

# STUDIES IN WOMEN'S PERSONAL GROWTH:

1899 TO 1991

by

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Although Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Kalli Chouri's *Thelma and Louise* were written over one hundred years apart from each other, and on the surface appear to deal with two completely different subject matters, the real meaning of each story is the same. Both stories, as unrelated as they may seem, focus on the continuous self-realization of their main characters; or as Susan Rosowski explains, it is a "movement . . . inward, toward greater self-knowledge and [knowledge about] the nature of the world" (49). Both Thelma and Edna, our main characters, start out as relatively weak and subservient creatures who progress into strong and independent women as their self-awareness grows. Another striking similarity is that both stories received harsh and critical reviews from the experts of their times. To read or watch these two stories, and take them at only face value, one might believe that the statement above is completely incorrect, that these stories could not be more different from one another. I encourage you to read further, and you will understand the deeper, more profound meaning of each of them.

Our introduction to each character is very descriptive, and also very important. To fully appreciate the end result one must have an understanding of who these women were at the beginning, and how they ended up in the situations they were in. We meet Thelma in her own home, through a phone call from her best friend. She is wearing a housecoat, hair undone, with no makeup. She is busy cleaning up the house, and preparing her husband, Darryl, for work. She is clearly a stereotypical housewife who lives solely to serve her husband. Juliet Buck refers to her as a "ditz that gets strong" (161). I disagree with this statement. Thelma is naive, yes, and she has no idea what the outside world holds. She has been sheltered, or repressed, whichever you prefer, by her husband her entire life. As Schickel puts it, Darryl has "[kept] Thelma in a state of near childish dependency" (54). She wants to go away with her friend for the weekend but is afraid to ask her husband's permission because she knows he will not let her go. She never does ask, but instead fastens his bracelet, pours his coffee, and wishes him a very nice day. Unfortunately, this is an image that a lot of women in today's society can relate to on a very personal basis. A Houston business woman tells us in Richard Schickel's review that the movie was "like seeing [her] life played before [her] eyes" (52).

Edna Pontellier is introduced to us through her own husband's eyes; and she is very much like the subservient Thelma. He views his wife as "a valuable piece of personal property" (4). She has clearly conformed to the role that was expected of her: a wife, a mother and a society woman. Her true role is best described by Kate Chopin herself in just one sentence: "She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes,

but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned to us" (32). She did very little on her own free will, but most of all did what her husband, and society, required of her.

A modern girl seeing these women might be a bit disgusted with their roles in life. But as the stories move along, we see that both women are inwardly resentful of the lives they feel they are being forced to live. Thelma makes this clear by going on her trip without telling her husband. She does, however, leave his dinner in the microwave and his beer with a teddy bear on top. Once she is alone with her friend, she becomes verbally expressive about her dissatisfaction with her situation. She wants to stop at a honkey tonk to have a drink. She has never been anywhere without her husband, and as she tells her friend, "He has never let me do a g--d--- thing that's any fun." She had been married at eighteen, and had dated Darryl for four years prior to that. Her husband was the only man she had ever known intimately. Her true feelings are most accurately revealed when she tells a future lover, "He is an asshole. Most of the time I just let it slide."

Edna, being a woman of the nineteenth century, is much less verbal about her feelings. All of her dissatisfaction is held inside, and brought to us by her innermost thoughts. She leads a life that I believe most of us live to some extent. Put eloquently by the author, it is a "dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (15). At an early age, she was one to dream of romance and beauty. She fell in love with unattainable men, such as the husbands of other women, or stars of the stage. Her marriage was meant to provide her with a purpose. She believed that "as the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her. . . that she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" (19). But, as often occurs, the harshness of reality rears its nasty head, and she returns to the fantasy world that she so longed to leave behind.

Soon, inner resentment turns to outer rebellion. Thelma's defiance comes through extremely violent acts brought about by circumstance. There is rape, then murder; and as a result of these acts Thelma commits robbery, and subsequently locks a police officer in the trunk of his car. All this is to escape reality. Susan Sarandon, who played Louise in the film, when confronted with the violence issue put it this way: "The violence I liked, in a way, because it is not premeditated. It is primal, and it doesn't solve anything" (Schickel 54). These drastic measures precipitated most of the bad press, so to speak, surrounding this movie. To list the details of these events would only be reiterating the story, so if you have not seen the movie, do so. There is a personal assault on Thelma, causing her to flee with her friend. Throughout the course of her self-discovery there is a love affair, and even more visible resentment for her husband. Every event brings even more strength to this once-meek woman, who is no longer a little girl. One of her finest moments in the movie is when she finally tells her controlling, abusive husband what she thinks; "Darryl," she says, "You're my husband, not my father. Go f--- yourself."

Edna's development is much more subtle, but still as powerful, considering the era in which the character lived. Her resistance starts with what the women of today would think of as normal occurrences in their everyday lives. She begins to defy her husband, be it in small ways. She does not want to check on the children when he asks her to, or remains sitting in the hammock when he demands her presence indoors. She starts painting again, a hobby she had abandoned long ago. She learns to swim, and becomes friends with a more outgoing, outspoken woman. She revels in the attention of a young and single man, although at first never crossing the line of intimacy. She realizes early in the story that something is changing, and in a conversation with her friend, she tells her that "she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (48). Little did she realize at that time that "herself" was someone she did not really know, only someone who was just beginning to be developed.

Edna's first large defiance, that sends her husband running to the local doctor, is when she decides to go out on a Tuesday afternoon. Kate Chopin describes Tuesday as "Mrs. Pontellier's reception day" (50). This is the day when everyone who is anyone comes to call. The women of society rank are expected to be at home to entertain their callers. For a lady not to be home at reception time without a suitable excuse was an insult to all her guests. When her husband demanded a reason for her pure rudeness, Edna curtly replies "I simply felt like going out, and I went out" (51).

There comes a moment of realization in each story that is so similar it is almost as if Kalli Khouri fashioned the moment after Kate Chopin's character. The version in *The Awakening* is much more powerful and profound than in *Thelma and Louise*, since reading a novel can give so much more insight to the characters' innermost thoughts and feelings. Edna's husband goes away to a wedding and her children have gone away to stay with their grandmother. You feel her "radiant peace" (72) and her pleasure in her solitude. She wanders around in her house and studies everything in it as if she were seeing it for the very first time. She sits in chairs and revels in their comfort as if she had never sat in them before. She inspects her home, inside and out, and becomes reacquainted with her gardens. Even the children's dog, whom she had very little to do with before, becomes a new and amusing friend. The newfound happiness is evident in all she sees and does.

In *Thelma and Louise* this vision comes to us in a thirty-second clip of the film. Thelma is sitting in the passenger seat of the convertible as Louise drives through the heart of the desert. Thelma has her head out the side and is watching the landscape roll by. As it does, she is also watching the passing scenery in the rearview mirror as they travel on. The contentment, the change, is evident in the expression on her face. It is a look of serene contemplation, as if she never thought that there could possibly be anything so beautiful, or that she could ever feel so free. There is another point in the film where she and her friend stand in the desert, gazing at the night sky, never speaking a word. Everything is different.

Even with all of the development that these women go through, it is a little hard to understand the ending of each of these stories. Both

women knowingly and willingly end their lives, rather than return to the lives that they had lived before. Why, though, must it be such a drastic ending? Why can't they just continue to live and revel in their newfound personalities and proceed as that allows? This has been a point of extreme debate surrounding this movie. Susan Sarandon believes that it was "the least compromising ending. You built this whole film to have these [women] not settle anymore" (Schickel 56). Other people see it differently. Film scholar Annette Insdorf puts it this way: "When death is your only choice, how free are you?" (56).

I feel that the answer lies in much deeper waters. Because the newfound lives of these women are still only lives of fantasy and romance, they cannot continue to exist in the real world. There is no reality base involved. Thelma, like Edna, "blindly follow[ed] whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (*The Awakening* 33). Susan Rosowski writes: "For only by complete isolation of self can Edna be true to her inner life. Any contact with external reality threatens this dream" (54). Neither Thelma nor Edna could have continued to exist in these romantic fantasy lives they had created for themselves. For that was all that they were, fantasies. The mind and soul long for everlasting life filled with love and romance, and this is in complete conflict with the female person living in the real world. Ms. Rosowski talks about these "sexist roles. . . restrict[ing] the woman from the expansion necessary to deal with [this] realization" (54). This is what causes Thelma and Edna to choose death over life.

Thelma tries to explain to her friend what has happened. In her attempt to make her understand that they can not turn themselves in, she tells her, "something's crossed over in me and I can't go back. I mean, I just couldn't live." Thelma knows, considering the consequences of her actions throughout the film, that if they are caught they will go to jail, most likely for the rest of their lives. She is scared, but quite certain death is her only option. As she faces death, staring into the depth of the Grand Canyon, she comments on the serene beauty that lies ahead, she kisses her friend goodbye, and they drive off the edge holding hands. A picture from the start of the journey flies out the back of the car. It is all that remains of the Thelma who started this film.

Edna's decision, to most readers, would not seem as necessary as Thelma's. There is a moment in the writing, though, where Edna realizes that there would be no other life of freedom for her. This realization is evident in a conversation with Robert, the man she feels is her true love, her soul mate. All throughout the story it has appeared to her that her life could be different if only she were with him. Robert is closer to her own age, and she seemed certain he would understand her desires, her longings, and most importantly, her independence. In a touching moment, as they confess their love for one another, Robert tells her about how he has dreamed of how Mr. Pontellier could set her free so that she could be his wife. I could feel how this statement felt to Edna. It must have been like a slap in her face. Even though it is said with some humor, her reply could no better have summed up her feelings: "You have been a very, very foolish boy. . . when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no[t] . . . one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give

myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (107). To make matters worse, Robert still did not understand what she meant. In her conversation with the town doctor directly after, it is evident that she has given up this illusion. She knows now that life with Robert would be no different than life with her husband.

Upon this realization, Edna seems despondent and unlike herself, or the self that she has come to know anyway. She goes alone to the sea, and dons her bathing suit. Once she is standing at the water's edge though, she decides to take the garment off. As if reborn, she stands naked in the open air, and slowly walks into the water. As she progresses out, she begins to swim, and does so until her arms grow weak and tired. What could be, and maybe should be, her reason to live, becomes her reasons to die. "She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (115).

Criticism of the movie is abundant, and easy to intertwine into the theme of this paper. Criticism of the book, however, is more criticism of the author, and the whole story in general. The book was called unhealthy, vulgar and morbid. The attacks not only focused on the story, but on Kate Chopin as a writer for bringing it to print. Although most critics were complimentary of her talent as a writer, she was shunned for this publication. One author from *Public Opinion* even went so far as to say that she was "well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf" (151). There are, however, some people who seemed to understand the validity of the story and stated their views with much thought. In a letter to Kate Chopin, Lady Janet Scammon Young explains how Kate could have turned the story into one with a happier ending. In it she explains how to develop the husband into a more understanding character, supporting his wife's inner desires and blooming sexuality. She begs of her, "Give us a great-hearted manly man--give us a great-natured woman for his wife. Give us the awakening of her whole nature, let her go to the utmost short of actual adultery" (156). The most beautiful and touching support, though, comes from a doctor, very much like the one in the novel. He writes a letter to Lady Young, explaining why she is wrong about her point of view. He views the process that led Edna to death as "inevitable, natural, and therefore clean and harmless" (158). He claimed to have helped many men through the awakening of their wives. Lady Young must understand, he claims, that Edna's stirrings are not love, simply passion. If she realizes this, she will see that "it [need] not touch her wife-life, her mother-life, [or] her self-hood. It is not naughty" (158). He claimed that this novel "stirred [him] to the soul" (158), as it did me.

One recurring theme in the criticism of the novel is that it should not be read by the younger generation, as it is, by far, too complex for them to understand. I see that same situation in the movie. I am not sure that a young person could even read through the entire novel without wondering what the point of it is. Of course they could, and would, watch the film; all the while being amused by the violence and humor throughout. The deeper meaning would never come through, though, unless one has experienced the type of growth that the movie portrays. It

was fascinating to me to rewatch this movie. The first time I saw it was in the theater at the age of twenty-three. I thoroughly enjoyed it, having just left my own controlling husband and all the while wishing I could do to him some of the things that Thelma was doing to these men. Five years later as I watch it again, the film takes on a much more profound meaning and I can better relate to the theme that runs through it. An eighteen year old, even a twenty year old, may not be able to understand the concept of awakening. I am sure that they believe they do, just as I did at that age. There may very well be no age limitation on this; some women may experience it at earlier ages, some later, depending on the circumstances that surround them. Mary Daly wrote a very strong statement that I believe wholeheartedly: "As one part of [the] person [develops], another part must die" (62). It is my belief that we are constantly changing individuals, experiencing continual growth and development. We must be sure, however, that our growth is reality-based, and not focused on romantic fantasies. We must also ensure that the growth focuses on ourselves and is not dependent on another person for our happiness, or we might end up disillusioned and alone with our mortality, just like Edna and Thelma.

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