

*In the name of God*

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IN THE NAME OF GOD



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**Foucault's Concept of Power in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin**

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## Table of Contents

Chapter one	
Introduction	3
<i>General Background</i>	3
<i>The Argument</i>	7
<i>Thesis Outline</i>	10
<i>Methodology and Approach</i>	13
<i>Definition of Terms</i>	15
Chapter Two	
Foucault and the Concept of Power	19
<i>Foucault: Traditional Power vs. Modern Power</i>	20
<i>Foucault and Resistance</i>	29
<i>Foucault and Feminism</i>	38
Chapter Three	
<i>The Awakening: Women vs. Tradition</i>	47
<i>Social Context and Critical Reception</i>	48
<i>The Awakening and Regional Fiction: Community of Creoles</i>	61
<i>The Awakening and New woman of the Late Nineteenth-Century</i>	64
Chapter Four	
<i>The Awakening and Foucauldian Power</i>	72
<i>Edna vs. Victorian Society</i>	73
<i>Edna: The Middle Ground between Domesticity and Independence</i>	77
<i>Edna: A Failure or a Success?</i>	79
<i>Edna and Resistance</i>	89
Chapter Five	
Conclusion	100
<i>Summing up</i>	100
<i>Findings</i>	106
<i>Suggestions for Further Research</i>	110
Bibliography	

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## Abstract

This thesis traces Foucault's notion of power in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. The subject is discussed in five chapters and the researcher brings into the light different aspects of a woman's position in the society of late nineteenth-century America. The thesis looks at private and social conditions of women, using Foucault's ideology of power, and discusses the reactions of Chopin's protagonist in relation to her actions towards the workings of power in her life.

This study discusses the subject in three main chapters besides chapters of introduction and conclusion. The main chapters start with a discussion of Foucault's ideas concerning power, his different conception of the term, his definition of resistance to power, his suggested means for resistance, and his common ideas with Feminism. The following chapter presents necessary information about *The Awakening*, its social and cultural background, its critical reception and its relation with the New Woman movement of the late nineteenth-century. Chapter Four focuses on a closer analysis of the novel based on Foucault's ideology of power. Besides discussing the workings of power in the protagonist's married and social life, this chapter includes her efforts to set herself free from this power and her process of resistance analyzed according to Foucault's theory.

The concluding chapter presents the researcher's findings: the impossibility of acting outside power, the possibility of resisting power from within and Foucault's "care of the self" as the only way to traverse the power-defined field of possible actions. The thesis shows that, Chopin's protagonist does not resist patriarchy based on Foucault's methods and her actions towards power do not lead to any effective ending.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

This thesis discusses Kate Chopin's major novel, *The Awakening*, according to Michel Foucault's ideas concerning power, modern forms of it, and possibilities of resistance. The significance of the novel lies in the fact that it is a good example of the late nineteenth-century New Woman fiction and depicts a woman's struggles in order to resist the power of patriarchal norms in her time and society. Her efforts and the way she resists patriarchy as a form of power can be analyzed based on Foucault's ideology of power and resistance. In this part, the thesis briefly introduces the novelist followed by a summary of the story and an account of Foucault's life and works in order to give a general view of the research subject.

#### **General Background**

Kate Chopin was born Kate O'Flaherty in St. Louis, Missouri in 1850. In 1855,

she was sent to The Sacred Heart Academy, a Catholic boarding school in St. Louis. She learnt French and music from her great grandmother. She grew up surrounded by smart, independent, single women like her mother who had been the first woman in St. Louis to obtain legal separation from her husband. Chopin married at the age of twenty. Oscar Chopin, her husband, was a French Catholic in background, as Kate Chopin herself was. After her husband and mother died, Kate began to write in order to support herself and her family. She was immediately successful and wrote short stories about people she had known in Louisiana. *The Awakening* was inspired by a true story of a New Orleans woman who was infamous in the French quarter. Her first novel, *The Fault*, was published in 1890, followed by two collections of her short stories, *Bayou Folk* in 1894 and *A Night in Acadia* in 1897.

*The Awakening* was published in 1899, and by then she was well known as both a local colorist and a woman writer, and had published over one hundred stories, essays, and sketches in literary magazines. The content and message of *The Awakening* caused uproar and Chopin was denied admission to the St. Louis Fine Art Club because of its publication. Like most of Chopin's stories, *the Awakening* is set in the late nineteenth-century Creole society of the New Orleans area. It is the story of a young woman's struggle to become herself. It finally reaches the point that the complete freedom and happiness that she craves for is not available to her in socially appointed roles as a wife and mother. The story directly rejected the basic principles of a Victorian society, and therefore did not face a welcoming attitude from the society of the time. It focused on a woman's efforts toward setting herself free from the bounds of patriarchy and marriage. She was seeking independence which was not a familiar and common notion for women of that time.

The story opens during a summer vacation at Grand Isle. This environment



allows Edna (the protagonist) to explore her own personality. It is on the island that Edna begins her “awakening” to life. She first realizes her dissatisfaction with her life. Then she learns the pleasure of swimming. It is on Grand Isle that she begins to feel sexual attraction to Robert, although her awakening to sexuality occurs months later. Edna also realizes that she is not a mother-woman this summer. She does love her two sons, but admits that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone. Although her husband, Léonce, would visit the island, Edna spent most of her time with Robert Lebrun, and finally falls in love with him. Edna was also related to two other women, Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. These two are totally different from each other. Adèle Ratignolle is a model of perfect femininity, and Mademoiselle Reisz an unconventional, self-assertive artist. Both of them affected Edna through her process of awakening. After the Pontellier family move to their winter home in New Orleans, Edna’s personality changes. She stops doing her household and marital duties. Robert has gone to Mexico, and Edna enters a sexual relationship with a man called Alcée Arobin to fill the gap her husband has left. She also begins painting, and roaming the streets. When Robert returns, he avoids her, because he is trying to forget her. By this time, Edna has already moved out of her husband’s mansion and is living independently in the so called “pigeon house”. After they meet each other unexpectedly, Robert confesses his desire for Mr. Pontellier to set her free, so that they might marry. Edna is surprised and disappointed at his idea, and realizes that Robert wants her to be his mother-woman. She learns that he is not very different from her husband and does not comprehend her needs to be recognized as an individual human being - a person as well as a woman. Edna stays up all night thinking about her choices in life. She finally swims out to the sea the next morning and ends her life.

Chopin did not comment on any of her protagonist's unacceptable actions, and so caused the reading public to reprimand her. Like her protagonist (Edna), Kate Chopin also paid the price for rejecting the rules of her society. She fought against the traditional views of her society, and finally died of a cerebral hemorrhage on August 22, 1904.

Since this thesis discusses the traces of Foucault's notion of power in Chopin's novel, and the way it affects its protagonist's life, a brief history of Foucault's life and works will be stated here.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was born as Paul-Michel Foucault to a notable provincial family. Following his early education and after World War II, Foucault entered the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, the traditional gateway to an academic career in the humanities in France, and took his *licence de philosophie* in 1948. He took his *licence de psychologie* in 1951, and a year later he obtained his diploma in psychopathology in order to do research into psychiatric practice and mental illness. These studies resulted in the publication of a book about mental illness and personality which was published in 1966 under the title of *Mental Illness and Psychology*. His major doctorate thesis was published in English as *Madness and Civilization*, and his *Birth of the Clinic* was also published in 1963. The first one deals with ideas, practices, institutions, art, and literature relating to madness in Western history, and the second work is about the development of the medical profession, and specifically the institution of the clinic. Foucault helped in the foundation of the "Prison Information Group", which led to the publication of *Discipline and Punish* that discusses the micro-power structures that have been developed in Western societies since the eighteenth century. Another major work named *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* was published in 1970. Its central

claim is that all periods of history possessed certain underlying conditions of truth that constituted what was acceptable as, for example, scientific discourse. Foucault argued that these conditions of discourse changed over time, in major and relatively sudden shifts, from one period to another. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, published in 1969, was an analysis by Foucault of the discursive and practical conditions of the existence for truth and meaning. During the late 1970s Foucault started working on *The History of Sexuality*. This work was planned to be written in six volumes, but Foucault could only find enough time to complete three of them before his death. The first volume, *The Will to Knowledge*, was published in 1976, and focused on the functioning of sexuality as an analytics of power related to the emergence of a science of sexuality and the emergence of bio-power. The next two volumes, which were titled *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, were published in 1984. They discussed those techniques and procedures that are designed to direct people's behavior, and also include some references to Greek and Roman literature. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Foucault took part in activities such as gay sex and sadomasochism, which some believe led to his contracting HIV, and his death in Paris June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1984.

Foucault's different notion of power, and the way it works in all private and public relationships has been much discussed since his introducing the term. His theories concerning resistance to this type of power, the possibilities of resistance, and the ways to manage this resistance have also been of great interest. This thesis tries to trace these notions in the patriarchal structure of Victorian society, the protagonist's attempts at resisting this system of power, and her possible chances to succeed.

## **Argument**

Chopin's novel portrays a woman's efforts to escape from tradition and authority, as

well as her efforts towards liberation from the bounds of bourgeois matrimony. By concentrating on such issues, both Chopin and her protagonist became representative of the late nineteenth-century New Woman. By the nineties, the emergence of New Woman movement brought about different discussions concerning women's social and domestic roles and rights. They were trying to obtain better social conditions for women such as job opportunities and also set them free from their matrimonial restrictions which bourgeois structures had set on them for so many years (Pykett 140).

Inspired by the New Woman movement of the turn of the century, literary works were mostly focused on moral and literary escapes from tradition and authority (Pykett 37). *The Awakening* was one of the literary works that enraged many readers of its time because of its open and direct treatment of a white, upper-class woman of Victorian society who was transgressing all values, norms, and social principles of her community. Most of *The Awakening* is told from the protagonist's perspective. Although the narrator recounts the events of the novel, he does not give any comment on the protagonist's unconventional behavior and her rejection of cultural norms. The author does not criticize her freedom-seeking, rebellious protagonist and by using a neutral tone seems to be sympathizing with her. Edna the protagonist is shown as confined in the patriarchal structures of her culture and society. She feels imprisoned in a place that has always been considered the kingdom of women through all ages. The house and its domestic rules seem to be natural to most of the women around Edna, but she cannot bear its restrictive nature that commands her to sacrifice all her time and energy in controlling its whereabouts. She cannot deny her own pleasures and desires, and pass her time by attending weekly guests and acting the role of an innocent, docile, submissive, and sacrificial wife. After she awakens to the injustices

of her society, and perceives her inner self, it is no longer possible for her to stay in the same prescribed position as a traditional Creole wife. The novel portrays her efforts toward finding her true self and living her own life. It also depicts the way through which she comes to understand the oppressive nature of her cultural norms, and the impossibility of resisting them based on her own principles. This leads her to committing suicide at the end. This work of Kate Chopin is a different and daring example of women's literature since it was written at a time when the notion of independence for women was considered a transgression and was punished by ignoring the transgressor and placing her in a state of social non-acceptance. Therefore the researcher believes it is worth being discussed as a revolutionary work of fiction. According to the revolutionary aspect of the novel which shows the role of patriarchal power in the life of late nineteenth-century women, this thesis discusses the concept of power based on Foucault's ideas, and also its examples in Kate Chopin's major work, *The Awakening*. As the researcher discusses in Chapter Two, Foucault's idea of power is a rather modern definition of the term in the sense that it rejects the negative and repressive nature of the concept and defines it in terms of a positive and productive force. His conception of power is a strategy which is present in all layers of society and all relations (Mills 35). It produces identities through instruments, such as normalization. By making a relation between the efforts of patriarchy to keep women in the domestic sphere of the house and the role of power-structures in this process, the thesis discusses Chopin's novel and the protagonist's motivations, desires, and efforts. The protagonist's actions in opposition to her society's conventions are also discussed as a form of resistance to this power. In doing so, the researcher uses Foucault's ideas concerning resistance to power. The thesis shows that a Foucauldian resistance cannot lead to total freedom of power. Instead it

will include an individual's performing some possible actions in a scope that is defined by power itself.

This thesis tries to find answers to these questions:

- How does disciplinary power work in people's everyday lives?
- How does power as a productive, positive strategy keep individuals in a state of submission?
- How does patriarchy as a form of modern power categorize male and female to keep men in their state of superiority to women?
- Is it possible to move outside power?
- Are there any possibilities of resistance outside power?
- What are the Foucauldian possibilities of resisting power?
- How does Chopin's protagonist resist the patriarchal power-structures of her society?
- Does her process of resistance fit Foucault's suggested method of confronting modern power?
- Does her resistance lead to her freedom from power?
- How can her suicide at the end of the story be interpreted?
- Is she successful in her confrontation with power?

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis includes five chapters. Besides the present chapter, the researcher expands the subject in three major chapters, and the final chapter contains the concluding results. The second chapter is about the theories of Michel Foucault concerning the notion of power. A brief history of diverse definitions of power is presented first, followed by Foucault's different conception of the term. Despite the older

understanding of power that considered it to be a repressive and negative force, Foucault argues that power is a positive strategy, which produces attitudes, identities, and values (During 119). He presents this form of power as a disciplinary one that controls individuals by normalizing them. By this he means that power categorizes individuals into normal and abnormal by setting standards of normality (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). Therefore, every attitude, behavior or identity that may be harmful for the stability of this power will be labeled as abnormal. In this way, all people check themselves and compare their actions to the normal, in order not to be considered abnormal. He also talks about resisting this power, and argues that it cannot be replaced by any other type of power. The reason is that this power is everywhere and can be found in all layers of society and all relations (Mills 35). He believes power sets a scope of actions for individuals and does not force an external coercion on it. It only guides people in this structure (of course to its own benefit). Therefore, in order to resist this power one should try to expand his/her scope of action in this defined area. Foucault also proposes the idea of "care of the self" for resisting the normalizing modes of power that define identities. In order to do this, Foucault suggests that individuals deny their identities. He puts forth three elements that he believes are necessary for an effective forming of the self (Infinite 14): an appropriate space that encourages experimentation with the self, awareness of one's cultural and historical present, and violating one's reality at the same time that one believes it. Since Foucault's ideas regarding the power of the norm and disciplinary power can be applied in discussing patriarchal power, and its functioning in everyday lives of women, the common grounds between Foucault's ideology and feminist perspectives are also be discussed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three focuses on the novel under study. It outlines the historical era,

and the cultural circumstances in which *The Awakening* was written and published. This contains presenting the ideological and traditional background of the late nineteenth-century Creole society of the story, and the outraged reception of the novel because of its direct rejection of Victorian values. Considering the regional setting of the story that happens among Creole people of Louisiana the third chapter also brings a brief history of these people. *The Awakening* is discussed as a regional fiction and as different from the so called local color fiction of its time. The third chapter outlines the novel's relation to the New Woman movement of the late nineteenth-century, and the literary movement attached to it as well. The novel is believed to include many New Woman attributes, because the protagonist's actions, behavior and even appearance is similar to those of the New Woman figure in challenging the prevailing codes of womanhood.

Chapter Four of the thesis traces Foucault's ideas in the case of power, and possibilities of resistance in *The Awakening*. It mostly includes the workings of patriarchy as a form of disciplinary power in the life of the protagonist. Her efforts to confront the confining reality of her society and married life are discussed, and her character is compared with two examples; one a domestic, traditional wife and mother and the other a secluded, independent woman. This clarifies her character as being neither of the two, but occupying middle point between them. The next part of the chapter discusses the protagonist's resistance to the power of patriarchy according to Foucault's proposition of how to resist. The rest of the chapter tries to give an answer to the question of whether she was successful in his confrontation or not. The researcher also expresses her idea about Foucault's theory of resistance and this notion that whether there exist other possible choices for the protagonist other than suicide or not.



## **Methodology and Approach**

This study is mainly based on library and electronic sources. The idea on which this study is based deals with the notion of "power" in Foucault's ideology.

As mentioned earlier, Foucault's conception of power differs from the older definitions of the term in the sense that it does not believe power to be a negative, repressive force that is summarized in one single source like a king. Foucault defines power not as a possession of a specific person or group, but as a strategy that is present in all social layers and can be seen in every relationship. This power is not visible as the one which is summarized in the figure of the king, or queen. It is invisible because it is present everywhere and cannot be pinned to a single source (Rabinow 63). This power is not repressive, but productive. This, Foucault argues is because power works as a disciplinary force that normalizes individuals. Discipline in this sense can be defined as a form of self-regulation that the normalization process creates in people. Standards of normality are set by power, in a way that serves the stability of power and its aims. This way, attitudes, behaviors, identities, and principles are distributed in two categories and are labeled normal and abnormal. Those which seem to threaten the presence and permanence of power are labeled abnormal, and the ones which serve the power are introduced as normal (Smart 86). Through this strategy, power makes individuals to engage themselves in a constant process of self-surveillance. Therefore, the law, and punishment of the sovereign power gives its place to norms. Power in this sense compels individuals to act according to defined rules, but it does this without any external force or physical harm.

In the case of resistance to power, Foucault's idea is that because disciplinary power is not placed in a single source, it cannot be resisted by trying to eradicate it.

This power cannot be replaced by other forms of power, because it is an ever-present form of relation that resists being traced specifically. Power, he argues, defines a scope of possible actions in which individuals can act. This scope can be considered as identical to the range of normality that is defined by power. Acting according to the standards of normality is having a settled framework in which an individual has the possibility of acting freely (Smart 133). Based on this quality, Foucault argues that resisting power can be done by changing oneself creatively in the context which power has defined for. By this he means that although one can question the limits of traditions, one cannot be liberated from these influences. Foucault proposes the idea of "care of the self" in this context. He defines this term as a form of resistance to anything that may control the individual's identity, like a normalizing disciplinary power. Therefore, in order to resist normalized identities he suggests learning to form oneself. In other words because our identities are formed by the normalizing power, we can resist it by denying our identities and trying to form our own identities based on our own history, and creative actions and thinking. For this Foucault proposes three elements; a safe and experimental environment that can encourage the experimentation with self, an awareness of the current cultural and historical moment, and a will to believe in the reality of presence and resisting it at the same time (Infinite 9-14).

Thus, according to Foucault's ideology, there is no way out of power, and in resisting its rules again you are doomed to respect its defined scope. The novel under study is analyzed based on the above-mentioned attitudes, and their working in the context of the functions of patriarchal power in the domestic and local relationships between men and women. The possibility of resisting its power will also be discussed by focusing on the protagonist's motives and efforts in doing so.

## **Definition of Terms**

In his discussions concerning power and resistance, Foucault uses some new words as well as some common words with different usages. These terms are defined briefly here and in alphabetical order.

### ***Care of the Self***

The name of the ethical principle that leads people to cultivate themselves, that is to work to improve themselves. “This ‘cultivation of the self’ can be briefly characterized by the fact that one must ‘take care of oneself’. In ancient times this was often understood to involve a ‘cultivation of the soul’” (cited in Martin 45). In earlier times this was a matter of self-mastery, but over the course of history it became more a matter of learning to shape one’s own inner character (cited in Martin 67). Foucault uses this classical concept to suggest a method of resistance. Since he believes that modern power is an omnipresent entity and therefore cannot be eradicated, every individual can resist this power by changing himself or herself creatively in the scope that power has defined for them.

### ***Discipline***

Discipline is a way of controlling the movement and operations of the body in a constant way. It is a type of power that coerces the body by regulating and dividing up its movement and the space and time in which it moves. Timetables and the ranks into which soldiers are arranged are examples of this regulation. The disciplines are the methods by which this control became possible. Foucault traces the origins of discipline back to monasteries and armies. He is clear, however, that the concept

changed in the eighteenth century. Discipline became a widely used technique to control whole populations. The modern prison, and indeed the modern state, is unthinkable without this idea of the mass control of bodies and movement.

### *Negative Power*

Negative power is the “power that says no” (*Power/Knowledge* 139). It is the power that says something cannot be done and acts to enforce this law. It is repressive, and uses external and physical force, like that of a master in relation to his slave.

### *Norm*

An average standard created by the modern power against which people are measured: the sane man, the law-abiding citizen, and the obedient child are all "normal" people. But an idea of the "normal" also implies the existence of the abnormal: the madman, the criminal and the deviant are the reverse side of this coin. An idea of deviance is possible only where norms exist. For Foucault, norms are concepts that are constantly used to evaluate and control us: they also exclude those who cannot conform to "normal" categories. As such, they are an unavoidable but somehow harmful feature of modern society.

### *Normalization*

The molding of people into “normal” as opposed to “abnormal” forms. It is the process by which a culture encourages its people to regulate and achieve their own conformity with the established rules. These rules are established to control individuals and serve the stability of power.