

Lesson Plan Revision:

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: Chopin, Realism, and Local Color in late 19th Century America

Lesson Two of Curriculum Unit:

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: No Choice but Under?

Introduction:

"Here was life, not fiction," Chopin wrote of Guy de Maupassant in her diary. "Here was a man who escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who, in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw." (from [Kate Chopin: A Re-Awakening](#) transcript) Guy de Maupassant was a French realist author of approximately 300 short stories, 6 novels, and various other writings who lived in the mid- to late-19th century [b. 1850, d. 1893].

Introduce to your students concepts of realism, a literary movement in the 19th century that focused on reporting aspects of "common" life (common, of course, is a relative term). Chopin is often regarded as a practitioner of regionalism or local color (the two terms are often used interchangeably).

While the specific attributes of realism as a literary style are often debated, a dedication to **verisimilitude** is the basic precept. Regionalist or local color writing focuses on a particular setting and segment of society—often mimicking in print their manner of speech (their vernacular), their class system, and other social rules particular to the region, such as specific roles or assumptions for women or children (see the first passage in "Selected Passages" below for an example of the latter).

Teacher will present the VoiceThread (<http://voicethread.com/share/423062/>) during the introduction to give a visual to the students. Encourage students to comment on the thread.

Students should understand from this introduction that American Realism is:

1. A representation of things 'as they are', as opposed to other writing styles, like Symbolism, that tend to show ideas through interpretation and representation.
2. Brought about because of the economic, social and cultural change that happened in America at the turn of the 19th century.
3. Meant to display the life of the ordinary American.
4. Spread throughout the art, literature and theatre of this time.

Guiding Questions:

In what ways does Chopin's *The Awakening* reflect attributes of literary realism, local color, and/or regionalism?

How does the Louisiana setting and Creole culture of *The Awakening* work as an important component of Edna's transformation?

Learning Objectives

- Define literary realism and discuss it as a style in American literature
- Reflect on how culture and setting plays an important role in a novel, especially in local color and regional literature

Preparing to Teach this Lesson

[Students should read at least the first seven chapters of *The Awakening* before doing this in-class exercise]

Review the lesson plan. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and other useful websites. Download and print out documents you will use and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.

Electronic Texts

E-texts of *The Awakening* are freely available at the following locations:

- [The Awakening](#) available through the [Library of Southern Literature](#) (via [Documenting the American South](#))
- [The Awakening](#) made available by UVA's [E-Text Center](#), a resource available through EDSITEment-approved [Center for Liberal Arts](#)

Realism

The websites used in the Activity provide a greater amount of detail—and complication—of literary realism of the 19th century, but the following two definitions serve as good starting points. In its literary usage, the term realism is often defined as a method or form in fiction that provides a "slice of life," an "accurate representation of reality."
—from the *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi

Literary realism is a 19th century conception related to industrial capitalism. In general, it means the use of the imagination to represent things as common sense supposes they are.
—from *Bloomsbury Guide to Literature*, ed. Marion Wynne-Davies
Literary realism is a variable, complex, and often argued about concept. No one work is a perfect example of 'realism'—Lesson #2 allows students to read through some basic attributes of realist literature in order to use that context to examine *The Awakening*. Practitioners of a realist style in the American tradition include William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, and Henry James.

Local Color and Regionalism

These two literary terms are often used interchangeably, and certainly they have many similarities. For the purposes of this lesson, students should not need to differentiate between the two, but for the teacher's clarity the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, excerpted in the EDSITEment reviewed website [Documenting the American South](#), distinguishes them as follows:
Although the terms regionalism and local color are sometimes used interchangeably, regionalism generally has broader connotations. Whereas local color is often applied to a specific literary mode that flourished in the late 19th century, regionalism implies a recognition from the colonial period to the present of differences among specific areas of the country. Additionally, regionalism refers to an intellectual movement encompassing regional consciousness beginning in the 1930s.
In *The Awakening*, as well as her short stories, Chopin frequently focused on the Creole culture of Louisiana. Unique regional features included a heritage that drew from French and Spanish ancestry, a complex cast system, the settings of urban New Orleans and rural vacation retreats like Grand Isle

(located on the Gulf Coast). Chopin's use of a culturally foreign protagonist - Edna was a protestant from Kentucky, rather than a French-speaking Catholic Creole like her husband—casts cultural differences into even sharper relief. Specific textual examples of Edna's encounter with Creole culture can be found in "Selected Passages" below.

Unfamiliar Words and French Phrases

Chopin's *The Awakening* is set in Louisiana—in the resort town of Grand Isle, as well as New Orleans. Often, the characters slip into French phrases, or Chopin uses words that might be unfamiliar to students—such as Creole or quadroon. Students should be encouraged to use either a print or online dictionary while reading—the [Internet Public Library](#) has several available, including [Dictionary.com](#), which provides both English and French dictionaries.

Activity:

Students will be broken into seven groups (one for each chapter of *The Awakening* we have read so far). They will choose one passage from their assigned chapter that exhibits Realism. Students should research the attributes of realism, local color, and/or regionalism. Working in groups (group size as appropriate for class size), students should find a passage in the novel that exhibits one or more aspects of these styles. Students should list why the passage reflects realism, local color, or regionalism; they should read the passage closely, giving detailed evidence.

The suggested websites are:

- [Realism in American Literature, 1860-1890](#), a resource available through [Literary resources on the Net](#) from EDSITEment-reviewed [Internet Public Library](#)
- [Regionalism and Local Color Fiction, 1865-1895](#), a resource available through [Literary resources on the Net](#) from EDSITEment-reviewed [Internet Public Library](#)
- [American Realism](#), from EDSITEment-reviewed [American Collection](#), which has an extensive definition of the literary movement.
- [Introduction to Literature in the American South](#) (via [Documenting the American South](#)), particularly the section on [Local Color](#), which lists the following as the "primary subject matter of this fictional movement:"
 - Peculiarities of speech,
 - quaint local customs,
 - distinctive modes of thought,
 - and stories about human nature
 - This section draws from the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* edited by Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris. Copyright (c) 1989 by the University of North Carolina Press, which is used by permission by [Documenting the American South](#)
- The [Regionalism](#) section of [Introduction to Literature in the American South](#) has a particularly poignant description of the rise of local color and regionalist literature:
 - The South played a major role in the local color movement that followed the Civil War. Although the beginning of the movement is usually dated from the first publication in the *Overland Monthly* in 1868 of Bret Harte's stories of California mining camps, a disproportionate number of contributors of local color stories to national magazines were southerners. The genesis of the local color movement was not surprising. The outcome of the Civil War signified the victory of nationalism over regional interests. With the increasing move toward urbanization and industrialization following the war and the concurrent diminishing of regional differences, it is not surprising that there was a developing nostalgia for remaining regional differences. Local color writing, which was regionally, and often rurally, based and usually took the form of short

stories intended for mass consumption, met a need for stories about simpler times and faraway places

- This section draws from the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* edited by Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris. Copyright (c) 1989 by the University of North Carolina Press, which is used by permission by [Documenting the American South](#)
- [Historical and Literary Contexts](#), through EDSITEment resource [Scribbling Women](#) (while this is ostensibly about Chopin's story "At the 'Cadian Ball," the background information is still applicable to *The Awakening*)

Possible questions to explore as students encounter different passages may include:

- How is the setting of the novel described? What are some unique features of the setting?
- What are some attributes of Creole culture or behavior that are foreign to Edna or exclude her? What is Edna's background—how is she different?
- How did the setting and culture create the environment that allowed for Edna's "awakening" while also condemning the choices that she made? Is there evidence of contradictory beliefs in the Creole culture that Chopin described?

What does Madame Ratignolle mean when she says to Robert of Edna: "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (beginning of Chapter VIII; page 64 Penguin Classics edition)? How is Edna different? What instances are there where Edna's "outsider" role affects or hinders her participation in Creole society?

Teacher will lead a class analysis, prior to beginning the group assignment, of a selection of the text that exemplifies Realism (see selections below). They will use these analytical skills to complete their activity and assessment later in class.

Selected Passages

The following passages are only a few of many that students might examine in context of realism, local color, or regionalism.

- Edna is a Protestant from Kentucky, and her "outsider" status in the predominantly Catholic, Creole society that she finds herself in helps illuminate the Creole culture in Louisiana. [Chapter IV](#)—especially the last few paragraphs—speaks specifically to some of the cultural differences Edna encounters, including an "entire absence of prudery," reconciled "with a lofty chastity which in the Creole women seems to be inborn and unmistakable."
- In [Chapter V](#), Edna, "with excessive naïveté," proposes that she might "make Alphonse jealous"—a statement that amuses the Creoles in her presence, who know "the Creole husband is never jealous." These statements are embedded in a discussion of Robert's affections towards Edna, who knows that "he had often spoken words of love to Madame Ratignolle, without any thought of being taken seriously." Edna expresses relief that he "had not assumed a similar role toward herself. It would have been unacceptable and annoying."
- Note that Edna's "awakening" starts in [Chapter VI](#)—"A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her—the light which, showing the way, forbids it." In what way does the local culture both allow and forbid her awakening? How does the region play a role in Edna's transformation?
- [Chapter VII](#) has several significant passages, including Edna's recollection of her life in Kentucky and how she met and married her husband. This passage about Leónce—which begins (if searching via an e-text) "Her marriage to Leónce Pontellier was purely an accident"—is wonderful for exploring the reaction of Realism to the dangers of Sentimentalism. Edna's sweeping passion for Leónce (and his for her) is later cooled by realities: "She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or

excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution." Chopin is not only commenting on Edna and Leonce's relationship—she is also attacking sentimental literature that preceded the move towards realism. More details about sentimental literature can be found under the "Types: Sentimentalism" section of [The Early American Novel: Introductory Notes](#), a resource available through [Literary Resources on the Net](#) from EDSITEment-reviewed [Internet Public Library](#)

Assessment:

Students will construct a 3-5 minute presentation in their groups based on the passage they selected from the text. They should also create a Power Point that will have an introduction slide with group member names, and 4-5 supporting slides for their presentation. Student groups should present the passage that they select to the classroom, discussing the various points of realism, local color, or regionalism as it pertains to their specific passage. Students should provide a close (rather than general) reading, pointing to specific phrases and ideas to support their ideas.

They will be graded on their recognition, understanding and explanation of the points in their passage that show Realism. The Power Point should add to their presentation, through text and excerpts from the Internet sources.