

GENDER AND LITERARY VALORIZATION: *THE AWAKENING OF A CANONICAL NOVEL*

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ABSTRACT: *We use the reception history of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* to study the social context in which and processes through which literary texts are evaluated. We explain *The Awakening's* ascendancy from an initial negative critical position in 1899 to its current canonical status by the emergence of new "interpretive strategies" for understanding and evaluating texts. The dominant interpretive strategies of nineteenth-century reviewers sentimentalized women as selfless wives and mothers responsible for moral purity, making it difficult to construct a valued or fruitful narrative from *The Awakening*. Late-twentieth-century feminist interpretive strategies, however, were highly productive tools for rereading *The Awakening*, generating a socially resonant narrative focused on the search for an independent female self. Most important, we show that analytic attention to interpretive strategies allows sociologists to analyze both the meanings constructed from texts and the differential judgments attached to them under varying interpretive strategies.*

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* was published on April 22, 1899. At that time, Chopin was a well-known resident of St. Louis, a widow who supported her six children through writing. Her career was increasingly successful; she had published her first novel in 1890 and two successful collections of short stories, *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, in 1894 and 1897 respectively. Chopin had also published a large number of short stories, poems, and essays in both popular and literary magazines, including *Youth's Companion* and *Vogue*.

Despite Chopin's growing reputation, *The Awakening* was not well received. It was denounced as "most unpleasant" (*Boston Herald* 1899), as "poison" (G.B. 1899), and as a book "that the author herself would probably like . . . to tear . . . to pieces by criticism if only some other person had written it" (*St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* 1899). Chopin was described as a writer of "sex fiction" (*Chicago Times-*

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Herald 1899) and as “another clever woman [who] has put her cleverness to a very bad use” (*Providence Sunday Journal* 1899). In response to the many harsh reviews, Chopin wrote a somewhat tongue-in-cheek but nonetheless defensive “retraction” of *The Awakening* that appeared in July 1899 (*Book News Monthly* 1899).

A century later, however, *The Awakening* holds a considerably higher status. It is now valorized as a central text in the American canon.¹ This transformation did not occur overnight. Although *The Awakening* was largely forgotten in the early part of the century, its ascent in the literary hierarchy began in the 1950s. As a result of this renewed interest, a new edition was published in 1964. In 1972 the popular women’s magazine *Redbook* reprinted *The Awakening* as “the Redbook novel.” During the 1970s, Chopin began to appear as a subject of doctoral dissertations at a wide range of institutions, and by 1974 she was considered a significant enough writer that the Modern Language Association (MLA) held its first panel on her work at its annual convention. By the late 1970s Chopin’s formerly unacceptable novel was clearly contending for a place in the canon.

The process of canonization was completed in the following decade. In 1985 *The Awakening* was included in its entirety in three of the four major college anthologies of American literature (Norton, Macmillan, and Random House).² In 1988 the MLA published *Approaches to Teaching Chopin’s “The Awakening,”* an edited volume entirely devoted to discussions of how best to teach the novel. The first Kate Chopin International Conference was held in April 1989 at Northwestern State University in Louisiana. By 1989 *The Awakening* had achieved core canonical standing as measured by its frequency of assignment in a survey of Introductory American Literature course syllabi at prominent colleges and universities (Corse 1997). In 1991–92 alone, eighteen dissertations were written on Chopin. *The Awakening* is no longer a minor and discredited work by a regional figure; it is now an American masterpiece. The obvious question then is how this transformation occurred: what allowed *The Awakening* to be so fundamentally redefined?

CULTURAL VALORIZATION

To understand this transformation we undertook a sociological analysis of the process of “cultural valorization,” or the creation and operation of systems of evaluation for cultural objects (Corse and Griffin 1997). This process is of increasing interest to sociologists (e.g., Bourdieu 1984, 1985; DeNora 1991; DiMaggio 1987), including those studying literary texts (Corse 1995, 1997; Griswold 1987, 1992, 2000). Unlike text-centered analyses in literary criticism, which focus on inherent textual attributes, sociological studies of cultural valorization have concentrated on the effect that historically contingent and specifiable practices, institutions, and actors have on the characteristics and judgments of evaluative systems (DiMaggio 1982; Griswold 1986; Lamont 1992; Mukerji 1990; see also Lauter 1991; Levine 1988; Tompkins 1985). As this literature argues and as we will show for *The Awakening*, the value of cultural works differs as evaluation systems change. The interpretive and material resources available within social systems construct both works and the judgments attached to them. Different resources can affect not only the evaluation of texts but also the very meanings created from

them. We use our analysis of *The Awakening*, then, to illuminate a general *if unstudied* process of cultural valorization—the interaction between textual multivocality and available intellectual resources. In particular, we demonstrate the differential rewards attached to texts under varying interpretive strategies. Although multivocality allows texts to be constructed very differently under one interpretive strategy versus another, as Griswold (e.g., 1987) has demonstrated so clearly, *the fruitfulness of these constructions varies*.

We look at the critical reception of *The Awakening* at three points in time—initial reception in 1899, liminal status in 1950–79, and canonical status in 1980 and beyond. These analyses demonstrate that the availability of different interpretive strategies means *The Awakening* is constructed as more or less valuable at different times. Interpretive strategies are intellectual resources, varying across environments, that create new readings of texts and therefore new audiences—and even new canons. Interpretive strategies construct a narrative for readers by selectively engaging certain aspects of multivocal texts—but not others—to create dominant readings of those texts by framing the narrative in specific, largely determining ways (see Binder 1993 on framing). Because texts are constructed in different ways, the question of which reading dominates is answered not simply by reference to inherent textual features, but through a sociological analysis of the available interpretive resources, the relative power of both competing readings and those who champion them, and the congruence between possible reading strategies and the capacities of the text.

Our data show that the dominant interpretive strategy of reviewers in 1899 was built on assumptions of reading as moral instruction and of women as selfless nurturers. Such interpretive strategies could make little of value out of *The Awakening*, constructing a narrative that was objectionable at best and virtually unintelligible at worst. Late-twentieth-century feminist interpretive strategies, however, constructed *The Awakening* as a compelling and socially resonant narrative of the search for the female self and patriarchal limits to women's lives that resonated powerfully with contemporary social concerns and provided rich material for critical and pedagogical investigation. We turn now to our analysis of the specific readings of *The Awakening* generated by changing interpretive strategies and the concomitant evaluations accorded the novel.

RECEPTION AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, 1899

Within a year of its initial publication, *The Awakening* was reviewed twenty-four times in newspapers ranging from the *New York Times Saturday Review* to the *Los Angeles Times*³ and in magazines such as *Public Opinion* and the *Nation*. Seven of the reviews were from newspapers in St. Louis, Chopin's home at the time. We were able to obtain copies of twenty-one of the original reviews in their entirety and significant parts of two other reviews.⁴ These twenty-three initial reviews constitute the data for our analysis of the original critical reception of *The Awakening*. Although the overall judgments of the book and the specific features of each review varied, we coded data in five categories in the initial period: a description of the "awakening," an evaluation of the morality of *The Awakening's* message or

TABLE 1
 Descriptions of the "Awakening"

	1899 ^a (N = 23) (%)	1950–1979 ^b (N = 24) (%)	1980–1994 ^c (N = 12) (%)
Self-discovery	4	50	67
Human nature/fuller life	13	12.5	0
Bad love or passion	26	0	0
Tragedy (through death or loss of reason)	17	0	0
Good love	9	0	0
Sexuality/sensuality	0	58	67
Woman's place in society	0	8	25

^a Thirty percent (N = 7) of the reviews do not describe the awakening.

^b Four percent (N = 1) of the reviews do not describe the awakening.

^c Every review describes the awakening.

theme, a judgment of Edna's character, assessments of Chopin's literary style, and an overall judgment of the novel.

Critical Commentary

Table 1 presents the comparative data on how reviewers describe the "awakening." Table 2 summarizes the reviewers' judgments on the remaining four points: the novel's moral message, Edna's character, Chopin's literary style, and the overall value of the novel. Table 2 includes only clear-cut responses; mixed opinions are discussed in the text.

Descriptions of the Awakening

The initial reviewers disagreed about the nature of the awakening Edna experiences, although most (seventy percent) defined it in their reviews (seven reviews do not describe the awakening). We summarize the reviewers' wide range of descriptors and metaphors of the awakening in five categories. In two categories, "Bad Love/Passion" and "Tragedy" (through death or loss of reason), the awakening is clearly understood in negative terms. In the remaining three categories it is understood as generally positive.

The most common category was Bad Love. One-fourth of the reviewers (26 percent) understood Edna's awakening as her exposure to or possession by passion or a morally inappropriate love. Porcher's (1899) is one of the most metaphoric, describing the "ugly, cruel, loathsome monster Passion," which "like a tiger . . . slowly stretches its graceful length . . . and . . . awakens." The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* (1899) saw "unhappy Edna's awakening" as "a passion which experience has taught her is, by its very nature, evanescent" and which is "confined entirely to the senses, while reason, judgment, and all the higher faculties and perceptions[,] . . . fell into slumber deep as that of the seven sleepers." The *Indianapolis Journal* (1899) is more straightforward: "'The Awakening' is when Mrs.

TABLE 2
Reception of *The Awakening*

	Favorable (%)	Unfavorable (%)
Initial reviews, 1899 (N = 23)		
Reviewers' judgment of		
Novel's moral value	4	65
Edna's character	0	53
Chopin's literary style	57	9
Overall evaluation of novel	22	61
Liminal reviews, 1950–1979 (N = 24)		
Reviewers' judgment of		
Novel's moral value	4	0
Edna's character	29	12.5
Chopin's literary style	54	0
Overall evaluation of novel	75	0
Canonical reviews, 1980–1994 (N = 12)		
Reviewers' judgment of		
Novel's moral value	8	0
Edna's character	33	0
Chopin's literary style	67	0
Overall evaluation of novel	58	0

Pontillier [*sic*] discovers that she loves another man than her husband, and from that moment, owing to her emotional nature, the story moves to a tragic ending."

An additional four reviews (17 percent) describe the awakening as a tragedy. Cather (1899) describes how for the "sentimentalist," who "abuses" her nerves, "'the awakening' comes." "Sometimes it comes in the form of arsenic[,] . . . sometimes it is carbolic acid taken covertly in the police station. . . . 'Edna Pontellier,' fanciful and romantic to the last, chose the sea." Cather thus equates the awakening with death itself. The *Literature* ([1899] 1976) review is less literary, noting sternly that the "awakening itself is tragic, as might have been anticipated."

In contrast to the 43 percent of reviews that saw the awakening as negative, a surprising 26 percent describe it in more positive terms. Three of these reviews focus on the awakening as an aspect of human nature or a desire for a fuller life. One of the *St. Louis Republic* ([1899a] 1990) reviews describes Edna as a "woman who has been merely quiescent, who has accepted life as it came to her, without analysis and without question, [who] finally awakens to the fact that she has never lived." The *Boston Beacon* (1899) review describes Edna's experience as an illustration "without prudery" that "a normal woman is capable without sin of experiencing a full awakening of the entire human nature." Two reviews understand Edna's awakening as learning to love, although they may not consider the focus of her love appropriate. The second *St. Louis Republic* (1899b) review describes how "after several years of 'unthinking life,' absorbed in what the author calls 'the externals,' [Edna] awoke and learned to love. The tragedy of it all

was that she did not love her husband." One *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (G.B. 1899) review seems the most tolerant of Edna's love for Robert, arguing that it is an example of "instinctive love" that "is involuntary and unerring." The review contrasts Edna's love for Robert with her love for her husband, arguing that her marriage was an example of "reasonable" love and thus "was an honest effort to love her neighbor as herself without relinquishing her inalienable rights, and like all such efforts it failed." The phrase "without relinquishing her inalienable rights" suggests that the reviewer sees the awakening, at least implicitly, as a legitimate expression of Edna's self.

Finally, Deyo (1899) is the only reviewer who explicitly understands Edna's awakening as the discovery of her individual self separate from her role as wife and mother: "One day Edna Pontellier . . . suddenly becomes aware she is a human being." Deyo also adds an infrequent critique of Edna's husband to his understanding of the awakening, describing Léonce as someone who "has vaguely held her dear as a bit of decorative furniture, [or] a valuable piece of personal property." This understanding of the awakening focuses on how Edna is "revealed . . . to herself."

The Moral Message

Perhaps the most jarring characteristic of the initial reviews for today's readers is their overwhelming and explicit focus on moral criteria. More than 90 percent of the reviews raised the issue of *The Awakening's* morality and used it as at least one measure of the novel's worth. The moral tone of the novel and the presumed effect on the moral values of its readers were central evaluative criteria for reviewers in 1899. Fifteen of the reviewers, 65 percent of the total, judged *The Awakening* unfavorably both because it depicted immoral behavior and because they felt that Chopin's condemnation of this behavior was insufficient. Thus the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* (1899) review complains that the writing is not of sufficient quality to compensate for the novel being "not a healthy book" and that the characters cannot claim readers' "admiration or sympathy" as their story does not teach any moral. Similarly, the *Providence Sunday Journal* (1899) calls the novel "gilded dirt" that is "promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires" that corrupt youth. The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* (1899) remonstrates against the notion that Edna's actions have divine—or authorial—approval:

[T]he assumption that such a course as that pursued by Edna has any sort of divine sanction cannot be too strongly protested against. . . . [T]here is throughout the story an undercurrent of sympathy for Edna, and nowhere a single note of censure of her totally unjustifiable conduct. (Emphasis added)

Another five reviews were similarly concerned with the moral message of *The Awakening* but judged the substance of the message mixed. While noting the immoral aspects of the novel, they also saw some redeeming moral qualities. For example, the *Boston Beacon* (1899) review felt that the novel "skims over some very thin ice," but as the author "emphasizes the immorality of a marriage of convenience," it is a book "that might be read by match-makers with profit." The only review that

presented an unqualified favorable evaluation of the novel's moral message agreed both that morality was important and that immorality should be punished. This reviewer believed that because the "sins and weaknesses [of the heroine] bring her no happiness" readers are "led to infer that the established order of things cannot be broken into without heavy payment" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1899). The remaining two reviews made no mention of the novel's morality.

Edna's Character

Although one-fourth of the reviewers ignored the question of Edna's character, this was generally because their reviews were short and dismissed the book or because the question was subsumed in their overall judgment of the novel. Two-thirds of the reviewers who raised the issue evaluated Edna's character unfavorably: the remainder recorded mixed judgments. The unfavorable judgments of Edna focused on two related but distinct aspects of her character: her immorality and her selfishness. Representative of the first criticism, that Edna is an immoral woman, are the *Providence Sunday Journal* (1899) review's claim that Edna "falls with a merely animal instinct into the arms of the first man she meets" and the *Literature* (1899) review's description of her as "one who has drifted from all right moorings and has not the grace to repent." Similarly, Deyo (1899) described her as "a derelict in a moral ocean."

In regard to Edna's selfishness, the reviewer for the *Nation* (1899) commented acidly that had she done "one thing a day" she did "not want to do[—]. . . flirted less and looked after her children more. . . . [W]e need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself." The *Los Angeles Times* (1899) review describes Edna as "a selfish, capricious woman," while Porcher (1899) chalks up Edna's problems to the fact that "she hated to be balked of her desire." The *St. Louis Republic* (1899b) review makes its critique plain in its concluding sentence: "So the woman who did not want anything but her own way drowned herself."

Chopin's Literary Style

In contrast to the generally harsh judgments of the moral worth of the novel and of Edna are the reviewers' generally appreciative evaluations of Chopin's literary style. The vast majority of the reviewers (87 percent) commented on this, and most (two-thirds of those commenting) evaluated Chopin's writing favorably. Many reviewers were highly complimentary: "extraordinary distinctiveness and force" (*Book News Monthly* 1899); "rare skill" (*Boston Herald* 1899); "flawless art [and] complete mastery. . . . [N]othing is wanting to make a complete artistic whole" (Deyo 1899); "in the essentials of her art she never blunders" (G.B. 1899); "subtle skill, pellucid style" (*Nation* 1899); "extraordinary art" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1899). Others were moderately favorable: "pretty bits of description" (*St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* 1899); "a clever way of managing a difficult subject" (*New York Times Saturday Review* 1899).

Twenty-two percent were more mixed in their assessments of Chopin's literary accomplishments. For example, although the *Outlook* (1899) reviewer noted the

book "is faithful enough in its presentation of certain phases of human passion and downward drift of character," the reviewer also cautioned that the story's "disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent." Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* (1899) review compares the novel to "one of Aubrey Beardsley's hideous but haunting pictures with their disfiguring leer of sensuality, but yet carrying a distinguishing strength and grace and individuality."

Two of the reviews were negative in their evaluation of Chopin's writing. The *Public Opinion* (1899) review, for example, dismisses the "theme and manner of treatment" as "a feeble reflection of Bourget" and notes Chopin was not even able to secure "our sympathy for this unpleasant person," adding sarcastically that "it would not have been a small victory" to do so. The other three reviews made no mention of Chopin's style.

Overall Judgments

The overall judgments of *The Awakening* exhibited a wider range of opinion than one might suppose from reading certain early Chopin rediscoverers, but it is fair to say that they were largely negative. A strong majority (61 percent) of the reviews were unfavorable. Nine of these (39 percent) were straightforwardly unfavorable. These reviews made comments that have become the most familiar to those with some knowledge of the history of *The Awakening*: "it leaves one sick of human nature" (Porcher 1899); it is a "morbid" book about an "unholy love" (*St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* 1899); the book belongs to "the overworked field of sex fiction" (*Chicago Times-Herald* 1899); Chopin is "another clever woman, but she has put her cleverness to a very bad use" (*Providence Sunday Journal* 1899); the novel is an "essentially vulgar story" in which the waters of the Gulf close "appropriately over one who has drifted from all right moorings" (*Literature* 1899; emphasis added).

The remaining five reviews in this majority tempered their primarily negative assessments with minor favorable comments. Most commonly, these reviews commented favorably on Chopin's writing while lamenting her choice of topic. Cather's (1899) review for the *Pittsburgh Leader* derides *The Awakening's* "trite and sordid . . . theme" and its focus on the "feminine type . . . forever clamouring in our ears, that demands more romance out of life than God put into it," while praising Chopin's "exquisite and sensitive," "irridescent," and "genuinely literary" style.

Approximately one-fourth of the reviews (22 percent) were generally favorable in tone; three of these were straightforwardly positive, and two were mixed. One of the favorable reviews comments thus:

Chopin has penetrated very far into the secret motives of action. She is not afraid to tell you what she finds there, feeling sure that the truth after all is wholesome. . . . [W]e are led to infer that the established order of things cannot be broken into without heavy payment. There is much beauty, however, in the development of this graceful, fascinating, subtle character, and Mrs. Chopin has described it with extraordinary art. There is no pose in her attitude; it is absolutely simple and sincere. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1899)

In addition to the praise for Chopin's writing, this reviewer sidesteps potential criticism of Edna's behavior by commenting that "the truth . . . is wholesome" and reminding readers that Edna's "awakening" does, after all, exact a heavy price. Similarly, Deyo (1899), while acknowledging that *The Awakening* "is sad and mad and bad," stresses that "it is all consummate art." Three reviews (13 percent) were evenly mixed in their overall judgments, and the remaining review was ambiguous.

Interpretive Strategies of 1899

The initial reviews can thus be summarized as generally negative in tone, yet appreciative of Chopin's writing ability, with a strong and unfavorable focus on the novel's moral message. These reviews indicate an interpretive strategy that assumed literature has specific functions of instruction and furthermore assumed women have a particular role confined to the domestic sphere. Douglas's ([1977] 1996) pathbreaking work on the feminization of culture in the nineteenth century argues that America underwent a cultural transformation in the latter part of the 1800s. Douglas (1996: esp. Chaps. 1, 2) argues that, among other things, this period saw the sentimentalizing of middle-class women's social function as they were displaced from the (male) productive sphere to the role of consumers, wives, and mothers whose power lay in their domestic and religious "influence" over children and—to some extent—adult men in the family (Kleinberg 1999). Literature, the new mass medium, became the chief organ for the dissemination of this desired influence (Douglas [1977] 1996:9; see also Kelley 1984; Hobbs 1995: esp. introd.). Literary critics, as Baym (1984) and others have shown, generally "not only accepted but also preached the conservative vision of True Womanhood [and] praised female characters who were . . . pious, pure, domestic, and pleasing to others" (Coultrap-McQuin 1990:11).

Thus *The Awakening's* initial reception occurred in a milieu in which Victorian notions of literature as a vehicle for sentimental, spiritual redemption and the support of a "culture of the feelings" still dominated (J. S. Mills, quoted in Douglas [1977] 1996:11; on sentimentality, gender, and literature in the nineteenth century, see e.g., Baym 1984; Samuels 1992; Tompkins 1985). The novel's construction as a redemptive tale is quite a stretch—although the *Boston Beacon* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reviews managed to understand the novel this way and consequently evaluated it more positively than most. Generally, however, the prevailing assumption of literature's function as a sentimentalizing and morally redemptive vehicle worked against the possibility of constructing a highly regarded narrative from *The Awakening*.

Allied with such conceptions of appropriate literary practice were equally strong notions of the role and character of women. Douglas ([1977] 1996: esp. Chap. 2) argues that as middle-class women were denied a role in the newly industrializing economy, they positioned themselves as the moral guardians of American families and society and as the embodiment of a certain kind of Christian piety, thus maintaining some importance in society (see also Cogan 1989; Cott 1977; Smith-Rosenberg 1985; Welter 1966 on the cult of "true womanhood"). They did so at high cost, however, participating in constructions of appropriate female behavior that denied a woman's relevance except as she contributed to others: a

good woman was "above all . . . unselfish. We demand that she shall seem to have alighted here for the world's comfort and blessing. . . . [A]ll the ways of selfishness are specially at variance with her beautiful errand" (Horace Bushnell, quoted in Douglas [1977] 1996:44–45). The "cult of motherhood" required that a good woman "will, in an abandon of irrational but instinctive self-sacrifice, nearly kill herself in efforts to obviate [a sick child's] least pang of discomfort" (Douglas [1977] 1996: 74, 46; see also Plante 1997). Of course, it is difficult to read Edna's character and behavior as interesting or brave or praiseworthy through such an interpretive strategy. After all, Edna "was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them" (Chopin [1899] 1976:47). Edna is "not a mother-woman" and is defined in clear contrast to such "women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin [1899] 1976:19). Finally, Edna's willful embrace of a burgeoning sexuality outside of her marital relationship fundamentally transgressed the definition of women's roles as moral guardians, wives, and mothers.⁵

THE LIMINAL PHASE, 1950–1979

In 1932 Daniel Rankin published the first biography of Kate Chopin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories*, based on his dissertation. The biography contains a number of inaccuracies and unsubstantiated stories (Culley 1976:163; Toth 1990:402–3, Appendix 3) but has been important because of Rankin's access to Chopin's then living family and friends. Although Rankin admired Chopin's work, he was not uncritical, nor was he particularly modern in his appreciation of Chopin. He described *The Awakening* as imbued with the fin-de-siècle "current of erotic morbidity" and as "exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation" (1932:174–75). His interest in Chopin was not shared by the literary establishment of the period.

In the 1950s American interest in *The Awakening* was renewed, in large part through the French critic Cyrille Arnavon's praise of the novel. For example, Van Wyck Brooks made laudatory mention of Chopin in his 1952 survey of turn-of-the-century American literature. Appreciative essays by both Kenneth Eble and Robert Cantwell were published in 1956. In 1962 Edmund Wilson (1962:590), in his analysis of American Civil War literature, called *The Awakening* "beautifully written," with a theme that "anticipates D. H. Lawrence."

By the late 1960s and 1970s praise for *The Awakening* was increasingly widespread. *The Awakening* appealed to readers and critics during this period both because of its resonant thematic appeal created through feminist rereadings and because of its congruence with more traditional critical approaches, for example, as an instance of the transition from romanticism to realism. Feminist criticism has demonstrated "that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experience" and has "established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis" (Showalter 1985:3; see also Kolodny 1985). These new strategies enabled scholars to construct *The Awakening* as the story of Edna's search for self-identity, for autonomy in the face of controlling

others, for the right to define her own life and sexuality rather than be defined by her responsibilities to her husband and children. Such a reading obviously creates a narrative fundamentally different from those that understood the novel as a story of a “selfish” or “most foolish” woman. The congruence—or lack thereof—between available and especially dominant interpretive strategies and specific texts thus determines the differential evaluation of texts across time.⁶

Evidence of Literary Reevaluation

We can chart the movement of *The Awakening* up the cultural hierarchy in the program of the annual MLA convention and in dissertation abstracts, as well as in the changing critical commentary on the novel. In 1974 Emily Toth conducted the first MLA session on Chopin and *The Awakening*. Marlene Springer was the only listed participant. At the 1975 MLA meetings, a paper titled “Kate Chopin’s European Consciousness” was given by Thomas Bonner at the panel “American Literary Realism: 1870–1910,” and Emily Toth led another seminar, titled “Kate Chopin,” although this one was composed of five papers. Panels and papers on Chopin and her work have become common in the twenty years since (e.g., the 1988 multipaper panels “Approaches to Teaching Chopin’s *The Awakening*” and “New Perspectives on the Life and Art of Kate Chopin”).

Kate Chopin also became an accepted dissertation subject in the 1970s. Between 1861 and 1970, only one dissertation on Kate Chopin is recorded in the Online Dissertation Abstracts. Rankin’s “Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories” was filed in 1932. In 1970 and 1971 two dissertations were filed: “Music From a Farther Room: A Study of the Fiction of Kate Chopin” and “The Fictive World of Kate Chopin” at Pennsylvania State University and Northwestern University respectively. By the end of the decade, however, there were seventeen completed dissertations focused wholly or in part on Chopin and her work.

The changing focus of the dissertations, as indicated by their titles, is of as much interest as their number. In the dissertations written before 1975, all but one focus on Chopin and her body of work.⁷ After 1975 the focus begins to change, either to an analysis of one element of Chopin’s work (e.g., “Sexuality in the Fiction of Kate Chopin” [1979]) or to a comparison of Chopin with other writers of her genre or period (e.g., “The Romantic Woman in Nineteenth-Century Fiction: A Comparative Study of *Madame Bovary*, *La Regenta*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *The Awakening*” [1979] and “Mythology and American Realism: Studies in Fiction by Henry Adams, Henry James, and Kate Chopin” [1975]). Chopin was no longer unknown enough for a graduate student to cover her entire life and oeuvre. Furthermore, Chopin had become so accepted that comparisons to authors such as Faulkner, Brontë, and James were seen as reasonable and even necessary.

Critical Commentary, 1950–1979

An analysis of a sample of reviews from the transitional period 1950–79 also indicates *The Awakening*’s ascendancy to a position of critical importance and demonstrates the changing nature of critical interpretive strategies. Given the vast

amount of critical commentary on *The Awakening* since its "rediscovery" in the 1950s, we limited the number of reviews in our sample. We chose to analyze the most cited and well known articles published in academic journals from 1950 to 1979. Our sample of reviews ($N = 24$) is composed of all articles published between 1950 and 1979 that were (1) cited in the 1976 Norton critical edition of *The Awakening*; (2) cited in more than one of the bibliographies of the 1976 Norton articles; (3) cited in Pizer and Harbert's (1982) entry on Chopin in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Realists and Naturalists*; or (4) cited in Kimbel's (1989) entry on Chopin in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Short-Story Writers, 1880-1910*.⁸

Descriptions of the Awakening

A review of Table 1 and the liminal critics' descriptions of the awakening reveals their view of the centrality of issues of the liberated female self and female sexuality. A full half of the critics cited self-discovery as an important aspect of Edna's awakening (note that unlike the early reviewers, many later reviewers described the awakening in multiple terms). These reviews focused on the extent to which Edna exemplifies the independent woman seeking to define herself on her own terms. Her awakening is "the emergence of the self or soul into a new life" (Ringe 1972:581), a realization of her "selfhood, her individuality" (Skaggs 1974:354). Another 12.5 percent of reviews described Edna's awakening as a search for a fuller life outside of society's constraints, while 8 percent commented that her awakening was her realization of the limitations placed on women by a patriarchal society. Seventeen percent of the critics celebrated Edna as a model of the "new woman" and urged other women to live by her example. In addition, 58 percent described the awakening as Edna's discovery of her sexuality, for example, the "emergence of [her] passional self" (Spangler 1970:251) and "a realization of her sensuous self" (Chametzky 1972:71). This evaluation parallels in some ways the category Bad Love cited as most common among initial reviewers. Liminal reviewers, however, see Edna's awakening sexuality as an indication not of her immoral nature but of her new *positive* sense of her natural self. As this analysis reveals, Edna's awakening is not only central to the liminal period's new constructions of the novel—30 percent of the initial reviews did not even describe the awakening—but the awakening is interpreted primarily through feminist interpretive strategies that focus on issues of female sexuality, selfhood, and social constraints on women, issues of central importance in American society at the time. Only one liminal critic did not comment on the meaning of Edna's awakening.

The Moral Message

Table 2 summarizes the transitional period reviews on the remaining four dimensions. Although two-thirds of the initial reviews were centrally concerned with the moral failure of Chopin's novel, *none* of the later reviewers made an unfavorable moral judgment on the work. No one argued that the book was dangerous to read or should be avoided. In fact, many reviewers agreed with Eble (1956:263) who condemned the "moral disapproval" characteristic of the initial reception

and argued that the “nature of its theme . . . would offer little offense today.” Not only were unfavorable moral judgments uncommon, but overtly favorable moral judgments were as well. In fact, 92 percent of the later critics did not make explicit moral judgments, although, of course, many subsumed implicit moral evaluations in their interpretive assumptions. Only one critic (4 percent) argued explicitly that Chopin’s novel could be read as a lesson in morality, and this lesson was defined as a positive one, a call for female freedom (Zlotnick 1968). One critic argued that the novel carried both a negative and a positive message.

Indicative of changing understandings about the purpose of reading—and of the increasing professionalization of literary critics as academics—the majority of liminal reviews focused on issues of theme, style, and language usage. Rather than evaluate the novel as a means of moral instruction, liminal critics *explicitly* considered it an object for analytic discussion. For example, while most critics refrained from moral evaluation, 75 percent focused on the major themes of the novel and another 25 percent engaged in in-depth analyses of the novel’s stylistic elements (e.g., use of metaphor, symbol, and setting).

Edna’s Character

This same shift away from moral judgment and toward more formal literary-critical analysis can be seen in the evaluation of Edna’s character. Whereas more than half of the original reviewers were critical of Edna’s character (and no one judged her favorably), later reviewers were more likely to characterize Edna favorably than unfavorably (29 vs. 12.5 percent). However, 38 percent of critics refrained from making any moral judgment about Edna’s character and actions. Moral critique was simply not a central aspect of the interpretive strategies employed by these reviewers.

Chopin’s Literary Style

As Table 2 indicates, the only area of evaluation that remained relatively unchanged between the initial reception and the transitional period was the critics’ evaluations of Chopin’s literary style: 57 percent of the original reviewers, compared to 54 percent of the liminal reviewers, commented favorably. Only two (8 percent) of the later reviewers provided a mixed judgment of Chopin’s writing style, and none made an exclusively negative evaluation. In addition, 38 percent of the later reviews did not provide any direct evaluation of Chopin’s literary style. Most of these reviewers seemed to assume that Chopin was a writer of high quality.

Overall Judgments

Although the original reviewers praised Chopin’s talent, they lamented her choice of subject, as indicated by the 61 percent who provided an unfavorable evaluation of the novel itself. By the 1960s and 1970s, not a single reviewer judged the overall quality of the novel unfavorably. Instead, 75 percent praised the novel for its “modern’ honesty” (Fletcher 1966:132), calling it a “substantial aesthetic

achievement" (Justus 1978:107) and "the finest novel of its sort written by an American" (Cantwell 1956:489). Only three critics made no comment on the overall quality of the novel, and another three provided a mixed response. This wholesale endorsement of *The Awakening* is indicative of the fundamental change in the dominant interpretive frame applied to the novel.

Finally, unlike the initial reviewers, a number of the transitional critics highlighted the importance of *The Awakening* by situating it in a more traditional critical chronology. This more critically formal approach to *The Awakening* allowed scholars to discuss the novel outside of the feminist interpretive strategy without reverting to outdated moral interpretive strategies. Fletcher (1966) cites *The Awakening* as an excellent example of the fiction written during the transition from romanticism to realism. Eble (1956:262) notes that "it anticipates in many respects the modern novel." Several critics cite the novel's achievement of psychological realism as its greatest contribution, made especially notable by its appearance at the beginning of the realism era (e.g., Arner 1975; Justus 1978). Casale (1978) urges readers to look beyond the feminist interpretation of *The Awakening* and appreciate the extent to which it is uniquely American in its treatment of individualism. He contends that while modern in many ways, the novel is also reminiscent of the romantic masterpieces by Hawthorne and Melville. These critics argue that *The Awakening's* importance is not limited to those attributes highlighted by feminist interpretive strategies; it should also be recognized for its qualities of romanticism and realism. Thus the novel is uniquely situated to benefit from those who choose feminist interpretive strategies as well as those who choose a more formal critical strategy.

New Interpretive Strategies

As indicated by the review data as well as the analyses of dissertations and MLA appearances, *The Awakening* underwent a significant reevaluation between 1950 and 1979. A number of factors both internal and external to *The Awakening* helped to reposition it in this period. First, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s exerted great diversification pressures on course content and brought an increase in the number of women in the academy.⁹ This in turn led to increased interest in women writers. Second, the intellectualization of the feminist movement into feminist literary critical theory generated new interpretive strategies for reading and evaluating texts. As we have suggested, *The Awakening* was uniquely situated to benefit from these broad changes because of two specific attributes.

The new feminist interpretive strategies created a reading of *The Awakening* in which the central theme became that of an independent female self exploring her individualized identity and sexuality in a world that largely refuses to recognize women outside of their roles as wife and mother. This narrative is obviously fundamentally different from the narrative constructed by the initial reviewers. The narrative thus generated was powerfully and importantly resonant (Schudson 1989) with central social issues of the day: it redefined female identity, uncovered women's oppression by patriarchy, liberated female sexuality, and reflected other tenets of the women's liberation movement. As Griswold (1986) has demon-

strated, the renewed congruence of specific literary themes with topical social issues strongly affects interest in older cultural products. Griswold focuses her discussion on the conditions conducive to revivals, however, while we focus on the variable fruitfulness of specific texts under varying interpretive strategies (but see note 11). Thus new feminist interpretive strategies made a more interesting and substantive story of *The Awakening* than had earlier paradigms that focused on literature's role in moral guidance and the construction of a selfless womanhood. Moreover, despite its suitability as a revisionist text, *The Awakening* was also accessible through more traditional readings as a transitional text bridging the romantic and realistic eras in American literature (e.g., Eble 1956; Fletcher 1966). In combination, these factors enabled *The Awakening* to be reconstructed as a potentially canonical text and enabled its incorporation into the curriculum by both traditional and revisionist scholars.

In the case of *The Awakening*, resonance with "topical" and "social interests" (Griswold 1986:187) is a particularly relevant point, extending beyond the themes of the novel to the history of its reception. A series of three myths about the history of Chopin, *The Awakening*, and the social reaction to the novel demonstrate the powerful resonance of the novel with the consciousness of the time. One of the most persistent myths surrounding *The Awakening* is that it was banned in St. Louis when it first appeared (Culley 1976:vii). In Seyersted's ([1969] 1980) biography of Chopin one chapter is titled "A Daring Writer Banned." *Redbook* (1972:199) claimed that the "Mercantile Library in St. Louis refused to handle" *The Awakening*. In fact, there is no evidence that *The Awakening* was banned or refused by any library. The rumor seems to have been started by an inaccurate recollection of Chopin's son, Felix, that was collected by Rankin (see Toth 1990: Appendix 3 for the most cogent discussion of this myth and its refutation).

The second enduring yet unfounded myth is that publication of *The Awakening* resulted in Chopin being either refused membership in or expelled from the St. Louis Fine Arts Club (Culley 1976:vii). First, as Seyersted ([1969] 1980) notes, there is no evidence that any such club existed. Second, Chopin was a lifelong member of the St. Louis Artist's Guild, the only known organization with a similar name. Third, Chopin read, by invitation, from her work at the exclusive St. Louis women's club, the Wednesday Club, on November 29, 1899—well after the publication of both *The Awakening* and its negative reviews.

The third myth is that the reception of *The Awakening* so upset Chopin that she never wrote again. The source of this story seems to have been Chopin's children, Felix and Lélia. Rankin (1932) and later researchers (e.g., Toth 1990) have conclusively proved this story wrong (see *Redbook* 1972 for its persistence). A short story of Chopin's was published in *Vogue* in 1900, another was published in the *St. Louis Mirror* in 1902, and *Youth's Companion* published two of her stories in May and July 1902. In addition, Chopin's own notebooks show that she wrote and sold a number of stories after the publication and review of *The Awakening*.

The point of these three myths and the reason for their persistence was that they demonstrated that women, in this case both Edna Pontellier and Kate Chopin, must pay for transgressing normative gender roles. Such stories were

powerfully resonant during a period when many women—and some men—were first institutionalizing social and academic understanding of patriarchy, gender socialization, and constrictive gender roles. The persistence of myths about Chopin's suffering at society's hands also expressed the frustration many feminists felt in trying to understand and explain the curious absence of recognized women in the arts.

CANONICAL STATUS, THE 1980s AND BEYOND

The Chopin industry boomed in the 1980s; thirty-three dissertations fully or partly focused on Chopin were filed during that period. In just the first three years of the 1990s, another twenty-two dissertations on Chopin were filed. In addition, the focus of dissertations on Chopin seemed to become increasingly explicit in their feminist orientation.¹⁰ Titles such as "Shifting Sexual Roles in Selected American Novels," "The Cultural Construction of Gender in American Women's Fiction," "Discourse and Identity: A Dialogic Feminine Voice on the Margins," and "The Politics of Reproduction: Demystifying Female Gender in Southern Literature" proliferated.

Critical Commentary, 1980–1994

A brief analysis of a sample of critical essays of this period suggests *The Awakening's* new position in the canon of American literature. The sample of critical essays ($N = 12$) is composed of all articles published between 1980 and 1994 that were (1) cited in the 1994 Norton critical edition of *The Awakening*; (2) cited more than once in the bibliographies of the 1994 Norton articles; (3) cited in Pizer and Harbert's (1982) entry on Chopin in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Realists and Naturalists*; or (4) cited in Kimbel's (1989) entry on Chopin in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Short-Story Writers, 1880–1910*.

The themes of female self and sexuality were still a central focus of critics' interpretations of Edna's awakening in the canonical period, as Table 1 shows. Two-thirds of reviewers cited both self-discovery and sexuality as the primary meanings of Edna's awakening; as in the transitional period, critics of the canonical period generally provided multiple descriptions of the awakening. An additional 25 percent of the reviews described Edna's awakening as her realization of the place of women in a primarily patriarchal society. Thus, like reviews in the liminal phase, feminist interpretive strategies proved the dominant approach to the novel. Such readings continued to highlight issues of the female self and exploration of female sexuality as a central theme of the novel, and critics seemed to be in relative agreement about the importance of these themes to an understanding of the novel. However, as was true in the transitional period, some scholars continued to analyze *The Awakening* using more formal approaches, for example, focusing on the motifs of music fantasy (Thornton 1980), the symbolism of sleep patterns (Levine 1982), and the significance of setting (Jones 1987).

The data in Table 2 demonstrate the agreement among critics as to the literary worth of the novel. No critic rated *The Awakening* unfavorably in any central cate-

gory. More critics of this period rated both Edna's character and Chopin's literary style favorably than did critics of the liminal phase. Although only 58 percent of critics openly judged the overall quality of the novel favorably (compared to 75 percent in the liminal phase), there were no mixed responses. Rather than critical in their appraisal, the remaining 42 percent of reviews did not directly comment on the quality of the novel. These reviews engaged in in-depth analyses of the themes and structures of the novel, working under the assumption that the novel was indeed worthy of such analysis. By this point, the novel's quality and place in the canon was taken for granted. Most reviews during this period focused primarily on analyses of style and structure. For example, critics analyzed the novel's characters, motifs, setting, language, and mythic qualities. Again, like the liminal reviews, critics abstained from moral considerations and focused on literary-critical analyses. Again, 92 percent of reviews provided no overtly moral evaluation of the novel.

The extent of critics' agreement on *The Awakening's* canonical status is supported by Chopin's appearance on twenty-four syllabi for Introductory American Literature courses at ten elite colleges or universities (Amherst, Brandeis, Oberlin, Pomona, and Williams Colleges; Princeton and Stanford Universities; the Universities of California, Berkeley; North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Chicago; and Michigan). Chopin's work, usually *The Awakening*, was assigned in thirteen of the twenty-four courses, more frequently than any authors other than Faulkner and Twain (see Corse 1995, 1997, for more detail).

These data indicate that during this last period of valorization (1980–94), *The Awakening* did in fact achieve canonical status. Critics agreed on the novel's general literary merit and its worth as literature deserving of analysis. In addition, critics seemed to be relatively unified in their assessments of the primary meaning of Edna's awakening, a central issue of the novel. The increasing number of tenured (feminist) women with responsibility for and power over curricular changes and the institutionalization of women's studies programs in American universities clearly played a major role in this transformation. Feminist interpretive strategies that privileged *The Awakening* interacted with new structural opportunities and resources to centralize Chopin's novel in the American canon. In the course of a century, *The Awakening* moved from reviled sex novel or trivial regional tale to revered icon firmly established in the pantheon of American literature.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the history of the reception of *The Awakening* highlights several important aspects of literary valorization. First, it is necessary to recognize that canon formation is a *social* process involving specifiable actors, institutions, and strategies rather than an inevitable process of recognition of inherent textual quality. Given the growing acceptance of the social basis for cultural valorization systems, the current task becomes the elucidation and elaboration of the specifics of the process.

Our historical analysis suggests three crucial aspects of sociological attention to literary evaluation. First, we believe the concept of interpretive strategy creates a

way to account for what has traditionally been understood as the aesthetic aspect of criticism while retaining the sociological grounding of all such judgments. Identifying changing interpretive strategies and understanding which people and which texts benefit from varying strategies allows researchers to apprehend cultural texts more fully without abandoning the commitment to a truly social understanding of evaluation and interpretation (Wolff 1992). The concept of interpretive strategies generates a set of empirical and theoretical research questions regarding, for example, the number and type of interpretive strategies extant at particular historical times; the perseverance, mutability, and stability of interpretive strategies; and the relationship among competing interpretive strategies and contestation for cultural authority. Interpretive strategies enable sociological analysis of other types of texts, such as visual images or film.

Second, an analytic focus on interpretive strategies also enables sociological studies of literature to consider some constraints on multivocality.¹¹ The fruitfulness or generativeness of novels for critical analysis varies across interpretive strategies. Differential rewards attach to novels constructed through varying interpretive strategies. Although texts may be multivocal, they are most surely more “vocal” in some readings than in others. *The Awakening* has a great deal more to say, a great deal more narrative substance, when women’s lives and their concomitant constraints and possibilities are under negotiation than when women’s worth is located in their service to others.

Third, we want to stress the importance of the concept of congruence or resonance (Griswold 1986; Schudson 1989). Cultural objects are indubitably more likely to be rediscovered or reassessed appreciatively during periods when their social themes are once again of central concern to society. However, we consider that the idea of resonance with social or topical interests must be understood *in conjunction with* the concept of interpretive strategies. In order for the congruence between a cultural text and the social environment to be perceived, an interpretive strategy that constructs the text in those terms must be available. Without an avenue for understanding a text in terms that make it accessible, topical, and substantive, lay readers and even scholarly specialists may find little of interest in older, half-forgotten texts—or even in new and highly visible texts.

NOTES

1. We use the term “American canon” to refer to the literary texts most widely legitimated and accepted as the nation’s “great works.”
2. The fourth anthology (Harper American) contains three of Chopin’s short stories.
3. We actually found references to a total of twenty-five reviews in our searches, but the review cited in the *Book Buyer* (April 1899) is a prepublication announcement rather than a review. We found a review from the *Congregationalist* (August 24, 1899, p. 256) only after our analyses were finished. The review, in its entirety, reads: “Kate Chopin is the author of *The Awakening* [H.S. Stone & Co. \$1.50]. It is a languorous, passionate story of New Orleans and vicinity, hinging on the gradual yielding of a wife to the attractions of other men than her husband. It is a brilliant piece of writing, but unwholesome in its influence. We cannot commend it.” Although this review is not included in our analysis, it echoes the central points of most initial reviews.

4. The two partial reviews we obtained were reprinted in the 1976 Norton edition of *The Awakening*. The review cited as being from the June 23, 1899, volume of *Literature*, p. 570, is in fact not correctly cited. We have searched all of the 1899 volumes of *Literature* without finding the review. Thus we include it in our analysis with the caveat that we are not sure of its source (see Toth 1990 on this review). We were also unable to obtain a complete copy of the Porcher review from the *St. Louis Mirror* of May 4, 1899.
5. The literature on the status of women in nineteenth-century American society is extensive. We highlight Douglas's argument about women's roles as a relatively typical discussion of the highly gendered world of Victorian society in the United States, but many others have made similar arguments. See, however, Kerber's (1988) critique of the reification of the separate spheres notion. Although we present a straightforward argument about the dominant interpretive strategy in play in late-nineteenth-century America, the range of cultural resources and possibilities was obviously much broader, as can be seen, for example, in the nascent feminist movement and some aspects of the abolitionist movement (see, e.g., Coultrap-McQuin 1990; Hoffert 1995; see also Reynolds [1988] 1989 for a broader discussion of literature and the subversive).
6. Of course, newly dominant readings of the text also benefited feminist critics engaged in behaviors consciously calculated to advance the position of particular novels and authors—and their own careers (see DiMaggio's [1982] notion of "cultural entrepreneurship"; Corse and Griffin 1997; cf. Tompkins 1985 on Hawthorne's literary supporters).
7. The five titles are "Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories," "Music from a Farther Room: A Study of the Fiction of Kate Chopin," "The Fictive World of Kate Chopin," "Kate Chopin and the Search for a Code of Behavior," and "Kate Chopin: Four Studies."
8. The two later samples of reviews exclude articles not written in English, biographical articles that do not discuss *The Awakening*, and articles not in academic journals.
9. Lauter describes the gender changes in the period. "In 1958 women were . . . 9.6 percent of the 228 paper presenters or discussion leaders at the [MLA] convention; they constituted approximately 19 percent of the 9,239 members of the association. By 1982 women made up 39.7 percent of the over 2,000 presenters or discussion leaders, while they constituted some 44 percent of the approximately 27,000 members" (1991:4). He argues that the surge in the number of female literary scholars was paralleled by a concomitant increase in interest in women's writing as "feminist critics . . . began to describe dominantly female . . . traditions in literature. . . . The major cultural task of canonical criticism in the late 1960s and 1970s . . . was, first, to 'define ourselves,' and then to force into literary consciousness . . . texts . . . that were previously conceived as peripheral" (1991:147). Primary methods for forcing texts into "literary consciousness" were the "practical matters such as organizing syllabi and making otherwise buried and forgotten texts and authors available, especially for classrooms" (1991:146).
10. Again, only as indicated by title.
11. Griswold (1987) invokes the concepts of cultural "power" and a "societal tenor" in her discussion of the comparative reviews of Lamming's novels. For Griswold, "cultural power derives from the combination of a work's ability to elicit relative consensus on what it is about plus its ability to sustain a relative divergence of interpretations" and is constrained by recognition of a novel's "genre or form" (1987:1106). A "societal tenor" is "a set of presuppositions, concerns, problems, and associations held by a particular social group in a particular historical and institutional context" (1987:1112). Obviously these concepts bear on our concept of differential rewards being attached to novels under varying interpretive strategies, but Griswold's definition of cultural power privileges inherent characteristics of texts (although always with regard to their

interaction with readers), and she defines a societal "tenor" as more diffuse, less dominant, and less organized than we conceive of interpretive strategies.

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