

O DESPERTAR: QUEBRANDO O PARADIGMA

THE AWAKENING: BREAKING THE PARADIGM

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The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It's a sad spectacle to see the weakenings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.
Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*.

ABSTRACT: *Kate Chopin is an important writer whose novel *The Awakening* (1899), written in the United States in the end of the Victorian Era, breaks away from women's writings which dealt with domestic issues such as child education and housekeeping. The novel portrays the condition of Nineteenth-Century women, and their need to be independent and free from the established codes of behavior, a theme that was not peculiar for that time. For this reason, when Kate Chopin's novel was published, it provoked reactions in its reviews: critics censured it in the national press and took it out of circulation. One of the reasons *The Awakening* was dropped out of sign was that, for the first time, a female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, explicitly violated the social codes of behavior of the patriarchal society of Nineteenth-Century New Orleans.*

KEYWORDS: Kate Chopin; Women's writing; Solitary novel; Victorian values.

RESUMO: *Kate Chopin é uma autora importante, cujo romance *O Despertar* (1899), escrito nos Estados Unidos no final da era vitoriana, se distanciava dos padrões de escrita feminina que tratavam sobre assuntos domésticos, educação de filhos e tarefas da casa. A obra retrata as condições em que viviam as mulheres do século XIX e a sua necessidade de independência e liberação quanto aos códigos de comportamento estabelecidos. Essa era uma temática incomum para aquela época. Por isso, o romance de Kate Chopin provocou reações adversas quando foi publicado, sendo criticado pela imprensa nacional e retirado de circulação. Um dos motivos por que *O Despertar* foi rechaçado é que, pela primeira vez, uma protagonista mulher, Edna Pontellier, afrontava de forma direta os códigos patriarcais da sociedade de Nova Orleans do século XIX.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Kate Chopin; Escrita feminina; Romance solitário; Valores vitorianos.

During the Victorian period, Queen Victoria solidified the concept of wives and husbands in the upper and middle classes. Women from these classes had a limited role in

society. They were expected to take care of their house by instructing the servants, and look after their husbands and children. They were also expected to be highly educated and attend balls and other social activities with their husbands. The men's role was to take care of business and political matters. They also had complete authority over their wives and children.

However, that was a time of rapid social and political changes that followed the Industrial Revolution. An important discussion was the role of women in the political and social issues, since women of lower classes would be employed full-time in industries. Campaigns were organized for women's right to vote. It was in the second part of the nineteenth century that the first feminist movement—the Suffragists—started. Their objective was to be able to take decisions and participate in the electoral processes. By the late 1800s many local women's suffrage societies had been formed in England.

Meanwhile, in the United States the higher classes were also influenced by the Victorian ideal of what was to be a woman and a mother, and a housewife. These values were spread to English colonies and the United States. Nevertheless, due to the American Revolution and the formation of a new country, the Seneca Falls convention, which discussed the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women for the first time, and the Civil war, the role of women had changed quite a lot, and women were organizing themselves to fight for their social and political rights. In the 1890s women were entering in higher education, and exercising professions prohibited for women before; others even decided to put their work first. Women were also discussing the rights for voting, which they granted thirty years later. Lower-class white women were organizing themselves to fight against working conditions, long shifts and low wages while upper-class white women were entering in higher education as well as in professions formerly unavailable for women.

Moving to Louisiana, we find a different setting. Louisiana was a colony of the French empire until 1682. In 1763, the territory became part of the Spanish empire and was administered by the Captaincy General of Cuba, until the Third Treaty of San Ildefonso (1800) and the Treaty of Aranjuez (1801), when it went back to France. In 1803, the United States bought the territory from France.

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Louisiana's law in the late nineteenth century still followed the Napoleonic code as the basis for marriage contracts. Culley (1994) writes that the code states that all accumulations of women, usually inherited before they married, could be controlled by them, while anything that was accumulated by women after marriage belonged to the husband, including personal belongings, such as clothes and accessories. Husbands were the legal guardians of children. Wives had to follow their husbands' decisions concerning private and social matters. Women were not allowed to sign any legal contract, appear in court, hold public office or make a donation to a living person without the consent of their husbands. Women under the law were totally incapable and had the same position of male children under 16 years old, insane and dumb people and convicts. Although divorce could be granted, it was not well seen by society, since Louisiana was largely Catholic, thus considering that practice scandalous.

Being the main city in Louisiana, New Orleans is a different and special city from its very beginning. *The Awakening* (1898) is set in an American city with a very peculiar history. In the nineteenth century, New Orleans was a place where there were shares of cultures among American Indians, free and enslaved Africans and European settlers. "Encouraged by the French government, this strategy for producing a durable culture" (Gwynedd-Mercy College, n.d) favored the social mix. It resulted in a different way of life from the culture that was produced in the English colonies of North America. Being a French and Spanish outpost for hundred years, the inhabitants secured that French was their main language and Catholicism was their official religion. These characteristics turned New Orleans into a unique city when compared to the other colonial cities.

Even when Louisiana was sold to the United States and became more connected to the rest of the country, the new American territory and New Orleans continued to have its particular way of life. American newcomers from the South and from the North reacted when they faced the predominant influence of the French language in the city, its dominant Catholicism and its peculiar traditions. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, a greater number of migrants arrived from the Northern states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, than from the Old South. Foreign immigrants such as French, Spaniards and Cubans, continued to arrive, as well as Germans and Irish. From 1820 to 1870, the Irish and the Germans made New Orleans one of the main immigrant ports in the nation, second only to New York.

Just before the twentieth century there was a large Sicilian immigration into New Orleans, which helped add to the complexity of its population and enrich its culture. Since most of the population of New Orleans came from Catholic families, it helped to increase the cultural diversity between Creoles, the descendant of French or Spanish, born in Louisiana, and Southern Protestants. Hirsch and Logsdon write,

The native Creole population and the American newcomers resolved some of their conflicts by living in different areas of the city. Eventually, the Americans concentrated their numbers on new uptown (upriver of Canal Street) neighborhoods. For a certain period, they even ran separate municipal governments to avoid political, economic, and cultural clashes. (HIRSCH; LOGSDON,2007, p. 9)

New Orleans is formed by two cities, divided by Esplanade Avenue, a broad avenue that runs east and west from Lake Pontchartrain to Mississippi river. Americans lived in the new part of the city called up town, located in south side of Esplanade Avenue while the French Creole lived in the old part of the city, also known as the French Quarter, located in the north side of the avenue. Shafter (1994, p. 137) writes that, “occasionally, a Creole family crosses the line, as it were, and goes to live up town, but they rarely become Americanized, for, above all things the Creole is conservative”.

Shafter (1994, p. 137) also comments that an article in the Chautauquan 15, released on June 1892, described Creoles as conservative, and the Creole women as beautiful. Besides being graceful and having distinctive marks of refinement, Creole women were described as artistic by nature, good at making witty replies and multilingual. Other important skills were: knowing how to dance and embroider. Moreover, they had to be native speakers of French and follow the Catholic religion.

According to Shafter (1994, p. 137) the Chautauquan affirmed that “As wives, Creole women, are loving and true, seldom figuring in domestic scandals”. Creole women should be good entertainers, refined in their manners but without any exaggeration, good housekeepers, economical and industrious. Large families were valued and girls were especially welcome. Women should be excellent and loving mothers and care for the health and beauty of their children.

Breaking through women's tradition

The Awakening (1899), by Kate Chopin, is set in the midst of changes in American society and in a place with a very different culture if compared to the culture of the Anglicized United States. Additionally, the novel breaks free from all that had already been written by women writers of that period in the United States. According to Showalter,

The Awakening is a novel about a process, rather than about a program, a passage, rather than a destination, [...] it is a transitional female fiction of the fin-de-siècle, a narrative of and about the passage from homosocial women's culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism. (SHOWALTER, 1993, p. 179)

Kate (O' Flaherty) Chopin is known in the literary world as the author of a series of short stories in which women's desires and attitudes are seen from women's perspective. As a writer, she went beyond her contemporaries, looked upon life through her own eyes and exposed herself to the world by writing on controversial themes as infidelity and women's self and sexual desire. One of her most memorable novels is *The Awakening* (1899), which deals with the condition of nineteenth-century women, a theme that was not peculiar for that time. For this reason, when Kate Chopin's novel was published, it provoked reactions in its reviews: critics considered the novel vulgar, immoral and morbid. It was censured in the national press and taken out of circulation. One of the reasons *The Awakening* was dropped out of sign was that, for the first time, a female main protagonist, Edna Pontellier, explicitly violates "the modes and codes of nineteenth-century American women's behavior" (SHOWALTER, 1993, p. 169). The protagonist detaches herself from her duties as a housewife and as a mother and pursues personal and sexual freedom.

American women novelists of the nineteenth century dealt with the female world within a patriarchal society. They mainly belonged to two movements: the sentimental novelists and the local colorists. Showalter (1993) comments that the sentimental novelists wrote about nonerotic intimate relationships between women and the roles of motherhood. Their protagonists revealed, counseled and helped one another on the subjects of marriage, childbirth, death, housewifery and other women's issues. The Sentimentalists, also known as local colorists, became popular after the Civil War. They "focused on regional customs, sites, events and characters representing local curiosities of all kinds in loving detail" (MURFIN, 1997, p. 164). Chopin breaks away from this

tradition of women's writing and, according to Elaine Showalter (1993, p. 170) "*The Awakening* became a solitary book, one dropped out of sight, and remained unsung by the literary historians and unread by several generations of American women writers".

There has been a discussion whether Kate Chopin has taken elements of her own life to create the character of Edna Pontellier. Some critics state that "*The Awakening* has its roots in Kate Chopin's own life" (TOTH, 1994, p. 114) as a woman who had the chance to experience other societies and was conscious of the limited role of women living in a society that was totally ruled by men in the last decades of nineteenth-century. Others say that the novel "is an analysis of the Creole society based on foreigner incapacity of adapting to this singular society" (WALKER, 1979, p. 66). Edna is a Kentucky Presbyterian. By being raised in the rigid Protestant culture, "Edna is not accustomed to an outward and outspoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others and she hardly knows how to accept the spontaneous caresses of the Creoles" (WALKER, 1994, p. 254). "She never realizes that the reserve of her own character has much, perhaps everything to do with the kind of friendship she has had as well as the practical way she was raised". (CULLEY, 1994, p. 17) Although she revolts against her Protestant tradition, she still carries the ideal of chastity, which is a quality of Southern American women. The narrator points out her own behavior when she describes some of Edna's characteristics in the beginning of the fourth chapter:

Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. Even as a child, she had lived her own small life within her. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life that outward existence that conforms, the inward life which questions (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 14).

Edna Pontellier and Kate Chopin were educated in completely different backgrounds. Chopin's father died when she was very young and she was raised in a matriarchal familial environment; she did not have any contact with married couples until she was sixteen. Edna comes from a patriarchal family. She is a member of the Presbyterian society of Kentucky, whose perspective of cultural variety was very narrow. Edna is provided with a far greater sense of cultural relativism. In Edna's world there are some issues that are open to questions and others that she cannot think of questioning. So, by being exposed to a totally different culture, "[s]he attempts to move into an area in which she can begin to explore feelings which lie outside the prescribed social code,

but because she is restricted in her knowledge of the world, she can only think herself within that code” (YAEGER, 1993, p. 274).

In other words, she is trying to emancipate herself, but her emancipation is far from complete. Her position in her father’s and her husband’s families is that of a possessed object, owned by men. Moreover, she is transferred from one society to another without being aware of the differences she would have to face. She could be shown as someone who attempts to emancipate herself, but as she is not experienced, she fails to expose those changes. She achieves an inner emancipation, but she is not able to change the outside world, which she lives in.

On the other hand, Kate Chopin was raised in a freer way since her mother and grandmother who, besides being a Creole, provided Chopin with a wide social role. She could also experience different cities and different countries. Her experience provided her with a wider cultural perspective and helped her to broaden her perception of the world. Nevertheless, her inspiration came from her time and place. Some of her characters are named after people she knew and some of her stories were taken from people’s experiences. According to Emily Toth (1994, p. 114), “*The Awakening* was inspired by the true story of a New Orleans woman, well-known to French Quarter Residents”. Toth (1994) also argues that the novel originates in Chopin’s life since she sought for her personal freedom and identity.

Edna and some of the traditions and codes of New Orleans

During summer in Grand Isle, Edna Pontellier undergoes new experiences that make her face life through a different perspective. At the same time, she gradually ignores the Creole society’s traditions and codes firmly established and begins to defy them. The following extract illustrates husbands’ right of absolute ownership: “You are burnt beyond recognition, he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 4).

Edna is learning how to swim in Grand Isle, so she spends most of her time in the water and because of that she gets a tan. The narrator describes her husband’s disgust in relation to her skin color. Although there seemed to be some racial mixture, there was segregation, especially concerning class stratification, and so issues about color defined social classes.

One night, after returning from Klein's hotel, the usual meeting point of men for talking and gambling, Mr. Pontellier, while undressing and piling the coins and bank notes he won in the hotel, tells enthusiastically about his night to his wife, but she does not listen because she is asleep. "Léonce found it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinces so little interest in things which concerned him and valued so little his conversation" (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 7). Mr. Pontellier then goes to the boys' room and, by checking them, he believes one of his sons, Raoul, has fever. When he tells his wife, she answers she is sure the boy does not have a fever because the day went perfectly well to cause the boy some sort of distress. Edna challenges the code of motherhood by neglecting her son, for her place is to look after children and she is not performing her obligations properly,

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, who's on earth was it? In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle" (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 7).

There are other moments in which Edna does not follow the Advice Book Sampler concerning influence of mothers: "What a child needs pre-eminently above playthings, books, clothes, and every other earthly thing, is the presence and influence of mother. No other woman in the world can take place" (STALL, 1897, p. 123). The narrator comments "The Creoles were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 9). Nevertheless, "Mr. Pontellier's wife was quite at rest concerning the present material needs of her children, and could not see the use of anticipating and making winter night garments the subject of her summer meditations" (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 10). In another moment the narrator observes,

She was fond of her children in an uneven way, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. The year before, they had spent the summer with their grandmother Pontellier in Iberville. Feeling secure regarding their happiness welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her for the responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 19).

But the strongest assertion Edna utters is when she tells Madame Ratignolle, when talking about motherhood and the duties of a housewife, that she would never

sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something I begin to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 46).

The Pontelliers are invited to a wedding in New York and Edna refuses to go, saying that “a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 54). Her husband departs and sends his children to his mother for a while. The narrator comments: “After all, a radiant peace settled upon her when she at least found herself alone. Even the children were gone. Old Madame Pontellier had come herself and carried them off to Iberville with their quadroom” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 69).

When she finally becomes herself, she goes back to Grand Isle alone and while walking on the beach “[her] children appeared before her like antagonists who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of the days. But she knew a way to elude them” (CHOPIN, 1994 p. 108). She goes into the water and while swimming she thinks of her husband and children. Her family was part of her life, but they would never “possess her, body and soul” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 109).

One night, after dining at Madame Lebrun's, Robert Lebrun, who has become Edna's swimming instructor and companion in Grand Isle, invites the party to go to the beach for a swim. When arriving to the beach, she decides to go for a swim and for the first time, she is able to do so. The narrator describes her joy as a “child who sudden realizes its powers and walks for the first time alone and boldly confident” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 27). Coming back home, she tells Robert: “A thousand emotions have swept to me to-night. I don't comprehend half of them. Don't mind what I'm saying; I am just thinking aloud” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 14).

Edna does not understand Creole's sense of friendship and starts to take Robert's companionship too seriously. As she falls in love with him, her need for freedom makes her resist tradition. At the same time, she is opening to feelings and sensations she has never experienced before, a new world in which she is the center of her own destiny.

After bathing, the family goes home. Robert and Edna arrive at home before Mr. Pontellier and the kids. She lies down in the hammock exhausted after her adventure in the sea. When Mr. Pontellier arrives, he invites her to come inside, it is late and she should come inside. She says she will stay outside and he does not need to wait for her.

She disobeys her husband's desires and needs. And this makes him rather furious about her behavior. Here is the passage,

"You will take a cold out there" he said irritably. "What folly is this? Why don't you come in?"

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.

"This is more than folly" he blurted out. "I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly".

With a writhing motion she settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that 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.

Edna Began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul" (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 30-31).

Coming back to New Orleans, not only she withdraws herself from her duties as a wife and mother but also behaves shamefully in the eyes of society. She frequently spends long afternoons at Mademoiselle Reisz, a single musician she has met in Grand Isle, who becomes Edna's friend and confidant, leaving her house unattended. One day, Miss Reisz asks her: "It's growing late, what time do you have to be home?" and she answers "Time doesn't concern me" (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 61). The book *Etiquette/ Advice Book of Sampler* advises married women not to neglect their husbands' needs: "Never let your husband have cause of complain" (CULLEY, 1994, p. 122). Arriving late at home would make her husband extremely annoyed.

According to the book housewives should "let nothing, but the most imperative duty, call you out upon your reception day. Your callers are in a measure, invited guests, and it will be an insulting mark of rudeness to be out when they call" (HARTHLEY, 1860, p. 123). On the reception day, Edna spends the whole day outside. When her husband arrives home, she is not properly dressed for the occasion, and then, he asks how many callers she has had. She answers there were a good many, she found their cards when she got home. He asks her why she has gone out and she answers, she felt like going out. Then, he asks her if she has given a suitable excuse, but she says she has

not. Her husband gets very upset and tells her “she has to observe *les conveniences*” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 49).

Besides being extremely disappointed with Edna, Mr. Pontellier complains about the meal and her lack of attention to the house and the servants, and leaves for the club where he is able to have a decent dinner. Again, Edna fails in her duties as a housewife. Edna finishes dinner alone and goes to her room. In her room she sizes a vase and smashes it to the floor. When the servant comes to clean, she tells the woman to let it the way it is until the next day. She does not follow the Duties of Wife in the Advice Book Sampler again, which preaches: “On the wife especially devolves the privilege and pleasure of rendering home happy” (RICHARD, 1886, p. 122). In the following morning Mr. Pontellier asks Edna to meet him in town in order to look at some new fixture for the library. She complains by saying that he is “too extravagant”. She shows complete disinterest for the house and her husband’s desires, to the point that Mr. Pontellier visits Doctor Mantand, the family’s doctor, to ask for some advice. He tells the doctor that “[his wife] has got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of a woman [...]. She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances and goes tramping about herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 63). Mr. Pontellier tells the doctor she told the cook to take all responsibility. “She told the cook that she herself would be greatly occupied during Mr. Pontellier’s absence and she begged her to take all thought and responsibility of the larder upon the shoulders” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 69).

The *Advice Book Sampler* recommends women to be aware of confidants: “Beware of trusting any individual whatever with small annoyances, or misunderstandings, between you and yourself, if they unhappily occur” (RICHARD, 1886, p. 122). In one of her visits to Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna tells the lady she is going to move away from her house on Esplanade Street:

I’m tired to look after a big house. It never seemed to be mine anyway – like home. I have little money on my own from my mother’s state, which my father sends me by driblets. I won a large sum this winter on the races and I’m beginning to sell my sketches (...). I can leave in a tiny house for little or nothing, with one servant (...). I know I shall like it, like feeling of freedom and independence” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 78).

In the end of the summer Edna and Robert were emotionally involved. There are some situations that show this involvement is getting serious and Edna is allowing her

acquaintances to see her interest in Robert. Here are some of the passages described by the narrator: “Robert and Mrs. Pontellier sitting idle, exchanging occasional glances or smiles which indicated a certain advanced stage of intimacy and *camaraderie*” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 11); “Mrs. Pontellier missed Robert the days when some pretext served to take him away from her, just as one misses the sun when it was shining” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 27). According to the chapter *Flirtation and Increasing Fastness of Manners*: in the Advice Book Sampler,

It is common to see a woman of fifty assuming the graces of sixteen and occupying the corridors and piazzas of watering-place hotels with feeble attendant swains. It is a melancholy spectacle to those who desire to respect or love the woman, particularly to her sons and daughters. But her end is gained if somebody says: ‘Oh, Mrs. Feathercap is such a very fascinating woman to gentlemen!’ She dresses, poses and lives painfully, to reach this goal, and becomes the worst model for her country women to follow (ANDREWS, 1880, p. 124).

By the end of the summer, Robert announces he is leaving for Mexico with an excuse he is going to do some business. This announcement was made suddenly during dinner at Madame Lebrun’s house. She gets visibly disappointed and leaves the house in the middle of the meal. When Madame Ratignolle asks her, she says,

All that noise and confusion at the table must have upset me, and moreover, I hate shocks and surprises. The idea of Robert starting off in such a ridiculously sudden and dramatic way! As if it were a matter of life and death! Never saying a word about it all morning when he was with me (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 42).

While Robert is away, Edna goes to the horse race with her father and meets Alcée Arobin. He invites her to go to the horse race again and then they become quite intimate. The Narrator comments: “She went again to the races, and again. Alcée Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp called her one bright afternoon in Arobin’s drag” (CHOPIN, 1994, p.70). Arobin begins frequenting her home and participating in all events. The *Book Sampler* advises women not to “accept invitation to visit any place of public amusement with a gentleman with whom you are but slightly acquitted, unless there is another lady also invited” (HARTLEY, 1860, p.125). Madame Ratignolle even tells Edna: “Well, the reason—you know evil-minded the world is—someone was talking of Alcée Arobin visiting you. Of course it wouldn’t matter if Mr. Alcée Arobin had not a dreadful reputation” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 91). It is written in the *Advice Book Sampler* that,

The truth lady walks the streets wrapped in mantle of proper reserve, so impenetrable that insult and coarse familiarity shrink from her, while she, at the same time, carries with her congenial atmosphere which attracts all, and put all their ease. A lady walks the streets without seeing and hearing nothing that she ought not to see and hear, recognizing acquaintances with a courteous bow, and friends with word of greeting. She never talks loudly or laughs boisterously, or does anything to attract the attention of passers-by (YOUNG, 1882, p. 125).

However, Edna “likes then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many sunny, sleepy corners, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 56). In her walks, she accidentally discovers a modest place in the suburbs where she sits alone and has something simply cooked to eat. “The place was too modest to attract the attention of people of fashion” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 99). When Robert Lebrun comes back from Mexico, she finds him unexpectedly while sitting and reading a book at the place. He asks her if she goes there often and she tells him she loves the place, it is out of the way and a good walk from the street car stop. She says: “(...) ‘I don’t mind walking. I always feel sorry for women who don’t like to walk; they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole’” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 101).

The *Book Sample* states that,

There is no longer any question about the length of a skirt or of the trousers that are worn, for it is now some years since the law went forth that it was not necessary to wear long ungainly trousers fastened in at the ankles and skirts as scant as possible, so that jaunty smart effect is perfectly possible, even in the plainest dress. Most women know how to swim, or are learning to, so that also has to be considered for her dress must then be made to allow as much freedom of the limbs as possible, and there must be nothing to hamper the circulation in any way." (HARPER’S Bazaar 25 June 1898:551)

In the final chapters, when Edna is back to Grand Isle alone out of season, she goes to the beach and finds her old bathing suit in the beach dressing room, but decides not to wear it. Instead, she undresses herself and stands naked by the sea. “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 109).

There are many symbols and motifs throughout the text. Art is one of them, being a symbol of both freedom and failure. When Edna begins to awake, she decides to take

up painting again. There is the suggestion that her art is not good. She tries to draw Madame Ratignolle but her drawing is defective. Mademoiselle Reisz often tells Edna about what it takes to be an artist – the “courageous soul”. When Edna is swimming naked in the sea she thinks: “How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! ‘And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions Madame! The artist must possess a courageous soul!’” (CHOPIN, 1994, p. 109)

Another major symbol from the beginning to the final image is the birds. The mockingbird and parrot symbolize the lack of communication since both birds are known for their imitation of others. Edna’s awakening makes conversation between the couple impossible. Birds also symbolize Edna’s desire for flight and freedom. Mademoiselle Reisz warns that to defy tradition and fly freely, it is necessary to have “strong wings”. On the deserted beach she sees a bird with a broken wing trying to beat the air above until it sinks into the water.

Swimming is the central symbol in the novel. In *Grand Isle* Edna tells Mme. Ratignolle of her experience as a young girl swimming through the meadow – Edna “swims” in the mead to escape from Presbyterian religion and its rituals. Learning to swim is related to becoming free, to awakening to becoming independent and able to defy tradition. But, in the end, does Edna embrace freedom by swimming naked until exhaustion or does her act portray her desperation because she will not be able to accept coming back to her former life?

Final considerations about Edna Pontellier

The Awakening portrays the protagonist’s transgressive attitudes towards the Victorian values and the Napoleonic codes governing female behavior in Orleans in the nineteenth century. Edna is from Kentucky, and therefore is raised in the Victorian social conventions. By getting married to Léonce Pontellier and moving to New Orleans, she has to follow the Napoleonic code. However, both social conventions are similar concerning women’s rights and duties. In her awakening, Edna ignores these social conventions in every decision she takes. She is a free soul living in a society of the nineteenth century in which everyone she meets is trapped in the social conventions of that time. In fact, the only characters who do not follow this convention are Mademoiselle Reisz, Alcéé Arobin and Robert’s brother, Victor, who assumes his love

for Mariequita, a young Spanish girl who is from Grand Isle. As she begins to gain personal freedom, she becomes the subject to criticism. Léonce Pontellier's friends stop visiting her, so she becomes a lonely soul. "Belonging to a world of limited possibilities for interpreting and reorganizing her feelings, and therefore of limited possibilities for her actions" (WALKER, 1993, p. 16-17.). Edna chooses suicide as a way of freeing herself from all questions, doubts and exposure she could have had if she had chosen not to follow society's rules. Her awakening is only inside her and it is clear when she is back to Grand Isle and, walking on the beach, she repeats to herself,

Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me; it doesn't matter about Léonce Pontellier- but Raul and Etienne! Now she clearly understands what she meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children (CHOPIN, 1994, p.108).

The Awakening is a truly feminist novel, much ahead of its time. Kate Chopin understood the female condition but also realized how difficult it was to change this situation, for most of society was totally immersed in a way of life which men ruled and controlled while women obeyed and followed their husband's and father's impositions without questioning or defying.

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