Text and Context: Nineteenth-Century American Women's Fiction and Kate Chopin's "The Awakening"

Cynthia Nicole Eddy

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-ra6y-v791

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
TEXT AND CONTEXT:
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION
AND KATE CHOPIN’S THE AWAKENING

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of the Arts

by
Cynthia Nicole Eddy
2000
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of the Arts

Cynthia Nicole Eddy

Approved, September 2000

Scott Nelson

Katherine Prown

Robert Dawidoff
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to place Kate Chopin’s 1899 novel *The Awakening* into an historical and literary context. In order to do this the novel must be read as part of an evolving body of American women’s literature across the nineteenth century, and alongside significant social, political, and economic trends of the century.

The approach therefore is interdisciplinary: novels by women from different parts of the century are analyzed next to events of the time, particularly as they apply to the roles and feelings of white, middle-class women. *The Awakening* was published at the end of a century of vast change in America both in literary styles and forms, and the development of a new Republic.

It is suggested that *The Awakening* provides late twentieth-century readers a window into American life at the turn-of-the-century, in particular how some writing women addressed more vocally in their texts issues of an imbalance of power in American society based on gender. *The Awakening* is Janus-faced: at once it looks back onto a long tradition of female literature and forms, and it looks forward asking questions about what women’s “proper place” should be in the new century.

The study suggests that women writers in the United States always approached their subjects considering gender and that their texts always focused in some ways on defining women’s roles and place. As America evolved and developed so did women’s writing and their discussion of gender roles. By the 1860s and 1870s some authors were more openly criticizing women’s inferior place in the social hierarchy, and the opportunities available to them in their fictional texts. Kate Chopin’s 1899 text *The Awakening* is a rather bleak study of the “proper place” of white middle-class women which openly criticizes the gender system of power.
TEXT AND CONTEXT:
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION
AND KATE CHOPIN’S *THE AWAKENING*
Introduction

If historians understand the element of history sometimes found in fiction, they will be better prepared to reduce the amount of fiction in the history they write.¹

It is true that historians typically shy away from using fiction as a source in their research because it is fictional. The untruths of literature can make it problematic as a reliable body of evidence for an historical study. Similarly, literary scholars trained in new critical theory have been reluctant to include the context or history of a text in their analyses for fear of devaluing the creativity of a given work. Scholarly discussions between the two fields tend to break down as the participants seemingly speak different languages and embrace different methods. I believe that straddling both fields is necessary, the endeavor of literary history worthwhile. Fictional texts emerge from a particular culture, are pieces of culture, and have the ability to shape culture. Literature by women is an essential place to turn in order to locate women’s beliefs and opinions, because it was a place in which they could express themselves, make contact with a wider audience, and wield cultural power. In this paper I look specifically at popular fiction written by women in nineteenth-century America in order to see how women wrote about gender beliefs and practices. It is fair to say that all women fiction writers across the century engaged in discussion about gender roles and “woman’s proper place.” I argue that writing and publishing fiction was a way for women to participate in the creation,

¹Lothar Honnighausen and Valeria Gennaro Lerda, eds. *Rewriting the South: History and Fiction*, (Tübingen, 1993), 34.
maintenance, and shaping of gender roles, and that as the century progressed more women included in their texts open criticisms of the ideology of separate spheres and encouraged their readers to reconsider traditional ideas about men’s and women’s roles.²

The first chapter of this paper is an overview of themes and forms of nineteenth-century women’s fiction. The overall premise here is that the context (political, social, economic, religious) determined to some extent both the way women wrote and what they wrote about. For example, I explore the connection between the Civil War and the shift to literary realism in America, and more specifically, how and why female authors altered their styles at this time. The second chapter is a close textual analysis of an 1899 work—Kate Chopin’s The Awakening—which stands apart thematically and stylistically from other fiction written by men or women of its day. Though much has been written about this text in the last hundred years, I believe a close reading of it in its historical and literary context provides insight into beliefs about gender roles at the end of the century. Even though criticisms of the gender system were present in women’s texts throughout the century, and were becoming more overt in the 1870s and 1880s, The Awakening was the first unabashed attack of the imbalance of economic and social power held by men and women in the nineteenth century, and so merits a closer look. I argue that the critical rejection of this book in its day and its exclusion from the literary canon until recently derives from the fact that it thematically and stylistically challenged what readers of the day believed appropriate or acceptable, and in this rejection we can see what accepted gender beliefs were at the time.

² It should be noted here that women writers were a small group composed of upper or middle-class whites, generally living in the north and so cannot speak for all women of the nineteenth century. Several of the authors of this study are in fact southerners and a more thorough exploration of the differences between texts written by women of different regions is necessary.
Virtually all fiction written by women in the nineteenth century lies outside today’s “literary canon,” leaving most people unaware of the prevalence and popularity of women’s fiction in its day. For the most part I limited my research to books and authors that reached a fairly broad audience. I chose popular books because one goal of this paper is to see where books, specifically books by women, could have affected changes in nineteenth-century America: it is unlikely that a book or story that went unread could have had a discernible impact. *The Awakening* is perhaps the only book in this study that did not reach a large audience, which makes it an interesting case study: here is a book by an already popular author which potentially could have had a significant impact because of its unique craftsmanship and bold new treatment of themes relevant to readers of the day. One of the questions I ask in the second chapter is, why didn’t *The Awakening* achieve the success of other women’s fiction, including Chopin’s earlier works?

Both male and female writers of the nineteenth century often used the rhetoric of separate spheres and in this they were simply expressing the broader cultural beliefs of their day. Middle and upper-class men and women defined masculinity and femininity in terms of these gender-divided spheres: popular novelist Elizabeth Boynton Harbert went so far as to title one of her books *Out of Her Sphere*. According to this ideological construct, men in the nineteenth century occupied the spaces outside of the home where they earned a living and participated actively in American industrialization. Women on

---

4 Historian Jeanne Boydston argues that men were able to move into industrial America and white-collar jobs because women stayed at home and took care of domestic labor, a task that had been shared by men and women before the nineteenth century. Jeanne Boydston, “The Pastoralization of Housework,” in Linda
the other hand stayed in the home, rearing children and providing a comfortable home for their spouses. Men were wage earners, women were not. By the end of the century all American men could vote, women could not. The theories of Jürgen Habermas have traditionally been applied to this two-sphere ideology despite the fact that he wrote not about public and private spheres, but about an official or government sphere versus a public sphere of unofficial power. The public sphere in Habermas’s work was certainly a man’s place as it was one of ideas and letters, but by definition this did not exclude women.\footnote{Jürgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.} Thomas Burger, trans. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989).} Nineteenth-century American women writers, whether they wrote novels, advice manuals, histories, political novels, or cookbooks, were participating in a wider world of letters and ideas.\footnote{Nina Baym in a recent book on ante-bellum women who wrote history books argues in fact that fiction writing women may have been the minority of women writers, though they have been paid the most attention by scholars, Baym, \textit{American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860} (New Jersey, 1995); there is also a recent book on political novels by nineteenth-century women, Susan K. Harris, ed., \textit{Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers 1797-1901} (Tennessee, 1995).} The irony is that women writers knew a two-sphere ideological construct was just that: an ideological construct, but one in which they had to engage in their texts, in order to uphold it or dismantle it.

The picture of gender roles in the nineteenth century that emerges from reading women’s fiction alongside current literary and historical scholarship, is that white, upper and middle-class women who were both the authors, and often the audiences of popular fiction, held power in limited, although changing, ways across the century. Women’s historians like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Nancy Cott have written about a few of the ways women carved out niches of power for themselves, whether in churches or in the

---

No matter how creatively women found power in gender relationships, the majority of white middle and upper-class women throughout the century relied on men economically from the time they entered their father’s house, throughout their married lives, and until they died. In addition to economic dependence on men, almost all nineteenth-century American women had little voice that could be heard beyond their home, their sewing circle, their family, or their church. In other words, most women had little or no “public” voice, and the power they held was most often exercised through their private relationships, either with their husbands, their children, their clergy, or their friends. But within the nineteenth-century middle-class gender system which limited women’s authority outside of the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood, several groups of white, middle and upper-class women, including women writers, emerged who worked within this constraining gender system to criticize the same system, thereby asserting a form of power. Therefore works of fiction written by women in the nineteenth century are important historical documents because they illustrate how women worked within the system (consider that all publishers were men) to either maintain it, criticize it, or attempt to alter it.

When compared to women’s efforts outside of writing fiction, for example in reform movements, we see a similar trend: as the century progressed, the wide variety of women involved in a score of different causes were more likely to overtly criticize the gendered distribution of power, rather than rely on tactics used earlier in the century such as “influence.” For example, in the early decades of the Republic, middle-class women were expected to urge their husbands inside their homes to avoid the vice of drinking

---

7 Nancy Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven, 1977); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York:
liquor, whereas by the 1840s some temperance societies (led by women) lobbied for local option laws which would prohibit the sale, manufacture, and consumption of alcohol. I believe that women writers had some freedoms available to them that some of their sisters in reform did not, because women writers could reach out to an audience outside of their community without ever leaving their house or stepping outside of their domestic sphere. They were not generally seen as a threat to the structure of nineteenth-century society. Because these white middle and upper-class female authors were perceived by men generally and publishers specifically as being innocuous, simply providing texts to educate or entertain, the subversive nature of their books was rarely censored or even criticized.

At the risk of oversimplifying nineteenth-century gender relationships and power struggles, the picture that emerged in my research of nineteenth-century female writers is one in which some women in their ante-bellum fictional texts criticized the division of power between the sexes and were quick to point out when men abused their power within that system; but these criticisms remained in the subtext of their works—they were subversive messages buried in acceptable, often conservative stories. It was not until more women gained access to the public sphere, both as writers, and elsewhere (such as in moral reform groups or abolitionism), that writing women’s criticism became overt; the message that the system needed to be changed. Participation in a Habermasian “public sphere” of writing and ideas allowed some women to shape nineteenth-century American cultural beliefs and practices. A literary voice for women was a political voice if politics means more than exercising a right to vote. But just as not every political message is accepted or popular (consider the failure of William Jennings Bryan in 1896, 1985).
three years before the publication of The Awakening), not every text will be embraced, and in the case of Chopin’s text I believe the rejection derived from a resistance to the radical change suggested in the pages of The Awakening.
Chapter 1

One of the trials of woman-kind is the fear of being an old maid. To escape this dreadful doom, young girls rush into matrimony with a recklessness which astonishes the beholder; never pausing to remember that the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called “Mrs.” instead of “Miss.”

Fortunately, this foolish prejudice is fast disappearing, conquered by the success of a certain class belonging to the sisterhood. This class is composed of superior women who, from various causes, remain single, and devote themselves to some earnest work; espousing philanthropy, art, literature, music, medicine, or whatever task taste, necessity, or chance suggests, and remaining faithful to and as happy in their choice as married women with husbands and homes.

(Louisa May Alcott, originally printed in the April 11, 1868 New York Ledger under the title “Happy Women.”)

In 1868, Louisa May Alcott unashamedly announced to mid-century New Yorkers that some women were moving into the public sphere. Many commentators at that time believed that this was done at the expense of the private sphere. While only a small minority of women could support themselves economically throughout the nineteenth century, many white, upper and middle-class women found themselves working, often outside their homes, in ways that earlier in the century would have been impossible. Cultural definitions of gender roles gradually changed during the nineteenth
century, allowing some white women to have an increasingly public role. The focus of this chapter is on these privileged women generally, and female writers specifically, the ways in which they were able to move into the public sphere, and the messages in their texts to a public audience.

One reason for shifting gender roles and beliefs was the socio-economic transformation of America in the century after the Revolution. As Americans' experiences and pressing issues changed, fictional themes and styles also changed. From the first novels written by women in America not long after the Revolution, to the close of the nineteenth century and the publication of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, we find common themes, styles, and characters in these works, while at the same time American fiction was transformed by changes such as industrialization, the rise of the middle class, the Civil War (and with it the abolition of slavery), and the shift from subsistence to market agriculture. These changes necessarily influenced the fiction that was generated at any given time and in any given region (change occurred at different paces throughout the United States) in nineteenth-century America.

Because this is ultimately a study about white middle and upper-class women, in literature and life, a discussion of the changes that occurred in America both as they were experienced and shaped by these women is critical. Throughout the nineteenth century white upper and middle-class women's roles changed, and while some women pushed harder for gender equality and the economic independence of women, they were usually able to do this because of their unique position as women who had stepped outside of their sphere to support themselves economically and otherwise. The reality for most nineteenth-century American women was dependence on men, and while this changed
throughout the century, and more late nineteenth-century women earned enough money
to live independently of men, Louisa May Alcott's 1868 vision of "Happy Women," was
still only possible for a few privileged women. Writers such as Alcott and later Kate
Chopin, were among the "privileged" women Alcott included in her notion of "the
sisterhood."

* * *

My study of fiction written by American women begins when the United States
begins—the end of the eighteenth century. My goal is to identify the issues important to
white middle and upper-class men and women throughout the century, and to see how
these social, political, cultural, and gender issues were addressed in fiction of the day.
Elsie Michie describes the interplay of nineteenth-century reality and fiction as
overlapping and interacting discourses—her goal "to analyze how discourses having to
do with gender [as played out in fiction written by women] work together with discourses
having to do with politics, economics, colonial thinking, or class relations." 8 My aim, like
hers, is to see how literary, economic, political, and social discourses worked together
and overlapped in the nineteenth century. It is necessary therefore to trace how fiction
written by women was influenced by changes in American society and politics, and in
turn to see how women's ideas and actions influenced why, when, and where American
society changed.

American women began writing and publishing fiction in the late eighteenth
century, during and after the American Revolution. Much of this fiction was centered
around the theme of a woman's "proper place," a theme that persists through most

---

eighteenth and nineteenth-century American women's fiction. In the late eighteenth-century literary and social debates over the behaviors and practices of citizens in the new Republic, defining gender roles was critical. Fiction was only one type of propaganda used by educated men and women attempting to create a new Republican society and culture. In contemporary newspapers and novels historian Linda Kerber finds examples of a sense of optimism and wide-open possibility for shaping a new society. From the birth of the Republic some women had access to the public sphere, and a conviction that their voices could help shape the society and culture of the new nation.

Female authors' themes and forms were limited by publishers. Sentimental fiction or seduction stories were the rule—stories in which virtue was rewarded and vice punished. In a typical seduction story a young woman is seduced by a more worldly man, impregnated, abandoned, and in the end dies. The main theme of seduction or sentimental works was Republican marriage. The target audience of the genre was young women, and the goal was to educate them in the field of choosing a husband to create a Republican marriage. Fiction also provided readers with instructions for proper behavior: women were to be virtuous and self-sacrificing. Historian Mary Beth Norton identifies the virtues of Republican women as industry, frugality, temperance, and moderation.

Because late eighteenth-century novels included both descriptive and prescriptive elements, the period lends itself to drawing connections between what was published as fiction, and the events of the day. Historians and literary scholars have both argued that

---

seduction stories were metaphors for larger political issues, that, "the melodramatic novel of seduction served to dramatize the republican struggle between virtue and corruption in terms that were at once political and gendered."¹² Many political theorists and members of the new Republic interested in the shape of the young nation, attempted to ground the democratic society ideologically in Republican marriage and motherhood. Survival and prosperity came to be tied to these gender roles, in which a woman’s role was to be virtuous and to make the appropriate marriage to ensure the stability and perpetuity of the nation.¹³ Historian Jan Lewis suggests that the villains or seducers in late eighteenth-century fiction were often defined by their association with Great Britain. These men embodied the evils of the patriarchal system in which the rich and powerful could take advantage of the poor and powerless. Therefore, a young woman in choosing a spouse, was making a choice between supporting the new democracy or the old system of patriarchy, and paternal authority in all its forms—familial, moral, religious, and political.¹⁴ Seduction represented the undermining of the new social system: the very nature of a fop or coquette (representing continental immorality) could kill the Republic.¹⁵

Two of the most widely read works of fiction in America at the end of the eighteenth century were both seduction novels: Susannah Rowson’s 1794 novel, Charlotte Temple, and Hannah Foster’s 1797 novel, The Coquette. In both texts the protagonist—a young American woman—is seduced by an Englishman after being

---

¹³ Jan Lewis defines the appropriate marriage as one in which both partners choose to marry for love rather than interest. Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” William and Mary Quarterly (1987), 694.
¹⁵ Ibid., 697-698.
promised marriage. As in all seduction novels the heroine dies, a lesson to readers about the dangers of choosing the wrong man. The audience of books such as these—upper and middle class men and women, boys and girls—understood that for women, intercourse was an act that belonged exclusively inside marriage, and that succumbing to a seducer always involved an element of danger for women. Seduction stories were not telling a reader anything they were not already aware of, and they were prescribing a course of action (virtue, proper marriage) no different from that of other advice books or the lessons of mothers. What is most significant about these novels is not their description of the dangers presented to women by immoral men, but rather the ways in which authors tied the rejection of a seducer to the prosperity of the new nation. In this way, novels showed readers, especially young women, the potential they had for shaping gender roles in a new society.¹⁶ If women pursued a particular course of action, in this case spurning the seducer and marrying for love, then they would be instrumental in creating a stable and virtuous Republic in which to nurture their children.

While both Charlotte Temple and The Coquette close with the death of the seduced woman, literary scholar Cathy Davidson points out subtle ways in which each author challenges the forms of the seduction or sentimental novel. She may be giving eighteenth-century readers too much credit for being able to identify subtle variations of theme, but her argument that some authors did include some subversive themes and scenarios is persuasive. For example, in Charlotte Temple, the baby born of the seduced woman lives, whereas fictional children born of adulterous relationships almost always died. Davidson also suggests that popular authors such as Susannah Rowson were able to explore possibilities of freedom within the social and political system of the early

¹⁶ Davidson, “Flirting,” 23.
Republic, where values, morals, and practices were not yet entrenched. Women in the Republic by definition would have more choice in their spouse if they were to marry for love rather than money or social position. Using this model then, the folly of Eliza Wharton in *The Coquette*, is not her sexual scandal, but instead that she had so few marriage options, and none that provided the loving relationship called for by Republican marriage ideology.\(^{17}\) What this example shows us is that some women writers were asking questions about gender roles, and in doing so believed that they were participating in the creation of a new social order.

American literature of the 1780s and 1790s highlighted a tension between older more conservative gender ideologies, and the possibilities for change perceived by some men and women as a result of the Revolution. This tension can be seen in both the theme—Republican marriage—and form—seduction stories—found in books published in the final decade of the century. While social and cultural changes seemed possible to some early Americans in the wake of the Revolution, when we turn to the fiction of the early nineteenth century we see less optimism at the possibilities of change, and more subversive criticism of the post-Revolution social order.

The message of prescriptive literature and sentimental fiction in the first decades of the nineteenth century was for women to be good wives and good mothers. This included everything from being a “helpmeet” to her husband, upholding proper morals and values (frugality, temperance, industry), and teaching children to be upstanding members of the Republic.\(^{18}\) While changes in normative gender roles seemed possible

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{18}\) Mary Beth Norton argues that the maternal functions of women were emphasized at this time because mothers were expected to socialize their children in the new Republic. Women then were responsible for creating moral and virtuous members of the young nation. Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 247.
during the social turmoil in the decades after the Revolution, by the early 1800s the role of Republican wife became the accepted practice in gender relationships in the middle and upper classes. Tara Fitzpatrick sees an intimate connection between seduction novels and the entrenching of gender roles that occurred in the early nineteenth century: "Once civic virtue was equated, however metaphorically, with sexual chastity, the transition from virtue as the public spiritedness of politically active citizens to virtue as a private, domestic, feminized, and largely apolitical concern became irresistible." 19

While the gender roles of white middle and upper-class Americans seemed to be solidifying, the opposite was true for the American economy. The economy of the early nineteenth century shifted gradually from an agrarian to a mixed economy. On small farms in the Northeast the custom of a father distributing land among all his sons became increasingly difficult to maintain, as nearby available lands became settled. Consequently, sons who in previous eras could rely on inherited land found they had to move west or find non-agricultural work. Daughters as well might be asked to earn money to supplement the family income before they were married. Many young men and women of the Northeast found they could work in the new mills for this income. 20 Even with these socio-economic changes prescriptive literature and fiction remained committed to instructing women in their roles as private and domestic creatures. The common belief and practice was that middle-class women who worked outside the home in their teens and early twenties, would move on to marry and assume their roles as wives

---

19 Historian Nancy Cott offers a convincing counter-point to this argument when she argues that within this gender system women discovered power—a power based specifically on those attributes associated with the domestic sphere: morality, virtue, and purity. See Nancy Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven, 1977), 201. Fitzpatrick, "Liberty," 59-60.

20 For more on women in the mills see Thomas Dublin, Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860 (New York, 1979).
and mothers. It is also possible that in a period of rapid change, people are inclined to pursue the comforts of continuity, and thus women might follow the pattern set by their mothers and grandmothers.

Literary scholar Nina Baym calls fiction written by women between the 1820s and 1870s “woman’s fiction,” instead of the more common sentimental, or domestic literature, and I have chosen to accept her category for my discussion of fiction written in this time. According to Baym, “woman’s fiction” is characterized by a plot in which a young girl is suddenly abandoned and must learn to survive in a difficult and often cruel world. The girl gains strength of character and discovers she is an individual, so when she ultimately marries, it is as an equal of her husband, or in some cases as superior to him. This literary model in which women gain a sense of themselves as individuals fits in with the ethos of Jacksonian America. Historian Gerda Lerner, for example, suggests that the Jacksonian message of individualism, upward mobility, and venturesome entrepreneurship reached women, and because they were denied access to this world based on gender, some white, upper and middle-class, educated women united to change this system in the Woman Movement begun in the late 1840s.

Writing fiction was only one avenue through which they could address feelings of gender inequality. Throughout the nineteenth century white middle and upper-class women became involved in a variety of reform movements. In novels and reform movements alike, women could condemn alcohol abuse, embrace religion, speak out for

---

21 Baym argues that women writers in this period actually attempted to distance themselves from sentimental fiction, which was most often associated with seduction novels, a genre they tried to escape. For more on her definition of woman’s fiction see her book Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-1870 (Urbana, Illinois, 1993), 22-27.
22 Baym, Woman’s Fiction, ch. 2.
abolition, or address abuses of power by husbands and fathers. "Excluded from electoral politics, all women were forced to devise innovative means to induce social change. Their choice of moral suasion or constitutional law, of outraged demands or respectable appeals, of sexual and racial equality or 'natural' hierarchies, reflected differences within society at large."24 Reformers ranged from the radical Elizabeth Cady Stanton who spoke publicly in support of women's immediate economic and social independence, to women allied to fight prostitution in the 1830s and 40s, to the Women's Christian Temperance Movement of the 1870s and 80s. Antebellum American women writers kept their messages of necessary change fairly conservative. This could explain why their fiction was enormously popular: the story and message of woman's fiction could realistically represent the life and beliefs of its audience (white, most likely middle class, educated, and often conservative), while at the same time the stories could give moral support and emotional sustenance in a gendered society in which female readers held little power.

Ann Douglas explains that the wide attraction of conservative reform proposed by such writers as Sarah Hale can be attributed to its more traditional approach of using "influence" rather than the more direct method of persuasion.25 Scholars Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett argue that using "influence" as fictional characters did, could be more effective than the overtly political reform efforts of someone like Elizabeth Cady Stanton. "By speaking, a woman was claiming her place as subject rather than object, as self rather than other. In this view, discourse is both power and the possibility of generating power; it is a political gesture even more important than a demand for voting.

Bardes and Gossett make a critical point here; writing, in particular writing fiction, was a political act. But while it was a political act, it oftentimes avoided the criticisms suffered by women who attempted reform in more overt ways than merely encouraging women to use their “influence.” The majority of female reformers in the early and mid-nineteenth century including women writers sent a message that most white middle-class women already understood: they could derive power through submission and influence rather than open criticism and rebellion. Women writers had an additional advantage in terms of the circulation of ideas, as many were published in national magazines and journals.

Woman’s fiction is conservative in that it did not call for an immediate change or revolution in gender roles. It also can be read as promoting female subservience and acceptance of a system in which a woman could not be an individual. There is today a great deal of disagreement and conflict among female literary critics as to the true meaning and message of woman’s fiction: there is even disagreement on what to call it. Jane Tompkins provides a convincing argument of the literary and historical value of woman’s fiction in her discussion of Susan Warner’s 1850 novel, *The Wide, Wide World*. Like *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*, *The Wide, Wide World* was extremely popular in its day, as measured by its sales: it broke all previous sales records for a novel. Tompkins argues that the book was not “saccharine” as a twentieth-century reader inevitably finds it, because in the 1850s the trials of the young female protagonist

---


27 In an article on Frances Willard, leader of the WCTU, Suzanne Marilley argues that Willard addressed women’s fears of political participation, and was able to attract them to her cause because they found it safer and ideologically more traditional. Marilley, “Frances Willard and the Feminism of Fear,” *Feminist Studies* XIX (1993), 125.
mirrored mid-century reality. According to Tompkins, some women, because they were so often confined to the private sphere of domesticity in the home, had to live their lives through their spirit and souls rather than through their actions. In this way Susan Warner as a woman could write about what she knew life to be as a woman, at the same time describing for her audience a life to which they could relate.29

On the other side of the contest of meaning in woman’s fiction, historian Ann Douglas argues that prescriptive fiction written by women performed a cultural service for the power-holding group in America who attempted to establish women as domestic and passive creatures.30 Douglas contends that the prescriptive message in novels such as Warner’s is: if you are a woman your only option in the face of inequality, or powerlessness is submission. Tompkins counters this argument by claiming that submission yields a type of power. Not unlike women’s historians she argues that,

American women simply could not assume a stance of open rebellion against the conditions of their lives for they lacked the material means of escape or opposition. They had to stay put and submit. And so the domestic novelists made that necessity the basis on which to build a power structure of their own.31

The submission of women depicted in this fiction, argues Tompkins, is really extreme self-control. Through self-mastery a woman could gain autonomy.32 Taking Tompkin’s

29Ibid., pp. 150-152.
31Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 161.
idea to its natural end, we find the prescriptive message in a book such as Warner's is that women could carve out power in gender relations, even though this power was compromised by the fact that they had to play by the rules of nineteenth-century gender roles. Through openly accepting their weaker status women could gain access to power. Where Tompkins and Douglas agree is in their analyses that most women writers believed that the only way women could seize power in the mid-nineteenth century was to do it in traditionally female ways such as persuasion and influence. One can see continuity of method between writers and moral reformers who similarly believed in the power of feminine influence.

Even though woman's fiction was formulaic the various authors engaged differently with the issue of women's power in gender relationships. What is most significant to this study is that they all engage with the issue of gender relations. Some women writing domestic fiction for instance, found ways to subvert the cultural call to submission and domesticity that defined the genre. E. D. E. N. Soutworth's 1859 novel *The Hidden Hand* illustrates how this subversion was possible. In this comic romp, Southworth creates a heroine who subverts all of the nineteenth-century gender roles: she dresses as a boy; she fights a duel; she refuses to submit. So how did the book get published, and even more importantly, how was it able to achieve the commercial success that it did? Critic Joanne Dobson believes the answer to these questions is two-fold. First, Capitola Black, the heroine, spent her youth disguised as a boy, which means that because she was socialized as a young boy, she could get away with behaving like one.

---

32Ibid., p. 162. This is similar to Nancy Cott's idea of early nineteenth-century women deriving power from their gender roles as wives and mothers in *Bonds of Womanhood*, See also Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York 1822-1872* (Ithaca, New York, 1984).
33Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, xi.
The second explanation is that Southworth imbues the story with so much comedy that readers, especially young girls, would have seen it as nothing more than a fantasy. What Dobson and other scholars of mid-century woman’s fiction are coming to discover is that many of these novelists had trouble selling the idea of separate spheres and female submission to their readers, but at the same time they realized that women had few choices if they were faced with a tyrannical husband, father, or guardian. So instead of serving as overtly feminist texts which openly called for change, woman’s fiction seems to have been a forum where some women could demonstrate the disparity in power between men and women (and in some cases blacks and whites, and rich and poor), and could question how women should live their lives within this power structure.

As new issues arose in America, such as the shift to more industrial work and reform movements addressing issues of abolitionism, slavery, and temperance, woman’s fiction incorporated new themes and issues, reflective of society and culture. Women writers at the middle of the century were less homogenous in the ways they addressed themes of gender and power in their texts. Many writers chose to set their stories in contemporary settings. One example of this trend was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ 1871 work *The Silent Partner*, in which a young woman inherits a factory but is unable to run it because she is a woman. In fact, literary scholar Mary Kelley argues that woman’s fiction was one way in which women fought to maintain their power as mothers and heads of the household in an age of growing capitalism and industrialization. By the end of the Civil War it is clear that the conservative message of fiction written by women

---

(submission, marriage as the final goal for women, etc.) was waning. A close reading of a few novels written by women in the 1860s and 1870s is helpful in establishing how previous forms and messages of fiction changed and why.

It is impossible to separate the new themes in fiction written by American women from what was happening in the nation in the 1860s, namely the Civil War and the post-war shift toward mass industrialization. The war itself, and some of its greater consequences, such as the abolition of slavery, and the necessity of many women both in the North and South to step beyond their gender roles in order to help the war effort, served as a catalyst for changes in gender relations. Reading and writing were activities that many women participated in, and both became favored pastimes. While women generally read anything they could lay their hands on, the type of reading they may have preferred was influenced by their current situations. Women who were left behind while their husbands, brothers, fathers, and friends went to fight, were eager to read war coverage in which they might learn of their relations' fates. Louisa May Alcott scholar Madeleine Stern also suggests that journals and papers began publishing more escapist literature for soldiers in the field (and most likely the women they left at home) to take their minds off the horrors of war.

Many women took up their pens and published during the war, and as they did this they joined the public sphere. Historian Drew Faust comments on Southern women who wrote, noting that "... the very process of authorship itself nurtured new female

---

35 This is Kelley's argument in, "The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home," Signs IV (1979), 437. This argument is convincing if we believe Nancy Cott’s notion of women deriving power from their role as mothers and moral guardians described in Bonds of Womanhood.

36 While the messages imbedded in novels was transitioning at the middle of the century to more overt criticism of gender relationships, the forms of these novels was slower to change, so we still see sentimental novels in this period.
self-consciousness.” As the demand for writing grew during the war, and women answered the call both in the North and the South, more women found it possible to support themselves financially, an important step in women gaining a “self-consciousness.” After the Civil War white middle and upper-class women of both regions, began to more openly question the gender system, and it is possible that this was due in part to the fact that they entered into the public sphere in unprecedented numbers because of the Civil War, either as nurses, seamstresses, plantation managers, or writers. It is important now to turn to several women’s texts published in the transitional period (roughly between 1861 and 1873) which reveal how women writers addressed issues of gender differently because of their war or industrial experience.

Louisa May Alcott’s book *Little Women* was published in 1868, three years after the last shots of the Civil War were fired. It is a text that illustrates the tension between ante and post-bellum fictional forms and messages. In theme and form it is more like books published before the Civil War than the books published later in the century, a fact perhaps explained by its printing date: in the immediate aftermath of a war in which six hundred thousand Americans died, it is possible that writers and publishers alike hoped to return to the antebellum status quo. While keeping the overt themes and plots of *Little Women* in the realm of woman’s fiction (each of the surviving sisters gets married, has children, etc.), Alcott moved away from creating female characters whose defining characteristics were passivity and submissiveness. A close reading of *Little Women*...
shows that on the surface Alcott conformed to early nineteenth-century fiction, but a closer reading shows that her book is rife with subversive messages.

Although *Little Women* was clearly a children’s (specifically a girls’) book, the social criticisms in the text were directed to a more mature audience. We hear Alcott’s critical narrative voice when she writes of Jo’s first published stories, “Like most young scribblers, she [Jo] went abroad for her characters and scenery.” What Alcott may be hinting at in this scene, is that the people who chose what was published were typically men who saw the economic and social profit (i.e. they could shape their female audience’s thoughts on proper place and behavior) in women’s sensational and romantic fiction. A greater sentimental moral—Alcott criticizing Jo for leaving her gender-defined place to publish fantastic rather than morally pure fiction—is here, but the episode can also be read as a subtle attack on the gendered publishing industry with which Alcott was familiar in the 1860s. In her own career she relied on the money she earned from writing, but was uncomfortable writing the children’s literature that her publisher continually asked of her.

Another mid-century American woman who was publishing material that went beyond the constraints of sentimental, or woman’s fiction, was Rebecca Harding Davis. While her most widely distributed and most popular work was the 1861 novella *Life in the Iron Mills*, some of her subsequent short fiction dealt more specifically with gender roles in nineteenth-century America. In Davis’s 1864 story “The Wife’s Story,”

*Women* as a turning point in woman’s fiction, but she argues that the themes of this genre were assumed by children’s or girls’ fiction in the late 1860s. She does note however that the March girls were the first representation of real women in fiction written by women. *Woman’s Fiction*, 299. Richard Brodhead writes of *Little Women*, “[it] tolerates deviations from normative gender identities unknown to earlier works in the domestic genre.” *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 1993), 92.
published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the protagonist is a wife and mother who is also a talented musician tempted into writing and starring in her own opera. In order to achieve her lifelong goal of becoming a famous musician, she must abandon her husband and children. She accepts this Faustian bargain only to have her opera meet with laughter and hissing, illustrating to her the folly of the deal. She walks into a scene where her husband has died of shock upon hearing the news about his wife’s career choice. Ultimately, Harding gives her story the sentimental ending that was expected by readers of the day: the wife wakes up and realizes it was all just a bad dream.

It is possible to read more out of “The Wife’s Story” than simply a retelling of the dangers involved when a middle or upper-class woman attempts to step outside her prescribed role. One function of stories like this and other Davis stories such as “Maria,” (1876) and “Anne” (1889), was to show readers how unjust the two-sphere system could be for middle and upper-class white women, because a man would never have to choose between marriage and family on the one hand, and a career as an artist on the other. Although some women, such as the author herself, became economically self-sufficient, and even supported husbands, many women in Davis’ audience probably related to the wife. Many women practiced their talent (painting, music, writing) when they were single, but once they were married they were expected to be wives and mothers first, roles that inherently dismissed the possibilities of economic independence. What undergirds stories such as “The Wife’s Story,” was the dangers white middle and upper-class women faced in a market society that had not yet established a place for them outside of the home. Waking up and realizing your artistic failure was nothing more than

---

a bad dream was the same as waking up and realizing that you were economically and
socially safe—though completely dependent on a man for that safety and security.

Because safety and security for women could be found most commonly in
marriage, all fiction written before the Civil War, and most of it written in the following
decades, culminated with the marriage of the protagonist. This was a continuation of the
marriage plot found in women’s fiction from the first half of the nineteenth century. By
the 1870s and 1880s the reality for some women was no longer one in which safety and
security could only be reached through a successful marriage. Some women, including
writers like Louisa May Alcott, struggled with this conventional plot technique because it
neither reflected their own lives, nor did it promote the idea of women as capable of
supporting themselves economically. Alcott bristled at her editor’s request for Little
Women to end with the marriage of Laury and Jo, since she had created in Jo a strong and
independent woman. Alcott compromised in the end, Jo March marries, but to an older
and uglier Mr. Baer, showing young women that romance did not automatically signify a
good marriage. By the late 1870s more stories by women excluded the marriage ending,
and a few ended with the heroines clearly choosing to remain single.

It is misleading to think that the fiction of any time was monolithic, and the period
immediately after the war through the close of the century in America was particularly
diverse. The war that turned brother against brother, that divided the country
geographically as well as ideologically, was perhaps responsible for the diversification of
genre and theme in American literature. Most fiction by women assumed specific forms,
and nearly all was concerned with the question of women’s place outside the home, but
themes and techniques varied more than they had in the previous seventy years. In fact,
the Civil War and the mass-industrialization immediately thereafter catalyzed the development of an entirely new genre of writing: realism.\footnote{The following chapter is devoted largely to a discussion of literary realism, but some sort of definition is required here, as the term itself is a contested one for literary scholars. Most scholars identify a group of writers who self-consciously regarded themselves as writing about new realities—men like Twain, Howells, and Dreyser. But realist texts are also stylistically new in that they use the vernacular and eschew Romantic ideals. Like the realist painter Gustav Courbet, writers wrote what they saw and experienced first-hand.} Rebecca Harding Davis’s 1861 story \textit{Life in the Iron Mills} is perhaps the best example of women’s writing that explored new literary territory. Many scholars identify the tragic story of the Welsh puddler in a Virginia iron mill as the first example of realism in American fiction. Davis used the local dialect, graphic descriptions of the squalor of the town where the two protagonists, Hugh and Deb live, and the back-breaking work of the mills, in order to provide her readers with a \textit{real} vision of the darker side of industrialization and capitalism.

The themes and story of \textit{Life}... and the use of vernacular speech were path-breaking in her time. But Davis’ book is a mix of new style and theme with more recognizable characters from other literary works such as the narrator. Literary scholar Sharon Harris, in a discussion of \textit{Life}... argues that Davis’ use of the frame story, where the narrator is an outsider, enabled her to draw her readers in without alienating them.\footnote{Sharon M. Harris, “Rebecca Harding Davis: From Romanticism to Realism,” \textit{American Literary Realism 1870-1910} (1989), 6-8.} In the novella, the narrator is a middle-class white woman, much like the average subscriber to the \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, where the work first appeared. I would argue that the story achieved the vast popularity it did because of its new type of writing which depicted in detail a very real world about which the audience knew little or nothing, and did it through the eyes of someone they knew and could trust: a peer. It is also possible that as
Civil War stories appeared in popular newspapers, readers became accustomed to realism, and found fiction that mirrored this form appropriate and enjoyable.

The type of realism that was adopted by most women in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was regionalism, or local color, and it is important to understand why. Literary scholar Richard Brodhead suggests that by the end of the Civil War it was impossible for people to think in terms of a unified nation, so they wrote of sectional settings and stories. Many feminist literary scholars, in contrast, suggest that local color embraced certain aspects of traditional woman’s writing (and their lives)—non-epic, less plot-driven—but moved clearly beyond sentimentalism and woman’s fiction, omitting the prescriptive marriage and the emphasis on motherhood. Because many of the stories in the local color genre were set in quaint areas and related lady-like stories, critics of the day did not notice the ways in which women writers were subversively criticizing American society. Literary scholar Millicent Bell agrees that post-war sectionalism was essential in the creation of local color, but she also asserts that the field was dominated by women because middle and upper-class domestic women were becoming marginal in an increasingly urban and industrial society. This marginalization led them to write stories about equally marginal people and places.43

Local color as a fictional form may have been caused by war-related sectionalism, or by the realization of inequality among women writers, but as a genre it was unified by the ways in which it reflected a variety of changes in American society in the 1870s and 1880s. It is likely that the changes brought by the Civil War and industrialization made many women’s inherited gender roles incompatible with their actual lives and

---

experiences.\textsuperscript{44} What appears in their prose as a result are women who elect not to marry, or choose to work in the public sphere before marriage.\textsuperscript{45} Local color is particularly interesting for its blending of nostalgia for a pre-industrial past, and its emphasis on the ability of women to be strong and independent in the present and future, which might indicate a certain ambivalence felt by the authors about abandoning older traditions completely. While local color stories often focused on women’s day-to-day lives and the types of choices that they made, and therefore in subject at least were related to women’s stories of earlier in the century, in their craft the stories introduced a new type of writing. Most literary scholars agree that women who wrote and published fiction beginning in the 1870s did it with an altogether different mind-set than the women who wrote and published early in the nineteenth century. Where E. D. E. N. Southworth or Susan Warner saw their writing as a job in which they were paid to produce a particular type of product (woman’s fiction), authors like Sarah Orne Jewett and Kate Chopin saw their writing as art.\textsuperscript{46} Because they saw themselves as artists, the writers of the last decades of the century are far more experimental and varied in their uses of language and imagery.

Sarah Orne Jewett, today perhaps the most remembered female local colorist, wrote three books that are of interest here because they illustrate a new brand of fiction in theme

\textsuperscript{44}For a good discussion of the differences in ideas and realities of generations of women in the nineteenth century see Nancy Theriot, Mothers & Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity (Kentucky, 1996).
\textsuperscript{45}Larzer Ziff posits that local color as a genre may have been a way for women writers like Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Jewett to avoid the marriage plot in their fiction. The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation (New York, 1966), 286-299.
\textsuperscript{46}For more on the shift to writing as art rather than a marketable product see Elizabeth Ammons, Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century (New York, 1991), 10; Baym, Woman’s Fiction, 296; Brodhead, Cultures, 161.
and form: *Deephaven* (1877), her first novel, *The Country Doctor* (1884), and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). What is of particular note in her first and last novels is the near absence of men of marriageable age, and the prevalence of single women. The two texts, however, differ in the types of single women portrayed. *Deephaven* is the story of two young Bostonian women who vacation one summer in the rural seaport town of Deephaven, Maine. This plot calls to mind the world described by women's historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her essay, "Female World of Love and Ritual," a world in which women entered into close homosocial relationships before and during marriage. 47 Jewett ends her story with the onset of autumn, and while the girls retreat to their social lives in urban Boston, there is no mention of either the possibility or necessity of marriage. By excluding the natural resolution of mid and late nineteenth-century fiction written by women, Jewett is subversively telling her audience that marriage is not the end of every young woman's story.

Jewett's subversion of the marriage plot becomes more evident in her later and more widely read novel, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The women in this book are older, and for the most part single either because they were widowed, or in the case of the narrator, because they have apparently chosen that lifestyle. Jewett's women are single more often by chance than by choice; nevertheless, this town is a female world. What is significant about these women is their strength and autonomy. Even Mrs. Todd's octogenarian mother, who relies on her son for so many day-to-day necessities, is capable of making long journeys and performing somewhat strenuous labor. There is also within the text the story of the woman who banished herself to a reclusive island dwelling where

---

she took care of herself with almost no outside support until her death. What *Country*... could demonstrate to a careful reader is that a woman’s independent life did not have to end with marriage. What it also showed its readers was a story constructed to resemble women’s lives of the day. “The rocking structure of Jewett’s narrative echoes, in other words, many women’s domestic, affectional experience, which is defined less by the attainment of unique individual goals than by process and repetition.” What this suggests is that the new realities depicted by female authors like Jewett who considered what she was doing realism, were often different than those of male authors because men’s and women’s lives were “real” and experienced in different ways.

* A *Country Doctor*, and several other books published in the 1870s and 1880s—among them Louisa May Alcott’s 1873 novel *Work: A Story of Experience*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1869 novel *My Wife and I*—describe women who chose to remain single (Christie, the heroine of *Work* married but was widowed young and chose not to remarry) so that they could devote themselves to a career. This is a significant departure from the standard marriage ending of woman’s fiction from earlier in the century. So while local color and regionalism for Jewett were ways to introduce a late-nineteenth-century realism to her audience through description and local dialect, *A Country Doctor* had a more overt demonstration of the idea that women did not have to marry or assume traditional women’s roles in order to be happy. The themes and plots of these novels, which Phillip Brian Harper refers to as “reform fiction,” signify a different brand of literary realism that was not as constrained as local color. According to Harper the point of reform fiction was to not only point out a

---

*Victorian America*, (New York, 1985), 53-76.
social problem, such as the horrible working conditions in factories, but also to propose a solution. Of this group Phelps’ novel is particularly noteworthy because her criticism was twofold: she was concerned with the economic powerlessness of women and the poor working conditions most factory workers faced.

Unlike the woman’s fiction described and analyzed by Nina Baym which had one or two plot-lines and endings, mid and late century writers such as Alcott, Jewett, and Chopin engaged more openly with questions of gender and a woman’s place in a society that looked altogether different than the one for which their mothers educated them and socialized them. The Civil War opened up society for some women, allowing them to run farms, manage estates, and contribute in a score of ways to the public war effort, the potential for change in gender roles and relations was accelerated by rapid industrialization. A major disruption of the normal functioning of society such as war or economic change can create the possibility for change in other areas. Linda Kerber argues this happened for women as a result of the Revolutionary War, and perhaps the Civil War and the second wave of industrialization similarly acted as catalysts for some women to reevaluate and begin to change their position in American society. By the 1870s and 1880s women were not only creating characters in fiction who chose career over marriage, but many middle-class women could choose careers which made the possibility of remaining single a reality. For the remainder of the nineteenth century the conflict between women earning wages and maintaining their place in the social order was

48 For more on Jewett’s organizational technique in Country of the Pointed Firs, see Elizabeth Ammons, Conflicting Stories, 54.
contested in fiction such as Jewett’s and Alcott’s, and outside of fiction in the suffrage movement.

Kate Chopin, like Sarah Orne Jewett, built up a reputation as a local colorist, writing stories about rural Louisiana and the various populations who lived on the bayou. Local color fiction was not plot-driven, but rather was an attempt to record real life in a given time and place, while at the same time telling a story that could apply to a greater number of Americans. Local color fiction had adopted much of the structure of sentimentalism (mostly in the way that it was still woman-focused and centered), while at the same time infusing it with greater realism. One of the only reasons why local color was not part of the more widely esteemed genre of regional fiction, was that local color was written by women, and regional fiction was written by men. Traditionally, literary critics differentiated the two by claiming that regional fiction discussed universal themes of the human condition, and that local color did not. What this overlooks is that whaling or running away from home with an ex-slave were activities only men (or boys) could do, and therefore not speaking of universalities, but rather gender-biased situations.51 From the beginning of her career as a writer Kate Chopin incorporated themes and story lines that violated the gender-based rules of sentimentalism embodied in local color.52

By the time The Awakening was published in 1899, Chopin had clearly moved beyond local color. What genre she moved into is an altogether different question, one that I do not think has been answered at this point with any kind of certainty. Chopin still used some of the tools of local color in her 1899 novel, like the rich descriptions of Grand Isle and New Orleans. While there was some precedent in American women’s fiction for

51Baym, Woman's Fiction, 14.
women choosing career over marriage, or for women choosing to remain single, separation and child abandonment, both discussed in the text of *The Awakening*, were new themes for American readers. *The Awakening* then did not come out of nowhere, but it moved the discussion of gender roles and women's identity ahead so quickly that it is a literary anomaly. Later books that also question the established gender system such as Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905), did so in ways that were more socially acceptable, and in fact thematically backtracked from Chopin's text. For example, Lily Bart in *House of Mirth* faces impossible decisions in terms of trying to establish her own identity and live a happy life much as Edna does, but Lily was not already married when she had to make these decisions.

One of the unifying aspects of nineteenth-century women's fiction is that women writers addressed gender relations and particularly marriage in their texts, but kept their criticisms of gender inequality mostly in the subtext. As the century progressed, the message that a problem with the ideology of gender and the gendered division of power between men and women gradually made its way to the forefront in texts. Jo March was forced by sentimental readers and publishers to marry, but the narrator of *Country of the Pointed Firs* was single, and Jewett received rave reviews for the book. The subversive was not totally gone (we do not know for a fact that the narrator of *Pointed Firs* was single), and what this meant for a novel of such clear and open social criticisms as *The Awakening*, is that neither readers nor critics were prepared for it. Edna Pontellier does

---

52 For more on Kate Chopin's violations of local color in her writings see Emily Toth's biography, *Kate Chopin* (New York, 1990).

53 Some critics, including biographer Emily Toth, argue that *The Awakening* thematically came from the influence of male European realists and naturalists such as Henrik Ibsen and Guy deMaupassant.
not become single by a stroke of luck such as the death of her husband: she leaves him and her two young sons to live an independent and scandalous life.

As American society changed, so these changes were reflected in fiction, and so fiction writers believed that they could continue to change American society. In reading back and forth between texts and contexts, like in the case of *Life in the Iron Mills*, where the context—industrial iron production—creates a text in which its author tried to open the audiences' eyes to the evils of industrialization, what we see is some American women addressing social issues from the way to be a proper Republican mother, to the possibility of suffrage, and in doing so engaging in a public and political activity. Writing in nineteenth-century America was always a political act for women. Art and culture can never be taken out of their historical context, just as that context is incomplete without an understanding of how cultural items such as books and magazines could affect people and drive them to change their society. Now I would like to open up Kate Chopin's text *The Awakening*, to see it in its context of gender, societal, economic, and political issues at the end of the nineteenth century.
To be able to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch according to my understanding; to be not only a painter but a man as well, in short, to create living art, this is my goal. (Gustave Courbet)

Let fiction cease to lie about life... let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off working them by springs and wires. (William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, 1891)

The words of Gustave Courbet and William Dean Howells point to a certain similarity between painting and writing from the middle of the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth: Courbet was one of the first painters to call himself a “realist,” and Howells one of the first American writers to embrace the same moniker. In order to understand how the themes and style of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* illustrate the place of women writers and their works at the turn of the century one must first understand realism, the genre in which she believed she was working. The ties to Courbet and Howells are appropriate, and perhaps necessary, because of the similarity in mindset, themes, and styles used by the group of artists working in a variety of different media, who called themselves realists. The theory in which realist painting and writing grounded itself, was that the artist’s work recreated the world around him without romanticizing or altering it; in Howells’s words, the goal was to “... leave off
painting dolls and working them by springs and wires." The late nineteenth-century world which artists were called on to recreate by Howells, Courbet, and a score of other painters and writers, was one of rapid industrialization, faster and better communication, increasing literacy, and in America, territorial expansionism: Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his paper on the significance of the frontier in 1893, seven years before the publication of Chopin’s novel. Technological innovation progressed rapidly in this world. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; the telegraph was brought to America by Samuel Morse in 1844; and perhaps most significantly for the art world, the science of photography was increasingly widespread among regions and classes. The impact on the art world, and perhaps the world of letters as well, of photography is immeasurable, but certainly important because art and literature at some level are attempts to recreate and fix life on a page. Suddenly artists and writers faced a new and scientific way of accomplishing this, a fact which must have affected the way they thought about and created their works. What the previous chapter has shown is that women writers of the nineteenth century were mainstream rather than marginal. Partly what I hope to show in this chapter is that Kate Chopin’s book can only be properly contextualized if one takes into account that she sat for photographs, that she corresponded with European authors, and that she considered herself a woman and artist of the world.

54 The springs and wires Howells refers to are references to earlier genres such as Romanticism which he believed to be the style of Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fennimore Cooper. In this sense Realism as a genre certainly grew from a reaction to an earlier genre.
55 Although artists as early as the seventeenth-century had used lenses in order to project scenes onto flat surfaces, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that photographic images could be chemically fixed onto a surface like metal or paper.
The genre of literary realism geographically spanned Europe and America, and on both continents current scholars argue over a definition of realism. Despite the lack of consensus no one has successfully jettisoned the category altogether. One reason why it is a difficult category to abandon is because the principle authors within the genre claimed to belong to it so strenuously. This group included staples of the American literary canon like Twain, Howells, Dreyser, and James, but feminist literary scholars have struggled to include women like Davis, Jewett, and Chopin.\textsuperscript{56} If one goes to the texts of this group one will find more difference than similarity, which is the problem scholars find now: how does one define the genre if authors themselves saw it differently and used it differently? I argue in this chapter that realism as defined by men like Howells and James excluded women and that the critical rejection of Chopin's book stemmed from the gendering of this literary field. Whereas women writers earlier in the century criticized gender relationships in genres deemed "acceptable" by critics, publishers, and audiences, Chopin was one of the first to openly work in the genre of realism and in doing so use what had been, up to that point, a tool of male authors. The response of late nineteenth-century American readers and reviewers is important in determining how mainstream women writers actually were by 1899: they embraced Twain, James, and Howells, as well as the earlier works of Chopin which were described by her contemporaries as "local color," but found her second novel too challenging. When Chopin in \textit{The Awakening} embraced a more European and male style, allowing her characters to move without springs or wires, to allow in particular one woman—Edna Pontellier—to move without these apparati, the reading community represented by critics rejected her. In considering Chopin's novel in

\textsuperscript{56} Both Howells and James wrote essays proclaiming the virtues of realism and what made a text fit into this genre. See William Dean Howells \textit{Criticism and Fiction} (1891), and Henry James "The Art of Fiction,"
its literary and social context it is possible to see American beliefs about gender roles at
the turn into the twentieth century.

*  *  *

Throughout the nineteenth century both male and female authors wrote in specific
genres. We have already seen a few of these, the seduction novel, children’s books,
“woman’s fiction,” and local color. But, as Nina Baym suggests in her recent work, there
were perhaps more non-fictional genres than fictional, including history writing, political
writing, advice manuals.57 In the closing decades of the century many women writers
wrote within the genre of local color or regional fiction, a style in which authors tried to
accurately paint or sketch a certain place and people at a given time.58 The authors were
concerned with recreating the language, mannerisms, and customs of a particular group
of characters with whom a wider audience might be unfamiliar. Kate Chopin became
famous as a local colorist in works like Bayou Folk (1894). In the stories of this volume
and her 1897 collection A Night in Acadie she presented readers across America with a
multi-racial, multi-ethnic place, Louisiana. As I argued in the last chapter, the most
significant difference between local color and literary realism as defined by writers,
publishers, and critics was one of gender, and today an increasing number of literary

57 Nina Baym in her recent book claims that literary texts by women may actually be the minority of those
published by women in the antebellum period. Baym, American Women Writers and the World of History,
1790-1860, (New Jersey, 1995), 4. Another important recent work discusses women writers of political
novels. See Susan K. Harris, ed. Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers 1797-1901
(Tennessee, 1995).
58 There is an interesting argument made by Kristie Hamilton that there is an entire genre that has been
overlooked which she dubs the “literary sketch.” Many of the stories by women like Jewett and Chopin fit
into this style. These were typically short pieces rather than novels that may have been published in
newspapers or magazines, or in collections. America’s Sketchbook: the Cultural Life of a Nineteenth-
Century Literary Genre, (Ohio, 1998).
scholars include women like Chopin and Jewett in studies of realism.\textsuperscript{59} I believe what links them fundamentally is a mindset which the authors brought to their writing. Both local colorists and realists attempted self-consciously to depict a world in which they lived. Like realist painters, these writers went \textit{en plein aire}, leaving the studio to observe real people and landscapes which they then recreated textually for their readers. While most scholars agree that there is no set of stylistic markers of realism they do agree that American texts from the 1870s on “turned to new realities.”\textsuperscript{60} Men and women might turn to different realities—whale hunting versus female economic independence—but both removed religion or an outside sense of morality and social propriety from dictating the behavior of their characters or the course of their books. It is likely that Chopin believed all of her works, not just her late novel, to be works of literary realism, not merely works of “local color.” Chopin convinces us of her self-conscious use of realism, that she has in fact heeded Howells’s call to remove the strings and wires, in her published response to the criticisms of \textit{The Awakening}:

I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company.

But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over

\textsuperscript{59} Michael Davitt Bell is one of these scholars. In a book on American Realism he includes an entire chapter on Sarah Orne Jewett. He does however argue that men’s and women’s writing had stylistic and thematic differences within the genre. Bell, \textit{American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea}, (Chicago, 1993), 175-204.

\textsuperscript{60} Bell, \textit{The Problem of American Realism}, 2. Some of the stylistic similarities that are cited by scholars are: less emphasis on plot, use of the vernacular, a wider variety of characters representing different races, cultures, and classes, and the novel format.
and it was then too late.61

Aside from the tongue-in-cheek tone of this response, it is clear Chopin understood what constituted literary realism. Chopin claims no moral responsibility for a character over whom she had no control. Edna was a real person.

A look at the text of The Awakening illustrates how Chopin attempted to recreate the world in which she lived. Read alongside other sources it is possible to see where the realist prose and subject matter of Chopin’s text open a window onto life and culture in late-nineteenth-century Louisiana for an audience then and now. It is through this type of close reading that an historian can find a visual picture of life in the past as well as a sense of speech, social norms, and behavior. Chopin was herself an outsider to the Creole culture of her text (she was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri and only moved to Louisiana after her 1870 marriage to Oscar Chopin), and so is describing her own white, middle-class, Protestant “reality” as well as the one she was part of for many years of her adult life. Edna Pontellier not only resembled her creator but also a potential audience for the book, and in choosing this dichotomy between protagonist and the majority of characters in the book she used the same technique as Davis did in Life in the Iron Mills. Chopin uses Edna to provide a white, middle or upper-class, largely Protestant audience, with a window into the sometimes mysterious and different Creole culture in which the protagonist and author lived.62 Unlike Davis’ narrator though, Edna is the protagonist not merely a removed observer, a distinction which may account for the novel alienating

61 Quoted in Emily Toth, Unveiling Kate Chopin (Mississippi, 1999), 223-224. This quote is also telling as it seems to reject one of the main premises of naturalist authors which is that given certain conditions people will behave in a certain way, in fact environment determines behavior.
readers, and also significant because Chopin is moving more confidently into the genre of realism in placing Edna amidst the action as a prime mover.

Despite the differences between Edna and the society in which she lives, there are some obvious ways that Chopin makes an argument for similarity between her audience and her mostly Creole cast of characters. It is in this similarity that twentieth-century readers can see how the novel described or reflected life at that time and in that place. The most obvious similarity between Chopin's cast of characters and her audience is class. The novel describes a leisured lifestyle that was experienced beyond New Orleans and Grand Isle, in many of the larger cities of late nineteenth-century America. When the book opens, Edna is summering at a resort in Grand Isle, Louisiana with her two young sons. Her husband spends weekdays working in New Orleans, and weekends with his family. The Pontellier's habit of vacationing away from the city in seaside resorts was one shared by many upper and middle-class Americans at the turn-of-the-century—it was a practice that required a certain economic stature and available cash. Leonce Pontellier was one of many American men aspiring to live a leisured lifestyle whom Thorstein Veblen identified and described in his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen's overarching argument is that many Americans tried to move up the social ladder by appearing to maintain a leisured lifestyle.

Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" to describe the effort of upwardly mobile members of society to distance themselves from the lower classes by

---

63 Literary scholar Mary Bendel-Simso argues that in fact, Creoles had, "adapted to and copied the business and political acumen of the Americans." Mary M. Bendel-Simso, "Mothers, Women and Creole Mother-Women in Kate Chopin's South," *Southern Studies* (1992), 36.
purchasing and displaying the trappings of the wealthier classes.⁶⁴ Among these trappings were large lavishly decorated houses, servants, expensive food, clothing, and jewelry. Contemporary writers like Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, even though they both described vastly different regions, depicted a society with practices and habits that were not far from Veblen's observations. Edna has servants who watch over her children and home, she is given a diamond tiara for her birthday, and in various scenes in the novel dines on rich food and drinks wine.⁶⁵ The description of the décor of the Pontellier's New Orleans house is detailed: Chopin pays specific attention to the types of household items which would indicate wealth and status, items that are leisured,

Within the doors the appointments were perfect after the conventional type. The softest carpets and rugs covered the floor; rich and tasteful draperies hung at doors and windows. There were paintings, selected with judgment and discrimination, upon the walls. The cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask which daily appeared on the table were the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier.⁶⁶

In addition to outfitting himself with these trappings, Leonce Pontellier also equips himself with a wife, and his wife, just like the silver and cut glass, is evidence of his status and success, able to give him respectability through her beauty and manners. Early

⁶⁴ Veblen writes, “In order to gain and hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence. . .” Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (New York, 1953), 42.
⁶⁵ Historians Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin argue that the governess was an important symbol for a family trying to display their wealth, “she [the governess] was a symbol of the wife/mother's emancipation from the last type of work. . .and of her adoption of a totally ornamental role.” Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin, eds., The Nineteenth-Century Woman (New York, 1978), 137.
in the text he, "[looks] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property. . . ." And when Edna went out one day when she was supposed to be receiving callers her husband’s response was, "Why, my dear, I should think you’d understand by this time that people don’t do such things; we’ve got to observe les convenances [appearances, society’s conventions] if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession."67

Despite the similarities Chopin draws between her characters and her audience, at times her choice of setting the story among Louisiana Creoles separated her audience from the characters in the text. In other words, the very thing that made her text adhere to the conventions of realism, alienated many of her readers. This is apparent primarily with the sexual content in the book, and in examining how she treats this topic we can see late-century beliefs about sexuality. If one is to take the book at face value it seems that Creoles had a somewhat different set of sexual standards, practices, and mores than white, Protestant Americans at the close of the nineteenth century. Chopin was not alone in believing Creole sexuality to be more open, and in choosing this culture in which to set her novel it was less dangerous for her to discuss sexual transgression in this society.68 Chopin’s choice of a white, Protestant protagonist who reflected the readership of the book may have backfired though: because Edna is familiar to the reader, it is disturbing that she chooses to transgress sexual boundaries and attempts to adopt a more open and culturally different sexuality.69 The difference in how Kate Chopin applied this technique

66 Kate Chopin, The Awakening (New York, 1976), 53.
67 Chopin, The Awakening, 2, 55.
68 Mary M. Bendel-Simso, in, "Mothers, Women and Creole Mother-Women," Southern Studies (1992) 35-44 discusses how Creoles viewed their own sexuality and how Edna as an outsider misunderstood many of their cultural values. For a good discussion of race and sexuality in the works of Chopin see, Michele A. Birnbaum, “‘Alien Hands’: Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race,” American Literature LXVI (1994), 301-323.
69 See Sara deSaussure Davis’s essay “Chopin’s Movement Toward Universal Myth,” in Lynda S. Boren and Sara deSaussure Davis, eds., Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou (Baton Rouge, 1992), 201.
and how Rebecca Harding Davis applied it in *Life in the Iron Mills*, is that Davis's narrator remained outside of the action of the story: she watched the events unfold from an upstairs room. Edna is more problematic because she adopts attitudes and practices of another culture that contradict her own upbringing, and that of white, middle and upper-class readers. In placing her protagonist among the "others" in society Chopin believed that she was following the theory and practice of realism—she created a setting and group of people in order to describe their lives, beliefs, and interactions. Unlike seduction novels which were meant to instruct a reader, realism in Chopin's view was only meant to recreate a situation, or a small world.

While I believe that the "real" qualities within *The Awakening* are found throughout, that one can feel the Grand Isle air and perhaps for a moment imagine life in late-century Louisiana, there are two especially important places in the text where one can see specific examples of life through a woman's eyes, and how a woman's reality was profoundly different than a man's in ways that could not be overlooked by a female author writing in this style. The first is the reaction to Edna's choice to live apart from her husband and sons, alone in a small house in New Orleans. She first presents this idea to her friend the musician Mademoiselle Reisz after she and Leonce had been back in New Orleans from Grand Isle for a few weeks. The older woman asks her, "'Where are you going? to New York? to Iberville? to your father in Mississippi? where?' 'Just two steps away,' laughed Edna, 'in a little four-room house around the corner. It looks so cozy, so inviting and restful..." Edna goes on to explain that though she is not entirely sure why she has made this decision to go, she has saved up enough money from her mother's estate, her gambling wins, and through selling her paintings that the rent of the house will
be manageable with her own money and not Leonce’s. She moves into her “pigeon-house” as she calls it, without informing Leonce. He learns about her move from someone else, and as soon as he does he, “immediately wrote her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance. . .and he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say.”\textsuperscript{71} In order to avoid people talking he goes to the extreme of publishing an ad in the paper announcing that the Potellier house was being remodeled to make it even grander, and to excuse his wife’s absence from it. It is obvious that what others would say is not positive, and that it would reflect very poorly on him—no doubt it would look like she had left him. While more women in the 1890s were able to support themselves, it was still by no means the majority, and it is likely that far fewer of them lived in the South. But this does not mean that living single was a societal norm, and we must also remember that Edna was married. Divorce in this time period was still rare and certainly most of Edna’s peers, and most of Chopin’s readers would in fact be astonished by Edna’s removal to the pigeon-house.

The other fine example of Chopin writing specifically about women and their place in society is her discussion of Madame Ratignolle’s pregnancy. She went farther than this and actually included a child-birth scene. Most scholars agree that \textit{The Awakening} was the first novel to openly discuss a pregnant woman. Here we can see how Chopin self-consciously included new realities into her text to better represent the world she knew. She in fact bore six children, and though birth rates were decreasing in the late nineteenth-century there was still a discrepancy based on religious belief and region. What episode of a woman’s life could be more “real” in a sense than pregnancy and

\textsuperscript{70} Chopin, \textit{The Awakening}, 85.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 100.
childbirth? Chopin includes them both in the pages of *The Awakening*, in the same way that Courbet and Millais included peasants in their paintings. Before the middle of the nineteenth century this subject matter was seen by critics and artists as unsuitable, but the genre of realism opened up the possibilities for new subject matter in both texts and the visual arts.

Two recent works on literary realism focus on the way that realism belonged to a particular group of writers, in a way that excluded the works of outsiders from the genre. Nancy Glazener argues that realism was a genre claimed largely by white, urban, middle and upper-class writers for a group of magazines and publishers she call the *Atlantic*-group, a title that illustrates their close connection to the dominant American literary journal *The Atlantic Monthly*. Similarly, Michael Davitt Bell gives realism a northern connection, but he also claims that realism was a genre claimed by a group of men for their own writing. Bell’s overall argument is that realism for male authors, most specifically for one of the self-appointed leaders of the movement William Dean Howells, was a way to establish their own gender identity and place within the literary community. Howells in the 1880s as an editor of the *Atlantic* declared a “realism war,” and it is important to understand what he meant by the term to see that women writers such as Chopin, while they might be published in the *Atlantic*, were never seen by their male contemporaries as realists. Bell sees realism as an approach to writing for Howells that was less artistic—that in fact male writers earlier in the century were perhaps not seen as real men because they lived a life of the mind. It is also important to recognize that fiction writing may well have been perceived by readers as “womanly” in an era
when three-quarters of all published novels were written by women in the United States.73 Because realism in Howells’ definition was a type of writing that included more of the realities of late-nineteenth-century life, in other words, men’s lives, it was a way for male writers to perform real and meaningful work.74 Part of this equation, Bell argues, is that writers like Howells had to lose their reputation as artists in order to claim a place as real men. The way to distinguish themselves from the Romanticism of Cooper or the morality of Hawthorne was to abandon style and plot as the markers of literariness and embrace subject matter and setting instead. In an attempt to make themselves less marginal in nineteenth-century America, realists defined themselves against other groups of writers, therefore creating new others or marginal groups such as women writers.

It is interesting that Michael Bell used Sarah Orne Jewett rather than Kate Chopin in his discussion of how and why women were excluded from full participation in the genre of realism by male writers, publishers, and literary critics. If in fact realists like Howells had to abandon style and art in their writing in order to gain legitimacy for male writing as a profession, Kate Chopin is perhaps the best example of how women writers in the late nineteenth century felt it was necessary to establish themselves as artists in order to gain legitimacy for themselves in the world of letters. The way she attempted to gain a place in the canon was by using the style of realism. Chopin and Jewett both abandoned themes and forms of earlier women’s fiction such as marriage endings

73 Susan Coultrap McQuin provides the following publishing statistics: before 1830 one third of published American writers were women; after 1872 three quarters were. Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century (Chapel Hill, 1990), 2.
74 Bell developed his original argument in his book The Problem of American Realism (1993), where he says not only did men like Howells gender the genre of realism, but in doing so they categorized the work
because they believed that by eschewing formulas they would be acknowledged as artists, rather than as writers for the market. Men and women in the late nineteenth century used realism for different ends and in different ways. Where Chopin saw realism as a way to gain caché as an artist, male authors such as Howells saw abandoning art and adopting what they called realism as the way to gain literary caché.

*The Awakening* can be read at two levels, both of which indicate how important being an artist was to Chopin, and how some women were trying to establish a new place for themselves in the world of literature, but also in the wider world of nineteenth-century America. One level of reading this text is to find the examples of women artists and to see what value Chopin gives them, the other is to see where Chopin saw herself as an artist in the creation of her text. At the core of both is the assertion of a particular type of authority: the authority to create outside of the strictures of morality or teaching lessons, and most importantly the authority to criticize women’s lack of power in a highly gender-defined world.

An important theme of *The Awakening* is leisure vs. work in the lives of middle and upper-class women. While the expectation of men like Leonce Pontellier and Monsieur Ratignolle is that their wives should lead leisured lives, Chopin puts a spotlight on two female character—Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna Pontellier—who choose to work as artists in order to illustrate the options beyond motherhood available to women. The character Mademoiselle Reisz is an established musician and spinster, unlike Edna who realizes after she is already married and the mother of two her desire to be an artist. Mlle Reisz is a gifted pianist who is described in the novel as, “a disagreeable little woman, no

of women like Sarah Orne Jewett as local color or regionalism, excluding them from “full participation” in the realist movement, 176.
longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others. Mlle is the quintessential picture of disagreeable spinsterhood, and it seems the reason for this spinsterhood is her own choice of art over marriage. She says to Edna that, “To be an artist. . .one must possess many gifts. . .And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies.” By remaining single, Mlle Reisz showed society that she possessed the type of soul to dare and defy nineteenth-century gender roles and expectations. At the same time, Chopin endows this character with a disagreeable nature, perhaps as a comment on how spinsters were commonly perceived by nineteenth-century Americans.

It is no coincidence that Chopin made her working women artists and not milliners or innkeepers: as with other women writers, Chopin wrote of her own experiences as an artist in nineteenth-century America. One key issue in the late nineteenth century for women who wanted to alter gender roles, was how to balance working at a vocation with the demands of domestic work. Chopin’s development of Edna as an artist and a mother acts as a counter-part to the single artist, Mademoiselle Reisz. Certainly the importance of motherhood, and the status a white, upper or middle-class woman received when she became a mother, was still relevant in the late nineteenth century. Historian Nancy Theriot writes, “Amid all the changes in women’s material conditions in the late nineteenth century, there was a general continuity in women’s high

---

76 Ibid., 68.
77 Chopin focuses on Edna and Mlle Reisz, but there are several other “working” women in this novel: Madame LeBrun, the woman on the Island Chernier, maids, and the nanny are a few. Most of these are more typical examples of women at work. Madame is a widow who runs a resort, and the others are either of an inferior race, class, or are yet to be married.
valuation of motherhood."78 Because of this "high valuation" it was difficult for women who chose not to become mothers to find a place in society, as it was difficult for women who chose motherhood and a career. Late nineteenth-century fiction by American women reflects both of these conflicts in many texts and subtexts, of which *The Awakening* is only one.79 But Chopin’s text allows us to see how one woman writer chose to address the tension between motherhood and career, or more specifically, domesticity and artistry. It is an interesting comment that in this novel Chopin poses the dilemma of women at the time in black and white terms: women such as Edna and Mlle Reisz were forced to choose between becoming an artist (someone who was true to their gifts and their courageous soul) and becoming a dutiful mother. Clearly Kate Chopin knew that it was possible to be a mother and an artist, as she herself was both. But she was an exception, and I believe her goal was to illustrate how difficult it was in the late nineteenth century for a woman to choose between herself and the role she was expected to fill.80 Chopin’s message is that women believed they had few options—if she overstates this or paints a stark picture it should be seen as a literary device to convince an audience of the limited options white, middle and upper-class women had at the end of the century. Nothing illustrates this literary device more profoundly than Edna’s suicide: when faced with the choice of reclaiming her role as a wife to Leonce and mother to her two young sons, or living the life of an artist where she dared and defied conventional social roles, Edna

---

79 Elaine Showalter argues that in several of Louisa May Alcott’s novels, including *Work, Diana and Persis* (an unfinished text where Alcott explores the possibilities of combining motherhood and a career), and *A Modern Mephistopheles*, she writes about the conflict between creativity and domesticity. Showalter, *Alternative Alcott* (New Jersey, 1988), xxxvi.
80 Literary scholar Susan K. Harris argues that the central problem in the novels *The Story of Avis, A Country Doctor, The Awakening*, and *O, Pioneers!* is whether women could have a non-domestic career and a marriage at the same time, and in each of these books the lesson is that you cannot. Harris, *19th-Century* 205.
believed that she could live with neither choice. The message of her suicide is that something in American society had to change to allow women to be mothers and wives if they chose, but also to be artists and mothers, or just to be artists. Literary scholar Winfred Fluck posits that Edna’s suicide was her way of refusing any of the roles offered her: her suicide demonstrates her agency in a world in which women still had limited power.\footnote{Fluck, “Transgressions,” 167.}

Kate Chopin saw herself as an artist who possessed a soul which dared and defied. It was because she saw herself as an artist, like her literary role model Guy deMaupassant, that she chose to explore themes and styles outside the realm of what was traditionally found in female-authored fiction. Chopin believed that these themes, such as sex, solitude, madness, disillusionment, and suicide, existed in the real world, and were therefore appropriate subject-matter for realism.\footnote{Toth, Chopin, 273.} Art to Chopin meant describing life in fiction without limits, just as life occurred realistically with no limits. Men and women had extramarital affairs, interracial sex was not a myth, women were capable of being artists and self-supporting individuals: all of these things were true in nineteenth-century America, and were therefore, to Chopin’s mind, appropriate themes for a realist author.

For a female writer such as Chopin, realism was both a way to distance herself from the formulaic books written by women earlier in the century which upheld middle-class morals and beliefs, and a way to create a category of woman artist in American society. What this meant to women writers was that they must strive to use realism—what they saw as a more artistic style of prose—in order to elevate themselves to a new level of respect and literary appreciation. In \textit{The Awakening} this craftsmanship can perhaps best...
be seen in the descriptive passages of characters and physical places. In fact this novel is largely devoted to description and reportage rather than plot, and so it would be difficult to select any one passage that emphasizes the style employed by Chopin.

Nineteenth-century readers were accustomed to local color sketches and stories as well as “new realities” described in the works of Dreyser and Howells. Even so, the contemporary reviews of *The Awakening* reveal that there were still certain new realities that were unacceptable in novels. The critical rejection of her book prevented Chopin from entering the league of realist writers, and also banished her book to obscurity until the 1960s. Chopin’s new brand of writing which blended realist subject matter like the sexual and moral transgressions of the protagonist, with local color style, was the subject of much criticism. The reviews came out in papers nationally, supporting the argument that Chopin was a writer with a wide audience, and if her book was focused on one parish in Louisiana, it was addressed to a much broader and more diverse readership. Several of the contemporary reviews of the novel address the style that Chopin adopted: realism. In a publicity review that was released before the novel, reviewer Lucy Monroe wrote, “. . .and Edna’s husband especially is drawn to life.” This comment is striking for a few reasons. First, Leonce’s character is secondary—he actually appears in very few chapters, and when he does it is often as a man who, “[looks] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property. . .” What this means is that Lucy Monroe, a woman living in the 1890s, recognized characteristics in a fictional man that she also observed in real men of her day. Among the few characteristics that Kate Chopin bestowed upon Leonce Pontellier were possessiveness, narrow-mindedness, and a sense that his wife was supposed to act a certain way because she was his wife. The other interesting point about this piece of the
review, is that while Chopin tried to create a cast of realistic characters, the one that stuck out to Monroe as being particularly believable was Leonce, not Edna. The reviewer in the *Indianapolis Journal* was more evenhanded in praising the realism of the novel, writing that, “one feels while reading it that he is moving among real people and events.”

Literary scholar Robert Shulman proposes an interesting and useful (though not in any way comprehensive) interpretation of late nineteenth-century American realism: “In nineteenth-century America ‘realism’ is a relational term defined partly by what people in a particular generation were accustomed to accept as plausible and lifelike, partly by what they responded to as pushing toward and beyond the boundaries of middle-class respectability.” This theory can be applied to Lucy Monroe’s review: she was accustomed to men like Leonce Pontellier, but she was not accustomed to people openly discussing a woman having an affair, or leaving a husband and two young children. It is these latter actions of Edna that pushed, “beyond middle-class respectability,” and made Chopin’s novel, however realistic it might have been, the target for some sharp criticism.

Many reviews of *The Awakening* printed shortly after the book’s release, express a tension between the fact that Chopin’s brand of realism in *The Awakening* was “plausible and lifelike,” and that it clearly “push[ed] toward and beyond the boundaries of middle-class respectability.” This tension was expressed by the reviewer from the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, who wrote, “there is no denying the fact that it [the novel] deals

---

83 These reviews were cited from Emily Toth’s biography, *Kate Chopin* (New York, 1990), 329, 355.
85 Biographer Emily Toth argued that reviewers overlooked many thematic transgressions in *The Awakening*, such as the description of a pregnant woman, but they could not overlook Edna’s extra-marital affair. *Kate Chopin*, 331-333.
with existent conditions and . . . handles a problem that obtrudes itself only too frequently in the social life of people with whom the question of food and clothing is not the all absorbing one.” At the same time that this reviewer characterizes the novel as realistic to some upper-class Americans, he/she says of it, “It is not a healthy book; if it points at any particular moral or teaches any lesson the fact is not apparent.” So while the novel may have been realistic, its lack of a moral or lesson made it unhealthy, and therefore something that Americans, in most reviewer’s eyes, should perhaps avoid. There was still an expectation that a novel would or should have a moral or didactic element. The fact that this reviewer warned Americans away from this book speaks to the belief that nineteenth-century Americans believed reading books on unacceptable subjects might be harmful, that they could effect the behavior, or change how a reader might act or think. The review speaks plainly to the idea of the influence of the written word.

The reviews in the Los Angeles Sunday Times and the Chicago Times-Herald, were similar in their praise of Chopin’s writing style and their criticism of her subject matter. Both reviewers acknowledged Chopin’s craft and story-telling as beautiful, “the book is a strong and graceful piece of work,” and realistic, “Miss Chopin has a keen knowledge of certain phases of feminine character,” but both condemned the subject matter of the book as “unhealthily introspective and morbid.” The Times-Herald reviewer went so far as to condemn the book as “sex fiction.” Perhaps the reviewer in the Pittsburgh Leader, a young writer named Willa Cather, summed up the sentiment of others when she wrote, “and I shall not attempt to say why Miss Chopin has devoted so

---

exquisite and sensitive, well-governed style to so trite and sordid a theme."\textsuperscript{88} No doubt the explanation lies in Chopin’s own desire to write about “life” rather than “fiction,” and that real life at the turn-of-the-century included much that was trite and sordid.\textsuperscript{89} In using realism to create Edna Pontellier and her surroundings, family, friends, desires, and crises, Chopin was able to make her believable, but in doing so she pushed Edna “beyond the boundaries of middle-class respectability,” in essence condemning her own novel, at least until a time when the boundaries of middle-class respectability had shifted enough to accept Edna and her story.

While everything that happened in the pages of \textit{The Awakening}, from Edna donning gloves to protect herself from the sun, to her extra-marital affair with Alcee Arobin, may have been plausible and lifelike, only some of the realism was acceptable to white middle or upper-class readers. When Chopin stuck to scenery, characters, and language (the backbone of local color writing), she received praise from critics. When these same characters behaved in an improper manner, or stepped beyond their gender roles, Chopin was condemned and accused of writing “sex fiction.” But at least some of the people who read and commented on Chopin’s novel had a different sense of what was plausible and lifelike. The criticism covered a spectrum where at one end the book had little to save it other than good writing, in the middle, the book had excellent writing and some unacceptable themes, and at the other end, the book was well-crafted and discussed themes which were important and highly relevant to some people of the day.


\textsuperscript{89} Emily Toth in her biography of Chopin discusses these artistic and stylistic choices of the author. She also discusses the role of European authors such as Guy deMaupassant in Chopin’s writing. Toth, \textit{Chopin}, 205, 287.
The best review Kate Chopin received for her 1899 novel ran in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* about a month after the book's release. The reviewer, C. L. Deyo, called the book "flawless art," and in closing wrote, "It is unique. The integrity of its art is that of well-knit individuality at one with itself, with nothing superfluous to weaken the impression of a perfect whole." Deyo warns off the young reader, "but not because the young person would be harmed by reading it." Instead, the reviewer's concern was that young readers would not understand the book because they had not lived enough. The suggestion that the book would not "harm" a young reader, again supports the idea that books in the nineteenth century had the ability to help or harm the individuals who read them. The statement also implies that if the readers of *The Awakening* had lived long enough they would understand the character of Edna Pontellier and feel "compassion, not pity," for her. Deyo also warns away the older reader saying, "there is much that is very improper in it, not to say positively unseemly." What these two judgments imply is that the critic counts himself/herself among a group of people who could accept that which was unseemly about the text and appreciate it as a whole despite its immorality. So not only was the novel "plausible and lifelike," but at least some of its readers believed that it rightly belonged to the genre of realism.

The reviewers as a group show a tension between different readers in terms of the respectability of the subject matter dealt with by Kate Chopin, a tension which was also felt by members of different generations who were struggling with their sense of what was plausible, lifelike, and acceptable in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Several literary scholars and historians have recently turned their attention to the idea that

---

what one generation accepts as plausible and lifelike, will not necessarily be the same as what the next generation (who live at the same time) find as plausible and lifelike, and how different generations in the nineteenth century had to adapt to new circumstances for which their upbringings may not have prepared them. This generational difference may be particularly true in the case of women, according to historian Nancy Theriot. In her study *Mothers & Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America*, Theriot writes that women who were in their teens at mid-century and adults in the latter decades of the century (these are the daughters in her study), accepted their mothers’ concepts of femininity, “as the core of gender consciousness,” but had to interpret this truth in a world that was physically and socially different than the one in which their mothers were reared and socialized. In other words, mid and late-century daughters inherited a script that they could not necessarily follow. White middle-class women, according to Theriot, were moving in unprecedented numbers away from the domestic world of their mothers, and joining the workforce or pursuing higher education.91

In her 1979 article, “The Ever Widening Circle,” historian Ann Scott suggests that nineteenth-century women, such as Theriot’s “daughters,” could hold parts of two value systems at once. In this interpretation, women in the nineteenth century perceived themselves as physically and socially different from the mothers who had socialized them. They did not have to cast off their mother’s value systems altogether, but could

---

incorporate parts of the older value system into their own.\textsuperscript{92} I believe this overall picture may be oversimplified, as many young women in the closing decades of the century adopted a number of different techniques to reconcile their upbringing with their situation, and a more nuanced analysis of these women is needed. However, it is clear in the women’s fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that women writers were deeply conflicted about what was right or proper based on their socialization, and what was right based on their own experiences and circumstances.

What stands out clearly in an historical study of the United States in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, is that men’s and women’s experiences and circumstances changed rapidly as social, economic, and political changes accelerated. One outcome of these changes was that some men and women in the late nineteenth century saw the period of as one of flux, and therefore one in which redefining their roles was a possibility, very similar to the Revolutionary period where American writers attempted to shape their new Republican society through their texts. Women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created texts in which characters abandoned older gender-defined roles, and struck out to search for what women’s new roles could be. Therefore writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather, all struggled in their texts with issues of the day such as women supporting themselves economically and emotionally. As with early and mid-century authors, and with many of their peers attempting to change women’s proper place in a number of different forums, these authors chose a variety of different approaches to

themes such as economic independence, the relevance or need for women to marry, and the notion of women in the work place.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the more outspoken writers in the late nineteenth century on the issue of women's proper place. In her 1898 book *Women and Economics* she described and criticized the process of restriction and repression into which all women were born: "the smothering 'no' which crushed down all human desire to create, to discover, to learn, to express, to advance."\(^{93}\) By the late nineteenth century many upper and middle-class American women found the "smothering no" less tolerable and actively sought other avenues for creating, discovering, learning, and advancing. Historian Nancy Theriot's research into middle and upper-class women's lives in the closing decades of the century revealed that among this group of women there was a striking increase in their employment rate, and unlike their mothers their work was not limited to domestic labor. These women were physically stronger, were likely to marry later in life, could in some cases receive a higher education, and because of new methods of birth control, had increased control over reproduction.\(^{94}\) It is impossible to determine whether some women moved into these spaces and patterns of behavior, leading more women by example to follow, or whether these spaces and opportunities opened up for some women who then moved into them: what is important is that this movement into new roles and public spaces fed itself. What is expressed in women's fiction of this time period, in books like *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*, is that moving into new roles was not an option for all middle or upper-class women, and it was still a difficult


\(^{94}\) Theriot, *Mothers & Daughters*, 79, 90. Also see Linda Gordon's discussion of advances in birth control in her book *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York,
move for those who made it. This was no doubt the experience of the women writers themselves, as they wrote in personal letters and diaries of their struggle to be seen as credible and respected artists, on par with their male peers in the field.\footnote{An early example of this is Louisa May Alcott who struggled with her publisher over writing the second installment of \textit{Little Women}. She objected to writing “moral pap.” Sarah Orne Jewett also wrote of her desire to be seen as an artist. See Richard Brodhead, \textit{Cultures of Letters} 173-174.}

For the most part, women who wrote novels and stories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not see an easy way to resolve issues of gender inequality, their compromised power relationship, and how limited a woman’s choices actually were. If a woman could not find a way to support herself financially over her adult years, she was left with little choice but to marry someone who could provide this security. If Chopin had seen a solution to Edna’s dilemma, her protagonist would not have believed her only option was to take her own life. As a group, these late-century writers did not have the solutions to questions of gender roles and power relationships or to how women could change their roles in American society, politics, economics, and culture. But they all engage with the issue of male dominance overtly, and critically in their texts, criticizing in particular the separate sphere ideology that more or less shaped society, or at least attempted to, throughout the nineteenth century. According to literary scholar Larzer Ziff, novels written in the 1890s made strong statements in regard to women’s equality, but had timid resolutions. Similarly, literary scholar Elaine Showalter sees \textit{The Awakening} as a novel about process rather than program, a passage rather than a destination.\footnote{Elaine Showalter, \textit{Sister’s Choice} (Oxford, 1991), 73, and Larzer Ziff, \textit{The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation} (New York, 1966), 275-306.} Two novels written by women in the early years of the twentieth century

1976), though she argues that the most significant changes happened in the first decades of the twentieth century. See particularly chapters 8 & 9.
also embody Showalter's idea of passage rather than destination: Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905), and Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1912).

The picture that emerges from an attempt to locate nineteenth-century life, notably views on gender and power relationships through a reading of *The Awakening*, is that the United States was caught in a period of flux where a younger generation of men and women were making decisions that sometimes ran contrary to their upbringings. Women writers in the later decades of the nineteenth century moved many of their criticisms of gender relationships from the subtext into the foreground of their texts, and asked many questions about the social and cultural system in which they lived. They especially questioned openly the ideology of separate spheres, and where women at the end of the nineteenth century fit into that construct. Even so, by 1899 these women were not suggesting answers to questions, or even discussing viable options for change. Edna Pontellier saw no way out of her unsatisfactory role as a wife and mother other than to take her own life. Edith Wharton's protagonist, Lily Bart in *House of Mirth* also commits suicide when she discovers no viable options for living her life as she wants to. The literature of this period is certainly more open and critical than in any other period in the nineteenth century, but it was still perhaps, at its best, only a forum for issues, not a program for change. *The Awakening* was startling because it seemed to bring issues so clearly into the foreground, and urge that change was necessary, that the current system was dated and that the ideology was highly unrealistic.
Conclusion

The worlds of literature and history can never be completely separated, for history is recorded in works of fiction, as fiction is created within a period of history. Therefore, in a study of history, fiction can play an important role in providing a window into a specific time period. In this study I pointed the historical lens at the entire nineteenth century, to see how women's fiction specifically told stories of the day from women's perspective, and to see the role those stories played in American society and culture. In reading both nineteenth-century women's fiction, and subsequent scholarship on this body of work, a clear dichotomy became apparent between ante and post-bellum themes and forms. Perhaps it is too easy to choose the Civil War as the great dividing line in the nineteenth century: while America was changed by the war in a multitude of ways, one has to imagine that the farmer in Worcester, Massachusetts, or the school teacher in Richmond, Virginia, did not experience a cataclysmic shift in his or her daily existence or personal outlook on life. The war did leave many Americans with a sense that they could not return to the pre-war years, and with a sense of new possibilities and opportunities. Women in particular experienced a shift in roles and opportunities partly because of the war, and partly because of the greater trend toward industrialization after the war.

While all women writers in the nineteenth century engaged with issues of gender and power, it was not until after the Civil War and greater industrialization that some women writers began to openly criticize the gender division of power which they felt left
them with a limited and repressed role. The change in themes of women writers is discussed by literary scholar Linda Grasso:

Such a shift in vision signals the ending of ante-bellum female literary culture rooted in an ideology based on separatism and difference from men and heralds the beginning of a "modernist" female literary culture that aspires to join men as equals and peers on common ground.97

Women writers on the whole were not any more radical than other American women like them: white, generally Protestant, and with upper or middle-class socioeconomic roots. Whether Northern or Southern, these women shared with their peers a mixed response to gender issues. Because many were reared by mothers who held one set of values and morals, they were not always willing or able to abandon the practice or ideology of separate spheres, nor did most wish to. Throughout the nineteenth century white middle and upper-class women derived what power they had through influence, and through their differences from men. Thus it was not easy to advocate or participate in a different type of criticism and protest, one which openly questioned and in may cases defied the idea that difference between the genders should define roles and modes of behavior.

What many white, middle and upper-class women struggled with in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was a tension between older more entrenched gender roles and restrictions, and the realities of attending universities, marrying later in life, and practicing more effective methods of birth control. As gains in education, women's
access to earning wages, and the ability to limit family size increased, so did the campaign to continue to change or eliminate restrictive gender roles. But as historian Nancy Cott argues, to call these nineteenth-century women feminists is ahistoric because they themselves did not adopt the term until the first decades of the twentieth century.98 Unfortunately, Cott’s definition limits us to feminism as a self-aware movement rather than a group of ideas that evolved over several decades.

Cott’s definition can still be useful however if we see that aspects of what became feminist ideology in the twentieth century were present throughout the nineteenth century. What we find in trying to define feminism is an evolution of goals and ideas. Certainly it was not until the twentieth century that groups of middle and upper-class women attempted to restructure the distribution of power within American society. However, late nineteenth-century women writers such as Kate Chopin and Sarah Orne Jewett, and early twentieth-century writers such as Edith Wharton, belong to an intermediate stage between the Woman Movement and Feminism—a period characterized in their works by the necessity of deconstructing the image of woman altogether, so that their metaphorical feminist daughters could build an image of woman anew.

While The Awakening is fundamentally about the tension between the definitive nineteenth-century woman and woman as an independent individual (as seen in Edna Pontellier before and after her “awakening,” or in the difference between the “awakened”

98 Nancy F. Cott, The Groundings of Modern Feminism (New Haven, 1987), 9. Cott’s analysis becomes problematical in the case of the writer and social critic Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose rhetoric was largely unchanged the 1890s through the early twentieth century, but according to Cott could not be called a feminist until 1911.
Edna and her friend Adele Ratignolle the quintessential mother-woman), it is difficult to place Chopin in the group of women who openly pushed for reforming gender roles. As literary scholar Elaine Showalter points out, Chopin was not a suffragist, nor was she an activist. Chopin even wrote once that the eleventh commandment should be "Thou shalt not preach." What Chopin’s short stories and other works show is her keen interest in human behavior and the choices men and women make. She places these behaviors and choices in nineteenth-century local settings, but in some sense they are timeless: love, sex, sensuality, etc. By choosing to depict the struggle of one woman between submission and selflessness on the one hand, and personhood on the other, Chopin drew closer to the type of activism she shunned: what were women to do when faced with Edna Pontellier’s same dilemma? Chopin did not openly urge women to act, or to rebel, but her text is certainly imbued with a sense of despair at the options married women, and especially mothers, had at the turn into the twentieth century.

What I am suggesting is that Chopin had no illusions that her writing could alter the place of women in society: she ultimately killed her protagonist rather than propose a solution to the question of what women’s roles were to be at that point in time. Chopin herself criticized two of her contemporary male counterparts—Hamlin Garland and Henrik Ibsen—for their dealing with immediate social problems which she saw as mutable. In reviews she wrote she also criticized Emile Zola and Thomas Hardy for

---

99 This discussion is located in Elaine Showalter’s introduction to the Everyman’s library edition of Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (New York, 1992), xiv
trying to instruct their readers.\footnote{Chopin’s criticisms of Garland and Ibsen are discussed by Emily Toth in her biography of Kate Chopin, 249. Her attacks on Zola and Hardy are discussed by Elaine Showalter in her introduction to The Awakening, xiv} Because Chopin chose to write about life from a realist perspective, her role as an author did not include instructions or prescriptions. The two are not always possible to separate from each other though, and this is shown more clearly in *The Awakening* than in her other works: if one was to write about the life of an unhappy and recently “awakened” white upper-middle class woman in 1899, one was unavoidably going to write the story of gender discord and the problems with the ideology of separate spheres.

In women’s writing of the late nineteenth century no text proposed a model of womanhood which could reconcile a woman’s biological role as a mother, and her potential role as an independent person equipped with her own sense of self. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gender roles and behavior were changing, but no one had a clear idea of where they would land. In her discussion of two other late-century stories, literary scholar Linda Grasso writes, “. . . in the post-bellum tradition, women’s ‘unmasked’ anger about the individual sacrificed self results in visions of death and isolated inarticulation.”\footnote{Grasso, “Thwarted Life,” 114.} It was not until the teens and 1920s that American women writing fiction created female characters who “dared and defied,” and whose stories had happy, if not perfect, endings.\footnote{The novel that perhaps best emphasizes this is Willa Cather’s 1912 work *The Song of the Lark*.}

In an insightful piece of analysis, Elaine Showalter observed, “*The Awakening* is a novel about a process rather than a program, about a passage rather than a destination.”\footnote{Showalter, in *The Awakening*, xvi} It is possible that the “destination” Showalter writes of was not discovered until the 1960s
and 70s in the United States when some women became more vocal about gender inequality, attacking the system that kept them in the home, held them responsible for household cares and rearing of children, a role that Edna Pontellier rejected a full sixty years earlier. Perhaps what young women in the 1990s like myself find so intriguing about *The Awakening* is that in so many ways gender roles and power relationships have changed very little. Even today, just over a hundred years after the publication of Chopin’s novel, it is difficult to imagine a positive social response to a woman leaving her children when she and the father split. Too often women are asked to compromise their careers or goals in order to raise a family, or are blamed by members of the conservative and religious right for causing the downfall of the American family and its “traditional” values.

Historian Linda Kerber in a discussion on women and individualism in American history wrote, “. . . in the long sweep of American culture history, the language of individualism helped them [women] very little.”105 Because women historically have not filled the role of individual (their biological role as mother precludes this) it is impossible even today to move away from the mindset that there is one solution that would be the panacea for all gender and power issues. While most women may have come closer to Showalter’s “destination” many are still working on the passage, and some may never come to see the need for either. What a book such as *The Awakening* shows a reader is how some women felt at a given time in our American past, and how women’s struggles of the past can shed light on women’s struggles and gender issues of today.

Primary Sources


Late Nineteenth-Century Book Reviews


**Secondary Sources: Books**


**Secondary Sources: Articles**


Bendel-Simso, Mary M. “Mothers, Women and Creole Mother-Women in Kate Chopin’s South,” *Southern Studies*, (1992), 35-44.


Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. “Kate Chopin’s *Awakening,*” *Southern Studies*, XVIII (1979), 261-290.


Cynthia Nicole Eddy was born in Torrance, California, April 24, 1972. She attended the University of California San Diego from 1990 to 1992, and graduated from the University of California Irvine with a Bachelor's degree in History June, 1993. She attended the College of William and Mary from 1995-1996. While working on her Master's in American History she worked at the Institute of Early American History and Culture. Her thesis topic is nineteenth-century American women writers with an emphasis on Kate Chopin. In 1997 she accepted a teaching position at St. Margaret's Episcopal School in San Juan Capistrano, California where she currently teaches part-time while pursuing a Ph.D. in history at the Claremont Graduate University. She will finish her course work, specializing in Early Modern Studies, in the spring of 2001.