The Awakening within "New Woman" Fiction [*]

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the modernist and feminist aspects of "New Woman" identity and thought entailed by the portrayal of one of Kate Chopin's female protagonists: Edna Pontellier. Chopin's The Awakening *(1899) reflects the authoress' regional flavored writing style and her preference for local-color fiction. Kate Chopin was a modernist before her time, but, apart from being a proto-modernist, she is also appreciated for being a proto-feminist. The climax of her female character's feminist awakening and self-liberation is marked by the feast which she prepares in order to celebrate becoming separated from her husband. Within the article, the focus is on critical reception and placing the novel within literary context. Despite the fact that most of her contemporary reviewers accused Chopin of crimes against society, many did have some appreciation for the brilliant and flawless writing that was materialized in an unconventional story which seemed to overshadow the well-governed style of the authoress.*

Keywords: *modernist, feminist, awakening.*

The "New Woman" movement began in the 1890's U.S.A. and was a cultural and literary arm of feminist activism according to which literature was to be used mainly as a political tool for social change.[1] Kate Chopin used themes of New Woman fiction in the novel *The Awakening*: marriage, motherhood and the typically female desire for a separate identity and for freedom and control over

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[1] Cf. Ann Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," in The *Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer, Kindle Locations 2695-2708 (Cambridge University Press, Kindle Edition) and G. Egerton, "A Keynote to Keynotes," in *Ten Contemporaries*, ed. John Gawsworth (Ernest Benn, 1932), 57-60, reprinted in *The Late-Victorian Marriage Question*, ed. Ann Heilmann (Routledge Thoemmes, 1998), vol. V *apud* Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Locations 2695-2708.

one's own body. These themes are conceptualized through metaphors of awakening and spiritual awareness.[2]

In Chopin's *The Awakening*, the scene which becomes an epitome of the female protagonist's emancipation is the one in which she learns how to swim. Swimming becomes a metaphor for "the awakening" – the realization of a female person's identity as a woman and not a mother or a wife:[3]

> *Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim. A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her. […] But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water.*

The moment when Edna learns how to swim almost coincides with the moment when she discovers her needs and aspirations as a woman. The summer when she becomes a swimmer is also the summer in which she learns that her identity is not reduced to being somebody's mother or wife. Her beginning as a different type of person resembles her beginning as a swimmer: she is bold and over-confident, but also full of joy for her newly-discovered nature.

The description of the way Edna handles and perceives swimming is an allusion to the epiphany that she is undergoing, as well as to her new ability of taking control of her own destiny and becoming independent and self-sufficient:[4]

> *A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. Her unlooked-for achievement was the subject of wonder, applause, and admiration. […] "How easy it is!" she thought. "It is nothing," she said aloud; "why did I not discover before that it was nothing. Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!" She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone. She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance— that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled*

[2] Cf. Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Locations 2717-45.
[3] Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* (Kindle Edition), 42-3.
[4] *Ibidem*, 43-4.

and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land. She made no mention of her encounter with death and her flash of terror, except to say to her husband, "I thought I should have perished out there alone." "You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you," he told her.

A feeling of exultation overtakes Edna as she becomes empowered by the chance of being in control of her own body and soul. She herself confesses that her newly-found strength confuses her to the point of becoming reckless with her own life, which can also be an allusion to the ending of the novel: once she gains absolute control over her own life, Edna loses the will to live and finds no purpose or meaning in her existence, thus, choosing to put an end to it during the very act of swimming. Other clues to her yet unexpressed desire of living a type of life that no woman was allowed to at the time can be found in her ambition to swim far out, where no woman has swum before. The moment she realizes that something (swimming) which she thought was out of reach for her is, actually, quite easy, she confesses her regret of not having tried it earlier. She becomes aware of the time lost – an awareness which also seems to transpire to her personal life which she can now view as lost time in terms of living freely and boldly.

Becoming intoxicated with her newly conquered power (both in her private life as well as in her swimming activities), Edna decides to swim on her own and, conversely, to live on her own. However, at one point in the process, she understands that she would never be able to overcome certain barriers in life as well as in swimming, which is why she is overwhelmed by a quick vision of death which takes control of her senses. After the flash of terror, she tells her husband that she felt she would die alone swimming, which again anticipates the way she would choose to end her life in her quest for ultimate freedom and fulfillment which seem unattainable in life.

Edna Pontellier's joy of learning how to swim (and be in control of her body and soul through physical exercise) is a metaphor for woman's "awakening" to her right and capacity of controlling the "working of her body and her soul."[5] The entire scene in which Edna learns how to swim pinpoints the conceptual and feminist dimensions of the act of swimming in the novel – an act which parallels the female protagonist's first steps towards evolving into an independent and self-sufficient person (not only woman). Therefore, for Edna, learning how to swim is not a victory of self-coordination. It is actually the victory of gaining self-ownership.[6]

[5] Chopin, *loc. cit.*
[6] Cf. Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2567.

Edna evolves into an autonomous subject who is in control of her body and mind and, thus, empowerment becomes a source of pleasure for the female protagonist who will continue to search for it from the minute she learns about it (when she begins to swim). Her need to search for new sources of power helps her develop a new trait: active self-determination.[7] The novel begins with Mr. Pontellier's assertion of his rights over his wife who is reduced to "a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" from too much exposure to the sun.[8] But, it ends with Edna's declaration of independence which parallels Chopin's proclamation of the right to choose the theme for her own writings and of swimming "where no woman had swum before" in terms of literary choices. *The Awakening* is, thus, part of the nineteenth-century endeavors of self-determination on behalf of female writers whose works align with the Anglo-American fiction of the New Woman. In *The Awakening*, the female sexuality of a married woman is boldly treated even in comparison with other well-known female or feminist writers at the time. Women writers were careful about touching upon female sexuality by always writing within certain pre-established boundaries. As a result, many contemporary reviewers asserted that Chopin violated the codes of morality to the same extent as her female protagonist.[9]

Kate Chopin within Social Context

Kate O'Flaherty (born on the 8th of February, 1850 in St. Louis, Missouri) was perceived differently by those who had the privilege to know her personally. She was, at times, seen as an opinionated writer, or a wise and cosmopolitan woman.[10]

Kate and her grandmother and great-grandmother made three generations of women who were widowed young and never remarried.[11] Therefore, Kate O'Flaherty grew up in a matriarchy, witnessing the ability of women to handle their own money and make their own decisions. As a result, she did not have the

[7] Cf. *ibidem*, Kindle Locations 2559-2568.
[8] Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, 8.
[9] Cf. *op. cit.*, Kindle Location 2568.
[10] Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 162, 197 *apud* E. Toth, "What We Do and Don't Know about Kate Chopin's Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer, Kindle Locations 669 (Cambridge University Press, Kindle Edition).
[11] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 683.

opportunity to comprehend traditional concepts of marriage and female submissiveness.[12]

So, when she married Oscar Chopin (a cotton factor owner) on the 9th of June 1870, Kate entered the marriage with an open mind. On the 10th of December 1882, Oscar died of malaria and left his wife with debts and no social protection.[13] Moreover, in 1885, Kate Chopin's mother died of cancer and, as a result of her deep grief, Chopin started writing and became St. Louis' first female professional writer. She published two novels (*At Fault* and *The Awakening*), short stories, essays, poems, translations, one play and one polka. At the time when *The Awakening* had just been published, Kate Chopin's health and her eldest son's mental state were deteriorating as he was suffering from a nervous breakdown caused by his wife dying at childbirth.[14]

On the 22nd of August 1904, Chopin died of cerebral hemorrhage and was forgotten as a writer until a Norwegian graduate student studying in the U.S.A. rediscovered her works.[15]

Kate Chopin used her own independence to become an active writer whose model was Guy de Maupassant – a racy French author who was known for writing erotic and bizarre tales that Chopin herself translated but did not dare to publish. Through the mid 1890's, Chopin drew away from local-color Louisiana stories and moved towards taboo subjects such as pregnancy and domestic oppression and, therefore, she outrageously crossed boundaries set for female as well as male writers. *The Awakening* itself is a novel combining local color with bold statements on marital rights of women and their need for independence. Unaware of the daring statements that she was making by means of *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin did not expect powerful reactions to the novel when it came out in April 1899. The only one to appreciate Chopin's efforts seemed to be the "New Women" reviewer – Lucy Monroe. The rest of the reviews consisted of negative comments and overall disapproval of the innovative and controversial treatment of marital life. Edna is portrayed as a neglectful mother and as a wife who strays, which is why the character was criticized for being dependent on romantic love and failing at finding her own purpose in life. Very few critics, however, took time to notice that the female protagonist is an artist insightful enough to engage in clever conversations with her lady friends. They also did not notice that most male

[12] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 688.
[13] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 694.
[14] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 699-705.
[15] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 705.

characters seem incapable of producing anything else but unjustified demands or flirtatious comments.[16]

It was even rumored that *The Awakening* had been banned in St. Louis but there is no clear evidence to that. However, despite all of the negative reactions that Chopin received from literary critics, there were many female supporters that wrote letters of praise and invited her to speak at various gatherings. Kate Chopin's life made a lasting impression on her lady friends and admirers, but also had a great influence on those who, later on, became inspired by her writings and independent lifestyle. Her interesting women friends praised Chopin and viewed her as a role model. Moreover, they were rebellious and independent themselves: Sue V. Moore became separated from her husband, Carrie Blackman – a regular visitor to Chopin's salon – was infamous for her unconventional behavior and Rosa Sonneschein was a cigar smoker dressed in extravagant theatrical costumes who founded *The American Jewess* and left her rabbi spouse after being accused of committing adultery. Besides Chopin's friendship with assertive women who supported her, there were other relationships in her life that allowed her to be inspired and write about meaningful life experiences and ways of relating to others: the love affair with Albert and the marriage with Oscar.[17]

Kate Chopin was animated to write not only by the relationships that she enjoyed during her entire lifetime, but also by her need to satisfy her writing standards and establish herself as a well-respected authoress. She proved to have a great commercial instinct and a flare for writing about subjects that women would find appealing at that time as well as in the distant future. Despite all the biographical facts that have been made available to the general public, many aspects of Kate Chopin's life remain a mystery and the true nature of this authoress can only be comprehended by analyzing her work, especially her two novels among which *The Awakening* is the best choice to highlight the writer's avant-garde mentalities and ideas that are recurrent throughout all of her writings.[18]

[16] Toth, "What We Do and Don't Know about Kate Chopin's Life," Kindle Locations 914-33.

[17] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 933-54, and Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of "The Awakening"* (Morrow, 1990), 422-5 *apud* Toth, "What We Do and Don't Know about Kate Chopin's Life," in *ibidem*, Kindle Locations 933.

[18] Cf. Toth, *op. cit.*, Kindle Locations 963.

The Awakening within Literary Context

Most reviewers accused Chopin of crimes against society, although many did have some appreciation for brilliant and flawless writing that was materialized in an unpleasant and unconventional story that seemed to overshadow the well-governed style of the authoress. Therefore, literary critics labeled the daring novel as vulgar, morbid and repellent on account of the choice of theme. Under the influence of European movements in art (such as the English decadence of Aubrey Beardsley and the French naturalism of Zola), Chopin became cleverly dismissive of censorship codes and wrote in imitation of strong-minded heroines of Madame de Staël's and George Sand's early nineteenth-century novels.[19]

The strongest European influence was that of Guy Maupassant's literary endeavors of which Chopin translated eight turn-of-the century stories. Two of them ("Solitude" and "Suicide") are directly related to the themes (solitude and suicide) explored in *The Awakening* which was, initially, entitled *A Solitary Soul*. Among other European influences are: Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877). The former tells the story of a wife who is involved in two love affairs and becomes bankrupt on account of her uncontrolled spending and, finally, decides to take her own life. Although there are certain similarities between the two novels, Emma Bovary is not as introspective or independent and self-sufficient as Edna Pontellier is. Therefore, *The Awakening* can be viewed in relationship to *Madame Bovary* only in terms of a late-century feminist response to Flaubert's European adultery novel.[20]

"New Woman" Identity in The Awakening

The climax of Edna's feminist awakening and self-liberation is marked by the feast which she prepares and enjoys in the name of her separation from Léonce. "Edna celebrates her freedom on her twenty-ninth birthday." She

[19] Cf. "Review in the St Louis Republic," 20 May 1899, quoted in L. Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* (Frederick Ungar, 1983), 59; C.L. Deyo, "The Newest Books," St Louis Post-Dispatch, 20 May 1899, in *Kate Chopin's The Awakening*, ed. Janet Beer and Elizabeth Nolan (Routledge, 2004), 56; "Literature," *Congregationalist*, 24 August 1899, in *Kate Chopin: The Awakening*, ed. Margo Culley (Norton Critical Edition, Norton, 1994), 173; "Books of the Day," *Chicago Times-Herald*, 1 June 1899, in *Kate Chopin: The Awakening*, ed. M. Culley, 166, "Notes from Bookland," *St Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, 13 May 1899, in *Kate Chopin: The Awakening*, ed. Margo Culley, 163; W.M. Payne, "Recent Fiction," *Dial 37*, 1 August 1899, in *Kate Chopin: The Awakening*, ed. M. Culley, 172, "Fresh Literature," *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 25 June 1899, in *Kate Chopin: The Awakening*, ed. M. Culley, 169; "Books of the Week," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 58 *apud* Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2567.

[20] Cf. Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2595-611.

decorates the dinner table with candles and candelabras and she dresses herself with a golden satin gown with which she seems to celebrate her beauty and youth. The feast description is filled with aural and olfactory effects and Edna's physical appearance marked by long and clean symmetrical lines point to "New Woman", "decadent" and "androgynous" aspects of her new identity and lifestyle. At the feast, Edna is androgynous in appearance, which alludes to typical "New Woman" physical and psychological traits.[21]

Moreover, contemporary debates often associate the "New Woman" with sexual anarchists and literary degenerates that challenged marriage, gender boundaries and sexual identities and politics in their personal lives as well as by means of literature. New Woman and the decadent man (as identified and perceived at the time) posed great threats to bourgeois society and any woman adopting "New Woman" and decadent ideas or an androgynous physical appearance was perceived as a fierce opponent of standard morals and romantic relationships (that were believed to be destined to develop only within marital life).[22]

Therefore, Edna's appearance at the feast is a hint to her aligning herself with the "New Woman" profile that was well-defined and often criticized at the turn of the century. However, Edna is more drawn to romantic sentimentality rather than decadence throughout the whole novel, her quest for identity being a solitary one. She does not truly adopt the "New Woman" identity and she struggles until the end to discover her true identity as a woman as well as a person. Although she realizes that she needs to renounce her old self, she becomes unable to replace her old identity with a new one, which, ultimately, leads to the suicide act that becomes a metaphor for freedom of choice.[23]

The Modernist Aspects of "New Woman" Identity and Feminist Thought in The Awakening

Kate Chopin was a modernist before her time, but, apart from being a proto-modernist, she is also appreciated for being a proto-feminist. Many critics have analyzed her works by placing them in the social and literary contexts of the nineteenth century and by focusing on the great influence of French nineteenth century authors such as Maupassant and Flaubert. Critics have also analyzed her writing style in relation to the New Woman ideology, the figure of the female

[21] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 2776-89.
[22] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 2776-89.
[23] *Ibidem*, Kindle Location 2776-800.

flâneur and other turn-of-the-century women authors such as Willa Cather and Edith Wharton. Although most studies have focused on Chopin's work as part of the nineteenth-century American literary tradition, publications on the connections between her work and modernism are just as enlightening and well-written as the others. Such publications do not deal with the relation between *The Awakening* and New Woman sexuality and feminist thought in itself, but rather with the modernist aspects entailed by this connection.[24]

In the essay entitled "Gendered Doubleness and the «Origins» of Modernist Form", Marianne DeKoven points out the formal experimental qualities of *The Awakening* and argues that ambivalence and contradiction in the novel are typical of early modernist writing. This inherent doubleness of modernist form also indicates ambivalence about the feminist content in *The Awakening* since the expression of the fear of punishment for female rebellion and assertion is precisely what the feminist content in the novel consists of. Similarly, in her article on *The Awakening*, gender and modernism, Sarah Klein asserts that the novel explores modernism from a gendered point of view. Alongside Klein, Emily Smith-Riser highlighted the fact that Chopin expresses a modernist type of disillusionment with social conventions by means of her treatment of norms and religion as well as by making use of ambiguous juxtaposition and ambivalence which are known to invariably anticipate modernism.[25]

The Deconstruction of Stereotypes in The Awakening

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) reflects the authoress' regional flavored writing style and her preference for local-color fiction. Writing in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, C. L. Deyo points out the unusual and unique qualities of Chopin's writings that oppose the constraints of literary tradition from her earliest compositions. Chopin opposed tradition not only as a writer, but also as a literary critic as she lamented the work of the Western Association of Writers who failed to engage with human existence in a subtle, complex and meaningful way. She asserted that a writer could achieve that only by defying ethical and conventional standards, which is why she often criticized the lack of artistic boldness and originality that most authors displayed at the time. Her opposition to artistic conventions is even reflected by her female characters who struggle to achieve creative expression by challenging and becoming dissatisfied with standard /

[24] Avril Horner, "Kate Chopin, Choice and Modernism," in The *Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, Kindle Locations 3818-22.
[25] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 3822-40.

traditional modes made available to them.[26] For instance, Edna Pontellier dislikes realistic representation and chooses to paint spontaneously with sureness and ease:[27]

> *She had reached a stage when she seemed to be no longer feeling her way, working, when in the humor, with sureness and ease. And being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work in itself.*

Since the critical reappraisal of Kate Chopin (in the 1960's), literary critics have referred to Chopin as to a ground-breaking artist that anticipated the concerns of feminism and literary modernism and engaged with romanticism, transcendentalism, literary realism, naturalism and New Woman fiction. Elaine Showalter views the female characters (Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz) in *The Awakening* as proto-heroines of sentimental and local color fiction generally portrayed by American women writers who articulated their artistic vision in a conventional style. Therefore, according to Showalter, Edna's failure to follow in the footsteps of her lady friends symbolizes Chopin's rejection of the conventions of women's writing. As a result, Chopin's two novels and Louisiana stories are not simply rich in the culture of their specific locale, but also rich in feminist and innovative content.[28]

In terms of innovative and anti-stereotypical literary influences, Chopin translated many of Maupassant's stories of which "Solitude" caught her attention in particular due to the focus on the isolation of the individual and the existence of an essential self that is always alone even in the formal company of others. *The Awakening* was originally titled "A Solitary Soul" and, towards the end of the novel, Edna Pontellier acknowledges the precarious nature of human relationships that offer human beings no permanent or complete satisfaction, which alludes to Maupassant's own meditations on individual solitude.[29]

Chopin adopted Maupassant's focus on the inner consciousness in order to achieve the subversion of genre. In *The Awakening*, the authoress placed emphasis on the psyche of the protagonist in order to portray a distinctly female selfhood. Chopin's attempt is subscribed to a tradition of such attempts that were recorded in 1990 by Anne Cranny Francis (in *Feminist Fiction*) who dealt with the means by which feminist writers of the late twentieth century took over and then subverted

[26] Cf. Elizabeth Nolan, "*The Awakening* as Literary Innovation: Chopin, Maupassant and the Evolution of Genre," in The *Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, Kindle Locations 3440-470.
[27] Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, 110.
[28] Nolan, *op. cit*., Kindle Locations 3476-86.
[29] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 3543-3550.

literary genres by opposing the gender (patriarchal) ideology of western society through themes and literary techniques. Although Chopin wrote a century earlier, she is still part of this tradition, being regarded as one of its pioneers. She was highly interested in themes such as domesticity and maternal responsibility and she subverted genre (both formally and thematically) by placing experiences typical only of women at the core of her literary endeavors.[30]

Although Maupassant's technique and style inspired Chopin to transcend traditional literary forms, the authoress did not imitate his model but rather attempted to revise it. In his writings, Maupassant expressed male fears and desires, portraying only the physical beauty of women and disregarding their identities (their female selves). Therefore, in his works, women are presented only as a source of pleasure for the men that "possess" their bodies which they almost view as property. As opposed to this portrayal of women, the soul-searching Edna Pontellier is presented as a complex and intriguing female figure throughout the entire novel. Although Chopin employs techniques used by Maupassant in the portrayal of her female protagonist, she revises, develops and extends those techniques so that they would fit her own purpose and vision. For instance, Maupassant equates aquatic imagery with female traits and characters, thus, hinting at a woman-nature prototype, which suggests that he perceives and, therefore, also portrays women as seducing and corrupting beings that overpower the hero just as a force of nature would. Chopin used this particular technique for the symbolism in *The Awakening*, but she transformed Maupassant's sexual symbolism of the woman-water combination (that leads to corruption and death) into imagery that would best suit her unconsciously feminist purposes.[31]

The eroticizing effects are, thus, transferred from a hero to a heroine that is seduced by the sensuous touch of the sea which she experiences while swimming.[32] Her experience becomes a source of deep-felt desire which marks the beginning of her spiritual awakening that consists of the assertion of an independent female identity:[33]

> *A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. Her unlooked-for achievement was the subject of wonder, applause, and admiration. […] "How easy it is!" she thought. "It is nothing," she said aloud; "why*

[30] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 3554-3578.
[31] *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 3578-602.
[32] Cf. *ibidem*, Kindle Location 3602.
[33] Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, 42.

did I not discover before that it was nothing. Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!" She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone. She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.

The joy and exultation that she finds in swimming become emotions that she seeks in everyday life as well, which leads to her rebellion and dramatic change from submissive wife to independent artist. With Chopin, the water imagery differs (from Maupassant's symbolism) even in the way that the sea is associated with death. Although a medium of death in *The Awakening*, the water symbolizes defiance rather than defeat.[34]

Conclusions

The novel *The Awakening* can be viewed as part of the feminist stage due to the character of Edna that can be best understood in the context of "New Woman" debates over the limited rights of married women to property, financial security and gain and sexual fulfillment.[35] Moreover, the character's progressive gain of female independence appears as a reaction to domestic confinement as the female protagonist strives to earn her right to a private space which, in Virginia Woolf's terms, could be referred to as "a room of her own" – a notion by which the "female stage" is often identified and characterized.[36] As a result, to a certain extent, *The Awakening* can be said to also belong to the last phase identified in the evolution of female literary tradition theorized by Elaine Showalter.[37]

A major influence on Kate Chopin's writing is the feminine and feminist tradition of women's writing to which *The Awakening* also belongs.[38] In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft demanded a 'revolution in female manners" which was then brought about by George Sand and Margaret Fuller and adopted by the Brontë sisters during the Victorian age when a new type of heroine was born in English literature:[39] Jane Eyre – the embodiment of female passion, sensuality, self-

[34] Cf. Nolan, *op. cit*., Kindle Locations 3602-17.
[35] Cf. Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2736.
[36] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Hogarth, 1929) *apud ibidem*, Kindle Location 2736.
[37] Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics (Feminine, Feminist, Female)," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992), 1231.
[38] Cf. Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2626.
[39] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Penguin, 1985), 132 *apud* Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2626.

assertiveness and female self-determination. This new type of female character replaced the previous angelic female protagonists in English literature and became the cornerstone of what would be known as the 1890's New Woman movement.[40] The Anglo-American New Woman debates of the 1890's revolved around the idea of Jane Eyre being the model for contemporary heroines hallmarked by well-defined individuality and unique temperaments.[41] However, critics did not favor the modern erotic-sensational novels of female sex-writers that were viewed with the same type of contempt with which Charlotte Brontë had been treated by Victorian literary critics.[42]

This rejection of "New Woman" novels that were meant to subscribe to the tradition initiated by the Brontë sisters was partially owed to the association with the earlier genre of sensation fiction.[43] "New Woman writers frequently employed sensational plot elements (cross-dressing, prostitution and madness) in exploring feminist themes (the social construction of gender, the sexual exploitation of women, the perils of marriage)."[44] Although there were also many sensation writers (Louisa May Alcott, Mary Braddon and Wilkie Collins) who created strong-willed and self-determined female protagonists and addressed delicate subject matters (such as adultery, bigamy and domestic violence) in a refined and decent manner, the majority of female-authored genres that caused literary sensations explored unconventional gender identities by touching upon the immorality of marriage, motherhood and sexuality – themes which were believed to have a corrupting influence on female readership.[45]

These female authors often created heroines filled with sex antagonism (hostility towards men), sexual knowledge and intolerance. It was in this context of overworked field of sex fiction that Chopin's novel was perceived as distorted by the depiction of immoral sensuality. However, a few contemporary reviewers did manage to see beyond this layer of the novel and, therefore, they could admire the unique treatment of a woman's awakening to her genuine needs and aspirations

[40] Cf. Heilmann, *op. cit.*, Kindle Location 2626.

[41] Cf. "The New Heroines of Fiction', *Harper's Bazaar*, 1 January 1898, in Nolan Beer, *The Awakening*, 23 *apud* Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2626.

[42] Heilmann, *op. cit.*, Kindle Location 2626.

[43] *Ibidem*, Kindle Location 2626-34.

[44] Heilmann, *loc. cit.*

[45] *Ibidem*, Kindle Location 2634-43, and L. Pykett, *The* "*Improper*" *Feminine* (Routledge, 1992); E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Virago, 1984), 153-215, *apud* Heilmann, "*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction," Kindle Location 2643.

as a person who will not be reduced to a social status (being somebody's wife or mother).[46]

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[46] Cf. "Books of the Day," *Chicago Times – Herald*, 166, "Fresh Literature," *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 169, "Books and Authors," *Boston Beacon*, 24 June 1899, 4, *apud* Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 348, *apud ibidem*, Kindle Location 2643.