

"the courageous soul that dares and defies": naturalism in the awakening essay

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Critic Donald Pizer understands literary naturalism as the artistic result of unremitting hardship, both personal and social. Taken one step further, literary naturalism laments humankind's lot through its focus on characters that attempt to break free from their suffering, only to suffer more in the attempt.

A naturalist author, in Pizer's mind, " grounds his fiction in the social realities of his historical moment and he therefore cannot help being especially responsive to social reality when that reality impinges cruelly on the fates of most men...[T]he naturalistic ethos, which views man as circumscribed by conditions of life over which he has no control, appears to be confirmed during periods of social malaise and individual hardship" (Pizer 153).

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is one such work. Set in turn of the century New Orleans, *The Awakening* details the futile attempts of the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, to realize a modicum of personal freedom amid the socially constrictive Victorian era, wherein the roles allowed to females consisted exclusively of wifedom and motherhood.

Where the novel differs from other naturalist novels of its time, however, is in its treatment of the artist. This essay will show that *The Awakening* is best understood less so as an example of naturalist fiction and more so as a manifesto that highlights the intense social sacrifices that the pursuit of art demands.

Chopin's nod to naturalism in *The Awakening* focuses wholly on the conundrum of freedom faced by women like Edna, who long for personal

freedom, yet feel biologically bound to their children, and unable to leave them as a result.

In Pizer's words, " though Edna may reject...the socially-constructed role of a mother's total absorption in her children, she has not escaped the biologically essentialist act of giving birth to children and thus finding within herself the protective emotions of a mother" (Pizer 6). We see this especially toward the end of the novel, once Edna has struck out alone.

Though for all intents and purposes she has achieved her aim - she is free of her husband and painting regularly - she suffers agony at the loss of her children. " It was with a wrench and pang that Edna left her children. She carried away with her the sound of their voices and the touch of their cheeks. All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song" (Chopin 248).

Critic Peter Ramos understands *The Awakening* as a " subtle but compelling critique of...naturalism" (Ramos 148).

Through Edna, says Ramos, Chopin " implies that in order for women like Edna to survive, the philosophical boundaries and consequences associated with these literary genres can and must be overcome. By...presenting women who seem to have a modicum of agency and autonomy, as well as a protagonist who mistakenly comes to believe that she has no say over her own fate, it undermines naturalism's claims of determinism" (Ramos 148).

However, the more distinct means by which Chopin deviates from naturalism occurs through the character of Mademoiselle Reisz, a woman who has transcended biological determinism through the commitment to her art.

The independence and sacrifice that Reisz the artist embodies stands in stark relief to Edna, the mother posing as an artist. Chopin's novel states in no uncertain terms that there are two reasons why Edna fails and ends her own life: she cannot be alone, and she cannot move beyond her identify as a mother, except through death.

We see this most poignantly illustrated immediately before Edna's suicide, when she imagines " the children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (Chopin 300).

Similarly, Edna's inability to truly embrace her art and simultaneously, her aloneness, appears in the following passage: " Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of existence, leaving her alone" (Chopin 300).

Edna's final thoughts envision the derision that Mademoiselle Reisz would heap upon her suicide, were she a witness to it. " How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! " And you call yourself

an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies" (Chopin 302).

Chopin's message appears to be that though women such as Edna may delude themselves into thinking it is the fault of biology that they cannot strike out on their own, the true fault lies in their inability to free themselves from their identity as "mother-woman" (Chopin 19). In Chopin's mind, it is Edna's inability to fully embrace her art that keeps her at the mercy of patriarchal social restraints.

In a similar vein as other turn of the century naturalist novels, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* "illuminates the socio-economic and cultural realities women like Edna faced, as well as the physical desires and social needs society denied them" (Ramos 148). However, the novel diverges from the form in the relationship that develops between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz, and through Reisz, Chopin delivers her ultimate message: the artist must accept the social consequences of her calling.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York: Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1899. Print.

Pizer, Donald. "American Naturalism in Its 'Perfect' State." *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1993. 153-166. Web.

Pizer, Donald. "A Note on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Naturalistic Fiction." *The Southern Literary Journal* 33. 2 (2001): 5-13. Web.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-courageous-soul-that-dares-and-defies-naturalism-in-the-awakening-essay/>

Ramos, Peter. "Unbearable Realism: Freedom, Ethics and Identity in The Awakening." *College Literature* 37. 4 (2010): 145-152. Web.