

High Times, High Tides—Nineteenth Century New Orleans and Grand Isle

Jacques Pitre

Course: English 300

Instructor: Chris Genre

Late nineteenth century New Orleans has some resemblance to New Orleans today—extravagant houses, clustered streets, major commercial centers. Violet Harrington Bryan notes: "The city was a place of intellectual stimulation and cultural sophistication, yet also of social stratification and rigorous traditions and social practices" (54-55). This description of New Orleans is evident in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Thus were the customs and lifestyles of the well-to-do members of society. However, Grand Isle provided a refuge from the socially stratified and sophisticated city. Lafcadio Hearn, when contrasting Grand Isle and New Orleans, wrote: "One lives here. In New Orleans one only exists" (Evans, Stielow, and Swanson 81). Though New Orleans was home to many, life was based on extravagance and superficiality. It was Grand Isle that allowed the liberation from societally-deemed norms. New Orleans represented society's expectations; Grand Isle represented the true inner identity. Chopin, a local color writer, does an excellent job of depicting late nineteenth century New Orleans and Grand Isle in *The Awakening*.

New Orleans, overall, was a beautiful and luxurious city. Frank Schneider describes New Orleans as "green neighborhoods of distinctive character where enterprising residents of varied cultures raised families" (3). The well-to-do enjoyed handsome homes. Chopin describes the Pontellier's house:

The Pontelliers possessed a very charming home on Esplanade Street in New Orleans. It was a large, double cottage, with a broad front veranda, whose round,

fluted columns supported the sloping roof. The house was painted a dazzling white; the outside shutters, or jalousies, were green. In the yard, which was kept scrupulously neat, were flowers and plants of every description which flourishes in South Louisiana. Within doors the appointments were perfect after the conventional type. The softest carpets and rugs covered the floors; rich and tasteful draperies hung at doors and windows. There were paintings, selected with judgment and discrimination, upon the walls. The cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask which daily appeared upon the table were the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier. (83).

Many people, like Leonce Pontellier, were concerned with such material possessions.

Of course, entertainment was needed. Musical entertainment was very common. In *The Awakening*, "The Ratignolles' *soirees musicales* were widely known, and it was considered a privilege to be invited to them" (Chopin 91). People like the Pontelliers and Ratignolles also attended other events, such as horse races. Most men enjoyed gambling and card playing. Elegant dinner parties were held, such as the one held by Edna before departing for her new "pigeon-house" (Chopin 156).

Women of upper class usually did not work. Women were supposed to be the mother-women like Madame Ratignolle in *The Awakening*. Chopin writes: "The Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperiling her health" (38). Instead, she stayed at home in elegant clothing and visited with acquaintances. Chopin describes one such occasion: "Mrs. Pontellier, attired in a handsome reception gown, remained in the drawing room the entire afternoon receiving her visitors" (84). Children were usually cared for by nurses or other servants. Such was common of "*les convenances*" (Chopin 85).

Unfortunately, with all of New Orleans' beauty, intrigue, and extravagance came its disease and disrule. Bryan notes: "The 1870s in New Orleans was a time of racial and economic turmoil" (53). Christopher Benfey writes: "During the years after the Civil War, New Orleans was already known for its raucous and sometimes dangerous nightlife" (85). Robbery and murder were present in the poorer sections of the city. These parts of New Orleans were "a maze of decrepit houses and narrow cross-streets" (Benfey 79). Lafcadio Hearn, while living in New Orleans, became "disenchanted with the city's sad beauty of physical decay and moral corruption" (Disheroon-Green and Abney 36). Punishments were severe. Benfey says that some New Orleanians practiced "*charivari*—a ritual of public humiliation comparable to tar and feathering.

One of New Orleans' biggest problems was its sanitation, or lack thereof. Benfey notes: "The sanitary arrangements in the city...were among the most primitive in the country: the open sewers between sidewalk and street were a medieval stew of rubbish, raw sewage, and dead animals" (86). Another description of New Orleans says: "The city was a hotbed of disease due in part to the limited sanitation methods and the daily arrival of immigrants with almost every sickness imaginable" (Grand Isle par. 2). New Orleans had serious health issues: "Health threats in the form of dysentery, malaria, small pox, tuberculosis, and typhoid, but especially the dreaded yellow fever, were sufficient reasons to escape New Orleans during the warm summer months" (Evans, Stielow, and Swanson 79-80).

To escape from such crude conditions, New Orleanians often escaped to Grand Isle during the summer. Most were New Orleans businessmen who were "intent on protecting their families began the practice of securing them on Grand Isle for the summer" (Evans, Stielow, and Swanson 80). During this time, it was common for "upper class wives and children to travel to

the hotels there and for husbands to visit on weekends” (McKinnon par. 2).

Grand Isle was a very beautiful resort island. It did not, however, possess the same beauty as New Orleans. Rather than the extravagant beauty of New Orleans, Grand Isle's beauty was natural. Large oak trees, palm trees, open fields, and beaches were what made Grand Isle so attractive. Instead of elegant houses and hotels, guests stayed in "Remodeled slave cabins, laid out in double rows between 'streets' lined with trees" (Evans, Stielow, and Swanson 75). Unlike the paved streets of New Orleans, Grand Isle only had shady lanes made of gravel and dirt. This, however, did not keep vacationers away.

Grand Isle is described as "a place where some people went to escape from the law and others went to escape from society" (McKinnon par. 11). Grand Isle was by no means lawless. Rather, it was a place almost free of any form of negligence. In *The Awakening*, Chopin notes several times how doors and windows were left open for the breeze. This could be done because of the honest and respectful atmosphere observed by Grand Isle's inhabitants and visitors. Lafcadio Hearn once wrote: "An absolutely ancient purity of morals appears to prevail here: - no one thinks of bolts or locks or keys, everything is left open and nothing is ever touched. Nobody has ever been robbed on the island. There is no iniquity" (Evans, Stielow, and Swanson 80).

Entertainment in Grand Isle was quite different from that of New Orleans. Women still visited each other, but not on a specific schedule. Leisure activities included "sailing, fishing and crabbing, or reclining in hammocks" (Evans, Stielow, and Swanson 79). Evans, Stielow, and Swanson note: "Children frolicked under the canopy of oaks. After dinner, recitals, card games, dancing and music prefaced an early bedtime in a carefree succession of days" (79). Most popular was surf bathing, found throughout *The Awakening*.

Women were usually left by their husbands during the week. Therefore, "Resorts gave

new opportunities to women of the time, who were the principal occupants" (Grand Isle par. 7). It was common for women to engage in extramarital affairs. Chopin writes: "It was the fashion to be in love with married people" (186). Chopin presents this idea when she writes: "Robert each summer at Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel. Sometimes it was a young girl, again a widow; but as often as not it was some interesting married woman" (20). Grand Isle was "a free-spirited place where no one really questioned [Edna's] time with Robert" (McKinnon par. 14). Obviously, affairs were one of Grand Isle's main attractions. For Edna, Grand Isle is an escape from the "industrious lifestyles" (Bunch 51) that she must partake in New Orleans. To her, it is a place "without the boundaries of civilization and morality. With Robert on the island, Edna feels the boundaries of society recede" (Bunch 53).

Indeed Grand Isle was a place without boundaries. Evans, Stielow, and Swanson observe: "To visit Grand Isle was to return to nature, shed city clothing and some degree of inhibitions. The resort years were characterized by an exotic, almost erotic atmosphere, markedly different from the rigid mores prevailing in late nineteenth century America" (82). Grand Isle provided "more air, more privacy, more yard room, and a feeling of home difficult to experience in occupying a single room in a large building" (Evans, Stielow, and Swanson 78).

Chopin's images of New Orleans and Grand Isle in *The Awakening* are excellent depictions of the late nineteenth century in Louisiana. Such local color writing enables us to have a better understanding of a piece of literature and makes the action in a piece, in many ways, seem possible.

Works Cited

- Benfey, Christopher. *Degas in New Orleans*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
- Bryan, Violet Harrington. *The Myths of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1993.
- Bunch, Diane. "Dangerous Spending Habits: The Epistemology of Edna Pontellier's Extravagant Expenditures in *The Awakening*." *Mississippi Quarterly* 55 (2002): 43-61. 24 March 2005 <<http://web23.epnet.com/>>.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York: Avon Books, 1972.
- Evans, Sally Kittredge, Frederick Stielow, and Betsy Swanson. *Grand Isle on the Gulf—An Early History*. Metairie, LA: Jefferson Parish Historical Commission, 1979.
- McKinnon, Todd. *Cheniere Hurricane*. 21 April 2005. <<http://www.loyno.edu/~kchopin/Hurricane>>.
- Songs of the Reconstructing South: Building Literary Louisiana, 1865-1945*. Ed. Suzanne Disheroon-Green and Lisa Abney. Westport: Greenwood P, 2002.