

New Orleans Society in the 19th Century

Directions: Read the following background information.

In the 19th century, the Creole was the aristocrat of New Orleans and of south Louisiana. Creoles are white people descended from the original French and Spanish settlers in Louisiana. Many of their ancestors were titled. The Creoles were proud, exclusive people who lived in a private circle, accepted only "the genteel and the cultured" in their homes, and took "great care to maintain the purity of their blood."¹ It is said that the Creole civilization is distinguished for "the courage and honorable bearing of the men, the beauty and refinement of its women, and the genteel manners of both sexes."²

The Creoles evidenced the following characteristics:

- disliked manual labor
- followed individual inclinations
- had impressive endurance
- did not display emotions openly
- were highly romantic
- covered violent extremes of emotion with listless indifference
- had inborn love of music³

Serving the Creoles were black servants who, in New Orleans, were divided according to their degree of black blood:

- mulatto (female: mulatresse): half-white, half-black
- quadroon: one-quarter black
- octoroon: one-eighth black
- griffe: three-quarters black (child of a black and a mulatto)

As you read *The Awakening*, notice the author's comments on Creoles and various characters' reflections of Creole characteristics. The protagonist, Edna, is not a Creole.

Historical footnote: The Cane River village of Cloutierville, La., where Kate Chopin lived for several years after leaving New Orleans and the setting of her bayou stories, was quite isolated until after World War II. The residents considered themselves citizens of France (a fact which kept the village from being burned during the Civil War), spoke only French, and consisted of what they called three "races": Creoles, Creoles of color, and Blacks.

¹Herrin, M.H. *The Creole Aristocracy* (New York: Exposition Press, 1952), 29.

²Ibid., 30.

³Ibid., 330-332, 74.