Swimming into the "Semiotic" Chora:
A French Feminist Reading of Kate Chopin's The Awakening

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In A Literature of Their Own, Elaine Showalter carefully studies the female tradition in the British novels, maintaining that the women's novels developed in three stages: 1840-1880 (the feminine stage), 1880-1920 (the feminist stage), and 1920 onward (the female stage). While characterizing the feminine stage as the phase of imitation and internalization of the male literary tradition, she considers the feminist stage to be the phase of protest against "realism," the male traditional standard in literature. Thus while the feminine novelists chiefly wrote domestic realism, the feminist writers created "fantasies," and these fantasy writers explored the theme of an "Amazon utopia, a country entirely populated by women and completely isolated from the male world" (Showalter 1977: 4). But the concept of Amazon utopias involved a fatal problem: because feminist utopians tried to escape from the male world to a culture defined in opposition to the male tradition, their utopias "were not visions of primary womanhood, free to define its own nature and culture" (Showalter 1977: 4). In short, within the feminist utopians' fantasies, there was no original theory of female art.

Although Showalter characterizes Edna Pontellier as one of the feminine heroines,¹ The Awakening, written in 1899, clearly belongs to the feminist literature in her classification, both for the year it appeared and for its feminist characteristics. The novel starts on a resort island, Grand Isle. Populated by women and their children, and only occasionally visited by men intending to spend weekends with their families, Grand Isle is an Amazon utopia. In this sense,
The Awakening is seemingly a fantasy unfolding in an Amazon utopia in Showalter's classification. About a decade after A Literature of Their Own was published, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar used the word “fantasy” again in characterizing Chopin's novel in No Man's Land, Volume 2: Sexchanges. They say “The Awakening is allusively organized by Kate Chopin’s half-secret fantasy of the second coming of Aphrodite” (97). Observing Chopin's understanding limitation of reality and realism in woman's literature, they consider the novel as one in which the author attempts moving from the melodramatic conventions that shape the “realistic” nineteenth-century novels to a new kind of writing, a metaphysical romance that elaborates her heroine’s female fantasy of fulfillment. Therefore, The Awakening is “a metaphysically lyric version of the seductive mazes of the sea from which her[Chopin's] Aphrodite is born, substituting the valorizations of myth and fantasy for the devaluations of ‘realism’” (Gilbert and Gubar 111). Contrary to Showalter, however, Gilbert and Gubar do not suggest any problems that fantasies may include.

Of course what Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar mean by the word “fantasy” are different, but I dare not approve of calling Chopin's work a “fantasy” in either meaning, though my understanding of the term is closer to Gilbert and Gubar's than Showalter's. Rather, I feel quite unsatisfied using such a commonplace word as “fantasy” in characterizing Chopin's work. Yet that both groups use the same word to characterize Chopin's and other nineteenth-century women writers' writings implies there are some “fantastic” characteristics in these writers' narrative styles. Furthermore, the interesting thing is that Hélène Cixous, a French feminist of the late twentieth-century, too, uses the very word “fantasy” when she characterizes women's writing. Examining Chopin's writing and Cixous and other French feminists' ideology of écriture féminine, I wonder whether both are in fact not far at all from each other: both consider the fantastic elements of women's writing more important than the realistic ones. Anglo-Saxon critics like Gilbert and Gubar portray Chopin's work as fantasy perhaps because they may have noticed the fantastic characteristic of écriture féminine in Chopin's novel. The purpose of this paper is to present how Chopin's idea proposed in the novel is similar to that of the today's French feminists' as well as to prove how the novel is different from what Showalter calls fantasy. However, the French feminist concept of female writing must be examined before I discuss Chopin's novel.

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Basically the concept accuses Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis of phallocentrism. For Freud, an individual is biologically sexual from birth. But on a psychological level, an infant is initially neither feminine nor masculine but capable of developing either feminine or masculine identities. In order to acquire a normal gender identity, a child has to go through complex psycho-sexual processes usually by the age of five. The processes involve castration and Oedipus complexes, and these complexes are resolved in different ways in the case of girls and in the case of boys.

In the case of girls, the acquisition of femininity takes place when a little girl experiences the moment of Oedipal crisis. At this moment, the girl notices that she does not have a penis while her father and other boys do. She then believes that she is already castrated like her mother. This disgusting idea makes her turn away from her pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother. She takes her father as love object instead, and at the same time, wishes to have her own penis through bearing a male child in the future. Thus, in Freud's theory, how an individual achieves psycho-sexual subjectivity chiefly depends on the presence or absence of the penis, and a woman's development of a fully mature femininity is supported by what Freud calls her penis envy.

Developing Freud's psychoanalysis of gender identity, Lacan con-
siders the process of acquiring one’s gendered subjectivity as the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order. The Imaginary corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period when the infant believes in the unity between itself and the mother. But at the moment of Oedipal crisis, the unity is split up by the father, and the child enters the Symbolic Order, where it accepts the phallus as representation of the Law of the Father and represses its desire for the mother.

Within this phallocentric Symbolic Order, while man can get a position of power and control through his penis, woman has no status except in relation to man because she lacks a penis. Moreover, as the acquisition of language is related to the entry into the Symbolic Order, woman, deprived of her subjectivity, becomes a mere object that is to be defined in the male language. She is identified with man’s other in a negative way as the lack of a penis, or at most, as a mirror to the male sexual identity. In order to acquire this phallocentric linguistic code, woman must cut off her pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother as well as her identification with the mother, and situate herself in relation to the father.

Given this notion of woman’s position in the Symbolic Order and its phallocentric language, the French feminists feel it necessary to develop the theory of woman’s language in order to reconstruct the female subjectivity outside the masculine language. Écriture féminine is the language that woman regains through reconciliation with the mother in the pre-Oedipal stage. Therefore, it is like “the voice of the mother” (Cixous 1981a: 54), and contrary to the symbolic language, it “goes off in all directions” (Irigaray 1981: 103) and “does not trace the same line” (Cixous 1981a: 54). In short it is the voice directly flowing out of the female libido.

In the pre-Oedipal period, however, woman is still bisexual (Cixous) or sexually plural (Irigaray) though on the process of sexual differentiation. Écriture féminine, therefore, does not totally exclude the masculine qualities. Likewise, it is important to note that écriture féminine is a kind of writing that man also can produce. In this sense, it is not far from what Kristeva calls “semiotic” language. Thus we can observe that écriture féminine is different from what Showalter introduces as nineteenth-century women writers’ fantasies that end up describing an Amazon utopia. Of course, if one defines the nineteenth-century women writers’ realism as their imitation of masculine literature, one can also say that fantasies are the women’s original literary style of that period. But if women’s literature attempts to separate itself completely from men’s literature, it is nevertheless still involved in the phallocentric Symbolic Order, because the idea of separation itself is based on the very binarism which characterizes phallocentrism. On the contrary, it is hard to imagine that Chopin, who loved her husband and was satisfied with her married life, idealized the Amazon utopia in her work. Actually she is critical of such utopias in her short story, “The Story of an Hour.” In this short story, the heroine who is pleased at the news of her husband’s death has to be punished by her own death at last. What Chopin accomplished in her longer work is, therefore, not to create one literary genre but to present écriture féminine as the model of women’s writing in the pre-Oedipal stage.

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In The Awakening, the story begins at Grand Isle, then moves to New Orleans, and finally goes back to Grand Isle. Metaphorically, Grand Isle corresponds to the Amazon utopia and New Orleans to the nineteenth-century patriarchal society. As I mentioned above, Grand Isle, populated only by women and children, seems to be separated from the male-centered economic system on the American continent. The only male character on the island is Robert, but he is described as rather feminine: he does not have a job (that means he is not incorporated into the male-centered economic system); his father is dead; he is thought to be his mother’s best beloved (these
things emphasize the maternal influence over him). Yet, though the 
island seems to be isolated from male society, it is still ruled by the 
patriarchal Symbolic Order, for women on the island exist in relation 
to men and economically depend on men: most women are 
mother-wives living on their husbands' salary.

In the beginning of the novel, the female protagonist Edna 
Pontellier is introduced from Mr. Pontellier's point of view. Coming 
back from the sea, Edna gets back her wedding ring from Mr. 
Pontellier and puts it on. Throughout the action, Mr. Pontellier 
looks at her as if she were his own property, and her wedding ring 
symbolizes his government over her. Edna laughs innocently as she 
wears the ring, but her laughter, delivered to readers through Mr. 
Pontellier's patriarchal language, sounds lifeless. She is deprived of 
er own voice under the government of her husband's patriarchy, 
and plays the role of his virtuous wife. In the first three pages of the 
novel, Edna speaks only a few words, which indicate concern for 
her husband: "Here, take the umbrella" (883) and "Coming back to 
dinner?" (883). The fact that her mother died when she was a little 
girl implies that Edna had already experienced the Oedipal crisis 
and acquired the phallocentric language through the death of her 
mother. Moreover, her married life, characterized as facing up to 
realities (898), has forced her, who was once an imaginative girl, to 
use language that addresses only realistic matters.

All these statements suggest that even at Grand Isle, a feminist 
uphoria, she and all other women are not able to free themselves 
from the government of the patriarchal language. Having presented 
the male-female dichotomy by describing the island isolated from 
the male world, Chopin maintains that the dichotomy itself is sup-
ported by phallocentric binarism based on phallocentric language, by 
indicating the fact that women living on the island speak the mascu-
line language after all. Furthermore, in the narrative technique, too, 
Chopin implies how women at Grand Isle, including Edna, are cap-
tured in the phallocentric Symbolic Order when she describes them 
in realism: for example, the description of Edna through Mr. 
Pontellier's eyes is realistic, not fantastic.

Nevertheless, the novel itself possesses the possibility of flying 
from the government of the Symbolic Order to the pre-Oedipal 
world of écriture. What may allow this flight is the sea ubiquitous 
in the novel. Though both Grand Isle and New Orleans are supported 
by the male-female binary system, there is not such a system in the 
sea. The fact that Edna never wears her wedding ring in the sea 
indicates that when in the sea, she is not restricted by the marriage 
system which is based on patriarchal binarism (In Chapter 1, Edna 
receives her wedding ring from her husband when she comes back 
from bathing. That means she does not wear it when bathing in the 
sea). The soft, close embrace of the sea that enfolds the heroine's 
body implies the mother's embrace in the pre-Oedipal stage. The 
sea in this case is not what Irigaray called "mère de glace (= mer de 
glace)" (symbol of the specularized mother). On the contrary, it is 
the dissolved sea (or the burning mirror that reflects nothing), the 
symbol of the pre-Oedipal stage in which the daughter recovers her 
attachment to her mother. Chapter 6 describes how Edna is inclined 
toward the seductive voice of the sea. The experience of the sea as 
the pre-Oedipal stage is strongly related to her newly dawning 
realization of her position in the universe as a human being, as well 
as the recognition of her relationship as an individual to the world 
within and about her.

Before the story begins, Edna, having been educated by the pa-
triarchal father who believes that woman is sexually passive, is ling-
guistically prohibited from expressing her own sexual pleasure 
(jouissance). So at Grand Isle, she cannot join in the Creole 
women's frank conversation about their sex (889). Of course she has 
sex with her husband, but it is not an act that indicates her accept-
ance of herself as a sexual being who can freely express her sexual
desire, but one that transfers her sexuality into motherhood by being solely for the purpose of reproduction. As a result, she becomes nothing but a mother, who thus contributes to maintaining the patriarchy. At the same time, subordinated to her husband’s desire, her own desire is silenced; disguising herself with a false womanhood that pleases men, she is incorporated into the phallocentric order. Edna is to be enjoyed by her husband, never to enjoy herself.12

When describing the sea, the author often uses expressions that call forth the sexual image of the sea, such as “delicious,” “seductive,” “soft,” “close,” “enfolding,” and “white serpents.” If, as Irigaray says, “woman has sex organs just about everywhere” (1981: 103), Edna may realize that she can have sexual pleasure not only through her clitoris and vagina but everywhere on her body, when she feels the touch of the sea all over her body. Perhaps in the sea she experiences for the first time a physical pleasure that she never had during sex with her husband. In the early stage, however, she does not know why she is drawn toward the sea. Although she is bewildered by “[a] certain light” (893) that the sea gives upon her female libido, she is neither able to express the nature of the “light” nor to understand it, as long as she uses the male language. As to this impossibility of expressing the female libido in the male language, Irigaray suggests as follows: “Woman’s desire most likely does not speak the same language as man’s desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks” (Irigaray 1981: 101).13 Having experienced female sexual pleasure in the sea, Edna tries to acquire a language with which she can express her sexuality in the later part of the novel.

One night at Grand Isle, Edna gets a chance to hear Mademoiselle Reisz playing the piano. Before that night, she used to create visual images in her mind whenever she heard music. For example, when she heard the music she named “Solitude,” she usually im-

agined the figure of a naked man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore; when she heard another piece, she remembered a dainty young woman clad in an Empire gown. That night she waits for the material pictures as usual, but she fails to see any. Instead, “the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her” (906). This is because the music directly stirs up Edna’s spirit through her ears. This kind of music is not a symbolic one, for in the symbolic world, most of the value standards must be based on visualization; the music that Edna heard is a “semiotic” one that evades visualization.

That night, right after she hears Mademoiselle Reisz’s piano playing, Edna goes to the sea. The touch of the sea as well as the touch of the music is “semiotic” because since it is only felt by the person on her/his skin, it is hard to visualize it or to correctly express it linguistically. Stimulated by the “semiotic” touches of both the sea and the music, Edna becomes able to swim. When swimming, she is almost awakened to the pre-Oedipal pleasure, becoming one with the sea:

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul.... She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before....

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlight sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. (908)

However, she soon becomes afraid of losing her standpoint by throwing away the Symbolic Order that she has been used to, and comes back to the shore (908-909). At this stage, she is not yet
acknowledged that the amiable feeling that the touch of the sea gives her body proves metaphysically the existence of the female libido which has been repressed by the Symbolic Order. Yet having experienced this *jouissance* in the sea, she comes to hate playing the role of mother-woman, though, on the other hand, she is still afraid of losing her status in the Symbolic Order. Thus she learns to reject her husband’s demands for the first time in her married life: when Mr. Pontellier comes back late that night, Edna is lying in the hammock outside the house. Mr. Pontellier tells her to go into the house with him, but she refuses and resists. She has always submitted to him before, but at this moment, she cannot understand why she has yielded to his desire. (Chapter 11)

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Coming back to New Orleans, Edna begins practicing her eroticism in an adulterous relationship with Alcée Arobin. The following passage describes her first kiss with Arobin. We can notice she acts very positively:

They [Edna and Arobin] continued silently to look into each other’s eyes. When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers.

It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire. (967)

She knows that it is not the kiss of love but the kiss of passion. That love, passion, and marriage exist separately is one of Chopin’s themes, in works such as “The Storm.” Exposure of Edna’s passion here indicates that woman as well as man has sexual desire on the one hand, and at the same time it stands in accusation, on the other hand, of the patriarchal system that has repressed woman’s expression of her sexual desire.\(^{14}\)

Still Arobin’s caress does not give as much sexual pleasure to Edna as the touch of the sea did. Edna’s eroticism, though having been expressed openly in the pre-Oedipal sea of Grand Isle, is now repressed and is losing its power in New Orleans where the phallocentric order powerfully governs the female. Likewise, a patriarchal womanizer like Arobin cannot give her the genuine pleasure that she really wants. At most, he gives her a socially prohibited kind of love, “adultery.” Moreover, he gradually comes to behave as if he were her governor (husband): in the episode about Edna’s dinner party in Chapter 30, Arobin performs like a host, and in the following chapter, he locks the door and holds the key of Edna’s house (strictly speaking, Mr. Pontellier’s house).

Beside having an adulterous relationship with Arobin, Edna begins to break social rules. For instance, on a reception day in the Creole society, a housewife is supposed to stay at home to receive guests. Edna has been keeping this custom since her marriage to Mr. Pontellier. But after spending the summer at Grand Isle this year, she refuses to follow the custom. She refuses to remain at home on the appointed day, and even to write excuses to the guests who visited her home in her absence. Finally she decides to leave her husband’s house, starting her life in the “pigeon house.”\(^{15}\)

Hence she tries to fly away from the phallocentric order. Still, it is important to note that her way of doing it is materialistic. Andrew Delbanco points out how Edna is incorporated into the male-centered economic system when she aims at her economic independence:

What in one sense is a tremor of professionalism — a feminist victory — is also a lapse into equating the expression of self with goods and services whose value depends on social use.... Edna is replacing her thralldom to particular men — father, husband, imagined lovers — with the thrill of partaking in exactly the experience that they had once monopolized: the experience of power. (99)
Ironically, what Edna is practicing is accepting the value standard stated in the phallocentric language and economy without modifying its very binary system. In short, she is only trying to become a "man." As a result, she is captured in the prison of the masculine language symbolized by the "pigeon house."

When Edna tries to live on her own by selling her pictures, she is only imitating Mademoiselle Reisz, a professional pianist. Denying everything that is thought to be feminine, Mademoiselle attains her economic independence. In this sense, her victory as a professional, if one can call it a victory, yields to phallocentrism as she accepts female inferiority. As a result, Mademoiselle is an old maid who does not have any feminine characteristics.

Economic independence, as well as an adulterous relationship with Arobin, does not satisfy Edna after all. Desire for the female language awakening in Edna's mind at Grand Isle cannot be easily forgotten. To complete this language is what she is determined to do in the novel. Seeking support from the other women she met at Grand Isle, she makes visits to Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle. But both women are so incorporated into the Symbolic Order, though in different ways, that they cannot support Edna's quest for a world free from phallocentrism. Accepting phallocentric binarism, Mademoiselle Reisz tries to be a man by excluding any feminine character from herself. On the other hand, Adèle Ratignolle, a typical mother-woman in the novel, considers motherhood to be the most valuable feminine character. In Chapter 37, in the midst of a painful childbirth, Adèle says to Edna in an exhausted voice: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them" (995). These words prove that Adèle is trying to re-evaluate motherhood, one of the feminine values, in a positive way. But the overestimation of motherhood itself is based on male-female binarism after all, and moreover, is in danger of being caught in sexism. Hence, Adèle's life, as well as Mademoiselle Reisz's, is not desirable for Edna. To Adèle, at the same time, Edna's unwillingness to sacrifice herself for her children is not understandable.

Consequently, Edna comes to long eagerly for the achievement of female sexual pleasure and of a female language in which she can express that pleasure, through perfecting the love between her and Robert, the feminine man she met at Grand Isle. However, the fact is that Robert is now in Mexico apart from his mother, and that he is not his mother's best beloved (Madame Lebrun loves Victor, Robert's younger brother, better than Robert). Robert's delusive feminine image is symbolized by the garden where Edna meets Robert in Chapter 36. The garden, located in the suburbs of New Orleans, reminds readers of Grand Isle, but in fact there is no sea in the garden. Thus the garden as island is only a delusion. Similarly, Robert's feminine image is only an illusion. Thus collapses Edna's attempt to construct a new relationship with the feminine Robert based on female language. Governed by the Christian idea about the unity of love, passion, and marriage, Robert fails to imagine having any relations with Edna outside that unity. However, the failure of Edna's project should not be attributed to Robert only. Clearly Edna herself should also be blamed for it. Affected by the Symbolic Order in New Orleans, Edna speaks the masculine language to Robert: "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (992). The idea of "to possess" and "to give" shows the male-centered economic value standard that commercializes woman. As long as she uses such language, she never succeeds in drawing out the feminine quality from Robert.

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Having failed to become an androgynous couple with Robert, Edna comes back to Grand Isle alone. Although the stage comes back to the same place where the novel first started, it is not
appropriate to discuss the circular structure of this novel, because in the ending, Edna is awakened from the sleep of the female voice to the public expression of the woman’s fantastic écriture. At this time, the heroine is a completely different person from what she was at the beginning. She no longer wishes to become a Mademoiselle Reisz or a Madame Ratignolle. On the seashore, Edna takes off her clothes. In the feminist context, the clothes symbolize the mask of “femininity” defined in the phallocentric language. When she takes them off, she feels “[h]ow strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious!” (1000). Having lost Robert forever, she no longer tries to identify herself through a male-female dichotomy. Hence, neither her husband nor Arobin is important to her any more.

The novel does not fully describe why Edna finally comes back to the sea. It says that the heroine “had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away” (999), but it fails to deliver the contents of her whole contemplation. Consequently, Edna’s decision to go into the sea seems to be sudden and unexpected. That Robert finally leaves her could be one of the reasons she “kills” herself. But as she realizes that he will soon melt out of her memory as a young man who used to visit a neighbor girl and as a tragedian who attracted her did (897-98), we cannot conclude that the departure of Robert motivates her to commit “suicide.” Rather, we should remember that Edna visits Adèle before she returns to Grand Isle. Upon seeing Adèle’s childbirth, Edna, with an inward agony, realizes the strong connection between the mother and the children. In Edna’s mind, the children appear like antagonists who have overcome her (999). In order to elude them, she chooses to go into the sea.

Many critics believe that the story ends with the heroine’s “suicide,” and find that the ending is unsatisfactory. Especially those who have been expecting the result of the heroine’s quest for auton-
phallocentric language. There is no death image when Edna, refusing to become the *mère de glace* in her children’s consciousness, goes into the dissolved sea. On one level, Edna is a scapegoat that draws back readers to the pre-Oedipal stage, where they may be able to acquire a new language which is not based on phallocentric binarism. Furthermore, the endless waves of the sea that the heroine at last goes into indicate the fluid image of *écriture féminine*, or in Kristeva’s words, “semiotic” chora, and at the same time, their endlessness implies that sexual difference is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to the other: that is, the differentiation is always deferred. (This is the basic significance of Derridean term “différence,” which can be translated both as “difference” and as “deferral” [cf. Moi 1985]. Derrida’s idea undermines the comforting closure of the binary opposition.)

Having presented the male-female dichotomy symbolized by the opposition between New Orleans and Grand Isle, the novel ends up showing the sea, in which there exists no dichotomy and which swallows up the heroine in the end. Its narrative style, which is realistic in the beginning when Edna is described from Mr. Pontellier’s point of view, is gradually transformed to the metaphorical as the plot reveals the heroine’s inward life. In conclusion, the ending is a metaphorical *écriture féminine* on two levels: on one level, as it presents more than the death itself when describing the heroine’s “suicide,” it has the characteristic of *écriture féminine* that does not directly convey the meaning; on the other level, the sea itself is a metaphor for the pre-Oedipal stage, the source of *écriture féminine*. The sensuous sea is repeatedly described in the whole narrative:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (893)

The sensuousness of the sea cannot be portrayed through realistic expression. Thus as long as there is the sea, which invites readers into the fantasy of woman’s writing, the whole narrative evades characterization as a realistic novel, the imitation of male literature. Furthermore, the existence of the sea — the womb — Kristeva’s “semiotic” chora — inside the narrative metaphorically indicates that the novel is female writing. However, the heroine’s seeming “death” in the end suggests that it is still impossible to define female writing in the actual world at present.20

*This essay is based on the paper read at the 44th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, Chubu, at Nagoya on October 3, 1992.*

Notes

1. According to Showalter, feminine heroines are both professional role-models and fictional ideals. These heroines could combine strength and intelligence with feminine tenderness, tact, and domestic expertise (Showalter 1977).

2. In Cixous’s theory, woman’s writing is characterized as follows:

   Let’s look not at syntax but at fantasy, at the unconscious: all the feminine texts I’ve read are very close to the voice, very close to the flesh of language, much more so than masculine texts .... (1981a: 54)

3. Of course, each French feminist has her original theory, but most of the French feminists, who pay attention to the relationship between language and culture, unanimously insist on the necessity of constructing women’s writing differently from that of men. Because of this common
movement, some scholars generically call French feminism écriture féminine.

4. See Cixous’s “Sorties” and “The Laugh of the Medusa,” and Irigaray’s “When the Goods Get Together.”

5. As to the following summary of Freud’s and Lacan’s theories, I chiefly refer to Toril Moi’s Sexual/Textual Politics and Chris Weedon’s Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory.

6. Moi explains Kristeva’s concept of the “semiotic” as follows:

The semiotic is linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes, the basic pulsions of which Kristeva sees as predominantly anal and oral; and as simultaneously dichotomous ... and heterogeneous. The endless flow of pulsions is gathered up in the *chora* (from the Greek word for enclosed space, womb) .... The *chora* is a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language. It constitutes, in other words, the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory. (1985: 161-62)

For further information, refer to Moi’s *The Kristeva Reader*.

7. According to Cixous, the theory of culture, society, and language in the patriarchal society elaborates on the phallocentric binary opposition of man and woman, in which woman is characterized as the male negative. Cixous’s main project is to deconstruct the binary system. Some scholars criticize her project for merely creating a new binarism: monosexual/bisexual. However, the crucial difference between male centered binarism and Cixous’s new binarism is that while woman’s voice is completely excluded from the former binarism, it is reflected in the latter one.

8. See Per Seyersted’s *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*.

9. In French, “mer” and “merre” have the same pronunciation, and the former means the sea and the latter means mother. The French word “glace” means both “glass” and “ice.” The multiple meaning of the French term “merre de glace” symbolizes Irigaray’s concept of “specularization.” For Irigaray, “specularization” suggests not only the mirror image coming from the visual penetration of the spectum inside the vagina but also the necessity of postulating a subject that is capable of reflecting on its own being.

10. The description of Edna’s childhood in Chapter 7 implies her sexual inexperience. Her father’s patriarchal idea about woman is shown in Chapter 24.

11. Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva insist that woman should achieve her own “language” (a method of expressing herself) so as to express her sexual pleasure, which has been silenced in the phallocentric language.

12. Irigaray says as follows:

Woman ... is only a more or less complacent facilitator for the working out of man’s fantasies. It is possible, and even certain, that she experiences vicarious pleasure there, but this pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own and that leaves her in her well-known state of dependency. (1981: 100)

13. In this novel, Chopin sometimes uses a bird image when she describes her heroine. For example, in Chapter 27, Edna’s shoulder blades are compared to the wings of a bird which soars above the level plain of tradition and prejudice. The bird image is characterized by a green and yellow parrot which appears in the very beginning of the novel. As the parrot speaks a language that nobody understands, woman speaks a language that man in the patriarchal society does not understand.

14. Peggy Skaggs refers to the relationship between Edna’s sexual awakening and her awakening to her own individuality. However, she fails to discuss how the sexual awakening motivates the heroine to modify the patriarchal language in order to achieve her identity. This is because she fails to comprehend Edna’s sexuality as something related to language in a metaphysical way.

Showalter suggests that it is revolutionary for Chopin to reveal, in the nineteenth-century, the existence of female passion. But, like Skaggs, she fails to argue the problematic relationship between language and female sexuality presented in the novel.

15. The name “Pigeon house” reminds readers of the bird cage that confines the parrot in the beginning of the novel. Whether or not Edna notices the cage image that the “pigeon house” delivers, the name itself
indicates that she, like the parrot in the cage, is still a prisoner in the patriarchal world though she has left her husband’s house.

16. In fact, Edna comes to talk like her father when she speaks about the race horse in Chapter 25.

17. Rachel Blan DuPlessis suggests that the ending of The Awakening is one of the nineteenth-century female writers’ conventional endings in which heroines choose marriage or death as resolutions of the plots of love and quest.

18. In Chapter 13, Edna runs away from the church again at Grand Isle.

19. Giorgelli Cristina suggests that the novel has a circular structure which indicates Edna’s rebirth in the ending. However, if she presumes that Edna is to be reborn in the same patriarchal society as that found in the beginning, such an interpretation makes the whole plot meaningless, for if Edna should be reborn, she would be reborn in a world where she could speak in her own voice.


Works Cited


