# THE AWAKENING

KATE CHOPIN



**EDITED BY MARGO CULLEY** 

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

SECOND EDITION



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### Kate Chopin THE AWAKENING

# AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS CRITICISM

SECOND EDITION

## Edited by MARGO CULLEY

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST



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### Preface to the Second Edition

As we approach the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of Kate Chopin's The Awakening, the novel has at last claimed its rightful place as a classic of American literature. But for the first half-century after its publication, The Awakening languished in obscurity, out-ofprint in America for almost sixty years. Widely condemned by early reviewers for its immoral or amoral sensibility, the novel continued to be ignored by all but a few important critics and shapers of the American literary tradition. (See "Editor's Note: History of the Criticism of The Awakening," p. 159.) Perhaps because of its "French connection," The Awakening first returned to print in France in 1953, translated with a long introduction by Cyrille Arnavon. Chopin thus joins a number of significant American writers, including Edgar Allen Poe and William Faulkner, whose work was particularly valued by French readers when it remained neglected at home. In this country, the novel returned to print in 1964, edited by Kenneth Eble. By 1969, the Norwegian scholar Per Seversted (a student of Cyrille Arnavon) had published a biography of Kate Chopin and edited The Complete Works of Kate Chopin for Louisiana University Press. In the 1970s, the impact of feminist criticism and its focus on women writers brought Kate Chopin and her work to center stage. Today The Awakening is widely available in numerous paperback editions and is routinely included in major anthologies of American literature. In addition to French, the novel has been translated into German, Italian, and several Scandinavian languages. Robert Stone's novel Children of Light (1986) imagines a Hollywood production of The Awakening, and, indeed, two feature-length films, The End of August (1982) and Grand Isle (1992), have been based on Chopin's tale. The novel has been reprinted in Redbook magazine, filmed for educational television, and recorded on audio tape, and Kate Chopin's life has been adapted for the theater. In 1990, Emily Toth published what is the third full-length biography of Kate Chopin, an exhaustive study of the writer's life and world.

What would Kate Chopin—who earned less than \$150 in royalties for *The Awakening* during her lifetime and who suffered widespread negative criticism for her bold novel—think of its late, great success?

In the preparation of this volume, I am particularly indebted to Emily Toth's extensive knowledge of Kate Chopin's life and its Louisiana context. Her detailed and generous suggestions guided my work on the second edition of the Norton Critical Edition of the novel. Any errors that persist are my own.

I would also like to thank the editor's editors: Carol Bemis for her expert guidance and her patience; Claudia Van der Heuval for her assistance in the final stages of the project; and Kathleen Swaim for two decades of cheerful and wholehearted support.

Margo Culley University of Massachusetts at Amherst

### Contents

Preface to the Second Edition	ix
The Text of The Awakening	
Illustration: Page from Kate Chopin's Notebook:	
"A Solitary Soul"	2
The Awakening	3
Biographical and Historical Contexts	
Editor's Note: Biography	113
Emily Toth • A New Biographical Approach	113
Editor's Note: Contexts of The Awakening	119
An Etiquette/Advice Book Sampler	122
Duties of the Wife	122
Avoid All Causes for Complaint	122
Beware of Confidants	122
Influence of Mothers	123
Reception Days	123
Rules for Summer Resorts	123
Flirtation and Increasing Fastness of Manner	124
Musicales	124
The Street Manners of a Lady	125
Places of Amusement	125
Formal Dinner Parties	125
Dress to Suit the Occasion	126
Dress for Receiving Calls	126
Carriage Dress	127
The Full Dinner Dress	127
Costumes for Country and Sea-side	127
Bathing Dresses	128

vi Contents

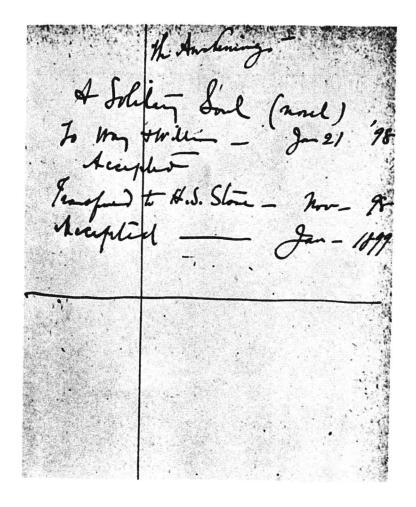
Fashion Plates from Harper's Bazar	131
Mary L. Shaffter • Creole Women	137
Wilbur Fisk Tillett • [Southern Womanhood]	139
Dorothy Dix • Are Women Growing Selfish?	144
The American Wife	146
Summer Flirtations	147
A Strike for Liberty	148
Women and Suicide	150
Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman) • From Women	
and Economics	151
Thorstein Veblen • [Conspicuous Consumption and the	.,.
Servant-Wife]	154
Servant-Whej	171
~	
Criticism	
Editor's Note: History of the Criticism of The Awakening	159
CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS	
From Book News (March 1899)	161
From The Mirror (May 4, 1899)	162
From the St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat (May 13, 1899)	163
From the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (May 20, 1899)	164
From the Chicago Times-Herald (June 1, 1899)	166
From The Outlook (June 3, 1899)	166
From the Providence Sunday Journal (June 4, 1899)	166
From the New Orleans Times-Democrat (June 18, 1899)	167
From Public Opinion (June 22, 1899)	168
From Literature (June 23, 1899)	168
From the New York Times (June 24, 1899)	169
From the Los Angeles Sunday Times (June 25, 1899)	169
From the Pittsburgh Leader (July 8, 1899)	170
From The Dial (August 1, 1899)	172
From The Nation (August 3, 1899)	172
From The Congregationalist (August 24, 1899)	173
Letters from "Lady Janet Scammon Young" and	
"Dr. Dunrobin Thomson"	173
Chopin's "Retraction"	178

Contents vii

ESSAYS IN CRITICISM	
Percival Pollard • [The Unlikely Awakening of a	
Married Woman]	179
Daniel S. Rankin • [Influences Upon the Novel]	181
Cyrille Arnavon • [An American Madame Bovary]	184
Kenneth Eble • [A Forgotten Novel]	188
Marie Fletcher • [The Southern Woman in Fiction]	193
Larzer Ziff • From The American 1890s	196
George Arms • [Contrasting Forces in the Novel]	198
Per Seyersted • [Kate Chopin and the American Realists]	202
George M. Spangler • [The Ending of the Novel]	208
John R. May • Local Color in The Awakening	211
Lewis Leary • [Kate Chopin and Walt Whitman]	217
Jules Chametzky • [Edna and the "Woman Question"]	221
Donald A. Ringe • [Romantic Imagery]	222
Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith • [Narrative Stance]	227
Cynthia Griffin Wolff • [Thanatos and Eros]	231
Suzanne Wolkenfeld • Edna's Suicide:	
The Problem of the One and the Many	241
Margo Culley • Edna Pontellier: "A Solitary Soul"	247
Nancy Walker • [Feminist or Naturalist?]	252
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese • [Progression and Regression	
in Edna Pontellier]	257
Paula A. Treichler • [Language and Ambiguity]	263
Sandra M. Gilbert • [The Second Coming of Aphrodite]	271
Lee R. Edwards • [Sexuality, Maternity, and Selfhood]	282
Patricia S. Yaeger • [Language and Female Emancipation]	285
Anna Shannon Elfenbein • [American Racial and	
Sexual Mythology]	292
Helen Taylor • [Gender, Race, and Region]	299
Elizabeth Ammons • [Women of Color in The Awakening]	309
Elaine Showalter • [Chopin and American	
Women Writers]	311
Kate Chopin: A Chronology	321
Selected Bibliography	323



# The Text of THE AWAKENING



The page from a Chopin notebook where she recorded the original title of the novel, "A Solitary Soul." Used with permission of the Missouri Historical Society.

A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over:

"Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!1 That's all right!"

He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence.

Mr. Pontellier, unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust. He walked down the gallery and across the narrow "bridges" which connected the Lebrun cottages one with the other. He had been seated before the door of the main house. The parrot and the mocking-bird were the property of Madame Lebrun, and they had the right to make all the noise they wished. Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining.

He stopped before the door of his own cottage, which was the fourth one from the main building and next to the last. Seating himself in a wicker rocker which was there, he once more applied himself to the task of reading the newspaper. The day was Sunday; the paper was a day old. The Sunday papers had not yet reached Grand Isle.<sup>2</sup> He was already acquainted with the market reports, and he glanced restlessly over the editorials and bits of news which he had not had time to read before quitting New Orleans the day before.

Mr. Pontellier wore eye-glasses. He was a man of forty, of medium height and rather slender build; he stooped a little. His hair was brown and straight, parted on one side. His beard was neatly and closely trimmed.

Once in a while he withdrew his glance from the newspaper and looked about him. There was more noise than ever over at the house. The main building was called "the house," to distinguish it from the cottages. The chattering and whistling birds were still at it. Two young girls, the Farival twins, were playing a duet from "Zampa" upon the piano. Madame Lebrun was bustling in and out, giving orders in a high key to a yard-boy whenever she got inside the house, and directions in an equally high voice to a dining-room servant whenever she got outside. She was a fresh, pretty woman, clad always in white with elbow sleeves.

<sup>1. &</sup>quot;Go away! Go away! For God's sake!"

<sup>2.</sup> An island fifty miles south of New Orleans, between the Gulf of Mexico and Caminada Bay. The island was famed as the headquarters of Lafitte's pirates in the early nineteenth century, and toward the end of the century became a celebrated Creole resort. In 1893 a hurricane devastated the resort area. Chênière Caminada (see below) is an island between Grand Isle and the Louisiana coast.

A romantic opera by the French composer Ferdinand (Louis Joseph) Hérold (1791–1833).
 The plot involves a lover's death in the sea.

Her starched skirts crinkled as she came and went. Farther down, before one of the cottages, a lady in black was walking demurely up and down, telling her beads. A good many persons of the *pension* had gone over to the *Chênière Caminada* in Beaudelet's lugger<sup>4</sup> to hear mass. Some young people were out under the water-oaks playing croquet. Mr. Pontellier's two children were there—sturdy little fellows of four and five. A quadroon<sup>5</sup> nurse followed them about with a far-away, meditative air.

Mr. Pontellier finally lit a cigar and began to smoke, letting the paper drag idly from his hand. He fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the water-oaks and across the stretch of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. When they reached the cottage, the two seated themselves with some appearance of fatigue upon the upper step of the porch, facing each other, each leaning against a supporting post.

"What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. He himself had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed long to him.

"You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her lawn sleeves<sup>6</sup> above the wrists. Looking at them reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm. She slipped them upon her fingers; then clasping her knees, she looked across at Robert and began to laugh. The rings sparkled upon her fingers. He sent back an answering smile.

"What is it?" asked Pontellier, looking lazily and amused from one to the other. It was some utter nonsense; some adventure out there in the water, and they both tried to relate it at once. It did not seem half so amusing when told. They realized this, and so did Mr. Pontellier. He yawned and stretched himself. Then he got up, saying he had half a mind to go over to Klein's hotel<sup>7</sup> and play a game of billiards.

"Come go along, Lebrun," he proposed to Robert. But Robert admitted quite frankly that he preferred to stay where he was and talk to Mrs. Pontellier.

<sup>4.</sup> A small boat with a sail. "Pension": boardinghouse.

<sup>5.</sup> A person with one-fourth black ancestry.

<sup>6.</sup> Sleeves made of lawn, a fine linen or sheer muslin.

<sup>7.</sup> Probably Krantz's Hotel, described by Catharine Cole in 1892: "An old, popular, well-known resort, built like a plantation quarters in a series of cottages along a grassy street. At one end a ballroom, at the other a dining room . . . out of the sight of the surf and the sea; but three times a day a tram car runs down to the beach where the bathhouses are. In the center of the island, rising above the clustered oaks, are the gray dormer windows of a huge unfinished hotel . . ." (The Daily Picayune, October 5, 1893).

"Well, send him about his business when he bores you, Edna," instructed her husband as he prepared to leave.

"Here, take the umbrella," she exclaimed, holding it out to him. He accepted the sunshade, and lifting it over his head descended the steps and walked away.

"Coming back to dinner?" his wife called after him. He halted a moment and shrugged his shoulders. He felt in his vest pocket; there was a ten-dollar bill there. He did not know; perhaps he would return for the early dinner and perhaps he would not. It all depended upon the company which he found over at Klein's and the size of "the game." He did not say this, but she understood it, and laughed, nodding goodby to him.

Both children wanted to follow their father when they saw him starting out. He kissed them and promised to bring them back bonbons and peanuts.

H

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, emphasizing 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. Her manner was engaging.

Robert rolled a cigarette. He smoked cigarettes because he could not afford cigars, he said. He had a cigar in his pocket which Mr. Pontellier had presented him with, and he was saving it for his after-dinner smoke.

This seemed quite proper and natural on his part. In coloring he was not unlike his companion. A clean-shaved face made the resemblance more pronounced than it would otherwise have been. There rested no shadow of care upon his open countenance. His eyes gathered in and reflected the light and languor of the summer day.

Mrs. Pontellier reached over for a palmleaf fan that lay on the porch and began to fan herself, while Robert sent between his lips light puffs from his cigarette. They chatted incessantly: about the things around them; their amusing adventure out in the water—it had again assumed its entertaining aspect; about the wind, the trees, the people who had gone to the *Chênière*; about the children playing croquet under the oaks, and the Farival twins, who were now performing the overture to "The Poet and the Peasant."

Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young, and did

An operetta by the Austrian composer Franz von Suppé (1819–95), known primarily for his overtures.

not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason. Each was interested in what the other said. Robert spoke of his intention to go to Mexico in the autumn, where fortune awaited him. He was always intending to go to Mexico, but some way never got there. Meanwhile he held on to his modest position in a mercantile house in New Orleans, where an equal familiarity with English, French and Spanish gave him no small value as a clerk and correspondent.

He was spending his summer vacation, as he always did, with his mother at Grand Isle. In former times, before Robert could remember, "the house" had been a summer luxury of the Lebruns. Now, flanked by its dozen or more cottages, which were always filled with exclusive visitors from the "Quartier Français," it enabled Madame Lebrun to maintain the easy and comfortable existence which appeared to be her birthright.

Mrs. Pontellier talked about her father's Mississippi plantation and her girlhood home in the old Kentucky blue-grass country. She was an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution. She read a letter from her sister, who was away in the East, and who had engaged herself to be married. Robert was interested, and wanted to know what manner of girls the sisters were, what the father was like, and how long the mother had been dead.

When Mrs. Pontellier folded the letter it was time for her to dress for the early dinner.

"I see Léonce isn't coming back," she said, with a glance in the direction whence her husband had disappeared. Robert supposed he was not, as there were a good many New Orleans club men over at Klein's.

When Mrs. Pontellier left him to enter her room, the young man descended the steps and strolled over toward the croquet players, where, during the half-hour before dinner, he amused himself with the little Pontellier children, who were very fond of him.

Ш

It was eleven o'clock that night when Mr. Pontellier returned from Klein's hotel. He was in an excellent humor, in high spirits, and very talkative. His entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and fast asleep when he came in. He talked to her while he undressed, telling her anecdotes and bits of news and gossip that he had gathered during the day. From his trousers pockets he took a fistful of crumpled bank notes and a good deal of silver coin, which he piled on the bureau indiscriminately with keys, knife, handkerchief, and whatever else happened to

The French Quarter, or Vieux Carré—the oldest part of New Orleans—settled by the French in the early 1700s and residence of most of the Creole population in the nineteenth century. See p. 10, n. 4.

be in his pockets. She was overcome with sleep, and answered him with little half utterances.

He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him and valued so little his conversation.

Mr. Pontellier had forgotten the bonbons and peanuts for the boys. Notwithstanding he loved them very much, and went into the adjoining room where they slept to take a look at them and make sure that they were resting comfortably. The result of his investigation was far from satisfactory. He turned and shifted the youngsters about in bed. One of them began to kick and talk about a basket full of crabs.

Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after. Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it.

Mrs. Pontellier was quite sure Raoul had no fever. He had gone to bed perfectly well, she said, and nothing had ailed him all day. Mr. Pontellier was too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken. He assured her the child was consuming at that moment in the next room.

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way.

Mrs. Pontellier sprang out of bed and went into the next room. She soon came back and sat on the edge of the bed, leaning her head down on the pillow. She said nothing, and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her. When his cigar was smoked out he went to bed, and in half a minute he was fast asleep.

Mrs. Pontellier was by that time thoroughly awake. She began to cry a little, and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her *peignoir*. Blowing out the candle, which her husband had left burning, she slipped her bare feet into a pair of satin *mules* at the foot of the bed and went out on the porch, where she sat down in the wicker chair and began to rock gently to and fro.

It was then past midnight. The cottages were all dark. A single faint light gleamed out from the hallway of the house. There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak, and the everlasting voice of the sea, that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night.

The tears came so fast to Mrs. Pontellier's eyes that the damp sleeve of her *peignoir* no longer served to dry them. She was holding the back of her chair with one hand; her loose sleeve had slipped almost to the shoulder of her uplifted arm. Turning, she thrust her face, steaming

and wet, into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood.

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself. The mosquitoes made merry over her, biting her firm, round arms and nipping at her bare insteps.

The little stinging, buzzing imps succeeded in dispelling a mood which might have held her there in the darkness half a night longer.

The following morning Mr. Pontellier was up in good time to take the rockaway¹ which was to convey him to the steamer at the wharf. He was returning to the city to his business, and they would not see him again at the Island till the coming Saturday. He had regained his composure, which seemed to have been somewhat impaired the night before. He was eager to be gone, as he looked forward to a lively week in Carondelet Street.²

Mr. Pontellier gave his wife half the money which he had brought away from Klein's hotel the evening before. She liked money as well as most women, and accepted it with no little satisfaction.

"It will buy a handsome wedding present for Sister Janet!" she exclaimed, smoothing out the bills as she counted them one by one.

"Oh! we'll treat Sister Janet better than that, my dear," he laughed, as he prepared to kiss her good-by.

The boys were tumbling about, clinging to his legs, imploring that numerous things be brought back to them. Mr. Pontellier was a great favorite, and ladies, men, children, even nurses, were always on hand to say good-by to him. His wife stood smiling and waving, the boys shouting, as he disappeared in the old rockaway down the sandy road.

A few days later a box arrived for Mrs. Pontellier from New Orleans. It was from her husband. It was filled with *friandises*, with luscious and toothsome bits—the finest of fruits *patés*, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance.

Mrs. Pontellier was always very generous with the contents of such a box; she was quite used to receiving them when away from home. The patés and fruit were brought to the dining-room; the bonbons were

3. Delicacies.

A four-wheeled carriage with a high top and open sides, named for Rockaway, New Jersey, where it was manufactured.

New Orleans's equivalent of Wall Street, and the location of the Cotton Exchange. Chopin's husband, Oscar, a cotton factor (agent, broker, banker) had his office on Carondelet Street.

passed around. And the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better.

IV

It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement.

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. Tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices, which usually prevailed against the other mother-tots. The quadroon nurse was looked upon as a huge encumbrance, only good to button up waists and panties and to brush and part hair; since it seemed to be a law of society that hair must be parted and brushed.

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.

Many of them were delicious in the rôle; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture. Her name was Adèle Ratignolle. 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: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. She was growing a little stout, but it did not seem to detract an iota from the grace of every step, pose, gesture. One would not have wanted her white neck a mite less full or her beautiful arms more slender. Never were hands more exquisite than hers, and it was a joy to look at them when she threaded her needle or adjusted her gold thimble to her taper middle finger as she sewed away on the little night-drawers or fashioned a bodice or a bib.

Madame Ratignolle was very fond of Mrs. Pontellier, and often she