

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction and Literary Review**

In the literary world many writers reach the height of their power and fame while they are living. However, there are some writers whose works have been overlooked for centuries for their controversial contents. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* once suffered for its controversy among American literary critics and readers in the nineteenth century. The novel's content presents the story of a woman's attempt to gain her personal freedom and desire suppressed by patriarchy. As a person who awakens into the realization of "her position in the universe as a human being", Edna Pontellier starts to think that her present life, a convenient life with a wealthy husband and two kids, is not the life she really wants. The public questioned whether the action of its female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, was socially acceptable as it clearly challenged the conventional role of women in the society. Soon after its publication, *The Awakening* was massively disapproved for its outrageous sexuality and "immorality" apparent in Edna's adulterous affair and her self-confidence. This outcry of disapproval banished Chopin from the St. Louis Art Association and her later works were consequently disregarded. Under these enormous social pressures, Chopin's career as a writer was not considered a success during her lifetime.

### **Kate Chopin's Biography**

Like her novel, Chopin's life is one of long patriarchal struggle. It is obvious that Kate Chopin creates *The Awakening* as partly a reflection of her life, especially the idea of "*emancipation*" from the patriarchal society (Walker, 1993, p.6). According to Emily Toth and Nancy Walker (Toth, 1992; Walker, 1993), Chopin's biographers, Chopin was raised in a matriarchal surrounding, her great-grandmother, grandmother and mother, who were all widows, were the main female figures in her childhood. These female presences forged her strong sense of female bonding and belief in women's ability to survive in the male dominated environment. Chopin's great grandmother, Victoria Verdon Charleville, was her first teacher who

taught Chopin the stories of strong maternal ancestry which could be counted as her first step into the literary world. Victoria Charleville's mother had been the first woman in St. Louis who achieved legal separation from her husband, after which she raised her five children and succeeded in a shipping business on the Mississippi. She grew up with the stories and experiences of women who could live without men and they greatly inspired Chopin's attitude toward gender equality.

Chopin's direct experience with gender inequality was when she left her family maternal surrounding by moving to New Orleans. This was the city that later added the elements of "local color" in her work as she observed its cultural division among the French, American and Mexican who all shared different life styles in the same space. When Chopin was twenty, she married Oscar Chopin and settled down in New Orleans. She was pregnant with her first child and was engaged with the domesticity in the role of wife and mother. When Oscar's business failed, Chopin's family moved to Cloutierville, in Natchitoches Parish. Her life in Cloutierville is an unpleasant one as she was seen as an outsider. This is because her gestures and manners were distinct from other women in such society. She was gossiped as being flirtatious and independent such as riding a horse and smoking some cigarettes, which was not the behavior of Creole women in Cloutierville's society. In 1879, Oscar Chopin died of swamp fever, leaving Chopin a single mother with six children. Hence, Chopin had to work herself to earn money for her family, tasks she was not accustomed to, but these conditions brought her to the fact that she could be a family provider as well as men.

Beginning her literary career, Chopin wrote short stories published in local newspapers, and gained her fame as a writer with numerous works such as short stories, novels, poems and plays. She finished her first novel, *At Fault*, which was published in 1880, and was beginning to be a respectable writer even though her writing did not provide her much money. As *The Awakening* was published in 1890, it also ended her career at the same time.

## Literature Review

Today *The Awakening* is widely acknowledged and appreciated among critics, scholars and readers not only for its fabulous and rich language, but also for its literary devices such as fertile imagery and symbolism. Moreover, *The Awakening* provides abundantly useful and vivid cultural information of Louisianan Creole. Although earlier critics such as Kenneth Eble called *The Awakening* “a forgotten novel” (Eble, 1956, 261, quoted in Walker, 1993, p.141), it has been accepted by the recent literary critics, firstly introduced by Per Seyersted, as a classic and has become a favorable novel among literary academia (Walker, p.145). Additionally, this novel is highly acknowledged as a literary bridge between women’s writing in the Victorian nineteenth century and the modern period. Susan J. Rosowski addresses Chopin’s *The Awakening* as a “prototype of the novel of awakening...making connections to one other novel-then another-until they recognize that the pattern Chopin presented runs through literature about women” (Rosowski, 1987, p.33). Chopin initiates a combination of writing styles in *The Awakening*. She fuses traditional sentimental writing that is popular among the nineteenth century women writers such as Jane Austen and the Brontës with the new age of women’s writing, which expresses the women’s demand for freedom and equality.

It is simple to see why *The Awakening* serves as a qualified exemplification of feminist writing in the eyes of the critics. The reason why *The Awakening* became acceptable and acknowledged is that it corresponded to the sexual liberation movement at that time. As the feminist movement and sexual liberation gained momentum in the 1960s, a novel that questions the role of women in a patriarchal society became the symbol for women’s emancipation. Edna’s rebellious attitude toward the traditional assumption of women's roles in the society corresponds with the rise of women's rights issue, particularly in America. The reinforcement of *The Awakening* as the pivotal feminist novel is essentially found in Elaine Showalter’s essay “Traditions and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a solitary book” (1993, pp.169-189). According to Elaine Showalter, *The Awakening* is the novel that embodies the three phrases of female writing. Showalter remarks that “Kate Chopin’s literary evolution took her progressively through the three phases of nineteenth-

century American's culture and women's writing". She further explains that *The Awakening* goes beyond three successive traditions in women's fiction divided into the domestic sentimentalist, the post-Civil War local color and the New Women writers. These three phrases are all embedded in Chopin's characterization of domestic Ratignolle, artistic Reisz and Edna whose "revolution from romantic fantasies of fusion with another person" to the desired "solitary soul". Remarkably, Showalter praises, Chopin's portrayals of Edna's instinctive actions that break the social convention also reflect the agenda of late nineteenth-century feminists, which is a demand for women's right and status. Portraying the idea of woman's emancipation from the patriarchal ruling, "*The Awakening* become[s] a solitary book, one that dropped out of sight, and that remained unsung by literary historians and unread by several generations of American women writers" (p.170 ), according to Showalter. "Edna Pontellier's 'unfocused yearning' for an autonomous life is akin to Kate Chopin's yearning to write works that go beyond female plots and feminine endings" (p.171). The novel, in Showalter's criteria, marks the point of departure from the male dominated literary voice of the Brontës to the complete female writing. By encompassing Showalter's entire traditions, it is safe to say that *The Awakening* transcends itself as avant-garde novel of women's fictions. Feminist critics in the past might have adopted Chopin's *The Awakening* as a representation of sexual liberation in their ages; however, my main interest is how she deliberately outlines women's path to freedom and equality in the novel. Chopin vividly shows the process of woman's search for freedom, from suffering under subjugated conditions in patriarchal oppression, to gaining awareness of her own potentiality, to attempting to be free from male domination, to the moment of emancipation which is considered as the triumph of woman's will.

My first impression toward *The Awakening* is that I was touched by the novel's delicate and sensuous languages, which provoke reader's emotion. Chopin's writing imaginatively creates words fully containing the vivid image as if she was creating a portrait. The sensuousness in Chopin's lyric is harmonious with the novel's provocative plot. Therefore, reading *The Awakening*, I feel like I am closely witnessing Edna's actions and development in order to break free from male domination. Also, I was very interested in how the fact that *The Awakening's*

uniqueness was ahead of its time when compared to other Victorian novels. It could be said that Chopin is the first female writer who inventively allows reader to investigate a woman's personal and sexual desire. Of course, the idea of a woman yearning for individuality and refusing to conform to the social conventions and values mirrors the perspectives and attitudes of contemporary women. The large number of interpretative possibilities clearly suggests the richness of the text and Chopin's ability as a writer.

It is well documented that a large collection of *The Awakening* criticisms is devoted to the study of its relationship with Chopin's life. Emily Toth's "Kate Chopin Thinks Back Through Her Mothers: Three Stories by Kate Chopin" (1992) is a defense against Kate Chopin's earlier criticisms that *The Awakening* is neither a biographical nor a feminist novel. Those critics point out that *The Awakening* is rather an objective novel, which is detached from Chopin's own life and historical context. However, Toth classifies the novel as a feminist and biographical novel because it is a reflection of Chopin's attitude toward her life and society, especially gender. Working with Chopin's biography, Toth speculates that her friends and her family mostly influence Chopin's works. She tries to draw the similarity between people in Chopin's life and their transition into the characters in the novel. The contrast image between Chopin's female members in her family and the submissive Creole women, who seek to be the ideal wife to their husband, inspires Chopin to create Edna's conflict in *The Awakening*. Toth proposes that *The Awakening* is a portrayal of the unhappy marriage between Edna and Léonce which is based on the "actual marriage disillusion of Chopin's mother" (p. 17). Having witnessed her mother's frustration and her resolution, Chopin then creates a novel about a young woman who awakens from life imprisoned in the role of a wife and mother and becomes an individual by emancipating her self through the death. The dominant female figure in Chopin's life includes her great grandmother who is similar to Reisz in the aspect that she is ahead of her time in term of gender equality. Toth then concludes that because the novel is based on Chopin's actual experience, the feminist characteristics of Chopin's mother and great grand-mother that are contrast to the belief and convention of the submissive Creole women, it should be logical that the novel's main conflict and theme represent the author's feminist attitude toward

patriarchal oppression. All in all, Toth uses these similarities between Chopin's biography and the characters in *The Awakening* to explore the historical background of the novel, treating the novel as a kind of insight into how Chopin's feminist attitude is constructed.

Toth's biographical approach is rather limited to studying the obviousness in a very scientific manner. The methods she applied focus on the speculation of factual information rather than interpreting what she claimed as the feminist aspect of the novel. Her article provides no new interpretation or understanding of the text but merely proves how its content relates to Chopin's real life. Needless to say, Toth's biography is quite problematic and highly debatable, especially her attempt to probe Chopin's thought process and inspiration. Moreover, the parallelism between the characters and people in Chopin's reality could not possibly be the same, placing Toth's entire hypothesis in jeopardy. Regardless of its flaw, there are some benefits to Toth's argument. For instance, Toth's article reaffirms the status of *The Awakening* as a feminist novel on the basis that it is written by a female author with the agenda for woman's autonomy. In Toth's point of view, *The Awakening* celebrates feminism because the author and the content declare the female's stance and desire to resist the patriarchal system.

While Toth's criticism concentrates on *The Awakening*'s feminism based on biographical approach, Donald Pizer's "A Note on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Naturalistic Fiction" (2001, pp.5-13) explores the canonized status of *The Awakening* through Naturalistic scope. Pizer's article offers the idea of "plain meaning" (p.5) – a novel's central theme which arises from the relationship between the novel and the concept of naturalism. He states that Edna's awakening and self-transformation, the core of the novel, is endorsed by natural and social contexts throughout the novel. To put it simply, Edna's awakening is impossible had she remained outside the two contexts. The sea, for example, provides Edna's awakening moment, first when she realizes that she can swim on her own and then later when she takes her last breath by walking into the sea. Symbolically speaking, Edna's birth and death take place in nature. Pizer then moves to the idea that Edna's self-transformation occurs because the other characters surrounded Edna act as her social facilitators. For example, the consistent disappearance of Edna's husband, the

romantic love with Robert and the passion toward art with Reisz. These characters chronologically help Edna to discover and transform her new identity besides her own determination. Consequently, her failure to completely transform herself is because the social and natural forces are too powerful for her to overcome.

In *The Awakening*, the idea of naturalism, or Darwin's all-conquering concept of natural selection, is represented by the patriarchal system as its ideology naturally and socially controls people. In other words, an individual is powerless against the opposing social and natural forces. In Pizer's point of view, Edna's tragic end is determined and can be predicted by the fact that Chopin portrays Edna as a woman who desires to break away from the patriarchy by rejecting the role of a wife and mother as well as isolating herself from her family - a vain attempt in naturalism framework. Pizer states that Edna's fate is predestined purely because of her biological status as a mother; therefore, she naturally cannot deny her genetically designed maternal instinct. Likewise, she cannot totally reject the social bond between her and other characters especially Robert. The fact that Robert, like other Creole men, believes in patriarchal convention stops Edna's attempt to struggle against female confinement in wife and mother roles. Pizer then concludes that Edna's final moment of walking into the sea is an act of hopeless desperation. Realizing that the rebellion against patriarchal convention is a romantic fantasy and coming to term with the fact that she cannot escape from maternal role, Edna totally gives up her endeavor to live. Thus, she commits suicide in order to escape from the broken fantasy and slavery soul.

Pizer uses naturalism to explain the human relationship among the characters in the novel but it is quite ironic that the very concept itself destroys the idea of human beings. According to Pizer, who follows naturalism strictly, the concept of "nature" is not limited to just human struggle for superiority but also extended to some outside forces that rule over the relationship of every individual (p.6). What I am most troubled in Pizer's article is whether the concept of the universal "nature" even existed. It is easy to question if the concept of nature, some kind of overwhelming natural forces outside our control, is the same as human's "nature". Could the existence of nature be culturally constructed rather than being external forces? Perhaps what Pizer sees as the "natural" characteristic of human

beings such as the inevitability of women being selected by men may be a culturally constructed belief instead of a fact (p.9). These suspicions aim to prove that Pizer's framework of "nature" is problematic and rather self-contradictory. The obvious flaw in Pizer's framework is his solution to Edna's journey. He contemplates that Edna fails in her attempt at emancipation because there is no way for her to resist or escape the maternal role - a position placed "naturally" upon her at birth. Without clarifying whether or not the "nature" of the individual is socially constructed or is a part of the natural phenomena, Pizer's article will only provide another framework on how the novel functions but never explore its significance. Edna, in Pizer's argument, will always remain a submissive woman as she is forever defeated by her maternal instinct. From a feminist perspective, his article provides no new insight into the nature of women but simply confirms the dominant patriarchal discourse.

Similar to the previous article, in "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and *The Awakening*" (2004, pp.57-73), Jennifer B. Gray employs the encompassing theory of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses as her main Marxist analytical framework. Gray's Althusserian framework is useful because it allows her to view the relationship between the characters in the novel as part of some ideology. In this article, Gray is interested in the relationship between the female characters, most noticeably Edna, and the patriarchal hegemony – the dominant ideological state in *The Awakening*. She reveals how patriarchal ideology works through the mechanism of female suppression. She argues that *The Awakening*, despite usually being labeled as the first of the feminist novel in the nineteenth century that strives for women's self-ownership, actually cannot escape from the patriarchal process of interpellation. The female characters, despite their different roles and statuses such as wife and artist, are hailed by male dominant ideology. This analysis of the ideological interpellation in *The Awakening*, according to Gray, presents the futile effort of feminists in the nineteenth century to declare women's right for self-ownership. This is because the very idea of self-ownership is impossible as male and female alike are subjected to patriarchal ideology.

In her article, Gray presents Edna's development in searching for her identity in the patriarchal world by exploring various changes of Edna's roles that occur throughout the linear plot progression. Within this scope, Adèle and Reisz, the

main female characters Edna encounters chronologically could be interpreted as ideological influences over Edna's ideological state. By comparing Edna to Adèle and Reisz, Gray demonstrates that Edna is caught between the two supreme forms of female roles: mother-woman and artist-woman, respectively. Gray suggests that Edna cannot reach the complete female role because she is caught in the middle between the oppositional roles of Adèle and Reisz. This triangular relationship means Edna is forced to reshape her female role within the limitation of two extreme ideological positions.

This article provides a tragic solution to Edna's action at the end of the novel. Gray states that Edna's attempt to free from patriarchy is a failure because no one can escape from the ideology – a reconfirmation of Althusser's ideological state apparatuses. She argues that by having experienced both positions through the relationship with Adèle and Reisz, Edna should be able to set up her new role as a free-woman, an individual who is awakened from the ideological hailing to completely oppose the patriarchal order. However, she fails to emancipate herself because, as the plot progresses toward the end, Edna is hailed back by the patriarchal ideology as she witnessed Adèle giving birth - a supreme image of the mother-woman. Suffering a crisis of consciousness as her maternal instinct comes in conflict with her desire to be a free individual, she again returns to the maternal role by which she is occupied at the beginning of the novel. In short, the process of emancipation ends when Edna realizes that she cannot maintain her role as a free-woman anymore for she is the mother of her children. Unable to free neither herself nor to go back to her children, Edna, who cannot fit in any role, escapes from the chaos by committing suicide. Gray concludes that this rerunning action represents Edna's failure to free herself from patriarchal hailing and is the main factor contributing to Edna's tragic fate at the end. Thus, Edna's development to her self-ownership is an ideological illusion as her participations in the mother-woman role, artist-woman role and free-woman role are all theoretical hailing of the patriarchal ideology.

Similar to Pizer's, Gray's argument follows similar pattern by employing an encompassing Althusserian's ideological framework that tries to explain the oppressive relationship between the female characters and the patriarchal system. The ideological framework, like Pizer's naturalism, simply explains Edna's inevitable

failure that women will always be victimized by what they feel as their natural positions as wife and mother. Hence, Gray's Althusserian framework becomes an over glorification of patriarchal domination - an overwhelming psychological instrument that dictates women's lives. In my opinion, Gray's method neglects to explore the power of womanhood. Her lack of emphasis on women's potentials is understandable as the Althusserian ideological framework will simply state that it does not exist. The female characters' braveness and determination in struggling against patriarchy are in vain. There is enough evidence in the text to support that, despite being imprisoned in the roles hailed by patriarchal ideology, these female characters are still determined to maintain their self-ownership, especially Edna, who tries to emancipate herself from the system. Without carefully exploring the details of Edna's emancipation process, Gray is too quick to cast judgment on Edna's failure. She also dismisses the idea of female solidarity vividly presented in the novel. For example, how the sharing of feminine experiences between Adèle and Reisz influences Edna's decision to resist the patriarchal system. Even Adèle, despite her obvious ideological conformity, also expresses her concern for Edna throughout the story. These female qualities should be further scrutinized in order to prevent the article from being an ironical patriarchal trap in itself.

In contrast to Pizer's and Gray's arguments, there are also critics who acknowledge *The Awakening* as a triumph of female struggle against patriarchal oppression. The vivid example can be seen in John R. May's "Local Color in *The Awakening*" (1997, pp.133-138). In his article, May discusses the characteristics of local color in the novel, pointing that the uses of symbolism and setting are integrated to develop and reinforce the theme of the novel. May praises Chopin as a writer who masterfully employs a complex symbolism. He states that the symbolic nature in the novel is very significant, for example, the 'sea' in *The Awakening* symbolizes various concepts and Edna's pigeon house symbolizes a place of cooing love. Moreover, Chopin's uses of symbolism and writing techniques are compatible and inherent to the novel's central idea; the repetition of the symbols such as houses in different scenes suggests the tension between freedom and restraint. May takes the natural setting such as sea and meadow in *The Awakening* as symbol of Edna's rebellion. In contrast to the natural setting, May sets up Grand Isle as a patriarchal space that represents

Edna's torment under patriarchal oppression. Thus Edna's final moment, her descending into the sea, signifies her freedom from patriarchy.

May's article is interesting because it tries to link the local color aspect and the representation of nature in *The Awakening* to the theme of female resistance. However, it is noticeable that May's parallelism of the setting and Edna's action is rather one-dimensional. The sphere of nature is immediately taken as a symbol of Edna's freedom. Looking through feminist lens, what is missing is how exactly Edna comes to realize that the natural spheres are her answer from patriarchal oppression. Without the reader's contemplation of why Edna sees nature as a sphere of individual freedom, Edna's suicide would be no more different than an act of escape. To contradict May's argument, it is possible to say that the image of the sea might refer to Edna's triumph when she can split from her old identity imprisoned as wife and mother. Besides, the significance of Edna's ability to swim is underdeveloped. May did not consider the possibility that the scene of Edna's swimming that is repeated throughout the novel signifies an experimental process rather than a single act of symbolic gesture.

From the criticisms, the most focused aspect of *The Awakening* is undoubtedly the ending, especially the significance of Edna's suicide. Should we see Edna's death as a celebration of women's victory against patriarchy or her submissive defeat? What the three criticisms share in common is their ambiguous interpretations of Edna's "awakening". They assume that Edna's awakening process exists in a single instance without any difficulty in between - negating the possibility of her multiple attempts to resist patriarchal oppression. This line of interpretation consequently reduces the interminable nature of Chopin's ending to the binary opposition of Edna's triumph or failure. Moreover, the critics' assumptions connote that Edna's struggle is based purely on her desire as an individual. Whether it is Edna's struggle against patriarchal ideology or her nature as a woman, it is always the struggle of herself as the individual. It is as though the individual's achievement or failure is based on her attempt or lack thereof. The only thing she could do is impulsively escape oppression through suicide.

In short, to clarify problems of these articles, Edna's escape must be further explored, particularly how it contributes to *The Awakening* as a novel of

feminist triumph. Edna's withdrawal from the restraint patriarchy to her own freedom is a sophisticated process. For example, does Edna's process of emancipation and resistance enable her to separate herself from the patriarchal system completely? In fact, could her resistance reinforce patriarchal supremacy rather than contradict it? To offer some different ideas from those criticisms, I would like to point out that Edna's struggle against patriarchal oppression needs her consciousness of social construction and ideology, apart from her individualistic determination and attempt. To be entirely free from patriarchal oppression, one must first be conscious of its overwhelming power, before removing him/herself from it.

### **Thesis Statement**

Due to the fact that my attempt has been given to study the cause and the resolution of women's oppression in patriarchal society, my thesis presents the success of female struggle against patriarchal oppression through Edna's emancipation from gender role to an individual in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. My analysis is based on Kate Millet's concept of "patriarchy" presented in *Sexual Politics* (1969, chap.2). To explore the entire process of women's struggle against patriarchal oppression, it will be useful to begin with Millet's concept of "patriarchy" as a source of women's oppression. The feminist theory of Kate Millet reveals how patriarchy oppresses women through the ideological construction of femininity especially the supposedly "natural" roles of wifehood and motherhood. The patriarchal oppression illustrated in the novel becomes a closed system that demystifies the common notion of how gender roles are naturally defined and assigned at birth. To put it simply, even Edna's struggle and emancipation depend on the patriarchal system. Her attempt to resist the system by contemplating her experience with other oppressed characters such as Adèle and Mlle. Reisz ironically reinforces patriarchal domination. However, with the great endeavor to bring Edna's success in her emancipation, I find that her suicide is a key signifying the path to her liberation. At the moment of her death, Edna is able to gain her individuality as she is free from woman's confinement in the constructed feminine roles of wife and mother. In death, Edna does not only stop practicing such female roles but she also stops the vicious circle of failed patriarchal

resistance. Hence, to end the analysis with the idea that women can be free from male domination, I would like to propose that Edna, who begins her process of emancipation by trying to revolt against patriarchy from within the system, succeeds in gaining her individuality through suicide.

In chapter two, I would like to introduce a major feminist theory of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* which is relevant to feminist analysis of *The Awakening*. Millet's theory contains key concepts of "patriarchy" and "aspects of women's oppression divided into temperament, role and status".<sup>1</sup> Significantly, these concepts relate to the analysis in the novel as they are the cause and procedure for oppression of female characters. In chapter three, I will explore women's oppression and enslavement through the analysis of three female characters in *The Awakening*: Edna, Adèle and Reisz. Although their characteristics and attitudes are totally different, they share the same status as oppressed women under the patriarchal society. Using Kate Millet's framework of patriarchy in *Sexual Politics*, my thesis will present how women are totally controlled and enslaved by male dominated system. In chapter four, my thesis will unravel the paradox of Edna's emancipation process. I suspect that the harder Edna tries to resist the patriarchal oppression, the more she is powerless to it. The thesis will end, in the last chapter, with the analysis of how Edna's true awakening comes when she reaches the realization that to completely emancipate from patriarchal oppression, she needs to leave the entire patriarchal sphere. Although many critics view Edna's suicide as an act of failure that she is finally unable to struggle for freedom or some say that death is the only way to escape from her society, I consider Edna's self-annihilation is a sign of her achievement in emancipation. I would like to propose that Edna's death enables her to liberate from the patriarchy's constructed roles of wife and mother, bringing her the status of liberal individuality. Thus, her suicide is not a mere impulsive action but the ultimate sacrifice in real *awakening*.

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<sup>1</sup>See chapter 2 of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* for completed information.