Unsinkable Edna: Critical Evolution and Cultural Revolution

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**Keywords**
Kate Chopin, The Awakening, Woman's Studies
Modern scholars can better understand the negative reviews of Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening* by excavating the cultural substrata of America before the dawn of the twentieth century. Charles Bressler attributes to Michel Foucault the belief that literary analysis should mirror an archaeological dig, aimed at uncovering "each layer of discourse" and the "set of inconsistent, irregular, and often contradictory discourses" that form the episteme of accepted truths in a time period (Bressler 186). *The Awakening* introduces Edna Pontellier, a woman who discovers she must navigate rough waters of feminine discourse surrounding the isle of selfhood 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” (34).

Chopin’s reputation as a writer grew from her stories of life in the bayous of Louisiana. Her audience was accustomed to texts full of charm and wholesomeness whose happy endings created “an agreeable impression—things come out right” (Toth 227). These factors led some reviewers to condemn the novel, dismissing Chopin as “one more clever author gone wrong” and mourning Edna’s destruction, suggesting her salvation if she had “flirted less and looked after her children more, or even assisted at more accouchements” (“From Recent Novels” 96). The Awakening was interpreted in late-nineteenth-century America as a rejection of assumptions governing women’s literature and societal views regarding the roles and rights of women. The solitary artist Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle, the “faultless Madonna,” reflect polarized cultural views of women and the absence of an acceptable middle ground in the feminine discourse of the period (32). The novel was considered by
some to represent a reversal of Chopin’s “horizon of expectation” as a regional author (Bressler 64).

Despite the negative reception of her novel, Chopin’s literary career continued although *The Awakening* was largely excluded from literary pedagogy for nearly fifty years. While the social upheaval of the late 1960’s was opening doors for women, scholars were rebelling against the “text and text alone” stance that had dominated literary criticism for nearly thirty years (Bressler 40). In the wake of changing interpretive strategies, feminist criticism arose to “review, reimagine, rethink, rewrite, and reinterpret the events and documents of the Western canon” (Gilbert 32). Rejected in some late-nineteenth-century literary circles as “gilded dirt,” *The Awakening* is now heralded by feminist critics as “the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 65). The novel is an example of how societal beliefs affect judgments about literature, and also demonstrates that cultural objects are more likely to be rediscovered when their social themes echo concerns central to society.
By examining layers of literary discourse, a reader can find portrayals of women in *The Awakening* that reflect the dichotomies of female experience in late-nineteenth-century America. During a summer on Grand Isle, the openness of the Creole culture draws Edna into a camaraderie of Creole women who “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves” (29). Adele Ratignolle, the chief of these “ministering angels,” (41) personifies the “Feminine Principle” of American fiction in Chopin’s day which claimed “Refinement, Delicacy, and Grace” as essential elements (Allen 164). These values were evidenced in the works of the “literary domestics” (Dyer 7), a group of women’s writers who were “expected to write specifically for their own sex” and not aspire to equanimity with Masters of Western literature (Baym, qtd. in Kolodny 49). In 1899, the premise that literature should provide “moral instruction” and depict women as “selfless nurturers” was the most prominent assumption in women’s literature (Corse 141). When Edna confides to Adele her unwillingness to sacrifice her life for her children, Adele scolds, “(A) woman who would
give her life for her children could do no more than that – your Bible tells you so. I’m sure I couldn’t do more than that” (70).

The antithesis of Adele Ratignolle is found in Mademoiselle Reisz, who models the life of the solitary artist. Mademoiselle Reisz is an unattractive oddity coerced to perform piano concerts for the throng on Grand Isle, then confined to her room until inspiration is needed again. A growing number of “odd women” who were choosing not to marry confounded Victorian sensibilities and were viewed as dwelling in “an unwholesome social state” (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 19). Such women were the most obvious beneficiaries of the early women’s suffrage movement and were viewed by some men as a threat because of their potential to compete in the workforce. When such women denied their “natural duties and labours” as mother and wife they were forced to “carve out artificial occupations” and interests (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 19).

Chopin portrays Mademoiselle Reisz as a “homely” spinster who “had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a
batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair” (47). She embodies the stereotype of the female artist as a counterfeit creation who must be “content with her rich shadows” as only an “unnatural woman” would value art above the “strange, unspeakable joys of wifehood” (Moody 160). In Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna finds a confidante to whom she declares her intention to become a painter. “I am becoming an artist. Think of it!” (86). In their final meeting, Mademoiselle Reisz foreshadows Edna’s doom saying, “‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings’” (106).

Though such recognizable characters were palatable to a nineteenth-century audience, Edna Pontellier’s transgressions provoke strident reactions. One contemporary critic decries that Edna “fails to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion” (Railton 3). At century’s end, many doctors (including Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s personal physician) had pronounced that “the anatomy and temperament of women” were “perfectly suited to motherhood; thus
equilibrium and health could be gained only through its pursuit" (Dyer 10). Despite their belief in the "curative value of domesticity" (Dyer 10), physicians were diagnosing growing numbers of women with "nervous maladies"—a blanket term which covered sexual dysfunction or "domestic unhappiness" (Dyer 10). Leonce Pontellier laments his wife's imbalance, confessing to Dr. Mandelet, "She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and – you understand – we meet in the morning at the breakfast table" (88).

Edna Pontellier is a woman whose marriage and children are a "responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (40). Edna does not possess the "protecting wings" of Adele and is "not a mother-woman" (29). The frequent dispatch of her children "seemed to free" Edna from the undesirable "realities" of her "uneven, impulsive" affections (40). Edna's suicide garnered harsh criticism and led one reviewer to gloat, "We are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death" (Railton 5).
Other more sympathetic readings credit Edna with more heroic motivation for suicide suggesting that she chose “not [to] forget her motherhood, and to save the remnants of it she swam out into the sunkissed gulf and did not come back” (Railton 3). In other words, she honors motherhood with the obliteration of her life. Kate Chopin publicly responded to critics’ condemnation of Edna’s suicide in sarcastic deference, expressing regret at “Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did” (Chopin, qtd. in Dyer 18); however, Edna’s clarity of mind as she approaches the water frames the suicide as her final defiance of “antagonists” who had “overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery” (138).

The narrative placement of Madame Ratignolle’s accouchement immediately before Edna’s suicide mirrors Edna’s “awful” and “delicious” sense that she has become “some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (138). Adele implores her friend to “think of the children! Remember them!” (134). As she walks on the beach, Edna does indeed remember the
children, but they emerge as “antagonists” in the struggle between the inward and outward existence she seeks to reconcile (138). Edna sees “what she meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice her self for her children” (138). Edna’s fatal sacrifice is the only way “to elude them” (138). In her death, Edna dares to reject the societal “notion that a woman’s duty and reward are found in motherhood” (Dyer 103).

In twenty-six percent of the contemporary reviews, critics speculate that Edna’s awakening derives from “her exposure to morally inappropriate love” (Corse 141). As a testament to the sexual norms of the era, the earliest signs of Edna’s awakening are rarely mentioned in reviews of the novel. In her “sensuous susceptibility” (35), Edna is infatuated with the “flaming and apparent” (29) beauty of Adele Ratignolle. The two share a seductive encounter by the sea when a touch from Adele’s hand begins to “loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (35). Their interaction is mirrored in the “(t)wo young lovers [...]
exchanging their hearts’ yearnings beneath the children’s tent” nearby (37). The novel reveals that “(t)he very passions themselves were aroused” in Edna’s soul as she listened to the music of Mademoiselle Reisz (47). In a moment of self-discovery, Edna sees “for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh” (58). Such sensual language was typically censored in genteel women’s fiction of the day. Chopin’s elaboration on Edna’s conquest of the rogue Alcee Arobin “deviated radically from accepted norms of women’s fiction out of which her audience so largely derived its expectations” (Kolodny 50).

Kate Chopin’s reputation as a regional author contributed to the negative reception of *The Awakening*. Following her unexpected death in 1904, Chopin was referenced in profiles of Southern writers for her depictions of the Cane River region of Louisiana. *The Awakening* and Chopin’s other novels were rarely included in discussion of her works; emphasized instead were portrayals of “Creole bucolic life” as her major literary achievements (Toth 299). Chopin’s collection of regionally inspired short
stories *Bayou Folk* was hailed as “altogether worthy of description and literary preservation” in *Publishers Weekly* of 17 March 1894 (Toth 223). The similar work *A Night in Acadie* was lauded as “exquisitely told” though *The Critic* determined the volume was “marred by one or two slight and unnecessary coarsenesses” (Toth 299). Like Edna Pontellier, Chopin’s local color heroines were awakening to “forbidden thoughts” including extramarital dalliances (Toth 298).

“Kate Chopin’s literary evolution took her progressively through phases of nineteenth-century women’s culture and women’s writing” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 69). By circumstance of her birth, Chopin would first encounter the sentimentalist works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner whose writings served as their “pulpit” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 11). Since men dominated the tradition of fiery oratory, fiction, especially the novel, was the means by which women could participate in the literary discourse of the day. “Female local color authors were also attracted to male worlds of art and prestige opening up to women,” but their success generally stemmed from adherence to acceptable
literary conventions (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 67). Large numbers of women who began to view writing as a profession in the mid-nineteenth century were “fondly imagined” by Nathaniel Hawthorne to be a “damned mob of scribbling women” encroaching on his market (Baym 64).

“Local colorists” provided Chopin a transitional model for her own writing although she did not embrace the “desperate nostalgia” typified in local color heroines (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 71). *The Awakening* demonstrates her turn from the milktoast women of nineteenth-century novels through Edna Pontellier’s abandonment of the marriage bed and renewed interest in painting as an attempt to spurn all things domestic. As the narrative advances, Edna surrenders to “the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (101).

Daniel Rankin, Chopin’s first biographer, classified *The Awakening* as a novel possessing a “current of erotic morbidity” (qtd. in Corse 148), which others identified as a characteristic of the fin de siècle (Corse 148). Formalists praised the novel as “an excellent example of fiction” that
“anticipates in many respects the modern novel” (Corse 152). Despite this praise, critical theories and traditions of American literature have “led to the exclusion of women authors from the canon” (Baym 63). Feminist critic Elaine Showalter asserts “radical departures from literary convention are especially likely to be censured and suppressed by the dominant culture within a minority tradition, because they violate social as well as aesthetic expectations and stereotypes” (Sister’s Choice 83).

Changing expectations for literature written by and about women expanded in the twentieth century as women began to look beyond traditional domestic roles for fulfillment. The women’s movement in America changed perceptions of literature written by women and asserted that “women have also told the important stories of our culture” (Showalter, New Feminist 3). Increasing numbers of female scholars in the 1960’s questioned patriarchal traditions—including patriarchal literary traditions—and recognized early rejection of the novel as emblematic of larger opportunities denied women. Kate Chopin’s forgotten novel
was resurrected through the evolution of feminine discourse in post-modern America and the growth of feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism challenges patriarchal literary assumptions, utilizing many theoretical lenses including Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. This critical approach speaks with many voices and cannot be seen as a monolithic critical perspective, as though a “revisionary sense of transformation” lies at its center (Showalter, *New Feminist* 5). The dominant ambitions of feminist criticism are to reexamine the Western canon of literature, assess the impact of gender on its formation, and revise literary theory to incorporate “gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis” (Showalter, *New Feminist* 3). Another goal of this perspective is to reconstruct a more accurate representation of Western literature by rediscovering texts written by women which have been buried under layers of misogyny. *The Awakening* can be viewed as a text uniquely qualified to fulfill the mission of feminist criticism, and feminist criticism is largely responsible for the reexamination—the reawakening—of the novel.
The Awakening benefited from this critical reassessment and the feminist critics' acknowledgement that the Western literary canon had been a "grand ancestral property" (Gilbert 33) where women authors "were relegated to modest dower houses on the edge of the estate" (Gilbert 33). Nina Baym expands upon this acknowledgement when she suggests that theories of literary criticism have done much to contribute to the "invisibility" of women authors in the Western canon (Baym 64). She also contends that male-dominated literary institutions are prevented from "recognizing women authors as serious writers" due to "simple bias" (Baym 64). Because women have not historically received "formal classical education," they "would not have written excellent literature because social constraints hindered them" (Baym 65). Consequently, assessing literature on standards from the body of early American texts, one could assume Western literature is an "essentially male" tradition (Baym 65). Baym asserts that while gender itself does not prohibit texts written by women from achieving canonical status, underlying causes of the exclusion may be "gender-connected" (65).
Kate Chopin seems to anticipate this critique of subjugated women artists and writers when Edna determines she must throw off the smothering draperies of *Chez Pontellier* and inhabit her “pigeon house” (114) to gain a “room of her own” (Bressler 145) in which to create herself and her art. Initial strategies of feminist criticism focused on confronting stereotypical female depictions. The use of feminine imagery provides a satirical subtext which belies conventional feminine heroines of Chopin’s era. Characterizations of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz convey “stereotyped images in literature of women as angels or monsters” (Showalter, *New Feminist* 5). The “pure white” of Adele’s “drapery and fluttering things which she wore” portray her as a heavenly messenger of redemption for Edna (36). Adele’s obsession with clothing symbolizes her confinement to the domestic sphere and the “hopeless ennui” of her “colorless existence” (78). The industrious Adele is pictured throughout the novel with needle and thread in her “exquisite” hand, busily fashioning garments for her family (29). Edna is only able to convince the “mother-woman” to venture to the beach without
her children after Adele insists on bringing her "diminutive roll of needle-work" (35). Adele Ratignolle reveals Edna’s destiny if she “would give her life for her children” (70).

From her apartment perch, Mademoiselle Reisz, the musical virtuoso, mirrors Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s analysis of the “situation of the nineteenth century woman writer, her anxieties about authorship as a monstrous and unwomanly activity” (Showalter, New Feminist 6). Mademoiselle Reisz is considered a “disagreeable little woman” (46), known by many people as the most “unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street” (81). Edna’s unexpressed desires are voiced through Mademoiselle Reisz, who “seemed to echo the thought which was ever in Edna’s mind; or better, the feeling which constantly possessed her” (68). Inspired by the plaintive melodies of Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna determines “to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (49). In Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna identifies a representation of what she might become if only she could throw off the shackles of societal repression.

Nearly fifty years of obscurity befell Edna Pontellier
“for transgressing normative gender roles” (Corse 153). Chopin’s complex heroine “dares and defies” the narrow avenues of existence she is afforded” (86). Edna “chooses not to live in a world that forces her to value herself first as a mother and second as a human being” (Dyer 17). Instead, she reaches out for “that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded” (67). “Intoxicated with her newly conquered power” (131), Edna begins a transformation from “one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions” (131) to a woman who would “do as she liked and [...] feel as she liked” (79). Edna attempts to “soar above the level plain of tradition” (106) by embracing “a male definition of selfhood” (Dyer 27). Despite nineteenth-century critics’ satisfaction with Edna’s suicide and classification of the novel by some as “sex fiction” (Chicago Times-Herald qtd. in Corse 139), Edna Pontellier would later impact feminist critics “through feminist re-readings” (Corse 148). Her “courageous soul” (86) has been hailed as an “embodiment of nineteenth-century feminist criticism” (Dyer 26). As a popular “rediscovered novel” in the early days of feminist criticism, The Awakening provoked a rallying cry to
rescue the novel from the ash heap and revive the reputation of Edna Pontellier. “Exposure to morally inappropriate love” (Corse 142), which was deemed by Chopin’s original audience to have precipitated Edna’s downfall, is interpreted by twentieth-century feminist readers as Edna’s awakening to “her natural sense of her natural self” (Corse 149). While the nature of the literary canon accounts for individual preferences, its creation remains largely a “social process” (Corse 141) that can designate a text “as more or less valuable at different times” (Corse 141). This revision of Edna’s awakening is fabricated “primarily through feminist interpretation strategies that focus on issues of female sexuality, selfhood, and social constraints on women” (Corse 149). The literary discourse of Chopin’s time might recognize the voluptuous Adele Ratignolle as a Romantic heroine. A feminist interpretation might champion Edna Pontellier for finding “a way to elude them” (138), or perhaps Mademoiselle Reisz, the solitary artist, would emerge as the one who “seemed to prevail that summer” (29). It seems, then, that the history of the book’s reception is worth reviewing.
Based on these historical responses to *The Awakening*—its initial rejection and later revival—it is certain that texts being overlooked today may emerge as the canonical works of the twenty-first century. After all, *The Awakening* has withstood angry waves of judgment, drifted unnoticed in a sea of social indifference, and reached the calmer waters of the post-feminist biases of the late twentieth century. However the twenty-first century’s winds of social change may affect her course, unsinkable Edna will continue to swim against the tide.
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