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## The Seduction Novel's Awakening

### Keywords

The Awakening, Kate Chopin, seduction, Edna Pontellier

## The Seduction Novel's Awakening

Julia Francis

**T**he *Awakening* by Kate Chopin is an 1899 novel depicting the self-actualization of its heroine, Edna Pontellier. Her epiphany comes in the form of an extramarital sexual awakening that reveals to Edna a purpose for existence other than being a mother and running a household. The novel follows Edna's exploration further and further into her own individual aspirations while she neglects her familial duties, ultimately ending with Chopin's suggestion that Edna commits suicide. Although the novel was controversial at the time of publication for its feminist ideas and anti-establishment ways of thinking about motherhood, the text can also be read as a revision of traditional American literary themes and genres. Specifically, the structure and plot of *The Awakening* closely follows that of a much earlier American seduction novel, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791): a young woman is seduced, becomes pregnant, is isolated from society, and subsequently dies. Chopin's novel can be read as a story of Edna's empowerment as she becomes pregnant with ideas and is reborn as a new woman, but the comparison can also open up new readings of Rowson's and other sentimental work. Scholarship on the seduction novel articulates plot points and tropes that are applied and changed in *The Awakening* as a way to emphasize Edna's individuality of character. *The Awakening* can be read as reinventing and transforming the

early American seduction novel's ideas about women by giving its heroine the power and choice to make the decisions that ultimately isolate her from her community as well as her gender.<sup>1</sup>

The seduction narrative intersects with the emergence of the sentimental genre in American fiction. Emerging just after the Revolutionary War, the sentimental genre reflected the newly founded American goals “to construct as well as to celebrate union” (Barnes 1). The new union was focused on creating an individual body politic out of a complex group of people. Sympathy played an important role in articulating the democratic ideas on which the new nation was founded, leading to the rise of sentimental fiction. The focus on women in the genre could be explained by the idea that “in the post-revolutionary period, women become increasingly associated with the dangers of psychological penetration; they embody, both figuratively and literally, the suggestibility requisite for sympathetic identification” (Barnes 8). Thus, the sentimental narrative became a way for countrymen to align themselves with the new nation; as explained by Elizabeth Barnes, “for men to be *truly* American, that is, truly sympathetic, they must learn to be more like women: more suggestible, more seducible, more impressionable readers of both literature and human relations” (xi). The seduction novel inspired more sympathy for the women it depicted, as well as sympathy for the country that it often represented. At the same time, women in the seduction novel served as a potential liability for the United States: young, vulnerable, and perhaps naive in deciding whether or not to trust outside forces. In this sense, the women in these novels deal with the

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same trepidation and endangerment that concerned the young country in which the novels were being written.

Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* is described by Shelley Jarenski as one of "the most popular seduction narratives of the late eighteenth century," and it is often seen as a template for the traditional plot structure of the seduction novel (59). Barnes describes the eighteenth-century seduction novel as "typically chronicling the single woman's fall from grace and family into the snare of her seducer" (157). *Charlotte Temple* tells the story of the seduction and ultimate downfall of its eponymous heroine. Charlotte is tempted away from her home, family, and country by her seducer, Montraville, and dies while birthing his child at the novel's conclusion. These plot points of *Charlotte Temple* reflect the broader genre of the eighteenth-century seduction novel, which in turn can be applied to *The Awakening*.

The first way Chopin utilizes and transforms the seduction novel's plot structure in *The Awakening* is through the act of seduction itself. Although Edna is sexually awakened by both of her lovers, Robert and Alcée, Chopin's writing suggests that other events in the novel are equally significant for Edna. The catalyzing event of seduction which eventually turns into a symbolic pregnancy happens for Edna during her first experiences in the sea. Before Edna has learned how to swim, Chopin describes the voice of the sea as "seductive" and the touch of the sea as "sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 25). Chopin's word choice associates the beginning of Edna's spiritual enlightenment with the idea of seduction. With this reading, the sea can be viewed as playing an encouraging role in Edna's seduction, physically isolating her in order to force her to think independently.

Chopin describes Edna's experience swimming for the first time "as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and soul" (51). In this sense, Edna can be thought of as both the seducer and the seduced in her story.

Instead of a man seducing her and swaying her opinion, Edna has seduced and isolated herself. In contrast, in *Charlotte Temple*, the seducer Montraville, in pursuit of Charlotte, claims, "I will not sacrifice internal happiness for outward show. . . . I will seek content; and, if I find her in a cottage, will embrace her with as much cordiality as I should if seated on a throne" (Rowson 5). Montraville's placement of individual happiness over adherence to social expectations is also present in one of Edna's conversations with Adele Ratignolle. In response to Adele's question about what a mother owes to her children, Edna responds, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me" (Chopin 88). In her awakening, Edna has assumed an identity marked by individuality and her own personal happiness, rather than allowing society's judgement of what makes a good mother dictate her actions. By putting Edna's individual desires in front of anyone else's, Chopin has used the seduction novel's characterization of the seducer to apply to Edna as well as to tempt her in her awakening.

In keeping with the structure of the seduction novel, Chopin isolates her heroine from her family and places her in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable environment; however, Chopin's version of the plot func-

tions as a catalyst for her heroine's self-actualization rather than her downfall. Charlotte Temple, taken to America by Montraville, is an example of the displacement of the seduction novel heroine. The mood of the post-Revolutionary time during which *Charlotte Temple* was written is described by Blythe Forcey as "one of distrust, alienation, and isolation, which was exaggerated by a nostalgic idealization of a supposedly stable, communal, and cooperative colonial or European past" (226). This mood is prevalent in *Charlotte Temple*, whose heroine is described as feeling like "a poor solitary being in the midst of surrounding multitudes" after she arrives in America and realizes Montraville will not marry her (Rowson 38). Forcey remarks that Charlotte is taken to "a New World where homelessness and foreignness define the conditions of her life" (226).

In *The Awakening* it is clear to the reader that the Creole community into which Edna has married is completely foreign to her. Just as Charlotte Temple's elopement with Montraville is viewed as an act of rebellion, so is Edna Pontellier's marriage to Léonce, which meets with "the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic" (Chopin 34). Marie Fletcher discusses Edna's unfamiliarity and embarrassment with Creole culture, and argues that Edna's "Protestant rigidity, anarchic individualism, pride, and conscience" force her to adapt to this Creole environment in her own way (126). Fletcher's point that Edna has changed her mentality in response to her foreign environment distinguishes her from the traditional seduction novel heroine. Like Charlotte, Edna is placed in a setting that is unfamiliar and at first uncomfortable. Unlike Charlotte, Edna is able to embrace this environment and allow her

discomfort and timidity to evolve into her own personal awakening. Much like Charlotte in *America*, Edna is at first overwhelmed and embarrassed by the frank and honest Creole culture. However, she uses these differences to change her thinking as well as distinguish herself from her peers rather than to wallow in her isolation. Edna's refusal to fit into the motherly role designated for women in the community reflects her contrast with the seduction novel's heroine.

A comparison can be made between the traditional seduction novel with *The Awakening* in terms of how each heroine uses her own agency. In *Charlotte Temple* and other seduction novels, the heroine's "strongest sensation almost immediately becomes that of not knowing what to do" (Rust 102). Marion Rust comments on the lack of agency apparent in Charlotte once she has been seduced and taken to America, describing it as an "absence of self-direction" (103). This lack of self-direction contrasts with Edna. While it can be argued that Edna is simply neglecting her household duties rather than taking on new responsibilities, she clearly has a sense of direction and self-awareness that heroines in the traditional seduction novel lack. This lack of agency, as pointed out by Rust, confines them to their eventual roles as mothers and they subsequently allow their situations to dictate their lives and actions rather than controlling them themselves. Instead of Edna acting as one of the "mother-women" described in the novel, confined to one role, she instead mothers her newborn identity as an individual (Chopin 16). After allowing the sea to awaken her, Edna emerges with a newfound sense of self.

By placing Edna in the role of seducing herself, Chopin gives her



back the agency taken from seduced women. The idea of a lack of agency in motherhood is articulated by Chopin, who describes the births of Edna's own children as involving "a stupor which had deadened sensation" (205). The deadened sensation Edna feels is her lack of control over the situation she is in and her inability to take any kind of action due to the medical practices of the time. Rust explains that in the traditional seduction novel, it is "in relaxing her sensitivity to her own impulses, not in giving in to them" that the heroine is trapped in the plot of the seducer (102). Chopin is able to flip this in that Edna's sensitivity to her own impulses gives her the "power of significant import" that enlightens her to the fact that she is her own person and not confined to motherhood and domesticity (51). In partially abandoning her role as a mother after returning to New Orleans, Edna assumes the agency to make her own decisions. Rather than confining her to one role, Edna's seduction and self-birth open her up to the individual freedom possessed solely by men in the seduction novel.

After Edna impregnates herself with the idea of her own identity, she in turn rebirths herself. Chopin uses figurative language in several locations to allude to Edna's newly born, developing self. This is prevalent in the passage in which she learns to swim "like the tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (51). The simile that Chopin uses to compare Edna to a young child represents her rebirth as she tests the waters of being on her own for the first time. Symbolism is also used to indicate the birth of Edna's awakened soul. Examples of this symbolism occur in several instances in which Edna's eyes are mentioned, including the "different eyes"

she sees herself with after spending the day with Robert, and her feeling that she is “some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world it had never known” at the end of the novel when she stands naked on the beach (74, 214). If the eyes are connected to the soul, Chopin’s repetition of the idea that Edna’s eyes have been opened in a new way reiterates the idea that she is a markedly changed person who has been reborn out of her own thoughts and awareness.

A common feature of seduction novels is the often debilitating social pressure faced by the heroine. Just before she gives birth and is searching for any available help, Charlotte Temple’s neighbors comment that she is a “nasty impudent hussy” who is searching for someone to help her “to maintain her and her bastard” (Rowson 60). Charlotte has been isolated from and shamed by her society, leading to degradation and her subsequent death. This extreme exile from society as well as shame about Charlotte’s pregnancy is also present in Edna’s narrative. A scene takes place in which her husband, Léonce, visits Doctor Mandelet to present his concerns about Edna. Léonce says to the doctor, “she has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark” (Chopin 123). At the end of the exchange, the Doctor decides not to ask Léonce if he believes there is another man in the picture, though he notably considers it an option. The Doctor’s willingness to allow Léonce to believe that his wife’s behavior is entirely her fault reflects the idea that a woman bears full responsibility for any wrongdoing, whether it be a change in personality that flouts societal norms or the birth of a child out of wedlock. This idea can be traced back to

Charlotte's assumed guilt for her unfortunate situation. The phrase "tramping about by herself" suggests that Edna is being promiscuous, though not with anyone else, but with herself and her own thoughts. The use of this language to describe his wife's behavior aligns Léonce with the townspeople who ostracize and look down on Charlotte Temple. Although Edna goes through her seduction in isolation, the public treats her with the shame and ridicule that the traditional seduction novel faces; Chopin treats this ostracism as a through line in history of the treatment of women by society.

The paternal figure has a prevalent role in both the traditional seduction narrative and *The Awakening*. Elizabeth Barnes articulates this point as it is presented in the seduction novel, arguing that early America embraced "an ethos of seductive paternalism whereby the positions of father and lovers become confused and intertwined. The seduction novel exploits such confusion, evincing the ceaseless modulation of masculine identities and exploring its effects on female characters" (56). This recalls the roles of Edna's father and her husband in *The Awakening*. Both Léonce and the Colonel express their need to control Edna. Even at the start of the novel, before Edna's true awakening, Léonce expresses his frustration with Edna: "he reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business" (Chopin 11). Léonce has many thoughts that he should exert more control over Edna yet has a difficult time actually doing so. This is expressed to him by the Colonel, who says, "You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce.... Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard;

the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it” (133). This exchange is immediately followed by Léonce’s thought that the Colonel had “coerced his own wife into her grave” (133).

Barnes’ claim that male figures in the seduction novel often act similarly appears in *The Awakening* as a way to redirect Edna’s narrative. If Chopin had followed the trope of the father-lover, Léonce would have a much larger role in Edna’s suggested death, mirroring the suggestion that the Colonel contributed to his own wife’s death. However, because Chopin suggests that Edna’s awakening possibly drove her to commit suicide, the idea that the Colonel and Léonce exert any control over Edna is untrue. Although they both have the same intention of controlling her and exerting dominance, Chopin chooses an alternative path from that of the seduction novel, giving Edna the power. Before she walks into the ocean at the end of the novel, Edna’s children and the “slavery” she is held in as their mother are mentioned, but Chopin writes that “she was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach” (213). The fact that Edna’s responsibilities in life are not in her thoughts suggests that although her husband and father emulate each other in attempting to exert control over her, Edna’s individuality prevailed. This both invokes the idea of male authority figures and debunks the power that Barnes finds in the seduction novel genre. Rather than allowing the male figures in her life control her actions, Edna assumes the role of the male figure by controlling her own narrative.

The final plot point of the seduction novel that Chopin uses in *The Awakening* is the heroine’s eventual death at the end of the novel. In the conclusion of *Charlotte Temple*, Charlotte dies in childbirth mid-thought:

“unable to finish the sentence, she sunk back on her pillow” (Rowson 68). In the traditional seduction novel, an early death serves as punishment for the female protagonist’s sins. The suggestion made by this ending is that the woman is dying out of shame for sinning against the societal code; she is dying for and because of her child. In the aforementioned scene between Adele and Edna, Edna argues that she would give up her life and money for her children, but not her “self,” to which Adele replies, “a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so” (Chopin 88). Shelly Jarenski suggests that it is a lack of education provided for the heroines of seduction novels and the “social structures in which these characters are trapped that dictate the endings of these novels” (65). Jarenski’s point illuminates Edna’s reasoning that she would die for her children rather than die to conform to society’s idea of motherhood. In becoming self-educated and enlightened, Edna has learned that she would die for her children because of her love for them rather than because society has told her it is what a mother should do for her child. Edna takes the idea of death into her own hands, viewing it not as a punishment, but as a welcome sacrifice for her “self” and her children. This places Edna outside the realm of traditional motherhood, and therefore outside the realm of traditional womanhood, in that she does not conform to society’s expectations of her as a woman.

Edna’s suggested suicide at the novel’s close is the second way in which the idea of death is addressed. When walking into the ocean she thinks of her children “who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (Chopin 213). The “soul’s slavery”

that Chopin refers to can be read as Edna's own personal hell: motherhood. Unlike a young woman condemned to hell after dying in childbirth in a seduction novel, Edna seems to be freeing herself from the hell on earth that she faces in being a mother without the ability to express her individuality to its fullest potential. The stages of Edna's awakening are repeated in the final scene. The sea is again "seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (Chopin 213). Edna is going through the stages of her awakening for the second time, as Chopin describes her entering the water without any thoughts of her family in her mind. By contrast, *Charlotte Temple* concludes with Charlotte dying in childbirth and her former mentor Madame La Rue passing away in the care of Charlotte's family, "a striking example that vice, however prosperous in the beginning, in the end leads only to misery and shame" (Rowson 71). Chopin's ending revises the ending to the traditional seduction novel, giving Edna the power to take her own life rather than succumbing to a fate that reflects the view that society has of her.

Still, Chopin does not provide her readership with a definitive ending to Edna's story. At the novel's close, Edna Pontellier is in the liminal space of the water which birthed her awakening in the first place. Chopin does not explicitly state whether Edna chooses to swim back to shore or commit suicide by drowning in the Gulf; it is left unanswered for the reader to interpret. This idea of leaving the character's actions up to the readership is reminiscent of the seduction narrative; *Charlotte Temple* is narrated by a voice representative of larger societal values, who instructs the audience on what to make of the novel's lesson (Barton). Although Chopin creates Edna

to break out of the helpless narrative of the seduction heroine, her fate is still left to the public to decide. Early in the novel, Edna is described to have a kind of double life: “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin 27). The final scene of *The Awakening* illustrates these two lives. The novel places these two existences at odds with one another, Edna’s family and friends pushing her toward the former, while her awakening inspires her to embrace the latter. It could be argued that Edna does in fact commit suicide; she could be using her own individuality as a way to break away from her society, or her suicide could be interpreted as society’s punishment for her behavior, that a woman with her values cannot survive in their society. However, just as *Charlotte Temple* is dictated by a narrator who represents larger social values, effectively giving society the narrative power, Chopin’s ending gives her readership, the public, the power to decide and judge Edna’s fate.

Both the seduction novel and *The Awakening* are historically viewed as one-sided narratives that reflect either the empowerment or oppression of women. Critics have often seen the seduction novel as an example of the shame cast on women in the post-Revolutionary period, while *The Awakening* is thought of as a “commentary on and illustration of the evolution of the literary feminist movement” (Williams 53). However, by emulating the traditional seduction narrative plot and consequently transforming it, Chopin questions how society views womanhood and femininity. By acting as both the seducer and the seduced, Edna Pontellier subverts the traditional seduction story and uses it to facilitate her self-actualization. Chopin weaves

the plot structure of the seduction narrative into her novel seamlessly, all the while transforming it into a tale of one woman's path to her destiny.



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