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# Kate Chopin and Immorality

Rylee Chamberlain

*Southwestern Oklahoma State University*

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## **Kate Chopin and Immorality**

Rylee Chamberlain

*Southwestern Oklahoma State University*

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### **Abstract**

For essentially the same reasons, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* received mostly negative reviews for the half century after its release and mostly positive reviews for the last half century. The decision of Chopin's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, to pursue personal fulfillment at the expense of her marriage, her relationship with her children, and eventually her life was seen by critics as the height of irresponsibility in the late Victorian era and as a blow for gender equity as second-wave feminism began to crest in the 1970s. Even if it is generally true that critics read into literary works the norms and values of their own times, such a shocking critical reversal within the same century is indicative of how advanced Chopin's ideas were. An examination of Chopin's career, her biography, and her thoughts on the pressing intellectual questions of her time hints that neither Victorian nor second-wave feminist critics understood Chopin perfectly.

"Chopin and Immorality" demonstrates the degrees to which the author believed that societal constraints hindered the growth of Edna Pontellier's identity, it examines her interpretation of the balance of motherhood and selfhood in a Victorian woman's life, and it explores her engagement with some of the most important new intellectual concepts of her time.

**Keywords:** feminism, feminist, literature, modernism, individuality, selfhood, motherhood, wifehood, social norms, societal complaints, Victorian era

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The idea that a female can have an identity independent of other human beings was not widely considered for a large part of our history. The idea that an individual should be able to explore their own identity without the constraints of societal convention was discussed even less. Those few rebellious minds who were brave enough to describe such an idea in their writing were often met with criticism and hatred in their own time, and later with praise and celebration. Kate Chopin was one of these authors, and although many of her stories were harshly criticized in her lifetime, they were ultimately significant in helping to clear a path toward literary freedom. Chopin's personal life was certainly influential to her stories to an extent, but most of her inspiration came from her own views of individuality. Chopin argues in *The Awakening* that self-fulfillment is a human right, justly pursuable through means which might be considered immoral by society's standards.

There is a recurring theme in Chopin's works of immoral acts such as infidelity and neglectful motherhood. It should be made clear that Chopin's fascination with these particular themes is not the result of a bad marriage or an unfulfilling family life. The "angry feminist" role is one that critics of Chopin have tried to force upon her, but it is not a role that she fulfills. For some, Chopin's common themes of infidelity and oppressive marriage might be easier to swallow if Chopin herself had been unhappy in her marriage or neglectful to her children. These would be simple reasons for someone to write about the rebellion of a married woman and mother. However, all evidence points to Chopin's having a loving marriage to her Creole husband Oscar and being devoted to her six children. To be sure, there are some similarities between Chopin's own life and the life of Edna, the protagonist in *The Awakening*, but not in the sense of Edna's domestic unhappiness. Chopin's marital contentment places more credibility upon the message that she was trying to send in so much of her writing: that marriage and motherhood don't have to be the sole purposes of all women's lives. Chopin's main theme throughout nearly all of her work is self-exploration, and exploring one's self was a very difficult task for married women and mothers, whose existences were so often defined by their relations to others.

The custom in Edna's society demands that being an exceptional mother and wife be the fundamental goal for all women. It is seen as an inadmissible flaw for women to fall short of this goal, and as hard as Edna tries to do the duty that is appointed to her by society, she cannot put her entire heart and soul into other human beings. As the narrator claims, "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (11). This is an unforgivable shortcoming to Edna's husband. In Leonce's eyes, the mother-women "were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 11). The fact that Edna does not fit into this role is something that she herself has likely been aware of for quite some time, but it is not until this particular summer at Grande Isle that Edna knows that what is missing in her life is not dedication to her husband and children but dedication to herself. As the narrator claims, "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (17). This revelation causes Edna to embrace the side of herself that is disapproved of by her husband and all of her society. Rather than worry about what society tells her she can and cannot do, she is determined to follow her own instincts. According to Edna's new philosophy, acknowledgement of social constraints would be the ultimate offense.

Following her “awakening,” Edna is inspired to examine her relationship to her husband with more transparency than she had allowed herself before. It is made abundantly clear that Edna does not feel romantic love toward Leonce and that he views his wife as property rather than a partner. Edna even recalls that her main motivation for marrying Leonce was to make a job at her father. These two people deciding to spend the rest of their lives together was an irrational decision but one fully supported and congratulated by society. The narrator claims that “Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate” (22). In this way, the unshakeable bylaws of marriage which demand that Edna exist purely for her husband are a major contribution to the lack of fulfillment in her life which, in turn, lead to her acts of infidelity and neglect.

Although this lack of compatibility does contribute to Edna’s attraction to Robert, who is himself a potential romantic partner, it does not explain or justify Edna’s acceptance of the advances that Alcee makes toward her, as she is clearly not interested in Alcee beyond the physical attraction that she feels for him. In the end, Edna’s reason for infidelity is what makes the meaning of this novel so difficult to grasp for some readers: that the significance that the men hold in this novel is created entirely by Edna. She is not motivated by Robert’s love or Alcee’s sensuality or even by Leonce’s cruelty; her sole inspiration is in her own self and the feelings that she is freshly aware of possessing. Edna is not a mother-woman, a passionate lover, nor a shameful adulteress, and her refusal to conform to any of these roles is what causes Edna to seek the end that she does. As Barbara Ewell states in her essay “Kate Chopin and the Dream of Female Selfhood,” “For Edna, then, to be a self, to have desires, is to be no longer selfless, which is the essential condition for women” (164). In Ewell’s statement, “selfless” refers not only to the act of caring for others rather than one’s self, but also to the aspect of not possessing a “self” (164). Early in the novel, Edna explains to Madame Ratignolle that she “would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 55). Later she learns that, for women, the “self” is not a possession that is acceptable in her society. Rather than force herself back into the “selfless” role of wife and mother or let others force her into the role of immoral adulteress, she decides to give up the unessential, her life, so that she never has to give up her “self.”

Critics have interpreted Edna’s suicide in many different ways, and, particularly in the years immediately following its publication, it was interpreted in a negative light. A review from 1899 claims that “‘The Awakening’ is the sad story of a Southern lady who wanted to do what she wanted to. From wanting to, she did, with disastrous consequences; but as she swims out to sea in the end, it is to be hoped that her example may lie for ever undredged” (qtd. in Petry 52). Another review states that “[i]f the author had secured our sympathy for this unpleasant person it would have been a small victory, but we are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf” (qtd. in Petry 58). These reviewers, and many after their time, interpreted *The Awakening* as a badly written cautionary tale. The fact that the novel was generally not deemed worthy of reading until decades after its original publication makes a statement all on its own. Society could not even fathom the idea that women could want to exist as more than merely extensions of husbands and children. When Chopin decided to end *The Awakening* with Edna’s suicide, she was essentially making the statement that a woman could not truly exist as an individual in her society, and the harsh

and ignorant reaction of society to the publication of this story perfectly demonstrates this idea.

After Chopin published *The Awakening*, her career was dealt a severe blow. The story was so harshly criticized that Chopin's reputation suffered, and she became discouraged, never writing again with the same enthusiasm that she previously had. There is infinite irony in the way that society deemed much of Chopin's work too immoral or crude because Chopin's main ambition was to bring to light the suffocating effect of social constraints. Sadly, *The Awakening* was, in a way, a self-fulfilling prophecy for Chopin. For writing with complete disclosure about the inner workings of women's minds, her career suffered and society turned its back on her, the same way Edna's society could not tolerate her desires for total selfhood. Chopin and Edna both, after making the unpopular decision to pursue truth regarding female identity, were rejected by their societies. Despite the fact that *The Awakening* was not a success in its own time, it has become an iconic work of literature in modern times, and scholars and fans of feminist literature will undoubtedly praise Chopin's work for many years to come.

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