Claims of Self-Liberation in Feminine Creole Fiction: A New Vision of Individualism Influenced by Naturalism

ÉLISE CANTIRAN
University Eötvös Loránd, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to interpret the poetics of self in Kate Chopin and Léona Queyrouze as a challenge to the established order and a claim to freedom. Both authors are familiar with Zola and naturalism: Queyrouze writes to the naturalist author while critics classify Chopin's novel The Awakening *as part of this literary movement. Nevertheless, both writers distance themselves from the naturalist model with their emphasis on the originality of the individual. The rhetorical device of* captatio benevolentiae *and other strategies contribute to self-actualization in a peaceful relationship with the Other. The protest of these authors against the dominant thinking of the period takes the form of an exaltation of singularity, contributing thereby to the development of the notion of the "American Dream."*

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article propose d'interpréter la poétique du moi chez Kate Chopin et Léona Queyrouze en tant que contestation de l'ordre établi et revendicaton de liberté. Les deux autrices connaissent Zola et le naturalisme puisque Queyrouze écrit à l'écrivain et que les critiques classent le roman The Awakening (L'Éveil) *de Chopin dans le courant naturaliste. Néanmoins, les œuvres des deux écrivaines se distancient du modèle en mettant en valeur l'originalité de l'individu. Le procédé narratif du* captatio benevolentiae *ainsi que d'autres stratégies contribuent à l'affirmation de soi dans un rapport apaisé avec l'Autre tandis que la protestation contre la pensée dominante de la période prend la forme d'une exaltation de la singularité pour contribuer au développement de l'idée du "rêve américain."*

In the United States of America, late nineteenth-century French literature was made known principally through translations of Henry Greville,[1] George Sand et Victor Cherbuliez,[2] whose novels offer traditional virtuous and/or otherwise outstanding heros. Naturalism, especially in Émile Zola's novels, tends to reformulate the idea of the main character as hero. As early as 1877, when as yet no English translation of *L'Assommoir* was available, an anonymous article appeared, with the statement: "[The] heroine is a washer-woman and the hero – in so far as there is a hero – is a roof-mender."[3] The cultural gap challenges the previous view of individuals in fiction according to which there should be a "hero" in the romantic way of thinking. We can infer that Zola's novel challenges the culture of the New World on a different level. Indeed, it is in this era when the concept of the self-made man triumphs over the crowd and the concept of the "American Dream" (later theorized by the historian James Truslow Adams) is operative, that American culture encounters a

[1] The pseudonym of Alice Marie Céleste Durand.
[2] Albert J. Salvan, *Zola aux États-Unis* (Providence RI : Brown University Studies, 1943) 11.
[3] Anonymous, "The Contributors' Club," *The Atlantic Monthly* 39 (May 1877): 610. Note: In the U.S., articles about Zola were rarely signed during the late nineteenth century.

philosophical disagreement with naturalism.[4] Our purpose is to examine how Kate Chopin (1850-1904) and Léona Queyrouze (1861-1938) participate in this thinking by glorifying individuality in the romantic sense, but with a difference.

If we consider the trajectory of literary naturalism, we see that it spread across the Atlantic to the Americas[5] and included authors such as Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser in the United States; all three, from the northeast, wrote novels with themes close to those in European naturalist novels, according to Donald Pizer.[6] The determinism and so-called pessimism of Zola's early works can often be detected in their works. While most American writers labeled naturalists by critics come from the northern states, the camp of victors of the Civil War, it is of note that women writers from Louisiana, a southern state, were also aware of Zola's ideas. Léona Queyrouze wrote to Zola in March of 1898, addressing a poem to his glory, while Kate Chopin published articles about his work and composed *The Awakening* (1899), a work modern critics consider naturalist. Pizer notes that, "[i]nstead of comparing Chopin to the Louisiana local colorist [...][,] critics now compare her exploration of new themes to the innovations of other daring writers of the 1890s: Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, and Frank Norris."[7] Both female writers were familiar with Zola and his novels. Their openness to France and to the innovations of the authors of their time demonstrates their willingness to consider more international ways of thinking. They express their worldview through liberated prose, confounding contemporary readers' expectations. While the novels of Dreiser, Crane, or James often evoke determinism with a certain brutality, the writings of Léona Queyrouze and Kate Chopin show a penchant for individualism and self emancipation in a more optimistic way, adapting the evolving idea of the "American dream" to their purposes.

The two female writers develop a unique aesthetic of self and society in the late nineteenth-century literary landscape. Queyrouze shows a keen interest in symbols and occasionally resorts to the rhetorical device of *prosopopoeia* in her poem "Sonnet, hommage respectueux à Émile Zola."[8] Her use of the pronoun "je" embodies Truth and figures her support for the French author's struggle for Justice and Truth.[9] Chopin creates a character who discovers her identity in an unaccepting society. In the case of each female writer, an enthusiastic version of "I"/"je" defends a specific idea of individualism, while adressing the benevolence of the reader.

These authors depict strong female characters who dare to stand alone in unwelcoming surroundings. They also offer a unique framework for their narratives: the landscape of the Creoles.[10] Their fictional "je"/"I" seeks to assert itself beyond adversity, whether through the embodiment of values or the creation of a female character in search of meaning. During her lifetime, Queyrouze writes to Zola three times: the first letter contains a sonnet written in the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair; the second letter contains clippings of articles of interest for the writer; and the last one encloses a text about the Affair written in

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[4] See James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1931). In his book, Adams coins the term the "American Dream" and defines it as the dream of a land in which life could be richer and fuller for every citizen. The social order allows men and women to reach their potential regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. See also < https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ldpd_4078384 >.

[5] Yves Chevrel, *Le Naturalisme. Étude d'un mouvement littéraire international* (Paris: PUF, 1982).

[6] Donald Pizer and Earl N. Harbert, *Dictionary of Literary Biography. American Realists and Naturalists,* vol. 12 (Detroit: Bruccoli Clark Book, 1982). See especially Pizer's foreword.

[7] Pizer 60.

[8] The poem is included in Léona Queyrouze's letter to Zola 02.03.1898 (Collection Brigitte Émile-Zola).

[9] The sonnet is quoted in footnote no. 41 below.

[10] In this context the term "Creole" refers to people of Louisiana and their descendants dating from its French and Spanish colonial status.

her own hand. The focus here will be on her sonnet, the only fictional work she sent to Zola. As for Chopin, *The Awakening* is the only one of her texts considered naturalist by critics. Through the joint study of a selection of Queyrouze's poems and passages from Chopin's *The Awakening*, we will explore how the two women writers use the concept of "I"/"je" to convey a positive idea of self-liberation in their fictional writing and will offer a reflection on the significance of this strategy. First of all, we will analyze how individualism can be an interpretation of naturalism. Then, we will focus on the importance of descriptions of surroundings in the liberation of the female "I"/"je." Subverting norms means new borders for both writers, as they highlight the necessity for a new space to experiment with freedom. Finally, we will examine the glorification of individuality in these texts and explore how the fictional "I"/"je" creates a special space in which it both opposes society and shows respect and love for alterity.

Individualism: An original and cultural vision of naturalism

The definition of "individualism" varies depending on the country, culture, and era. The concept appeared during the French Revolution, but the word came into use during the nineteenth century and has become a source of confusion, as historian Koenraad W. Swart underlines:

> The present-day confusion about the meaning of the term individualism dates back to the mid-XIXth century when the word was invented. From the very beginning, "individualism" was used to designate at least three highly dissimilar clusters of ideas: first, the idealistic doctrine with equalitarian [sic] implications of the rights of man, or what may be called political liberalism; secondly, the anti-statist, largely utilitarian doctrine of *laissez-faire*, or economic liberalism; thirdly, the aristocratic cult of individuality, or Romantic individualism.[11]

We will focus principally on the romantic notion of individualism that characterizes the fiction of the nineteenth century. We should note that Frank Norris believed naturalism was a form of romanticism: "Naturalism is a form of Romanticism, not an inner circle of Realism."[12] Naturalism might have developed the notion of individualism in its own way, though, especially when the literary current migrated to other countries. The philosophical concept of "individuality" and its expression in literature adapt culturally to different circumstances. Swart notes a different understanding of the concept, which began in Protestant countries, such as Germany: "The change in the meaning of individualism from a term characterizing a society dominated by selfish interests to one denoting the idea of the free individual and his development took place in Germanic, predominantly Protestant countries earlier than in France."[13] In the United States, also a predominantly Protestant country, individualism as a philosophical notion merges with the concepts of the "self-made man" or the "American Dream," which already evoke a positive image of the same idea. Indeed, individualism celebrates liberal democracy. Political and social theorist Steven Lukes states: "It became a symbolic catchword of immense ideological significance, expressing all that has at various times been implied in the philosophy of natural rights, the belief in free

[11] Koenraad W. Swart, "'Individualism' in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860)," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 23 (1962): 77-90.77.
[12] Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer," in *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco. Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism* [2nd ed.], ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) 274.
[13] Swart 86.

enterprise, and the American Dream."[14] Nevertheless, sociologist Claude S. Fischer emphasizes that considering Americans as exclusively individualist would be a mistake. He would prefer to call their state of mind "voluntarism" since, in his opinion, American individualism does not necessarily preclude the influence of societal norms: "An ideologically consistent individualist, a libertarian in the Ayn Rand Mode, say, would endorse the freedom to have extramarital sex, but not the typical American; faith often trumps individualism."[15] In practice, emphasis on one's individuality does not have to come at the expense of the group. To Fischer's way of thinking, freedom and self-initiative are not always allowed in this kind of individualism, as Americans value group commitment. Thus, promoting self-initiative over following social rules is already a form of contest against mainstream thinking in literary works. Furthermore, since the "American dream" is still developing at the time when these Southern women are writing, we will consider individualism in its romantic sense, as a form of protest celebrating the individual over the group, and show how it assumes new forms in the feminine Creole fiction of Queyrouze and Chopin.

Finding one's identity by defining new boundaries: Self-liberation and the landscape

A Creole poet, essayist, and composer, Léona Queyrouze expressed herself "on such issues as culture, race, politics, literature, art and music."[16] She had a perfect command of both French and English and worked as a translator. Her salon in New Orleans was well-known and she was one of the founders of the literary circle *L'Athénée louisianais* and its journal, *Les Comptes-Rendus*, whose mission it was to preserve the French language and culture. She was friends therefore with other writers, including Lafcadio Hearn. She was famous for her involvement in political questions; in this regard, Donna Meletio notes: "She explored ideas in a manner that was a contradiction of sympathies and allegiances, and a study of her life reveals that she was as complicated as the Creole culture itself."[17] She believed in the ideals of romantic literature and, despite her admiration for Zola, she never followed Hearn's advice to write realistic fiction. In her poetry, she expresses her desire for intellectual independence, a wish that could be linked to current events in Louisiana. Her poems and essays, mostly written in French, were often published in *L'Abeille*.[18]

Both of these writers lived in Louisiana at a time when French culture was in serious decline, and they both played a role in defending its identity. Louisiana had been French since 1682. It was first a French colony and, after a period of Spanish colonial rule, it became French again. However, after its purchase by the United States in 1803, the Creoles felt increasingly threatened by Anglo-Saxon domination: "If the French Creoles defined themselves by their ethnic markers and pitted themselves against the Anglo-Americans, they risked marginalization, but if they did not take that risk, they faced an untenable situation – the loss of their heritage."[19] It is in this context that the resistance against Anglo-Saxon

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[14] Steven Lukes, "The Meanings of 'Individualism.'"*Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1971): 45-66. 59.
[15] Claude S. Fischer, "Paradoxes of American Individualism," *Sociological Forum* 23 (2008): 363-72. 367.
[16] Donna M. Meletio, *Léona Queyouze (1861-1938): Louisiana French Creole Poet, Essayist, and Composer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Doctoral Dissertations, 2005)15. Meletio's dissertation includes an appendix with a selection of Queyrouze's poems from the archives in Baton Rouge. The poems "Par Arrigo Boita [sic]" and "Resurge" quoted here appear in Meletio's dissertation, pages 239 and 271, respectively.
[17] Meletio 3.
[18] See Meletio 6. The poems referred to here are all written in French.
[19] Melitio 1.

manners and customs takes place in the writings of Queyrouze and Chopin. Queyrouze was involved in the defense of the Creole way of life at various levels, and she and Chopin were witnesses to a threatened French culture, each expressing her unique relationship to it. Meletio explains: "Thus, long into the twentieth century, Léona remained a woman out of time and out of place, holding on to the vestiges of a fashion and a culture that had disappeared long ago."[20] Although showing more of an influence from American writers, Chopin also exhibits a strong relationship with Creole culture: her work is "an interesting mixture of American and Creole sensibilities [and] serves as a bridge between the two worlds."[21] The question of identity and culture is particularly crucial in her work *The Awakening*, set in a Creole framework on Grande Isle and in New Orleans.

These female writers are out of place in different ways: Queyrouze at times feels her Creole lifestyle will not survive, while Chopin is lost between two cultures. Unable to fit into the modern Anglo-American world taking over the cultural field, they turn to new ways to express themselves. Elmo Howell explains that the devotion of Chopin to Louisiana is a way for her to talk about deeper issues: "She was devoted to Creole Louisiana, but her subject was human nature, not a region – human nature decked out in the manners of a particular time and place, with an aura of the natural world that was her special touch."[22] Chopin values the subjectivity and the psychological aspect of Zola's work but does not follow his lead. Her particular point of view and the prevalence of local color in her novels make them difficult to classify. However, we could infer that the "colorist" aspect of her writing underlines the importance she attributes to the environment. In Chopin's novel, protagonist Edna Pontellier's trajectory resonates with life on Grande Isle and in Louisiana – her story is clearly linked to a Creole setting and its culture. Critic Eric Margraf has thus noted "[t]he impact of the exotic environment and the Creole milieu on Edna's awakening."[23]

First of all, the character appears to be moved by the rhythm and the flow of her environment, which creates an intense inner dialogue beyond her control: "I was not conscious of thinking of anything, but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts."[24] Since the "I" here expresses an impression developing in her mind, the reader notes an early indication of her new consciousness. While the third-person narrator has already revealed that Edna and Madame Ratignolle "had no intention of bathing" (15), the protagonist's self-identification is blurred with a lexicon of indecision, in the alternation between "perhaps" and "I can." Shortly after, Edna moves from Grande Isle to the city – New Orleans. As the land spreads out before her, her concept of self seems to open up and increase as well. Edna's desire manifests itself in a story she creates during a dinner with her father and her husband, showing that she is already feeling threatened by society. Her way of protecting herself is evoked in the description of the imaginary safe place of Grande Isle, where she first becomes aware of herself as an individual:

[20] Meletio 42.
[21] Meletio 189.
[22] Elmo Howell, "Kate Chopin and the Creoles' Country," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 20 (1979): 209.
[23] Erik Margraf, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as a Naturalistic Novel," *American Literary Realism* 37.2 (Winter 2005): 93-116. 102.
[24] Quotations are taken from Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 2008) 16. Henceforth, references to this edition will appear in the text parenthetically as page numbers only.

> She had one of her own to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found a trace of them from that day to this. It was a pure invention. She said that Madame Antoine had related it to her. That, also, was an invention. Perhaps it was a dream she had had. But every glowing word seemed real to those who listened. (70)

This dream which presages Edna's suicide by drowning is also a poetic way for her to talk about a special imaginary place where she could exist as she pleases. It should be noted that Chopin here switches from the first-person pronoun to third person, a move which could read as a regress, as her first attempt to affirm herself fails. Indeed, her husband and her doctor display a lack of understanding; and she is unaware herself that, because of her timidity, she attributes the story to Madame Antoine. However, shortly after this incident, while she is with the town womanizer Alcée Arobin, Edna speaks directly: "I'm greatly upset by the excitement of the afternoon, I'm not myself. My manner must have misled you in some way. I wish you to go, please" (77). The change is noticeable, with the use of "I" and "my," especially the "I'm not myself." What is this "self" she talks about? Is it her true identity or some identity she does not want anymore?

In her poem "Par Arrigo Boita [sic],"[25] Queyrouze explores the myth of Prometheus in an "invincible and magical" land.[26] Although the action takes place on the Adriatic Sea, it describes a mystical volcano that "devours the flame."[27] Her final verse illustrates how this special place gives new life to her creativity: "And my pen and my heart would break."[28] In Chopin's text, where there is a parallel situation, Edna is a painter who develops her art only after she finally becomes a homeowner. The poet Queyrouze also closely associates the location with the desire to burst through limits and break rules. In "Resurge," her dream leads her to leave her "misty prison" to seek "release."[29] She claims to follow a new personal path, walking "in harmonious rays that stretch from the stars."[30] Queyrouze's poetry is full of imaginary lands where mythology on an epic scale conjures up places capable of breaking the chains of constraint. In fact, each writer depicts a safe place for herself in her imagination. There is a need to elevate the self above the felt oppression. In this last verse of the poem, a rejection of realism, the predominant literary current of the time, can be detected in the evocation of "starlight" – a type of allusion usually associated with idealistic or romantic texts. Indeed, as Meletio tells us, Queyrouze refuses to engage in the realist movement, more in vogue at the time, in spite of her friend Lafcadio Hearn's advice:

> Noting her propensity to write flowery and sentimental verse, Hearn advised her against her present course and pointed the way toward a new direction in writing – that of realism. Founded upon principles established in French literary circles, realism was taking hold in American literature, and it paved the way toward a new means of expression embraced by iconic American writers, such as Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Jack London, and Stephen Crane.[31]

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[25] Queyrouze gives a tribute and thanks Italian writer and composer Arrigo Boito for his work *Mefistofele*.

[26] While the original poem is written in French, Meletio provides English translations. We will give the French in footnotes for these short quotations: "invincible et magique."

[27] "dévorant la flamme."

[28] "Et ma plume et mon coeur briserais." The subject of "briserais" is likely an implicit "je" if we consider the whole stanza.

[29] "prison de brume" and "essor."

[30] "L'harmonieux réseaux des cordes sidérleas [sic]."

[31] Meletio 27-28.

This choice to go against the dominant trend could be linked to current events in Louisiana. The environment of traditional Creole culture motivated both writers to engage with the literary world in specific ways of their own. In 1895, Queyrouze confirmed her will to reject the "American mainstream literary culture in New York."[32] Queyrouze and Chopin associate their environs with an idea of liberation in different ways. In Chopin's novel, the magical environment of Grande Isle and the Creole surroundings provide the essential components for Edna's awakening. The author associates the land with a sudden glorification of the "I" and strives in new ways to find a space outside of societal constraints. For Queyrouze, the idea of magical and mythical lands capable of triggering self-liberation is crucial. Both authors value the relationship between the individual and the environment in their writings, in order to express their identification with people of minority cultures. They champion thus an idea of literature that is out of step with their times. Louisiana's bruised identity inspires them to emphasize their culture, through the creation of a symbolic and imaginary land where they can be themselves and develop their modes of expression – Edna's desire for solitude and the attraction of the sky for Queyrouze. By focusing on the tension between the surroundings and their characters, these writers create a magical place where the self can burst its chains and define new boundaries and new borders. In so doing, they offer what could be viewed as a subjective take on the "American Dream." This personal claim on the role of literature matches the subversive inclination of both writers.

Their common refusal to follow modern trends reflects their idea of individualism tinged with enthusiasm – a futher expression of their resistance to societal injunctions. Nevertheless, their desire for uniqueness does not come with a critical judgment of current literary trends or opposition to them. In fact, their attitude toward naturalism is quite positive. While Queyrouze wrote to Zola during the Dreyfus Affair showing her admiration for his work, Chopin, as a journalist, penned several articles[33] in which she reveals her views on literature, and more specifically on naturalism.

Self vs. society: An alternative way of seeing individualism

Certain critics of the nineteenth century saw naturalist writings as imbued with tropes of pessimism and fatalism. But, interestingly, both Queyrouze and Chopin typically ignored those aspects of Zola's work. An examination of their comments on the master of Médan reveals how they formulated a new idea of individualism. The author of *The Awakening* furiously condemns what she considers offensive and nauseous description and rampant sentimentality in Zola's novel *Lourdes*.[34] However, she defends the idea that the novelist's prose is psychological and has a symbolic meaning. In her discussion of the scene that takes place in front of the Grotto, she states: "The writer here touches a fine psychological point, though not a new one – the possibility of the combined will-power of a mass of humanity forcing nature to subserve its ends."[35] Chopin is fascinated with the study of the power of subjectivity and highlights the psychological aspect of his writing, this latter an angle she explores as well in her novel. As for Queyrouze, she writes directly to Zola, referring to the story in one of the clippings she sends him, which reminds her of a passage in his novel *La Bête humaine*: "Ce récit m'a naturellement ramenée aux pages si saisissantes de 'La Bête Humaine' dans lesquelles j'avais lu 'Ce duel épouvantable de deux hommes en train de se

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[32] Meletio 36.
[33] See, as an example of this kind of journalism Kate Chopin, "Emile Zola's 'Lourdes,'" *St. Louis Life* (17 Nov. 1894): 5. Hereafter this article is referred to as Chopin.
[34] Chopin 5.
[35] Chopin 5.

dévorer pendant que la foudre les emportait.'"[36] Her use of adjectives such as "saisissantes," "épouvantable," and the noun "foudre" accentuates the larger-than-life, exaggerated, and epic qualities of the struggle. Furthermore, she manifests an interest in the sudden violence that erupts in this murder scene and in how the events drive the characters to madness. Similarly, she describes the scene when Jacques kills his lover Severine. The poet emphasizes personal relationships, while Chopin focuses on the psychological aspect of solitude – both linking their narratives to the notion of individuality.

Thus, these women writers' view of Zola has nothing to do with determinism or pessimism, but rather focuses on human psychology, revealing the main literary interest of both authors. In Queyrouze's poetry, psychological elements define strong mythological characters, like Medea or Prometheus, who affirm their identity and opinions in a hostile society. As for Chopin, she develops both an internal and external perspective on Edna's awakening. Both writers thus subvert dominant literary currents through their nuturing of self-actualization and their glorification of the human mind.

The rhetorical device of *captatio benevolentiae*

In a text, *captatio benevolentiae* refers to the narrator's strategy to inspire the reader's sympathy, what Teresa Sánchez defines as "the securing of the goodwill of the reader."[37] Both female writers make an effort to elicit Zola's benevolence. Queyrouze's figure of the "secular virgin" embodies Truth coming to assist Zola in his most honorable fight against the French government: "Maintenant que vous avez eu l'honneur d'être condamné pour avoir, avec tant de vaillance et de désintéressement, pris en main la cause du malheur, je ne puis résister au grand désir que j'éprouve depuis déjà quelque temps, de vous exprimer mon admiration."[38] Since, rather than the subject of the sentence "je," it is the second-person pronoun "vous" which frames the sentence, the intention is to provoke the interlocutor's feelings of benevolence toward the speaker by addressing him directly. She then shifts her focus slightly, from her correspondent to her perception of him. The formulations in the first person are about her feelings – her overwhelming desire to speak out. Even in the introduction to the poem, we witness this gentle affirmation of her individuality slowly taking place in relation to Zola, who represents Otherness. In the introduction, the use of "je" refers to the poet herself, which will not be the case in the body of the poem.

In *The Awakening*, Edna shows a strong desire to live for herself. The notion of Truth within the framework of the fiction is about a duty to herself only and, in this way, she differs from Queyrouze. She does not feel totally at home with Creoles as she resents being told how to behave. The pronoun "I" is rare; the author most often speaks of her character in the third person. Edna struggles externally, with her peers, but also internally with her upbringing. Her Anglo roots constrain and oblige her, as when she and her father "had a warm, and almost violent dispute upon the subject of her refusal to attend her sister's wedding" (76). Caught between two cultures that weigh on her, she tries to find her own way of being herself,

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[36] Lettre de Léona Queyrouze à Émile Zola, 02/03/1898 [collection Brigitte Émile-Zola]. Translation: "This story naturally brought me back to the very striking pages of 'La Bête Humaine' in which I had read 'This dreadful duel of two men devouring each other as lightning swept them away.'" The entire sentence in Zola's novel reads as follows: "La station de Malaunay fut franchie, dans un tel coup de vent, que le sous-chef, debout sur le quai, ne vit même pas ces deux hommes, en train de se dévorer, pendant que la foudre les emportait." Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (La Bibliothèque du Québec, vol. 90. Version 2.1) 732.
< https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/vents/zola-17.pdf >.

[37] Roura Teresa Sánchez, "What's Left of 'Captatio Benevolentiae' in 15th-Century English Letters? A Study of the Cely Letters," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 102 (2001): 317–38. 317.

[38] Quotations are taken from the letter Léona Queyrouze sent to Émile Zola, 02.03.1898 (collection Brigitte Émile-Zola).

reflecting on her place on Earth: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (13). Her family and social circle may fiercely condemn her behavior, yet the character is made unique by the physical qualities attributed to her: "But with more feeling and discernment [a discriminating observer] would have recognized the noble *beauty* of [the] *modeling* [of her figure], and the graceful severity of *poise* and *movement*, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd" (14, my emphasis). Here, Chopin paints her character as having a queenly bearing. The narrator makes an effort to understand Edna in several passages which are reminiscent of Chopin's comments on the psychological aspect of Zola's writing: "Edna bit her handkerchief convulsively, striving to hold back and to hide, even from herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotions which were troubling – tearing – her. Her eyes were brimming with tears" (45). The references to Edna's vulnerability underscore her humanity and create within the reader feelings of empathy. The glorification of self is rare in the lines where Edna Pontellier speaks directly. Chopin uses c*aptatio benevolentiae* mostly from the narrator's perspective, whereas the passages in the first person convey a strong character who breaks free from her chains.

Self-actualization and Otherness: A gentle way of defining

The work of Chopin has inspired some critics interested in inclusion and empathy, as well as those whom Chopin critics Magraf and Camastra consider "feminist."[39] Molly Hildebrand notes that "[Chopin] desires [for women] the rights of white, upper-middle class men, not the recognition and sense of shared responsibility that come with acknowledgment of her relationship with other women, including poor white women and all women of color."[40] Indeed, Edna, being self-absorbed, lacks concern for the minority population. *The Awakening* is a story about the will of an individual, rather than about striving to embrace everyone. The novel portrays Edna as a white, middle-class woman struggling with her peers who want to make her respect and obey the rules. Even though she makes firm decisions to live for herself, she displays deference toward others. It is not empathy that she feels but rather a kind of glorified sense of self, an individuality deriving from a sense of her own Otherness. Indeed, a part of her awakening is to care about herself above all, protecting her individuality from others and their demands in a non-violent way.

Edna refuses to be bound by the obligations of hospitality inherent in her social status. When her husband asks her why she went out instead of receiving visitors during his absence, she states: "I simply felt like going out, and I went out" (50). Despite his insistence, she at first refuses to concede and wants him to justify his expectations. Shortly after, however, she retracts her insistence on following her own inclinations, since the last time she uses the first-person pronoun is when she says, "I don't remember who was here" (50). Although she had just shown the strength of her will, she does not speak in the first person during the remainder of the chapter. A possible interpretation would be that after she has exhaustively expressed her desire and her feelings, she no longer feels the need to do so. In the end, this determination to assert her individuality slowly disappears from the text, until finally she decides to return to Grande Isle, wade into the water, and drown. Before her suicide, she knocks at the Lebruns' door. Robert, her lover who is part of this family, is not present. The conversation between Victor, Robert's brother, and Edna is the last moment of the novel

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[39] Nicole Camastra, "Venerable Sonority in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Literary Realism* 40 (2008):154-66. In this article, Camastra emphasizes the mutual respect between Edna and Madame Reitz, the pianist.

[40] Molly J. Hildebrand, "The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,*" *American Literary Realism* 48.3 (Spring 2016): 189-209. 203.

where she speaks in the first person, expressing the basic need to eat: "I'm very hungry, but don't get anything extra" (114). Because she does not want to reveal her suicide project, the words she then speaks barely allude to her plan:

> Well, I might go down and try – dip my toes in. Why it seems to me the sun is hot enough to have warmed the very depths of the ocean. Could you get me a couple of towels? I'd better go right away, so as to be back in time. It would be a little too chilly if I waited till this afternoon. (114)

When she last uses the pronoun "I" it is to communicate her desire to eat fish – "I hope you have fish for dinner" (114) – and therefore hints at the environment in which she will drown and whose warm depths appeal to her.

In this last conversation there are five first-person pronouns whereby Edna expresses four needs or plans: "I'm very hungry"; "I might go down"; "I'd better"; "I hope"; and "if I waited." These phrases make sense, as at this moment all that matters is her desire to leave this world. However, we note an abundance of modal auxiliaries and verbs – "might," "seems," "could," and "would" (two times) –, perhaps to sound casual and not alarm anyone. The last use of a first-person pronoun in the novel appears when she later thinks to herself: "It makes no difference to me" (115). At this point, she is alone and does not feel the need to use "I," the pronoun which finds its purpose only in the presence of others. In the end she is destroyed by her experience.

In the framework of a sonnet, Queyrouze also develops a pattern in which the first-person pronoun "je" makes sense only when linked to Otherness and society in general.[41] Her

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[41] Here is the reproduction of the sonnet Queyrouze sends to Zola, followed by my translation into English:

Sans honte et sans dégoût tu t'es penché vers Elle,

Palpant sa chair putride et sentant palpiter
Son cœur gonglé d'angoisse, et sans fin haleter
Sa poitrine qu'oppresse une ardeur éternelle.

Et tes lèvres ont bu, sur sa lèvre rebelle,
Les râles, les regrets qui soudain font douter,
Et les cris de désir qu'on ne peut écouter
Sans frémir dans son être. Alors, sanglante et belle,

Sous ton souffle puissant la sombre Humanité
Tout-à-coup s'est dressée et, dans sa nudité,
La vierge séculaire a classé, triomphante:

Vers l'avenir viens donc, toi qui n'as pas douté,
Viens, car tu m'as conquise et si je suis tou (sic) amante
Laissez passer, vous tous; je suis la Vérité.

Without shame or disgust you leaned towards her,
Palpating her putrid flesh and feeling her palpitating,
Her anguished heart, and endlessly panting
Her chest oppressed by an eternal ardour.

And your lips drank, on his rebellious lip,
The rales, the regrets which suddenly make one doubt,
And the cries of desire that one cannot listen to
Without shuddering in one's being. Then, bloody and beautiful,

Under your powerful breath dark Humanity

"je" occurs only at the end of the poem, after she develops other characters, evoking the third-person "Elle" (humanity) and the second-person "tu" (Zola), and their related forms. This "je" defines itself thanks to the complementarity with Zola. Its first occurrence is "je suis tou [sic] amante," which both defines the "je" in relation to the "tu," and expresses love. Then she refers to "vous" meaning the crowd, which she will pass through. Her poem is triumphant while Chopin's novel is more ambiguous. Nevertheless, we witness in both writings a gentle way of introducing the "I"/"je" and affirming the self through *captatio benevolentiae*.

Although both women's plots end on a sad note, their texts portray the development of their individuality in a positive and enthusiastic way, one which strongly opposes the prevalent literary trends of the era. The main purpose of their protest is self-liberation and the quest for personal freedom. As such, it could be considered a unique take on what will be theorized in the following decades as the "American Dream."

Queyrouze acknowledges the role of Zola in the Dreyfus Affair. She describes how the novelist is concerned about humanity, designating the latter as "Elle" and the French author as "tu." Under the influence of "la Vérité," conveyed by Zola's words, all are freed from their "angoisse," "râles," and "regrets." The poet evokes Zola's "souffle puissant" that brings life to "la sombre Humanité." She refers to all mankind as an alterity which must be convinced to step out of the shadows. In this way, "la Vérité," expressed by "je," is released and commands everyone to let her pass: "Viens, car tu m'as conquise et je suis tou [sic] amante / Laissez passer, vous tous; je suis la Vérité." The final stanza manifests the idea of liberation evoked in *The Awakening* through the character of Edna Pontellier. Her desire to live for herself leads her to create an existence outside the rules of society. She acquires her own home and begins a relationship with a lover, which is an assertion of independence that provokes the incomprehension of her relatives.

While on Grande Isle, surrounded by Creoles, Edna experiences a sense of fullfiment, followed by a good measure of introspection. Moments of inner dialogue are usually formulated in the third person but also occur in the rare first person: "I would give up the unessential; I would give **m**y **m**oney, I would give up **m**y life for **m**y children, but I wouldn't give myself. I can't **m**ake it **m**ore clear; it's only so**m**ething which I a**m** beginning to co**m**prehend, which is revealing itself to **m**e"(47) (My emphasis). The author gives Edna a voice that she uses to affirm herself. An alliteration in [m] and assonance in [i] come together to make "me," which is also the last word of this quoted sentence, while "I" was the first. Edna's claim to hold onto herself includes and protects this affirmation of the first-person pronoun. This celebration of her personality can be considered a liberation from the Otherness that she would throw away. In Queyrouze's poem, an analogous pattern first- and second-person pronouns develops in the last stanza – where both the "je" and the "tu" are on the side of "Vérité":

> Vers l'avenir **viens** donc, **toi** qui n'as pas douté,
> **Viens**, car **tu** m'as conquise et si je suis **to[n]** amante of
> Laissez passer, vous tous; je suis la Vérité.

While the stanza's first line features only second-person pronouns, in the second line there is

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Suddenly rose up and, in its nakedness,
The secular virgin has gained rank, triumphant:

To the future come then, you who did not doubt,
Come, for you have conquered me and if I am your lover
Let pass, all of you; I am the Truth.

recourse to both first- and second-person pronouns; yet, in the last line, "je" appears to speak for both, leaving "vous tous" – the ignorant crowd – behind. The use of the first-person pronoun begins within the framework of the second-person pronouns. Both writers not only convey an idea of liberation through the promotion of the individual in a society where the emphasis is on conformity to norms, but they further show a triumphant version of "I"/"je" in their works.

To conclude, Chopin and Queyrouze use first-person pronouns "I"/"je" to promote a unique form of positive individualism compatible with self-improvement and protest – which could be considered a feminist component of what we call today "the American Dream." The recourse to the first-person pronouns "I" and "je" underscores the idea of liberation from the injustices of society, whether in the real context of the Dreyfus Affair or in the fiction of *The Awakening*. To convey this positive image of selfhood, both female writers use *captatio benevolentiae*, language processes such as modal verbs and auxiliaries, and thus forge an affective link between the speaker and the interlocutor. The narrative voices do not oppose society but rather define themselves in conflict with its restrictions. While the Louisiana setting partially explains their desire to protest against the oppression of dominant groups, their evocation of space indicates their desire to draw new borders and boundaries to define their identity. As women writers in a male-dominated literary world, these authors find a new way of expressing themselves – through enthusiasm and the avoidance of the literary clichés of the era. They foster and build an idea that embraces difference and allows individuals to speak for themselves. Hence, they are very close to the notion of American Dream taking shape at the time. Edna does not fit in any community – she is an outsider –, while Queyrouze's "secular virgin" speaks out against the corrupt French military top brass. Chopin gives a voice to Edna, a character desperate for happiness and freedom; similarly, Queyrouze gives her voice as a poet to the figure representing Truth. Both female writers thus endorse the inclusion of divergent and unique opinions in literary discourse. They promote a glorification of the self that reshapes the concept of individualism toward values beyond social mobility and financial success. This idea of liberation through self-expression is embodied in our current notions of personal development and fulfillment. In their anticipation of these ideas, Queyrouze and Chopin were ahead of their time.