
UNIT 1 LOCATING THE AWAKENING: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Intellectual Setting of *The Awakening*
- 1.3 The Nineteenth Century: A Socio-Cultural Background
 - 1.3.1 Nineteenth Century Britain
- 1.4 Location: The Writer and the Novel
- 1.5 Symbolising in *The Awakening*
- 1.6 Kate Chopin's Oeuvre
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Hints to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will introduce you to the writer **Kate Chopin** and examine the times during which she lived and wrote *The Awakening*. It is important that we learn about the writer and her times to get a better understanding of Chopin, *The Awakening* and her other writings. We will also take a look at the social and cultural milieu in which the novel is located, and at the philosophical ideas of the 19th century that prevailed then, so that you comprehend the themes of the novel better.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We will now look at and discuss the socio-cultural background and intellectual/philosophical ideas of the late nineteenth century, as those are the contexts within which the novel – *The Awakening* is set. Kate Chopin, well read and intelligent, observed with keen irony and absorbed the mood of the ending of the century. She was familiar with the works of **Gustave Flaubert (1821-80)**, (French novelist who wrote *Madame Bovary (1856)*, and Chopin's novel has been compared with **Flaubert's** through reviews that will be discussed in Unit 3), **Tolstoy (1828 – 1910)**, (Russian novelist who wrote *Anna Karenina (1878)*, to which also, some critics have compared *The Awakening*), **Guy de Maupassant (1850 -93)**, (French writer whom she greatly admired). In fact, she was so inspired by his stories, many of which dealt with dark themes of suicide, infidelity, drowning etc that she translated eight of them, managing to sell only the three most conventional. It must also be mentioned that some of the same themes are also present in her works as well. She had also read the works of other modern European writers such as, **Ibsen (1828 – 1906)**, and **Swinburne (1837 – 1909)**. Influences of American writers such as, **Walt Whitman (1819 – 92)**, (*Leaves of Grass, 1855*), **Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 – 64)**, (*The Scarlet Letter, 1850*) and **Herman Melville (1819- 91)**, (*Moby Dick, 1851*) have been traced in her work. **Henry James (1843 – 1916)**, and the psychological novel (for instance, *Portrait of a Lady (1881)*) was contemporaneous with Chopin's time. The dark vision of the

human condition as noted by German Philosopher **Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 -1860)**, influenced Chopin, as did the music of **Richard Wagner, (1813-83)**, a German composer of operas. The next section will examine the socio-cultural background/ context of the nineteenth century as well as it was during this period that the novel was written.

1.2 THE INTELLECTUAL SETTING OF *THE AWAKENING*

The decade in which *The Awakening* was published, namely, the 1890s, was a complex time, as it mirrored the unresolved tensions between the old world and the new, the transition time between the two centuries and the traditional vis a vie modern ways of thinking. Intellectual thought was at this time being redefined by the influential works of **Charles Darwin (1809 – 82)**, **Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903)** and **Aldous Huxley (1894 – 1963)**, and at the end of the century by **Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939)**.

Theories of evolution and determinism were inspiring naturalistic ways of thinking (the ways in which women were locked into social roles from which there was no escape, except through death), on the one hand there was faith in the ways of destiny and pre-ordained kinds of living and then there was science that ‘confirmed (Chopin) in her belief of the relativity of morals’: ‘*Fixed truth in any form-moral or religious or scientific-seldom Chopin’s ironic glance.*’ (Joyce Dyer, 1993, 5)

The stories of a few strong women living at this time have been documented by historians, women who demonstrated independence in personal lives and those who campaigned for women’s voting rights in the public realm. New terms for ‘ideal marriage’ were described as follows: ‘...let your *Dependence be mutual, your Independence, equal, your Obligations, reciprocal.*’ **Elizabeth Candy Stanton (1815 – 1902)**, published her radical *The Woman’s Bible* in 1895 and **Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 -1935)**, a member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, published *Women and Economics* in 1898.

Gilman argued the case for women’s economic independence as the foundation for better marriages, equal relationships and more humanity for women: ‘marriage is not perfect unless it is between class equals. There is no equality between those who do their share in the world’s work in the largest, newest and highest ways and those who do theirs in the smallest, oldest, lowest ways.’

However, although there were some actual women in the last years of the nineteenth century who were redefining the meaning of freedom and equality, most of the representations, of single or divorced women, the new woman or the widow, offer only traditional and weak solutions, hardly being able to free themselves from the patterns of marriage and family.

Joyce Dyer (1947), states this as follows: ‘*Female passion was thought to be immoral and unhealthy by even some of the most aggressive proponents of realism and feminism in the last decades of the nineteenth century*’. To suggest otherwise was to enter extremely perilous waters, the waters in which Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of *The Awakening* swims. Consequently, female characters separated from men-by their unmarried status, their disillusionment with husbands, or divorce - seldom considered the avenue of liberated sexual behaviour an option.

Even Gilman, mentioned in the last paragraph, spoke out strongly against female eroticism, sex in her views '*useful for reproduction only*' ...she argued for the '*sanctity of marriage...monogamy and fidelity*' claiming that the worst of all were '*promiscuous and temporary sex-relations.*'

Thus, we need to understand that Chopin is writing against such a socio-cultural background where her Edna Pontellier is one of the first women to think, and to express herself and act in the defiant manner in which she does. Chopin's Dr Mandelet, who shows insight into Edna's sexual psychology and is progressive in his ideas of therapy, is also advanced for her time as other physicians insisted on the values of domesticity as the cure for women's nervous and depressive conditions. The next section will look at the location of the author/ writer/ Kate Chopin and her work/novel/ *The Awakening*.

Critics have compared Kate Chopin to other American realist and naturalist writers who were her contemporaries, such as, **Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser**, Henry James, and Edna Pontellier to their heroines: 'all rather sexless compared to Edna, and their descriptions of sexual matters in general are tame'. Not only did Chopin draw a heroine who was not afraid to be a sexual being, she is honest and bold enough to articulate that extra-marital sex need not be accompanied by guilt and that a woman was perfectly justified in seeking selfhood and fulfillment outside the institutions of marriage and motherhood.

In addition, it is also clearly stated that Edna believes herself to be becoming more of a spiritual being as she continues on her journey of awakening, descending alongside in the social scale. Both role models of womanhood, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz are presented as alternative ways of being, rejected by Edna Pontellier as they are inappropriate for her. Adele is mother-woman, her identity subsumed within that of her children; with her husband too the sense of identification is so complete as to affect a strange kind of merging of selves. Mlle Reisz is the solitary artist, detached so completely from the real world that she appears to others as arrogant, or insane.

Edna is a solitary soul too, (and that was the original title of the novel), those moments in the novel many when she is enjoying her solitude with relish and abandon, when she takes pleasure in feeling her round arms, eating a hearty meal, seeing the material objects in her house as though for the first time when she is by herself, but her art does not sustain her completely; she needs her fantasies and delusions. When she swims out into the sea alone for the first time, feeling a sense of her new power and of course in the last scene when she is truly solitary without even the burden of a piece of clothing, only the hum of the bees and the fragrance of pinks to keep her company, she is also the hopeless romantic for whom the vision of the ideal world cannot be substituted by dreary reality. She is existentialist too, her vision of life - dark and sombre, presented as follows: '(there were days) when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly towards inevitable annihilation.'

The fact that Chopin's novel had the courage to embody such modernist themes through language and style that was both explicit and deeply symbolic makes *The Awakening* far ahead of other literary writing published in the late nineteenth century. The times were not prepared to receive it and thus it had to wait for another seventy years before it could claim its rightful place in the literary canon. Before we go any further, we might need to look at the sociocultural background/

context of the nineteenth century as well as it was during this period that the novel was written. This we shall do in the next section.

1.3 THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: A SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Although *The Awakening* is an ‘American’ novel, some information about the general background of nineteenth century socio-cultural contexts, readership and a more specific literary context may help you to situate and understand it better. Hence, some facts related to ‘Victorian’ England, and fiction written in the nineteenth century by British writers such as, George Eliot (1819 – 1880), Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870), Charlotte Bronte (1816 – 1855), Jane Austen (1775 – 1817), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811 – 63), etc., whom you may have read about and may be useful to you, are given in this section.

1.3.1 Nineteenth Century Britain

This was a time of great transition, from the agricultural to the industrial, a discrediting of old tradition and religious faith in favour of accepting a mechanical natural process, a new sense of empowerment for women and the working classes. Writing of fiction became a new form of commerce, readership becoming far more widespread, women accounting for a major share both as consumers and producers of fiction. Many novels were serialised in magazines and periodicals, and the readers often played an important role in deciding what the writer would write, thereby determining the text. Lending and circulating libraries mushroomed to satisfy growing demands. As regards subject matter, social comment and moral guidance were important aspects. Thematically, domestic/middle-class settings, and issues related to family, such as, marriage and morality in relationships were widely dealt with, but sex was taboo. The ‘fallen woman’ had to be punished, removed from society so the moral fabric was not compromised. However, by the last years of the century, there also began to emerge a picture of the New Woman, and novels engaged with feminist questions such as, employment for women. Still, sex and relationships that would challenge established moral codes were hardly discussed, and thus Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* would have been considered too transgressive and explicit to be accepted. We shall look at the intellectual setting of *The Awakening* next.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write a critical note on the nineteenth century background against which you may find it useful to read *The Awakening*.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Discuss the influences upon Chopin that you think may have helped to shape her novel.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Does this make more sense to you with your increased knowledge about the time in which Chopin lived and wrote? Give specific examples.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) How do you think the nineteenth century readership would have affected the novel?

.....

.....

.....

.....

1.4 LOCATION: THE WRITER AND THE NOVEL

We will be discussing the novel at length later but just to give you an example of how the location of the writer and the setting of the novel, has a bearing on the novel we will be looking at some examples from the novel in this section. Another crucial aspect of the location of the writer and her novel is the setting within which the action takes place. It begins on Grand Isle, an island fifty miles south of New Orleans, a Creole summer resort, and goes on later to be situated in the city of New Orleans. The city was American, southern and Creole. The Creoles were the descendents of French and Spanish colonists of the eighteenth century. They were Catholics and believed in strong and conservative family values, spoke French, and felt a close sense of community to their own cultural group, (they formed approximately one-third of the population of New Orleans in 1860) thus, somewhat separate in identity to Anglo-American society. Their attitude towards life was easygoing, and they liked to live a life rich in sensual pleasure and enjoyment. Even so, Louisiana remained a very conservative state, the patriarchal family being the foundation of society, and even when the Creole women appeared to be frank, open and sensual, like Adele in the novel, they were in reality unquestionably chaste, religious and completely committed to their families.

In fact, this is what makes their open manner possible, and we get a sense of this contradiction reflected in the character of Adele who is openly flirtatious with Robert and is at the same time the true embodiment of the ideal devoted wife and mother. Edna is herself not from such a background, rather she is married to a Creole and at the start of the novel, seems to be thrown into an atmosphere to which she is a stranger. We hope you've done at least one reading of the novel by now.

If you remember, when Adele notices Edna's 'awakening' in the presence of Robert, she warns him, asking him to keep away from her, stating clearly, 'she is not one of us...she may make the blunder of taking you seriously.' Edna is described as Kentucky Presbyterian by birth and her own reserved and rigid upbringing clashes with the open sensuality she finds here. Not only is she awakened and subsequently propelled by her infatuation for Robert to become an unthinking drifting thing who has no anchor to restrain her, she is also attracted to Adele and Mlle Reisz in this strange seductive scenario where the inviting sea also plays a part.

New Orleans was also American, Calvinistic and Puritanical, and when Edna returns to the city at the end of her summer flirtation, newly awakened to selfhood and sexual consciousness, she has to succumb once more to the conservatism of her social roles, receiving guests every Tuesday and supervising her husband's meals among other boring domestic chores. She does not wish to do any of this now, and thus, she simply doesn't. Robert has done the honourable thing by escaping to Mexico as he is too traditional to seriously imagine a relationship with a married woman. Even towards the end of the novel, when he returns, confessing he has been imagining making her his wife despite his best judgement, he cannot visualise the kind of free relationship based on Edna's ideas of liberty and self-definition that she suggests when she says, 'I give myself where I choose.' Thus, for the second time in the novel, he runs away, leaving behind a note saying, 'Good-by- because I love you,' clearly indicating a clash of cultures. But that is something we shall examine in the next section when we discuss the use of symbolism in the novel.

1.5 SYMBOLISM IN *THE AWAKENING*

In this section we shall define symbolism and then look at instances of symbolism in *The Awakening*. Symbolism, (according to **Ross Murfin**, and **Supriya M Ray** in *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*), comes from the Greek *symballein*, meaning "to throw together", the serious and relatively sustained use of symbols to represent or suggest other things or ideas. They also suggest that along with the writer's "explicit use of a particular symbol in a literary work.... the term symbolism sometimes refers to the presence, in a work or body of works, of suggestive associations giving rise to incremental, implied meaning." The French symbolist believed that writers "create and use subjective, or private symbols in order to convey very personal and intense emotional experiences and reactions." They were of the opinion that the "network of such symbols" form the core of any literary work. With this definition to guide us, we shall now take a look at the imagery of the sea and its symbolism next.

The clash of cultures mentioned in the earlier section is also represented through the imagery of the sea that forms the backdrop of Grand Isle, sensuously

enveloping Edna in a warm embrace while it beckons her into contemplative mazes of solitude, and the harsh bleak reality that is her posh home on Esplanade Street in New Orleans where, she is compelled to live on her husband's bounty, and thus, remain one of his 'possessions.' Caught between these oppositional forces she loses herself, unable to adjust any longer to her role as wife and mother, not courageous enough to soar alone as an artist (like Mlle Reisz can), waiting for Robert who she thinks can set her free and falling into the arms of Alcee Arabin. Read the symbolism of the trip to Cheniere Chaminada, set in almost mysteriously idyllic setting where, finding the atmosphere of the church suffocating, Edna has to leave and goes into a deep sleep at Madame Antoine's. When she wakes up there are the fantasies of telling stories in which Edna and Robert wake up like lovers in a make-believe world. There is also the duo of the lovers always present, though nameless and faceless, symbolic in the way they are lost in each other but lost also to the rest of the world. And the woman in black, always preoccupied with the beads of her rosary. Having hinted at the symbolism in the novel we might also need to take a look at some of Kate Chopin's other works largely from the point of view of her oeuvre providing a context to *The Awakening*, and that we shall do presently in the next section.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Comment on the emerging 'New Woman' in the late nineteenth century. Does Edna Pontellier fit into the description?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Do you think the Creole background is important in reading *The Awakening*? Give reasons for your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) What role does the sea play in the novel? Use examples from the text to substantiate your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) Discuss *The Awakening* as a symbolic novel.

.....

.....

.....

.....

1.6 KATE CHOPIN'S OEUVRE

It needs to be mentioned that Kate Chopin has often been compared to other American realist and naturalist writers who were her contemporaries, such as, Frank Norris (1870–1902), Stephen Crane (1871– 1900), Theodore Dreiser (1871 -1945), and Henry James (1843 -1916).

Chopin wrote about the life, the circumstances and the people she was familiar with. She enjoyed instant success with her writings as she dealt with the French Creoles and the Cajuns she had met and observed during her time in New Orleans and Cloutierville. The Cajuns also known as Acadians were the descendants of the French colonisers who had settled in Louisiana and though they were often described as Creoles, the Cajuns and the Creoles are often portrayed as separate identities today.

Her short stories and essays examine themes such as, love, independence, passion and freedom. Chopin attended conferences and gave speeches and was well known and received most of the times, during her extremely short writing career.

Some information about Kate Chopin's other work will be a useful background and will help you to place *The Awakening* within the context of what she wrote before it and after. She began writing for publication only in 1890. Kate Chopin was well known to the readers of Louisiana for her, (what was termed) 'local colour stories' in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890) is also set mostly in Louisiana. Her collection of short stories *A Vocation* and a *Voice*, which was to be published after *The Awakening*, was rejected by her publisher, though it is not certain if that happened as a result of the negative responses received by the novel *The Awakening* or was an independent decision on the part of the publisher. She did not send one of her stories, *The Storm*, for publication considering it to be too sexually explicit. Kate Chopin's most popular short stories were: "The Story of an Hour", "The Storm", "Désirée's Baby", "A Pair of Silk Stockings", "A Respectable Woman". Her other popular work was her Children's Stories.

We must remember that during the time when *The Awakening* was published (1899), the feminist movement, was just starting to be talked about in America. Louisiana being a southern state was quite conservative and this new fad of feminism had not reached there yet. In fact, during that time, under Louisiana law, a woman was said to be the property of her husband. Needless to say *The Awakening* would not have been received well in such an environment. *The Awakening* discusses quite openly, the emotional and sexual needs of women, and this would have a taboo topic amongst the Southerners. Chopin herself was quite surprised and upset about the reception her novel received and she published only three more short stories before her death. Kate Chopin died of a brain hemorrhage in 1904.

Posthumously, Chopin was remembered as a writer of “local color”, as her works depicted the people of New Orleans, (remember the regional novel discussed in Unit 2 of Block I). She was not recognised as a great writer till *The Awakening* was discovered by **Per Seyersted**, a Norwegian literary scholar, much later (50 years later) in the 1960s.

However, from where we stand today in history, we realise that the novel is an honest, open, matter of fact declaration of female sexuality and a woman’s emotional and sexual needs and that it is very realistically written. *The Awakening* has now made a place for itself. But we need to remember that this observation and our acceptance of the novel are in retrospect.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the philosophical ideas that were a part of the atmosphere of the time during which Kate Chopin wrote. These contexts are important as such contexts provide a background to the literary text *The Awakening* in our case. The unit has also examined the various influences upon Chopin that helped to shape her novel, and attempt has been made to locate the novel within the American literary tradition, while tracing connections with some other well-known texts/drawing significant parallels, to tell you a little about the ‘Victorian’ background and nineteenth century British writing so you can also read the novel against that literary tradition and analyse the significance of the sea since the Gulf waters make a critical contribution to the text, both as a setting as well as a symbol and have given some basic information about Kate Chopin’s other writings as well.

1.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read sections 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 carefully and cull out your answer from there.
- 2) The answer may be found in sections 1.1 and 1.2
- 3) Having read the sections mentioned above carefully, stop, and think about what has been said and then try and answer the question keeping in mind the location of the writer, the times in which she lived and wrote and her own life as well.
- 4) Section 1.3 and any other information you might have on particularly Victorian England could guide your answer.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The answer may be found in section 1.2.
- 2) Section 1.4 provides the clue to your answer.
- 3) Sections 1.4 and 1.5 discuss the role of the sea. You may also look at suitable quotes from the text.
- 4) Define symbolism briefly and then re-read sections 1.4 and 1.5 and see how the sea is symbolic or whether there is anything else in the novel that may be read as symbolic when attempting this answer.