



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Kate Chopin's

The Awakening

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

DOUGLAS GRUDZINA

EDITED BY PAUL MOLIEN



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General Introduction to the Work

The Setting and Social Background

GRAND ISLE, LOUISIANA, AND NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA, circa 1899 are the two settings for this novel. New Orleans—Catholic, French, with a great deal of interracial mixing—is a relatively easygoing society. Husbands are not overly jealous of the attentions their wives receive from other men. Women do not place too much credence in these attentions. Edna comes from the more structured and rigid society of the Protestant South.

Edna is a southern Presbyterian while her husband, Leonce Pontellier, is Creole. At one point, there were no fewer than thirty definitions of *Creole*. Descendants of early French and/or Spanish settlers born in Louisiana are called *Creole*. Another definition is a mixture of African and French and/or African and Spanish born in Louisiana. A third definition is the “Gens de Couleur Libres” or “Free People of Color” who had lived in New Orleans alongside European settlers from the city’s founding.

New Orleans was established in 1718 as a French-Canadian outpost. Its location near the mouth of the Mississippi River led to rapid development. Its unique social structure began to evolve with the first mass importation of African slaves in the 1720s. By the end of the eighteenth century, the port city was flourishing, an attractive haven for smugglers, gamblers, prostitutes, and pirates. The growing population included British-Americans escaping the American Revolution and aristocrats fleeing the revolution in France. The city also became a refuge for whites and free blacks—along with their slaves—escaping the slave revolts in Saint-Domingue.

The Spanish, French, and free people of color worked together, lived next to one another, and intermarried, creating a distinctive Creole culture with its own traditions and ways of life, its own regional dialect, and a cuisine that drew on its African, European, and American colonial roots. New Orleans was already a multi-faceted city when it was sold to America under the Louisiana Purchase. The Americans who migrated there were unwelcome in the “Creole city”—today’s French Quarter.

This apparent enmity between Creoles and Anglo-Americans was not long-lived. They fought side by side in the 1815 Battle of New Orleans, the final battle of the War of 1812. The victorious general, Andrew Jackson, became a national hero and eventually U.S. president. His motley volunteer army was made up of Anglo-Americans, slaves, Creoles, free men of color, and Native Americans—as well as pirates supplied by the notorious Jean Lafitte.

Before the Civil War, New Orleans experienced an economic golden age as a port and finance center for the cotton industry. This came to an end, however, by the long Union occupation of the city and the Union blockade of the port.

Marxist Criticism Applied to *The Awakening*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea was called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated production, not in the hands those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture and that culture can be affected by literature. (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution.) Marxism is linked to Freudian theories by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, ideologies



Activity One

Examining Sources of Income and Relative Integrity

1. Divide the class into groups of four (or multiples of four).
2. Have each member of the group choose a character: Leonce Pontellier, Robert Lebrun, Alcee Arobin, and Alphonse Ratignolle.
3. Each member should then reexamine the text, paying special attention to incidents in which the chosen character takes part or is discussed.
4. Have each group member answer the following questions for the chosen character.
 - How wealthy does this character appear?
 - What evidence of wealth is stated in the text?
 - What is the source of the character's income or wealth?
 - What strengths of character (if any) do this character's actions suggest?
 - What character flaws (if any) do this character's actions suggest?
5. Small groups should reconvene and compare notes, ultimately developing a rank ordering of the four characters from "Most character strengths / Least character flaws" to "Most character flaws / Least character strengths."
6. Groups then examine each character's apparent wealth and source of wealth.
7. Each small group develops a thesis regarding a man's wealth, source of wealth, and character.
8. Have the class reconvene, and have each group read its thesis to the rest of the class, sharing the support gathered in the small-group meeting.
9. Discuss similarities and differences among the various theses.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Awakening*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that dreams are where a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining Edna as Id, Mademoiselle Reisz as Ego, and Adele Ratignolle as Superego

1. Review with students and have them research Freud's concepts of id (desire, passion), superego (conscience), and ego (mediator between id and superego).
2. Divide the class into three groups (or a number of groups divisible by three).
3. Assign each group (or let each group choose) a different term (id, superego, ego) and have them examine the text for evidence that Edna's desire for independence and self-fulfillment is similar to the id in Freud's scheme; that Adele Ratignolle's complete surrender to her husband and children (and her advice to Edna) calls to mind the superego; and that Mademoiselle Reisz's artistry, independence, and sympathy to Edna's plight allow her to function in the novel like the ego.

New Historicism Applied to *The Awakening*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.

Activity One

Examining Racial Class Structure as Exemplified in *The Awakening*

1. Have students refer to the information they gathered and notes they took in steps A and B of Marxist Theory, Activity Two.
2. In small groups, or as a class, have students discuss the impact characters of various races have on the plot, theme, and outcome of the novel.
3. In small groups, or as a class, have students discuss whether Chopin is *creating* a social structure in her book or merely recording the social structure more or less as she saw it.
4. Have students freewrite *their* reactions to how Chopin handles racial minorities in the book.
5. Have students then share their reactions with either their small groups or with the class.