

INTRODUCTION



Kate Chopin

(1851-1904)

Kate Chopin is a Realist precursor of Modernism who wrote many stories and one outstanding novel, *The Awakening* (1899), which is now a classic widely taught and much analyzed. The most significant literary qualities of *The Awakening* are (1) its unique synthesis of Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism and “Modernism” a decade in advance of the Modernist movement; (2) its Existentialism, the first expression in American literature since Melville in *Moby-Dick*, later a characteristic of Modernism; (3) its economy and vividness as one of the purest examples of literary Impressionism; (4) its effective variations in prose style, with figurative language, multiple ironies, thematic parallels, image patterns, motifs and lyricism; (5) its satirical critique of the same romantic feminism of the New Woman that was to become so popular among feminists again in the late 20th century.

CHOPIN AND CRANE

Chopin and Stephen Crane are the purest Impressionists in American fiction, directly influenced by the techniques of Impressionist painters in the 1890s such as Mary Cassatt. Other Realists such as Henry James and Edith Wharton used Impressionist techniques among others--such as extensive psychological analysis--that reduce the vividness, rapid pace and other characteristics of pure Impressionism. Chopin and Crane are the most vivid painters in words before F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). They are also alike in blending Impressionist techniques, Naturalist themes and the priorities of Realism, mainly debunking popular romantic illusions. Both are consistently ironic in tone. And both rejected the absolute determinism of the Naturalists, affirmed the existence of free will in most cases and held characters responsible for their actions.

BIOGRAPHY

About ten years after Huck and Jim floated past on their raft, Kate O’Flaherty was born in St. Louis, a steamboat port and gateway to the West. Her father Thomas O’Flaherty emigrated from Ireland at the age of 18, moved out to St. Louis in the 1820s and prospered by selling supplies to pioneers in the wagon trains rolling west on the Oregon Trail. When she was only 6, he was killed in the collapse of a railroad bridge. Her mother Eliza Faris was of French descent and Kate grew up more influenced by French literature and

culture than any other American fiction writer, giving her perspective a cosmopolitan sophistication, like that of Henry James.

One of 4 children, she was educated by nuns at the Catholic Academy of the Sacred Heart and graduated in 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War. Her family and their neighbors had owned slaves, they identified strongly with the South and her half-brother George was killed fighting for the Confederacy. Kate began to write as a teenager and was accomplished on the piano, like Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*, with whom she twice identifies herself by name. An attractive upper-middle-class young woman, Kate made a debut into St. Louis society, the purpose of which was to acquaint young women with eligible young men. She participated in what she found a tiresome endless round of parties and social calls that left her little time to read and write.

MARRIAGE

At age 18 she married Oscar Chopin—"the right man," she called him in her diary. Oscar Chopin was a French Creole from a socially prominent family, he spoke fluent French, had studied in France and was a banker and cotton broker. They toured Europe for their honeymoon in 1870, then settled in New Orleans. He was a Southerner who belonged to a white supremacist group after the Civil War, but Kate was independent of mind and wrote stories opposing racism with sympathetic portraits of black people, most notably "Désirée's Baby." She had 5 sons and a daughter with Chopin and her marriage was a happy one, as even Feminist critics admit.

Oscar Chopin prospered as a cotton broker until several crop failures and the yellow-fever epidemic of 1878. Then the family moved inland to Cloutierville, Louisiana, a small town surrounded by plantations. Though Oscar was reduced to being a shopkeeper, the family was affluent enough to live in a mansion with servants. Kate took horseback rides alone, smoked cigarettes and was known for being independent and flirtatious. Oscar died of malaria in 1882 and Kate is thought by some to have had an affair with a local landowner known as a womanizer like Alcée Arobin in *The Awakening*. She remained in Cloutierville for two years as a widow, running the family store and paying off debts accumulated by her husband. She had an inheritance from her mother, retained ownership of rental property and did not have to continue working to make a living.

PUBLISHING CAREER

She moved back to St. Louis and by age 39 she had published poetry and short stories. She was unable to find a publisher for her first novel *At Fault* and published it herself in 1890. Set in her part of Louisiana, the novel is about a Creole widow who refuses to marry a businessman from St. Louis because he has been divorced. He remarries his alcoholic wife, she drowns in a flood and the lovers are united. Though it is a weak novel, *At Fault* contains elements that later appear in *The Awakening*: independent women, lovers from very different backgrounds, unconventional possibilities for relationships between men and women. She completed another novel, *Young Dr. Gosse and Theo*, but could not find a publisher and destroyed it. She was successful with short stories, however, publishing a number in national magazines and a collection, *Bayou Folk* (1894). Her stories are about controversial subjects including race, miscegenation, adultery, venereal disease and wife abuse. Reviews were mostly favorable but superficial, focusing on the exotic charm of her settings in Louisiana and reducing her to a local color regionalist. A second collection *A Night in Acadie* (1897) includes stories of women undergoing "awakenings."

The Awakening (1899)

During the 1890s she admired in particular the writing of William Dean Howells, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Guy de Maupassant and Gustav Flaubert--all Realists. In her review Willa Cather calls *The Awakening* "a Creole *Bovary*." Chopin disliked Zola and the Naturalists for lack of economy and subtlety. *The Awakening*, a pre-Modernist novel, received support from Lucy Monroe in a notice for *Book News*. Lucy Monroe was a manuscript reader for a publishing company and the sister of Harriet Monroe who later founded *Poetry* magazine, which became a flagship of the Modernist movement. However, after the novel was published in 1899 the reviews were overwhelmingly negative in response to Edna's sensuality and adultery--so negative the novel was effectively removed from circulation for the next 50 years.

IMPRESSIONISM AND NATURALISM

“I once heard a devotee of impressionism admit, in looking at a picture by Monet, that, while he himself had never seen in nature the peculiar yellows and reds therein depicted, he was convinced that Monet had painted them because he saw them and because they were true. With something of a kindred faith in the sincerity of all Mons. Zola’s work, I am yet not at all times ready to admit its truth, which is only equivalent to saying that our points of view differ, that truth rests upon a shifting basis and is apt to be kaleidoscopic.” Chopin’s perspective here points to the Modernist technique of multiple points of view, as in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” by Stevens and *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner.

DEATH

Only 5 years after the negative reviews, Chopin died of a brain hemorrhage at age 54. *The Awakening* was rescued in the 1950s by male New Critics with aesthetic values.

Michael Hollister (2013)

CHOPIN RESPONDS TO REVIEWERS

“Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late.”

Kate Chopin
St. Louis, Mo., 28 May 1899
Book News 17 (July 1899) 612

CRITICAL RECEPTION

“In 1956, Kenneth Eble praised *The Awakening* but called it ‘a forgotten novel.’ Twenty years later, *The Awakening* became part of the Critical Editions series published by W.W. Norton, which suggested that it was frequently assigned in college literature classes. In 1988 it was the subject of the sixteenth volume in the *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series published by the Modern Language Association, taking its place alongside such acknowledged classics as Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Indeed, it was the first book by a female author to be included in this series. A survey conducted in the 1980s by Paul Lauter of the Feminist Press revealed that Chopin was the thirty-seventh most frequently taught American writer in colleges and universities. In one sense, it took a long time for Chopin’s novel, published in 1899, to be recognized as the fine novel that it is, but on the other hand, given the fifty years of critical neglect that followed its publication, the novel’s rise to prominence following its rediscovery was meteoric....

By the middle of the twentieth century...frank discussion of sexuality and infidelity was cause for praise rather than censure...Almost all of *The Awakening*’s earlier champions had been men. What Seyersted could not have foreseen was the dramatic increase in the number of female literary scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, and the concomitant development of several varieties of feminist literary theory, all of which have found *The Awakening* a congenial text....It is perhaps fortunate that in the 1950s and 1960s when Chopin’s novel was being rediscovered, the formalist approach of the New Critical school of literary theory was still dominant in critical circles, because the close attention to the forms, patterns, and structure of literary works favored by the formalists established *The Awakening* as a work of art rather than as the document of flawed morality that its early reviewers had reacted to. Thus, the assessments of Eble, Brooks, and Leary were important steps in the process of separating the book from its author and rescuing it from oblivion.”

Nancy A. Walker, ed.
“A Critical History”
The Awakening
(Bedford/St. Martins 1993) 141, 146, 148-49

FEMINIST CRITICS

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 Mandelelet refers with disdain to a local Feminist group as "a circle of pseudo-intellectual women--super-spiritual superior beings." Chopin makes Doctor Mandelelet 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

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