

Grace Knudsen
Dr. Pennington
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Nineteenth-Century Feminism in Chopin's *The Awakening*

“The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (Chopin 96). The feminist movements of the nineteenth century embodies the resilience that Mademoiselle Reisz describes in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Seeking for the right to property and equal sexual status with men, feminists fought against social ideologies that forced them to be subordinate to their male counterparts. Chopin addresses these movements in her development of the character of Edna Pontellier. Questions of property and autonomy in Kate Chopin's novel serves as a response to the first-wave feminism movement in the early nineteen-hundreds.

Before Chopin's novel can be analyzed for the commentary it provides on feminist rights and the female experience, it is important to note the attitudes and goals of the feminist movements at the time that the novel was written. Jennifer Gray writes that “nineteenth century feminist discourse was an oppositional ideology, a resistance to obstacles of female fulfillment” (Gray 53). This ‘fulfillment’ that was needed by nineteenth century feminists was property rights and equal status with men; specifically, their husbands. There are many different ways in which equal status can manifest itself, and Chopin's novel details multiple cases of feminine equality.

The house that Edna purchases for herself to be independent, the pigeon house, serves as a reflection of the property rights of women during the nineteenth century. A large factor of the discourse of female ownership during Chopin's lifetime revolved around property and earnings. During the nineteenth century, women were required by law to hand over their earnings to their husbands. However, the middle to late century saw the overturning of these ownership laws.

“Most states gave wives rights to hold their earnings as separate property in the late nineteenth century. The first earnings act was passed by the Massachusetts legislature in 1855 and the last by Georgia during World War II” (Zeigler 70). As women were finally given the right to their own property, they drew closer to the ability to draw away from their husbands and have their own autonomy.

Chopin’s novel also serves as a commentary on the social oppression of women by their husbands during the nineteenth century. The dynamic between husbands and their wives was consistently unequal, as men dominated power over their wives and treated them as property rather than as equal partners in their relationship. Feminists described the state of marriage in the nineteenth century as a labor contract. “The mother was, legally, a babysitter performing part of her labor contract. The husband could also fire his wife, should she fail in several of her duties, by divorcing her... The whole functioned to ensure that the wife, because of her dependent status, continued to perform her wifely duties” (Zeigler 69). Edna is cognizant of this fact in her relationship with Leonce Pontellier, yet “when Mr. Pontellier became rude, [she] grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward” (Chopin 66). In her resistance to backing down against her husband, Edna embodies the feminist movement of taking ownership of oneself and refusing to allow herself to become subordinate to a man, in this case being her husband. This ‘step backward’ also represents feminists’ constant push for constant autonomy rather than sacrificing their freedom.

Feminists also addressed the double standard between male sexuality and female sexuality. These concepts are conceptualized through Edna’s sexual awakening in the novel. Edna’s relationship with Robert and Arobin show her search for sexual liberation as she seeks out sexual relationships that she actually feels pleasure and benefit from, as Chopin describes

Edna's liberation with the phrase "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded" (Chopin 96). Social chains seek to make Edna feel guilty about her relationships with Robert and Arobin, however, as her friends encourage her throughout the novel to stay away from these men and instead return to her wifely duties.

Motherhood also plays a large role in Chopin's discourse on the feminist movement. As Edna becomes sick and tired as a mother, she reflects the same attitude as other feminists at the time of the novel. The "mother, a role dictated for married women by hegemonic ideology in her society" (Gray, 54), seemed to be the only position that a woman could hold in the nineteenth century in order to hold a fragment of respect by the patriarchy. There was no other option available for women that could warrant the approval of society at this point in history. Edna is forced to care for her kids despite knowing that she yearns for a life outside of being a mother, but she, like other women at the time, is forced by social convention to remain their caretaker and nothing more.

Late nineteenth century discourse on reproductive rights are reflected by Adele Ratignolle's coercion into childbirth by her husband's demand. Adele is forced by her husband to have multiple children, with each of their births described as "scene[s] [of] torture" (Chopin 127). Feminists provided their insight into the issue of forced births and the denial of bodily autonomy by asking "If Christian women are *prostitutes* to Christian husbands, what can we expect but the natural consequence- infanticide?" (Anthony 4) By denying women the right over their own sexuality and denying them the right over their bodies, they will resort to methods such as abortion because they seek such autonomy. However, "women would shun abortion if they were granted equal rights suggest[ing] that individual women, and not the state, should control decisions about reproduction" (Beisel and Kay 515). Feminists fought for the right to their own

bodies and the ability to refuse bearing children for her husband. This issue of reproductive rights still stands today, as legislators and political parties still debate over the ethics and legality of certain contraceptives and access to abortion in countries all over the world.

Along with providing insight into the empowered side of feminist politics, the negative roles in the feminist movement are also portrayed in Chopin's novel. Adele Ratignolle is critiqued in the novel for her complacency in feminist politics, as Chopin marks her character as a perpetuator of wifely oppression. Nineteenth century feminists fought back against tradition and "attacked the common law fiction of marital unity because they believed it was prescriptive and embodied a classic example of patriarchal values" (Basch, 349). Those who accepted their roles in society by becoming mothers or any other form of subordination were enablers of the patriarchal oppression.

Given all of the methods in which feminists sought to find liberation, a final solution to their demands can be found through the absolute rejection of social standards and even the rejection to live in one's own oppressive society. How are women to proceed if they are not given full autonomy and fulfillment? The answer lies in Edna's fate by the end of the novel. A feminist cry of "give me liberty or give me death!" can be heard in Edna's suicide, as she realizes that the oppressed roles she as a woman must play is not a life worth living. Chopin describes Edna being overwrought by oppressive forces who "sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (Chopin 132). Rather than Edna's death being interpreted as "giving up", Edna's suicide resonates as a rejection of the standards she is forced to uphold, and instead the upheaval of her regular life in order to find her own liberation.

Chopin's novel stands as a piece of history documenting the different forms of discourse among women's rights activist of the nineteenth century. Property rights, reproductive rights, and overall equality are argued for both by feminist movements of the time and by Chopin's writing. By providing insight into the different issues and giving a face to the feminist movement in the embodiment of Edna Pontellier's character, Chopin reflects the strength and resilience of a group of individuals driven towards change.

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