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Challenging and redefining traditional narratives: A Gynocritical rendition of *the awakening*

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Abstract

This paper explores Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) through the lens of gynocriticism, a critical framework that emphasizes the importance of female subjectivity and the unique perspectives women bring to literature. Gynocriticism aims to uncover and establish a female literary tradition by examining women's writing within their historical and cultural contexts. *The Awakening* holds a significant place in this tradition as an early and bold exploration of female autonomy and sexuality. The study focuses on Edna Pontellier's journey towards self-awareness and independence, her defiance of patriarchal norms, and her exploration of sexual self-discovery. Key moments, such as Edna's move to the "pigeon house" and her ultimate act of defiance through suicide, are examined to illustrate her struggle for autonomy and self-determination. By situating *The Awakening* within the broader context of gynocriticism, the paper underscores its enduring impact on feminist literature and its role in challenging and redefining the traditional narratives surrounding women's lives and experiences.

Keywords: Autonomy, defiance, patriarchal, sexuality, narratives

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* through the lens of gynocriticism, a critical framework that emphasizes the importance of female subjectivity and the unique perspectives that women bring to literature. Gynocriticism, as articulated by Elaine Showalter, seeks to uncover and establish a female literary tradition by examining women's writing in relation to their historical and cultural contexts. *The Awakening* holds a significant place within this tradition as an early and audacious exploration of female autonomy and sexuality. Through its rich narrative style and deep psychological insight, Chopin's novel not only critiques the patriarchal norms and societal expectations of the late 19th century but also paves the way for future generations of women writers to explore similar themes with greater freedom. By analysing Edna Pontellier's journey towards self-awareness and independence, this paper aims to highlight the novel's contribution to the female literary tradition and its enduring impact on feminist literature. Kate Chopin, born Katherine O'Flaherty on February 8, 1850, in St. Louis, Missouri, is celebrated as a pioneering figure in American literature, particularly for her contributions to feminist writing. Her work, which includes novels, short stories, and essays, explores themes of female autonomy, sexual liberation, and the complexities of marriage and identity in a patriarchal society. Despite facing considerable backlash during her lifetime, Chopin's work has since been recognized for its ground breaking portrayal of women's inner lives and its challenge to societal norms. Chopin's early work consisted mainly of short stories that were published in magazines such as "Vogue," "The Atlantic Monthly", and "Harper's Young People". Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890) ^[11], dealt with the complexities of divorce and remarriage, themes that were quite progressive for her time. However, it was her collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) ^[12] and *A Night in Acadie* (1897) ^[13] that established her reputation as a talented regional writer. These stories, set in Louisiana, vividly depict the lives of the Creole and Cajun communities, focusing on the daily lives and struggles of women. Chopin's keen observations and empathetic portrayals brought the region and its people to life, challenging stereotypes and highlighting the nuanced realities of their existence. Chopin's work is often viewed through a feminist lens, as she was one of the first American writers to portray women's struggles for independence and self-fulfilment.

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Her characters frequently confront the limitations imposed on them by society, and her stories explore the consequences of breaking away from traditional roles. In stories like "The Story of an Hour" (1894) ^[14], Chopin examines the constraints of marriage and the longing for freedom. The protagonist, Louise Mallard, experiences a brief moment of exhilaration upon learning of her husband's death, imagining a life of independence and self-determination. This fleeting joy is cut short by the sudden return of her husband, leading to Louise's death, which Chopin subtly critiques as a symbolic return to the oppressive confines of marriage. Similarly, in "Desiree's Baby" (1893) ^[15], Chopin addresses issues of race, gender, and societal expectations. The story reveals the destructive power of racism and the precarious position of women within the social hierarchy. Desiree, who is abandoned by her husband due to the racial ambiguity of their child, represents the vulnerability of women who lack autonomy and are subject to the whims of patriarchal authority. Kate Chopin's work was largely forgotten after her death in 1904 but experienced a revival in the 1960s and 1970s during the rise of the feminist movement. Scholars and critics began to re-evaluate her contributions to literature, recognizing the radical nature of her themes and her pioneering portrayal of women's lives and struggles.

Elaine Showalter's essay *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1985) ^[8] is a seminal work in feminist literary criticism, introducing the concept of gynocriticism. This critical framework is dedicated to exploring literature by women, emphasizing the study of women as the creators of textual meaning and highlighting their unique contributions to the literary landscape. Gynocriticism marks a significant departure from earlier feminist approaches that predominantly analysed how women were portrayed in male-authored texts. Instead, it prioritizes the study of women's writings and experiences, aiming to develop a female-centered framework for literary analysis. This is a critical approach that aims to understand literature from the perspective of women writers. Showalter argues that traditional literary criticism often reflects male biases, which can distort or overlook the realities of women's lives and contributions. By developing a female-centered framework, gynocriticism seeks to counteract these biases and provide a more accurate and inclusive understanding of literary texts. It delves into the psychodynamics of female creativity, examining the specific conditions, challenges, and experiences that shape women's literary production. This includes understanding how women writers navigate their careers both individually and collectively. By doing so, gynocriticism seeks to uncover how a distinct female literary tradition evolves over time, recognizing the unique ways in which women express themselves through writing. Showalter highlights the importance of female subjectivity, arguing that women's writings often reflect unique perspectives, emotions, and experiences. Gynocriticism brings these aspects to the forefront, offering a nuanced understanding of women's inner lives and social realities. This approach recognizes that women's experiences are often different from men's and that these differences should be acknowledged and explored in literary criticism. A key focus of gynocriticism is identifying themes and genres that are particularly prevalent in women's literature. These may include domesticity, motherhood, female relationships, and personal and emotional issues. By highlighting these

themes, gynocriticism underscores the distinctiveness of women's literary contributions and challenges the traditional literary canon that often marginalizes or ignores these subjects. Showalter emphasizes the need to uncover and establish a female literary tradition. This involves tracing the historical development of women's writing and recognizing the continuities and connections between past and present female authors. By doing so, gynocriticism seeks to create a sense of continuity and shared heritage among women writers, fostering a collective identity and tradition that has often been overlooked in literary history. Showalter proposes four models of difference that help unify and advance gynocriticism. These models address various aspects of women's writing, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and analysing literature from a female perspective. The biological model explores how gender differences are reflected in women's writing. Showalter suggests that women's biological experiences, such as motherhood, can metaphorically influence their creative processes. This model seeks to highlight the uniqueness of women's perspectives and experiences, moving away from reductive associations with gender stereotypes. By examining how biological factors shape women's writing, gynocriticism provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which women's lived experiences influence their literary works. The linguistic model focuses on how language can reflect gender differences. Showalter, drawing on the work of feminist linguists such as Mary Jacobus, argues for the need to reinvent language to express women's experiences and perspectives. This involves defining and categorizing the similarities and differences between male and female writing, thus establishing a gynocentric language. By doing so, gynocriticism seeks to challenge the male-dominated linguistic norms that have traditionally shaped literary criticism and to create a language that accurately reflects women's voices and experiences. Showalter critiques traditional psychoanalytical theories that have marginalized women's writing, such as Freud's concept of hysteria and Lacan's notion of women as "castrated males." She advocates for a psychoanalytical approach that connects contemporary women writers with their precursors, establishing a continuous female literary tradition. By reinterpreting psychoanalytical theories from a feminist perspective, gynocriticism seeks to uncover the psychological dimensions of women's writing and to explore the ways in which women's experiences and identities are reflected in their literary works. The cultural model interprets women's writings within their specific cultural contexts. Showalter emphasizes the duality of women's roles as participants in both women's culture and the broader, inclusive culture. This model recognizes that women's literature is shaped by cultural forces and seeks to understand these influences comprehensively. By examining the cultural contexts in which women write, gynocriticism provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of their literary contributions and challenges the traditional literary canon that often marginalizes or overlooks women's voices. In *The Second Sex*, (1989) ^[4] Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have been historically marginalized and defined as "The other" in relation to men. De Beauvoir's work highlights the ways in which women's experiences and identities have been shaped by patriarchal structures and cultural norms. Showalter builds on de Beauvoir's insights

by emphasizing the importance of understanding women's writings from a female-centered perspective and by seeking to establish a distinct female literary tradition. Virginia Woolf's seminal essays, *A Room of One's Own* (1989) ^[16] and *Three Guineas*, (1966) ^[17] explore the challenges and barriers faced by women writers in a male-dominated literary world. Woolf's work emphasizes the need for women to have their own spaces and resources in order to create and express themselves freely. Showalter's concept of gynocriticism echoes Woolf's call for the recognition and validation of women's literary contributions and seeks to create a critical framework that supports and empowers women writers. In *Sexual Politics*, (1970) ^[6] Kate Millett analyses the ways in which literature and culture reflect and reinforce patriarchal power structures. Millett's work highlights the political dimensions of literature and the ways in which literary texts can perpetuate gender inequalities. Showalter builds on Millett's insights by emphasizing the need to develop a female-centered framework for literary analysis that challenges male-dominated perspectives and recognizes the unique contributions of women writers. In their landmark work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, (1984) ^[5] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar analyse the ways in which women writers have been marginalized and pathologized in literary history. Gilbert and Gubar explore the tensions and contradictions that characterize women's writing and the ways in which women authors navigate the constraints imposed by patriarchal culture. Showalter's psychoanalytical model of gynocriticism builds on Gilbert and Gubar's insights by seeking to establish a continuous female literary tradition that connects contemporary women writers with their precursors and by reinterpreting psychoanalytical theories from a feminist perspective.

The Awakening is a profound exploration of a woman's quest for self-discovery and autonomy in the restrictive societal framework of late 19th century America. The novel revolves around Edna Pontellier, a wife and mother who, while vacationing on Grand Isle, begins to experience a profound internal awakening. Influenced by her interactions with the flirtatious Robert Lebrun and the independent musician Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna becomes increasingly aware of her own desires and the limitations imposed upon her by her roles as wife and mother. This newfound awareness is symbolically captured in her learning to swim, which signifies her burgeoning sense of empowerment and control over her life. Returning to New Orleans, Edna distances herself from societal expectations: She neglects her household duties, pursues her passion for painting, and moves out of her husband's house into a small abode she calls the "Pigeon house." She embarks on a passionate affair with Alcée Arobin, exploring her sexuality beyond the confines of her marriage. However, Edna's true emotional attachment remains with Robert, who returns from Mexico only to leave her once again, unable to reconcile his love for her with societal conventions. Edna's growing isolation and realization that her quest for independence is unattainable within the bounds of her societal environment lead her to a state of profound despair. The novel reaches its climax as Edna returns to Grand Isle, the site of her initial awakening. In a final act of defiance and liberation, she swims far out into the sea, shedding her clothes and, metaphorically, the constraints of her life. The ending is ambiguous, often interpreted as Edna's suicide, representing her ultimate

escape from the societal restrictions that she cannot overcome.

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin's portrayal of Edna Pontellier's journey towards self-awareness and independence serves as a poignant exploration of female creativity and autonomy. Gynocriticism, which emphasizes the psychodynamics of female creativity and women's literary careers, offers a lens through which to analyse Edna's transformative experience. Edna's discontent with her given roles as wife and mother is palpable from the early chapters of the novel. Chopin vividly captures this sentiment in Chapter 4, where she writes:

"She was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood" (Chopin 29).

This passage illustrates Edna's rejection of the conventional "mother-woman" archetype, symbolizing her yearning to liberate herself from the confines of traditional gender roles. By refusing to conform to societal expectations of maternal devotion, Edna asserts her desire for individuality and self-expression. Furthermore, as Edna embarks on her journey of self-discovery, she grapples with the constraints imposed by her marriage and societal norms. Chopin delves into Edna's inner turmoil, portraying her conflicting emotions with striking depth and complexity. In Chapter 20, Chopin writes:

"The years that are gone seem like dreams-if one might go on sleeping and dreaming-but to wake up and find-oh! well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (Chopin 147).

Edna reflects on the disillusionment she feels upon awakening to the reality of her unfulfilled desires and suppressed identity. This introspective moment encapsulates the profound psychological journey Edna undergoes as she grapples with the tension between societal expectations and her own yearning for autonomy.

Kate Chopin presents Edna Pontellier's awakening as deeply intertwined with her exploration of sexual self-discovery, depicted with a frankness that was ground breaking for its time. Edna's relationships, particularly with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin, serve as catalysts for her realization of desires and needs distinct from societal expectations. Chopin poignantly captures Edna's burgeoning awareness with evocative imagery. In Chapter 6, she writes:

"A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her-the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (Chopin 55).

This imagery symbolizes Edna's awakening to her own desires, illuminating her path while simultaneously highlighting the societal constraints that seek to suppress her newfound self-awareness. The metaphorical "light" represents Edna's emerging consciousness of her own agency and desires, even as societal norms attempt to quell her awakening. Edna's affair with Alcée Arobin further exemplifies her journey of sexual exploration and liberation in when Chopin says, "It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin 210). This vivid imagery depicts Edna's embrace of her sexual freedom as a powerful force igniting her desires. The metaphorical "flaming torch" symbolizes the intensity and passion of Edna's sexual awakening, challenging traditional Victorian ideals of female purity and passivity. Through Edna's experiences, Chopin confronts

societal expectations regarding women's sexuality, advocating for their autonomy and agency in matters of desire and fulfilment. In *Orlando* (1956) [10] Woolf presents the titular character's journey of self-discovery, which includes moments of sexual awakening and exploration:

"But, good or bad, it was her nature to grow tired, so that the tide of her spirits ebbed lower and lower until she became almost the dullest, the most prosaic person in the world. What caused this I know not? But, hero or not (and she suspected not), Orlando could not help becoming all that, after two hours of it" (Woolf 40).

It is the reflection of Orlando's inner turmoil and her struggle to reconcile societal expectations with her own desires and identity. Like Edna Pontellier Orlando grapples with the constraints imposed by societal norms and seeks to assert her individual autonomy. Additionally, Woolf employs vivid imagery to depict Orlando's awakening to her own desires and writes:

"It was as if a hand, plunged into the water, had drawn from it some curious fish; or as if a seal had come through the waves; or a rose had blown; or a flower had fluttered from its stem and fallen. She was, in short, yet another Orlando, an entirely different person" (Woolf 129).

This imagery symbolizes Orlando's transformative experience, akin to Edna's awakening in *The Awakening*. The metaphorical "hand" represents Orlando's exploration of desire, while the references to water, seals, and flowers evoke themes of fluidity, change, and renewal. Through Edna's journey towards independence and self-realization, Chopin challenges traditional gender roles and advocates for women's autonomy. One significant moment in Edna's quest for autonomy is her decision to move out of her husband's house and into her own residence, which she calls the "pigeon house." Chopin describes this move as a pivotal step towards independence:

"Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual" (Chopin 189).

This quote illustrates Edna's assertion of independence and rejection of societal expectations that dictate a woman's identity should be tied to her roles as wife and mother. By establishing her own space, Edna asserts her agency and autonomy, challenging the patriarchal structures that confine women to predefined roles and obligations. Edna's ultimate act of defiance against societal expectations is her tragic suicide. While her death can be interpreted as a tragic end, it also serves as a final assertion of control over her own life. Chopin portrays Edna's final moments with poignant imagery:

"She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again" (Chopin 233).

This quote highlights Edna's inner turmoil and her refusal to be confined by societal expectations, even in the face of despair. Edna's death symbolizes her struggle for female autonomy and self-determination, challenging the norms and conventions that seek to constrain women's lives.

One of the key aims of gynocriticism is to uncover and establish a female literary tradition. *The Awakening* holds a significant place in this tradition as an early and bold exploration of female autonomy and sexuality. Chopin's work paved the way for future generations of women writers to explore similar themes with greater freedom. Chopin's narrative style, characterized by its lyrical prose and deep psychological insight, contributes to the establishment of a

distinct female literary voice. Her portrayal of Edna's inner life and struggles resonates with the experiences of many women, creating a sense of continuity and shared experience across generations of female writers and readers. Successors such as Virginia Woolf, Zora Neale Hurston, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Atwood have built upon Chopin's legacy, each contributing their unique voices and perspectives to the rich tapestry of women's literature. Through their works, these writers continue to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for female empowerment, ensuring that the tradition of gynocriticism remains vibrant and evolving.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* stands as a seminal work within the female literary tradition, profoundly influencing the trajectory of women's literature. Through her bold exploration of female authority and sexuality, Chopin challenged the restrictive societal norms of her time, paving the way for future generations of women writers to explore similar themes with greater freedom and depth. Pain is the very essence of feminist awakening and the driving force behind any progressive change. Struggling and suffering to gain authority and autonomy as a female writer is preferable to remaining complacent, as was often the case for Victorian women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" stands as a seminal work within the female literary tradition, profoundly influencing the trajectory of women's literature. Through the lens of gynocriticism, which emphasizes the psychodynamics of female creativity and women's literary careers, we gain a deeper understanding of Edna Pontellier's transformative journey towards self-awareness and independence. Chopin's bold exploration of female autonomy and sexuality challenges the restrictive societal norms of her time, paving the way for future generations of women writers to explore similar themes with greater freedom and depth. As successors continue to build upon Chopin's legacy, the tradition of gynocriticism remains vibrant and evolving, ensuring that women's voices and experiences are recognized and celebrated in the literary landscape.

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