Feminism and Other Critical Approaches


Feminist Criticism of The Awakening


Lant, Kathleen Margaret. “The Siren of Grand Isle: Adele’s Role in


A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Tradition and the Female Talent: The Awakening as a Solitary Book

Whatever we may do or attempt, despite the embrace and transport of love, the hunger of the lips, we are always alone. I have dragged you out into the night in the vain hope of a moment’s escape from the horrible solitude which overpowers me, and still each of us is alone; side by side but alone.” In 1895, these words, from a story by Guy de Maupassant called “Solitude,” which she had translated for a St. Louis magazine, expressed an urbane and melancholy wisdom that Kate Chopin found compelling. To a woman who had survived the illusions that friendship, romance, marriage, or even motherhood would provide lifelong companionship and identity and who had come to recognize the existential solitude of all human beings, Maupassant’s declaration became a kind of credo. Indeed, The Awakening, which Chopin subtitled “A Solitary Soul,” may be read as an account of Edna Pontellier’s evolution from romantic fantasies of fusion with another person to self-definition and self-reliance. At the beginning of the novel, in the midst of the bustling social world of Grand Isle, caught in her domestic roles of wife and mother, Edna pictures solitude as alien, masculine, and frightening, a naked man standing beside a “desolate rock” by the sea in an attitude of “hopeless resignation” (44: ch. 9). By the end, she has claimed a solitude that is defiantly feminine, returning to the nearly empty island off-season, to stand naked and “absolutely alone” by the shore, and to elude “the soul’s slavery” by plunging into the sea’s embrace (136; ch. 39).

Yet Edna’s triumphant embrace of solitude could not be the choice of Kate Chopin as an artist. A writer may work in solitude, but literature depends on a tradition, on shared forms and representations of experi-
ence; and literary genres, like biological species, evolve because of significant innovations by individuals that survive through imitation and revision. Thus it can be a very serious blow to a developing genre when a revolutionary work is taken out of circulation. Experimentation is retarded and repressed, and it may be several generations before the evolution of the literary genre catches up. The interruption of this evolutionary process is most destructive for the literature of a minority group, in which writers have to contend with cultural prejudices against their creative gifts. Yet radical departures from literary convention within a minority tradition are especially likely to be censored and suppressed by the dominant culture, because they violate social as well as aesthetic stereotypes and expectations.

*The Awakening* was just such a revolutionary book. Generally recognized today as the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman, it marked a significant epoch in the evolution of an American female literary tradition. As an American woman novelist of the 1890s, Kate Chopin had inherited a rich and complex tradition, composed not only of her American female precursors but also of American transcendentalism, European realism, and fin-de-siècle feminism and aestheticism. In this context, *The Awakening* broke new thematic and stylistic ground. Chopin went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longings for sexual and personal emancipation.

Yet the novel represents a literary beginning as abruptly cut off as its heroine's awakening consciousness. Edna Pontellier's explicit violations of the modes and codes of nineteenth-century American women's behavior shocked contemporary critics, who described *The Awakening* as "morbid," "essentially vulgar," and "gilded dirt." Banned in Kate Chopin's own city of St. Louis and censored in the national press, *The Awakening* thus became a solitary book, one that dropped out of sight, and that remained unsung by literary historians and unread by several generations of American women writers.

In many respects, *The Awakening* seems to comment on its own history as a novel, to predict its own critical fate. The parallels between the experiences of Edna Pontellier as she breaks away from the conventional feminine roles of wife and mother, and Kate Chopin, as she breaks away from conventions of literary domesticity, suggest that Edna's story may also be read as a parable of Chopin's literary awakening. Both the author and the heroine seem to be oscillating between two worlds, caught between contradictory definitions of femininity and creativity, and seeking either to synthesize them or to go beyond them to an emancipated womanhood and an emancipated fiction. Edna Pontellier's "unfocused yearning" for an autonomous life is akin to Kate Chopin's yearning to write works that go beyond female plots and feminine endings.

In the early stages of her career, Chopin had tried to follow the literary advice and literary examples of others and had learned that such dutiful efforts led only to imaginative stagnation. By the late 1890s, when she wrote *The Awakening*, Chopin had come to believe that the true artist was one who defined tradition, who rejected both the "conventions" of respectable morality and the conventions and formulas of literary success. What impressed her most about Maupassant was that he had "escaped from tradition and authority . . . had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes" (Seyersed, *Complete Works* 701). This is very close to what happens to Edna Pontellier as she frees herself from social obligations and received opinions and begins "to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life" (115; ch. 32). Much as she admired Maupassant, and much as she learned from translating his work, Chopin felt no desire to imitate him. Her sense of the need for independence and individuality in writing is dramatically expressed in *The Awakening* by Mademoiselle Reisz, who tells Edna that the artist must possess "the courageous soul . . . that dares and defies" (88; ch. 21) and must have strong wings to soar "above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" (103; ch. 27).

Nonetheless, in order to understand *The Awakening* fully, we need to read it in the context of literary tradition. Even in its defiant solitude, *The Awakening* speaks for a transitional phase in American women's writing, and Chopin herself would never have written the books she did without a tradition to admire and oppose. When she wrote *The Awakening* in 1899, Chopin could look back to at least two generations of female literary precursors. The antebellum novelists, led by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and E. D. E. N. Southworth, were the first members of these generations. Born in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they began to publish stories and novels in the 1850s and 1860s that reflected the dominant expressive and symbolic models of an American woman's culture. The historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has called this culture the "female world of love and ritual," and it was primarily defined by the veneration of motherhood, by intense mother-daughter bonds, and by intimate female friendships. As Smith-Rosenberg explains: "Uniquely female rituals drew women together during every stage of their lives, from adolescence through
courtship, marriage, childbirth and child rearing, death and mourning. Women revealed their deepest feelings to one another, helped one another with the burdens of housewifery and motherhood, nursed one another’s sick, and mourned for one another’s dead” (28). Although premarital relationships between the sexes were subject to severe restrictions, romantic friendships between women were admired and encouraged. The nineteenth-century idea of female “passionlessness”—the belief that women did not have the same sexual desires as men—had advantages as well as disadvantages for women. It reinforced the notion that women were the purer and more spiritual sex, and thus were morally superior to men. Furthermore, as the historian Nancy F. Cott has argued, “acceptance of the idea of passionlessness created sexual solidarity among women; it allowed women to consider their love relationships with one another of higher character than heterosexual relationships because they excluded (male) carnal passion” (233). “I do not believe that men can ever feel so pure an enthusiasm for women as we can feel for one another,” wrote the novelist Catherine Sedgwick. “Ours is nearest to the love of angels” (qtd. in Cott 233). The homosocial world of women’s culture in fact allowed much leeway for physical intimacy and touch; “girls routinely slept together, kissed and hugged one another” (Smith-Rosenberg 69). But these caresses were not interpreted as erotic expressions.

The mid-nineteenth-century code of values growing out of women’s culture, which Mary Ryan calls “the empire of the mother,” was also sustained by sermons, child-rearing manuals, and sentimental fiction. Women writers advocated motherly influence—“gentle nurture,” “sweet control,” and “educating power”—as an effective solution to such social problems as alcoholism, crime, slavery, and war. As Harriet Beecher Stowe proclaimed, “The ‘Woman Question’ of the day is: Shall MOTHERHOOD ever be felt in the public administration of the affairs of state?” (qtd. in Kelley 327).

As writers, however, the sentimentalists looked to motherhood for their metaphors and justifications of literary creativity. “Creating a story is like bearing a child,” wrote Stowe, “and it leaves me as weak and helpless as when my baby was born” (qtd. in Kelley 249). Thematically and stylistically, pre-Civil War women’s fiction, variously described as “literary domesticity” or the “sentimental novel,” celebrates matriarchal institutions and idealizes the period of blissful bonding between mother and child. It is permeated by the artifacts, spaces, and images of nineteenth-century American domestic culture: the kitchen, with its worn rocking chair; the Edenic mother’s garden, with its fragrant female flowers and energetic male bees; the caged songbird, which represents the creative woman in her domestic sphere. Women’s narratives were formally composed of brief sketches joined together like the pieces of a patchwork quilt; they frequently alluded to specific quilt patterns and followed quilt design conventions of repetition, variation, and contrast. Finally, their most intense representation of female sexual pleasure was not in the terms of heterosexual romance, but rather the holding or suckling of a baby; for, as Mary Ryan points out, “nursing an infant was one of the most hallowed and inviolate episodes in a woman’s life...” Breast-feeding was sanctioned as “one of the most important duties of female life,” “one of peculiar, inexpressible felicity,” and “the sole occupation and pleasure of a new mother” (Ryan, Womanhood 144).

The cumulative effect of all these covert appeals to female solidarity in books written by, for, and about women could be a subversive critique of patriarchal power. Yet aesthetically the fiction of this generation was severely restricted. The sentimentalists did not identify with the figure of the “artist,” the “genius,” or the “poet” promulgated by patriarchal culture. As Nina Baym explains, “they conceptualized authorship as a profession rather than a calling...” Women authors tended not to think of themselves as artists or justify themselves in the language of art until the 1870s and after.” In the writing of the sentimentalists, “the dimensions of formal self-consciousness, attachment to or quarrel with a grand tradition, aesthetic seriousness, are all missing. Often the women deliberately and even proudly disavowed membership in an artistic fraternity” (32). Insular as art implied a male club or coterie of brothers, women felt excluded from it. Instead they claimed affiliation with a literary sorority, a society of sisters whose motives were moral rather than aesthetic, whose ambitions were to teach and to influence rather than to create. Although their books sold by the millions, they were not taken seriously by male critics.

The next generation of American women writers, however, found themselves in a different culture situation. After the Civil War, the homosocial world of women’s culture began to dissolve as women demanded entrance to higher education, the professions, and the political world. The female local colorists who began to publish stories about American regional life in the 1870s and 1880s were also attracted to the male worlds of art and prestige opening up to women, and they began to assert themselves as the “daughters of literary fathers as well as literary mothers. Claiming both male and female aesthetic models, they felt free to present themselves as artists and to write confidently about the art...
of fiction in such essays as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's "Art for Truth's Sake" (1897). Among the differences the local colorists saw between themselves and their predecessors was the question of "selfishness," the ability to put literary ambitions before domestic duties. Although she had been strongly influenced in her work by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862), Sarah Orne Jewett came to believe that Stowe's work was "incomplete" because she was unable to "bring herself to that cold selfishness of the moment for one's work's sake" (qtd. in Donovan 124).

Writers of this generation chose to put their work first. The 1870s and 1880s were what Susan B. Anthony called "an epoch of single women," and many unmarried women writers of this generation lived alone; others were involved in "Boston marriages," or long-term relationships with another woman. But despite their individual lifestyles, many speculated in their writing on the conflicts between maternity and artistic creativity. Motherhood no longer seemed to be the motivating force of writing, but rather its opposite. Thus artistic fulfillment required the sacrifice of maternal drives and maternal fulfillment meant giving up artistic ambitions.

The conflicts between love and work that Edna Pontellier faces in *The Awakening* were anticipated in such earlier novels as Louisa May Alcott's unfinished *Diana and Peril* (1879) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Aris* (1879). A gifted painter who has studied in Florence and Paris, Avis does not intend to marry. As she tells her suitor, "My ideals of art are those with which marriage is perfectly incompatible. Success—for a woman—means absolute surrender, in whatever direction. Whether she paints a picture, or loves a man, there is no division of labor possible in her economy. To the attainment of any end worth living for, a symmetrical sacrifice of her nature is compulsory upon her." But love persuades her to change her mind, and the novel records the inexorable destruction of her artistic genius as domestic responsibilities, maternal cares, and her husband's failures use up her energy. By the end of the novel, Avis has become resigned to the idea that her life is a sacrifice for the next generation of women. Thinking back to her mother, a talented actress who gave up her profession to marry and die young, and looking at her daughter, Wait, Avis takes heart in the hope that it may take three generations to create the woman who can unite "her supreme capacity of love" with the "sacred individuality of her life" (126, 246). As women's culture declined after the Civil War, moreover, the local colorists mourned its demise by investing its traditional images with mythic significance. In their stories, the mother's garden has become a *paradise* sanctuary, the caged bird a wild white heron, or heroine of nature; the house an emblem of the female body, with the kitchen as its womb; and the artifacts of domesticity virtually totemic objects. In Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), for example, the braided rag rug has become a kind of prayer mat of concentric circles from which the matronly priestess, Mrs. Todd, delivers her syllable pronouncements. The woman artist in this fiction expresses her conflicting needs most fully in her quasi-religious dedication to these artifacts of a bygone age.

The New Women writers of the 1890s no longer grieved for the female bonds and sanctuaries of the past. Products of both Darwinian skepticism and aesthetic sophistication, they had an ambivalent, or even hostile relationship to women's culture, which they often saw as boring and restrictive. Their attitudes toward female sexuality were also revolutionary. A few radical feminists had always maintained that women's sexual apathy was not an innate feminine attribute but rather the result of prudery and repression; some women's rights activists too had privately confessed that, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in her diary in 1883, "a healthy woman has as much passion as a man" (qtd. in Cott 236; n. 60). Not all New Women advocated female sexual emancipation; the most zealous advocates of free love were male novelists such as Grant Allen, whose best-seller, *The Woman Who Did* (1895), became a byword of the decade. But the heroine of New Woman fiction, as Linda Dowling has explained, "expressed her quarrel with Victorian culture chiefly through sexual means—by heightening sexual consciousness, candor, and expression" (441). No wonder, then, that reviewers saw *The Awakening* as part of the "overworked field of sex fiction" or noted that since "San Francisco and Paris, and London, and New York had furnished Women Who Did, why not New Orleans?"

In the form as well as the content of their work, New Women writers demanded freedom and innovation. They modified the realistic three-decker novels about courtship and marriage that had formed the bulk of midcentury "woman's fiction" to make room for interludes of fantasy and parable, especially episodes "in which a woman will crossdress, experimenting with the freedom available to boys and men" (Victims xvi). Instead of the crisply plotted short stories that had been the primary genre of local colorists, writers such as Olive Schreiner, Ella D'Arcy, Sarah Grand, and "George Egerton" (Mary Chavelita Dunne) experimented with new fictional forms that they called "keynotes," "alllegories," "fantasies," "monochromes," or "dreams." As Egerton explained, these impressionistic narratives were efforts to explore a hith-
erto unrecorded female consciousness: “I realized that in literature everything had been done better by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was only one small plot left for herself to tell: the term inscrutability of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her—in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself away in his writings” (60).

Kate Chopin’s literary evolution took her progressively through the three phases of nineteenth-century American women’s culture and women’s writing. Born in 1850, she grew up with the great best-sellers of the American and English sentimentalists. As a girl, she had wept over the works of Warner and Stowe and had copied pious passages from the English novelist Dinah Mulock Craik’s The Woman’s Kingdom (1868) into her diary. Throughout her adolescence, Chopin had also shared an intimate friendship with Kitty Garésch, a classmate at the Academy of the Sacred Heart. Together, Chopin recalled, the girls had read fiction and poetry, gone on excursions, and “exchanged our heart secrets” (Seyersted, Kate Chopin 18). Their friendship ended in 1870 when Kate Chopin married and Kitty Garésch entered a convent. Yet when Oscar Chopin died in 1883, his young widow went to visit her old friend and was shocked by her blind isolation from the world. When Chopin began to write, she took as her models such local colorists as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins, who had not only mastered technique and construction but had also devoted themselves to telling the stories of female loneliness, isolation, and frustration.

Sandra Gilbert has suggested that local color was a narrative strategy that Chopin employed to solve a specific problem: how to deal with extreme psychological states without the excess of sentimental narrative and without critical reclamation. At first, Gilbert suggests, local color writing “offered a mode and a manner that could mediate between the literary structures she had inherited and those she had begun.” Like the anthropologist, the local colorist could observe vagaries of culture and character with “almost scientific detachment.” Furthermore, “by reporting odd events and customs that were part of a region’s ‘local color’ she could tell what would ordinarily be rather shocking or even melodramatic tales in an unmelodramatic way, and without fear of . . . moral outrage” (16).

But before long, Chopin looked beyond the oddities of the local colorists to more ambitious models. Her literary tastes were anything but parochial. She read widely in a variety of genres—Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley, as well as Aristophanes, Flaubert, Whitman, Swinburne, and Ibsen. In particular, she associated her own literary and psychological awakening with Maupassant. “Here was life, not fiction,” she wrote of his influence on her, “for where were the plots, the old fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinking way I had fancied were essential to the art of story making” (Seyersted, Complete Works 700–01). In a review of a book by the local colorist Hamlin Garland, Chopin expressed her dissatisfaction with the restricted subjects of regional writing: “Social problems, social environments, local color, and the rest of it” could not “insure the survival of a writer who employs them” (Seyersted, Complete Works 693). She resented being compared to George Washington Cable or Grace King. Furthermore, she did not share the female local colorists’ obsession with the past, their desperate nostalgia for a bygone idealized age. “How curiously the past offices itself for me!” she wrote in her diary in 1894. “I cannot live through yesterday or tomorrow” (Seyersted, Kate Chopin 58). Unlike Jewett, Wilkins, King, or Woolson, she did not favor the old woman as narrator.

Despite her identification with the New Women, however, Chopin was not an activist. She never joined the women’s suffrage movement or belonged to a female literary community. Indeed, her celebrated St. Louis literary salon attracted mostly male journalists, editors, and writers. Chopin resigned after only two years from a St. Louis women’s literary and charitable society. When her children identified her close friends to be interviewed by her first biographer, Daniel Rankin, there were no women on the list.

Thus Chopin certainly did not wish to write a didactic feminist novel. In reviews published in the 1890s, she indicated her impatience with novelists such as Zola and Hardy, who tried to instruct their readers. She distrusted the rhetoric of such feminist best-sellers as Sarah Grand’s The Heavenly Twins (1893). The eleventh commandment, she noted, “Thou shalt not preach” (Seyersted, Complete Works 702). Instead she would try to record, in her own way and in her own voice, the term inscrutability of a woman’s “inward life” in all its “vague, tangled, chaotic” tumult.

Much of the shock effect of The Awakening to the readers of 1899 came from Chopin’s rejection of the conventions of women’s writing. Despite her fame, which echoes two famous heroines of the domestic novel (Edna Earl in Augusta Evans’s St. Elmo [1867] and Edna Kenderdine in Dinah Mulock Craik’s The Woman’s Kingdom [1868]), Edna Pontellier appears to reject the domestic empire of the mother and the
The sororal world of women’s culture. Seemingly beyond the bonds of womanhood, she has neither mother nor daughter, and even refuses to go to her sister’s wedding.

Moreover, whereas the sentimental heroine nurtures others and the abstemious local color heroine subsists upon meager vegetarian diets, Kate Chopin’s heroine is a robust woman who does not deny her appetites. Wilkins’s New England nun picks at her dainty lunch of lettuce leaves and curdants, but Edna Pontellier eats hearty meals of pâté, pompano, steak, and broiled chicken; bics off chunks of crusty bread; snacks on beer and Gruyère cheese; and sips brandy, wine, and champagne.

Formally, too, the novel has moved away from conventional techniques of realism to an impressionistic rhythm of epiphany and mood. Chopin abandoned the chapter titles she had used in her first novel, As Fault (1890), for thirty-nine numbered chapters of uneven length, ranging from the single paragraph of chapter 28 to the sustained narrative of the dinner party in chapter 30. The chapters are unified less by their theme than by their focus on Edna’s consciousness, and by the retention of key motifs and images: music, the sea, shadows, swimming, eating, sleeping, gambling, the lovers, birth. Chapters of lyricism and fantasy, such as Edna’s voyage to the Château Cantinada, alternate with realistic, even satirical, scenes of Edna’s marriage.

Most important, where previous works ignored sexuality or spiritualized it through maternity, The Awakening is insistently sexual, explicitly involved with the body and self-awareness through physical awareness. Although Edna’s actual seduction by Arnaud takes place in the narrative nowhere between chapters 31 and 32, Chopin brilliantly evokes sexuality through images and details. In keeping with the novel’s emphasis on the self, several scenes suggest Edna’s initial autoeroticism. Edna’s midnight swim, which awakens the “first-felt throbbings of desire,” takes place in an atmosphere of erotic fragrance, “strange, rare odors...a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms” (46; ch. 10). A similarly voluptuous scene is her nap at the Château Cantinada, when she examines her flesh as she lies in a “strange, quaint bed, with its sweet country odor of laurel” (55; ch. 13).

Edna reminds Dr. Mandelet of “some beautiful animal waking up in the sun” (90; ch. 23), and we recall that among her fantasies in listening to music is the image of a lady stroking a cat. The image both conveys Edna’s sensuality and hints at the self-contained, almost masturbatory, quality of her sexuality. Her rendezvous with Robert takes place in a sunny garden where both stroke a drowsy cat’s silky fur, and Arnaud first seduces her by smoothing her hair with his “soft, magnetic hand” (113; ch. 31).

Yet despite these departures from tradition, there are other respects in which the novel seems very much of its time. As its title suggests, The Awakening is a novel about a process rather than a program, about a passage rather than a destination. Like Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905), it is a transitional female fiction of the fin-de-siècle, a narrative of and about the passage from the homosocial women’s culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism. Chopin might have taken the plot from a notebook entry Henry James made in 1892 about “the growing divorce between the American woman (with her comparative leisure, culture, grace, social instinct, artistic ambition) and the male immersed in the ferocity of business, with no time for any but the most sordid interests, purely commercial, professional, democratic, and political. This divorce is rapidly becoming a gulf” (qtd. in Ziff 275). The Gulf where the opening chapters of The Awakening are set certainly suggests the “growing divorce” between Edna’s interests and desires and Léonce’s obsessions with the stock market, property, and his brokerage business.

Yet in turning away from her marriage, Edna initially looks back to women’s culture rather than forward to another man. As Sandra Gilbert has pointed out, Grand Isle is an oasis of women’s culture, or a “female colony”: “Madam Lebrun’s pension on Grand Isle is very much a woman’s land not only because it is owned and run by a single woman and dominated by ‘motherwomen’ but also because (as in so many summer colonies today) its principal inhabitants are actually women and children whose husbands and fathers visit only on weekends...[and is situated] like so many places that are significant for women, outside patriarchal culture, beyond the limits and limitations of the city where men make history, on a shore that marks the margin where nature intersects with culture” (25).

Edna’s awakening, moreover, begins not with a man, but with Adele Ratignolle, the empress of the “mother-women” of Grand Isle. A “self-contained” (85; ch. 7) woman, Edna has never had any close relationships with members of her own sex. Thus it is Adele who belatedly initiates Edna into the world of female love and ritual on the first step of her sensual voyage to self-discovery. Edna’s first attraction to Adele is physical: “the excessive physical charms of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty” (32; ch. 7). At the beach, in the hot sun, she responds to Adele’s caresses,
the first she has ever known from another woman, as Adèle clasps her hand "firmly and warmly" and strokes it fondly. The touch provokes Edna to an unaccustomed candor, leaning her head on Adèle's shoulder and confiding some of her secrets, she begins to feel "intoxicated" (37; ch. 7). The bond between them goes beyond sympathy, as Chopin notes, to what "we might as well call love" (32; ch. 7).

In some respects, the motherless Edna also seeks a mother surrogate in Adèle and looks to her for nurturance. Adèle provides maternal encouragement for Edna's painting and tells her that her "talent is immense" (75; ch. 18). Characteristically, Adèle has rationalized her own "art" as a maternal project: "she was keeping up her music on account of the children . . . a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (43; ch. 9). Edna's responses to Adèle's music have been similarly tame and sentimental. Her revealing fantasies as she listens to Adèle play her easy pieces suggest the restriction and decorum of the female world: "a dainty young woman . . . taking mincing dancing steps as she came down a long avenue between tall hedges"; "children at play" (44; ch. 9). Women's art, as Adèle presents it, is social, pleasant, and undemanding. It does not conflict with her duties as wife and mother, and can even be seen to enhance them. Edna understands this well; as she retorts when her husband recommends Adèle as a model of an artist, "She isn't a musician, and I'm not a painter" (77; ch. 19).

Yet the relationship with the conventional Adèle educates the immature Edna to respond for the first time both to a different kind of sexuality and to the unconventional and difficult art of Mademoiselle Reisz. In responding to Adèle's interest, Edna begins to think about her own past and to analyze her own personality. In textual terms, it is through this relationship that she becomes "Edna" in the narrative rather than "Mrs. Pontellier."

We see the next stage of Edna's awakening in her relationship with Mademoiselle Reisz, who initiates her into the world of art. Significantly, this passage also takes place through a female rather than a male mentor, and, as with Adèle, there is something more intense than friendship between the two women. Whereas Adèle's fondness for Edna, however, is depicted as maternal and womanly, Mademoiselle Reisz's attraction to Edna suggests something more perverse. The pianist is obsessed with Edna's beauty, revives her figure in a bathing suit, greets her as "ma belle" and "ma reine," holds her hand, and describes herself as "a foolish old woman whom you have captivated" (84; ch. 21). If Adèle is a surrogate for Edna's dead mother and the intimate friend she never had as a girl, Mademoiselle Reisz, whose music reduces Edna to passionate sobs, seems to be a surrogate lover. And whereas Adèle is a "fauteuil Madonna" who speaks for the values and laws of the Creole community, Mademoiselle Reisz is a renegade, self-assertive and outspoken. She has no patience with petty social rules and violates the most basic expectations of femininity. To a rake like Arabin, she is so unattractive, unpleasant, and unwomanly as to seem "partially demented" (104; ch. 27). Even Edna occasionally perceives Mademoiselle Reisz's awkwardness as a kind of deformity and is sometimes offended by the old woman's candor and is not sure whether she likes her.

Yet despite her eccentricities, Mademoiselle Reisz seems "to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (99; ch. 26). Her voice in the novel seems to speak for the author's view of art and the artist. It is surely no accident, for example, that it is Chopin's music that Mademoiselle Reisz performs. At the pension on Grand Isle, the pianist first plays a Chopin prelude, to which Edna responds with surprising turbulence: "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily bear upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (45; ch. 9). Chopin becomes the code word for a world of repressed passion between Edna and Robert that Mademoiselle Reisz controls. Later the pianist plays a Chopin impromptu for Edna that Robert has admired; this time the music is "strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with ennui" (84; ch. 21). These references to Chopin in the text are on one level allusions to an intimate, romantic, and poignant musical savoir that reinforces the novel's sensual atmosphere. But on another level, they function as what Nancy K. Miller has called the "internal female signature" in women's writing. Here, a literary punning signature that alludes to Kate Chopin's ambitions as an artist and to the emotions she wished her book to arouse in its readers.

Chopin's career represented one important aesthetic model for her literary namesake. As a girl, Kate Chopin had been a talented musician, and her first published story, "Wiser than a God," was about a woman concert pianist who refused to marry. Moreover, Chopin's music both stylistically and thematically influences the language and form of The Awakening. The structure of the impromptu, in which there is an opening presentation of a theme, a contrasting middle section, and a modified return to the melodic and rhythmic材料 of the opening section, parallels the narrative form of The Awakening. The composer's techniques of unifying his work through repetition of musical phrases, his experiments with harmony and dissonance, his use of folk motifs,
his effects of frustration and delayed resolutions can also be compared to Kate Chopin's repetition of sentences, her juxtaposition of realism and impressionism, her incorporation of local color elements, and her rejection of conventional closure. Like that of the composer's impromptu, Chopin's style seems spontaneous and improvised, but it is in fact carefully designed and executed.

Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz not only represent important alternative roles and influences for Edna in the world of this novel, but as the proto-heroines of sentimental and local color fiction, they also suggest different plots and conclusions. Adèle's story suggests that Edna will give up her rebellion, return to her marriage, have another baby, and by degrees learn to appreciate, love, and even desire her husband. Such was the plot of many late nineteenth-century sentimental novels about erring young women married to older men, such as Susan Warner's *Diama* (1880) and Louisa May Alcott's *Moods* (1882). Mademoiselle Reisz's story suggests that Edna will lose her beauty, her youth, her husband, and children—everything, in short, but her art and her pride—and become a kind of New Orleans nun.

Chopin wished to reject both of these endings and to escape from the literary traditions they represented, but her own literary solitude, her resistance to alienating herself with a specific ideological or aesthetic position, made it impossible for her to work out something different and new. Edna remains very much entangled in her own emotions and moods, rather than moving beyond them to real self-understanding and to an awareness of her relationship to society. She alternates between two moods of "intoxication" and "languor," expansive states of activity, optimism, and power and passive states of contemplation, despondency, and sexual throttling. Edna feels intoxicated when she is assertive and in control. She first experiences such exultant feelings when she confides her history to Adèle Ratignolle and again when she learns how to swim: "intoxicated with her newly conqured power," she swims out too far (46; ch. 10). She is excited when she gambles successfully for high stakes at the race track, and finally she feels "an intoxication of expectancy" about awakening Robert with a seductive kiss and playing the dominant role with him (133; ch. 38). But these emotional peaks are countered by equally intense moods of depression, reverie, or stupor. At the worst, these are states of "indescriverable oppression," "vague anguish," or "hopeless ennui." At best, they are moments of passive sensuality in which Edna feels drugged: Arobin's lips and hands, for example, act "like a narcotic upon her" (98; ch. 25).

Edna welcomes both kinds of feelings because they are intense, and thus preserve her from the tedium of ordinary existence. They are in fact adolescent emotions, suitable to a heroine who is belatedly awakening, but Edna does not go beyond them to an adulthood that offers new experiences or responsibilities. In her relationships with men, she both longs for complete and romantic fusion with a fantasy lover and is unprepared to share her life with another person.

Chopin's account of the Pontellier marriage, for example, shows Edna's tacit collusion in a sexual bargain that allows her to keep to herself. Although she thinks of her marriage to a paternalistic man twelve years her senior as "purely an accident," the text makes it clear that Edna has married Léonce primarily to secure a fatherly protector who will not make too many domestic, emotional, or sexual demands on her. She is "fond of her husband," with "no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth" (37; ch. 7). They do not have an interest in each other's activities or thoughts, and have agreed to a complete separation of their social spheres; Léonce is fully absorbed by the business, social, and sexual activities of the male sphere, the city. Carondelet Street, Klein's Hotel at Grand Isle, where he gambles, and especially the New Orleans world of the clubs and red-light district. Even Adèle Ratignolle warns Edna of the risks of Mr. Pontellier's club life and of the "diversion" he finds there. "It's a pity Mr. Pontellier doesn't stay home more in the evenings," she tells Edna, "I think you would be more—well, if you don't mind my saying it—more united, if he did." "Oh! dear no!" Edna responds, "with a blank look in her eyes. 'What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other'" (89; ch. 23). Edna gets this blank look in her eyes—eyes that are originally described as "quick and bright"—whenever she is confronted with something she does not want to see. When she joins the Ratignolles at home together, Edna does not envy them, although, as the author remarks, "if ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (75; ch. 18). Instead, she is moved by pity for Adèle's "colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment" (76; ch. 18).

Noretheless, Edna does not easily relinquish her fantasy of rhapsodic oneness with a perfect lover. She imagines that such a union will bring permanent ecstasy, it will lead not simply to "domestic harmony" like that of the Ratignolles, but to "life's delirium" (76; ch. 18). In her story of the woman who paddles away with her lover in a pirogue and is never heard of again, Edna elaborates on her vision as she describes the lovers, "close together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness,
drifting into the unknown” (91; ch. 23). Although her affair with Ar- obia shakes her into an awareness of her own sexual passions, it leaves her illusions about love intact. Desire, she understands, can exist independently of love. But love retains its magical aura; indeed, her sexual awakening with Arobia generates an even “fiercer, more overpowering love” for Robert (104; ch. 28). And when Robert comes back, Edna has persuaded herself that the force of their love will overwhelm all obstacles: “We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence” (130; ch. 36). Her intention seems to be that they will go off together into the unknown, like the lovers in her story. But Robert cannot accept such a role, and when he leaves her, Edna finally realizes “that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (136; ch. 39).

The other side of Edna’s terror of solitude, however, is the bondage of class as well as gender that keeps her in a prison of the self. She goes blank too whenever she might be expected to notice the double standard of ladylike privilege and oppression of women in southern society. To Edna’s shock, she discovers in her “mazes of inward contemplation,” Edna barely notices the silent quadroon nurse who takes care of her children, the little black girl who works the treadles of Madame Lebrun’s sewing machine, the laundress who keeps her in frilly white, or the maid who picks up her broken glass. She never makes connections between her lot and theirs.

The scene in which Edna witnesses Adele in childbirth (130–32; ch. 37) is the first time in the novel that she identifies with another woman’s pain, and draws some halting conclusions about the female and the human condition, rather than simply about her own ennui. Edna’s births have taken place in unconsciousness; when she sees Adele’s childbirth, “her own life experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation” (131; ch. 37). The stupor that deadens sensation is an apt metaphor for the real and imaginary narcotics supplied by fantasy, money, and patriarchy, which have protected Edna from pain for most of her life, but which have also kept her from becoming an adult.

But in thinking of nature’s trap for women, Edna never moves from her own questioning to the larger social statement that is feminism. Her intellectuality is partly a product of her time; as a heroine in transition between the homosocial and the heterosexual worlds, Edna has lost some of the sense of connectedness to other women that might help her plan her future. Though she has sojourned in the “female colony” of Grand Isle, it is far from being a feminist utopia, a real community of women, in terms of sisterhood. The novel suggests, in fact, something of the historical loss for women of transferring the sense of self to relationships with men.

Edna’s solitude is one of the reasons that her emancipation does not take her very far. Despite her efforts to escape the rituals of femininity, Edna seems fated to reenact them, even though, as Chopin recounts these scenes, she satirizes and revises their conventions. Ironically, considering her determination to discard the trappings of her role as a society matron—her wedding ring, her “reception day,” her “charming home”—the high point of Edna’s awakening is the dinner party she gives for her twenty-ninth birthday. Edna’s birthday party begins like a kind of drawing-room comedy. We are told the guest list, the seating plan, the menu, and the table setting; some of the guests are boring, and some do not like each other; Madame Ratignolle does not show up at the last minute, and Mademoiselle Reisz makes disagreeable remarks in French.

Yet as it proceeds to its bacchanalian climax, the dinner party also has a symbolic intensity and resonance that makes it, as Sandra Gilbert argues, Edna’s “most authentic act of self-definition” (30). Not only is she the twenty-ninth birthday a feminine threshold, the passage from youth to middle age, but Edna is literally on the threshold of a new life in her little house. The dinner, as Arobin remarks, is a coup d’état, an overthrow of her marriage, and the more an act of aggression because Léonce will pay the bills. Moreover, she has created an atmosphere of splendid and luxury that seems to exceed the requirements of the occasion. The table is set with gold satin, Sèvres china, crystal, silver, and gold; there are “champagne to swim in” (106; ch. 29), and Edna is magnificently dressed in a satin and lace gown, with a cluster of diamonds (a gift from Léonce) in her hair. Presiding at the head of the table, she seems powerful and autonomous: “There was something in her attitude... which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (109; ch. 30). Edna’s moment of mastery thus takes place in the context of a familiar ceremony of women’s culture. Indeed, dinner parties are virtual set pieces of feminist aesthetics, suggesting that the hostess is a kind of artist in her own sphere, someone whose creativity is channeled into the production of social and domestic harmony. Like Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse...
(1927), Edna exhausts herself in creating a sense of fellowship at her table, although in the midst of her guests she still experiences an “acute longing” for “the unattainable” (109–10; ch. 30).

But there is a gap between the intensity of Edna’s desire, a desire that by now has gone beyond sexual fulfillment to take in a much vaster range of metaphysical longings, and the means that she has to express herself. Edna may look like a queen, but she is still a housewife. The political and aesthetic weapons she has in her coup d’etat are only forks and knives, glasses and dresses.

Can Edna, and Kate Chopin, then escape from confining traditions only in death? Some critics have seen Edna’s much-debated suicide as a heroic embrace of independence and a symbolic resurrection into myth, a feminist counterpart of Melville’s Bulfinking: “Take heart, take heart, O Edna, up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing, up, straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!” but the ending too seems to return Edna to the nineteenth-century female literary traditions, even though Chopin redefines it for her own purpose. Readers of the 1890s were well accustomed to drowning as the fictional punishment for female transgression against morality, and most contemporary critics of The Awakening thus automatically interpreted Edna’s suicide as the wages of sin.

Drowning itself brings to mind metaphorical analogies between femininity and liquidity. As the female body is prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid, so in drowning the woman is immersed in the feminine organic element. Drowning thus becomes the traditionally feminine literary death. And Edna’s last thoughts further recycle significant images of the feminine from her past. As exhaustion overpowers her,

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 musky odor of pinks filled the air. (137; ch. 39)

Edna’s memories are those of awakening from the freedom of childhood to the limitations conferred by female sexuality.

The image of the bees and the flowers not only recalls early descriptions of Edna’s sexuality as a “sensitive blossom,” but also places The Awakening firmly within the traditions of American women’s writing, where it is a standard trope for the unequal sexual relations between women and men. Margaret Fuller, for example, writes in her journal: “Woman is the flower, man the bee. She sighs out of melodious fra-

grance, and invites the winged laborer. He drains her cup, and carries off the honey. She dies on the stalk; he returns to the hive, well fed, and prai sed as an active member of the community” (ed. in Cheyney 349). In post–Civil War fiction, the image is a reminder of an elemental power that women’s culture must confront. The Awakening seems particularly to echo the last lines of Mary E. Wilkins’s “A New England Nun” (1891), in which the heroine, having broken her long-standing engagement, is free to continue her solitary life, and closes her door on “the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees; there were halloos, metallic clatterings, sweet calls, long hummings.” These are the images of nature that, Edna has learned, decry women into slavery; yet even in drowning, she cannot escape from their seductiveness, for to ignore their claim is also to cut oneself off from culture, from the “humming” life of creation and achievement.

We can re-create the literary tradition in which Kate Chopin wrote The Awakening, but of course, we can never know how the tradition might have changed if her novel had not had to wait half a century to find its audience. Few of Chopin’s literary contemporaries came into contact with the book. Chopin’s biographer, Phoebe Youens, notes that her work “was apparently unknown to Dreiser, even though he began writing Sister Carrie just when The Awakening was being loudly condemned. Also Ellen Glasgow, who was at this time beginning to describe unsatisfactory marriages, seems to have been unaware of the author’s existence. Indeed, we can safely say that though she was so much of an innovator in American literature, she was virtually unknown by those who were now to shape it and that she had no influence on them” (Youens, Kate Chopin 196). Ironically, even Willa Cather, the one woman writer of the fin-de-siecle who reviewed The Awakening, not only failed to recognize its importance but also dismissed its theme as “trite.” It would be decades before another American woman novelist combined Kate Chopin’s artistic maturity with her sophisticated outlook on sexuality, and overcame both the sentimental codes of feminine “ariseness” and the sexual codes of feminine “passionlessness.”

In terms of Chopin’s own literary development, there were signs that The Awakening would have been a pivotal work. While it was in press, she wrote two of her finest and most daring short stories, “The Storm,” which surpasses The Awakening in terms of its expressive freedom. Chopin was also being drawn back to a rethinking of women’s culture. Her last poem, written in 1900, was addressed to Kitty Garisch and spoke of the permanence of emotional bonds between women:
To the Friend of My Youth

It is not all of life
To cling together while the years glide past.
It is not all of love
To walk with clasped hands from the first to last.
The mystic garland which the spring did twine
Of scented lilac and the new-blown rose,
Faster than chains will hold my soul to thine
Thro’ joy, and grief, thro’ life—unto its close.

(Seyersted, Complete Works 735)

We have only these tantalizing fragments to hint at the directions Chopin’s work might have taken if The Awakening had been a critical success or even a succès de scandale, and if her career had not been cut off by her early death. The fate of The Awakening shows only too well how a literary tradition may be enabling, even essential, as well as confining. Struggling to escape from tradition, Kate Chopin courageously risked social and literary ostracism. It is up to contemporary readers to restore her solitary book to its place in our literary heritage.

WORKS CITED


