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**Universidad de Valladolid**

FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

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The Development of the Feminist Self and the Quest  
for Identity in *The Awakening* and “The Storm”

Ana Rosa Roldán Ruiz

Tutor: José Manuel Barrio Marco

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## ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin is considered one of the first feminist writers of the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as well as an important author of local color realism. As we enter the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the prototype of conventional heroin in American novels disappears while the image of the new woman begins to emerge. In her works *The Awakening* (1899) and 'The Storm' (1898), the main aspects of feminism can be appreciated, such as the right to live happily with oneself, the rejection of patriarchy and sexual independence, which even leads to adultery. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to make a comparison between Edna Pontellier and Calixta based on behavior in marriage, sexual freedom and the development of the feminine "self".

Keywords: Kate Chopin, feminism, adultery, independence, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, local color realism

## RESUMEN

Kate Chopin es considerada como una de las primeras escritoras feministas de la última década del siglo XIX, así como una autora importante del costumbrismo local. Conforme nos adentramos en esta última década del siglo XIX el prototipo de heroína convencional en las novelas Americanas va desapareciendo mientras que comienza a surgir la imagen de la nueva mujer. En sus obras *The Awakening* (1899) and 'The Storm' (1898) se pueden apreciar los aspectos principales del feminismo como el derecho a vivir feliz con uno mismo, el rechazo al patriarcado y la independencia sexual lo que llega incluso al adulterio. Por esto, el objetivo de este ensayo es realizar una comparación entre Edna Pontellier y Calixta basándonos en el comportamiento en el matrimonio, la liberación sexual y el desarrollo del "yo" femenino.

Palabras clave: Kate Chopin, feminismo, adulterio, independencia, siglo XIX, costumbrismo local



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## Introduction

The present dissertation offers an exploration on the female self and identity in America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, based on Kate Chopin's literature, in particular, her famous novel *The Awakening* and her well-known short story called 'The Storm'. Chopin creates main characters settled in the American South, an important feature of her literary work. She is in charge of providing her heroines with real feelings and attitudes, opposing marital frustrations with love and passion, as well as her dependence as a mother and her independence as a woman. Instead of analyzing in depth Kate Chopin's life and work, this study will provide a broader perspective of the female roles in her fiction which are related to the transparent behavior of women towards society according to consciousness and sexual desire.

As it happens in *The Awakening* and 'The Storm', Chopin tries to interpret the relationship between oppression and release of the main characters, although in the case of *The Awakening* it is done through suicide. Seduction and suicide are important features of the domestic and sentimental novel which is usually aimed at a female audience. This type of novel came from Europe to America and it uses characteristics such as the love-passion particular of romanticism. This worrying increase in suicides would be reflected in the naturalistic novel that flourished in the United States at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, a literary stage where characters like Maggie can be found written by Stephen Crane in 1893. In the naturalist novel, the reader can appreciate how a girl in the street is determined by its environment and its circumstances in the main character which will dominate her behavior, depriving the individual of responsibility. However, in 1890 that literary naturalist current reached its full glory, despite having been introduced to America years before provided by Crane's novels.

*The Awakening* and 'The Storm' are also examples of naturalism, a term which is influenced by Charles Darwin. "America's literary naturalists dismissed the validity of comforting moral truths." (Barrio 75) The representation of human beings, the instincts and passions of the main characters are important features of this type of philosophical ideas. In other words, the naturalist novel aims to present the new point of view of a woman or a man as a person who is determined by the pressures of the moment. The elements of Darwinian theories in Chopin's works are obvious since both

women, Edna and Calixta, belong to a traditional family who expresses their sexual desires and sexual freedom. According to Charles Darwin (1859), “all animal and human behavior was determined by biological impulses rather than divinely inspired reason” (101). In fact, there is naturalism at the moment when a character is moved by instinct. In the case of *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier awakens by her instinct, in other words, that instinct is what moves her to wake up. Naturalism is also clearly seen in ‘The Storm’ since Calixta has a momentary outburst of physical passion over the past. The storm is a sexual explosion, a punctual desire without feeling.

Moreover, an interesting case about the concept of “new woman” in America is the naturalist writer Theodore Dreiser, who began writing his novel called *Sister Carrie* in 1900 just as *The Awakening* was beginning to be censored. For the publication of this novel, Dreiser had to face some difficulties such as education of the time, and social conventions. It is important to remark this novel since its main character, Carrie Meeber, is also a woman who fights for her independence both economically and lovingly. Undoubtedly, these elements have a certain similarity with Edna Pontellier and Calixta. Dreiser’s novel broke with the social conventions of the time as *The Awakening*, to such an extent that the editors had to remove it for a few years.

Considering all those features, this essay will provide an introduction followed by a state of the issue in which there are several sources and important authors on which the search for information has been based to carry out this work and the methodology on which the work is based. Moreover, the next section contains a brief biography and literary work by the author in order to contextualize this dissertation. The following part deals with the analysis of the novel and the short story taking into account the issue of marriage, maternity and family, the self and identity and sexual freedom. There are many aspects of the novel and short story which I could talk about, but I have decided to analyze the more visible and relevant ones.



## 1. State of the issue

The study focuses on the important role of women in literature as well as the new women in American society. Nevertheless, most of the sources found are in English since we are focusing on a specific period in American literature, the 19th century. For this purpose, the search of databases is significant. For instance, ProQuest, JSTOR and MLA are the databases consulted in order to set information for this essay. The results reveal some articles like “El Despertar de la Mujer Norteamericana: Creación de una Estética Feminista en *The Awakening* de Kate Chopin” written by María Antonia Alvarez in 1993. She focuses only on this novel and its main character taking into account and comparing it with other American novels in which the woman is the main character since the whole work is a justification of women's rights. Another relevant journal article is called ‘The Kaleidoscope of Truth: A New Look at Chopin's *The Storm*’ written by Allen Stein in 2003. Nevertheless, the main novel which *The Awakening* is compared to is with “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892. The main character affirms that she does not agree with the ideas of her husband as it is observed in Chopin’s novel and she wishes to be liberated from such oppression.

Regarding the knowledge analyzed in this essay, it is required to find more precise information about both main characters, Edna Pontellier and Calixta. This is the case of an article entitled “Kate Chopin and her Critics: Edna and Calixta Interpreted and Misunderstood” written by Craig in 2006 which makes a comparison according to the role of women and the act of adultery in both characters. In addition, there are some relevant books in which more specific information about Chopin’s life and works has been easy to find. For instance, ‘*Kate Chopin: A Literary Life*’ written by Nancy A. Walker in 2001. The author shows the life and the career of Chopin in an excellent way according to the context of 19th Century American women writers. Other books that have been useful in the development of this work are ‘*The Awakening*’ edited by Margaret Culley in 1996. It is considered a critical edition because as can be seen in the content of the book there is a section dedicated to the themes agreed in this project. Besides that, it is important to consider that the contribution of this analysis is closely attached to some of the class notes during the degree. For instance, ‘*Literatura en Lengua Inglesa II*’ (2015-2016) and ‘*Literatura en Lengua Inglesa IV*’ (2016-2017).

## **2. Methodology**

The aim of this analysis is to compare the role and behavior of the two main characters in each work, Edna Pontellier and Calixta, concerning some aspects related to marriage, the self, identity and maternity. For this practical application, the theme of female adultery has been selected in the genre of the novel and the short story by a specific author, Kate Chopin, in a limited time frame, the last decade of the 19th century. So it is important to understand the political and social context in which the author has written them.

This study will be interesting since the American society in which the author lived could try to make comfortable the concept of “new woman” in terms of better education and conditions in the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. What they could not tolerate was the desire for sexual freedom, especially outside marriage. It was a new awareness of the identity of women and their mission in society. From 1849 to 1880 women wrote basically imitating male models although the topics were feminine. As a consequence, the female writing was limited in society to discussing certain issues considered to be typical women. For this reason, Chopin anticipated her times, refusing to write within the established conventions of the period in which she lived. Therefore, according to the most remarkable years of Kate Chopin, the final aim of this dissertation is to determine the main features of the self-development of the characters, Edna Pontellier and Calixta, taking into account the characteristics previous mentioned. In this way, desire and passion arise and it is changed to full consciousness by the adultery. Besides, this study includes a conclusion about the role of woman and the objective of the author when writing those works.

### 3. Kate Chopin

#### 3.1 A brief biography

Kate Chopin also known as Katherine O’Flaherty was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1850 and died in 1904. She belonged to a traditional family who followed the typical conventions of that period. Her father called Thomas O’Flaherty was a rich businessman that had emigrated from Galway, Ireland. His mother, Eliza Faris, was a French Creole. When her father died, she was an orphan before her fifth birthday and she grew up in a family exclusively composed by women, who would later become the essential characters of her stories. Curiously, Kate began to write a diary in which it could be appreciated how she developed her thoughts about literary texts, poems and narratives. In 1855, Kate became a student at St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart and in 1868 she graduated from such an academy. She enrolled in that institution after having lost suddenly her father, brothers and sister.

She married Oscar Chopin, in 1870 and she had five children, but she was soon widowed since he died in 1884 because of yellow fever. Her husband was a member of the French Creole community of St. Louis as her mother. At that moment, she devoted herself to writing as a way of life, acquiring great notoriety about southern society taking into account “local color realism”, a style of writing influenced by specific features of southwestern dialect, history or inhabitants. During those times, Kate suffered a nervous breakdown and her doctor suggested her that she should consider writing as a way of finding herself. The publication of *The Awakening* was a great achievement and personal satisfaction for Chopin. She had to face several criticisms that she received from the society which was not ready yet to take on the reflections on marriage, sexuality, social independence and the need for freedom since she was ahead of her time.

In addition, this advice helped her to rediscover her narrative and separate her personal life as a wife and mother from her life as a writer. For that reason, “writing was for her a compensatory activity, something she turned to in widowhood, or that following the death of Oscar Chopin she was forced to find a socially sanctioned means of supporting herself and her children” (Walker 2).

Finally, it is important to remark that the writer through the personal experiences of her heroines defends the position of women who were subject to moral control and in fact, these aspects of her life showed her great independence in all senses.

### **3.2 Kate Chopin's work and writing style**

American writer, Kate Chopin is considered in those times as a controversial and challenging writer due to her work being socially recognized as one by the first feminist writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her writing style is influenced by Darwinism as mentioned before in the introduction. Thus, she has not only occupied a great place among the writers of her time, but also thanks to the interest of her work has been placed within the context of American realism and naturalism and even European. Sometimes these two literary movements alternate as can be seen in her two major works analyzed in this dissertation. She uses a very revealing point of view, around people's feelings and emotions. Moreover, Chopin presents the conflict between the supposed feminine innocence and sensuality with humor and without ambiguity between the self and the social and religious conventions of the Victorian era. For this reason, she is considered as a great innovator in American literature since she escapes from the literary traditions.

At the end of 1880, it could be found a great literary creation composed by short stories, articles and translations which appeared in famous newspapers exactly at those times. She was one of the most important authors of "local color realism" in America, although her literary qualities sometimes were forgotten. Throughout the novel and the short story analyzed in this essay, there are several details of this type of fiction. "Local color realism" refers to the characteristics, history, customs and even the peculiar way of speaking in a specific state or city and its inhabitants, in this case, Louisiana where a closed society is described, the Creoles (Florinda 310). In the mid-1890s, Kate Chopin's literary fame was recognized throughout the country, although her career as a writer lasted only around ten years. In 1904, while Kate was visiting the St. Louis World's Fair, she suffered a mental breakdown and she never wrote again.

As it was mentioned above, Chopin wrote for several magazines and newspapers, but her best-known works are her short story 'Desirée's Baby' and her

novel *The Awakening*, both of them included in the great controversy in that time. Therefore, Kate Chopin focused her work on portraying the lives of women and their constant efforts to create an own identity within the southern society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as we can see in ‘The Story of an hour’, ‘The Storm’, ‘A respectable woman’ and in ‘Pair of silk stockings’<sup>1</sup> among others. The great number of stories that she published, guaranteed her the solvency she needed and also allowed her to combine literary writing with her life as a housewife (Walker 3). It is relevant to mention that Chopin has written hundreds short stories throughout her life.

In fact, her novels contain much resemblance to those of Maupassant, a French writer whom she admired and a great influence on her literary work. She wanted to escape from tradition and authority and tell what she saw of life in a direct and simple way. The admiration that she felt for Maupassant developed into “a profound influence on her work- and certainly that influence show in Chopin’s deft and striking economy of word and event and in her aversion to overt moralizing” (Stein 4). For this reason, it can be appreciated how the characters of both authors try to evade from the tradition and the social conventions in society. Besides this, Kate highlighted of that writer the rejection of imitation and tradition, the refusal to submit to the dictates of the mass and the determination to prioritize the individual conscience (González 182). Obviously, the exuberant passion of Chopin's writing represents a decisive change related to the point of view and the techniques of other contemporary novels with female main characters such as *Sister Carrie* written by Theodore Dreiser where the main character has very similar behaviors to Edna Pontellier and Calixta.

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<sup>1</sup> All the short stories published by Kate Chopin were compiled by her biographer, Per Seyersted in 1969.



#### 4. A Comparative analysis of the main characters in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and 'The Storm'.

Although Chopin's *The Awakening* is considered a novel and Chopin's 'The Storm' is a short story, they have several features in common. In 1887 she started writing *The Awakening*, convinced that this novel was going to be her greatest literary work until that moment. The process, in which Chopin worked hard, lasted two years while she always kept writing other stories such as the famous short story 'The Storm'.

The publication of *The Awakening* in 1899 unleashed many criticisms, mostly negative criticism, including the moral prejudices of the North American critics at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as in 'The Storm'. Critics showed that there were certain issues such as sexuality, independence, desires and power of women that could not be spoken relatively freely. Both works introduce a female character that behaves in an adulterated way. It is a kind of development from romantic imaginations with other men who is not their husband to self-reliance and self-sufficiency (Showalter 9).

Moreover, the symbolism that is appreciated in the works is what defines the limits and dangers of the awakening experienced by both main characters. The narrative style that Chopin uses is poetic, visual and sensual, as Joyce Dyer affirms. This author asserts that without the complex symbols and images, the novel and the short story would lose their shine and depths and it would even be very complicated to understand the behavior of Edna Pontellier and Calixta<sup>2</sup>. Undoubtedly, both works have a special cultural connection with French literature and the Creole society.

The novel made its first appearance when American culture was still dominated by the traditional morality of the so-called 'Genteel Tradition' (González 182). It was quickly remarked because it was considered immoral and even dangerous for the youth of the time since the main character, Edna, manifested her sexual desire. For this reason, it was considered a revolutionary book and marked an important period in the development of American female literature (Showalter 10). Moreover, Chopin had described perfectly not only the landscape of Louisiana, but also the linguistic richness and the curiosities of its Creole inhabitants. Be that as it may, it is hard to believe how a novel deals in a deep way with the reflection on a bourgeois woman who enters into a

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce Dyer, "Symbolism and Imagery in *The Awakening*", in *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening*, ed. Bernard Koloski, New York, The Modern Language Association of America, 1988, 126-131.

crisis because she does not feel fulfilled and she doubts about her marriage and her motherhood. She wants to live and feel the love she has never felt, because of that she looks for a man, a company and a feeling. That is why it is a novel that contains adultery since there is no remorse on the part of the main character. Furthermore, in this novel, it can be seen a new behavior in American literature in which the main character leaves her children to find herself, which will be discussed later. In fact, the awakening, as the novel is called, refers to the search for the self. Regarding Edna's character, the author faced the ideas of what was expected and accepted by American women in 1899.

Equally important, 'The Storm' is a short story written in 1898 and it was not published while Kate Chopin was alive, but it was published in 1969, almost 65 years after her death. The story deals with a specific moment in the life of the main character, Calixta, in which her sexual desire is manifested as we can observe in *The Awakening*, but this sexual desire is rather considered passionate sex. In fact, Chopin explores lovers meeting married people. The emotional storm passes and the lovers return to their routine life. It is also set in Louisiana at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, at which time two sinner lovers is considered an immoral argument. It is worth underlining the importance of its momentary outburst of physical passion without further emotional implications. The storm is a very important symbol as it was mentioned before talking about naturalism since the main character, Calixta, carries it inside and outside her. Basically, it is a sexual explosion and a punctual desire without feeling (Stein 52).

As can be seen in the publication dates of both works, while Kate Chopin writing *The Awakening* is when she writes 'The Storm'. From my point of view, the author generates ideas about that novel such as adultery in marriage or sexual freedom, and at the same time, those ideas also arise in 'The Storm'. Both Chopin's heroines behaviors are considered adultery, but Edna is conscientious, because she wants and Calixta comes by instinct because it is a past relationship that is retaken for a moment. In addition, Chopin plays with the premeditation of when a decision is deliberately taken as can be appreciated in the case of Edna and the non-premeditation as can be seen in Calixta.

Obviously, it had not been expected that a radical novel and short story would be a very good idea to be published in the United States at that time, and even less if written by a woman. The writer looked for realities in which she could develop



feminine consciousness, the identity of women and the experiences against patriarchy. Seyersted affirms that “Chopin was not interested in the immoral itself, but in life as it comes, in what she saw as natural” (147). In other words, it can be seen in such Kate Chopin’s works that there are aspects of the individual identity of women as for example her own sexuality and freedom both in marriage and society.

Apart from the historical and social context, it is important to know that Chopin's characters are reflected in herself. Throughout the works, the irony is a significant feature and obviously, these unexpected endings are showed through the thoughts and wishes of Edna Pontellier and Calixta. The choice of all these techniques and literary resources made Chopin's stories and novels become innovative works of the 19th century in American literature because she tried to experiment and in this way, she managed to create some alternatives from the conventional canon.

Actually, Chopin approached the literary concept of Bildungsroman focused on the Darwinian determinism of naturalism. There is also a higher criticism of human origins and destiny related to the Bible. It is important to mention that in ‘The Storm’ the author is inspired by *Song of the Songs*, a conjugal love poem of the Old Testament. In this case, it is offered a view in which there is a great religious influence and the argument is very similar. However, in both works, we can see two lovers who seek and claim their love in a sensual and inspiring descriptive way. Both are developed through the world of nature relating to lovers and the desire to see each other.

#### **4.1 Edna Pontellier and Calixta**

##### **I. Marriage**

I would like to remark the institution of marriage in Chopin's novel and short story chosen for the development of this study. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century American wife assumes all authority of the home and family while her husband just focuses on earning money for his family without taking part in any household chore. However, the emergence of the "new woman" was beginning to occur in American society as one of

the most primordial transformations of the time. It seems that the term "new woman" was used for the first time by the British novelist Sarah Grand to describe those women who felt dissatisfied with the Victorian ideal of femininity.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is going to present throughout the novel as much as her 'awakening' of marriage as of her daily life. The meaning of marriage for Edna was very different from what she had imagined. At the beginning of the novel, it can be examined how the narrator says that "her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident" (Chopin 35). The author is responsible for endowing her heroine, Edna, with attitudes against the frustrations of her marriage. Edna deals with lack of interest in her bourgeois and conventional marriage, but little by little she awakens her conscience to reality in order to feel free and independent in love. It can be observed how according to this novel the woman breaks her frustrations towards marriage, family and children.

"His entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and fast asleep when he came in. He talked to her while he undressed... He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (Chopin 9)

As mentioned above, the woman, in this case, Edna has to be at his entire disposal for everything during the day. Mr. Pontellier got really angry because his wife did not listen to him because she was already sleeping and he wanted her to pay attention. Although her husband is a good husband, generous and hardworking, he is nevertheless a man immersed in a traditional culture. The same night that Edna learns to swim, it is also the same night she disobeyed her husband for the first time. Within marriage, there is also another conflict, in this case, the children.

"Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after. Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it... He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business" (Chopin 10)

Edna has to take care of her children while Mr. Pontellier does other things like reading the newspaper or smoking a cigarette. Throughout the novel, just as Edna is

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<sup>3</sup> Charlotte J. Rich, *Transcending the New Woman. Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2009, 7.

moving away from her husband, she is also neglecting her children. Chopin in *The Awakening* wants to reject the conventions of the time and the values of American domestic literature. From this perspective, Edna's character wants to shed her domestic role and she wishes to develop herself outside home. It is important to mention that Mr. Pontellier does not want to see the reality that Edna wants to be an independent woman in society as an individual. As the novel moves forward, Edna meets other men as is the case of Robert Lebrun who falls in love. When she deliberates on infidelity, she thinks of Robert rather than her husband. "She did not mean her husband; she was thinking of Robert Lebrun. Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse". (Chopin 147) In the same way, the heroine discovers that she does not want Leonce Pontellier since she realizes that her husband expresses his love through gifts more than with affection and he also values her as one more object among his valuable possessions.

Concerning the connexion between *The Awakening* and 'The Storm', it is remarkable to mention that Calixta is a woman dedicated to home and family. She has been happily married for 5 years. At a specific moment in her life, she returns to the love of the past and she unleashes the storm and a passionate love while her husband was outside home with their child. The lover's name is Alcee and he is married too. It is significant to keep in mind that there is a clear connection in the name "Alcee" in both *The Awakening* and 'The Storm'. In those literary creations, that name is the lover of the main character. In the following quote, this may be seen how the irony takes over the short story. "Bobinôt's explanations and apologies which he had been composing all along the way, died on his lips as Calixta felt him to see if he were dry, and seemed to express nothing but satisfaction at their safe return" (Chopin 3)

Once the love between Calixta and Alcee is consummated, he leaves the house because her husband and her son are about to return. Meanwhile, the storm both inside and outside happens. Moreover, Calixta is the person who would have to apologize for what happened under the roof of her house with Alcee, but she seems more worried about her husband and her son than about what she has just done. However, at the moment when she is with her son and her husband after everything has happened, in a certain way, she feels guilty, she tries to show her husband loving appreciation and interest. "Shrimps! Oh, Bobinôt! you too good fo' anything!" and she gave him a

smacking kiss on the cheek that resounded, "J'vous répons, we'll have a feás' to-night! umph-umph!" (Chopin 3)

The behavior of Edna's husband in *The Awakening* and of Alcee in 'The Storm' is very similar since both go to another place leaving his wife with the children. In the case of Mr. Pontellier, he travels every week and in the case of Alcee allows his wife and children to travel to Boloxi for a few days. After committing infidelity, Alcee sends Clarisse a letter because he feels guilty and wants to sacrifice certain time without seeing his wife and children.

This is another feature of the justification that Chopin was writing:

"It was a loving letter, full of tender solicitude. He told her not to hurry back, but if she and the babies liked it at Biloxi, to stay a month longer. He was getting on nicely; and though he missed them, he was willing to bear the separation a while longer -- realizing that their health and pleasure were the first things to be considered."  
(Chopin 4)

The peculiarity of adultery in this novel and in this short history of the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> Century is the romanticism in which the woman waits for the salvation of a man who is not her husband and he could make her life better. However, Edna Pontellier leaves her home, her husband, and her children, while Calixta continues her life as before, hiding infidelity.

## **II. Sexual freedom**

Many women lived in the same domestic routine during this time in their marriage. However, the behavior of these two heroines was not the same as that of the wives of this century. As regards to the sexual liberation, this is another of the awakenings that Edna and Calixta suffer, considered a taboo issue at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as it is a period of sexual repression, especially among women of the bourgeois class. So, the particular interest that the author had in elaborating this novel and this short story was that the society understood all features of the female psyche and above all the woman's awakening, both sexual and social, becoming aware of the fact that her true nature.

In *The Awakening*, Edna falls in love with Robert Ledron, flirts with Alcee Arabin and prefers suicide rather than undergoing a conventional marriage all her life: Leonce Pontellier's wife and mother of his children. From my point of view, the first awakening is learning to be a sexually independent woman. "She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (Chopin 62). Edna begins to behave in a liberated way without any responsibility. Chopin's heroine awakens physical and spiritual pleasures at the same time. Her desire for independence goes hand in hand with her infatuation with Robert and her sensual awakening. "She gazed away toward Grande Terre and thought she would like to be alone there with Robert, in the sun, listening to the ocean's roar..."(Chopin 66). She only thinks about being with her lover instead of her husband. It is important to bear in mind that Edna Pontellier does not want to be owned by anyone and so she tells Robert: "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. (Chopin 206). However, although Edna wishes to become a free sexual woman, she wants to be with Robert, but he flees because he takes into account that she is a married woman and in the conventional society in which they live, it would be frowned upon. Therefore, the heroine declares herself as an independent woman since she is unable to live as an object on which her husband has power.

Thus, the manifestation of sexual freedom was not an attitude proper to a lady like Edna because she had a series of obligations such as showing domesticity and obedience to the conventional society of the time. The author also lets us see that a woman cannot respond sexually if she has not first managed to be an independent woman. This is what happens to the main character, Edna, as she becomes independent; she feels sexual desire with Robert and with Alcée. "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire". (Chopin 57) This feeling is unknown to her in marriage.

Therefore the sexual awakening of Edna was immoral and scandalous. She does not conceive any attempt to repress that sexual appetite, and what is more, Edna goes against the society and its rules abandoning its family and raising as to the level of commit adultery. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that Edna not only responds to sexual stimuli, but also to aesthetics such as music, painting and literature as it can be seen in the following quote: "Mrs. Pontellier had brought her sketching materials, which

she sometimes dabbled with in an un-professional way. She liked the dabbling. She felt in it a satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her.” (Chopin 21). The main character feels great satisfaction in her life thanks to painting, she feels free and self-sufficient.

In one of the various editions of the novel that are taken into account for the realization of the dissertation, specifically in the edition by Piñero, she tells us that the atmosphere of sensuality that prevails in the novel is the result of the influence of the impressionist painting before the publication of the work. For this reason, Chopin develops that interest in *The Awakening*. (92) In this way, Edna has not only transformed her life into a different experience, but imitating impressionist artists, she decides to paint that new vision breaking with the limits imposed on women by custom and tradition.

Regarding ‘The Storm’, two former lovers already married to other people return to resume their old relationship at a specific time. The emotional storm passes and the lovers return to their conventional life, but the intense experience of the truth remains in their intimacy, beyond the social norms of the time. For this reason, Calixta’s sexual desire is evidently related to the storm. “But she felt very warm and often stopped to mop her face on which the perspiration gathered in beads. She unfastened her white sacque at the throat.” (Chopin 2) At that moment the storm was coming and everything starts in the sense of sexual passion is unleashed.

In the same way, her memory of the past reappears when they begin to embrace. The two lovers did not think about the consequences that could have since both were married and had children. The body and the instincts were responsible for carrying out this act of passionate love. “Alcée clasped her shoulders and looked into her face. The contact of her warm, palpitating body when he had unthinkingly drawn her into his arms, had aroused all the old-time infatuation and desire for her flesh” (Chopin 2) The impulses of Calixta and Alcee are a temptation forbidden at this time. For this reason, the sexual desire that exists between them probably transmitted an idea beyond the traditional features of the short story such as the passionate connection between the characters and nature. In the following quote, there is a force between the male and the female without a rivalry of opposing points of view as in *The Awakening*.

“Her lips were as red and moist as pomegranate seed. Her white neck and a glimpse of her full, firm bosom disturbed him powerfully. As she glanced up at him the fear in her liquid blue eyes had given place to a drowsy gleam that unconsciously betrayed a sensuous desire” (Chopin 2)

While these lines explain explicitly that Calixta's lips are a temptation of that sexual desire, it can be interpreted implicitly that the body of the heroine finally achieves that freedom during the storm, taking on a will of its own. Hence, the author brings the reader closer to a story where nature, love, sexual desire and the physical act of procreation create a clear connection by unifying.

Concerning both stories, on the one hand, it is possible to observe that Edna is a realistic character because she makes her own decisions, and also naturalist in the sense of she has feelings and new impressions that lead her to be independent and to love who she wants. Therefore, her suicide does not transmit pity and despair, but it is a voluntary suicide. Calixta, on the other hand, is a naturalistic character because she does not think about having an affair with another man, Alcee. She does not think about anything because while she is at home, Alcee knocks on the door and suddenly this internal and external storm is unleashed. In addition, Edna will be with her lovers because she wants while she breaks up with her marriage and possesses a sexual freedom and Calixta has no intention of breaking her marriage, but she is sexually liberated at a given moment, by her natural instinct. Eventually, *The Awakening's* heroine rejects her sexual life because, for her, life is empty when the man she loves begins to distance himself from her because each looks for different things in life, but ‘The Storm’s’ heroine, dominated by her instincts, lives her unpremeditated experiences following her nature.

### **III. Identity and self**

Regarding this section, Edna Pontellier and Calixta challenge more social conventions; in this case, they are looking for identity and themselves, taking into account all the times that they behave against the society.

On the one hand, Edna Pontellier understands that “herself” is the most precious thing she possesses. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, *The Awakening*’s main character discovers it timidly, but then she has more confidence in herself. “Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening” (Chopin 65). She feels free comparing herself like a boat that anchors in the middle of the sea. In addition, Chopin's heroine is exposed to a constant struggle because she wants to stop being dependent on her husband and be able to develop self-reliance and self-awareness. Chametzky in his essay "Edna and the Woman Question" argues that “the struggle is for the woman to free herself from being an object or possession defined in her functions, or owned, by others”. (200)

Furthermore, she is considered a rebellious woman against the social conventions since she does not have too much interest in how her life develops. “She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility”. (Chopin 62) Meanwhile, she behaves as she truly is, without any responsibility. For this reason, as Edna wakes up, she rebels against the roles imposed by the society that surrounds her. Thus, she is also against the woman-wife-mother role assigned by society. All she wants is to dedicate herself to being an independent individual and not the "wife of" Leonce. “But whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself.” (Chopin 153) Nevertheless, Edna is not the typical Creole, puritanical and Catholic woman as is considered her friend Adele Ratignolle who owns "the more feminine and matronly figure" (Chopin 28). Ratignolle is the perfect woman, good mother and wife.

Besides this, Edna also rebels against motherhood. She realizes that children limit the independence that she so desires. At a specific moment in the novel, the main character tries to explain to her friend, Adele, the feelings towards her children, but Mrs. Pontellier affirms that she is not willing to give up her rights as a person for them.

“I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.”  
(Chopin 90)



In fact, she would never leave her essence, not even her children because this essence belongs only to her. It is an internal and external reflection of herself. The following quote is one of her last and most relevant reflections.

“The years that are gone seem like dreams – if one might go 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.” ... “There are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me. But I don't want anything but my own way.” (Chopin 213-214)

Basically, the main character does not want to be responsible for the consequences that cause the effects of her happiness. Edna states that it is better to be aware of things than to live with illusions and hope. For the heroine, this discovery is a way to achieve a certain social as well as economic independence.

Equally important, after her transformation physically and spiritually, Edna on her last visit to Grand Isle is introduced to the sea "pure as a Darwinian animal"<sup>4</sup> once she has removed her clothes as a symbol of detaching herself from her marriage and social status. In fact, the suicide of Edna Pontellier in the sea, in which she finds herself alone, constitutes the affirmation of her individuality, the perception of herself as a person and not as an object owned by her husband or as a mother dedicated to her children as in the case of Madame Ratignolle. Edna chooses her own destiny, so the suicide is a definitive clarification the culmination of her awakening. Upon entering the sea, the heroine is trying to revive the sensation of freedom she had felt before. According to Per Seyersted, her biographer, he affirms that

"Edna's action of casting off her garments symbolizes a lifting of the veil with which conventional ethics have draped the true meaning of existence. She is new-born in the sense that she comprehends and accepts life's basic urges in all their nakedness". (159)

Likewise, when she has learned to be herself, she prefers death rather than ceasing to be herself because of what society imposes. As I mentioned before, the society of that time was not going to allow a woman to live independently and separate from her husband and children.

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<sup>4</sup> Katherine Joslin “Kate Chopin on Fashion in a Darwinian World” *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Jane Beer, Cambridge, 2008, 84

On the other hand, the description of Calixta reminds the individuality of women, and at the same time, the traditional domestic position of femininity at the end of the 19th century. Before starting by analyzing the quotes from the short story, it is important to note that the title refers to the state of mind in which Calixta is found, in a storm which passes and the calm finally return. The storm begins and ends at the same time as the adventure between Calixta and Alcee and the story. For this reason, the appearance of this driving energy is not accidental because there is a clear relationship between the duration of this meteorological phenomenon and the adultery that the main character develops.

Unlike Edna, Calixta is still the same woman before and after infidelity to her husband. In the middle of the short story, there is a description in which Calixta is commonly referred to as a very positive woman, a beautiful person who has not changed anything. In fact, she has all the personality she had before and more.

“She was a little fuller of figure than five years before when she married; but she had lost nothing of her vivacity. Her blue eyes still retained their melting quality; and her yellow hair, disheveled by the wind and rain, kinked more stubbornly than ever about her ears and temples.” (Chopin 2).

In addition, another curious feature related to the identity of the heroine is that Calixta embodies the masculine role when she finds herself in a passionate moment with Alcee since she feels a free woman to do what she wants without any remorse. “The generous abundance of her passion, without guile or trickery, was like a white flame which penetrated and found response in depths of his own sensuous nature that had never yet been reached”. (Chopin 2) Interestingly, this type of behavior had not been seen before in American literature written by a woman.

From the first chapter to the last, it can be perceived the clash between personal freedom and personal responsibilities. "So 'The Storm' passed and every one was happy." (Chopin 5) This quote is the last line of the short story and goes alone in a paragraph as a mere fact of emphasis and rhetoric. Besides those particular characteristics, another common feature that can be found in both main characters of this work is free will. This peculiarity holds that people have the power to choose and make their own decisions by being conscious and responsible. Edna owns this

characteristic, with which she is not a pure naturalist when making her own decisions. Calixta is purely instinctive and aware of the infidelity that she performs.

Hence, it should always be taken into account that in these works there is a clear conflict between man and the "self". In this case, we are going to talk about an internal conflict that it is the forces that arise at a certain moment. Chopin's heroines struggle against society to overcome emotional problems and the personal crossroads of their lives. However, there is also an external conflict between man and society. In *The Awakening*, the characters that are around Edna are well characterized. Her social determinism is to marry who her father says and behave as others believe she should do so, but she does not let herself be impressed by those external forces. For this reason, she is not a naturalistic character, because she does not allow herself to be conditioned by external forces. She wants to develop as a person that is why she sets her tone. By comparison, Calixta is conditioned by these external forces because the heroine does not want to break up with her husband and son, since she cares about them, even though she has an affair with another man. Evidently, the tireless search for interior clarity and harmony between her inner self and her social life is change of thought considered the new matter that Kate Chopin brings to her literature. In addition, she does not let herself be conditioned by her internal forces, but she just lets herself be carried away by instincts at any given time.



## 5. Conclusion

The main intention of Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* and 'The Storm' is to offer a detailed critique of women and the struggle for their rights of the society of the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was considered a transitional era in which the progress of the American "new woman" was being projected and developed socially, seeking equality and freedom between men and women, although all of them could not express it. As a consequence, Chopin's heroines represent the thoughts of those women who were not satisfied with being housewives without desires or aspirations beyond the domestic impositions. Despite all the criticism that Chopin's work has suffered, it is interesting to remark that they are a significant piece of fiction based on the role of women in the Puritan society, the criticism of the mother-married-woman and they are set in Creole culture of Louisiana. This fact suggests that *The Awakening* and 'The Storm' explore the erotic and emotional needs of a woman immersed in a repressive society. "It remains a book by a woman about a woman who could not find a place in the society in which she lived because she was a woman" (Saphiro 118). It is curious that in 1887 she began to write *The Awakening*, convinced that this novel was going to be her greatest literary work so far, without stopping writing other stories as in the case of 'The Storm'. From my point of view, this is the reason why both works have features in common.

Thus, as a conclusion of the comparison of the development of the feminist self and the quest for identity, the most profound transformation that Chopin's heroines may experience is their own self-awareness and awakening, although in Edna that awakening leads her to loneliness and the painful alienation from others. There is a great crossroad as a mother and the direct consequences of their awakening. Obviously, Mrs. Pontellier realizes that she is not willing to renounce her new identity even for her children. The awakening of sensuality and freedom both personal and social are so important because without them she would not consider herself a complete human being. On the other hand, Chopin explores in 'The Storm' a loving encounter of two former lovers now married. The emotional storm passes and the lovers return to their lives, but in their thoughts the experience of the passionate explosion is present, leaving aside social norms and marriage.

In addition, Chopin presents two very different types of adultery. On the one hand, we have the case of Edna Pontellier in which she begins to see herself alone and confused since this voluntary sexual relation contributes in a harmful way to her suffering in life and on the other hand, adultery committed by Calixta is considered an outburst of energy at a specific moment in her life, but after that liberation, she continues to be happy with her family. Regarding those features, Kate Chopin was attracted by Darwin's theories and naturalism taking into account the human behavior and biological impulses since Edna and Calixta have always conducted themselves as individuals of nature and not through social classes.

*The Awakening* and 'The Storm' present a significantly realistic and naturalistic idea based on the ability to be dependent as a mother but independent as a woman. It is relevant to mention that these works are a clear example of the writing of adultery and feminist, since it is a justification of the rights of women, analyzing the forbidden passion of women at the end of the 19th Century. The author tries to show through the story of patriarchal culture, the struggle of women to achieve their sexual and marital freedom. In addition, these unexpected endings are shown through the thoughts and desires of the main characters, and therefore, they remain hidden for the rest of the characters. In this way, the reader becomes the confidant of the narrator, so he is the only one able to understand the irony that Chopin presents in the last chapters.

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