

4-6-2015

Kate Chopin Awakened by Henrik Ibsen

Jenna Headrick
Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Headrick, Jenna, "Kate Chopin Awakened by Henrik Ibsen" (2015). *English Class Publications*. Paper 3.
http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications/3

This Class Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Class Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

Jenna Headrick

American Literature II

Mrs. Pittman

6 April 2015

Kate Chopin Awakened by Henrik Ibsen

Many authors have been recognized for their contributions to the feminist movement. Out of these many authors, Kate Chopin and Henrik Ibsen have been seen as major contributors because of their respective works, *The Awakening* and *A Doll's House*. Even though Chopin and Ibsen fought against their alleged relations with the feminist movement, there is reason to believe they were helping the movement progress. I think they were helping the advancement of the movement because they both write about the new woman. More specifically, I believe Chopin was inspired to write about the new woman in *The Awakening* through reading and/or watching Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. To support my topic I will present three subjects: First, I will provide background information on Chopin and Ibsen. Second, I will discuss Ibsen's influence on Chopin. Third, I will compare the protagonist from Chopin's *The Awakening* with the protagonist from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. In using these topics, I hope to show that Chopin was ultimately inspired by Ibsen's works, and to show that both authors were inspired by the feminist movement.

Background

Chopin's father, Thomas O'Flaherty, had no interest in women's rights. He was the perfect example of a dominating patriarch. Critic Emily Toth suggests that Kate (Chopin) O'Flaherty was a rambunctious little girl who asked her father too many questions. Due to Kate's curiosity, Thomas O'Flaherty may have been the one to suggest sending her away to boarding school (Toth 3). Before Kate was born, Thomas' wife, Catherine O'Flaherty died in child birth.

Thomas moved on by marrying a woman named Eliza Faris, who was Kate's mother. While Toth thinks that Thomas sent Kate away, she ultimately believes Kate was sent away because of family drama. Toth does not give any hint as to what this drama may have been. Soon after Kate was sent away, in 1885, Thomas O'Flaherty died in a train accident. Kate was brought home to a single parent. More specifically, to a single mother. From her arrival forward, Kate would not learn how to live life through men, but through women who were in her life (Toth 3-8).

Like Chopin, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen had a tough beginning. During Ibsen's youth, until he met his wife, Ibsen struggled to survive with his writings. Even when he found someone who appreciated his writing style, there were always more people who disliked his works. Due to his mediocre texts, Ibsen had many disappointments in his life. Ibsen would have these disappointments until he met and married his wife, Suzannah. Suzannah encouraged Ibsen, which did wonders for his works. Due to his marriage he had something and someone to work for (Lann). Ibsen would soon find that Suzannah was not just an encouraging woman, but also a woman with a strong personality. In some ways, I think her strong character contributed to his works.

I believe that Chopin's mother and grandmother contributed to her works by contributing to her life. Both of these women taught her unconventional ways of how a woman should be. Instead of, these woman taught her to be independent. Another relative, Madame Charlesville, Kate's great-grandmother, taught her also. Madame Charlesville arrived at Kate's doorstep because she thought she was going to die soon. Even though she was just visiting, she wanted to teach Kate things that a "Frenchwoman" should know. Madame Charlesville did teach Kate many worthy things, such as French, but above all she taught Kate about women. Kate had learned about women's lives through Madame Charlesville's love of gossip. She talked about her

family mostly, but also loved to tell stories about “women who were torn between duty and desire” (Toth 13). Kate learned that women were important, even if men did not think so (Toth 12-13). Chopin’s audience notice some similarities to her life and the central themes in her short stories and novels.

Like Chopin, Ibsen had also come across a lot of independent women, whom he learned from. Ibsen began working at the Norwegian National Theatre, when he met Magdalen Thoreson, a coworker and strong feminist. Through Magdalen, Ibsen met his wife Suzannah, who was also Magdalen’s stepdaughter. After Ibsen married Suzannah, he became more acquainted with Magdalen and her feminist ways. Joan Templeton, an Ibsen scholar, states that Magdalen “pitied the insolvent young writer, took him under her wing, and brought him home” (36). This shows Ibsen’s readers that Ibsen had spent some time with Magdalen and at least learned feminist ideas from her. Magdalen had certainly passed on her feminist thoughts to her stepdaughter, Suzannah. There is no doubt that Ibsen would have learned many feminist ideas from Suzannah alone (Templeton 36).

Chopin would continue to learn about independence through her life experiences. Even though Chopin learned how to be independent, she married a man named Oscar Chopin. However, Oscar died and left her with six children to attend and an estate to look after. Without her husband, Chopin had to handle a lot of responsibilities, but she had already been taught how to survive alone. When her readers look back at her childhood, they can see that Kate Chopin had grown up in a world “ruled entirely by women” (Toth 11). All of the patriarchs of the family had died:

These strong women also had an unusual talent for outliving their husbands. At a time when women often died in childbirth, Kate’s female ancestors enjoyed exceptional

longevity. Her great-grandmother died at eighty-three, and her grandmother died at eighty-eight. By middle age, or sometimes even before, they had left or lost or buried the fathers of their children, and then gotten on with their lives. (Toth 11)

The deaths of the Chopin's male ancestors did not stop each female ancestor from obtaining a successful life. Each woman in Chopin's life had to make a way for themselves, which required independence. Chopin grew up watching her mother and grandmother enduring life without their husbands. It only makes sense that Chopin would learn how to be independent and strong herself. Due to Chopin's strength, Oscar's death did not stop Chopin from becoming one of America's most successful writers. I think Chopin's life experiences influenced the way she wrote. Chopin most likely pulled her independent background into her stories.

After the death of her husband, Chopin began to write. She wrote many short stories that people liked. Many people liked Chopin, until *The Awakening* was published. Her novel was criticized widely because the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, was contrary to what a woman of the day was supposed to be. Men and women of Chopin's time did not appreciate Edna's independence, her freedom of sexuality, or her lack of motherly endearment. Even the book club Chopin was a part of criticized her works. Chopin took on a lot of criticism and took it to heart because many people she knew were looking down on her. Hanging on to what everyone said about her work really affected her health, but she continued to write nonetheless (Toth 224).

Like Chopin, Ibsen wrote a controversial play called *A Doll's House*. When it was published it was extremely criticized because Nora, the protagonist, leaves Torvald at the end of the play. Many audience members became more frustrated because they saw Ibsen as a writer of realism. They thought he was supposed to be making plays that represented real life, but they did not think the ending was real. They did not think that a woman could leave her husband and

children the way Nora leaves Torvald and her children. Most people could not accept *A Doll's House* because they did not believe a woman act like Nora.

Influences

Due to the similar criticism from audience members and readers and the similar characters in *The Awakening* and *A Doll's House*, I think there is a link to Chopin's works and Ibsen's works. Chopin's works were influenced by her immediate family and life, but she was probably also influenced by other written works and other writers. One writer that may have had a profound influence on Chopin's works was Henrik Ibsen. After all, Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* twenty years before Chopin published *The Awakening*. Chopin may have read or seen Ibsen's play and draw inspiration from him. *oHouHI* come to this conclusion because Chopin's themes are very similar to that of Henrik Ibsen. I do not think that it is a coincidence that Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is like Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

It is also evident that Chopin had a least known about Ibsen because she talks of him, even though she talked of Ibsen with harsh criticism. She gave Ibsen a dim review when she said he had only written about social topics:

... Aeschylus is true, and Shakespeare is true to-day, and why Ibsen will not be true in some remote to-morrow, however forcible and representative he may be for an hour, because he takes for his themes social problems which by their very nature are mutable... social problems, social environments, local color and the rest of it are not of themselves motives to insure the survival of a writer who employs them. (Warnken 45)

Chopin thought that Ibsen's works could not survive because, she said, he only wrote about social problems. She also thought that people had a way of doing things that could not be changed because people had known only their way of doing things since they were born (Warnken 44). Perhaps she thought Ibsen's work would not survive because people would not be willing or capable to change social norms.

Chopin's criticism leads me to ask, did Chopin think *her* works would survive throughout time? What did she think was so different between her themes compared with Ibsen's? Toth says that Chopin liked to think her works might transcend over time, but that she was more concerned with people of her time accepting her stories and novels (244). However, what puzzles me is how Chopin thought her own themes were better than Ibsen's because she thought her themes did not discuss social issues. Both authors themes seem too similar to discount the possibility that Chopin may have written about social issues thinking she was writing from a source entirely different.

Even the people involved in the women's movement thought both Chopin and Ibsen were writing about social issues. The feminists thought both Chopin and Ibsen's writings supported allegiance to women's rights. However, both Chopin and Ibsen said they did not belong to the "Women's Rights movement" (Warnken 43). Templeton states that "when he [Ibsen] made the banquet speech denying that he had consciously worked for the movement, he was primarily interested in young women and annoyed by the elderly feminist who surrounded him" (36). Ibsen was a part of the feminist movement, but his speech was taken out of context. On the other hand, Chopin did not like how the feminists approached equality. Chopin felt that feminist women wanted men to meet a women's moral standards. She did not like the idea that men should have to live up to women's unrealistic ideas of purity. I believe Chopin added these

thoughts within her stories and came up with her own feminist notion. For example, Edna, in *The Awakening*, has sexual freedom, which is not what the feminists of her day were fighting for. In fact, they were doing the opposite. Yet, Chopin's stories may only have been produced at a coincidental time, a time when people were merely looking for support to spur their social movement.

Whether or not Chopin's or Ibsen's works were meant to deal with social problems, there is definitely a link between the two author's works. *The Awakening* and *A Doll's House*, for example, have many similarities in themes, plot, symbolism, and characters. It is not too farfetched to think that Chopin read *A Doll's House* and was inspired by it. It seems plausible that Ibsen's play could have helped her think of *The Awakening*. After all, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was published twenty years prior to *The Awakening*, which was published in 1899 (Warnken 43).

Edna and Nora: A Comparison of the Protagonists

It is plausible to think that Chopin had read Ibsen's work because the protagonists from *The Awakening*, Edna, and *A Doll's House*, Nora, are both represent the New Woman. Although Edna and Nora are similar in character, they have differences in that their stories begin at different times. *The Awakening* begins where *A Doll's House* had left off. Most of Nora's story takes place under the *oppression* of her husband, until the very end of the play, when Nora is *awakened*. However, the *awakening* in Edna's story happens at the beginning. Even though the time when an awakening occurs seem to be different between Nora and Edna, I will mainly focus on the many comparisons of these two characters. Through looking at the comparison of the two characters, I can see that Chopin was inspired to write by the theme of *A Doll's House*, even though she gave Ibsen such a critical review.

I see hints of Ibsen's ideas/themes in Chopin's *The Awakening* through looking at the comparison of Edna and Nora's secrets. Both Nora and Edna have underlying secrets that symbolize bigger secrets. Nora's underlying secret is the macaroons. She buys the macaroons knowing that her husband would disapprove, eats them multiple times behind his back, and then hides them when he is near. Nora's secret about the macaroons symbolize the bigger secret she keeps from Torvald (Mr. Helmer). Nora never told her husband about a debt that she had to pay back, which in turn gets her into trouble toward the end of the play. Edna on the other hand has a somewhat bigger underlying secret; Edna is having affairs with other men behind Mr. Pontellier's back and has a secret love for Robert (Warnken 45). I believe that Edna's underlying secret symbolizes that she had no intentions of returning to her husband. She had no intentions at all of going back to the way things were before she was *awakened*.

Another way I see Ibsen's ideas in Chopin's work is through the way each protagonist attempts to go against social norms. "Each work features a woman struggling to remove social fetters, to become free" (Warnken 45). Both Edna and Nora live in a society of patriarchy with reputation at stake. Both husbands in these stories do not realize their wives need their help, but instead worry about themselves. Mr. Helmer worries more about his bank than he does his wife, Nora. The same goes for Mr. Pontellier; he worries about his finances more than Edna. Mr. Helmer and Mr. Pontellier also worry about reputation. Mr. Helmer cannot do what Nora asks of him, which is to keep Krogstad as a worker, because he will be seen as weak to the men at work. Mr. Pontellier does not want Edna to live somewhere else because he does not want people to think he has gone poor. He is concerned that it would hurt his business. Both women live under the husband's ideology that says the husbands' way is the only way (Warnken 45). At certain

points, both Nora and Edna cannot handle the oppression given by their husbands or by their society so they try to change.

The second way Edna and Nora rebel against a male dominated society is by being unconventional mothers. Mr. Pontellier frequently scolds Edna for her lack of motherhood because after Edna's awakening, she does not try to take care of her children, she lets her maids do that for her (Warnken 46). When she returns home from Grande Isle, she sends them to live with their grandmother and then goes off to live by herself in a house she paid for. Many people who criticized *The Awakening* did not agree with Edna's lack of motherhood. Even though Nora's story begins at a different time than Edna's, Nora is similar in the way she conducts herself as a mother. Nora likes her children, but does not take care of them as a mother should. She only wants to see her children when it is convenient for her, but when she is stressed she locks them away with their maid. Like Mr. Pontellier, Mr. Helmer tells Nora she needs to be a good mother.

The last way I see similarities in Edna and Nora is through the endings of each story. Both new women have to make big decisions. Nora decides to leave because she realizes that Torvald (Mr. Helmer) is selfish and because "she has no way of knowing that she is not endangering her children with her presence" (Brooks 16). Similarly Edna decides to leave her husband and children by committing suicide. Like Nora, Edna knows her husband is only keeping a reputation and because she knows she is not a good mother she swims out to die. Edna "thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin 652). Robert Treu claims that Edna's last swim is a symbol of how Edna had changed throughout the novel (32). The endings of each story

show the readers that both Chopin and Ibsen's stories were part of the feminist movement, even if they did not like them to be such.

I think it is important to see Chopin and Ibsen as feminist writers because they ultimately helped many women gain rights. It is interesting to know that Chopin did not think Ibsen's work would last because he wrote about the feminist social movement. In essence, Chopin did not think her own writings would last:

She was wrong about Ibsen, of course, and would no doubt have been wrong about the fate of her own works. A century later, *The Awakening* still speaks to women, in particular, about the war between responsibility to others and responsibility to oneself...a century later, when we read her, we know that she opened windows, and she gave us wings. (Toth 244)

Today, women can thank Chopin for her writings even though she did not think they would be relevant to women today. Chopin and Ibsen used their works to encourage women to fight for what they believed, even if her efforts were not purposeful. Whatever the motive, both writers and works lasted and both helped spur the feminist movement. Without Chopin and Ibsen's hard work, where would women be today?

Works Cited

Brooks, Daniel J. "Infection: The Motivating Factor Behind Nora's Flight In A DOLL HOUSE."

Explicator 71.1 (2012): 14-17. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 Apr. 2015

Chopin, Kate. "The Awakening." *The Norton Anthology: American Literature 1865-1914*. Eds.

Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine. Vol. C. 8th ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 561-652. Print.

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Clayton, DE: Prestwick, 2005. Print

Lann, Thomas Van. "Ibsen: A Brief Life." *The Ibsen Society of America*. Rutgers University,

n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

Templeton, Joan. "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen." *PMLA* 104.1

(1989): 28-40. Print.

Toth, Emily. *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1999. Print.

Treu, Robert. "Surviving Edna: A Reading Of The Ending Of *The Awakening*." *College*

Literature 27.2 (2000): 21. Professional Development Collection. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

Warnken, William P. "Kate Chopin and Henry Ibsen: A Study of *The Awakening* and *A Doll's*

House." *Massachusetts Studies in English* 4 4-5 (1974): 43-49. Print.