

Block

2

KATE CHOPIN: *THE AWAKENING*

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

The Awakening by **Kate Chopin** is a novel published in 1899 at the very end of the 19th century and is Chopin's second and final novel. Even though this novel was published at the height of her popularity, this work literally marked the end of her career. *The Awakening* though now considered a classic as we shall see in Units 3, and 4, was not well received at the time of its publication. This could have been because the novel deals with a theme that was not acceptable to the Victorian reader. The Victorian age (between 1820 –1914) as you may be aware, corresponded more or less to the years of Queen Victoria's reign (1837 - 1901). Since this novel deals with a woman who changes drastically from a married woman and a mother to become an independent as well as sexually aware self indulgent woman, the readers of the times probably could not come to terms with the theme of the novel and hence, did not accept it. Needless to say, this novel never got its due then.

In Unit 1: we try and locate/ situate the novel *The Awakening* by providing the intellectual setting to the novel and also a brief look at the socio-cultural space of the age. We also introduce you to the writer Kate Chopin and her works and place *The Awakening* within her oeuvre. And we look at what a biographical approach to literature is and see if it helps us understand a novel better.

Unit 2: In Unit 2, we look at the context of *The Awakening*.

Unit 3: In Unit 3, we look at the critical Responses to *The Awakening*

Unit 4: In Unit 4, we look at three critical approaches to *The Awakening*

THE PEOPLE'S
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UNIT 1 LOCATING THE AWAKENING: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Intellectual Setting of *The Awakening*
- 1.3 The Nineteenth Century: A Socio-Cultural Background
 - 1.3.1 Nineteenth Century Britain
- 1.4 Location: The Writer and the Novel
- 1.5 Symbolising in *The Awakening*
- 1.6 Kate Chopin's Oeuvre
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Hints to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will introduce you to the writer **Kate Chopin** and examine the times during which she lived and wrote *The Awakening*. It is important that we learn about the writer and her times to get a better understanding of Chopin, *The Awakening* and her other writings. We will also take a look at the social and cultural milieu in which the novel is located, and at the philosophical ideas of the 19th century that prevailed then, so that you comprehend the themes of the novel better.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We will now look at and discuss the socio-cultural background and intellectual/philosophical ideas of the late nineteenth century, as those are the contexts within which the novel – *The Awakening* is set. Kate Chopin, well read and intelligent, observed with keen irony and absorbed the mood of the ending of the century. She was familiar with the works of **Gustave Flaubert (1821-80)**, (French novelist who wrote *Madame Bovary (1856)*, and Chopin's novel has been compared with **Flaubert's** through reviews that will be discussed in Unit 3), **Tolstoy (1828 – 1910)**, (Russian novelist who wrote *Anna Karenina (1878)*, to which also, some critics have compared *The Awakening*), **Guy de Maupassant (1850 -93)**, (French writer whom she greatly admired). In fact, she was so inspired by his stories, many of which dealt with dark themes of suicide, infidelity, drowning etc that she translated eight of them, managing to sell only the three most conventional. It must also be mentioned that some of the same themes are also present in her works as well. She had also read the works of other modern European writers such as, **Ibsen (1828 – 1906)**, and **Swinburne (1837 – 1909)**. Influences of American writers such as, **Walt Whitman (1819 – 92)**, (*Leaves of Grass, 1855*), **Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 – 64)**, (*The Scarlet Letter, 1850*) and **Herman Melville (1819- 91)**, (*Moby Dick, 1851*) have been traced in her work. **Henry James (1843 – 1916)**, and the psychological novel (for instance, *Portrait of a Lady (1881)*) was contemporaneous with Chopin's time. The dark vision of the

human condition as noted by German Philosopher **Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 -1860)**, influenced Chopin, as did the music of **Richard Wagner, (1813-83)**, a German composer of operas. The next section will examine the socio-cultural background/ context of the nineteenth century as well as it was during this period that the novel was written.

1.2 THE INTELLECTUAL SETTING OF *THE AWAKENING*

The decade in which *The Awakening* was published, namely, the 1890s, was a complex time, as it mirrored the unresolved tensions between the old world and the new, the transition time between the two centuries and the traditional vis a vie modern ways of thinking. Intellectual thought was at this time being redefined by the influential works of **Charles Darwin (1809 – 82)**, **Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903)** and **Aldous Huxley (1894 – 1963)**, and at the end of the century by **Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939)**.

Theories of evolution and determinism were inspiring naturalistic ways of thinking (the ways in which women were locked into social roles from which there was no escape, except through death), on the one hand there was faith in the ways of destiny and pre-ordained kinds of living and then there was science that ‘confirmed (Chopin) in her belief of the relativity of morals’: ‘*Fixed truth in any form-moral or religious or scientific-seldom Chopin’s ironic glance.*’ (Joyce Dyer, 1993, 5)

The stories of a few strong women living at this time have been documented by historians, women who demonstrated independence in personal lives and those who campaigned for women’s voting rights in the public realm. New terms for ‘ideal marriage’ were described as follows: ‘...let your *Dependence be mutual, your Independence, equal, your Obligations, reciprocal.*’ **Elizabeth Candy Stanton (1815 – 1902)**, published her radical *The Woman’s Bible* in 1895 and **Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 -1935)**, a member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, published *Women and Economics* in 1898.

Gilman argued the case for women’s economic independence as the foundation for better marriages, equal relationships and more humanity for women: ‘marriage is not perfect unless it is between class equals. There is no equality between those who do their share in the world’s work in the largest, newest and highest ways and those who do theirs in the smallest, oldest, lowest ways.’

However, although there were some actual women in the last years of the nineteenth century who were redefining the meaning of freedom and equality, most of the representations, of single or divorced women, the new woman or the widow, offer only traditional and weak solutions, hardly being able to free themselves from the patterns of marriage and family.

Joyce Dyer (1947), states this as follows: ‘*Female passion was thought to be immoral and unhealthy by even some of the most aggressive proponents of realism and feminism in the last decades of the nineteenth century*’. To suggest otherwise was to enter extremely perilous waters, the waters in which Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of *The Awakening* swims. Consequently, female characters separated from men-by their unmarried status, their disillusionment with husbands, or divorce - seldom considered the avenue of liberated sexual behaviour an option.

Even Gilman, mentioned in the last paragraph, spoke out strongly against female eroticism, sex in her views '*useful for reproduction only*' ...she argued for the '*sanctity of marriage...monogamy and fidelity*' claiming that the worst of all were '*promiscuous and temporary sex-relations.*'

Thus, we need to understand that Chopin is writing against such a socio-cultural background where her Edna Pontellier is one of the first women to think, and to express herself and act in the defiant manner in which she does. Chopin's Dr Mandelet, who shows insight into Edna's sexual psychology and is progressive in his ideas of therapy, is also advanced for her time as other physicians insisted on the values of domesticity as the cure for women's nervous and depressive conditions. The next section will look at the location of the author/ writer/ Kate Chopin and her work/novel/ *The Awakening*.

Critics have compared Kate Chopin to other American realist and naturalist writers who were her contemporaries, such as, **Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser**, Henry James, and Edna Pontellier to their heroines: 'all rather sexless compared to Edna, and their descriptions of sexual matters in general are tame'. Not only did Chopin draw a heroine who was not afraid to be a sexual being, she is honest and bold enough to articulate that extra-marital sex need not be accompanied by guilt and that a woman was perfectly justified in seeking selfhood and fulfillment outside the institutions of marriage and motherhood.

In addition, it is also clearly stated that Edna believes herself to be becoming more of a spiritual being as she continues on her journey of awakening, descending alongside in the social scale. Both role models of womanhood, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz are presented as alternative ways of being, rejected by Edna Pontellier as they are inappropriate for her. Adele is mother-woman, her identity subsumed within that of her children; with her husband too the sense of identification is so complete as to affect a strange kind of merging of selves. Mlle Reisz is the solitary artist, detached so completely from the real world that she appears to others as arrogant, or insane.

Edna is a solitary soul too, (and that was the original title of the novel), those moments in the novel many when she is enjoying her solitude with relish and abandon, when she takes pleasure in feeling her round arms, eating a hearty meal, seeing the material objects in her house as though for the first time when she is by herself, but her art does not sustain her completely; she needs her fantasies and delusions. When she swims out into the sea alone for the first time, feeling a sense of her new power and of course in the last scene when she is truly solitary without even the burden of a piece of clothing, only the hum of the bees and the fragrance of pinks to keep her company, she is also the hopeless romantic for whom the vision of the ideal world cannot be substituted by dreary reality. She is existentialist too, her vision of life - dark and sombre, presented as follows: '(there were days) when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly towards inevitable annihilation.'

The fact that Chopin's novel had the courage to embody such modernist themes through language and style that was both explicit and deeply symbolic makes *The Awakening* far ahead of other literary writing published in the late nineteenth century. The times were not prepared to receive it and thus it had to wait for another seventy years before it could claim its rightful place in the literary canon. Before we go any further, we might need to look at the sociocultural background/

context of the nineteenth century as well as it was during this period that the novel was written. This we shall do in the next section.

1.3 THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: A SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Although *The Awakening* is an ‘American’ novel, some information about the general background of nineteenth century socio-cultural contexts, readership and a more specific literary context may help you to situate and understand it better. Hence, some facts related to ‘Victorian’ England, and fiction written in the nineteenth century by British writers such as, George Eliot (1819 – 1880), Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870), Charlotte Bronte (1816 – 1855), Jane Austen (1775 – 1817), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811 – 63), etc., whom you may have read about and may be useful to you, are given in this section.

1.3.1 Nineteenth Century Britain

This was a time of great transition, from the agricultural to the industrial, a discrediting of old tradition and religious faith in favour of accepting a mechanical natural process, a new sense of empowerment for women and the working classes. Writing of fiction became a new form of commerce, readership becoming far more widespread, women accounting for a major share both as consumers and producers of fiction. Many novels were serialised in magazines and periodicals, and the readers often played an important role in deciding what the writer would write, thereby determining the text. Lending and circulating libraries mushroomed to satisfy growing demands. As regards subject matter, social comment and moral guidance were important aspects. Thematically, domestic/middle-class settings, and issues related to family, such as, marriage and morality in relationships were widely dealt with, but sex was taboo. The ‘fallen woman’ had to be punished, removed from society so the moral fabric was not compromised. However, by the last years of the century, there also began to emerge a picture of the New Woman, and novels engaged with feminist questions such as, employment for women. Still, sex and relationships that would challenge established moral codes were hardly discussed, and thus Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* would have been considered too transgressive and explicit to be accepted. We shall look at the intellectual setting of *The Awakening* next.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write a critical note on the nineteenth century background against which you may find it useful to read *The Awakening*.

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- 2) Discuss the influences upon Chopin that you think may have helped to shape her novel.

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- 3) Does this make more sense to you with your increased knowledge about the time in which Chopin lived and wrote? Give specific examples.

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- 4) How do you think the nineteenth century readership would have affected the novel?

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1.4 LOCATION: THE WRITER AND THE NOVEL

We will be discussing the novel at length later but just to give you an example of how the location of the writer and the setting of the novel, has a bearing on the novel we will be looking at some examples from the novel in this section. Another crucial aspect of the location of the writer and her novel is the setting within which the action takes place. It begins on Grand Isle, an island fifty miles south of New Orleans, a Creole summer resort, and goes on later to be situated in the city of New Orleans. The city was American, southern and Creole. The Creoles were the descendents of French and Spanish colonists of the eighteenth century. They were Catholics and believed in strong and conservative family values, spoke French, and felt a close sense of community to their own cultural group, (they formed approximately one-third of the population of New Orleans in 1860) thus, somewhat separate in identity to Anglo-American society. Their attitude towards life was easygoing, and they liked to live a life rich in sensual pleasure and enjoyment. Even so, Louisiana remained a very conservative state, the patriarchal family being the foundation of society, and even when the Creole women appeared to be frank, open and sensual, like Adele in the novel, they were in reality unquestionably chaste, religious and completely committed to their families.

In fact, this is what makes their open manner possible, and we get a sense of this contradiction reflected in the character of Adele who is openly flirtatious with Robert and is at the same time the true embodiment of the ideal devoted wife and mother. Edna is herself not from such a background, rather she is married to a Creole and at the start of the novel, seems to be thrown into an atmosphere to which she is a stranger. We hope you've done at least one reading of the novel by now.

If you remember, when Adele notices Edna's 'awakening' in the presence of Robert, she warns him, asking him to keep away from her, stating clearly, 'she is not one of us...she may make the blunder of taking you seriously.' Edna is described as Kentucky Presbyterian by birth and her own reserved and rigid upbringing clashes with the open sensuality she finds here. Not only is she awakened and subsequently propelled by her infatuation for Robert to become an unthinking drifting thing who has no anchor to restrain her, she is also attracted to Adele and Mlle Reisz in this strange seductive scenario where the inviting sea also plays a part.

New Orleans was also American, Calvinistic and Puritanical, and when Edna returns to the city at the end of her summer flirtation, newly awakened to selfhood and sexual consciousness, she has to succumb once more to the conservatism of her social roles, receiving guests every Tuesday and supervising her husband's meals among other boring domestic chores. She does not wish to do any of this now, and thus, she simply doesn't. Robert has done the honourable thing by escaping to Mexico as he is too traditional to seriously imagine a relationship with a married woman. Even towards the end of the novel, when he returns, confessing he has been imagining making her his wife despite his best judgement, he cannot visualise the kind of free relationship based on Edna's ideas of liberty and self-definition that she suggests when she says, 'I give myself where I choose.' Thus, for the second time in the novel, he runs away, leaving behind a note saying, 'Good-by- because I love you,' clearly indicating a clash of cultures. But that is something we shall examine in the next section when we discuss the use of symbolism in the novel.

1.5 SYMBOLISM IN *THE AWAKENING*

In this section we shall define symbolism and then look at instances of symbolism in *The Awakening*. Symbolism, (according to **Ross Murfin**, and **Supriya M Ray** in *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*), comes from the Greek *symballein*, meaning "to throw together", the serious and relatively sustained use of symbols to represent or suggest other things or ideas. They also suggest that along with the writer's "explicit use of a particular symbol in a literary work.... the term symbolism sometimes refers to the presence, in a work or body of works, of suggestive associations giving rise to incremental, implied meaning." The French symbolist believed that writers "create and use subjective, or private symbols in order to convey very personal and intense emotional experiences and reactions." They were of the opinion that the "network of such symbols" form the core of any literary work. With this definition to guide us, we shall now take a look at the imagery of the sea and its symbolism next.

The clash of cultures mentioned in the earlier section is also represented through the imagery of the sea that forms the backdrop of Grand Isle, sensuously

enveloping Edna in a warm embrace while it beckons her into contemplative mazes of solitude, and the harsh bleak reality that is her posh home on Esplanade Street in New Orleans where, she is compelled to live on her husband's bounty, and thus, remain one of his 'possessions.' Caught between these oppositional forces she loses herself, unable to adjust any longer to her role as wife and mother, not courageous enough to soar alone as an artist (like Mlle Reisz can), waiting for Robert who she thinks can set her free and falling into the arms of Alcee Arabin. Read the symbolism of the trip to Cheniere Chaminada, set in almost mysteriously idyllic setting where, finding the atmosphere of the church suffocating, Edna has to leave and goes into a deep sleep at Madame Antoine's. When she wakes up there are the fantasies of telling stories in which Edna and Robert wake up like lovers in a make-believe world. There is also the duo of the lovers always present, though nameless and faceless, symbolic in the way they are lost in each other but lost also to the rest of the world. And the woman in black, always preoccupied with the beads of her rosary. Having hinted at the symbolism in the novel we might also need to take a look at some of Kate Chopin's other works largely from the point of view of her oeuvre providing a context to *The Awakening*, and that we shall do presently in the next section.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Comment on the emerging 'New Woman' in the late nineteenth century. Does Edna Pontellier fit into the description?

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- 2) Do you think the Creole background is important in reading *The Awakening*? Give reasons for your answer.

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- 3) What role does the sea play in the novel? Use examples from the text to substantiate your answer.

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- 4) Discuss *The Awakening* as a symbolic novel.

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1.6 KATE CHOPIN'S OEUVRE

It needs to be mentioned that Kate Chopin has often been compared to other American realist and naturalist writers who were her contemporaries, such as, Frank Norris (1870–1902), Stephen Crane (1871– 1900), Theodore Dreiser (1871 -1945), and Henry James (1843 -1916).

Chopin wrote about the life, the circumstances and the people she was familiar with. She enjoyed instant success with her writings as she dealt with the French Creoles and the Cajuns she had met and observed during her time in New Orleans and Cloutierville. The Cajuns also known as Acadians were the descendants of the French colonisers who had settled in Louisiana and though they were often described as Creoles, the Cajuns and the Creoles are often portrayed as separate identities today.

Her short stories and essays examine themes such as, love, independence, passion and freedom. Chopin attended conferences and gave speeches and was well known and received most of the times, during her extremely short writing career.

Some information about Kate Chopin's other work will be a useful background and will help you to place *The Awakening* within the context of what she wrote before it and after. She began writing for publication only in 1890. Kate Chopin was well known to the readers of Louisiana for her, (what was termed) 'local colour stories' in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890) is also set mostly in Louisiana. Her collection of short stories *A Vocation* and a *Voice*, which was to be published after *The Awakening*, was rejected by her publisher, though it is not certain if that happened as a result of the negative responses received by the novel *The Awakening* or was an independent decision on the part of the publisher. She did not send one of her stories, *The Storm*, for publication considering it to be too sexually explicit. Kate Chopin's most popular short stories were: "The Story of an Hour", "The Storm", "Desirée's Baby", "A Pair of Silk Stockings", "A Respectable Woman". Her other popular work was her Children's Stories.

We must remember that during the time when *The Awakening* was published (1899), the feminist movement, was just starting to be talked about in America. Louisiana being a southern state was quite conservative and this new fad of feminism had not reached there yet. In fact, during that time, under Louisiana law, a woman was said to be the property of her husband. Needless to say *The Awakening* would not have been received well in such an environment. *The Awakening* discusses quite openly, the emotional and sexual needs of women, and this would have a taboo topic amongst the Southerners. Chopin herself was quite surprised and upset about the reception her novel received and she published only three more short stories before her death. Kate Chopin died of a brain hemorrhage in 1904.

Posthumously, Chopin was remembered as a writer of “local color”, as her works depicted the people of New Orleans, (remember the regional novel discussed in Unit 2 of Block I). She was not recognised as a great writer till *The Awakening* was discovered by **Per Seyersted**, a Norwegian literary scholar, much later (50 years later) in the 1960s.

However, from where we stand today in history, we realise that the novel is an honest, open, matter of fact declaration of female sexuality and a woman’s emotional and sexual needs and that it is very realistically written. *The Awakening* has now made a place for itself. But we need to remember that this observation and our acceptance of the novel are in retrospect.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the philosophical ideas that were a part of the atmosphere of the time during which Kate Chopin wrote. These contexts are important as such contexts provide a background to the literary text *The Awakening* in our case. The unit has also examined the various influences upon Chopin that helped to shape her novel, and attempt has been made to locate the novel within the American literary tradition, while tracing connections with some other well-known texts/drawing significant parallels, to tell you a little about the ‘Victorian’ background and nineteenth century British writing so you can also read the novel against that literary tradition and analyse the significance of the sea since the Gulf waters make a critical contribution to the text, both as a setting as well as a symbol and have given some basic information about Kate Chopin’s other writings as well.

1.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read sections 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 carefully and cull out your answer from there.
- 2) The answer may be found in sections 1.1 and 1.2
- 3) Having read the sections mentioned above carefully, stop, and think about what has been said and then try and answer the question keeping in mind the location of the writer, the times in which she lived and wrote and her own life as well.
- 4) Section 1.3 and any other information you might have on particularly Victorian England could guide your answer.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The answer may be found in section 1.2.
- 2) Section 1.4 provides the clue to your answer.
- 3) Sections 1.4 and 1.5 discuss the role of the sea. You may also look at suitable quotes from the text.
- 4) Define symbolism briefly and then re-read sections 1.4 and 1.5 and see how the sea is symbolic or whether there is anything else in the novel that may be read as symbolic when attempting this answer.

UNIT 2 CONTEXTUALISING THE AWAKENING

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Contextualising *The Awakening*
- 2.3 Biographical Approach to *The Awakening*
- 2.4 Kate Chopin's: Early Life & Background
- 2.5 The Creole Background
 - 2.5.1 The History of New Orleans
- 2.6 Edna Pontellier and Kate Chopin
 - 2.6.1 Kate Chopin
 - 2.6.2 Edna Pontellier
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Hints to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this Unit are to help you:

- a) understand what the biographical approach to literature is,
- b) know some important facts about Kate Chopin's life so you can see for yourself if there are any similarities between them and what you find in the novel,
- c) read *The Awakening* with the help of the biographical approach,
- d) discuss the main themes, (i.e. a woman's awakening to sexual consciousness and desire, her need for personal autonomy and her right to be an individual and not only a role such as, that of a wife or a mother, the obstacles that may come in the way during such a journey), in the light of the biographical approach.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will introduce the novel so that the important themes can be presented to you. This will help you discuss and analyse them. You will also be introduced to the main characters, Edna Pontellier, her husband, Leonce Pontellier, Robert Lebrun, Alcee Arobin, Adele Ratignolle and her husband, Mademoiselle Reisz and some less important characters, like Victor Lebrun and Marquieta.

2.2 CONTEXTUALISING *THE AWAKENING*

The Awakening by Kate Chopin is the story of Edna Pontellier, a twenty eight year old Creole woman living in New Orleans. It is about her awakening to sexual consciousness, her discovery and assertion of this new 'self' through rebellion against the conventional role of being a wife and a mother and the

consequences thereof. The novel is about self-expression and a woman's right to be herself, and to be an individual.

Edna is locked in a typical marriage to Leonce Pontellier, a marriage of convenience made when she was very young, not made with love or romance though he is a good man and a caring husband. Her romantic urgings and physical longings have at this stage hardly been articulated and certainly not satisfied. The family goes to Grand Isle for the summer where she meets and spends a lot of time with Robert Lebrun, an unattached young bachelor, talking, swimming, being together (and of course the Creole husband is never jealous, but you will find out more about this in the section on Creole background). Before they know it, both Edna and Robert begin to feel an attraction towards each other and an intensity of emotion they perceive as unusual, unmanageable and somewhat threatening in the context of their lives and conventional reality. This emotion is passionate and all consuming, leaving no room for thought or sensible action. Robert realises the impossibility of the situation, and not knowing how to deal with it, flees to Mexico to 'make money' (we will discuss if he is an escapist, a coward or an honourable man, or all of the above). Once he's gone, the truth confronts Edna with further starkness and clarity. The summer just like the flirtation, has come to an end and Edna and her family return to their posh home on Esplanade Street, in the city. But things can never be the same for Edna as she is a changed person, as a result of her encounter with Robert and her new self.

This new Edna is a painter. She does not care about her wifely responsibilities or about keeping up appearances by observing the customs. This new Edna refuses to stay home on Tuesdays to receive her callers, as her husband expects her to, but goes out just because she prefers to do so. Her husband complains about her lack of supervision of the servants, and he leaves in the middle of a badly cooked dinner to go out to the club to eat. She becomes careless, and disinterested with regard to domestic affairs, letting everything on the home front slide as it is no longer of any significance to her. Her family by now is meaningless and distant for her, her desire to fiercely possess her identity and be her own person being now her primary focus. She wants to feel a sense of being financially independent, not answerable to anybody for her actions, in other words, completely autonomous. She refuses to go for her sister's wedding and has no thoughts about propriety or 'what the world will say' with regard to any of her actions. Mr Pontellier worries about his wife's health and her strange behaviour, consulting the doctor about both. Although she appears to be in robust health, a disconnect has happened which gives the appearance that she's not quite all there.

Mr Pontellier leaves town on account of business, for a long period, and she refuses to accompany him. The grandmother takes the children away and she (Edna Pontellier) stays back alone in the house, perfectly happy to paint and do her own thing. During this time she also regularly visits Mademoiselle Reisz, a pianist of exceptional talent but also a strange character that few people like and whose acquaintance she had made during the summer at Grand Isle. Robert Lebrun writes on a regular basis to Mme Reisz, seeking of information about Edna, letters that she shares with Edna. The letters suggest that he is in love with her, something Mme Reisz reiterates too. Mme Reisz's music evokes in Edna the nostalgic times spent with Robert while it also makes Edna remain in a state of perpetual anticipation and physical longing. She is alone and in the right

frame of mind and body for a man of the world, a seducer such as, Alcee Arobin to come along and make her his prize. She is still very much in love with Robert but he is not there and her sexual consciousness has been awakened.

Besides, she hardly cares about her actions because of her frustration at not being able to possess Robert. All this while Edna and Alcee Arobin become more and more physically intimate with each other, he visiting her regularly as she lives alone in the 'pigeon-house'. This is a much smaller house that she has moved into round the corner from her husband's posh, expensive and much bigger house on Esplanade Street. Her reasons for moving, which she plans and implements during her husband's absence, are to have a place of her own that she can feel she can independently deal with financially so, she can be an individual in her own right rather than being only Leonce Pontellier's wife.

Of course, her husband disapproves, most bothered as he is about 'what people will say'. He saves face too, keeping up appearances by immediately putting up the big house for major repairs and renovations, thereby, justifying Edna's move and trying to prevent the gossip mills from running. Before she moves into the 'pigeon-house' she throws a party for a small, select group of friends. This is an important event in the novel and we will discuss it in some detail later.

Somewhere inside her Edna Pontellier keeps waiting for Robert Lebrun, and then one day as she waits for Mme Rreisz in her home, he comes and they meet. She is disappointed and heartbroken that such an accidental meeting should have occurred between them, instead of one where Robert should seek her out intentionally as soon as he arrives in town. He walks her home and during the quiet evening spent together she forces him to articulate his real feelings towards her. Both express their emotion, albeit in a sad, resigned and nostalgic way. He tries his best to stay away from her, as from temptation, stating clearly enough that being a married woman she was not free to belong to him. However, as soon as they confess their love for each other Edna is called away by her friend Adele Ratignolle, to assist her during childbirth. She implores him to wait for her return but when she does return, Robert is gone, having left her a note saying, 'goodbye-because I love you.'

Both Adele's childbirth and then the note are traumatic experiences for Edna as they reiterate with full clarity, to Edna, that she can hardly live in this world by the strength of her own desires and convictions alone, that the fact of her being a mother has to determine her actions. After a despondent night spent in deep thought and reflection she goes back to Grand Isle the next morning, the location of her first awakening, and walks away into the waves of the sea, naked and alone, in search of her final home.

Having presented the outline of the novel, we hope you've read the short novel by now. Let us quickly examine the biographical approach to Literature before we move further in our exploration of the text and the novel as a genre.

2.3 BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO *THE AWAKENING*

What is the biographical approach to reading a novel?

The biographical approach to reading a novel is when we read about the writer's own life in order to know her/his personal story so that we get some clues and insights into understanding the novel better. Just as it is important to know about the society, culture and politics of the time when the novel was written and published it helps to know about the family background, views and beliefs of the writer. It would be interesting to know what Chopin's 'real' life was like? Was she 'independent' and can we draw parallels between Edna Pontellier and the writer? What was Chopin's marriage like? The themes that *The Awakening* deals with are contemporary, feminist and were hardly addressed in her time by other writers. What in her own life gave her the experience and the abilities to discuss them so freely and successfully? The answer to some of these questions is what 'biographical criticism' is about. This information will help us make better sense of the events that take place in the text. In the next section we shall take a look at the early life and background of Kate O' Flaherty or Kate Chopin as she was later known as.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you understand by the term the biographical approach to Literature?

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2.4 KATE CHOPIN'S: EARLY LIFE & BACKGROUND

Kate O' Flaherty was born in St Louis in 1850 and she was one of five children, but she was the only one who survived beyond the age of twenty-five. Chopin attended a Catholic boarding school and a couple of months later, when she was just five, her father died in a tragic train accident. She came back home after her father's death and lived at home surrounded by only women, all single and fiercely independent, all widows, her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. When she was seven, she went back to The Sacred Heart Academy where she was taught French and Music and was a distinguished student winning medals and awards. Whether at home or at The Sacred Heart Academy (boarding school with the nuns), Chopin grew up in the midst of intelligent and independent women. Since there were no males around her home or in school, during her early years, she never did witness traditional female submission and male dominant roles. Had her father not passed away so tragically or had she had a great grandfather or a grandfather around, she might have witnessed a traditional familial set up where the male was the patriarch in the family. Hence, she did not have any

knowledge or understanding of such marriages and relationships of male dominance and female submission that defined 19th century marriages (actually most marriages even today follow this traditional pattern). After graduating from The Sacred Heart Academy, Chopin became a part of the St. Louis social scene. But it needs to be noted that even in her youth she was cynical, writing in her diary, “I dance with people I despise; amuse myself with men whose only talent is in their feet.” She was desperate to spend more time with ‘my dear reading and writing that I love so well.’

In 1870 she married **Oscar Chopin**, the ‘right man’, and son of a prominent Creole family from Louisiana. They shared similar values and tastes and had a special kinship of the kind that Edna, in the novel, does not find with her husband. (The portrayal of the Edna-Leonce Pontellier marriage, according to Chopin’s biographer **Emily Toth**, has similarities with that of her parents, who too shared no common interests or spontaneous warmth).

During their European honeymoon, Kate Chopin was an emancipated woman, drinking, smoking publicly, walking alone, both she and her husband skipping church. During her New Orleans years, 1870-1879, she took long walks and streetcar rides alone, exploring the city and enjoying her own company. Notice what Edna says in chap 36, ‘I always feel sorry for women who don’t like to walk; they miss so much-so many rare glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole.’

Kate Chopin was also constantly pregnant-and therefore not to be seen in public. Forced to stay indoors except for Grand Isle vacations, Kate became a talented mimic, keen observer and even more a social critic.

Daniel S Rankin, “Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories” Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932, p.82

Kate Chopin had six children with Oscar Chopin during the first ten years of her marriage. She as mentioned above enjoyed a wide range of freedom that was unconventional for her times. She was a good wife and a mother, but when domesticity became overwhelming, she would escape quietly to smoke or walk around alone through New Orleans. She had very strong and independent opinions about most contemporary issues and controversial issues of the day. Oscar Chopin loved her dearly and admired her intelligence, opinions and her strength. However, misfortune struck them and his cotton brokerage failed in 1879 after which the Chopin family moved to Cloutierville, Louisiana, where he owned property. Kate Chopin managed to adjust to this small provincial town but was also a source of gossip with her eccentric ways. Her husband died suddenly in 1882 of a swamp fever and though devastated, Chopin ran his store and plantation for a year. She was also thought to have encouraged the affections of a married man (Albert Sampite), who pursued her, but by 1884 she had returned to St Louis to live with her mother. (Edna too goes to Adele, the ‘mother-woman,’ leaving Robert). When Chopin’s mother died the following year, and she had to be singly responsible for the upbringing of her six children, she turned to writing in 1889, a creative activity that helped her grow and write about her often-strong views on women, marriage and sex.

Her first published story, “*Wiser than a God*” (1889), is about a woman who becomes a great artistic success, but only after her mother’s death. Kate Chopin

was immediately successful as a writer, had connections with writers, journalists, and literary figures. She was invited to give a reading at the Wednesday Club, the most prestigious intellectual women's club in St Louis. Her second and final novel, *The Awakening* was published in 1899. She remained, throughout her life, unconventional and emancipated, cherishing her freedom and her solitude, obvious from her decision not to marry again but devote her life to what she loved best, her writing. Like Edna, she was 'the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone.' Having discussed the life of Kate Chopin briefly, let us look at the Creole background in the novel next.

2.5 THE CREOLE BACKGROUND

This section on the nineteenth century Louisiana Creole culture and people is important because it will help you understand the setting and socio-cultural contexts that Chopin uses in *The Awakening* better.

The Paris of Louisiana Creoles is New Orleans...

Daniel S Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932, p.82

The city of New Orleans had two distinct parts, one American, the other French. Creoles are described as those descended from European ancestors, French and Spanish, and in Louisiana those descended from the French were many more. So, the Creole in Louisiana would consider himself / herself to be basically of French descent. The picture of the 'artistic,' 'exotic,' life of social gatherings, musical soirees and fine dining painted in the novel is clearly drawn from the life led by the Creoles in New Orleans in the nineteenth century that Chopin was very much a part of. In the novel, the difference between the 'American' Edna, from a religious Kentucky background and the life on the Creole resort, on Grand Isle, comes through very clearly, as the Creoles are much more warm, free, open and flirtatious and she finds this atmosphere very strange. Let us now examine the similarities or otherwise between Edna Pontellier the protagonist of the novel *The Awakening* and Kate Chopin the author.

2.5.1 The History of New Orleans

New Orleans as you may be aware is in the state of Louisiana in the United States of America. It is on the Gulf of Mexico, with the state of Mississippi to the East, Texas on the West, and Arkansas to the North. New Orleans has a very interesting history as it was basically colonised by both the French and the Spanish at various points in time. In order to get a better understanding of the history of New Orleans and of the Creole culture it would be pertinent to look at some critical dates in the history of modern-day North America. For this we would need to go back a little further in time.

As far back as the beginning of the 17th century, France had already explored the Mississippi River valley and also established a few settlements in the area. By the middle of the 18th Century, France had a major dominance over territories in the United States than any other European power. Her sway extended from New Orleans to the Great Lakes and towards the North West to the state of modern-day Montana. The New Orleans of today was established by the explorer **Robert Cavalier**, as Sieur de La Salle in 1682 and was later christened La Nouvelle-

Orleans in 1718 by **Jean Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville**. New Orleans was to grow and develop around the Old Square or the *Vieux Carré*, which was basically a central square from which the French Quarter evolved. La Nouvelle – Orleans was the capital of the French Colony in 1723 and grew into a vital hub for trade and commerce. In 1762, France ceded French Louisiana west of the Mississippi River to Spain after the French and Indian War. Hence, from 1763 to 1800, La Nouvelle – Orleans was under Spanish rule. During these four decades New Orleans was an important trading and cultural Spanish outpost with friendly ties to Cuba, Haiti and Mexico. The Spanish period of New Orleans history saw more liberal views on race and fostered a social class of people known as the free people of color. We must also remember that America during these early years of the 19th Century still had a large population of the people of colour working in the plantations in the Southern States.

In 1800, the Spanish ceded Louisiana back to France but Napoleon Bonaparte, the Emperor of France, was ready to sell the city and the Louisiana territory to the United States. As a result of Napoleon’s eagerness to cede Louisiana to the United States, the United States of America was able to acquire nearly 828,000 square miles of land at a very low cost (almost at the rate of 3 cents per acre). The treaty between France and the United States was drawn up on April 30 and signed on May 2. In October 1803, the U S Senate ratified the purchase, and in December of the same year, France transferred authority over the region to the United States as a part of the 15 million-dollar Louisiana Purchase.

Although the French sold Louisiana to the United States, the inhabitants of New Orleans chose not to abandon their old ways, their culture and mores. If anything, they held tighter to their Francophile ways, speaking mostly, French and following French customs, cooking French cuisine and propagating the opera and the complex social strata of the French residents of a now newly American city. The *Creoles*, who were the American-born offspring of European settlers, many with French blood, were to create a sophisticated and cosmopolitan society in colonial New Orleans. New Orleans as you may already know was also the birthplace of Jazz which emerged during the late 19th century, combining other genres like ragtime, blues, and the spiritual songs. While Jazz grew prominent much later (in the 1920s) with the coming of the American songbook (the most influential canon of American Popular Songs and Jazz standards (between 1920 –50), in America, New Orleans had already been down that road in the 1800s.

But from what we have read so far about New Orleans, the history, geography, and culture of the city, what is crucial for our understanding is also who or what the Creoles were as the Creoles are a large part of the culture in which Kate Chopin lived and wrote. Moreover, they figure prominently in the novel under study.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Who were the Creoles?

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2) What is your understanding of Creole culture?

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2.6 EDNA PONTELLIER AND KATE CHOPIN

In this section, we shall examine the biographical accounts of the life of Kate Chopin in connection with her novel *The Awakening* first and later look at the character of Edna Pontellier as a mouth - piece of Kate Chopin.

2.6.1 Kate Chopin

Chopin also went regularly for Grand Isle summer vacations with her family. Her life in the city and in the resort on Grand Isle are replicated in the portrayal of Edna in the novel. In the novel, the resort of Grand Isle lies outside the ‘norm,’ that exotic, unconventional space where during the husband’s frequent absences, her relationship with Robert grows, and her ‘awakening’ takes place. As a widow, at thirty-two, Chopin also did not follow convention. In fact, the images of bereaved women in her writing are those of widows feeling joy at new - found freedom and their desire/determination to pursue new and exciting interests. Her biographer, Emily Toth documents that as a young widow Kate Chopin had a passionate liaison with **Albert Sampire**, a married man. There are other such men in her fiction and they are all named Alcee, all “kindle desire and devote themselves to sexual pleasure.” *Toth, 169 (quoted in sourcebook, p 9)*

As in the novel so too in real life, Chopin leaves both her lover and her life on the plantation, to go and live with her mother and take care of her children. However, we need to remember that the novel only has some input from her life and that it is NOT autobiography but a work of fiction. Edna Pontellier is Kate Chopin’s heroine and they are certainly NOT the same person.

Chopin came from a traditional Southern family, her father being a religious Irishman. Although her education was geared to teaching virtues of duty and submissiveness, her upbringing by her great-grandmother who was forward thinking, unconventional and independent had much to do with the kind of personality and thinking Chopin developed. This duality in Chopin’s life and in her ‘self,’ making a conventional marriage, following the expectations of society, went together with a fierce independence of spirit and a flouting of established norms (like exploring the city on her own, smoking in public, having an affair, not re-marrying).

2.6.2 Edna Pontellier

Edna too seeks independence, expressing dissatisfaction with her marriage. She wishes above all to be an individual, not a mere role, such as a wife or and a mother. In fact, she challenges the notion that all mothers have maternal instincts.

There is a useful description of Mrs Pontellier as a woman and a mother in this chapter, the writer comparing her to another 'mother' in the story, Adele Ratignolle. Edna was not a 'mother-woman,' the children hardly rushing into her arms to be comforted if they had a fall during play, for instance. Instead they would pull themselves together and get on. Mr Pontellier felt, rather than perceived, that his wife failed in her duty towards the children, a fact he was regretful about. The mother-women, of whom there were many at Grand Isle that summer, are described as follows:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother- woman. The mother-woman seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were 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.

The Awakening, (Ed., Margo Culley, 1994, Chapter IV, p. 9)

Adele Ratignolle is one such, 'delicious in the role,' 'embodiment of every womanly grace and charm.' Madame Ratignolle has been married seven years and had had a baby every two years, and on her way to having another one and always talking of her 'condition.' She is busy anticipating the future needs of her children, fashioning and sewing things while Mrs Pontellier does not see the usefulness or the point of that. Her 'uneven and impulsive' fondness for her children is described in the text and it shows quite clearly that she is not ideally fitted into the conventional role of the mother, hardly missing them when they are away and in fact feeling relieved and free. When she is happy she sends them presents and later in the novel when she lives alone in the city she goes to spend a week with them at their grandmother's place at Iberville, giving generously and freely of herself, 'filling herself with their young existence,' as they excitedly shared with her their present lives in the countryside, full of pigs and cows and fish and trees. She leaves them with a pang but by the time she reaches the city, the music of their lives she carries back no longer echoes inside her and she is alone again.

The writer comments about Edna: 'a certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, - the light which, showing the way, forbids it.' This new sensation confuses her, moving her to dreams and thoughtlessness and tears. For the first time in her life she begins to perceive herself positioned in the universe as a human being who has a relationship with the world around and within her. The narrative comment on such a realisation is that it was like a weight of wisdom that all women might not have the privilege of receiving. So far she has lived, and most women might do so for their entire lives, according to the rules and conventional norms of society and she is now discontented with this situation. She begins to feel the need to look for a 'self' that goes beyond her role as a wife and mother and this realisation is confusing, disturbing and destabilising for her.

The imagery of the sea describes the voices of the waters she hears as 'seductive,' murmuring to her invitingly to lose her being in mazes of contemplation and solitude. The voice of the sea speaks to her soul as its touch sensuously enfolds her body in a 'soft, close embrace.' Mrs Pontellier has been described as a reserved and self-contained person, not given to confidences. But here at Grand Isle she begins to lose some of her reserve under the influence of the beautiful, friendly and frank Adele Ratignolle. Edna recalls and shares with her friends, the memories

of her childhood days when she walked in the green meadows, aimless and unthinking, just following an impulse. She says too that it was a similar state of mind, idle, uncertain and unguided, that she felt herself to be in now. Her early experiences of being passionately infatuated by a ‘dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer,’ somewhat attracted by another young gentleman who used to visit a lady on a neighboring plantation, and then finally as a young lady going through the climax of emotion for the great tragedian, a well-known Shakespearean actor (note given later), are described by the narrator. Without meaning to, and even without realising it, Edna finds herself being talkative and sharing the events of her past with Adele, resting her head on her friend’s shoulder, their faces turned to the sea. She felt ‘flushed,’ ‘intoxicated,’ by this unfamiliar mood of her own which, ‘muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom.’

We are told about Edna’s marriage to Leonce Pontellier too in this chapter, something that happened purely by accident, without any romantic dreaming on her part, and more like something that was decreed for her by destiny. The narrator describes the marriage and the relationship as follows: ‘He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing...he pleased her, his absolute devotion flattered her...she fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accepting Monsieur Pontellier for a husband.’ All this shows us that Edna is a romantic at heart, a part of her wanting to live in a world of beauty, unreality, romance and dream. Also, she has a rebellious spirit and the objection of her family to the marriage convinces her that it is exactly what she herself wanted to do. She decides to become the devoted wife of a man who worships her, and thereby ‘take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams.’

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Do you find any similarities between the author Kate Chopin and Edna Pontellier the protagonist of the novel?

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

The story of Kate Chopin’s life can be divided into two neat sections. She belonged to an upper-middle-class Irish and French family and was married to a young businessman with promising prospects. She became the mother of six children between the years 1871 and 1879. The second part of her life was devoted to writing. As one scholar writes about this clear division:

Chopin in her twenties and thirties, married and bearing six children, was living one sort of life but quite another through her forties and fifties, writing, publishing,

Kate Chopin: *The Awakening* and involved in literary society until her death in 1904.

Victoria Boynton, 'Kate Chopin,' *Nineteenth Century American Women Writers: A Bio- Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, Ed., Denise D Knight, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 50

Chopin writes in her diary, on 22 May 1894, about the changes that came into her life after the death of her husband in 1882 and her mother in 1885: 'if it were possible for my mother and husband to come back to earth, I feel I would unhesitatingly give up everything that has come into my life since they left.... To do that, I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth-my real growth.' However, her early family life in Louisiana, both the cosmopolitan Creole life of New Orleans, and the rural, largely Cajun (Acadian) culture she was part of, contributed a great deal to her later life as a writer. When she moved to the intellectual circles of St Louis after her husband's death, the life and society there encouraged her innate literary talents and abilities.

According to Chopin's brother-in-law, **Phanor Breazeale**, with whom she played cards and discussed religion, 'the inspiration and plot of *The Awakening* came from the true story of a New Orleans woman'. In her own life, Chopin enjoyed being alone, independent and having an identity apart from her children. The novel *The Awakening* is about sexual freedom, infidelity, transgression of accepted codes of behaviour. Through the persona of Edna the above themes get displayed and discussed. In Kate Chopin's own personal life, we find the same streak of independence, the same beliefs in the rights of being an individual, and the very same determination to choose to have her own way.

2.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read section 2.3 carefully and then answer.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Creoles are the descendents of European namely, the French and Spanish. The Creole in Louisiana particularly would consider himself/herself to be of basically French descent.
- 2) The Creoles are believed to be artistic, even exotic, and they led lives of social gatherings complete with musical soirees, fine cuisine as depicted in the novel.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read Section 2.6 both sub sections 2.6.1 and 2.6.2 carefully and then write your answer.

UNIT 3 CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE AWAKENING

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Critical History of *The Awakening*
- 3.3 Summary of Nineteenth Century and Other Early Critical Responses
- 3.4 Mid - Century Critical Responses until the Novel's Rebirth in 1969
- 3.5 Modern Critical Interpretations
 - 3.5.1 Interpreting *The Awakening*
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Hints to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this Unit are, to briefly introduce to you, the facts around the publication and reception history of *The Awakening*. This unit also seeks to familiarise you with the critical history of *The Awakening* by providing brief commentaries and samples of the early reviews, published in the nineteenth century, when the novel first came out and a brief summary of the reviews in later years, after 1969, the year of publication of the first authoritative biography by Per Seyersted, which helped to give the novel new life and meaning for the modern reader.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The date of publication, 1899, of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, is significant. Perched dangerously in the last years of the nineteenth century it is also at the brink of the ushering in of the twentieth. The above fact becomes even more important when we look closely at the critical history of this novel.

3.2 CRITICAL HISTORY OF *THE AWAKENING*

Condemned immediately on publication, and later deliberately ignored due to its discussion of taboo themes - such as, infidelity, a woman's desire for self-definition, independence and sexual liberty, challenging the institution of motherhood - it is important to know that *The Awakening* has received enormous attention in later years. It is obvious that the writer and this novel were much ahead of the time they were historically located in and thus, *The Awakening* was considered completely transgressive and unacceptable in the nineteenth century.

In fact, when Emily Toth, Chopin's most recent biographer, first read the novel in 1970, she admits to having been 'astonished that a woman in 1899 had asked the same questions that we, in the newly revived women's movement were asking seventy years later.' **Cyrille Arnavon**, a French academic, re-discovered the novel, wrote about it in 1946 and translated it into French in 1953 (as *Edna*). Although he thought Edna to be 'regressive' and the suicide 'unjustified,' he claimed the

1899 work was an American *Madame Bovary*.’ (Willa Cather in 1899 had made the same comparison. In fact, several critics drew this parallel at times). He also encouraged his young graduate student Per Seyersted to continue further research in this area, who in turn devoted long years of his academic life to this project, finally publishing both a *Critical Biography* and *Complete Works* in 1969.

The time of the novel’s rebirth was also crucial as it coincided with the second wave of the feminist movement. The readership for Kate Chopin was now ready and the feminists claimed the novel immediately as they saw that is reflected in it all their important concerns such as, women’s independence and liberty, self-definition and sexuality. It was reprinted several times in the 1970s and has inspired readers, scholars and critics to continue to engage with it ever since.

The Awakening has made a long journey from being completely forgotten and ignored to becoming vastly popular. It is now also canonised, that is, it is a part of several courses being taught to students all over the world - Literature courses, courses on Feminist Theory, Women’s Writing, and Nineteenth Century Studies, American Studies, Textual Linguistics, Folklore, Women’s Studies etc. It is a part of the postgraduate syllabi at University of Delhi and now you, at IGNOU, are studying it too.

The next section briefly sums up some of the nineteenth century critical responses to the text before giving you some actual excerpts.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Do you think the date of publication of *The Awakening* is significant? Why?

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- 2) Why was Emily Toth astonished to read the book in 1970?

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3.3 SUMMARY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY AND OTHER EARLY CRITICAL RESPONSES

Almost all critics of *The Awakening* thought that Edna Pontellier was ‘morally offensive.’ **Frances Porcher**, who reviewed the novel for the *St Louis Mirror*, was full of praises for the style and description but termed Edna’s passion ‘an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster.’ She continues, ‘There is no fault to find with the

telling of the story, there are no blemishes in its art, but it leaves one sick of human nature and so one feels - *cui bono!*' **Daniel Rankin**, Chopin's first biographer, said complimentary things about her art but thought the novel 'exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation.' Other critics too thought Edna was 'selfish' and the novel was about 'moroid psychology.'

In fact most of the reviews praised the novel for its skilful storytelling and style but almost all reviewers saw the theme as immoral and the portrayal of Edna as disagreeable, unrefined and vulgar.... 'flawless art...delicacy of touch of rare skill in construction, the subtle understanding, of motive...lacks the high motive of tragedy... (is) not for the young person.' Some other comments are cited below and all the reviews from where these have been extracted are quoted in full so you will have all the publication details:

- *The worst of such stories is that they will fall into the hands of the youth, leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, and promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires.*
- *It was not necessary that for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction.*
- *...the story was not worth telling, and its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent.*
- *It is not a healthy book...the poison of passion seems to have entered her system, with her mother's milk.*

These comments do not carry the details of reviews/reviewers as the details form a part of the reading list at the end of this block.

C L Deyo, published in the St Louis Post- Dispatch, 20th May 1899, writes about Kate Chopin's craftsmanship as a novelist.

There may be many opinions touching other aspects of Mrs. Chopin's novel The Awakening, but all must concede its flawless art. The delicacy of touch are skill in construction, the subtle understanding of motive, the searching vision into the recesses of the heart - these are known to readers of 'Bayou Folk' and 'A Night in Acadie'. But in this new work power appears, power born of confidence. There is no uncertainty in the lines, so surely and firmly drawn. Complete mastery is apparent on every page.

Nineteenth - Century Responses, Contemporary Reviews, C L Deyo, St Louis Post - Dispatch, 20 May 1899, reprinted in, Margo Culley ed. The Awakening, New York: WW Norton & Company, 1994, p. 164

A little further on, he offers his comments on the plot and the use of language in *The Awakening*.

Nothing is wanting to make a complete artistic whole. In delicious English, quick with life, never a word too much, simple and pure, the story proceeds with classic severity through a labyrinth of doubt and temptation and dumb despair.

Although a lot of writing exists on Kate Chopin's works, mostly her short stories are the subject of discussion. *The Awakening* disappears completely from the literary scene during the first half of the twentieth century. **Joseph Reilly** suggested that a dozen stories selected from Chopin's two collections of short

fiction would create a single work ‘which those most proud of American literature would gladly proclaim an addition to its masterpieces.’ However, the novel is not mentioned by him, he does not even seem to be aware of it.

In fact, the manner of its absolute disappearance from the literary scene during this time gives a push to the theory that it was banned or taken off library shelves. But this was a rumour rather than the reality, as Emily Toth establishes through her research and interviews etc. It was also rumoured that Chopin was so heartbroken by the reception of this novel that she stopped writing altogether. This too has been disproved as she did write and publish more short fiction but all her work following *The Awakening* was more conventional, less significant, less vast. The publishers rejected *A Vocation* and a *Voice* although no reasons are offered in any of her papers there are controversial conjectures. Daniel Rankin assumes that it had a connection with the negative reception of the novel whereas her later biographers believe it was a business decision on the part of the publishers that was unrelated to Chopin’s earlier work.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Imagine that you are asked to review *The Awakening* by a leading newspaper of the city. Write a short review, expressing your responses.

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3.4 MID-CENTURY CRITICAL RESPONSES UNTIL THE NOVEL’S REBIRTH IN 1969

In the 1950s, however, the scenario changed somewhat and American critics began to recognise that *The Awakening* was an important literary work. **Van Wyck Brooks** called the novel the ‘one novel of the nineties in the South that should have been remembered, one small perfect book that mattered more than the life-work of many a prolific writer.’ In 1956, **Kenneth Eble** called it ‘a first-rate novel,’ (one that) ‘deserves to be restored and to be given its place among novels worthy of preservation.’ He praised ‘its general excellence’ and although he said also ‘quite frankly, the book is about sex,’ the comment was not disparaging as in the case of other critics before him.

The mid-century then saw many American critics engaging positively with *The Awakening*, calling Chopin’s text: ‘an anachronistic, lonely, existential voice out of the mid-20th century’ ‘To discover a novel of such stature in the American past is both a happiness and an occasion for some shame. Not many readers would claim to know all of American Literature, but some of us like to think that at least we know the best of it. *The Awakening* has been too much and too long neglected.’

And finally, came the invaluable work of rediscovery by Per Seyersted, that completed the retrieval of this novel from the recesses of oblivion, placing it

clearly on the literary and feminist map ... '(the novel is) as modern now as it probably will be in a still patriarchal tomorrow.'

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What was the reaction of the early reviewers when the novel was published in 1899?

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- 2) Critically comment on the journey this novel made from 1899 to 1969.

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3.5 MODERN CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

I will try to sum up important post 1970 responses to the novel so you get a fair idea about how the critical insights change and develop as new literary theories begin to shape thinking.

Although critics increasingly began to see *The Awakening* as a crucial literary statement about a woman's quest for emancipation from traditional and stereotypical gender roles leading to her determination to live life on her own terms, there was an emphasis that it was not exactly a political work where the woman was a crusader for women's rights that she was really a writer who held a moderate position and did not intend the work to be a feminist document. Some see her as trapped in a system to which she offers at best some personal rebellion and resistance. **Lawrence Thornton** perceives the text to be very political, as Edna is deceived 'by her private vision and by the society she discovers during the summer on Grand Isle,' speaking also of the 'labyrinth of social conventions, marriage, and motherhood that is closing around her like a vise.' **Linda Huff** believes Edna lives as 'new woman' in an "'old' society, with its conventions, prejudices and superstitions," 'too small' though to be able to change anything.

In 1976, Emily Toth saw Edna as embodying nineteenth century feminist criticism though other feminist critics have seen her as not able to go beyond self-questioning to a larger engagement with the social structures of oppression. Critics have recognised Edna's articulations of important issues like childhood and motherhood as proving to be 'disastrous, causing insanity, death, and-of more significance to Chopin-a woman's loss of self.'

Several critics have viewed the novel as very 'modern' as it does not provide any final answers. Its ambiguity and mystery, its taking of many-sided perspectives, the withholding of judgment, are seen as being its real strengths, as this 'implicates us in its probing of such moral questions as the nature of sexuality, selfhood, and freedom, the meaning of adultery and suicide, and the relationship between biological destiny and personal choice'.

Elizabeth Fox - Genovese in her article '*The Awakening in the context of Experience, Culture and Values of Southern Women,*' *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening*, edited by Bernard Koloski, says:

The Awakening shocked Chopin's contemporaries for the same reason that it has earned the admiration of recent generations: it candidly acknowledges women's impulses. Modern readers [...] tend to view Edna's awakening to her sexuality as logically portending her struggle for liberation. Yet Chopin remains more ambiguous, thus inviting multiple, even contradictory, readings [...]

3.5.1 Interpreting *The Awakening*

The final section of this Unit, summarises a few important ways of reading and interpreting the novel, offered by critics during the late nineties and some even more recently for instance **Donald Pizer** in his '*A Note on Kate Chopin's The Awakening as Naturalistic Fiction,*' *Southern Literary Journal*, 33, No.2 (2001), pp. 5-13, Pizer reads the novel as an example of naturalistic fiction, which he describes as 'the principal innovative movement in American fiction of the 1890s.' He defines literary naturalism as 'the dramatization of the limitations placed upon the human will by the biological and social realities within which the will attempts to find its way.' He uses Darwinian theories in his essay, focusing upon Edna's 'inability to overcome the biological instincts of motherhood despite her repeated rejections of the socially imposed expectations of the role.'

Stephen Heath, 'Chopin's Parrot', Textual Practice, Vol.8, No.1, Spring 1994, pp.11-32

This essay is particularly relevant as it compares once more Gustave Flaubert's *Emma Bovary* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Heath traces Emma's journey towards becoming Edna, 'the married woman (who) moves once more to suicide after weariness in marriage and knowledge of an adulterous passion.' He notices too, however, the sophistication of Chopin, the later writer, well-read in the works of Charles Darwin, Aldous Huxley and Herbert Spencer and thus, familiar with the intellectual thought of the time. Analysing the unconventional behaviour of both heroines (Emma Bovary and Edna Pontellier) as 'pathological,' he comments on the presence of a Dr Mandelet, who suggests she needs 'an inspired psychologist,' thus, anticipating the theories of **Freud**, whose work was just emerging at this time: 'In Emma Bovary's world there is no understanding; in Edna's a glimmering: her doctor at least shows some comprehension, even if ultimately held in the conventions of what Freud himself will continue to call 'the riddle' of woman.'

Stephen Heath points out the following: the theme of lesbianism, hinted at through the portrayal of Mademoiselle Reisz, the significance of story-telling, and in both novels the predominance of images of birds, and the motif of flight - Emma wishes to 'escape from life and fly away in an embrace,' Mlle Reisz speaks to Edna of 'the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and

prejudice.’ He draws attention to the parrot, who speaks a ‘language which nobody understood’ suggesting the ‘problem of representation that Chopin faces.’ The novel ends with the voice of the sea, one to which Edna has responded throughout, and now awakened and attuned, identifies with. He locates both novels in the tradition of ‘women’s modernism’ seeing the latter as a continuation of the modernist project: ‘between the two, parrot and sea, there is the whole process - the substance - of Chopin’s writing, the difficult course of Edna’s desire for herself, reaching out ‘for the unlimited’.

Ivy Schweitzer, in her ‘*Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening*’, *Boundary II*, vol. 17, Part I, 1990, pp.158-86, reviews the novel in the tradition of American Literature being about a search for self, and the theme of conflict between the individual and society, but primarily as being a male concern (e.g. mainstream American texts like Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*). In the case of this novel these themes are further problematised by the facts of maternity and motherhood: she writes, ‘(the novel) raises many genre questions about the differences in a romance written by a woman, and, most specifically, it raises the question of whether a woman may be the hero of romance.’ Schweitzer uses feminist theory to examine the complex presentations of motherhood, responsibilities of the role of mother, ‘metaphors of self-birth and the seductive, maternal sea which liberate (Edna.)’ She perceives Edna’s early awakenings as ‘universal’ and not merely ‘gender-specific’ and yet she also sees motherhood and individuality as ‘mutually exclusive.’ Edna’s models of individuality are all male, apart from Mlle Reisz, who is also represented as somewhat strange. However, although she highlights the idea of male subjectivity in Edna following the ‘pattern of the male hero of romance, defining herself as self through her desire for another,’ she questions it too by the last image being one where Edna is starkly reminded of her womanhood (motherhood) while attending to Adele during childbirth.

Thus, her flight towards freedom (in seeking some kind of ideal relationship), she realises, has to take into account those ‘antagonists’ (the children). And unable to reconcile the two conflicting but equally powerful aspects of her ‘self’ she makes the only choice available to her at that time. Many readers who read the novel today may assert that the choices for women in Edna’s situation have not increased remarkably in the century that has gone by, since the time of the publication of the novel in 1899. That I suppose is what makes *The Awakening* important today - modern, relevant, contemporary - and thus, constantly under discussion by readers, students and researchers. Contemporary criticism is continuously engaging with new approaches to reading *The Awakening*, perspectives informed by movements in literary, theory such as, feminism, post structuralism, New Historicism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and recent developments in the fields of history, economics, philosophy, sociology etc.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has tried to look at the late nineteenth century novel *The Awakening* from the point of view of the kind of critical comments and responses that it generated particularly at the time when the novel was published. From whatever has been discussed so far we do discern that the novel was not really welcomed or even liked at the time of its publication. But we have also come to realise through the course of this unit that the novel *The Awakening* was rediscovered

and reborn in the 1970s and that feminists instantly claimed it as addressing issues of importance to them. Since then the novel has been in circulation, is even taught and is in fact canonised, all this to my mind, hints at the novel's potential appeal to even modern day readers.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) How did the critics of the early twentieth century respond to *The Awakening*?

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- 2) Discuss the trends of critical opinion in the responses of the post-1970 readers of the novel. What are your views?

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- 3) Critically comment on the ending of *The Awakening*.

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- 4) Imagine Edna Pontellier living in the present time. Do you think her story would be any different? How?

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- 5) Do you think there is any difference between the nineteenth century reviews of the novel and those in our times? Discuss the difference and comment upon it?

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3.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The date of the publication of *The Awakening* is significant as it was published at the very end of the 19th Century. The world order was changing, literary trends were changing and above all Kate Chopin's novel was too early for that era.
- 2) Emily Toth was astonished to read the novel in 1970 as she felt that Kate Chopin had asked all the questions that women and feminists in the twentieth century were asking. She was amazed that Kate Chopin had the foresight to even raise these questions.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read the unit carefully and frame the answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read the section 3.2 and 3.3 carefully and then answer.
- 2) Read the Section 3.4 carefully and then answer.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Read Section 3.4 for the answer.
- 2) Read Section 3.5.
- 3) The ending of *The Awakening* is significant as it is symbolic of various things such as women's quest for freedom, the re-birth of Edna Pontellier or more significantly the re-birth of women in general.
- 4) Read Section 3.5.1.
- 5) Read the novel, read the block carefully and then think and write out a well reasoned answer.

UNIT 4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO *THE AWAKENING*: FEMINIST, PSYCHOANALYTICAL, OTHERS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 *The Awakening* and the Age
- 4.3 Feminist Approach to *The Awakening*
- 4.4 Psychoanalytical Approach to *The Awakening*
- 4.5 Symbolism in *The Awakening*
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.8 Suggested Readings & References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to familiarise you with a few critical approaches that may be pertinent to the analysis of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Critical approaches may be defined very simply as **David Daiches** does in the *Introduction* to the second edition of *Critical Approaches to Literature* as a way of illuminating “both the nature of literature and the nature of criticism” and as “important ways” in which literature (in our case the novel, *The Awakening*) can be discussed. Keeping this in mind let us begin by looking very briefly at the novel and then proceed to examining the feminist approach.

4.2 *THE AWAKENING* AND THE AGE

The novel as you already know was written and published towards the end of the nineteenth century, 1899 to be precise. It was literally the end of the nineteenth century and the nineteenth century as we are all aware was the Victorian age in England, (approximately a period of sixty years from the 1830s to the 1890s) an age defined by its moral stance and the extreme deference to conventions. It was an age when a man could not smoke in public (today smoking is banned by most countries including our own country due to health reasons, but during the Victorian age, it was thought of as indecorous) or a woman, ride a bicycle!

But it was also the age of relative peace in England while America was faced with the scars of the Civil War (1861-65) but, at the same time there was also interaction between the American and the European writers and it was an age of what Edward Albert calls “spacious intellectual horizons, noble endeavour, and bright aspirations. The novel as we have seen in the earlier unit was a controversial one as it dealt with issues then thought of to be taboo...and did not receive its due then. It was re-discovered nearly sixty years later and then promptly claimed

by feminists. Given the theme of the novel it obviously lends itself to serious critical engagement as we may have discerned from the earlier units. In the next section, we will look at the feminist approach to literature in some detail as a way of examining the issues that is dealt with in this novel.

4.3 FEMINIST APPROACH TO *THE AWAKENING*

Let us begin this section by quoting Anand Prakash who says that,

...a significant area of suppressed identities in the contemporary novel relates to women in all societies, irrespective of race or class. Most of the novels in the twentieth century present women with a bias. Scarcely any light is shed on the question of women's exploitation under the pressure of home, marriage and the overarching patriarchy.

Such feelings was to create the feminist approach to literature that became a major contending force in the late 1970s when feminist theory came to be applied to linguistic and literary material. Much of feminist critical theory is derived from the works of the French feminist writer **Simone de Beauvoir** in particular her book *The Second Sex or Le Deuxième Sexe* published in 1949. Beauvoir's main contention was that when men were associated with humanity then women were very often relegated to a lesser space/ a lower/ inferior position in society. Critics after Beauvoir strengthened this debate by focusing on language as a tool of male dominance while looking at the manner in which the man's point of view was therefore, presented as the point of view. Then there were critics who felt that women not only have different experiences from men but also write differently. Critics such as **Hélène Cixous** tried to look at the "essential connection between women's body whose sexual pleasure has been repressed, and women's writing" (**Murfin and Ray**, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 1998, p 123).

This by the way is just the beginning of the discussion on the feminist critical approach to literature and *The Awakening*. You could read up more on feminist theory and feminist critical approaches if you would like to learn more about this approach. Coming back to the novel *The Awakening*, let us look at the feminist issues depicted through the character of Edna Pontellier.

Some of the issues that come to mind are, the notion of women being viewed as personal property by the men in the novel. For instance, if we look at the time period and the culture in which the novel has been set, there are innumerable instances that indicate the fact that men simply thought of their wives as personal property. It almost appears as if they did not know any better or could not even conceive of the fact that their wives were independent people with a mind of their own as is the case with Edna Pontellier. This may also be discerned when we look critically at what Léonce Pontellier has to say about his wife Edna Pontellier as well as in the narrator's voice.

The woman in question, (in this case, Edna) is of course helpless till she is awakened, and feels a sense of hopelessness and entrapment in her marriage as well as within the walls of domesticity. The awakening of Edna of course has disastrous consequences as it ultimately results in her suicide as we see towards the end of the novel. *The Awakening* is also a very good illustration of how society too enforces the norms of conventionality by isolating anybody who

dares defy its norms and particularly so a woman daring to do so. Moreover, the novel depicts very clearly how society imposes its norms on some women such as, Adele Ratignolle who, finds both economic as well social reward in conforming whereas, Edna Pontellier does not do so and society finds this non-conformity a sign of rebellion and does not look upon these acts of transgression with sympathy.

In fact, society punishes these so called rebels through isolation fearing that such flawed characters might challenge society's very existence. Edna Pontellier after her awakening (in this case the first awakening, which may be looked upon as a sexual awakening, when she thinks of herself as a woman with desire) is a changed woman and for her, her artistic as well as sexual desire are important whereas, tradition and conventionality are seen as those imposed and therefore, thrust upon women are not desirable. Then again, there are instances when Léonce Pontellier thinks his wife's aspirations are merely trivial and frivolous and that he can actually make her conform to his way of life, which is in a sense a very difficult thing for Edna Pontellier to accept and she finds the whole exercise painful and frustrating.

The awakened (sexually awakened, at this stage) Edna also emerges as a character who, seeks to take control of her own life and her own feelings as someone who wishes to escape from the confines of marriage, domesticity and even motherhood more than, cling to the safety of a husband, home and hearth. Moreover, Edna finds herself struggling with her feelings of motherhood or lack of it, as she also realises what society dictates as motherhood and being a mother. These instances that we have talked about are some points indicative of the manner in which feminists could approach the study of this text.

In the next section, we shall look at what the psychoanalytical approach to literature is about and we shall try and suggest pointers to examining the novel under study with this approach in mind.

Check Your Progress1

- 1) What is the feminist approach to the study of literature?

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- 2) Can you use the feminist approach to analyse *The Awakening*?

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4.4 PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH TO *THE AWAKENING*

The psychoanalytic approach to literature derives from the work of the Austrian **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) a psychoanalyst by profession. He was the pioneer of psychoanalytical criticism. He developed “a language that described, a model that explained, a theory that encompassed human psychology,” (*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 1998, Murfin and Ray, p. 311), all directly or indirectly related to the nature of the unconscious mind. Freud identified three components of the human psyche -the *id*, the *ego* and the *super ego*. The *id* according to Freud is the “predominantly passionate, irrational, unknown, and unconscious part of the psyche.” The “*ego*” which is predominantly rational, logical, orderly, and conscious.” The *ego* is also the mediator between the *id* and the *super ego*. The *super ego* according to Freud is that part of the human psyche that internalises the norms and mores of society. Implying, that a reflection of societal norms and mores may be looked at as “external” or “outside the self” and as a self check in-built mechanism that makes moral judgement and tells us to make sacrifices even if we know that such sacrifices may not be in our best interest.

Sigmund Freud also believed that as human beings we all have what he calls “repressed wishes and fears” (p. 312) that have been pushed under the carpet or the surface by the super ego in its capacity as moral guardian and that which has been pushed even further by the ego into the unconscious realm of the human psyche. These repressions are then manifested in the form of dreams, in language as the Freudian slip and in creative activity that, as Freud says, “may produce art (including literature), and in neurotic behaviour” (p.312). Freud also talks about the Oedipus complex, and used the analysis of dreams as “a tool for uncovering our repressed feelings and memories.” Freud was of the opinion that “repression” surfaces in dreams, masked in symbolic form.

Carl Gustav Jung an analytical psychologist developed a theory of “the collective unconscious, a repository of shared unconscious memories dating back to the origins of literature” (p. 313). According to Jungian theory, a great work of literature is not a disguised expression of its author’s repressed wishes (as thought by Freud), but “a manifestation of desires once held by the whole human race (but that are now repressed because of the advent of civilisation) (p. 313). The French theorist **Jacques Lacan** “focuses more on language and language related issues. He extends Freud’s theory of dreams, literature and their interpretation; he has also added the element of language to Freud’s emphasis on psyche and gender. For Lacan, the unconscious is a language and dreams a form of discourse. “Thus, we may study dreams psychoanalytically in order to learn more about the unconscious. Lacan identifies three stages of development: (1) pre- Oedipal stage/ the pre- verbal stage, (2) the mirror stage/ imaginary stage and (3) the “I” stage/ stage of laws, language and society. (p. 310).

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What is the contribution of Freud, Jung and Lacan to psychoanalytical studies?

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4.5 SYMBOLISM IN *THE AWAKENING*

The reason why I have chosen to talk about the psychoanalytical approach is essentially to draw your attention to symbols and symbolism in the novel *The Awakening*. Symbols stand for or suggest something else, something larger, something more complex - often an idea or a range of inter-related ideas, attitudes and practices, (p. 319). The word symbolic as stated in Unit 2 Section 1.5 comes from the Greek word *symbolleîn* to mean, “throw together”. Keeping in mind what has been said about symbols and symbolism there, we shall now proceed to look at some of the symbols and their significance in *The Awakening*.

Simply put, symbols may be recognised as objects, characters, figures, or colours used to represent abstract ideas/ concepts. There are several symbols that come to mind when I think of *The Awakening*. You may have noticed these as well but may or may not have recognised them or looked at them as symbols. Or you may have already recognised them as symbols and gone ahead and analysed them as well! In any case, let me begin by talking about the symbol of birds in the novel. Birds stand for something in this novel. The birds that have been described, discussed and any bird imagery that is drawn up represents images of entrapment in *The Awakening*. The caged birds signify Edna Pontellier’s own entrapment within the confines of her marriage and children. It could also be indicative of the entrapment of all women or women in general in the Victorian Age, as we do know the position of women. Then, Madam Lebrun’s parrot and the mocking bird could be looked upon as signifying Edna Pontellier and Madame Reisz as well. Since both the birds are in captivity their movements are restricted, similarly, the movement of the women in the novel are restricted and limited by the conventions and traditions laid down by society and particularly a rigid one at that. They are so severely restricted in their movement that at times, they fail to even communicate with the world around them. For instance, Edna Pontellier is not able to articulate her innermost anguish clearly even to her husband or to herself for that matters, or any other character in the novel. She tries to escape from the narrow confines of society, the domesticity of her marriage and her children. She sets up a place entirely for herself away from her husband and her children: the pigeon house, and finds solace in the fact that her new home is symbolic of her independence, but we as readers are aware that the pigeon house is in fact, just “two steps away” and really indicative of her own innate inability to remove herself entirely from her former life.

Her friend Mademoiselle Reisz tells Edna Pontellier that she will need to have very strong wings in order to survive the turmoil that she'll face if she intends to act on her love for Robert Lebrun. By the time she sets up the pigeon house, we know that he has gone away to Mexico. Mademoiselle Reisz warns Edna Pontellier saying:

The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weakling bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth"

(Chapter XXVII, p. 79 Edited by Margo Culley, Wordsworth Norton & C: New York, 1994)

Then there are the critics of the novel who also use the final imagery of the bird to argue that Edna Pontellier's suicide at the end of the novel is, in fact, a sign of defeat, both for her as an individual as well as for all women in general.

A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water."

While these critics cite this quotation from Ch XXXIX, p. 108 of the text, as an example of Edna's and women's defeat in general, some other critics argue that if the symbol of the birds is to signify not Edna Pontellier's individual defeat but that of the collective defeat of the women in the Victorian age, then Edna Pontellier's suicide/ final awakening may also be looked upon as representing the fall, tradition/ convention that in a sense, may be said to have been achieved by Edna Pontellier's suicide.

We have already talked about the symbolism of the sea in Unit 2, but we can always take another look at the sea that is a major symbol in the novel, here as well. The sea has been used as a symbol by many authors and of course we must not forget the images of the sea in our own myths as well as the images in the Bible. In particular I am talking about two major works that you must have read or if not, you must have definitely heard about - **Herman Melville's** *Moby Dick* (1851) and **Ernest Hemingway's** *The Old Man and the Sea* (written in Cuba in 1951 and published in 1952). Both these novels (actually the latter is a novella or a short novel or a long short story, just under a hundred pages) use symbolism and the sea also figures in these novels in a big way. The sea may be said to be signalling a sense of space, boundless and timeless, a sense of freedom from life's shores and hence, from life's trials and temptations as well. It is interesting to note that Edna Pontellier has tried learning swimming unsuccessfully earlier on but she is taught by Robert Lebrun and learns to swim and feels the sea and the surf beckoning her throughout the novel. She is said to be seduced by the sound of the surf, "The voice of the surf is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (Chapter VI, p. 14), and she succumbs to the temptation only when she has actually been empowered (by her act of learning to swim successfully). She is also aware of her and by extension human being's place in the scheme of things as is obvious from the next quote in the same chapter, "In short, Mrs Pontellier was beginning to realise her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual in the world within and about her" (p.14). Throughout the novel there is a sense of the unknown, the wild, - the sea and the surf calling out to her.

Moreover, if we look at the sea not as sea *per se* but as water then we get another picture of the symbolism of the sea in *The Awakening*. If we look at the sea as water then we would realise that the sea then symbolises ritual cleansing/ the Christian concept of baptism/ re-birth. And it is therefore, apt that Edna Pontellier should drown or swim away to her death symbolising her re-birth “ a re-birth of sorts.

The Awakening is very rich in symbolism as mentioned earlier and it is now up to you to take the initiative and look at symbols in the novel. We have merely pointed out what symbolism is and shown you examples of how symbolism works. We expect you to look for other symbols in the novel as you read it. However, we'd still like to point out a few major symbols to you in your task but we expect you to explore the symbolism behind these. For instance, look at the way in which Edna Pontellier and women in the novel are presented to us (the readers) in the novel. ... The mother- women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolised their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chapter IV p.9)

Then look at the treatment of art by Kate Chopin in *The Awakening*. Art seems to awaken Edna Pontellier. Take the case of the bird imagery in the novel. Birds and clothes are other symbols that you could locate and analyse. Then there is the whole symbolism generated by food/meals, the symbolism of the house, Edna Pontellier's desire to learn swimming, the symbol of the moon and finally the ocean, the gulf or the sea. Your list could also include music, or the playing of the piano and sleep as a symbol.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Analyse *The Awakening* from the point of view of symbolism.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to look at several critical approaches to literature and in particular to the novel, in this case, *The Awakening*. We have also defined three major approaches and summarised these approaches very briefly while pointing out instances from the novel or indicating how we could analyse or approach the novel from the perspectives of these approaches. In particular, we have dealt with the symbolic approach to the study of *The Awakening* in greater detail.

4.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Feminist approach to the study of literature is when we approach a text using woman's perspective and raise questions about women's issues. Section 4.3 should be read carefully.
- 2) Section 4.3 should be read carefully.

Check Your Progress2

- 1) Read Section 4.4 and then write your answer.

Check Your Progress3

- 1) Read Section 4.5 then read the novel again and answer this question. You could begin by defining symbolism and then locating various symbols in the text, after which you could examine and analyse these symbols.



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