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Reading Beyond Modern Feminism: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

**Reading Beyond Modern Feminism: Kate Chopin's
*The Awakening***

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Although Kate Chopin published *The Awakening* in 1899, her text did not gain acceptance in the American literary canon until the late twentieth century, corresponding with the rise of feminist criticism as a mode of literary discourse. As a result, *The Awakening* is often labeled as an early feminist novel. Although Chopin's eventual canonization provides a commentary on and illustration of the evolution of the literary feminist movement, the complex themes and motifs of *The Awakening* restrain the text from wholly conforming to feminist dogma. *The Awakening* may focus on a female character's self-discovery,

but such a narrative is not exclusively a feminist critique, especially considering the historical context in which Chopin was writing. Any text written by a female author and focusing on a female character cannot avoid feminist trends, but Chopin's *The Awakening* is not a feminist novel in the modern sense. In fact, Edna Pontellier never moves beyond the patriarchal constraints of the society depicted in the novel, a vital component to the modern feminist mode of discourse. Investigation of gendered associations, naturalism, and imagery suggests that the novel is a study of identity, regardless of sex, and that it illustrates naturalistic motifs that more accurately place the novel within the American literary canon.

Many literary critics label Edna Pontellier as a radical feminist whose journey of awakening is one of woman reaching beyond the boundaries of masculine subjugation; however, analysis of the gender relations and social constructs at Grand Isle and in New Orleans reveal that, as an anomaly of both gender and society, Chopin's heroine makes no such leaps of feminist grandeur. In "Edna's Wisdom: A Transitional Numinous Merging," Cristina Giorcelli notes that "it is the tendency of her nature to escape structured categories..." (113). As such, Edna displays equivalent masculine and feminine qualities that neutralize her gender, save for the sexual transformation that lies at the heart of her awakening.

Edna's femininity is best illustrated by her interaction with her husband, which establishes the objectification of the heroine through the male gaze. While

watching Edna return from the shore, Leonce “fixed his gaze” on his wife and regards her “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 4). The emphasis on his perception of her establishes a male gaze that objectifies Edna as a woman, and preliminary discussion of this phenomenon establishes the oppression of the feminine sex. In addition to Leonce, other male characters reinforce the male gaze; Victor Lebrun purposefully seats himself “where he commanded a view of Edna’s face,” (58) and Chopin’s linguistic choices clearly indicate the masculine dominance.

Even after her awakening, Edna never moves beyond the control of masculine characters. Once she leaves her husband’s subjugation and relocates to the pigeon house, she is dominated by her desires for Lebrun and Alcee Arobin, both of which direct her sexual awakening. Her desires suggest an awareness of her identity rather than a revolt of social and gender constructs. She also remains within social feminine precepts as illustrated by the significance of her wedding ring. Upon meeting Leonce after swimming, “she silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm” (4). The silent exchange suggests her acceptance of her place in the social construct of marriage, and even when she later attempts to discard the ring, she again “held out her hand, and taking the ring, slipped it upon her finger” (51). The parallelism of this gendered symbolism suggests no change in her acceptance of her existence within feminine constructs.

In contrast to the effect of her male counterparts' objectification, Edna herself objectifies the men in her life with the same reliance on visual perception, demonstrating her own masculinity. Indeed, sight and perception are recurring themes throughout the novel, as Victor Lebrun teases Edna with a French song, "Ah! If you knew / What your eyes are saying to me" (86). One of the first descriptions of the heroine focuses on her eyes and establishes her ability to utilize the male gaze in the same way as her husband: "Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright....She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there..." (5). The specimen under her gaze is typically Robert Lebrun, and this situation creates a gender construct that objectifies the masculine to the feminine subject. At Madame Antoine's, she "peeped out at him two or three times" (36) and "turned deliberately and observed him" (93); like Victor, she positions herself "where she commanded a view of all..." (25). The specific repetition of "commanded" from Victor's male gaze illustrates a linguistic similarity of dominance connecting his masculinity to Edna's own identity.

Chopin further establishes Edna as a gender anomaly by contrasting her undiscovered individualism with feminine stereotypes. In "Adele Ratignolle: Kate Chopin's Feminist at Home in *The Awakening*," for example, Kathleen M. Streater discusses Adele as the archetypal mother figure, observing that Adele is glorified as the "angel in the house" archetype and that "the tone is almost silly in its over-the-top admiration" (407). Indeed, Chopin repeatedly associates

Adele with biblical imagery of motherhood, as Edna compares her friend to “a faultless Madonna” (Chopin 11). In contrast to the lofty characterization of Adele, the narrator notes that “in short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (9), and her fickle attentiveness to her own children succinctly illustrates the point and further alienates her from the mother archetype. Additionally, Adele’s marriage establishes Edna’s relationship with Leonce as anomalous. Chopin writes, “The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union” (54). Edna and Leonce, in contrast, do not appear to function together in any capacity, further establishing Edna as a being already beyond social constructs.

The domesticity of Madame Lebrun also creates a contrast to Edna’s abandonment of her own housewife duties, further alienating her from femininity. After Robert leaves for Mexico, “she [goes] up in the morning to Madame Lebrun’s room, braving the clatter of the old sewing machine” (44). Chopin’s language illustrates the discomfort Edna suffers in Mrs. Lebrun’s presence, and the uneasiness stems from the sewing machine, a symbol of feminine domesticity that is noted for its particularly loud rattling that makes its presence unavoidable. Additionally, the general tendency of the Farival twins to please those around them stands in contrast to Edna’s relationship with her father and husband, further setting her apart from the typical feminine stereotypes Chopin presents in the novel. That Edna sells her artwork and makes money from her own labor further

masculinizes her character. Edna's characterization as both a masculine and feminine being makes it difficult to place her in either realm, and her masculine equivocation discredits attempts to make the novel a journey of feminist revolution.

At the outset of the novel, when Edna is first introduced, the reader is already aware that she is not really confined by her sex. This characterization is due in large part to the cultural setting of the novel. Indeed, comparing her supposed radicalism to the Creole culture that surrounds her dissuades feminist considerations in favor of a more individualistic approach less concerned with the woman question. In this regard, Nancy Walker denies the feminism other critics imagine. According to Walker, "there is, in Chopin's novel, no stance about women's liberation or equality; indeed, the other married women in the novel are presented as happy in condition" (256). In fact, Edna has no association with feminist groups in the novel; Leonce denies any such association when Dr. Mandelet asks if she "has been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings?" (Chopin 63). The Creole lifestyle of liberality across the sexes, shown by the participation of women in risqué conversations, rouses Edna's sexual awakening. Rather than the struggle of sexes, Walker argues that "Edna is not behaving in a shocking, inexplicable manner in the novel... Rather, by succumbing to the sensuality of the Creoles, she is denying what she has been raised to believe, so that in some ways the novel deals with the clash of two cultures" (Walker 254). Edna's journey appears to be a transformation into the sensual

Creole woman, which opposes the Protestant farm life of her childhood.

Edna's passivity in her awakening attests to a naturalist structure of the novel, making the text difficult to label as feminist. Her ignorance of her awakening until its pinnacle is due largely to her lack of will in the transformation, suggesting the authority of natural forces in her journey to self-consciousness. If she is unaware and inactive in her awakening, a feminist agenda has little place in the novel because Edna's transformation is merely the consequence of nature and not of her own desire to usurp patriarchal constructs of society. The fact that men frame her sexual awakening shows that Edna makes no attempt to move beyond patriarchal constructs; Robert spurs the desire for and curiosity about sensuality, Arobin consummates the desire, and Robert then rejects her proposal of an affair. In *Kate Chopin: a Critical Biography*, Per Seyersted argues that "what dominates her imagination during this period is not so much a feminist revolt as the idea of transcendent passion for Robert" (141). In her relationships with men, Edna evidently remains in a dream world of passivity, guided by men, as her awakening is one of self-identity as an individual, regardless of gender. According to Seyersted, Edna is captured by the romanticism of Robert's fairytales and ghost stories (141). Edna moves from her own slumber and denial of her dissatisfaction with her marriage to a dream world based on Robert's imagination.

Edna's attachment to Arobin also centers on her slumber. In "Language and Ambiguity," Paula Treichler

points out that “the deliciousness of the dream is at the root of its deceptive power. The ‘cup of life’ that sexual passion holds out is nature’s narcotic, which both intoxicates and drugs” (270). Comparatively, Arobin’s ministrations have a narcotic effect on Edna, as “she could have fallen quietly asleep there if he continued to pass his hand over her hair” (Chopin 88). The dreamlike deception of the men guiding her awakening merely reflects the illusory nature of her environment, as Chopin depicts the Creole culture as one of exaggeration and insincerity. Dr. Mandelet espouses this indifference of nature to Edna’s own values and temperament: “And nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost” (105). Edna, therefore, cannot help but react to her environment in kind. In “Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” Sullivan and Smith argue that Edna’s characterization reflects the richness of the culture through which she must navigate to her own self-awareness. Like the extravagant Creole culture, “temperance, sanity, and rationality are not for Edna, who wants to explore the unknown and forbidden” (156). Her passivity is still unavoidable, as she is ignorant to the changes that lead to her eventual move from her husband and toward self-reflection. She is so unaware and inactive in her transformation that she herself is unable to verbalize the change. Patricia Yaeger observes, in “Language and Female Emancipation,” that after Edna’s awakening to the power of sensuality during her night swim, “it is Robert Lebrun who speaks for her, who frames and articulates the

meaning of her adventure” (286). Edna also has difficulty explaining her reason for moving into the pigeon house to Mademoiselle Reisz and is frustrated by her inability to understand the emotions music often evokes in her. Clearly, her transformation is not entirely within her control, and this naturalistic element disallows a strong feminist reading of *The Awakening*.

The importance of imagery also reveals a novel centered less on feminism and more on the discovery of sensuality and the self beyond gender constructs. The overriding ocean metaphor, for example, illustrates Edna’s awakening as one of sensual self-discovery and not of women’s social liberation. In a rare moment of action, Edna “walks for the first time alone, boldly, and with overconfidence.... A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul” (Chopin 27). Paula Treichler addresses Edna’s success in swimming as evidence of “real changes in her behavior and understanding. Her shout fuses body and consciousness” (265). The characterization of the sea through repeated images of physical sensuality defines Edna’s awakening. The narrator explains that “the voice of the sea is seductive...the touch of the sea is sensuous,” and Edna’s first inklings of individual awareness occur as she realizes “her position in the universe as a human being [and] ...her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 14). The sensual and self-reflective aspects of the sea directly link Edna’s sexuality to her understanding of herself, and the repeated imagery reinforces the connection,

suggesting an inner-reflection of individualism beyond gender and a more meaningful interpretation of the novel beyond a purely feminist reading.

Edna's strides to achieve clarity of self-consciousness are further related to her sensuality because they are tied to her interaction with the sea. Her progression from dreams to reality is marked by her relationship to the ocean. The emotional arousal caused by Mademoiselle Reisz's music, for example, conjures a vision of "the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation" (26). The final scenes of the book mimic this image, bringing Edna's dream into reality and self-consciousness. She revisits Grand Isle, and "when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone...she stood naked in the open air" (108), consummating her achievement of self-individuation by mirroring a masculine image. According to Michael Gilmore in "Revolt Against Nature: The Problematic Modernism of *The Awakening*," this circular structure shows that "by the end of the narrative, Edna has become one with the inner life that is her real identity. She commits suicide rather than continue what she now recognizes to have been a shame of an existence" (82). Furthermore, the awakening of the individual is stressed over the awakening of female independence by the fact that "Chopin's novel ends...with Edna's attention turned neither toward Robert nor her husband and children, but toward her own past" (Yaegar 289). This interaction between sensuality and individuation

in the context of sea imagery, therefore, casts the novel as a general journey toward self-identity rather than a struggle for one woman's liberation from societal constraints.

Although feminist threads cannot be completely ignored in reading Chopin's *The Awakening*, investigation into Edna's journey reveals an emphasis on self-individuation rather than feminine liberation. Consideration of the cultural and gender constructs created by the author indicates the focus is on the expression of the inner-self, regardless of gender. Rather than posing the woman question, Chopin is perhaps posing a challenge to consider the humanity question in illustrating the journey an individual must take to recognize the self in a society in which he or she does not fit. Without an understanding of Edna as a person, rather than simply a woman, Chopin's novel would lack the depth and meaning that its symbolism and naturalistic imagery create and that ultimately secure *The Awakening* within the American literary canon.

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