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Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

NARRATIVE STANCE IN KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith* Since its revival by Kenneth Eble in 1964, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) has received prodigious praise for the courage of its theme, its fluid and unassuming style, and the vividness of its portrait of French Creole society. It has also been commended because it presents without moral censure or implied lesson the story of a woman's growing awareness of and wish to express her own sensuality, an awareness and wish that first lead to infidelity and then to suicide. *The Awakening* is unusual among pieces of fine American fiction because it deals with men and women engaged in adult emotional relationships. "Our great novelists," writes Leslie Fiedler, though experts on ambiguity and assault, on loneliness and terror, tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of a novel. Indeed, they rather shy away from presenting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women giving us instead

monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality. 1 The novel with which *The Awakening* is most consistently compared and to which it bears striking resemblances is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. It is a "first rate novel, and we have few of its stature," Kenneth Eble says about *The Awakening*; 2 Edmund Wilson calls it "a quite uninhibited and beautifully written [book], which anticipates D. H. Lawrence in its treatment of infidelity;" 3 and Carlos Baker says it is a novel with "intensity, courage, vigor, and independence." 4 "Mrs. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," says Robert Cantwell, "seems to me to be the first novel of its sort written by an American, and to rank among the world's masterpieces of short fiction." 5 *The Awakening* also receives special attention and praise from those interested in fiction by and about women, for it has been read as a novel about a woman's emancipation from a stuffy, middle-class marriage with its domestic routines and rigid standards prescribing how to be a good wife and mother. Edna is admired for her courage in acting upon her artistic and sexual impulses and even in

*This paper was presented at the December 1972 meeting of The Group for Applied Psychoanalysis, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ruth Sullivan is an Assistant Professor of English at Northeastern University. Stewart Smith is a psychoanalyst in Brookline, Massachusetts. *Studies in American Fiction* 63 committing suicide as a free act of self-assertion and refusal to return to her domestic trap. And it is said to be a novel about the necessity of being free to choose one's own destiny. Further, one reads almost everywhere in criticism of the novel that Kate Chopin both sympathized with her heroine and on the whole presented her story "objectively." "Kate Chopin sympathized with Edna, but she did not pity her. She rendered her story with a detachment akin to Flaubert's." 6 "The author obviously sympathized with Mrs. Pontellier." 7 The novel manifests a "serene amoralism." 8 One also finds assumed or explicit the conviction that Kate Chopin the woman is inextricably identified with her work; the novel presents "essentially . . . the author's way of looking at life." 9 These statements of the theme and assumptions about the point of view of the novel are inaccurate. Edna never really becomes a free woman because she confuses impulsive action with liberation and because she never understands herself or her own wishes and goals. And, to speak about Kate Chopin the woman's sympathy toward her characters and identification with her own creation is to discuss biography, whereas to speak of the attitudes, values, and ideas Kate Chopin the author brings to bear on her fiction is to discuss literature. The author chose to use a complex narrative stance in which Edna is presented alternately as an unusual woman with significant problems admirably dealt with and as a narcissistic, thoughtless woman, almost wantonly self-destructive. These views singly or in concert are not impartial; they are not "objective," "amoral," or "detached." Of course...

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