

# The Emergence of New Woman: A Study of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

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## Abstract

This paper is based on the hypothesis that Edna Pontellier, a young married woman in Kate Chopin's path breaking novel, *The Awakening* (1899), paved the way to create the image of a New Woman in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, Ernest Hemingway, in his highly acclaimed novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), skilfully portrayed the character of Lady Brett Ashley, a sexually liberated woman. This study argues that Edna Pontellier and Brett Ashley challenged the concept of an ideal woman and affirmed the position of a New Woman in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper aims to establish the fact that Brett Ashley was able to achieve what Edna Pontellier had aspired for. Delving deep into the psyche of the two quintessential female characters, Edna and Brett, this research intends to explore the evolution of a liberated new woman and its impact on the society.

**Key Terms** : path breaking, New Woman, sexually liberated woman, ideal woman, quintessential

## Introduction

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society had prescribed the role and position of women in a highly structured manner. A woman's worth was measured with her capability to give birth, and to remain subservient to her husband. Women stayed at home, raised children, cooked, cleaned and took care of their household. Their conversation was limited only to the female discourse. The topics of divorce, sexual desire and female autonomy were considered as taboo. They were expected to adhere to a rigidly defined code of domestic and moral duties, however, women increasingly resisted these restrictions in the last two thirds of the century ([encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/women-19th-century-introduction](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/women-19th-century-introduction)).

Writers and thinkers, all across, have criticised the harsh patriarchal ideology that measured a woman's worth based on her biological ability to procreate. The turbulent unrest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century society resulted in the toppling of the gender hierarchy whose traditional values had vanished in the wake of modernism. In her chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* entitled "Modernism and Gender," Marianne Dekoven sheds light on the reality that "shift in gender relations at the turn of the century was a key factor in the emergence of Modernism" (Dekoven 2011). This shift in gender relations is essential in understanding the social context out of which the image of the New Woman finally came to exist. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Michael Levenson observes that the social atmosphere of the twentieth century was laden with swift social changes created by a general feeling of anxiety and uneasiness (Levenson, 2011).

## The New Woman

The concept of the New Woman in American literature, emerged out of key historical events, such as the First World War and the Women's Suffrage movement. The twentieth-century American women ferociously acted upon their newly discovered power and raised their voice of dissent within the family and society previously not allowed to them. Devonek describes the New Woman as the protagonist of a new movement: "independent, educated, sexually liberated and oriented more towards a productive life in the public sphere than towards a reproductive life in the home" (Devonek, 2011). The new woman, also known as 'the American Eve,' was born out of the urgency for the

women to redefine their discursive power in a society historically defined by the patriarchal institutions (Guay-Weston, 2014). The newly liberated woman in the American society challenged the established social norms and revised the modern woman's space. It is during this feminist period of criticism that issues such as patriarchy, woman's independence and sexual desire were first considered significant by critics.

The image of American Eve emerged out of the early twentieth-century woman's dire need to free the female voice from the patriarchal discourse (Guay-Weston, 2014). The New Woman is professionally and sexually more assertive than any previous model of femininity. Gail Finney states that the New Women seek to eliminate the double standard that shaped the sexual mores of the time, and is much more frank about their sexuality than the old women. She is not ready to sacrifice any of her pleasures (Finney, 1991). They felt a strong need to raise their voice against the male hierarchy to achieve independence and individuality.

The New Woman's space was defined by two different female characters in modern American literature: Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Lady Brett Ashley in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Lady Brett Ashley in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) are the representative characters of that eventful time. Edna Pontellier's contribution lies in her revision of the social roles of wife and mother in the American Creole society. Hemingway's Brett Ashley's image of new woman results in the revision of modern female sexuality. This is affirmed by the active exploration of her sexual discursive power over the male characters in the narrative.

### Edna Pontellier

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* depicts the character of a young married woman with two children, Edna Pontellier, who falls in love with a forty year old Robert Lebrun. Edna's character is in contrast to that of the character of Madam Adele Ratignolle, a mother of five children and an ideal wife. Adele Ratignolle is the epitome of Victorian womanhood. While spending her holidays in one of the Lebrun cottages at the celebrated Grand Isle resort, Edna Pontellier befriends Adele Ratignolle and develops intimacy with a flirtatious Robert Lebrun. Later, in the absence of Robert, Edna gets close to Alcee Arobin, goes to racetracks and begins sexual relationship with him. Though Edna is married and has two children, she doesn't want her husband to have any sort of claim on her. Edna wanted more than to be only defined as a wife and mother (<http://people.loyno.edu/~kchopin/new/women/motherhood.html>). Edna defies patriarchy, despises marriage and the traditional role of a mother and wife.

In the words of Deborah Gentry, Chopin portrays Edna as emotionally repressed and naïve than sexually oppressed: "Mrs Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself (Gentry, 1992). At a very early period, she had apprehended instinctively the dual life that outward existence which conforms the inwards life which questions" (*The Awakening*, P.15). The character of Edna Pontellier, rooted in her awakening and sexual discovery is 'fundamentally evasive' (Spangler, 1970). The narrative lays bare the process of Edna's 'awakening from the comfort of marriage to the realization of the deeper needs of her soul' (Fletcher, 1966). Chopin's *The Awakening* is an attempt to delve deep into 'the psychic and social structures which orient the female world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century' (Lee, 1994).

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is all about a young woman's personal freedom and sexual intrigue. Edna's story gives voice to thousands of those women who share a bed with her husband but inhabit a different life. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan articulated the frustration of women whose lives gave them virtually no independence, creativity or opportunity, and who were expected to feel grateful about it (Frieden, 2013). The character of Edna and her suicide represent the suppressed voice of hidden female desire, which got its fruition during and after the devastating periods of the First World War.

The message that Kate Chopin intends to communicate through Edna, is that of the woman's right to challenge the stereotyped patriarchal structure she was subjected to (Guay-Weston, 2014). Edna's discovery of her hidden power reveals a passionate woman's tension and restlessness to embrace an impossible horizon. Throughout the story, Edna constantly struggles to understand her heart's desires and society's norms. Her inner turmoil leads her to the revision of what it means to be a wife and mother in the late nineteenth-century society.

### Brett Ashley

In the 1920s Ernest Hemingway portrays a new type of female character Lady Brett Ashley in his celebrated novel *The Sun Also Rises*. Brett Ashley is one of the most complex female characters, Hemingway had depicted. Brett's promiscuous nature, extroverted personality and her refusal to conform to traditional social norms provoked anger

amongst critics and readers, nevertheless, she remained the epitome of the modern woman (Rad, 2012). Unable to consummate her love with American newspaperman Jake Barnes, because of his war injury, Brett has sexual affairs with many others, including the American expatriate Robert Cohn and the handsome young bullfighter Pedro Romero ([www.britannica.com/topic/The-Sun-Also-Rises](http://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Sun-Also-Rises)).

When Brett enters into the fold of narrative, she adopts both masculine and feminine behaviour. She neither looks like a lady nor acts in accordance with socially acceptable manners. Brett's impotent lover, Jake Barnes notes her appearance: "her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht. Although her curves prove her femininity, her short hair reinforces her masculinity (*The Sun Also Rises*, P.12 ). In addition to her stylish haircut Brett smokes cigarettes, wears hats and does not wear stocking, and follows behaviours associated with men. Brett's appearance represents her freedom from culturally-defined categories and freedom from stereotyped patriarchal control. By destabilizing differences between men and women, Brett makes sure that neither gender has absolute authority over the other, and no one can position her in the position of a victim (<https://anastamos.chapman.edu>).

By deconstructing the preconceived notions about gender, Brett Ashley transforms herself from the submissive object into the authoritative subject, turns the male gaze on the men who objectify her, and attains sexual autonomy (<https://anastamos.chapman.edu>). Brett's sexual dominance over her male companions allows her to rediscover her sexual needs and thus performs her role as "becoming-revisionist" (Finney, 2011). The structural changes in female sexuality in the 1920s are central to Brett Ashley's characterization.

Brett Ashley's character can be interpreted as someone who influenced the sexual voice of the New Woman in 1920s America. With her sexual discursive power, Lady Brett contributes to the growth and development of the American Eve's revised feminine space. Brett's unwillingness to sacrifice her pleasures is best portrayed through her relationship with Jake Barnes (Guay-Weston, 2014). Despite an emotional connect with Jake, who can never satisfy her physical urge, Brett insists that she and Jake should maintain a platonic relationship. A sexless relationship with Jake permits Brett to achieve a sexual discovery of herself. Beverley Gross provides a fitting description of Brett as "a woman who is driven by her sexual drives, desires, and vanity" (Gross, 1994). Brett's affirmation of her promiscuity is a demonstration of the prioritization of her own sexuality. The consciousness with which Brett makes this decision renders her a sexually mature individual.

However, unlike Edna who is experimenting in uncharted territory, Lady Brett is thoroughly aware of the dominant power she has over her relationships. Brett is endowed with a huge sexual potency Jake is incapable of executing. Brett, unquestionably, chooses not to suppress her sexuality, and is not bothered about the impact it would have on the patriarchal structure of the society.

## Conclusion

Both Edna and Brett are strong characters who developed a code for themselves that was free of the prejudiced gender role and sexual restraints of the Victorian society. Chopin's *The Awakening* can be seen as a married woman's frustration and thwarted dreams to find an alternative against the stale thinking and commodifying of a woman. Edna exerted a part of female experience that had never been acknowledged before. Edna's "marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident" (*The Awakening*, 18), and that "no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby, threatening its dissolution" (*The Awakening*, 19). Edna's suicide didn't conclude her story, rather it was her restlessness and her discovery that paved a way for the future generation women to find a path where they can walk with firm steps to snatch power from the hands of the patriarchs.

Vibrating with frustration, both Edna and Brett are keen to break the rules as they would not prefer to act as a response to the man's needs; instead, they would like to assume their position as a sexual agent to fulfill their secret desires. Their approach challenged the male dominated sexual relationship, where the female is no longer an active agent, and established the role of the 20<sup>th</sup> century female as an active and demanding partner in the male-female relationship. Given an opportunity, many of the women would like to walk the path Edna and Brett has shown, and would dare to raise their voice to give a shape to their frustrations and thwarted dreams. It was a significant part of female experience that was never acknowledged before. These two characters discovered themselves and became a role model for many of the females to show that the alternatives exist; the pleasure of a companion, with whom they could talk for hours without running out of things to say. They discovered that they needed a man who actually listened to them, as most of them have a husband who ignores them, or scolds them for imaginary infractions, sometimes

ferociously (Kingsolver,2014). Education, financial insecurity, availability of contraceptives and the easy divorces have entirely changed the female's outlook on life.

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