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THE AWAKENING AND SELECTED STORIES OF KATE CHOPIN

KATE CHOPIN

Includes detailed explanatory notes,
an overview of key themes, and more

**THE AWAKENING AND
SELECTED STORIES
OF KATE CHOPIN**



Kate Chopin

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POCKET BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

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POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

The Awakening was first published in 1899

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ISBN: 0-7434-8767-2

First Pocket Books printing July 2004

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Cover design by Jeanne M. Lee
Cover illustration by Greisbach-Martucci

Manufactured in the United States of America

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INTRODUCTION

The Awakening: Sex, Self, and Scandal



The Awakening (1899) is a short but intensely rich novel, as dense and brilliant as the French Impressionist paintings which were put on exhibition for the first time a few decades before its publication. Like those paintings, the novel scandalized its contemporary audiences. Within a few years, however, the book was all but forgotten. Fortunately, it was rescued from oblivion seventy years later and has emerged triumphantly as one of the most celebrated portraits of a lady in American literature.

Why was the novel so scandalous? To begin with, Kate Chopin was an established writer before she published *The Awakening*, well known for charming, amusing portraits of Creole, Acadian, and Southern life. Her audience was wholly unprepared for what one reviewer termed the “hot blast” of *The Awakening*’s focus on the restless, frankly sexual story about a married woman with children, her casual adulterous affairs, and her search for individual fulfillment. In hindsight, many of

Chopin's early stories appear to anticipate *The Awakening*, and to contain their own forms of shocking subversion—in this volume, most notably “The Kiss,” “Désirée's Baby,” “A Respectable Woman” “At the 'Cadian Ball,” and its unpublished sequel, “The Storm.” Though many male writers of the time, especially those in France and England, were beginning to explore the power of sexuality, American audiences were simply not prepared for such fare from a woman's pen. They were equally unprepared for the heroine's casual disregard of her marriage, and her only intermittent attachment to her children. Many reviewers damned Edna Pontellier as selfish, weak, and immoral.

It is difficult to know whether Chopin anticipated her readers' response to *The Awakening*. She published little after its condemnation, and died only five years later. Many critics have assumed her dwindling production of literature, and even her death, were responses to the novel's failure. However, one of her biographers, Emily Toth, has argued that evidence suggests Chopin suffered from illness many years before her death, and that physical weakness, rather than despair, was what slowed her down. Certainly the ironical “apology” for *The Awakening* Chopin published soon after its condemnation does not sound like the work of a chastened woman:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I 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 then too late. ["Aims and Autographs of Authors," *Book News* 17 (July 1899): 612.]

Contemporary readers who join Chopin's "party" may be just as baffled by Mrs. Pontellier's behavior as her creator was, but they are also just as sure to fall under her fascinating spell.

Life and Work of Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin was born Kate O'Flaherty, in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 8, 1850, to an Irish Catholic father (Thomas O'Flaherty) and a French Creole mother (Eliza Faris). Her parents' marriage was, by all accounts, a happy one. Chopin's childhood, however, was marked by tragedy when her father was killed in a railroad accident. She was four years old at the time of his death.

Kate grew up listening to her grandmother's racy stories of Creole life and reading French literature in addition to the books assigned her at her excellent Catholic school. While there, she befriended Kitty Gareshé, who was to be one of Chopin's only close friends. The two were separated during the Civil War in 1863 when Chopin's staunchly pro-Confederate family forbade her to see the pro-Union Gareshés. Shortly thereafter, Kitty's family was driven out of St. Louis for their political views. In the same year, Chopin's half brother died of typhoid while serving in the Confederate army.

At the age of twenty Kate married Oscar Chopin, also a French Creole Catholic, and the couple moved to New Orleans. Chopin had six children over the next nine years, but unlike many nineteenth-century women, she seems to have avoided being buried alive by domestic chores. This may have been due to the happiness she found in marriage; Oscar Chopin seemed to enjoy and encourage his wife's independence, especially her penchant for walking about the strange new city to which he had brought her. Oscar lost a great deal of money when the cotton market bottomed out in 1878. In 1879, he moved his family to Cloutierville, a small town in the Natchitoches Parish where his extended family lived, in order to save expenses. Chopin remained there until Oscar's sudden death from "swamp fever" in 1882. Though for a time she took over the family business and by all accounts ran it successfully, she soon moved back to St. Louis with her six children to be near her beloved mother. Sadly, Eliza O'Flaherty died only one year after Chopin's return in 1885.

Plunged into grief and depression by the successive deaths of her husband and mother, Chopin found solace in her friendship with Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, her obstetrician. Dr. Kolbenheyer was an agnostic and a progressive intellectual. He introduced Chopin to the works of such writers as Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley and encouraged her to write. Soon, Chopin was answering the call from publishers for works of "local color" with short stories of Creole and Acadian life. By 1890 she had published her first novel, *At Fault*. She followed it with two collections of her short stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A*

Night in Acadie (1897). Both received enthusiastic reviews. By the time she published *The Awakening* in 1899, Chopin was a successful middle-aged woman who held a small literary salon at her home and enjoyed considerable social status in St. Louis—in spite of her eccentric French habits of smoking, drinking, and walking about alone. In the face of great sadness and difficulty, she had both taken care of her six children and built a literary and social life for herself. This made the negative reception of *The Awakening* in her hometown all the more difficult.

Chopin's next collection of stories, *A Vocation and a Voice*, was rejected by her publisher the following year. Kate Chopin died of a brain hemorrhage on August 20, 1904, in St. Louis, after visiting the World's Fair, which she loved, one last time.

Historical and Literary Context

The Gilded Age and the Fin de Siècle

The years in which Chopin wrote were filled with tumultuous economic and social change. Léonce Pontellier's preoccupation with business and material goods echoed that of the nation. Rapid industrialization and growing cities coupled with national expansion had created both tremendous wealth and horrific poverty. While workers suffered, the businessmen who employed them created enormous monopolies and joint stock companies and became "robber barons," and "captains of industry." With their ostentatious homes, enormous parties, and gorgeously attired wives, they were the

superstars of their day. The same year that *The Awakening* was published, American economist Thorstein Veblen brought the term "conspicuous consumption" into popular use with his *Theory of the Leisure Class*.

This was the so-called Gilded Age, a period lasting from about 1890 to the beginning of World War I. As the term "gilded" implies, the tacky splendor of the time barely covered a profound unease. In Britain and France, the "aesthetes," writers such as Oscar Wilde and Algernon Swinburne (whose erotic poetry Edna's guest quotes at the climax of her dinner party), affected a world-weariness at the *fin de siècle* ("century's end") and, in place of a troubled religious faith, a devotion to decadence and the erotic, including the homoerotic. French poet Charles Baudelaire, whose 1857 poetry collection *The Flowers of Evil* caused a public outcry because of its "immorality," paved the way for "decadent" poets such as Arthur Rimbaud, whose famous 1873 collection of poetry *A Season in Hell* described a tortured existence of sensual excess and emotional wretchedness. Meanwhile, other writers of the "naturalist" and later, of the "realist" school documented the fissures in society's façade, and the lives of the poor. Notable among this group was Emile Zola, whose novels, such as the 1880 novel *Nana* and the 1885 novel *Germinal*, had a powerful impact on other European and American writers. Because of her devotion to French literature (especially the work of early naturalist Guy de Maupassant, author of such stories as "The Necklace") and her sharp eye for social details, Chopin has been associated with all of these literary groups.

Sex and "The Woman Question"

Chopin's generation of women had inherited the political legacies of their abolitionist mothers. As the middle class thrived and standards of education rose, more women entered the workplace and the fight for women's suffrage and emancipation intensified. Chopin was not overtly politically active, and even pokes fun at the political and intellectual pretensions of some of the minor female characters in *The Awakening*. However, her work explores the kinds of anxieties these changes raised about the role women should play in society, and their sexual, romantic, and legal relationships with men. Even the crucial role swimming plays in the novel and the revealing clothes her female characters wear were signs of the great changes afoot; swimming clothes meant to be worn in the water had just come into fashion, though they were still stiff and bulky and covered most of the body.

In the literary world, male uneasiness over women's power and sexuality emerged in the figure of the *femme fatale*, a semimonstrous creature fatally attractive to men and driven by her own desires. Equally ambivalent, but slightly more positive, was the "New Woman" typified in such American novels as Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* as forthright, innocent, and intelligent. In *The Awakening*, and in many of her short stories, Chopin answers these male fantasies with subtle portraits of the female psyche struggling to move beyond their constraints. Thus we see Edna Pontellier treated by her husband as valuable property, by Robert Lebrun as a romantic heroine, and by Alcée Arobin as a budding *femme fatale*, even as Edna herself struggles

to define her desires, and to understand herself as a separate and solitary being.

Local Color, Creole Life, and Race

For many years, Chopin was considered a “regional” or “local color” writer. When she began writing, the demand for charming portraits of life on the “margins” of American society was high, and her stories of the post-Civil War South, Creole New Orleans, and Acadian country life fit the bill. Feminist critics and others have since discussed the ways writing local-color stories allowed Chopin to cloak her subversive themes in what seemed like exotic locales to many of her readers. The French Creole life of New Orleans, with its sophisticated European feel, was particularly useful in this regard since Americans, both then and today, often expect nothing less from the French. These urbane descendants of the original French and Spanish settlers were truly in a country of their own, deliberately separated socially, geographically, and linguistically from the newer “American” part of town. But all of these worlds had in common the sense of *fin de siècle*, the sense of coming to an end, or having been passed by (deliberately or not). *The Awakening* was literally a record of a lost community: a great hurricane had almost completely destroyed Grand Isle and the Chênrière Caminada six years before the novel was published.

The issue of race was unavoidable for Chopin because of the communities she wrote about. Though her pro-Confederacy background certainly left her no radical on the subject, she did occasionally tackle the

problems and ironies of race directly, as in "Désirée's Baby." More usually, race was an important backdrop to the emotions and actions of her characters. The intricate French system of classification that produced the "quadroon" (a person of one quarter black blood) and the "griffe" who served the Creole characters in *The Awakening*, while the presence of Mexico produced the "Spanish" (Mexican) Mariequita, and the Veracruz girls whom Robert meets while he is away. Scholars have only begun to explore this side of Chopin's work in the past ten years.

CHRONOLOGY OF KATE CHOPIN'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1850: Born, February 8, in St. Louis, Missouri.
- 1855: Father dies in railroad accident.
- 1855–68: Attends and graduates from Sacred Heart Academy in St. Louis. Becomes friends with Kitty Gareshé.
- 1863: Half brother George dies of typhoid while fighting in Confederate army. Kitty Gareshé's family driven out of St. Louis for pro-Union stance.
- 1869: Writes first known short story (unpublished), "Emancipation: A Life Fable."
- 1870: Marries Oscar Chopin and moves to New Orleans after European honeymoon.
- 1871: Son Jean Baptiste born.
- 1874: Son George Francis born.
- 1876: Son Frederick born.
- 1878: Son Felix Andrew born.
- 1879: The Chopins move to Cloutierville, Louisiana. Daughter Leila born.
- 1882: Oscar Chopin dies.

- 1884: Returns to St. Louis with children.
1885: Mother dies.
1888: Begins to write professionally.
1889: Publishes first work, poem to husband, "If It Might Be," and story, "A Point at Issue!"
1890: Self-publishes first novel, *At Fault*.
1891: Completes novel *Young Dr. Gosse and Théo*, but later destroys manuscript.
1891-93: Stories published in magazines including *Vogue* and *Harper's*.
1894: Publishes story collection *Bayou Folk*.
1897: Publishes story collection *A Night in Acadie*.
1898: Writes "The Storm," but does not attempt to publish it.
1899: Publishes *The Awakening*.
1900: Publisher declines story collection *A Vocation and a Voice*.
1902: Last story, "Polly," published in *Youth's Companion*.
1904: Dies of a cerebral hemorrhage in St. Louis, August 20.
1932: First critical biography of Chopin published.
1969: Second critical biography and collected works published.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *THE AWAKENING AND* *SELECTED STORIES OF KATE CHOPIN*



- 1803: Americans take control of French New Orleans.
- 1808: New Orleans Creoles enact Napoleonic Code in effort to protect their culture.
- 1811: Large slave rebellions in St. John the Baptist and St. Charles parishes suppressed.
- 1812: First Mississippi River steamboat arrives in New Orleans; Louisiana admitted to the Union.
- 1815: Battle of New Orleans won by General Andrew Jackson.
- 1838: First Mardi Gras parade held in New Orleans.
- 1848: Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention.
- 1849: Baton Rouge becomes the capital of Louisiana.
- 1852: Americans overturn Creole laws. New Orleans has become the nation's largest slave-trading center.
- 1853: Yellow fever epidemic kills thousands in Louisiana—11,000 in New Orleans alone.
- 1861: Civil War begins.
- 1863: Lincoln emancipates slaves.

- 1865: New York Stock Exchange building erected; Civil War ends.
- 1870: Fifteenth Amendment gives ex-slaves, but not women, the right to vote.
- 1877: Occupying troops leave Louisiana; "Jim Crow" segregation becomes commonplace.
- 1884: World's Fair held in New Orleans.
- 1893: Chicago World's Columbian Exposition includes "Women's Building"; a hurricane hits southern Louisiana and Mississippi, killing about 2,000 people.
- 1895: Charles "Buddy" Bolden and his band begin playing at dances and parades in New Orleans; he is considered the first band leader to play the improvised style of music that would later be called "jazz."
- 1896: *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalizes segregation.
- 1898: New state constitution includes poll tax and literacy test designed to keep most African-Americans from voting.
- 1901: Oil is discovered near Jennings, Louisiana.
- 1915: The term "jazz" is used to refer to music of New Orleans origin.

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