Kate Chopin
The Awakening & The Southern Renaissance

Objectives

1. Recognize the shifting perspective or frame of the narrative voice in *The Awakening*.
2. Identify textual repetitions in the novel and how they remind readers of earlier scenes or link scenes.
3. Relate Chopin's *The Awakening* to the other literary and artistic movements in America encountered in the course.
4. Recognize the proto-feminist relationship among Woolf's and Chopin's works.

Reading Assignment

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*.

A History of Women's Achievement in America. "Women Begin to Transform Themselves." Ambrose Video, 2006.

Commentary

Kate Chopin was born and lived in the American South but came from an internationally-oriented family. Her father was from Ireland and her mother was a part of the French community in St. Louis, Missouri. She left St. Louis when she married in 1870, and lived in New Orleans until 1884, two years after her husband's death, at which point she returned to St. Louis, which had a literary and artistic society with which she was more familiar. The time in New Orleans, however, would deeply shape her literary work, providing a worldview and locations for her subsequent fiction. *The Awakening* is her most famous novella (first published in 1899), although it was condemned at the time for what critics saw as immorality. Chopin died relatively young in 1904 while visiting the St. Louis World's Fair – she had been writing for only 12 years by the time she died.

The plot of *The Awakening* is relatively straight forward, and the interest for the reader lies in the narrative style and the textual repetitions. Edna Pontellier is married to Léonce Pontellier in New Orleans, but they have an unhappy marriage. Edna falls in love with

Robert Lebrun, who eventually leaves New Orleans to avoid their relationship, which would be doomed. Edna's friends, Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, provide different ideals of femininity and warn her of social limitations. Eventually, when Léonce Pontellier leaves Edna for an extended period and sends their children away, Edna experiences her "awakening." Contrary to the social pressures of her time period and social milieu, Edna wishes to become her own person, free in her desires and personal growth. When Robert Lebrun returns, they confess their love, but he leaves her forever, and she is distraught with this loss. The novella then ends ambiguously with Edna swimming in the Gulf of Mexico.

The two scenes that have aroused the most sustained critical attention are Edna's "awakening" and her swimming far out to sea at the end of the novel. Both are ambiguous. These ambiguities are compounded by the detachment of the narrator from the plot and the stylistic innovations Chopin employs in narrative form. Moreover, small textual repetitions send the reader "back and forth" in the book as scenes are linked to each other by these repetitions. In addition, the consciousness of the narrator is explored through the narrative form, which reflects the protagonist's experiences and feelings.

The Southern Renaissance

Chopin is often regarded as an early figure in what would become the "Southern Renaissance." She wrote earlier than the mainstream authors of this movement, but she anticipated much of their innovation. The Southern Renaissance authors are particularly known for their use of modernist literary techniques and innovations more closely associated with European-based art movements. The literary trends that developed between the First World War and the Second World War are collectively known as "modernist" and were a driving force behind the Southern Renaissance, but these artistic innovations were also anticipated in other locations at earlier dates. Chopin's writings were one of those innovations. Prior to the First World War, literature from the American South was dominated by nostalgic presentations of life prior to the American Civil War, and much of this literature promoted a racist view of an idyllic world amidst slavery and the rural (yet genteel) life of the plantation. In this sense, it was like the literary genre in Britain associated with the country house and rural life rather than the city (most often associated with the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, perhaps exemplified by Jane Austen's novels). The British genre, however, was not nostalgic for a pre-war decadence and did not entail the preservation of slavery – in Austen's work, such topics

appear rarely, and they are not condoned (even if the wealth and leisure of the characters is based on income from foreign assets made possible by the slave trade).

While Southern Literature idealized this rural past of plantation life that depended on slavery in order to maintain a genteel and leisured existence, Chopin instead wrote works like *The Awakening*. This makes her different. Other authors followed her lead, and in an approximate parallel to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the Southern Renaissance authors began to produced literature that critiqued the social conditions of the American South and developed more *avant-garde* or experimental styles. While her contemporaries were looking backward to the American South prior to the ending of the Civil War in 1865, Chopin was looking forward and was integrating cutting edge European ideas and aesthetics into her stories and novellas, such as her extensive allusions to her contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche (Bradley 40-41), whom she read in German before he was translated into English (44), and her familiarity with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, whose plays are linked with the New Woman movement discussed by Virginia Woolf (Den Tandt 74).

Some authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston, who was a vital figure in the Harlem Renaissance, bridged both literary movements. The poets who would later develop "The New Criticism" were also early developers of the Southern Renaissance, and their critical works defined what was emerging at the time as the modern discipline of English (as distinct from Literary History or Classics). The most famous author in the Southern Renaissance was William Faulkner, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949. His works integrated many modernist features that we will find in a protean form in Chopin's *The Awakening*.

American Stylistic Innovations

The stream of consciousness technique is particularly prominent in Chopin's works and is her most frequently cited stylistic innovation. Faulkner also developed the technique extensively, but it is already noticeable in Chopin's 1899 novella more than 25 years prior to Faulkner's major works. The American psychologist William James, at Harvard University, first developed the particular notion that a text could narrate the internal peculiarities of human thought in its irrational and ever-changing forms – this is what "stream of consciousness" means: not only thoughts but the peculiar associative and irrational patterns of thinking. He proposed the idea in 1890 in his book *Principles of Psychology*, and though we do not know a great deal about Chopin's contact with James' works, he did contribute articles to the *Journal of*

Speculative Philosophy run by the St. Louis Movement, a group to which Chopin belonged, and Moseley has argued that the function of music in *The Awakening* depends on James' discussion of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (369). In *Principles of Psychology*, James argued the unconscious mind relies on a continuous flow of associations, thoughts, memories, and irrational "jumps" between ideas (for example, if asked about your breakfast, you might also think about your frying pan and the roommate who actually owns it and then your feelings about this roommate, even though this is "irrational" or seemingly unrelated to your breakfast).

The concept proved important as a narrative technique for fiction and prose in general. James was famous for his own psychological research at Harvard University, where he was a professor, as well as his philosophical arguments for religious faith, but this was compounded by fame in several other areas – William James was the brother of the famous novelist Henry James, who used a variant of the "stream of consciousness" idea that he called the "narrative consciousness," such as in his novels *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*. For Henry James, this occasionally meant employing the associative leaps and irrational connections theorized by his brother, but it was primarily a tool that he used to restrict the narrative voice to the perspective of a particular character. This is to say, the narrator in such a novel is no longer omniscient and does not have access to information, feelings, or facts that are outside of the "consciousness" of a particular character. Chopin does very much the same thing in *The Awakening* (in 1899) as James does in *The Wings of the Dove* (in 1902).

The American novelist and poet Gertrude Stein studied Psychology under William James at Radcliffe College (a coordinate college of Harvard for women) before moving to Paris to become a writer. Her experiments focused on "Normal Motor Automatism," which hypothesized the unconscious "stream" could be expressed when people were distracted between two activities, such as writing while speaking – the consequent mistakes were assumed to be expressions of the unconscious. Stein later employed this technique to write with her own form of the "stream of consciousness." She went on to study embryology at the Johns Hopkins Medical School but left for Paris without completing her medical degree. While in Paris, she not only used these techniques in her own highly complex works, such as *Tender Buttons*, but influenced other modernist writers and painters. She was close friends with both Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, and collected the works of Paul Cézanne, Pierre-August Renoir, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. In this way, she influenced Georges Braque's and Picasso's theory of Cubism. She was an influence on familiar modernist

authors at this time as well, most notably the young Americans Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and Sherwood Anderson. Hemingway even refers to her in the epigram to *The Sun Also Rises*, and she was a major influence on his work. In many respects, Stein's notion of "Normal Motor Automatism" and Automatic Writing went on to influence the Surrealists as well as the development from Henry James' "narrative consciousness" to the "stream of consciousness," which was intended to include the unconscious thoughts and associations of characters.

In these respect, Chopin is not only often associated with the Southern Renaissance but is also seen as a proto-modernist who anticipated the literary developments that would soon follow after her relatively early death – you may find it helpful to compare her emphasis on thought and stream of consciousness with Hemingway, who was deeply influenced by these concepts yet decided to almost completely remove all forms of interiority from his writing (they instead show up in actions, from which we infer that the characters have an internal life we are simply unable to access). Some critics have given particular attention to Chopin's innovative techniques (Nolan 118–131) while others focus on her social critique (Heilmann 87–104), but both components of her work show her anticipation of the Southern Renaissance and the artistic movements that critics would later identify under the umbrella term "Modernism."

Reading *The Awakening*

As is noted above, small scale repetitions, narrative form, and literary allusions to other texts all play major roles in Chopin's writing, especially in *The Awakening*. An immediate example occurs on the first pages of the novella. The parrot (a bird that can speak but that does not fully understand language) draws the reader's attention to the core problems of the novel by saying "*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!* That's all right!" (Chopin 1). Readers will first notice the competition between French and English in this quotation, and a quick translation reveals that the bird is saying "Go Away! Go Away! For Heaven's sake!" The caged bird is telling us to flee in French, while in English it is reassuring us "That's all right!" (Chopin 1). The themes that emerge in these opening lines, then, are freedom and bondage, escape or awakening, and the possibility for consciousness and unconsciousness. The bird is caged but calls for escape, its voice is divided by language and competing narrative realities, and we are unsure if the bird is self-conscious or not. As the novella progresses, we realize the same themes apply to our protagonist, Edna, who is caged, seeks an awakening and freedom, and is continually torn between being either self-conscious or

unthinking. The narrative voice is continually shifting as well, and we are unsure how to understand these conflicts. This situation gives us, as readers, a great deal of interpretive responsibility.

Kindred problems emerge quickly in the narrative. As we move to the seventh paragraph of the novella, on pages 1 and 2, we cannot tell if we are inhabiting the narrator's thoughts or Mr. Pontellier's. The narrator's position, either independent of the characters or within Mr. Pontellier's frame of reference, remains confused across this brief chapter as a whole. Edna is referred to across the chapter as "his wife" or "Mrs. Pontellier" rather than by her own name, and we only discover her name when he speaks it at the close of the chapter (Chopin 3). That is, we understand her only from the perspective of or in relation to him, not on her own. The chapter also identifies characters by race in a manner that reflects Mr. Pontellier's views rather than those of his wife, such as when the narrator (almost certainly inside Mr. Pontellier's frame of reference) notes "A quadroon nurse followed them" (Chopin 2). We are also reminded that while we have access to Mr. Pontellier's feelings in this chapter, Edna's feelings are only presented (in this chapter and the second) as "some appearance" (2) or "as if" (4). This is to say, we can be told what Mr. Pontellier feels, but we can only interpret Edna's feelings based on what Mr. Pontellier is able to *see* of her. This suggests strongly that we need to be observant with regard to the narrative voice – our narrator moves around between the perspectives of characters and has limited ability to report directly on what characters think. This is also a provocation – we cannot "hear" Edna's thoughts at this point because she has not "awakened" into self-consciousness. The novella repeatedly refers to her as either thinking or *not* thinking, and we as readers cannot occupy her mind in the narrative voice until she is self-conscious.

As examples of this "thinking" or "not thinking" by Edna, watch for peculiar phrases. We are told by the narrator that "She could not have told why she was crying" (7), which suggests that Edna is unable to understand her own emotions. She experiences emotions, but she is unable to understand *why* she feels them, much like the parrot can say words in the opening of the novel but cannot understand them. This provocative phrase, which reflects Edna's repressive society and her unconsciousness when she experiences this repression, is further emphasized in the next paragraph when her inability to understand her position is again presented as "unthinking":

> An *indescribable* oppression, which seemed to generate in some *unfamiliar part of her consciousness*, filled her whole being with a *vague* anguish. It was like a shadow, like a

> mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She *did not sit there inwardly* upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. *She was just having a good cry all to herself*. (7; emphasis added)

The impossibility of describing her oppression shows that she is not even aware of it because it occupies an "unfamiliar part of her consciousness," and furthermore, while we and the narrator are aware of its origin in her husband and society, she is incapable of understanding this and thinks she is just "having a good cry" for no particular reason.

Precisely the same sentiments repeat at the beginning of Chapter 6 when the narrator tells us "Edna Pontellier *could not have told why*, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined" (14; emphasis added). In effect, we are being reminded that Edna does not understand why she takes some actions. This is made clear when the narrator emphasizes that Edna "followed in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses" (14-15). These are not Edna's choices, but rather her unthinking obediences to impulses, which are not conscious thoughts. Nevertheless, the first hints of Edna's awakening begin here: "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her" (15). The nature of the light is vague and "certain," which is a vague word, but we as readers already have a sense of what is developing. The narrative voice is growing in parallel to Edna's awakening mind and consciousness.

The great provocation, however, falls at the end of this chapter when the narrator tells us:

> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; *to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation*.
>
> The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. *The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace*. (15; emphasis added)

These comments reappear in a direct repetition that should send readers back to this moment in the text, the moment of Edna's first vague

awakening. Despite the ambiguities of the novella's ending, in its final scene, we are sent back and given hints when the narrator's voice tells us "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (136). The passage is an exact repetition.

To close the circle of this repetition, after Edna's extensive thoughts and self-discovery in her awakening, the novel closes as it opens. The narrator tells us that Edna "was not thinking… as she walked down to the beach" after a paragraph that is detailed in its explorations of thoughts and desires (135).

Critical interpretations of the ending of the novel are widely varied. Some critics point to the bees as a reminder of the Greek Goddess Artemis, the goddess of chastity who is associated with bees. Hence, Edna is swimming out of reality into a mythical world. Others emphasize the political resistance to authority in Edna's actions since her swimming has earlier been tied to female power (37, 38). Still others point out that Edna has constructed reasonable alibis in which her death would appear to be an accident. Choosing from among these potential interpretations is the reader's responsibility since Chopin has very deliberately left the novel's ending ambiguous, which makes it difficult for us to experience the "not thinking" of Edna. The effect in all cases is to "awaken" the reader.

Questions for Self-Review

1. How would you describe Edna's "awakening"?
2. How does the voice of the narrator differ from or reveal the voices of the characters?
3. What does the ending of the novel mean?
4. Why would critics of Chopin's time period have responded to the novel as if it were obscene?

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Author: James Gifford
Editor: Lucie Kotesovska