

At midnight there was a cry . . .

In a novel titled *The Awakening* – published in 1899 – Kate Chopin (née Catherine O’Flaherty) tells of a Louisiana woman named Edna Pontellier who senses a change taking place in her life. Indeed the whole country at that date felt a change taking place. From having been mainly an evolving colonial continent, America was emerging into an energetic nation, a world power – as evidenced in the Chicago World’s Fair of 1904. Displayed there were exhibits that introduced somewhat provincial Americans to the wonders of other cultures, the wider world – but also displayed – with a sense of superiority – America’s own industrial wonders, signals of future world dominance. In other words the Fair served to exhibit America’s own awakening from its prior isolation.

This World’s Fair – in Kate Chopin’s novel - serves as a metaphor of domestically bound Edna’s own beginning to discover her worth and wider possibilities. Her husband’s being at work every day or travelling, her being housebound, raising their children – the routine way with women – she meets a Creole lady who teaches her how to express her emotions – freely; inspires her to imagine other interests beyond the kitchen and the nursery. She begins to desire things, takes up painting again, wakes up to her delight with music, learns to swim, takes into account her own needs as a rightful person.

Which reminds me that well before 1900 AD the religious orders of women in our Church had already initiated the emancipation of women. As I remember, it was the parochial school nuns who held the role of authority over us children – speaking with authority, educating us, laying the foundation for our own capacity for taking on responsibility for our futures. Granted they were under the dominion of a male hierarchy, nevertheless they were women with power – as many a local pastor would agree.

But, for generations of most women in the past, domesticity and social constraints plus early death in childbirth limited their potential for a fuller experience of human existence. In Edna’s case at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century horizons in every direction were beginning to open up. The tragedy of Edna’s story is she was born too soon; constraints still prevailed. She was becoming wakeful but also inclined to lapse into her traditional slumber. Her friendly doctor tells her *The trouble is that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature* [which seems to say *That’s simply the way things are; you have no choice*]. To which Edna responds wearily *Yes- . . . if one might go on sleeping and dreaming – but to wake up and find – oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life.*

The novel seems to end up tragically – Edna swims into the Gulf of Mexico toward an ever receding horizon and does not return. Not so her sisters of later generations who now hold positions of skill and authority in every profession: politics, science, technology, ministry, even the military – a presence that floods the media in ways unimaginable decades ago. And who is to say that today’s Gospel was not anticipating – relative to the ten young women of the parable – the awakening of the feminine in our own day [at least to the tune of fifty percent, with more to come] to its proper influence upon this globe?

