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Literary Theory and Writing: Draft Three
11-22-19

Sexuality and Reproductive Rights in Chopin's *The Awakening*

“The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (Chopin 96). Without this strength, no social change can truly be brought about. The feminist movements of the nineteenth century embodied this resilience that Kate Chopin describes in her 1899 novel *The Awakening*. Seeking for the right to their own bodies and to equal sexual status with men, women fought against social ideologies that forced them to be subordinate to their male counterparts. Chopin addresses these movements in her development of the characters of Edna Pontellier and Adele Ratignolle. The women in Chopin's novel are used to present the different struggles that nineteenth century feminists worked against in their pursuit of sexuality and reproductive rights, along with representing the efforts that were used to fight back against oppression.

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” exists in the freedom of women to pursue their own desires. The feminist movement worked towards desires of employment, property, sexuality, and reproductive rights. Edna's embodies the movement towards sexual equality in the novel, refusing to be caged by the patriarchal society in her desires and to “never again belong to another than herself” (Chopin 92).

Feminists of the nineteenth century criticized the double standard between male sexuality and female sexuality, and Chopin shows the bias in these standards 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. Edna's kiss with Arobin is described by Chopin as "the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded" (Chopin 96). Edna's "nature," or her honest self, is finally acknowledged through her intimacy with Arobin in the scene, showing that her husband had never allowed her to truly explore her desires and feel "natural." Throughout Edna's entire life, she has never been given the chance to seek out her own sexual and romantic pleasure. Instead, women were forced to remain responsible for their husband's pleasure and to sacrifice their own in exchange. With her attraction to Robert, Edna "for the first time recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child" (Chopin 53), a feeling she was never able to feel in her adult life with her husband. By allowing herself the ability to be intimate with men that she actually desires, Edna's relationships with these new men exist as acts of rebellion, and the seizure of her own autonomy that her husband had previously kept a hold of. The social chains seek to make Edna feel guilty about her relationships with Robert and Arobin, such as her husband's anger with her and friends' encouragement to return to her wifely duties by telling her to "think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 127). These influences do not stop Edna from seeking out her true desires, however. This determination captures the essence of the feminist movement: seeking to fulfill oneself before fulfilling the desires of others.

The revered social status of motherhood stands as another blockade to a woman's self-fulfillment, however. As Edna becomes sick and tired of her role as a mother, she reflects the same attitude as other feminists at the time. 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 have a fragment of respect by the patriarchy. Motherhood also is the result of sexuality, therefore any form of sexual expression that a woman was allowed to have at the time was socially required to result in bearing children. There was no other option available for women that could warrant the approval of society at this point in history. Edna describes her children as “antagonists who had overcome her” (Chopin 132), showing that she does not believe herself to fit into the role of mother. She does not fit in the mold that society has made for her and is forced to follow the life set out for her, rather than pursuing her own passions. 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.

The dangers and oppression that lies in forced childbirth is shown through the character of Adele Ratignolle. Late nineteenth century discourse and the patriarchal hold on women’s reproductive rights are reflected by Adele’s coercion into motherhood 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). During the nineteenth century, there was a large movement of women who refused sexual contact with their husbands because they “had good reason to fear the physical consequences of pregnancy and childbirth” (Freedman 199). This fear is reflected in Edna and her aversion to Adele’s lifestyle as the “mother-woman.” Despite the knowledge that Adele’s female friends have of the pain and suffering that Adele goes through with each of her children, the patriarchal society praises Adele for her choices and “esteemed it a holy privilege [for women] to efface themselves as individuals” (Chopin 11). Along with the fact that the woman’s body was forced to only fulfill their husband’s sexual desires, the body was also

demanding to provide the husband with another commodity in the birth of children. No part of the nineteenth century woman's body was allowed to exist only to her. Rather, men claimed ownership over every aspect of them and denied them the fulfillment of their own desires.

Adele Ratignolle is critiqued in the novel for her complacency in feminist politics, as Chopin marks her character as a perpetuator of wifely oppression. The conditions of Adele's marriage to her husband are praised by society, stating that "if ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (Chopin 65). However, nineteenth century feminists critiqued this type of marriage and fought back against the support of marital tradition because "they believed it was prescriptive and embodied a classic example of patriarchal values" (Basch 349). Chopin critiques Adele's role as the "mother woman" through Edna's disagreement with her lifestyle when she states 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). Those who accepted their roles in society by becoming mothers or by accepting any other form of subordination by society were enablers of the patriarchal oppression. Adele shows the traditional side of nineteenth century women, holding onto their oppression and becoming complacent. Chopin uses Adele's character to highlight the vast difference in autonomy that Edna shows in her pursuit of desire in the novel.

Chopin responds to these cases of inequality by showing how to fight back against patriarchal forces. 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). This 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. 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). Edna demands fulfillment whether her husband can provide it or not, and fights back when Leonce tries to silence her. In her resistance to backing down against her husband, Edna embodies the feminist movement of taking ownership of one’s self 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.

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. Edna believes that if fulfillment cannot be reached in the world that she lives in now, perhaps fulfillment exists in death.

Chopin’s novel stands as a piece of history documenting the different forms of discourse among women’s rights activist of the nineteenth century. Sexuality, 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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