A Vanishing Act: The Invisible Quadroons of Chopin’s *The Awakening*

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Readings of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* have often focused on the feminist criticisms presented by Edna’s awakening, but the central role Edna plays in the novel is underscored by the role that the quadroon women play in setting up Edna’s world. The work of the quadroon nurses and nannies set up the Louisiana society of the late nineteenth century and allowed Edna to ponder her existence and awaken to her new life. Thus, though these quadroon nurses and nannies seem to be invisible through the novel, they actually provide the guiding hand that keeps society intact and give the white women disposable time. These quadroon women have a complex role within the novel, as, through their employment, they reify the very same system that oppresses them as colored women in a society still rampant with racist undertones (Taylor 155).

The narration and plot structure of *The Awakening* focuses the reader’s attention on Edna’s agency and interests in the novel. Therefore, scholarship has tended to focus on questions surrounding Edna’s character and the decisions she makes throughout the novel. Though Edna is still the central character of the novel, and the feminist awakening that she embodies is not to be ignored, focusing on her and the other white women of her social status causes the reader to overlook the women of color serving as the novel’s working class. Tamara Powell notes that “the reader is forced to either notice the dismissal [of the quadroons] or be complicitous [to their subjugation]” (278). Though analysis of Edna’s character is crucial to understanding the novel, to appreciate her awakening, it is also important to analyze the social structure that underlies it and the quadroon women who worked to create the households of society. The minor glimpses of the quadroon women in the novel give small
insights into the machinery of the social structure of the novel, revealing the white male hegemony that dominates the society. In many ways, the quadroons were subjugated under the women of Edna’s class. The struggles that the quadroon women face in the novel—their confinement within the pages of the text and their limited agency within the story—in many ways parallel the feminist plight of Edna. Thus, the racial and social subjugation the quadroons face mirrors the repression Edna feels, but they are once more subjugated, as Edna and the other whites suppress these women of color and force them to uphold and maintain the social structure that oppresses them.

One significant theme that pervades Chopin's novel is the distancing and differentiation between characters through the shaping of the narrative. Many critics have analyzed the distance Edna feels within her society, whether she positions herself in this way, or the Creoles distance her from their group identity (Larzer 23). By understanding the quadroon nurses and nannies in their subjugated and excluded positions, Edna is also distanced in a certain sense. Edna’s position, however, differs from the quadroon women in that, in many ways, Edna is still an accepted part of the society she wishes to be rid of, and she also has the ability to think, speak, and act within her subject position in the novel. The quadroon women, on the other hand, are not considered a part of the society they operate within, as they are not acceptable in proper society, but serve as “a huge encumbrance, only good to button up waists and panties and to brush and part hair” (Chopin 11). The nurses and nannies also lack agency and voice to express their identity within or against their position. The distance that Edna feels actually places her in a liminal position, as she straddles the border between being accepted in Creole society and being an outsider to this society. The quadroon women, however, are completely silenced and excluded in the novel, which is revealed by their disappearing and invisible presences. The novel's construction distances these women to such an extent that the reader is led into complicity, to ignore the presence of women of color, as they cannot be mentioned or dwelled upon—merely dealt with, denigrated, then disregarded through the lens of the white women of the novel.

Mariquetta also serves as a Mexican outsider to the Creole society of Louisiana in the novel. As a Mexican woman who moves in and out of the story and the society, she also serves as an outsider to the normalized vision of Creole women. Like Edna, however, Mariquetta serves as a liminal figure, as she is able to fully enter into the society when she talks with Robert and spends time with Edna. Thus, Mariquetta is not completely ostracized from the Louisiana Creole society as the quadroon women have been. Mariquetta is similar to the quadroons, however, as
she is employed and enjoys more independence from the society, both socially and racially. She, nonetheless, is not completely silenced or made invisible in the story.

Some scholarship surrounding *The Awakening* has addressed the topics of race and the quadroons, and many scholars have written about issues of race in Chopin’s other works—specifically, “Desiree’s Baby.” The short story focuses on a woman who kills herself and her baby when her husband disowns them both for seeing color in the baby’s skin (and, therefore, the wife’s blood). Issues of race and color are central to the story, as Robert Arner has noted that Chopin outlines the distinction of race in the story by showing the imaginary line drawn between black and white to describe race, which truly lies along a spectrum (144). Janet Beer argues that the racial undertones of her work reveal Chopin’s Louisiana as “a post-colonial society in its own internal power structure,” wherein race and ethnicity dictate social structure and class (25). Cynthia Griffen Wolff argues that Chopin’s stories are “consummately interior”—focusing on both the specificity and the volatility of existence—as margins and boundaries easily slip, just as race is spectral, rather than binary (42). Thus, issues of race have been adequately researched in Chopin’s short stories, and these analyses outline the nuanced ways in which she addresses the complexity of racial identifications. Her portrayals of women of color in *The Awakening*, however, exemplify the marginal roles of these women in relation to the white and Creole women in the novel.

The issue of race in *The Awakening* has been taken up by a few scholars who point to the role of the quadroon and black women in the novel. In their analyses, scholars have tended to merge ideas of class and race together. Though Chopin’s novel is set in post-bellum Louisiana, the racist undertones of social and class structure still pervaded society. Race and class denoted one another, such that the quadroon women fit into a social class below the whites. Michele A. Birnbaum focuses on the influence the women of color have on Edna, and, more specifically, how the different lives of these women presented alternative ways of living outside of Edna’s social class. Birnbaum also claims that “Edna’s agency is measured against—indeed is contingent upon—the necessarily mute quadroon” (305). Thus, though Edna observes and is affected by the presence of the quadroons, she nonetheless has a different standing and her agency is juxtaposed against the quadroons’ lack of agency. Helen Taylor argues that the women of color are portrayed in a way that “confirms their simplicity, fidelity to and love for whites, and constructs them as cheery figures acting out a pastoral subplot to the comic or tragic dramas of white communities” (156). Tamara Powell notes that *The Awakening* is guided by the stereotyping and fetishization
of the Africanist presence in the novel (276). For Powell, Chopin’s novel focuses the reader’s attention on Edna’s awakening, but “Edna would not have so much time to sit around and ponder her lack of self-determination if she were not economically and racially privileged. She has the luxury to question why and how she is oppressed because she is not occupied struggling to survive” (277). Ammons claims that “the very liberation about which the book fantasizes is purchased on the backs of black women” (310). Powell and Ammons note the important role these women of color play in the novel, in setting up the world that Edna eventually leaves behind. However, I will nuance their arguments by focusing solely on the quadroon nurses and nannies and how their role is more complex than these authors have explained. The quadroon women do set up the world in which Edna resides, but they maintain this society and the hegemonic structures of white male dominance not by choice, but because they are confined to a role in which they must support the structure that suppresses them.

In Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, he describes imperialist movements, both past and present, where “to ignore or otherwise discount the overlapping experience of Westerners and Orientals, the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories, is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century” (xx). In *The Awakening*, the narration overlooks and makes invisible the presence of the quadroon women as representative of a class of ignored, colonized peoples. Though *The Awakening* is set in the post-bellum period of the late nineteenth century, the quadroon women of the novel serve as colonized peoples—as people who have been subjugated and manipulated under the hegemonic force of a ruling, colonizing class. As Janet Beer notes, “[t]he narrative present of Kate Chopin’s stories is of a society where slavery no longer exists and yet its class structure is absolutely determined by the power-relations of the old, pre-war South” (30). The white, and Creole, upper-middle class of the novel, including the Pontelliers and their ilk, subjugate the quadroon nurses and nannies in a society and economic structure based on race. The white women note that they are often “grumbling” and “scolding” the quadroon women for their supposed “negligence” (Chopin 55, 60). As Beer states, though chattel slavery has disappeared, the treatment of the women of color by the white women reveals the remaining racist ideologies that infiltrate class and economic structures of the novel. These white women expect the quadroons to stay invisible, they are constantly denigrated, and they are forced to labor under the whites because of their race, and thus, their social class, which reveals the inequities remaining from the racialized slave trade.
The whites have also forced the colonized quadroons to support and reify the hegemonic structure of white society through their work. These characters force the quadroon nurses and nannies to raise the white babies who will eventually come to power in white society, thus maintaining the status quo that has subjugated them as inferiors only good for housekeeping. As Susan Castillo notes, “for women of colour in post-bellum Louisiana, motherhood exists under very similar conditions to those of slavery. In both stories, the only possible maternity is of the surrogate variety, to the children of white women, but never to children of their own” (65). Thus, the quadroon women in the novel serve to maintain the white houses and raise the white babies, only to have these babies grow up and hire their own children of color to serve the whites in a similar way. While some may see Edna’s inability to work independently and make a living for herself as setting her in a more difficult position than these women of color, when the work these women do is considered, they have no more agency than Edna. In fact, the quadroon women are further subjugated because they are forced to reify the system of inequality that sets them below their white bosses and will continue to subjugate their own children.

In Chopin’s novel, the quadroon nurses and nannies are marginalized and overlooked in the shaping of the narrative frame. The quadroon nanny is only seen following the children, portraying her as inferior to even the white children, as the “quadroon nurse followed [the Pontellier boys] about with a far-away, meditative air” (Chopin 4). In this scene, the quadroon’s presence is only apparent in order to follow and maintain the children. The “far-away, meditative air” of the quadroon seems to remove her further from the scene, showing that she is mentally distanced from the story and the characters: she is only a physical presence in the novel, and even her physical presence is limited to her work with the children. Similarly, when the children later come in from their play, the novel portrays “the quadroon following at the respectful distance which they required her to observe” (Chopin 16). The quadroon nanny is only useful in dealing with children, and she must obey the white children’s order as well, as they force her to “follow[] at a respectful distance” (Chopin 16). Thus, in many ways, the quadroon nurses and nannies are infantilized, as they are only seen in conjunction with the children, but they are also portrayed as inferior to those children whom they serve, as the children seem to set the rules for the quadroons. In following with Edward Said, this portrayal of the quadroon nurse reveals how the overlapping of the whites and the women of color within the novel is completely overlooked. These brief glimpses into the quadroons’ treatment reveal how the whites of
the novel asserted supremacy over the quadroons; thus, the well-hidden colonial tensions of the novel are revealed through the treatment and placement of the quadroons.

Edna often dismisses the quadroons, forcing them to disappear. When Edna begins to feel motherly at various points in the novel, she pushes the quadroons away. As Edna tucked her children into bed, it is noted that “[t]he quadroon had vanished” (Chopin 51). Again, the quadroon’s appearance was only necessary when she was caring for the children, but when Edna took over the mothering, the quadroon nanny simply “vanished.” The quadroon nurse had no other agency or presence outside her nanny role, and, therefore, it was necessary that she disappear. Likewise, after Edna helped the quadroon clean the house, Edna again decides to briefly take on her motherly role, as she “sent the quadroon away to her supper and told her she need not return” (Chopin 56). Edna has the ability to make the quadroon disappear, because the quadroon’s existence in the novel is predicated on her role as the children’s caretaker. While Edna struggles to define womanhood outside of motherly and wifely roles, the quadroons of the novel are only defined by their duties as “surrogate” mothers to the home. Again, Edna’s confinement seems to be undermined by the confinement of quadroons in the novel and by Edna’s ability to make demands of the quadroons and make them disappear.

While Birnbaum argues that the quadroons, as servants of society, are “keepers” of white male hegemony in The Awakening, the quadroon characters are forced to be keepers of the status quo—they are doubly victims of the society, as they are both subjugated by the system, and they are then forced to uphold that same system of oppression (307). Birnbaum points to the scene where Edna throws her wedding ring upon the ground and stomps on it, while a quadroon gives back her ring and puts the room back in order. The quadroon says, “And here’s your ring, ma’am, under the chair.” We then learn that “Edna held out her hand, and taking the ring, slipped it upon her finger” (67). Though the quadroon seems to bring Edna back in line, guiding the novel, the wife, and the house back to normalcy as Birnbaum notes, this moment is actually reflective of a larger system of control. It is not by mere volition that the quadroon brings back the status quo in the house; rather, she has been hired and trained to do so. Much like Edna, the quadroon’s survival is dependent on keeping things in order, keeping the structures of power intact in order to receive money and other necessities. Therefore, this scene does not indicate that the quadroons are “the keepers rather than the victims” of society, for the façade of orderliness and the keeping of the home does not erase the underlying position of the quadroon (Birnbaum 307). No matter how much the
quadroons serve and maintain the whites’ homes, they will always be socially distanced in this society. As long as they are serving and working in “white” homes, the quadroons are forced into an inferior position. The invisible and disappearing nature of the quadroons’ presence emphasizes the fact that the novel only presents small glimpses of these characters. When the quadroons uphold the social system, this only gives a surface look at the quadroons’ actions, with no regard to their intentions.

In addition to their invisible presence in the novel and their forced upholding of white hegemony, the quadroon women are nameless, faceless non-agents. Though Chopin’s novel has been analyzed as an attempt to universalize the characters and the social commentary within the text, Janet Beer questions, “at what cost such people change from the individual to the generic” (37). She argues that the universalizing of themes in the novel is what allows for the overlooking of the individual quadroons in the text, for they are lumped together into the category of “quadroon nurses and nannies.” Thus, these quadroon women lack names, bodies, and agency through most of the novel. When Edna begins her painting career, “[t]he quadroon sat for hours before Edna’s palette, patient as a savage” (Chopin 73). The quadroons throughout the novel, but especially in this scene, are objectified—they are objects that are only seen, heard, and thought about in relation to the white characters’ concerns and thoughts. In addition, the “savage” imagery signals the denigration of the quadroons to an inferior class and their position as colonized peoples. Thus, much like posing statues or one-dimensional artwork, the women of color in the novel do not present any thought or agency behind their actions—they merely do what they are told and disappear when they are told. In this portrayal, unlike Edna, the quadroons do not even have the voice or agency to protest against their position. Ammons notes, however, that throughout the novel, “the black characters change from nameless parts of scenery to individuals with names and voices” (310). When Edna moves into her “pigeon house,” suddenly one of the quadroons from the novel is named—“Old Celestine” (99). Celestine also develops a voice, which is more than any women of color had earlier in the novel, signaling a parallel between Edna’s plight for freedom and the quadroons fight for selfhood. The quadroons’ freedom ends with names and some modest voice, however, as these women are still restrained in what they may say. They still do not have the freedom and the time to ponder their position or speak out against their oppressors. This change to voiced and named quadroons is a small step to recognizing their subservience through the novel. The women of color are not freed from their inferior role in the novel, as they are still framed by the whites—disappearing when told and only acting within their
confined roles in the home.

“If it was not a mother’s place to look after her children, whose on earth was it?” (Chopin 8). This question plagues *The Awakening* and the characters within the text. Though many readers focus on Edna’s struggle with this question, the answer lies with the quadroon nurses and nannies who care for the white children in the novel. Though they are overlooked and are often invisible or disappear from view, the presence of the quadroon women allows for Edna to question her identity. Thus, in the final scene of the novel when Edna floats off to sea and seems to disappear as “the hum of bees and the musky odor of pinks filled the air,” the true disappearing act is done by the quadroons (Chopin 143). The question is not whether Edna has died in the final scene; rather, the question that readers should be asking is what will happen to her children, her home, and her husband. The answer to all of these is that the invisible presences that keep white society running will continue working to maintain the whites’ homes. These quadroon women do not choose to be invisible or to drift off and run away as Edna has, but rather, they are bound to their duties.

In Said’s conception of imperialist discourse, the quadroon women are silenced and robbed of their ability to fight their colonizers. The quadroons have an internal battle to gain freedom and equality with their white counterparts, but this tension is never brought to the surface in the novel: it is suppressed and made invisible much like the quadroons themselves. Recognizing this invisible tension requires that we read *The Awakening* differently. The most prominent and obvious parts of Edna’s story are not the only significant themes in the novel, but the invisible and disappearing characters reveal the underlying structure of the prominent storyline. That which is not said, heard, or seen is often the most telling part of a story’s structure, and the distance that Edna feels is part of a complex system of hierarchies, where more than the male/female binary is critiqued. Thus, to properly read the novel, and Edna herself, we must understand the social structures and hierarchies present in the novel. The quadroon nurses and nannies give a new viewpoint on that society, as they are subjugated by the social structure as people of color. Yet they also reify that structure in their roles as nannies and nurses—hired to keep the house, and the society the way they are. These critical characters, however, are not given the voice to tell this story. Our reading of Edna’s final scene presents a complicated analysis of the quadroon women back on land. If Edna’s final swim is a heroic act of freeing herself, then the quadroon women’s fight to survive by serving the whites seems to be weak, whereas, if Edna’s final swim reveals a powerlessness to the forces that confine her, then the quadroons
seem more heroic in their ability to continue living within the system and not giving up with death. Thus, Edna and the quadroon women have a complex relationship that intersects through the story. Though the text allows the readers to overlook those quadroons, our reading of their characters through the novel can give insight into Edna’s awakening and death—whether they were heroic acts of independence or weak acts of powerlessness.
Works Cited


Beer, Janet. “‘dah you is, settin’ down, lookin’ jis’ like w’ite folks!’ Ethnicity Enacted in Kate Chopin’s Short Fiction.” *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction.* New York: St. Martin’s, 1997. 24-39.


