During the second wave of the Women's Movement in the 1960s, the novel was resurrected as an example of women's search for self-fulfillment. Almost a century after *The Awakening* was originally published, Bert Bender identified the source of many of Chopin's scenes.

Bender is a professor of English at Arizona State University. He had just finished his first book, *Sea-Brothers*, when he happened to re-read *The Awakening*.

"Having read a lot of Darwin in the course of writing on sea fiction, I saw immediately what no one had ever seen—that Chopin was creating many scenes which drew directly on passages from Darwin's *Descent of Man* and *Selection in Relation to Sex.*

Bender's articles on this discovery, which later became chapters in his second book, *The Descent of Love*, are landmarks in Kate Chopin studies.

For example, Bender found evidence in the scene where a musical performance arouses Edna Pontellier, the main character. Chopin uses some of Darwin's language from *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, as well as from *The Descent of Man*, to describe Edna's emotional and sexual response to music.

Chopin wrote that the first note "sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column…. [T]he very passions themselves were aroused within her soul…. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her."

By comparison, Darwin wrote about the "thrill or slight shiver which runs down the backbone and limbs of many persons when they are powerfully affected by music" and the experience of a "trembling of the body" and "a slight suffusion of tears" in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Darwin connects this response to how "our early progenitors courted each other by the aid of vocal tones."

In further research, Bender learned that Chopin's biographers had reported she was an avid reader of Darwin, as was novelist Edith Wharton and many other American writers. "No one had ever taken it seriously and imagined that interest in Darwin would be reflected in how they told their stories and imagined their female characters," Bender says.

The clues are especially clear in the language they use to handle courtship and marriage. In many scenes, the female characters select the male. "Some of Edith Wharton's female characters are very powerful because they use their power to … view; the strongest measure of her selfishness is that, in her quest for social wealth, she abandons her own child."

Male characters in early 1900s American novels also show Darwinian traits. "In many courtship scenes, males display their sexual nature, as Darwin defined it, in being possessive and aggressive sexually," Bender says. The male characters often use their hands to grasp and hold the female
characters. "In Darwin's analysis of sex, that is one of the main 'secondary sexual characters' of the male—his prehensile ability to capture and possess the female."

Examples of Darwin's influence are found in the sexual liberation of female characters, such as Chopin's Edna Pontellier and Ernest Hemingway's Lady Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*. Even more than Edna, Brett exercises her power to select not only one, but several lovers. Evidence that it was natural for women to have sexual desires beyond the constraints of marriage could be found in, for instance, Darwin's studies of birds, Bender says. "This enabled Kate Chopin's famous character, Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* to have lovers outside of marriage. Chopin's argument was that Edna's sexual awakening is only natural and in a way innocent, although it is extremely troublesome to her husband."

Bender has studied the American literary response to Darwin for more than 14 years. At the beginning, he had to convince scholars about Darwin's influence on American fiction. His book *The Descent of Love* was the first to explain "how powerfully the theory of sexual selection appealed to the literary imagination." Now, several other scholars are also working in this field.

In the preface to his third book, *Evolution and 'the Sex Problem,'* Bender writes, "We are a bit freer to examine how our novelists have contributed to our culture's long and continuing struggle to realize the meaning of our common descent."

In this forthcoming book, Bender examines how 15 writers, including Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, explored sexual reality in the context of evolutionary theories. Bender looks at a period of about 60 years during what has been called the eclipse or denial of Darwinism, from the turn of the century to the 1950s.

The writers navigated the problems Darwin put on the table with his theory of evolution. They tried to weigh their way through these problems, sometimes by embracing an anti-Darwinian theory of evolution, such as Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, Bender says. "They realized that you couldn't write a novel about human nature and development outside of evolutionary theory. The question was, what kind of evolution?"

In the 1880s, if you were an aficionado of novels about doctors (the ancestors to today's television shows "ER" or "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman," perhaps), you would have had at least four choices from four different writers. The books and their authors may sound familiar depending on how much literature you studied in college—Dr. Breen's *Practice* (1881) by William Dean Howells, *Doctor Zay* (1882) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *A Country Doctor* (1884) by Sarah Orne Jewett, and *The Bostonians* (1886) by Henry James.

With the exception of *The Bostonians,* these books are similar in that each has a woman doctor as the main character. In *The Bostonians,* a woman doctor, Dr. Prance, is still an important character. Two authors portray their woman doctors as successful professionals. The other two show their doctors as less capable, with one being an outright failure. The war of ideals falls along gender lines, with women and men novelists on opposite sides. Each side, however, uses the same ammunition—Charles Darwin and his work—but in different ways, according to Bert Bender of the ASU English department.

Bender has traced the differences between the novelists interpreting Darwinian theories about sexual selection, which they used to support their positions in the debate regarding women's rights to higher education, the vote, and related issues.

"The men, Howells and James, wrote novels about women doctors who failed as doctors because their emotional makeup and mental capacity is limited," Bender says. "Their interpretation of Darwinian theory may be best described as Victorian sexual science, a sexist misinterpretation of Darwinian theory." The idea was that if you allow women to go into higher education when their ovaries are developing, this would damage their emotional and mental makeup and render them incapable of mothering the species. It would be a real threat to society to allow women to go into higher education, and especially to become doctors, because they would have to dissect and so forth.

The women writers, Phelps and Jewett, on the other hand, wrote about women doctors who were excellent in their work. In fact, their patrons included men who were characterized as weak and emotionally effeminate, according to Bender.

"Darwinian theory gave women a way to argue for their rights to engage in society—to engage in higher education and especially to enter the professions, like the medical profession," Bender says. For more information, contact Bert Bender, Ph.D., Department of English, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 480.965.7660, send e-mail to bertbender@asu.edu