

Softening of the stereotypes

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



Kate Chopin, an American author, wrote during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the movement for women's liberation was taking place (Chopin XVII). When the movement began, two major stereotypes were created. The New Woman depicts women who are intelligent and innocent, yet empowered.

The femme fatale depicts a woman who is desired by many men but only focuses on her own desires (Chopin XIII). To combat stereotypes and expectations for women at the time, Chopin wrote *The Awakening* in the mindset of Edna Pontellier, who disregards what society expects of her. Although Mrs. Pontellier is married to Lonce Pontellier, she is in love with two other men, Robert Lebrun, and Alce Arobin. By representing expectations of society through Mr. Pontellier, representing different stereotypes of women through Lebrun and Arobin, and showing Mrs. Pontellier's unconformity, Chopin uses *The Awakening* to contradict society and literature of her time (Chopin XIII).

Mr. Pontellier is a businessman who supports many of the expectations for women during the 1800s. For example, he expects Mrs. Pontellier to look after their children, Raoul and Etienne, and he often scolds her when he feels she is not doing her job well enough. He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on Earth was it? (Chopin 8). This quote shows that Mr. Pontellier expected his wife to care for their children since he felt he did not have time. This quote also shows that Mr. Pontellier demands respect from Mrs. Pontellier. He expects her to listen to his commands, and he treats her as a piece of property, which is representative of many

marriages at the time (Married Women's Property Laws: Law Library of Congress). He shows this when he says, 'You are burnt beyond recognition' [...] looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property (Chopin 3). Through these actions and expectations, Chopin uses Mr. Pontellier to represent marriages and expectations in her time.

Chopin not only represents society's expectations of women through Mr. Pontellier's actions; she also represents the stereotypes of the *femme fatale* and the New Woman. To Mrs. Pontellier's first lover, Lebrun, she is the New Woman. Lebrun represents the portion of society that sees women as empowered, intelligent, and innocent. This can be seen when Lebrun interacts with Mrs. Pontellier, such as when he and Mrs. Pontellier are talking about what they might do at their vacation island, the Grand Isle. He says, 'We'll go wherever you like' (Chopin 52). In sharp contrast to Mr. Pontellier, when Lebrun speaks with Mrs. Pontellier, he allows her more freedom such as choosing where to go. These details show that he not only loves her but he respects her in a way most men did not respect women at the time. By characterizing Lebrun in this way, Chopin represents the sector of her society that respects women and supports the revolution.

However, to Mrs. Pontellier's second lover, Arobin, Mrs. Pontellier is a *femme fatale*. She is desired by several men, her husband, Lebrun, and Arobin, yet she only follows her own desires to love Lebrun. At times, Mrs. Pontellier even openly rejected Arobin's affectionate gestures. One evening after getting home from the races with Arobin, he kisses her hand, and she quickly

stands up and backs away. As Arobin leaves she feels, Somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity, (Chopin 119). She also thinks to herself, What would he think? (Chopin 119). However, she is not thinking of what Mr. Pontellier would think. Instead, she is wondering what Lebrun would think, which shows that her actions are driven by her desires of Lebrun (Chopin 119). By using the femme fatale personification in combination with the mindset of Mrs. Pontellier, the reader understands her actions. It shows that Mrs. Pontellier is seeking to be able to express herself and be free from her husband. This makes her socially unaccepted acts more understandable, and they fight the stereotypes of the time period. Another way Chopin combats the nineteenth-century societal stereotypes is through Mrs. Pontellier's actions. Since the novel is written from her perspective, the reader finds it easier to sympathize with Mrs. Pontellier's feelings of oppression from the expectations Mr. Pontellier has for her. The expectation that women are the sole caretakers of the children is combatted because, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman, (Chopin 11). She did love her children, but, in an uneven impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart, she would sometimes forget them (Chopin 28). Had Mr. Pontellier accepted that his wife was not a very matronly person and then helped her with the caretaking of their children, their relationship may have been more successful. With a successful and loving relationship, Mrs. Pontellier would have felt less of a need to seek out love in other places, such as from her other lovers, Arobin and Lebrun. By showing the Pontellier's relationship through Mrs. Pontellier's

mind, the reader is able to understand how oppressive it is, and how society and Mr. Pontellier's actions affect Mrs. Pontellier.

The effects of the oppression Mrs. Pontellier has suffered are seen at the end of the novel when Mrs. Pontellier drowns herself off the shore of the Grand Isle. She does this because she cannot bear to live with her husband who will only accept her if she is what he wants her to be. However, she also knows that she cannot simply leave for another man because of her children. This is shown when she says to herself, To-day it is Arobin, to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Lonce Pontellier, but Raoul and Etienne! (Chopin 176). This quote shows her eternal search for love and acceptance by the way she says that in the future she might acquire yet another man to love. It also shows that she does not care for her husband. In fact, she wants to leave him, but she knows she cannot leave her children with the disgrace society will push upon them. After this internal contemplation, she drowns by the Grand Isle because it was too much to bear that in no circumstances she and society would be appeased. This act, along with her reasons for it, shows what the effects of society can be. Since the 1800s, women have gained more rights, and they are no longer viewed as property (Detailed Timeline).

It is also common to see women in the workforce today. In a study done by the Center for American Progress, it was found that 42% of mothers are the primary workers of the household (Godfrey). Since mothers are beginning to do more work, it is more common to see fathers taking care of the children

(Godfrey). Today women not treated as property, but rather they are treated as valuable members of society.

Today's society also pushes for more equal treatment of women. While society still has some stereotypes of women, those who believe in equal rights are actively working to combat them. Organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), fight against stereotypes about women. These organizations focus on helping women attain equality by advocating equal rights in education and employment. They also speak out against gender-based domestic violence, and physical and mental abuse from husbands. (ACLU). These organizations fight against stereotypes and advocate women's worth. Overall, in *The Awakening*, Chopin uses different characters to express different aspects of the nineteenth-century society. Through the actions of those characters, Chopin combats the stereotypes and expectations of women. Lebrun and Arobin each represent stereotypes of what people thought of women at the time, and Mr. Pontellier shows the expectations placed on women. Mrs. Pontellier's rebellious nature, and her final act of drowning by the Grand Isle, ties the story together and shows what the effects of an oppressive society can be.

Today, society is much different and women have many more opportunities, which can be seen through the contrast of today's society compared to the one Chopin writes about. Although society is still not perfect, many people support equality for women, and they are actively combatting stereotypes and expectations.