

An Evolution of Womanhood: A Study of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*



American culture and society has only allowed women the opportunity to truly self-actualize in roughly past fifty years. Now, in some families, men and women both face the shared challenges of raising a family together. However, before the era of feminine empowerment, women had certain societal and familial obligations that were expected of them. Women who overlooked these duties were left with only a few choices for a way of life, and none of them very desirable. Kate Chopin explores the idea of a woman born before her time in *The Awakening*. The novel revolves around Edna Pontellier, a Kentucky woman married to a wealthy New Orleans businessman, who discovers the life she is leading is not the life she wants. Throughout the story, Edna goes through three “awakenings” only to discover that she can never achieve her true identity.

The Initial Awakening: Roles of Wife and Mother

Edna’s initial “awakening” is that of wife and mother. As the story begins, Edna is married to Leonce Pontellier, a kind but inattentive husband obsessed with his work and societal norms. They have two children and are vacationing at the luxurious Grand Isle; she seems to have an ideal life. However, the reader becomes quickly and keenly aware of the misery that surrounds Edna. She is mostly apathetic towards her children and simply sociable with her husband. Her family seems to bring her only guilt and unhappiness. Gray notes how the “institutions of nineteenth-century society required women to be objects in marriage and motherhood” (1). Societal institutions are intensified by the character of Adele, who while Edna’s friend, is the also her foil (Pizer 2). Adele lives the life Edna is supposed to be living: devoted to her family, tender to her children, and enraptured by her husband. Adele is the

nineteenth-century ideal of a woman: “. . . sexually alluring, but also passive, chaste, and pure” (Gray 4). Edna appreciates Adele’s beauty as it fits into the societal norm however, she feels “repressed by [these societal and] cultural forces that she does not understand” (Gray 2). Consequently, Edna finds her solace not with the members of the “societal norm,” but rather with the outcasts of the isle: the young island beau, Robert and the spinster musician, Mademoiselle Reiz. Through both Robert and Mademoiselle Reiz, Edna awakens to her other selves.

The Second Awakening: The Artist

Edna’s second “awakening” is of an artist. Initially, Edna shows a slight interest in art, and she even sketches Adele in her role as “perfect wife/mother.” However, when Edna hears Mademoiselle Reiz play the piano at a party, something within her changes:

She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (Chopin 27)

As the music lashes Edna like a sea of emotions metaphorically, she literally goes to the ocean and finally learns how to swim. Pizer notes how “the sea . . . [is] the context for liberating freedom and sensuality” (1). The moment she learns to swim and is no longer afraid of the sea, the artist within Edna is born. Her fear of inadequacy is gone and she can pursue her art fervently. She begins sketching more frequently and even sells some of her sketches. The art for Edna is a way to “shape and control her world” (Gray 10). By sketching him, Edna employs her art to even gain control over her pompous father. Her new-found passion in art helps her gain independence from her husband. Amidst her artistic awakening, Chopin notes how Mr. Pontellier could not even “see that she was becoming herself and [was] daily casting aside that fictitious self we assume like a garment” (57). He either ignores or chooses to ignore his



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wife's transition into her own person. Through her art sales and savings, Edna decides to fulfill her need for her own life by purchasing a small home of her own. By staking out her own life she begins to actualize her womanhood, and her own identity.

The Final Awakening: Acceptance

Edna's final "awakening" is her acceptance of herself as a desirable and independent woman. She experiences the power she has over her art, over her family, and over the men in her life. She has managed to gain independence in a society that shuns a woman taking such liberties, or as Gray suggests, she "experiments with a highly oppositional role, the 'free-woman,' a role of individuality and sexual freedom" (3). The local Lothario, Alcee, replaces the absent Robert for Edna with his constant affections. She is able to actualize her new-found sexuality with Alcee. She then tries to actualize her love with Robert. However, her sense of



freedom is shattered when Robert will not take her unless her husband releases her first. She realizes at that moment, as Gray observes, "that . . . Robert . . . view[s] her as an object, rather than a subject;" that she is still considered property, not her own woman (13). The picture is completely destroyed by Adele, who is suspicious of her affairs and cautions Edna, "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them" (Chopin 111). By

having her independence denied and her motherhood suspected, Edna feels left with only one alternative to release herself from her earthly bonds to become truly independent. Pizer notes that "despite her belief that she has awakened to a need and a capacity to escape the confining roles of wife and mother, Edna remains trapped in these roles and can only escape them, she believes, in death" (5). She returns to her moment of initial freedom at the sea, swims until she can go no further, and drowns.

Chopin showed the readers of her time that women could be and perhaps needed to be more than just wives and mothers. Nineteenth-century societal norms seemed to conform to the belief that women could not be individuals and those who were had been relegated to spinster

roles, like Mademoiselle Reiz. Today, busy schedules and hectic lives that tend to lead us to the same philosophies. Soccer moms who are attending their children and working mothers who are juggling business and home are classified as simply “soccer moms” or “working women,” with all the stereotypical negativity that is associated with those terms. These women sometimes forget to be women. Chopin wanted to awaken her readers to the possibilities of women beyond their families. Her work is the extreme; not every woman needs to abandon her children and husband. However, *The Awakening* is a gentle reminder to us to be the person and do the things that make a woman who she is. Chopin’s work rings as poignant today to remind us that beneath it all, we are women with needs of our own.

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