

Chapter 3: A MISSING LINK

Kate Chopin and *The Awakening*

One of the American reviewers of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was Kate Chopin, who called it "detestable," but not because of Hardy's introduction of sex or class contradictions. "The characters are so plainly constructed with the intention of illustrating the purposes of the author, that they do not for a moment convey any impression of reality." But she spoke out against censoring the book, and it was said that in the interests of free speech she kept a copy of it visible and available for friends' borrowing.

There seems to be no evidence that Hardy returned the favor a couple of years later when Chopin was attacked on grounds of indecency similar to the charges against him. He probably had never heard of Kate Chopin, nor apparently had Theodore Dreiser nor Stephen Crane nor others of her male contemporaries who were fighting publishers' censorship of their attempts to present realities in the lives of women protagonists in *Sister Carrie* and *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*. In those days, of course, the World of Writers rarely took notice of the world of women writers, especially not southern women writers.

Kate Chopin was born Katherine O'Flaherty in 1850 into a highly privileged St. Louis family. Her father was a well-to-do merchant of Irish background, her mother of a French-Creole family; French was spoken in the home. She was only four years old when her father was killed in a bitterly ironic train accident. As one of the prominent men of the city, he went on the inaugural ride over a new railroad bridge, which collapsed, killing twenty-nine passengers. Kate spent much of her time with her Creole great-grandmother, who not only told her many uncensored tales of Creole lives and loves but also encouraged and guided her early reading beyond what nice young girls of the time read. By the time she entered an exclusive girls' academy, at age nine, she had already read French classics, and many novels of Walter Scott and Charles Dickens.

She enjoyed the social life of a young debutante, though in one of the few personal statements she wrote in her private commonplace book, she mourned the loss of time to read and write. The only sample we have of her early writing—probably written when she was about eighteen—is an allegorical tale of a beast who discovers his cage is open and escapes to freedom. What this says about her feelings at the time we can only guess. We do know that she continued to read a formidable number of writers in French, German, and English. Two authors remained, throughout her life, her favorites and her inspiration—Guy de Maupassant (she later translated some of his stories into English) and Walt Whitman. There are obvious signs in Chopin's writing that she aimed at the clean, simple, "continental" style of the former, and the devotion to the "Open Road" of passionate life experience of the latter. Whether either writer was considered proper for a respectable woman of the time to read is another question.

Chopin was surely aware of the surge of feminism of the 1880s and 1890s. She had read George Sand and Ibsen and probably Margaret Fuller. (She actually had met Victoria Woodhall, suffragist and "free love" advocate, who urged her "not to fall into the useless degrading life of most married ladies—but to elevate my mind.") But Kate was also a woman of the south, where the pressure to reject such "unwomanly" ideas was formidable, especially on privileged white women.

In 1870 she married Oscar Chopin, a Creole from Louisiana. After the standard European honeymoon, they moved to New Orleans, where Oscar became an agent in cotton sales until the business went bad. He never managed to recover his losses. To save money, the family moved to Clouterville near the Chopin family plantation. Between 1871 and 1883, Kate bore six children, one of whom she named Lélia, after George Sand's most famous heroine of female rebellion and independence. In 1884, Oscar was stricken with swamp fever and, after several recoveries and relapses, he died. At thirty-two Kate was left with six children and a debt-ridden plantation.

There may have been an affair with a married planter who became the model for virile and seductive lovers in Chopin's fiction. But there is no evidence of it beyond the gossip of Clouterville residents a generation or two removed from the events. Kate evidently managed the plantation better than her husband had, but she could not dig her way out of debt. Within a year she sold her land and went to live with her mother in St. Louis. She evidently cleared enough from the sale to support herself and her children comfortably if not lavishly.

Then, in 1885, her mother suddenly died. Chopin had lost all of her adult family. A sister had died during her childhood, soon after her father's accidental death. Two brothers had died in their early twenties. Then her husband; now her beloved mother. According to one of her sons, she fell into a depression that drew her more deeply—perhaps too deeply, her doctor thought—into her Catholic faith. It was he who encouraged her to turn outward through taking up writing again. She might even make some money, which she could use now that the children's needs were increasing with their ages. His advice legitimized a dubious activity for a genteel southern woman. At age thirty-six she turned back to literature—the first love of her girlhood—with serious intent to become a professional writer.

She wrote short poems and short stories—clearly inspired by Maupassant—which began to be published within a couple of years. She tried a novel titled *At Fault*, which no one would publish. She paid a vanity press to publish it and got some good notices from reviewers who admired her writing but not the "morals" of her characters. (Chopin had made it clear that they were foolish to sacrifice a good illicit relationship for the sake of patching up a bad marriage.) She had no luck finding a publisher for her second novel, but continued to write short stories tailored to fit the market that was open to her—ladies' magazines. The trouble was that she was always pushing the limits of what was considered appropriate writing by ladies for ladies. Editors considered her stories rather "daring."

Her living conditions, as well as publishing realities, may have dictated that she write short stories. She wrote in the parlor surrounded by her children, who later remembered her as being always available to them. Her frequent social gatherings were attended by prominent southern literary figures who thought it was just fine that this beautiful young widow smoked and cut her hair and showed a bit of leg while she sat and read-wrote-talked about sophisticated adult literature. She was known in St. Louis as a witty, flirtatious woman, but not even a whisper of gossip hinted that she cared about anything but her writing and her children. From 1889 to 1899 she published nearly one hundred stories—quite a few in national magazines like *Vogue*—as well as sketches, essays, reviews, and poems.

Despite this wide publication, getting her stories into print was always difficult and sometimes impossible. There was something a bit risky about them. Was "Lilacs" hard to place because it showed the mean intolerance of a group of cloistered nuns? Was "Miss McEnders" slow to find an outlet because it accused the rich of dishonesty on a grand scale?

Stories that touched on relations between men and women were even more problematical. One was rejected everywhere during her lifetime. In "The Story of an Hour," a woman, informed of her husband's sudden death, sobs hysterically in public. The moment she finds herself alone, she sings out, "Free at last!" This was surely a statement of the hidden feelings of many women. Did it obliquely express some of her own feelings? She wrote in her private commonplace book, "If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up everything that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs. To do that, I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth—my real growth."

Another rejected story was "Two Portraits," two alternative stories of Alberta, who in one version of her life becomes a sensuous, capricious woman who "gives her love only when and where she chooses," and who, in another version of her life, becomes a nun fully as passionate and sensual in her mystical relation to God. Several other stories that mixed sensuality and irony were called "unethical" by editors who rejected them.

Her most popular story was "Désirée's Baby" in which an apparently white woman who gives birth to a baby with Negroid features is deserted by her husband. In a surprise twist at the end, the husband learns that he is the one with the previously unknown African ancestry. This was a story that was "safe" in that it could be interpreted any number of ways depending on individual opinion—from pointing up the long legacy of the evils of slavery to the doubtless popular southern conviction (in 1890) of the evils of miscegenation. Yet she also managed something not quite so safe, an implied statement of the husband's double loss—that of his richly mixed heritage as well as of his wife and child. "Désirée's Baby" established Chopin as an important writer of "local color."

Chopin was a serious writer (often impatient at her friends' failure to recognize this) who had gained considerable recognition in a short time. But she could not seem to break out of the category of "local color" writer. Of course, all settings are "local." But no one had ever called Hawthorne or Thoreau a "local color" writer. Obviously, the term designated a minor talent as well as a setting south or west of New York. Certainly Kate Chopin had not published anything that would thrust her beyond this category. Perhaps it was time to try another novel, one to which she could bring her unique combination of talents and influences: her familiarity with European literature; her broad, non-puritanical view of human nature; her experience as a wife and mother; her probable, if very discreet, experience as a lover outside of marriage; the strong currents of feminism that made ripples even in the South.

The Awakening is a short novel with a simple plot. Edna Pontellier is the 29-year-old wife of a prosperous New Orleans Creole businessman, and the mother of two young boys. She, like other wives of her privileged class, is spending the summer with her children and servants on Grand Isle, a resort off the coast of Louisiana. She is visited on weekends by her husband Léonce, who is by turns indulgent, indifferent, and peevish—

an ideal husband in the eyes of the other women. Edna comes from a Presbyterian family in Kentucky and feels a bit of an outsider among her Catholic Creole friends. To her they seem shockingly free in their speech, especially with loose young men like Robert LeBrun, who is always hanging around, flattering the ladies as they flirt with him. Husbands are tolerant, even fond of men like Robert, harmless mascots who innocently entertain the women, leaving their husbands free to go to their clubs and talk about important things like business.

What Edna doesn't quite get is that under this loose-seeming behavior is a code of conduct for the women which is every bit as rigid—perhaps more rigid—than any puritan ethic Edna had absorbed from her family. This unstated code combines with idle self-indulgence to stifle in these women any sense of adventure, serious thought, intelligence, and spirit. Such unwomanly attributes are embodied in the rude, haughty, ugly and despised Mademoiselle Reisz, a fine musician who ekes out a living teaching and entertaining the idle rich, whom she in turn despises. Mademoiselle Reisz has chosen spinster hood and penury over marriage to any conventional man.

This is the summer of crucial changes in Edna. She finally learns to swim, experiencing an exhilarating freedom and relaxation that is part of her self-discovery. She realizes and accepts, without guilt, the fact that she is not a "mother-woman." As Edna expresses it to her friend Adèle (a perfect mother, absorbed in her children) she would give up her life for her children but not her self. Adèle, of course, has no idea what she is talking about, and neither, really, has Edna, who is just beginning to have any sense of self. She allows the music played by Mademoiselle Reisz to enter and move her on a deeper level. She acknowledges to herself that she married only because it was expected of her, and that, far from learning to play the harmless Creole flirting game, she has fallen in love, for the first time, with Robert, and he with her. However, adhering to the conventional moral code he only seems to be flouting, Robert flees to Mexico.

Back in New Orleans Edna takes up her old hobby of painting, this time more seriously. To her husband's consternation she stops holding the Tuesday at-homes that are so vital to their social position and, thus, his business interests. She also refuses to continue the tedious, time-consuming occupation of daily social visits which are the major duty of rich women. When her children go to visit their grandmother and her husband goes on a business trip, she moves to a smaller house where she can live more simply and paint. But Mademoiselle Reisz, whom she visits in a cramped walk-up filled by a grand piano, warns her that "to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul . . . the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth."

Edna's husband Léonce becomes disturbed enough finally to consult the family doctor about her. The doctor soothes him with platitudes about the delicate balance of the mysterious mind of woman and advises him to let her have her way until this phase ends. After Léonce leaves, Dr. Mandelet silently and more honestly says to himself, "I hope it isn't Arobin."

But it is. Aroused to love by Robert, then deserted by him in his fit of ethics, Edna is vulnerable to the attentions of Arobin, an idle unattached male who is not so harmless. When she finally lets Arobin kiss her, "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature

had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire." A break in the narrative leaves the reader to fill in the satisfaction of this desire.

But Chopin manages delicately to make it clear that Edna has experienced her first orgasm, and following it, post-orgasmic clarity of thought. "Above all, there was understanding . . . a mist had been lifted from her eyes . . . among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse," only "a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had . . . held this cup of life to her lips." Unlike Thomas Hardy's Sue, Edna's intelligence is not part of an aversion to sex but is fused with sex—sex with or without love, an amazing fact that contradicts everything she has been taught is "natural" to a woman.

Then Robert returns, but when Edna makes advances to him, he misunderstands. He tells her his dream of the impossible, that they might marry, and she answers that marriage is not what she had in mind. He is shocked. Edna is called away to attend her friend in childbirth. "With a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture." Both her friend and the attending doctor are disturbed at her state of mind. Doctor Mandelet understands that the change in her may go beyond a brief fling with Arobin, and tells her,

"The trouble is that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature, a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost."

"Yes," she said. "the years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life."

She rejects Doctor Mandelet's urging that she come to him for help. "I don't want anything but my own way." When she returns home, Robert is gone. Again he has done the hatefully proper thing, leaving a melodramatic note (worthy of a 1930s B movie), "Good-bye, because I love you." During a sleepless night, Edna reaches some hard conclusions: that Robert understands nothing; that her passion for him will fade—"Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else;" that the freedom of her mind and her body are essential to her—are life itself; that no one has the right to hold her to rules that strangle either; that she cares for the feelings of no one—except . . . "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them."

In the morning Edna travels back to the island, to live out her statement that she would give up her life but not her self for her children. She strips and swims out to sea. As she swims farther and farther out, she thinks, "How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered . . . 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.'" Above her "a bird with a broken wing was beating the air, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water."

The novel was accepted for publication and, except for some delays as the publishing house changed ownership, there seem to have been no requests for changes, no anticipation of any objections to its contents. It was published in April 1899. There was one favorable notice written by a woman who worked for the publisher, but the first independent reviews were distinctly unfriendly. In *The Mirror* Frances Porcher wrote, "It is not a pleasant picture of soul-dissection . . . there are no blemishes in its art, but it leaves one sick of human nature . . ." The *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* called it "not a healthy book. . . a morbid book" certain that "the author herself would probably like nothing better than to tear it to pieces by criticism if only some other person had written it." C.L. Deyo, a friend of Chopin, wrote an ambivalent review in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. In one sentence of that review, he says more about American society at the time than about the book: "A fact, no matter how essential, which we have all agreed shall not be acknowledged, is as good as no fact at all." But he concludes, "It is sad and mad and bad, but it is all consummate art." Chopin showed Deyo's review to everyone as the single example of a thoughtful, honest reading of the book.

The fact that reviewers were shocked by the content but still admiring of her craft must have given Chopin a false sense of security. When invited to write an answer to the harsh criticism in *Book News*—she answered lightly, even flippantly:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late.

If this was intended as a southern-feminine deflection of hostility (what?—little old me?), it was ineffective against the wave of critical hostility that began in June and swept across the country. "It was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction," said the *Chicago Times-Herald*, referring to a lucrative genre of smut written mainly by male authors. "The purport of the story can hardly be described in language fit for publication." (*Providence Sunday Journal*) "The assumption that such a course as that pursued by Edna has any sort of divine sanction cannot be too strongly protested against . . . there is throughout the story an undercurrent of sympathy for Edna, and nowhere a single note of censure of her totally unjustifiable conduct." (*New Orleans Times-Democrat*) "If the author had secured our sympathy for this unpleasant person it would not have been a small victory, but we are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf." (*Public Opinion*) " . . . the story was not really worth telling, and its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent." (*Outlook*, New York) " . . . unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling." (*Los Angeles Times*) "One cannot refrain from regret that so beautiful a style and so much refinement of taste have been spent by Miss Chopin on an essentially vulgar story." (*Literature*) "One more clever author gone wrong . . ." (*The Nation*) "It is a brilliant piece of writing, but unwholesome in its influence. We cannot commend it." (*The Congregationalist*)

Was Chopin the first American woman to write about a woman rebelling against her prescribed feminine role? Actually, a few American women authors had been writing such novels during the past fifty years. (They are among the ones indicted by Hawthorne in his diatribe about "scribbling women!" and their books are now forgotten except by scholars.) In these novels a woman refuses her traditional role of wife and mother, choosing a celibate life of education followed by teaching or social work. While such novels were considered rebellious, they were not condemned as indecent or contemptible—perhaps because they avoided any acknowledgment of a woman as a sexual being, and because they often ended quite traditionally with marriage to a man more accepting of a woman with a mind.

One of the most damning reviews concluded, "I shall not attempt to say why Miss Chopin has devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme." (*Pittsburgh Leader*) It was written by a young Willa Cather (twenty-three years Chopin's junior). Cather was the first of many later critics to compare *The Awakening* to *Madame Bovary*, a valid comparison that could lead to interesting insights. It didn't, not until decades into the twentieth century. In her review Cather lumped together Emma Bovary and Edna Pontellier, writing, "Both women belong to a class, not large, but forever clamoring in our ears, that demands more romance out of life than God put into it. . . . These people really expect the passion of love to fill and gratify every need of life, whereas nature only intended that it should meet one of many demands." This may be a fair statement, as far as it goes, about Emma Bovary, but it does not really fit Edna Pontellier.

At the time, Willa Cather was just beginning to get some of her short stories published. Like Chopin she would use a setting outside the urban East, and like her she wrote a clear, deceptively simple prose. She must also have been coming to terms with her lesbian sexuality, certainly a truth her society had "decided not to acknowledge." She had certainly rejected the traditional woman's life and chosen to compete with men, pursuing a career in New York publishing. These facts of her own life should have made her more sensitive to both the creator and the protagonist of *The Awakening*, but, as often happens, they seem to have done just the opposite. After a name-dropping attack (she cites everyone from Dumas to Wagner) on her distorted version of Edna the Romantic, she concludes by hoping "that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause."

Chopin did receive some encouraging letters from friends, along with some gently appalled ones. She also received two mysterious, well-reasoned analyses of the book in letters from London—mysterious because they seem to have come from people who did not exist. They might have been written by a friend who frequently traveled to London and who wanted to encourage some intelligent commentary on the issues raised by the book. Chopin's friend's taking the trouble to fabricate the letters and mail them from London hints at the demoralizing effect of the reviews on Chopin, even though, as her children later said, she never mentioned them. (Chopin was a very private person and left few personal papers, no journal aside from occasional notes in her commonplace book.)

Biographers disagree on whether or not *The Awakening* was withdrawn from some libraries. Per Seyerstad says it was. Emily Toth disagrees, citing lack of evidence that the book was ever officially withdrawn. However, in the case of libraries, documentary evidence may be less reliable than rumor. Librarians have unofficial ways

of withdrawing books. They can neglect to buy, or "lose," or restrict the circulation of books that they and/or some community groups dislike. Because of several experiences like the one I'll now relate, I go with Per Seyerstad. In the 1970s, one of my dearest old friends (now dead), a children's librarian and a staunch First Amendment defender, told me she had taken a whole series of beloved children's books off the shelves and stored them behind the check-out counter, available only to children who specifically requested them. Her reason was stated in a virtuous and credible tone: racist epithets. Since she, as a public librarian, was acting as an agent of the government, didn't this constitute the kind of censorship forbidden by the First Amendment? She fixed a defiant, determined glance on me and said, "Yes!" I did not say what I was thinking, that probably all censors feel virtuous and justified.

A few friends continued to attend Chopin's literary gatherings, but others avoided her. Her status in some local clubs became shaky, even threatened, and, although she was included in a feature on local authors in a St. Louis newspaper, the reporter omitted any mention of *The Awakening*.

Often reviews that label a book indecent or sordid will sell books, or a public prosecution becomes the best promotion for the book, a rallying point for support for the author. That was what had happened to Flaubert. The 1840 government prosecution for the "indecent" of *Madame Bovary* made him famous and established him as an important author. Chopin had no such luck. The reviews were enough to bury the book. Their tone seems to have turned away the readership for Chopin's Creole stories without creating a new audience. There was no use of terms like "indecent" that might have titillated readers. Instead reviewers used the words "morbid," "unhealthy," "trite," "vulgar," "unwholesome," "sordid," "repellent," joined to statements of admiration for Chopin's "iridescent style," "exquisite style," "brilliant," "consummate art." To most readers this is code for "arty and depressing"—a recipe for boredom. Praise of the author's skill assures the reader that the reviewer's sentiments toward the writer are only the best, his or her intentions pure, and his condemnations reluctant, even sad at such a failure—especially by a nice lady author. The treatment worked. Sales were poor.

Was Chopin's problem that of a woman who dared to write about sex? Yes and no. The lucrative market for "sex fiction" was dominated by men. Yet, interestingly, only three years later, in 1902, a book written by a privileged nineteen-year-old girl in Butte, Montana became an instant, nation-wide best seller for its perceived indecency. *The Story of Mary MacLane* was a gushy, narcissistic manifesto avowing adolescent rejection of all inhibition, and written in the energetic, abstract language of inexperience. The Butte Public Library banned the book, but the 80,000 who bought it during its first month were delighted by its breathless defiance: "I should prefer some life that is not virtuous. I shall never make use of the marriage ceremony. I hereby register a vow, Devil, to that effect. . . . My soul goes blindly seeking, seeking, seeking . . . every nerve and fiber in my young woman's body . . ." And so on—and on.

Why did this effusion of adolescent despair and loose sexual energy attract so many readers, in spite of official attempts at censorship? Perhaps because, with all its allusions to "free love," hunger for fame, and defiance of family, it was read as a charming outpouring of youthful exuberance—before reality sets in. (Certainly it had nothing to do with the grim reality of life for most women in the industrial mining town of Butte.) Whether such writing is called "sex fiction" or obscenity or indecency or

pornography, its main requirement is that it be no more than titillating fantasy. While male writers like Dreiser were still struggling to get their novels of fallen women into print, readers were lapping up Mary MacLane's "life of longing" because its "daring" was so totally safe. Like Hardy's Bathsheba in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, or the lively girls in the novels of Henry James, middle-class Anglo-American girls were allowed to be "spirited," even defiant and daring in their vicarious life—before settling down and embracing the realities of respectable marriage and motherhood.

Chopin's Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, was married and had a couple of children. And Chopin's style, far from gushing, was as truly sensuous, ironic, and disciplined as—well, as male writers like Maupassant. Edna's passions and conflict rang too true, too disturbingly real, too genuinely threatening to the status quo. Not only was Edna less than totally absorbed in her children (while not a neglectful parent), and not particularly grateful to her indulgent, money-making husband. Worse, she was becoming restless and susceptible to romantic flirting. Far worse, her susceptibility (indeed Chopin's prose throughout the book) is saturated with erotic sensuality, suggesting that a respectable wife is driven by the same physical urges as a wanton—or a man. So far, we are clearly in the territory of Emma Bovary, whose behavior was shocking enough to bring the author to court—in France, no less!

But *The Awakening* (and this is not to say that it is as great a book as *Madame Bovary*) goes even further. Per Seyerstad called it "a woman's answer to Madame Bovary." It may also have been a woman's answer to *Jude the Obscure*. In the letter in which Hardy wrote that "Sue is a type of woman which has always had an attraction for me," he added, "her sexual instinct being healthy as far as it goes, but unusually weak and fastidious . . ." Hardy connects Sue's intellectuality with frigidity, a common stereotype among male writers. For Chopin, a robust intellect goes with a robust libido in a woman as well as in a man. Edna's affair with a roué she does not love does not further addle her mind (as seems the case with Emma Bovary). It clears her mind of cant.

(Consider the distinguished writer Edith Wharton's orgasmic affair with the shallow Morten Fullerton. She credited him with deepening her experience and her writing. She spelled this out in her letters to Fullerton [this shifty character ignored her pleas to return them and later sold them—they surfaced in 1989] but never in her novels about lost sexual beings like Lily Bart in *House of Mirth*, published five years after *The Awakening*.)

Edna's physical orgasm is an orgasm of the mind as well, a burst of light on many realities that have been systematically denied. She relaxes into "understanding" the imperative of her sexual drive, independent of "love." She is, for the first time, beginning to "comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality." This insight is underscored by the scene of Edna's assisting in the childbirth of her friend. The ruthless call of sex is intimately connected with the ruthless tearing asunder of childbirth. All genteel, ladylike evasions and euphemisms are canceled out by these juxtaposed physical images, which were taboo for a woman writer and were usually squeamishly or indifferently avoided by male writers.

One reason given for condemnation of the book was that Edna shows no shame, no remorse for her adultery, only "an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility" toward everything she has been taught she is supposed to think and feel. Unlike Hardy's Tess, Edna is not torn apart by continuing to accept the lie while living the punishing truth.

Experience has exploded the lies she tried to live by, has set her totally alone on her path toward truth. Edna is at the beginning of mature, independent thought.

This is a standard coming-of-age element in novels with male protagonists, a crisis of independent thought usually occurring in youth, material for the many portraits-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man. Chopin's novel asserts that this human crisis came later for women, who by educational and social restrictions were kept in a childlike stage until safely married and nailed down by pregnancies and child care. Then, in their thirties, women (those strong enough to have survived half a dozen pregnancies and rich enough to have help in caring for their children) might catch their breath and recognize some realities in their lives.

This usurpation of "male" development as well as "male" sexuality may have infuriated or perhaps frightened reviewers and early readers of *The Awakening*. It was as if Chopin's novel had fused Hardy's Sue and Arabella into one woman determined both to think and to enjoy sex, neither mind nor body tamed, let alone satisfied, by motherhood. Even Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (published after some struggle three years after *The Awakening*) did not portray a woman who is a sexual being, much less a thinking being. In his struggle to get the book published, Dreiser had toned down the sex. The resulting "Carrie" is a beauty who, out of economic necessity, rather passively sleeps with a series of men, apparently without ever getting pregnant, then successfully goes on the stage, living in financially secure but solitary melancholy.

Perhaps if *The Awakening* had been written by a man, the killer attack by reviewers would have been less demoralizing. Hardy had been shunned by some Dorset folk after he wrote *Jude*, but what did they matter to him? He had plenty of literary men dropping by, and there were always his annual trips to London, where he was lionized by even more men and women. Kate Chopin, as a woman writer in a southern American town, was in a quite different position. Her social life revolved around her home and other women's homes. When that began to unravel, she had no tavern or club where she could meet other free spirits, no tough, independent comrades to laugh away prudish attacks. As for escapes to the literary capitol of New York, who knew her there? She was simply shunned, enveloped in disapproving silence. She had embodied the advice of her character Mademoiselle Reisz; she had put into her novel all of her "courageous soul that dares and defies." Soaring above the "level plain of tradition and prejudice," she had been shot down.

She might have shrugged off her isolation—she still had her children and her work—but the following year brought the defining blow. Her publisher had already agreed to publish her third collection of short stories. But when Chopin sent in the manuscript of *A Vocation and a Voice*, it was returned without comment.

She never tried to publish *A Vocation and a Voice* elsewhere. Nor did she try to publish a new story now considered one of her best, written while *The Awakening* was at press. "The Storm" is a humorously erotic piece in which the beginning of a light-hearted affair promises to increase the happiness of both marriages "betrayed" by the illicit lovers. It was as if Chopin had moved on from *The Awakening* to a more optimistic, ironic, playful view of sexual irregularities in the lives of ordinary, good people.

After the unexplained return of her manuscript, she wrote another piece she never tried to publish. "A Reflection" allegorizes life as a vast, crowded, moving procession with "souls and bodies falling beneath the feet of the ever-pressing multitude. . . oh I

could weep at being left by the wayside; left with the grass and the clouds and a few dumb animals," but she realizes that this is where she belongs because, "In the procession I should feel the crushing feet, the clashing discords, the ruthless hands and stifling breath. *Salve!* ye dumb hearts. Let us be still and wait by the roadside." The overwriting, the tone of self-pity, completely unlike Chopin, give an indication of how devastated she was.

Chopin's daughter Lélia said that her mother never wrote again. A few innocuous stories were published in magazines like *Youth's Companion*, but they were probably part of a backlog. She seemed to run out of energy both physically and creatively. Her health quickly declined. By 1902—she was only fifty-two years old—she was going rapidly downhill. She revived sufficiently in 1904 to drag herself enthusiastically around the St. Louis World's Fair. On August 22, after a day at the fair, she collapsed and died of a stroke. Obituaries praised her Creole stories but ignored *The Awakening*. In 1905 she was entirely left out of a new book on southern writers.

In 1906 *The Awakening* was reissued but evoked little response except the usual statements that her best work was in her Creole stories. Then in 1909, in a book aptly titled *Their Day in Court*, attention was given to *The Awakening* by a prominent critic, Percival Pollard, who wrote an attack more furious than anything written during Chopin's lifetime. No one seems to know what touched off this eruption of sarcasm at an unknown novel written by a dead, forgotten writer. At least Pollard does touch on the plot, or, rather, sputters in fury at it: "She was almost at the age that Balzac held so dangerous—almost she was the Woman of Thirty—yet she had not properly tasted the apple of knowledge. She had to wait until she met a young man who was not her husband, was destined to tarry until she was under the influence of a Southern moonlight and the whispers of the Gulf and many other passionate things, before there began in her the first faint flushing of desire. So, at any rate, Kate Chopin asked us to believe."

His outrage increases: "We are asked to believe that . . . marrying and having children and all the rest of it, had left her still . . . as innocent of her physical self as the young girl." (What's hard to believe? The letters of Simone de Beauvoir, published in the 1990s, reveal that despite her worldly sophistication, her feminism, and her long-term relationship with Jean Paul Sartre, Beauvoir had her first orgasm in her late thirties with Nelson Algren.)

Was Pollard responding to some unrecorded appreciation of *The Awakening*? (Did his wife read it? his daughter? Or were some defenders surfacing?) Two years later, in 1911, Orrick Johns called Chopin "the most individual feminine talent America has produced." Then Fred Lewis Pattee called her a "genius," yet never mentioned *The Awakening*. In 1930 Dorothy Anne Dondore, writing the 1930 entry on Chopin in *Dictionary of American Biography*, did mention *The Awakening*, calling it "two decades ahead of its time." But in the first biography of Chopin, published in 1932, Daniel Rankin dismissed the book and its "erotic morbidity," derivative of things like "Beardsley's hideous and haunting pictures, with their disfiguring leer of sensuality." For the next twenty years, *The Awakening* had its quiet, obscure ups and downs, occasionally praised, more often condemned or left out of the very few discussions of Chopin's work.

The turning point came in the late forties when French writer Cryrille Arnavon, for the first time, compared her with major writers like Dreiser, Flaubert, and Maupassant, and arranged for a French translation of *The Awakening* (published in 1953).

Attention and praise grew throughout the fifties, climaxing in the 1961 anointing of *The Awakening* by Edmund Wilson as a "quite uninhibited and beautifully written novel which anticipates

D. H. Lawrence in its treatment of infidelity." In that year Per Seyerstad began the work that resulted in his critical biography of Chopin and his edition of her *Complete Works* (1969). Publication of these books coincided with the new surge of feminism, which created a flood of essays and paperback editions used in university classes across the United States. The book was examined from almost every social, historical, psychological, and philosophical perspective, and the examination continues.

This discussion becomes contentious on the difficult point of Edna's death. Her suicide has variously been called entirely appropriate, a lapse into sentimentality, a violation of the established character, a mythic immersion into Eros, a Freudian regression and rejection of motherhood, a failure of nerve on Chopin's part, and an ultimate act of courage by a protagonist who has found her strength. There is, at the end of the book, something just slightly mushy in the usually poetically precise prose of Chopin—a hint of author ambivalence?

Whatever criticisms are now leveled at the book, it is at least taken seriously. *The Awakening* has achieved a firm place in American literature, now that the truths of Edna's life are taken for granted. But the reading list of college classes is a sad place to occupy after being buried for two generations, during which the core of Edna Pontellier's ordeal became an obvious truism, instead of the bombshell it could have been in 1900. The book that cost its author her career, her will to write, and perhaps her life is now called a link between George Sand and Simone de Beauvoir. But is it? Can a book that was effectively suppressed for more than half a century act as a link? Did its suppression injure much more than its author? Elaine Showalter thinks so:

A writer may work in solitude, but literature depends on a tradition, on shared forms and representations of experience; and literary genres, like biological species, evolve because of significant innovations by individuals that survive through imitation and revision. Thus it can be a very serious blow to a developing genre when a revolutionary work is taken out of circulation. Experimentation is retarded and repressed, and it may be several generations before the evolution of the literary genre catches up. . . . *The Awakening* was just such a revolutionary book.

If what happened to *The Awakening* is a "serious blow" to literature, then the obvious question is an ominous one: how many such missing links remain lost? The fact that a book is rediscovered and given its due does not prove the comforting old cliché that if a book (or a writer or an artist) is worthy, recognition will eventually come. The re-emergence of *The Awakening* proves no such thing. I believe—but cannot prove—that it is an exception among many buried books. Books written from outside the dominant class, ethnicity, gender, religion, or location, and written on subjects that offended or bored that dominant class. How many such books remain lost to us because no persistent scholar or resurgent political movement happened to dig them up? How many were lost

