

***The Awakening* (1899)**
by Kate Chopin (1850 – 1904)

About the author:

- born Katherine O’Flaherty in St. Louis, Missouri
- at 19, Kate married Oscar Chopin, a young cotton broker and moved to New Orleans
- when Oscar died in 1882, Chopin moved back to St. Louis with their six children
- she began writing to afford care and necessities for her children

Women’s rights during this time:

- Louisiana was governed under Napoleonic Code and Louisiana Law
 - Napoleonic Code said that all of the wife’s "accumulations" after marriage belonged to the husband and that the husband automatically got custody of children in a divorce
 - Louisiana law claimed that
 - a woman could not sign a legal contract other than her will
 - could not initiate a lawsuit
 - could not hold public office
 - could not serve as a legal witness to any document
 - Others who could not do this included the blind, the deaf, the mute, children under 16, the legally insane, or those with criminal records

Creole Society:

- The Creole culture
 - was very family-oriented
 - considered themselves an elite social class in New Orleans
 - Creole women, even if very poor, were not permitted to speak of poverty
 - expected Creole women to be
 - very religious, usually Catholic
 - modest and pure of thought but still able to talk frankly about sexuality and childbirth
 - enthusiastic mothers
 - good dancers
 - artistic by nature
 - good housekeepers
 - good conversationalists

Chopin’s writing:

Chopin’s writings emphasize women’s struggles for freedom, but she did not consider herself a feminist or suffragist—her definition of "freedom" involved more than the right to vote and equal pay; Chopin felt freedom was a matter of the spirit, the soul, and choices about living one’s life—both men and women alike.

Critical Responses to *The Awakening*:

- 1899 - "Trite and sordid"; "Essentially vulgar"; "Unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling"; "Its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent"
- Chopin’s response: "Having a group of people at my disposal [the characters in her novel], I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. . . . I never dreamed

of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did.” (*Book News* July 1899).

- Contemporary review - “She’s one of those writers whose sense of craft puts her right on the edge of poetry. . . . The rediscovery of *The Awakening* came as a Godsend, the most incredible gift to the women’s movement” (Prof. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Emory University)

Use of Local color:

A form of **Realism** devoted to descriptions of characters, dialect, customs, and geography of a specific setting. It emphasizes setting and the character of the region instead of character of the individual. Characters are usually there to add to the "feel" of the place (when you read, think Arobin, the servants and residents at Grande Isle, Madame Ratignolle, etc). The main character is usually an outsider, which makes it easier for the reader to identify with them—after all, the reader is as much an outsider as anyone. The most common plot involves tension between traditional and new ways of life, often symbolized by the intrusion of an outsider who is demanding something from the community.

Setting:

- late nineteenth century on Grand Isle (off the coast of Louisiana) and in the city of New Orleans

Important Characters:

- Edna Pontellier – rejects the role of domestic goddess
- Leonce Pontellier – Edna’s husband
- Robert Lebrun – Edna’s male friend and lover
- Alcee Arobin – Edna’s suave love interest
- Madame Adele Ratignolle – Edna’s female friend; the “earth mother”
- Mademoiselle Reisz – Edna’s friend; her beautiful piano music contributes to Edna’s “awakening”

Symbolism:

- Water/Sea
- Swimming
- Birds (caged, free, Pigeon house, broken wing)
- Art
- Music
- Lady in black
- Two lovers

While reading, pay attention to:

- Leonce’s and society’s view of women and motherhood
- Attitudes about love and infatuation
- How often and when Edna goes to sleep
- Edna’s change in clothing
- Edna’s relationship with husband and children
- Other women (Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz) and their roles

Themes:

- Repressed feelings
- Personal freedom
- Role of women
- Search for self
- Alienation and loneliness
- Consequences of choices