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Nineteenth-Century Feminism in Chopin's *The Awakening*

Questions of property and autonomy Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* 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 wom

- a. "Feminists attacked the common law fiction of marital unity because they believed it was prescriptive and embodied a classic example of patriarchal values" (Basch, 349).

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.

- b. "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)

Chopin's novel also serves as a commentary on the social oppression of women by their husbands during the nineteenth century, and the double standard between male sexuality and

female sexuality. These concepts are conceptualized through Edna's sexual awakening in the novel. Edna is not attracted to her husband, Mr. Pontellier as he is demanding and oppressive of his wife and her interests.

- a. Something about husbands seeing wives as property, find a quote
 - i. "When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward" (Chopin 66) She fights back though.
 - ii. 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).
 - b. Robert and Arobin: actual attraction here and they allow Edna to sexually liberate herself, but social chains want her to feel guilty about this
 - i. "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded" (Chopin 96).
 - c. Motherhood
 - i. "Mother, a role dictated for married women by hegemonic ideology in her society" (Gray, 54).
- B. Concept of death as feminist liberation in *The Awakening*
- a. Chopin shows the rejection of the different patriarchal values of the time through Edna's suicide at the end of the novel. A feminist cry of "give me liberty or give me death!" resonates in Edna's decision, as she realizes that the oppressed roles she as a woman must play are not lives worth living.

C. Conclusion

- a. Point towards the future: reproductive rights, equal rights amendment, etc.

D. Works Cited

Basch, Norma. "Invisible Women: The Legal Fiction of Marital Unity in Nineteenth-Century America." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1979, pp. 346–366. *JSTOR*.

THE BOOK

Gray, Jennifer B. "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and 'The Awakening.'" *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2004, pp. 53–73. *JSTOR*.

Zeigler, Sara L. "Wifely Duties: Marriage, Labor, and the Common Law in Nineteenth-Century America." *Social Science History*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1996, pp. 63–96. *JSTOR*.