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Chopin's *The Awakening* and First Wave Feminism

It does not take much to be labeled as an outsider. Kate Chopin practically gave up writing after publishing *The Awakening* in 1899 because of the backlash she received that pushed her outside not only the writing community but also ostracized her in her deep southern community as well. In *The Awakening*, Chopin used the shift in Edna's identity to emphasize a want for women to be free from the societal standards of the time period. The aforementioned desire for freedom is highlighted through Edna's outsider status in multiple communities, including the Creole society as a whole and the women of the same society. In this society, women were expected to conform to the cult of true womanhood in which the identity of American women was "within the domestic sphere as wives, mothers, and housekeepers" (Delikonstantinidou 54). Edna's lack of conformity to societal standards from multiple levels shows her disapproval of the cult of true womanhood, the Creole society, and the lack of independence of women as a whole. Through the character of Edna, Chopin shows disapproval of the same ideal by herself and other women of the time period. Women no longer wanted to be stuck in within the frame that society deemed as womanhood. They were ready to break free and the first step that the women of first wave feminism took was working toward getting the right to vote. The first wave of feminism is marks its beginning with the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention in 1848 and found its goal to be a woman's right to vote (Hewitt 15). The women that stood up for their rights during this first wave of feminism in the United States even further

ostracized themselves from a predominately male society, however their efforts were not done in vain.

Chopin introduced the protagonist as Mrs. Pontellier through the eyes of her husband, Mr. Leonce Pontellier to reveal the way in which men perceived women. In the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Pontellier attempts to be like everyone else in the Creole society. She is the property of her husband and lives to please him. By introducing the wife of Mr. Pontellier in such a manner, Chopin is showcasing the common expectation of women in the Creole society. The women were property of their husbands and were to behave as such. Mrs. Pontellier as a “wife and mother is defined by her relationship to husband and children” (Jacobs 80). The aforementioned defines not only Mrs. Pontellier’s role in society but the common role of all women in society the time in which Chopin lived. Women were living dolls, their husbands having control over who they were to talk to and what they were to do. That being so, Mr. Pontellier also referred to his wife as his property. This is made prevalent when he assesses a sunburnt Mrs. Pontellier, “looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 2). Mr. Pontellier’s view of his wife as property was Chopin describing the men of her era. The men’s role was to obtain property, their wife and kids being thrown amongst their material possessions. Even so, a man was considered successful in New Orleans if he was able to send them to the Creole resort island known as Grand Isle. Not only is this place important throughout *The Awakening*, but it is also a real place that Chopin spent her summers with her children if not in St. Louis (Toth 78). Her husband, Oscar, not only introduced Kate to Creole society in New Orleans but also to the resort of Grand Isle (Rosenblum 2). Husbands who took care of their possessions, or wives and children, showed

this by shipping them off to a tropical-like island during the summer months to show they cared for them. By starting as a possession, Edna's journey to independence is lengthened.

To show the shift from Edna being owned to being an individual, Chopin begins by calling the protagonist by her married name, Mrs. Pontellier, and gradually transitioning into calling her by her first name, Edna. In the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Pontellier is a woman who tries to fit into the Creole society and do what is expected of Creole women by tending to the needs of her husband and children. As she claims her individuality and strays away from the societal expectations, she becomes known as Edna. Chopin's focus in her novel was to reveal the power that comes from Edna being independent, as well as the solitude that accompanied it. The aforementioned is validated by the original title of the novel being *A Solitary Soul*. By focusing on the strength and power of Edna's solitude, Chopin revealed how women of her time wished to have that same power and strength. The women wished to have their own independence. The name "Edna" is used one-hundred and fifty times throughout the novel, while Mrs. Pontellier is used only fifty-eight. Chopin used "Edna" twice as much as "Mrs. Pontellier" to show the want by women to be known as an individual.

The shift from Mrs. Pontellier to Edna is further evidence of Chopin showing how much women wished to be individuals rather than property to be associated with their husband. The increased use of the name Edna was further used to show the possibility of overcoming the any label of Miss, Mrs., Madame, or Mademoiselle. Chopin lived over twenty years as a widow and was therefore able to experience the difference in one's name and their effect on a woman (Walker 1). Part of being an individual is having the right to vote. In the nineteenth century, it was still common for everything 'owned' by a woman actually belonging to her husband (Toth 123). So it was a very big deal when women gained the right to vote in 1920, more than twenty

years after Chopin's novel was published. Women did not desire the right to vote, a manly privilege, overnight. Women had been fighting for independence in the United States since 1848 when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca, New York (Rutgers). This desire for more freedom though being able to vote is yet another example of making the shift from being owned to being an individual with one's own thoughts, actions, and property. By overcoming her oppression, Edna was allowed to make her own decisions and thus challenge what traits were considered masculine and which were considered feminine.

Chopin provided Edna with more masculine traits as she became more independent to show the correlation between being free and being a man. One such masculine trait was being an artist. In the late nineteenth century, painting was a predominantly masculine hobby "with its traditional emphasis on the female form (particularly the female nude as an essential feature of art training), painting serves as a metaphor for the psychological and economic subjugation of women" (Barker 62). In Chopin's time, men were the artists because the models for inspiration were typically nude women. The men would buy paintings of these women to add to their possessions. It was absurd to think that a woman would want to paint another naked woman. By making Edna an artist and a painter by trade, Chopin expanded on the changing art world and joined in challenging the belief that only men could be painters. This statement made it known that the women did not want to be defined by their womanly traits, rather that they could do things traditionally labeled as masculine. Edna enjoyed sketching other people as a hobby. The woman in which Edna was modeled after, Edma Pontillion, also had such a hobby. Once Edma married "she gave up her art. She became one of her husband's possessions, and her life was one of sadness and unfulfillment" (Toth 74). This real-life parallel was included in the creation of Edna's identity for a purpose. Chopin used Edma's experience in her characterization of Edna to

further define the oppression of women and to show that her depiction of Edna was not unrealistic, as she was based heavily upon a real-life woman. Before women were married they had the freedom to choose their hobbies. Once they were married, however, their freedom to choose was taken away. As Edna became more independent, her art flourished. Her art was yet another symbol for overcoming the dictating hand of her husband. Furthermore, Chopin herself dallied in writing which was difficult to exist within as “it is far more difficult for a woman to fit into a profession run by men” (Toth 121). Chopin wrote the freedom of being able to choose into Edna’s journey as another example proving that the women of her era wanted their freedom back. Kate Chopin had begun “writing to support her six children after her husband died in 1883. Without a husband, she had the ability and necessity to be independent” (Toth 169). Not only was Chopin writing because she had to take care of her family, but she also used it as a means of independence. She had the freedom to choose her profession in her husband’s death. By giving Edna the freedom to choose, however, Chopin separated her protagonist from other women of her society.

Chopin strategically created a protagonist that was an outsider to even the women in her society so as to relate the outsider status of the women of the first wave of feminism to that of the Creole society. In Louisiana in the late 19th century the word creole had “became a self-identifier that distinguished the established residents of the territory from Anglo-American newcomers” (Wendte 2). Through this definition of creole, Edna could never belong to the society as she was a newcomer to the territory. Emily Toth states that “the central character, Edna Pontellier, is a Kentucky Presbyterian and an outsider to Louisiana and the Creole culture” (209). As a woman from Kentucky, no matter how hard Edna tried, she could never fully consider herself as creole. Edna’s status outside the Creole society is also noted when Madame Ratignolle refers to Edna

being “not one of us; she is not like us” (Chopin 23). Madame Ratignolle’s confession shows how Edna is even an outsider among the other women in her society. She is recognized as not being a true creole. At this point in time it is easier for Edna to further otherise herself from the society rather than try to fit into a realm that by definition she could never fit into. Chopin included Edna’s non-Creole background to further emphasize her pariah standing in her society. Chopin, too, was an outsider to the Creole society, hailing from St. Louis. Edna is aware of her outsider status in that she “becomes aware of political crises related to her position within Creole society” (Thornton 50). Edna is aware of political crises that directly relate to the real world at the time the novel was written/published such as the role of a woman and the expectations she was to uphold. Chopin emphasized the common feeling between women in her era of being outsiders in a man’s world by making Edna an outsider to her community at the three points from being a woman, from another state, and originating from a different religion than the others in her society. Chopin, too, was an outsider in the world of writing and even how she approached being a female writer during the time as “Chopin did not challenge men and patriarchy in the open and direct way of present-day authors. Instead, she presented, almost instinctively, the tragedy of a young woman trying unsuccessfully to break away from traditional sex roles” (Normann Nilsen 28). Chopin emphasized the feeling of being an outsider among all women of her time by making Edna such a drastic outsider. Edna’s status within her community conveyed what the women of the nineteenth century wished to say.

Edna’s suffering and death were the result of being unable to fit into both societal and personal realms. It is said that “Edna's despair is couched in a language that is related to the fin-desikcle atmosphere of the 1890s, in which spleen and a sense of doom were fashionable” (Normann Nilsen 28). Popular writing of the time included aspects of doom, so Chopin included

Edna's death so as to affirm to these popular standards. This was what people wanted to read about in the late nineteenth century, and authors were conforming to such wishes, Chopin included.

Chopin's route to displaying Edna's identity was one with a purpose, a purpose to reveal the oppression of women of the late nineteenth century. Edna's identity was written as such to proclaim the oppression of the women of Chopin's era and to give them the hope that it was possible to overcome it. Chopin expressed the feelings of women through Edna's journey in becoming an independent woman through events that shadowed her personal life, lives of women she knew, as well as women as a whole during the late nineteenth century. What Chopin truly thought about societal standards in the nineteenth century were revealed through her writing and her voice clearly heard on such topics as women's independence and freedom.

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