPED. (CHAPTER XXXI)

Edna utters these words to Arobin when she leaves her old house for her small apartment. Perhaps she has just snapped the final ties to her old life as Léonce's wife. She has been under much internal and external tension and feels emotionally and physically spent.

#### **4.4 Results and Conclusion**

The processes of deconstruction have given us a clearer picture of the inner-workings of Edna Pontellier. There is a continuous loop turning over in her thoughts linking her childhood memory of running through a grassy field to her experience of learning to swim in the sea. She is always heading into the unknown. There is a permanent tension between fear and exhilaration.

She is very rational in the everyday matters of life. She carries out her plans with determination, expediency and efficiency. Her discourse is full of imperative verbs. She knows how to get things done and how to get what she needs.

Edna is very self-aware. She knows she gets on her husband's nerves.

HE'D NEVER BE IN A BAD HUMOUR IF IT WEREN'T FOR ME. (CHAPTER XXVII)

She knows she needs to develop her skill as a painter in order to feel fulfilled. She knows she has physical needs. Her only regret, and it is one that weighs very heavily upon her, is for her children, who are the innocent victims of the story. Edna is a highly intelligent person.

Between her bursts of intense activity, Edna is beset by physical and emotional exhaustion. It is perhaps this feeling of utter exhaustion that stops her from resisting being overcome by the sea at her death.

Edna has a lively sense of humour and irony. 'I'll let Léonce pay the bills' she says about the cost of her birthday party. Her imagination is also rich. She conjures up images of pirates and their treasure and wonders about the ways of Mexican women in order to tease Robert.

### Aspects of Edna's character.

1. She is very proactive and determined.
2. She enjoys good company.
3. She loves her children while recognising she is not very motherly.
4. She rejects her role as her husband's ornament and wants a fulfilling life.
5. She is devoid of hate.
6. She has a sharp and highly amusing sense of humour.
7. She suffers from periods of exhaustion.
8. She can appear stubborn and at times trite.
9. She loves many aspects of life including art, music and walking.
10. She is very clever at managing money.
11. She is disinterested in opulence and extravagance.
12. She wants a sex life.
13. She wants to be with a man she truly loves.

## **5. A Comparative Analysis of the Motives behind the Suicides of Gonerill and Edna Pontellier**

### **5.1 Comparing the Characters of Gonerill and Edna Pontellier**

Both Gonerill and Edna are highly intelligent and determined women who, despite being different in many ways, share many qualities. Please see Table 4 below.

What is especially interesting is their differences. We see that Gonerill feels hatred and resorts to violence whereas Edna is devoid of these traits. It is as well to bear in mind here that Gonerill lived in a violent age (Ancient Britain) where there were few laws to be broken. Another notable difference is Gonerill's intolerance of fools and impatience. These are not qualities shared by Edna.

Both women are brave and intelligent and are not afraid to fight for what they believe are their rights, despite the terrible odds.

**Table 4 A Comparison of Gonerill and Edna Pontellier**

<b>GONERILL</b>	<b>EDNA PONTELLIER</b>
<b>S I M I L A R I T I E S</b>	
Very analytical about situations and people	
Stuck in unhappy marriages	
Determined to find love	
Very well organized and expedient	
Fighting against patriarchal societies	
Dislike extravagance	
Wry sense of humour	
Brave	
Prepared to break the rules	
Natural commanders	
Skilled at subterfuge and carrying out part of their lives in secret	
<b>D I F F E R E N C E S</b>	
Prepared to use violence	Does not blame or hate anyone
Intolerant of fools	Genuinely interested in other people of very different backgrounds and characters
Capable of deceit	Sincere
<b>T R A N S F O R M A T I O N S</b>	
Submissive to proactive	Submissive to proactive
Wife to commander	Dependent to independent
Kind to cruel to evil to madness	Unsure to happy to despair
Commander to madness	Uncertain to certain
	Unfulfilled to fulfilled

### **5.2 Motives for the Suicides of Gonerill and Edna Pontellier**

Both women are effectively killed by the same thing: their utter grief and despair at not being able to form a relationship with the men they love. Gonerill is driven to acts of madness and despicable evil and stabs herself out of grief and shame. For Edna, a life without Robert seems pointless, and she drowns herself. Both came very close to obtaining what they wanted but were thwarted. Edmund did not love Gonerill in equal measure. He was attracted to both Gonerill and Regan and so her secret plans could not succeed. And Edna's great hopes were dashed by Robert's unwillingness to take risks. Gonerill would surely have referred to Robert as a moral fool. Thus, they were effectively driven to suicide by failings in the men they loved and not by lack of their own courage and intelligence.



### **5.3 Feminist Literary Interpretation**

It would seem clear then that both Gonerill and Edna were forced into a corner with no option but to take their own lives by patriarchal systems they both fought fiercely against. For Edmund, Gonerill was expendable in his game of politics; a woman of no importance. Robert would not come outside the rules of a patriarchal society in order to be with Edna. Robert's final verdict was that Edna, was not worth it. This means that both women were effectively alone in their fight for what they valued. They paid for challenging their respective social systems with their lives.

King Lear is a Jacobean androtext which ends in a bloodbath which includes the deaths of all three sisters. The Awakening, on the other hand, is a gynotext. Edna has gained her independence both as artist and woman. Her life being taken at the end is utterly gut-wrenching for the reader. Her life was about to blossom. Her life was not worth losing over one frustrated love affair. The reader is left devastated. Kate Chopin wants us to feel the full horror of what women have to tolerate in the society of her day and so deprives us of a better outcome for the brave woman the reader has grown to adore.

### **5.4 Answering the Key Questions**

How can literary theory help us to understand more clearly the driving forces behind these two female characters?

Literary theory has provided us with the tools to prise open the text to see what forces are clashing within.

What does marriage mean to these intelligent and ambitious women?

Marriage for them has been a loveless trap, one that both women were determined to free themselves from.

What are the economic forces at work and how do they affect and influence Gonerill and Edna and what roles do they play in their respective tragedies?

Gonerill is associated with free market forces. She sees no value in the status quo and strives forward to establish a new kind of Britain. Edna combines skill and prudence in her monetary affairs in accordance with her Puritan background. At the

same time, she is well-aware that her own personal revolution needs financing and knows how to do it.

How much had women's place in society advanced from Shakespeare's time to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which are the 300 years which separate the two works? (Although King Lear is set in the Dark Ages, Shakespeare's works reflect the issues of his own time).

It seems that women in Edna's time were just as likely to get trapped into marriage and domestic slavery as women from 300 years previously. The great advance is that women writers now felt brave enough to protest and fight their cause. Even so, *The Awakening* was severely criticized by some reviews for championing very dangerous ideas.

To what extent are King Lear and *The Awakening* ahead of their times?

Shakespeare is always challenging his audiences and many of his issues remain potently relevant today. This is why his work has endured and remained very popular. Kate Chopin was perhaps the last female writer to be chided for fighting for women's rights. She contributed to the beginning of their liberation, a process which is ongoing today. Indeed, *The Awakening* was rediscovered in the 1960s at the height of the Women's Movement.

How do these works reflect on our own times of wage inequality and glass ceilings where parity between the sexes has still not been convincingly achieved.

Contemporary studies of company board of directors still show that even Western societies are still a long way from reaching parity between the sexes. Women must still fight harder than men to reach their goals and wage inequality is still a widespread problem. The fight is not over.

## **5.5 Answering the Hypotheses and Final Conclusion**

1. King Lear and The Awakening clearly show that women's issues in late Victorian England were entirely distinct from those of the Jacobean era.

This comparative study shows the opposite to be true. Women could still easily get trapped into marriages of convenience and have any chance of self-fulfilment stifled by male powers in late Victorian America.

2. A close reading of King Lear by Shakespeare and The Awakening by Kate Chopin indicate that women in the late Victorian era were still under the yoke of a patriarchal society and did not have the freedom to live their own lives.

This hypothesis is borne out by this study. As in the case of Adèle Ratignolle, wives were expected to be docile baby-machines. And if they didn't conform, they would come to a bad end.

### **Final Conclusion**

Focussing on Gonerill and Edna Pontellier in their own words with the aid of deconstruction and a feminist literary mental framework has resulted in a very satisfying experience. Literary theory has helped establish what kind of women Gonerill and Edna were. Gonerill's descent from intelligent and rational leader into madness and evil has been well explained by using these techniques. We have been able to follow Edna's blossoming as both woman and artist and shudder at the tragic outcome of her bravery. We have clearly proven that both King Lear and The Awakening offer tremendous insights into the inner workings of women fighting to be allowed simply to be themselves.

I chose these two works because they had such an impact on me as reader. I found them both thrilling. Thanks to literary theory I have been able to qualify their excellence and demonstrate their great value as works of art. And above all I have demonstrated that any woman who wished to achieve any level of self-fulfilment had to face ferocious opposition, both in Jacobean times and at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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