

# An analysis of kate chopin's the awakening essay



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Edna Pontellier: previously desires ultimately needs Outrage felt American Critics of the 18th century when *The Awakening* was published. Who would have dared to write about a topic such as sex and even suggest women as sexual beings with desires? That person, that woman, was Kate Chopin.

Throughout her career, many praised Kate Chopin for her short stories full of local color and style and even considered her a regional writer. With great anticipation, they had been waiting to read her masterpiece *The Awakening* expecting it to be just as her past short stories. However, they were soon surprised.

As one expert critic said, "The many admirers whom she has won by her earlier work will be surprised... by this latest venture...it was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction." (*Books of the Day* 149). Another proficient critic wrote, "It is sad and mad and bad..." (*Deyo* 149) Clearly, Chopin was ahead of her time. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin's heroine Edna Pontellier awakens to self-expression, freedom, and passionate love.

Edna is a Presbyterian who never had a deep bond with a woman. Her mother died when Edna was at a young age and she never had a deep emotional bond with her sisters. However, that changed at Grand Isle. A competent critic suggests, "Through her relationship with Adele, Edna learns a great deal about freedom of expression." (*Ward and Spain*) Adele Ratignolle is the epitome of a perfect Creole woman. Often described by Chopin as a mother-woman, Adele is a giver, a woman who only lives for her children and husband.

Ironically, Adele's relationship with Edna triggers her awakening. Without her, Edna would have probably stayed the same woman she was before going to Grande Isle. With Adele Edna learned to express her thoughts, sometimes making no sense. However, as one competent critic implies, "Edna differs from the Creoles in that she respects words and tries to use them accurately, so as to express her individuality... Edna is now the one whose 'freedom of expression' is incomprehensible, and she thoroughly exposes the falsity of the Creole claim to liberated speech." (Gilmore 66)

Though not understanding the falsity of freedom of speech in Creole society did not hinder Edna's awakening she later has to deal with the reality of the false freedom. Although, Adele's Creole unusual behavior initiated Edna's awakening, it is not until she swims in the sea that she gives in to her new awakened self.

As a capable critic said, "Her new-found control immediately tempts Edna to excess, swimming 'far out' where no woman had swum before." As Paula Treichler observes, the passage with its implied warnings of premature confidence, pinpoints both the spiritual dimension and sexual—political risks of Edna's act." (Ewell 148). In the sea, Edna experiences something she had never felt before: self-control. She never in her life had felt alive or in control. She had always followed and listened to men.

First, that person in control of her was her father, and then her husband. Edna did not have to listen to anybody in the sea—she was free and controlled every movement she made. As a respected critic says, "...Edna's midnight swim, which awakens the 'first-felt throbbings of desire,' takes place in an atmosphere of erotic fragrance..." (Showalter 43) The sea unfolds

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Edna's deepest desires of freedom, self-expression, and passionate love. The indescribable feeling of freedom and self-control overwhelmed her as a result freeing her of the social chains of society.

Subsequently, after freeing herself of social restraints, Edna finally decides to follow her desire for the young man, Robert Lebrun. A knowledgeable critic states, " When she learns to swim, she becomes aware of the sensations of her body—the feel of the water against her limbs...and with the awakened sense of her body comes sexual arousal. " (Huf 43) The son of Madame Lebrun, Robert each summer devotes himself to a woman regardless if she is married or not. With Robert, Edna wishes to satisfy her desire for a passionate love she never has experienced with her husband. Edna finds herself needing him and asking Robert to go with her places when she never felt that need for his attention and company before.

Later, Robert knowing that a romantic relationship with Edna was impossible and unacceptable in society's view especially the Creole society, he decides to leave Edna and go to Mexico. As a respected critic points out, " Though Robert abruptly departs for Mexico... [Edna] will not be again suppressed. " (Ewell 141). Later she returns to her French quarter home, where she dreams of her passionate love for Robert but still conscious of her awakening, her changes. Edna starts to express herself.

Ceasing from her social roles and routines, she neglects to do what her husband orders her to do. She starts to do what she feels like—taking walks by herself, painting and ultimately leaving her husband's house. As an authoritative critic agrees, " By rejecting the centrality of domestic life, Edna

gives up the social and economic scenario that provides the basis for her existence. By stepping out of the protected space of home...Edna experiences an exhilarating sense of possibility...this freedom is thrilling but perilous. (Martin 20)She leaves because she realizes she is self-sufficient and does not need a man to continue living. Leaving her husband's house, Edna moves to her small house, which she calls " the pigeon house.

" There as an important critic suggests, " Edna remains a figure of romantic ideals in spite of her acting with a sexual freedom...Mrs. Chopin tends to regard them [Edna's actions] as romantically motivated rather than as realistically considered. " (Arms 177) After she moves to her pigeon house, Edna begins to concentrate more on art. She starts painting no longer as an amateur but as a professional artist. Through her paintings, she tries to express herself. She wants to live her life to the fullest and she does.

She does not care what society thinks of her. She is living alone and has a friendship with a disreputable man named Arobin. A reliable critic points out " Edna's central problem, once the hidden ' self' begins to exert its inexorable power, is that her libidinal appetite has been fixated at the oral level. " (Wolff 208) The relationship between Edna and Arobin is in the total control of Edna. Since she cannot fulfill her sexual desires with Robert, she eventually fulfills them through Arobin.

She experiences for the first time what passion really is which she had never felt with her husband. Guilt, a feeling Edna only felt once after her awakening. She felt guilty because Arobin ultimately fulfilled her sexual desires despite the fact that she had no emotional attachments to him nor

loved him. She felt guilty because she found out her as a woman could experience passionate love without romance. A venerable critic expresses "... her awakening to an erotic life...[was] through Alcee whom she sees merely as a convenience. " (Arms 178)She is no longer under the false impression that passion and romance are the same.

As remarkable critic points out, " If Edna's affair with Arobin gives her some control of her sexuality (an expression of individuality, her desire for a more complete relationship with Robert is thwarted. " (Jewel 151) After her experience with Arobin, Edna knows that a more complete relationship with Robert, the man she was so deeply in love with, would mean that she would have no control. As the story continues, there is a very gradual change in Edna's clothing. A change that dignifies her freedom and self-expression. Little by little, Edna starts to wear fewer clothes.

As one noteworthy critic suggests, " With her nakedness, the casting off of socially prescribed clothing, comes a spiritual revelation...Edna relates to the needs of her body...she is aware that she is ' very hungry' ". (Gaskill 3) In the beginning of the story, Edna dresses like a typical creole woman.

Unmistakably, one would expect a person from the 19th century to wear many layers of clothes especially women. By showing more skin and wearing fewer clothes, Edna confirms her new awakened self. An awakened self who is " hungry" for freedom. " Hungry" for self-expression.

" Hungry" for passionate love. These desires became necessities to her and without them Edna would be an incomplete being. Robert's return brings Edna to the final stages of her awakening. She romanticized his return

thinking he would come to her running in desperate need of her. She thought he wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

Perhaps he did but his love was incomparable to the great intensity of Edna's love. While he was gone, she thought of him but also realized what she wanted to accomplish in life. She was a new woman and at her first encounter with Robert, he notices it. As an outstanding critic points out " Robert can see Edna only in conventional terms, and he is visibly shocked by her rebuke of his own ' wild dream' that Leonce can free her from her obstructing marriage. " (Ewell 151) Robert cannot understand Edna's new self.

Edna puzzles him by how she talks to him openly about love and laughs when he tells her about his " wild dream. " Just like society, he does not understand who Edna is—a true woman not afraid to show her true being. The mentality of society in the 19th century is very different from today's society. As a result, it is understandable why critics rebuked Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. One notable critic said, " Of course she went and drowned herself.

She realized...that it was now merely Man, not Robert or Arobin, that she desired. So she took an indefinite dip in the passionate Gulf. "(Pollard 162) If this novel had not been written in the 19th century, would that have affected today's society? Would critics of today have the same reaction, critics of Chopin's time had when *The Awakening* was published. Perhaps woman's role would have stayed the same if it were not for Kate Chopin's boldness in writing her masterpiece. In reality, since Chopin's novel played no significant

if any in the woman's rights movement, today's society would not have been affected if Chopin had or had not written *The Awakening*.

Nevertheless, Chopin by choosing to write her masterpiece *The Awakening* takes the reader with Edna's awakening in a pursuit to understand a woman's desires: freedom, self-expression and passionate love, that are ultimately needs and accepting them as they are and come.