

Late 19th century creole society essay sample

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



Late 19th Century Creole Society as it pertains to: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* During the 1890's, New Orleans was an interesting place to be. Characterized by strict social codes, both spoken and unspoken, a prosperous lifestyle was the reward for following these strict laws of the society. This conformity made for a strenuous situation for Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*. It is of utmost necessity that Chopin places Edna in this unique setting, both because of the characters who inhabit it and the situations that are created and advanced in this late 1800's society. It is the essence of the society and culture that dominates the novel and fuels the conflicts that are the body of the story. The single most important aspect of Kate Chopin's, *The Awakening* is the placement of the setting in New Orleans society during the 1890's; for it was the major justification and reasoning for Edna's rebellion from restrictiveness, Leonce's adherence to tradition, as well as the overall progression of the novel.

During this time period, women were supposed to take care of their children and obey their husbands at all costs. The society was made up of 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 16). Life was very difficult for Edna under these circumstances. To a certain extent *The Awakening* shows Edna at the mercy of a patriarchal husband, a hot climate, a Creole lifestyle, and the circumscribed expectations of a particular class of Louisiana women (Taylor 306). This eventually leads to Edna's breaking free. In this society the attitudes of the husbands played a large role in Edna's disapproval. The

Creole husband is ? never jealous? (Chopin 21). However, their wives ? were possessions, cared for and displayed, who often brought a dowry or inherited wealth to a marriage? (Wyatt 1). Edna didn? t fit into the role of the common Creole woman because they were expected to, ? subordinate their needs to their husbands wishes, in short, they were expected to be Adele? (Wyatt 1).

Women in the 1890? s were to follow certain codes and fit into prescribed roles. These were usually very strict and, ? In Creole eyes, women who flout the codes governing female behavior are dangerous or mad? (Taylor 305). As well as the codes that the women were to live by, they were also characterized into gender roles. These roles consist of, ? societies views or expectations of women; daughter, wife, mother, nurturer, or lady? (Fox-Genovese 37).

Women also had to follow some very strict laws concerning who was in charge and what they were and weren? t permitted to do. ? Under the Louisiana code, patterned after the Napoleonic code of France, a women belonged to her husband? (Wyatt 2). As if this wasn? t harsh enough for the Creole women, ? article 1388 established the absolute control of the male over the family? (Wyatt 2). It is easy to see why Edna felt out of place in this New Orleans society. Women were thought to be nearly useless. Under article 1124 married women were equated both with babies and the mentally ill, all three were deemed incompetent to make a contract (Wyatt 3). Despite this brutal treatment, and overall disrespect toward women, few women spoke out against this treatment, for women were supposed to be very

conservative during this time period by virtue of both Puritan and Catholic beliefs.

Wyatt describes the Creole women as being very conservative, perhaps the most conservative group in the nation during this time period. Louisiana had its own set of problems that added to the confused feelings of this society. It was a state created out of three different cultures. ? It is American in many ways, but it is also southern, and Creole? (Wyatt 1). The combination of these cultural forces was very strong. The Creole culture was very different from others, it was Catholic in a Protestant country. All of this chaos contributes to Edna's intense feelings and emotions that strongly oppose this late 19th century society.

Edna did not by any means fit into the Creole society of which she lived. ? Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles; never before had she been thrown so intimately among them? (Chopin 18). Edna was intrigued by the Creoles but did not fully understand their ways or reasons. ? A characteristic which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery? (Chopin 19). ? She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others? (Chopin 31). Edna continues to be shunned from the apparent Creole clique when Madame Ratignolle says, ? she is not one of us; she is not like us? (Chopin 35). Along with Edna's feelings of separation and solitude, she felt trapped by her family, especially her children.

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman? (Chopin 16). When her kids spent part of the summer with grandma Pontellier, Edna didn't even miss them. In fact, their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which fate had not fitted her? (Chopin 33).

Despite Edna's feelings of entrapment by her family, she grew fond of both her husband and children as time went on. She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution? (Chopin 33).

It was a more twisted fondness that Edna expressed toward her children. She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them? (Chopin 33). Her children and husband further separate Edna from the society in which she lives. Edna is pulled in two different directions; she is torn between what she believes is right and what the society that she inhabits sets forth as the way things should be.

Edna's husband follows the characteristics of a husband during the late 1800s. Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife? (Chopin 95). He also views his wife as a typical husband of this time period would. When Edna returns home with a sunburn Leonce angrily states, you are burnt beyond recognition?; looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage? (Chopin 7). This view of a man's wife

being his possession is prevalent throughout the entire novel, especially in the household of Leonce and Edna Pontellier.

Sexuality was another aspect that made Edna an outcast in this society. Any kind of outward sexuality during this time period was strictly against social codes and values and was thought of as immoral. ? Their very moral nature did not allow any doubt that sex was to be kept to themselves and not outwardly expressed? (Kniffen 46). In fact, ? the women associated sex more with children than pleasure, for fear that it was unholy and against puritan views? (Finiels 18). This further portrays how oppressed women really were during this time period. They were basically not supposed to enjoy anything, only work hard and please others. A life somewhat centered on everyone but themselves.

This Creole society that is the setting of the novel leads to both the rise and fall of Edna Pontellier. She rises as she finds ways to overcome her feelings of entrapment and worthlessness in this society that plagues her with feelings of solitude and oppression. She falls only to save herself from this hell, and finds death is the only way to end her misery. She goes to the beach, removes all of her clothing, and proceeds to swim out into the deep cold Gulf as the glimmering sun sets beyond the horizon. She notes that the sea is, ? sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace? (Chopin 189). She swims on and on, she did not look back now, but went on and on. The chilling Gulf waves slowly engulfed her, and her hell was no more.