

# The Awakening Study Guide

## The Awakening by Kate Chopin

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# Introduction

*The Awakening* tells the story of Edna Pontellier and the changes that occur in her thinking and lifestyle as the result of a summer romance. At the start of the story, Edna is a young mother of two and the wife of a successful New Orleans businessman. While the family is vacationing at a seaside resort, Edna becomes acquainted with Robert Lebrun, a younger man who pays special attention to her. Moonlit walks and intimate conversations with Robert spark feelings that Edna has forgotten. When she returns to the city, Edna throws off the trappings of her old life—devotion to family, attention to societal expectations, and adherence to tradition—to explore independence in love, life, and sexual fulfillment.

While this plot is common by today's standards, it caused a huge commotion when Herbert S. Stone and Company published *The Awakening* in 1899. The book was removed from library shelves in Kate Chopin's hometown of St Louis, and the St. Louis Fine Arts Club expelled Chopin from its membership. Although there was some praise for the novel's artistry and insight, critics generally denounced Chopin for her failure to condemn Edna's actions and for allowing Edna to make her final choice in life.

As evidenced by the many reprints of the book, modern critics appreciate Chopin's skill and artistry—particularly her use of psychological realism, symbolic imagery, and sensual themes. The feminist movement lauds Chopin's portrayal of Edna and the restraints tradition places on women.



## Author Biography

Kate Chopin was born in 1850 to the well-to-do St Louis couple Eliza and Thomas O'Flaherty. She attended a convent school, took piano and French lessons, and delighted in her two years as a St Louis debutante. Kate had a nonconformist side, too. For example, she spent many hours with her family's slaves and became St. Louis' "Littlest Rebel" when she took down and hid a Union flag. In addition, she retreated to the attic of her family's home and remained secluded there for about two years after the death of several of her family members.

Kate O'Flaherty's actions reflected the influence of her great-grandmother, who lived with the family until Kate was eleven. Kate learned from her the love of storytelling, an interest in history, and an inquisitive attitude. Encouraged by her great-grandmother, Kate read widely and pondered unconventional ideas. When she met a woman in New Orleans who was successful at having a career, family, and social life, Kate was thrilled by the possibilities. Kate later behaved in ways that showed she believed in a woman's having control over her own life. After she was married, for example, she ignored society's disapproval as she often walked alone through the streets of New Orleans, smoking cigarettes.

Kate married Oscar Chopin in 1870. Oscar was from New Orleans. He worked as an agent, a banker, and a broker in the cotton industry. As members of the Southern aristocracy, the Chopins owned a summer residence on the shore, had servants, and were involved in many social activities. Kate was an active socialite during this time but also helped Oscar run the business. This equal sharing of work and play by husband and wife was unusual for the time. Their luxurious life came to an end, however, when the business failed in 1879. With six children, the Chopins moved to Couleville—a small town in north-central Louisiana—where they lived on her father-in-law's property and helped manage the Chopin family plantations. They had only been there four years when Oscar died of swamp fever. Kate managed the business for a year on her own but then moved back to St. Louis to live with her mother.

When Kate's mother died in 1885, Kate had little money. Her few friends encouraged her to write professionally, having been impressed with her letter writing. At the time, Kate was reading such authors as Guy de Maupassant, Alphonse Daudet, Moliere, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spenser. Relying on her life experiences, her great-grandmother's wisdom, and the influence of great writers, Kate began to write about life in north-central Louisiana. While readers enjoyed her first collection of stories, Chopin wrote stories that challenged and conflicted with society's moral standards. Her novel, *The Awakening*, was widely criticized for this when it was published in 1899. Even fellow author Willa Cather condemned the book for having a "sordid" theme.

Understandably despondent over this criticism, as well as the subsequent rejection of her next book, *An Avocation and a Voice*, Chopin nevertheless did not at first give up on her writing. She composed a number of short stories, including "The Storm," a tale of two lovers and their infidelity during a rainstorm.

By 1904, however, the author began to abandon writing as her health worsened. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage on August 22 of that year. Today, Kate Chopin is recognized not only for her skills as a local colorist but also as a realist.



# Plot Summary

## Grand Isle

*The Awakening* opens at the summer resort of Grand Isle, a small hotel located fifty miles off of the coast of New Orleans. Grand Isle is populated by well-to-do families escaping the blistering New Orleans heat. The action begins as Léonce Pontellier, the husband of the novel's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, sits on the porch of his cottage reading his day-old newspaper. Léonce is a self-important man who accepts as his due the deference of others to his perceived superiority. As Léonce sits on the porch, his wife returns from the beach with Robert Lebrun, the son of the resort owner. After some bantering between Robert and Edna about their trip to the beach, which Léonce does not find amusing, Léonce leaves for his club to play billiards. He invites Robert to join him, but the younger man declines the invitation, choosing instead to remain with Edna. Robert prefers the company of women, choosing to spend the long summer afternoons reading to the married ladies and playing with their children, rather than pursuing the more manly endeavors of working in the city or socializing at the local men's club. Each summer, Robert "constitutes himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel," but always chooses women who are safe - either girls who are too young to marry or matrons.

Edna does not fit in with the Grand Isle crowd. She is the only person at the hotel who is not a Creole, and she is embarrassed by the Creole society's openness on subjects such as sex and childbirth. Edna's discomfort with the Creole community is aggravated by a growing dissatisfaction with her socially-prescribed role as a "mother-woman," a role which assumes that she will be completely fulfilled by caring for her husband and children. Instead of experiencing this fulfillment, Edna is restless and subject to spells of depression that she does not understand. Edna's performance of her motherly duties does not satisfy her husband, either. On more than one occasion, he berates her for neglecting their children, and for being unconcerned about keeping up social appearances. For example, when Léonce returns from his club late one evening, he awakens Edna, telling her that one of their young sons has a fever. Edna believes that the child is perfectly well, since she had only put him to bed a few hours before. When Edna does not immediately spring from her bed to minister to her son, Léonce accuses her of neglect. Edna's response is to cry long after her husband has smoked a cigar and gone to bed. Léonce's scoldings, however, begin to lose their effectiveness as the story progresses. The more Léonce chastizes Edna for her shortcomings, the more resentful she becomes until she finally dismisses his complaints altogether.

Edna's feelings of boredom grow, and the more restless she becomes, the more she finds herself drawn to Robert. The two become nearly inseparable, sitting together and talking in the afternoons, going to the beach to swim, and taking boat trips to neighboring islands. As Edna's infatuation with Robert becomes obvious, one of Edna's friends, Adèle Ratignolle, warns Robert to stop flirting with Edna, because she is not like the Creole women with whom Robert has flirted in the past. Adèle tells Robert that Edna



is different because she might make the mistake of taking him seriously. Robert becomes angry at the suggestion that he is not a man who a woman should take seriously, but retreats from his position when Adèle reminds him that should he allow himself to become involved with a married woman, he would not be worthy of the trust that the families at Grand Isle place in him. Adèle's warning may ultimately precipitate Robert's premature departure from Grand Isle.

Edna's restlessness leads to a series of emotional awakenings from which she begins to gain a sense of the parts of her life that she must cast off. These awakenings cause her to try to break away from the traditional role of wife and mother that turn-of-the-century society prescribed for women. Her first awakening occurs in chapter one, when she listens to the artist Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano. Edna is "fond of music" because it allows her to enjoy pleasant mental images. She sits on the edge of the gallery during a gathering of all the vacationers. In this scene, she is poised on the edge of two worlds, the family-centered world of Creole society, and the enticing gulf, with its "mystic moon" which "speaks to the soul." The "voice of the sea" exerts a strong influence in Edna throughout the novel, offering a salve to her restless spirit and "inviting" her "to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude" in an attempt to fulfill her inner self. As Edna sits looking out over the gulf and listening to the strains of Mademoiselle Reisz's haunting music, Edna experiences the "first passion of her life." Her awakening becomes apparent later in the evening as she effortlessly swims for the first time. Edna has tried to learn to swim all summer but has no success until after her awakening.

Following her initial awakening, Edna begins to depart from the prescribed "mother-woman" role. She returns to her family's cottage after her swim, drained and tired after experiencing both the "unlimited" in which her "excited fancy" wished to "lose itself," and a momentary flash of terror that she would be unable to regain the shore. Robert accompanies her to her cottage, where Edna reclines in a hammock, and Robert remains with her until the other bathers return from the beach. As he leaves, Edna experiences the "first-felt throbbings of desire" for him. She remains in the hammock after Léonce returns from the beach, despite his insistent demands that she enter the house and go to bed. She tells him to leave her alone, tired of his rude commands, and finally tells him that he should "not speak to [her] that way again" as she "shall not answer." Only after her husband seats himself outside with her, smoking the cigars which are symbols of his overbearing masculinity, does Edna enter the house.

The next morning, Edna summons Robert, inviting him to accompany her to a nearby island, the Chênière Caminada. While attending mass at the Chênière, Edna becomes ill. Robert takes her to the home of Madame Antoine, who offers Edna a place to rest. Later in the evening, Mme. Antoine tells stories of lovers and pirates that are so real to Edna that she can hear the "whispering voices of dead men and the clink of muffled gold." As they return to Grand Isle late that night, Edna and Robert lay plans for other excursions together, and their conversation implies that they are each considering embarking on an affair. Shortly after their trip to the Chênière, however, Robert suddenly decides to leave Grand Isle and go to Vera Cruz to seek his fortune with a family friend. Shocked by his abrupt departure, Edna begins to realize the depth of her feelings for



Robert. He bids her a cold and distant farewell, which, coupled with his "unkind" departure, sends Edna into a depression from which she never fully recovers.

## New Orleans

At the end of the summer, the Pontelliers return to their fashionable home, in New Orleans. Edna's malaise deepens, leading her to ignore her household responsibilities in favor of "lending herself to any passing caprice." Edna neglects the supervision of the servants, leading to unpalatable meals. She paints and refuses to keep her "at home" days, demonstrating a general disregard for society's conventions. When Léonce chastises Edna for "letting the housekeeping go to the dickens," she does not become upset like she used to. Instead she tells Léonce to leave her alone because he "bothers" her. She begins roaming through the streets of New Orleans, on some days feeling happy and content, and on others feeling "unhappy, she did not know why - when it did not seem worthwhile to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead." The change in Edna becomes obvious to everyone around her, including her father when he comes to New Orleans for an extended visit. Edna in "some way doesn't seem like the same woman."

In the midst of Edna's turmoil, Léonce departs on an extended business trip. During his absence, Edna sends her children to stay with their maternal grandmother and continues to live for herself. She begins attending the races and other social outings with Mrs. Highcamp, whom her husband has discouraged her from socializing with, and Alcée Arobin, with whom she ultimately has an affair. She decides to move from her husband's home into a house around the corner, which is dubbed the "pigeon house" because it is so tiny. Before she leaves Léonce's home, Edna hosts an elaborate dinner party for a selected few of her friends. She is the consummate hostess, making even the irascible Mlle. Reisz content, until Robert's brother, Victor, begins singing a song that poignantly reminds her of Robert. The lethargy that she has suffered from since the previous summer once again falls over her, and when the young man refuses to stop singing the song, she becomes agitated and cries out for him to quit. The party breaks up quickly after her outburst. Léonce is horrified at her flaunting of societal conventions, but rather than casting her out, he covers her social *faux pas* by making a grand spectacle of remodeling the family home.

Edna misses Robert sorely after his departure from Grand Isle, yet it is only in the presence of Mlle. Reisz - "that personality which was offensive to her," but whose "divine art" reached Edna's spirit and "set it free" - that she admits that she is in love with the younger man. Edna experiences a second epiphany as a result of Mlle. Reisz. As she continues to slide into despair during the New Orleans winter, Edna decides to find Mlle. Reisz. She begins spending time with the artist, listening to her play the piano. Upon learning that Robert has been writing to Mlle. Reisz, she begs for news of the young man. After Robert returns to New Orleans, Edna inadvertently meets him at Mlle. Reisz's apartment; again, Mlle. Reisz unwittingly acts as a catalyst for Edna's emerging sense of what she must do to ease her restlessness. Edna discovers that the young man has been avoiding her, and although they go to a cafe to have some coffee, they





part on strained terms. They later meet, again by coincidence as Robert has continued to avoid Edna, in a garden coffeehouse, and this time he accompanies her to the pigeon house. Edna confesses her love and passion for Robert very openly, telling him that they will "love each other." Just as they are on the verge of becoming intimate, however, Edna is called away to attend Adèle who is giving birth to her fourth child. Robert begs Edna not to leave, but Edna feels compelled to sit with her friend. She leaves, promising to return shortly.

Edna finds Adèle's ordeal exhausting and emotionally draining, and as she leaves Adèle's bedside, the attending physician recognizes her turmoil. He speaks of the tricks that nature plays in order to get "mothers for the race," and invites Edna to come and speak with him about what is troubling her. Still distressed by Adèle's pain, Edna returns to the pigeon house, expecting to find Robert. Instead, she finds a note which says "Good bye - because I love you. Good bye."

## **Return to Grand Isle**

Edna spends the remainder of the night lying on her sofa, thinking. In the morning, she goes to Grand Isle. She encounters Victor, and tells him that she is going to the beach for a swim. She requests that he find some lunch for her. She then goes down to the beach, strips her clothes from her body, and "stands as a newborn creature under the sky." She walks into the gulf, which again "speaks to the soul, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude." She swims out quite far, not realizing until it is too late that she has no strength to return to the shore. She drowns in the gulf, remembering key events from her life, and through her death becomes one with the sea which has so affected her.



# Characters

## Alcée Arobin

Alcée Arobin provides for Edna the distraction she needs from her involvement with Robert. Arobin is a "womanizer." A single man who is known to go from one woman to another, Alcée recognizes in Edna a vulnerability from which they can both benefit. He does not have to commit to Edna, and she does not have to deny herself for him. While he has no intentions of marrying Edna—nor she him—they satisfy each other's needs for companionship and sexual gratification.

## Colonel

The Colonel is Edna's father, a man who believes in tradition and constancy. He visits briefly with the Pontelliers while in the city to purchase a wedding gift for another daughter. A retired confederate who enjoys his "toddlies," the Colonel is tall, thin, and rugged-looking with white hair and a mustache accenting his bronzed face. Every bit the military man, as well as the Southern gentleman, he expects to be waited on and catered to. He also expects Edna to attend her sister's wedding as a womanly gesture and a matter of family respect. When Edna refuses to attend, the Colonel tersely advises Léonce to control Edna with a firmer hand.

## Doctor

See Dr. Mandelet.

## Robert Lebrun

Robert Lebrun, though clean-shaven, has nearly the same brown coloring as Léonce, but his youth makes his common look appear handsome. Robert is single and enjoys his holidays on the Grand Isle with his mother, who owns the resort. He always spends time with one of the female vacationers. Tills year he chooses Edna Pontellier. They take walks together, have long conversations, and go swimming and boating on a daily basis. Robert finds that he and Edna have a great deal in common. They spend so much time together and enjoy each other so much, he realizes they are falling in love.

Creole men were often friends with other men's wives, but they would not think of having affairs with them. A true Creole, Robert does not believe that he should be a party to Edna's betrayal of her husband. He becomes concerned that people will see their relationship for what it really is. While Robert does love Edna, he is not strong enough to rebel against Creole honor and duty to prove it to her. Robert leaves for Mexico at the end of the summer to avoid the problems that would arise if he and Edna were to continue their relationship.



Robert returns to New Orleans and visits with Edna but does not consummate the relationship. Still unable to ignore the influence of his Creole upbringing, Robert cannot accept Edna for the person she is. He is not strong enough to turn his back on traditional expectations to love the Edna who can make her own decisions.

## Dr. Mandelet

Gray-haired with reading glasses, the round Doctor Mandelet is the picture of wisdom. When he taps the arms of his chair with his fingertips and raises his bushy eyebrows, he is busy pondering symptoms and possible diagnoses. In Léonce's presence, the Doctor attributes Edna's unusual behavior to a passing whim, or a womanly idiosyncrasy. The Doctor observes Edna, however, and detects in her only a radiant happiness. While he would not overstep Creole boundaries to say anything to Léonce, the Doctor tells himself that Edna's "problem" is a man other than Léonce.

## Edna Pontellier

Edna Pontellier, twenty-eight years old, is the conventional Southern wife of a successful businessman. She is a handsome woman with light brown hair and eyes to match. With thick eyebrows like her father's, her face is interesting—handsome and honest.

She dutifully manages two children and her New Orleans household and maintains her role in high society. While on summer vacation, however, Edna begins to feel that her life is too confining and that there might be more to it than marriage, motherhood, and image. This awareness is brought about in part by the attentions of Robert Lebrun, a younger single man. Edna allows herself to enjoy his company and flirtations and to start to consider some of her own needs and desires. Becoming more assertive, the formerly shy Edna opens up to Adèle Ratignolle, a fellow vacationer. Edna talks to Adèle about her life as well as her feelings related to being a woman and mother. Edna also learns to swim, something she has never before been courageous enough to try.

When the family returns to New Orleans, Edna decides to take charge of her life. Edna feels inspired by her accomplishments on the Grand Isle and by the bold thoughts she has allowed herself. She refuses to sleep with her husband, stops the socially required receiving of guests, ignores household responsibilities, and resumes her painting. In a final act of assertion, she moves out of the house. Edna experiences a feeling of freedom that affirms for her that she has done the right thing.

Edna wants to be liberated, but she also needs love and appreciation. She desires the freedom to make her own choices and to determine her own direction. Unfortunately, she finds that society—not just her marriage—is too restrictive to allow her to do these things. Her new-found freedom is short lived. While she had hoped to find happiness in a sexual relationship with acquaintance Alcée Arobin, she discovers only regret that he is not Robert While she had hoped to be successful as an artist, she finds that she has little talent. Her final discouragement comes when she realizes that she cannot separate



action from emotion—that while she will not live for others, she cannot live without others

Edna understands that her desires and her newfound true self will not be accepted by society. Unwilling to go back to being the conforming wife and mother, and really unable to, Edna chooses to commit suicide—a final act of self-determination.

## Léonce Pontellier

Léonce Pontellier is the successful New Orleans businessman to whom Edna is married. His whole appearance suggests precision. He is a small, 40-year-old man who keeps his beard neatly trimmed and his part even in his straight brown hair. His slightly stooped shoulders hint at long hours doing paper work. He has achieved a respectable status in the social and professional communities. His friends and associates admire him and consider Edna lucky to be his wife.

Very much the typical Creole gentleman, Léonce believes strongly in traditional Creole values. Léonce expects Edna to be devoted to him, their children, and their social obligations. He feels that a married woman should want nothing more than to serve her husband and care for their children. Léonce asserts that he works hard to support his family. He shows them love and consideration through the home and status that he provides. Thus, he finds it difficult to understand his wife's disinterest in their life together.

Léonce does not, however, allow himself to be too concerned. He views her new interests as a passing mood or a temporary insanity. Shrugging off Edna's disdain for him, Léonce does not even begin to think that he might be part of her "problem." He does not have much patience with what he considers her lack of responsibility, but he seriously doubts that the new Edna is a permanent one. Rather than try to communicate with Edna, or to find out what has happened to the relationship, he consults the family doctor. Léonce lets the matter drop when he is satisfied that his own evaluation of Edna's behavior is correct.

## Madame Adèle Ratignolle

Adèle Ratignolle is the Southern woman that Edna Pontellier will never be. Devoted to her husband and children, Adèle lives for them and through them. She is the typical beautiful and charming woman of Creole culture—helpless, domestic, and self-involved. Her fair complexion and voluptuous white-clad figure perfectly convey her angelic nature.

While she allows Edna to confide in her, Adèle can neither understand nor approve of Edna's yearnings and is shocked at Edna's confessions. Adèle sees a woman's role in life as being the refined wife of a Southern gentleman. She denies that she is anything but fulfilled. She relies on her husband's direction and approval to give definition to her life. Adèle cannot and will not do anything without her husband by her side. She feels



abandoned if her husband and family aren't continually attentive. Adèle spends her time cultivating her image of the dutiful wife and mother. True to her beliefs, Adèle exemplifies the Southern woman.

## Mademoiselle Reisz

Mademoiselle Reisz wears her black lace and artificial violets in defiance of conformity. Unmarried and unattractive, she finds passion only in her piano playing and feels that Edna Pontellier is a kindred spirit. Edna understands her music. Edna understands the role Mlle. Reisz has chosen to play in life.

Mlle Reisz listens to Edna without passing judgement and provides for her a haven where Edna can be carried away by music and thoughts about Robert. Because she is a lonely woman who pursues her talent in exchange for relationships, Mlle. Reisz relishes Edna's presence and her appreciation for Mlle. Reisz's music. Seen as eccentric, the shriveled Mlle Reisz simply chooses to be herself. To conform to the role that society defines for women would mean that Mlle. Reisz would have to give up her music. That would mean death for Mlle. Reisz.



# Themes

## Flesh vs. Spirit

Edna's rediscovery of feelings that she has long repressed underlie her search for freedom, self-expression, and love. Her relationship with Robert Lebrun awakens forgotten physical needs and prompts Edna to think about her life. For the first time, she begins to open up to others. She shares confidences with Robert Lebrun and Adèle Ratignolle and allows herself to be stirred by Mlle. Reisz's music. She learns to swim, further experiencing the power of the connection between mind and body. She finally acknowledges her feelings toward Robert and realizes that she can take action to control her own life. The new Edna results from a marriage of flesh and spirit.

## Freedom

The awakening that Edna experiences at the Grand Isle is the beginning of her quest for personal freedom. She realizes that she wants to live her life beyond the definitions of wife and mother. When she returns to New Orleans, she refuses to sleep with her husband and gradually withdraws from meeting social obligations with people who are important only to her husband and his social status. She ultimately moves out of the house and rents a place of her own. No longer limited to doing what society expects of her, Edna earns her own income through her painting and socializes with whom she chooses. She enjoys the freedom of venturing out on her own—discovering parts of the city she never knew existed and noticing people she previously would have ignored. For Edna, choice defines freedom.

## Sexism

In acknowledging her personal desires and dreams, Edna realizes that double standards exist for men and women. While no one thinks anything of Robert's attention to Edna, people would be appalled at knowing how Edna feels about him. Adèle, for example, is shocked and tries to warn Edna to be careful of her reputation. It was unthinkable that a woman should have her own desires or want to do anything but supervise her household and participate in social functions. Men, on the other hand, engaged in extra-marital affairs, pursued business and personal interests, and virtually had the freedom to do as they pleased. To illustrate, Léonce shows no concern over Robert's relationship with his wife, yet is so perturbed by Edna's actions that he believes she is having a nervous breakdown and consults the family doctor. The roles that Edna, Robert, and Léonce play in the story point out the unfairness of sexism and the repression of individual freedom that it causes.



## Search for Self

Edna's spiritual and physical awakenings herald her search for self. While Léonce can see her actions only as some sort of temporary insanity, Edna knows that she is discovering the person within who wants to be free of society's boundaries. In attempting to determine that person, she first tries out her assertive self by refusing to have sexual relations with her husband. She next taps her creative self by reviving her interest in painting. She tries to define her relative self by considering her feelings about motherhood and her relationships with people. Finally, she experiences her sensual self by allowing herself to feel and act upon her own desires. Edna succeeds in determining who she is but discovers that the price for having her own Identity is more than she can afford.

## Choices and Consequences: Free Will

From the time that she first meets Robert, Edna realizes that all choices have their consequences. Her choice to remain in a relationship with Léonce would result in her continuing dissatisfaction with life. Yet she really doesn't understand, initially, that she can make choices that will result in different consequences. When she does see that she can make changes, she experiences a freedom that she has never before felt. This exhilaration, however, is short-lived. Edna finds that free will carries with it responsibilities that are almost as confining as her marriage was. Her loveless affair with Alcée, and Robert's inability to reciprocate her love, lead Edna to see the final, dismal consequence of her life. No matter what choices she makes, Edna can never be totally free within the confines of the society in which she lives.

## Sex

The choices Edna makes in her life result, largely, from her rediscovery of sexual pleasure. Robert's attention prompts Edna to ponder her life. As an initial result, Edna withholds sex from her husband. Then, her unfulfilled love for Robert and her loveless affair with Alcée demonstrate to her that love and sex are entirely separate entities. Edna discovers that while sex draws men and women together and can be physically satisfying, it does not necessarily meet one's emotional needs. Free sex has its price, and ultimately, Edna is not willing to pay it.

## Alienation and Loneliness

Although people surround Edna on the Grand Isle, she feels separated by her thoughts. She believes that if she makes changes in her life to reflect her true self, she will be able to do what she chooses and associate with people who think like she does. Unfortunately, while her new companions do live their lives in their own ways, they also live isolated by society's rules. Mlle. Reisz is a prime example. She is a talented musician who has chosen the unconventional road. Because Mlle. Reisz is unmarried



and living alone, people think she is odd. Few people appreciate her music and fewer still associate with her. Mlle. Reisz finds comfort and passion only in her music. Edna eventually feels the same kind of loneliness. Tantalized by what could be, she refuses to give up her dream of freedom and to sacrifice her newfound individuality. As a result, she alienates herself from all of society in her choice to create her own destiny.

## **Public vs. Private Life**

Edna recognizes that she is unhappy with the life she is leading and all that it represents. She must answer to a husband who wants her to be nothing more than a household manager and nursemaid. She must perform the social duties expected from the devoted wife of a highly respected man. She must appear to be the loving mother of children who demand her full and constant attention. To maintain this public image, Edna must deny herself the intimate pleasures of mutual love, the liberating acts of self-expression and creativity, and the joy of having friends with whom she can share her most private thoughts.

Edna finally tires of the masquerade. She realizes that she can no longer ignore her own desires, thoughts, and aspirations. She knows that her new attitude will be difficult to reconcile with a public life, but she pursues it with determination. No longer stifled by public expectations, Edna acts on her thoughts.

Unfortunately, her liberation does not last. She finds that there can be no true union of her public and private selves. The world in which she lives is bound too much by social convention to accept long-term nonconformity. The public is not ready to embrace the private Edna, and Edna is unwilling to yield to public sentiment.





# Style

## Point of View

An objective third person narrates the story of Edna Pontellier and her search for self in *The Awakening*. The narrator does not criticize or applaud characters for their traits or their actions. Most importantly, the narrator withholds judgement of Edna and the choices she makes.

## Conflict

The basic premise of *The Awakening* is conflict. Edna Pontellier discovers that she cannot be the person society expects her to be and seeks to resolve the problem by changing her life. Even as she recognizes the conflict within herself and begins to deal with it, the people with whom she associates present her with new challenges. Edna believes that she can be an artist and a lover and still be independent. Alcée and Robert prove her wrong. They reimpose the original conflict by proving to Edna that they can see her in only one way. While each has his separate view, both men reflect society's beliefs that women have certain functions in life. Edna is right back where she started.

## Setting

The setting contributes to the conflict. The story takes place in the late 1800s. Most of the action is set in the heart of Creole society, New Orleans. The city bustles with social gatherings, business meetings, and the impersonal pace of busy people. However, it is Grand Isle, a resort near New Orleans, that has the most influence on Edna. The Grand Isle in the Gulf of Mexico offers an intimate and relaxed atmosphere for walks along the beach, leisurely swimming, and moonlit conversations. Edna falls in love on the Grand Isle and changes her life upon return to, and under the cover of, hectic city life.

## Imagery

Imagery used in the story emphasizes the conflict with which Edna struggles. Edna realizes that she cannot tolerate being confined to marriage and motherhood, but nor is she free to love and create. Society sees the two choices as complete opposites. Other opposing images emphasize the contradiction. New Orleans city life, with its stiff social rules, contrasts with the openness and ease of life on the Grand Isle. Birds fly freely on the Grand Isle, while they live in cages in the city. Edna's friends, Adèle and Mlle. Reisz, are complete opposites as well. Adèle exemplifies the traditional Southern woman while Mlle. Reisz represents the typical societal outcast. The final, and most significant, image is the seductive acceptance of the sea. It mirrors both birth and death.



## Foil

Foil is used to emphasize the primary conflict by exaggerating the distinct differences among Edna, Adèle, and Mlle. Reisz. Edna knows that she does not want to be, and will not be, like Adèle. Adèle lives only for her husband and her children. While she loves her family and they love her, she has given up her own will and bows to the whims of those around her. Unlike Adèle, Mlle. Reisz has forsaken love and relationships for her music. Her lonely life revolves around playing for audiences who don't appreciate her talent. Edna does not want to be like either woman. She would like to combine the best of both of them. Edna wants to be needed and loved, like Adèle, but would also like to pursue her own interests, like Mlle. Reisz. The idea of having to remain in her marriage, with all its responsibilities and restrictions, smothers her. On the other hand, if loneliness is the price she has to pay for freedom, Edna does not want that either. The constant interplay among the three characters keeps the conflict alive.

## Symbolism

All of the images found in *The Awakening* gain more symbolic meaning as the story progresses, but the sea is the primary symbol. The sea represents the differences between choice and blind obedience, self-determination and predestination, and ultimately, between life and death. It is while at the seaside resort that Edna first realizes that she can still feel love and that she can change her life. She learns to swim at this time, too, and experiences the power of the connection between mind and body. Both of these experiences contribute to Edna's determination to find herself. To Edna, the sea represents acceptance, comfort, and self-renewal. Later, a disillusioned Edna returns to the sea to try to renew the feeling of freedom that she experienced on learning to swim and on changing her life. The sea again beckons her, and Edna willingly releases to it the conflict within her.

## Realism

The author honestly portrays Edna's conflicts. Edna faces her first dilemma when she is attracted to Robert Lebrun. She is sexually aroused and wants to consummate the relationship with Robert. She then ponders her role in life, does not like what she sees, and makes changes to redefine it for herself. Kate Chopin puts Edna in real-life situations and gives her real-life emotions. At the time the novel was written, this was unheard of. Now, critics recognize that Chopin was ahead of her time in her frank exploration of the relationship between self and society.

# Historical Context

## Creole Society

Kate Chopin lived in, and generally wrote about, life in the South. In *The Awakening*, she wrote specifically about Creole society in northern Louisiana. Creoles saw themselves as different from Anglo-Americans and maintained cultural traditions passed down from their French and Spanish ancestors. They enjoyed gambling, entertainment, and social gatherings and spent a great deal of time in these activities. The Creoles seldom accepted outsiders to their social circles and felt that newcomers should live by their rules. Men dominated the households and expected their women to provide them with well-kept homes and many children to carry on the family name. Women responded by bearing children and refining their social talents. While the Creole men caroused, their women kept well-run houses and perfected their accomplishments in music, art, and conversation. Such refined women enhanced their husbands' social status.

## The Beginnings of the Women's Movement

The 1800s saw a change in the status of women. Chopin's character, Edna Pontellier, illustrates the independent nature that women began recognizing in themselves. Edna felt that there was more to life than living in her husband's shadow and stifling her own desires and dreams. Women of the time felt the same way. As early as 1848, women gathered in New York State to begin addressing issues of equality. This first convention of women set the groundwork for the women's rights movement. Women's groups continued to organize to educate women about social and political issues and to allow a forum for women's discussions. While women did not gain the right to vote until 1920, these pioneering efforts gained a voice in society that would not be quieted. Edna's actions in *The Awakening* reflect the times and the emotions felt by the many women who sought personal freedom.

## Literary Criticism

Chopin's editors tolerated her daring themes and characters' actions more than did the critics and general public. Chopin wrote about life as it really was and did not shy away from subjects that were considered taboo. The characters in Chopin's short stories and novels often demonstrated the "dual lives" that women of the 1800s lived. In a time when women's roles were changing, Chopin's characters found themselves questioning conformity and duty versus freedom and personal identity.

Kate Chopin, herself, exemplified the spirit of the women's movement during the 1800s. While she was married to a wealthy Southern businessman, she defied tradition by assisting her husband with his business, taking walks by herself through the streets of New Orleans, and smoking cigarettes. Her blatant disregard for society's expectations



peaked in *The Awakening*. Her character, Edna Pontellier, thinks and acts in many ways like Kate Chopin did. Edna thinks about herself as separate from her family and society. She challenges the role society has forced upon her and courageously turns her back on it.

Critics denounced Chopin for allowing Edna Pontellier the freedom to refuse conformity. They also criticized Chopin's seeming sympathy for her character. The outcry demonstrated that the literary world was not ready for the realism Chopin's novel portrayed. Even though women's roles in the real world were changing, Chopin's frank treatment of female sexuality, social impropriety, and personal freedom shook the literary world. Critics condemned the novel. Libraries removed it from their shelves. In spite of the freer climate initiated by the women's movement, the St Louis Fine Arts Club removed Kate Chopin from their rolls. Chopin continued to write, however, and to allow her characters to stretch beyond the confining boundaries set by society. Today's critics recognize her artistry and applaud her realistic approach that helps define society in the late nineteenth century.



## Critical Overview

Critics condemned *The Awakening* when it was first published in 1899. They criticized Chopin's frank treatment of such moral issues as extramarital affairs and female sexuality. Good literature simply did not discuss women's emotions. It ignored the fact that women have the same impulses as men. For Edna to admit, even to herself, that she was sexually aroused, was shocking. For her to actually engage in an affair was scandalous.

Critics also denounced Chopin's seeming acceptance of Edna's search for personal freedom. They were appalled at the choices Edna made to acquire her freedom. Women were expected to accept their station in life and to repress any feelings they might have that could be considered non-conformist. Edna not only disliked her role in life, she also blatantly refused to continue it. Readers naturally sided with Léonce when Edna refused to have sex with him. When Edna moved out of the house, readers criticized her for abandoning her children.

Critics felt Chopin was overstepping her rights to discuss Edna's thoughts and improprieties so objectively. They felt that Chopin should have punished Edna in some way. The public, too, took offense at Edna's passion and adultery and virtually cheered her ultimate suicide. Women who wanted to keep their social standing lived within the rules of society. While men could have affairs and still be respected, society despised women who did. Edna could have had her thoughts if she had kept them to herself. For Edna to openly air them and to act upon them was a moral outrage. The public disapproved not only of the character, but of the author who could write so dispassionately about such improper behavior. As a result, Chopin's hometown library removed the book from its shelves, and the St. Louis Fine Arts Club banned Chopin from its membership.

*The Awakening* remained unnoticed for several years after the commotion it initially caused. In the 1930s, however, the book came back into the limelight when literary critics changed their minds about it. An intense look at the work revealed its positive elements. The researcher who first studied it appreciated Chopin's attention to literary form, particularly her mastery of form and theme. Chopin's composition has a poetic unity to it that comes from her application of symbolic imagery to plot. An example of this is Chopin's use of the sea—as a symbol of life and death as well as the site for the main action in the plot.

Since this first new look at the work, other critics have applauded Chopin's use of psychological realism, symbolic imagery, and sensual themes. For example, Per Seyersted stated that Chopin was the first female to write about sex in an intelligent, realistic and non-judgmental way. Other critics agree that Chopin used sex in *The Awakening* not to moralize, but to reveal certain psychological characteristics of her characters. Characters become real people with real emotions as a result of the way Chopin dealt with their sexuality. This attribute raised the book above the "sex fiction" that one critic accused Chopin of writing, according to Margo Culley who edited the



second edition of Chopin's *The Awakening*. The book's form, style, characterization, and symbolism contribute to both its early opposition as well as to its acclaimed acceptance today.

*The Awakening* has taken on a new significance since the advent of the women's movement. Literary debates have raged over the significance of Pontellier's awakening, her suicide, and the conflict between motherhood and career for women in the nineteenth century. Many critics feel that Edna's suicide was an independent victory over society's limitations. Others feel that she killed herself because she felt defeated by society and did not want to disgrace her children.

Women's issues were still too new in the late 1800s for the book to have any impact at the time it was published. Feminists since the 1940s and 1950s, however, have recognized the book as an important contribution to the understanding of women's changing roles in an evolving society.

Chopin was in tune to women's issues and in a broader sense interested in universal human nature. Through her characters, she explored the relationship between self and society.

Particularly aware of the conflicts women face—due in part to her French background and her female perspective—Chopin shared with her readers a view of women in American society that differed from other writers of her day. Her characters often held unconventional attitudes toward themselves and society's rules. These characters tried to fit into society and, at the same time, remain true to themselves. Edna Pontellier is no exception. She represents women in society both past and present. She joins other of Chopin's female protagonists in forming a basis for dialogue about a society that once devalued female sensuality and independence.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



# Critical Essay #1

*Green, who is the co-author of Kate Chopin: An Annotated Bibliography of Critical Works, discusses how Chopin's work, which was very controversial when it was published, has become a classic in American literature and a particularly important piece of fiction among feminist critics.*

Published in 1899, Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is considered to be one of the cornerstone texts of both American realism and the feminist movement. Modern critics praise *The Awakening* for its daring treatment of traditional gender roles as they were defined at the turn of the century, and for its exploration of a woman's search for self-fulfillment. However, when Chopin's novel first appeared, it met with harsh criticism. Reviewers objected to the unwholesome content of the novel, and although many considered the writing style outstanding, most critics dismissed the book as trash because they perceived its protagonist as an immoral woman. One reviewer, commenting on Edna Pontellier's lack of moral substance, remarked in *Public Opinion* that "we are well satisfied when she drowns herself."

The harsh reviews that *The Awakening* received have led to a common misconception concerning the effect of its critical reception. The first biography of Kate Chopin, by priest Daniel Rankin, reports that Chopin was shunned by society and that *The Awakening* was banned by many libraries, including those in her native St Louis. These reports circulated widely for several decades, and until 1990, were accepted as factual accounts. Emily Toth's authoritative biography of Chopin, which appeared in 1990 and was subsequently nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, refutes Rankin's claims. Toth offers evidence that although *The Awakening* was reviled in some circles, the book was never officially banned, nor was it removed from library shelves during Chopin's lifetime. While Chopin lost a pre-existing contract for a collection of short fiction which would have appeared after *The Awakening*, Chopin was not a social outcast as a result of writing the controversial novel.

Despite the fallacies surrounding the initial publication of Chopin's novel, the mixed critical reception that the novel received led Chopin's publishers to allow it to pass out of print soon after its initial publication. From 1906, the date of the second printing of the novel, until 1969, when Norwegian scholar Per Seyersted began studying Chopin's fiction and produced a volume of the writer's *Complete Works*, only a few of Chopin's short stories remained in print. The appearance of Seyersted's biography precipitated scholarly study of Chopin's texts, and much of this study has focused on *The Awakening*. Feminist critics, in particular, have looked at *The Awakening* with renewed interest, and have successfully included Chopin's works in the core group of texts that constitute the basis of American literature. Since Chopin's rediscovery in 1969, her writings have remained in print continuously and have gained popularity at a rapid rate. When Chopin's works began to be reprinted, they represented a marginal example of the Southern local color school. Three decades later, *The Awakening* is a classic of American literature that is read more frequently than Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.





In *The Awakening*, Chopin adopts the point-of-view of a third-person, omniscient narrator. The narrator primarily reports the thoughts, actions, and feelings of both the main character, Edna Pontellier, and occasionally of some minor characters, such as Leonce Pontellier and Robert Lebrun. An important departure from this point-of-view occurs in chapter six, when the author pointedly intrudes into the novel. It is at this point that the reader is introduced to the internal turmoil that is the source of Edna's unrest and which causes her to act "capriciously." Chopin interjects her own voice into the narrative to tell the reader that Edna is discovering her "relations as an individual to the world within and about her" and that she is experiencing the dawning of a light which "showing the way, forbids it." Chopin takes great pains to assure that the reader does not miss the importance of this "beginning of things" that is taking place inside Edna's head, as it represents Edna's first steps on the road toward self-discovery and away from the restrictions of the gender roles which were prescribed for turn-of-the-century women. Chopin makes use of repetition, often of entire sentences or paragraphs, to point out important events in the narrative. She also very often uses oddly constructed sentences to highlight key points in the action of the story.

*The Awakening* is most often read in the context of feminist criticism. While a variety of sub-schools exist within the feminist movement, much of the feminist critiques of literary texts focus on the ways that women are treated. Feminist literary texts illustrate the types of oppression that women experience and the ways in which they struggle to break free from this oppression, realizing that they are worthwhile individuals with something meaningful to contribute to society. Accordingly, feminist readings often discuss the "jobs" that are traditionally assigned to women, such as tending a home, caring for a husband, and bearing children, and the ways in which these jobs are used to keep women in a powerless position. Female sexuality, and the way that a patriarchal system - a societal system in which men are the authorities and control the power structure - controls that sexuality are also common themes in feminist criticism. *The Awakening* deals with many of these traditionally feminist concerns. For example, much of the plot of *The Awakening* hinges on Edna's dissatisfaction with her role as a wife and mother. She feels oppressed by it and tries many avenues to escape from its restrictions.

One of the major outlets that Edna pursues as she attempts to escape from her prescribed role is the development of her sexuality. In fact, some critics have argued that Edna's awakenings are little more than a series of passionate encounters with men who are not her husband. While Edna experiences a variety of awakenings that transcend the physical or sexual, her experiences with passion play a major role in her decisions to disregard her husband's wishes, to conduct indiscreet affairs, to leave her husband's home, and ultimately to swim to her death in the sea.

Edna's destruction comes about as an indirect result of her attempts to escape, from being her husband's property, both financially and physically.

Early in the novel, she is identified as Leonce's property. For example in the first chapter of the novel, as Edna returns from the beach with Robert, she meets with Leonce's disapproval because she has allowed her self to be "burnt beyond recognition," a



conclusion which her husband draws as he looks her over as "one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage." We later find out that Leonce spends a good deal of his time admiring his "household goods," and that he numbers Edna among his possessions. However, we should not judge Leonce too harshly for his evaluation of his wife's value, because his attitude was the norm in the U.S. at the turn of the century. In fact, Edna's friends at Grand Isle consider Leonce the model husband, forcing Edna to admit that she knows of no men who treat their families with such consideration. Despite the fact that Leonce is well-to-do and gives his wife every imaginable luxury, Edna is compelled by the seductive voice of the sea to pursue the fulfillment of her inner self, even at the cost of her material possessions, her friends, and ultimately, her life.

Adele Ratignolle, Edna's close friend at Grand Isle, is a foil (or opposite) to Edna. Adele is the consummate mother-woman, who dotes on her husband, adores her children, and produces a new baby at regular intervals. Adele often pressures Edna to conform to societal standards, arguing with Edna about what a mother's responsibilities are and urging her to "think of the children" when she fears that Edna may take a rash action that would adversely affect her two small boys. Despite prompting from all sides to follow the expected path, Edna is incapable of conforming. All of her life, she has instinctively understood the "dual life" that was necessary for a woman of the late 1800s, a life which consists of "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions." However, as the summer at Grand Isle progresses, Edna becomes increasingly incapable of keeping the inward life from spilling into, and eventually completely consuming, her outward existence.

Edna's inability to reconcile her inner and outer lives precipitates her final swim in the sea. Throughout the novel, Edna is inexplicably drawn to the sea. At first, she only splashes around, as she cannot master even the most basic swimming strokes. Following her first epiphany, however, she begins to swim effortlessly. The sea is connected with many of her awakenings: Chopin invokes the sea in chapter six, describing it as "whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander," as a seductive enchantress which is "seductive, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace." Edna's final awakening, as she stands at the edge of the sea, invokes these same lines. These lines mark the starting and ending points of Edna's search for a different type of life. She is initially drawn to the sea, and finally is drawn into it permanently because of the freedom that it represents.

Scholars argue over the particulars of Edna's suicide, attempting to determine whether her death is intentional or accidental, and, by extension, whether Edna is a successful character or not. The text of *The Awakening* is ambiguous on each of these points. The text seems to support the conclusions that Edna intends to commit suicide. She strips naked before her swim; she swims very far away from the shore without once looking back; and she is in a state of despair when she arrives at Grand Isle, incensed that her husband and children presumed that they could "drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days." However there is an equal measure of evidence that supports the argument that Edna drowns accidentally. For example, she discusses her meal and sleeping arrangements with Victor at some length before she goes to the beach, and



the narration tells us that in spite of the blow that she has suffered at Robert's departure she is "not thinking of these things as she walked to the beach."

Edna's death also begs the question of whether she is a success or a failure. Many critics have argued that because she dies, she is by definition a failure. After all, she is dead. However, given the options open to women at the turn of the century, it can also be argued that death was the only viable alternative that Edna had not experienced. She could no longer survive as merely a wife and mother, and she did not find fulfillment in art or in casual affairs. The man that she loved had deserted her, and she quickly came to the realization that his departure did not mean much, as the day would come when "the thought of him would melt out of her existence." Her only alternative was the peace and freedom that would come with a painless death. Death represented one aspect of her life that she could take complete control over. While these questions will undoubtedly be debated at length for some time to come, no clear-cut answers are to be found in the text. Chopin's ending is ambiguous, and it would appear to be intentionally so.

*The Awakening* offers a stirring glimpse into the psyche of a woman, giving contemporary readers insight into both the social structures and the effects that these structures have exerted over generations of women. This novel also offers a female protagonist with whom we can identify, and for whom we can have a great deal of sympathy. Edna Pontellier's escape strikes a cord in many readers, in large part because she had the strength to act, to take control of her destiny. It is this very act, this empowerment, which has made *The Awakening* a mainstay in the American literary canon.

Source: Suzanne D. Green, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following excerpt, Stone examines the growth of Edna's artistry and autonomy.*

Many recent critics of *The Awakening* fail to see Edna's growing sense of power and control as signs of progress toward a new self-definition. They view her as a woman deluded by romanticism who is unable to make a conscious choice, such as the decision to become an artist, because her instincts are regressive... .

In this essay I will argue that Edna's memories of her childhood, her immersion in the sea, and her search for a mother figure are emblems of regression in the service of progression toward an artistic vocation. Rather than returning to the dependency of childhood, she goes forward to a new conception of self, a definition of herself as artist. Further, I will suggest that Edna's romanticism is positive because it catalyzes her imaginative power. As the final step forward functioning as an autonomous human being, moreover, she sees through the delusion of romantic love after confronting the horror of giving birth.

Edna's artistic birthing is shown through the contrasting characters of two women, Adèle Ratignolle, a "mother-woman," and Mme. Reisz, a pianist. As Per Seyersted has observed [in *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, Louisiana State University Press, 1969], "the novel covers two generations and births.. a finely wrought system of tensions and interrelations set up between Edna's slow birth as authentic and sexual being and the counterpointed pregnancy and confinement of Adèle." Adèle embodies female biology, always talking of her condition, for she has a baby about every two years. Adèle's opposite, Mme. Reisz, a serious artist, is unmarried. She exemplifies the solitary life of the dedicated artist.

A third influence on Edna's artistic development is Robert Lebrun, a young Creole man who, because he has not yet assumed the masculine values of his society, can be a friend to Edna as her husband cannot. He teaches her to swim, furthering her autonomy, and with his easy way of talking about himself, encourages her self-expression. Because he has aroused sexual desire in her, she eventually has an affair with another man, Alcée Arobin, an affair which functions as a rite of passage to sexual autonomy.

Each of these three figures has positive and negative qualities that help and hinder Edna's struggle to be creative. Adèle Ratignolle, a sensuous woman, awakens Edna to the sensuality of her own body. Also Adèle's candor in talking about such subjects as her pregnancy helps Edna to overcome her reserve. Furthermore, Adèle encourages her to express thoughts and feelings she had kept hidden, even from herself. For example, at Adèle's urging to say what she is thinking as they sit together by the sea, Edna recalls "a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl□"



In these early scenes by the sea Chopin also establishes the sea as a central symbol for Edna's birthing of a new self. The connection in her mind between the grass and the sea foreshadows the autonomy she achieves by learning to swim, as well as her final walk into the sea at the book's end. Symbolically, the sea is both a generative and a destructive force in *The Awakening*; it represents danger inherent in artistic self-expression—losing oneself in unlimited space—as well as the source of all life, facilitating rebirth, so that Edna in her first moments of being able to swim feels like a child who has learned to walk. The ocean has also been seen as a symbol of woman or the mother in both her benevolent and terrible aspects. Madame Ratignolle, in association with the sea, represents the benevolent mother who nurtures Edna and even inspires her to paint. Adèle seems to her, as she is seated on the beach, like "some sensuous Madonna," and she paints her picture.

At this beginning point in her artistic development Edna thinks of herself as a "dabbler." However, though Edna has had no formal training, Chopin establishes the fact that she is talented for "she handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came not from a long and close acquaintance with them but from a natural aptitude." We also see early on that Edna has the capacity for self-criticism as "after surveying the sketch critically, she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface and crumpled the paper between her hands." Later when Edna's critical faculties are turned against conventional values of home, husband, and family in the direction of autonomy, Adèle will show the negative side of her mothering qualities. By constantly reminding Edna of her duty to her children, she binds her to society's rules and impedes her creative growth.

In these early scenes at Grand Isle where Edna's struggle to be an artist is beginning, Robert is another source of imaginative power. As she paints Adèle's portrait, he encourages her with "expressions of appreciation in French." While this may simply be Creole flattery, it is more encouragement than she has ever received from her husband. Like Adèle, he is sensual, and as she paints he rests his head against her arm. He also speaks about himself freely, telling her of his plans to go to Mexico. Under his influence she speaks to him about her life, and it is he who awakens her to the passions of her body. A few weeks after the painting scene on the beach, Chopin again uses the sea as a symbol of growth, and again in connection with Robert. One evening he proposes a night swim and we see him lingering behind with the lovers, "and there was not one but was ready to follow when he led the way." Robert's appearance is associated frequently with lovers; he becomes Cupid who awakens Edna to the force of Eros. This evening she learns to swim and feels herself "reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself." Loss of boundaries suggests orgiastic union which foreshadows Edna's final merging with the sea. Significantly, that evening as she lies in a hammock, an image of lovemaking, she feels herself "pregnant with the first felt throbbing desire" for Robert.

When her husband returns later she refuses to go inside when he asks her to. By now she has achieved mastery over her body by learning to swim and mastery over her environment by challenging his authority. She now has to achieve mastery over her imagination, but at this point can only "blindly follow whatever impulse moved her." Next morning, without much thought, she asks a servant to tell Robert she wishes him to take the boat with her to Chênrière for mass. Walking to the wharf, there are, as always when



Robert appears, lovers who already stroll "shoulder to shoulder." Edna's imagination is subsumed by the romance phase of her creative growth as she spends an idyllic day with Robert....

The woman who represents a structured form of art is Mme. Reisz, the true artist Edna wishes to become. While Madame Ratignolle plays the piano solely for the pleasure of her family, Mme. Reisz plays Frederic Chopin with great feeling and art. Before hearing Mme. Reisz play, music had evoked pictures in Edna's mind. After listening to her play, Edna's passions are aroused. But like such nineteenth century female artists as Emily Dickinson, Mme. Reisz is unmarried, childless, eccentric in manner and in dress, and alienated from society. She cannot serve as a role model for Edna. Nevertheless, Edna's creative development continues. After the family's return to New Orleans, she takes up her painting once more in spite of her husband's admonishment that she "not let the family go to the devil" while she paints. She works with "great energy and interest" though she feels she is not accomplishing anything....

There are factors beyond Edna's control, however, which limit her development [Sandra] Gilbert and [Susan] Gubar [in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Yale University Press, 1979], in a discussion of the woman writer in patriarchal society, describe "the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent need for a female audience." Certainly this describes Edna's situation as she seeks out her two contrasting women friends for validation, Mme. Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle. She brings her paintings to Adèle even though she knows in advance, "her opinion in such a matter would be next to valueness ... but she sought the words of praise and encouragement that would help her to put heart into her venture." Adèle, true to her character as a "mother-woman," tells her that her talent is immense, and Edna is pleased even though she recognizes "its true worth." She receives a much harsher judgement of her artistic capacity from Mme. Reisz. In reply to the question of what she has been doing, Edna tells her "I am becoming an artist" and her friend says, "Ah! an artist. You have pretensions, Madame." Sensing the insecurity which keeps her from total commitment to art, Mme. Reisz warns, "To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And moreover, to succeed the artist must possess the courageous soul"...

Two events occur almost simultaneously at the novel's climax, events which portray the forces that finally defeat Edna's search for artistic wholeness.

One is her witnessing of Adèle's suffering in childbirth and the other is Robert's admitting that he loves her and wants to marry her. Edna has gone to Adèle, leaving Robert just after he tells her he has dreamed of marrying her if her husband will free her. She has replied that she is no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to be given away. When she returns from Adèle's he is gone, having explained in a note that he has left not because he doesn't love her but because he does. Robert has been deeply connected to her sexual growth, which in turn affected the growth of her Imagination. Through him she has begun to transfer the authenticity of her romantic vision to her paintings. Now, romantic illusions shattered, she loses the catalyst for her art.





The other illusion that is shattered is that of childbirth being a moment of joy. Edna does not remember her own pain when she gave birth, since she was chloroformed. Now, seeing Adèle's pain, she recognizes that she cannot rebel against nature. Adèle's parting words "think of the children" remind her of her mother-role which conflicts with her new-found freedom. Chopin was far ahead of her time in exposing the myth of bearing children as a woman's ultimate fulfillment, calling Adèle's "accouchement" a scene of torture. Almost a century later Sylvia Plath was to use the same image in *The Bell Jar* by describing the delivery room as "some awful torture chamber." .

The next morning Edna returns to Grand Isle and walks to her death in the sea. Is her suicide triggered by Adèle's suffering in childbirth? By the knowledge that it is futile to rebel against biology? Does she kill herself because Robert has left her? Or because she has failed to become an artist? Edna drowns herself because she cannot live as a conventional wife or mother any longer, and society will not accept her newfound self. The solitude she enjoys makes for artistic growth, but she is bound to children, home, social duty. She will not sacrifice her new autonomy because, as Anne Jones points out [in *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936*, Louisiana State University Press, 1981], "she will not relinquish the core of her vision, which is not finally romance, but rather her own autonomous being... so she freely goes to the sea, losing her life. But she does not lose her self."

By beginning and ending *The Awakening* with the sea Chopin gives the book a wholeness that Edna cannot find in her life. Furthermore, Chopin's themes of sea/mother, love/lover, self/birth, sexuality/creativity are joined as Edna's birth of a new self is juxtaposed against Adèle's giving birth to another. In a moment of liberty she stands naked on the beach feeling like "some new-born creature" before entering the sea which becomes the universal Great Mother. To be sure, Chopin uses one image of defeat, the "bird with the broken wing," which Edna sees "reeling, fluttering, circling, disabled down down to the water" This was the image used by Mlle. Reisz when, as if predicting Edna's fall she said, "it is a sad spectacle to see the weakling bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth." But how strong must a woman be at this time in order to maintain her artistic vocation without any support from community?..

Yet Edna's final moment is one of autonomous sexuality, as the world of her imagination resonates with fertility□"There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air." Chopin repeats the description of the sea which describes Edna's first swim, "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace," and with this symbolic closure portrays Edna becoming whole in the only way she can, by Immersion in the universal sea of love. But how can Edna's death be positive? Many critics think it is not.... Nevertheless, Edna Pontellier succeeds in giving birth to a new self even though the fact that she can not live on earth as this new self is tragic. The triumph of *The Awakening* lies in Chopin's depicting, when others did not, the conflicts faced by women who wish to become artists. Courageously, she built in her novel a bridge from past to future so that women might find their way across. Like her heroine, she too was a *pontellier*, a bridgemaker.

Source: Carole Stoue, "The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*' Birth and Creativity," in *Women's Studies*, Vol. 13, Nos 1 & 2, 1986, pp. 23-31.





## Critical Essay #3

*In this excerpt, Eble relates background information about the author and re-evaluates themes and controversies aroused by Chopin's novel upon its publication at the turn of the century.*

The claim of [*The Awakening*] upon the reader's attention is simple. It is a first-rate novel. The justification for urging its importance is that we have few enough novels of its stature. One could add that it is advanced in theme and technique over the novels of its day, that it anticipates in many respects the modern novel. It could be claimed that it adds to American fiction an example of what Gide called the *romanpur*, a kind of novel not characteristic of American writing. One could offer the book as evidence that the regional writer can go beyond the limitations of regional material. But these matters aside, what recommends the novel is its general excellence...

In a way, the novel is an American *Bovary*, though such a designation is not precisely accurate. Its central character is similar: the married woman who seeks love outside a stuffy, middle-class marriage. It is similar too in the definitive way it portrays the mind of a woman trapped in marriage and seeking fulfillment of what she vaguely recognizes as her essential nature. The husband, Leonce Pontellier, is a businessman whose nature and preoccupations are not far different from those of Charles Bovary. There is a Leon Dupuis in Robert Lebrun, a Rodolphe Boulanger in Alcee Arobin. And too, like *Madame Bovary*, the novel handles its material superbly well. Kate Chopin herself was probably more than any other American writer of her time under French influence. Her background was French-Irish; she married a Creole; she read and spoke French and knew contemporary French literature well; she associated both in St. Louis and Louisiana with families of French ancestry and disposition. But despite the similarities and the possible influences, the novel, chiefly because of the independent character of its heroine, Edna Pontellier, and because of the intensity of the focus upon her, is not simply a good but derivative work. It has a manner and matter of its own.

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 Awakening* is a study of Edna Pontellier, a story, as the *Nation* criticized it, "of a Southern lady who wanted to do what she wanted to. From wanting to, she did, with disastrous consequences." Such a succinct statement, blunt but accurate so far as it goes, may suggest that a detailed retelling of the story would convey little of the actual character of the novel. It is, of course, one of those novels a person simply must read to gain any real impression of its excellence. But the compactness of the work in narrative,



characterization, setting, symbols and images gives meaning to such an imprecise and overworked expression. Some idea of the style may be conveyed by quoting the opening paragraphs:

A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over" *Allez vous en' Allez vous en! Sapristi!* That's all right."

He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence.

Mr. Pontellier, unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust. He walked down the gallery and across the narrow "bridges" which connected the Lebrun cottages one with the other. He had been seated before the door of the main house. The parrot and the mockingbird were the property of Madame Lebrun and they had the right to make all the noise they wished. Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining.

This is Mr. Pontellier. He is a businessman, husband and father, not given to romance, not given to much of anything outside his business. When he comes to Grand Isle, the summer place of the Creoles in the story, he is anxious to get back to his cotton brokerage in Carondelet Street, New Orleans, and he passes his time on Grand Isle at the hotel smoking his cigars and playing cards. When he is on the beach at all, he is not a participant, but a watcher.

He fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunk of the water oaks and across the strip of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were their faces, Mrs. Pontellier and young Robert Lebrun

It is apparent that a triangle has been formed, and going into the details of the subsequent events in a summary fashion would likely destroy the art by which such a sequence becomes significant. Suffice to say that Robert Lebrun is the young man who first awakens, or rather, is present at the awakening of Edna Pontellier into passion, a passion which Mr. Pontellier neither understands nor appreciates. Slowly Edna and Robert fall in love, but once again, the expression is too trite. Edna grows into an awareness of a woman's physical nature, and Robert is actually but a party of the second part. The reader's attention is never allowed to stray from Edna. At the climax of their relationship, young Lebrun recognizes what must follow and goes away. During his absence, Mrs. Pontellier becomes idly amused by a roue [a man devoted to sexual pleasure], Arobin, and, becoming more than amused, more than tolerates his advances. When Robert returns he finds that Edna is willing to declare her love and accept the consequences of her passion. But Robert, abiding by the traditional romantic code which separates true love from physical passion, refuses the offered consummation.



When he leaves Mrs. Pontellier, she turns once again to the scene of her awakening, the sand and sea of Grand Isle:

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.

Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded, upon its accustomed peg.

She put it on, left her clothing in the bath house. But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some newborn creature, opening its eye in a familiar world that it had never known.

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out.

The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft close embrace....

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musty odor of pinks filled the air.

Here is the story, its beginning a mature woman's awakening to physical love, its end her walking into the sea. The extracts convey something of the author's style, but much less of the movement of the characters and of human desire against the sensuous background of sea and sand. Looking at the novel analytically, one can say that it excels chiefly in its characterizations and its structure, the use of images and symbols to unify that structure, and the character of Edna Pontellier.

Kate Chopin, almost from her first story, had the ability to capture character, to put the right word in the mouth, to impart the exact gesture, to select the characteristic action. An illustration of her deftness in handling even minor characters is her treatment of Edna's father. When he leaves the Pontellier's after a short visit, Edna is glad to be rid of him and "his padded shoulders, his Bible reading, his 'toddies,' and ponderous oaths." A moment later, it is a side of Edna's nature which is revealed. She felt a sense of relief at her father's absence; "she read Emerson until she grew sleepy."



Characterization was always Mrs. Chopin's talent. Structure was not. Those who knew her working habits say that she seldom revised, and she herself mentions that she did not like reworking her stories. Though her reputation rests upon her short narratives, her collected stories give abundant evidence of the sketch, the outlines of stories which remain unformed. And when she did attempt a tightly organized story, she often turned to Maupassant and was as likely as not to effect a contrived symmetry. Her early novel *At Fault* suffers most from her inability to control her material. In *The Awakening* she is in complete command of structure. She seems to have grasped instinctively the use of the unifying symbol - here the sea, sky and sand - and with it the power of individual images to bind the story together.

The sea, the sand, the sun and sky of the Gulf Coast become almost a presence themselves in the novel. Much of the sensuousness of the book comes from the way the reader is never allowed to stray far from the water's edge. A refrain beginning "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, clamoring, murmuring, ..." is used throughout the novel. It appears first at the beginning of Edna Pontellier's awakening, and it appears at the end as the introduction to the long final scene, previously quoted. Looking closely at the final form of this refrain, one can notice the care with which Mrs. Chopin composed this theme and variation. In the initial statement, the sentence does not end with "solitude," but goes on, as it should, "to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation." Nor is the image of the bird with the broken wing in the earlier passage; rather there is prefiguring of the final tragedy: "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft close embrace." 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....

It is not surprising that the sensuous quality of the book, both from the incidents of the novel and the symbolic implications, would have offended contemporary reviewers. What convinced many critics of the indecency of the book, however, was not simply the sensuous scenes, but rather that the author obviously sympathized with Mrs. Pontellier. More than that, the readers probably found that she aroused their own sympathies....

Greek tragedy - to remove ourselves from Victorian morals - knew well *eros* was not the kind of *love* which can be easily prettified and sentimentalized. Phaedra's struggle with elemental passion in the *Hippolytus* is not generally regarded as being either morally offensive or insignificant. Mrs. Pontellier, too, has the power, the dignity, the self-possession of a tragic heroine. She is not an Emma Bovary, deluded by ideas of "romance," nor is she the sensuous but guilt-ridden woman of the sensational novel. We can find only partial reason for her affair in the kind of romantic desire to escape a middle-class existence which animates Emma Bovary. Edna Pontellier is neither deluded nor deludes. She is woman, the physical woman who, despite her Kentucky Presbyterian upbringing and a comfortable marriage, must struggle with the sensual appeal of physical ripeness itself, with passion of which she is only dimly aware. Her struggle is not melodramatic, nor is it artificial, nor vapid. It is objective, real and moving.



And when she walks into the sea, it does not leave a reader with the sense of sin punished 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.

Our advocacy of the novel is not meant to obscure its faults. It is not perfect art, but in total effect it provokes few dissatisfactions. A sophisticated modern reader might find something of the derivative about it. Kate Chopin read widely, and a list of novelists she found interesting would include Flaubert, Tolstoy, Turgenev, D'Annunzio, Bourget, Goncourt and Zola. It is doubtful, however, that there was any direct borrowing, and *The Awakening* exists, as do most good novels, as a product of the author's literary, real, and imagined life.

How Mrs. Chopin managed to create in ten years the substantial body of work she achieved is no less a mystery than the excellence of *The Awakening* itself. But, having added to American literature a novel uncommon in its kind as in its excellence, she deserves not to be forgotten. *The Awakening* deserves to be restored and to be given its place among novels worthy of preservation.

Source: Kenneth Eble, "A Forgotten Novel. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," in *Western Humanities Review*, No 3, Summer, 1956, pp. 261-69.

# Adaptations

*The Awakening* is the basis for the film, *The End of August*, released in 1982. Produced by Warren Jacobson and Sally Sharp under Quartet Production Company, the film features Sally Sharp as Edna and David Marshall Grant as Robert.

The book is also available as a sound recording. Narrated by Alexandra O'Karma, the four tapes offer the unabridged version of the story. The taped volume is published by Charlotte Hall, MD: Recorded Books, 1987.



## Topics for Further Study

Trace the history of the women's rights movement beginning with the first political convention held in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York and ending with the current decade. By way of a pictorial timeline, relate significant incidents to other historical events of the times.

Research the Creole culture. Explain how Creoles have both Spanish and French ancestry and how that ancestry affects their lifestyle. Describe the culture through the customs and traditions honored by Creole descendants as well as through their routines of daily life.

Critics consider *The Awakening* a study in psychological realism. In an essay, address the following questions: How does Chopin use psychological realism to make her characters believable? Do her characters react in ways that you would expect? Explain.

Compare and contrast New Orleans' Carondelet Street and New York's Wall Street in 1899. Does Carondelet Street still exist?

Consider Léonce Pontellier, Robert Lebrun, and Alcée Arobin—the most prominent male characters in *The Awakening*. How do you see each man as representative of his culture and the times? What are each man's specific traits? Explain how and why you might relate to each man.

The Grand Isle was destroyed by a storm in 1893. Investigate the storm that destroyed it. Develop a series of news items that might have appeared at the time that (a) predict the storm, (b) cover the news as it's happening, and (c) report the results of the storm.



## Compare and Contrast

**1890s:** The women's movement begins to gain a foothold on American society. However, women still do not have the right to vote, and women's issues were not part of the political platform.

**Today:** Women have had the right to vote since the passage of the Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution in 1920.

**1890s:** According to the law, a married woman's property belonged to her husband, even if she had inherited land before being wed. If she later divorced her husband, the land would still be legally his.

**Today:** Women have equal legal rights to property, and divorce cases usually conclude with at least half—if not more—of a couple's possessions going to the wife.

**1890s:** Advice columns for women had their beginning. With the advent of Dorothy Dix's column in 1895, advice columns appeared in newspapers and provided a forum for discussion of women's issues.

**Today:** Not only do publishing companies print women's columns in newspapers, but they also dedicate entire magazines to women's issues.





## What Do I Read Next?

*Bayou Folk* is Chopin's 1894 collection of stories that present the people of Natchitoches Parish as they live and love in daily life. Chopin's skill as a local colorist as well as an adept storyteller is evident in her perfect rendering of people, places, and events of the area and time. She uses universal themes, such as prejudice and interracial relationships, that are not common in regional fiction.

Another of Chopin's collections is *A Night in Acadie*, written in 1897. Critics recognize this collection, too, for Chopin's skill as a local colorist. The difference in this collection and *Bayou Folk* is that in *A Night in Acadie*, Chopin's characters express their individuality more and recognize and heed impulses that are socially unacceptable. Chopin emphasizes more sensuous themes, and reviewers voiced their concerns.

Chopin's third volume of works, *A Vocation and a Voice*, was not published in its entirety until 1991. Publishers prior to this time continued to question the appropriateness of Chopin's choice of themes. They failed to recognize the work for its outstanding treatment of such psychological elements as human consciousness and its relationship to circumstance, motivation, and action. The stories in this collection reflect less of Chopin's ability as a local colorist and more of her skill at understanding individual motives.

*The White Dove* is a 1986 novel written by Rosie Thomas. Set in Great Britain in the 1930s, the story is about Amy Lovell, a young woman of the upper middle class who chooses a career over a life of luxury. Amy falls in love with Nick Penry, who is not only from a vastly different background but who also is a fiery socialist. Amy's search for a useful and fulfilling life forces her to make difficult choices.

G. J. Scrimgeour wrote *A Woman of Her Times* to portray a woman who is torn between the respectable roles of wife and mother and the necessity of leading her own life. This is a story about a woman who starts out in pre-World War I Ceylon as a young British colonial wife, becomes a London socialite in the twenties, moves through a period in the thirties of being an impoverished working mother, and reaches the place in life where she feels she has survived as herself.

*Coming of Age in Samoa* was considered shocking when it was published in 1928 as a psychological study. Dr. Margaret Mead, anthropologist, was only twenty-three when she started the study of Samoan children to determine if stress experienced by American children is a "natural" part of growing up. The results of the study confirmed that actions we have often attributed to "human nature" are actually reactions to civilization's restraints. Mead emphasized every child's right to know and to choose freely.



## Further Study

Review of *The Awakening*, in *Public Opinion*, Vol. 26, 1899, p. 794

This unfavorable review of *The Awakening* criticizes the immorality of the book, calling into doubt "the possibility of a woman of solid old Presbyterian Kentucky stock ever being at all like the heroine" and concluding that "we are well satisfied when she drowns herself."

Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views' Kate Chopin*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 1987.

This compilation offers perspectives from such distinguished critics as Larzer Ziff, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, and Susan Rosowski. Their interpretations run from an analysis of the author's "Flaubertian detachment" to a feminist's evaluation.

Carley Rees Bogarad, "'The Awakening': A Refusal to Compromise," in *The University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies*, Vol. II, No 3, 1997, pp. 15-31.

Bogarad reviews the novel and classifies it as a "novel of development." The review offers the idea that Edna's awakening is a double one. Her first awakening occurs when Edna realizes that she wants autonomy as a human being and conceives of a life that would allow her to follow her dreams and still be connected to society. Her second awakening begins when she concedes that she can not reconcile her definition of self with society's definition. The reviewer provides detailed support for her view.

Thomas Bonner, Jr., *The Kate Chopin Companion*, Greenwood, 1988.

Bonner compiles an encyclopedic dictionary of all of Chopin's characters. This volume also includes several of Guy de Maussapant's short stories, which were translated from French into English by Chopin.

"Books of the Day," in *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, *Chicago Times-Herald*, Vol I, June, 1899, p. 9.

Although the reviewer praises *The Awakening* for being "strong," the overall review is negative. The reviewer says of *The Awakening* that "It was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction. This is not a pleasant story, but the contrast between the heroine and another character who is utterly devoted to her husband and family saves it from utter gloom."

Lynda S. Boren and Sara de Saussure Davis, *Kate Chopin Reconsidered Beyond the Bayou*, Louisiana State University Press, 1992

This volume of essays offers multiple feminist readings of *The Awakening* and some of Chopin's short fiction.



Violet Harrington Bryan, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature*, University of Tennessee Press, 1993.

Bryan discusses the influence of New Orleans culture on Chopin's fiction, focusing heavily on issues of gender and race.

Joyce Dyer, *The Awakening, A Novel of Beginnings*, Twayne, 1993.

Dyer analyzes the nature of female awakenings in Chopin's short fiction and in *The Awakening*, but since she sees Chopin as sensitive to male perspectives, she argues that Chopin's true subject is not limited to an examination of the female nature, but to human nature.

Anna Shannon Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line: Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin*, University Press of Virginia, 1989.

Elfenbein discusses the double-bind that many of Chopin's characters of mixed race find themselves in, and the ways in which they attempt to overcome the prejudices against them. Although Elfenbein focuses on the short fiction, her book is useful for gaining a sense of Chopin's attitudes concerning racial equality.

Barbara C. Ewell, *Kate Chopin*, Ungar, 1986. Ewell analyzes *The Awakening* as a feminist novel. She also discusses biographical information and the short fiction.

Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, Ungar, 1983.

Huf discusses *The Awakening* as "a tale of a young woman who struggles to realize herself - and her artistic ability."

*Louisiana Literature*, Vol. 2.1, 1994.

An entire section of this Journal is devoted to essays presented at the Biannual Kate Chopin International Conference. The introductory essay by Emily Toth discusses new issues in Kate Chopin's work, and is especially useful for those unfamiliar with Chopin's work.

Carol S. Manning, editor, *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*, University of Illinois Press, 1993.

This volume of essays discusses, in passing, Chopin's contribution to the Southern Renaissance in literature.

Wendy Martin, editor, *New Essays on The Awakening*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Contains essays on the roles of the artist, of modernist thought, of Edna's dilemma and her potential solutions in *The Awakening*.



*Perspectives on Kate Chopin: Proceedings of the Kate Chopin International Conference*, Northwestern State University Press, 1990.

Collected papers from the 1988 meeting of the Kate Chopin International Conference. This volume is very difficult to locate, but has some excellent essays on lesbianism, local color, and philosophical influences on Chopin. It also includes an essay on Chopin's relationship to her publishers.

Anne Rowe, "Kate Chopin," in *The History of Southern Literature*, Louisiana State University Press, 1985.

This essay offers a brief biographical sketch of Kate Chopin.

Per Seyersted, editor, *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, Louisiana State University Press, 1969.

This volume contains all of Chopin's known fiction, including *The Awakening*, *At Fault* and over 100 short stories. It also includes essays, poetry, and a song. Although a few pieces of Chopin's work have been discovered since the *Complete Works* appeared, it is still a reasonably complete volume.

Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin - A Critical Biography*, Louisiana State University Press, 1969

This biography gives information about Chopin's life, but also relies heavily on explication of her texts. Seyersted sets right some of the inaccuracies of Daniel Ranjan's early, discredited biography.

Helen Taylor, *Gender, Race and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart and Kate Chopin*, Louisiana State University Press, 1989

Taylor argues that Chopin's fiction is inherently racist and illustrates with copious examples.

Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of The Awakening*, Morrow, 1990.

This authoritative biography of Chopin's life was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Toth's style is very readable, and the book is chocked full of personal anecdotes from those who knew Chopin.

# Bibliography

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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized





Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students  
Gale Group  
27500 Drake Road  
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535