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Get Woke: The Themes and Receptions of the Works of Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin was a prolific writer in the late nineteenth century, popular for her copious number of short stories focusing on the circumstances and lives of married women, that is, the relationship between women and the institution of marriage itself. She published these short stories primarily in magazines such as *Vogue*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Century* (Clark), and they were well received by the public, especially women, during that time. Her most popular stories were compiled into two collections: *Bayou Folk*, published in 1894, and *A Night in Acadie*, published in 1897. Both collections were highly praised by critics and served to further improve Chopin's reputation as an author, with *Bayou Folk* receiving positive reviews for its "crispness of dialogue" as well as its "charm and tenderness" (Hale and Godey 432). However, while her short stories undoubtedly prove her popularity in the late nineteenth century, her lengthier works mark her fall from public graces. With the publishing of *The Awakening* came an uproar of public ridicule, with critics labeling it "morbid, vulgar, and disagreeable" (Clark). The novella was so hated that it was banned from public libraries and was read by virtually no one until the 1950s, when scholars finally began to recognize its merits. It took twenty more years after this for the book to resurface for the public.

Chopin's short stories place great emphasis on the physical, mental, and emotional constraints of marriage on women—"The Story of an Hour" does an especially good job of bringing this issue to the forefront of a reader's mind—as well as on the amorality of infidelity,

the illusions of marriage as maintained by societal convention, and the so-called fault of woman, which appears to be most prevalent in “*Désirée’s Baby*.” The themes of these stories appear to have been subtle yet clear for their contemporary audiences, and they were well loved for their “intensity and passion” (Hale and Godey 432). *The Awakening*, ironically, contains all of the aforementioned themes in one way or another, even expounding upon such themes by incorporating them into a full-length novella rather than a brief short story. Chopin was not writing anything new or more vulgar than some of her most popular short stories, so why was *The Awakening* criticized so harshly by critics and audiences when all it really did was elaborate on the preexisting themes of her previous stories? Perhaps the opposition stemmed from the lines Chopin drew between love and the institution of marriage, or between the societally ideal woman and the independent new woman who—believe it or not—had a mind of her own. Such a juxtaposition certainly becomes clear when examining the binary oppositions between Edna Pontellier and Adèle Ratignolle, or rather, the new woman and the societally ideal woman, respectively. Or perhaps the opposition came not from the elaborated themes of promiscuity and marital entrapment, but rather from the commentary the novella provides on the part society plays in implementing such themes. After all, it is not inaccurate to say that the majority of people, while they seem to enjoy reading about such promiscuity and drama, also seem to prefer the ambiguity of society’s role in such issues over the clarity of it all, because they can more readily deny its existence and conform to the very society that created the issues to begin with.

Some of Chopin’s most famous short stories portray infidelity in one way or another. In a few of her short stories, this infidelity is somewhat subtle. For example, the infidelity present in “*The Story of an Hour*” is not physical, but rather mental and emotional, wherein Louise Mallard is overjoyed at hearing of her husband’s death because it means that she no longer has to

cater to his needs and desires. Upon finding that her husband has not, in fact, died, Louise is so heartbroken that she ironically dies “of joy that kills” (Chopin, “The Story of an Hour” 544). “*Désirée’s Baby*,” too, depicts psychological infidelity as a husband lies to both himself and his ever-faithful wife by forcing her to bare his blame, ultimately causing her to disappear into the bayou and never “come back again” (Chopin 542). In other stories, however, it is more straightforward. In “The Storm,” for example, such infidelity is obvious: two married people share a night of flagrant passion together while their respective spouses are none the wiser, and everyone—including the spouses they just cheated on—is content to simply go on with life. Chopin is quick to illustrate the societal norm for such transgressions, as she ends the story by stating that, when the so-called storm passes, everyone is happy. As the most blatantly promiscuous of the three short stories, “The Storm” is also the last to have been published of the three, thus depicting Chopin’s progression into tensions between “individual erotic inclination and the constraints placed on desire—especially on women’s sexual desire—by traditional social mores” (Reidhead 537). Such infidelity clearly marks the constraints created by the institution of marriage, as Chopin appears to be making a direct commentary on the injustices of marriage as a social convention. In each of these stories as well as in *The Awakening*, Chopin creates a unique heroine who will not be categorized by her contemporary conventions, but rather who will “transcend the limits of society... [to] realize her true nature” (Fite 2). In other words, in a time when ideas of the so-called new woman were just beginning to form, Chopin embraced those ideas with vigor, bringing to light the dark truths of married life preceding the Gilded Age and entertaining the idea that, yes, women do have their own desires.

Following this analysis, it is not difficult to see that Chopin’s writings commentate rather directly on the illusions of marriage during the nineteenth century. Social convention during this

time mandated that women were to be like the “‘steel-engraved’ woman [associated with] *Godey’s Lady’s Book*,” that is, the woman “‘prepared for the home environment” (“The Gilded Age and the Beginning of the New Woman”) and consequently prepared to live a life of total domestic subservience. Chopin’s heroines are the polar opposite of what *Godey’s Lady’s Book* believed to be the ideal woman, with the one exception arguably being Désirée of “Désirée’s Baby.” While it is true that Désirée is completely loyal to her husband and serves him to the best of her ability throughout the short story, though, she ultimately does all of this in vain, discovering that her obedience and utter faithfulness can do nothing to save her from the cold dismissiveness with which he treats her. Therefore, even though Désirée appears to be the closest protagonist to the steel-engraved woman, Chopin depicts such a character as extremely unlucky, insinuating that Désirée would have been better off had she been more independent, more concerned with her own needs and wants: “She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds” (“Désirée’s Baby” 542). Had Désirée not been so trusting in, obedient to, and even afraid of Armand, she never would have had to desert the comfortable life she had in favor of the dangers of the bayou into which she disappears. In short, Désirée was so faithful to her husband that she ultimately forgot her own humanity and ended up being torn apart, both physically and mentally, because of it.

Chopin’s writings go far in depicting the inadequacies of what her contemporary society likely viewed as the fault of woman, critiquing this fault and shifting blame onto not only men, but the whole of society, including those unfortunate women who adhere strictly to convention and see nothing wrong with the institutionalized juxtapositions between male and female members of the social order. In “Désirée’s Baby,” for instance, Chopin does a fabulous job of

illustrating this perceived fault of woman. As stated above, Désirée is no more than an extremely lucky girl whose unlucky past was used to take advantage of her. When Armand allegedly falls in love with her, he does not care about her past, as Chopin states that her unknown origins do not matter because Armand “could give her one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana” (“Désirée’s Baby” 539). Armand does not think of any issues that may arise due to her lack of a family history, and in the end, it is true that there are no issues. However, the fact that Désirée was adopted sadly ends up serving as an escape route for Armand when he realizes that he has sired a biracial son—a concept which, during this time, was thought of as scandalous and unrespectable—and Désirée is thereby done away with. The blame is wrongfully cast upon her, and she ultimately disappears from the lives of everyone she knows and loves because of it. Even Désirée herself begins to believe that the so-called fault may be her own, as her adoptive mother proves unable to tell her otherwise since she simply does not know. Armand, as both a man and a husband, is able to punish his wife for his own misgivings, tossing the blame away from himself as easily as if he were swatting at a fly. Even after discovering the truth of his own origins—although he arguably could have known the truth all along—Armand makes no attempt to atone for his mistreatment of the woman he claims to have loved, opting instead to burn everything that reminds him of Désirée and the child they had together:

A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless *layette*¹. Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and

¹ Clothes for newborn babies

embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the *corbeille*² had been of rare quality.

(Chopin, “Désirée’s Baby” 542)

Because his name and reputation are more important to him than his wife and child, Chopin’s critique on the social construct of marriage is obvious. Armand, as the husband, has all the power in the relationship and is therefore able to have everything just the way he likes, while Désirée must cater to his desires and watch in passive silence as he behaves cruelly towards his slaves. He appears to have cared for Désirée deeply at one time, but upon discovering that the color of his son’s skin might be ill received by society, he chooses to throw Désirée under the metaphorical bus and save his own reputation. Chopin’s choice to have Désirée abandon this society altogether, no matter the dangers that might arise from such an abandonment, is a direct critique of the society which allowed Armand to remove blame from himself and his conscious, placing it instead on his wife.

With her other works, though, Chopin grew more blunt than what was considered the standard for women writers of the nineteenth century. “The Story of an Hour” shows no attempt on Chopin’s part to conceal the tight bonds of marriage and their effects on women, illustrating with stark clarity the ways in which “modern feminism was borne on her pages” (“Kate Chopin”). Nor does “The Storm” describe the immoralities of sexual infidelity, but rather the freeness of acting upon one’s sexual desires in spite of societal requirements for keeping up the illusion of a good marriage: “... the first free breath since [Clarisse’s] marriage seemed to restore the pleasant liberty of her maiden days... So the storm passed and every one [*sic*] was happy” (548). It is from these analyses that readers are able to see that Chopin was a feminist before the term *feminist* had even come into existence. When thinking of literary works that depict proto-

² Basket

feminist ideals, most people will call *The Awakening* to the forefront of their minds. The fact of the matter is, however, that all of Chopin's works signify proto-feminism, not just her novella. Chopin's heroines embody her interpretation of what a freethinking woman should be—a woman who is independent, strong, and aware of both her body and her mind. Such a freethinking woman is portrayed perfectly by the following image by Charles Dana Gibson, which depicts a woman who has been golfing and who, rather than submitting to the men who surround her, dominates their presupposed masculinity by politely urging them to stop ogling her; the illustration's caption, which reads "Advice to caddies: You will save time by keeping your eyes on the ball, not the player," thus illustrates the self-aware independence that the freshly termed new women of the time period possessed.



Then, with *The Awakening* comes yet more depictions of the image of marriage as perceived by society. The novella opens with Edna Pontellier being seemingly content with her married life, but this quickly changes as Edna comes to the realization that “at a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward experience which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin, *The Awakening* 559). The diction in this quotation is striking in the fact that it refers to the conforming life as an *experience* rather than the *life* of that which questions, maintaining that a person's true life exists within him- or herself, and his or her

outward experience is only just that—an experience. Chopin creates a stark contrast between the contemporary ideal woman and the new woman with *The Awakening*, using the character of Adèle Ratignolle to serve as a foil to that of Edna Pontellier. Adèle represents the epitome of a so-called good wife, blessing her husband with a new baby about every two years and always striving to make him happy above all else. Adèle and the other mother-women, as Chopin terms them, are “women who [idolize] their children, [worship] their husbands, and [esteem] it a holy privilege to efface themselves and grow wings as ministering angels” (*The Awakening* 554). Edna is undoubtedly the exact opposite of this ideal woman, expressing ideologies of the modern new woman with her indifference towards the children she has and her assertion that she never truly loved her husband. In fact, Chopin states that Edna’s marriage to Léonce was “purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate” (*The Awakening* 562). She is not a mother-woman like Adèle, but rather an indifferent type of mother who, according to the laws of society at this time, “[fails] in her duty toward [her] children” who seemingly know that to “rush crying to [their] mother’s arms for comfort” will do them no good whatsoever (Chopin, *The Awakening* 554). As the heroine of the novella, it becomes clear that Edna’s so-called shortcomings when it comes to domestic life are utilized by Chopin to illustrate the problems with society’s assumption that a woman must always be an adoring wife and a doting mother if she ever hopes to succeed in the world.

In addition to demarcating the line between society’s ideal of a woman and a woman’s ideal of herself, Chopin draws a thick line between romantic love and marriage. As previously stated, Edna is quick to say that she does not love her husband, but rather that her marriage to him was one of rebellion against her family, as Chopin writes that one need seek no further than the “violent opposition of [Edna’s] father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a

Catholic” (*The Awakening* 562) to understand why she married Léonce at all. Considering that Edna deems marriages such as her own to be the norm, it is obvious that Chopin sees a very big difference between the marital construct and one’s ability to love and be loved by another person. In fact, the relationship between Edna and Robert Lebrun, as well as the contrast between Robert and Léonce, perfectly illustrate Chopin’s stance. For instance, Léonce proves from the very beginning of the novella to have certain domestic expectations of Edna, believing that if it is “not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth [is] it?” (Chopin, *The Awakening* 552). He views his wife as a tool with which the household chores are done and the children are tended. Robert, on the other hand, is a man with whom Edna has interest; according to Chopin, Edna and Robert both are always “interested in what the other [says],” even when they seem only to be talking about themselves (*The Awakening* 551). Where Léonce believes himself to be the independent head of his household, thus in charge of his wife, Robert views Edna as an individual and treats her as such, which cannot help but be appealing to her suffocating psyche. As the novella progresses, it becomes more and more apparent that Edna loves Robert—the man who treats her like a true individual—rather than Léonce—the man who views her as a domesticated trophy that must be set upon a pedestal to be viewed, appreciated, and even envied by his peers. It is not Léonce’s existence who “dominate[s] her thought, fading sometimes as if it would melt into the mist of the forgotten, reviving again with an intensity which fill[s] her with an incomprehensible longing” (Chopin, *The Awakening* 590), but Robert’s. Loving Robert inevitably helps Edna see that she is not meant to be her husband’s subservient wife, but rather that a life as Léonce’s wife is “not a condition of life which fit[s] her” (Chopin, *The Awakening* 592). It is not Edna’s fault that she thrives as a free woman instead of a married woman; her new woman attitude simply cannot coexist with the societally normal marriage

construct into which she has been placed. Nor can it be correct to say that Edna's affair with Robert is a sin—can she really be blamed for leaving a marriage that was only a marriage in the eyes of her neighbors? For the newly awakened Edna to remain part of an institution that, in this context, exists only to please society is ludicrous, if not because the image created by such a marriage is an inherently false one, then simply because Edna does not love her husband, nor does he love her. The sad truth of marriages such as Edna's is that they were apparently the norm during the nineteenth century, and since readers of the time likely did not want to read about such a sad truth, they likely condemned Chopin's novella in a last-ditch effort to save face and pretend that such a corrupt view of the institution of marriage could not possibly be real.

There is, however, one other possibility as to why *The Awakening* had such an ill reception: suicide. While Chopin's other writings certainly touch on most, if not all themes present in *The Awakening*, they lack one major motif—suicide. Edna's suicide at the end of the novella may come as a shock to some readers, but the reality of it is that, for Edna, her death serves as the final and most crucial part of her journey into self-awareness. Everyone around her has become aware of her so-called awakening, and no one save Mademoiselle Reisz particularly approves of it. Even Adèle, who despite being her foil has been one of her greatest friends throughout the novella, urges her to stop being so independent, telling her to “think of the children [and] remember them” (Chopin, *The Awakening* 635). It is not until Edna comes to the realization that her children will face backlash for her choices that she decides to end it all. As she comforts Adèle while she gives birth, Edna remembers her own experiences, recalling an “ecstasy of pain... and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go” (Chopin, *The Awakening* 634). It is precisely at this moment that Chopin begins to illustrate some of Edna's darkest emotions,

stating that “[Edna] began to wish she had not come; her presence was unnecessary” (*The Awakening* 634). These words have two meanings when taken into context, the first and most obvious being that Edna wishes she had not come to be with Adèle during childbirth. The second, more latent meaning, however, takes precedence over this first meaning. Upon closer reading, it becomes clear that, based on Adèle’s aforementioned words to her, as well as her own knowledge that her actions affect those around her, Edna is not only talking about her physical presence during the birth of Adèle’s child, but also her presence in the world as a whole. She begins to wish that she was not alive, even that she’d never been born in the first place. It is clear that Edna feels she does not belong in the world she was raised in, nor does she feel that she is needed in such a place. As Adèle implies, Edna’s actions will have a lasting effect on her children and how they are treated by those around them. She cannot go back to being the subservient, dormant creature she was at the beginning of the novella, nor can she allow herself to jeopardize her sons’ futures. So, for Edna, removing herself wholly from the picture seems like the best option. From this reading, it becomes clear that her suicide was not a selfish act of weakness, but rather a self-aware attempt to rectify the harm that her newfound independence has wrought upon those she cares about. In killing herself, Edna has not only saved her children from a world of ridicule, but has also freed herself from the tight constraints of the very society which bound her.

Even though Kate Chopin may have fallen from the graces of her contemporaries, she is thankfully once more revered as one of the leading women writers of the nineteenth century. Her work, while it was not properly valued as such during the time in which it was written, was revolutionary for not only the audiences of the nineteenth century, but also for the readers yet to come. Considered to have played a great part in the proto-feminist movement, it is easy to see

how Chopin's stories tackle major issues of the late nineteenth century societal conventions she was no doubt a witness to, bringing to light problems with the institution of marriage and a woman's inability to act on her own desires despite knowing that the same cannot be said for a man. Chopin's writing depicts stark oppositions between previously ambivalent concepts, love and the institution of marriage, as well as the societally ideal woman and the fresh-out-of-the-oven concept of the new woman being only a few. While her short stories were well received by virtually all who read them, her novella proves to have been ahead of its time, far too close to the truth for the comfort of her contemporary audiences. Regardless of her popular-then-unpopular-then-popular-again status, Chopin's influence in literature and society is undeniable. Morally ambiguous though she may seem, she not only pioneered what would one day transmute into the feminist movement, but also heavily critiqued the morals and values of the society in which she lived, effectively—though not fully, as to completely eradicate societally-based marriages seems impossible—altering the way in which people viewed both love and the institution of marriage.

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