

Exploring Female Autonomy and Resistance in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

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Abstract-In Kate Chopin's work *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, a married woman in late 19th-century Louisiana, struggles to define herself against social expectations. After meeting and falling in love with Robert Lebrun, Edna, who is dissatisfied with her role as a wife and mother, embarks on a quest for independence and self-discovery. Issues of female liberty, libido, and societal norm constraints are all examined in the text.

Instead of living under control, Edna chose to embrace the loneliness of the sea, which ultimately leads to her terrible demise.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the psychological deterioration of a woman who received the "rest cure" for postpartum depression is detailed. She becomes obsessed with the patterns of the yellow wallpaper after being confined to a room with it and comes to feel that the design symbolizes a woman who is trapped. Because of her increasing fixation, the protagonist utilizes the wallpaper to represent the broader enslavement of women in patriarchal societies.

The narrative highlights the harmful consequences of seclusion and forced inactivity while also criticizing the way women's mental health is handled through her deteriorating mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin's book *The Awakening* was released in 1899. Issues of feminine awakening, social constraints, and sexuality are all explored in this book. It is recognized as a significant feminist literary piece. This book is one of the first in the United States to use narrative techniques to discuss the challenges faced by women.

The book is set in New Orleans and along Louisiana's Gulf coast at the close of the 1800s. The plot centres on Edna Pontellier, the main character, and her struggle between her more outlandish views on feminism and parenthood and the prevailing social ideals of South America at the turn of the century.

When Edna meets Robert Lebrun, a charming young man who expresses interest in her and makes her feel

romantically attracted to him, she begins her awakening journey while on summer vacation at Grand Isle. This marks the beginning of Edna's realization that her life has been mostly formed by social norms rather than her personal preferences or sense of self. As Edna returns to New Orleans, her growing discontent with her responsibilities as a wife and mother collides with her developing independence. Edna begins to resist her affluent businessman husband, Leonce Pontellier, who expects her to be the perfect "mother-woman," by putting her personal interests ahead of household responsibilities. As Edna explores her long-neglected love of painting, her metamorphosis becomes more profound. She moves out of the family home and into a smaller one that she calls the "pigeon house," symbolizing her longing for independence.

Despite their growing intimacy, Robert eventually departs for Mexico to avoid placing her in a precarious situation. However, Edna continues to experiment with her autonomy and objectives. She had an affair with notorious womanizer Alcée Arobin, but this connection does not satisfy her emotionally.

Despite their professed love, Robert's brief appearance betrays his inability to control his feelings in light of Edna's marital status and the societal norms they must adhere to. He confesses to using the business trip to Mexico as a pretext to end an unsuccessful romance. Edna is asked to help her friend Adèle through a difficult delivery. Edna finds a note from Robert informing her that he has permanently gone because he loves her too much to make her feel inferior by dating a married woman. Edna is shocked when she returns to Grand Isle, the place where she first met Robert Lebrun. In an effort to get away, Edna drowns herself in the Gulf of Mexico waves.

INTRODUCTION OF THE SECONDARY TEXT

In January 1892, American novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* made its debut in *The New England Magazine*. Because it illustrates 19th-century notions about women's mental and physical health, it is regarded as an important early work of American feminist writing. It is hailed as an outstanding piece of horror fiction as well.

The story revolves around a young woman and her partner. He has her undergo a rest treatment when she suffers from "temporary nervous depression" after the birth of their child. During their summer stay at a colonial mansion, the narrator is confined primarily to an upstairs nursery. The novel uses a stunningly unreliable narrator to gradually illustrate how much her spouse has "imprisoned" her due to her physical and mental health. The shredded wallpaper, barred windows, metal rings in the walls, "scratched and gouged and splintered" floor, bed bolted to the floor, and gate at the top of the stairs, she says, must have been inhabited by children.

Its "sickly" colour, "yellow" smell, odd and unnerving design that resembles "an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions," missing patches, and the way it leaves yellow smears on all skin and clothing are all described by the narrator in numerous journal entries. She notes that the longer one remains in the bedroom, especially in the presence of moonlight, the more the wallpaper appears to shift. She finally comes to the conclusion that a woman crawling on all fours is following the pattern. She believes she must let go of the woman in the wallpaper, so she begins to take the last of it off the wall. When her husband arrives home, the narrator refuses to let him unlock her door. When he returns with the key, he finds her skulking around the room, rubbing against the wall covering, and shouting, "I've got out at last... in spite of you."

About the Author

On February 8, 1850, Katherine O'Flaherty, better known as Kate Chopin, was born. She was an American novelist and short story writer who lived in Louisiana. Chopin was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Because of her topics and methodology, her stories generated controversy; some reviewers denounced them as unethical. Kate Chopin's literary career began when her first piece was published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. During the period between the late 1880s and the early 1900s, when

American literature was moving away from romanticism and toward realism and naturalism, Chopin wrote.

Her early works, which included short tales published in magazines like *Vogue* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, often depicted the Creole and Cajun ways of life in Louisiana. These tales, which stood out for their in-depth descriptions, perceptive knowledge, and psychological depth, helped her establish a modest reputation as a gifted regionalist author.

At the time of its initial publication, *The Awakening* was heavily attacked, with many people calling it offensive and unethical. This reaction harmed Chopin's career and contributed to her long-term literary exile. Despite how it was received at the time, *The Awakening* is now recognized as a feminist literary classic that was ahead of its time in depicting women's inner lives and fights for independence.

Understanding of Kate Chopin's Writing Style

Kate Chopin's writing is often commended for its emotional richness, lucidity, and creative examination of gender, identity, and individual freedom issues. A trailblazer of feminist literature in the late 19th century, Kate Chopin's novels challenged conventional norms, particularly those pertaining to women's roles in marriage, parenting, and self-identification.

Clear prose, striking imagery, and a subtle yet profound capacity to portray her characters' inner problems are characteristics of her writing. Chopin's poetry is incredibly precise and evokes the wonders of nature and the senses.

Particularly important is the sea's exquisite imagery in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. The vivid, even poetic phrase Edna Pontellier used to describe the water reflects her quest for autonomy and self-expression. For instance, Chopin writes:

"The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude."

This literary method creates a rich, captivating atmosphere while reflecting Edna's inner transformation and feelings.

One of the best things about Chopin's writing is her ability to delve into the mental states of her characters, particularly the women. Her work

regularly explores their inner conflicts, aspirations, and issues, portraying them as whole individuals rather than as clichés. Chopin's novels regularly question social norms and traditional gender roles. Her protagonists often want for autonomy in their personal lives, careers, or relationships. The American South is often the scene for Chopin's works, which are intricately detailed and crucial to her story.

Her writing consistently highlights Southern cultures, traditions, and dialects, providing readers with an authentic and captivating experience. This geographic focus gives her paintings depth and firmly places them within a specific historical and cultural context.

Chopin's life had an impact on the Awakening, particularly in relation to her desire to have a separate identity from men and her kids. Chopin's writing was groundbreaking because it challenged conventional depictions of women and paved the way for other female writers.

Character Analysis

Edna Pontellier (Main Protagonist)

The protagonist Edna Pontellier undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis during the course of the book. She is shown as a woman and mother who conforms to the social mores of her time. However, it is during her summer at Grand Isle that she begins to discover her own desires and frustrations with her constrained work. Edna's character is defined by her conflict between her need for freedom and her obligation to society. She is torn between loving her children and seeking independence, as well as between being faithful to her husband and being drawn to Robert Lebrun.

Robert Lebrun

In Edna's life, Robert Lebrun is significant. Edna's intellectual and emotional growth is accelerated by him. He is a charming and gorgeous young man who enjoys spending his summers on Grand Isle.

Edna initially had a friendship, but it progressively grows into a strong, intimate relationship. Robert's personality is characterized by his sensitivity and understanding. He provides Edna with the much-needed emotional support and acknowledges her discontent. He encourages her to express herself and pursue her own interests. However, Robert is also constrained by societal conventions. Because he

cannot fully transcend the constraints of his time and place, he eventually departs from Edna's life.

Situations of the Women During the Victorian Era

During the Victorian Era (1837–1901), Britain saw substantial social, political, and economic change. Strict social conventions were also in place throughout this time, particularly for women. The ideal Victorian lady was expected to embody the "Angel in the House" paradigm, a selfless, hygienic, and domestic figure whose primary role was to be a wife and mother. Women were expected to be obedient and subservient to their husbands, manage the household, and raise the children. They lacked access to political, economic, and educational opportunities, and their authority was mostly confined to the home.

Adèle Ratignolle, Edna's companion and the archetypal "mother woman," is a prime embodiment of this ideal in Kate Chopin's work *The Awakening*. Adèle embodies the Victorian ideal of domesticity by dedicating her life to her spouse and children. She is admired by society for her generosity and unwavering commitment to her family. However, Edna feels increasingly bound by these requirements. She can't fit into the "Angel in the House" role and longs for something more.

The Limitations of Marriage and Parenting

Marriage was viewed as the ultimate goal for women in the Victorian era. It was regarded as a woman's innate destiny and the only honorable path she could take. A woman's spouse inherited all of her financial and legal rights after they were married. She was viewed as her husband's property and lacked a feeling of self.

Women were also expected to birth and nurture children, and motherhood was highly valued. Edna and Léonce Pontellier's marriage lacks both passion and emotional intimacy. Léonce sees Edna as a possession, and their marriage is more of a social contract than a loving one. Edna feels stuck in her marriage and longs for emotional and mental growth. She is drawn to Robert Lebrun, a young man who shows her compassion and understanding.

Motherhood is also frustrating to Edna. Even though she adores her children, she feels overloaded by the demands of motherhood and the expectation that she should always be there for them. She battles the loss

of her individuality and the feeling that she is merely a wife and mother.

Theoretical Frameworks

The Awakening, a well-known feminist novel by Kate Chopin, examines issues of female independence, uniqueness, and defiance of conventional expectations. Existentialism, psychoanalytic theory, and feminist theory are just a few of the theoretical frameworks that might be applied. These perspectives shed light on the main character, Edna Pontellier, as she struggles for her identity, defies patriarchal norms, and deals with the fallout from her choices.

Feminist Theory and the Autonomy of Women

Feminist literary theory is one of the most crucial perspectives for analyzing *The Awakening* since it seeks to dismantle the gendered power structures that shape Edna's reality. At a time when women were primarily responsible for taking care of the home, Chopin composed her story, which was published in 1899. According to feminist philosophy, Edna's awakening—her realization of her individuality and desires—challenges the conventional norms of motherhood and wifehood.

Theory of Psychoanalysis and Edna's Resistance

Psychoanalytic philosophy, particularly Sigmund Freud's idea, explains Edna's internal struggles and the psychological components of her resistance.

1) The Theory of the Unconscious by Freud:

The primary character in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, has a complicated psychological makeup that can be significantly explained by Freud's Theory of the Unconscious. Freud's thesis that human behavior is driven by unconscious sentiments, repressed emotions, and internal conflicts is strongly tied to Edna's journey of self-discovery and eventual mortality.

At the start of the novel, Edna conforms to social conventions as a wife and mother. Her suppressed desires, however, surface while she remains in Grand Isle. Her latent desire for independence and passion, which is suppressed by social conventions, begins to influence her conscious thoughts.

The release of Edna's id (Instinctual Desires) from the grip of the superego is symbolized by her awakening. She shows that she is giving in to her

primal urges by having an affair with Alcée Arobin and becoming more attracted to Robert Lebrun. Similar to Edna's doubts about marriage and parenthood, Freud believed that when repressed desires become too intense, they manifest as behaviors that defy social norms.

Existentialism and Edna's Search for Sincerity

Existentialist theory, particularly the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, offers an alternative reading of Edna's awakening as her quest for authenticity in a society that rejects her individuality.

1) Sartre defines "bad faith" as a tendency to adhere to societal conventions rather than embrace true freedom. Living in ill faith is exemplified by Edna's early years as a loving wife and mother. Her awakening signifies a change toward authenticity as she begins to base her decisions more on her own interests than on those of others.

2) Beauvoir's *The Othering of Women*: Edna's account supports Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." By resisting the pressure from her society to be the perfect woman, she attempts to define herself by her own standards. But ultimately, society's lack of support for her independence leads to her loneliness and demise.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the book *The Awakening* discusses female sovereignty. As a result of her self-discovery, Edna Pontellier, the main character, challenges conventional standards in her pursuit of personal fulfillment and autonomy beyond the duties of mother and wife. Throughout the book, she progressively gains control of her own life by moving out of her husband's house, having an affair, and pursuing her artistic ambitions. She finally realizes that total independence is unachievable due to society's constrictive structure. Her choice to walk into the sea could be seen as her final gesture of independence. Additionally, there are multiple interpretations of the book's last scene, where Edna enters the Gulf of Mexico. It is regarded as both her last statement of independence and a heartbreaking admission of her inability to live up to social expectations.

By refusing to give up her aspirations for social approval, she challenges the notion that marriage

and motherhood are the only paths to feminine fulfilment. Her awakening encompasses both sexual and emotional independence as well as the fundamental right to individuality.

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