

FEMINISTS ASSAULT KATE CHOPIN

(1851-1904)

1. In her introduction to her edition of the novel Nancy A. Walker interprets Kate Chopin's published note in response to reviewers of *The Awakening* to mean that Edna's suicide was "necessary and inevitable." On the contrary, what Chopin says in her note is that Edna makes "a mess of things" and works out her own "damnation." This implies that she has free will, that her suicide was *not* "necessary and inevitable." Walker identifies with Edna rather than Chopin.

2. At the same time Walker is typical of subjective readers in believing that the novel means whatever any reader wants it to mean: "Each reader of *The Awakening* must decide whether to view Edna Pontellier's experience as positive or negative--or both." This relativism is typical among Feminists who are unable to read objectively. The many Feminists who have identified with Edna and see her suicide as somehow "positive" disagree with Chopin, who portrays Edna as childish and self-destructive, twice identifying herself by name with the realistic perspective of Mademoiselle Reisz instead.

3. Many critics have agreed with Walker's Feminist stock response that Chopin depicts "a woman whose culture provided neither incentive nor model for women's intellectual achievement--only the passions of maternity, art, or romantic love"; that Chopin "intended the novel as a general critique of a culture that severely restricted women's opportunities for emotional fulfillment and self-expression." On the contrary, in America at that time, most successful novelists and 80% of novel readers were women. All the artists in this novel are female: the pianists Mademoiselle Reisz, Adele Ratignolle and Mrs. Highcamp--even the redundant Farival twins, who express themselves repeatedly to the exasperation of Mademoiselle Reisz--and the painter Edna Pontellier, who sells her work on the open market like male painters. Reisz is a model of the true artist for Edna, who refuses to use her head at all, let alone be intellectual as the Feminists would have her be. Doctor Mandelet refers with disdain to a local Feminist group as "a circle of pseudo-intellectual women--super-spiritual superior beings." Chopin makes Doctor Mandelet the most sympathetic to Edna of any character in the book and he does not blame society for her problems as do the pseudo-intellectual Feminists, he blames Nature.

Michael Hollister (2013)

SOCIAL CONTEXT

"Though Kate Chopin was not a feminist, and *The Awakening* is not a political novel in the narrow sense of the term, it is important to understand the political and social context in which it appeared. A novel exploring the consequences of personal--particularly sexual--freedom for the married woman, appearing as it did in a decade much preoccupied with the New Woman in its midst, was certain to provoke strong reactions....

By 1890 'the woman question' had been a matter of public discussion for over fifty years. In that year the two national suffrage organizations merged for the final push for the vote--which would not come, however, for another thirty years. Upper-class women were attending college in record numbers, entering professions previously barred to them, and beginning to reap the benefits of improved medical care and dress reform. They belonged to innumerable women's organizations: social, intellectual, political, and philanthropic. Lower-class women came together to work long hours for low wages, and what organizing they did was into unions to combat the working conditions in the textile mills and other factories where they were employed. Women at all levels of society were active in attempts to better their lot, and the 'New Woman,' the late-nineteenth-century equivalent of the 'liberated woman,' was much on the public mind.

Upper-middle class southern women, raised with a special sense of 'woman's place' derived from some mythic age of chivalry, and then drawn by the Civil War into arenas of activity previously unknown and forbidden to them, seemed comparatively little interested in ideology. Kate Chopin was never a feminist or a suffragist; in fact, she was suspicious of any ideology. She was committed to personal freedom and defied social convention in a number of ways, including smoking cigarettes and walking out alone. Her diary

records that she met one of the Claflin sisters while on her honeymoon and assured her that she would not fall into 'the useless degrading life of most married ladies.'

Most married ladies in New Orleans, where the novel is set, were the property of their husbands. The Napoleonic Code was still the basis of the laws governing the marriage contract....Louisiana was a largely Catholic state and divorce was a scandalous and rather rare occurrence (29 divorces granted per 100,000 members of the population in 1890). In any case, Edna Pontellier had no grounds for divorce, though her husband undoubtedly did. Despite, or perhaps because of, the repressive legal conditions, the 1890s brought the first stirrings of the women's movement to New Orleans. In 1892 the first suffrage organization, the Portia Club, was formed. In 1895 Susan B. Anthony visited the city. In 1896 a second suffrage organization, the Era Club (Equal Rights Association), joined efforts with the Portia Club. Before the end of the decade women had won the right to vote on matters of local taxation....

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* was the first major American newspaper edited by a woman, and its pages supported a variety of women's causes in the 1890s. A June 1897 article recounts the occupations women in the city were pursuing: 'Among other things gleaned from [the city directory] of our own city, is the fact that there are two women barbers, following the hirsute tradition in the Crescent City. There are also importers of cigars among the fair sex, six women undertakers, one embalmer, a real estate agent, an insurance agent (it is true in partnership with a man), insurance solicitors, several practicing physicians, a box manufacturer, three drummers, a steamboat captain, several florists and a number of liquor dealers.' The national census of 1890 showed that in only 9 of the 369 professions were women not represented."

Margaret Culley, ed.
The Awakening
(Norton Critical Edition 1976) 117-19
reprinted revised edition 1994, 119-21

CHOPIN'S VIEW

"How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.'" (Edna Pontellier)

"Edna Pontellier, fanciful and romantic to the last, chose the sea on a summer night and went down with the sound of her first lover's spurs in her ears, and the scent of pinks about her. And next time I hope that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause." (Willa Cather)

"I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own *damnation* as she did." (Kate Chopin)

ROMANTIC FEMINISTS

"When the apparently defeated Edna takes off her clothes...it symbolizes a *victory* of self-knowledge and authenticity as she fully becomes herself." (Per Seyersted)

"*The Awakening* brings together the romantic...the mingled voices of European and American naturalistic determinism and progressive or utopian feminism, and the hopelessness and *joyous* defiance of the 'New Woman' who refuses political, social, and personal compromise." (Helen Taylor)

"Edna awakens to the horrible knowledge that she can never, *because she is a female*, be her own person." (Kathleen Margaret Lant)

"*And how, after all, do we know that she ever dies?* What critics have called her 'suicide' is simply our interpretation of her motion, our realistic idea about the direction in which she is swimming. Yet as Chopin's last words tell us, that direction is toward the mythic, the pagan, the aphrodisiac....Defeated, even *crucified* [!], by the 'reality' of nineteenth-century New Orleans, Chopin's *resurrected* [?] Venus is returning to Cyprus or Cythera." (Sandra M. Gilbert)

“As if embodying every infant’s wish come true, she slips into the universal womb--the ocean, where she can go on wishing...*we readers relish her liberation.* (Jo Ellen Jacobs)

“The suggestion of a *new beginning* hints that Edna’s final act of escaping her children may be a *triumph that keeps her reborn self intact.*” [She is dead!] (Patricia Hopkins Lattin)

“Judgmental attitudes tend to fade when students understand Edna’s social milieu and the naturalism in the novel....The romantic setting and plot of *The Awakening* become antiromantic as *they stifle Edna* and prevent her expansion as a person.” (Peggy Skaggs)

“In talking about how to teach this novel, I presume to stand outside the text. Yet I am also within it, constructing a story about Edna Pontellier that is consistent with *my theory.*” (Elizabeth Rankin) [Readers are likely to be more interested in Chopin's theory than in yours.]

“Students have little trouble recognizing the basic parts *all three men* play in *forcing* Edna to her marginal and finally suicidal position at the novel’s end....Dr. Mandelet...addresses Edna as his subordinate, as ‘my dear child.’ (E. Laurie George)

“She breaks the isolation of her existence, sublimates her instincts by directing them toward the *Ideal* and joins the universe.” (Christina Giorcelli)

“Edna’s death in the ocean dramatizes the self-ownership rhetoric of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.” (Margit Strange)

“She transcends the mythologies offered to her, and to us [such as motherhood], and *this is treated as a triumph*, not a failure.” (Paula A. Treichler)

We cannot but admire Chopin's Edna for the strength of her *uncompromising* dreams." (Joyce Dyer)

[Note that like Edna, these Feminists do not consider the longterm impact of her suicide upon her children, not to mention her husband. They are narcissists.]

Italics added.

The novel is sustained irony from beginning to end--Realism countering Romanticism--especially in the last chapter, where a satirical tone is set by a reference in the first paragraph to the Roman satirist Gaius Lucilius, who likewise ridiculed the indulgences of his society as expressed at lavish banquets. Talking to Mariequita at Grand Isle out of season, Victor compares Edna’s dinner party to a “Lucillean feast” and she herself to “Venus rising from the foam”--ironically as it turns out. Venus and Edna move in opposite directions.

Mariequita thinks Victor must be in love with Mrs. Pontellier. When she threatens to run away with someone else, the reader is reminded of the irony that the poor girl is more free to be impulsively romantic than Edna. The simple directness of relations among common people, exemplified by the banter of Victor and Mariequita, contrasts with the complications of relations among the affluent. The ironic tone of the chapter is sustained as Victor insults and threatens to murder his rival for Mariequita’s affections: “This assurance was very consoling to Mariequita. She dried her eyes, and grew cheerful at the prospect.”

Edna arrives at the hotel, surprising Victor and Mariequita. She asks what time dinner will be served and declares her intention to go swimming before dinner. She asks for towels, then expresses the hope that they will serve fish--a dark joke from Chopin as it turns out. She walks to the beach “mechanically”: “She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning.” She has done so little thinking that it is not presented in the text, only what thinking was “necessary”--apparently to decide what to do now. It is clear that she has finally awakened to her true nature: “To-day it is Arobin; to morrow it will be some one else.” As an existential artist, *she has made herself a female counterpart of Arobin.* Unlike him, however, she is a romantic in love and feeling sorry for herself even though she knows now that eventually she would have grown tired of Robert.

Childishly she blames her children for her own life choices, feeling they are “antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days.” Of course, that is absurd. They have spent most of the book with their nursemaid and their grandparents. She is making her children scapegoats for her guilt. Her children have become her conscience. “But she knew a way to elude them.” Edna is similar to Poe’s William Wilson, who tried to escape his conscience by murder, whereas Edna kills herself. Her commitment to “elude” her children indicates that it is in her mind at some level to elude them by killing herself, though “She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach.” Her requests for dinner and towels suggest that she is not *thinking* about killing herself and that makes her suicide seem impulsive, though she may already have decided to do it. In any case, by not thinking about it anymore, she has to some extent predetermined her own fate.

The lyricism of the prose style conveys the romanticism of Edna and the archetypal lure of the sea. “A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water”--analogous to her own descent. Mademoiselle Reisz cautioned her that she needed strong wings to defy society, whereas Edna is broken by losing her fairytale dream of Robert and by awakening to her true nature: “She felt like some new-born creature, opening eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.” Her awakened self cannot survive self-knowledge, which accounts for her odd “indifference” to her Fate at critical times, as she has occasional intimations of the truth.

As she swims out into the Gulf--now a gulf between her and the world--she immerses herself in cold water yet imagines that she is back in the warm meadow “she had traversed when a little child.” This contradiction sustains the ironic tone. Childishly again she accuses her husband and her children of thinking “they could possess her, body and soul.” In fact, her husband has followed Dr. Mandelet's advice and let her go her own way, and her children make slight demands upon her. “How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! ‘And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame!’” Having twice identified herself with Reisz, Chopin clearly wants to be understood as expressing her personal opinion of Edna through Reisz at the end, but she transcends her personal opinion in her art by including the perspective of Mandelet (sounds similar to mandala, a symbol of wholeness).

“Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him--but it was too late.” Mandelet has already displayed his ability to understand and not to blame her, but she is too impulsive to seek his help. Whether he could have helped her is questionable, since she has said that she only wants her own way. At the end, Edna thinks of Reisz and Mandelet in symmetrical contrast, representing contradictory perspectives like the two birds at the beginning of the novel. Chopin is egalitarian in offering Edna a male as well as a female guide, both of whom would disapprove of her suicide. Reduced by Edna’s thoughts to allegorical personifications, Reisz and Mandelet embody complementary modes of perception and poles of response. Solitaries, each of their perspectives is limited, but together they constitute a balanced view.

Edna demonstrates that she lacks the strength and courage necessary to live as a rebel. She is a rich pampered woman living in luxury, indulged in everything by her husband, her kids in child care, doing whatever she wants, becoming a successful painter, living separately, having adulterous affairs, who kills herself on impulse because she has lost her self-respect, realizing that “She has made herself a female counterpart of Arobin”--who is what Feminists call a pig. Chopin calls Edna's suicide her “damnation,” perhaps eternal. Edna's last thoughts are escapist, a sentimental regression to childhood, and they identify the primary motivating forces in her life as (1) immature rebellion against authority, as expressed by feeling “chained” like a dog and as represented by the voices of her father and her sister Margaret, which she associates with family conventions and the church; and (2) romantic longing for “the unattainable,” as first spurred by her infatuation with a cavalry officer wearing spurs. Chopin’s aesthetic vision, as distinct from her personal opinion, synthesizes the Realism of Reisz and the Naturalism of Mandelet with all the additional implications of the novel, expressing a synergy that is holistic and Modernist.

Michael Hollister (2014)