
UNIT 4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO *THE AWAKENING*: FEMINIST, PSYCHOANALYTICAL, OTHERS

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to familiarise you with a few critical approaches that may be pertinent to the analysis of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Critical approaches may be defined very simply as **David Daiches** does in the *Introduction* to the second edition of *Critical Approaches to Literature* as a way of illuminating “both the nature of literature and the nature of criticism” and as “important ways” in which literature (in our case the novel, *The Awakening*) can be discussed. Keeping this in mind let us begin by looking very briefly at the novel and then proceed to examining the feminist approach.

4.2 *THE AWAKENING* AND THE AGE

The novel as you already know was written and published towards the end of the nineteenth century, 1899 to be precise. It was literally the end of the nineteenth century and the nineteenth century as we are all aware was the Victorian age in England, (approximately a period of sixty years from the 1830s to the 1890s) an age defined by its moral stance and the extreme deference to conventions. It was an age when a man could not smoke in public (today smoking is banned by most countries including our own country due to health reasons, but during the Victorian age, it was thought of as indecorous) or a woman, ride a bicycle!

But it was also the age of relative peace in England while America was faced with the scars of the Civil War (1861-65) but, at the same time there was also interaction between the American and the European writers and it was an age of what Edward Albert calls “spacious intellectual horizons, noble endeavour, and bright aspirations. The novel as we have seen in the earlier unit was a controversial one as it dealt with issues then thought of to be taboo...and did not receive its due then. It was re-discovered nearly sixty years later and then promptly claimed

by feminists. Given the theme of the novel it obviously lends itself to serious critical engagement as we may have discerned from the earlier units. In the next section, we will look at the feminist approach to literature in some detail as a way of examining the issues that is dealt with in this novel.

4.3 FEMINIST APPROACH TO *THE AWAKENING*

Let us begin this section by quoting Anand Prakash who says that,

...a significant area of suppressed identities in the contemporary novel relates to women in all societies, irrespective of race or class. Most of the novels in the twentieth century present women with a bias. Scarcely any light is shed on the question of women's exploitation under the pressure of home, marriage and the overarching patriarchy.

Such feelings was to create the feminist approach to literature that became a major contending force in the late 1970s when feminist theory came to be applied to linguistic and literary material. Much of feminist critical theory is derived from the works of the French feminist writer **Simone de Beauvoir** in particular her book *The Second Sex or Le Deuxième Sexe* published in 1949. Beauvoir's main contention was that when men were associated with humanity then women were very often relegated to a lesser space/ a lower/ inferior position in society. Critics after Beauvoir strengthened this debate by focusing on language as a tool of male dominance while looking at the manner in which the man's point of view was therefore, presented as the point of view. Then there were critics who felt that women not only have different experiences from men but also write differently. Critics such as **Hélène Cixous** tried to look at the "essential connection between women's body whose sexual pleasure has been repressed, and women's writing" (**Murfin and Ray**, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 1998, p 123).

This by the way is just the beginning of the discussion on the feminist critical approach to literature and *The Awakening*. You could read up more on feminist theory and feminist critical approaches if you would like to learn more about this approach. Coming back to the novel *The Awakening*, let us look at the feminist issues depicted through the character of Edna Pontellier.

Some of the issues that come to mind are, the notion of women being viewed as personal property by the men in the novel. For instance, if we look at the time period and the culture in which the novel has been set, there are innumerable instances that indicate the fact that men simply thought of their wives as personal property. It almost appears as if they did not know any better or could not even conceive of the fact that their wives were independent people with a mind of their own as is the case with Edna Pontellier. This may also be discerned when we look critically at what Léonce Pontellier has to say about his wife Edna Pontellier as well as in the narrator's voice.

The woman in question, (in this case, Edna) is of course helpless till she is awakened, and feels a sense of hopelessness and entrapment in her marriage as well as within the walls of domesticity. The awakening of Edna of course has disastrous consequences as it ultimately results in her suicide as we see towards the end of the novel. *The Awakening* is also a very good illustration of how society too enforces the norms of conventionality by isolating anybody who

dares defy its norms and particularly so a woman daring to do so. Moreover, the novel depicts very clearly how society imposes its norms on some women such as, Adele Ratignolle who, finds both economic as well social reward in conforming whereas, Edna Pontellier does not do so and society finds this non-conformity a sign of rebellion and does not look upon these acts of transgression with sympathy.

In fact, society punishes these so called rebels through isolation fearing that such flawed characters might challenge society's very existence. Edna Pontellier after her awakening (in this case the first awakening, which may be looked upon as a sexual awakening, when she thinks of herself as a woman with desire) is a changed woman and for her, her artistic as well as sexual desire are important whereas, tradition and conventionality are seen as those imposed and therefore, thrust upon women are not desirable. Then again, there are instances when Léonce Pontellier thinks his wife's aspirations are merely trivial and frivolous and that he can actually make her conform to his way of life, which is in a sense a very difficult thing for Edna Pontellier to accept and she finds the whole exercise painful and frustrating.

The awakened (sexually awakened, at this stage) Edna also emerges as a character who, seeks to take control of her own life and her own feelings as someone who wishes to escape from the confines of marriage, domesticity and even motherhood more than, cling to the safety of a husband, home and hearth. Moreover, Edna finds herself struggling with her feelings of motherhood or lack of it, as she also realises what society dictates as motherhood and being a mother. These instances that we have talked about are some points indicative of the manner in which feminists could approach the study of this text.

In the next section, we shall look at what the psychoanalytical approach to literature is about and we shall try and suggest pointers to examining the novel under study with this approach in mind.

Check Your Progress1

- 1) What is the feminist approach to the study of literature?

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- 2) Can you use the feminist approach to analyse *The Awakening*?

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4.4 PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH TO *THE AWAKENING*

The psychoanalytic approach to literature derives from the work of the Austrian **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) a psychoanalyst by profession. He was the pioneer of psychoanalytical criticism. He developed “a language that described, a model that explained, a theory that encompassed human psychology,” (*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 1998, Murfin and Ray, p. 311), all directly or indirectly related to the nature of the unconscious mind. Freud identified three components of the human psyche -the *id*, the *ego* and the *super ego*. The *id* according to Freud is the “predominantly passionate, irrational, unknown, and unconscious part of the psyche.” The “*ego*” which is predominantly rational, logical, orderly, and conscious.” The *ego* is also the mediator between the *id* and the *super ego*. The *super ego* according to Freud is that part of the human psyche that internalises the norms and mores of society. Implying, that a reflection of societal norms and mores may be looked at as “external” or “outside the self” and as a self check in-built mechanism that makes moral judgement and tells us to make sacrifices even if we know that such sacrifices may not be in our best interest.

Sigmund Freud also believed that as human beings we all have what he calls “repressed wishes and fears” (p. 312) that have been pushed under the carpet or the surface by the super ego in its capacity as moral guardian and that which has been pushed even further by the ego into the unconscious realm of the human psyche. These repressions are then manifested in the form of dreams, in language as the Freudian slip and in creative activity that, as Freud says, “may produce art (including literature), and in neurotic behaviour” (p.312). Freud also talks about the Oedipus complex, and used the analysis of dreams as “a tool for uncovering our repressed feelings and memories.” Freud was of the opinion that “repression” surfaces in dreams, masked in symbolic form.

Carl Gustav Jung an analytical psychologist developed a theory of “the collective unconscious, a repository of shared unconscious memories dating back to the origins of literature” (p. 313). According to Jungian theory, a great work of literature is not a disguised expression of its author’s repressed wishes (as thought by Freud), but “a manifestation of desires once held by the whole human race (but that are now repressed because of the advent of civilisation) (p. 313). The French theorist **Jacques Lacan** “focuses more on language and language related issues. He extends Freud’s theory of dreams, literature and their interpretation; he has also added the element of language to Freud’s emphasis on psyche and gender. For Lacan, the unconscious is a language and dreams a form of discourse. “Thus, we may study dreams psychoanalytically in order to learn more about the unconscious. Lacan identifies three stages of development: (1) pre- Oedipal stage/ the pre- verbal stage, (2) the mirror stage/ imaginary stage and (3) the “I” stage/ stage of laws, language and society. (p. 310).

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What is the contribution of Freud, Jung and Lacan to psychoanalytical studies?

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4.5 SYMBOLISM IN *THE AWAKENING*

The reason why I have chosen to talk about the psychoanalytical approach is essentially to draw your attention to symbols and symbolism in the novel *The Awakening*. Symbols stand for or suggest something else, something larger, something more complex - often an idea or a range of inter-related ideas, attitudes and practices, (p. 319). The word symbolic as stated in Unit 2 Section 1.5 comes from the Greek word *symbolleîn* to mean, “throw together”. Keeping in mind what has been said about symbols and symbolism there, we shall now proceed to look at some of the symbols and their significance in *The Awakening*.

Simply put, symbols may be recognised as objects, characters, figures, or colours used to represent abstract ideas/ concepts. There are several symbols that come to mind when I think of *The Awakening*. You may have noticed these as well but may or may not have recognised them or looked at them as symbols. Or you may have already recognised them as symbols and gone ahead and analysed them as well! In any case, let me begin by talking about the symbol of birds in the novel. Birds stand for something in this novel. The birds that have been described, discussed and any bird imagery that is drawn up represents images of entrapment in *The Awakening*. The caged birds signify Edna Pontellier’s own entrapment within the confines of her marriage and children. It could also be indicative of the entrapment of all women or women in general in the Victorian Age, as we do know the position of women. Then, Madam Lebrun’s parrot and the mocking bird could be looked upon as signifying Edna Pontellier and Madame Reisz as well. Since both the birds are in captivity their movements are restricted, similarly, the movement of the women in the novel are restricted and limited by the conventions and traditions laid down by society and particularly a rigid one at that. They are so severely restricted in their movement that at times, they fail to even communicate with the world around them. For instance, Edna Pontellier is not able to articulate her innermost anguish clearly even to her husband or to herself for that matters, or any other character in the novel. She tries to escape from the narrow confines of society, the domesticity of her marriage and her children. She sets up a place entirely for herself away from her husband and her children: the pigeon house, and finds solace in the fact that her new home is symbolic of her independence, but we as readers are aware that the pigeon house is in fact, just “two steps away” and really indicative of her own innate inability to remove herself entirely from her former life.

Her friend Mademoiselle Reisz tells Edna Pontellier that she will need to have very strong wings in order to survive the turmoil that she'll face if she intends to act on her love for Robert Lebrun. By the time she sets up the pigeon house, we know that he has gone away to Mexico. Mademoiselle Reisz warns Edna Pontellier saying:

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 weakling bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth"

(Chapter XXVII, p. 79 Edited by Margo Culley, Wordsworth Norton & C: New York, 1994)

Then there are the critics of the novel who also use the final imagery of the bird to argue that Edna Pontellier's suicide at the end of the novel is, in fact, a sign of defeat, both for her as an individual as well as for all women in general.

A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water."

While these critics cite this quotation from Ch XXXIX, p. 108 of the text, as an example of Edna's and women's defeat in general, some other critics argue that if the symbol of the birds is to signify not Edna Pontellier's individual defeat but that of the collective defeat of the women in the Victorian age, then Edna Pontellier's suicide/ final awakening may also be looked upon as representing the fall, tradition/ convention that in a sense, may be said to have been achieved by Edna Pontellier's suicide.

We have already talked about the symbolism of the sea in Unit 2, but we can always take another look at the sea that is a major symbol in the novel, here as well. The sea has been used as a symbol by many authors and of course we must not forget the images of the sea in our own myths as well as the images in the Bible. In particular I am talking about two major works that you must have read or if not, you must have definitely heard about - **Herman Melville's** *Moby Dick* (1851) and **Ernest Hemingway's** *The Old Man and the Sea* (written in Cuba in 1951 and published in 1952). Both these novels (actually the latter is a novella or a short novel or a long short story, just under a hundred pages) use symbolism and the sea also figures in these novels in a big way. The sea may be said to be signalling a sense of space, boundless and timeless, a sense of freedom from life's shores and hence, from life's trials and temptations as well. It is interesting to note that Edna Pontellier has tried learning swimming unsuccessfully earlier on but she is taught by Robert Lebrun and learns to swim and feels the sea and the surf beckoning her throughout the novel. She is said to be seduced by the sound of the surf, "The voice of the surf is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (Chapter VI, p. 14), and she succumbs to the temptation only when she has actually been empowered (by her act of learning to swim successfully). She is also aware of her and by extension human being's place in the scheme of things as is obvious from the next quote in the same chapter, "In short, Mrs Pontellier was beginning to realise her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual in the world within and about her" (p.14). Throughout the novel there is a sense of the unknown, the wild, - the sea and the surf calling out to her.

Moreover, if we look at the sea not as sea *per se* but as water then we get another picture of the symbolism of the sea in *The Awakening*. If we look at the sea as water then we would realise that the sea then symbolises ritual cleansing/ the Christian concept of baptism/ re-birth. And it is therefore, apt that Edna Pontellier should drown or swim away to her death symbolising her re-birth “ a re-birth of sorts.

The Awakening is very rich in symbolism as mentioned earlier and it is now up to you to take the initiative and look at symbols in the novel. We have merely pointed out what symbolism is and shown you examples of how symbolism works. We expect you to look for other symbols in the novel as you read it. However, we’d still like to point out a few major symbols to you in your task but we expect you to explore the symbolism behind these. For instance, look at the way in which Edna Pontellier and women in the novel are presented to us (the readers) in the novel. ... The mother- women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolised their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chapter IV p.9)

Then look at the treatment of art by Kate Chopin in *The Awakening*. Art seems to awaken Edna Pontellier. Take the case of the bird imagery in the novel. Birds and clothes are other symbols that you could locate and analyse. Then there is the whole symbolism generated by food/meals, the symbolism of the house, Edna Pontellier’s desire to learn swimming, the symbol of the moon and finally the ocean, the gulf or the sea. Your list could also include music, or the playing of the piano and sleep as a symbol.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Analyse *The Awakening* from the point of view of symbolism.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to look at several critical approaches to literature and in particular to the novel, in this case, *The Awakening*. We have also defined three major approaches and summarised these approaches very briefly while pointing out instances from the novel or indicating how we could analyse or approach the novel from the perspectives of these approaches. In particular, we have dealt with the symbolic approach to the study of *The Awakening* in greater detail.

4.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Feminist approach to the study of literature is when we approach a text using woman's perspective and raise questions about women's issues. Section 4.3 should be read carefully.
- 2) Section 4.3 should be read carefully.

Check Your Progress2

- 1) Read Section 4.4 and then write your answer.

Check Your Progress3

- 1) Read Section 4.5 then read the novel again and answer this question. You could begin by defining symbolism and then locating various symbols in the text, after which you could examine and analyse these symbols.



4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

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