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# The Awakening by Kate Chopin

With an Introduction by  
Marilynn Robinson



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# The Awakening and Selected Short Stories by Kate Chopin

**With an Introduction by  
Marilynne Robinson**



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The Awakening  
and Selected  
Short Stories  
by Kate Chopin

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## INTRODUCTION

Born Katherine O'Flaherty, in St. Louis in 1851, Kate Chopin was the daughter of a successful Irish merchant who had married into an established and prominent French Creole family. Widowed at thirty-two, the mother of six children, she took to writing short stories, which were widely published and established her as a respected literary figure. Then, in 1899, she published *The Awakening*. This beautiful little book so disturbed both critics and the public that it was banished from sight and from print for decades afterward, and its author and her reputation were carried into an oblivion from which they are only newly recovered.

Yet although *The Awakening* is now widely read and admired, the conversation about it has changed very little. For most critics the issues still seem to be whether Edna Pontellier is justified in withdrawing from her marriage and her place in society, and whether her suicide should be read as failure, tragedy, or triumph. It seems to me the book is directed precisely toward defeating such strategies of interpretation. Chopin does not allow us to forget that in killing herself Edna is acting badly toward her children. It is startling when, in her final thoughts, her two very young, entirely undemanding boys appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days." Yet neither does Chopin punish her protagonist with a terrible death, as Flaubert did his Madame Bovary, in the novel to which *The Awakening* has always been compared. The

yearnings that draw Edna to solitude and finally to death have a universality in them that acts as a charm against the harsh self-absorption that more and more characterizes her as she falls under their sway.

We have long been accustomed to the fact that when science analyzes any mystery it reduces it to component mysteries, no less perplexing. Novelists whose impulses are interrogatory rather than declarative, those more inclined to inquiry than to statement, can also embarrass us with evidence that the world exceeds our grasp. Kate Chopin's affinity with Romanticism and with other nineteenth-century American writers is clear enough to prepare us to see her as one who, like Poe or Emerson, Hawthorne or Melville, Whitman or Dickinson, would set about to expound mystery rather than to dispel it. I suspect that to inquire into the rightness or wrongness of Edna Pontellier's withdrawal and suicide is like asking whether Melville's *Bartleby* might have benefited from career counseling, or Poe's *Man of the Crowd* from the comforts of domestic life. An alienated perspective is valuable in fiction because it establishes a new vision of a world we take to be solid and familiar.

To explore alienation and self-destructiveness is not to set about making converts to them. There is plenty of both in the world, and in every individual experience, to reward a writer's attention to them, however. The appropriate question to ask about Edna Pontellier is not whether her behavior is justified, but what is revealed in it. Fictional characters invented to be the objects of praise or blame belong in melodrama. Contemplative writers practice the broadest possible extension of sympathy. Our modern "realist" tradition makes us oddly impatient with real life. We are eager to coerce art into the service of politics and morality, both of which are concerned with controlling or changing human nature. We are not interested in according attention or doing justice to the gallant, sad, amaz-

ing, unregenerate form of it we have, which, for all we know is its true and final form.

Kate Chopin makes a woman's suicide the occasion for exploring consciousness, for opening, in her ambitious phrase, the question of a human being's "position in the universe," just as Dostoevsky uses an act of murder in *Crime and Punishment*. Both writers may be said to dignify things regrettable in themselves. Or they may be said to propose that every human act is of the highest order of complexity and of ultimate significance.

Edna Pontellier's alienation and suicide is taken by many readers to be a rejection, and as such a critique, of conventional society. Society becomes a regime of brutal, minor propriety, spiritual hardness domiciled in excessive material comfort, intellectual vacancy with or without pretensions but absurd in either case. Thus, if Edna is worthy of sympathy, it is assumed those around her must be less worthy. If she is sensitive, they must be obtuse. If she cannot take satisfaction or comfort where they do, their satisfactions or comforts must be hollow and meretricious. This interpretation is, again, an impulse toward melodrama, victimizing and villainizing, reducing a splendid book to impossible simplicity. If Kate Chopin's gaze rests on Edna longer than on those around her, that does not mean Chopin has excluded the others from her sympathy. It is bizarre to treat all differences as oppositions, as if those at home in society and those who crave other satisfactions should be thought of as warring camps.

This tendency to read *The Awakening* as a story of oppression and escape is supported by the perception that the novel is a feminist work and by the habit of assuming that feminism must always take conflict between individualist women and social expectations as its primary subject. In endowing Edna with a compulsion to discover herself by isolating it from all bonds that seem to her to attenuate her identity, Kate Chopin has given

her female protagonist the central role, normally reserved for Man, in a meditation on identity and culture, consciousness and art. This seems to me a higher order of feminism than repeating the story of woman as victim, with its unfortunate tendency to reinforce images we must hope to move beyond.

I would suggest that Kate Chopin has written a novel in the American Romantic tradition, though with a darker view of Nature than other such novels. She portrays Nature as violent and deceptive and also quite explicitly predatory. Her Nature is closely associated with the sea and is potent and gorgeous and abysmal. The Creole society summing on Grand Isle is a little like Melville's "Insular Tahiti," the balmy island one leaves at peril of engaging the most fearsome and absolute spiritual questions. However, Chopin's society has a knowing innocence. It is not primitive, but worldly, courtly, and highly conventional. Her Creole culture is vivid and beautiful in a fulsome bourgeois style—or to use words that in *The Awakening* are used interchangeably for the Gulf and the people of Grand Isle, it is sensuous and delicious, because it is suffused with the same romantic energy that animates the sea.

It is not surprising that Kate Chopin being urban, aristocratic, Southern, French, and Catholic, should discover in society's graces and pleasures a positive value that the New Englanders did not find, nor that she should write an apologia for them. Kate Chopin remembered the Civil War from her childhood. Her sympathies were strongly on the side of the Confederacy, and her identity was strongly rooted in the special strain of Southern culture, French and Catholic, represented in the Creoles that surround Edna Pontellier. Southern writers have always treated society more as an organism, less as a mechanism, than have Northern writers. That is, Southern writers have viewed society as a repository of experience and wisdom, however dark, rather than as a system of accommodation

among individuals, always subject to reform. And Southern writers tend to regard their society with nostalgia in anticipation of the loss of its particularity and therefore to dwell on its striking or its amiable features, especially those that might be expected to pass away.

The Creole society of *The Awakening* seems to me an idealized culture, tolerant and humane, however highly structured. Edna Pontellier ignores all its conventions and expectations, yet she bears no social penalty, continuing to enjoy the affection of her friends and the loyalty of her husband. When, late in the novel, the old Dr. Mandelet hears her confess her fear that she will trample little lives, her children's lives, he asks her only not to blame herself, whatever happens. If Chopin's thinking about society in general is conservative—that is, based on the idea that it enriches the understandings of individuals rather than limiting or frustrating them—then we should expect to find something very like this Creole society, in which people are virtuous because they satisfy its expectations, not because they defy or elude them.

Robert Lebrun is a gentleman, whose life Edna Pontellier unreflectingly disrupts, driving him away from the temptation she presents. Alcée Arobin is a cad, with a tainted atmosphere about him, because he oversteps the bounds Robert will not cross. These constraints, encoded in traditional society as honor, function as collective memory and foresight, meant to preclude the injuries their absence or failure would entail. Being clear and also communal, they free their adherents of the need to make fresh calculations of right and wrong.

The "American" Edna Pontellier is a fair representative of the majority culture in that she believes her self is inhibited by every claim society makes on her. The reader's response to her yearning for freedom, as she conceives it, is very strong. Yet Chopin herself cannot be assumed to be wholly uncritical of Edna's sense of things. It must be noted



that freedom is defined by Edna in very negative terms. Her desire to be an artist comes and goes, but her solitude grows continuously.

Yet when Edna confides to Adèle at Grand Isle that she sometimes feels as she did when a child, walking through a meadow "idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided," Adèle responds with affectionate understanding, caressing her hand and murmuring "Pauvre chérie." Just as Edna's discontents are never beyond the compassion of her friend, they are always wholly within the range of the author's sympathy.

In other words, if the mores of Chopin's Creole society are indeed invested with value, this need not imply that Edna's experience is not also valued. The compassion Adèle and the Doctor express can only mean that they have felt similar unease. The genius of their society is not to exclude emotion or suffering, but to make it bearable.

The role of woman in the society Chopin creates is of special interest and relevance. The "freedom of expression" Edna finds so startling is precisely a willingness to talk frankly in mixed company about sexuality and childbirth, rather than to isolate and conceal the experience of women, the more typical impulse of middle-class society in the nineteenth century. Chopin may be offering a justification of her own choice of subject.

In contrast to Edna's father with his whiskers, military airs, and padded coat, the Creole men in *The Awakening* seem notably free of masculine pretensions. They pursue tedious occupations in the city, earning affluence, which they devote to their families. They are, in a word, bourgeois. Yet they scarcely seem patriarchal. Robert Lebrun's great gift is for attentiveness and flattery. He is good with children and he can cook. Alcée Arabin puts on a maid's dustcap to help Edna with the work of moving. Edna's husband, Léonce Pontellier, scolds Edna once for failing to supervise the house and to receive callers, but he takes it upon himself to go

alone to her sister's wedding to try to repair with love and money the offense she has caused by refusing to attend. In other words, men frequently accept roles that elsewhere are normally delegated to women.

The vivid and accomplished characters are women; Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, the latter admired for her music though she violates every supposed female norm by being independent, ill-mannered, single, and childless. Even the duties of mother-women are largely ceremonial, since their children are attended by nurses. Kate Chopin seems in fact to have created the least onerous situation imaginable for Edna, one leisured and without coercion, ready to accommodate her choices.

The novel begins on a Sunday morning; many of the residents of Grand Isle are at mass. An old woman paces with her rosary, and children are playing at croquet. It is a scene of virtuous languor, which Mr. Pontellier watches over his newspaper. His perceptions record a calm, habituated pleasure, though for some time he is watching the slow approach of his wife and the young Robert Lebrun, sharing a sunshade as they return from a swim together. His response to the scene is aesthetic. He notes "the stretch of yellow camomile," and how "the gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon." When they arrive the two sit down on the porch facing each other, laughing over "some adventure out there in the water," a joke in which they try and fail to include Pontellier. The ease and intimacy of Robert and Edna's behavior toward each other does not perturb Pontellier at all. After a little talk he leaves them together again, off for a game of billiards. He invites Robert to join him, but "Robert admitted quite frankly that he preferred to stay where he was and talk to Mrs. Pontellier."

While the three are together, Edna and Pontellier effect a little transaction with the wordlessness of

deep familiarity. He has kept her rings in his vest pocket. He gives them to her and she puts them on. It is a most connubial piece of stage business, emphasizing the privileged relationship of Edna and Pontellier over and against the apparently greater intimacy of Edna and Robert. Much has been made of Chopin's saying in this scene that Pontellier looks at his wife as one looks at "a valuable piece of personal property." But he is not in the slightest degree possessive or controlling in his behavior toward her. It is his confidence in the permanence of their relationship that makes him so at ease with her apparent flirtation with Robert.

The first scene of *The Awakening* establishes a situation in which one would expect to find at least the shadow of jealousy, not only because the relationship of Edna and Robert looks like a flirtation, but also because Pontellier is treated by them as of no special interest. Yet Pontellier watches them "lazily and amused." The pleasures of such relationships as theirs are permitted on Grand Isle, along with billiards on Sunday, shocking books, and frank conversation in mixed company. All this is the freedom permitted by the presumption of a final innocence, prescribed by honor and good form.

At first Pontellier seems the outsider in this scene. But we will soon learn that Edna, an "American" woman and Protestant in a world of Creole Catholics, only poorly comprehending the culture into which she has entered, will disrupt the indulgent serenity of the world we are shown first through her husband's eyes. Pontellier knows, as Edna does not, that Robert will never transgress the wide limits of acceptable behavior, and that these limits are intrinsic to the role Robert assumes toward Edna and toward all the women to whom he had devoted himself, whiling away eleven earlier summers at Grand Isle. Robert can act as he does because there is "a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakeable," permit-

ting an "entire absence of prudery." Edna is not a Creole woman, however.

The society of Grand Isle preserves in modest and vernacular forms relics of courtly society, including a playful dominance of women, and mock-amorous devotions to them by young men. Even their sewing has medieval antecedents, as does the earthy urbanity of their reading and conversation. This is only to say that the Creoles, unlike the artless Kentucky Presbyterian who has married among them, inherit and preserve a tradition of aestheticized behavior. They assume roles toward one another that they perform to their mutual pleasure within strict conventions: the first being that no real tears or blood should be shed, no emotions stirred of the kind that would, for example, make the beau forget his exit.

Edna's friend Adèle Ratignolle warns Robert Lebrun that Edna "might make the unfortunate blunder of taking [him] seriously." Her warning is prescient. But by then Edna has already experienced her first awakening, in a form so definitive that the language in which it is described will occur again as she goes to her death in the sea. From the point where she first feels her soul invited to abysses of solitude, all her actions, even her yielding to infatuation with Robert, will be attempts to find an equivalent or a response to this "awakening," these stirrings, this seduction by a force as formless as a shower of gold. Late in the book old Dr. Mandelet, returning with Edna from attending Adèle in childbirth, responds with intuitive understanding to Edna's telling him that she wants to be left alone, by her husband and even by her children. "The trouble is," he says, "that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost."

"Yes," Edna replies. "The years that are gone seem like dreams."

The amoral, seductive potency of Nature, always translated for her into infatuations, is what Edna is continuously awakened to, even as the illusory, accidental character of every previous passion or promised satisfaction becomes apparent to her. Her first and last memory of herself swimming through blue grass is attended by the sound of the spurs of the sad-eyed cavalry officer she had loved as a child.

It is not precisely true that Edna does not understand the playacting of Robert Lebrun. At first she is diverted, charmed or tolerant, a little wary of his taking a role toward her that would be "unacceptable and annoying." Finally Robert is simply there, like the photograph of the tragedian she cherished in her girlhood, to be the object of emotions called up in her by Nature, by the sea, with its "loving but imperative entreaty." She understands that a game is being played by those about her, but she refuses to understand what the game is, or why its rules must not be broken nor its essential artfulness forgotten. Robert's role as suitor gives Edna occasion to be infatuated, although she is wrong to accept him as he presents himself.

The little colony disporting itself along the rim of this seductive sea is beautiful, free, sexual, and fecund, within the limits of conventions so profoundly inculcated that they are rarely expressed. The Creoles embody and perform the great gulf's dangerous and irresistible behests as in a kind of sympathetic magic, acting out sensuousness and infidelity while practicing a perfect restraint. Indeed, the colony exists with profoundest reference to the Gulf, as in a seascape where the silks and billows and furbelows, the flying sashes and coattails and sleeves of ladies and gentlemen, nurses and babies, all exuberantly conform themselves to the roll and froth of the water. While it is the sea that seduces Edna Pontellier, so does "the influence of

Adèle Ratignolle," who is associated very powerfully with the sea, as mother-woman, the creature for whom, according to Dr. Mandelet, the world's decoys and illusions are deployed.

The ease and elegance of Chopin's prose disguise the structural brilliance of the novel. A remarkable symmetry of structure and detail undercuts the sense of freedom generated in the narrative by the evolution of Edna's perception, which unfolds as if impulse followed intuition toward the discovery and expression of an individuality previously concealed even from itself. The narrative is not retrospective. It follows Edna's consciousness to its extinction. There is no implied narrator to color events by anticipating their conclusion. Yet the structure of the novel establishes with great care that its end is in its beginning.

Adèle Ratignolle is newly pregnant as the book begins and newly delivered as it ends, when her suffering turns Edna to open revolt against Nature. In Chapter V—which precedes the short chapter in which we are told that "a certain light was beginning to dawn dimly" within Edna—she and Adèle spend an afternoon cutting a pattern and sewing; Robert is with them, teasing Adèle about his passionate love for her, which she has scorned, while venturing little advances toward Edna, which she rebuffs. Edna's attention is entirely focussed on Adèle. She attempts to sketch her, and fails. Adèle's beauty, we are told after the beginnings of Edna's awakening are described, is important to the change that is at work in her friend: "The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty."

Edna has aspirations to paint, and these artistic impulses figure in her efforts at self-discovery. But Chopin makes it very clear that in the person of Adèle Ratignolle art exists before and apart from any attempt at sketching her. She is "the bygone

heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams." She is "delicious in the role" of mother-woman. She is "like some sensuous Madonna." Her sensuousness is contained, expressed, made the harmless object of delectation in her pose of motherly virtue. The artificial society in which Edna finds herself is artful—rich in allusion, emotional suggestion, aesthetic pleasure. These things are distanced, through art, allowing the experience of dangerous emotions and powerful attractions without guilt or harm or peril.

In Chapter V, after Edna has tried and failed to sketch Adèle's likeness and after Adèle has folded her sewing, grown faint, and been revived with cologne, Edna watches her walk away "with the grace and majesty which queens are sometimes supposed to possess." Taking her youngest child from its nurse, this sensuous Madonna "with a thousand endearments bore it along in her own fond, encircling arms." The little chapter that describes Edna's first glimmer of awakening ends a page later: "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace." Adèle's regal, motherly bearing in effect interprets the sea to Edna, who will stand naked beside it like a newborn thing and give herself up to its close embrace. Edna is awakening to sensuousness and desire. The intensity of physical love, first of all as between mother and child, and under the influence of a society that conjures these spirits to control them. Thus instructed in beauty and pleasure, Edna, the product of a culture whose defenses were prudishness and austerity, is defenseless against their power.

It is not only Adèle's physical charm that has affected Edna but also "the candor of the woman's whole existence, which everyone might read." This seems a strange statement, coming soon after a fainting spell Edna thinks may have been feigned. But the bathing of her face with cologne, repeated in the actual, torturous birth, reminds us finally that

Adèle plays at being what she really is. She persists in her role of mother-woman through every extreme of misery and exhaustion when she whispers to Edna, "Think of the children. . . . Remember them." Bearing children every two years, as Kate Chopin herself did, Adèle Ratignolle knows the full implications of assuming this role. Her playing it to perfection, making it her ornament, signifies acceptance of a kind Edna never considers, altogether transcending resignation or passivity.

The birth scene is pure suffering—there is no mention of a baby—and it shakes even the old doctor. It is Nature having its terrible way, every guise and illusion dropped. Edna is only further estranged by the spectacle of Adèle's suffering. Chopin does not suggest any goodness at all in Nature, except insofar as it is transformed by code and custom, transformed by players who invest themselves in its beauty and mime its seductions. Society is natural in the sense that it makes nature habitable. Turning from it, Edna finds meaninglessness and death.

One of the most interesting things about the awakening of Edna Pontellier is the very slight degree of the change that actually occurs in her. Chopin anticipates every aspect of Edna's awakened self from the beginning. Her husband's sense that she is somehow not sufficiently devoted to her children will be borne out. She has already sent her children to their grandmother once, as she will do again at the end of the novel, and felt relieved by their absence, which "seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her." Certain of the changes in Edna are in fact regression. She has already discovered her propensity for passionate attachments of a strangely impersonal kind. Of her devotion to the tragedian's photograph, she says what she might say later of her feelings toward Robert Lebrun; "The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness



of it colored it with the lofty tones of a great passion."

She marries Léonce Pontellier because he is absolutely devoted to her, and because his Catholicism offends her father. She feels that in her marriage she is "closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams." In fact, however, she is destined to be overwhelmed again by the propensity to infatuation that she traces back through her childhood. Since she has married Pontellier to put an end to romance and dreams, her rejecting him later in favor of them has more the look of a relapse than a development of any kind. Clearly she launched on her marriage with no other aspiration than to establish herself "with a certain dignity in the world of reality." Pontellier's suitability to assisting her in this can not be held against him. The dreams from which she turns to him are notably vacant, and her marriage is an act of rebellion against her family. Thus she is hardly victimized, rather less so than her husband, who marries her out of love and in good faith.

We are told early in the novel that Edna, never before given to confidences, is influenced by Adèle's candor. When she herself speaks candidly, the experience is "like a first breath of freedom" to her. Yet in the late chapter where she talks with Dr. Mandelet, after they leave Adèle's childbirth, the Doctor asks Edna to tell him what is troubling her, promising her understanding, promising a conversation that "will do us both good." But Edna replies, "Some way I don't feel moved to speak of things that trouble me." So her awakening seems not to have had among its consequences any greater impulse to express her thoughts. The "pigeon house" into which she withdraws in the second half of the novel repeats the play domesticity of the summer house in the first half, with Alcée Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp as disreputable counterparts of Robert and Adèle.

At the racetrack, where "the breath of the blue