

THE FAILURE OF
GENDER PERFORMANCE
AND THE NEED FOR
POLITICAL
ORGANIZATION IN
KATE CHOPIN'S *THE*
AWAKENING

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“Since *The Awakening*, feminism has evolved and now is more inclusive of all women’s voices...If Edna’s solidarity with other women had been stronger and they had been able to engage in dialogue instead of

feeling like birds in separate cages, they might have achieved more than they did operating on an individual basis. The lack of solidarity, as well as the presence of sexism, racism, and classicism, needed to be unlearned in those times and still needs to be even today. If that had been so, Edna might not have felt so alone in her feminist struggle as a wife and more than one character would have awakened to new beginnings in this story.” (Clark 346)

Recent critics of Kate Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, have centralized their critiques on performances of gender and sexuality. Through Edna’s failed attempt at gaining freedom and autonomy, the novel refutes the idea that gender is a mutable category that can be performed successfully. The text reveals that no matter how the female characters perform gender, they are still biological women and therefore cannot escape their inferiority. Critics equate sexual preference and gender as an interrelated category, but I read them as separate entities all together. Elizabeth LeBlanc is one of many critics who assert that gender and sexual orientation are interdependent and definitive of one another.² In her essay, “The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*,” she argues that Edna is a “metaphorical lesbian,” because she does not fit into a particular social, political, or normative role

² Mary Biggs also examines sexual orientation in her essay “‘Si tu savais’: The Gay/Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*.” She convincingly argues that Robert and Mademoiselle Reisz can be read as gay: “Encountering Robert and Reisz as real people in daily life, many of us would have little question about their sexuality” (Biggs 145). Never having married, ostracizing herself from society, focusing solely on her art, and most importantly awakening Edna’s emotions and senses, Mademoiselle Reisz can arguably be a lesbian figure in the novel.

in society. For this reason, Leblanc says that there is a “third gender.” However, Edna cannot perform this “third gender” successfully because there is no safe space in society to express it. Instead of representing a “third gender,” Edna serves as a model for advocating a new and progressive female gender in the future.

The novel discredits gender performance since performing masculinity cannot possibly free Edna, Madame Lebrun, Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele from their entrapment. Through Edna’s failed attempt at awakening her fellow women, the novel suggests a union of all women, despite whether they are gay, straight, confused, “metaphorical lesbians,” mother-women or anti mother-women. Thus the novel acts as a social force, giving readers the drive and motivation towards political activism and liberation out of the confines of their gender. But first, like Edna, we must awaken and become subjects of our own destinies rather than objects of male pleasure and desire.

The novel portrays different forms of entrapment through its female characters. Adele Ratignolle embodies an admirable femininity for nineteenth century society, as the “mother-woman;” but is unconsciously enslaved by her husband and children. Madame Lebrun performs masculinity, owning and managing the cottages at Grand Isle, but is still trapped behind the bars of her home in New Orleans. Mademoiselle Reisz is independent and possesses herself; however, she must live as a recluse in order to achieve this. Finally, Edna, as an awakened woman, conscious of her entrapment, tries to perform masculinity in order to be the possessor of her own thoughts and feelings. She distances herself from her husband and children but still does not achieve the freedom and justice that she desires.

Adele Ratignolle’s character is extremely important because she is Edna’s true role model of femininity and motherhood. Her objectification illustrates how society renders women as objects:

Many of them were delicious in the role; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he

was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture...There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams. There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them (Chopin 181- 2)

As I mention above, Adele's most important role in the novel is the "mother-woman." Her immediate objectification is therefore the novel's way of exemplifying the debased status of the female gender in the nineteenth century. Adele portrays a desirable, edible, luxuriant, and a pricey possession through the novel's comparison of her eyes to blue sapphire and her lips to "delicious" cherries or crimson fruit. Society depicts women simply as beautiful specimens without voices or power of their own.

Adele's character possesses "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm." The repetition of the word "delicious," highlights Adele's objective role. But how can this lustful object or possession also be "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm?" By comparing Adele's husband to a "brute, deserving of death by slow torture," the novel places Adele on a pedestal of beauty, wifely and domestic duties but also traps her as an object of man's desire.

Even though Adele's description portrays the theme of female entrapment and objectification, her hair symbolizes autonomy and free will: "There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain..." (183). The words "flaming and apparent," evoke passion and sexuality. However, Adele's sexual desire is never demonstrated in the novel. Instead childbirth stands for Adele's sexuality. Her hair as free and unrestrained is surprising since she is otherwise

completely committed and dedicated to her wifely and motherly duties. Adele's wild hair hints at her potential to awaken; but first she must become consciously aware of her position as an object and debased gender in order to break free from her entrapment.

Adele had been married for seven years and had a baby about every two years (183). Even with her "condition" and the pain and hysteria associated with Adele's childbirth, she still insists on procreating. She is in a state of agony and hysteria at the end of the novel. Through this pain and exhaustion, "Adele, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: "Think of the children! Remember them!" (343). Even in a heated moment of pain and distress, Adele presses her cheek, which is a maternal embrace. This exemplifies Adele's dedication to the mother-role of her gender. At the end of the novel, she sacrifices herself on the altar of motherhood. In essence, she dies for what she believes is the female duty or responsibility. Adele's death most strongly symbolizes female entrapment and represents the constraints and limitations of the female gender. Her sacrifice warns readers of the danger in living as an object.

Madame Lebrun's character, like Adele, is trapped by the constraints of her gender. Grand Isle, a summer vacation spot, is a more female-dominated space than New Orleans. The men go into the city during the week for business, while the females stay in Grand Isle with the children and are able to roam freely. However, their responsibility to their children hinders these women from going into the city or traveling the world, as their husbands do. Madame Lebrun, although she is a female, presides over Grand Isle, owning the house and cottages. She is a widow but never remarries, choosing independence, despite her suitor Montel (Biggs 164). Although Madame Lebrun performs masculinity, as the owner of the house and cottages of Grand Isle she still cannot escape the fate of her gender. Chopin illustrates this through Madame Lebrun's maternal characteristics.

Joyce Dyer explains Madame Lebrun's position as a widow in her book, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*. Women who divorced "found their salvation in remarriage" but "some single women – or divorced women – in nineteenth century novels do refuse to marry, or remarry...These women are either withdrawn from society...or commit themselves to a righteous cause" (8). Instead of remarriage, Madame Lebrun chooses independence and self-sufficiency, running her estate on Grand Isle. However, as Mary Biggs mentions in her essay, "Si tu savais": The Gay/Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Mademoiselle Reisz claims that Madame Lebrun "worships" and "lives for" Victor, who ironically is the more masculine of her two sons.

In addition to Dyer's discourse on the widowed woman, Barbara Ewell's essay, "Kate Chopin, the Short Story (and Me)," adds that these women, if they do not remarry, can be bold. However, they must also hide behind the shield of motherhood. This was a prevalent theme in 19th century society and literary discourse (44). As a widow, who did not remarry, one was able to perform masculinity and obtain some power. This was possible only if she still carried out her maternal responsibilities. Barbara Ewell's essay discusses the historical context of women in nineteenth century society. Although Madame Lebrun is not a writer, her character is still indicative of this historical context. Ewell uses Ann Douglas Wood's essay, "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America," to discuss working women in the nineteenth-century (Koloski 43). Wood argues that nineteenth-century women had to justify their desire to work as an economic or moral motivation. She also says that women wrote to express morality or to support their children (43). Madame Lebrun fits this mold as the widowed woman who chooses independence in the form of an "unladylike" professional ambition," and hides behind the "pretexts of moral or economic necessity" (43).

The novel's adherence to the historical and social context of the time allows readers to identify truly with her characters. For the ultra-feminine women, there is

Adele; Madame Lebrun for the independent but cautious; Mademoiselle Reisz for the artistic and anti-social; and Edna for those in the process of awakening. By establishing characters that readers can identify with, the novel applies to the women of the 19th century, and even to women today.

Madame Lebrun is the first female character introduced in the novel. This description, contrasts, parallels, and intertwines masculinity and femininity: “Madame Lebrun was bustling in and out, giving orders in a high key to a yard-boy whenever she got inside the house, and directions in an equally high voice to a dining-room servant whenever she got outside. She was a fresh, pretty woman, clad always in white with elbow sleeves. Her starched skirts crinkled as she came and went” (172). At first, Madame Lebrun is portrayed as masculine: “bustling in and out,” which evokes a sloppy disorderly manner. She is performing masculinity when she gives orders yet she gives these orders “in a high key” and “high voice,” missing feminine and masculine performance. However, this power that she is performing is contained in the female sphere of domain: the household. The kitchen and dining room were proper places for women to take control. Therefore, Madame Lebrun’s masculine performance does not help her achieve more power and prestige. She still needs to hide behind her maternal characteristics in order to be accepted by society. Since she is maternal and has two sons whom she cares for “she remains beneath the gossips’ radar” (Biggs 165-6).

Madame Lebrun’s female attire directly contrasts and devalues her masculine performance. The novel describes Madame Lebrun as a “pretty woman,” in white, looking “fresh” with “starched skirts” (172). This white and fresh attire alludes to Madame Lebrun’s sexual purity, which further discredits her masculine performance. Madame Lebrun fails in her attempt to perform masculinity and escape the confines of her gender in this static and socially constrained community of the nineteenth century.

Although Madame Lebrun performs masculinity in Grand Isle, she subjects herself strictly to the inferior feminine role in New Orleans. Madame Lebrun's house serves as a metaphor for her entrapment: "Their home from the outside looked like a prison, with iron bars before the door and lower windows. The iron bars were a relic of the old *regime*, and no one had ever thought of dislodging them" (262). Mary Biggs, in her essay, comments that this is Lebrun's way of "shutting herself away from her society," since the city is male-dominated and not as open to feminine sentiments as Grand Isle (165). This contrast between Grand Isle and New Orleans stands as a metaphor for the failure of gender performance. Madame Lebrun is able to perform masculinity in Grand Isle but literally imprisons herself in New Orleans. Even by performing masculinity in Grand Isle, Madame Lebrun still cannot escape the fate of her disempowered gender.

Madame Lebrun's birds exemplify this paradox of masculine performance without superior status and power: "The parrot and the mocking-bird were the property of Madame Lebrun, and they had the right to make all the noise they wished. Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining" (171). When first reading this scene it appears as though the birds, and in turn, Madame Lebrun, have power over Mr. Pontellier. Instead, the novel hints at Madame Lebrun's false sense of autonomy, through her masculine performance and ownership. No matter how well the women in the novel attempt to perform masculinity, the social constraints of the nineteenth century still cage them in. They can make all the noise they want but they still have no power.

The novel depicts women interchangeably as masculine and feminine. Men in the novel are similarly depicted with both masculine and feminine traits. However, this reality is overshadowed and discredited by the social control of gender. When women are masculine they are still inferior because they are women; but when men are feminine, they are good fathers, such as Edna's husband, Leonce. Their children are more attached to their father than their mother: "both children

wanted to follow their father when they saw him starting out.” (174). Through this feminine performance, Leonce becomes the “best husband in the world” (180). The novel depicts Edna’s frustration with this social inequality of gender performance: “Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better” (180). The fact that Edna must deem her husband as “the best,” shows her lack of power and autonomy. With this rigid social control, gender performance fails to change social order.

Mademoiselle Reisz possesses herself and does not buy into social constraints, especially of gender behavior; however, she is a social outcast and has no economic or political power. Edna looks to her for inspiration; however, she does not want to be an outcast. Mademoiselle Reisz’s society stigmatizes her as a peculiar woman:

She was dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby, which a nurse in the adjoining cottage was endeavoring to put to sleep. She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others...She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair (208).

The fact that Mademoiselle Reisz objects to a crying baby is unnatural for a woman of the nineteenth century. This controversial masculine performance demonstrates Mademoiselle Reisz’s false sense of freedom. Even when her music is well regarded, Reisz cannot communicate with her fans. Moreover, she does not communicate with anyone in the novel besides Edna and Robert. For her minimal socialization, Mademoiselle Reisz accumulates a negative reputation. She is depicted as “disagreeable;” “quarreled with almost every one;” “self-assertive” and a “disposition

to trample upon the rights of others.” These traits hardly ever play out in the novel. This rusty or masculine femininity further highlights the ceaseless theme of female entrapment. Even though she is isolated from society, Mademoiselle Reisz tries to awaken Edna, since she is at least part of society, in order to fight for the autonomy and freedom that she cannot fight for due to her isolation.

As many critics agree, it is no coincidence that the novel opens with “a green and yellow parrot,” shouting “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right,” which means: Go away! Go away for G-d’s sake (171). This foreshadows Edna’s plight since the parrot “speaks a language which no one understood” (171). Sandra Gilbert, in her essay, “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire,” equates the birds to Edna’s character: “for, as we shall see, these birds together prefigure both Edna’s restlessness and her irony, her awakening desire for freedom and her sardonic sense that freedom may ultimately be meaningless, her yearning for solitude and her skeptical worries about loneliness” (48). Gilbert admirably suggests that Edna finds this freedom, or false sense of freedom, meaningless; when it is not coupled with justice and power. Edna fails to achieve power, in the form of social justice and equality because she needs the support of her fellow women.

Edna has not won a voice or a safe space in society; she has just isolated herself like Mademoiselle Reisz. The freedom that she is searching for cannot be achieved alone but instead through a unification of all women from various social statuses. Zoila Clark, in her essay, *The Bird that Came out of the Cage: A Foucaultian Feminist Approach to Kate Chopin’s The Awakening*, uses this opening image of caged birds to show the lack of fraternity, which is the true ingredient to “equality and freedom for all” (Clark 335). In this representation the novel calls its readers to take political action because this is the only way to gain freedom for all women in nineteenth century society. The fact that the bird is multi-colored and speaks multiple languages, one in particular that cannot be understood, foreshadows

Edna's character and struggle. Clark interestingly points out this "lack of communication" as the key theme throughout the novel; in Edna's marriage and in her relations with other women (337). Clark attributes this lack of communication between Edna and the women to Edna's progressivism and their blind entrapment: "Edna is unable to communicate with other women in Creole society because they keep whistling 'fluty notes,' are distracted with their charms, and do not develop that language 'nobody understood, unless (it is another caged bird)'" (337).

Contrastingly, I believe that these women need to band together and communicate especially because they are all so different. Through Edna, the novel tries to awaken its readers one "stereotypical woman," as Clark calls them, at a time (339). Not only does Edna lack the proper "language" or "communication" to speak with the women of Grand Isle and New Orleans, but these women also cannot communicate with each other past their stereotypical social roles or stances in society.

Edna possesses both masculine and feminine traits. On one hand she is very emotional, but on the other she is autonomous and deeply desires to be the possessor of her own actions and sentiments. No matter whether performing masculinity or femininity, Edna still makes an alliance with the women – butch, feminine, mother – women, widows, independent women, etc. However, she does not gain the "regal" throne that she desires. The dinner party scene depicts Edna's gender play between masculine and feminine performance. Edna wants the power to reign, as the "regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone"; but she also desires the "presence of the beloved" (308). This contrast occurs throughout the novel, at times separately, and at times side by side. Even though Edna can perform both masculinity and femininity, she still cannot escape her entrapment. Creole women are less prudish than the Presbyterian, Kentucky women, which Edna grew up around. The book, "*The Awakening: A Novel of New Beginnings*," by Joyce Dyer, depicts Edna's cultural background and the way that she blends two distinct cultures together:

The Creole women of Louisiana, though seemingly less constrained than other women, were actually among the most conservative members of their sex in the nineteenth century. Like Adele, they were frank and physical. But it was their questionable personal and religious commitment to family, chastity, husband, and children that made this open manner possible...Edna, not a Catholic but a Presbyterian, not a Creole but a southerner, adopts the candor and sensual manner of her Creole friends yet leaves their traditional notions of wifedom and motherhood behind (11).

This passage highlights the problem with Edna's character, in regards to the social construction of gender; she is not maternal or domestic. Creole society tolerated being masculine, "frank and physical," as long as the women were also motherly and servile to their husbands. Edna, however, does not fit this criterion.

Edna drinks "the liquor from the glass as a man would have done" (Chopin 294); and like a barbarian or animal "Edna bit a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong, white teeth. She poured some of the wine into the glass and drank it down. Then she went softly out of doors, and plucking an orange from the low-hanging bough of a tree, threw it at Robert, who did not know she was awake and up" (228). The novel's language for Edna – "tearing," "drank if down," "plucking," "threw" – is active and coded in society as masculine. However, the novel adds a hint of femininity to this hyper masculine depiction through the use of the word "softly." The novel uses this common trend in its gender play. Even when a character conveys hyper masculinity or femininity, the novel still attributes subtle nuances of the opposite gender. This lack of conformity within individual characters further exemplifies the impossible standards that society perpetuates.

Even though Edna is an autonomous being, tearing at her food barbarically with her "strong teeth," she is also "a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 173). By calling Edna "property," the novel takes

her entrapment metaphor to the extreme, equating Edna's entrapment to slavery. Leonce marries Edna in the hopes that she will conform to her inherent mother role, which the social construction of gender dictates, but Edna refuses to pretend to conform to this role anymore because it is not natural for her. She cannot conform to the roles and responsibilities of her gender but she cannot perform her way out of them either. She is both manly and an object belonging to her husband. This disjunction is not possible in her society. Edna would be able to get away with some masculine traits, as Madame Lebrun does, however, her lack of maternal care is a deal breaker.

Edna compares her responsibilities to her children as the confinements of slavery: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (350). The classification of Edna's children as antagonists is extremely strong. The fact that her children overcame and overpowered Edna situates them in the masculine role with power over her, even though they are just children. As the novel progresses, Edna stops performing femininity, succumbing to her husband's desires, and instead performs masculinity, rejecting her responsibilities to her husband and children; but she cannot free herself from her debased gender.

The novel illustrates the struggle of the female cause in Edna's journey, awakening, and death. Edna's death creates space for future attempts at change and activism. Anca Parvulescu highlights Edna's awakening, or consciousness of her entrapment, through the scene where Edna insists on lying on the hammock late at night: "She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us" (218). This unconsciousness stems from the social construction of gender; men and women are set in their ways or positions in society and cannot

escape them even when performing gender. For this reason, the women in the novel need to unite in order to demand for their voices to be heard. The novel's language connects female "obedience" or "submission" with their unconscious state. This further depicts the novel's intention to awaken not just its characters but its readers as well.

Parvulescu claims that Edna does achieve power, which the novel portrays through the swimming and flying metaphors; however this power only functions as a "narcotic" or "intoxication" to cover up Edna's feelings of "anguish" over her "double" life (482). Contrastingly, Ann Heilman, in her essay *The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction, argues that Edna does in fact establish a sense of self-ownership and autonomy from her midnight swim. She proves this by quoting Mr. Pontellier's reference to his wife as property and Edna's quote towards the end of the novel when she states that she is no longer one of her husband's possessions (Beer 87).

Zoila Clark interestingly references Western feminism: "The oppression of upper class white and Creole women in Louisiana as portrayed in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899) is an example of how the main goal of Western feminism was to achieve liberty, disregarding equality and fraternity" (335). Clark then uses Harry Brod's words to point out that the "negation of equality and fraternity excluded women from full participation in society" (335). Through Edna's character and ultimate demise, the novel calls for justice and equality, which can only be obtained through a political organization. Since Edna struggles and truly dedicates herself to finding a free space to express her voice in society, but fails, there is nothing left for her to do but serve as a model for future generations. Interestingly, at the time that the novel was published, the women's suffrage movement was underway. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women finally achieved the power to vote, following the novel's message of female unity and political organization (Great Neck, Publishing). Clark uses Foucault's theory of the

power/knowledge connection in order to show that women have the power to change society: “Women reinforce their own oppression because knowledge is biased. We all have something to do with it; consequently, we have the power to change it” (335). This “biased knowledge” evokes the perpetuation of the social construction of gender. The women in the novel, and at the time the novel was published (1899), need to awaken out of their unconscious and subservient roles, unite, form a “community of women” (Parvulescu), or a “fraternity” (Clark) and rescue their subordinate gender. The novel’s illustration of the female struggle for power and equality still resonates today, which is why this literary conversation still continues.

Contrastingly, Parvulescu claims that Edna is not a feminist. She clarifies her argument by specifying the type of feminism she is addressing: “within the notion of feminism that the text defines” (485). Although the women’s suffrage movement was underway, feminism had not yet reached its peak when the novel was published. Therefore Parvulescu does not see Edna as a feminist because she is only looking within the text to define a feminism that does not exist yet. Beyond the text, Edna can be read as an early feminist archetype. Through Edna, the novel attempts to unite all the women in the text; not only the women who have awakened but also the mother women too. Parvulescu’s counter argument is as follows:

Edna is not a feminist. At least not within the notion of feminism that the text defines. She does not associate with the ‘pseudo-intellectual’ women that Doctor Mandelet immediately thinks of and that we now recognize as the suffragists of the day. The feminists as suffragists want something; Edna does not want anything. Or she does not know what she wants. Or she wants everything. In any case, her desire is not recuperable within feminism. (285-6).

Edna is not confused about what she wants, but instead plays and experiments with gender in an attempt at achieving justice for all women as a collective gender. The

novel shows this through her death at the end of the novel and through the bird imagery, as Zoila Clark's essay discusses. The fact that Edna's death is still talked about today shows the sacrificial intent of her death to instill change and activism.

At the end of her essay, Parvalescu touches upon my idea of a union of women. Instead she uses the idea of "a community of women," similar to Clark's concept of "fraternity." Parvalescu connects Edna's death with a sacrifice, which generally helps bring people together for a greater good. However, I do not view Edna's "death" in the terms of sacrifice but as a frustration with the social construction of gender that entraps women. When Edna does find power within herself, she cannot outwardly exhibit it because it is not socially acceptable. Edna wants independence but does not wish to ostracize herself from society as Mademoiselle Reisz does. Due to the rigid nature of the social construction of gender, Edna cannot successfully perform masculinity and must swim out into the metaphorically free space of the ocean, making way for others to follow her cause.

The novel ends with images of female entrapment: "She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (Chopin 351). This military imagery represents patriarchy and male dominance. The animal imagery symbolizes confinement and containment and the "pinks" clearly symbolize femininity. Therefore, the last image that we are left with is of Edna confined by her society, regardless of her performing masculinity or femininity; and regardless of her being a lesbian, metaphorical lesbian, or confused. The image of the dog barking represents Edna's expression of autonomy, through her masculine performance. The fact that the barking dog is chained, like the birds being able to make all the noise they want, but in their cage, represents the failure of Edna's masculine performance. She can perform masculinity and try to be autonomous all she wants, but Edna is still a biological woman, and therefore, does not have a say or voice in society. The spurs of calvary

clanking represent society's rigid order and structure, which situates Edna, as a female, below men. The hum of bees represents Edna's sexual awakening and the musky odor of pinks represents femininity. These images all together summarize Edna's entrapment. By leaving the reader to interpret Edna's fate, the novel creates space for its readers to awaken and continue where Edna could not.

A provocative book, reminiscent of *The Awakening* itself, circulates among the women of Grand Isle: "A book had gone the rounds of the pension. When it came her turn to read it, she did so with profound astonishment. She felt moved to read the book in secret and solitude, though none of the others had done so – to hide it from view at the sound of approaching footsteps. It was openly criticized and freely discussed at table. Mrs. Pontellier gave over being astonished, and concluded that wonders would never cease" (184). The book "moved" Edna in the same way *The Awakening* still moves its readers today. The fact that Edna reads the book in "secret" and "solitude" is interesting because she is searching for a safe space throughout the novel to express herself but cannot find one. If she cannot even read a provocative book in public then she is not ready to change the social construction of gender in society. This proves that Edna serves merely as a motivating symbol or stepping stone in the fight for female autonomy. Ironically "the approaching footsteps" that Edna hides from are members of society, who actually need to see Edna reading this provocative book in order to make a statement and advocate for her space in society. By reading this book, Edna learns that sexuality can be freely expressed. This newfound sexuality fuels her quest in finding a safe space in society to express herself. Furthermore, this free circulation of sex among a community of women is a unifying step in awakening and liberating them from their entrapment.

The Awakening drastically transcends its time. The book "*The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*," describes the novel's journey through the social climate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "The tensions between the old and the new, the traditional and the untraditional, were great during the final years of the nineteenth

century” (Dyer 11). The novel was deemed “immoral” and “disappeared for over half a century” (17). The book, *Awakenings – The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival*, roots the novel’s problem in its honesty and realism: “It was not the truth of her book that came under attack in 1889 but the fact that Chopin had put that truth on paper and published it” (Koloski 3). Edna’s character shows us that women need to unify in order to overcome their individual entrapment. With the first wave of feminism already active, in 1899 when the novel was published, and the second wave of feminism underway when the novel resurfaced in 1964, the novel’s message was (and still is) extremely relevant.

The revitalization of *The Awakening* is proof of the novel’s success in awakening its readers. Critics with different views and interpretations of the text came together for a common cause (Koloski 8). They employed Chopin’s message, without even knowing it: “If the Kate Chopin revival was anything it was teamwork” – all the critics worked together but separately “knew of one another but were competing to make the most headway” (8). Thus the novel serves as a social force to bring women from all different backgrounds and beliefs together for a unified purpose. Critics of different perspectives came together for a common goal. Feminism in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, for which the novel sets the stage, also fueled the Kate Chopin revival (6). Although *The Awakening* is not as sexually perverse and shocking in our time, its feminist and autonomous voice still resonates with readers today. Barbara Ewell ends her essay, “Kate Chopin, the Short Story (and Me) with this message to her fellow critics and readers: “Hopefully others will be able to swim out even farther – with more confidence, greater buoyancy, and altogether better results” (45). Ewell’s message is evidence of *The Awakening*’s main message to its readers: to continue Edna’s fight where she left off.

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