

The Awakening by Kate Chopin

Published in 1899

“If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up every thing that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs. To do that, I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth--my real growth.”

-Kate Chopin's diary, 22 May 1894

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BACKGROUND...

- **Katie O'Flaherty Chopin: born in St. Louis 1850 to Irish father and French mother. Best biography by Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999).**
- **Largely neglected and forgotten for about 50 years until 1969 when Per Seyersted published his work *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*. He identifies Chopin as “pioneer American realist in her treatment of ‘women’s urge for an existential authenticity’ and her capacity for sexual passion.”**
- **Third child of 5. The only one to survive past the age of 25. Sent to private Catholic boarding school at the age of 5 1/2. Barely arrived when her father was killed when riding a train over a new bridge--and it collapsed.**
- **Stayed home for two years living with mom, grandmom, and great-grandmom--all widows. None remarried. Very independent and outspoken women. Returned to Sacred Heart Academy--known for its intellectual rigor. She excelled as a student, but had few close friends.**

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BACKGROUND...

- Like Edna Pontellier, Chopin questioned conventional Catholic religion--and any religion. She was a cynic who was known (as a young woman) to “...dance with people I despise; amuse myself with men whose only talent is in their feet” (her diary). Her advice on flirting: “just keep asking, ‘What do *you* think?’”
- Married Oscar Chopin in 1870. Love marriage apparently. He was handsome and from a wealthy cotton-growing family in Louisiana. Both French Catholic and spoke French. Settled in New Orleans. She continued experimenting with her “emancipation,” but settled for convention when she was pregnant--and she was always pregnant. Women not allowed to be seen in public when pregnant.
- At 28, she had 5 sons. Had last child--a girl--in 1879.
- Husband died of “swamp fever” in 1882. She tried to run his general store and plantation for a year, then gave up, sold everything and returned to mom in St. Louis. Her mother died a year later.

Interesting historical stuff

• **Married women in Louisiana were the legal property of their husbands. She could retain control over any inheritances she had received prior to her marriage, but all her accumulations after the marriage were the property of her husband, including any money she might earn and the the clothes she wore. Husband was legal guardian of children and until 1888 was automatically given custody of children in case of divorce. Wife could not sign any legal document--except her will--without husband's consent. She could not institute a lawsuit, appear in court, hold public office or make a donation to a living person.**

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The Writing

- Largely short stories involving thinly disguised folks she had met in Louisiana. *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*.
- First novel, *At Fault*.
- Used the people she knew to create characters. Caused some hostility. Dr. Mandelet in *The Awakening* is modeled on her own New Orleans' obstetrician.
- Drew from her years in New Orleans to write *The Awakening*.
- *The Awakening* takes place over 9 months, the length of Adele's pregnancy.
- Both positive and negative reactions by public and critics.
- Died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1904.

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The Book

The book can be grouped in chapters as follows:

I-VI: Grand Isle--introduces the major conflicts of the novel and set the tone for Edna's awakening.

VII-XVI: Grand Isle--here we see Edna's various awakening set in motion. (you should have noted and annotated them)

XVII-XXX takes place in New Orleans. Here we see significant growth in both Edna's rebellion and her resulting conflicts.

XXXI-XXXVIII continues in New Orleans and are about Edna's independence.

XXXIX should be read alone. The story moves back to Grand Isle, and it is the resolution of the novel.

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The Book

Whenever you read a piece of literature, examine it in the following three ways:

1. What is your gut response to the literature?

(Observe)

2. How do you interpret the literature? (layers of meaning) (Connect)

3. What is your evaluation of the literature based on the quality of artistic achievement and its place in the social/cultural context of its time? Our time? (Infer)

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Using the previous three analytical tools, discuss the characters in the novel as assigned.

(Observe, Connect, Infer)

- 1. Where does the character first appear? What context?**
- 2. Describe physically. Describe personality and motivation.**
- 3. Relationship to Edna and purpose.**
- 4. Present and discuss.**

Alcée Arobin

The Colonel

Dr. Mandelet

Robert Lebrun

Edna Pontellier

Léonce Pontellier

Adèle Ratignolle

Mademoiselle Reisz

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Using the previous three analytical tools, discuss the themes in the novel as assigned.

(Observe, Connect, Infer)

- 1. Flesh vs. Spirit**
- 2. Personal Freedom**
- 3. Sexism**
- 4. Search for self**
- 5. Choices and consequences: Free will**
- 6. Sex**
- 7. Alienation and loneliness**
- 8. Public vs. Private life**

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Using the previous three analytical tools, discuss the style of the novel as assigned. Evaluate the quality of artistic achievement.

Point of view

Conflict

Setting

Imagery

Foil

Symbolism

Realism