An Introduction to
The Awakening

KATE CHOPIN
Critical Responses in 1899
(Published April 1899)

“Trite and sordid”

“Essentially vulgar”

“Unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling”

“. . .its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent” (from *The Outlook*, 1899)
"It is not a healthy book; if it points any particular moral or teaches any lesson, the fact is not apparent. . . . Mrs. Pontellier does not love her husband. The poison of passion seems to have entered her system, with her mother's milk."
“That the book is strong and that Miss Chopin has a keen knowledge of certain phases of feminine character will not be denied. But it was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction.”
Contemporary Response to The Awakening

“She’s one of those writers whose sense of craft puts her right on the edge of poetry. . . . The rediscovery of The Awakening came as a Godsend, the most incredible gift to the women’s movement” Prof. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Emory U.
Catherine O’Flaherty was born Feb 8, 1850, in St Louis Missouri to Thomas and Eliza O’ Flaherty. Due to her mother’s background she grew up speaking French and English in the home. She considered herself French-American. Her embrace of the French culture is evident in many of her novels.

Kate’s father died in 1885 and her great-grandmother, who encouraged her love of her French heritage, died in 1863.

Kate grew up in St. Louis, a divided city that supported both the Union and the Confederacy. She grew up with slavery as part of her daily life.

Kate kept a journal of sorts, a book of essays, poems and diary entries written from 1867 to1870. In 1869, she wrote her first story, “Emancipation: A Life Fable”.

The Author: Kate Chopin
Kate married Oscar Chopin of Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana on June 9, 1870. After a honeymoon in Europe they settled in New Orleans where Oscar established a business.

Kate gave birth to her first son, Jean Baptiste, on May 22, 1871.

The family moved to Cloutierville, LA in 1879 where Oscar purchased a general store.

Oscar Chopin died December 10, 1882 from malaria.

Although she never remarried, Kate enjoyed a romance with Albert Sampite from 1883 to 1884. When the relationship failed, Kate moved back to St. Louis.

A family friend, Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, encouraged her to continue writing.

Kate was influenced by Guy De Maupassant, and other French and American writers.

She also involved herself in St. Louis literary and cultural circles.
Her first novel, *At Fault*, was published in 1890.

Over the next several years, Kate wrote prolifically.

Her stories include:

“A No Account Creole”
“Beyond the Bayou”
“Ripe Figs”
“The Story of an Hour”
“At the ‘Cadian Ball”
“A Matter of Prejudice”
“Athénaïse”
“Charlie”

Her last publication, “Polly”, appeared in *Youth’s Companion* on July 3, 1902.

Kate Chopin died on August 22, 1904 of a brain hemorrhage.
What are her themes?

- the dilemma of an individual’s conflicting responsibilities to others and to herself
- a wife’s impatience and frustration with marriage
- A rejection of the traditional roles of women
- a woman’s acknowledgement of and responses to her sexual urges
- the results of acting on one’s nature and impulses
- alienation
- the search for freedom
- the search for identity—a theme that recurs in Chopin’s work
The Awakening is a novel by Kate Chopin. She began writing the novel in 1897, and finished it in January 1898. It was first published by Herbert S. Stone & Company of Chicago in April 1889.

The Awakening was a controversial novel due to the subject matter.

In The Awakening, Chopin incorporated French-American cultural elements and the idea that a woman could be a separate entity from her husband.

Her idea that a woman’s needs were important was somewhat radical. Women were not considered to be independent, and women’s rights were still being fought for.
Historical and Cultural Background

Written at the end of the 19th century

• Conflict between the old and new
• World’s Fair
• Darwin
• Criticism of the Bible
• Women’s Suffrage
• Industrial Age (Machine Age)

In addition to the changes the country was facing, Louisiana had its own set of problems:

• Mix of three cultures: American, Southern, and Creole
• Aftermath of the Civil War still reverberating
• Edna’s father is a good example of this.
Setting and Social Background

- Grand Isle and New Orleans, LA – circa 1899 are the two settings
- New Orleans – Catholic, French, with a great deal of interracial mixing – is a relatively easy-going society.
- Edna is a Southern Presbyterian who contrasts with her husband who is a Creole.
- Creoles are the descendants of early French or Spanish settlers. Another definition is a mixture of African and French or African and Spanish. A third definition is “Gens de Couleur” or “Free People of Color”
- Husbands are NOT overly jealous of the attentions that their wives receive from other men. Women do not place too much credence on these attentions.
- The problem comes from Edna who is not from there – she does take Robert’s flirtations seriously.
The Victorian attitude toward human sexuality was largely influenced by two people: Darwin and Freud.

Darwin “lowered” man to almost animal status.

Freud “revealed” that man’s most every thought was sex related.

Although it is clear that Alcee Arobin’s threat to Edna is sexual and that they did indeed consummate their relationship, Chopin does not openly discuss this.

Men and women were not supposed to talk or THINK about sex.
### Symbolism in the Text

| **ART** | --a symbol of both freedom and failure  
|         | --a major part of Edna’s awakening is her decision to take up painting again  
|         | --through her sale of paintings, she is able to leave Leonce’s house and move to the Pigeon House  
|         | --there is the suggestion that her art is flawed (her drawing of Mad. Ratignolle is not a good likeness)  
|         | --Mad. Reisz often cautions Edna about what it takes to be an artist – the “courageous soul” and the “strong wings”. |
Birds

- major symbol from the first page to the final image
- the mockingbird and parrot symbolize various ineffective attempts at communication.
- both birds are best known for their imitation of others, rather than having their own voice – they cannot tell their own stories
- the parrot screeches “Get out! Get out!” which could foreshadow Edna’s desire to leave confines of her middle-class life.
- The fact that both birds are caged clearly shows entrapment.
- The ability to spread wings and fly occurs often in the novel – “strong wings”
- While listening to Mad. Riesz, Edna daydreams about a naked man standing on a beach watching a bird fly away.
Swimming

Appears as a central issue 3 times

- Edna tells Mad. Ratignollle of her experience as a young girl swimming through the meadow – here the swimming is an escape from formalized religion (Edna’s father’s gloomy prayers)

- Edna finally learns how to swim – after trying all summer. Experiences exhilaration and freedom. Also experiences the fear of drowning
Water

Water is a symbol of both freedom and escape.

Edna remember the Kentucky fields of her childhood as an ocean, and she daydreams of the day she “swam” the meadow. Her learning to swim in the Gulf is a show of self-assertion, and she finally “escapes to the sea”. Even in NO there are lots of references to water in the form of rain or the river.
Piano Playing

Even at the beginning of the novel we hear the Farival twins playing the piano. Here, the fact of playing the piano is an allusion to the opera. On the evening of Edna’s 1st swim, the twins play again, but their inept poundings are replaced by Mad. Reisz.

Both Adele and Mad. Reisz play the piano. Each woman functions to underscore a different aspect of the novel. Adele is good because she practices every day – but she does not love it. She wants to set a good example for her kids. Mad. Reisz is an artist. She serves as a mentor to Edna.
Sleep and Awakening

- The 1st night of the novel, Edna cannot sleep after her husband rebukes her for neglecting the children. It is during this sleepless night that her “awakening” begins. We are told, “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish.”
Sleep and Awakening

Similarly, the night of Edna’s 1\textsuperscript{st} successful swim, she also cannot sleep. Yet, the next day, she experiences a deep, dream-filled sleep during her nap at the home of Madame Antoine.

Each major episode – disagreements with Leonce, encounters with Alcee, Madame Ratignolle’s childbirth – are punctuated by specific mentions of Edna’s sleep, or lack of sleep. During this time, physical sleep also comes to represent a state of awareness as in Edna’s conversation with Doctor Mandelet the night of the birth, the night before her suicide.
“A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her—the light which, showing the way, forbids it” (Chapter 6).

“At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chapter 7).

“Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (Chapter 11).