

## **Intuiting Freud in Darwinian Times. On Edna Pontellier's Silence and Voice in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

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### **Abstract**

A practical definition for Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is that of a 'pre-Modernist' novel. Even though it belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we can already perceive traces of proto-stream of consciousness in it, which would become a major technique for Modernist writers. Interestingly, stream of consciousness can be related to Freudian therapy as it consisted on the patient speaking until finding keys to the origin of their problems and because Modernist authors were the first ones to be influenced by Freudian thought. This essay shall cover these topics, but it will also analyse Chopin's contemporary times, during which Darwin's name was used for obscure practices of social domination against women. Thus, the asylums we can relate *The Yellow Wallpaper* to isolated those who did not conform to the patriarchal norm so that they would not disturb wider society. It is not only surprising that Kate Chopin avoided such fate, but also her progressiveness both as a writer and as a woman. Beyond the imposition of silence, Edna Pontellier's thoughts become a murmur the reader has access to and, although these are mediated by the narrator, the will to speak out gains force in Chopin and paves the way to Modernists.

**Keywords-** *Psychoanalysis, Modernism, Chopin, stream of consciousness, Darwinism*

## **Edna Pontellier and her social circumstances: Darwin, asylums and silences**

It does not escape the reader of Kate Chopin's masterpiece *The Awakening* the social condition of her protagonist, Edna Pontellier. Despite belonging to the upper class in New Orleans society and never in material scarcity or need, the character lacks a compact group of friends, and those she has and gets in touch with are not generally helpful: Madame Adèle Ratignolle, true angel in the house, cannot grasp her struggle to fulfill herself as an adult woman; Mademoiselle Reisz, although similar in certain tastes and thoughts, she avoids from time to time, as if not entirely comfortable by her side. In a sense, Edna Pontellier is an isolated woman with no one to talk to, not to her husband or lovers — after all, she is a Presbyterian from Kentucky in a world of Catholic Creoles.

She devotes herself to streams of thoughts and reflections upon her conditions as a consequence. And this essay will dedicate some of its space to these thoughts in relation to the posterior stream of consciousness, but before that some further dwelling on Edna Pontellier's situation seems pertinent. By that it is meant her loneliness and inability to speak her mind to people around her (1), leading to mental processes and not to some actual verbalisation or conversation. Kate Chopin's story already provides us with the clues as to why this occurs, why our protagonist shuts up and boils herself in her longings until the bitter end. Afterwards we will trace these circumstances to 19th century Darwinian psychiatry and how Edna Pontellier searches for a transcendence of its repression, intuiting Freud without Kate Chopin —to our knowledge— ever reading his theories. The comparison with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* will further illuminate this point.

When asked by Mr Pontellier to help about her "oddity", Doctor Mandelet, most of the time a seemingly gentle man, questions: "has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women — super-spiritual superior beings?" (2). Women's associations, as we know, were not well regarded as there was always something of danger about the idea of women thinking or about broadening the spectrum of people entitled to fight for the values of the 18th century revolutions, such as the American or French ones (or worse, the Haitian!). 19th century saw a boom in the building of asylums (3) and the confinement in them of women who stepped out of the line, who asked questions and wondered by themselves without the supervision of their fathers, priests or husbands. The threat of women acting independently had to be due to madness, as Mr Pontellier considers a few pages before consulting with Doctor Mandelet (4), in order to lock them up.

This crude persecution of freethinking women and many others has been referred to as Darwinian psychiatry by different authors and writings, some of them present in the bibliography. And the adjective 'Darwinian' denotes a so-called following of Darwin's theory of evolution, which 'proved' man's superiority over woman in the most refined actions, as sir Charles himself wrote in his *Descent of Man* that the former possessed "a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can

women—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands” (5). This undervaluing of women’s intellectual capabilities not only depicts Darwin’s own discriminatory views (6), no matter how much of a progressive he was, but also that some control over them should be exercised. As read in Fee, the foremost father of the theory of evolution believed that "unchecked female militancy threatened to produce a perturbation of the races" and to "divert the orderly process of evolution" (7).

These assertions horrify us, as they should, but it would be unfair not to mention that Darwin never foresaw any practical way to counterbalance those elements that perturbed the laws of evolution and reproduction. Much of a Whig, no intervention could he approve of; but that does not entail that others did not feel backed to propose hideous understandings of human nature. Many different scientific fields attempted to irrefutably prove women’s inferiority towards men (8), as if Darwin’s literal evolutionary comments on men’s intellectual prowess and women’s maternity instinct were religious dogma. At the social level, this led to regarding those women speaking out in the 19th century as madwomen in the attic, as elements toxic to society and threatening to disrupt the birthing of labour force. Those doctors who occupied themselves with locking women who dared to think by themselves in mental asylums called themselves Darwinians and we are only left to wonder if Charles Darwin would not have fallen into depression had he known what his name was going to be used for. Showalter concisely put it down in her classic *The Female Malady*, as quoted in Walmsley’s article: “Darwinian therapists took a dim view of asylum care and paternalistic therapy; instead they redefined their role as that of the psychiatric police, patrolling the boundaries between sanity and madness and protecting society from dangerous infiltration by those of tainted stock”. (9)

Under this oppressive prism we ought to approach Edna Pontellier and her inner monologue. As a woman with a taste for the creation of arts, unorthodox views about motherhood, and a growing tendency to speaking out loud, she could meet institutional punishment in the century of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In the novel, Edna is actually forced to keep mostly quiet, for at the time psychiatrists considered freethinking women as undesirable and, if ill in any form, as requiring confinement to a mental asylum: to isolation, beatings and abuse. And, needless to say, this way of proceeding did not quickly vanish but kept being practised at the beginning of the 20th century; one woman who underwent this sort of imprisonment was the author Virginia Woolf, whom we will study in the following pages.

For now, it suffices us to closely read Kate Chopin’s novel as contemporary to the 19th century we just briefly reflected upon, in which all women who did not adhere to the role of the angel of the house were sure to be punished as if by God’s wrath. Edna Pontellier, who learns to swim and starts perceiving the world under a new light, cannot count with anyone’s thorough help to guide her

through her personal awakening, for the obstacles are many (page 88), as well as our own scars as frail mortals (page 86). Alone she remains throughout the novel, reflecting by herself and only afterwards communicating her decisions to others: on moving out, painting or her present condition. Society does not look kindly upon rebellious individuals, which takes her to a strong mental process we become fellow travellers of. We will see in the next part of our essay that Kate Chopin expediently follows the focus of 19th century Realist and Naturalist novels on the psyche of their main characters, approaching us to Edna's thoughts as if they were a river and we could hear its murmur. The similarities and differences to what the 20th century would bring both in the form of psychoanalysis and of stream of consciousness will allow us to understand how Chopin intuited Freudian theory and how we can trace a connection between her and other authors such as Virginia Woolf.

### **Intuiting Freud in Darwinian times: *The Awakening* before Freud's couch and stream of consciousness**

Edna Pontellier's silence —she only clumsily expresses her inner feelings at a short handful of moments, like in her exchange with Doctor Mandelet, pg. 105— does not translate into a non-existent personal life in any way. The narrator of the novel, a comprehending and kind one, closely examines Edna's train of thought and informs us about it as a mediator. Throughout *The Awakening*, we read some comments such as "Mrs Pontellier was glad that he had not assumed a similar rôle toward herself" or "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her", to quote just two brief examples from the start of the novel (10). That is, we do not actually have direct access to the state of mind of the protagonist, but the narrator's laborious, caring, work grants us knowledge of her process of awakening.

From Balzac to Zola, the 19th century, especially in its latter half, went through the cultural paradigm of Realism and Naturalism. Where the narrative voice was concerned, it entailed an unsurprisingly growing focus of attention on the psyche of the characters. Unsurprising because the Realists and Naturalists attempted to show life as it were in the 19th century Western world, meaning faithfully representing all the major industrial, social, political and economic changes occurring at the time and their consequences on people's minds. The quotations from the previous paragraph, and countless others in *The Awakening*, show us that Kate Chopin expertly followed this trend in her masterpiece. Her work, and here we need to understand her as a *fin de siècle* author, went somewhat beyond what her epoch offered.

By this "going beyond" I mean the narrator's caring approach to Edna, as put above. Every single reflection that comes to her mind, the narrator will surely report it with such a level of precision, proof of Chopin's mastery, that eventually the reader forgets the mediation that separates

her or him from the character. We come to think we are drinking from her words. (11) The narrator arrives to the point of nearly turning invisible, granting more space of manoeuvre to Edna Pontellier, who dwells in a stream of thoughts whose murmur reaches us. Because of the social constraints, Edna constructs her own bubble inside her mind, where no one can reach her, and begins a form of monologue in a sense. She dedicates herself to speaking as she cannot do with anyone else, making us wonder if Kate Chopin regarded verbalising longings and problems as cathartic and liberatory.

Were there not more to this, this line of questioning would turn pointless in this essay, for the interesting aspect here derives from the fact that a prominent figure had the same ideas and understood talking as a way to healing. Sigmund Freud, whom no evidence has been confirmed that Kate Chopin ever read, opposed the asylum system of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for people's problems came from untreated traumas, mostly from childhood experiences, and instead of shutting them down from society, they should have a chance to express themselves. Freud wanted people to talk, sometimes even about the first thing that came to their minds, until they would come across what he regarded as the source of the problem. That way he claimed to have cured famous cases such as Anna O.'s or Dora's (12). The couch had a reason for staying at his studio: the more comfortable the patient the better.

Freud's revolution with psychoanalysis provoked an intellectual earthquake in Europe. Some youngsters perceived it as the path toward unlocking all of the mind's secrets and pains, toward unleashing all of humankind's creativity and a reconciliation with sex instead of repressive moral codes, which of course forced everyone to forget about Freud's own obsession with sex, quite unhealthy in itself. However, these youngsters became the Vanguardists: Dadaists, Surrealists, Cubists... and shattered art history's forever. Literature also digested Freud's theory and used it as an inspiration for, surely, the single most important narrative technique of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: stream of consciousness. These authors, such as Joyce, Eliot or Woolf, took the 'healing talk' and employed it in their own characters.

Let's make the case with Virginia Woolf who, after all, is the one of the three who shares the most with Kate Chopin (13), and her *Mrs Dalloway*, because it depicts a woman repressed in a men's world. Mrs Dalloway, by the beginning of the novel, has already been defeated, unlike Edna (14), and lives in a world that does not accept certain subversive behaviours (here, homosexuality, whereas in *The Awakening* the case consisted in relationships out of wedlock) while undergoing menopause in the aftermath of World War One. The world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century differs from the New Orleans of Kate Chopin inasmuch as, after the technological slaughter of the Great War, the exhaustion and crisis of society is more widely acknowledged: not only Clarissa actually suffers, but also Septimus Smith, Peter Walsh and others. And, as all gregarious animals we label as humans, they need someone to talk

to about their problems. Of course, society has not suddenly opened to hear still morally sanctioned conditions; a crisis being the moment when the old is dying and the new cannot be born, according to Gramsci. Consequently, these characters resort to their own interiorities, like Edna does, but with a slight difference in the form of the already mentioned stream of consciousness. And before advancing, an example of it seems in order, so in page 46 we read:

Well, I've had my fun; I've had it, he thought, looking up at the swinging baskets of pale geraniums. And it was smashed to atoms — his fun, for it was half made up, as he knew very well; invented, this escapade with the girl; made up, as one makes up the better part of life, he thought — making oneself up; making her up; creating an exquisite amusement, and something more. But odd it was, and quite true, all this one could never share — it smashed to atoms.

The differences are obvious between both texts. Woolf's is much more direct and the character's thoughts nearly reach us directly were it not because of the narrator's interferences, whereas Kate Chopin's shows much more paced reflections with the narrator still a more commanding figure; Woolf belongs to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Chopin to the 19<sup>th</sup>, in sum. But not paying attention to the similarities would mean not doing our work right. Kate Chopin does not practice the stream of consciousness technique, granted, but she expresses in her writings the intention to make explicit her characters' psyche, to make us participants of what they think before acting. In *The Awakening*, Edna's thoughts become a guide to understand a woman's struggles and the experimentation the author dwells in predates stream of consciousness in both form and content. One of the last paragraphs in Chopin's story exposes this:

She had said over and over to herself: "To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Léonce Pontellier — but Raoul and Etienne!" She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children. (15)

*The Awakening's* narrator still determines the transmission of information; however, Edna's voice is also present and occupies a space in the narration, confronting the narrator's monopoly over voicing. Edna, surrounded by a desert of solitude, uses her voice as if reaching her hand to us with the purpose of collectively avoiding silence and alienation. That is the genius of Chopin: she not only captured the silence imposed on women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also configured a protagonist who defies norms and who expresses herself, if mostly mentally, to exercise her right to expression, her voice. This is not only a political struggle, but also an attempt to find a key, a solution, through verbalising, in search of a catharsis. Outwardly, Edna is silent; inwardly, much alive and vibrant.

The stream of consciousness we find in Virginia Woolf resembles this with some slight differences but remaining in the whole the same idea: where one's work ends, the other's begins. This connection between two female writers who questioned their roles and liberties (or rather, the lack of them) not only entails that the patriarchal structure kept leading, and still does, women to their early grave, but also, where literature is concerned, Kate Chopin's ability to, in a world of angels in the house as the only viable role for women—in opposition to whores and madwomen—, understand approaching inner thoughts as a necessity, as something that promises a reward of some form, a cure. In Darwinian times, Chopin never needed Freud to follow his theories, she intuited them as the creative person she always was, paving the way for Modernism without ever realising it. Her stature as a *fin de siècle* author is only reinforced as a genius, not only socially but narratively advanced to her own times. Her writings remain a *tour de force* to be reckoned with.

### **Kate Chopin, the pre-Modernist, and further conclusions towards a revisitation of *fin de siècle* literature**

This essay has attempted to express, above all else, that many features in Kate Chopin's stories seem to foresee what Modernism would enthrone; that, in a century of silencing and imprisoning dissenting women, some free form of expression was on order. Before Freud, she already intuited his theory and the importance of the *logos*. Of course, Chopin could not have written *Mrs Dalloway* or *Ulysses*, but some connections we have already covered evidence this statement, such as consumed patriarchal societies where men do not provide for any help and women struggle to speak their minds—worlds at a crisis which only intensifies with the turning point of World War One.

Virginia Woolf, writing in the 20th century, more tragically knew about the horrors these societies encapsulated, not only because of the war but also because of her psychiatric treatment. Some decades earlier, another author saw this muzzle on women as well and could tell that more than one or two things were wrong about the world surrounding her. She explored new ways of expression in her novels and short stories. Still belonging to her own time, and following the narrative focus on characters' psychology so common in the 19th century, her Edna Pontellier is presented so close to the readers that little distance separates us from her. The memory it leaves is that Mrs Pontellier actually spoke directly to us; which of course she does not completely do, but this feeling indicates a well-orchestrated rendition of the character and a near-invisibility of the narrator in others. Summarily, that Kate Chopin never wrote like the Modernists did, but her writing provides with examples of proto-stream of consciousness. It may not splash us, but the murmur of Edna's reflections does reach us.

Modernism did not appear out of a vacuum, or just from Freud's theories, but it also had a vast literary canon preceding it that had oriented itself towards the new techniques they (Woolf, Eliot, Joyce) would employ. And not only that, but Chopin's narrator in many of her short-stories, such as in

‘The Story of an Hour’, seems to advance the use of irony in postmodernism, something worthy of investigation too. However, and just for now, a reevaluation of *fin de siècle* authors as pre-Modernists seems appropriate in light of the many perspectives and contributions we might overlook if we do not pay this effort. Still, as many pre-Modernists as there might be, none fills in the category as perfectly as Kate Chopin does. For her condition, her mastery and her intuition, her talent still shines more than one hundred years after her death, and rightly so.

## Notes & References

1. Something possibly related to her being an orphan, who lost her mother quite young and with a difficult relationship with her father.
2. *The Awakening*, 1994: 63.
3. Shorter, 1997: 34.
4. “It sometimes entered Mr Pontellier’s mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally.” 1994: 55.
5. 1896: 564.
6. Darwin "reasoned that males are more evolutionarily advanced than females." (Kevles, 1986: 8).
7. Fee, 1979: 415.
8. One further example of the anti-egalitarian scientists in the 19th century was Broca, the famous anthropologist, who endeavoured on measuring human skulls, believing in a correlation between size and intellect. As we read in Gould, 1981: 83, Broca argued that skulls were “larger in mature adults than in the elderly, in men than in women, in eminent men than in men of mediocre talent, in superior races than in inferior races...”.
9. Walmsley, 1993: 748.
10. 1994: 12 and 14.
11. Just like Chopin’s characters sometimes “drink music”, as studied in Piñero Gil, 2015; also for an examination of Kate Chopin’s, and her protagonists, creative will and artistic eclecticism.
12. More on this in Freud and Breuer, 2004.
13. Or, for that matter, with Edna Pontellier and their shared death by water.
14. Who is defeated in the end, following Gray, 2004, 54: “Because of her strong interpellation as a mother, a role dictated for married women by hegemonic ideology in her society, she finds that she cannot exist in an alternative or oppositional female role. However, because of her awakening to herself as an individual, she cannot exist in the female roles sanctioned by patriarchal ideology. Her only escape from this ideology is death, and hence, Edna commits suicide at the site of her awakening, "the sea"”.
15. Pg. 108.

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