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"Mrs. Chopin was at least a decade ahead of her time: The Place of The Awakening in the American Canon"

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"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."
Oscar Wilde

"Sex fiction", "an essentially vulgar story", "we are fain to believe that Miss Chopin did not herself realize what she was doing when she wrote it."[i] These words of disdain reverberated through the public two months after the first publication of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in 1899. Although C. L. Deyo in his review claimed the book to be *"flawless art,"*[ii] *The Awakening* had to endure savage criticism. Opinions differ as to whether the book was dismissed from the libraries in St. Louis[iii], but it is certain that Kate Chopin was not admitted to the St. Louis Fine Arts Club, and it took half a century for her novel to be granted canonical status becoming its artistic merits.

Deyo in his 1899 review concludes: *"It is sad and mad and bad, but it consummate art. The theme is difficult, but it is handled with cunning craft. The work is more than unusual. It is unique. The integrity of its art is that of well-knit individuality at one with itself, with nothing superfluous to weaken the impression of the perfect whole."*[iv]

As I have already suggested, contemporary criticism did not concur with his judgement and *The Awakening* was only once more reprinted in 1906 and never again until more than fifty years later. Even though her short stories enjoyed no little popularity, Chopin was not included in the a lot of the literary histories and other reference works (e.g. the *Cambridge History of American Literature* of 1918) published during the first half of the twentieth century. Even later when she becomes mentioned at all, she is ranked amongst the "local colourists".

To understand why the book was regarded a disgraceful piece (and Kate Chopin *persona non grata*), we need to consider the circumstances of its publication. The last decade of the nineteenth century in America was that of growing social tension. Traditional ways of life were undergoing change due to the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. Darwinism challenged the so far persisting ideas of human origins and destiny. As Margaret Culley says: *"It is not surprising that in such a period the particular Puritan-American brand of Victorian morality became and especially rigidified stronghold against social and intellectual ferment."*[v] Victorian prudery had its impact on literary criticism and would still prevail in 1899, when readers encountered *The Awakening*. A novel radiating, according to their judgement, such flawed morality would automatically be cursed.

Moreover, we should not forget the peculiarities of the St. Louis Creole society of those days. Mary L. Shaffer writes the following about Creole women in 1892: *"Creole women, as a rule, are good housekeepers, are economical and industrious… They are tender loving mothers, they care for the health and beauty of their children."*[vi] We are not exaggerating when we suggest that Edna Pontellier, the central figure of Chopin's novel, was not the epitome of the Creole woman. Society rejected such *"progressive"* a lady. Above all this, a lot of the readers identified Chopin with her heroine and, thus, they were both condemned. Kate Chopin in her response to the critics' reaction says: *"I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and*

working out her own damnation as she did", then goes on with cunning humour: "If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over, and it was already too late."[vii]

The Awakening sank into oblivion for decades. The only major work written on Chopin before the 1960s was Daniel S. Rankin's *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories*, published in 1932. In this first biography of Kate Chopin she was, as the title already suggest, ranked amongst the regionalist writers and *The Awakening* was not attributed much artistic significance. Rankin's opinion is best illustrated by the following sentence: *"The Awakening is exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation"* [viii]

By the 1950s American society had abandoned its rigorous moral doctrines and became more open and liberal to a considerable degree. In such a changed climate Kenneth Eble could freely praise *The Awakening* and call this *"forgotten novel"* a *"first-rate"* piece of work. In establishing the novel's deserved canonical status it was European critics who had incomparable share. Cyrille Arnavon compared *The Awakening* to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and, unlike former critics (Willa Cather amongst them), emphasised the positive nature of the similarity. He even translated the novel into French. The most important work in this respect was the Norwegian Per Seyersted's *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, published in 1969. In the same year he also issued *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* in two volumes. This included her short stories, her poems, both *At Fault*, Chopin's first novel, and *The Awakening* as well as more than a dozen of her essays. The most notable aspect of this critical biography is Seyersted's realising Chopin's position as a "long-neglected pioneer":

Kate Chopin is a rare, transitional figure in modern literature. In her illustration of the female condition she forms a link between George Sand and Simone de Beauvoire. In her descriptions of the power of sexuality she reflects the idea of such a work as Hippolytus and foreshadows the forceful 20th-century treatments of Eros.[ix]

He places Chopin's work amongst those of the great turn-of-the-century naturalists of American fiction: *"Cyrille Arnavon is thus no longer alone in elevating Kate Chopin from the group of local colorists to that of the American pioneer writers of the 1890s, the group which comprises such authors as Crane, Garland, Norris and Dreiser."*[x]

"Chopin's book has emerged from obscurity to 'classic' status in part because it broaches themes subsequently taken up by twentieth-century feminism"[xi] (83) observes Michael T. Gilmore, articulating a factor that played a crucial role in *The Awakening*'s ascend. Feminists from their earliest emergence, just as Chopin's novel, were primarily concerned with women's status in society in relation to that of men's, as well as the problems they had to face when trying to define themselves in their position as women. Feminist critics had a variety of goals. Some of them revisited books by male authors from a women's perspective to see how they "both reflect and shape attitudes that have held women back" (Murfin 158). Some studied writings of known woman writers, whilst others tried to rediscover forgotten texts by neglected female authors. *The Awakening* was such a text and it too was reinvestigated from a feminist point of view. Nancy A. Walker observes:

… feminist critics began to use psychoanalytic theory, linguistics, classical mythology, and perceptions of the cultural position of women in the late nineteenth century to reveal the novel's richness (…) And Kate Chopin was, in the process, elevated from the status of a minor local color writer to that of an author of major American novel. (142)

A rather favourable condition also undeniably promoted *The Awakening*'s gaining canonical status. Namely, the fact that critics of the 1950s and 60s were not concerned with making moral

judgements but, rather, they concentrated on the novel's imagery and symbolism. As a result, the unquestionable artistic skill with which it had been written finally obtained due recognition. As Nancy A. Walker puts it:

It is perhaps fortunate that in the 1950s and 1960s when Chopin's novel was being rediscovered, the formalist approach of the New Critical school of literary theory was still dominant in critical circles, because the close attention to the forms and patterns, and structure of literary works favored by the formalists established *The Awakening* as a work of art rather than as the document of flawed morality that its early reviewers reacted to. (149)

With Seyersted's volumes Kate Chopin was finally recognised and most of her writings were made available to the reading public, which had been deprived of them for over half a century. *The Awakening*, which the vestiges of Victorian prudery almost eliminated from literature, in due course received proper attention, and the creator of Edna Pontellier was eventually granted adequate position in world literature. Edmund Wilson in his foreword to Seyersted's *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* expressed his appreciation and gratitude for "reconstructing… both the work and the personality of this daring and accomplished woman" (qtd. in Walker 146).

"She wanted to swim far out, where no other woman had swum before"

Kate Chopin's reckless venture

"In many respects, *The Awakening* seems to comment on it own history as a novel, to predict its own critical fate." (Showalter 34) Having had a glance at the brief outline of *The Awakening*'s critical history, Showalter's remark seems self-explanatory. There is an obvious parallel between the revolutionary protagonist and the equally daring piece of writing.

According to Elaine Showalter, women writers between 1850 and 1890 were to be classified as either sentimental novelists or local colourists. Ross C. Murfin in his introduction to Elaine Showalter's essay entitled "Tradition and the Female Talent" says: "Sentimentalists thought of themselves as moralists, not as artists, after all they thought of art as a profession and of the professions as a masculine domain" (163). Local colourist like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, on the other hand "were attracted to the male world of art and prestige" and "began to assert themselves as the daughters of literary fathers and mothers" (Showalter 38) These writers were mainly focusing on regional events, customs and characters and never went beyond these boundaries.

In the 1890s a new generation of women writers emerged to whom Kate Chopin stands closest. In her literary career she went through al three phases of the nineteenth century American women's writing but it did not take long for her to discover her own voice. She identified with the New Women writers of the 1890s, that is "late Victorian feminists" (Ledger 9), who "no longer grieved for the female bond and sanctuaries of the past" (Showalter 40)

In *The Awakening* Chopin tackles cardinal matters within the realm of personal, mental, spiritual and sexual development. Kenneth Eble somewhat oversimplifies the issue when he, in his otherwise appreciative essay, laconically states: "Quite frankly, the book is about sex." (qtd. in Culley 166) Indeed, the book is far from being merely about sex. Were it not so, Edna would hardly end her life in the closing chapter. One can easily agree that a pure sexual experience will not trigger such ending. John R. May's remark seems considerably more valid. He says: "I have already suggested that an explanation of her [Edna's] awakening simply in terms of a growing awareness of her sexual needs is too facile an interpretation of this rather complex novel. On a much deeper level Edna awakens to the reality of her own nature in relation to life" (qtd. in Culley 193) Bath Ann Bassein's observations coincide with the above:

Edna's awakening is many-sided and not just in the realm of sex, as many who rejected the novel upon publication thought. Her sexual longing is symptomatic of a much greater, more pervasive and more general longing, which includes becoming sharply aware of her own nature, of her need for solitude and the opportunity to be an artist, and of the removal of the prison-like atmosphere of her own married life. (117)

Showalter's other astute comment leads me back to my initial statement: "…radical departures from literary convention within a minority tradition are especially likely to be censured and suppressed by the dominant culture, because they violate social as well as aesthetic stereotypes and expectation" (34). *The Awakening*, it seems, was such a "radical departure" from the literary tradition of American women's writing; hence its tormented history.

The original title of the novel was *A Solitary Soul*, which Chopin later changed into *The Awakening*. In fact the two titles together suggest the essence of the novel: the more one becomes conscious of oneself, the more awake one is, the more one's ultimate solitude become blatant. This is exactly what happens to Edna Pontellier, even though there are a number of allusions in the text to her not being conscious of what is happening to her: "I feel this summer as if I was walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (TA 43). "She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (TA 82). As Beth Ann Bassein puts it: "When Edna moves toward greater and greater solitude and those around her (Léonce, Robert, and her children) recede from her immediate surroundings, she gradually nears the greatest isolation of all, death" (120) In this respect we may suspect a rather strong influence of Guy de Maupassant on Chopin. She had translated Maupassant's short story entitled *Solitude*. In the story during a nighttime walk one of two friends confesses: "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. But what is the use! I speak and you answer me, and still each of us is alone; side by side but alone." (qtd. in Showalter 33) The more awake Edna becomes, the grander her solitude grows, both physically, mentally and spiritually.

In *The Awakening* Chopin abandons the conventional mode of portraying marriage as the ultimate consummation of a woman's career in the world. It recounts the story of a woman who is not only unwilling to sacrifice herself for her family, thus seriously violating social conventions, but also realises and accepts the infinite solitude one is doomed to withstand. It describes a woman who has her own choice, who "resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (TA 208). As Elaine Showalter puts it: "Chopin went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation." (34).

Edna Pontellier Amongst Other Women and Men

"So lonely am I
My body is a floating weed
Severed at the roots.
Were there water to entice me,
I would follow, I think."

Ono no Komachi

"Edna Pontellier was different from the crowd" (TA 37), Chopin describes her in chapter VIII of *The Awakening*. She was, indeed, unlike her companions regarding both her looks and her nature. She is further depicted the following way:

Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright; they were a yellowish brown, about the color of her hair. She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought.

Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasising the depth of her eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features. (TA 7)

This passage suggests a woman whose charm and attractiveness do not derive directly from her womanliness. Her hidden splendour, which lies in her lively mind (suggested by quick and bright eyes) and a rareness of qualities, needs to be discovered. Early on in her life her rebellious nature manifested itself. As a child she ran away from prayers and later on "her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident" (TA 46). She insisted on marrying Léonce to revolt against the "violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic" (TA 47).

Considering what Mary L. Shaffer, already quoted, claims the ideal Creole woman to be, Edna Pontellier is truly the odd one out. Although she is "artistic by nature" (Shaffer 120) (she paints) and her manner is "engaging" (TA 7), both attributes of the Creole woman, she is far from ideal according to their standards. She is not a mother-woman. She dedicates much less time to being with her sons as other women would. However, this does not mean "it is because she is overtly cruel to them that they are not always in her company. They are used to doing without her and have an attractive kind of independence that some of their friends lack. They can pick themselves up when they fall down" (Bassein 116). She openly expresses that she is not willing to sacrifice herself for her children: "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself." (TA 122) She feels little, if any, affection towards her husband, who treats her as if she was some object he could freely possess.

Edna's character is sharply contrasted by the figure of Adéle Ratignolle, her friend. Adéle represents all that Edna Pontellier is not. First of all, Madame Ratignolle is a perfect mother, giving birth to a child every two years. She is unconditionally dedicated to her husband and she is a real beauty: "There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams. There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent" (TA 19)

Adéle seems perfect, regarding both her physical qualities and her nature. She takes piano lessons in order to be able to entertain and to enlighten the atmosphere of her home. Edna, however, is a "selfish", dedicated artist who pursues her painting purely to her own delight. Also, it is an important means of self-expression for her, as well as a significant aid in her quest for her true self.

Discussing relationships in the novel Deborah E. Barker comes to a somewhat far-fetched conclusion respecting Edna and Adéle: "Part of what makes the scene of Edna's painting radical is that her desire is directed towards Adéle, not Robert (…) The sensuality of Edna's desire for Adéle is palpable" (Barker 63) Barker seems to suggest that the following line supports her argument: "she 'liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (Barker 64) In my view, it seems Barker fundamentally fails to understand an artist's soul, as well as why and how he or she perceives objects and persons. The artist is predominantly interested in and excited by the nature of the specific person; let them be either male or female. This interest or attraction is regardless of sex and has nothing to do with physical longing. It is nevertheless true that it is a rather intensive emotion and it keeps the artist excited so thoroughly that it may well be mistaken for what one would call "being in love". It may be even more

pervasive than that but it remains purely on the spiritual level. Edna is tied to Adéle by this subtle bond which very often does not become conscious and, thus, leaves one puzzled as to how to interpret it. This is not to say that it may *never* have physical dimensions. In the present case, however, it does not seem appropriate to diverge in that direction.

Another important woman in Edna's life is Mademoiselle Reisz the pianist, who according to Linda S. Boren is "a thinly disguised witch" (186) and is "decidedly demonic" (190). Mademoiselle Reisz is definitely not an ordinary woman. Her figure is an even sharper contrast to that of Adéle Ratignolle than Edna's. She is the typical outcast artist, who lives for her art, and in self-exile. The old lady is so little and "bodiless", she can hardly be regarded a woman. Also, she is "gifted" with a rather unpleasant nature which safely assures her isolation as no one comes near her unless it is absolutely necessary; except Edna who frequents her dwellings whenever she can, as "there was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (TA 204)

Robert writes letters to the old lady from Mexico, which Edna scrutinises with eager interest seeking for latent confessions of his love for her. She somehow associates the Mademoiselle with the young man and that is why she desires to stay in her presence. On the other hand, the pianist is an artist soul mate to Edna. The old lady shares her philosophy of art and being an artist with her, even though Edna is not able to thoroughly grasp all of what she tells her: "…when I left her today, she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. 'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.' (…) I only half comprehend her." (TA 217)

Adéle and Mademoiselle Reisz together shape Edna's view of herself. They both incarnate and reinforce dimensions of Edna's personality. Adéle helps Edna discover and adjust her feminine qualities, whereas Mademoiselle Reisz supplies her with intellectual nourishment.

Robert Lebrun plays a considerable, although not exclusive part in Edna's awakening. The young man resembles Mrs. Pontellier concerning both his physical and spiritual features. Chopin describes him in the following manner: "In coloring he was not unlike his companion. A clean-shaved face made the resemblance even more pronounced than it would otherwise have been." (TA 8) Cristina Giorcelli comments: "Edna's inner crisis comes to a head because of her infatuation/love for Robert, who shares some of her physical and psychological characteristics, which are achieved both by making her more masculine and him more feminine. (…) Psychologically…Robert tends to be passive and childish (…) They are indeed mirror images" (116-17). The primary grounds of their affection is "their propensity to conjure up and become attuned to fairy-tale situations" (Giorcelli 117):

"When Edna awoke it was with the conviction that she had slept long and soundly.(…)

'How many years have I slept?' she enquired. (…)

'You have slept precisely one hundred years' " [answered Robert]

At their first encounter after Robert has come back from Mexico their spiritual kinship is delicately pronounced by Edna:

" 'But I'd rather talk about you, and know what you have been seeing and doing and feeling out there in Mexico.' [said Edna]

'I've been seeing the waves and the white beach of Grand Isle; the quiet, grassy street of the *Chêniére*; the old fort at Grande Terre. I've been working like a machine, and feeling like a lost soul. There was nothing interesting.' (…)

'And what have you been seeing and doing and feeling all these days?' he asked.

'I've been seeing the waves and the white beach of Grande Isle; the quiet, grassy street of the *Chêniére Caminada*; the old sunny fort at Grande Terre. I've been working with a little more comprehension than a machine, and still feeling like a lost soul. There was nothing interesting'" (TA 260-61).

According to Michael T. Gilmore by giving such an answer Edna "satirizes Creole verbal practices by both parroting and mocking him for his evasion" (67) Although it cannot be altogether ruled out, this interpretation seems less valid and less perceptive of the female spirit (whatever that may be) than the one I would like to propose. Edna's response is a tender confession. She uses almost exactly the same words and expressions as Robert to emphasise the similar nature of her and Robert's experiences, to indicate that they had been living in the same spiritual and emotional dimension despite the temporal and spatial distance between them.

Robert's true significance in Edna's gaining consciousness is symbolic. In my view, George M. Spangler seems to be fairly mistaken when he evaluates the ending of the novel in the following fashion: "…in the final pages, Mrs. Chopin asks her reader to believe in an Edna who is completely defeated by the loss of Robert, to believe in the paradox of a woman who has awakened to passional life and yet quietly, almost thoughtlessly, chooses death. (…) Having overcome so much in the way of frustration, Edna is destroyed by *so little*" (qtd. in Culley 187, italics mine) I am suggesting that the loss of Robert equals the loss of the thing which sustained Edna, which she believed to be the ultimate aim of her struggle. As John R. May observes: "In seeking to possess Robert and be possessed by him, she has allowed herself to be duped by the sensuous freedom of the environment into thinking that she can testify her deepest human longings. *Robert himself represents the unattainable, the possibilities that life offers, but never actualizes.*" (qtd. in Culley 193, italics mine). It is this "little" Edna misses by losing Robert.

It is perhaps only Dr. Mandelet who empathetically understands Edna. The woman trusts him fully and he foresees exactly what she is heading to. Amongst her very last thoughts he emerges: "Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him-but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone." (TA 302).

The Awakening, due to its "violating social as well as aesthetic stereotypes and expectations" (Showalter 34) of the time of its publication, had to wait more than half a century to be recognised as a rightful piece in the American canon. Its masterly qualities became acknowledged only after decades of neglect. Despite the initial rejection, Kate Chopin's enterprise has proven to be revolutionary in American women's writing. She tackles the theme of a married woman's self-quest, which involves even adulterous experiences. Its then unusual plot meant an absolute deviation from works written by American women the nineteenth century. *The Awakening*'s protagonist is a curious character. Her relationship with the people around her and the way she experiences and interprets events in her life make her an outsider who chooses to walk along the path of personal development alone.

The above is part of a longer dissertation. The remaining parts of the essay give a detailed analysis of the text's literary style as well as its symbolism and leitmotifs as structuring principles.

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[i] Margaret Culley, Ed. *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition.* New York: Norton, 1976. 149.

[ii] Ibid. 147

[iii] Nancy A. Walker claims that no evidence exists for The Awakening ever having been removed from libraries. (see Walker 14)

[iv] Margaret Culley, Ed. *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition.* New York: Norton, 1976. 149.

[v] Ibid. 117

[vi] Ibid, 120-21

[vii] Ibid, 159.

[viii] Ibid, 165

[ix] Nancy A Walker, Ed. *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: Kate Chopin The Awakening.* Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1993, 146.

[x] Margaret Culley, Ed. *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition.* New York: Norton, 1976. 180.

[xi] Michael T. Gilmore, "Revolt Against Nature: The Problematic Modernism of The Awakening." ed. Wendy Martin. *New Essays on The Awakening.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 83.