Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 127

Volume 127

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Janet Witalec
Project Editor

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 127

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* (*CLC*) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

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A *TCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

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- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review* 6 (Winter 1949): 85-92; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 40-3.

William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined,* ed. Victor A. Kramer (AMS, 1987), 65- 91; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 94-105.

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Contents

Kate Chopin
1851-1904

(Full name Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin) American novelist, short story writer, and essayist.

For additional information on Chopin's life and works, see *TCLC,* Volumes 5 and 14.

INTRODUCTION

A popular local colorist during her lifetime, Chopin is best known today for her psychological novel *The Awakening,* (1899) which depicts a woman's search for spiritual and sexual freedom in the repressive society of late-nineteenth-century America. When *The Awakening* appeared, critical and public indignation over the novel's frank treatment of guiltless adultery caused Chopin to abandon her literary career, and the novel itself was forgotten for several decades. Since the 1950s, however, serious critical attention has focused on the pioneering psychological realism, symbolic imagery, and artistic integrity of the work.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1851, Chopin was the daughter of a prominent businessman and his wife. Her father died when Chopin was four years old, and her childhood was profoundly influenced by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, women descended from French Creole pioneers. Chopin also spent time with her family's Creole and mulatto slaves, whose dialects she mastered, and she read the works of Walter Scott, Edmund Spenser, and other writers who were not represented among the encyclopedias and religious books in the family library. Despite her bookish nature, Chopin was an undistinguished student at the convent school she attended. She graduated at age seventeen and spent two years as a belle of fashionable St. Louis society. In 1870 she married a wealthy Creole cotton magnate, Oscar Chopin, and moved with him to New Orleans. For the next decade, Chopin pursued the demanding social and domestic schedule of a wealthy New Orleans wife, the recollection of which would serve as material for *The Awakening.* By 1880, however, financial difficulties made it necessary for Chopin's steadily growing family to move to Cloutierville in Natchitoches Parish, located in Louisiana's Red River bayou region. There Chopin's husband managed the family plantations until his death in 1883. Afterward Chopin insisted on assuming her husband's managerial responsibilities, which brought her into contact with almost every aspect of the family business and every segment of the

community. She was particularly intrigued by the French Acadian, Creole, and mulatto sharecroppers who worked the plantations. The impressions she gathered of these people and of Natchitoches Parish life were later reflected in her fiction.

In the mid-1880s Chopin sold most of her property and left Louisiana to live with her mother in St. Louis. Family friends, who had found her letters entertaining, encouraged Chopin to write professionally, and she soon began writing short stories. These early works show the influence of her favorite authors, especially the French writers Guy de Maupassant, Alphonse Daudet, and Molière. At this time Chopin also read the works of Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer in order to keep abreast of trends in scientific thinking, and she began questioning the benefits of certain mores and ethical constraints imposed by society on human nature. After an apprenticeship marked by routine rejections, she published the novel *At Fault* in 1890. This work displayed many of the shortcomings of a first novel and failed to interest readers. Chopin had also begun to publish short stories in the most popular

American periodicals. With the publication of the collections *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), her growing reputation as a skillful local colorist was established. In 1899 Chopin completed her ambitious novel *The Awakening,* which was received with hostility by critics despite general acknowledgment of Chopin's mature writing skills. Chopin's reputation as a writer was severely damaged by the negative reception of *The Awakening*; she had difficulties finding publishers for her later works and was ousted from local literary groups. Demoralized, she wrote little during the rest of her life. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1904.

MAJOR WORKS

The short stories collected in *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie* established Chopin as an important writer of local-color fiction. Set primarily near Natchitoches Parish, these tales of Creole and Cajun life are noted for meticulous descriptions of setting, precise dialect, and an objective point of view. Although they sometimes have a slick quality, the stories in *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie* attempt honest examinations of sexuality, repression, freedom, and responsibility—themes Chopin was to explore more fully in *The Awakening.*

The Awakening is considered Chopin's best work as well as a remarkable novel to have been written during the morally uncompromising era of 1890s America. Psychologically realistic, *The Awakening* is the story of Edna Pontellier, a conventional wife and mother who experiences a spiritual epiphany and an awakened sense of independence that change her life. The theme of sexual freedom and the consequences women must face to attain it is supported by sensual imagery that acquires symbolic meaning as the story progresses. This symbolism emphasizes the conflict within Pontellier, who realizes that she can neither exercise her newfound sense of independence nor return to life as it was before her "awakening." For example, the sexual candor of the Creole community on Grand Isle, the novel's setting, is contrasted with the conventional moral strictures of New Orleans; birds in gilded cages and free-flying birds are juxtaposed; and the protagonist selects for her confidantes both the domesticated, devoted Adele Ratignolle and the passionate Madame Reisz, a lonely and unattractive pianist. The central symbol of the novel, the sea, also provides the framework for the main action. As a symbol, the sea embodies multiple pairs of polarities, the most prominent being that it is the site of both Edna Pontellier's awakening and of her suicide at the end of the narrative.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

After the initial furor over *The Awakening* had passed, the novel was largely ignored until the 1930s, when Daniel S. Rankin published a study of Chopin's works that included a highly favorable assessment of the book. During the succeeding decades, critical debate surrounding *The Awakening* has focused on Chopin's view of women's roles in society, the significance of the main character's awakening and her subsequent suicide, and the possibility of parallels between the lives of Chopin and her protagonist. George Arms, for instance, has contended that Chopin was a happily married woman and devoted mother whose emotional life bore no resemblance to that of Edna Pontellier, while Chopin's principal biographer, Per Seyersted, has noted her secretive, individualistic nature and her evident enjoyment of living alone as an independent writer. Priscilla Allen has posited that male critics allow their preconceptions about "good" and "bad" women to influence their interpretations of Chopin's novel, arguing that they too often assume that Edna Pontellier's first priority should have been to her family and not to herself. Like Allen, Seyersted brings a feminist interpretation to *The Awakening* and points out that the increasing depiction of passionate, independent women in Chopin's other fiction supports the theory that she was in fact concerned about the incompatibility of motherhood and career for women living during the late nineteenth century.

Once considered a minor author of local-color fiction, Chopin is today recognized for her examination of sexuality, individual freedom, and the consequences of one's actions—themes and concerns important to many later American writers. While her psychological examinations of female protagonists have made *The Awakening* and several of Chopin's stories seminal works in the development of feminist literature, her writings also provide a broad examination of societies that stifle self-expression, illustrating, as Peggy Skaggs has observed, that "having a secure place . . . is not enough in life; that one's sexual nature is a powerful part of the self, whether feminine or masculine."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

At Fault (novel) 1890
Bayou Folk (short stories) 1894
A Night in Acadie (short stories) 1897
The Awakening (novel) 1899
The Complete Works of Kate Chopin. 2 vols. (novels, short stories, poetry, and essays) 1969
The Awakening, and Other Stories (novel and short stories) 1970
The Storm and Other Stories, with The Awakening (novel and short stories) 1974
The Awakening, and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin (novel and short stories) 1976
A Kate Chopin Miscellany (diaries) 1979
A Vocation and A Voice: Stories (short stories) 1991
Matter of Prejudice & Other Stories (short stories) 1992
A Pair of Silk Stockings and Other Stories (short stories) 1996

CRITICISM

Emily Toth (essay date fall-winter 1976)

SOURCE: Toth, Emily. "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Feminist Criticism." *Southern Studies* 2, nos. 3-4 (fall-winter 1991): 231-41.

[*In the following essay, originally published in 1976, Toth argues that* The Awakening *belongs to the didactic feminist tradition of women's literature.*]

The title of this essay is bound to annoy some readers. ***The Awakening***'s not about "Women's Lib," they may argue. It's a skillfully written novel, not a tract. It's a work of art, not a polemic. Or—as some critics have claimed—it's not really about women at all, but about the universal, existential human condition, loneliness and alienation.[1]

But Edna Pontellier is a woman, and what happens to her would not have happened to a man. ***The Awakening*** is a story of what happens when a woman does not accept her place in the home. The novel moves us because it illustrates the need for women's psychological, physical, social, and sexual emancipation—the goals of feminists in the twentieth century as well as the nineteenth. In its picture of the particular limitations placed upon women, the novel belongs to the tradition of feminist criticism a century ago, a tradition which embraces both fiction and social commentary. It is a tradition which literary historians still generally ignore.

What I call feminist criticism, or the criticism of women's limited roles, is not new to the nineteenth century. In the fourteenth century, Christine de Pisan wrote *Le Duc des Vrais Amants* to attack the double standard in love and sex, as embodied in the system of courtly love. In the seventeenth century Anne Bradstreet, the first American poet, complained in the *Prologue to the Tenth Muse* that her contemporaries failed to take her seriously because of her sex. Nor were other women poets, unknown today, silent about prejudices against them and women in general.[2]

A more systematic criticism of women's role in society begins in 1791, the year Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* She argued that women's weaknesses stem from deprivation: lack of experience and education, repression of individual talents. Wollstonecraft's work inaugurated more than a century of ferment over what was termed "the Woman Question."

Countless other critical works followed, especially in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Some of the more influential include Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (American, 1844), John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* (English, 1869), August Bebel's *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (German, 1883), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (American, 1898).

All these feminist critiques are compendia, covering the situation of women in the physical, psychological, sociological, and economic spheres. All support greater independence for women. Wollstonecraft and Fuller are the most idealistic and utopian; Mill is a liberal who stops short of such radical changes as easy divorce and the entry of large numbers of women into "male" professions. Bebel and Gilman are materialists, socialists who see change in the "sexuo-economic relation" (Gilman's phrase) as essential to any other changes on women's condition. Only Bebel gives more than cursory attention to poor and working-class women. Yet the similarities among these critics are far more evident than their differences.

What unites these books is a concern for women's escape from confinement, in all spheres of her life. And escape from confinement is the overriding theme of ***The Awakening,*** a book which demonstrates Kate Chopin's close connections with the ideas of feminist social critics. While there is no proof that she read feminist social commentaries, she did read wisely, in several languages. Moreover, the ideas expressed by feminist critics were part of the cultural milieu of her day, part of the Woman Question. Even if she had not embraced feminist ideas, she could not be untouched by them.

In ***The Awakening,*** Kate Chopin transforms the insights of feminist critics into fiction. Her translation involves a movement from the abstract to the concrete. Instead of an idea, she presents a character; instead of a generalization, she makes a case study. In a number of ways, Edna Pontellier is the embodiment of nineteenth-century feminist criticism. In ***The Awakening,*** Kate Chopin uses directly the ideas of Gilman, Mill, and Bebel, and makes of ***The Awakening*** both a synthesis and crowning achievement of feminist consciousness at the turn of the century.

Edna Pontellier of ***The Awakening*** is twenty-eight years old and married to a New Orleans businessman twelve years her senior. During a summer at Grand Isle, she has a sensuous awakening. The sea, sand, and sky provide a seductive background; the Creoles, especially the mother-woman Adèle Ratignolle, encourage her to overcome her reserved Kentucky Presbyterian ways. Edna begins to examine her place in the universe.

She learns to swim, and she becomes attracted to Robert Lebrun, a young man (26) who flirts with her in the Creole fashion. She becomes more and more discontented with her role as wife and mother of two young sons. Sensing that their growing psychological intimacy is dangerous, Robert leaves immediately for Mexico, ostensibly on business. Soon afterwards, the Pontelliers return to New Orleans for the winter.

Edna continues to question her purpose in life. She becomes friendly with the disagreeable pianist, Mademoiselle Reisz, who is close to Robert and shares his letters with Edna. She begins to paint, and drops her social obligations. While her husband is away on a business trip, she

moves out of his house into a small home of her own. And her awakened sensuality leads her to begin an affair with a roue, Alćee Arobin. She feels no shame, no remorse: only a greater intensity of passionate desire than she had ever felt before.

Robert returns from Mexico. Although he tries to avoid seeing Edna, they meet twice by chance. He confesses his love for her, but seems shocked at her independent behavior. Her sensual responsiveness seems to surprise him: she touches and kisses him before he makes any move toward her. Her announcement that she is not her husband's property, but gives herself as she chooses, seems to frighten Robert. Then Edna is suddenly called away to assist Adèle Ratignolle, who is about to give birth to her fourth child. The conventional word used for giving birth has a particular irony: it is Adèle's "confinement."

When Edna returns, after witnessing a scene of "torture" that caused in her an inward revolt against woman's lot, she finds only a parting note from Robert: "Good-by—because I love you."[3] Edna does not sleep that night. Confronting her destiny, she refuses to sacrifice her "self." She realizes that Arobin and Robert are both meaningless to her, and the children (who are supposed to give significance to a woman's life) are antagonists she must elude, to avoid "the soul's slavery" (999).

She returns to Grand Isle, the site of her mental and physical awakening. Shedding all her clothes on the beach, she swims until her strength is gone and death overtakes her.

Kate Chopin's critics found the novel immoral and condemned the book and its author, primarily for her expression of female sexuality. Very hurt by the book's reception, Chopin wrote only a few more stories before her early death in 1904, at the age of 53. Apart from the sexual awakening, however, she was not expressing uncommon thoughts, for the theme of confinement was treated thoroughly by feminist critics.

Confinement is both a process and a state, and it begins very early in a girl's life. Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes the process in *Women and Economics.*

> Each woman born . . . has had to live over again in her own person the same process of restriction, repression, denial; the smothering 'no' which crushed down all human desires to create, to discover, to learn, to express, to advance. Each woman has had, on the other hand, the same single avenue of expression and attainment; the same one way in which alone she might do what she could, get what she might. All other doors were shut, and this one always open; and the whole pressure of advancing humanity was upon her."[4]

Writing a year or two before ***The Awakening,*** Gilman describes through a general social commentary the process of confinement Edna underwent as a child. The only visual image we have of Edna's childhood is a description she gives Adèle Ratignolle of

> . . . a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water.
>
> (896)

In Edna's description of herself as a young girl, the child is active, in control of her body. She strikes out at her environment; it does not mold her. She is outdoors, not confined in the home. The analogy to the ocean and swimming suggests no restrictions—and anticipates Edna's emancipation and death.

Where was Edna going then? Adèle asks. Edna does not recall, and adds, "My sun-bonnet obstructed the view." (896) It should be noted that bonnets, parasols and gloves are very much a part of a lady's apparel in ***The Awakening,*** for fair skin is part of the bourgeois ideal of beauty. These accessories protect her from the sun, but also insulate her from a life of the senses. Edna's freeing herself from her role is paralleled in clothing. Our first view of her is a view of an advancing parasol, seen by her husband. As she reconsiders her life, she finds herself "daily casting aside the fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (939). At the end of the novel Edna has cast aside all confinements, all garments, and stands naked at the sea. During her final swim she recalls "the blue-grass meadow that she traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end." (1000).

In Edna's answer to Adèle, the sunbonnet may be read as a sign that Edna was undergoing the process of confinement required for a young girl. The bonnet restricts her ability to discover, to advance. Both literally and symbolically, she cannot see where she is going.

She tells Adèle that "I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it. I don't remember whether I was frightened or pleased" (896). She confides to Adèle that "sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (897). Edna seems to prefer the freedom of the child, before the process of confinement begins in earnest, before all doors but one are closed. Yet she recognizes that one may be "frightened" by freedom.

Gilman's "same single avenue"—a clearly-defined, restricted space—contrasts sharply with Edna's "stretch of green," or unlimited territory. Both are metaphors for a condition in life: a state of confinement or a freedom to choose.

In the past, Edna soon learned that "All other doors were shut" (in Gilman's words) except the door to "the same single avenue of expression and attainment." As an adolescent, Edna was infatuated with a cavalry officer, with the fiance' of another young woman, and with a great trage-

dian. All of these were hopeless from the start; yet they reveal that by her adolescent years Edna could no longer see her fate as an unlimited meadow. Instead, her future would be embodied in a man. Her only choice, her only avenue, would be her choice of that man.

Edna learned as a young woman to say to herself what Gilman calls "the smothering 'no.'" Society (or Gilman's "pressure of advancing humanity") begins the process of conditioning, but then each woman lives "over again in her own person" her confinement. Edna keeps to herself her inward disturbances, and expects to lead the dual life, "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (893). She completes for herself the process of "restriction, repression, denial" begun by society: giving up her dreams, she accepts the "single avenue."

When she marries Léonce Pontellier, she does not love him, but "his absolute devotion flattered her" (898). Yet her marriage is a form of rebellion, a last attempt at evading the "smothering 'no'"—for her father and her sister Margaret, her surrogate mother, feel "violent opposition" to her marriage with a Catholic (898). Edna's choice seems to be an attempt to widen her avenue.

After her wedding, however, Edna expects to be a dignified matron, "closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" (898). "Portals" is simply a more romantic term to show that, as Gilman states, "All other doors were shut, and this one always open." The door as an image of enclosure is conventional, virtually a dead metaphor; but it is noteworthy that it appears in both Gilman and Chopin to allude to the same critical choice in a young woman's life.

Edna's illusions do not die. They merely go underground, to surface again with her attraction to another man, Robert. In modern terminology, Edna has not been completely conditioned to the female role. In Kate Chopin's imagery, Edna prefers the ocean of green grass.

Gilman's picture of the *process* of confinement is the most telling among nineteenth-century feminist critics. But John Stuart Mill gives the best portrayal of the *state* of confinement experienced by the bourgeois woman, especially the wife.[5] Several key passages in *On the Subjection of Women* anticipate ***The Awakening.*** Mill argues, as does Chopin, that women need to free their bodies from physical limitations and to liberate their energies from confinement to domestic duties.

Mill is aware of the relationship between mind and body, and between social customs and behavior. He answers the complaint that women are too changeable and uncertain to be suited for anything but domestic life by arguing that

> Much of all this is the mere overflow of nervous energy run to waste, and would cease when the energy was directed to a definite end. Much is also the result of conscious or unconscious cultivation; as we see by the almost total disappearance of 'hysteria' and fainting-fits, since they have gone out of fashion. Moreover, when people are brought up, like many women of higher classes . . . a kind of hot-house plants, shielded from the wholesome vicissitudes of air and temperature, and untrained in any of the occupations and exercises which give stimulus and development to the circulatory and muscular system . . . it is no wonder if those of them who do not die of consumption, grow up . . . without stamina to support any task, physical or mental, requiring continuity of effort. But women brought up to work for their livelihood show none of these morbid characteristics. . . . Women who in their early years have shared in the healthy physical education and bodily freedom of their brothers, and who obtain a sufficiency of pure air and exercise in after-life, very rarely have any excessive susceptibility of nerves which can disqualify them for active pursuits.[6]

Mill argues, then, that physical exercise is essential to mental well-being; that work cures nervous susceptibility and inability to concentrate; that much of women's weakness is traceable to customs of the day. All three of these points are illustrated in ***The Awakening,*** through the three main female characters: Edna, Mademoiselle Reisz, and Madame Ratignolle.

Throughout much of the novel, Edna is characterized by a kind of lassitude, a torpor: she spends an inordinate amount of time sleeping or eating[7]; she abandons herself, as she tells Adèle, as if she were still the child in the unlimited meadow. All summer she has tried and failed to learn to swim. But one night in the moonlight she succeeds. She gains an outlet for her energies.

> "She was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who all of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone. . . . She could have shouted for joy. . . .

"A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. . . ." She swims out toward the sea, and "As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (908).

The language is the antithesis of confinement: "powers," "control," "daring," "reckless," "overestimating," "unlimited." As she exults in pushing her body to its limits, Edna senses a liberation of both body and soul. This is her first awakening in the book, the first answer to her questions about her place in the universe.[8] The freedom of her body enlarges her vision of herself.

The physical exercise and the life outdoors awaken her sensuality: her pleasure in her own body is one of the forces impelling her toward the affair with Alćee Arobin. She no longer accepts woman's "crushing 'no'"; instead she seeks an intensity of experience. Her growing desire for physical independence leads her to move from her husband's house, which stands for a confinement of her body. Her learning to swim is indeed like a baby's first step. In

the last scene in the novel, she is naked and feels "like some new-born creature" (1000).

Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle are counterparts to Edna, representing two different directions in which the newly-awakened Edna might use her energies. Mademoiselle Reisz has overcome the limitations of the female role through meaningful work, illustrating Mill's point that directing one's energies to a definite end cures any "nervous susceptibilities." She is an unpleasant and assertive little woman, no longer young, lacking any feminine tentativeness of manner. Her independent status gives her strength and the right to her eccentricities: although she is both ugly and outspoken, her splendid piano-playing entrances Edna. Later Mademoiselle Reisz talks with Edna abut the need for "the soul that dares and defies" (946). Edna thinks about her own painting as a possible way of defining herself through work—but she lacks the commitment to be that courageous soul.

Madame Ratignolle illustrates Mill's third point, that much of women's weakness is traceable to the customs of the day. Adèle is the complete "mother-woman," the antithesis of Mademoiselle Reisz in her joyful absorption in others: her husband, her three young children. Voluptuously beautiful, golden-blonde, she is a madonna fluttering with protective wings about her children. She is constantly concerned with her "condition," her latest pregnancy. She uses is as an occasion to be a coquette.

Although she is in robust health, she prefers to lean on a man's arm when she walks. She lets everyone know that the doctor forbade her "to lift so much as a pin!" (892). In one scene she complains of faintness. Edna bathes her face with cologne; Robert fans her; and the narrator reports that "The spell was soon over, and Mrs. Pontellier could not help wondering if there were not a little imagination responsible for its origin, for the rose tint had never faded from her friend's face" (892).

Edna's thoughts are traitorous, but they are also John Stuart Mill's. Mary Wollstonecraft, too, was aware of the effect that fashions in female behavior had on women's apparent health. She writes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that a wife might even "condescend to use and feign a sickly delicacy in order to secure her husband's affection."[9]

Mill and Chopin portray fainting as a feminine wile in a more sympathetic way. To Mill, it is a result of society's definition of women as weak creatures; to Chopin, it is the manifestation of Adèle's good-natured and total acceptance of what is expected from women. In both writers, women's weakness is a result of conformity; women's strength, a result of struggle against confinement. Madame Ratignolle absorbs the female role; Mademoiselle Reisz transcends it; Edna is trapped between the extremes incarnated in her two friends.

Edna ultimately believes herself incapable of escaping woman's state of confinement. Escaping through a man would simply be choosing the same avenue: "Today it is Arobin, tomorrow it will be some one else" (999). Neither the liberation of the soul through painting nor the liberation of the body through sensuality is enough: she lacks that "continuity of effort" which Mill finds lacking in most "women of the higher classes." Her vagueness, her dreamy purposelessness illustrate his description of bourgeois woman's untrained, hot-house existence. Edna Pontellier is the concrete embodiment of Mill's ideas.

These examples from Gilman and Mill should suggest some connections that can be drawn between the feminist analysis in nineteenth-century social criticism and that found in fiction of the same era. Other significant parallels may be seen between ***The Awakening*** and works of feminist critics.

For instance, Mill's description of the married woman who is expected to "have her time and faculties always at the disposal of everybody," who "must always be at the beck and call of somebody, generally everybody" (211) anticipates Léonce Pontellier's demands for attention and the children's demands for bon-bons.

There is also a connection with Gilman's criticism of men and women who are "over-sexed": in her definition, too involved in the specialized tasks allotted to their gender. Both "mother-women," like Adèle Ratignolle, and businessmen immersed in their work, like Léonce Pontellier, are illustrations for her criticism.

Gilman was strongly opposed to gratification of sensual appetites, but not all feminist critics agreed with her. Some of the writers even excuse adultery in women, in a somewhat limited fashion. Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, feels that given women's education toward pleasing men, women no longer young nor beautiful may find themselves with an unsatisfied need for "gallantry" and "conquests": hence, a desire for other men's approval and attention when those of their husbands are lacking (60-61, 137). But her discussion really centers around the need for male approval, not the need for sexual pleasure or variety.

Among the major feminist critics, only August Bebel, in *Die Frau und der Sozialismus,* provides an unambiguous and positive view of female adultery. He argues that a sexually-unfulfilled spouse has the right to seek satisfaction outside marriage, that nature should not be thwarted, and that sexual abstinence in women may lead not only to hysteria, but to insanity. He makes no strong distinctions between love and lust.[10] Nor does Edna Pontellier, although respectable women were supposed to embrace the one and shun the other. Bebel is hardly typical of even the most radical critics in the Victorian era, but his ideas suggest that Kate Chopin was not utterly alone in her thinking.

The connections between nineteenth-century feminist critics and such important writers of fiction as Kate Chopin, Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot have barely been touched. Literary criticism has too often confined itself to

texts defined strictly as "literary," excluding social criticism from consideration. Students of social history have too often ignored fictional materials.

A work like ***The Awakening*** functions not only as a story, but also a critique. When we can see more clearly its place in nineteenth-century social criticism, we can understand more easily its impact on its original readers and its meaning for us as part of our widening knowledge of women's past. Because it expands our field of vision, ***The Awakening*** is the best kind of feminist criticism.

Notes

1. The argument that *The Awakening* is universal rather than female in application is almost a convention in Chopin criticism. Merrill Maguire Skaggs argues, for instance, that the novel is an expose' neither of the "new woman" nor of the Creoles, "but rather of any society in which the rights of one individual are automatically less than those of another." See *The Folk of Southern Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 188. For similar arguments, see also John R. May, "Local Color in *The Awakening*," *Southern Review* 6 (Autumn 1970), pp. 1031-40; Michael D. Reed, "Social Convention and Passional Nature in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," paper given at the Modern Language Association convention, 1974.
2. Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the Duke of True Lovers,* trans. Alice Kemp-Welch (London, 1908); Anne Bradstreet, "The Prologue" in *The Women Poets in English: An Anthology,* ed. Ann Stanford (New York, 1972): 46-47. *The Women Poets in English* contains the works of numerous forgotten feminist critics, including Rachel Speght, Katherine Philips, Joan Philips, and Mary Lee, Lady Chudleigh.
3. Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin,* ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge, 1969): 995, 997. Further references to this edition will be cited by page number in the text.
4. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (New York, 1966): 70-71.
5. Although Mill wrote *On the Subjection of Women,* he explains in his autobiography that it was "enriched" by his daughter's ideas, and that "all that is most striking and profound belongs to my wife," Harriet Taylor Mill. Bebel also gives credit to his wife for helping him with his work. The women critics (Wollstonecraft, Gilman, Fuller) give no particular credit to men in their lives, presumably because they have lived what they are writing about.

   On the Mills, see Alice Rossi, "Sentiment and Intellect" in *Essays on Sex Equality* by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill (Chicago, 1970), esp. p. 57. For Bebel's debt to his wife, see his *Aus Meinem Leben* (Stuttgart, 1910): 180.
6. *On the Subjection of Women,* in Rossi, 194. Other references to this edition will be cited by page number in the text.
7. Edna's sleeping and eating are analyzed in two recent articles. See Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith, "Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,*" *Studies in American Fiction* (September 1973): 62-75 and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,*" *American Quarterly* 25 (October 1973): 499-71.
8. Learning to swim is not, however, classified as an awakening in Otis B. Wheeler's "The Five Awakenings of Edna Pontellier," *Southern Review* 11 (January 1975): 118-128. Wheeler is more interested in awakenings which involve directly Edna's rejection of female social roles.
9. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (New York, 1967): 62. Other references to this edition will be cited by page number in the text.
10. August Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (Berlin, 1946): 132, 156, 158, 162.

Joyce Dyer (essay date winter 1981)

SOURCE: Dyer, Joyce. "Symbolic Setting in Kate Chopin's 'A Shameful Affair.'" *Southern Studies* 20, no. 4 (winter 1981): 447-52.

[*In the following essay, Dyer discusses the ways in which Chopin's use of setting in "A Shameful Affair" prefigures the symbolism of* The Awakening.]

"A Shameful Affair," written on June 5th and 9th of 1891, represents an exciting thematic prelude to ***The Awakening.*** In it Mildred Orme, for a moment in her life at least, trades volumes of Ibsen and Browning for the broad, brawny shoulders of Fred Evelyn, a farmhand. She suffers more from guilt than Edna Pontellier seems to. Nevertheless, she makes discoveries about her physical nature that are as overwhelming, forceful, and important as Edna's. She awakens eight years before Chopin's best-known heroine. She prepares the way.

"A Shameful Affair" anticipates ***The Awakening***'s technique as well as theme. The story explores Mildred's desires symbolically. The setting—the lush Kraummer farm on the Iron Mountain—is as important to our understanding of Mildred Orme's awakening as the sea, the night, and the Grand Isle oaks are to our understanding of Edna Pontellier. The Kraummer farm, where Mildred Orme spends a summer, is indeed "no such farm as one reads about in humorous fiction."[1] Images of fertility—undulating wheat fields and streams of clear water full of fish—continually remind us of the force and insistency of Mildred's passion. In each of the story's three sections, Chopin juxtaposes or integrates lush descriptions of nature with scenes in which Mildred Orme discovers what James E. Rocks calls "the violent physical and mental effects of repressed desire."[2] **"A Shameful Affair,"** then, introduces us to a technique—the extensive and elaborate use of sym-