

# Draftings In

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Volume 4  
Number 1 *Draftings In Interactive Reading*

Article 6

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1989

## ***The Awakening: Lasting Impressions***

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### **Recommended Citation**

Price, Anthony C. (1989) "*The Awakening: Lasting Impressions*," *Draftings In*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings/vol4/iss1/6>

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# *The Awakening:* Lasting Impressions

by Anthony C. Price

As I continue to struggle with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, I face the almost impossible task of communicating just how deeply Chopin's work has touched me. Even as I type this, I can't help feeling that there are no words expressive enough to convey what I feel. Perhaps this is due to my own reading strategies and background; perhaps it is a comment on the talent of Kate Chopin. Either way, describing my feelings about her work has become what amounts to a genuine emotional trial for me, forcing me to define just exactly what I saw in the text and making me reveal to myself the feelings I cover up with everyday activities. And not only my own feelings have been revealed. While it is true that focusing on my reactions to Chopin's work has brought to light personal conflicts within myself, I have come to realize that these inner conflicts are also indicative of a broader social conflict in American life.

From the very beginning, *The Awakening* made me uncomfortable. From the first chapter I couldn't shake the feeling that Chopin was concealing some great truth that she would eventually reveal in a tumultuous climax. Nor could I help feeling that this "truth" was somehow familiar to me, that what I was looking for was a piece of knowledge I had already attained but had somehow forgotten. When I read the final lines and realized what was happening--that Edna Pontellier was committing suicide--I wanted to stop her. I wanted to shake Kate Chopin, and ask her for the hidden germ of truth that she was denying--concealing--by allowing Edna to die.

Later, when I realized that no pat, Hollywood-type answer would be forthcoming, I found that the story still would not leave me alone. It followed me like the same "dark shadows" that haunted Edna throughout Chopin's novel. I have read books like this before, books which explained or revealed some elusive concept about myself. The problem was that I had no idea what it was exactly that this particular book was revealing to me.

So I read it again.

I even came up with several interesting theories that might have had possibilities, if pursued, as respectable critical interpretations--if that had been my goal. But these theories did not satisfy my need to understand Chopin's novel.

What I needed was to understand Edna for myself. It wasn't important, I decided, to manipulate the text into some kind of slick academic interpretation of what the author intended. What made a difference, I reasoned, was what the novel meant to me. What mattered was that I had responded--consciously or unconsciously--to some cue, some echo of recognition, and I felt that perhaps by understanding Chopin's work I might somehow gain insight into my own cluttered world.

This time when I returned to *The Awakening*, I looked specifically for images that held especially strong meaning for me. I watched for patterns and trends, repeated words and phrases, and recurring images. And from these images and associations I hoped to construct a complete picture of what this novel really meant to me. What I found was that in my search for the core of truth in Chopin's novel, I was beginning to identify myself with Edna. It may sound presumptuous, but I began to feel strongly that our lives were somehow parallel. Many of the conflicts she had, many of the situations she encountered along the way, I had experienced as well. I have felt "the awakening" within myself, and I felt as if I knew what had caused Edna to act as she did--including what caused her to take that final, irreversible walk into the sea.

I felt I knew, for instance, what Edna was feeling when she began to go against everything that normally would have governed her daily actions. It started on the island when she began to resist her husband's commands: "Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire . . . her will blazed up, stubborn and resistant . . . she could not realize why or how she should have yielded . . ." (52). I could understand this because I had begun my own rebellion, as a kind of second rebellion against my parents, several years ago during my sophomore year of college--without even knowing exactly why. I began to grow my hair longer and choose a different sort of friend--more exotic, just as Edna chose Mlle. Reisz. I started to go places and do things on the spur of the moment, things that didn't necessarily have anything to do with my academic program. In the same way Edna, on her return to New Orleans at the end of the summer: ". . . began to do as she liked and feel as she liked. She completely abandoned her Tuesdays at home. . . . going and coming as it suited her fancy, and, so far as she was able, lending herself to any passing caprice" (95).

Although, as I have said, this process started several years ago in my own case--leading to studying abroad in France and Mexico, as well as long, solitary adventures on the spur of the moment--it seems to have intensified in the past few months. I have found myself searching for ways to "disappear," longing to free myself from my responsibilities, and picking up adventurous and sometimes dangerous activities just because the

opportunity exists--even though the consequences are sometimes terribly hard to justify even to myself. This, in my opinion, is exactly what Edna was experiencing in her potentially scandalous affair with Alcee Arobin: "She felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity, and realizes the significance of the act without being wholly awakened from its glamour" (129).

She was caught up in her passionate new world, a world of electrifying new challenges and sensations, and when opportunities presented themselves, and were taken advantage of, she questioned her own reasons for the new feelings intruding on an otherwise stable life. Dark forebodings were beginning to haunt her as every step led her further out from the safe and familiar "beaches" of familial life. Far from engaging in a conscious process of rebellion and self-realization, she was following her feelings blindly.

At this point, Edna was nearly out of control. While she knew that what she had attained--a degree of independence--and what she was ultimately reaching for--control of her own destiny--were important to her, she also must have realized, subconsciously at least, the precarious position she was in both emotionally and spiritually. She had cut herself off from her family by rejecting the life she had so passively accepted before. At the same time, she had removed herself from the social life to which she was accustomed. One might imagine how she must have felt: there were few to turn to for support, and there was nowhere to rest from her struggles when she became emotionally exhausted. It seemed natural to me, then, that she began to grasp for support where she could find it. This she did in two major ways: by turning to music in the person of Mlle. Reisz, and by reaching for self-definition, learning to reach inside herself for support, from her painting.

Mlle. Reisz is the portal for her need for companionship and music. She, unlike the others surrounding Edna, sees no need to question her about her actions. She seems to understand without asking the turmoil and vague yearnings that Edna feels. Edna identifies with her through her music even though at one point she admits: "I don't know whether I like you or not" (104). Mlle. Reisz's music affected her first on the night she learned to swim--her first real awakening: ". . . the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking and the tears blinded her" (45).

The music continued to lash her throughout her life, as she slowly sloughed off her ties to the rest of the world. Edna, through the music, was able to realize the passions she was holding in check within herself, while at the same time recognizing the same passions manifested in another human being. This created a bond between Mlle. Reisz and herself.

As Edna Pontellier was affected by music, so am I by art. I remember distinctly the time I first felt these feelings stirring within me, visiting the "Maison de Rodin" (the house and studio of Rodin) in Paris. I remember being moved to tears by the incredible expressions of emotion--of passion--in Rodin's sculpture. "Le Main de Dieu" and "le Cri" in particular struck me as "the abiding impress of truth" (45) that Chopin depicts in Edna's life. When I saw them, I recall standing and staring, walking around and around thinking that nothing could express more fully or honestly the love, the anguish, and the mystery of human existence. I felt as if I could draw strength from the passions Rodin had captured in his marvelous art. Now, whenever I can, I go to art museums and I look for that same feeling, for others who know what I felt on that day long ago, what Rodin obviously knew and, I believe, what Edna felt as she listened to the art of Mlle. Reisz.

Although Edna drew strength and support from the music, Edna painted in an attempt to define her own capabilities and limitations, her own truth. Her painting, I feel, was her attempt to define her own personality. As her talent blossomed, as her figures came to life on the canvas, Edna was fleshing out her own self-image. She was defining for herself an identity separate from her husband, her social position, and her past. As she developed, she began to drop those things which otherwise would have served to define her identity: her social position, her husband, her children, and finally her house. This gave her the opportunity to find the resources within herself that would allow her to function as a unique and solitary individual. She was, in fact, isolating herself while attempting, at the same time, to pick up a new life.

My own "talent" has been writing poetry. Over the years as my poetry has developed, my need has grown for an identity separate from what the world is generally willing to allow me. At first, my poems were never quite good enough. Just as Edna crumpled up works that did not satisfy her, I have rejected poems over and over that I felt did not meet certain internal standards. The strange thing is that the poems have not only reflected (and still reflect) the degree of my skill and experience as a writer, they have also reflected, more or less, the solidity and condition of my own self-image, my own identity: in dark moods, my poems are dark and forbidding--often enough I write nothing at all during these times. In better times, they can reflect a vibrancy and clarity that is truly satisfying to me. It is at these times that I feel my own worth as an individual, that my life is substantial despite the inner turmoil I feel.

I felt this echoed strangely, and was expressed better than I have ever been able, by these lines of Chopin's:

There were days when she was very happy without knowing why . . . . She liked then to wander alone . . . and she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested.

There were days when she was unhappy . . . when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood. (97)

Here is my final connection with Edna. As I re-read the book for one of the last times, I noticed how many times "shadow" and spirit images were used to express what was happening to Edna. For example, when Edna first learned to swim, she commented that "there must be spirits abroad tonight" (49). And earlier Chopin writes: "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day" (14).

She felt as I have on many long walks, which seem to be more and more common as the months and seasons pass by with no resolution to the turmoil I feel inside: "She was seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half darkness which met her moods. But the voices were not soothing that came to her out of the darkness . . ." (87).

These "voices"--for I have felt them as well--are the voices of deep depression, leading to dark thoughts and the deepest melancholy. Yet, they also seem to be agents of freedom. They seem the most insistent when I feel like trying to escape from all that surrounds me, and all that I have surrounded myself with: family, friends, job, and all of the responsibilities and expectations that go with them. In other words, the darkness and the voices may be symptoms of an almost unconscious need to break away. And they are frightening, truly frightening. I feel, instinctively almost, that these same dark feelings are reflections of what is inside of me--good and bad--and that in order to break free I must face them and be willing to change or be destroyed.

What I have been feeling in response to this book are the results of having exposed an interesting personal dilemma that nonetheless holds a larger significance for our modern American society as a whole. In their 1985 book *Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah and others, discuss a problem, a paradox in American life, that may hold the key to my own inner conflicts. Their work seems to suggest that, far from being relatively rare, my private, personal conflicts and those described by Chopin are individual symptoms of a society-wide crisis of character and community, a crisis in which members of a highly individualistic American society, emphasizing the concept of self-reliance, are coming into conflict in

ever increasing numbers with society *and* with themselves. Each individual, struggling to establish an identity separate from the community, works towards an independence from society. At the same time, the only entity which can even attempt to grant this independence is that self-same society. The result is that not only the fabric of the society surrounding the individual is breaking down, but the individual as well:

What is at issue is not simply whether self-contained individuals might withdraw from the public sphere to pursue purely private ends, but whether such individuals are capable of sustaining either a public *or* a private life. . . . perhaps only the . . . forms [of individualism] that see the individual in relation to a larger whole, a community and a tradition--are capable of sustaining genuine individuality and nurturing both public and private life. (143)

And they may be right. As I contemplate the significance of Bellah's work, I find myself asking if I am one of those who are attempting to become "self-contained" at the expense of a identity within the community.

What they are suggesting, albeit in much greater detail, is that while our society promotes the ideals of self-reliance and self-realization, the results are a severing of the individual from the supporting social institutions which necessarily surround us. As each individual comes nearer to fulfilling the individual ideal, he or she is, in effect, cutting off all possibility of the kinds of psychological and spiritual support possible only within the community: "The [the citizens of society] cry out for the very community that their moral logic [i.e., individualism] undercuts. . . .it is only in relation to society that the individual can fulfill himself and . . . if the break with society is too radical, life has no meaning at all" (144).

If Bellah and his co-authors are right, this may explain Edna's final, fatal walk into the sea, as well as the driving force behind the "shadows" of unexplained dread that have been haunting me in my own "awakening." Edna, in her rejection of her husband, children, and social position, cut herself off from the very institutions which provided her with an identity. This made her very vulnerable to the emotions she had been feeling with Robert. As for myself, while my struggle has led to some personal successes, I recognize that my subsequent position is one that is emotionally precarious. I have established, somewhat, an individual identity, yet I sometimes, in the back of my mind, wish for the emotional comfort that a closer relationship with a caring community would provide.

As I near the end of this paper, I realize that so much more could be said. While I may have touched on the main points that stirred me in Chopin's novel, the roots of why I was stirred--the *real* reasons--lie buried,

perhaps, too deeply within me to bring fully to the surface in any understandable way. Despite a seemingly inborn desire to know and understand myself, I realize that that much truth about myself is not something that is easy to confront. Unlike Edna, I have not yet broken my ties with the world; I may never do so. Considering the insights of Bellah, it may be that in doing so completely, I would be creating forces inside myself which could, in the end, overwhelm me.

Realizing the significance of Edna's actions, I understand the courage they required and I must admire her for it. I will continue my own struggle, and I hope one day to ease the bonds I have created for myself, and which society has created for me, to allow myself to become more than I am now. Like Edna, I have not perfected my medium for life, the poetry with which I struggle to define myself. But not having lived, I will not choose death. I will content myself with the struggle, with searching for the passions I want to understand in the art and literature of others, as well as in myself. I may eventually, perhaps, find it necessary to tie myself back more firmly to a supporting community of some sort--as Bellah suggests, perhaps a community which understand my passions and allows me to express them without fear of judgment but in the spirit of simple acceptance.

I sometimes see the struggle as a journey, as if I have somewhere I am meant to go. Yet I realize what a total departure would mean in terms of my social responsibilities and commitments. It would mean a total separation of myself from these things, things I'm not sure I'm willing to sacrifice. I am not sure, truthfully, whether such a separation would allow me to achieve what I seek or merely doom me to a life of always searching for what might be, in the end, impossible to find. The question remains in my mind: do I, as Mlle. Reisz asked Edna, have "wings strong enough to fly above the level plain of tradition and prejudice?" (138).

### Works Cited

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