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“Too Strong a Drink for Moral Babes:” Reception Theory Applied to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

“If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded [Edna Pontellier] from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was too late” (Chopin 17). This snarky comment made by Kate Chopin is a response to the all the negative criticisms written about her novel, *The Awakening*, in 1899. How could such a successful, revered author create a work that was despised by many and ultimately forgotten about for years? The answer lies with Hans Robert Jauss’ theory of reception. This social component of Reader Response theory explains that “every writer is dependent on the milieu, views, and ideology of his audience, and that literary success presupposes a book which expresses what the group expects, a book which presents the group with its own image” (Jauss 26). In other words, the relationship between a literary work and its audience is what determines the work’s success or failure in history. *The Awakening* was met with an audience that was not presented in its own image, using Jauss’ language. Instead, Chopin’s novel was directly critiquing the society it was born into, pulling out all of its flaws. Using Jauss’ Reception Theory by looking at the historical reception of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* at the time of publication (1899), the time of its revival (1961), and 2019, it can be said that the novel was ahead of its time, entering into a world in the late 1800s that was not ready for its message.

In “Toward an Aesthetic of Reception,” published in 1982, Jauss explores the idea that the relationship between a work of literature and its audience is incredibly important when analyzing that work. He writes:

The relationship of literature and reader has aesthetic as well as historical implications.

The aesthetic implication lies in the fact that -the first reception of a work by the reader includes a test of its aesthetic value in comparison with works already read. The obvious historical implication of this is that the understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation; in this way the historical significance of a work will be decided and its aesthetic value made evident.

(Jauss 20)

The culture in which a work of literature is born is integral in that work’s success or failure. The audience is ultimately what determines a work’s fate, and a work that is too progressive or too different from the expected norm of society at that point in history will not succeed. Jauss introduces the idea of the horizon of expectations, what each reader brings to a new work. The horizon of expectations is a reader’s preunderstanding of a text based on texts they have already read. Depending on how a work impacts them, their horizon can be expanded or changed. Jauss explains, “Reception can result in a ‘change of horizons’ through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness” (Jauss 250). As singular readers have horizons of expectations, society as a whole also has a horizon of expectations that changes throughout time. This change leads to different interpretations as history progresses; someone in the early 1900s would not necessarily read *The Awakening* and find the same meaning as someone in the 2000s would because of how society’s ideals have changed. Society played the biggest role in *The Awakening’s* downfall in the same

way that it played the biggest role in its revival. Keeping Jauss' theory of reception in mind, the ill reaction to *The Awakening* after its publication in 1899 makes complete sense.

The reception of *The Awakening* in 1899 was less than favorable, and this reaction is what led to Chopin's negative reputation and the novel's demise. What seems like a tame book today was not a tame book back then, and reviewers uniformly focused on Edna Pontellier's growing independence from her socially constructed role, finding her behavior 'shocking,' 'sickening,' and 'selfish'" (Chopin 16). One of the most negative reviews written about *The Awakening* at the time labeled the book as poisonous and immoral. These reviewers, mostly men, focused solely on Edna's affair with Arobin, even though it is an event that only occurs once in the book. According to Jauss, this fixation on sex in *The Awakening* by critiques would have been because Edna's sexual freedom is so beyond society's horizon of expectations at the time. A woman who does not want to be a wife or a mother, a woman who would rather have sex with a man she barely has a connection with, was outlandish in the late 1800s. Imagine if Chopin had allowed Edna to live at the end of the book! Because men were in control of editing and publishing and reviewing, they never accepted Chopin's "vision of women's ambitions and passions, nor did they even notice her celebration of women's friendships" (Toth 226). Society at the time placed power in the hands of men, and because Chopin was openly criticizing society through Edna Pontellier, men were not happy. Little importance is placed on the fact that the first review of the novel was a positive one, written by a woman who understood the significance of Edna. The overwhelmingly negative reviews are the ones that caused *The Awakening* to be forgotten about for fifty years after its publication, not the few positive ones. The world of 1899 was not yet ready to accept the truth that Chopin was writing about, but the world of the 1960s most certainly was.

The revival of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is what has sealed its fate as an essential part of the literary canon. On the return of a literary work, Jauss writes:

A literary past can return only when a new reception draws it back into the present, whether an altered aesthetic attitude willfully reaches back to reappropriate the past, or an unexpected light falls back on forgotten literature from the new moment of literary evolution, allowing something to be found that one previously could not have sought in it. (Jauss 35)

Although *The Awakening* started gaining popularity as early as the 1930s, it did not make a societal impact until Per Seyersted brought it back to life while at Harvard in 1961 (Toth, 243). Seyersted found modern aspects in *The Awakening*, especially in Edna's realization that "the physical component of love can stand apart from the spiritual one, that sensuous attraction is impersonal and can be satisfied by a partner she does not love" (Seyersted 142). The words in the novel had not changed, but society had, which is why the novel became much more important in the 60s and 70s than it was in the early 1900s. According to an essay by Emily Toth, there are three reasons why *The Awakening* became so much more popular during this time than other works being revived at the time. Firstly, the height of the sexual revolution was in the 70s, "ten years after the Pill and three years before *Roe v. Wade*" (Toth, "My Part in Reviving Kate Chopin" 18), and the sexual nature of *The Awakening* was intriguing to many people. The second reason is that the novel's revival was headed by powerful men, making it acceptable for other men to be able to read the novel without shame. Finally, and most importantly, there was a rumor that *The Awakening* had been banned in libraries for its sexual content, and "in 1969-70, everyone wanted to read banned books" (Toth, "My Part in Reviving Kate Chopin" 18). Chopin's novel was reborn into a much more accepting society, a society that wanted and needed

books like *The Awakening*. Of course, this novel had great importance for women during the 60s and 70s, its rebirth coinciding with the rebirth of feminism in America. Toth found that teaching Chopin in class was important because her works helped “destroy the myth that women had never written anything of literary or cultural merit” (Toth, “My Part in Reviving Kate Chopin 17). Overall, society in the 60s and 70s was much more accepting of the content in *The Awakening* than society in the early 1900s was, and using Jauss’ Reception Theory, this is why the novel became a huge success after its revival. Even still, reading *The Awakening* in the 21st century is important and lessons can be learned from it, lessons that were not learned in the 1900s.

Reading *The Awakening* in 2019, 120 years after its initial publication, I find that Jauss’ Reception Theory holds true. Though the novel has always been relevant, the society it was born into was not ready to accept, but once it found its place in the right time period, society played the biggest role in its success. I do not think the novel has lost any of its relevance. As ideology has changed, so has potential interpretations of the novel. Many scholars are reading more into the homoerotic tendencies of Edna and of Robert; this interpretation would not have been popular or accepted in the early 1900s or even in the 60s and 70s. As “very few reviewers ever seemed to know that Kate Chopin was writing about more than sex” (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 226) when the book was first published, modern readers “are less sure” about “exactly what Edna was doing with Alcee Arobin” (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 213). What was considered provocative over a century ago is now considered tame. Personally, I found a lot of relevant meaning when I read *The Awakening*. On a general level, I think viewing Edna as a rebel who breaks out of the societal norm is something that will be relevant forever. Society will always oppress certain people, and having a story where a main character goes against her role is

important. Of course, with the #MeToo movement, the fight for reproductive rights, and the Women's March, Edna's story is still important today. Women still need that strong heroine who is willing to take the first step.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was a novel ahead of its time, bringing out flaws in a society that was not yet ready to accept them. Negative review after negative review, the novel went out of print until Per Seyersted rediscovered it in the 1960s. With all the societal events going on during that time, *The Awakening* was the perfect novel to carry the banner of women's issues and bring awareness to the work that women writers were doing. Jauss' Reception Theory can be used to explain why the novel was not accepted when it was first published and why it ended up being an essential reading in classrooms across the world. Society has the power to make a work successful, just as it has the power to do the opposite. As its ideals change and evolve, so does the willingness to accept works that were unacceptable at other points in history. Ultimately, Kate Chopin broke new ground in literature with this novel. In the words of the man who rediscovered *The Awakening*, Chopin "is in many respects a modern writer, particularly in her awareness of the complexities of truth and the complications of freedom" (Seyersted 198). She was unafraid to call out society for its treatment of women and demand better, making her somewhat of a lone wolf in that respect. *The Awakening* is a novel that I cannot imagine falling out of popularity any time soon because of its universal truth that silence is a woman's worst enemy.

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