

37 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Awakening (1899)

Kate Chopin

(1851-1904)

“A remarkable novel will come out of the West about the first of March, a novel so keen in its analysis of character, so subtle in its presentation of emotional effects that it seems to reveal life as well as to represent it.... This it is which justifies the audacity of *The Awakening* and makes it big enough to be true. The author has shown herself an artist in the manipulation of a complex character, and faulty as the woman is, she had the magnetism which is essential to the charm of a novel.... The men in the book are capital, with the exception perhaps of Robert, who is a bit wooden; and Edna’s husband especially is drawn to the life. In construction, in the management of movement and climaxes, the thing shows a very subtle and brilliant kind of art.”

Lucy Monroe
“Chicago’s New Books”
Book News (March 1899) 387

“Because we admire Kate Chopin’s other work immensely and delight in her ever growing fame and are proud that she is ‘one-of-us St. Louisans,’ one dislikes to acknowledge a wish that she had not written her novel. Not because it is not bright with her own peculiar charm of style, not because there is missing any touch of effect or lacking any beauty of description--but--well, it is one of the books of which we feel ‘*cui bono?*’ [‘What’s the use?’] It absorbs and interests, then makes one wonder, for the moment, with a little sick feeling, if all women are like this one, and that isn’t a pleasant reflection after you have thoroughly taken in this character study whose ‘awakening’ gives title to Mrs. Chopin’s novel...what an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster Passion can be when, like a tiger, it slowly stretches its graceful length and yawns and finally awakens...she realizes that something is due to her children, that she cannot get away from, and she is too weak to face the issue.... There is no fault to find with the telling of the story, there are no blemishes in its art, but it leaves one sick of human nature and so one feels--*cui bono!*”

Frances Porcher
“Kate Chopin’s Novel”
The Mirror IX (4 May 1899) 6

“It is pre-eminently a romance of to-day--a love story with one woman as the central figure, around which several male characters revolve; and the thoughts of the proverbial moth and the traditional candle force themselves on the reader in almost every chapter. At the very outset of the story one feels that the heroine should pray for deliverance from temptation... One thinks that her suicide is in itself a prayer for deliverance from the evils that beset her, all of her own creating. It is not a healthy book; if it points any particular moral or teaches any lesson, the fact is not apparent.... After reading the whole story, it can not be said that either of the principal characters claims admiration or sympathy. It is a morbid book, and the author herself would probably like nothing better than to ‘tear it to pieces’ by criticism if only some other person had written it.”

Anonymous
“Notes from Bookland”
St. Louis Globe-Democrat (13 May 1899) 5

“There may be many opinions touching other aspects of Mrs. Chopin’s novel *The Awakening*, but all must concede its flawless art. The delicacy of touch and rare skill in construction, the subtle understanding of motive, the searching vision into the recesses of the heart--these are known to readers of *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*. But in this new work power appears, power born of confidence. There is no uncertainty in the lines, so surely and firmly drawn. Complete mastery is apparent on every page. Nothing is wanted to make a complete artistic whole. In delicious English, quick with life, never a word too much, simple and pure, the story proceeds with classic severity through a labyrinth of doubt and temptation and dumb

despair.... Compassion, not pity, is excited, for pity is for those who sin, and Edna Pontellier only offended--weakly, passively, vainly offended.... No, the book is not for the young person, nor, indeed, for the old person who has no relish for unpleasant truths. For such there is much that is very improper in it, not to say positively unseemly....but it is all consummate art...a perfect whole.”

C. L. Deyo
“The Newest Books”
St. Louis Post-Dispatch (20 May 1899) 4

“Kate Chopin, author of those delightful sketches, *A Night in Acadie*, has made a new departure in her long story, *The Awakening*. The many admirers whom she has won by her earlier work will be surprised--perhaps disagreeably--by this latest venture. That the book is strong and that Miss Chopin has a keen knowledge of certain phases of feminine character will not be denied. But it was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction.”

Anonymous
“Books of the Day”
Chicago Times-Herald (1 June 1899) 9

“*The Awakening* is a decidedly unpleasant study of a temperament. The author, Kate Chopin, is known as the writer of several faithful stories of Louisiana life. This, too, is faithful enough in its presentation of certain phases of human passion and downward drift of character, but the story was not really worth telling, and its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent.”

Anonymous
“Novels and Tales”
The Outlook (3 June 1899) 314

“Miss Kate Chopin is another clever woman, but she has put her cleverness to a very bad use in writing *The Awakening*. The purport of the story can hardly be described in language fit for publication. We are fain to believe that Miss Chopin did not herself realize what she was doing when she wrote it. With a bald realism that fairly out Zolas Zola, she describes the result upon a married woman who lives amiably with her husband without caring for him, of a slowly growing admiration for another man.... The worst of such stories is that they will fall into the hands of youth, leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, and promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires.”

Anonymous
“Books of the Week”
Providence Sunday Journal (4 June 1899) 15

“*The Awakening* does not strike one as a very happy title for the story Mrs. Chopin tells. A woman of twenty-eight, a wife and twice a mother who in pondering upon her relations to the world about her, fails to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion which experience has taught her is, by its very nature, evanescent, can hardly be said to be fully awake.... Certainly there is throughout the story an undercurrent of sympathy for Edna, and nowhere a single note of censure of her totally unjustifiable conduct.”

Anonymous
“New Publications”
New Orleans Times-Democrat (18 June 1899) 15

“*The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, is a feeble reflection of Bourget, theme and manner of treatment both suggesting the French novelist. We very much doubt the possibility of a woman of ‘solid Presbyterian Kentucky stock’ being at all like Mrs. Edna Pontellier who has a long list of lesser loves, and one absorbing passion, but gives herself only to the man for whom she did not feel the least affection. If the author had secured our sympathy for this unpleasant person it would not have been a small victory, but we are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf.”

Anonymous
“Book Reviews”
Public Opinion XXVI (22 June 1899) 794

“One cannot refrain from regret that so beautiful a style and so much refinement of taste have been spent by Miss Chopin on an essentially vulgar story.... The awakening itself is tragic, as might have been anticipated, and the waters of the gulf close appropriately over one who has drifted from all right moorings, and has not the grace to repent.”

Anonymous
“Fiction”
Literature IV (23 June 1899) 570

“Would it have been better had Mrs. Kate Chopin’s heroine slept on forever and never had an awakening? Does that sudden condition of change from sleep to consciousness bring with it happiness? Not always, and particularly poignant is the woman’s awakening, as Mrs. Chopin tells it. The author has a clever way of managing a difficult subject, and wisely tempers the emotional elements found in the situation. Such is the cleverness in the handling of the story that you feel pity for the most unfortunate of her sex.”

Anonymous
“100 Books for Summer”
New York Times (24 June 1899) 408

“It is rather difficult to decide whether Mrs. Kate Chopin, the author of *The Awakening*, tried in that novel merely to make an intimate, analytical study of the character of a selfish, capricious woman, or whether she wanted to preach the doctrine of the right of the individual to have what he wants, no matter whether or not it may be good for him.... As the biography of one individual out of that large section of femininity which may be classified as ‘fool women,’ the book is a strong and graceful piece of work.... In many ways, it is unhealthily introspective and morbid in feelings, as the story of that sort of woman must inevitably be. The evident powers of the author are employed on a subject that is unworthy of them, and when she writes another book it is to be hoped that she will choose a theme more healthful and sweeter of smell.”

Anonymous
“Fresh Literature”
Los Angeles Sunday Times (25 June 1899) 12

“*The Awakening*, by Mrs. Chopin, is a story in which, with no other accessories than the trivial details of everyday life in and about New Orleans, there is worked out a poignant spiritual tragedy. The story is familiar enough.... It is needless to say that the agency by which she becomes awakened is provided by another man. But he proves strong enough to resist temptation, while she is too weak to think of atoning for her fault. To her distraught thinking, self-destruction is the only way out, and the tragedy is accomplished in picturesque fashion. The story is a simple one, not without charm, but not altogether wholesome in its tendency.”

William Morton Payne
“Recent Fiction”
The Dial 37 (1 August 1899) 75

“*The Awakening* is the sad story of a Southern lady who wanted to do what she wanted to. From wanting to, she did, with disastrous consequences; but as she swims out to sea in the end, it is to be hoped that her example may lie forever undredged. It is with high expectation that we open the volume, remembering the author’s agreeable short stories, and with real disappointment that we close it. The recording reviewer drops a tear over one more clever author gone wrong. Mrs. Chopin’s accustomed fine workmanship is here, the hinted effects, the well-expended epithet, the pellucid style; and, so far as construction goes, the writer shows herself as competent to write a novel as a sketch.... Had she...flirted less and looked after her children more, or even assisted at more accouchements...we need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself.”

Anonymous
“Recent Novels”
The Nation 69 (3 August 1899) 96

“It is a languorous, passionate story of New Orleans and vicinity, hinging on the gradual yielding of a wife to the attractions of other men than her husband. It is a brilliant piece of writing, but unwholesome in its influence. We cannot commend it.”

Anonymous
“Literature”

The Congregationalist (24 August 1899) 256

“It was Robert who awoke her. But, when he went away, it was another who continued the arousal. Do you think Edna cared whether it was Robert or Arobin? Not a bit. Arobin’s kiss upon her hand acted on her like a narcotic, causing her to sleep ‘a languorous sleep, interwoven with vanishing dreams.’ You see, she was something of a quick-change sleep-artist: first she slept; a look at Robert awakened her; Arobin’s kiss sent her off into dreamland again; a versatile somnambulist, this. Yet she must have been embarrassing; you could never have known just when you had her in a trance or out of it.... Think of it! Edna finally awake--completely, fiercely awake--and the man she had waked up for goes away! Of course, she went and drowned herself. She realized that you can only put out fire with water, if all other chemical engines go away. She realized that the awakening was too great; that she was too aflame; that it was not merely Man, not Robert or Arobin, that she desired. So she took an infinite dip in the passionate Gulf. Ah, what a hiss, what a fiery splash, there must have been in those warm waters of the South!”

Percival Pollard

“The Unlikely Awakening of a Married Woman”

Their Day in Court (Neale 1909) 41-45

“Kate Chopin was an original genius. Her story may be similar to any number of novels, but all suggestion of direct literary descent in method or manner of treatment is false. Literary influences are deceptive at best, and in the case of Kate Chopin no single author can be said to have contributed the weightiest influential impetus to *The Awakening*. She was a great reader, a contemporary mind. She absorbed the atmosphere and the mood of the ending of the century, as that ending is reflected in Continental European art and literature. Perhaps in St. Louis she was closest in touch with the tendencies of the century’s ending--in music, poetry, fiction. She was not imitative in the narrow sense of being completely under the sway of any one writer, but the range of her debts is wide: Flaubert, Tolstoy, Turgenieff, D’Annunzio, Bourget, especially de Maupassant, all contributed to her broad and diverse culture.

The Awakening follows the current of erotic morbidity that flowed strongly through the literature of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The end of the century became a momentary dizziness over an abyss of voluptuousness, and Kate Chopin in St. Louis experienced a partial attack of the prevailing artistic vertigo. The philosophy of Schopenhauer, the music of Wagner, the Russian novel, Maeterlinck’s plays--all this she absorbed. In *The Awakening* under her touch the Creole life of Louisiana glowed with a rich exotic beauty. The very atmosphere of the book is voluptuous, the atmosphere of the Gulf Coast, a place of strange and passionate moods.... Kate Chopin’s extraordinary tact enabled her to produce a book which tells the truth without offense, with detachment... But was the theme deserving of the exquisite care given it?”

Daniel S. Rankin

Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories

(U Pennsylvania 1932) 173-75

“There seems to be insufficient justification for Edna’s ‘romantic’ suicide, and this is the main weakness of this fine novel. Edna’s situation is far from hopeless, either morally or materially. Robert Lebrun leaves her, he says, because he loves her. In other words, their love affair has not come to an end, rather, one would say there is a chance of reconciliation. Leonce Pontellier, who is absent, leaves her in peace. And has not she herself often pointed out that she does not really love him, although he enables her to lead a pampered existence? Is she a victim of her nerves? Possibly, but there is nothing in her behavior so far that suggests a characteristic inclination toward suicide. When we consider the hopeless infatuation of Madame Bovary, we find this psychological weakness in Kate Chopin’s novel doubly striking....

Edna's inexplicable suicide, which seems to stem from her negative attitude toward life, is in reality a flight from sexual experience. The reader will remember that Edna, with her strict Puritan upbringing and resulting repressions and inhibitions, once confided in Adele Ratignolle. Since early adolescence, her gestures and descriptions of herself reveal, she possessed a very ardent temperament. She had felt attracted to men who for some reason or other were inaccessible: the cavalry officer, the engaged man, the actor. Subsequently, she displays an affection for her brilliant and headstrong fellow vacationer Adele Ratignolle which neither she herself nor Kate Chopin was able to explain. She let herself be married, primarily as a reaction against her own family and the atmosphere prevailing in her home."

Cyrille Arnavon
Introduction, *Edna* (Paris 1953)
trans. Per Seyersted & Emily Toth, eds.
The Kate Chopin Miscellany (Northwestern State U 1979) 168-88

"Quite frankly, the book is about sex. Not only is it about sex, but the very texture of the writing is sensuous, if not sensual, from the first to the last. Even as late as 1932, Chopin's biographer, Daniel Rankin, seemed somewhat shocked by it. He paid his respects to the artistic excellence of the book, but he was troubled by 'that insistent query--*cui bono?*' He called the novel 'exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation.' One questions the accuracy of these terms, and even more the moral disapproval implied in their usage. One regrets that Mr. Rankin did not emphasize that the book was amazingly honest, perceptive and moving....

The way scene, mood, action and character are fused reminds one not so much of literature as of an impressionist painting, of a Renoir with much of the sweetness missing. Only Stephen Crane, among her American contemporaries, had an equal sensitivity to light and shadow, color and texture, had the painter's eye matched with the writer's perception of character and incident. The best example of Mrs. Chopin's use of a visual image which is also highly symbolic is the lady in black and the two nameless lovers. They are seen as touches of paint upon the canvas and as indistinct yet evocative figures which accompany Mrs. Pontellier and Robert Lebrun during the course of their intimacy....

What convinced many critics of the indecency of the book...was not simply the sensuous scenes, but rather the author obviously sympathized with Mrs. Pontellier. More than that, the readers probably found that she aroused their own sympathies.... How wrong to call Edna, as Daniel Rankin does, 'a selfish, capricious' woman. Rather, Edna's struggle, the struggle with eros itself, is farthest removed from capriciousness. It is her self-awareness, and her awakening into a greater degree of self-awareness than those around her can comprehend, which gives her story dignity and significance."

Kenneth Eble
"A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*"
Western Humanities Review 10 (Summer 1956) 261-69

"*The Awakening*, quite uninhibited and beautifully written...anticipates D. H. Lawrence in its treatment of infidelity. Another attractive young woman, a Kentuckian married to a Creole broker, who is away on a long business trip, falls in love with a young man on a vacation at Grand Isle in the Gulf of Mexico. He is alarmed by the situation and goes away to Mexico. She returns to New Orleans, but she has been transformed. She moves into another house and begins to lead a new social life independent of her husband's circle. She has a love-affair with an experienced Creole. She does not worry about the consequences for her children: she does not want to feel that they possess her; she simply enjoys herself. But the lover does not satisfy her, and when the young man comes back from Mexico, she lets him know that she is now prepared to have with him a serious affair. The scene is interrupted and he, an all too honorable young fellow, runs away from the situation again, leaving a note to say, 'Goodbye--because I love you.' She goes back to Grand Isle alone, takes off all her clothes on the beach--she had first put on a bathing costume but then 'cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her'--and swims out into the Gulf of Mexico till she tires herself out and drowns.

It is a very odd book to have been written in America at the end of the nineteenth century. It is not even a 'problem novel.' No case for free love or women's rights or the injustice of marriage is argued. The heroine is simply a sensuous woman who follows her inclinations without thinking much about these issues

or tormenting herself with her conscience. Even her death is hardly a tragedy, hardly a deliberate suicide. 'How strange and awful and delicious!' she thinks, standing naked on the sand, and the description of her fatal swim has the same sensuous beauty as all the rest. The book was of course a scandal. The *St. Louis Republic* wrote, 'In her [Kate Chopin's] creations she commits unutterable crimes against polite society, but in the essentials of her art she never blunders. Like most of her work, however, *The Awakening* is too strong drink for moral babes, and should be labeled "poison".'

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore
(Oxford 1962) 590-91

"It is, of course, a New Orleans version of the familiar transcendentalist fable of the soul's emergence, or 'lapse,' into life (it is also, with its talk of 'mother-women,' 'animalism,' and the moral neutrality of Nature, a period piece of post-Darwinian ethics). In detail, *The Awakening* has the easy candor and freedom appropriate to its theme. It admits that human beings are physical bodies as well as moral and social integers and that the spirit acts not only by sublimation but directly through the body's life. Not many English or American novels of the period had come so far. And its successive scenes--of household, country place, cafe garden, dinner party, and racetrack--are vividly realized. Kate Chopin seems to have paid some attention to the recently translated *Anna Karenina* and its extraordinary clairvoyance of observation.

(Her short stories--the best are in *Bayou Folk* of 1894--are less successful, relying excessively on Maupassantesque twists of ironic revelation on the last page. But the people in them are real physical presences; invariably they strike us as having actual body, breath, color, and temperature.) That *The Awakening* caused a scandal is not surprising. But its irregular theme as not the main reason. Its deeper offense was in presenting the phases and consequences of the heroine's history--withdrawal from her duties as a wife and mother, adultery, the contemplation of divorce--without cautionary emphasis and without apology (Dreiser's offense, too, a year later, in *Sister Carrie*). The fact that her 'awakening' ends in tragedy did not lessen the offense, for the description of her suicide is not less sympathetic in its ample intensity (so that it is psychologically, sensually, convincing), yet it is matter-of-course, unarguable."

Warner Berthoff
*The Ferment of Realism:
American Literature, 1884-1919*
(The Free Press/Macmillan 1965) 88-89

"Though the heroines of Kate Chopin's local color fiction have some of the characteristics of the traditional lady, changes are already appearing. However, Edna Pontellier, a Southerner, though a Kentucky Protestant rather than a Creole Roman Catholic, is the only one of the heroines who finds and likes personal independence. The irony is that to keep from relinquishing it she has to commit suicide. Sexually awakened as she is, she cannot bear to live on as the wife of Leonce Pontellier; Robert Lebrun does not really want her; and with Alcee Arobin there is no feeling of companionship, only sexual satisfaction about which she has a sense of guilt because of her feeling that she has betrayed Robert. The most unchanging quality in Southern heroines is the ideal of chastity. In spite of her realism, or perhaps because of it, Kate Chopin throughout her work, upholds the Creole belief in the purity of womanhood and those other aspects of the feminine mystique and Southern cult of family which follow from it."

Marie Fletcher
"The Southern Woman in the Fiction of Kate Chopin"
Louisiana History 7 (Spring 1966) 117-32

"Like *Madame Bovary*, *The Awakening* is about the adulterous experiences of a married woman, and while Mrs. Chopin did not have to go to Flaubert for the theme, she obviously was indebted to him for it as well as for the masterful economy of setting and character and the precision of style which she here achieved. Sarah Orne Jewett had also been an admirer of *Madame Bovary* and had defended Flaubert's theme by saying that 'a master writer gives everything weight.' But she had drawn quite a different moral from the novel. Miss Jewett wrote of Emma Bovary, 'She is such a lesson to dwellers in country towns,

who drift out of relation to their surroundings, not only social, but the very companionship of nature, unknown to them.' Emma Bovary is a foolish, bored woman, while Mrs. Chopin's Edna Pontellier is an intelligent, nervous woman, but Edna's salvation is not to be found in drifting back into relation with her environment. Rather, the questions Mrs. Chopin raises through her are what sort of nature she, twenty-eight years of age, married to a rich man and the mother of two children, possesses, and how her life is related to the dynamics of her inner self. Sarah Jewett counseled sublimation; Kate Chopin pursued self-discovery and counseled not at all.

The Awakening was the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America, and the first fully to face the fact that marriage, whether in point of fact it closed the range of a woman's sexual experiences or not, was but an episode in her continuous growth. It did not attack the institution of the family, but it rejected the family as the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment, and on the very eve of the twentieth century it raised the question of what woman was to do with the freedom she struggled toward.... The new century was to provide such an awakening for countless American women, and *The Awakening* spoke of painful times ahead on the road to fulfillment. Kate Chopin sympathized with Edna, but she did not pity her. She rendered her story with a detachment akin to Flaubert's."

Larzer Ziff
*The American 1890s:
Life and Times of a Lost Generation*
(Viking 1966) 297-305

"Kate Chopin was at least a generation ahead of her time, an anachronistic, lonely, existential voice out of the mid-20th century."

Stanley Kauffmann
"The Really Lost Generation"
The New Republic
(3 December 1966) 38

"To grow sleepy over a Transcendental individualist also hints that Edna's individualism lacks philosophical grounding. This sleepiness from reading Emerson leads to the contrast, implicit in the title. In treating Edna's awakening, the author shows irony and even deviousness. We look upon Edna's awakening as archetypal in marking her passage from death to rebirth, but we may also look upon her awakening as not a rebirth but as another kind of death that is self-sought. Amusingly enough, the author, quite consciously I am sure, allows Edna to do an inordinate amount of sleeping throughout the novel, in spite of her underlying vitality.

She first appears 'with some appearance of fatigue' (admittedly after she has been swimming); that night she is 'fast asleep,' and her weariness is noted many times, especially when she falls in love with Robert, though at one time she only sleeps fitfully. When she first openly seeks out Robert and takes him--again amusingly--to Sunday morning mass, she is so drowsy at the service that she has to leave, and sleeps the whole of the rest of the morning and afternoon at a nearby house, with Robert remarking at the end, 'You have slept precisely one hundred years.' Again, when she celebrates her decision to break with her husband at a dinner party, 'the old ennui' overtakes her. It is almost as if the author were saying here is my heroine who at the critical points in her progress toward an awakening constantly falls asleep.

An even grimmer irony, or course, is in her awakening to an erotic life not through Robert, whom she truly loves, but through Alcee, whom she uses merely as a convenience. Though Edna recognizes this, she hardly does so in the sense that the novel does. We are told that 'Alcee Arobin's manner was so genuine that it often deceived even himself,' but also that 'Edna did not care or think whether it were genuine or not.' We cannot help suspecting that Edna simplifies and melodramatizes her view of herself far more than the author does.... I suppose that those who look upon the novel as a defense of the New Woman would feel that Mrs. Chopin regards freedom from children as a necessary basis for complete freedom. But again I am doubtful, for Mrs. Chopin delights in the contraries which are present in Edna's response toward her boys.... We may observe her constantly returning to her children as a kind of penance whenever she displays most markedly her love outside of marriage."

George Arms
"Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in the Perspective of Her Literary Career"
Essays in American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell
ed. Clarence Gohdes (Duke 1967) 215-28

"Mrs. Chopin was at least a decade ahead of her time. During the years following America's silencing of her, 'Edith Wharton's genteel satire and Ellen Glasgow's moral searchings were the strongest fare that it could take,' as Robert E. Spiller has observed. Kate Chopin can be seen not only as one of the American realists of the 1890's, but also as a link in the tradition formed by such distinguished American women authors as Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather, and the two just mentioned.... As exemplified in Mrs. Todd of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, woman is a rock guarding the old qualities, the men being either weak or dead. To Mrs. Chopin, woman is no more of a rock than is man, being neither better nor worse than he. Mrs. Wharton and Miss Glasgow may have attacked certain aspects of the aristocracies they sprang from, but they also wanted to preserve some of their values. Kate Chopin on the other hand, was no celebrant of the aristocratic qualities of her own distinguished background.

The one value that really counted with her was woman's opportunity for self-expression. She...was sensitive, intelligent, and broad enough in her outlook to see the different basic needs of the female and the various sides of her existence and to represent them with impartiality. Her work is thus no feminist plea in the usual sense, but an illustration--rather than an assertion--of woman's right to be herself, to be individual and independent whether she wants to be weak or strong, as nest-maker or a soaring bird."

Per Seyersted
Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography
(Louisiana State 1969) 190-96

"One can easily and happily join in the praise that in recent years has been given to *The Awakening*--one can, that is, until one reaches the conclusion of the novel, which is unsatisfactory because it is fundamentally evasive. Other commentators, it should be noted here, have been as affirmative about the conclusion as they have been about the novel as a whole. Though Edmund Wilson merely notes that the ending has 'the same sensuous beauty as all the rest,' other writers have not confined their praise to the esthetic. Berthoff, for example, finds Edna's suicide 'psychologically, sensually convincing,' 'matter-of-course, unarguable'; and Kauffmann sees it as 'the confrontation of resultant consequences without plot contrivance or escape.' Ziff, in some detail, argues for the psychological coherence and, by implication, the rightness of the suicide; and Eble comments on Mrs. Chopin's 'complete command of structure,' including, presumably, the conclusion. What, in the narrowest sense, happens in the final pages, which seem so right to five readers and so unsatisfactory to at least one?

Its great fault is inconsistent characterization, which asks the reader to accept a different and diminished Edna from the one developed so impressively before. Throughout the novel the most striking feature of Edna's character has been her strength of will, her ruthless determination to go her own way. In thought and act she has rejected unequivocally the restraints of conventional morality, social custom and personal obligation to her husband and children (through most of the novel the children are visiting their grandmother). Yet in the final pages, Mrs. Chopin asks her reader to believe in an Edna who is completely defeated by the loss of Robert, to believe in the paradox of a woman who has awakened to passionate life and yet quietly, almost thoughtlessly, chooses death. Having overcome so much in the way of frustration, Edna is destroyed by so little. As well, the reasonings and feelings attributed to her as motivation at the end do not bear scrutiny. Her brief affair with Arobin hardly proves the certainty of a host of future lovers, but it has clearly shown her what is missing from her life; and since she has long been indifferent to convention and domestic ties, she could well expect to find someone less shoddy than Arobin and less scrupulous than Robert.

Equally perplexing is the sudden concern for her children, who previously have seemed to matter little as long as they were out of the way. Increasingly strong, practical and sure of herself and her needs through most of the novel, Edna suddenly collapses, and what the reader gets in the way of explanation does not follow from what he has witnessed before. Once capable of leaving her husband, relegating her children, establishing her own home, earning money with her painting, accepting one lover, pursuing

another--at the end she is unable to endure Robert's tender note of rejection.... It is a conclusion for an ordinary sentimental novel, not for a subtle psychological treatment of female sexuality.

If the rest of the novel existed only at the sentimental, romantic level, then Edna's suicide would be conventionally appropriate and acceptable: a woman surrenders her chastity and death is the consequence. In such a novel Robert would be the single great love of her life, a great romantic passion, finally doomed and destructive. But despite its conclusion *The Awakening* is not such a novel; indeed its relation to the conventional sentimental novel is not apparent until the final pages. For Mrs. Chopin was concerned not with seduction and retribution, but with woman's passionate nature and its relation to self, marriage and society.

Yet at the end she transformed a character who has embodied these complex issues into one who simply dies from disappointed, illicit love. In a word, a complex psychological novel is converted into a commonplace sentimental one.... For in the final pages Edna is different and diminished: she is no longer purposeful, merely willful; no longer liberated, merely perverse; no longer justified, merely spiteful. And the painful failure of vision (or, more likely, of nerve) implicit in the change prevents a very good, very interesting novel from being the extraordinary masterpiece some commentators have claimed it is."

George M. Spangler
"Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: A Partial Dissent"
Novel 3 (Spring 1970) 249-55

"Echoes of the poetry of Whitman can be recognized in these recurrent murmurings of the sea, especially of his 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,' in which the sea whispers the strong and 'delicious' word *death*. Mrs. Chopin seems to have known Whitman's poetry well and to have had confidence that her readers did also, as is suggested in her quotation from Whitman's 'Song of Myself' in her story 'A Respectable Woman'... Indeed the whole of *The Awakening* is pervaded with the spirit of Whitman's 'Song of Myself'....

Bird images will be found throughout the novel, sometimes presented with quiet irony, as when Edna, seeking more freedom than her husband's house affords, takes a house of her own and calls it her 'pigeon-house,' allowing a reader then to recall that the pigeon of the kind she thought of was a domesticated, often a captive bird.... Almost every incident or reference in *The Awakening* anticipates an incident or reference that follows it or will remind a reader of something that has happened before....

Among Mrs. Chopin's American contemporaries only Henry James and perhaps Sarah Orne Jewett had produced fiction more artfully designed; there is a simpleness and a directness in *The Awakening* which has inevitably reminded readers of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and an economy and mastery of incident and character which seem to forecast the lucid simplicity of Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, so different in theme, but comparable in technique. Few words are wasted, nothing is incomplete.... Whether she is weak and willful, a woman wronged by the requirements of society, or a self-indulgent sensualist, finally and fundamentally romantic, who gets exactly what she deserves--these are not considerations that seem to have concerned Mrs. Chopin."

Lewis Leary
"Kate Chopin and Walt Whitman"
Southern Excursions: Essays on Mark Twain and Others
(Louisiana State 1971) 169-74

"Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a powerful romantic novel. It develops the theme of self-discovery so important in the works of the transcendentalists and does it in terms of imagery that is thoroughly appropriate to its presentation. Unlike the transcendentalists, however, Kate Chopin allows her character no limitless expansion of the self. She presents her, rather--in terms suggesting Melville--as a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender. Chopin herself makes no explicit comment on Edna Pontellier's actions. She neither approves nor condemns, but maintains an aesthetic distance throughout, relying upon the recurring patterns of imagery to convey her meaning. It is not the morality of

Edna's life that most deeply concerns her, not even the feminist concept so obviously present in the book. It is, rather, the philosophic questions raised by Edna's awakening: the relation of the individual self to the physical and social realities by which it is surrounded, and the price it must pay for insisting upon its absolute freedom."

Donald A. Ringe
"Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*"
American Literature 43 (January 1972) 580-88

"Her young children, however, present a great problem. She says that she might die for her children, but would not give up her essential selfhood for them. This sentiment seems admirable but it is somewhat ambiguous, for at the end, in a muddled way, it is precisely the image of the children and her uncertainty about the nature of her role toward them that prove her undoing. Unconcerned herself about her new, freer attitude toward illicit sex, she fears the effects it will have upon her children when they learn about it. Mrs. Chopin had shown earlier how the husband uses the children and the mother's presumed duties toward them as a means of control and subjugation of the woman, but she is, finally, at a loss as to how to break through to newer and more humane conventions--a legitimate and recognizable dilemma. More startling to contemporaries must have been Edna's sentiments after her fall into adultery, and with a most unworthy lover. Whatever the conflicting emotions that assail her, she says, 'there was neither shame nor remorse'...

What makes it peculiarly related to the woman question in *The Awakening* is Mrs. Chopin's unwillingness to make her heroine's situation easier by removing from her selfness the burden and possibility of motherhood.... Mrs. Chopin stumbles ambiguously on this question, as indeed we still do. Awakened by a realization of her sensuous self, Edna Pontellier grows in self-awareness and autonomy. But it is a lonely and isolated autonomy that exacts a terrible price."

Jules Chametzky
"Our Decentralized Literature"
Jarbuch fur Amerikastudien (1972) 56-72

"The novel dramatizes the irony that the awakening which Edna most desires is to sleep and dream, to merge with a warm body, to be indulged, and to be fed, drives related to her early motherlessness and to a need for compensation. The latent wish to be fed is communicated in the novel through one of its dominant images: food.... Edna's motherlessness makes appropriate the abundance of images connecting food with love and its loss; motherlessness also seems to account for the double irony that a woman who wishes to awaken should nevertheless wish so often to sleep and dream, and that one who wants to find herself should be described as happily losing herself....

In *The Awakening*...Chopin dramatizes two almost contradictory views of her heroine, one of them critical and the other sympathetic and admiring. This narrative technique must affect an interpretation of the theme of the novel and should discourage hasty identifications between Kate Chopin and her work.... The effect of such a technique in this novel is to present simultaneously two essentially different and incompatible ideals about how people should conduct their lives. The partisan narrative stance speaks for a romantic vision of life's possibilities; the alternate stance for a realistic understanding and acceptance of human limits.... Edna can be free only if she consciously recognizes her need for intensity of experience and wishes to find this through sexual adventure.

Then she might find a suitable place in which, and people with whom, to realize these desires. She would not be blindly driven to self-destruction or to acts of aggression against her children and husband. To some readers, the sympathetic view speaks so movingly that they do not hear the sober realism also richly represented in the novel. *The Awakening* portrays neither the feminist's heroine nor an impulsive, somewhat shallow deceiver; it portrays both in unresolved tension.... One might say that the realistic narrative view appeals most to the reader's adult self; the partisan, to the child, or to the self that would reach beyond its grasp no matter what the tragic consequences."

Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith
"Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*"
Studies in American Fiction 1 (1973) 62-75

“The recent critical controversy as to the meaning and value of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* is epitomized in the range of responses to Edna’s suicide.... The most complete affirmations of Edna’s suicide are found in the criticism of Per Seyersted and Kenneth Eble. Each proclaims the nobility of Edna’s achievements and the heroic grandeur of her final gesture. Seyersted, approaching the story through feminist and existentialist perspectives, sees Edna’s death as motivated by an uncompromising desire for ‘spiritual emancipation.’ Her suicide is ‘the crowning glory of her development from the bewilderment which accompanied her early development to the clarity with which she understands her own nature and the possibilities of her life as she decides to end it.’ Eble, distinguishing Edna from such deluded romantics as Emma Bovary, places her with classical figures who ‘struggle with elemental passion.’ Her suicide, seen as an immersion in Eros, gives her ‘the power, the dignity, the self-possession of a tragic heroine.’ Both Seyersted and Eble acclaim the artistry of Chopin and assert her sympathy for Edna.

Donald A. Ringe and George Arms, each focusing on Edna’s romanticism, present more qualified views of the significance of her suicide and question the assumption of Chopin’s sympathy for her protagonist. Ringe relates Edna’s romanticism to the transcendental theme of self-discovery and perceives her suicide as the consequence of her realization of her essentially solitary nature. Stressing Chopin’s philosophic concern with the relation of the individual to external reality, he evaluates Edna’s final act as ‘a defeat that involves no surrender.’ Arms, despite the basic realism of Edna’s sexual emancipation, sees her as a figure motivated by romantic ideals, who ‘drifts’ aimlessly into death. Noting the irony that pervades Chopin’s treatment of Edna, he distinguishes between the romantic heroine and the realistic writer.

Daniel S. Rankin represents the negative pole of reaction in his verdict on the work as ‘exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation.’ Edna’s suicide is a testimony to the fact that ‘human nature can be a sickening reality.’ He identifies Chopin with Edna and judges the writer as an impressionable victim of romantic literature.

George S. Spangler also presents a forceful indictment of the conclusion, not as does Rankin in terms of moral perversity, but on purely aesthetic grounds. He regards Edna’s suicide as a pathetic defeat that is inconsistent with the depiction of her previous strength and achievements and accuses Chopin of a lapse from psychological subtlety into banal sentimentality.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, acknowledging Chopin’s insight into human nature, sees her depiction of Edna as a penetrating account of psychological disintegration. Wolff analyzes Edna’s experiences in the contexts of Laing and Freud and defines her as a schizoid personality whose erotic development has been arrested at the oral stage. Her suicide is a regressive act coming from ‘a sense of inner emptiness’ and a failure to fulfill in real life her infantile yearnings for fusion.

Between the positive and negative responses to Edna’s suicide stand the views of Kenneth M. Rosen and Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith. Rosen insists on a purposeful ambiguity in which the sea is seen as symbolizing both life and death. Sullivan and Smith argue not for ambiguity but for ambivalence in Chopin’s presentation of Edna through two distinct and irreconcilable points of view. The reader’s response to Edna’s suicide depends on whether he is compelled by the voice that indulges a romantic vision of life’s possibilities or by the contrasting view that insists on accommodation to the limitations of reality.

Those critical views that distinguish between the realism of Chopin and the romanticism of Edna and question the value of her suicide reflect most closely the meaning and spirit of *The Awakening*. The vision of life that emerges from the novel constitutes an affirmation of the multiple possibilities of fulfillment, an affirmation made with a clear and profound grasp of the problematic nature of reality. Chopin’s attitude to Edna involves the same mixture of irony and respect that marks her treatment of the other characters in the story. Her sympathy, and perhaps even identification, with Edna are most evident in her dramatization of Edna’s struggle to face the realities of life and her partial achievement of selfhood. But ultimately Chopin places Edna’s suicide as a defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate herself to the limitations of reality.

This approach has affinities with the interpretations of Donald A. Ringe and George Arms and corresponds at points to the psychoanalytic study by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. But Ringe and Arms do not

probe Edna's romanticism far enough to the psychological core, and Wolff tends to impose a clinically schematic pattern that sometimes distorts Chopin's use of imagery and implicitly raises the question of the author's control over her material. A reading that remains faithful to the psychological implications of Chopin's imagery in terms of her own apprehension of reality will illuminate most fully the meaning of Edna's suicide....

Chopin repeatedly underlines Edna's particular susceptibility to the infantile yearning for regression and subtly weaves the patterns of imagery that will culminate in her final surrender.... Edna's regressive instincts are embodied in the series of fantasies of unattainable lovers that dominated her early life. The infantile core of her romanticism is revealed in the childhood memory reawakened by the sight of the 'water stretching so far away'... She connects this experience of the infinite in 'that ocean of waving grass' to her first passionate infatuation with a visiting cavalry officer.... Through her dramatization of the Sleeping Beauty motif, Chopin reveals the conflict between the basic reality of Edna's erotic desire for Robert and the impossibility of her romantic quest for fusion.... Edna's problem is that she believes she can attain the final, unlimited union of the fairy-tale lovers. Robert's departure forces her to face the fact that real life is quite different from the idealized realm of the fairy tale....

Edna does not possess the strength to live her life alone and is therefore driven to seek the solitary security of death. Her view of her children as enemies who seek 'to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days' is the hysterical response of a woman who, compelled by the instinct to return to the unbroken bond with her mother, must perforce renounce her own motherhood. Edna's suicide is not a conscious choice reached through her achievement of self-awareness. She was 'not thinking' as she walked down to the beach.' Her act of stripping off her clothes is not a gesture of self-liberation but rather a regression to the animality of infancy: 'She felt like some new-born creature....' Her experience of rebirth is directed not forward to new life but backward to the womb. Her final memories before her death represent a return to childhood, to her first fantasy lover, and to her walk in the meadow of infinity....

In her portraits of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, she suggests the multiplicity of roles open to women.... The richness of Chopin's vision of life comes from her awareness of the many paths to self-realization from which to choose, each one involving compromise and renunciation. Her realism is inherent in her refusal to endorse the sentimentality of a fairy-tale resolution or the feminist fatalism of presenting Edna as the victim of an oppressive society. Chopin, as wife, as mother of six children, and as writer, is herself an affirmation of the many modes of living a woman can attain."

Suzanne Wolkenfeld
"Edna's Suicide: The Problem of the One and the Many"
The Awakening (Norton Critical Edition 1976; revised 1994) 241-47
ed. Margaret Culley

"Edna drifts into death because she does nothing to stop it; in this action, as in preceding ones, she has not controlled her own destiny.... Chopin writes *The Awakening* from the perspective of a Naturalist, giving Edna little control over her own destiny, and it is important to note that she is controlled by her own emotions, not by men or society. She has less 'open-eyed choice' than Dreiser's *Carrie*. 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 their condition. Perhaps those who read the novel as a feminist document are also affected by a clash of cultures, their own and that which the novelist inhabited."

Nancy Walker
"Feminist or Naturalist:
The Social Context of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*"
Southern Quarterly 17 (1979) 95-103

"Edna's inability to cast her awakening into social terms is directly related to her seduction by the childish forms already established to contain her sensual impulses. This failure rests partly with her and partly with Robert--her inspiration, her collaborator, but a man whose arrested capabilities are finally as shocked by his encounter with Edna as hers are by her involvement with him. Both regard their own person and the other as characters in a predetermined fairy tale.... If this structure liberates in some ways, it confines in others. Edna's existence as the princess requires Robert to be the prince. When, unwilling to

take on the burdens of this role, Robert flees to Mexico (perhaps in a similar indulgence of romantic possibility denied by the obligations of the adult world), Edna feels stranded. Tortured ‘with the biting conviction that she had lost that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded,’ she feels that Robert’s absence leaves ‘a void and wilderness behind her.’ Meaning has leached from the world....

It is only when Robert returns, prepared to do what the fairy tale requires and marry Edna, that she realizes this plot suffers from the same restrictiveness as the one in which she is already involved in her life with Leonce. When Robert reveals his ‘wild dream’ of Edna’s becoming his wife, his recollection of ‘men who had set their wives free,’ Edna is indignant... When Edna finally discovers that even with Robert, the structures of sexual relationships ill fit the evanescence of desire, the implications of this revelation are devastating. Edna’s love for Robert makes her wish to see him as unique and herself as faithful. But the attraction between herself and Alcee Arobin forces her to acknowledge that sensuality, once roused, is inherently promiscuous. Edna has also misjudged Robert, who reveals himself to be as conventional as Leonce. Robert’s love for Edna includes a wish to marry her, and he cannot understand that marriage is, at best, irrelevant to the qualities Edna most values in their relationship.”

Lee R. Edwards

Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form
(Wesleyan U 1984) 123-26, 130-32

“*The Awakening*, a flawed but strong novel, now enjoys an eminent status among feminist critics, but I believe that many of them weakly misread the book, which is anything but feminist in its stance.... The sexual awakening that centers the novel involves a narcissistic self-investment that constitutes a new ego for the heroine. Unfortunately, she fails to see that her passion is for herself, and this error perhaps destroys her....

I continue to admire *The Awakening*, though a bit less at the second reading than at the first. Its faults are mostly in its diction; Chopin had no mastery of style. As narrative, it is simplistic rather than simple, and its characters have nothing memorable about them. Chopin’s exuberance as a writer was expended where we would expect a daughter of Whitman to locate her concern: the ecstatic rebirth of the self. Since Chopin was not writing either American epic or American elegy, but rather an everyday domestic novel, more naturalistic than Romantic, fissures were bound to appear in her work... Nevertheless, as a belated American Transcendentalist, Chopin risked the experiment, and what Emerson called the Newness breaks the vessels of Chopin’s chosen form. I would call this the novel’s largest strength, though it is also its formal weakness....

Chopin’s heroine, Edna, becomes, as it were, one of the roughs, an American, when she allows herself to lust after her real me, her me myself. That is why Chopin’s *The Awakening* gave offense to reviewers in 1899, precisely as *Leaves of Grass* gave offense from its first appearance in 1855.... Edna, like Walt, falls in love with her own body, and her infatuation with the inadequate Robert is merely a screen for her overwhelming obsession, which is to nurse and mother herself. Chopin, on some level, must have known how sublimely outrageous she was being, but the level was not overt, and part of her novel’s power is in its negation of its own deepest knowledge. Her reviewers were not stupid, and it is shallow to condemn them, as some feminist critics now tend to do.”

Harold Bloom, ed.

Introduction

Kate Chopin

(Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1987) 1-2

“Critics by the 1960s and the early 1970s—before most Americans had heard of *The Awakening*—were sensitive to the subtlety of Chopin’s vision and mode of expression. Kenneth Eble, who in 1964 edited the first paperback version of *The Awakening*, helping to set off the Chopin revival in the United States, speaks of Kate Chopin’s ‘underground imagination’—‘the imaginative life which seems to have gone on from early childhood somewhat beneath and apart from her well-regulated actual existence’....

An instinctive yearning for freedom, for a more fulfilling life, is an organizing theme in *The Awakening* (1899) and in some of Chopin’s strongest short stories... She grew up among single, independent women,

spending much of her youth with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, so she was especially aware of the social possibilities for women and makes exploration of those possibilities the subject of some of her most powerful fiction—*The Awakening* and stories like ‘A Respectable Woman,’ ‘Athenaise,’ ‘The Story of an Hour,’ and ‘A Pair of Silk Stockings.’ Her stories about women have for 25 years driven the remarkable revival of her work and placed her in the first rank of American writers.”

Bernard Koloski
Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) xii, 4

“Her second published novel, *The Awakening* in 1899, with its skillfully written story of a woman who for a time actually breaks through...restraints [and] created a scandal. The admirable sketches of life in New Orleans which graced that work went all but unnoticed in the furor that completely eclipsed her brief popularity. Chopin died five years later, still attempting to write but virtually forgotten.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 14

Michael Hollister (2014)