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English 305: New Historical

1 December 2018

Post-Bellum Effects on Kate Chopin and *The Awakening*

Roberta Maguire states that “literature and history are not separate terms” (125). History can greatly impact literature, just as literature can have the same effect on history. Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, first published in 1899, is an example of this. Chopin was born in 1850 and died in 1904, meaning she lived through the American Civil War (1861-1865) – a time of profound oppression, specifically slavery. Chopin’s experience with slavery led her to tackle another societal injustice, women’s oppression and lack of freedom. Chopin was raised in the border state of Missouri, so she was immersed in both Northern and Southern ideologies. She also spent some of her time in the Deep South down in New Orleans. Chopin discovered that the oppressive expectations and ideologies the South placed on women did not correspond with her own beliefs. Chopin channeled her negativity toward Southern beliefs into her writing, which is “celebrated for its subtle treatment of the changing face of Southern life, and especially of Southern women” (Beer 147). By taking a closer look at history during the Civil War era, it is evident that the American Civil War heavily influenced Kate Chopin’s literary works in the post-Civil War time period, especially *The Awakening* as it is based on the oppression and enslavement of women.

Chopin had a unique perspective on feminism and life in the United States because she was raised in Missouri, a border state during the separation of the Union and Confederacy. Chopin was “born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1850” (Tucker 105) and lived there until 1870.

Missouri was a divided state throughout much of this time as some of the Missouri residents supported the North while others supported the South. Tuire Valkeakari notes that “although St. Louis took the Northern side during the Civil War, Southern influences made themselves felt almost as powerfully in St. Louis” (196-197). Missouri’s strong ties to both the Union and Confederacy provided Chopin with a deep understanding of both Northern and Southern ideologies. Chopin’s family leaned more toward support of the Confederacy. “In the years before the Civil War, while Chopin was a young girl growing up in the state of Missouri, her family and their neighbors were slaveholders” (Maguire 124). As was common in a slave-owning household, Chopin was raised as a Southern belle – a girl of upper socioeconomic status who is very proper and is from the South. Women in the South, including Southern belles, had certain expectations pressed on them. For example, women were limited to the domestic sphere as their sole ‘purpose’ was to raise children while the men worked. “Female submissiveness” (Valkeakari 197) was another example of an expectation of Southern belles. Due to these expectations, Chopin discovered two things: “the role of a Southern belle did not satisfy her,” (Valkeakari 201) and she “has no sympathy for the Southern plantation life” (Beer 157).

Throughout *The Awakening*, Chopin clearly illustrates her displeasure with Southern beliefs toward women. Valkeakari states that *The Awakening* attacks “Southern society’s inadequate recognition of women as a diverse group of individuals who may hold different views as to what constitutes a fulfilling and meaningful life” (204). Chopin creates two types of female characters in the book: those that embody the Southern ideology of women and those that embody Chopin’s ideology of a strong, independent woman free of Southern oppression. Mrs. Ratignolle fits the label of an ideal Southern belle as she is extremely motherly and puts her

home and family above all else. On the other hand, Edna Pontellier is the exact opposite of a Southern belle by “refusing to be solely a wife and mother” (Valkeakari 204).

After the Civil War, Chopin continued to reject the lasting Southern ideologies that negatively impacted women. In 1870, She married Oscar Chopin, and they moved to New Orleans, Louisiana. Chopin was “mesmerized by the city” (Beer 150) of New Orleans because it was different from many other places in the South. Beer states that

New Orleans already lived in popular imagination as a city of unique racial mixtures, including the largest community of free people of color, sexual pleasure and immorality, and it was often compared with the erstwhile colonial city of Paris – specifically in relation to a metaphoric femininity, with both seen as sites of romance, glamor, and sexualized street life. (148)

New Orleans was attractive to Chopin because it was modernizing and its societal ideologies were beginning to align with Chopin’s own beliefs. However, hints of Confederate ideology remained in New Orleans during post-bellum times: “New Orleans remain[ed] a private, feminized Catholic city of racial and sexual secrets, shadows, and patriarchal surveillance” (Beer 149). Because of her opposing views, Chopin “avoided, as far as possible, the formal claims of New Orleans society” (Fletcher 120). In doing so, Chopin pursued activities and interests that were seen as unbecoming of a woman raised as a Southern belle. Music, for example, is an interest of Chopin’s that was thought of as useless for women in the South because they were supposed to be focused on their families and children. Chopin’s progressive interests are epitomized by Valkeakari’s statement that “Chopin’s husband tolerated more unconventional behavior on his wife’s part than our knowledge of the mores of the era’s Southern upper-classes would have us assume” (199). Chopin’s interest in music is also conveyed through her writing,

specifically through Edna in *The Awakening*. “Edna was what she herself called very fond of music” (Chopin 34). Additionally, Edna is overcome with emotion after hearing Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano: “she trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her” (Chopin 35). Chopin’s interest in music was synonymous to Edna’s, and Chopin was encouraged to pursue her interest in music because of the progressiveness of New Orleans and her husband.

After her husband died, Chopin and her children moved back to her home state of Missouri; Missouri’s similarity to Kentucky then served as an inspiration for Edna Pontellier’s character and *The Awakening*. In *The Awakening*, Edna is originally from Kentucky. During the time of the Civil War, similarly to Missouri, Kentucky was a “state of contradiction – at once a defender of the idea of the Union while also deeply invested in slavery” (Maguire 126). There is a clear connection between Chopin’s life during the Civil War and Edna’s character seeing as both Missouri and Kentucky were border states that the Union and Confederacy fought over. The connections between Chopin’s writing and the Civil War do not stop here, though. “Not only is *The Awakening*’s main character, Edna Pontellier, from Kentucky, but her father is a Kentucky colonel who fought in the Civil War” (Maguire 127). Edna’s father “had been a colonel in the Confederate army” (Chopin 91). Chopin uses the character of the Colonel as a mockery of the South in order to emphasize her discontentment of Southern ideologies and beliefs toward women. Maguire states that “in 1899 (the year *The Awakening* was first published), the image of the colonel became a kind of shorthand for signaling the lawlessness, violence, and corruption that outsiders believed Kentucky had fallen into” (128). Kentucky embraced a Southern, Confederate identity, but this was an “identity that [Kentucky] never had” (Maguire 128). Chopin symbolizes Kentucky’s ‘false identity’ by means of the Colonel’s padded clothes. “He was tall and thin, and wore his coats padded, which gave a fictitious

breadth and depth to his shoulders and chest” (Chopin 91). Just as the Colonel had a falseness to him, so too did Kentucky during the Civil War. Chopin continues her mockery of Kentucky and the South by illustrating the Colonel an alcoholic. “The Colonel drank numerous toddies during the course of the day,” and “he was an expert at concocting strong drinks” (Chopin 93). Lastly, Chopin utilizes the Colonel and his talk with Léonce as representation of Southern ideology regarding women. The Colonel says, “You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce. Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard: the only way to manage a wife” (Chopin 97). Chopin uses the Colonel’s quote to exemplify Southern society’s unjust expectations of women that Chopin experienced during her time in Missouri.

Chopin’s experiences throughout her life, including her experiences during and after the Civil War, influenced and inspired her writing of *The Awakening*. Growing-up in the border state of Missouri provided Chopin with an understanding of the different ideologies held by the Northern and Southern states. Ultimately, through her writing, Chopin opposed the South’s oppressive views toward women and supported the North’s progressive views. Maguire was correct in saying that “literature and history are not separate terms” (125) because Chopin’s writing altered and encouraged feminist ideologies during the post-bellum time period while the Civil War and post-bellum society simultaneously influenced Chopin’s writing.

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[file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/A_cry_of_the_dying_century_Kat%20\(1\).PDF](file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/A_cry_of_the_dying_century_Kat%20(1).PDF)

In deed, in the United States corporal punishment as such appears to be contrary to the 8th Amendment's restrictions on cruel and unusual punishment. Yet the rate of imprisonment in the United States appears to be growing. Furthermore, since the middle of the 20th century, popular and professional sentiment has taken a distinctly punitive turn and now tends to see retribution and incapacitation rather than rehabilitation as the goals of criminal punishment. Criminal sentences ordinarily embrace four basic modes of punishment. In descending order of severity these are: incarceration, commu ...was adding slave states to the Union but had a smaller population than the North. The southern states were losing power in the House of Representatives. ...opposed federal laws and seceded (sepaÂ rated) from the Union by creating the ConfedÂ erate States of America. ...opposed the election of Lincoln and chose Jefferson Davis President of the Confederacy. B Make sentences about the information in A. You can use these sentence patterns and the pictures on the next page for ideas. 1. The northern states.