Chapter 4

*The Awakening: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*

“Ah, but what is ‘herself’? I mean what is a woman?”

*Virginia Woolf*

4.0: INTRODUCTION

The second novel that will be examined is by the American writer Kate Chopin (1851-1904). Her novel, *The Awakening*, was published in 1899. Kate Chopin was the daughter of a distinguished St. Louis family. Born in 1851, Kate Chopin received a strict Catholic education at the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart. She learned early to speak French fluently, played the piano, read voraciously both the French and British classics, and supported the Confederacy during the Civil War (1861-65). In 1868, after graduating from the academy, she ‘came out’ in society. In 1870 she married Oscar Chopin, with whom she moved first to New Orleans and then, in 1879, when Chopin’s business failed, to a plantation near Cloutierville. Kate Chopin had six children; she was quite fond of her husband and led a happy and industrious life. When her husband died of swamp fever in 1883, she returned to St. Louis with her children. She began to write short stories, partly to supplement her income and partly to distract herself from her grief. Her third novel, *The Awakening*, appeared in 1899, but was not as enthusiastically received as her stories. From the first both her short stories and her novel(s) were studies of ‘emancipation’ and often specifically of female emancipation.

The two female characters who are mirrored in *The Awakening* are Edna Pontellier and Adèle Ratignolle. The most important character in this novel is Edna Pontellier, a twenty-eight year old wife and mother. During a summer vacation at Grand Isle, she falls in love with ‘another’ man, Robert Lebrun. Robert is equally intrigued by

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2 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* (1899; Harmondsworth, [etc.]: Penguin Classics, 2003). All further references to this novel will be indicated with AW, followed by the page number.
3 Chopin’s earlier novels were: *At Fault* (1890) and *Young Dr. Gosse* (1891; but never published).
Edna; but the situation confuses him and he flees to Mexico. At the end of the summer, Edna and her children go back to New Orleans. Edna, however, now becomes aware of the limitations of her marital and social context and she breaks with many aspects of her earlier life. All of this frustrates her husband, Léonce, to such an extent that he goes to New York on a business trip of several months. Raoul and Etienne, Edna’s sons, go to visit Léonce’s mother at Iberville during their father’s absence. Edna now begins an affair with Alcée Arobin, and moves to another house that she can pay for herself. When Robert returns from Mexico, she tells him that she loves him. Right at this moment, a servant from her friend Adèle comes to fetch Edna to assist with Adèle’s delivery. When Edna later returns to her house, Robert has left, leaving a message saying “Good-by – because I love you” (AW, 176). Edna realizes that neither Léonce, nor Alcée, nor Robert take her seriously as an individual. This knowledge disappoints her to such an extent that she goes back to Grand Isle and drowns herself (AW, 175).

The style of this novel can be described as emotional realism. The story is told by an omniscient narrator. The book opens with a chapter recounting the point of view of Edna’s husband Léonce, but in most of The Awakening we are told about Edna’s thoughts and feelings. Adèle is sometimes presented as an alternative and throughout the story there are occasional comments by the narrator. The female main characters Edna Pontellier and her friend Adèle Ratignolle are about the same age. The protagonists in this novel are in a different phase in life than Shirley and Caroline. Both Edna and Adèle are already married; Edna has two children and Adèle three. Still, certain differences between the female protagonists that can be observed in Shirley are also present in The Awakening, and The Awakening will be analyzed along similar lines as the previous novel.

Edna Pontellier represents the more rebellious character. She does not stick to the accepted norm and value system related to the gender specific roles of wife, housewife, and mother, or the class specific role of the lady. On the contrary, Edna is beginning to realize that she is an individual and that she may have different priorities in life than sticking to the accepted gender and class roles. Her behavior is regarded with suspicion by the other characters and actively corrected by her mirror image, Adèle Ratignolle, who, by contrast, is the personification of the ‘Angel in the House.’ Edna Pontellier is described as more ordinary; she does not make such an angelic impression, but then, she is not trying to be the perfect mother, wife, or lady. She just wants to be ‘herself.’ Some of the minor characters in the novel seem to understand what Edna is going through and actively try to help. Mademoiselle Reisz is one of them, as we shall see later on, and another one would be Dr. Mandelet. Overall, the patriarchal society Edna lives in is unsympathetic to Edna’s behavior, though; and some contemporary readers were so shocked by Edna’s conduct that they severely criticized the novel. Literary critics did the same, with the result that The Awakening was the last novel Kate Chopin published.6

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5 Chopin’s overall style in this novel is generally referred to as realistic. Throughout the story, however, Chopin not only faithfully records an actual way of life, there is also an intense focus on the emotional experience of the protagonist(s), hence my use of the terms emotional realism.

6 I will explain this process in detail in my discussion of the reception of The Awakening in 1899, in Chapter 4.5 of this dissertation.
4.1: PSYCHOMACHY

What is noteworthy about the gender specific socialization both protagonists experience is that neither of them seems to have received a proper education. Both Edna and Adèle are well-bred and the socialization and education they received within the family was the standard nineteenth-century socialization for upper middle-class girls and young women in America. But it is not mentioned that Edna or Adèle went to primary or secondary school, or that they received any higher education. This is ironic, because basically the whole novel is about Edna’s ‘education’ or her growing awareness of her own position in the world. “Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (AW, 57). Such a realization would never have been the goal of a proper education, though. It is something within Edna herself that craves for such knowledge. It is quite remarkable that at the age of twenty-eight, after having been married for six years and after having had two sons, Edna begins to wonder about gender roles and her own wishes as an individual. And though taking place much later in life, this process of awakening and subsequent personal development has an enormous impact on Edna’s life.

Throughout this process various people have different influences. Two characters are especially important, namely Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle. It is Mlle. Reisz with her music and her independent spirit who presents the most explicit example of female independence to Edna. Edna is very moved by her music and intrigued by her personality. Mlle. Reisz in turn is drawn to Edna because she is more serious and more reflective than the others at Grand Isle. Overall, Edna and the pianist are very much alike; so much alike, in fact, that they can almost be regarded as mirror images. That this term is not used in relation to Mlle. Reisz is because she is not consistently compared with Edna throughout the novel. She is a minor character, she appears in only five chapters, and Edna and Mlle. Reisz are compared with regard to only a few traits. Still, these aspects are quite important, and Mlle. Reisz is the only ‘teacher’ whom Edna respects. Edna Pontellier and Mlle. Reisz are most similar in their reactions to the aesthetics of art, and whereas the pianist is already an artist, Edna has the potential to become one. Edna sees herself as the pianist’s protégée. “I am becoming an artist,” Edna confesses, realizing that the pianist has opened a door for her to a spiritual world beyond the ordinary world of social obligations (AW, 115). As Melanie Dawson notes, Edna begins to imitate Mlle. Reisz to seek “spiritual elevation,” and while they already share certain inward characteristics, Edna attempts to

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7 In spite of the fact that this novel was written fifty years after Shirley, there is now no depiction of any educational institution at all.
9 I have used the abbreviation Mlle. For Mademoiselle. This is not always considered to be the most accurate form, but it is the one Chopin consistently uses in her work.
10 In The Awakening Mlle. Reisz appears in the Chapters IX, XVI, XXI, XXVI, and XXX.
make her outward life resemble that of Mlle. Reisz, too. 11 First, she begins to work on her paintings in an attic room, similar to Reisz’ “apartments under the roof” (133). Later on she rids herself of husband and children and moves into the tiny pigeon house. She begins to develop a disdain for ‘materialism,’ admitting to herself a genuine satisfaction with the pianist’s modest little room. She even seats herself at the artist’s piano, attempting to play a few measures from music that belongs to the pianist. Edna assumes the physical position of a student to her absent teacher.

In my view, Chopin uses the pianist for several purposes in addition to being an artistic role model for Edna. While Mlle. Reisz appears in only five chapters, her artistry and ideas permeate the entire text. In her first appearance in the novel, Mlle. Reisz functions to provoke Edna’s final awakening, her realization of the extraordinary beauty and power of music, and, by extension, of all art. Listening to the pianist play at Grand Isle, Edna is profoundly moved. The narrator tells the reader that Edna heard artists at the piano before, but this was perhaps the “first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth” (AW, 71). When Mlle. Reisz sees Edna moved to tears, she pats her on the shoulder. “You are the only one worth playing for,” she replies (72). Mlle. Reisz recognizes Edna’s sensitivity and intelligence. She is also the only other character in the novel who views Edna’s behavior in a positive light. Joyce Dyer accurately calls the pianist the “center of beauty” and “wisdom” in the novel. 12 These aspects are not always so appreciated or even understood by the other (minor) characters. Mlle. Reisz remains an outsider both at Grand Isle and in New Orleans. The other characters like her music, but they also seem slightly afraid of her talent, and they make fun of her appearance.

When Mlle. Reisz appears in chapter XVI she attempts to comfort Edna, who is upset about the departure of Robert. The pianist asks whether Edna “did not greatly miss her young friend,” although she already knows the answer (AW, 97). She talks to her about music, too, and gives Edna her address in New Orleans. She becomes Edna’s lifeline, not just the one who notices and encourages the fascination Edna and Robert possess for each other, but the one to whom Edna turns for guidance, support and inspiration. When Edna decides to visit her in the city in chapter XX, she goes “above all, to listen while she played upon the piano” (AW, 109). It is in this scene that Edna reveals to Mlle. Reisz that she is becoming an artist. In her response to Edna, Mlle. Reisz tells her what an artist must have: talent and a courageous temperament.

All of these scenes are told by an omniscient narrator. The reader witnesses Edna’s and Mlle. Reisz’ conversations and interactions. In the narrative, the perspective quickly changes from either the more distant point of view of the narrator to the consciousness of Edna or the point of view of Mlle. Reisz. The perspective varies from a more general bird’s eye view of the situation to a zooming into and sharing of the thoughts and feelings of an individual character. The reader can thus closely observe and follow Edna’s awakening.

The last two chapters in which the pianist appears function in part as forewarning. In chapter XXVI, Edna confesses her love for Robert to the pianist, and Mlle. Reisz replies:

"If I were young and in love with a man ... he would have to be some grand esprit, a man with lofty aims and ability to reach them; one who stood high enough to attract the notice of his fellow-men ... I should never deem a man of ordinary caliber worthy of my devotion" (AW, 136). She says this in spite of her high regard for Robert. At the end of the novel, the reader realizes how ordinary Robert really is in his limited understanding of Edna and life. The final scene in which Mlle. Reisz appears is Edna’s farewell dinner. Here again, her role in the scene is cautionary, because her parting words to Edna are “[b]onne nuit, ma reine, soyez sage” (145). She alone in the novel is in a position to realize how difficult Edna’s choices may prove.

Each of Mlle. Reisz’ appearances in the novel is a learning experience for Edna and becomes part of the awakening process she goes through. Yet, perhaps the most important overall lesson she wants to teach Edna is that being an artist has difficult consequences. Mlle. Reisz accepts these consequences and she tries to teach Edna this approach, too.

“To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul ... The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies.” (AW, 115)

Such behavior would deviate completely from the accepted norm and value system of the nineteenth century. After marriage women were supposed to be wives, housewives, and mothers. Serious music (or by analogy any other form of art) was regarded by most people to be the domain of the male. Women did study music as one of the accomplishments, and the piano was considered to be an instrument that was also suitable for the female. It became a common adornment in the drawing room, ready for women to entertain themselves and guests. Adèle Ratignolle’s behavior in this context would be considered appropriate. She performs simply for her family’s entertainment, and considers the piano “a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (AW, 69). Music, for Adèle, is a kind of “domestic decoration,” as Kathryn Seidel aptly notes. Such harmless recreation is quite different from the way Mlle. Reisz plays the piano. She plays the piano with great power and emotion and moves beyond the confines of traditional female achievement or definition.

By thematizing the creation of art in this way, Chopin raises the expected type of behavior by women in this context to a higher and more conscious level of understanding. At the same time, she thus also questions the contemporary norms. Mlle. Reisz is apparently a very good musician, but she lives alone in a dingy apartment, she receives only a meagre income from teaching, and she has no material possessions of worth, except her “magnificent piano” (AW, 113). These aspects refer to the sacrifices she has made, both materially and emotionally, to live the solitary life of an artist. She is not married and she does not have any children. Mlle. Reisz is more aware of the limitations of the accepted gender role divisions than any of the other characters.

That Edna does not succeed in becoming an artist or even in fulfilling the awakening process is sad, but not surprising. Still, the ending of the novel has evoked a range of interpretations based on different social, psychological, or feminist critical points of view.

In the last paragraph, Edna is the wounded bird. Her wings have not been the wings that Mlle. Reisz advised, strong enough to “soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (AW, 138). On the contrary, at the end of the novel she has lost her aspirations and succumbs to doubts of self-worth. While Mlle. Reisz had inspired her to create beauty, she had not been able to help her develop the strength needed in sustaining such a career, and in the final scene, the narrator admits that “[e]xhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her.” This phrase seems applicable to more than just her struggle in the water, because she also lacked the strength to maintain “her new self” in the integrity of her work. In the last scene, we are told about Edna’s thoughts and feelings. As Edna swims out into the gulf she is preoccupied with various notions: her disappointment in Robert, her denial of her children’s needs, and her failure as an artist. She imagines Mlle. Reisz ridiculing her artistic “pretensions” (176), but here Edna seems to project her own artistic disappointments on the resurrected image of the pianist, because just as Dr. Mandelet might “have understood if she had seen him” (176), Mlle. Reisz might have offered assistance to a struggling artist.

Wendy Martin points out that, “[a]mbition, striving, overcoming odds, the focusing of energy on a goal are habits of mind associated with masculine mastery. A woman who wants to develop these skills has to defy a centuries-old tradition of passive femininity” (Martin, 22). Mlle. Reisz had been able to internalize such discipline, but at a tremendous cost, her own isolation. Her protégée could not. Still, Edna’s attempt shows a glimpse of the world of female possibilities, and is therefore an option for anticipation for the contemporary reader. At the turn of the century, such options were in fact becoming realities for some middle class women in the United States.

The other character who tries to educate Edna in this psychomachy-like battle for the soul is Adèle Ratignolle. Carole Stone points out that Adèle Ratignolle has positive and negative qualities that help and hinder Edna’s struggle to be creative (Stone, 23-32). Overall, she has quite a different influence on Edna, but in the context of art her influence is not altogether negative. Adèle is Edna’s mirror image. Edna and Adèle are consistently compared and contrasted throughout the whole novel. They are very much alike in that they have about the same age, have children of a similar age, share the experiences of holidays at Grand Isle, move in the same social circles, live in the same neighborhood in New Orleans, and are friends. Yet, in spite of all of these similarities, they have quite a different approach to life. Edna is becoming aware of her place in society as an individual; she is beginning to take control of her life, and wants to become an artist, as we have just seen.

Stone indicates that it is Adèle, a sensuous woman, who awakes Edna to the sensuality of her own body. Adèle’s frankness in talking about such subjects as her pregnancy helps

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16 See for a detailed discussion of the developments in education in the United States, Chapter 2.4 of this dissertation, and for women’s participation in the workforce Chapter 2.5.

17 Per Seyersted also points this out, calling Adèle “a perfect foil for Mrs. Pontellier,” Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) 141.
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Edna to overcome her reserve. In addition, Adèle encourages her to express thoughts and feelings she had kept hidden, even from herself. For example, at Adèle’s urging to say what she is thinking as they sit together by the sea, Edna recalls

a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl … She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. (AW, 60)

When Edna says that she feels as if this summer is like walking through that meadow again “unguided,” Adèle strokes her hand, and we see that in fact, though not an artist, it is she who guides Edna towards warmth, openness, and creativity (AW, 57). Adèle also inspires Edna to paint, in a very concrete way. As she is seated on the beach, like some “sensuous Madonna,” Edna feels she has to paint her (55). Similarly, when she needs encouragement later on she takes all of her sketches and paintings to the Ratignolle home where Adèle enthusiastically compliments her work. Yet Adèle sees it more as a diversion and not as an option for a career for a woman. She herself is a decent enough piano-player, but she would never attempt to become a serious pianist.

On the contrary, overall it is Adèle Ratignolle who tries to make Edna stick to the accepted norms and values of patriarchal society, and who functions as her corrective on many occasions. Throughout the novel Chopin contrasts and compares Edna and Adèle in such a way that it becomes clear that Adèle follows the accepted norms and values of patriarchy and manifests the accepted type of behavior, whereas Edna’s conduct can be marked as deviant.18 Edna Pontellier, for example disregards the norm of the gender specific role of the mother. She is not a “mother-woman” towards her children.19

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 grounds in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted

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18 However, as Edwin M. Schur points out in his study Labeling Women Deviant (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984):

the recent guiding conception of deviance as a ‘social construction’ encourages attention to the relation between deviance and social change. If current deviance definitions have been ‘created’ and imposed, then they can also be modified or removed. Today’s deviance may be tomorrow’s conformity. Women’s relation to deviance has been defined primarily by men, who have monopolized the power to define. The future relation between women and deviance will depend on whether there are changes in the distribution of such power. Women’s collective efforts to effect such changes therefore also become important factors which the sociologist working in this area must study. 18.

19 The word “mother-woman” is not a regular English word. It seems to be an invention of Kate Chopin herself. In The Awakening, she first introduces the word on page 51.
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. (AW, 50-51)

Adèle Ratignolle, on the other hand, is a typical mother-woman and she is described in all her glorious details by Chopin:

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. (AW, 51)

This passage is not without irony, however; all of the phrases used to describe or compliment Adèle are stereotypes that are typically used to describe a beautiful woman. We do not get a good impression of her real personality. In fact, so much praise makes the reader doubt whether she has a personality or whether she really is that perfect. Edna seems rather careless in her behavior towards her children. She admits that “she was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way.” When she leaves them with the grandmother in Iberville, she notices that “[t]heir absence was a sort of relief” (AW, 63). The narrator stresses that Edna found this hard to admit, yet the overall impression that you get from the novel, is that her two sons do not really seem to mind, that they prefer their independence, too.

A second gender norm that Edna seems to disregard, in the world of the text, is the proper behavior of a wife or her allegiance to Léonce (Seyersted, 135). She does not behave like the typical, doting wife. On the contrary, she seems to be more interested in other men; and in spite of the fact that they have had two children together, Edna is only now, at the age of twenty-eight, becoming aware of her own sexuality. Both Arobin and Robert seem to be able to arouse these feelings, but not her husband, whom she does not really seem to have a real connection with. Edna’s deviant behavior even goes so far that she goes to a neighborhood island with another man, Robert, and stays away all day. During her absence it is her ‘mirror image’ Adèle Ratignolle who not only supplies the image of the faithful

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20 The advice manuals from Mrs. Ellis were also available in America. Her ideas about what a mother should be like could be found in: The Mothers of England: Their Influence and Responsibility (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, 1844).
and doting wife, she also actively corrects Edna, by taking care of her children during
Edna’s absence.

The youngest boy, Etienne, had been very naughty, Madame Ratignollle said, as she delivered him into the hands of his mother. He had been unwilling to go to bed and had made a scene; whereupon she had taken charge of him and pacified him as well as she could. Raoul had been in bed and asleep for two hours.

The youngster was in his long white nightgown, that kept tripping him up as Madame Ratignollle led him along by the hand. With the other chubby fist he rubbed his eyes, which were heavy with sleep and ill humor. Edna took him in her arms, and seating herself in the rocker, began to coddle and caress him, calling him all manner of tender names, soothing him to sleep. (AW, 87)

Edna really seems to love her children, and she is very tender with them. But she does not exaggerate it in a way some of the other mothers seem to think they have to. Perhaps reading these passages with twenty-first century eyes, one gets a different impression than contemporary readers did. Child-care centers and crèches are quite normal these days, but in nineteenth-century Creole society (rich) children had to be pampered, pleased, and patted on the back by their parents; and in daily practice, it was especially the mother who did this.

Edna’s neglect of her husband in this passage does not really seem to upset Léonce. He is worried for a little while in the beginning, but after Monsieur Farival’s reassurance that Edna was only overcome with sleep, and that she was being taken care off, he goes over to Klein’s Hotel without another thought, to look up “some cotton broker whom he wished to see in regard to securities, exchanges, stocks, bonds, or something of the sort, Madame Ratignollle did not remember what. He said he would not remain away late” (AW, 87). It seems exaggerated to blame Edna for neglect here; the feeling of neglect or disinterest seems to be mutual.

21 Adèle’s rushing off to her own husband “for Monsieur Ratignollle was alone, and he detested above all things to be left alone,” may be intended as a correction towards Edna, but it seems to lack conviction, because of Léonce’s own uninterested attitude.

A last example concerns the gender specific role of the housewife. During her awakening process Edna begins to disregard her housekeeping and she also ignores her regular Tuesday afternoon gatherings and other social obligations. She prefers to spend most of her time painting in an attic room and uses every member of the household to sit for her as a model. As a result of this, her household “goes to the dickens” according to Léonce (AW, 117).

21 Daniel Rankin’s comment on this is: “It was her husband’s misfortune that he did not make the interesting discovery himself that his wife was a human being; but he had his brokerage business to think about, and brokers deal in stocks, not hearts.” Kate Chopin And Her Creole Stories (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932) 171.
“It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family.”

“I feel like painting,” answered Edna. “Perhaps I shan’t always feel like it.”

“Then in God’s name paint! but don’t let the family go to the devil. There’s Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn’t let everything else go to chaos. And she’s more of a musician than you are a painter.” (AW, 108)

Again Edna’s behavior is mirrored with that of Adèle Ratignolle. It is Léonce who introduces Adèle, here. He points out that she has creative tendencies, too; she is a musician, but she still conducts her housekeeping as she should.

In all of the examples Edna’s aberrant behavior is corrected by means of a confrontation with her mirror image, Adèle. In this way, the main character, the other characters, and the readers get a good view of what the behavior of the woman in nineteenth-century society, as represented in this novel, was supposed to be like. The technique of thematization and the attempted stabilization by means of the corrective use of the mirror image reveal very clearly how difficult it was for women to attempt to transcend cultural limitations.

The opposing influences of Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle are quite revealing in relation to the kind of society that these women live in. Women do not seem to be allowed to simply be themselves or to go for greater options, but are supposed to behave according to the prescribed gender roles, and if they do not do this, they almost become outcasts, in spite of the talents they may have. What is interesting about the perspective used in the novel is that we as reader are often told about things from Edna’s point of view and move along with her thoughts and feelings. It thus also becomes easier to sympathize with her because we know her motivations. If we had not been given this more personal information from and about Edna, it might have been more difficult to understand or appreciate her actions. The ease with which she leaves her children, for example, might have become incomprehensible. The overall comment from the omniscient narrator provides the wider perspective. This bird’s eye view of the events also makes it possible for the reader to situate Edna’s position in the wider social context.

4.2: TO DRESS OR NOT TO DRESS?

Annelie Hegenbarth-Rösgen’s technique to determine the social roles on the basis of role attributes and/or social position is especially useful in the context of class-specific socialization. Yet, Hegenbarth-Rösgen is not the only one who notices the importance of role attributes such as clothes. In 1898, at the time when Kate Chopin was writing The Awakening, the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall published one of the first studies that investigated the reasons behind choices in clothing. He believed that a certain style of dress could supply the wearer with a way to adapt to the expectations of society at large.

Granville Stanley Hall (1846-1924) was a pioneering American psychologist and educator. He was the first president of the American Psychological Association and the first president of Clark University. Most of his studies focused on adolescence.
Hall’s study recognizes the social value of dress, suggesting that dress is linked with one’s social role and identity. This symbolic representation of social self forms the basis for Chopin’s use of clothing in *The Awakening*. From Chopin’s first introduction of her protagonist Edna “drawing up her lawn sleeves” to Edna’s final acts of changing into her “old bathing suit” and then casting even these “unpleasant, pricking garments from her,” clothing delineates Edna’s life (AW, 45, 175). Clothing also depicts the social roles which Edna refuses to “assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (AW, 108).

Because social class and gender underlie the choices wearers make, the clothing that Edna rejects during the course of the novel as well as the nakedness she embraces in the end are heavily inscribed with socio-political meanings. Garments within Chopin’s novel represent social roles and the related marital status and class affiliation. They also express the complex system of appearance being worked out by nineteenth-century American society at large, the middle classes, who wanted to distance themselves from those below them. By placing Chopin’s descriptions of dress within their socio-historical contexts, an important means of signification emerges in her images of satin gowns (AW, 145) and gauze veils (58), on the one hand, and images of bare feet (81) or prunella gaiters (113) on the other. Through studying the nature of the characters’ dress, this section has a close look at the organization of nineteenth-century American power-relations, as represented in this novel, suggesting ways in which class determined the sort of self women should fabricate.

Again, it is Adèle, Edna’s mirror image, who has the right attributes and the characteristics that befit the typical role of the woman. As far as her looks are concerned, she possesses “the more feminine and matronly figure” (AW, 58). The role attributes, the characteristics of her personality, and her social position are also typical for the ‘lady’ of nineteenth century

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23 More contemporary studies that investigate the social value of dress are: Francois Boucher’s *20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment* (New York: Abrams, 1987). His history of costume notes that the choice of a particular form of costume reflects social factors such as social role, personal status, aesthetics, religious beliefs and the wish to be distinguished from others (9). Fred Davis’ study, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) points out that social role, as reflected in dress, creates the direction for fashion by eliciting, chanelling, and assimilating changes in the social context.
American society. Adèle is, for example, extremely careful of her complexion, twining “a gauze veil about her head, wearing “dogskin gloves, with gauntlets that protected her wrists” (58). Her outfit is very feminine: “[s]he was dressed in pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles that became her. The draperies and fluttering things which she wore suited her rich, luxuriant beauty as a greater severity of line could not have done” (AW, 58). Adèle is also prone to fainting, and always carries a large fan with her.24

The attributes with which Edna is being described are the complete opposite; “[t]he lines of [Edna’s] body were long, clean and symmetrical” and “there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it” (AW, 58). Her style of dress is quite sober, in fact: “[s]he wore a cool muslin that morning – white with a waving vertical line of brown running through it, also a white linen collar and the big straw hat which she had taken from the peg outside the door” (58). She is also quite nonchalant about her appearance, “[t]he hat rested any way on her yellow-brown hair, that waved a little, was heavy, and clung close to her head” (58). This same attitude is shown by her, as far as her complexion is concerned, and one day, when she comes home from the beach, her husband even remarks, “[y]ou are burnt beyond recognition” (44).

Overall, however, it is especially her clothes that are given social significance. Propriety, the most important element of middle class constructions of identity, required that women accumulate expansive (and expensive) wardrobes since the different hours of the day required dress of a particular style and cut.25 Women like Edna Pontellier bought various outfits appropriate for morning, afternoon, and evening wear, keeping in mind that city dress differed from country dress and that shopping demanded a simple jacketed gown that would be unsuitable for making formal calls.26 Like other middle-class women of the time, Edna prepares her toilet several times a day. Wearing a “white morning gown” as she contemplates “speaking to the cook concerning her blunders,” Edna begins her day in the typical laced and flounced dress worn by upper middle-class women as they directed their household staffs, made out menus, and saw to the maintenance of the house (AW, 104). Such dresses could not be worn in public, though, so on the morning when Edna neglects speaking to the cook, she dresses again, this time in a handsome “street gown,” which she wears to make informal morning calls on Madame Ratignolle, the Lebruns, and Mademoiselle Reisz (105, 111, 113). The tailor-made street gown of the period was made up of three pieces, skirt, waistcoat, and coat, and was typically lined with silk; the skirt was long enough to touch the tops of the shoes but did not drag on the pavement as women ventured “into the street … shopping, going to matinees, church, travelling, [or] making

24 Examples of this occur on the following pages in AW: 56, 58, 59, 88.
informal calls.” The narrator states that Edna looks “handsome and distinguished” in the street gown, a description that underlines her tasteful choices, since women lacking in refinement were apt, according to etiquette manuals of the 1890s, to appear in costumes overly rich in fabric and too noticeable in color or style. “Black is becoming to every woman, but as she does not dress to be seen when walking, it would be well to wear it, even if she thought it not becoming,” one writer observed. The elegant woman must be influenced in her choice of street wear by “suitableness,” “harmony,” “simplicity,” and “refinement.” Upon returning home, if the lady were to make afternoon calls, she would put on a formal day or visiting dress, elaborated with lace frills or insets of rich fabric, sashes and ribbons, but always high in the neck. Day decolletage was considered bad taste as was too much elaboration: “[d]ay dress should distinguish itself by simplicity and restraint.” If, instead, she were to receive callers, she must wear a reception gown, elaborately constructed and perhaps more rich in style than other afternoon dresses, but still high in the neck. Layers of flouncing, scalloped frills, piping, tucks, and insets of brocade typically trimmed these confections, and it is Edna’s mistake not to be dressed in this way that brings Mr. Pontellier’s reprimand. Angry that she has apparently not kept her formal reception day, he says, “it’s just such seeming trifles that we’ve got to take seriously; such things count.” Edna’s adherence to what writers of etiquette manuals call ‘good form’ supports Mr. Pontellier’s position among men who could, according to him, “buy and sell us ten times over” (AW, 100-101).

At the beginning of the novel, Edna Pontellier still faithfully wears her “Tuesday reception gown,” “house dress,” “street gown,” “white morning gown” and “bathing suit” on the appropriate occasions (AW, 99, 100, 104). It is interesting that it is especially in relation to Edna that these terms with their social designations are used. Her clothing seems to define and limit her social role and her behavior. Because dress is so much a part of middle-class identity, which positioned wives as mere possessions of their husbands, Edna’s refusal to dress as expected symbolizes her rejection of the roles of lady, wife, housewife, and mother. Besides the actual, literal use of clothing, it also becomes a metaphor that reinforces Edna’s wish for a different identity. Little by little we see more of Edna’s real self, both literally and psychologically, when she begins “to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (57).

In vowing “never again to belong to another than herself,” Edna questions her socially prescribed roles, and places herself between the extremes of the selfless femininity represented by Madame Ratignolle or the self-realization of Mademoiselle Reisz (AW, 135). In this middle ground, between white restrictive skirts and a “batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets,” Edna attempts to find her own individuality (71). Instances of dress and undress symbolize her progression towards self-discovery: her body

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29 *The Woman’s Book* (1894) 158.

30 This quotation from a contemporary etiquette manual is used by Perrot in *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, 93.
and her identity are alternately revealed and covered again. Edna’s clothes cover her body and repress her ideas about her real self. She tries on and rejects, literally and figuratively, costumes which confine her to a social role.

At home and during moments of reflection Edna often wears her peignoir. Unlike the white cotton lawn dresses or the city dresses, she wears the peignoir for her own comfort, not for the representation of herself as lady, or mother, wife, and housewife. The loose image of the peignoir contrasts sharply with the restraining gowns of “white with elbow sleeves …[and] starched skirts” (AW, 44). Edna attempts to transgress this boundary between self and social role by retiring in her peignoir to the porch in a display of individuality. Yet, the “indescribable oppression” of female identity is still “generated in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness” (49).

Edna finally rebels at Madame Antoine’s as she “loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them” (AW, 84). No longer trapped by her clothes, Edna looks past the limits of social roles, and she sees her body as a part of her identity, not as her identity itself. Edna examines herself for the first time away from the confines of her own home. She has a mystical revelation and a sensual and physical awakening. In Edna, this self-exploration arouses a desire to see past physical appearance. In examining the texture and not just the smoothness of her body, she begins to understand the complexity of her real self beneath the surface of her clothes and the corresponding female roles imposed by patriarchal society. After sleeping, Edna realizes that,

her present self – was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment. (AW, 88)

She has begun consciously to perceive the “mantle of reserve” and has let it fall away to see her own being revealed.

With her nakedness, and the casting off of socially prescribed garments, appears a spiritual revelation. When Edna returns to Grand Isle, she arrives “in flesh and blood” and not merely as an “apparition” (AW, 173). Similar to the experience at Madame Antoine’s, Edna becomes aware of the needs of her body; she now realizes that she is “very hungry.” Edna begins to understand her body’s requirements, which develops into a metaphor representing the need to discover and realize her individual self.

With her growing awareness of her bodily sensations, Edna rejects the bathing suit, too; “when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun” (AW, 175). Such a representation would have required a lot of courage from Chopin, especially because by removing the bathing suit, Edna is now also depicted as detaching herself from the limitations of her gender. She feels like “some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (175; italics mine).

Edna’s quest into the traditionally masculine world of self-discovery reflects the image of the naked man on the seashore. By imitating such a male-centered scene, Edna sheds her passive female social role. Edna can only achieve the genuineness she almost finds through Mademoiselle Reisz’ piano playing by moving away from social roles. In an attempt to define herself, Edna becomes aware of more individual talents as she frees herself from the
general and imposed social roles of lady, wife, housewife, and mother. Swimming naked out into the Gulf of Mexico, Edna, finally, fully sheds the “mantle of reserve,” empowering her being to “light out” for one, brief moment (AW, 57).31

4.3: NINE MONTHS

The context of the more general type of behavior, the selection of a partner and the behavior in a relationship also present interesting oppositional behavioral patterns. Like the behavior of Shirley and Caroline, the conduct of Edna and Adèle is quite different here. Adèle Ratignolle, Edna’s mirror image, again shows the more acceptable type of behavior.

Adèle’s marriage is almost as perfect as her feminine beauty. The idea that her husband, Alphonse Ratignolle, might be jealous of other men who pay attention to her causes laughter among all who know the couple: “The right hand jealous of the left! The heart jealous of the soul!” (AW, 54). Adèle puts her husband’s preferences above her own in all things. She hurries home, not because she wishes to be there, but because “Monsieur Ratignolle was alone, and he detested above all things to be left alone” (88). When Alphonse talks about politics, city news, or even neighborhood gossip, “[h]is wife was keenly interested in everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth.” In fact, “[t]he Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union” (106-107). In general, however, this perfect union seems to result more from Adèle’s adaptation of her personality rather than a fusion of their two identities. Throughout the novel, it is Adèle who adapts her behavior to her husband’s (and children’s) needs, but Alphonse is a thoughtful, considerate, kind, and generous man and Adèle seems perfectly happy.

Edna is a witness to their marital happiness on various occasions, but on one of them, after having had lunch with the Ratignolles, she openly admits that,

[she] felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, -- a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium. (AW, 107)

Chopin’s depiction of Edna’s reaction would have been completely opposed to the norms and values adhered to in contemporary Louisiana society. Chopin would have been very much aware of this. Still, she chose to make Edna’s reaction quite onorthodox, thus consciously risking criticism. In the novel, Edna does not really know what she means by “life’s delirium,” and she does not seem to have a clear picture of an acceptable form of

31 Per Seyersted is one of the first critics who stresses the strength of Edna’s action in this context. He states: “when the apparently defeated Edna takes off her clothes ... it symbolizes a victory of self-knowledge and authenticity as she fully becomes herself.” Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography, 194.
partnership, but this ‘perfect image,’ and in a way correction, offered by her mirror image, does not work for Edna.

So far, Edna’s own marriage has not been represented as especially different from Adèle’s. Edna has been married for six years at the beginning of the novel, and she admits that the marriage “was purely an accident” (AW, 62). At a time when she believed herself hopelessly in love with a famous tragedian, she met Léonce.

He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband. (AW, 62)

As the daughter of a hypocritical, pious-talking Presbyterian father who had “coerced his own wife into her grave,” Edna had little means to fulfil any of her basic needs for love, place, and autonomy before she met Léonce (AW, 125). The chance to satisfy at least two of those needs led her into the marriage: “[a]s the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality” (AW, 63). For six years the third need - the need to be autonomous and to be respected as an individual - has apparently not worried her.

At first, Edna accepts her marriage and her husband without question. Like many couples, they often communicate without words. Returning from the beach, Edna reaches out her hand and Léonce wordlessly gives her rings to her. He says he is going to Klein’s hotel to play billiards, and Edna asks if he will be back for dinner.

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 good-by to him. (AW, 45)

Léonce often sends Edna boxes filled with “friandises, with luscious and toothsome bits -- the finest of fruits, patés, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance” when she is away from home (AW, 50). However, Léonce shows his possessiveness, when he looks at his sunburnt wife “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (44). When he returns from Klein’s hotel late one night, finds Edna asleep, but is in high spirits himself after winning at billiards, “[h]e 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.” He wakes her under the pretence that one of the children has a fever. Then,

[h]e 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

32 For a sketch of the “repressive legal condition” of women under the Napoleonic Code which was still the basis of the laws governing the marriage contract in New Orleans at the time the story was set, see Margo Culley’s note to the Norton Critical Edition, “The Context of The Awakening,” 118.
The Awakening: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

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. (AW, 48)

Edna gets up and goes into the other room to see about Raoul, whom she finds sound asleep and quite healthy. Léonce finishes smoking his cigar, goes to bed, “and in half a minute he was fast asleep.” Wide awake by now, Edna goes out, sits down in the wicker chair on the porch and begins to cry.

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. (AW, 49)

On this particular night, however, Edna begins to sense the true nature of her husband’s regard for her; and, sitting there alone after midnight, she feels the first stirrings of her individuality. She does not seem especially angry towards her husband, but

[a]n 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. (AW, 49)

This feeling of oppression will develop into such a strong determination to seize control of her own life that it will cause Edna to give up everything else in its pursuit. Edna does not yet realize that she has begun to “awaken,” that a “certain light” will soon begin to illuminate her consciousness. When this “light” does begin to dawn, Edna cannot stop the process (AW, 57).

Once Edna’s realization of her self as an individual has begun to develop, her relationship with Léonce deteriorates and their marriage begins to disintegrate. Léonce is a kind and generous man, and although he believes he loves his wife and seeks and follows the best advice he can get in his marital confusion, Léonce’s Catholic and Creole background, which idolizes the “mother-woman” prevents his ever understanding his wife’s awakening need for autonomy. 33

33 The whole novel is imbued with Catholic imagery, ranging from the “sensuous Madonna” to the “last supper.” Women in the novel are mostly associated with children. The “sensuous Madonna,” Adele, is pregnant and portrays the perfect “mother-woman” (AW, 55, 51). Madame Lebrun’s retreat is a community made up of women and children. In the society depicted in the novel, women and children belong together and are almost considered one whole. The fact that a woman might prefer to recover her own individuality and would like to become more autonomous does not fit into such a world view. Ivy Schweitzer examines the opposition of motherhood and individuality in her article “Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,” Boundary 2, 17:1 New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon (Spring, 1990): 158-186; 162. Jarlath Killeen from the University College Dublin examines the contrast focusing on
Throughout Edna’s awakening process Edna’s mirror image, Adèle Ratignolle, goes through a different birthing process. Rather than experiencing a rebirthing herself, however, she is pregnant with her fourth child. The process of her nine-month pregnancy exactly corresponds with the time-span of Edna’s awakening to her own individuality. Adèle behaves according to the social roles allotted to her by patriarchal society, and she has a baby every two years. She corrects Edna’s behavior especially through reminding her how important children are. These opposing patterns of behavior of both protagonists thematize the expected type of behavior of women in nineteenth-century Creole society. The attempt to stabilize the accepted type of behavior raises both behavioral patterns to a more conscious level of understanding for the reader.

When the character Adèle realizes that she is pregnant again, she starts mentioning her “condition,” though it “was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation” (AW, 52). She also starts making clothes for the new baby and brings patterns of such clothes to Mrs. Pontellier. Edna values her company and friendship, but is preoccupied with her own awakening process. During a Saturday night, a night that is usually filled with a few entertainments for all of the guests at Madame Lebrun’s resort on Grand Isle, Adèle Ratignolle offers to play the piano whilst the others dance: “Madame Ratignolle could not, so it was she who gaily consented to play for the others” (AW, 69).

This night, the twenty-eighth of August, is also the night the Pontelliers have their second quarrel. It is the night when Mademoiselle Reisz’ music first moves Edna to tears and the night Edna learns to swim. Elated though exhausted, she sits with Robert while waiting for Léonce to come home, and she confesses: “[a] thousand emotions have swept through me tonight. I don’t comprehend half of them. … I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one.” While they sit there in silence, Edna begins for the first time to awaken sexually: “[n]o multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbtings of desire” (AW, 77). Throughout her physical and emotional awakening process Robert has been at her side, and he is also at her side now, when her individuality becomes strong enough to release her sexual nature.

When Léonce comes home, Robert leaves and Edna remains on the porch, although Léonce calls to her to come inside.

She heard him moving about the room; every sound indicating impatience and irritation. Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us. (AW, 77-78)

Edna experiences an awareness that she has never known before. Léonce changes his tone, this time calling her “fondly, with a note of entreaty,” but when his wife still refuses to

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34 Marion Muirhead stresses this in her article “Articulation and Artistry: A Conversational Analysis of The Awakening,” 48.
come inside, to bed, Léonce becomes angry. Edna, however, settles down to remain indefinitely on the porch:

> her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did. (AW, 78)

Throughout these two passages both Edna’s thoughts and the narrator’s comments are combined in one consonant voice of defiance. Edna’s behavior digresses from the required behavioral patterns of a wife at the time, but Chopin’s subtle use of perspectives suggest an overall support for Edna’s irregular behavior here. The passages emphasize that both Edna’s mind and her body are undergoing the awakening process. In the presence of Robert, who at this point seems to regard her as an individual, her sexual feelings also begin to stir. With his possessiveness Léonce wants to deny her the right to respond or not. He assumes that he can possess her body and soul, while she has to repress her authentic feelings, but Edna can no longer do that. After a while Léonce joins Edna on the porch and lights a cigar, the symbol of his male authority. There he remains, smoking one cigar after another, until at last he subdues his wife’s body and spirit, at least for the moment.

When Edna awakens early the next morning, she decides to spend the day on a nearby island with Robert. After coming home in the evening, she sits outside alone, again awaiting her husband’s return from Klein’s hotel and trying to understand what is happening within her: “She could only realize that she herself -- her present self -- was in some way different from the other self” (AW, 88). The narrator’s depiction of Edna’s confusion about her own personality and the required social roles is gradually becoming more poignant. The rest of the summer passes without the Pontelliers quarreling again, although by the time Edna returns to New Orleans she feels consciously her passion for Robert. She sees no conflict between this emotion and her regard for Léonce, because the feelings she has for Robert do not resemble those she has for her husband. Her awakened feelings and emotions concerning her individuality do not remain a secret, private, separate part of her being any longer, though. One Tuesday a few weeks after her return from Grand Isle, Edna decides not to stay at home to receive guests; Tuesday being the ‘reception day’ she has held during her marriage, so far. Léonce is confused and angry when Edna tells him that she has been out all afternoon (AW, 100).

From lecturing her about this deviation, Léonce moves on to complain about the food, the expenses, and Edna’s general household management. Finally, he stalks out, saying that he will get his dinner at the club. On earlier occasions, such quarrels made Edna miserable, causing her to lose her appetite and to study ways to improve her household management, but “that evening Edna finished her dinner alone, with forced deliberation. Her face was flushed and her eyes flamed with some inward fire that lighted them.” After dinner, she goes to her room and looks out the window,

> upon the deep tangle of the garden below. All the mystery and witchery of the night seemed to have gathered there amid the perfumes and the dusky and tortuous outlines of flowers and foliage. She was seeking
herself and finding herself in just such sweet half-darkness which met her moods.” (AW, 102)

That Edna is searching for all of herself, for her own answer to Virginia Woolf’s question, “but what is ‘herself’?” can hardly be more directly stated. Yet, the hopelessness of her situation almost overwhelms her, and she begins walking up and down the room.

Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet. (AW, 103)

Unable to make even a mark upon the encircling traditions that imprison her, she seizes a glass vase from the table and throws it upon the tiles of the hearth. Powerless to destroy the restrictive social forces represented by the traditional wedding ring, she destroys the fragile vase instead. The next morning, “unusually pale and very quiet,” she allows her husband to kiss her good-bye (AW, 103).

Edna looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic. (AW, 104)

She decides to try more seriously to develop her ability to paint and to direct her own life. When, later in the day, she has lunch with the Ratignolles, they seem more harmonious as a couple than ever. Adèle is by now obviously pregnant, and she wears a comfortable and loose fitting peignoir when Edna visits them. To Edna the visit to them has an opposite effect, as we have seen, and from now on Edna’s determination to achieve some measure of autonomy is becoming the most important issue in her life. The disintegration of the Pontelliers’ marriage continues accordingly. The narrator explains:

Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him. When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward. (AW, 108)

At about this stage, Léonce seeks the advice of Dr. Mandelet, who tells him to leave Edna alone, so that she can get over this passing whim in her own due time; and so Léonce goes off to New York on his business venture of a few months’ duration.

Before he leaves, Edna tries to explain to Léonce what she is going through, but the attempt proves futile. Léonce, in fact, wonders if Edna is not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world. (AW, 108)
Chopin’s oppositional use of perspectivity becomes apparent in this scene. The second sentence reveals Léonce’s ideas about Edna, which are then subtly undermined by the comment from the narrator in the following phrase. It is noteworthy to see that it is again the metaphor of clothes that is used to describe what Edna is experiencing. Throughout the process, Edna hardly ever feels angry or resentful towards Léonce. She simply decides to do and to think as she pleases. She even cries a little when he leaves for New York and believes that she will become lonely without him. “But after all, a radiant peace settled upon her when she at last found herself alone” (AW, 125). As a matter of fact,

when Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief. A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her. She walked all through the house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time. … And she perambulated around the outside of the house, investigating. … The flowers were like new acquaintances; she approached them in a familiar spirit, and made herself at home among them. (AW, 126)

Just as Edna becomes a different person when she stops belonging to Léonce, so the house seems to take on a different character in the absence of its owner. Later Edna even decides to move out of Léonce’s mansion to a small house she can finance independently.

Instinct had prompted her to put away her husband’s bounty in casting off her allegiance. She did not know how it would be when he returned. … but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself. (AW, 135)

Edna realizes that what she wants is to escape Léonce’s ownership of herself, to leave behind forever her place among his possessions. Yet, she still goes along with Léonce’s cover story that she has moved so the mansion can be renovated. She seems to admire the business instincts that motivate the story and the ingenuity that conceives it. Edna continues to value some of her husband’s qualities, but she knows that he will never respect her as an individual, a person rather than a wife, a housewife, or a mother. The contemporary reader can take heed of these ideas through the very private activity of reading a novel and can thus experience the awakening process alongside with Edna. In this way, the problematizing aspect of the text really makes the reader ‘experience’ the difficulties involved in adopting other behavioral patterns.

Influenced by her need to be recognized as an individual, Edna turns to Robert, who has chosen her as the object of the attention he devotes to one of the married women at his mother’s resort every year. The Creole women he has honored in this way during the previous summers have never taken his attentions seriously; but Edna, entangled in forces beyond her comprehension, begins to depend upon his understanding presence. And at the end of the day they spend together on Chênière Caminada, when Robert leaves Edna waiting for her husband to return from Klein’s hotel, Edna wonders why.

It did not occur to her to think he might have grown tired of being with her the livelong day. She was not tired, and she felt that he was not. She regretted that he had gone. It was so much more natural to have him stay. (AW, 88)
Edna herself only realizes that sexual desire strongly colors her affection for Robert, when he suddenly announces that he is going to Mexico. After he leaves, she feels that his going, had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything. The conditions of her life were in no way changed, but her whole existence was dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing. (AW, 95)

As her personality emerges during his absence, her passion for him grows, too. It is again Adèle Ratignolle who tries to correct Edna and who attempts to warn her concerning her irregular behavior. Now highly pregnant, she visits Edna in the little house:

Madame Ratignolle had dragged herself over, avoiding the too public thoroughfares, she said. She complained that Edna had neglected her much of late. Besides, she was consumed with curiosity to see the little house and the manner in which it was conducted. She wanted to hear all about the dinner party; Monsieur Ratignolle had left so early. (AW, 153)

Monsieur Ratignolle had left the party at ten o’clock because “Madame Ratignolle was waiting for him at home. She was bien souffrante, and she was filled with vague dread, which only her husband’s presence could allay” (AW, 145). As a concerned husband should, he had been the first to leave Edna’s party to be with his wife who was now seven months pregnant. During Adèle’s visit to the little house, Adèle and Edna talk about the party, the pigeon house, and Edna’s conduct. Adèle wonders about the smallness of the house: “Where on earth was she going to put Mr. Pontellier in that little house, and the boys?” (153). Adèle is also worried about Edna’s staying there alone:

“Well, the reason – you know how evil-minded the world is – some one was talking of Alcée Arobin visiting you. Of course, it wouldn’t matter if Mr. Arobin had not such a dreadful reputation. Monsieur Ratignolle was telling me that his attentions alone are considered enough to ruin a woman’s name.” (AW, 153)

Adèle means well in giving Edna this advice; she is a good friend and she values Edna’s company.

Adèle also asks Edna to assist her during the “accouchement,” as her sister will not be able to come, and she would appreciate the presence of a friend. Edna promises to come. Very soon after Adèle’s visit Robert returns from Mexico. Edna has freed herself from among Léonce’s possessions, as we have seen, and she greets Robert with frank and open joy. He responds, “Mrs. Pontellier, you are cruel” (AW, 158). The same Creole and Catholic culture that molded Léonce also influenced Robert, and he does not understand Edna any better than her husband does. At first Robert avoids her, but then he confesses that he dreams of asking Léonce to set her free to marry him. Her reaction to this shocks him.

“You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours.’ I should laugh at you both.” His face grew a little white. “What do you mean?” he asked. (AW, 167)
Before Edna can try to explain, a servant comes to take her to Adèle. Edna rushes off to her friend and bravely tries to assist her through the delivery. It is not an easy birth, and Edna is shocked by the whole process. She perseveringly stays at Adèle’s side, though, and only leaves after the baby has been born.

Adèle’s nine-month pregnancy and the final giving birth to a new life have developed alongside Edna’s awakening process during this period. The final step in Adèle’s pregnancy, the “accouchement”, seems to be the only correction Edna pays heed to. It seems to stir her conscience. It makes her wonder whether the process she is going through is right or wrong, and instead of fulfilling her own individualization process this event is the first aspect to interfere with it.

After returning home from Adèle’s ‘accouchement,’ Edna only finds a note from Robert, informing her that he has left, because ‘he loves her.’ This is the second aspect to interfere with Edna’s awakening process. Edna realizes that it is mainly her imagination that has endowed Robert with sympathetic understanding, but that he does not understand her need to be recognized as an individual human being, either. She becomes conscious that, “the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (AW, 175). Edna consciously perceives that she is stuck in a vicious circle; she cannot go back to her husband or have more children, and dutifully perform the social roles of wife, housewife, mother, and lady, as she should. Society will not accept her, if she does fulfil her awakening process, becomes a painter, and has the occasional affair with a man. The only way out of this impasse for Edna seems to give up altogether.

4.4: IN PERSPECTIVE

Chopin’s use of the mirror image in *The Awakening* gave nineteenth-century and later readers a good idea of the behavioral patterns expected of women at that time. In both the gender and class context upper middle-class American women had to fulfil the social roles assigned to them. Self-realization was considered a male prerogative, though even for men this right would be reserved for the higher social echelons. By mirroring Edna’s awakening process with Adèle’s pregnancy it also becomes clear in a very practical way what the tasks of a woman were.

Women had quite a few obligations; in marriage they were supposed to fulfil the appropriate social roles and stick to their marriage vows. Léonce is astonished by Edna’s deviance from this and he visits Dr. Mandelet to ask him for advice, “[s]he’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and – you understand – we meet in the morning at the breakfast table” (AW, 118). As I discussed in Chapter 2.6, in daily life a great many women had already begun to question the rules and regulations of patriarchal society, and in America such movements gained solid ground around the turn of the century. In *The Awakening* one group is mentioned by Dr. Mandelet in his response to Léonce’s question:

“Has she,” asked the Doctor, with a smile, “has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women – super-spiritual superior beings? My wife has been telling me about them.” (AW, 118)
Edna’s behavior is also a sign of the times. Her conduct may not be acceptable for the patriarchal society depicted in the novel; yet, from her perspective the norms prove a restriction to her feminine nature. Chopin thus underlines the negated possibilities for a woman in the social context sketched in the novel. The contemporary Louisiana norm and value system is thus thematized and begins to appear in a different light for the reader.

That the awakening process Edna goes through becomes understandable is a result of the system of perspectivity used in this novel. The arrangement of the perspectives used throughout the novel is similar to the “oppositional” arrangement mentioned by Iser. The story is told to us by an omniscient narrator, but within that account we are presented with perspectives which consider the norm and value system of a particular class in both a positive and a negative way. In the novel such an oppositional arrangement is sometimes realized by means of the contrasting of the perspectives of the two female protagonists, but occasionally it is also the perspectives of one of the protagonists and the narrator that are compared. Most of the time, we are told about the events from Edna’s point of view. The, in fact, unacceptable and unpopular process Edna is going through is thus made comprehensible for the reader. We ‘see’ things from her perspective, we are informed about her motivations and, even though, as readers we may not agree, the process at least becomes understandable.

The more individual aspects of feminine nature are portrayed as being opposed to the contemporary norm- and value system, and also begin to cast doubt upon it in proportion to its limitations. The negation of other possibilities by the contemporary norms leads to a new appreciation of ‘feminine nature’ to the extent that the norms of the depicted Catholic and Creole society are revealed as a constraint on Edna’s individuality. By means of this thematization the reader’s attention becomes fixed, not upon what the norms represent, or how their sanction or correction through the mirror image, Adèle Ratignolle, works, but upon what their manifestation excludes. They no longer just represent the social regulators prevalent in the thought systems of the nineteenth century, but instead, they indicate the amount of feminine potential which they suppress, because, as rigid principles, they cannot tolerate any different behavioral patterns.

What the narrator presents as Edna’s well-intentioned authenticity seems to turn into the incompetence of an impulsive nature, at least according to the represented contemporary norm- and value system, and we perceive that even the best of intentions may come to nothing, if they are not aided by changing social values. The example of aberrant behavior, portrayed in Edna, is more outspoken than Shirley’s behavior and the mirroring of both protagonists here reveals more extreme dramatic oppositions than the earlier novel, but the ideas Chopin conveys to her readers are a similar concern with individuality and well-being of women.

4.5: MIXED EMOTIONS

On 22 April 1899, Herbert S. Stone & Company from Chicago officially issued *The Awakening* in America. *The Awakening*, which sold for $1.50 a copy, was a slim volume with a light green linen binding decorated with graceful green and wine-dark vines, printed

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35 See Chapter 1.3 in this dissertation for a detailed explanation of the various types of text perspectives.
The Awakening: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

on the sides and spine in red. There had been various pre-publications to promote the novel. The first review that was printed in the St. Louis Republic was also encouraging. But most of the local American reviews that appeared between April 30th and October were quite concerned about the subject matter of the book. Chopin’s art, structure, style, language, imagery, as well as her proficiency as a writer of local color received applause, but her topic was condemned. Reviews in national newspapers were more positive, and in Great Britain critics admitted that it was one of the year’s most significant books. A Dutch poet, Maarten Maartens, pleaded for its translation into Dutch, Scandinavian and Russian. Yet, because the novel was regarded as controversial and shocking on publication, it did not receive very wide distribution or dissemination.

Its boldness of subject and design earned it some supporters. Many friends and acquaintances wrote Chopin very enthusiastic letters. But the absence of an arbitrating, moralizing voice within the narrative structure and the depravity of the plot caused some critics to condemn the novel. In general, opinions about the novel varied greatly. It was Chopin’s misfortune that it was especially the local press that seemed to take so much offence at the novel. Quite a few local readers and critics could not appreciate Edna’s behavior, but, as I hope to show, they understood the meaning of the novel. The narrative strategies used by Chopin worked well, but the contemporary social context of a mainly Catholic Louisiana society was not ready for such a leap in behavioral patterns.

That the novel’s meaning was understood becomes clear from an examination of some contemporary critical reviews. I have also included several newspaper articles from minor newspapers and journals, because Chopin’s early recognition was mostly regional.

Characterization

One quarter of the reviews of The Awakening that are still available describe the novel in quite positive terms. Several of these reviews focus on Edna’s awakening as an aspect of

37 This fact is first stated in Lady Janet Scammon Young’s letter which is fully cited by Daniel Rankin in his study Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories, 178. Repeated by Toth, 364. In his study, Per Seyersted adds: “I am indebted to the Maartens-expert, Professor W. Van Maanen of Amsterdam, for the information that this author was indeed in London in Oct. 1899, but that he apparently never referred to Kate Chopin in writing.” 225. Maarten Maartens (1858-1915) was a pseudonym for Jozua Marius Willem van der Poorten-Schwartz. He was a Dutch poet and writer who wrote the first ‘Dutch’ detective novel called The Black Box Murder (1890). He wrote in English, and he was very much esteemed in Great Britain, the United States and Germany. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of Aberdeen and he was a member of the ‘American Author’s Club.’ In The Netherlands he was not very popular, though his poetry, which he wrote in Dutch under the pseudonym of Joan van den Heuvel, was praised.
38 Investigations of the reception of The Awakening at later points in history have shown that the understanding of the novel did not change that much, but that its appreciation has increased immensely. As, for example, Corse and Westervelt have shown, there is an undeniable reciprocity between the socio-historical context and the evaluation of a literary work (Corse & Westervelt, 139-161). In general, nineteenth century novels used to be read for and judged concerning their moral messages. It is therefore not surprising that a book like The Awakening was not appreciated more at the time.
39 For an overview of all the contemporary reviews examined, please see the Appendix.
human nature or a desire for a fuller life. Just as with the discussion of the reception of Shirley, I will quote from quite a few articles and reviews to give a flavor of, not only the general interpretative strategies, but especially of the actual reactions of individual readers. The Awakening’s first notice, by Lucy Monroe in the Book News issue of March 1899, was extremely favorable. In the article, Monroe refers to Chopin’s work as a “remarkable novel,” one

so keen in it analysis of character, so subtle in its presentation of emotional effects that it seems to reveal life as well as to represent it. In reading it you have the impression of being in the very heart of things, you feel the throb of the machinery, you see and understand the slight transitions of thought, the momentary impulses, the quick sensations of the hardness of life, which govern so much of our action. It is an intimate thing, which in studying the nature of one woman reveals something which brings her in touch with all women — something larger than herself. This it is which justifies the audacity of “The Awakening” and makes it big enough to be true.

Chopin’s use of emotional realism is praised, as is her portrayal of female character. In Monroe’s view, Kate Chopin is “an artist in the manipulation of a complex character, and faulty as the woman is, she has the magnetism which is essential to the charm of a novel.”

It is a quality hard to analyze, for it does not seem to be in what she says or does; it is rather, as in life, in what she is … In construction, in the management of movements and climaxes, the thing shows a very subtle and a brilliant kind of art. (Toth, 491)

The next announcement was a pre-publication in The Book Buyer of April 1899, with a portrait of Kate Chopin in ruffled hat and boa. Her Bayou Folk “had many delighted readers,” The Book Buyer reported, and her new novel, The Awakening, “is said to be analytical and fine-spun, and of peculiar interest to women” (Toth, 329).

The first St. Louis review, in the St. Louis Republic for March 25, 1899, was also encouraging:

The phase of development which Mrs. Kate Chopin describes in “The Awakening” is rare in fiction, but common enough in life. A woman who has been merely quiescent, who has accepted life as it came to her, without analysis and without question, finally awakens to the fact that she has never lived. Mrs. Chopin tells the whole of her story, with its inevitable consequences of joy and suffering. Quietly as the work is done, it makes her intensely real; it brings her out with extraordinary

40 Lucy Monroe, “Review of The Awakening,” Book News Monthly XVII (March 1899): 387, in a section called “Chicago’s New Books.” The whole article is reprinted in Toth, 491. Toth adds that Monroe was “chief reader and literary editor” at Stone & Company who published The Awakening and may not have been “disinterested.”

41 Corse and Westervelt do not examine this review; according to them it is a prepublication announcement rather than a review; 156, note 3.
distinctness and force. It is the work of an artist who can suggest more than one side of her subject with a single line. (Toth, 329)

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that the writer indicates that the story allows more than one reading of “her subject.” Conservative contemporary views condemned Edna straightforwardly, but this seems too simple an approach to *The Awakening*. The story also attempts to evoke sympathy for a character who does not comply with the prevalent norm and value system. This critic seems to realize this, and to approve of it. The *Boston Beacon* review is equally positive. It agrees that “*The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, is emphatically not a book for very young people” but it referred to the novel as a cautionary tale, a criticism of “marriage without real love.” The *Beacon* had quite a modern interpretation of Edna’s lover:

The pure affection of her lover saves the heroine from irrevocable disgrace by a very narrow margin, but it is a powerful stroke on the part of the author to secure a strong artistic effect. In thus dealing with the subject the author emphasizes the immorality of a marriage of convenience. (Toth, 348)

This newspaper was also unique in not condemning Edna’s sexual desires:

There is an evident effort to illustrate without prudery – very much without prudery – that the normal woman is capable without sin of experiencing a full awakening of the entire human nature. One closes the volume, wondering what good, clever old Dr. Mandelet would have said to justify his telling the heroine not to blame herself, whatever came. (Toth, 348)\(^2\)

*The New York Times Book Review* was even more sympathetic to Edna. This reviewer states:

Would it have been better had Mrs. Kate Chopin’s heroine slept on forever and never had an awakening? Does that sudden condition of change from sleep to consciousness bring with it happiness? Not always, and particularly poignant is the woman’s awakening, as Mrs. Chopin tells it. The author has a clever way of managing a difficult subject, and wisely tempers the emotional elements found in the situation. Such is the cleverness in the handling of the story that you feel pity for the most unfortunate of her sex.\(^3\)

*The Awakening*’s initial reception occurred in a context in which traditional, Victorian ideas about literature as a means for sentimental, spiritual redemption and the support of a culture of the feelings still dominated. This novel’s interpretation as a redemptive tale would be quite a stretch, but the reviews in the *Boston Beacon, The New York Times Book Review* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, quoted later, managed to understand the novel in this way and consequently evaluated it more positively than most other newspapers. Generally, however, the nineteenth-century assumption of literature’s function as an edifying and

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\(^2\) The passage referred to in this quote occurs in AW, 171-172.

moral redemption worked against the possibility of considering it a more highly regarded novel, especially because Edna’s behavior seemed to question and transgress borders, rather than to respect their limitations.

A more neutral notice in the *Publisher’s Weekly* pays attention to both female main characters and the contrast between them:

A Kentucky girl, brought up among strict Presbyterians had married a Creole speculator, chiefly because her family had actively opposed the marriage because the man was a Catholic. He took her to New Orleans, and when the story opens she is twenty-eight, the mother of two boys, spending her summer at Grand Isle. In strong contrast is her Creole friend devoted to husband and children. The descriptions of Creole summer pastimes, the hotel life, the flirtations, chiefly occupy the author. This summer Madame Montpellier [sic] awakens to the fact that her indulgent, good-natured husband and her children and home do not satisfy her. Two men stir her emotional nature for a short time. There is a tragical ending.  

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Overall, the other contemporary reviews are less positive about the novel. It is not that critics do not understand the book, but they would have preferred a more traditional moral message. In my discussion of the reception of *Shirley*, I already mentioned that Corse and Westervelt indicated that nineteenth-century novels were mostly read for and judged concerning their ethical aspects. In relation to their own examination of *The Awakening* their data show that because of Chopin’s failure to promote the contemporary norm and value system, the story as a whole was not appreciated more.

We can see a similar reaction in the quotations that will now follow. Still, even these more negative reviews contain passages that indicate that the meaning of the novel was clearly understood. Most of the articles from which they were taken were published anonymously. A review in the *Chicago Times Herald* admits that the book is strong and that Kate Chopin has a:

keen knowledge of certain phases of feminine character … But it was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the over-worked field of sex fiction … This is not a pleasant story, but the contrast between the heroine and another character who is devoted to her husband and family saves it from utter gloom, and gives us a glimpse of the real Mrs. Chopin.  

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The representation of a character like Adèle Ratignolle provides the edifying aspect that would have been a requirement of instructive literature of the time. It is interesting to see that it is especially the contrast between the opposing images of the “Angel in the House” and the more rebellious character that is stressed in this quotation. The comparing and contrasting of the main characters seemed to work as a consciousness-raising technique. It succeeded in *thematizing* the acceptable behavior for women, by raising it to a more

conscious level of understanding. The stabilization of the contemporary norm and value system by means of the ‘good’ example of Adèle, though, in my view, hardly the main goal of the story, also seemed successful.

Social roles

The critic Charles L. Deyo discusses Chopin’s novel very elaborately. In his review in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch he summarizes the plot and he criticizes Léonce Pontellier for treating his wife as a “bit of decorative furniture.” He mentions Edna’s interest in painting, her friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz, and Robert’s departure. Edna he considers “not good enough for heaven, not wicked enough for hell.” He notices her neglect of the traditional tasks of a mother:

Her children did not help her, for she was not a mother woman and didn’t feel that loving babies was the whole duty of a woman. She loved them, but said that while she was willing to die for them she couldn’t give up anything essential for them.

He also mentions her neglect of her husband: “Her husband was extinct so far as she was concerned;” but he praises the book’s “flawless art,” and the “delicacy of touch of rare skill in construction, the subtle understanding of motive, the searching vision into the recesses of the heart.” He compliments the style of The Awakening, “power appears, power born of confidence … In delicious English, quick with life, never a word too much, simple and pure, the story proceeds with classic severity through a labyrinth of doubt and temptation and dumb despair.” Deyo’s discussion focuses on the representation of the various social roles for women. He takes the novel much more seriously than many other critics did and he was less negative about Edna’s behavior.

The 1890s in America saw the sentimentalizing of middle-class women’s social function as they were displaced from the (male) productive sphere to the role of consumers, wives, housewives, and mothers whose power lay in their domestic and religious influence over their families. Novels became a vehicle for the distribution of this desired influence. Literary critics not only accepted but preached the conservative idea of ‘the Angel in the House’ and praised female characters who were pious, pure, domestic, and pleasing to others. The depiction of Edna in The Awakening did not fit into this approach. On the contrary, the reviewer of the New Orleans Times-Democrat states:

A woman of twenty-eight, a wife and twice a mother who in pondering upon her relations to the world about her, fails to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion which experience has taught her is, by its very nature, evanescent, can hardly be said to be fully awake. … In a civilized society the right of the individual to indulge all his caprices is, and must be, subject to many restrictive clauses, and it cannot for a moment be

47 Toth adds that Deyo was a close friend of Chopin , 342-343.
admitted that a woman who has willingly accepted the love and devotion of a man, even without an equal love on her part – who has become his wife and the mother of his children – has not incurred a moral obligation which peremptorily forbids her from wantonly severing her relations with him, and entering openly upon the independent existence of an unmarried woman. … there is throughout the story an undercurrent of sympathy for Edna, and nowhere a single note of censure of her totally unjustifiable conduct.\footnote{First published in the New Orleans Times-Democrat (18 June 1899): 14-15; cited in Springer, 184; cited in Culley, 150.}

I would argue that it is not quite accurate to suggest that the story shows sympathy for Edna’s conduct throughout the novel. The sometimes detached perspective of the narrator, the mirroring of the behavior of the two female main characters, and the critical remarks uttered by some of the minor characters construct an opinion about Edna’s behavior that is more nuanced than that. Yet, this more nuanced representation in itself seems too extreme for 1899, as this critic’s reaction suggests. The reviewer of the Los Angeles Sunday Times has a similar reaction, and states:

\[\text{[t]here are sentences here and there through the book that indicate the author’s desire to hint her belief that her heroine had the right of the matter and that if the woman had only been able to make other people “understand” things as she did she would not have had to drown herself in the blue waters of the Mexican Gulf.}\]

This reviewer considers it a story about “fool women” and adds:

\[\text{as the biography of one individual out of that large section of femininity which may be classified as ‘fool women’ the book is a strong and graceful piece of work. It is like one of Aubrey Beardsley’s hideous but haunting pictures with their disfiguring leer of sensuality, but yet carrying a distinguishing strength and grace and individuality. The book shows a searching insight into the motives of the ‘fool woman’ order of being, the woman who learns nothing by experience and has not a large enough circle of vision to see beyond her own immediate desires. In many ways, it is unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling, as the story of that sort of woman must inevitably be.}\]

Linked with the contemporary ideas about appropriate literary practice were equally strong ideas about the social roles for women. As we have seen, in the 1890s, middle-class women were still denied a role in the newly industrializing economy; they were positioned as the moral guardians of families and society and as the embodiment of a certain kind of Christian piety, thus maintaining some importance in society. This happened at high cost leading to constructions of appropriate female behavior that denied a woman’s relevance, except as she contributed to others. The ‘cult of motherhood’ seemed to require that a good woman should sacrifice herself for her family. From such an interpretive bias, it is difficult to read Edna’s character and behavior as interesting or brave or praiseworthy. After all, Edna “was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather...
them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (AW, 63). Edna is not a “mother-woman” and is defined in clear contrast to Adèle and to such “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” (51). Edna’s acceptance of sexuality outside marriage fundamentally transgresses the definition of women’s roles as moral guardians, wives, housewives, and mothers.

Literary critics kept publishing negative reviews; focusing especially on norms, values and the (required) social roles for women. The reviewer of the Nation explains:

[w]e cannot see that literature or the criticism of life is helped by the detailed history of the manifold and contemporary love affairs of a wife and mother. Had she lived by Prof. William James’s advice to do one thing a day one does not want to do (in Creole society, two would perhaps be better), flirted less and looked after her children more or even assisted at more accouchements … we need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself.51

Again the traditional social roles required of women are stressed. In the absence of their confirmation, this reviewer cannot approve of the novel either. All readers and critics seem to become very much involved in the story. Iser’s theories about the reading process are applicable here, too. Rather than analyzing the structure of the novel, the use of perspectives, or the techniques of characterization, most responses focus on the ethical aspects of the story and many reviewers indulged in fits of morality. This reviewer of the Nation again responds emotionally, rather than analytically.

Sexual independence

The larger part of the contemporary reviews were published anonymously, but at least two of the more negative contemporary reviews were known to have been written by women. These were the reviews by Frances Porcher and Willa Cather. To write the St. Louis Mirror’s review of The Awakening, which appeared on 4 May 1899, Billy Reedy, the editor in chief selected a woman who had much in common with Chopin. Frances Porcher was a short story writer, a widow, and she attended parties that Chopin also went to. Porcher was a Virginian by ancestry, but she attended Missouri private schools. Porcher was an active contributor of book reviews, short stories, and dramatic criticism for the St. Louis Mirror, while also freelancing for other newspapers. However, Porcher’s stories were generally from a male point of view, and rarely sympathetic to women who were other than conventional. She disliked women who were cynical or who wanted to control their own lives. She disapproved of anything unpleasant that strayed from ‘the ideal.’52 In 1899, Frances Porcher was much more conservative than Chopin, both in her writing, and in her thinking about the subjects Chopin portrayed in The Awakening, such as lovers outside marriage, and a mother’s obligations to her children. Porcher believed in a writer’s

51 It first appeared in the Nation LXIX (3 August 1899): 96; cited in Springer, 185.
52 In her “Introduction” to Women and Literature in Britain 1500-1700, Helen Wilcox points out that we should “avoid the assumption that patriarchal culture was upheld only by men; many of the tropes of misogynist thinking were deeply absorbed and reproduced by women themselves.” Even during the timespan examined here, this appears to be true (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.
THE MIRROR IMAGE

responsibility to avoid morally diseased characters and adult sin. She admired Chopin’s “peculiar charm of style” and “beauty of description,” but *The Awakening* worried her:

> It is not a pleasant picture of soul-dissection, take it anyway you like; and so, though she finally kills herself, or rather lets herself drown to death, one feels that it is not in the desperation born of an over-burdened heart, torn by complicating duties but rather because she realizes that something is due to her children, that she cannot get away from, and she is too weak to face the issue. Besides which, and this is the stronger feeling, she has offered herself wholly to the man, who loves her too well to take her at her word … she has awakened to know the shifting, treacherous, fickle deeps of her own soul in which lies, alert and strong and cruel, the fiend called Passion.

In Porcher’s eyes, Edna’s was not even a proper improper passion. It was not love, but something “sensual and devilish.” She “played the wanton in her soul.” Porcher condemned Edna not for her thoughts, but for her actions, for choosing sensuality over self-sacrifice.” This novel Porcher concluded is “not a pleasant picture of soul-dissection.” According to her, it “is better to lie down in the green waves and sink down in close embraces of old ocean, and so she does.”

In July *The Awakening* received its third known review by a female critic. The *Pittsburgh Leader*’s reviewer, who signed herself by her middle name (‘Sibbert’), was the twenty-three-year-old writer named Willa Cather. Cather admired Chopin’s writing, but she detested the subject of this novel. She called the novel a Creole *Bovary*, because of the similar themes. Both novels are about women who demand “more romance out of life than God put into it.” This class of women, Cather stressed, expect

> The passion of love to fill and gratify every need of life, whereas nature only intended that it should meet one of many demands. They insist upon making it stand for all the emotional pleasures of life and art; expecting an individual and self-limited passion to yield infinite variety, pleasure, and distraction, to contribute to their lives what the arts and the pleasurable exercise of the intellect gives to less limited and less intense idealists … They have staked everything on one hand, and they lose … Edna Pontellier, fanciful and romantic to the last, chose the sea on a summer night and went down with the sound of her first lover’s spurs in her ears, and the scent of pinks about her. And the next time I hope that

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54 Willa Sibert Cather (1873-1947); American author and teacher; considered to be one of the best chroniclers of pioneering life in the 20th century; she wrote among other works *My Antonia* (1918).
55 *Madame Bovary* (1857) by Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880). This story of the adulteries and suicide of a doctor’s wife in provincial Normandy, is notable for its rigorous psychological development, and manifests the qualities that mark all of Flaubert’s mature work: authenticity of detail, an impersonal narrative method, and a precise and harmonious style. Certain passages in *Madame Bovary* having been judged to be offensive to public morals, Flaubert, his publisher, and his printer were tried but acquitted.
Miss Chopin will devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause.  

Yet, her insistence on the “arts and the pleasurable exercise of the intellect” as being equally and perhaps even more important sources of satisfaction to “less limited and less intense idealists” is something that Chopin might have agreed with. Overall, neither Porcher, nor Cather mention the contrasting of the female main characters, any other narrative strategies or the ‘woman question.’ For them Chopin’s emotional realism mainly seems to draw attention to the sexual aspect.

In order to get as wide a perspective as possible on contemporary responses to *The Awakening*, I also investigated personal comments, letters and fan-mail from around 1899. Chopin, for example, received some ‘fan-mail’ from two London readers while she was in Wisconsin. They had been sent to her c/o Herbert S. Stone, who forwarded them to her.  

The cover letter was from Lady Janet Scammon Young in London, an admirer of *The Awakening*, “Evidently like all of us you believe Edna to have been worth saving – believe her to have been too noble to go to her death as she did,” and she also suggested an alternative scenario for the novel:

But suppose her husband had been conceived on higher lines? Suppose Dr. Mandalet had said other things to him – had said, for example: “Pontellier, like most men you fancy that because you have possessed your wife hundreds of times she necessarily long ago came to entire womanly self knowledge – that your embraces have as a matter of course aroused whatever of passion she may be endowed with. You are mistaken. She is just becoming conscious of sex – is just finding herself compelled to take account of masculinity as such. You cannot arrest that process whatever you do; you should not wish to do so. Assist this birth of your wife’s deeper womanliness. Be tender, let her know that you see how Robert, Arobin affect her. Laugh with her over the evident influence of her womanhood over them.” (Toth, 358)

Dr. Mandalet, Young wrote, should advise Léonce Pontellier to trust Edna. If Edna’s husband followed that advice, Young had Dr. Mandalet say “in a year you will have a new wife with whom you will fall in love again; & you will be a new husband, manlier, more virile and impassioned with whom she will fall in love again.” Young seemed convinced of the didactic options of a novel and she also believed that a woman must distinguish between passion and love – and that, she said, should be the subject of Chopin’s next novel.

You can write it. You alone. You are free from decadency. Your mind and heart are healthful, free, clean, sympathetic. Give us a great hearted manly man – give us a great natured woman for his wife. Give us the awakening of her whole nature, let her go to the utmost short of actual adultery … not for the sake of scenes of passion, but that readers may be

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56 This review can be found in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews* II; Ed. William Curtin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970) 697-699.

57 Both letters are wholly cited in Daniel Rankin’s study, 178-182. Per Seyersted adds in a note in his study: “These letters (and the envelope) are at the Missouri Historical Society at St. Louis,” 225.
helped whose self respect is shipwrecked or near it because they have gone far and are saying “I might as well go all the way.” (Toth, 359)

Lady Janet also enclosed a letter from Dunrobin Thomson, whom she called “the great consulting physician of England” and “the soundest critic since Matthew Arnold.” Dr. Thomson had written an admiring letter about _The Awakening_, which he called “easily the book of the year.” It reminded him, he said, of _The Open Question_ – “but how vastly superior in power, ethic and art is this newer book.” He also believed that Edna’s ‘case’ was not exceptional. The fault lay with “the accursed stupidity of men,” who:

marry a girl, she becomes a mother. They imagine she has sounded the heights and depths of womanhood. Poor fools! She is not even awakened.
She, on her part is a victim of the abominable prudishness which masquerades as modesty or virtue. (Toth, 359)

Taught that “passion is disgraceful,” the doctor added, young women often become confused about their feelings:

In so far as normally constituted womanhood must take account of something sexual, it is called “love.” It was inevitable, therefore, that Edna should call her feeling for Robert love. It was as simply & purely passion as her feeling for Arobin. “Kate Chopin” would not admit that. Being (I assume) a woman, she too would reserve the word love for Edna’s feeling for Robert. (Toth, 360)

According to him, husbands should teach their wives to “distinguish between passion and love” so that any natural attraction a wife felt toward other men would not “touch her wife-life, her mother-life, her true self-hood.”

Chopin was very pleased with her letters from London. She may not have agreed with everything in them, as their focus is very much on the sexual aspect and there are many more facets to the novel. _The Awakening_ is not solely a criticism of Léonce Pontellier’s failure to understand his wife, nor is the novel only about Edna’s sexual awakening. Edna’s revolt is against the institution of marriage, and the confinement of her dreams, and she ultimately refuses everything ‘compulsory’: social calls, her husband’s bounty, her children’s demands, together with her lovers’ expectations that she be honorable or amoral. Still, the letters that had been sent to Chopin throughout the year often seemed to have much more nuanced and intelligent remarks in them than many of the negative reviews.

**More nuanced views**

Just after the publication of _The Awakening_ in 1899, Chopin also received a great many letters from friends and acquaintances. They again showed quite a different opinion than

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58 By Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952), Robins was an American-born writer who campaigned for women suffrage in England. She was president of the Women Writers Suffrage League. In the novel, _The Open Question: A Tale of Two Temperaments_ (London: Heinemann, 1898) which was published under her pseudonym C. E. Raimond, the main issue is the question of the value of life or whether life in the abstract is worth living. The subsequent question that is raised for the female protagonist is whether women have a right to an independent career.

59 Toth tried to trace the writers of both letters, but could not find people with those names in London. She suggests the letters may also have been invented by friends from Chopin, to cheer her, 360.
The Awakening: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

the contemporary negative reviews and were, in fact, more in line with the later, positive criticism. On April 28, the poet. R. E. Lee Gibson wrote her that no story had ever “affected me so profoundly” as The Awakening. The novel, he wrote, was “intensely dramatic and awfully sad,” and also “exceedingly clever, artistic, satisfying.” He admired the novel’s “quiet humor, the pleasing descriptions; the dramatic situations; the analysis of character and feeling and the consummate skill generally with which the story is constructed.” The ending made him feel “bitterly grieved,” and “[t]he pathos of it all is overpowering; the impression is painfully sweet and sad. It is heart-breaking.” The Awakening, he said, left him “deeply stirred and strangely fascinated,” and “[t]here is no end to my admiration of your undoubted genius.” One sentence in Chapter XXI impressed him as a description of Kate Chopin: “To be an artist includes much, one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one’s own effort.” Someone like Chopin, Gibson believed, “one capable of writing stories like yours is wonderfully gifted above the balance of us, and is worthy of all possible praise and success” (Toth, 337).

Lewis B. Ely, another friend and young St. Louis attorney, also wrote to Chopin on April 28 about The Awakening. He called the book “delicate” and “artistic” and termed it “a moral tale rather than an immoral one but I think the moral is a deep one. The book is a sermon against un-natural-ness and Edna’s marriage – as I understand it.” He added, “I think there is little in it to offend anybody” (Toth, 338). In May, other friends were also still writing favorable letters. Lizzie L., a Louisville friend, wrote on 10 May that she had been,

So deeply interested, so absolutely absorbed in “The Awakening” that I could not realize the denouement. It seemed so impossible that Edna should sacrifice her life, although I understand how her nature had become completely metamorphosed under the influence of an infatuation she was powerless to control.

The reading process surely made this reader become part of the world evoked in the text. Her involvement in the act of creative reading even made her misapprehend the ending of the story; her entangled imagination probably having created a different and more liberated one. Next to Iser’s explanation of the experience of the reading process, it seems to be the emotional aspect of Chopin’s realistic style that stimulates the engagement of the reader.

Six days later, another friend whose signature was “L.” and who lived in St. Louis, wrote to Chopin about The Awakening:

To me [this novel] is a psychological study – the development of a soul – an awakening to the possibilities of life – an emancipation of the whole being from the trammels of conventionalism. But why must it ever & always be in fiction as in fact that those brave enough to make the daring leap are inevitably swallowed in the chasm of defeat. Why not let joy & triumph await those who dare defy the edicts of merciless custom – but all this would be foreign to the school of Realism & you are as realistic as Zola.

L. mentions Chopin’s style and she also notices the issue of emancipation as does Anna L. Moss, a St. Louis clubwoman and book reviewer, who wrote on June 25:
To make moral or immoral use of your gift is our problem, not yours. The surety of your sense that preaching is not the province of fiction, is delightful … I wish you believed that the Ednas will somewhere, somewhen, somehow grow into a spiritual harmony to which the splendor of their frailty will contribute beauty – that the freedom and liberty – into which your heroine went with the exultation of irrepressible life … must contribute to a result grand in the whole, as the factors she brings are strong and compelling. (Toth, 349-351)

Moss comments on the contemporary ‘moral’ approach to literature and she also refers to the broader meaning of the novel, though she refers to “freedom and liberty” rather than emancipation.

The first more generally positive reviews again started appearing from 1928 onwards. Dorothy Anne Dondore wrote a contribution on Kate Chopin for the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Her biographical sketch is accompanied by brief critical commentary. She praises Chopin as a local colorist, and as a short story writer. Her stories are marked according to Dondore by “sympathy, delicately objective treatment, and endings poignant in their restraint.” She believes it one of the tragedies of American literature that harsh criticism made Chopin stop writing after *The Awakening*, “a book two decades in advance of its time,” according to her.  

In 1932, Daniel S. Rankin published the first doctoral dissertation on Chopin: *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories*. This was the earliest biography of Chopin and it is very valuable for its material on how she was viewed by her immediate social context. In the same year, Edward Larocque Tinker criticized the contemporary focus on morality. Though ostensibly a review of Rankin’s biography, Tinker devotes most of his essay to critical commentary on Chopin herself. He praises her refusal to patronize the Cajuns, and her rejection of that urge to point a moral.  

The National Cyclopedia of American Biography contains a brief biographical sketch plus a short history of her work. It notes that *The Awakening* may have been received with hostility in America, but adds that most English critics considered it to be one of the year’s most significant books. It points out that Chopin obtains her effect by accuracy of reporting and restrained sympathy. Cyrille Arnavon translated *The Awakening* into French in 1953. He wrote a very appreciative introduction to the novel and helped to acquaint a larger audience with her work. Subsequent advocates were Van Wyck Brooks, Robert Cantwell, Carlos Baker, Lewis Leary and Joan Zlotnick who all discussed different aspects

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60 This later comment was first published in the *Dictionary of American Biography*; ed. Allen Johnson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928) 90-91; cited in Springer, 193.


62 From the evidence I have examined this opinion only became obvious from the letters Chopin received from London. The novel *The Awakening* was not published in London at the time, because of the initial negative responses in America. This withheld publishers from investing in it. I have not been able to trace any British reviews at Colindale from as early as 1899 or 1900.

of her work in more detail. From then on, the reviews become generally more positive in tone, and in 1966 Larzer Ziff writes:

*The Awakening* is a superb creative work which searchingly explores on the very eve of the twentieth century “the question of what woman was to do with the freedom she struggled toward …. The book was also the awakening of the deepest powers of the author, but she was struck mute by a fearful society which could not tolerate her questionings.

Per Seyersted published the first full length critical biography in 1969 and edited *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* published in the same year. His work made Chopin’s fiction generally available for the first time and Chopin criticism now grew in scope and appreciation (Skaggs, 6-7). Overall, late-twentieth century feminist interpretations see the novel as a socially relevant story of the search for the female self and patriarchal limits to women’s lives that resonate powerfully with contemporary social concerns and supply rich material for critical and pedagogical investigation. My own contribution to this discussion is innovative in that I focus on the narrative strategies used by Chopin and examine especially the technique of contrasting images.

The negative publicity of the novel in 1899 also led to the rumor that her book had been banned by the local libraries. Toth examines the rumors suggesting this “banning,” but she can find no evidence for it. On the contrary, *The Awakening* seemed to be available at both bookstores and libraries. Officials at the Mercantile Library and the St. Louis Public Library were critical of fiction reading. From the 1870s on, both libraries had tried to inspire their readers with ‘better tastes.’ But public library officials had also noticed that the Mercantile’s circulation soared when it stocked popular fiction. In 1871, the Public Library created the Collection of Duplicates, consisting of popular fiction. Borrowers paid five cents a week, so that tax money would not be used to buy such fiction. Once the books became less popular, they would be withdrawn or sold. On 26 April 1899, the St. Louis Public Library bought three copies of *The Awakening* for its Collection of Duplicates; between 29 April and 28 June, the Mercantile Library bought four copies. Both libraries obviously thought it an important book, worth keeping in stock. There is also no contemporary evidence that they ever removed the novel from their shelves; though Toth admits that, at a certain point in time, books do wear out: “At the Public Library, one copy of *The Awakening* was withdrawn in 1912 and another in 1914, obviously worn out; a third copy was reported missing in 1901, but a replacement copy was bought in 1906.” Toth traces a similar process at the Mercantile Library (Toth, 368). Many contemporary readers, then, had been able to read the novel and it was very popular at the time with the ordinary reading public.

The focus of most critics and readers seemed to be on the sexual liberation requested for women and on Edna’s unusual behavior in relation to the required social roles. But the mirroring of the main characters is noticed and Chopin’s style of emotional realism is

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66 Toth indicates that Chopin received $102 in royalties for *The Awakening* in 1899, while she earned $3.25 for *A Night in Acadie* and $3.12 for *Bayou Folk*, 367.
praised. I would therefore like to conclude with Anne Goodwyn Jones’s insight that “the novel does what Edna cannot,” that the novel gives us a glimpse into a world beyond the oppositions in which Edna is caught, a society where the acceptance of a different kind of life for women opens up the possibility of recovering selfhood and womanhood in society.\(^\text{67}\) In spite of the limited scope still allowed to Edna, Chopin’s depiction of her plight and her use of the mirror image have at least presented alternative behavioral patterns to readers and offered options for *anticipation*. This quite conscious depiction of revolutionary alternatives was indeed picked up by critics and readers, as becomes clear from the reviews and letters referred to. Kate Chopin has thus indeed succeeded in depicting both the restricted roles for women in contemporary society and in presenting alternatives to the reader.

Chopin was not involved in the women’s suffrage movement, in the progressive movements for educational reform, health care reform or sanitation improvement. All organizations in which many of the more radical female thinkers took part in the 1890s. She was a writer of fiction and like many writers she considered that her primary responsibility to people was to show them the truth about life as she understood it. She was not a social reformer. Her goal was not to change the world, but to describe it accurately, to show the reality of the lives of women and men in the nineteenth century. She was among the first American authors to write honestly about women’s hidden lives, about women’s sexuality, and about some of the complexities and contradictions in women’s relationships with their husbands. She was a pioneer in the non-moralistic treatment of sexuality, of divorce, and of woman’s urge for an existential authenticity. In many ways, she was a ‘modern’ writer, especially in her awareness of the complexities of truth and the complications of freedom.

Brontë’s novel *Shirley*, written fifty years before Chopin’s novel, had received less negative criticism. Some of the negative comments it received focused on the depiction of more liberated patterns of behavior for women, but most of them criticized the unity of the novel and the abundance of characters. In her request for better options for women, Brontë concentrated on education, job opportunities and equality in marriage; most contemporary readers could not really find any fault with that. Chopin moved a step further, requesting and depicting not only financial independence and more equal rights for women, but also the woman’s sexual independence. For this last aspect, she received most of the negative criticism. Not only did this make the novel ‘immoral,’ and caused it critics to refer to the book as “sex-fiction;” some critics like Willa Cather, also considered it too limited a request. Whether one agrees with some of the criticism or not, the novel did succeed in initiating a discussion about the proper social roles for women. Through Chopin’s *thematization* of a woman’s (sexual) behavior, an intense debate on social norms and roles for women took place amongst critics and readers. This may not have been the novel’s initial goal, but the narrative strategies used in the novel do appear to develop into a real consciousness-raising technique. This effect of the novel may not have been appreciated at the time, the ideas represented by means of the ‘mirror image’ were definitely understood.

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