

Emma Williams

Dr. R. Berkeley

English 490

24 April 2023

Southern Women: How They are Shown in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and How it Relates to
Modern Southern Women

In the Southern United States of America, there are many things that make up the culture of this area. At the root of the culture is the Southern woman. These women are seen “As the figurehead of the South she was perceived to be the moral guardian of her region, and as such also an innocent above reproach” (Good 73). The Southern woman has high expectations that are placed on her. She is supposed to be strong, supportive, motherly, kind-hearted, pure, and self-sacrificing. If she does not fit those roles that are set upon her, she then becomes judged by the society around her. In *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, we are able to view many different types of Southern women. We are able to view the ideal Southern woman with Adèle Ratignolle and in contrast we are also able to view Edna Pontellier, who was not born in the South and it proved to be hard to integrate into. Unlike the typical Southern women, Chopin does not always write her heroines as docile. Her heroines “...are beautiful; but there is less emphasis in her work on their smallness and fragility than there was in the romantic tradition” (Fletcher 131). Chopin aims to write her women as a new and modern Southern woman. While the southern states have evolved with their treatment of women, there are still themes that applied to *The Awakening* that was published in 1899, that can also be applied to the modern day. Not every woman wants to continue appearing strong when they feel weak, be a mother, or continue to hide who they are to fit with the majority and their approval. This essay will show how Kate Chopin’s character Edna Pontellier set the goal for the modern Southern woman and how it relates to true stories of modern Southern women and how Southern society viewed them.

Mental illness can be a taboo topic in the South, and it is not always properly understood. There is stigma around mental illness that is not just limited to the southern part of the country. Some people in more rural places of the region typically go to general health care providers to help them with their mental health. This could be because “...in part because of the stigma

attached to mental disorders, ignorance about how mental illnesses can be treated effectively, and reliance on primary health care providers for any health intervention” (Fox 456). There is a lack of mental health education in the South, and that is what helps keep the stigma alive and people not receiving the proper help that they deserve. Problems with mental health is often considered “...the domain of family and church” (Fox 442), which can discourage any professional help. When mental health problems appear, they can often be discouraged by partners, family, and friends.

Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening* suffers from depression throughout the novel. She is an independent woman living in a society where that is not allowed. Along with that, she is also trying to assimilate into a culture that is very different from her own, which can cause problems. Her children are present in her life, but they do not play an active role with her. She knows her husband is a good man, but there is a lost love between them. One of the first signs of her depression appeared in the scene when Léonce scolded her for not taking good enough care of their children. After he was done with scolding her, he fell asleep and she began to cry. Edna’s moment was a very vulnerable one:

“Turning, she thrust her face, streaming and wet, into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arm. She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the forgoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband’s kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood” (Chopin 49).

After the altercation, Edna began crying and did not know how to stop, all without even truly knowing why she was crying in the first place. She knew her husband was a good man and kind,

but yet this experience she was feeling was not uncommon in her marriage. Edna's job at the time was the same as many women of the time, which was "...satisfying her husband, raising his children, meeting the demands of the family's social position, and sustaining the ideals of the South" (Jones 42). When the pressure became too much for a life that Edna truly did not want and a culture that is so foreign from her own, that is when she begins to spiral into her depression. It is expected of southern women to dissemble and "...to cloak the steely strength with the delicate covering of a magnolia bud..." (Good 75). Léonce believed that his wife should be strong and capable of taking care of their children, but still being motherly towards them, which she cannot do. When she is alone, she is able to remove the cloak of both the strength and delicateness and show her true identity of vulnerability.

People view their mothers as a constant and strong figure in their life. In the south, mothers are pillars of our society. When they show vulnerability, the moment can be jarring. This is how my uncle felt after he witnessed my grandmother spiral into her depression. My grandmother faced three deaths of her older brothers and mother, which all occurred in a span of a year. After the traumatic experience that she faces losing most of her family in a short amount of time, she also almost lost her eldest son to the same addiction that took her brothers and mother away. It was after that moment that my grandmother snapped and went deep into her depression. She moved states and away from her family for a short amount of time. When she returned, she was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and had her youngest son confused by her actions. He could not understand why she was not stronger and did not fight through it. This proves the existing research that states that "...men rely more on spouses and mothers when seeking help" (Fox 456). When it comes to southern mothers, no matter what they are going through, they are expected to still be there and attending to the men and children in

their family. Which can also be seen in *The Awakening* where Léonce expects Edna to take better care of the children, no matter what she is going through.

Mothers are very important part of the culture in the South. Mothers are treated with respect and when see a person, you ask how their “mom ‘n them are”. They are the backbone of the culture. Mothers are expected to be “...a preeminent moral guardian and a tower of strength, as well as efficient, protective, and self-reliant...” (Burton 191). There are heavy burdens that are expected of mothers to fill. There is a neotraditional myth called the “mommy myth”. The mommy myth is about women who “...were incomplete without children, and Good Mothers devoted their entire beings, body, soul, time, and mind – to their children” (K. Williams 29). What if some women did not want to commit themselves to that lifestyle? If they already have kids, then they are considered bad mothers. If they do not wish to have children, then they do not exist. In 1891, there was a clergyman and author by the name of Wilbur Fisk Tillet. On the typical Southern woman, he wrote “On becoming a mother, her life was complete” (K. Williams 29). While it has become more accepted that not all women will be mothers, it is still a common belief that being a mother helps makes a woman.

In *The Awakening*, Edna is not a mother-woman, which is a term used to described the ideal woman and mother. Edna described the mother-woman as:

“...fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 51).

Like said before, Edna’s children are present in her life, but are not an active part of it. She will have sporadic burst of affection for them, but they are mainly only back up characters in her life

story. She is not like the other mother-women and she does not believe her being a mother defines who she is. American novelist, Gail Goodwin said "...the roles of wife and mother have traditionally given identity to the southern woman" (Burton 191). Motherhood never defined who Edna was and she did not make it her identity, which can be seen when she told Adèle "I would give up the unessential: I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin 97). Edna is aware that she is not like the other women who surround her, especially Adèle, who represents the ideal southern woman by "...celebrating her childbearing role" (Burton 190). When compared to Adèle, Edna is the complete opposite of the mother-woman role. She does not dote on her children, when they get hurt, they get right back up because they know their mother will not come to them. When it comes to being a mother or being herself, Edna will chose herself every time. Many see this as selfish, including Adèle, however it proves that not all women desire to be mothers.

There are many people in the younger generation that will openly voice that they do not want children in the future. When it is said out loud, there are many times where there is push back saying that they are still young, and they will change their mind when they are older. While there are some occasions that this is true, there are also times where it is not true. I have a friend that does not wish to be a mother. She does not see herself having that future for her. All of the possibilities of the childbirth going wrong terrifies her. She once vocalized this to her father who could not understand why she would not want children. One of his biggest questions was what she will be if she is not a mother. If she is not a mother, she plans on being a wife, a career woman, a traveler, and just herself. Her father then became angry with her and called her selfish. She did not see herself as being selfish. She instead saw herself just being human. The mommy myth is not a life that she wants to live. Like Edna, she knows the importance of herself, and

southern society expectations would take that from her. She not only did not want to be defined and identified by her children like it was said by Gail Godwin and Wilbur Fisk Tillet, she did not want the pain of childbirth. The southern woman historically "...had children with remarkable frequency, rarely talking about the pain and suffering that accompanied almost constant childbearing" (Burton 190). With most southern women knowing that large families are not uncommon in their area, and if you do not wish for the pain and uncertainty about childbirth, children may not be in the future.

There can be two sides of a Southern woman, the one presented in public and the one in private. The way a Southern woman presents herself is very important since that is how people will perceive them and make their judgements about them. They are aware that living in the South is not always a judgement free zone. Anne Jones said "Public reputation, not private guilt, motivates behavior in this system; hence the 'enforcement of gender and family convention [is] community business' rather than personal choice (46). In a small, southern community, nothing is guaranteed to be kept private. Your private business can easily become public business. This is why it is important for a Southern woman to present herself to the public in a way that the public will approve. If they step out of the line that was set for them, then that is when the public begins to talk. When the public begins to talk and gossip, that is when the damage starts to happen, which is the "...most terrible of Southern tortures – the withdrawal of approval" (Good 76). Having approval withdrawn from you can be a very damaging action in the South. This need for approval and wanting to a public reputation intact has always been a part of the Southern woman's culture and can still be seen today.

In *The Awakening*, public appearance and perception was very important to characters other than Edna. When Edna wanted to move from the house she shared with Léonce to her own,

he greatly disapproved and “He hoped she had not acted upon her rash impulse; and begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say” (Chopin 150). Léonce did not care that his wife was moving from their house while he was away. All that he cared about that their public appearance would not be tainted, that people would not think negatively of the Pontellier family. Being a southern woman “...meant not simply self-sacrifice and silence, but sacrifice for family and honor, in which women took pride- and courage- in accepting fate without complaint” (Jones 46). It was expected of Edna to continue her suffering in silence, because that way, her family name would still be protected, and they would still be in the good graces of society. The fear that Léonce has only proves the notion that private business is public business and what they do has to be calculated and masked. The need for a good public appearance is also seen when Adèle goes to Edna about the rumors that begin to spread about her and Alcée Arobin, who is known for having affairs. When speaking to Edna about Arobin, she said “Monsieur Ratignolle was telling me that his attentions alone are considered enough to ruin a woman’s name” (Chopin 153). Adèle does not bother to ask if it is true or not, she is simply giving Edna a warning that people are beginning to talk. This shows how “...the South is far more concerned with the appearance than with the actual in the sphere of its ladies’ sexual activities...” (Good 76). This is shown by Edna not caring about what people thought of her and Arobin, but outsiders cared about the possibility of her having a sexual relationship with someone other than her husband. This affair would have not positively affected her appearance, which is what Edna’s peers cared about the most.

It is still a common practice of having your Southern neighbors judge you for your actions. The gossip that fuels the society of the South never faded away, it was still very strong and prominent in the early 2000s. It was in the early 2000s when my mother had a child outside

of wedlock and was also a single mother. While this is not a scandal like it was decades ago, it still caused people to talk. What fueled the fire even more is when she had her high school sweetheart visit her after her child was born. It was a platonic visit but some, like his mother, did not view it as that. His mother began to spread the rumor that my mother was simply just looking for a father for the baby. She did not care that my mother was doing fine on her own and that her son was engaged. She also did not care that the visit was initiated by him and not my mother. This was not just caused by my mother's lack of social expectations, but also from her being a single mother. It has been stated that "Some single mothers and their families have been judged more worthy than others in different historical moments, but all of them appeared at best inadequate or at worst pathological in a male-centered world where the father-dominated breadwinner family model represented normality" (R. Williams 263). It was obvious from the woman's reaction that my mother was being judged for not representing the normality at the time. This judgement showed how her not trying to save face and keep the pregnancy secret or try and marry, hurt her public image and people began to think differently of her. Similar to Edna, my mother did not care what others thought and stayed true to herself.

These stories of modern Southern women are still relatable to a text that was written in 1899. While there has been progression and change in the South, at the root of it all, there are views and beliefs that may never change in the society. There are many Southern women that can relate to the character of Edna Pontellier and what she stood for. However, not everyone will view Edna and the other women as the true representation of a Southern woman. Despite the differing of views and opinions, all women in the South are the true backbone of the society and seen as the figurehead.

Works Cited

- Burton, Orville Vernon, and Charles Reagan Wilson. "Motherhood." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, edited by NANCY BERCAW and TED OWNBY, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 187–94. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616728_bercaw.52.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening and Selected Stories*. Penguin Books, 2003.
- Fox, Jeanne, et al. "De Facto Mental Health Services in the Rural South." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, vol. 6 no. 4, 1995, p. 434-468. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/hpu.2010.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2010.0003).
- Good, Cherry. "The Southern Lady, or the Art of Dissembling." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1989, pp. 72–77. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555095>.
- Jones, Anne Goodwyn, and Charles Reagan Wilson. "Belles and Ladies." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, edited by NANCY BERCAW and TED OWNBY, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 42–49. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616728_bercaw.13.
- Marie Fletcher. "The Southern Woman in the Fiction of Kate Chopin." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1966, pp. 117–32. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230896>.
- Williams, Keira V. "Southern Women Writers and the Politics of Motherhood." *Southern Cultures*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2015, pp. 27–42. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26220275>.
- Williams, Rhonda Y., and Charles Reagan Wilson. "Single Mothers." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, edited by NANCY BERCAW and TED

OWNBY, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 263–66. *JSTOR*,
http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616728_bercaw.67.