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fClaim of self-liberation in Feminine Creole fiction: a New Vision of Individualism driven by Naturalism

In the United States of America, French literature is known through Henry Greville, George Sand et Victor Cherbuliez¹, whose novels tend to shape heroes. Naturalism, especially with the voice of Émile Zola, tends to reshape this idea of the main character who would be the hero. As early as 1877, when no English translation of *L'Assommoir* is yet available, an anonymous article states: “heroine is a washer-woman and the hero - in so far as there is a hero - is a roof-mender.”² The cultural gap challenges the vision of individuals in fiction: there should be a “hero,” in the Romantic concept. We can infer that Zola's novel challenges the culture of a new world on a deeper level. Indeed, in this era where the self-made man triumphs over the crowd, American culture meets a philosophical disagreement with naturalism. It is when the concept of the “American Dream” was built before being theorized by the historian Truslow³. We intend to study of Kate Chopin (1850-1904) and Léona Queyrouze (1860-1904) take part on this thinking by glorifying the individuality in the Romantic sense.

Nevertheless, the literary movement spread across the Western World⁴ and included authors such as Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, all three from the

1 Albert J. Salvan, *Zola aux États-Unis*, (Providence, Brown University Studies: 1943): 11.

2 ANONYME, “The Contributors’ Club,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Boston, 39, May 1877: 610.
Note: articles about Zola are rarely signed in the US during the late XIXe century.

3 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 should be better and richer and fuller for every man. He defines a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman can reach their goal regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

4 Yves Chevrel, *Le naturalisme, étude d'un mouvement littéraire international* (PUF:1982).

Northeastern of the United States, wrote novels close to naturalist themes according to Donald Pizer⁵. They came from the camp of the victors of the Civil War and usually keep the determinism and so-called pessimism of Zola's works. Most of the American writers called naturalists by critics come from the Northern States. Thus it is of note that, women writers from Louisiana, a southern state, were also interested in Zola. Léona Queyrouze wrote to him in March 1898, addressing a poem to his glory, while Kate Chopin published articles about his work and composed *The Awakening* (1898), whose text pushed critics to consider her a naturalist: "Instead 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." (PIZER 60) Both writers knew Zola and showed interest in his work. Their openness to France and to the innovations of the authors of their time demonstrate an international vision of otherness. They express their world's perception through liberated prose, in opposition to society's 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 model to the "American dream."

Those writers develop a unique aesthetic of self and society in the late Nineteenth literary landscape. Queyrouze shows a keen interest in symbols and does not hesitate to make a prosopopée in her "Sonnet, hommage respectueux à Émile Zola"⁶. Her "I" embodies the Truth and is the metaphor for her support in the French author's fight. Chopin creates a character discovering her identity in an unaccepting society. In both cases, an enthusiastic

5 Donald Pizer, Earl N. Harbert, *Dictionary of Literary Biography, American Realists and Naturalists*, 12 (Detroit, Bruccoli Clark Book: 1982).

6 Included in her letter : Letter from Queyrouze to Zola, 02/03/1898 (Collection Brigitte Émile-Zola).

version of “I” defends a specific idea of individualism, shaping its place while addressing the benevolence of the reader.

These authors depict strong female characters who dare stand alone in unwelcoming surroundings. They also represent quite a unique framework for naturalism: the landscape of the Creoles. Their fictional “I” seeks to assert itself beyond adversity, whether through the embodiment of values or the creation of a female character in search of meaning. Queyrouze writes to Zola three times: the first letter contains a sonnet and is written in the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair. The second letter contains clippings of articles of interest for the writer, while the last one encloses a text about the affair written in her own hand. We will focus on her sonnet, the only fictional work sent to the writer. As for Chopin, we note that *The Awakening* is considered a special text: as it is the only one considered naturalist by critics. How do Chopin and Queyrouze use an abstract representation of the concept of “I” to convey a positive idea of self-liberation in their fictional writing? This paper will attempt to unlock the deeper meaning of these works through the joint study of Queyrouze's poems and *The Awakening*. First of all, we will analyze how individualism can be an interpretation of naturalism. Then, we will focus on the importance of the land in the liberation of the “I” of the author. Subversion means new borders not only for places but also for people: both writings highlight the necessity of a new space to experiment with freedom. Then, we will study the glorification of individuality and how the fictional “I” tends to make a special place both in opposition to society and respect and love for alterity.

Individualism: an original and cultural vision of naturalism

Let's us define “individualism” whose meaning varies depending on the country,

culture, and era. The concept appeared during the French Revolution, but the use of the word started during the nineteenth century and is still a source of confusion, as historian Koeeraad 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 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.⁷

Our focus will be more on The “Romantic individualism,” characteristic of 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.”⁸ Naturalism might have developed individualism in its own way though, especially when transplanted in other countries. The philosophical concept and its expression in literature adapt culturally. The researcher Swart notes a different vision of the concept starting 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

7 Koenraad W. Swart, “Individualism” in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860),” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 23 (1962): 77.

8 Frank Norris, “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” *McTeague* (1997): 274.

countries earlier than in France.⁹ On the United States also a predominantly Protestant country, philosophy of individualism meets the concepts of “self-made man” or the “American Dream,” already a positive vision of the same idea. Indeed, individualism celebrates liberal democracy. Fischer, a sociologist, 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 enterprise, and the American Dream.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, the researcher emphasizes that considering Americans as only individualists would be a mistake. He would call their state of mind “voluntarism” as in his opinion, American individualism does not prevent society from weighing on the individual: “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.”¹¹ Individualism does not mean to be rare, original or to value stepping away from the group. To his mind, free enterprise 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 of mainstream thinking in literary works. Furthermore, the “American dream” is still developing at this moment : 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 shapes in the feminine Creole fiction of Queyrouze and Chopin.

Finding one's identity defining new boundaries: self-liberation and land

9 Swart, Koenraad W. “‘Individualism’ in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860).” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 23, (196): 77-90.

10 Lukes, Steven, “The Meanings of ‘Individualism.’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1971): 45-66.

11 Claude S. Fischer “Paradoxes of American Individualism” *Sociological Forum*, 23 (2008): 367.

Queyrouze (1861-1938) was a Creole poet, an essayist and a composer who expressed herself “on such issues as culture, race, politics, literature, art and music.”¹² She had a perfect command in both French and English : she translated some works. Her salon in New-Orleans was well-known, she was the creator of the journal the *Athénée* to preserve French culture, and had a great friendship with Lafcadio Hearn. Her involvement in political questions was famous, and 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.” (MELETIO 3) She believed in Romantic literature, and despite her admiration for Zola, she never followed Hearn's advice to write realistic fiction. In her poetry, she displays her desire of intellectual independency that we could link to the current events happening in Louisiana. Her writings were mostly in French and written in *L'Abeille*.¹³

Both writers lived in Louisiana, a state whose culture was threatened and needed to defend its identity. It is the land of the Creoles: these people felt threatened by the domination of Anglo-Saxon thought: "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.” (MELETIO 1) Following the sale of the region to the United States in 1803, the Creoles sought to define their identity by promoting and defending their culture. In this context, the resistance against Anglo-Saxon manners and customs takes place in literature, namely in the writings of Queyrouze and Chopin. The former is involved in the defense of Creole culture at various levels, and both are interested in French culture. Meletio explains: “Thus, long into the twentieth century, Leona remained a woman out of time and out of place, holding on to the

12 Donna M. Meletio *Léona Queyrouze (1861-1938): Louisiana French Creole poet, essayist, and composer*, (Louisiana, LSU Doctoral Dissertations, 2005):15.

13 See Meletio dissertation (6). Queyrouze mostly expressed herself in French. The poems we quote are all written in French.

vestiges of a fashion and a culture that had disappeared long ago.” (MELETIO 42) Chopin is quite different but still has a strong relationship with Creole culture: “There is, however, one significant connection to American writers, one that can be found in the work of Kate Chopin, and she represents an interesting mixture of American and Creole sensibilities and serves as a bridge between the two worlds.” (MELETIO 189) The question of identity and culture is crucial in her work *The Awakening*, set in a creole framework as Grande Isle and New Orleans.

These female writers are out of place in different ways: Queyrouze can feel her creole lifestyle will not survive, while Chopin is lost between two cultures. They do not fit in the modern Anglo-American world rising and need to explore new ways to express themselves. 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.”¹⁴ Chopin values the subjectivity and the psychological aspect of Zola's work but does not want to follow his lead. Her particular point of view and the prevalence of local color in her novels make them works difficult to classify. However, we could infer that her “colorist” side underlines the importance that gives to the environment. Edna Pontellier's awakening resonates with life in Grande Isle and in Louisiana. As Margraf states: “The impact of the exotic environment and the Creole milieu on Edna's awakening thus becomes obvious in the case of *The Awakening*”¹⁵. The author links her story and plot to her vision of the Creoles' culture and setting.

First of all, the character looks moved by the rhythm and the flow of the place,

14 Elmo Howell “Kate Chopin and the Creoles Country,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 20 (1979): 209.

15 Erik Margraf “Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" as a Naturalistic Novel,” *American Literary Realism* 37 (2005): 102.

creating an intense inner dialogue beyond her control: “I was not conscious of thinking of anything, but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts.”¹⁶ The “I” here expresses something intellectual, in progress in her mind: we see the dawn of her awakening coming slowly. While the third-person narrator has already told the reader the intention of Edna and Madame Ratignolle “The two women had no intention of bathing,” (15) the self-identification blurs with words like “perhaps” or “I can.” Shortly after, she moves from Grande Isle to the city, New Orleans. As the land spreads out and unburls, her identity seems to grow as well. Her desire manifests with a story she creates during a dinner with her father and her husband. Her, her awakening is already threatened by society. Her way to protect herself is evoke the imaginary safe place of Grande Isle, where she first awakened:

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 Baratanian 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 announces her suicide drowning but is also a poetic way to talk about a special imaginary place where she could exist as she pleases. It is noticeable that Chopin does use the first-person pronoun here. It could read as a first attempt to pull back as her attempt to affirm herself fails. Indeed, her husband and her doctor do not display understanding, and the

16 Quotations are taken from Kate Chopin *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* (The Pennsylvania State University: Penn State, 2008): 16. Henceforth page numbers only will appear in the text.

fact that she attributes the story to Madame Antoine shows her shyness. However, shortly after this incident, while she is with Alcée Arobin, Edna talks 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 by the use of “I” and “my,” especially with 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? Being “not herself” anymore, she expresses her feeling of excitement, defines her boundaries, professes her madness, and confirms her will to be alone “I wish you to go.” Hence, Grande Isle is a place where she can express herself and build protection, which explains why she evokes the place in her imagination when she feels threatened.

In her poem “For Arrigo Boito”¹⁷ Queyrouze explores the myth of Prometheus in an “invincible and magical”¹⁸ land.(239) Although the action takes place in the Adriatic Sea, it describes a mystical volcano that “devours the flame.”¹⁹ Her final verse illustrates how this special place gives new breath to her creativity: “Et ma plume et mon cœur briserais”²⁰. The association between her “heart” and her “pen” underlines her self-liberation. In Chopin’s text, Edna is a painter who develops her art only after she finally becomes a homeowner. The poet thus associates closely the location with the desire to break the limits and rules. In “Resurge”,

17 Donna L. Meletio adds an appendix in her thesis with a selection of Queyrouze’s poems she found in the archives of Bâton Rouge. All the poems quoted are available in her thesis.

18 Queyrouze gives a tribute and thanks Arrigo Boito for his novel ‘Mefistofele’.

The original poem is written in French, the english translations are from Meletio. To help the reading and avoid the awkwardness of a sentence partly in French, partly in English, we will give the French original in a footnote when the quotation is included in the sentence : « invincible et magique ».

19 « dévorant la flamme »

20 the subject of “briserais” is likely an implicit “je” and not a typo if we consider the whole stroph :

Puis de tous ces rayons, Maître je te ferais
Un sonnet plus fragrant que le miel d’Aristée;
Et ma plume et mon cœur ensuite briserais

(271) her dream leads her to leave her “misty prison” to seek her “release.”²¹ She claims to follow a new personal path, walking “in harmonious rays that stretched towards the stars.”²² Queyrouze's poetry is full of imaginary lands where mythology on an epic scale creates places capable of breaking the chains of constraint:: both writers depict a safe place for themselves in their imagination. There is a need to elevate herself above the oppression she feels. In this last verse of the poem, a reject of realism, the predominant literary current of her time, can be seen by the reference to “stars,” a term usually associated with Romanticism or Idealism. 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. (27-8)

This will for contest and going against the dominant current could be linked with the current events happening in Louisiana. The spirit of the land made both writers engage in specific ways on their own. In 1895, Queyrouze confirmed her will to reject the “American mainstream literary culture in New York” (36). Queyrouze and Chopin associate their land with an idea of liberation in different ways. Chopin's novel, *Grande Isle*, the magical environment and the Creoles' surroundings provide the essential tools for Edna's awakening.

21 « prison de brume » « essor »

22 « L'harmonieux réseau des cordes sidérables »(sic)

The author associates the land with a sudden glorification of the “I,” striving in new ways 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, mirroring their struggles with those of different cultures. They championed an idea of literature that was out of step with their times. Louisiana's bruised identity inspires them to emphasize their cultural identity, through the image of a symbolic and imaginary land where they can be themselves and develop their expression. By focusing on the tension between the surroundings and their characters, they create a magical place where the self can break its chains and define new boundaries and new borders. They create a new space for spreading individuality in the novel, which could be interpreted as a version of the “American Dream.” Edna's desire for solitude and Queyrouze's attraction to the sky build a space where individuality can grow. This literary claim matches the subversion of both writers.

Their common refusal to follow modern trends reflects their idea of individualism tinged with enthusiasm, expressing resistance to society's injunctions. Nevertheless, their desire for uniqueness does not come with judgment or opposition to current literary trends. Indeed, their attitude toward naturalism is quite positive. In fact, Queyrouze wrote to Zola during the Dreyfus affair showing admiration for his work and Chopin composed several articles²³ about naturalism. A journalist as well as fiction writers, she reveals her vision of literature in her journalistic articles.

Self vs society: an alternative way of seeing individualism

23 See as example Kate Chopin “Emile Zola's “*Lourdes*”” *St. Louis Life* 17 nov. 1894:5. Kate Chopin underlines the force of Zola's descriptions.

Certain critics of the nineteenth century saw naturalist writings as imbued with the clichés of pessimism and fatalism. But, interestingly, both Queyrouze and Chopin typically ignored those aspect of Zola's work. Understanding their views on the master of Médan show 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 (5) in Zola's novel *Lourdes*. However, she defends the idea that his prose is psychological and has a symbolic meaning. Concerning the scene before the Grotto, she state: “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.”(5) Chopin is fascinated with the study of the power of subjectivity, and comments the psychological aspect of his writings. It's a point that she explores as well in her novel, as we will analyze later. As for Queyrouze, she writes directly to Zola to tell him about her personal experience and understanding of his books: “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 dévorer pendant que la foudre les emportait.”²⁴ Her use of adjectives such as “saisissantes” “épouvantable” and the noun “foudre” underlines the larger-than-life, exaggerated, and epics qualities of the struggle. Furthermore, she manifests an interest in the sudden violence in this murder scene in the characters' relationship and how the events drove them crazy. Indeed, she describes the scene when Jacques kills his lover Severine. The poet underlines the relationships between people, while Chopin focuses on the psychological aspect of solitude, linking both to individuality.

24 Lettre de Léona Queyrouze to Émile Zola, 02/03/1898 (collection Brigitte Émile-Zola).

This story naturally brought me back to the so 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.”

Thus, our women's writer view of Zola does not concern determinism or pessimism, but rather focuses on human psychology, revealing the main literary interest of both authors. In Queyrouze's poetry, these elements define strong mythological characters like Medee or Prometheue who affirms their identity and opinions in a hostile society. As for Chopin she develops both an internal and external viewpoint of Edna's awakening. Both writers thus subvert dominant literary current through their nurturing of self-actualization and their glorification of the human mind.

The captatio benevolentiae

In a text, we call *captatio benevolentiae* the narrator's strategy to get a positive vision from their reader. Teresa Sánchez explains: “that of the securing of the goodwill of the reader, known as *captatio benevolentiae*.”²⁵ Both female writers are indeed trying to trigger Zola's benevolence. Queyrouze embodies Truth in her 'secular virgin' coming to help Zola fight against the French government. In her opinion, it is a great honor: “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.”²⁶ The second-person pronouns “vous” frame the sentence, showing a little change from the place of the subject which commands at the beginning to the object of her talk in the end. All the expressions in first-person are about her feelings, from her desire to her fascination. She shifts slightly her focus, from her correspondent to her perception of him. Even before the poem, we witness this gentle

25 Roura Teresa Sánchez “What's left of 'Captatio Benevolentia' in 15th Century english letters ? : A Study of the Cely Letters” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 102 (2001), 317.

26 Quotations are taken from the letter From Léona Queyrouze to Émile Zola, 02/03/1898 (collection Brigitte Émile-Zola). Henceforth page numbers only will appear in the text.

affirmation of her individuality slowly taking place in relation to Zola who represents otherness. Thus, the pronoun of second-person stays in high admiration to trigger the benevolence of the author. In this introduction, the use of “I” directly refers to herself, which will not be the case in the poem.

In *The Awakening*, Edna shows a strong desire to live for herself. Truth is about a duty to herself and not about convincing people, and in this way she differs from Queyrouze. She does not feel totally at home with Creoles as she does not like how she is told to behave. The expression “I” is rare, as the author often speaks of her character in the third person. She struggles externally, with her peers, but also internally, with her education. Her Anglo roots contain her, as some passages about her father and sister convey, such as when Edna refuses to attend her sister's wedding: “Edna and her father had a warm, and almost violent dispute upon the subject of her refusal to attend her sister’s wedding.”(76) Stuck between two cultures that weigh on her, she tries to find her way of being herself. She reflects 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) They fiercely condemn her behavior. Yet, the character is made unique by the qualities attributed to her: “But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd.”(CHOPIN 14) Chopin paints her as a queen who would be above the crowd with words such as “noble” and “graceful”: she seems distinguished. The narrator tries to understand her in several passages reminiscent of her comments about Zola's writing on psychology: “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).

Her vulnerability creates a link of empathy with the reader, and underlines her humanity. This glorification of self is rare in the lines where Edna Pontellier speaks directly. Chopin uses the *captatio benevolentiae* in her narrator's perspective. The expression of the first person conveys 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 those considered as “feminist” in Magraf's and Camastra's²⁷ analysis. Hildebrand notes about Chopin : “She desires 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.”²⁸ Indeed, Edna does not concern for the minority population but is rather self-absorbed. *The Awakening* is a story about the will of an individual, not 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 other and their demands in a non-violent way.

She expresses her feelings toward her husband in relation to the obligations of her

27 Nicole Camastra “Venerable Sonority in Kate Chopin's "The Awakening"” *American Literary Naturalism*, 40 (2008) 154-66. In this article, Nicole Camastra underlines the mutual respect between Edna and Madame Reitz, the pianist.

28 Molly J. Hildebrand “The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin's,” *American Literary Naturalism*, 48 (2016) 203.

social status. When he is surprised that she did not receive any visitors, and demands explanation, she simply states “Nothing. I simply felt like going out, and I went out.” (50) Despite his insistence, she does not give up and wants him to justify his expectations. However, she lets go of her will of expressing herself shortly after, as the last time she uses the first pronoun is when she says “I don’t remember who was here.”(50) Despite her willpower, she does not speak in the first person anymore during this chapter. A possible interpretation would be that after she has expressed her desire and her feelings, she does not feel the need herself anymore. At the end, this self-expression slowly disappears from the text, until finally he decides to return to Grande Isle and drown herself. Before her suicide, she knocks at the Lebrun's door. Robert, her lover, is part of this family but is not present. The conversation between Victor, Robert's brother, and her is the last moment of the novel where Edna speaks in the first person. She states 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, which she then hints at: “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) Finally, she communicates her desire to eat fish “I hope you have fish for dinner.”(114) Her last expression of “I” is a euphemism for her drowning and a comment imbued with double-meaning speech only the reader can suspect. We can notice her hunger and the fact that the depths of the ocean look warm and sealing to her. The mention of the “fish” she wants to have for dinner evokes the environment where she will drown. In this last conversation; we count five “I” in which she 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 to her is her will to leave this world. However, we

note an abundance of modal auxiliaries and verbs: “might,” “seems,” “could,” and “would” two times. Then, later, she thinks to herself: “It makes no difference to me.” (115) It is the last mention of first-person in the novel. She expresses herself with “I” in a conversation but not as much when she is alone. The expression of “I” finds its purpose in the presence of others and is beaten by adversity in the end.

In the framework of a sonnet, Queyrouze also develops a process where the expression of “I” makes sense only when linked to Otherness and society in general. Her “I”²⁹ occurs only at the end of the poem, after she develops other characters, evoking the

29 Here is the reproduction of the sonnet she sends to Zola and its translation in english (my translation):

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'opprime 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 j 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
Without shuddering in her being. Then, bloody and beautiful,

Under your powerful breath the dark Humanity
Suddenly rose up and, in its nakedness,

“she” (humanity) and the “you” (Zola). This “I” defines itself thanks to the complementarity with Zola. Its first occurrence is “I am your lover”, which both defines the “I” thanks to the “you,” and expresses love. Then she refers to “you” meaning the crowd, which she will pass through. Her poem is triumphant while the Chopin's novel is more ambiguous. Nevertheless, we witness in both writings a gentle way of introducing the “I” and affirming the self through *captatio benevolentiae*.

Although both women's plots finish on a sad note, their texts portray the development of one's individuality in a positive and enthusiastic way, one which strongly opposes to the prevalent literary trends of the era. The main purpose of their protest is self-liberation and the quest for personal freedom. It could be a special interpretation of what will be theorized after as the “American Dream.”

Queyrouze acknowledges the role of Zola in the Dreyfus Affair. She describes how he takes care of humanity, referring to it “she” and to the author as “you”. Under the influence of “Truth”, conveyed by Zola’s words, all are freed from their “anguish”, “rules” and “regrets”. The poet evokes Zola’s “powerful breath” on “humanity descended into darkness”. She refers to all mankind as an alterity which must be convinced to step out of the shadows. In this way, the Truth, expressed by “I” is released and commands everyone to let her pass: “Viens, car tu m'as conquise et j suis tou (sic) amante / Laissez passer, vous tous ; je suis la Vérité”. The new paragraph manifests the idea of liberation evoked in *The Awakening* through the character

The secular virgin ranked, 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.

of Edna Pontellier. Her desire to live for herself leads her to create 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, she experiences a sense of fulfillment, followed by a lot of introspection. Moments of inner dialogue are usually in the third person but also occur in the rare first-person: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give up **my** life for **my** children, but I wouldn't give myself. I can't **m**ake it **m**ore clear; it's only something which I **a**m beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to **m**e.” (47) Then the author gives Edna a voice, that she uses to affirm herself. We note an alliteration in [m] and assonance in [i]. These two sounds make « me », which is also the last word of this quoted sentence, while « I » was the first. Her claim to hold on to 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, we witness a similar game of first and second-person pronoun at the last strophe, where the « I » and the « you » are on the same side, embodying Zola and Queyrouze deception of lies, the opposite of Truth.

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

The text first verse shows only second-person pronouns, then the second verse involves both of them, and in the last line, it looks like the « I » speaks for both, leaving « vous tous », the ignorant crowd, behind. The expression of first-person pronoun open in the

framework of the second-person pronoun, and only after it. Both writers convey an idea of liberation through the promotion of individuals but also show a triumphant version of « I » in their works.

In conclusion, Chopin and Queyrouze use the expression of « I » to promote a unique form and positive individualism compatible with self-improvement and protest, and part of what we call today “the American Dream.” The expression of “I” and “Je” underline the idea of liberation from the errors and 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 “I,” they both use the *captatio benevolentiae*, language processes such as modal verbs and auxiliaries, and using a love link between the first and second person pronouns. They do not oppose society but rather define themselves in conflict with it. The Louisiana setting partially explains their desire to protest against oppression of dominant groups. Their use of space indicates their desire to draw new borders and boundaries to define their identity. As women writers in a male-dominated literary world, they need to find a new way of expressing themselves. Their promotion of the prevalent individual is enthusiastic and opposes the clichés in literature of the era. They foster to build an idea of individualism that embraces our differences and allows everyone to speak up for themselves. Hence, in this way, they are very close to the notion of American Dream idea still building itself during this era. Edna does not fit in any community, she is an outsider, while the secular virgin of Queyrouze speaks up against corrupt, military brass French. By giving voice to Edna, a character desperate for happiness and freedom and by giving her voice as a poet to Truth, Chopin and Queyrouze respectively value the inclusion of divergent and unique opinions in literary discourse. Thus, they promote

a glorification of the self that reshapes the concept of individualism towards more positive values. One can see this idea of liberation through self-expression embodied in our current notions about “personal development.” In this sense and “personal fulfillment,” Queyrouze and Chopin were ahead of their time their anticipation of these ideas.