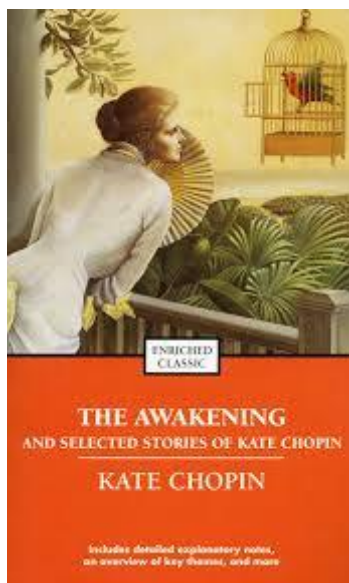


**A Woman's Achievement of Liberating Triumph from Worldly  
Bondages: A Critical Analysis of Kate Chopin's  
*The Awakening***

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Courtesy: <http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Awakening-and-Selected-Stories-of-Kate-Chopin/Kate-Chopin/Enriched-Classics/9780743487672>

**Abstract**

Kate Chopin is one of the prolific feminist English writers of the nineteenth century. She is well known for her novel *The Awakening* a compellingly prescient story of a woman unfulfilled by the mundane and feminine role. A woman's awakening from the inertia of patriarchal social conventions is the main theme of the novel. The protagonist Edna's consciousness and her problems are fully explored in this paper. This paper focuses how Edna investigates her own sexual desires and her mandatory female social roles. She is a woman who fights for her individual identity beyond the traditional, orthodox boundary against women. All the changes in the novel result in conflict, tension and confusion. This is very close to what happens to Edna Pontellier as she herself from social obligations and received opinions and begins to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. Women like Edna and others are still fighting and struggling for their freedom, emancipation and liberation in our society. **The main objective of this research is to analyse how a woman achieves liberating triumph from worldly bondages. Analytical, descriptive and comparative methods will be used in this research. Data collected from texts, books, journals, magazines and articles written by renowned scholars.** This research will be helpful to expand students' skills in arguments and enormously enlighten their knowledge in literature field. This paper analyzes a woman's thirst for personal emancipation and transcendence of her soul's slavery from materialistic boundary.

**Keywords:** Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, awakening, bondages, liberating, feminine role, identity, changes, slavery

## I. Introduction

Kate Chopin is one of the eminent feminist writers of the nineteenth century. She was following a rather conventional path as a housewife until an unfortunate tragic incident - the death of her husband - altered the course of her life. Her best known novel *The Awakening* examines a woman's struggle to claim and to assert her essential self and identity within the cultural constrain of later nineteenth century America.

“With an effortless, sure –handed artistry, Kate Chopin takes her New Orleans heroine, Edna Pontellier, through the success stages of a compelling but ultimately tragic search for personal freedom. *The Awakening* in its frank, unapologetic treatment of the subjects of its time that it aroused, on its publication in 1899, a storm of controversy violent enough to end its authors young career. The fact that we have the book at all is the most convincing tribute to its enduring, un-suppressibly power.” - Elaine Showalter.

*The Awakening* is a compellingly prescient story of a woman unfulfilled by the mundane yet highly distinguished feminine role and her painful comprehension that restraints by virtue of her sex obstructed her talents and ability to continue a more gratifying life. When it was published it immediately aroused controversies and problems among the critics, educationalists and scholars of the Victorian era. They felt angry to her portrayal of a woman prowl with active sexual deserves who dares to leave her husband and her children.

Sandra M. Gilbert, in *The Second coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy Desire* considers Edna as a heroine who is journeying not for toward rebirth but toward a regenerative and revisionary genre, that intends to propose new realities for women by providing new mythic paradigms through which women's lives can be understood.” (Gilbert, 1983:59)

Every woman faces the challenges, barriers and problems when she creates her own life with self confidence and proceeds her journey of life. *The Awakening* tells about gender relations which brings out the stifling effect of societal expectations on a woman's growth as a free soul. The author shares her view of the intrapsychic pain of Edna the protagonist which encourages our understanding of her. The theme of selfishness and emancipation of woman before domestic duties are restrictively of woman's desires and oppression.

Kate Chopin, a pioneering feminist writer, was writing at a time when women were confined to the private sphere of the home and were often denied participation in the public. Patriarchal attitudes dominated the minds of American people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Chopin's work encouraged women to look at their situations from a critical point of view, one in which women were unfairly treated because of their status as female.

Chopin portrays the oppression of women in the Patriarchal Society of nineteenth century America through the typical Southern Plantation home. Society of the nineteenth century gave a heightened meaning to what it means to be a woman. According to the commonly known 'code of true womanhood, 'women were supposed to be docile, domestic creatures, whose main concerts in life were to be the raising of their children and submissiveness to their husbands. *The Awakening*

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:10 October 2018

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deals with the condition of the nineteenth century woman in marriage and has been more recently rediscovered and recognized as an overtly feminist text for these reasons.

Chopin wrote *The Awakening* in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a transition period from the Victorian age to the era of Modernism. In Europe and the United States, late nineteenth century was a chaotic and tumultuous period, where the social, scientific and cultural paradigms in Europe were undergoing radical changes due to the theories propounded by the Scientists and theorists.

## 2. Edna's Sufferings in the Society

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has enjoyed a success in different ways. The literary critics and scholars have condemned the novel for Edna's unrepentant drive for independence and emotional, sexual, psychological and spiritual awakening. The novel starts:

“A green and yellow parrot which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: *Allezvous – en! Allezvous –en! Sapristi!* That's all right!” (Chopin 1)

“He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out, upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (Chopin 1)

It shows the protagonist's struggles against society and nature. She is a controversial character who denies her role as a mother and a wife. Chopin portrays the reflection of growth but the concept of motherhood is the main theme throughout novel. Edna Pontellier struggles and fights against society and nature.

Edna's selection of life paths is exhibited in the novel. Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz are the good examples of female characters that the other characters around Edna contrast her with and from whom they gain their expectations and expressions for her. She finds both role models lacking and begins to see that the life of freedom, equality and individuality that she wants to fight against both society and nature.

Kate Chopin depicts her protagonist Edna in a different way:

“Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright; they were a yellowish brown, about the colour of her hair. She had a way of turning them. Swift upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some in the maze of contemplation or thought.” (Chopin 6)

“Her eye-brows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was rather than handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features. Her manner was engaged.” (Chopin 6)

Adele is a Mother-Woman. She is the epitome of the male defined wife and mother. The mother woman were idolized their children, worshipped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels (Chopin 10). Adele is described as being a fairly a pianist, yet even the very person act of 'creating music is performed for the sake of her children.'

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“She was keeping up her music on account of the children she says because she and her husband considered it a means of brightening the home and making it alight.”(Chopin 27).

Awakening from the slumber of patriarchal social convention is the main theme of the book. Edna must rouse herself from the life of dullness she has always lived. What she awakens to. However, it is so much larger than her that she ultimately cannot manage the complexity of it. The artist’s ability to create herself is another theme. Can Edna do it? Life’s paradoxes are so huge, and Edna’s experience so limited, that the question fuels the book’s plot.

Kate Chopin is known for writing about women and their struggles in patriarchal society. In her work, *The Awakening* she portrays women who have taken on different types of female roles. Edna, the protagonist is a woman in search of her female identity. She is uncomfortable in her role as the ‘patriarchal woman’ and has trouble obtaining either of the two roles.

Edna begins to refuse her role as mother and she does not reject the role entirely; rather she rejects the idea that motherhood was the most supreme role a woman could hold.

Edna tells Adele, the epitome of a ‘Mother – Woman’ that:

“I would never sacrifice myself for my children or for any one.....  
I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money,  
I would give up my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t  
make it more clear it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend  
which is revealing itself to me” (Chopin 53).

Edna realizes that her husband and children have not only disturbed on her identity but have frightened to become her identity if she does not take decisive action to reject her current circumstances. Chopin portrays an increasingly more self-aware Edna, consequently more antagonistic view of her from her male partners. As Edna more readily rejects the roles of a mother and wife and searches for a new identity.

While she would not mind giving up money, comfort and even her own life but she cannot accept “they possess her body and soul” (Chopin 160). The inevitability of her fate as a male-defined creature brings her a state of despair and she frees herself in the sea.

### 3. Abysses of Solitude

One piece which that lady played Edna had entitled ‘Solitude’. It was a short, plaintive, minor strain. The name of the piece was something else, but she called it ‘Solitude’ when she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him.

“Isn’t this a delightful place? She remarked. - I am so glad it has never actually been discovered. It is so quiet, so sweet, here. Do you notice there is scarcely a sound to be heard? It’s so out of the way; and a good walk from the car. However, I don’t mind walking. I always feel so sorry for women who don’t

like to walk; they miss so much - so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole.”(Chopin 49)

In *The Awakening* The Sea signifies freedom and escape. It is a vast expanse that Edna can brave only when she is solitary and only after she has discovered her own strength when in the water, Edna is reminded of the depth of the universe and of her own position as a human being within that depth. The sensuous sound of the surf constantly beckons and seduces Edna throughout the novel.

“The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.” (Chopin 220).

Water’s associations with cleansing and baptism bring it a symbol of rebirth. The sea, thus also serves as a reminder of the fact that Edna’s awakening is a kind of redemption. Appropriately, Edna ends her life in the sea: a space of infinite potential envelops void and emptiness that carries both a promise and a threat. The sea represents the freedom, the strength and lonely horror of independence.

Edna tells Robert that she has been seeing ‘the waves and white beach of Grand Isle’ while he was gone. Waves ‘may be stirred to violence by external forces and their passivity is as dangerous as their uncontrolled activity. They stand for all the power of massive inertia may represent the inability of Edna and the temptation to choose self-indulgence and individuality over self-sacrifice and community.

The bird can represent the soul or intellect escaping from the body. It is possible that the bird with the broken wing in the suicide may symbolize either Edna’s mental distraction or consequent inability to sacrifice for her children. It is an expression of rising to the sublime and of striking to transcend the human condition.

The success and complexities, problems and conflicts of this novel include but exceed these recognized by contemporary feminists who seek to reclaim this piece of the American Women’s literary tradition, citing its protagonists revolutionary response to the expectations of gender and period. Chopin blends with old tradition with modern ideas in her novel *The Awakening*.

“The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, is not for her in this world. As the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams.” (Chopin 35)

The final representation of Edna’s desire to be free is, of course, her death. Throughout the entire novel, Edna had struggled to make her internally persuasive voice-her impulses and desires-heard against the overpowering and authoritative voices of her culture, her religion, *A Solitary Soul*, (Tuttleton 2005) centers around a theme of isolation that Edna feels cannot be escaped, even by the most determined souls. Edna sees the touch of the ocean as “sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embraces” (Chopin 113).

#### 4. Edna's Exploration and Liberating Triumph

*The Awakening* explores themes of patriarchy, marriage and motherhood, women's independence, desire, and sexuality both honestly and artistically. Edna wants to liberate herself from all these materialistic bondages and transcends her imprisoned soul into the world of bliss and freedom.

Edna investigates her own sexual desires and her mandatory female social roles; a woman who struggles to proclaim an individual identity beyond the bounds of that etched by the rulers of patriarchy. These desires to stray from the custom, and to turn out to be her own person, are roused by Edna's interest in art. Edna's experimentation with art directly corresponds to her lifestyle and sexual experimentation. All of the changes in the novel connect to the confusion her role as a female artist has created, including her opinions of the people around her, her ignited romantic desires, the decay of her relationships and eventually, her own demise.

“Well, I might go down and try- dip my toes in. Why, it seems to me the sun is hot enough to have warmed the very depths of the ocean. Could you get me a couple of towels? I'd better go right away, so as to be back in time. It would be a little too chilly if I waited till this afternoon.” (Chopin 218)

She tried hard to understand her relations to her marriage, her society, and her intimates. She tries to discern just how much freedom she can carve out for herself in the world she known. Ultimately she confronts frustration and apparent defeat, but her effort, whatever her shortcomings may be not without certain courage.

With *The Awakening* Chopin manages to portray clearly and effectively how the addition of the role of female artist and the subversion of the traditional roles society places upon a woman, can awaken new desires that result in sharp changes of her opinions of the people around her, the gradual decay of her relationships and ultimately tragic death.

“She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on thinking of the bluegrass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end.” (Chopin 221)

Edna feels happy with joyful mood and ready to mingle with sea:

“She put it on, leaving her clothing in the bath-house. But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.” (Chopin 220)

She enjoys and feels like a new born creature:

“How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.” (Chopin 220)

In *The Awakening* the protagonist Edna's consciousness is fully explored. This novel focuses how Edna investigates her own social desires and her mandatory female social roles. She is an ordinary woman who fights for her individual identity beyond the traditional, orthodox boundary.

*The Awakening* centers upon a woman experimenting with her own sexual desires and her obligatory female social roles; a woman who "struggles to assert an individual identity beyond the bounds of that inscribed by the dictators of patriarchy. These desires to stray from the norm, and to become her own person, were brought about and 'awakened' by Edna's interest in art; in fact, Edna's experimentation with art directly corresponds to her life style and sexual experimentation. All of the changes in the novel connect to the confusion her role as a female artist has created, including her opinions of the people around her. Edna's romantic desires, her relationships and eventually her own death.

Awakening from the inertia of patriarchal social convention is the key theme of the novel. Edna must awaken herself from the life of monotony she has always lived. What she awakens to, however, it is so much larger than her that she eventually cannot accomplish the intricacy of it. Familial relationships are inspected in this novel and vetoed by Edna. In trying to fashion a novel order, Edna castoffs all the old ones.

"The inevitable fate leads her to a state of ....and she liberates herself throw committed suicide." (Papke)

"The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace." (Chopin 220)

## 5. Conclusion

*The Awakening* explores one woman's desire to find and live fully within her true self. Her devotion to that purpose causes friction with her friends and family, and also conflicts with the dominant values of her time. The author gives us a protagonist who chooses untimely death because she is unable to find a place for her newly conscious, fully recognized self within the restrictions of the present social system.

At the end of the novel Edna emerges as a powerful soul which has the capacity to translate its utmost yearnings, desires and deeply buried passionate dreams and adoration into a real situation. Her death demonstrates the ultimate freedom and independence of a passionate soul which struggles for a harmonious existence in the universe. Throughout the novel Edna relentlessly struggles to pronounce her individuality, liberation and emancipation. She finds herself trapped and silenced.

Finally, her iron-will break the barriers, chains of manacles are marvelous achievement. She is a prototypical feminist who has the courage and strength to face the challenges against the traditional orthodox society. During this journey Edna has bursts of clarity where she is able to authoritatively form a new word to explain this new-awakening. Edna awakens as a different, capable woman who achieves her liberating triumph through many hardships, struggles, bitter experiences etc. Her death by drowning into the sea is joyful event to Edna.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:10 October 2018

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Edna demonstrates that she lacks the strength and courage necessary to live as a rebel. Her last thoughts are sentimental regression to childhood and identify the primary to childhood and identify the primary motivating forces in her life as rebellion against authority as expressed by feeling 'chained' like a dog and as represented by the voices of her father and sister Margaret, which she associates with family conventions and the church and romantic longing for the 'unattained', as first spurred by her infatuation with as Calvary officer wearing spurs. Edna's journey towards awakening is depicted as a painful yet purposeful process that, Edna never fully understands herself and is never fully able to accomplish in her life time.

Edna's says bravely that I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence ... resolving never again to belong to another than myself.

Edna likes freedom, independence, individuality, self-identity, emancipation and liberation. She does not want to live like an ordinary woman. She longs for liberation. Finally she achieves liberating triumph from worldly bondages by drowning into the sea. So the society allows women to live freely like men. Kate Chopin gives a message to the readers that women are equal to men. So they enjoy the freedom, individuality, equity and equality.

Edna's drowning into the sea may probably symbolize in the author's perspective, the fusion of the soul with nature reflecting eternal bliss. The final association of Edna with the sea signifies emphatically and in the sense spiritually bondage of the soul with nature often celebrated as the manifestation of Supreme Being.

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