Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

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[Author’s note: the following material formed the nucleus of the program I presented at the Laffite Society monthly meeting held on Tuesday, October 13, 2009. Much of it – e.g., the author’s biography, and the plot summary and literary analysis of The Awakening - was culled from the Internet site Wikipedia, the content of which may be modified by anyone and thus may contain inaccuracies and opinion.]

Introduction

Many times our program topics do not directly involve the Laffites, but in the sense that they involve the milieu in which the Laffites flourished – e.g., New Orleans, Creole and/or plantation society of 19th-century Louisiana – a connection does indeed exist, since the same socioeconomic and cultural influences operated upon them all. Such is the case with the late-nineteenth-century author Kate Chopin and her novel *The Awakening.*

Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin was born Katherine O’Flaherty in St. Louis on February 8, 1850. Her father was an immigrant from Ireland and a merchant, her mother an aristocratic Creole well-connected in the St. Louis French community. At the age of nineteen, she began to write both adult and children’s stories. A year later, in 1870, she married Oscar Chopin and settled in New Orleans.

Kate Chopin was not a typical woman of the era; she dressed unconventionally, she smoked, she took long unchaperoned walks. She gave birth to all of her six children by the age of twenty-eight. When Oscar Chopin died unexpectedly in 1882 after twelve years of marriage, leaving the family with a significant amount of debt, Kate took over the management of some small plantations and a general store in Cloutierville, in southern Natchitoches Parish. But after two years, having met with no financial success in the endeavor, she moved back to St. Louis to be near her mother.

After the death of her husband, while in her early thirties, Chopin began writing in earnest. Her stories were published in such periodicals as *Vogue, Century Magazine,* and *Atlantic Monthly.* She also published a novel and two collections of stories prior to publishing, in 1899, *The Awakening,* the tale of a woman trapped in the confines of a restrictive society which demanded that its members behave within rigid bounds.

*The Awakening* aroused a national scandal for its “indecency.” It was assailed for its frank depictions of female sexuality and banned by libraries. The book even prevented Chopin’s admission into the St. Louis Fine Arts Club, despite Chopin’s renowned literary salon, which attracted distinguished artists and writers from all over the country.

Sensitive to criticism, Chopin was devastated by harsh reception of *The Awakening,* which ultimately caused her to stop writing. She died of a brain hemorrhage while visiting the St. Louis World’s Fair on August 22, 1904, at the age of fifty-four.

*The Awakening* – a short novel at some one hundred fifty paperback pages - was a book far ahead of its time. Out of print for decades, it eventually came into its own, as did the literary reputation of Chopin, who is now considered by some to be a forerunner of 20th-century feminist authors. *The Awakening* was dramatized in 1991 as the film *Grand Isle.*

Plot Summary of *The Awakening*

*The Awakening* is set at the end of the nineteenth century on the southern coast of Louisiana and in New Orleans. The plot centers on Edna Pontellier and her struggle to reconcile her increasingly unorthodox views.
about femininity and motherhood with the prevailing social attitudes of the turn-of-the-century South. *The Awakening* is one of the earliest American novels that focus on women’s issues without condescension. It is also considered by some to be one of the most important novels written by an American woman in the nineteenth century - perhaps second only to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in terms of historical and social significance.

The novel opens with the Pontellier family vacationing in Grand Isle, Louisiana, on the Gulf of Mexico, at a resort run by Madame Lebrun and her two sons, Robert and Victor. The Pontellier family is composed of Léonce Pontellier, a businessman of Acadian heritage, and Edna, his twenty-eight-year-old wife. They have two sons, Etienne and Raoul, who do not feature prominently in the plot and who are largely symbols of Edna's proscribed existence.

Edna spends most of her time in Grand Isle with her close friend Adèle Ratignolle, who reminds her of her duties as a wife and mother. Edna eventually forms a connection with Robert Lebrun, a charming and earnest young man who actively seeks Edna's attention and affections. They start to fall deeply in love, but Robert, sensing the doomed nature of any relationship that would develop between them, flees to Mexico under the guise of pursuing a business venture.

The narrative focus of the novel then shifts to Edna's complex and changing emotions as she reconciles her familial duties with her desires to be with Robert and to obtain social freedom.

At summer’s end, Edna and her family return to their home in New Orleans. Gradually, Edna begins to reassess her personal priorities and to pursue her own happiness. She increasingly isolates herself from New Orleans society and withdraws from some of the duties traditionally associated with motherhood. Léonce eventually calls in a doctor, fearing that Edna is losing her mental faculties, but the doctor advises Léonce to let her be.

When Léonce travels to New York City on business, the children are sent to stay with his mother. Edna is thus left alone for an extended period, and this solitude provides her the physical and emotional room in which to breathe and to ponder various aspects of her life. She decides to move from her large house into a small, nearby bungalow, and during this period of transition begins an abortive affair with Alcée Arobin, a persistent suitor with a reputation for being free with his affections. It is the first time in the novel that Edna is shown as a sexual being, but the affair proves awkward and emotionally fraught.

During this period of solitude, Edna reaches out to Mademoiselle Reisz, a gifted piano recitalist by whose music Edna was profoundly moved while both vacationed in Grand Isle. Reisz, renowned in New Orleans for her musical talent, generally maintains a hermetic existence, but she does remain in contact with Robert Lebrun in Mexico, receiving letters from him regularly. When Edna begs her to reveal the letters’ contents, Reisz does so, and they prove to Edna that Robert is likewise thinking about her.

Eventually Lebrun returns to New Orleans. At first aloof, he finds excuses not to be near Edna, but he eventually confesses his passionate love for her. He admits that his business trip to Mexico was an excuse to distance himself from a potential relationship that would be doomed to failure.

One day, as her relationship with Robert Lebrun appears to be at the point of carnal consummation, Edna is called away to help Adèle Ratignolle as she goes through a difficult childbirth. Adèle pleads with Edna to
consider what she would be turning her back upon were she to behave inappropriately with Lebrun. When Edna returns home, she finds a note from him stating that he has left and will not be returning.

Edna is devastated and travels immediately to Grand Isle, where she and Robert first met. It was also at Grand Isle that Edna had learned to swim that past summer; the episode was for her both exhilarating and terrifying, and she wrestled with these same conflicting emotions repeatedly during the remainder of the novel. *The Awakening* ends as Edna allows herself to be overcome by the waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

**Literary Analysis**

The narrative style of *The Awakening* is essentially realistic, with its perceptive focus on human behavior, the banalities of everyday life and the complexities and impact of social strictures. Also evident is the nascent Southern novel as a distinct literary genre, not just in setting and subject matter but also in narrative style.

Chopin's portrayal of her protagonist's shifting emotions is a narrative technique upon which Mississippi author William Faulkner would expand in novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Alternately—and almost contradictorily—the stark absence of sentimentality and the uncluttered nature of the plot presage the stories of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor and the plays of William Inge.

Edna Pontellier's emotional crises and her eventual tragic demise point ahead to the complex female characters of the plays of Tennessee Williams. Aspects of Chopin's style also prefigure the lyrical and experimental style of novelists such as Virginia Woolf and the unsentimental focus on female intellectual and emotional growth in the novels of Sigrid Undset and Doris Lessing.

Chopin's most important stylistic legacy may be the detachment of her narrator. The narrator does not treat women's issues with condescension nor offer an assessment or opinion of the protagonist's behavior, a departure from the contemporary Victorian tendency toward narrative judgment and editorial commentary. It is left to the reader to assess the merit of the protagonist's decisions, and this is arguably the novel's boldest stylistic choice.

**Publication and Critical Reception**

*The Awakening* was particularly controversial upon publication in 1899. Chopin's novel was considered immoral not only for its comparatively frank depictions of female sexual desire but for its portrayal of a protagonist who chafed against social norms and established gender roles. The public reaction to the novel was similar to the protests which greeted the publication and performance of Henrik Ibsen's landmark drama *A Doll's House* (1879), a work with which *The Awakening* shares an almost identical theme.

Published reviews ran the gamut from outright condemnation to the recognition of *The Awakening* as an important work of fiction by a gifted writer. A good example of this can be found in the divergent reactions of two newspapers in Kate Chopin's hometown of St. Louis, Missouri. The *St. Louis Mirror* said:

> One would fain beg the gods, in pure cowardice, for sleep unending rather than to know what an ugly, cruel, loathsome Monster Passion can be when, like a tiger, it slowly awakens. This is the kind of awakening that impresses the reader in Mrs. Chopin's heroine.

Later in the same year, however, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* would praise the novel in an essay entitled "A St. Louis Woman Who Has Turned Fame Into Literature."

Some reviews clucked in disappointment at Chopin's choice of subject. The *Chicago Times-Herald*: "It was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the over-worked field of sex-fiction." Others mourned the loss of good taste, as when the *Nation* referred to Chopin as "one more clever writer gone wrong." And some reviews indulged in outright vitriol, as when *Public Opinion* stated: "We are well-satisfied when [Edna Pontellier] drowns herself."
However, Chopin did not garner universally negative reviews. The *Dial* called *The Awakening* a "poignant spiritual tragedy," with the caveat that the novel was "not altogether wholesome in its tendencies." In the *Pittsburgh Leader*, none other than Willa Cather would set *The Awakening* alongside *Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert's equally notorious and equally reviled novel of suburban ennui and unapologetic adultery. She famously quipped: "A Creole Bovary is this little novel of Miss Chopin's."

The Laffite “Connection”

Much of *The Awakening* takes place in and around the Barataria of the Laffites, but three quarters of a century subsequent to their departure.

In the first portion of the novel the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, is summering in Grand Isle, as her creator Kate Chopin did annually for more than a decade.

Pontellier spends an afternoon on nearby Grande Terre Island, across Barataria Pass east of Grand Isle, where she and a friend visit the “old fort” - Fort Livingston, which members of the Laffite Society explored on a field trip in the 1990s.

Pontellier also crosses by boat to attend church in nearby Chenière Caminada, west of Grand Isle. Chenière Caminada occupies a tragic place in coastal Louisiana history via its devastation by a powerful hurricane in early October, 1893. The storm killed an estimated two thousand people, including more than one-half of Chenière Caminada’s 1,500 inhabitants, mostly from storm surge.

The Laffites and their associates would have known well all three of these places - Grand Isle, Grande Terre and Chenière Caminada.

The remainder of the book’s activity occurs in New Orleans, another long-time Laffite haunt where Jean and Pierre resided intermittently for perhaps a decade and a half.

Lastly, Kate Chopin lived for a time, and began writing in earnest, in southern Natchitoches Parish. On a plantation in that same parish called both “Melrose Plantation” and “Yucca Plantation,” author Lyle Saxon spent much time relaxing and writing, from the nineteen-teens or -twenties until his death in the mid-forties. Saxon penned perhaps the most well-known book about the Laffites, *Laffite the Pirate.*