

## “The Voice of the Sea Speaks to the Soul”: Voicing Silence in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and in Rebecca Migdal’s Graphic Adaptation

“La voz del mar se comunica con el alma”: Dando voz al silencio en *The Awakening* de Kate Chopin y en la adaptación gráfica de Rebecca Migdal

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Received: 27/07/2020. Accepted: 06/03/2023

How to cite this article: Abril Hernández, Ana. “The Voice of the Sea Speaks to the Soul”: Voicing Silence in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and in Rebecca Migdal’s Graphic Adaptation.” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 44, 2023, pp. 187–212.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.44.2023.187-212>

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**Abstract:** This article examines Kate Chopin’s second novel, *The Awakening*, in conjunction with a graphic novel of this work developed by Rebecca Migdal in *The Graphic Canon, Vol. 3* and aims to study the use of silences in Chopin’s novel and the graphic version. This analysis examines non-linguistic communication presented in Chopin’s novel in the figure of her literary alter ego, Edna Pontellier. The methodological framework of this investigation draws on intermedial semiotics with the aim of discussing the use of the literary resource of silence as a visual communicating device in Chopin’s cornerstone of feminist literature *The Awakening*.

**Keywords:** Kate Chopin; *The Awakening*; silence; feminist literature; graphic novel.

**Summary:** Introduction: from the unfair price of speaking to the precious prize of a voice. Visual words and verbal silences: Chopin’s heroine in *The Awakening* and the graphic novel. Conclusions: from imposed silence into introspection.

**Resumen:** Este artículo se centra en la segunda novela de Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, en relación con una novela gráfica de este trabajo desarrollada por Rebecca Migdal en *The Graphic Canon, vol. 3* con el fin de estudiar el uso de los silencios en la novela y en la versión gráfica. Este análisis examina la comunicación no lingüística en la figura del alter ego literario de Chopin, Edna Pontellier. El marco metodológico se basa en la semiótica intermedial para investigar el uso del recurso literario del silencio como mecanismo de comunicación visual en la novela de Chopin *The Awakening*.

**Palabras clave:** Kate Chopin; *The Awakening*; silencios; literatura feminista; novela gráfica.

**Sumario:** Introducción: del injusto precio de hablar al precioso premio de la voz. Palabras visuales y silencios verbales: la heroína de Chopin en *The Awakening* y en la novela gráfica. Conclusiones: del silencio impuesto a la introspección.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: FROM THE UNFAIR PRICE OF SPEAKING TO THE PRECIOUS PRIZE OF A VOICE

In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence.  
(Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* 204)

Women were long neglected in societies up until some voices were raised such as John Stuart Mill in his essay from 1869: *The Subjection of Women*. Women had their spaces banished from the public sphere, a tendency that was radically defied by the movement of the “New Woman” and which found in literature its battle horse. The term “New Woman” was coined by the Irish feminist author and Woman Writer’s Suffrage League activist Sarah Grand (1854–1943) to refer to the women who “were awaking from their long apathy, and, as they awoke . . . began to whimper for they knew not what . . . [and who] might have been easily satisfied at that time had not society . . . shaken them and beaten them” (660–61). These “new women” sought equality of rights mainly through the control of their own bodies and, the sexual side of the marriage contract, which they perceived as terribly asphyxiating. Literature has been a most powerful reflection for their claims ever since this idea emerged in the late nineteenth century in novels like that which is examined in this study, the masterpiece of feminist narrative *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin (*née* Katherine O’Flaherty, 1850–1904).

This second novel in her literary production was not well-received by critics, who found in its protagonist, the young wife and mother Edna, a dangerous mixture of female emancipation and a challenge to their patriarchal stability. With her female main character, this American novelist and writer of short stories takes readers through a voyage along Edna’s first steps into the world upon her epiphanic awakening to the sensuality of life. In her study on the phenomenon of synaesthesia as manifested in this novel, Eulalia Piñero Gil explores the affordances of the aural channel and its evocative potential for the woman-artists in *The*

*Awakening*; “when words cannot express a mode of perception, arts such as music or painting can liberate humans from the prison of language” (120). Chopin’s subtle style knits an earthly paradise in the exotic landscape of Grand Isle where Edna first becomes familiar with the tender murmur of the Louisiana Gulf coast in a spiritual watery baptism and ensuing metaphorical rebirth.

The delicate narrative of this novel embarks readers on a trip of discovery of Edna’s self in a cathartic manner through the maze of the inner alleys of her mind. Chopin permeates this narrative with a remarkable load of information which is expressed through the silence of its protagonist. One of the most characteristic signs of the New Woman in literature (such as in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* or Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*), was her outspoken character regarding taboo topics such as sex and passion (adultery, as in the case of Edna) in order to attain full liberation from the male-dominated society that relegated them to the role of second-class citizens. Interestingly, this book opens not with an image, but with a sound: the voice of a parrot who verbalizes the protagonist’s thoughts casting out strangers: “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi” (1) (*Go away! Go away! Sapristi*). The initial image in the novel is not the woman’s voice, but a parrot’s, thus deferring the emergence of Edna’s voice both literally and metaphorically. Mr. Pontellier’s speech (Edna’s forty-year-old Creole husband) precedes that of his wife in the novel as he addresses her “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (4). Although verbally engaging, this first encounter with the Pontelliers bespeaks a clear (verbal) dominance on the part of the man as a subject and a visibly passive role on the part of his submissive wife, at least in the beginning.

This article examines the representation of silences in Chopin’s narrative from an intermedial lens mediated by a modern comic adaptation of this book. The female emancipation that women have gained with the passing of time has, nonetheless, not meant their immediate visibility in Western societies. This fact makes it crucial to examine the semiotic use of silences in literature in different media (written and visual formats) in order to study how a physical awakening is reached by struggling with silences. The writer and graphic artist Rebecca Migdal has produced a twelve-page graphic novel reading Chopin’s novel published in *The Graphic Canon Vol. 3: From Heart of Darkness to Hemingway to Infinite Jest* and edited by Russ Kick. Migdal’s comics have been presented in

different exhibits from museums to bookstores to galleries such as “Exit Art” in New York City.

The Canadian critic and writer Linda Hutcheon points out in *A Theory of Adaptation* the scholarly disapproval experienced by modern popular adaptations (2). Hutcheon claims that a “transmutation or transcoding” is required when a change of medium and code are involved in a process of adaptation (16), as in the case of a written novel turned into a graphic work. As the comics critic Thierry Groensteen states in *The System of Comics*, readers of graphic novels inevitably gaze from one side of the comic page to another more randomly than classical readers do (47). In the theoretical framework that allows for the comparative analysis of a graphic adaptation of a work of literature, balloons are the visual elements which capture readers’ attention (Groensteen 79), since they carry the written mode that readers are more familiar with.

In her study “Intermedial Metarepresentations,” the Estonian semiotician Marina Grishakova discusses the different meanings that a work of literature acquires depending on its medium and the semiotic potential of both the support and the work. Grishakova develops a theory of intermedial texts based on the two main communication modes: the visual and the verbal. In her analysis, she differentiates between metaverbal texts, which examine “the incomplete nature of the verbal medium by probing the limits of verbal representations” (315) and metavisual texts, in connection with the “incomplete nature of the visual representation by juxtaposing image with verbal message and revealing their discrepancy” (315). The scenes from *The Awakening* examined in this article analyze the ways in which Edna resorts to silence for an answer, a gateway from internal or external trouble, or simply to turn to her inward eye for understanding (e.g., the splash page or introductory page and the last panels in Midgal’s graphic adaptation examined in the following section).

The intermedial perspective of this study enables a contemporary and broader reading of this novel from the combinatory use of the written and the visual modes; as Silvia Adler claims in relation to this form of literature: “we could place comics, and graphic novels as a particular case, somewhere in the middle in the sense that both the verbal and the visual (non verbal) channels are equally important to meaning processing” (2284). This article explores the silent voices and the silenced internal speech that this female protagonist is not allowed to verbalize. In considering the issue of women’s expression of their thoughts and feelings,

Adrienne Rich poses the following question which this article will examine from an intermedial lens: “[w]hat kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?” (italics in the original; *Arts of the Possible* 322). Rich asks this question in the context of a woman poet (herself) who wonders about the potential topics for her literary creation; similarly, in *The Awakening* Chopin deals with the long-sustained norm of silence imposed on women for the sake of male command over their female companions.

## 2. VISUAL WORDS AND VERBAL SILENCES: CHOPIN’S HEROINE IN *THE AWAKENING* AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Silence is certainly an auditory means of communicating without words, as Adam Jaworski agrees in *The Power of Silence* (151). Jaworski claims that silence can also be rendered visually in the graphic medium which is characterized in this iconic means of communication as having “minimal internal contrast” among the elements that give form to it (142). Thus, Edna reacts speechlessly when she finds herself abandoned to the delicious odor of the night after her first awakening bath: “[n]o multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire” (Chopin 77). After that her husband, Léonce, instructs her to come into the house. Fig. 1 below corresponds to that moment, and in the comic we notice the semiotic significance of the linguistic utterances devoted to Edna and to the two men in the scene: her lover, Robert, and her husband. Fig. 1 shows four speech bubbles in Edna’s conversation with Robert Lebrun, and six speech bubbles for him; in her husband’s exchange, Edna has only one speech bubble and Mr. Pontellier, two, which shows in visual terms the men’s social power over her, based solely on gender constructs.

Fig. 1. *The Awakening* (Migdal 18)

The resources that Chopin puts at play aim to replace Edna's silences with a most vivid scene with only the voices of some bathers and her silence full of the satisfaction of liberation—albeit tentative. In the first panels of the graphic novel seen in Fig. 1 above, Migdal draws this moving moment of intense secrecy between the lovers. The small speech bubbles in the panels on Fig. 1 account for the outweighing load of the visual

medium. Edna is comfortable here until her husband commands her to enter the cottage. The panels that Migdal depicts in this page all have homogeneous proportions and their size is average, which the celebrated scholar Will Eisner interprets from a semiotic intermedial lens as steadiness in the narrative pace (32). Another relevant scene is her first bath in the sea, when she feels the smooth and calming murmur of the sea despite her initial fear to become lost in the dark waters of the Gulf. Panels three, four and five in Fig. 2 (on the next page) show Edna as she penetrates the deep waters. There is a visible difference in the form and size of these three middle panels and the panels that surround them on that page. These three panels attract the observers’ attention as they are placed in the center of the page, and they disrupt the visual narrative rhythm of the rest of the page. As Eisner states, this kind of panel: “create[s] a crowded feeling [in order to] enhance the rising tempo of panic” (33), the same excitement that this awakening New Woman felt when she swam in the sea for the first time.

It is worth noting that Edna’s inability to raise her voice and speak her mind when she is scolded by Léonce Pontellier for neglecting their children derives (to a large extent) from her inability to make sense of her submissive situation as a woman. As this analysis of verbal and visual silences examines, the protagonist in *The Awakening* moves from a male-imposed silence on women to a feminist adoption of this resource by Edna as the ultimate form of expression left for her in her sociocultural milieu (although Chopin did not regard herself as a feminist). This process of self-realization is progressive and steady throughout the novel, demonstrating that silence may also be read as “a state in which one gains knowledge [i.e., when Edna admits the only way out from her society], or it may be a state of idle ignorance, or unlearning [i.e., her incomprehension concerning her unfavorable marital situation]” (Jaworski 69). This way, after being scolded for not taking proper care of her children, Edna starts to sob frantically and the narrator informs us that “she could not have told why she was crying” (Chopin 14) although “[s]uch experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life” (14). As Catherine Adamowicz argues, she does not realize at first why she obeys her husband so compliantly, a silence that was, as this critic agrees, characteristic of—and expected from—the southern lady stereotype she was bound to live by (39). The internal struggle of this literary alter ego of Chopin stems from the sheer clash between her view of female life—and sought-after liberation from patriarchal control—and the gender roles and impositions

that women had to conform to in Louisiana's middle-upper groups at the turn of the twentieth century (Adamowicz 38). Chopin was, in effect and with all her strength, challenging the image of the southern lady (Adamowicz 52) as a compliant angel in the house.<sup>1</sup>

Fig. 2. *The Awakening* (Migdal 17)

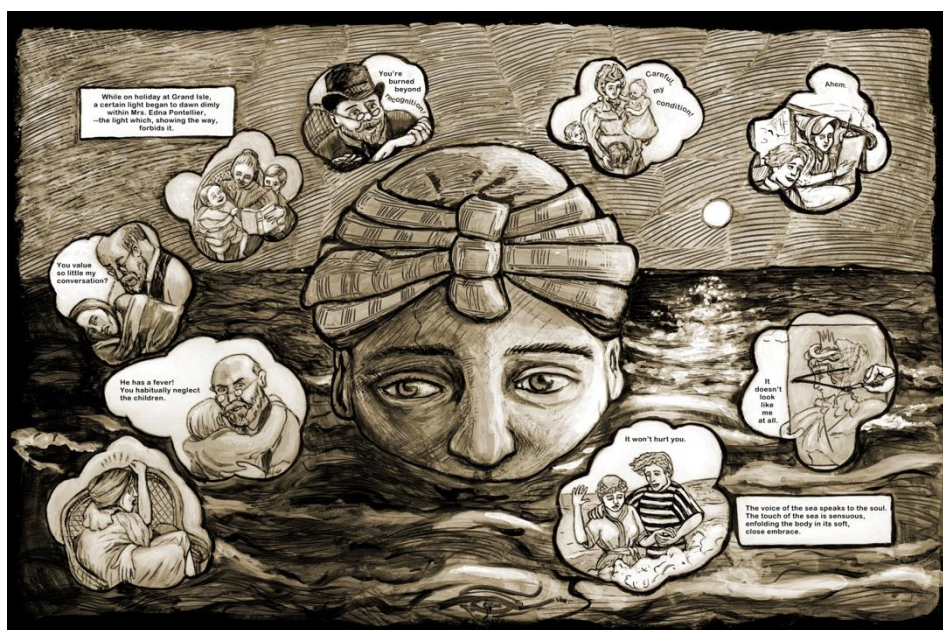


<sup>1</sup> The notion of the "angel in the house" is a term coined in 1854 by the English poet and critic Coventry Patmore in his homonymous narrative poem.



The main reason is that it offers a view of its protagonist from within (Huck 204) in the manner of the insightful novels of Henry James, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. If “‘to see’ means ‘to know’ and thus to verbalize” (Grishakova 323), in several moments Edna avoids speaking as if she has to justify her decision or explain it to anyone (knowing that no one would listen to her), so she turns the former silence of oppression into an empowering inward strategy to move towards self-fulfillment. Fig. 3 represents the splash page, and it uses thought bubbles to depict the unuttered thoughts of its protagonist. This silent macro-panel does not provide a temporal framework, whose wordless quality endows her thoughts with a sort of timelessness in line with the scholar Scott McCloud’s ideas on the visual representation of time in comics: “when the content of a silent panel offers no clues as of its duration, it can also produce a sense of timelessness” (102).

Fig. 3. *The Awakening* (Migdal 14–15)



But silence is not always presented in this novel as a representation of Edna’s lack of knowledge or inability to see or speak. Hence, early in the novel (chapter two) readers become aware of the difference between male silences and their female analogues in the conversation between this young

lady and her lover, Robert Lebrun, using speech as its active counterpart to show the visible-invisible dichotomy: “Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young, and did not know any better. Edna talked a little about herself for the same reason” (Chopin 8). Chapter one shows only one verbal utterance from Edna, and it is addressed to Mr. Pontellier. Chapter two opens with a description of this woman by the narrator (7), and the only direct speech we receive from her is, again, about her husband, regretting that he would probably come back home late that night (10). The third chapter does not devote any direct speech from this character to herself, either; here we can only read a few lines where she celebrates the wedding gifts they would buy for her sister Janet with the money that Léonce had made that night at Klein’s hotel (16). Silences are, for Edna, a haven with no place; when she breaks them in the first chapters of the story, her words are devoted to her husband in order to detach the focus of attention from herself.

There is not a single reference to herself in any of the direct speech manifestations that we find in the first three chapters of the novel: she is either talking about her husband or a member of her family. Not all silences stem from the same causes; hence, not every wordless utterance has the same implications. In the case of women, we must distinguish between female silence “as a sign of their submission and the silence of women as a reaction to their ambiguous (taboo) status” (Jaworski 126). Edna conveys both sides: she is both subjected to her husband (she has no voice of her own until later) and struggles to find her inner voice while being part of a society that relegates her to a secondary individual. Yi Chen identifies in the study “The Silent Majority: The Function of Female Characters in *The Awakening*” the role of women of color as the case of the Pontelliers’ quadron, whom, as this scholar declares, are the “silent majority” and foils to Edna (108) who are thrice subjugated in virtue of their “(taboo) status” (Jaworski 126) as women, dark-skinned, and working under the orders of their masters. The panels in Fig. 4 correspond to the first three chapters of this novel. In all five panels Edna is presented in a submissive manner: with her head mildly leaning, in silent contemplation of her husband and Robert, or in quiet meditation in the lower panel of the page. A reading of her behavior from the proxemics lens reinforces this claim: Edna is depicted both by Chopin and by Migdal in a wordless, passive attitude that bespeaks her initial state of ignorance as regards the reason why she could not speak out her mind (Adamowicz 39).

Fig. 4. *The Awakening* (Migdal 16)



Only when she is surrounded by the art of dance (bottom left panel) is she kinesthetically active, performing, assuming a leading role in her actions. The bottom panels where she is surrounded by the arts of dance and music are “bleed” panels; they extend the images contained in them outside the frames that contain them. As Scott McCloud claims, this iconographic mechanism represents the timelessness of the scene depicted in it, and its temporal infiniteness (103). As McCloud declares in his book

*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, “comics are just *one of many* forms of self-expression and communication available to us” (italics in the original; 162). In line with this affirmation, Migdal’s comic represents Edna’s speechless presentation at the beginning of the novel. The panels demonstrate that she is only free when she is able to express herself in the language of art, not in words.

The scholar Joseph R. Urgo states that Edna’s “story . . . is unacceptable in her culture . . . in order to live in society she has to silence herself . . . [which] she rejects” (23). This is the “social problem” partially identified by the men and male authorities in her family and her society—her father, her husband and Doctor Mandelet. Indeed, she moves from silence to speaking (Urgo 22), and the following instance from the novel illustrates this steady progression towards self-discovery after her lover Robert’s escape to Mexico:

She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself. (Chopin 121)

Léonce, concerned about his wife’s emotional state, visits Doctor Mandelet and talks about her wellbeing in the following terms: “[s]he’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (Chopin 170). He is unable to realize the (psychological) ills that affect Edna as regards her oppression and impossibility to express her feelings. The critic Barbara C. Ewell argues rightly in this sense that we are in front of “a woman whose shaping culture has, in general, refused her right to speak out freely; this is, moreover, a culture that construes a woman’s self-expression as a violation of sexual ‘purity’” (90).

Her lack of verbalization creates a torrent of emotions which only serve to intensify her passion for Robert Lebrun, Alcée Arobin and Victor Lebrun. As Ewell claims, a lack of linguistic expression of her thoughts triggers her fall in disgrace, given that she is unable to share her distress (90). The life and personality of this young southern lady is narrowly tied to that of her creator. Katherine O’Flaherty also fought to find her own voice in a world that seldom regarded women as anything other than possessions and children-bearers. This writer, as Emily Toth’s fine biography *Unveiling Kate Chopin* reads, suffered from “loss of voice”

after the war, which she overcame thanks to the female models she counted on in her schools (34). The opposite process occurs in Edna: she moves from a lost voice to regaining it. She is not a devoted mother and her clearest rejection of the role of “mother-woman” (Chopin 19) is presented at the end of this narrative during Madame Ratignolle’s delivery of her fourth child which is described by the protagonist as a “scene of torture” (288).

Edna is represented as a woman that was aware of the life she was leaving behind in accepting to be a wife first, and a mother later. According to Toth, “[s]he became a mother without particularly wanting to be one, and she silenced her own voice” (210). This silencing of her own voice is very much connected with the many instances in this novel in which her protagonist, Edna, is silenced by the pervasive male discourse. A clear example of the male *versus* the female discourse in this narrative is expressed by a male science authority, Dr. Mandelet, who speaks of the “story of the waning of a woman’s love, seeking strange, new channels only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest” (182). In response to this not-too-subtle hint at Edna’s love affairs, “[s]he had one of her own [stories] to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back” (183).

Metavisual texts account for visual representations which offer a surplus of visual information in the absence of verbal reports. The graphic representation of this novel offers an engaging source of metavisual information when Chopin articulates silence at key junctures in the story that is useful in the analysis of silences in both works developed in the present research. Edna slowly removes the blindfold from her eyes so that she feels that she has: “risen in the spiritual [scale]. She began to look with her *own* eyes” (emphasis added; 245) when she manages to live in her “pigeon house.” This metavisual excerpt offers an overload of the narrator’s voice at the expense of a verbal utterance from Edna expressing her ambiguous feelings in this respect since the metavisual text relies on the “inability to capture the overwhelming complexity of the perceptual world” (Grishakova 322). This is so in Migdal especially because of the inherent inability of a graphic artwork to capture the entirety of a given situation beyond the immediate setting where the action in each panel takes place. Upon learning about her recent acquisition of the pigeon house, Léonce immediately conceives of a plan to “save . . . appearances” (Chopin 245) in front of the public eye, yet Edna “admired the skill of his maneuver, and avoided any occasion to balk his intentions” (245). Finely drawn, what

this American writer is presenting here is a silent moral defeat for this proto New Woman developed by her husband to stop people's criticism concerning the abandonment of his wife. This is only a gentle token of the soundless abuse that the patriarchal control enforced and that they had to endure in their roles of mothers, wives and, simply, women.

Another central rite of passage in the life of Edna—besides the musical evening party studied by Piñero Gil in her article (124)—is her last and ultimate bath in the sea. Mercedes L. Schaefer finds in Edna's suicide “her great work of art” (14). She eventually finds her own voice: the voice of the sea, which she welcomes warmly. As Schaefer declares: “The female artists in *The Awakening* . . . seek new ways to express and define themselves; they move within the margins and discover creative outlets to negotiate with language and their own phallogocentric internalizations to form subjectivities outside the traditional sphere of gender roles and expectations” (12). Curiously, the “voice of the sea” changes its tonality depending on Edna's state of mind; from a “whisper . . . through the reeds that grew in the salt-water pools!” (Chopin 91) to being finally “seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (34, 300) to being “sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (301). The sea does have a voice, which she longs for, and which only *she* can hear. Fig. 3 and Fig. 7 present this proto-Modernist character in the midst of this element in a calm way, as if she felt at ease with her body submerged in the water.

A central moment in this novel in which Edna lets her frustration loose upon her husband's abusive power over her takes place towards the end of chapter eighteen when, “taking off her wedding ring, [Edna] flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it” (135). This scene develops after her husband reprimands her for not receiving the visits of some of the richest women whose husbands could ensure him a considerable amount of money. She refuses to wait patiently for these visits at home and she reacts to her husband's resentment with the scene quoted before. This scene develops with Edna's verbal silence, and it becomes even more powerful in this context because it is her action and her anger that speak for her. Her anger turns into rage as she tries to get rid of the circle that tied her to the man who found in her little more than a precious possession of his. However, in spite of her fury, “her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (135). This vivid image is more

symbolic than verbal; the words she cannot utter turn her despondency into the evidence that women’s efforts to break free from the yoke of the patriarchal institution of marriage were indisputably helpless. Fig. 5 shows Migdal’s interpretation of this moment.

Fig. 5. *The Awakening* (Migdal 19)



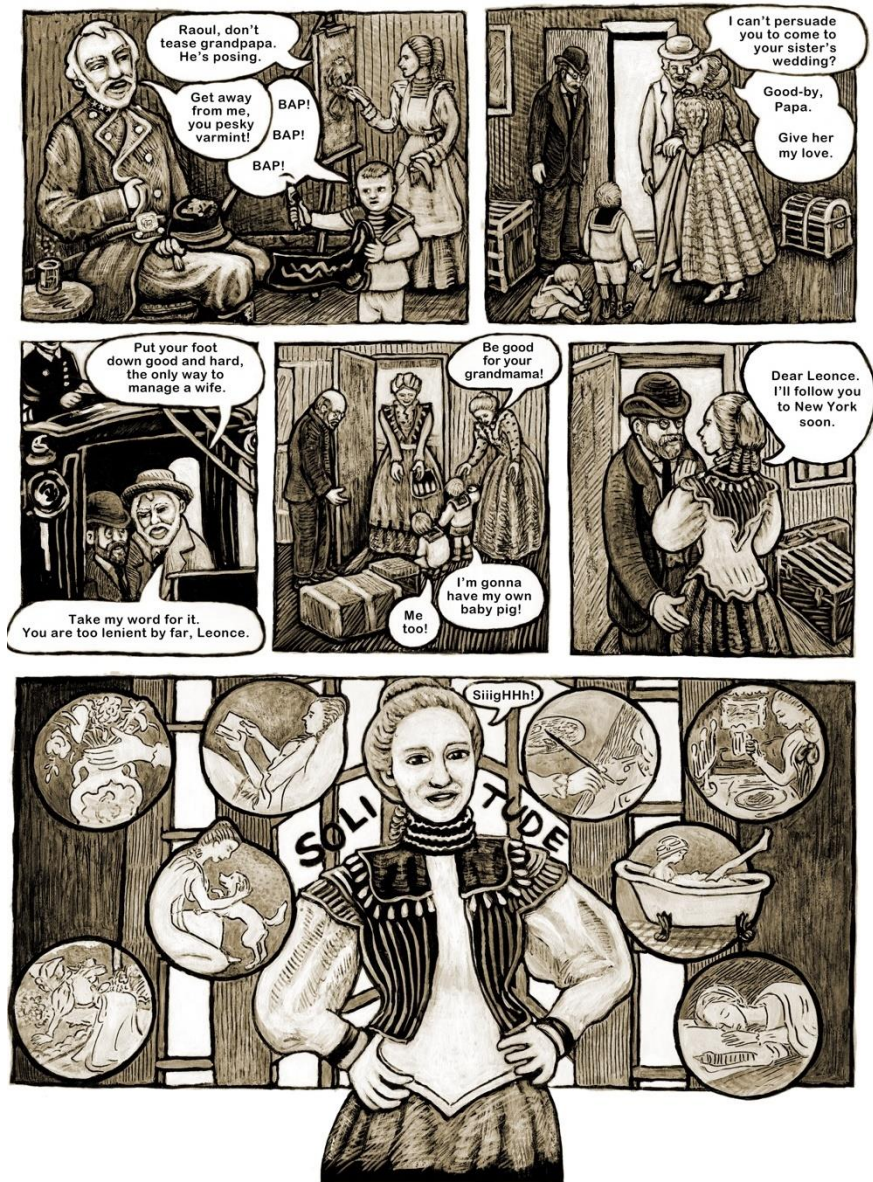
In the lowest panels of Fig. 5, we can see a succession of stylized, narrow panels that, as examined before in this article, bear, for Eisner, the symbolism of increasing temporal succession of events due to panic (33), or as in this case, of rage. Edna's desire to banish the wedding ring from her life is thwarted by the implied power that this tiny object bears (that is, sustaining an entire system of social order based on male control over women). The bottom left and bottom central panels depict the lady "seiz[ing] a glass vase from the table and flinging it upon the tiles of the hearth [because] [s]he wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear" (Chopin 135). In the bottom right two last panels of this page, Migdal presents the ring on the floor (upper panel) and her foot (lower panel) in smaller square frames. All four bottom panels lack speech bubbles since, as mentioned earlier on, Edna does not utter a word in this fit of anger, she only acts. Just an upper caption in the bottom left panel provides the narrator's words as if from within Edna's head: she has just learned that Robert is immediately leaving for Mexico and she is trapped in an empty, loveless marriage.

In her semiotic approach to the intermedial rendering of silence in comics, "Silence in the Graphic Novel," Silvia Adler sets forth one more difference in the interpretation of silences: "silence related to the protagonist's voice channel, in one case, and silence of the narrator (who intentionally lets the iconographic level and the implicatures—below the surface—'talk'), in another" (2279). Consequently, in the previous comic page (Fig. 5), which shows Edna's rage and mute acting, the narrator is represented in the comic with an upper caption over Edna's head (bottom left panel). This iconographic depiction of the omniscient narrator in *The Awakening* informs about the pervading presence of this unseen voice and its controlling power over her. Silences in these panels come both from the narrator and from the protagonist (which Chopin manifests as an overload of the narrator's presence at this point). These wordless panels serve as an emphatic device that directs the observers' attention towards the main character and her movements in the graphic novel. The gutter in this comic (the blank space separating the panels) is prominently wide, which operates as a cognitive-emotional resource. Observers and readers "fill in the details that are missing between the frames, but [they] also responds with an intense emotional, intellectual and/or critical reaction to what is not articulated explicitly and therefore restored through [their] own understandings" (Adler 2279). The broad gutters in Fig. 5 and the perfectly framed panels they separate represent the "struggle with the angel [figure



in] nineteenth-century writers” (Paretsky 14) as women well-girded in their domestic, private sphere. The gutters construct a visually arranged graphic discourse that bespeaks order, contrary to the images depicted in them, which disrupt this image.

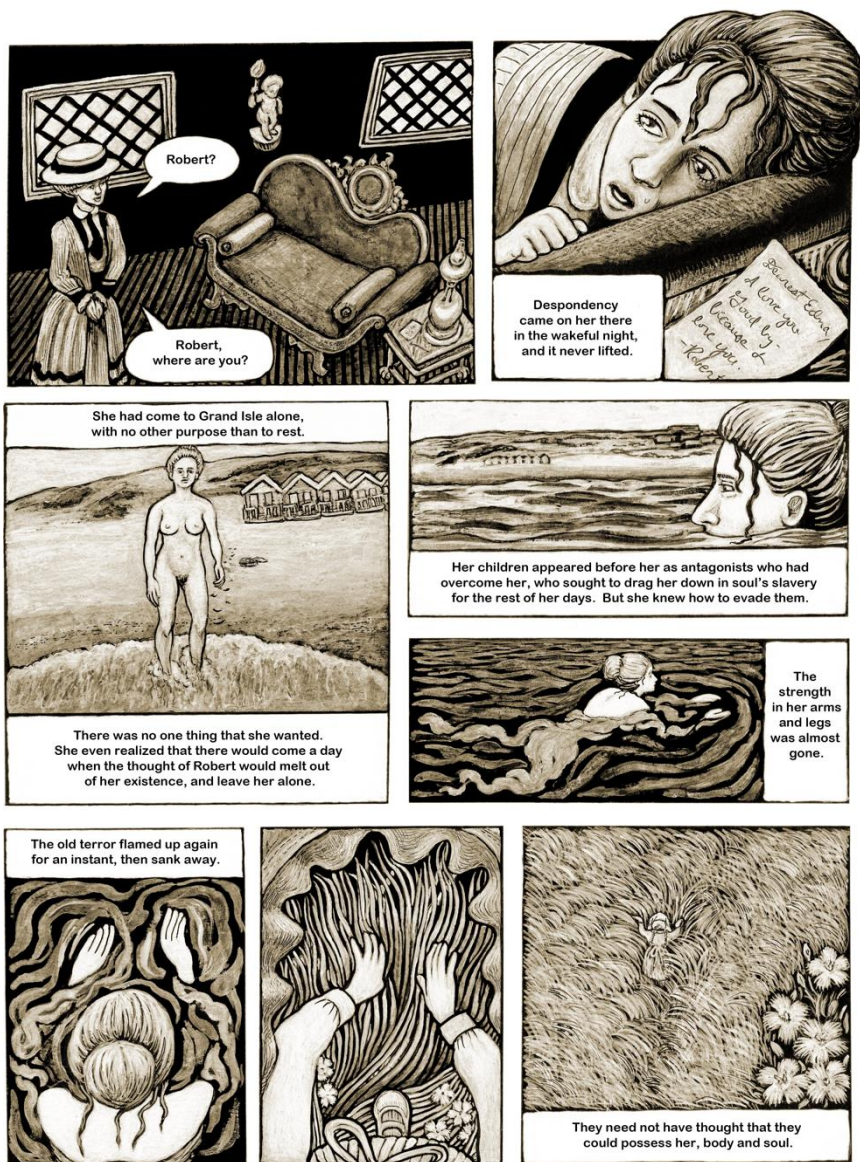
Edna Pontellier, the pioneering New Woman in this novel, is a noticeably rebellious protagonist, not only for her love affairs with other men but also on account of her intellectually engaging attitude as regards knowledge and books. In a very insightful instance in Chopin’s story, we can hear Edna’s thoughts mediated by the narrator—thus only partly hers—when her husband leaves the family home to work abroad, and his two children are sent to stay with their grandparents. When she is finally alone in the house, she “breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief. A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her” (Chopin 188). That day she played with the children’s dog, dined, read Emerson because “[s]he realized that she had neglected her reading, and determined to start anew upon a course of improving” (190) and, after that, she had “a refreshing bath” (190) while “a sense of restfulness invaded her, such as she had not known before” (190). The series of actions that she performs take the form of a domestic ritual of purification of her soul (indulging herself in the pleasure of literature) and of her body, too (the bath she takes are reminiscent of the purifying waters that cleanse the body and soul), indicating her rebirth. In fact, “[t]he story which Edna needs to tell, of course, is the story of her awakening body” (Urgo 28) and her domestic ritual prepares both her mind and her body for her spiritual and bodily awakening (Chen 107). Resuming the persistent distinction that men and women make of silences in view of their unequal access not to linguistic expression, but to an ensuing adequate societal response—to be heard in society—Bobbye D. Sorrels states that “women often have less opportunity than men for the kind of private silence that leads to good thinking and rehabilitating meditation. . . . [Women] do not have that special room or special time that society permits the man to take” (114). In effect, Léonce fits in the mold of the prototypical middle-upper businessman from the late nineteenth century who was fond of his control over everything and everyone around him, an attitude against which his wife rebels.

Fig. 6. *The Awakening* (Migdal 20)

No words are mouthed during the previous domestic scene of female liberation in which readers are informed about the steps Edna takes, presenting this character as the object of the narrator's gaze. Fig. 6 has a

lower frame where this narrative scene is visually condensed in a large horizontal panel. In that panel, Edna’s image is placed in the middle. This location of the mute character is significant in the sense that we can perceive she is not the speaking subject but the object of the narrator’s, readers’, and observers’ intruding gaze into the privacy of her life. We find now the self-imposing narrative view. This narrator is the subject of vision and Edna, the object of this gaze. The central character is here rendered silent by the narrator, whose overwhelming omniscient gaze pervades this frame. The protagonist directs her eyes at the observer and her bodily language seems to control the panel, an image that opposes her tragic end. However, it would not be completely untrue to say that she is not in command of her actions and her life: in taking action and resolving to free herself by drowning in the water that brought her awakening, Edna is choosing her own path. From this point of view, her suicide is not presented as a surrender but a deliberate choice of her destiny.

The last page of Migdal’s adaptation shows the voice of the narrator in the form of captions (see Fig. 7, center and bottom panels) with the dissimilar size of the panels indicating her internal unrest at the act she is about to carry out (Eisner 32–33). Visually, the last three panels of the comic also become steadily larger in size, symbolizing the magnitude of her decision and operating on the perspective moving from a close-up shot of her body diving into the water to a long shot. This movement of visual focalization is mirrored in the novel with the narrator’s voice pervading the final scene and Edna’s own voice fading into nonexistence (at least in the form of direct speech). The graphic representation shows this progressive distance from her as she returns to her merrier, bygone life, hearing “her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s” (Chopin 303), the “hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks” (303). In this critical moment of her being, Edna retrieves a happier time in her life by resorting to her time in Kentucky in the form of sound (voices) and odor (the flowers) in a vivid portrait of an unrecoverable past. Yet, she does not see herself among these memories, but rather presents them as an external observer would narrate a novel alien to his or her life. The protagonist is slowly detaching herself from everything around her because she notices that she was no more than an observer in her own life, an external being meant to be controlled and cared for by her father, her husband, or her lovers.

Fig. 7. *The Awakening* (Migdal 25)

Edna finally loses herself in the sea, represented as the grassy meadows of her native hometown. This is yet another visual manifestation of timelessness, eternity fusing the past quietly—her childhood memories—with the present time in the sea and the promise of a liberated

future ahead, far from the distant shore at her back; Edna has, in the end, gained enough power and knowledge to design her own journey. We are accustomed to interpreting silence in the form of tacit acceptance of impositions or norms by the subjugated, but as this study demonstrated, the meanings of this device are as varied as its linguistic and literary manifestations. Silence in this novel ends up being Edna’s chosen escape from a world where she did not belong. She was the Other, the alien being in a male-controlled society which saw the publication of this novel as a challenge for the upkeep of male supremacy. As Adrienne Rich reminds us:

If we have learned anything of our coming to language out of silence, it is that what has been kept unspoken, therefore *unspeakable*, in us is what is most threatening in the patriarchal order in which men control, first women, then all who can be defined and exploited as “other.” All silence has a meaning. (*italics in the original; On Lies* 308)

Indeed, Edna’s silence in her speechless, sad final decision is the outcome of profound reflection upon her life and her position in it. Curiously, if we take a look at the introductory page (Fig. 3) of the graphic adaptation and we compare it with the fourth panel on the right in Fig. 7 we can appreciate that her mouth is the only part of her face that is sunken in the water with the panel stressing her eyes and forehead. If we assume that the mouth is the symbol of speech, its position under the water implies impossibility to speak, silence. This image is repeated at the beginning and at the end of the comic, encompassing the thematic circularity of the novel in relation to the image of Edna’s watery awakening because, as she is forced to admit in the end, “[p]erhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (Chopin 292).

A more modern reading of this mechanism of self-expression or rebellion against the norm is presented in Sara Paretsky’s book: *Writing in an Age of Silence*. In it, this scholar and writer of science fiction states that “[s]ilence does not mean consent. Silence means death. When we have something to say, and we are afraid to speak, or forbidden to speak, we feel as though we’ve been walled into a closet” (113) and she further adds in connection with Chopin, “[s]ilence can come from . . . public hysteria, as it did for Kate Chopin” (Paretsky 113). A hysteria triggered by her sheer disregard as a woman, a wife and with the only traditionally feminine role left for her of motherhood, which relegated her to the domestic sphere of

silence and obedience. This death is what is left for Edna upon her husband's lack of understanding of her emotional needs as an individual, for he "could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (Chopin 148). In fact, it is Léonce's inability to understand—to *see*—what eventually triggers Edna's death when, in the end, she did open her eyes and faced reality as it was. The last panels of the graphic version show this reflection; once she is aware of her place in life and of the mechanisms that govern society, she realizes that words are useless from her position in society and so, the narrator tells us, "she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (208).

### CONCLUSIONS: FROM IMPOSED SILENCE INTO INTROSPECTION

In Edna's physical and spiritual awakening in this novel, Chopin manifests her inner unrest as regards the secondary role of women in society and in the marriage institution in the late nineteenth century (which she shares with her protagonist). Her silences in this novel bear a rich variety of meanings; from an internal rebellion in not replying to some of her husband's demanding utterances about her role as a mother, to her liberating muteness as the only way out of social oppression, as in the final scene. Migdal's graphic adaptation draws on the absence of speech balloons to portray Edna's silences and on the powerful potential of images to direct the observers' attention to her and her actions in the panels, instead. Edna partakes of Kate Chopin's "quiet" laugh and her "gentle and low" voice according to her biographer Per Seyersted (24). This writer and her heroic alter ego manifest in an earnest manner women's agitation "against tradition and authority; with a daring which we can hardly fathom today . . . she undertook to give the unsparing truth about woman's submerged life" (Seyersted 198).

To conclude, a comparison between the first and the last pages where water intervenes shows Edna's progression in *The Awakening* from blindness to blinding light; the splash page of this comic (Fig. 3) already foreshadows this encompassing the rhythmic progress towards Edna's final awakening into the world through language. This can be perceived in Migdal's version in the presence of water in the macro-panel that opens the comic (Fig. 3) and the bottom panels in Fig. 7. As Adrienne Rich put it, women had to strive to find their own voice for, historically, "[p]atriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and

through silence” (*On Lies* 189). The metavisual page that opens up the comic shows the protagonist avoiding the use of language (speech bubbles representing verbal silence and an internal flood of thought). As a result, the graphic designer replaces those bubbles with thought bubbles, contrary to the silent panels in the last page of the comic and the dominance of the visual mode by the end of the novel in both versions. As this article demonstrates male dominance in Chopin’s society and their economic, social, and institutional preeminence automatically placed women in a disadvantageous situation which rendered them unseen and, unheard. Consequently, female vision—gaze—and voice were raised by some brave writers as Chopin and literature denouncing this unfair situation was immediately discarded as inadequate.

Sara Paretsky makes a strong claim in favor of women’s rights as regards their access to culture. This writer acknowledges Chopin’s titanic effort to make their adverse situation public and reverse the course of history through her literature, an admirable effort that was not praised and, on the contrary, punished by male contemporary critics. Paretsky engages in this demand for basic human rights for women who have struggled “standing up to excoriation—or in the case of writers like Kate Chopin dying in the face of it—to come to our present situation, where women have easy access to books, both as readers and as writers” (77). In the end, Chopin has her heroine stand up for her inner thoughts until the end, not letting society tame her into what they claimed was proper for a lady. As such, Chopin “was unable to see [her] heroine as [a] sinner [and this novelist] braved public opinion by refusing to have [her protagonist] repent” (Seyersted 193). After the analysis developed in these pages, we return to the question posed by Adrienne Rich in the introduction of this study: “[w]hat kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?” (italics in the original; *Arts of the Possible* 322). It is not an individual voice, but an entire history of female subjugation that Chopin represents in this challenging proto New Woman at the expense of Edna’s own life and Chopin’s literary fall from grace in the eyes of male critics’ of her day. It is the clamor of generations of women left aside who are slowly thriving among their male peers transmitting the cry of those who were not heard. The silence from which Chopin intended to save women was, in sum, the oblivion of their forgotten voices and her claim, the celebration of woman’s inner and outer awakening.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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