

The Awakening

Chapter I

1. Explain the significance of the parrot and the mockingbird at the beginning of this chapter.

2. Why would Chopin have thought it important to include this detail in her brief mention of the children's nurse?

3. Why would Pontellier consider his suntanned wife to be a "damaged piece of property"?

4. Who is Robert Lebrun?

5. What is his relationship with Edna?

Chapter II

1. Describe Edna Pontellier.

2. What kind of person is Robert Lebrun?

3. What shift in point of view is evident in Chapter Two?

4. What do you learn about Robert and Edna from their conversation at the end of this chapter?

Chapter III

1. How does Léonce's behavior when he returns from the Klein Hotel reveal his attitude toward his wife?

2. What is the first sign that Edna is not completely happy with her life as it is?

3. Discuss how sounds are used as a backdrop to the scene of disagreement between Léonce and Edna.

4. How do the gifts Edna receives from her husband symbolize her marriage and most marriages of this time?

Chapter IV

1. Describe the unusual nature of the relationship between Edna and her children.

2. What is Chopin implying by this description: “They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.”

3. Who is Adèle Ratignolle, and how is she the embodiment of the “mother-woman”?

4. How does the fact that Edna is not a Creole affect her relationship with others on Grand Isle?

Chapter V

1. How does Robert's behavior toward Edna fit the pattern of Medieval and Renaissance courtly love?

2. What is the difference between Robert's present attentions to Edna and his past attentions to Adèle Ratignolle?

3. Compare Edna's sketching with Adèle's sewing.

4. To what tradition is Chopin referring when she has Edna compare Adèle to a Madonna?

5. What is ironic about the simile?

Chapter VI

1. What is significant about Edna's first saying she did not want to go swimming with Robert and then agreeing to go?

2. How is the sea used symbolically in this chapter?

Chapter VII

1. How are Edna Pontellier and Adèle Ratignolle contrasted in this chapter?

2. What does the road to the beach symbolize in this chapter?

3. What is the significance of the lady in black and the two lovers in this chapter?

4. What does the flashback to Edna's childhood reveal to the reader?

5. What do you learn about Edna as a person, given the reasons for her marriage to Léonce?

6. “She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution.” How does the narrator’s omniscience reveal Edna’s feelings about marriage and intimate relationships?

7. How does Edna feel toward her children? What does she realize about herself and her role as a mother?

8. How is the theme of “awakening” revealed in this chapter?

9. How is the symbolism of the unknown “lovers” used in this chapter?

Chapter VIII

1. Why does Adèle tell Robert to leave Edna alone? Why is he annoyed by this?

2. How is the sound of the sewing machine (different from previous sounds) used in this chapter to reflect mood?

Chapter IX

1. How is the sound of the parrot used in this chapter? Can you see any significance to the words the parrot says, particularly in relationship to the turmoil developing in Edna Pontellier?

2. Who is Mademoiselle Reisz? How is she a contrast to Edna Pontellier?

3. In the past, what image has been evoked in Edna’s mind by a certain musical passage? How is this a contrast to Edna’s life up to this point?

4. What is Edna’s response to the music of Mademoiselle Reisz? How is this related to the “awakening” theme in the novel?

Chapter X

1. What realization does Edna come to as she walks to the water with her husband by her side?

2. How are images of sound and smell used as a backdrop to this scene?

3. How does Edna respond to swimming successfully for the first time? What happens that can be considered symbolic or foreshadowing?

4. What is ironic about Edna's swim and her fear of being unable to return to shore? What might this indicate?

5. What realization are Robert and Edna arriving at on the porch of Edna's cottage after the midnight swim?

Chapter XI

1. Explain the importance of the exchange between Léonce and Edna in this chapter? What is significant about the way it ends?

Chapter XII

1. Edna goes to the Chênrière for mass. How are the “lovers” used here?

2. What does Edna do that she has never done before? What phrases are repeated?

3. What is Robert’s reaction? In what position does this put Edna as far as her relationship with Robert is concerned?

4. How does Edna feel as she and Robert sail to the Chênrière Caminada?

5. Who are the people aboard the ship in addition to Robert and Edna? Briefly explain the significance of these people.

6. What is the significance of the plans Robert says he has for the future? What is Edna’s response?

Chapter XIII

1. What is the probably physical cause of Edna’s distress during the service? What is the probably psychological/emotional cause?

2. Who is Madame Antoine?

3. What does Edna do at Madame Antoine’s house? How is this related to the “awakening” theme in the novel?

4. What role does Robert play during this time?

5. What thoughts has Edna had about her husband and her children?

Chapter XIV

1. What is Léonce’s reaction when Edna does not return with the others? How is his reaction ambiguous?

2. Explain the allusion when Edna remarks that they have spent the entire day together and Robert responds, “All but the hundred years when you were sleeping.” How does this contribute to the theme of the novel?

3. How is the song she hums after parting from Robert related to the theme of awakening?

Chapter XV

1. What possible reasons are there for Robert’s decision to go to Mexico?

2. What is Edna’s reaction to the news that he is leaving?

Chapter XVI

1. What does Léonce Pontellier’s reaction to Robert’s being gone suggest about him?

2. How does Edna spend much of her time after Robert leaves? Why is this significant?

3. What does she say or do that shows the depth of her feelings for Robert and her awareness of a change within herself?

4. What do we learn about Edna’s feelings for her husband?

5. How are Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle foils to Edna?

6. How is the following quotation an example of foreshadowing? Edna says, “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself.”

7. Not much happens in this chapter to advance the plot. What function does it serve? What does the end of summer coinciding with Robert’s leaving symbolize?

Chapter XVII

1. What is the setting for Chapter Seventeen? How does this contrast to the previous setting?

2. How is Léonce Pontellier's attitude toward his home similar to his attitude toward his wife?

3. What is the purpose of Edna's Tuesday "at home"? How does this change after she returns from Grand Isle, and how does this fit into the theme of rebellion?

4. How does her husband react to this and other things that happen in the household, such as his complaints about the cook?

5. What is significant about what Edna does after Léonce leaves?

6. What is the significance of Edna taking off her wedding ring and then putting it back on?

Chapter XVIII

1. How is the Ratignolle marriage a contrast to the Pontellier marriage?

2. How does Edna feel about a marriage such as Adèle's?

3. What undefined concept occurs to Edna at the end of this chapter?

Chapter XIX

1. How does Edna spend most of her time in this section of the book?

2. What is Léonce’s reaction?

3. How does Edna feel about her painting?

4. If Edna recognizes that she is not an artist, why does she paint?

5. What is the significance of the song Edna sings while she paints?

6. How sympathetic toward Edna does Chopin seem?

7. Although she is haunted by memories of Grand Isle, how does she manage to “enjoy” her life?

Chapter XX

1. What purpose does the long, detailed narration of Edna's search for Mademoiselle Reisz serve?

2. How is Victor a kind of exaggeration of Robert?

3. What does Edna learn about Robert while she is there? Why does this depress her?

4. What has changed in Edna that Victor would notice and comment on?

Chapter XXI

1. What is significant about the description of Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment?

2. What is significant about the view of the river and the ships from Mademoiselle's apartment?

3. How does Mademoiselle Reisz react when Edna talks about her painting?

4. What is the content of a letter Robert has written to Mademoiselle Reisz?

5. What is Edna's reaction?

6. How does this letter contrast with all of the letters from Robert Edna read in the previous chapter?

7. What is the attitude of Mademoiselle Reisz at this time?

8. What does Mademoiselle Reisz represent in Chopin's societal microcosm?

Chapter XXII

1. What does Léonce’s conversation with Dr. Mandelet reveal about himself as a character?

2. What is Doctor Mandelet’s apparent reaction?

3. What does the doctor suspect but never say to Léonce?

Chapter XXIII

1. What do Edna and her father share as common interests?

2. How does Edna receive her father's visit?

3. How is her father's dress and appearance characteristic of him as a person?

4. How does Adèle treat Edna's father? What is Edna's reaction?

5. What is different between Adèle's flirting with Edna's father and Edna's flirtation with Robert?

6. Of what two vices is Edna's father the apparent victim?

7. What observations does Doctor Mandelet make when he comes to the Pontellier home to meet Edna's father and to observe her?

8. What is significant about the story the Doctor tells after dinner?

9. What is the doctor's reaction to the evening and to Edna's story? How is this an example of foreshadowing?

Chapter XXIV

1. What excuse does Edna offer for not attending her sister's wedding? Why is this significant?

2. Compare Edna's father to Léonce.

3. Describe Edna's emotional state associated with Léonce's departure for New York.

4. Why does she act this way?

5. How does Edna feel about being alone?

6. In terms of the developing theme of this story, what does the country (Pontellier's country boyhood, Edna's memory of "swimming" in the meadow, the summer at Grand Isle) represent? By contrast, what does the city represent?

7. Why does Chopin have Edna read a volume of Emerson on her first night alone?

Chapter XXV

1. Who is Alcée Arobin?

2. How does he feel about his past encounters with Edna? What is different now?

3. Describe Edna's reaction to the races.

4. Describe Edna's behavior after her evening with Alcée.

5. How does the relationship between Edna and Alcée develop?

6. What thoughts does Edna have about Robert and about her husband?

Chapter XXVI

1. What ploy does Alcée Arobin use to intensify his relationship with Edna? How well does it work?

2. Why does Edna visit Mademoiselle Reisz?

3. What does Mademoiselle's initial reaction to Edna's announcement that she is moving indicate about the society in which the two women live and Mademoiselle's opinion of Edna?

4. What does Edna decide to do before leaving?

5. From his letters (sent to Mademoiselle Reisz), what does Edna learn about Robert's plans?

6. What is Chopin suggesting about Mademoiselle Reisz by the comment she makes about the type of man she would love?

Chapter XXVII

1. Explain how the bird symbolism resurfaces in this chapter. What does it foreshadow?

Chapter XXVIII

1. At less than one page, this is the shortest chapter in the book. What of any significance has occurred in this short chapter?

Chapter XXIX

1. What does the fact that Edna never questions her actions indicate?

2. How does Edna appear to be a different person now?

Chapter XXX

1. Some critics have likened Edna’s grand dinner party to the Last Supper as recounted in the four Gospels. In what ways is it similar?

2. Who are the guests who attend the dinner?

3. Who was invited but did not attend?

4. Consider Edna’s behavior at the party. Has she become an independent woman?

5. What does the following quotation indicate about the evening?

“The voices of Edna’s disbanding guests jarred like a discordant note upon the quiet harmony of the night.”

6. How might this chapter turn out to be a climax to the story?

Chapter XXXI

1. Why does Edna say, “I feel as if I had been wound up to a certain pitch—too tight—and something inside of me had snapped” ?

2. In what ways is Alcée manipulating Edna?

Chapter XXXII

1. What incidents show that Léonce is concerned more with appearances than the actual state of things?

2. How does Edna feel in her new home?

3. How does Edna’s move seem to affect her children and her relationship with them?

4. Evaluate the statement that Edna may have fallen in her social standing but had risen in her spiritual standing?

Chapter XXXIII

1. What warning does Adèle give to Edna when she visits her at the pigeon house? What is Edna's attitude?

2. What request does Adèle make of Edna?

3. Why is Edna upset when she sees Robert at Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment?

4. In this chapter, Robert is clearly linked to Edna's awakening. Is he alone responsible for her changed behavior and her awakening self?

5. What excuse does he give for not writing to Edna during his absence? Why do you think he says this?

6. Later, during dinner at the pigeon-house, what does Edna learn is the reason for Robert's return? How does she feel?

7. How does this chapter contribute to the unravelling of Edna's awakening?

Chapter XXXVI

1. How is the garden in the suburbs used as a symbol in this chapter?

2. During her encounter with Robert, what does Edna realize is true about his feelings for her? Why do you think this presents a problem for him?

3. What does Edna mean when she says that Léonce cannot free her?

Chapter XXXVII

1. What does this childbirth episode contribute to the developing theme of the book and to the plot?

2. What does Adèle mean when she begs Edna to “think of the children”?

Chapter XXXVIII

1. What does Edna's conversation with Dr. Mandelot reveal about the Doctor?

2. What is Edna's frame of mind as she returns home?

3. What do you think Robert means by the note he leaves?

Chapter XXXIX

1. How is the setting for this last chapter appropriate?

2. What is the subject of conversation between Victor and Mariequita?

3. The reader learns what Edna thought during that last sleepless night following her return from Adèle's. What realization does she come to about herself, Léonce, her children, and Robert?

4. How is Edna's removal of her clothes as she walks down to the beach symbolic?

5. The lines here, about the seductive voice of the sea echo what other incidents in the book?

6. Edna swims out too far, experiences one moment of terror, and then relaxes into the ocean. What thoughts does Edna have now?

7. Explain how Chopin's decision to have Edna end her own life is an ambiguous ending for the book.
