

BACKGROUNDS

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A New Biographical Approach

Emily Toth

If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up every thing 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.

Kate Chopin's diary, 22 May 1894
(Seyersted and Toth 92)

Kate Chopin never expected us to read her diary—nor, most likely, did she expect us to read *The Awakening*. But my students are always intrigued by Kate Chopin. They want to know about her life and “real growth”: How independent was she? Did she earn a living from her writing? (No; she lived on real estate investments.) What really went on in her marriage? And how did she know all that in 1899?

Literary critics have long presented Kate Chopin as a detached, objective observer who rarely wrote from personal experience—but as I show in my biography (forthcoming), she drew on real life for most of her inspiration. In short stories, Chopin used the names of real people and revealed their secrets with only the thinnest of disguises. She also was not above using fiction for satire and revenge. Even the plot of *The Awakening* is not a total invention; according to Chopin's brother-in-law Phamur Breazeale, with whom

she enjoyed playing cards and arguing religion, *The Awakening* was inspired by the true story of a New Orleans woman, well-known to French Quarter residents (Waters: Rankin 92).¹

But *The Awakening* also has its roots in Kate Chopin's own life, especially her pursuit of solitude, independence, and an identity apart from her children—and apart from the men who always admired her. Like Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin knew “the outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (7). From an early age, she developed both “a keen sense of humor,” in her daughter's words, and “a rather sad nature,” because of her many early losses. (Rankin 35; Seyersted 48).

Kate O'Flaherty, born in St. Louis in 1850, was the third of five children, but her sisters died as babies and her brothers died in their twenties—so that Kate was the only one to live past the age of twenty-five (M. Wilson, “Kate Chopin's Family”; interview).² But Kate had also been sent from the family nest much earlier than the others: she was barely five and a half when her parents enrolled her in boarding school, at the Sacred Heart Academy in St. Louis. Then, just two months after Kate began school in 1855, her father was one of the civic leaders riding the first train over the newly built Gasconade River bridge. The bridge collapsed, Thomas O'Flaherty was killed, and for the next two years Kate lived at home with her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother—all of them widows. (Nearly forty years later, Kate Chopin created a railroad accident in “The Story of an Hour,” in which a woman newly widowed revels in her independence and freedom.)

Kate's great grandmother Victoria Verdon Charleville took charge of Kate's education, emphasizing French, music, clear thinking, and scandalous gossip about St. Louis women of the past. Charleville's own mother had obtained the first legal separation in colonial St. Louis—after which she'd raised five children while running a highly profitable shipping business on the Mississippi. But Mme Charleville's daughter, Kate's grandmother, had married a man whose every financial venture turned to dross, and when he disappeared, he left his wife with no money and eight children (Rankin 35–36; Mills 51, 56–57; Seyersted 13–21; M. Wilson, “Kate Chopin's Family,” “Woman's Lib”).

And so the eldest child, Eliza, barely sixteen, did the one thing she could do to save her family: she married. Eliza brought to her marriage the Charleville name and social standing, and her husband, Thomas O'Flaherty, a thirty-nine-year-old Irish immigrant, brought money, financial acumen, and a son from his first marriage. No “excessive and fictitious warmth-colored her affection,” Kate Chopin writes of Edna and Léonce Pontellier in *The Awakening* (7)—and it is unlikely that the O'Flahertys had any particular community of interests. Once Thomas died, Eliza—like her mother and grandmother—did not remarry.

Kate O'Flaherty attended school irregularly and lived in a house full of people. Besides her mother, grandmother, great grandmother, and brothers, there were aunts and uncles and cousins and servants and boarders. But there were no married couples in the house until Kate was sixteen, after the Civil War (1850 and 1860 censuses, St. Louis city directories). Kate O'Flaherty grew up surrounded by single and very independent women, both at home and at the Sacred Heart Academy, where the sisters were famous for their intellectual rigor.

Then, at the academy, Kate found a soulmate: Kitty Garesché, a classmate who also loved climbing trees, sharing candy, and laughing and weeping over popular novels—but their idyllic friendship was shattered by war (Seyersted and Toth 104; Rankin 37). The O'Flahertys and Gareschés were slaveholders and rebel supporters in a Union city, and when both girls were thirteen, Kitty's family was banished from St. Louis. The Gareschés spent the next four years in South Carolina (Holland 169). Kitty did return and their friendship resumed until she entered a convent, but Kate seems never to have been as close to another girl—a fact reflected in Edna Pontellier's girlhood memories. All Edna's friends had been "of one type—the self-contained," and her "most intimate friend at school had been one of rather exceptional intellectual gifts" with whom Edna "sometimes held religious and political controversies" (7).

Kitty was exiled in 1863, the same year Kate's great grandmother and mentor, Mme Charleville, died, three weeks after Christmas. Less than a month later, Kate's half-brother, George, a rebel soldier, died of typhoid on Mardi Gras Day. Their father had been killed on All Saints' Day, eight years earlier, and Kate grew more than a little skeptical about the consolations of religion: even the Presbyterian Edna, in *The Awakening*, finds church suffocating and races outside for air and freedom (8).

Most college students reading *The Awakening* have questioned their own religious upbringing; most also understand the social pressures that make young women deny their intellectual achievements. Although Kate Chopin claimed, much later, to have been "undistinguished" at the Sacred Heart Academy after the war, in fact she was an honor student. She was elected to the elite Children of Mary Society, she won medals, and she delivered a commencement address, an original composition called "National Peculiarities" (Schuyler 116; "St. Louis Convents").

Kate O'Flaherty was also a youthful cynic, and today's students enjoy her musings. Fawned over as a society belle, admired for her cleverness and musical talent, Kate wrote what she really thought in her diary: "I dance with people I despise; amuse myself with men whose only talent is in their feet." She wrote advice about how to flirt (just keep asking, "What do you think?" and you'll be praised everywhere for your intelligence), and she was

desperate to spend more time with "my dear reading and writing that I love so well" (Seyersted and Toth 62, 63, 60).

Then, in 1870, she married "the right man." Oscar Chopin was twenty-five, handsome, from a wealthy cotton-growing family in Louisiana. (The name is pronounced "show-pan," like the composer's.) Both French Catholic by ancestry, Kate and Oscar spoke French and evidently had that kinship of tastes and values Edna hopes for but never finds (Carnahan; Seyersted and Toth 67; Rankin 58, 81, 82, 89; Seyersted 31, 38, 39; Waters). Kate used their European honeymoon to emancipate herself: she smoked cigarettes publicly, walked about alone, and drank beer; she learned to row and got herself a sunburn (probably, like Edna, she threw off the hats and gloves and veils that separated women from sensual experiences). Kate and Oscar also skipped mass—and that seems to have become a habit by the time they settled in New Orleans (Seyersted and Toth 75, 78, 81, 82, 85).

During the New Orleans years, 1870–79, Kate Chopin was abruptly separated from her community of women. She took long walks and streetcar rides alone, exploring the city and enjoying her own company. ("I always feel 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," Edna says in ch. 36). Still, Kate Chopin was also constantly pregnant—and therefore not to be seen in public. Forced to stay indoors except for Grand Isle vacations, Kate became a talented mimic, a keen observer, and even more of a social critic (Rankin 82).

By the time she was twenty-eight, Kate Chopin had given birth to five sons, with her mother by her side. (After the first birth, in 1871, Oscar departed on a summer-long European trip.) Still, Oscar was evidently a loving, jolly father but a failure as a breadwinner. After several disastrous seasons, he closed up shop as a cotton factor, and the Chopins moved to his old home in Cloutierville, Natchitoches Parish, northwest Louisiana. (The names are pronounced "Clooohy-ville" and "NAACK-it-rush"; Louisiana has "parishes" instead of counties.)

For the first time Kate would be living in a small town—and when she arrived, she was pregnant with her last child, the daughter they named Léila, born 31 December 1879 (Rankin 89–90; Seyersted 38). In Cloutierville—a tiny French village that became the site of many of her short stories—Kate Chopin shocked the longtime residents. She would lift her skirts too high, deliberately revealing her ankles, when she crossed the town's one street; she smoked Cuban cigarettes and wore fancy riding habits from New Orleans, and many local people tut-tutted. But after Léila's birth, Kate was finally freed from constant pregnancy and able to listen much more to her own needs (Rankin 103; Carnahan).

After Oscar Chopin died suddenly of "swamp fever" in December 1882,

Kate ran his general store and plantation for more than a year. An attractive local planter, a married man, pursued her, and Kate was more than a little responsive—but she made a choice: in 1884 she sold her furniture and returned to St. Louis to live with her mother. (That choice is echoed in *The Awakening*, when Edna leaves a man—Robert—to be with a woman: the “mother-woman” Adele, who is about to give birth [Carnahan; DeLouche; Hernandez].) But when Eliza O’Flaherty died the following year, leaving Kate with a modest income and sole responsibility for six children, Kate turned to writing. Her first published story, “Wiser Than a God” (1889), tells the story of a woman who becomes a great artistic success, but only after her mother’s death.

By almost any standards, Kate Chopin was an immediate literary success. Within four years she was appearing in the most prestigious national magazines. Her first short story collection, *Bayou Folk*—mostly local-color stories of Cloutierville-area people—gained nationwide acclaim; her second, *A Night in Acadie*, was well-received. She was also one of the most popular and sought-after writers in St. Louis’s literary colony. She held salons at her home, with visiting writers; she was friendly with journalists, poets, and editors of both sexes. She had numerous admirers and suitors, including an editor at the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, which published her son Oscar’s sketch of his mother’s study (Waters: “St. Louis Woman”).

In the 1890s Kate Chopin also retained her ties with Louisiana friends and relatives, although some bristled when they recognized her characters. In her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), and in several short stories, she portrayed the Cloutierville priest Father Jean Marie Beaulieu (“Père Antoine”) as obtuse and ineffectual—but in “Dr. Chevalier’s Lie” (1893) she published a sympathetic portrait of her New Orleans obstetrician and anticipated the character of Dr. Mandelet. For several rakish characters, she drew on the Louisiana planter who had pursued her, and she named one story for his wife.

During her prime, Kate Chopin also wrote “The Storm” (1898), about a young Louisiana mother and a planter—both married to others—who take refuge in her house during a thunderstorm. The storm outside inspires a different sensual storm inside, which is described with a startling explicitness for the 1890s: “When he touched her breasts they gave themselves up in quivering ecstasies, inviting his lips . . .” (*Works* 2: 595). The enthusiasm in the story—and its lack of moral condemnation—suggests a personal experience, which may be why Kate Chopin never attempted to publish “The Storm.”

Then, in *The Awakening*, Chopin reconsidered her years in New Orleans, the years of pregnancy and motherhood. The action takes place over nine months, the space of Adèle’s pregnancy; *The Awakening’s* image of womanly beauty is a radiantly pregnant woman—perhaps the only one described in

novels of the 1890s. Though Adèle, the traditional woman, prefers to give birth in pain, Edna (like her creator) took chloroform during her deliveries—and *The Awakening* is Edna’s protest against physical and spiritual confinement and pain. Most of Edna’s awakenings take place in the unconfined outdoors, in the sensual tropical paradise of Grand Isle (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, “Timely”; Seyersted and Toth 93).

The Awakening, of course, generated a storm of hostile criticism, but there is no documentary evidence that the book was actually banned or withdrawn from St. Louis library shelves. The story that it was kept from the public stems mainly from Kate Chopin’s own ironic statement: “The librarist! Oh, no, they don’t keep it” (*Works* 2: 722).³ Nor was Kate Chopin totally ostracized in St. Louis: women wrote her warm letters full of praise for *The Awakening* (Seyersted and Toth 133–34, 137–39). They also invited her to give a reading at the Wednesday Club, the most prestigious intellectual women’s club in St. Louis. Of the two women who reviewed *The Awakening*—Willia Gather in Pittsburgh and Frances Forcher in St. Louis—both had questions about the theme, but both warmly praised the book’s artistry (Culley, *Awakening* 145–46, 153–55).

It was the male critics, editors, and gatekeepers in St. Louis and around the nation who condemned *The Awakening* and cut short Kate Chopin’s writing career. She was stung by the negative reviews—some of them from men she knew well—and afterward wrote only a few more short stories. At the turn of the century, she was in failing health (her symptoms suggest diabetes); many of her close friends were dying; and her son Jean’s young wife died in childbirth, along with Kate’s first grandchild. Though Chopin rallied with enthusiasm for the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904, the August heat brought on a cerebral hemorrhage, and she died on 22 August. She was buried in St. Louis’s Calvary Cemetery (sec. 17, lot 47) and virtually forgotten for half a century, until Per Seyersted rediscovered her in the 1960s and American feminists embraced her.⁴

My students like to know that Kate Chopin did not walk into the sea and that long after her death, she has been resurrected for us. They are also fascinated by the unconventional streak that seems to run through her entire life—including her refusal to remarry; obviously she preferred her freedom, her writing, and her solitude. Like Edna, she was “the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (30). She was her own woman.

NOTES

¹ My Chopin biography, which will be published by Athenaeum, will treat the real-life parallels in much greater detail. “Miss McEnders,” for instance, is about a

recognizable St. Louis philanthropist whose money was obtained in questionable ways—which explains why Chopin published the story under the pseudonym "La Tour."

² The 1850 census lists "Cath. 7/12" among the O'Flaherty's, meaning that "Cath." was seven months old as of the census date, June 1850—but Kate Chopin's tombstone and other biographers give her birthday as 8 February 1851. The definitive evidence, however, comes from Jean Bardot, who has recovered the baptismal record at the St. Louis Cathedral, showing that Kate O'Flaherty was born 8 February 1850. Kate's sisters Jane and Marie Therese died in infancy; her brother Tom was killed in a buggy accident at age twenty-five (US Census, 1850; Bardot 18; M. Wilson, "Kate Chopin's Family," interview).

³ Librarians Erik Stocker of the St. Louis Public Library and Robert Behra and John Neal Hoover of the St. Louis Mercantile Library can find no evidence that the book was ever banned or withdrawn.

⁴ For more than half a century, Kate Chopin's writings were virtually unknown outside Louisiana—except to Fred Lewis Pattee, who frequently anthologized the short story "Desirée's Baby." "The Lesche Club, a drama club at the Louisiana Normal School in Natchitoches, used to write and perform plays based on Kate Chopin stories—and when the Normal School became Northwestern State University, it retained a dormitory called Kate Chopin Hall (but that dormitory was torn down in the 1970s). Three Kate Chopin homes still survive today: 1413–15 Louisiana Avenue in New Orleans, a house now belonging to a women's historical association; the Bayou Folk Museum and Kate Chopin Home in Cloutiersville, open to the public; and 4232 McPherson Avenue in St. Louis, now a private home with city landmark status.

The Historical and Cultural Setting

Nancy Walker

One dimension of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* likely to be overlooked in the classroom is the richness of the historical and cultural background against which the novel takes place. New Orleans Creole culture in the late nineteenth century constituted a world unto itself—a set of traditions, mores, and customs unlike any other in America. Indeed, Chopin's descriptions of this culture serve as more than mere backdrop; the contrast between Edna's upbringing in Kentucky and the Creole society of Léonce Pontellier creates a subtle but persistent thread in the novel, one that helps to explain Edna's restlessness and alienation from the society around her. Approaching the novel as—at least in part—an account of the clash between the dominant southern culture in which Edna was raised and the New Orleans Creole subculture in which she finds herself after her marriage allows students not only to better understand a part of American cultural history but also to see Edna as a woman influenced by her past as well as by the events and surroundings of her present.

As Per Seyersted's biography and the letters and diary entries in the *Kate Chopin Miscellany* make clear, *The Awakening* is far from autobiographical. Kate Chopin and Edna Pontellier were the products of very different backgrounds, and that difference influenced their individual responses to the mores and values of New Orleans Creole culture toward the end of the nineteenth century. Whereas Edna has come to her marriage directly from the stern Protestantism of her father's home, Chopin grew up immersed in the cosmopolitan life of the Creoles in both St. Louis and New Orleans. Chopin's maternal grandfather, Wilson Farris, was a Kentuckian, a circumstance that, though it may well have contributed to Chopin's understanding of southern life east of the Mississippi River, had little effect on the atmosphere in which she was raised. In addition, Chopin had traveled extensively before she settled in New Orleans, and her perspective on cultural variety was far wider than that of Edna. On her way to New York to embark on a several-month honeymoon tour of Europe, Chopin commented favorably on Cincinnati and its beer gardens but was not at all pleased by Philadelphia, which she described as a "gloomy puritanical looking city" (Seyersted and Toth 68). The breadth of Chopin's experience with travel and reading—especially by the time she wrote *The Awakening* in her mid-forties—distinguishes her from the unworlly Edna and provides her with a far greater sense of cultural relativism.

The setting of the novel derives from Chopin's residence in New Orleans from 1870 to 1879 as well as from earlier visits there with her family. Born in St. Louis to an Irish-Catholic father and a French-Creole mother, Kate O'Flaherty married Oscar Chopin, a Creole from Natchitoches, Louisiana,

and the couple settled in New Orleans, where Oscar became a cotton merchant. The Chopins lived in what was known as the "American" part of the city, an area now known as the Garden District, across Canal Street from the French Quarter. Constantinople Street and Louisiana Avenue, where the Chopins had successive residences, formed part of a burgeoning suburb outside what most long-time residents considered "real" New Orleans: the *Vieux Carré*. In fact, Per Seyersted, Chopin's biographer, mentions that Oscar Chopin's father, who had come to Louisiana from France and had clung to his French heritage, disliked the fact that the couple chose to live in the American section of the city (37). Nevertheless, Kate Chopin explored New Orleans with a freedom unusual for women in the 1870s and became well acquainted with the colorful mixture of cultures and the bustle of trade in this port city.

Between 1860 and 1880, the population of New Orleans grew from 168,675 to 216,090 (nearly half of the residents were black), and the city was at that time "the only metropolis in the South" (Ezell 232). Founded in 1718, it was also one of the oldest cities in the southern part of the country. Age and size had their negative effects on life in New Orleans in the 1870s. Because the city lacked an adequate system of sanitation and stood below sea level, its narrow streets were filled with human and animal wastes and garbage; and epidemics of yellow fever, smallpox, and cholera were common, largely due to the miasmal swamps immediately adjacent to the city. The yellow fever epidemic of 1878, for example, claimed the lives of more than four thousand New Orleans residents. In an attempt to escape this threat, the wives and children of many Creole families, including those of Oscar Chopin, spent their summers on Grand Isle, which, because it is an island in the Gulf of Mexico about fifty miles south of New Orleans, enjoys gulf breezes that virtually remove the fever-carrying mosquitoes.

It is in this languid, semitropical setting that Chopin places the beginning and the ending of *The Awakening*. Because Grand Isle's summer population was almost entirely Creole, Edna is first shown here immersed in a culture with which she feels at odds and yet to which she is strongly attracted. Unlike Kate Chopin, who grew up speaking French and who managed to charm her Gallic father-in-law, despite his displeasure with her half-Irish heritage, Edna was born to a Kentucky Presbyterian family with values far removed from those of the warm, easygoing Creoles. Early in *The Awakening*, Edna recalls a day in her childhood when she felt a pleasant sense of escape from the rigidity of her home, and she says to Mme Ratignolle, "Likely as not, it was Sunday, . . . and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (7). Although Edna's family subsequently moved

to Mississippi, her severe Calvinistic Protestant background underwent no apparent change, and she is again reminded of it in the novel when her father comes to New Orleans to visit. She is relieved when he finally leaves, taking with him "his padded shoulders, his Bible reading, his 'toddlies' and ponderous oaths" (24).

Differences in values and behavior between the Catholic French Creoles of New Orleans and the Kentucky Presbyterians during the years before and after the Civil War could hardly have been more striking. Religious and political forces combined in the early years of the nineteenth century to alter southern Protestantism in ways that created a gulf between it and both Catholicism and northern Protestantism. As Ezell points out in *The South since 1865*, the "Great Revival" of 1800 strengthened evangelical Protestantism among the middle and lower classes of the South. Although this revival spirit initially fostered democratic and even liberal social attitudes, beginning in the 1830s northern criticism of the South—especially of the system of slavery—caused an increasing conservatism among southern Protestants that eventually led to the splitting of most denominations into northern and southern branches. "A great resurgence of religious orthodoxy began to regiment thought to protect Southern vested interests. . . . Liberalism brought threats to the *status quo*, therefore, Southern reaction was conservative in religion as well as in politics" (341). Edna's Kentucky Presbyterian father, who had been a colonel in the Confederate army, is a member of the generation of southerners who were most directly affected by this intense conservative trend in both religious and social attitudes.

The Catholic church, in contrast, was largely unaffected by the wave of southern conservatism in the middle years of the nineteenth century, and the Creoles of southern Louisiana, although many of them owned slaves, preserved through the century virtually the same traditions and social attitudes that they had developed during the years since their settlement of the area in the early eighteenth century. New Orleans, during the period of Chopin's residence there, was dominated by Creole culture, and the Creoles, who had developed a highly sophisticated society, were notably hostile toward the backwoods "Americans" who poured into this major port city with boatloads of timber, furs, and tobacco. To the refined Creole, these hunters and farmers seemed crude, dirty, and socially backward, and although they came down the Mississippi from a variety of states, Kentuckians must have seemed particularly offensive, because the Creoles called all these outsiders "Kaintocks" (Chase 80).

From its street names and architecture to its Mardi Gras celebrations, New Orleans, under the influence of the Creoles, more nearly resembled a southern European than an American city. Edward King, a contemporary

observer writing in *Scribner's Monthly* in 1873, stresses the European atmosphere of French New Orleans:

Step off from Canal Street, that avenue of compromises which separates the French and the American cities, some bright February morning, and you are at once in a foreign atmosphere. Three paces from the corner have enchanted you, the surroundings of a Southern-American commonwealth have vanished; this might be Toulouse, or Bordeaux, or Marseilles. (10)

Long before the advent of jazz, music was an important part of the city's cultural life, and the French Opera House was the first in the country to stage productions of Wagner (Seversted 42). Unconstrained by the Puritanism of their Protestant neighbors, for whom life was serious business, the Creoles played as hard as they worked. Indeed, to those from other parts of the country, Creole life seemed almost sinfully sensuous. Seversted quotes Lafcadio Hearn, the author, who moved to New Orleans in 1877, as saying, "work . . . in this voluptuous climate . . . is impossible" (41). What appeared to some to be a hedonistic way of life, coupled with the Creole institution of concubinage with quadroon and octoroon women, gave New Orleans a reputation as a sinful city. As Clement Eaton notes in *A History of the Old South*, "Americans who came down the Mississippi were shocked at the Creole Sundays, when the Sabbath day was devoted to pleasure and commerce. Furthermore, these Latins were passionately fond of gambling, lotteries, and dancing" (183). Even those Americans living as neighbors to the French Creoles were vexed at their self-sufficiency, their lack of interest in political affairs. As Edward King describes the situation, "they seem as remote from New York and Washington as if limitless oceans rolled between" (12).

In keeping with this atmosphere of social freedom, women in Creole culture, as is evident in *The Awakening*, were far less affected by the Victorian strictures that dictated the behavior of middle-class women in other parts of the country. Although they tacitly supported a sexual double standard by their acceptance of their husbands' part-Negro mistresses and were legally as powerless as other women, Creole women participated fully in the sensuous atmosphere that surrounded them: drinking wine, enjoying music and literature, wearing bright colors, and entertaining lavishly. Well-educated, especially in the arts, these women were acquainted with literary trends, and many were accomplished musicians and painters. Although Creole culture was patriarchal in the extreme, women enjoyed life in ways that those subjected to Edna's father's "gloom" could not.

Teaching *The Awakening* with an awareness of the religious and social

differences in Kate Chopin's cultural milieu enriches students' reading of the novel. It also removes Chopin from the narrow designation of "regionalist" or "local colorist" to which she has often been confined and demonstrates her understanding of the larger cultural patterns and problems of the late nineteenth century. Certainly Edna Pontellier's brave if doomed attempts at self-definition remain the central issue of the novel, but complicating those attempts are the romanticism that results from her rebellion against her rigid Presbyterian background and her inability to adjust that romanticism to the reality of her present environment.

Early in the novel, Chopin makes clear Edna's distance from the mores of the Creoles summing at Grand Isle: "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles; never before had she been thrown so intimately among them. . . . A characteristic which distinguished [the Creoles] and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery" (4). Edna is shocked by Mme Ratignolle's detailed recounting of her childbirth experiences, and she reads "in secret and solitude" an unnamed novel that the others read and discuss openly (4). The gossip, confidence-sharing ways of the Creoles does not merge easily with Edna's Presbyterian reserve—"Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences" (7)—yet she is seduced by the easy relations of this culture: "That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (7). Significantly, Chopin places the Pontelliers' New Orleans residence not in the Garden District, the "American" part of the city, but on Esplanade Street (actually, Avenue), at the edge of the French Quarter. Chopin had been familiar with this neighborhood since before her marriage, since it was noted for its grassy promenades where the part-black mistresses of white gentlemen strolled, often with their illegitimate offspring, just minutes from their homes on streets with such names as "Desire" and "Good Children." Edna is thus immersed physically in the Creole world, both on Grand Isle and in New Orleans.

Edna's early desire to escape the griminess of her Kentucky home has led to her marriage to Léonce. Beneath her reserve lies a strain of romanticism and rebelliousness that early in her life manifested itself in imagined attachments to a series of unavailable men: the "dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer," the young man in Mississippi who was engaged to someone else, and finally the "great tragedian" whose picture she kept on her desk. Chopin makes it clear that Edna's marriage is not the result of any such grand passion: "Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident" (7). One of her motives for marrying him, in fact, is her desire to flout the wishes of her father, who violently opposes her marrying a Catholic. Even after her marriage, her stern father attempts to dictate her values and her behavior.

Though proud of her artistic talent, he takes credit for it, "convinced as he was that he had bequeathed to all of his daughters the germs of a masterful capability" (23). The Colonel disagrees with Léonce's rather liberal treatment of Edna's "moods":

"You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce," asserted the Colonel. "Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it."

The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave. (24)

Caught between the Puritanical sternness of her father's world and the relaxed familiarity of Creole culture, Edna can belong fully to neither. Mme Ratinolle recognizes Edna's position as an outsider early in the novel when she exhorts Robert Lebrun to stop flirting with her: "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (8). Edna does, of course, take Robert seriously, just as he takes seriously her status as a possession of her husband, even though she tries to counteract this assumption toward the end of the novel: "I give myself when I choose. If he [Léonce] were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours, I should laugh at you both' (36). Robert cannot understand this freedom, and so he does the "honorable" thing by leaving. And having effectively left her husband, Edna can imagine no future; therefore, she swims into the Gulf of Mexico.

Readers of *The Awakening* have tended, correctly, to see Edna as a "misfit" in several ways. She is not a "mother-woman" like Mme Ratinolle, nor is she a self-fulfilled artist like Mlle Reisz. She tries to be an artist—with Mlle Reisz's encouragement—but tragically, considering the milieu, fails for lack of sufficient talent and commitment. She feels unconnected to her marriage and wants independence, but divorce is not an option and she does not have the means to be financially independent. In these respects she is a woman who does not belong to her time, but it is equally important to realize that she does not belong to her place.