

# Belittling Women's Mental Health:

## The Struggles of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

### Abstract

Women have often been treated as secondary persons in history, as well as in literature. The mental health of women has often been ignored or downplayed, unless their behaviour challenges convention or goes against social norms. The treatment of Edna Pontellier, the main character in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, illustrates this treatment of women's mental health issues in turn-of-the-century America. The novel's dialogue illustrates how Edna's mental health crisis was misunderstood, belittled and ignored by those closest to her and how this treatment contributed to Edna's inability to cope with her identity issues.

Keywords: Literature, mental health, women, psychology, history, feminist literature

### Introduction

Women, and especially women with mental health issues, have often been treated unfairly in literature, just as they have been mistreated by patriarchal Western society. According to PhebeAnn Wolframe's paper on discrimination based on mental health status "The Madwoman in the Academy, or, Revealing the Invisible Straightjacket: Theorizing and Teaching Saneism and Sane Privilege", race and sex are not the only forces at work that disadvantage a selected group of people; "saneism," or the stereotyping and discrimination against those with mental disorders, also exists (6). According to feminist theorist Marilyn Frye (1983), people feel the pressures of oppression based on their membership in a particular group or category and not based on their individual situation: "Women are oppressed, as women. Members of certain racial and/or economic groups and classes, both the males and the females, are oppressed as members of those races and/or classes. But men are not oppressed as men" (15-16). This idea of a particular group as oppressed can be extended beyond the boundaries of gender, race and class, to sub-groups such as the mentally ill. Historically, women who have mental health issues face more stigma and restrictions than women without mental health issues, or men who have the same disorders.

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Literary theorist Myra Jehlen (1995) stresses the importance of understanding how women with mental health issues are portrayed in literature is critical to developing cultural and historical perspectives: “If gender is a matter of nurture not nature, the character conventionally assigned men and women in novels reflects history and culture rather than nature, and novels, poems and plays are neither timeless or transcendent” (264).

The oppression of women with psychological issues can be examined in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, a story about a woman who struggles to create an identity apart from traditional societal norms and, in the end, chooses non-existence over the pressures of convention. When we examine the relationships, and in particular the dialogue, between Edna and secondary characters, we can see how women who thought differently were treated historically. Although her female companions are sympathetic to her divergent thoughts, they are unable to truly understand her turmoil and pressure her, directly or indirectly to adhere to more traditional roles. The men in her life either belittle her issues, ignore them, or only address them when they were negatively impacted themselves. The struggles of women with mental illness are often downplayed or ignored until their symptoms become problematic to others or challenge societal norms.

*The Awakening* was not critically accepted when it was first published because culturally and historically, the plights of women and their mental health struggles were not considered a relevant issue. It was not until decades later that feminist literature with characters that strived to exist outside of societal and gender norms grew to be appreciated. It is important to note that the critical response at the time of publication came from privileged white men, and it was not women who provided feedback on the worthiness of the text. One critic wrote that “had [Edna] lived by Prof. William James’s advice to do one thing a day one does not want to do...flirted less and looked after her children more... we need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself” (From Recent Novels 166). Another critic feared that the work would fall into the hands of youth, “leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, and promoting unholy imaginations and unclean deRsires” (From Recent Novels 166). None of the initial reviews were sympathetic to Edna Pontellier’s character or even considered that this woman might have been facing real internal struggles in terms of her identity

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and mental health. The accepted roles available to women at the time were limited, and Chopin's pivotal work rejects these literary traditions (Showalter 215).

### **Historical Context**

*The Awakening* is praised by feminists as a forward-thinking work about a woman who pushes against societal norms for proper Southern ladies at the turn of the 20th century. However, when we examine Edna Pontellier's thoughts and actions closely, it becomes evident that there is more to her internal struggles than just freedom from the control and oppression of a patriarchal society. The periods of depression and crying spells, the periods of increased creativity and activity, apathy, trouble sleeping, mood swings, increased confidence and risky behaviour (such as walking alone and associating with men of questionable character) and thoughts of suicide are all possible symptoms of manic-depressive disorders such as bipolar disorder, according to the American Psychological Association's website.(APA.com) Throughout the text, Edna alternates between moods of "intoxication" and "languor" (Showalter 215). Chopin describes Edna's everchanging moods with clarity, if not full psychological understanding:

There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight... There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why, - when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead... she could not work on such a day, nor weave fancy to stir her pulses and warm her blood. (80)

Bipolar disorder was just starting to be understood at the end of the 19th century, and effective drug therapies such as lithium would not become common until the 1950s (bpHope.com). Women who had such conditions often went without proper treatment and diagnosis or were institutionalized because their moods disagreed with convention. Edna expressed some concern that her husband may find her demented because of her changing moods and desire to explore her true self (Chopin 102). This was a genuine concern as many "demented" women in the 1800s found themselves hospitalized against their will. According to Michel Foucault, many doctors in the 1800s were aware that mania and melancholy were related but refused to accept them as

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different symptoms of the same illness (274). Chopin wrote this work during the period of time that Foucault described as the “modern experience of madness,” which included the creation of institutions and hospitals specifically for the treatment of the mentally ill (Khalifa xviii).

Edna’s “expansive states of activity, optimism, and power and passive states of contemplation, despondency, and sexual thralldom” today would bring her to the attention of doctors, counsellors or psychologists, but at the turn of the 20th century, her moods only brought her despair as she was reproached by those closest to her (Showalter 215). The treatments for women’s mental health are well described by the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892. The narrator of this short story describes being frustrated because her treatments do not seem to help and her husband, who is also her doctor, does not seem to understand or believe she is seriously ill. She is discouraged from having companionship, or associating with anyone who could truly understand her predicament. Edna, in *The Awakening*, also struggles to be understood, and this lack of solidarity with others is a major contributing factor in her choosing suicide. Both texts illuminate the patriarchal pressures on women in the late 19th century and the struggles of those experiencing a psychological crisis at a time when few understood the nature and causes of mental health disorders or how to address them (Ramos 145).

Even if Edna’s character did not have a diagnosed manic-depressive condition such as bipolar disorder, certainly her struggle to create an identity that did not align with social conventions causes her a great deal of stress and “despair in many ways akin to madness, for both [madness and a surrendering of the will] involve relinquishing the sole means of self-representation in a society that already limits and undermines women’s ability to do so” (155).

### **The Female Reaction**

Although it could be expected that other women would be more understanding of Edna’s struggles, this is not the case. Two of Edna’s closest confidants, Adèle Ratignolle, a stereotypical loving wife and mother and Mademoiselle Reisz, an older cantankerous musician, talk at length with Edna about her struggles to find her place in the world, but neither of them is able to truly understand or assist her, as they have both accepted their places in society. According to Zoila Clark who has

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written on women and gender in literature and film, both women “being prisoners of their own desire to live the stereotype of the woman-mother or the woman-monster, they even police each other and become their own counsellors when in danger of stepping out of their given identities” (344).

Adèle is described as the “embodiment of every womanly grace and charm... Delicious in the role [of mother and wife]” (Chopin 29). Edna and Adèle become good friends while they are vacationing at Grande Isle together. Edna, who is an introverted soul, has not previously confided in many people, but as she starts her “awaking” she begins to loosen her reserve and talks more openly about her own inner thought (35). When Edna first discusses her feeling of wandering aimlessly with Adèle on the beach, Adèle is sympathetic and comforts Edna with kind words and gentle hands (38). Adèle is loving and gentle, but she is not able to truly commiserate with Edna. She has never doubted her place in the world. Even though Edna starts to open up to Adèle, she cannot be completely candid with her. For example, Edna is glad to be rid of her children at times, but she would never say so to Adèle (40). Even though they have a friendship blooming, Edna does not feel that she can be completely honest and open with Adèle in matters of the home and family. The dialogue between these women is far from free and open and is stifled at best.

After Adèle has spoken with Edna and witnessed her closeness with Robert Lebrun, a flirtatious mutual acquaintance the Pontelliers meet while on vacation, Adèle tries to help, but not in a direct way. She approaches Robert and tells him to be careful with Mrs. Pontellier. She asks Robert to “let Mrs. Pontellier alone... She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking [your attention and admiration] seriously” (41). Instead of speaking frankly with Edna about her friendship with Robert, she decides to approach the man in the situation and plead with him to be careful of their affections. The fact that Adèle chooses to address Robert instead of Edna illustrates that she feels men are in control in relationships, and women, especially non-Southern women, are not as strong or capable emotionally. Adèle treats Edna as a subordinate, like a child, and decides to take her concerns to those with more power and perceived better judgment.

In a later conversation, the women have an argument about Edna’s firm belief that she would not sacrifice herself for anyone, not even her children (69). The two women cannot come to an

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understanding on this issue. Adèle cannot fathom someone not willing to sacrifice absolutely everything for her children. When Edna states, “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”(70-71), Adèle responds with bewilderment: “I don’t know what you call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential... but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that” (71). This lack of understanding and open dialogue between the women exacerbates Edna’s confusion (Clark 346).

As Edna slips further away from conventions, Adèle continues to try to help her friend, but her idea of helping is suggesting that Edna spend more time with her husband. Adèle simply wants Edna to accept her place in society, to return to normal. Adèle also advises Edna to be careful of the company she chooses to keep:

In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life. That is the reason I want to say you mustn't mind if I advise you to be a little careful while you are living here alone... Well, the reason — you know how evil-minded the world is — someone was talking of Alcée Arobin visiting you. Of course, it wouldn't matter if Mr. Arobin had not such a dreadful reputation. (119)

Adèle sees Edna as a child who is running from her responsibilities. She does not treat Edna as an equal person with legitimate troubles, just a lost child who needs guidance back to her family. It is for the children that Adèle pleads for the last time with Edna: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (134) Adèle pleads weakly just after giving birth herself. This final plea illustrates the need that Adèle feels for Edna to return to her children and husband, not for her own sake but for the sake of the family institution. Adèle’s mind is preoccupied with family and the importance of that relationship. Certainly, at the time, women’s role in the domestic sphere was seen as paramount and rejecting the maternal was seen as unnatural and ‘monstrous’ (Clark 342).

Mademoiselle Reisz is another important female relationship for Edna, and Reisz is the polar opposite of female stereotypes. She is a musician and artist and does not have the same domestic

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obligations as Edna because she has marketable talents that enable her to support herself. Reisz embodies a more domineering role in contrast to Adèle's maternal paradigm, and Edna is both drawn to and repulsed by her (Schweitzer 170). Edna spends a great deal of time with Reisz despite her rough-around-the-edges personality. Reisz acts as a matriarchal totem for Edna, offering sage council without giving direct advice or instructions. Reisz is not shocked by Edna's behaviour and reacts calmly to the proclamation that Edna has decided to leave her husband's house. In fact, she seems distant and disinterested in the matter (102), but that is only because she wants to pull Edna's true motivations from her without interjecting her own thoughts and beliefs. She does not chide Edna for neglecting her family but cautions that it takes a courageous soul to walk the path of an artist. She tells Edna, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (106).

Edna's conversations with Reisz are helpful to Edna and force her to think introspectively and whether or not she has the strength needed to defy convention. Reisz does not condescend to Edna by claiming that she knows better, or that Edna should abandon her family to pursue her art or stay and accept her fate. Reisz acts as a sounding board for Edna. However, neither Adèle nor Mademoiselle Reisz are able to help their friend through her personal struggles, as they have both accepted their roles in society. According to Clark, "Women like Mrs Ratignolle and Miss Reisz have internalized the way they have been defined by society...Neither of them seems to have freely chosen her role. Instead both women enact these two stereotypes [woman-mother and woman-spinster respectively] because they bestow a sense of belonging and assurance of identity" (338-339). As these women have not struggled greatly with their identity and place in society, they are unable to help Edna and actually hinder Edna's exploration of identity. The conversations between these women and Edna help to illustrate the societal pressures placed on women, especially those who are already struggling with their mental health.

### **The Male Perspective**

Edna's husband, Léonce Pontellier, is a typical Southern businessman concerned with appearances and possessions. As was a typical attitude at the time, he also viewed his wife as a possession, he

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“look[s] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property” (24). Even though he is fond of his wife, he struggles to understand her and is disheartened that she does not share the same interests as him, and that she neglects her wifely and motherly responsibilities (26). He often chides his wife for “her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children” and feels that it is her sole responsibility (27). He knows that she is not a mother-woman and he is disappointed in her failure to perform her duty towards the children and home (29).

As Edna rebels against convention more and more, her husband grows concerned that she is “growing a little unbalanced mentally” (79), but his main concern is not truly for Edna, but for his own social appearance. When Edna stops receiving visitors on her usual reception day, her husband is immediately angry that his wife views important social obligations as trifles (73). His concern is not that she decided to go out instead, but that she did not leave a good excuse. He is very concerned with how this slight will be perceived by fellow members of upper society.

When Edna’s behaviour becomes even stranger, he seeks the advice of Dr. Mandelet. Even though his wife is not physically ill, he feels compelled to seek out a medical doctor because “the doctor had become the great advisor to discipline women’s bodies and minds” (Clark 343). But even when he is trying to describe her changed condition, the first example that he gives is that she “lets the housework go to the dickens” and her changed attitude is “making it devilishly uncomfortable for me” (Chopin 88). She also no longer sleeps in their marital bed, and they “meet in the morning at the breakfast table” (Chopin 88). It is evident that his concern is not really for his wife, but for himself. He only wants her better so that things will return to the status quo. He describes part of her malady as “some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (Ibid 88). Edna’s feminist thoughts are seen as a part of a deviant mental condition. Léonce had previously been very amiable toward his wife, as long as she was submissive and placid, but he finds himself growing angry with his wife when she disregards her wifely duties (Chopin 79). He is worried about her mental health, but only because her peculiar behaviour goes against his expectations of a wife and he is considered with how it will impact his social status.

Léonce accepts the doctor’s advice to leave his wife alone and not contradict her, but it does not seem to improve Edna’s condition. After Edna decides to leave her marital home, she sends a letter

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to her husband explaining her intention to leave. His response is almost unfathomable by today's Western standards. Instead of pleading with her to stay for the good of himself, the home, or the children - he begs her "to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say" (116). He is not concerned with the scandal that he may be a cuckold, but he is worried about how his financial integrity will be perceived. He immediately takes steps to ensure the public does not view his wife moving to a smaller house as a sign of financial insecurity. He places an announcement in the paper that they are relocating to perform extensive and expensive renovations. His concern above all else is to save appearances (116-117), and his concern for his wife is merely that he does not want to lose a valuable possession, which gives him status.

Dr. Mandelet, who is the most understanding and sympathetic male character, unfortunately is not able to move past his patriarchal view of society and treat Edna's mental health with proper care. When Edna's husband first approaches him for medical advice about Edna's behaviour, he offers some key insights into how men perceived women's mental health. His first reaction is to ask Léonce what he has done to his wife, insinuating that her mental health issues stem from mistreatment by a man (88). Once he has ruled out mistreatment by her husband, his questions move on to a family history of such ailments. This reflects a strong belief at the time that "feminist ideas are like an illness that can be inherited and requires treatment" (Clark 343). After excluding a family history of defiant behaviour, he tells her husband to "Let her stay among her own people for a while...Let your wife alone for a while. Don't bother her, and don't let her bother you" (88-89). The tone of this advice is condescending towards Edna, insisting that her husband has control over her and should "allow" her to act as she sees fit. The repetition of the word "let" conveys the sense that men should have control over their women, even their moods and behaviour. He views women and their mental health issues as completely different from those of men and defy understanding:

Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism - a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. Most women are moody and whimsical.

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This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone. (89)

Once Mr. Pontellier has left, Dr. Mandelet secretly wonders if the cause of Edna's changed behaviour is because there is another man involved. Later, when he meets the Pontellier's for supper, he does not notice the strange behaviour that Léonce mentioned but once again, his thoughts turn to a possible affair as the cause of Edna's discontentment and secretly hopes that it is not the case (93).

When the doctor is finally able to speak privately with Edna after attending the labour of Adèle, he offers more support than any other male character and laments Edna's predicament "The trouble is... that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obligated to maintain at any cost" (134-135). Even though he is understanding of the arbitrary social chains that confine Edna, his attempts to help Edna are still condescending and patronizing. He calls her a child, even though she is a mother and twenty-nine years old (135). He offers his confidence if she wishes it and states, "I know I would understand, and I tell you there are not many who would - not many, my dear" (135). This conversation insinuates that very few people in society would be accepting of Edna's thoughts and ideas. The attitude that men knew what was best for women, especially male doctors, was a popular notion. It can be seen in other literature about women's mental health at the time. For example, the husband (who is also a doctor) in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is caring and tries to assist his wife with her depression, but his attempts are sloppy and he treats women as fragile creatures that cannot tolerate too much excitement (Gilman).

## **Conclusion**

In Edna's last moments, while she is swimming, naked and free, out to sea, she thinks of those relationships and people who affected her decision to seek freedom in the eternal:

She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed,

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perhaps sneered, if she knew! “And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.” ...Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him - but it was too late.” (139)

Instead of Edna deriving strength and comfort from her relationships, they were the source of her discontent. In Mikaela McConnell's essay examining the myth of awakening, she states that, “Self-discovery does not happen in isolation, divorced from people and the world...self-discovery involves awakening and negotiating the boundaries of self as it relates to others...Edna commits suicide because the arduous journey of creating and re-creating ‘self’ becomes more of a burden than a blessing” (41). As Edna struggled with her sense of self, and possibly a serious mental health condition such as bipolar disorder, she cast aside those who could have helped her. Ramos states that, “Her desire to live outside of all societally constructed identities cannot be realized, precisely because such an existence, even if achievable, cannot be sustained. In such a chaotic state, circumstance and whim would determine one's existence, which would become akin to madness and, ultimately, would direct itself toward oblivion, toward self-annihilation” (150). Perhaps Edna would not have met such an unfortunate end if she had been treated by a psychotherapist, or if she would have been able to communicate her internal struggle with identity and be accepted by fellow women. Wolff states that Edna would not have committed suicide if she would have been able to articulate her emotions and desires. According to Clark, “If Edna's solidarity with other women had been stronger and they had been able to engage in dialog instead of feeling like birds in separate cages, they might have achieved more than they did operating on an individual basis. The lack of solidarity, as well as the presence of sexism, racism, and classism, needed to be unlearned in those times and still needs to be even today” (346).

The tone of the dialogue in *The Awakening* illustrates how women who were struggling with their mental health, identity and place in society were treated poorly - like children or fragile creatures - misunderstood, ignored, chastised and condemned. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who specializes in American Literature, describes *The Awakening* as a “tale about not speaking... about stories that cannot be told and things that can be neither thought nor spoken because they do not have a name” (3). Women's mental health was not discussed or addressed openly in the 1800s. Even when

women did dare to discuss their predicaments, they were not able to be understood by men or women in Western society. Women's mental health struggles were not given the weight or merit that they would receive today. Even though we are now more open to discussing and treating women's mental health issues, many women are mistreated - stereotyped, discriminated against and chastised - for daring to express their thoughts that go against convention. Reading *The Awakening* reminds the reader that although stigma and misunderstanding about mental illness still exist, society has come far in its the treatment of women and their metal health.

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