

The Awakening / Kate Chopin

About the Book...

First published in 1899, this beautiful, brief novel so disturbed critics and the public that it was banished for decades afterward. Now widely read and admired, *The Awakening* has been hailed as an early vision of woman's emancipation. This sensuous book tells of a woman's abandonment of her family, her seduction, and her awakening to desires and passions that threatened to consume her. Originally entitled "A Solitary Soul," this portrait of twenty-eight-year-old Edna Pontellier is a landmark in American fiction, rooted firmly in the romantic tradition of Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson. Here, a woman in search of self-discovery turns away from convention and society, and toward the primal, irresistibly attracted to nature and the senses. *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin's last novel, has been praised by Edmund Wilson as "beautifully written." And Willa Cather described its style as "exquisite," "sensitive," and "iridescent."

About the Author...

Kate Chopin (1851-1904) did not begin to write until she was thirty-six years old. Up to that time, her life gave no hint of either literary talent or literary ambition. Yet after the publication of her first stories in 1889, she enjoyed ten years of a productive, serious, and fairly successful career. Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), had difficulty finding a publisher, so she brought it out at her own expense and sent review copies to important journals. Her short stories—close to a hundred of them—were published for the most part in prestigious national magazines. They gave her a solid reputation as a gifted 'local color' writer—that is, an author specializing in the depiction of a particular region of the country and its inhabitants. From these many stories, she culled two well-reviewed collections: *Bayou Folk* in 1894 and *A Night in Acadie* in 1897. *The Awakening*, now her best-known work, appeared in 1899.

Critics of Chopin's own day disapproved of the sexual frankness of *The Awakening* and were especially disturbed by the narrator's neutrality toward the unconventional behavior of Edna Pontellier, the heroine. All reviews of the novel were unfavorable. Soon after this setback, a planned third collection of short stories was rejected by a publisher, and Kate Chopin essentially ceased to write. In poor health, she died some five years after *The Awakening* appeared. She was only fifty-three.

Discussion Questions...

1. How does this novel frame the notions of freedom and responsibility?
2. What role do children play in Edna's life?
3. Think about the three main women in the novel: Edna, Adele, and Mademoiselle Reisz. How are they different and how are they alike?
4. Why did Edna return to Grand Isle at the end of the novel?
5. Which of the men in the novel do you find most sympathetic? Why?

6. Does Edna undergo more than one awakening in this novel? What is she awakened to?
7. Why does Mademoiselle Reisz say that it takes courage to be an artist? Do you agree? Is her opinion rooted in her time and her gender?
8. Imagine *The Awakening* set in today's American society. How would it be different? How would it be the same?
9. What role does race and class play in this novel? Does Edna have anything in common with the poor black woman who serves her?
10. Is Edna's act of suicide at the end of the novel an act of bravery or cowardice? Do you think it was an intentional or premeditated act on her part? Why does Chopin leave the answer to this question so vague?