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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Kate Chopin
THE AWAKENING

AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS
CRITICISM
SECOND EDITION

Edited by
MARGO CULLEY
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST



ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ ΑΓΓΛΙΚΟΥ
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in her swim toward death: "They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul."

While the motivation from the children has been amply anticipated, its final realization produces something of a shift. Perhaps one might go so far as to say that the children, used in this way, somewhat flaw the novel. We recall that many of Mrs. Chopin's short stories first appeared in *Harper's Young People's Magazine*, the *Youth's Companion*, and also in *Vogue*, with the uneasy feeling that the author is still writing in a juvenile vein or from the conventional angle of a woman's magazine. Yet this difficulty might be answered by recognizing that the children stand for a stable society and the permanency of an unbroken home. Perhaps it would even be better to treat them as bringing another contrast into the story. Like those contrasts of purpose and aimlessness, of romance and realism, and of sleep and awakening, this one is not of absolute opposition but is complex and even blurred. As my argument has suggested, precisely this complexity may be what Mrs. Chopin is trying to achieve. She presents a series of events in which the truth is present, but with a philosophical pragmatism she is unwilling to extract a final truth. Rather, she sees truth as constantly re-forming itself and as so much a part of the context of what happens that it can never be final or for that matter abstractly stated. * * *

PER SEYERSTED

[Kate Chopin and the American Realists]†

* * * Cyrille Arnavon is thus no longer alone in elevating Kate Chopin from the group of local colorists to that of the American pioneer writers of the 1890's, the group which comprises such authors as Crane, Garland, Norris, and Dreiser.¹ It is therefore fitting to look at works like *Maggie*, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, *McTeague*, and *Sister Carrie*, all written in that formative decade of American literature, and compare their approach to certain fundamental issues with that of *The Awakening*.

If we turn to the treatment of sexuality in Garland's novel, for example,

† From *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969) 190-96. Reprinted by permission of the author. Except as noted, all footnotes are by the editor of this Norton Critical Edition.

1. Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), prolific naturalist novelist, best known for his *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1925). "Crane": see above, p. 190, n. 3. "Garland": Hamlin Garland (1860-1940) wrote novels depicting the hardships of farm life in the Middle West. "Norris": Frank Norris (1870-1902) is best known for his *The Octopus* (1901), one of a number of novels examining economic and social realities.

See also Cyrille Arnavon, "Les Débuts du Roman Réaliste Américain et l'Influence Française," in *Romanciers Américains Contemporains*, Henri Kerst, ed. (*Cahiers des Langues Modernes*, I Paris, 1946), pp. 9-35; and the introduction to Arnavon's French translation of the novel: *Edna* (Paris, 1953), pp. 1-22 (above, pp. 184-88).

we find that his Rose, a farmer's daughter, views all aspects of animal reproduction as natural matters. We might then perhaps expect her to see sex in humans as equally natural, a view undoubtedly held by Edna. But though she is courted by "wholesome," "clean" men—one of them observes that human procreation is "not as yet a noble business"—she feels "revulsion" when she realizes how their presence stirs up desire in her "pure wholesome awakening womanhood." While men are "sordid and vicious, . . . polygamous by instinct, insatiable as animals," women are virtuous by nature, Garland declares, and Rose sublimates her "brute passion" into a desire to become a great poet.²

That man's erotic and other drives are brutal is of course one of the tenets of naturalism, and Garland's illustration of it is mild compared to that of the others of the quartet. Norris, for example, whose theme in *McTeague* is how greed leads to murder, compares his hero to an evil beast who takes a "panther leap" and kisses Trina, the heroine, "grossly, full on the mouth," and who delights his wife and himself with biting and beating her.³ Though Kate Chopin saw brute selfishness as the dominant principle of the world, she rarely used the imagery of man as a warring animal, and, more specifically, she never attached anything brutish to physical passion. Moreover, she lets Edna make absolutely no attempt to suppress her amatory impulses.

In fact, not only does Mrs. Chopin treat sex at least as amorally as any of the other four writers, but she also describes it more openly than they do. Their heroines—Maggie, Rose, Trina, and Carrie—are all rather sexless compared to Edna, and their descriptions of sexual matters in general are tame. This is perhaps most surprising in Dreiser, who is otherwise so elaborate and who wants us to believe that Carrie is dangerously attractive to men, and in Norris, who had made sex the main theme of his unfinished *Vandover and the Brute*. Garland is comparatively daring when he lets Rose feel desire and when he speaks of her "splendid curve of bust," but he allows her no more than a kiss on the hand.⁴ It is hard to understand that this book was locally banned; yet this reaction frightened the author, who thereafter fully adhered to R. W. Gilder's⁵ genteel literary code. *The Awakening*, meanwhile, is suffused with sex, and we witness how Alcée arouse Edna and how she in turn sets Robert on fire with a voluptuous kiss. On this point of physical attraction and contact, Kate Chopin gave not only a fuller, but also a more convincing picture than any other serious American novelist had done.

2. Hamlin Garland, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (Chicago, 1895), pp. 59, 62, 121, 147, 288, 294, 364 [Seystersted's note].

3. Frank Norris, *McTeague* (New York, 1899), pp. 30-31, 300, 310 [Seystersted's note].

4. Garland, *Rose*, p. 245 [Seystersted's note].

5. Editor of *Scribner's Monthly* (1870-81) and *The Century Magazine* (1881-1909), Gilder was a strong influence in establishing what he considered standards of moral wholesomeness in the popular and literary magazines at the end of the century.

A fact which significantly sets off *The Awakening* from *Maggie, Rose, McTeague*, and *Sister Carrie*, is that Edna has children and the other heroines do not. This points to a fundamental difference in emphasis: Kate Chopin concentrates mainly on the biological aspects of woman's situation, while the other writers are more concerned with the socio-economic forces shaping her life. When Edna stands back from society and questions its rules for woman's existence, the other women move with the procession in their fight for wealth, rank, or physical survival.

Common to all Edna's four counterparts is their admiration of those who are well dressed. Maggie and Carrie are more easily seduced because of their suitors' stylishness, which they equate with power and standing. Both Rose and Carrie⁶ are allured by the life of the rich, and their "imagination," as it is called, represents a desire to succeed and move up in the world. Dreiser speaks in one breath of Carrie's "emancipation" and her "more showy life." For Edna, who is the only one of these five women to start near the top, emancipation means something quite different; as she moves to a smaller house, she has "a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual."

When Carrie leaves Hurstwood, on the other hand, it is not her inner integrity she is thinking of, but her outer or material progress. She arrives at the attitude which long dominates Rose, that is, she does not want a husband and children to impede her climb on the ladder. As the two women rise, both judge themselves against their betters in society. Rose is particularly influenced by a woman doctor who tells her to think first of her career. Garland, who had once let a heroine demand "the right to be an individual human being first and a woman afterwards," is ostensibly in favor of female emancipation; the doctor leaves out the promise of obedience in her marriage ceremony, and Rose is told by her suitor that he expects her to be as "free and as sovereign" as himself and to follow her profession. But the author could not quite free himself from accepted ideas: The doctor insists that though she is ambitious in her career, she "could bear to give it all up a hundred times over, rather than [her] hope of being a mother," and Rose revels in "doing wifely things" for her friend the moment he has proposed, just as she suddenly finds it much more important that he appreciates her as a woman than that he praises her poetry.⁷

In Crane's version of the relationship between man and woman, Maggie's swaggering seducer asserts his "reassuring proprietorship" while she shows a dependent air: "Her life was Pete's." Norris' view is also

6. Garland, *Rose*, p. 299; Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York, 1900), pp. 58, 126. Jessie Ogden of Henry B. Fuller's *The Cliff-Dwellers* (New York, 1893) is an example of a contemporary American heroine who has a child; when she neglects it, it is in order to rise socially, not spiritually [Seyersted's note].

7. Hamlin Garland, "A Spoil of Office" in *Arena*, V (March, 1892), 515; *Rose*, pp. 330, 380, 395 [Seyersted's note].

uncomplicated when he lets Trina be subdued and conquered by McTeague's "sheer brute force" and declares that she "belongs" to him, body and soul, "forever and forever," because "the woman [worships] the man for that which she yields up to him." Norris here seems to have been influenced by the Darwinian idea of the female selecting the strongest suitor⁸ (which fits in with general male conceptions), and he also accepts the concomitant unromantic view of the love of an aroused heroine when he writes: "The Woman is awakened, and, starting from her sleep, catches blindly at what first her newly opened eyes light upon. It is a spell, a witchery, ruled by chance. . . ." *McTeague* thus for a moment parallels *The Awakening*, but Trina's "love of submission," on the other hand, is utterly unthinkable in the self-asserting Edna.⁹

Kate Chopin's novel stands up well when compared to these four important works in the canon of early American realism or naturalism. *Maggie* is a stereotype seduction-story which is only saved by Crane's irony and general artistic mastery; *Rose* has much of a moralistic, sentimental romance in spite of Garland's attempts to make it into a serious *Bildungsroman*,¹ and *McTeague* has not a little of the melodramatic, particularly in the conclusion of its Zolaesque motif. *The Awakening*, on the other hand, has a fundamental seriousness which goes beyond that of these three works, and this and other qualities unite it more closely with *Sister Carrie* than with any of the other books.

Kate Chopin and Theodore Dreiser have in common a directness and a complete honesty in their descriptions of Edna's and Carrie's violations of what both writers considered society's "arbitrary scale" of morals. Unable to see their heroines as sinners, they braved public opinion by refusing to let the two repent, and they had the further audacity to present their stories with no trace of moralism and without apology. There are no villains in the two works. A seducer like Arobin appeals to the reader; Hurstwood achieves a certain dignity even in his downfall, and Adèle, who represents everything that Edna opposes, is portrayed with sympathy and understanding.

We have here two unillusioned authors each writing about a heroine pursuing a chimera; the magnet drawing Carrie is the golden radiance on the distant hill tops, and the illusion firing Edna is the idea that she can achieve the ecstasy of an all-encompassing love. Both writers see their protagonists as wisps in the wind among the forces that move us, but with a difference. Though Dreiser at one point speaks in terms of evolutionary optimism and Kate Chopin sees man as basically unimprovable, there are greater changes, certainly a greater spiritual evolution, in Edna than in Carrie.

8. See Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, eds. John Tyler Bonner and Robert M. May (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 262.

9. Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (New York, 1893), pp. 106, 107; Norris, *McTeague*, pp. 84, 88, 89, 183, 309 [Seyersted's note].

1. A novel of "education," traditionally of a young boy arriving at manhood.

The reason is that Dreiser, reflecting a mostly socio-economic determinism, endows Carrie with less free will than that found in Edna. What freedom Carrie has she uses to act out the changing roles which she copies from those one step ahead of her. True, she achieves outer independence, but she is unthinkable without the society which provides her with models. As symbolized by the rocking-chair, she has scarcely moved at the end of the novel; she is basically unchanged, ever looking to the next hill, her eyes still largely unopened to the real emptiness of her longings.

Edna, meanwhile, is awakened to a spiritual independence in general and to a realization of the nature of reality in particular. Of these two solitary souls, the outwardly successful Carrie gains little more than the finery without which she, like her first lover, is merely "nothing";² when the apparently defeated Edna takes off her clothes, on the other hand, it symbolizes a victory of self-knowledge and authenticity as she fully becomes herself.

Carrie's blind, irresistible fight to get ahead has an unquestionable universality, and there is a similar quality in Edna's open-eyed choice to defy illusions and conventions. Different as these two novels are in form and theme—one terse in its concentration on inner reality, the other full of details on the outer show—both give a sense of tragic life, conveying something of the human condition.

What unites these five works from the 1890's is that they all, in one way or another, represent their authors' will to renew American literature. In subject matter or approach, they had enough of the new realism or naturalism to shock the Iron Madonnas.³ Refusing to idealize life in the old manner, these writers all took a step forward in what Howells⁴ called truthful treatment of material.

Kate Chopin parallels the naturalists in her view of basic urges as imperative, but differs from them in that she lets Edna decide her own destiny in an existentialist way. *The Awakening* also differs from *Maggie* and *McTeague* in that there is nothing of the sordid in it. Yet we note that while Norris and Crane became less iconoclastic in their subsequent work, Mrs. Chopin moved on to the increased openness of "The Storm."⁵ After science had robbed her of some of her early beliefs, she may at times have wanted to join one of her heroines who decided to "go back into the dark to think" because "the sight of things" confused her. However, whereas Maupassant's reaction to the new knowledge was sadness rather than exhilaration—"tous ces voiles levés m'attristent," as

2. Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, p. 4 [Seyersted's note].

3. A phrase used to describe the female audience of late-nineteenth-century fiction.

4. William Dean Howells (1837-1920), influential critic and novelist, proponent of literary realism; edited *The Atlantic Monthly* from 1871 to 1881; served on the editorial board of *Harper's*. His best-known novel is *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885).

5. See Per Seyersted, ed., *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969) 2.592-96.

he expressed it⁶—Kate Chopin was sad only at the thought of woman's position, while being exhilarated at the opportunity of portraying life truthfully. Though she did not aim at exposing false respectability, her work is in certain respects a forerunner of such later eye-openers as *Spoon River Anthology*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, and *Main Street*.⁷

Mrs. Chopin was at least a decade ahead of her time. During the years following America's silencing of her, "Edith Wharton's genteel satire and Ellen Glasgow's moral searchings were the strongest fare that it could take," as Robert E. Spiller has observed.⁸ Kate Chopin can be seen not only as one of the American realists of the 1890's, but also as a link in the tradition formed by such distinguished American women authors as Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather,⁹ and the two just mentioned. One factor uniting these writers is their emphasis on female characters. Another is their concern with values, but here we see a difference between the St. Louisian and the others in that she is less interested than they are in preserving these values. As exemplified in Mrs. Todd of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, woman is a rock guarding the old qualities, the men being either weak or dead. To Mrs. Chopin, woman is no more of a rock than is man, being neither better nor worse than he. Mrs. Wharton and Miss Glasgow may have attacked certain aspects of the aristocracies they sprang from, but they also wanted to preserve some of their values. Kate Chopin, on the other hand, was no celebrant of the aristocratic qualities of her own distinguished background.

The one value that really counted with her was woman's opportunity for self-expression. She knew that there are many *Woman's Kingdoms*.¹ She was sensitive, intelligent, and broad enough in her outlook to see the different basic needs of the female and the various sides of her existence and to represent them with impartiality. Her work is thus no feminist plea in the usual sense, but an illustration—rather than an assertion—of woman's right to be herself, to be individual and independent whether she wants to be weak or strong, a nest-maker or a soaring bird.

6. Maupassant, as quoted in Edward D. Sullivan, *Maupassant: The Short Stories* (London, 1962), p. 57 [Seyersted's note]. "All these lifted veils sadden me."

7. Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* are all works of realism with a satiric edge that made them controversial books, especially in the locales they depict.

8. Robert E. Spiller, et al., eds., *Literary History of the United States*, II (New York, 1948), 1197 [Seyersted's note]. Edith Wharton (1862-1937), American novelist of manners and morals in New York society. Ellen Glasgow (1847-1945), American author of nineteen novels, many of which are set in Virginia.

9. See p. 197, n. 3; Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) wrote short stories and a novel of life in New England; Willa Cather (1876-1947), best known for her *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), wrote a number of studies of southwest immigrant settlers.

1. The title of a novel by Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, published in New York in 1869, from which Chopin copied an antifeminist passage into her diary. See Seyersted, *Kate Chopin*, p. 29. See also Showalter, below, p. 312, n. 2.