The Awakening

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATE CHOPIN

Katherine O'Flaherty was born in St. Louis to an Irish father and a French-Canadian mother. Her father died in a tragic accident when she was only five, so she spent most of her childhood surrounded by a warm community of widowed older women: her mother, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother, who taught Kate to love fairy tales, music, and French culture. When she was a teenager, Kate attended a Catholic boarding school called the Sacred Heart Academy, where she was known for her intelligence and literary wit. At the age of twenty, she married Oscar Chopin and moved to New Orleans. By twenty-eight, she had given birth to six children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In turn-of-the-century America, when Kate Chopin lived and wrote, the women's rights movement was still quite young and toothless. In Louisiana, a predominantly Catholic and conservative state, a woman was considered the legal property of her husband, and divorce was practically unheard-of. Women (especially upper-class women) had to conform to Victorian ideals of femininity and motherhood: they were expected to be delicate, passive, and saintly, and they were meant to find fulfillment in raising children and tending to household tasks. *The Awakening* questioned the foundations of this fading social order.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Awakening is similar in theme to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which describe the boredom and desperation of intelligent housewives. Kate Chopin's writing has many elements in common with the novels of Edith Wharton and Henry James, who wrote about the nuances, deceits, and dissatisfactions of American high society; such elements include intricate, contradictory psychological narration, witty dialogue, and a delicate subversion of stale but still powerful social rules and prejudices. *The Awakening* is linked to the tradition of French existentialist literature, as well; the narrators of novels like Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* share Edna's formless dread and alienation.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Awakening*
- **When Written:** between 1897 and 1899
- **Where Written:** St. Louis, Missouri.
- **When Published:** 1899
- **Literary Period:** late Victorian
- **Genre:** *Bildungsroman*, a novel tracing a young person's emotional and intellectual maturation.
- **Setting:** Grand Isle and New Orleans in the late 19th century.
- **Climax:** There are several potential climaxes in the story. One could choose the night Mademoiselle Reisz's music moves Edna to tears; her first kiss with Arobin; or her last, fatal swim.
- **Point of View:** Third person.

EXTRA CREDIT

Divorce in the Family. Kate Chopin's great-great-grandmother was the first woman in Mississippi to legally separate from her husband. She went on to raise five children and run a successful shipping business.

Fame After Death. Female desire and nonconformism were so taboo in turn-of-the-century Louisiana that *The Awakening* was largely forgotten after its publication; Chopin herself died in disgrace. Not until the 1960s did critics recognize Chopin's last novel as a canonical work of literature.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins at Grand Isle, a ritzy vacation spot near New Orleans, where Edna Pontellier is summering with her husband and two children. Her husband Léonce is often away on business, so she spends most of her time with a beautiful, shallow friend named Adèle Ratignolle and a charming young man named Robert Lebrun. From the beginning, the reader perceives that all is not harmonious in the Pontellier family: Edna seems bored by her children and frustrated with Léonce, who is silly, ill-tempered, and inattentive (his lavish gifts notwithstanding). Her friendship with Robert, though, has been blossoming. They spend almost every day in each other's company, strolling on the beach and exchanging quiet jokes and observations.

The third-person narrator, whose voice blends somewhat with Edna's inner voice, begins to remark on the artificiality of the other women and to question Edna's habitual obedience to her foolish husband. One night, Edna is moved to tears at a party by the music of Mademoiselle Reisz, a sharp-voiced unmarried woman who most people dislike. Later that same night, Edna conquers her fear of the **sea** and swims far into the ocean. That

night is the culmination of her awakening, her critical, thoughtful examination of the social world and of her inner life. Her friendship with Robert becomes romantically charged. Soon, Robert leaves Grand Isle for Mexico, where he hopes to forget the illicit romance. Edna spends the rest of the summer longing for his company.

In September the Pontelliers return to New Orleans. Edna begins to neglect her household and her children so that she can devote her days to painting, reading, and seeing friends. Her friendship with Madame Ratignolle disintegrates somewhat, but she goes often to see Mademoiselle Reisz, who gives Edna good advice, shows her Robert's letters (which mention his love for her), and plays beautiful pieces on the piano. Edna's concerned husband consults with Doctor Mandelet, a wise family friend, who advises him to wait it out. Edna also becomes romantically involved with Arobin, a fashionable young man with a bad reputation. She doesn't love him, but she is strongly physically attracted to him. Their relationship is a source of confusion and anxiety to her.

Edna's husband leaves for a long business trip and her children go to stay with their grandmother. She loves her new freedom and decides to move to a smaller house, moving out of her current home and leaving her husband. By selling her paintings, she can become financially independent. She throws a beautiful going-away party, but is troubled throughout by feelings of blankness and despair. One day, Edna learns from Mademoiselle Reisz that Robert is due back in New Orleans. She runs into him at the pianist's apartment a few days later. He is distant and formal at first, but she convinces him to have dinner at her new house, and soon enough they begin to talk frankly and affectionately. He stays away from her for some time, in a last effort to avoid the affair, but when they run into each other again they return to Edna's house and confess their feelings openly.

They're interrupted, however, by an urgent summons from Madame Ratignolle, who is about to give birth. Edna watches the difficult procedure in horror. On her way home, she talks haltingly with Doctor Mandelet about her confused desire for freedom and her aversion to marriage. When she comes home, Robert is gone. He has left a note explaining that he can't be with her.

Not long after, Edna returns to Grand Isle. She says hello to Victor, Robert's brother who lives on the island year-round, and walks to the beach. She thinks with despair about her indifference to the world and longs for complete freedom. As she begins to swim, bright and lovely memories from her childhood flicker across her consciousness. In the book's final, confused moments, as she feels completely free, she drowns.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Edna Pontellier – The novel's sad heroine, a twenty-eight-year-old housewife and mother of two whose personality blurs and sharpens from minute to minute. The novel chronicles her transformation from a quiet, not entirely content housewife to a spirited, freethinking artist haunted by feelings of aimlessness and despair. Her vacation at Grand Isle precipitates the moment she calls her awakening: a combination of Mademoiselle Reisz's beautiful music, Robert's romantic attentions, and an inexplicable deepening of her self-understanding that together cause her to recognize the meaninglessness of most conventions, the deceits and injustices of family life, and the emptiness of her social attachments. With time, she acts more and more freely according to her new convictions: she neglects family responsibilities and superficial social obligations, and she seeks refuge in art and in the company of similarly minded friends. In the end, however, her unhappy love affair and her deeply conflicted desire for total freedom are more than she can bear.

Robert Lebrun – Edna's close friend and almost-lover, Robert Lebrun is a wealthy, charming twenty-six-year-old man without any apparent occupation besides befriending pretty married women. After spending most of the summer in each other's company, Edna and Robert develop a strong romantic attachment to one another, and in an effort to protect Edna, Robert flees to Mexico under the pretense of a business opportunity. He is absent during most of the novel except as the idealized, illicit object of Edna's love. Despite his irreverence and easy humor, Robert ultimately does not have the courage to love Edna without the sanction of marriage.

Mademoiselle Reisz – A rough-edged, plainspoken spinster, a gifted piano player, and Edna's closest friend. Many people in the novel dislike Mademoiselle Reisz for her harsh manner and impatience for social niceties. Edna, however, becomes deeply attached to the pianist and her music because both seem to Edna to contain the emotional depth and spiritual freedom that she has recently discovered in herself, and which she has found sorely lacking in her friends and occupations.

Adèle Ratignolle – Edna's close friend and temperamental opposite, Madame Ratignolle is the model of Victorian womanhood: she is pretty, fragile, warm-hearted, and completely devoted to her husband and children. She seems to find satisfaction in her motherly and wifely chores, and she urges her friend to do the same. Her tiny, placid world, with its mundane pleasures and tepid artistic efforts, is precisely the world Edna tries to leave behind.

Alcée Arobin – A fashionable young man notorious for his relationships with married women. He courts Edna aggressively. His mixture of coyness and sincerity both repels

and fascinates her, and they become close friends. Edna is attracted to Arobin, but does not love him. It's implied that they eventually become lovers, though the book does not describe anything more explicit than a kiss.

Léonce Pontellier – Edna's husband, a pragmatic, sociable businessman who takes great care to keep up appearances. He expects his wife to perform her social and motherly obligations in the conventional ways, and he is quick to chastise her for any perceived oversights. He loves Edna, in his way, but he is deaf and blind to her turbulent inner life. He can't understand her personal transformation, or the unconventional lifestyle that results from it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Doctor Mandelet – A wise family doctor, friend of the Pontelliers and the Ratignolles. He seems to understand Edna's predicament better than any other character.

The Colonel – Edna's stiff and conservative father, who has a penchant for making elaborate cocktails.

Mrs. Highcamp – An elegant, middle-aged socialite who introduces Edna to Arobin.

Madame Lebrun – Robert and Victor's widowed mother. She owns the Grand Isle cottages where the other characters vacation.

Victor Lebrun – Robert's impetuous younger brother.

Etienne and Raoul Pontellier – Edna and Léonce's two young sons.

Mariequita – A young Spanish girl that has a loose romantic attachment to Victor Lebrun.

The Farival Twins – Fourteen-year-old girls that often play the piano at Grand Isle parties. Their perfunctory music is set against Mademoiselle Reisz's passionate performances.

The Lady in Black – A mysterious widow who walks silently up and down the beach counting her prayer beads. In this society, a woman without a husband is doomed to live out the remainder of her days in grim, helpless solitude.

The Lovers – A couple that often walks on the beach in the happy oblivion of young love. The brief, chaste period of courtship that precedes marriage seems to be the only appropriate moment for romantic love, according to the Victorian mores of 19th-century New Orleans.

Madame Antoine – A friend of Robert's and a native of Grand Isle. She welcomes Edna into her home to rest and recuperate after mass.

Mr. and Mrs. Merriman – A couple that attends Edna's party. Mrs. Merriman is flirtatious, and Mr. Merriman is dull.

Miss Mayblunt and Mr. Gouvernail – Another couple at Edna's party; both have vague intellectual pretentions.

Monsieur Ratignolle – The husband of Adèle Ratignolle.

Tonie – The son of Madame Antoine .

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CONVENTION AND INDIVIDUALITY

A person in the middle or high society of 19th century New Orleans lived by intricate systems of social rules. These largely unspoken rules governed minute details of dress and expression, and prescribed certain behaviors for different social roles: mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, virgins and spinsters all measured against their respective Victorian ideals. Of course, every society in every period has created its own unwritten laws; but *The Awakening* takes place in a society whose rules were particularly stringent. As a young woman, Edna assumes that she must live and die according to these rules, like all the people who surround her.

From an early age, she learns to separate her murky, curious, disobedient inner life from the anonymous outer life—a quality other people perceive as reserve. But sometime during her marriage the inner life goes dark under the weight of convention, and Edna enters a sort of long sleep. Mademoiselle Reisz's music, Robert's love, and the strange beauty of the **sea** startle her awake. Thought, emotion, and will return to her all at once; she examines her various roles as wife, mother, and friend, and finds them all duplicitous and bizarre.

Soon, she learns to ignore convention and to behave according to her idiosyncratic beliefs and impulses. But, as we know, this is much easier said than done. Edna abandons her entire worldview (which, borrowed though it was, had guided her every step) in exchange for—what? When the initial destructive thrill weakens and fades, she finds herself in an emotional wilderness. She is strong enough to denounce and reject a false code, but not quite strong enough to invent a true one. Without it, she is lost—she must live at the mercy of her emotions, which are violent with contradiction. In a way, Chopin's novel is a cautionary tale: though individuality and inwardness must struggle against convention, one cannot live by inwardness alone.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS, FEMININITY, AND MOTHERHOOD

In the social world of New Orleans, femininity was

controlled and defined with severity. At every stage of life, a young woman faced myriad rules and prescriptions; a little girl should be A, a teenage girl should be B, an engaged woman C, a young married woman D, a mother E, a widow F, and on and on and on. In 19th century America, when the women's rights movement was still quite new, conservative states like Louisiana granted women very few rights. Women could not vote, hold property, or (in most cases) file for divorce. And, in addition, there was a social world of more intangible restrictions: women should not be too warm or too cold, should not expose themselves to sun or to wind, should fear dirt, physical exertion, violence, vice, confusion and darkness of every kind; women should desire marriage above all else, but they should merely tolerate sex; the list seems never-ending.

In the early chapters of the novel, it becomes apparent to Edna that society considers her a possession of her husband's and a willing, even happy, slave to her children. As the ocean and her realization of her desires through her budding love for Robert grow within her, she rejects these roles. She begins to notice some of the more intangible rules, as well. She distinguishes between two models of femininity: externalized femininity, where nothing is hidden, which is characterized by perfection, delicacy, purity; and internalized femininity, which is thoughtful, strong, contradictory, and chaotic.

The eccentric Mademoiselle Reisz is an outlier to this model, because in society's eyes her spinsterhood strips her of her femininity. By the end of the novel Edna comes to doubt the harsh, moralizing oppositions of Victorian femininity. She is neither exposed nor hidden, neither shy nor outgoing, neither dirty nor clean, neither bad nor good; like Mademoiselle Reisz, she sees herself as existing outside the roles society has defined for her. And, as an outsider, she sees no role or world for herself.

REALISM AND ROMANTICISM

Realism is a perspective that emphasizes facts, surfaces, and life's practical aspects, and romanticism as a perspective that focuses on emotion, varieties of experience, and the inner life. In Chopin's novel, realism emerges from a conventional worldview, and romanticism emerges from an individualistic worldview. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle, who are preoccupied almost exclusively with surfaces—the *appearance* of a comfortable home, the *appearance* of a happy family—exemplify realism. Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz, who seek out emotional and spiritual experience, exemplify romanticism. Robert, Victor, Arobin and several other characters are more ambiguous, because they switch sometimes from one perspective to the other: Robert, for example, is interested in business and respectability, but he is also sensitive to the magic of a summer night.

Edna herself passes through several phases. Her memories of childhood are mostly image and emotion; but when she decides to marry Pontellier, "she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams." Her loveless, practical marriage carries her into realism – a period that coincides with what she remembers as a long sleep, a time when her feelings and thoughts lay dormant. As she awakens, she begins to see the world as through a misty lens. Romance occludes her ordinary vision and sharpens her inward vision. She shows a growing contempt of daily tasks and small pleasures, which she feels chase away some more thrilling and essential aspect of life (art and love are central to this other existence). Eventually, her sense of reality abandons her almost completely; when she can no longer see romance in the people and things that surround her, they become alien and irrelevant, and she withdraws totally into herself.

ACTION AND REFLECTION

Edna senses a gulf between action and thought, between "the outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions." She feels more comfortable in the inner life, which she has rediscovered very recently. As she questions her habitual actions, her thoughts often seem separate from her body. Other women in the novel are represented by their hands, which are expressive, which *do* things. Edna's central feature is her eyes, which are reflective. She is often looking and observing: her sight is a symptom of her new wakefulness. Action, on the other hand, is often related to artifice—the bustling mothers in the park, the dutiful but bored pianists and dancers at Madame Lebrun's soirée.

But as Edna becomes more confident in her new identity, her actions express her thoughts and beliefs more faithfully. She abandons many tasks that others expect her to perform, like visiting days and household chores, and spends her time painting and visiting real friends. Her love for Robert, especially, seems to connect the outer and the inner self, but the loss of that love divides them irremediably. After Robert leaves, her love becomes a more generalized desire, and the experience of physical desire without its emotional partner shifts her focus to surfaces once again. By the end of the novel she seems trapped in a strange middle space, a limbo between the inner and the outer life, without the resolve to reenter either.

FREEDOM AND EMPTINESS

Freedom, for Edna, is release from the binding rules and stereotypes of convention, which the narrator compares to an ill-fitting garment. Freedom, for her, is also disengagement from obligation of any kind, including obligations to her husband and children. This desire for radical freedom is what is behind her obsession with the **sea**, a place of complete solitude and emptiness. As she

loses her desire for a connection to others, she gets the sense that the people around her are "uncanny, half-human beings" in "an alien world." She feels loosed from her place in the world, as though she is free to be no longer human. Life itself, with its peculiar and humiliating processes, comes to seem like an obligation when she watches her friend give birth.

Over the course of the novel Edna longs more and more deeply for ***freedom from,*** a negative liberty, but she has no clear idea of the ***freedom to***, the impulse to seek satisfaction and achievement - perhaps because her small world gives her so few opportunities. In this way, desire for negative freedom becomes a desire for emptiness, for nothingness. Early on in the novel, convention had seemed to Edna like an uncomfortable outer garment; by the end, emotion itself is such a garment. Even her soul is something that another can possess, and she wants to be possessed in no way. When she dies, drowning alone in the sea, she finally feels naked, finally free.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BIRDS

As in many Romantic works of the 19th century, **birds** in *The Awakening* are symbols of freedom and imagination. In flight, they soar above earthly rules and inhibitions. They observe the world from a cool distance, like passengers on a plane watching abstract squares of farmland. The power of flight (imagination) allows the birds to escape the laws of the earth.

THE SEA

Such freedom comes with a price, however. The novel's birds symbolize both the joys of freedom and its potential dangers. As she listens to Mademoiselle Reisz's music, Edna imagines a man watching a bird flying into the distance. Later, Edna's story about illicit love makes her listeners hear the romantic rustling of birds in the dark. In both instances, birds are markers of forbidden desire. And as the book draws to its conclusion, birds become warning signs. Edna watches a bird with a broken wing float down to the ocean in the moments before she drowns.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Awakening* published in 1993.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.

Related Characters: Léonce Pontellier (speaker), Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Having just returned from a morning at the beach, Edna is met by her husband, who complains that she has let herself get sunburnt. Léonce is not worried about any physical discomfort on Edna's part; rather, he views her as a piece of "property" which he wishes to keep safe and undamaged. Rather than viewing his wife as a person with an independent mind and will, he instead sees her as nothing more than an object.

From its very beginning, then, *The Awakening* makes it clear how tethered and claustrophobic Edna's life is. She cannot even spend time out in the sun without being chastised and scolded by her husband. Rather than caring about her inner life, Edna's partner is only concerned with her outward appearance, showing that she is not expected to have desires, values, or beliefs of her own.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright; they were a yellowish brown, about the color of her hair. She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation and thought. ... She was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Although Edna begins the novel hampered and deadened, the narrator still implies that she has an active inner life, describing how when she observes an object, she seems "lost in some inward maze of contemplation and thought." Although the "maze" of her inner life may, at the moment, be

unknown to her, Edna clearly possesses hidden depths, however unexplored they may be, and a tendency towards inner reflection.

Even while providing a hint of Edna's interior state, the narrator also establishes how society sees the main character, noting her eyes, the color of her hair, and the quality of her face. From this description, it is clear to readers that most people value Edna only for her attractiveness. They do not know or care that she has an inner life, instead thinking of her only as a "handsome" and well-mannered woman.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

After an evening with Robert and a scolding from her husband, Edna escapes out onto the porch. Feeling restless without knowing why, she feels "oppression" and "anguish," although she cannot identify the cause. This moment of panic and pain is one of the first pangs of the "awakening" that Edna will experience over the course of the novel. Slowly but surely, she is realizing how confined and claustrophobic her life is. Such thoughts are "unfamiliar" to her because she has suppressed them for her entire life. Yet so strong is the sensation that it soon "fill[s] her whole being."

This passage is also an example of *The Awakening*'s habit of fusing its narrator with the inner thoughts of its main character (a technique called "free indirect discourse"). Having slipped from recounting external events to describing Edna's internal state, the narrator is able to give readers an inside-out view of the turmoil taking place within the heroine.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Adèle Ratignolle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator begins to contrast Edna's lack of motherliness with many of the other women on the island—chief among them, her friend Adèle Ratignolle. While Edna's role as wife and mother does not quite fit her, women like Adèle seem perfectly suited to the task. Indeed, in serving their husbands and their children, they feel themselves blessed, even as they erase themselves as "individuals" and instead become selfless "angels."

It is with a fair amount of sarcasm that the narrator describes these perfect wives and mothers. The idea of destroying oneself as an individual is a horrifying one, and yet these figures view it as a "holy privilege." Although Léonce may wish that his wife were more like these women, readers can clearly see how deluded they are, and how impoverished are their lives. At the same time, however, society esteems these women as paragons of virtue, and the height of femininity. They are content and comfortable, while the more self-aware Edna is increasingly tortured.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

As Edna marvels at her own contradictory impulses, the narrator describes what is happening within her: she is beginning to understand what it means to be a "human being," and to understand how she must relate to her own inner world, and to the world "about her."

By using such a simple and generalized term—"human being"—the narrator makes clear how barren and deficient Edna's life has been up until now. Told by society and by her husband that she is an object to be possessed and put to use, Edna has not realized that she is, in fact, a subject entitled to feel selfish and capricious desires.

This passage also makes clear the two worlds in which Edna lives: the outer, and the inner. At this moment, her relationship to both worlds is changing. As she realizes that she may act as a free and independent agent in the outside world, she has also begun to listen to her inner world, which drives her in impulsive and sometimes contradictory directions.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator turns to Edna's childhood, describing how, from "a very early period," she had understood the difference between inner and outer life. Encouraged by society and family to transform herself into the perfect woman, Edna learned to conform, making herself into the person whom all around her wished her to be.

At the same time, the young Edna understood that she had a life quite apart from her conformist, external existence: an "inward life." Private and entirely interior, this interior consciousness could question the rules and restrictions imposed on her, even as she outwardly followed them.

With this passage, the narrator makes clear that Edna has always been observant and thoughtful, however much she has tried to suppress her own questioning and discontent. At the same time, readers can also see how terribly divided Edna is. Although she attempts to put on the mask of a dutiful wife and mother, her inner life desires something far different, and questions her conformist behavior and actions.

❝ The acme of bliss, which would have been marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world. As the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Turning to Edna's girlhood, the narrator describes a series of infatuations, including one with a famous actor. While still passionately in love with this "tragedian," Edna met her current husband, who flattered her with his devotion, and so won her hand.

In just a few sentences, the narrator describes Edna's quiet, tragic disillusionment: convinced that she will never marry a man whom she truly loves, she chooses instead to marry a man who worships her. She believes that in doing so, she has moved from the realm of fantasy to the realm of reality, and thinks that her actions are moral and correct.

Although Edna's decision to tun her thoughts away from a hopeless crush on a famous actor may seem rational, it hides a tragic truth beneath it. Convinced that her emotions are meaningless and foolish, Edna has become convinced that actually falling in love with someone who loves her is fantasy—the stuff of "romance and dreams." In other words, she does not believe that true partnership can exist, and so has consigned herself to a marriage without love or true understanding, and to a life of dull realism.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

For her entire summer on the island, Edna has been attempting to learn to swim, and to conquer her fear of the ocean. At last, she succeeds—and as she does so, she suddenly feels "exultation." Glorying in her own independence and power, she becomes "daring," wanting to

"swim far out" despite the fact that she has never swum before in her life.

So confined and constrained is Edna that even this small moment of freedom—being able to swim by herself—is intoxicating, making her feel invincible and powerful. She has lived such a dependent and suffocating life that something as simple as being able to propel herself through the water takes on a revelatory quality.

In this passage, the narrator makes clear both the necessity and the danger of such freedom. While Edna is abruptly happier than she has ever been, she is in no way used to these feelings, or to making decisions for herself. Instead, she becomes "reckless," completely unused to being able to make her own decisions, or determine her own future.

❝ A thousand emotions have swept through me tonight. I don't understand half of them... I wonder if I shall ever be stirred again as Mademoiselle Reisz's playing moved me tonight. I wonder if any night on earth will again be like this one. It is like a night in a dream. The people about me are like some uncanny, half-human beings.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier (speaker), Mademoiselle Reisz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Having been deeply moved by Mademoiselle Reisz's piano playing, and then having swum in the ocean by herself for the first time, Edna attempts to explain her emotions to Robert. She is confused, unable to understand the feelings that have "swept" through her. Fearful that she will never feel this way again, she wonders if "any night on earth will again be like this one."

For years, Edna has moved through life like a sleepwalker. She has kept her behavior correct, and her inner thoughts suppressed. However, the music she has heard, her experience in the ocean, and her growing passion for Robert have awakened her. Unused to such powerful sensations as love and freedom, Edna is unable to even identify what exactly she is feeling. So unreal do her experiences and emotions seem to her that she wonders if she is in a "dream."

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul from responsibility.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Having tasted freedom for the first time, Edna now begins to experiment with the sensation. Rather than acting in a responsible and rational manner, she now chooses the reverse, "blindly following" her own impulses and desires, however contradictory or strange they may be.

Edna is completely unused to freedom. She has spent her marriage doing what her husband says, and spent her entire life doing what society says. As such, she has essentially no experience with self-direction. Now, as she attempts to embrace freedom, she becomes aimless and reckless, so unused is she to making her own decisions or listening to her own inner desires.

In the midst of awakening, Edna is in a murky and perilous place. Although she has begun to throw off the values of society, she has no values of her own, and so is completely unguided by her own principles and unsure of how to proceed.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But the small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Having fought with her husband about the quality of their dinner and her skill as a housekeeper, Edna grows deeply upset. She feels suffocated by their married life together in New Orleans, yet is unable to escape. Becoming increasingly upset, she approaches something like a tantrum, eventually removing her wedding ring and trying to crush it with her boot; however, she is completely unable

to do so.

The symbolism of this passage is clear. Unhappy in her marriage and imprisoned within society's strictures, Edna attempts to destroy the emblem of her marriage: her own wedding ring. She is not strong enough to do so, however, and the ring seems indestructible. Similarly, however much she may struggle for freedom, it is incredibly difficult for Edna to actually escape the role that society has set for her.

This inability to escape has less to do with Edna's lack of strength than with the rigidity of the world around her. In this place and time period, there simply was not room for a woman to be independent, or to have a mind of her own. Edna feels trapped because, in truth, there is simply no place for her new emotions, or for her to seek out a new role for herself.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier, Etienne and Raoul Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

The day after her tantrum, Edna awakes with a strange discontent and apathy. She is unable to take "interest in anything about her," finding everything that she surveys to be displeasing and "antagonistic."

As she slowly but surely awakens, Edna's inner and outer worlds are merging. The discontent and anguish that she feels internally has spilled into her outside life, making the world seem harsh, disharmonious, and disgusting.

Of course, the world is indeed unfriendly to Edna's new emotions, and to her desire to be free. Everything around her seems designed to force her back into the role of wife and mother. Newly aware of how claustrophobic and caging her life is, it makes sense that Edna would suddenly view the world around her as "alien." Having never realized before how confining it was, she is now seeing her circumstances with fresh eyes--and she does not like what she sees. Although Edna's awakening may be a necessary one, it is also deeply painful.

❝ The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier, Adèle Ratignolle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

After dining with Adèle Ratignolle and her husband, Edna reflects on how different their domestic tranquility and harmony is from her own unsettled, discontented life. Having observed how Adèle worshiped and deferred to her husband at every turn, Edna realizes that she does not envy her friend, no matter how content she may seem. In fact, she actually pities Adèle, who (she assumes) will never realize the fullness and richness of life.

Having become increasingly aware of her own suffocating circumstances, Edna now feels pity for other women, such as Adèle, who do not perceive the strictures all around them. Although her new condition is a painful and confusing one, Edna reflects that she would rather experience "anguish" and "delirium" rather than return to the "colorless existence" of a woman like Adèle. She is now choosing Romanticism, with all its flaws, over the practical world of Realism.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier, Léonce Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Reflecting on the sudden change in his wife's behavior, Léonce Pontellier concludes that she is "not herself." The

narrator reveals, however, what Edna's husband does not understand. By casting off her masks of dutiful wife and mother, Edna is in fact "becoming herself." The narrator describes the process, relating that the main character is removing the "fictitious self" with which all people represent themselves "before the world."

By wittily turning a common phrase—"not herself"—on its head, the narrator makes a crucial point. Although Edna's behavior may seem strange and off-putting to those who know her, she is actually (for the first time) being true to her own desires, and uniting her inner with her outer self.

From here, the narrator broadens out. This type of automatic deception is not unique to Edna. Rather, all people clothe themselves in a "fictitious self" when they go out into the world. What makes Edna unique, rather, is that she is doing away with the dishonest mask that most people wear unconsciously.

❝ There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why —when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

As Edna begins to free herself from the restraints of her life as a wife and mother, her emotions remain in turmoil. Although she neglects the household, choosing instead to paint, she does not always feel happy, longing for her summer with Robert, and indeed falling into depression. During these times (which are described with a surprisingly modern accuracy), she does not even care whether she is dead or alive, thinking life itself to be "a grotesque pandemonium."

Although Edna increasingly neglects the obligations and strictures that made her miserable, her life still has no purpose. Having never before made her own decisions or chosen her own pursuits, she now wonders whether her existence has any meaning at all. The freedom that she sought has led to anxiety and emptiness. Although she is no longer forced into roles that do not fit her, no new employment or sense of fulfillment rises to take their place. Without her jobs as wife and mother, Edna has become a woman without a place, and without an identity.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ She won't go to the marriage. She says a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth.

Related Characters: Léonce Pontellier (speaker), Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Confused by his wife's new rebellious behavior, Léonce Pontellier consults a doctor. When the other man suggests that he send Edna up to her sister's wedding to be among her own family, Léonce replies that she will not go, as she thinks that weddings are "the most lamentable spectacles on earth."

After years of trying to be a dutiful wife and mother, Edna has hurtled headlong in the other direction. She is now convinced that marriage is an evil institution, because it requires women to give up themselves for their husbands. She pities women such as Adèle and her sister, who are still satisfied with the institution of marriage, because she believes that they simply do not see the terrible truth that she does.

Even as Edna articulates these strong negative feelings towards marriage and men, it is shocking how her husband and the doctor treat her pronouncements. Believing her to be a silly, unstable woman, they do not try to understand why Edna is upset, or what she means. Instead, they simply believe her to be fickle, and reassure themselves that her strange behavior will pass with time.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ He observed his hostess attentively from under his shaggy brows, and noted a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun.

Related Characters: Doctor Mandelet, Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

The doctor who is Léonte's confidante pays a visit to the Pontelliers, and is shocked by the transformation of Edna. While he remembers her as "listless," he now finds her "energetic" and full of life. Unable to understand the change in Edna, he eventually assumes that she must be in love with another man.

Although the doctor cannot fathom Edna's transformation, readers know its cause. Even the relatively unobservant doctor notices that Edna resembles a "beautiful animal" who is "waking up" because of the sun. The liveliness and energy that the doctor perceives is, in fact, another symptom of Edna's awakening. Having removed herself from societal expectations, and having at last begun to gratify her own wants and desires, it makes sense that Edna should seem more alive than ever. After suppressing herself for years, she has finally begun to live her life more fully.

Chapter 27 Quotes

"One of these days," she said, "I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am."

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Speaking to Alcée Arobin, who will soon become her lover, Edna wonders aloud whether she is a good woman or a bad woman. She reflects that, based on the "codes" of society, she is "devilishly wicked," but adds that she does not *feel* wicked.

Edna's inner life has now come into direct conflict with external expectations. By following her own desires, Edna has slowly come to the realization that she does not want to be a wife to her husband, or a mother to her children. Now, in fact, she stands on the cusp of an affair with a notorious seducer of married women.

Yet though society frowns on this behavior, Edna has now behaved so out of malice, ill will, or immorality. Instead, she is simply attempting to escape the strict limitations that society has placed on her, her behavior, and her thoughts. In being true to herself, it is accurate that she has broken those rules—yet both she and readers alike must wonder whether doing so really makes her "wicked."

It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier, Alcée Arobin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

After a long period of flirtation, Edna and Alcée Arobin, an infamous seducer of married women, finally kiss. As they do so, the narrator relates that it was "the first kiss" of Edna's life "to which her nature had really responded." Readers can infer that Edna has never before kissed a man she was really attracted to, or experienced desire for someone who wanted her in turn.

Edna's spiritual awakening has now become sexual. For the first time, she now knows what it is to want and be wanted--her frozen mental and physical state has melted entirely. The narrator extends this metaphor, explaining that the kiss Edna experiences is "a flaming torch that kindled desire."

After years of resigning herself to marital relations with a husband to whom she was not attracted, this kiss is revelatory for Edna. It teaches her what actual physical desire feels like, and makes her understand what she has been missing up until now.

Chapter 30 Quotes

But as she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtake her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. ... There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In order to celebrate moving out of her husband's house, Edna throws herself a glamorous party for her twenty-ninth birthday. Yet though she plays the glamorous and charming hostess, Edna is unhappy. She feels "hopelessness" assail her, and longs to be with Robert, the man she loves and has lost.

Despite having removed herself from the boundaries of societal norms, Edna remains dissatisfied. She has no purpose in her life, and no one to love. Alcée Arobin has ignited her sexual desire, but she does not feel any emotional attachment to him. Although Edna may be freer than she was before, she still does not have the love of the man she truly wants.

This passage also provides an excellent example of the boundaries of the internal and external. On the outside, Edna is all ease and grace, making her guests feel comfortable at her strange gathering. On the inside, she is full of anguish and discontent, longing for someone who is not present.

Chapter 32 Quotes

❝ There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eye: to see and apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator relates Edna's feelings about her new house, which is much smaller and less grand than her husband's dwelling. Edna delights in this descent "in the social scale," believing that it will correspond with a rise "in the spiritual" realm. The more she erases the "obligations" of the social world, she believes, the more she will expand "as an individual."

With every successive step, Edna is removing herself further and further from societal expectations. She started the book as a rich wife and mother; she is now separated from her children and her husband, lives in a small house, and has taken a lover. All of these changes, Edna believes, will help her find her true self, and to observe "the deeper undercurrents of life."

After years of sacrificing her inner life for external appearances, Edna is now doing the reverse. By distancing herself from every convention to which she once conformed, the Edna hopes to finally become her own person.

Chapter 35 Quotes

❝ She answered her husband with friendly evasiveness, - not with any fixed design to mislead him, only because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier, Léonce Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Having seen Robert, but not fully reconciled with him, Edna falls into a strange sort of apathy. When she writes a letter to her husband, she does not tell him about her life—not because she wants to "mislead him," but because the goings-on around her do not feel real. Instead, Edna has "abandoned herself to Fate." Her attitude toward her existence, now, is one of "indifference."

After her exultation and joy in her own independence, Edna has now found its dark side: purposelessness. She has no place in society, and does not know whether the man she loves will return her affections. With no experience exerting her own autonomy or pursuing her own desires, Edna does not know how to continue. She has cut herself off from all external expectations, but in so doing, she has removed any sense of connection or meaning from her life.

Chapter 36 Quotes

❝ I always feel so sorry for women who don't like to walk; they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Attempting to make innocent conversation with Robert, Edna observes that she pities "women who don't like to walk," because it is one of the few ways that women can learn about life. After all, she comments, "we women learn so little of life on the whole."

This offhand comment shows how disillusioned Edna has truly become, and how distant she feels from all of humanity. She envies men for their freedom, and pities women for their ignorance, believing that only she can see how false and empty their lives really are. Her statement about how "little" women learn is a reference to how confined women's lives are, and how sheltered (and imprisoned) they are by societal expectations imposed on them by men.

> You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier (speaker), Robert Lebrun, Léonce Pontellier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Having finally kissed Edna, Robert explains that he stayed away from her up until now because she was married, and belonged to another man. Edna, however, scoffs at this sentiment. She explains that she is "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions," and that she may give herself to Robert if she chooses.

This statement truly exemplifies how far Edna has come from the beginning of the book. As the narrative started, Edna quietly accepted the way that her husband treated her like an object. Now, however, she is even laughing at the man she loves, so absurd is the idea of her belonging to her husband.

Even as readers witness how confident Edna is in her autonomy and her freedom, we also begin to sense that Robert might not be as enlightened as our main character. He still thinks of Edna as bound to another man, and does not seem to understand that she now considers herself entirely her own person, responsible to neither her husband nor her children.

> It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier (speaker), Robert Lebrun

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Edna attempts to explain her awakening to Robert, stating that spending time with him made her understand that her life until then had been a "stupid dream." Loving Robert, she implies, was the first desire she ever experienced that was for herself, rather than because society told her to want something. This experience of selfish and uncontrollable desire made her realize that, up until this point, she had suppressed her wishes and impulses in favor of others' expectations and beliefs.

Edna also continues the theme of her life as a wife and mother as a kind of "dream." She has moved so far away from her prior personality that she can now hardly view her past experiences as real. She condemns them, too, calling them "stupid," exemplifying just how much contempt and hatred she feels for the person she once was, and the life she once lived.

Chapter 37 Quotes

> With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier, Adèle Ratignolle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Edna is summoned to Adéle Ratignolle's bedside, where she watches her friend give birth. As she sees the expectant mother's physical anguish, Edna herself feels an "inward agony." She hates "Nature" for imposing such "torture" on

women, and internally "revolt[s]" against a world of such pain and unfairness.

Traditionally, childbirth and motherhood are considered the pinnacles of a woman's life. In reality, however, natural childbirth is a painful and dangerous process, one that unfairly falls entirely to women. Edna feels an internal sense of disgust and injustice, one that makes her despise Nature for forcing women through such an ordeal.

Edna's inner life has now broken from the entire world. She now hates not only society, but also nature itself, and palpably feels the pain and injustice of being a woman in the world. Her love for Robert remains her one last link to the world around her.

Chapter 39 Quotes

❝ There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them.

Related Characters: Edna Pontellier, Robert Lebrun, Etienne and Raoul Pontellier

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Despairing and alone, abandoned by Robert and unwilling to return to her family, Edna swims out to sea, where she will soon die. As she comes to her decision, she thinks about Robert—her final link to the world—and realizes that one day she will forget even him. Remembering her children and her love for them, she realizes that returning to them would "drag" her back into a "slavery" to them.

At this moment, Edna truly believes that she has no remaining human connections, and no other choice. She does not love her husband; the man she loves has left her; and although she loves her children, resuming her role as a mother would mean erasing the new self that she has found. Confronted with either eternal emptiness or unending obligation, Edna instead chooses the ultimate freedom: death. In so doing, she will escape the aimless, free life that she has led, while also "elud[ing]" a life spent in devotion to others.

By presenting these equally hopeless options, the narrator makes clear how the society in which Edna exists has, essentially, killed her. It has made her equally unable to be free and to be tethered. Detached as she is from humanity, and empty as her life is without her lover or her children, she has no other option but to die.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

As the book begins, Mr. Pontellier is reading a day-old newspaper next to a group of summer cottages at Grand Isle, a vacation spot near New Orleans. Madame Lebrun's noisy **parrot** begins to annoy him, so he relocates to a chair outside his own cottage. There, other noises distract him: children playing the piano, others playing croquet, Madame Lebrun shouting orders to her servants.

Pontellier's character is introduced and dismissed in almost one stroke. We gather right away that he is a cranky, unsettled, slightly ill-tempered man who does not look kindly on the disorder of animals, women, and children. He prefers order and quiet.

As he smokes a cigar, Pontellier watches his wife and Robert Lebrun walking towards him from the beach. When they reach him, he reproaches his wife for going to the beach in the middle of the afternoon, and for her unsightly sunburn. She quietly retrieves the wedding rings she had given to him for safekeeping. She and Robert laugh to each other knowingly about some small incident they witnessed at the beach; Pontellier asks them to explain, but the joke loses its appeal in the retelling.

Pontellier treats his wife as a possession he does not like to see damaged. He is affectionate and intolerably condescending all at once. Here we see, for almost the last time, the sort of wife Edna had been until now: docile, obedient, and uncomplaining. Her friendship with Robert, which is happy and comfortable, stands in stark contrast to her marriage.

Pontellier decides to go to Klein's, a nearby hotel, to play billiards and perhaps to eat dinner. He invites Robert, but the young man declines in favor of Mrs. Pontellier's company.

It does not occur to Pontellier to spend the evening enjoying his wife's company, as Robert does. Edna and Pontellier are not friends.

CHAPTER 2

We learn that Mrs. Pontellier has yellow-brown hair and eyes, which are inward-looking and contemplative. She is lovely and reserved, while Robert is bright and carefree; they are similar in appearance. She and Robert talk easily about this and that—the beach, the romping children, their pasts, and their future plans. Robert intends to go Mexico in the fall after he and his mother leave Grand Isle. Mrs. Pontellier describes her father's plantation in Mississippi and her childhood in Kentucky. Then Mrs. Pontellier leaves to get ready for dinner.

We learn that the foundations of Edna and Robert's friendship are similar interests, senses of humor, and sensibilities. Their similar appearances suggest that their friendship is that of equals. Compared to their easy conversations, Edna's stilted interactions with Pontellier seem like business negotiations. Edna and Robert are linked inwardly, while Edna and Pontellier are linked only outwardly, by law and convention.

CHAPTER 3

Pontellier comes home late at night and wakes Mrs. Pontellier to tell her about his night. She answers him drowsily, and he takes offense at her nonchalance. He forgot the candy he promised to bring the children, but he goes to the bedroom to check on them. He tells his wife that Raoul has a fever; Mrs. Pontellier assures him the child is fine, and Pontellier criticizes her for her perceived neglect. She checks on the children to humor him. Soon thereafter he falls asleep.

Pontellier expects Edna to attend to his every need, though he does not give a thought to her needs. When Pontellier feels his needs are not being met, he childishly diverts his irritation to Edna's capacities as a mother. He is an ill-tempered bully who expects to have his way in every situation.

By now, Mrs. Pontellier is awake. She cries a little and goes out onto the porch. Suddenly she begins to cry intensely. She had never reacted quite this strongly to a domestic squabble; she feels a nameless darkness and exhaustion overcome her. She ignores the bites of the mosquitoes swarming around her.

Though Pontellier often scolds and bullies her, Edna responds to this instance with unusual intensity. She has a strong sense that something is wrong; that sense of injustice gives her a feeling of emptiness. Her awakening is beginning.

Pontellier eagerly sets out for a week of work in the city the next morning. He gives his wife a little money, which she accepts gratefully. Wife and children say a cheerful goodbye. A few days later, he sends her an expensive gift of food and wine, as is his habit. Mrs. Pontellier shares the gift with her friends, and they compliment his generosity. Mrs. Pontellier accepts the compliments with just a hint of sarcasm.

Despite her strange despair, Edna behaves with her usual docility the next morning. She obeys the force of habit and accepts Pontellier's presents. But though her external behavior has not yet changed, some internal darkness and doubt have taken root.

CHAPTER 4

Pontellier considers his reasons for criticizing his wife's choices as a mother. The children are independent and self-sufficient—they never come to their mother for comfort. The other mothers at Grand Isle, by contrast, are nervous, protective, and self-sacrificing. Adèle Ratignolle, a friend of Mrs. Pontellier's, is the epitome of such a woman: beautiful, graceful, and motherly, with small delicate hands.

Femininity, in this place and time, is closely bound to motherhood: a woman without children is not quite a woman. Mothers—and women by extension—exist to care for children. They must put the needs of their children above their own needs. Edna does not align perfectly to this stereotype. Her deviation from the norm irritates her husband.

Madame Ratignolle is sewing a child's garment at Mrs. Pontellier's cottage when Mr. Pontellier's package arrives. Mrs. Pontellier takes up some sewing as well, though it doesn't much interest her; Robert watches them idly. We learn from the narrator that Mrs. Pontellier had never spent much time with Creoles, Americans of French and Spanish descent, until this summer; she reflects that they are extremely open and uninhibited.

Though Edna realizes that she does not feel the overwhelming devotion to her children that the other mothers seem to feel, she does her best to put up a good show. She is not yet fully conscious of her difference; her habitual respect for convention, as well as her natural reserve, hold her back from any openly unconventional behavior.

CHAPTER 5

As Madame Ratignolle sews, Robert and Mrs. Pontellier chat intimately. Robert has been spending a great deal of time with Mrs. Pontellier this summer, as is his habit—he usually attaches himself to a married or unmarried woman for the vacation season; once he even admired Madame Ratignolle, and he speaks of it freely. Mrs. Pontellier is glad he is not so shameless with her. She looks admiringly at Madame Ratignolle's saint-like beauty and sketches her idly. She is not a professional artist, but she is naturally gifted.

Sewing children's clothes cannot hold Edna's attention – she would rather draw and talk to Robert. She would rather develop her own sense of self, both socially and artistically, than cater to the needs of her children. We learn that Robert's relationship with Edna is not quite like his flirtations with other women on the island. It is more sincere and more respectful; it is a relationship of equals.

Robert compliments her drawing, but Mrs. Pontellier does not think much of it. He tries to lay his head on her arm, but she pushes him away. Her two children run in from outside and beg for candies. Madame Ratignolle says she feels ill, as she often does; Mrs. Pontellier suspects that it's only an affectation. Her friend picks up her children and goes home. Robert convinces Mrs. Pontellier to come to the beach.

Robert tries to steer his friendship with Edna in a more conventional romantic direction, with small displays of physical affection and exaggerated praise, but Edna resists him. She is learning to demand respect and exert control over her relationships with men.

CHAPTER 6

Edna Pontellier wonders why she followed Robert to the beach, though she had not wanted to go. She is beginning to become aware of her place in the world—she feels a new understanding settling on her, and it makes her gloomy and thoughtful.

Edna's awakening is still in a hesitant, transitional phase. She has become aware of her individuality and her opinions, but she is not quite sure how to act on these new impulses.

CHAPTER 7

We learn from the narrator that Mrs. Pontellier has always been very private, and has always been aware of the distinction between the inner and the outer life: the inner life is free, the outer life is confined by custom. Under Adèle's influence, she has been growing less reserved.

Edna's mannerly upbringing—her genteel reserve– has allowed her to betray, even forget about, her convictions and her impulses. She has taken it for granted that action does not come from feeling, but from external rules.

Adèle and Mrs. Pontellier walk to the beach one morning. Mrs. Pontellier is slim, poised, and modest, while Madame Ratignolle is plump and frilly. They sit in the shade and talk, glancing at the widow counting her beads and two lovers talking in blissful ignorance of their surroundings. Edna remembers walking as a child through a meadow in Kentucky, which seemed endless; she still feels like that child today, confused and aimless. Madame Ratignolle touches her arm consolingly.

In this chapter, the narrator begins to call the heroine not Mrs. Pontellier but Edna—a narrative technique that marks Edna's changing relationship to herself. She begins to see herself not as the wife of Pontellier, or as the society woman on her calling cards, but rather as a private person, a simple but profound first name.

Edna remembers that she had never had any affectionate friendships; she and her sister often fought, and her one close friend had been reserved just like her. She remembers that as a young girl she was in love with a cavalry officer, then later she fell in love with a young man who was engaged, and finally she loved a famous tragedian (an actor). At around that time she met her future husband, who fell in love with her and convinced her to marry him. She doesn't love him, and she loves her children only intermittently. Edna confesses most of this to Madame Ratignolle. Robert and the children approach them; Madame Ratignolle leaves the beach with Robert.

Edna had felt the touch of romance as a girl and a young woman, but something about her upbringing and the social customs of the time convinced her that romance is both too low and too high for a respectable woman like her—both too frivolous and too magical. She accepted as a very young woman that her marriage would not include romantic love: married life would bring her respect and stability, but not freedom and happiness. Suddenly, in retrospect, her choices become strange to her.

CHAPTER 8

On their way from the beach, Madame Ratignolle asks Robert to keep away from Mrs. Pontellier, who, she says, might take his attentions too seriously. Robert brushes her off. They watch the lovers and the lady in black walk by. He says a courteous goodbye, after giving the "sickly" woman some soup, and goes to his own cottage. He reads as his mother sews. She asks him to pass along a French book to Mrs. Pontellier.

What Edna has told Madame Ratignolle has disturbed her. Edna's transformation is beginning to show, and the more conventional people around her—the minor guardians of the social order—have begun to act defensive. Robert, though, watches the transformation with pleasure. The lovers and the lady and black, like bookends, define the proper arena for love—young youthful love leading to marriage, or, for those women who don't marry, a lonely life as a spinster outside of regular society.

Robert calls down to the street to his impetuous younger brother Victor, who rides away without responding. Madame Lebrun tells Robert that a friend of hers invited Robert to stay with him in Vera Cruz—news Robert receives enthusiastically.

We learn that Robert is somewhat more cool-headed and polite than his younger brother. He is curious and adventurous, but he is the more conventional of the two.

CHAPTER 9

A few weeks later, Madame Lebrun holds a party for her guests. The place is beautifully decorated, children are playing, adults are chatting. Two young girls called the Farival twins play a boring duet on the piano, and everyone but the irritating parrot listens patiently. Two other siblings recite some literature, and a very small girl in a fancy costume performs a dance as her mother watches avidly. Madame Ratignolle plays the piano—mostly, she says, for the sake of her family.

The first half of the party is occupied with examples of art that is dull, insincere, and socially motivated. The twin girls play because it is appropriate for young girls to perform on the piano, not because it brings anyone pleasure; the little girl dances a grotesque parody of femininity at her mother's behest; and Madame Ratignolle's performance is just another example of her performance as a mother.

Mrs. Pontellier dances for a while and then retreats to the windowsill to observe the party. Robert offers to ask Mademoiselle Reisz, a talented musician and a cantankerous spinster, to play the piano; to Mrs. Pontellier's delight, the old woman agrees. Mrs. Pontellier loves hearing the woman play—the music often creates images in her mind. This time, Mademoiselle Reisz plays a piece Edna calls "Solitude." Edna responds to the music not with images but with powerful feelings, and begins to cry. The pianist notices her strong reaction and speaks to her with approval.

Madame Pontellier is bored by the first three displays, but Mademoiselle Reisz's music overwhelms her with feeling. The difference is that Mademoiselle Reisz plays from her self, and for herself. The twins, the child, and Madame Ratignolle perform to obey (more or less consciously) a set of social conventions. Edna reacts so strongly to the Mademoiselle Reisz's music because it conveys to her a glimmer of individuality.

CHAPTER 10

Robert convinces the party to go to the beach. The women walk with their husbands, and Edna wonders why Robert doesn't join her; he hasn't been spending as much time with her as usual. Edna had never been able to **swim**, and Robert had tried all summer to teach her; but she was always strangely afraid of the water. Tonight, though, she swims confidently for the first time, and it brings her great joy and relief. The water seems infinite, and she feels a newfound strength. When she reaches shore again, she leaves the party and starts toward home.

We never learn why Edna had been afraid of swimming, but we can infer that it has something to do with the ocean's infiniteness and opaqueness. The ocean is a place that is at once dangerous and completely free, a place where a person loses various kinds of gravity—the gravity of the limbs, the gravity of the social order. It has often been compared to the soul. Edna, now, plunges into the ocean like she plunges into her own formerly remote self.

Robert joins her; Edna describes her overwhelming response to the music and her estrangement from the people around her. She settles into a hammock near her cottage, though the hammock is not very clean. Robert brings her a blanket and sits by her side in pregnant silence. He leaves quietly as the other guests return from the beach.

Robert is the only person Edna wants with her during her awakening. He is not merely one of the doll-like guests at the party. He and Edna are together as individuals, not as members of the social machine. Their romantic attraction deepens during this night.

CHAPTER 11

When he returns from the beach, Pontellier comes to ask his wife to come inside. Edna insists on staying in the hammock, though she usually obeys him in similar situations. He tries to be patient, but becomes annoyed; he stays up drinking and smoking. Finally Edna slips out her reverie and goes to bed.

Edna is learning to act on her impulses instead of obeying the men around her. She begins to translate feeling into action—not for the sake of any higher goal, but to be true to her inner life.

CHAPTER 12

Edna sleeps very badly; early that morning, when others are sleeping or in church, she sends a servant girl to get Robert—a liberty she had never taken before. They eat a quick breakfast and go to mass by boat with several others. The lady in black appears once again, praying and feverishly counting her beads. Robert talks to Mariequita, a Spanish girl he is friends with (and with whom he had perhaps been romantically entangled). He invites Edna to go to Grand Terre, a romantic nearby island, and she jokingly accepts.

Just as she begins to disobey men, Edna begins to ignore social conventions restricting her relationships. Robert's flirtatious friendship with Mariequita suggests that he, too, is willing to ignore conventions. He welcomes Edna's new freedom and reciprocates her advances. Their romance becomes possible outside convention. The lady in black appears once again, shrunken and dried by the rules Edna and Robert ignore.

CHAPTER 13

Edna grows very tired and weak during the service, so she and Robert leave the church and go to rest in the house of Madame Antoine, a Creole woman who lives in the village. She welcomes them into her spotless house; Edna naps in a private room while Madame Antoine cooks dinner and talks to Robert and later to Tonie, her son. Edna wakes up to find a small meal laid out for her in the kitchen. She walks outside, where Robert had been waiting for her; they joke that she must have slept for a hundred years. By now, Madame Antoine and Tonie had both left. Edna and Robert eat a meal and relax until Madame Antoine returns in the evening. She tells them many fantastic stories. Late at night, they finally return to Grand Isle.

As Edna begins to resist the various rules and habits that have governed her adult life, the outlines of her days begin to blur as well: her previously orderly eating and sleeping have become lively and disarranged. The new disorder gives her new friendships and experiences, which are both tiring and elating. Robert accompanies her on these adventures, so their intimacy quickly deepens.

CHAPTER 14

When she comes home that night with Robert, Edna takes Etienne and Raoul from Madame Ratignolle, who had been watching them, and helps Etienne get to sleep. Pontellier had been a little worried about Edna's absence, but eventually he went to the Klein hotel to do business. Madame Ratignolle leaves for her own cottage; Edna and Robert say goodbye. Edna waits for her husband outside, pondering the changes taking place in her mind and dreaming of Robert's voice.

Edna's awakening is beginning to create difficulties for her family, which functions a bit awkwardly without her. But her children are independent, and her husband's concern is tempered with good humor and indifference —her gradual withdrawal creates no real lack. Her role in the family proves ephemeral.

CHAPTER 15

One evening, Edna comes into the dining room to find a noisy discussion: the vacationers are talking about Robert's sudden decision to leave immediately for Mexico. He had not mentioned it to Edna, and avoids her eyes with embarrassment. He explains that he had always planned to try his luck in Mexico, and that a family friend invited him to come post-haste. Guests give him various kinds of advice.

Though it seemed that Robert would accompany Edna on her frightening and exciting project of rule-breaking and self-knowledge, here he clearly retreats. He had been reticent at times before, but his sudden departure makes it clear that he has decided not to join her - he is too firmly rooted in realism and convention.

Edna quickly finishes her dinner and returns to her cottage. She tidies and fusses, changes into casual evening clothes, and helps put the children to bed. A servant girl brings an invitation from the Lebruns, but Edna declines for now. Outside, she complains to Madame Ratignolle about Robert's dramatic decision; her friend leaves to say goodbye to Robert soon after.

Edna does not fully understand the confusion and disappointment she evinces in her behavior. Though this indicates a sort of repression, an evasion of feeling, it is also a new kind of freedom: her actions derive spontaneously from her feelings, rather than from social expectations.

Later still, Robert comes to tell Edna goodbye. Edna talks to him with irritation; he stammers and promises to write her. She cries to see him go. She realizes that she has feelings for him, and dreads her slightly emptied future.

We see the rift between Edna and Robert begin to grow. She ignores propriety and shows her sadness; he tries to fit the moment into a conventional model of friendly goodbyes.

CHAPTER 16

As she walks to the beach one morning with Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna reflects on her response to Robert's sudden departure. She thinks of him all the time, and feels disinterested in the life around her. She **swims** often and visits Madame Lebrun, who talks to her about Robert and shows her Robert's things. One day, she gives Edna a letter that Robert had sent to his mother, but there's no mention of her.

Why does Robert's departure make Edna feel that her life is meaningless? This sort of dependent love, we should note, is not a particularly feminist subplot. Edna's awakening and her budding romance take place at the same time, so perhaps in her mind they become dependent on one another.

Edna remembers telling Madame Ratignolle in a casual conversation that she would never sacrifice herself for her children—she would sacrifice almost anything, but not her self.

Like many people around her, Edna understands motherhood as sacrifice. For someone like Madame Ratignolle, it is a sacrifice that gives meaning to life. For Edna, it is an impingement on her freedom, which is meaningful in itself.

She talks to Mademoiselle Reisz about Robert on their way to the beach. Edna says that Madame Lebrun must miss her son, but Mlle Reisz answers that she cares more about his brother Victor. The older woman remembers that the two brothers quarreled over the girl named Mariequita. Edna grows sad and **swims** for a long time. Back on shore, Mlle Reisz invites Edna to come visit her in the city.

Robert's departure doesn't entirely derail Edna's awakening. Though he's gone, she still enjoys swimming in the ocean, which stands for the freedom and self-knowledge she seeks. His departure does color her awakening a darker shade of ennui and despair.

CHAPTER 17

Back home in New Orleans, the Pontelliers live in a very expensive and refined home, where Mrs. Pontellier usually receives callers on Tuesday. One Tuesday, however, Pontellier notices that Edna is not wearing her usual Tuesday dress, but an ordinary housedress; she informs her husband that she went out for the day instead of receiving callers. Pontellier asks her to fulfill her social obligations and complains about the quality of the dinner. He storms out to eat dinner at the club.

Edna start to ignore social conventions like visiting days in more overt, pointed ways. Her evasions had been blurry and intuitive; now, she consciously disregards social rules in order to prioritize her own preferences and beliefs and to live more freely. Her husband reacts with anger and incomprehension. Society does not understand or countenance such behavior.

Another night, Edna might have gone in and reproached the cook; tonight, she simply finishes the meal and goes to think in her own room. The murky, flowery atmosphere helps her think. She grows upset, tears apart a handkerchief, and stamps on her wedding ring - but the ring remains intact, so she throws a vase. She puts the ring back on with resignation.

One after another, Edna breaks old habits and begins to find her own way. But despite her relative freedom of action, she is helpless against her small but intractable marriage ring, which also stands in for the rules of society at large.

CHAPTER 18

The next morning, Pontellier asks Edna to help him pick out some new fixtures for the house, but she declines. She watches the children playing absent-mindedly; everything around her seems indifferent and strange. She considers speaking to the cook again about the flawed dinner, but instead she takes up some of her old drawings and looks at them critically.

Edna begins to reject familial obligations along with social ones. She realizes that she does not care much about household details, and she is not absorbed by her children. Her choice of painting over taking care of her home and children is small but pivotal.

Since she is not in the mood to draw, Edna leaves the house to visit Madame Ratignolle. As on most occasions, she thinks a great deal about Robert. When she reaches her friend's house, Edna asks Madame Ratignolle for her opinion of Edna's sketches, though she knows that opinion will be neither objective nor well-informed. Madame Ratignolle praises the sketches effusively, and Edna gives her most of them. She eats lunch with husband and wife, who are incredibly harmonious in all matters. Their harmony repels and depresses her.

Edna values her individual perspective more than the opinions of others—especially Madame Ratignolle's, who is an embodiment of general social attitudes. Edna's growing respect for her own values and opinions is an important part of her awakening. In this process, she also becomes much more honest with herself: she acknowledges that conventional marriage disgusts her.

CHAPTER 19

As time passes, Edna feels less and less frustration; she stops taking care of the household and does whatever she pleases. When her husband scolds her, she fights back. She spends a great deal of time painting, though she does not think highly of her work. Her children and the nurse model for her.

As Edna begins to act on her thoughts and feelings, she feels happier and calmer: she narrows the gap between feeling and action, the interior and exterior, and the anxieties of insincerity and hypocrisy dissipate.

As Edna paints, she often thinks of the summer, and she feels something like desire. Some days she is happy and dreamy, other days life seems dark and meaningless; when she is sad, she can't paint.

Edna places more importance on her inner life, and less on social surfaces; but her emotions are turbulent, so her behavior is erratic.

CHAPTER 20

On one of her dark days, Edna decides to go see Mademoiselle Reisz; to find out her address, she visits Madame Lebrun. Victor greets her enthusiastically and begins to tell her a very personal story about an encounter with a pretty girl, but Madame Lebrun's entrance happily interrupts the story. Victor recites the two letters they'd received from Robert: they are factual and spare. Edna despairs to hear that he didn't include any message for her. Address in hand, she leaves to find Mademoiselle Reisz.

Victor, the wild younger brother, has free and unconventional ideas about romantic relationships; if he is the freer of the two brothers, Robert must be the more conservative. Edna is hurt by Robert's apparent indifference. By another book's standards, he might be considered the more delicate and gallant of the two brothers; here, his formality seems thick-headed and harmful.

CHAPTER 21

Mademoiselle Reisz lives in a cramped, untidy attic apartment crowded by a beautiful piano. She is very pleased to see Edna; she did not think Edna would accept her invitation. When Edna learns that Mlle Reisz has a letter from Robert, she convinces the older woman to let her read it. The letter mentions her very often; as Edna reads, Mademoiselle Reisz plays sad, beautiful music. Edna cries over the letter and promises to come see the pianist another time.

Madame Ratignolle and other women like her revere cleanliness and neatness, but Mademoiselle Reisz does not pay attention to the surfaces of her home. Her piano, her passion, is all that matters. Edna, too, often disregards messes—she sleeps in a dirty hammock and lets her face burn in the sun. She chooses the internal over the external.

CHAPTER 22

One day, Pontellier goes to visit Doctor Mandelet, an old friend who is known for his wisdom. He tells the doctor that Edna has been unwell: she has been acting strangely and ignoring her housewifely duties—she had mentioned something related to women's rights. The doctor suggests that Pontellier send Edna to her sister's wedding, but Pontellier replies that she refuses to go—she hates the idea of marriage. The doctor thinks for a minute and advises him to leave his wife alone for a while, until her strange mood passes. Pontellier plans to go away on business for a while, and the doctor tells him to leave his wife in New Orleans if she prefers it. He promises to come see the couple later that week.

For the first time, the narrator mentions women's rights as such. We've observed that Edna's dissatisfactions have mostly been linked to her identity as a wife and mother, but now Edna herself has connected her sadness to her position as a woman in late nineteenth century New Orleans – and she tells her husband as much, in her new confidence and forthrightness. We can infer, from her husband's confused report, that she experiences marriage as one of the main factors of female oppression.

CHAPTER 23

Edna's father, referred to as the Colonel, comes to New Orleans to buy a wedding present for his other daughter Janet. Edna enjoys spending time with him; she sketches him, they attend a musical party at the Ratignolles', and they bet at the races.

We finally learn a little bit about Edna's past and family life. Perhaps Edna enjoys her father's company because with him she is neither a wife nor a mother—she can take part in more masculine activities, like betting and painting.

When Doctor Mandelet pays them a visit, he finds Edna in a very good mood: she seems free and easy. The Pontelliers, the Colonel, and the doctor have a very pleasant dinner. They all tell stories; the doctor describes a woman that has an extramarital affair but eventually returns to her husband, and Edna makes up a story about two lovers that got lost at **sea**. The doctor assumes Edna is in love with another man.

It seems odd to us that the Colonel's visit would cause such a change in Edna's disposition. The elusive freedom and satisfaction she seeks is so mysterious to her, and so difficult to define, that she picks up traces of it in many different situations.

CHAPTER 24

Edna and her father quarrel when Edna refuses to attend her sister's wedding, and she is glad to see him leave. Pontellier decides to make up for his wife's rudeness with expensive gifts; the Colonel advises him to keep a stricter rein on his wife.

We learn from the Colonel's incidental comment that Edna grew up in a harsh, restrictive family, where her father dominated over her mother and the three sisters.

As Pontellier prepares to leave for his prolonged business trip, Edna becomes affectionate and solicitous. But his departure, and the departure of the children gone to visit their grandmother, comes as an enormous relief. She feels a new sense of freedom and a renewed curiosity for her surroundings, especially the garden. She even enjoys planning her meals. She determines to use her free time to read and study, and picks up a copy of Emerson's essays.

When her husband and children leave, Edna realizes how much she values the freedom their absence affords her—both freedom from familial obligations and freedom from immediate emotional ties. Her choice of reading material is significant: Emerson is famous for his essays on freedom and self-reliance.

CHAPTER 25

When it is sunny, Edna enjoys working on her painting, which is becoming more confident. On dark days she visits friends about town or sits at home and broods. She often goes to the horse races with Alcée Arobin, a popular and somewhat notorious young man famous for seducing married women, and Mrs. Highcamp, a cold and sophisticated woman in her forties.

At this stage, Edna seeks happiness and satisfaction in her art and in the company of socialites. They may not be true friends like Mademoiselle Reisz, but their pleasure-seeking habits are a pleasant distraction that focuses on individual desires. Edna tries both to remedy the emptiness she feels and to escape it.

Edna knows a great deal about horse racing from her father, so her first time at the races she bets very successfully. Arobin becomes infatuated with her. Dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Highcamp and Arobin that night is a little dull; when Arobin drives her home, he insists that they go to the races again before long. She cannot sleep because of a mixture of boredom, anxiety, and excitement. She writes a frenzied letter to her husband in her mind.

Edna's social identity is changing. At the beginning of the book, people admire her for her grace and reserve; now, her friends value her high spirits and her charm. Although Edna does not much like Arobin as a person, his flirtations trouble and excite her—they remind her of her past infatuations, of the romance that is absent in her marriage.

A few days later, Arobin comes to visit her alone; she can't think of an acquaintance to chaperone them, so they spend the evening together at her house. They talk frankly, and the evening rises to a romantic pitch. When Edna impulsively touches a scar on Arobin's hand, she becomes uncomfortable and tries to cut the evening short. She refuses Arobin when he invites her to the races or asks to come see her paintings; but her earlier excitement encourages him to confess his feelings, in a roundabout way. We are led to understand his declaration is not entirely genuine. Edna thinks of Robert and feels ashamed of her behavior.

Edna's reactions to Arobin's persistent courtship are at times difficult to understand. If she loves Robert and feels indifferent toward Arobin, why should she feel so excited and moved by his courtship? The implication that Edna needs not only romantic, idealized love but also sensual love (of the kind Arobin offers her) was very controversial at the time the novel was published. It was quite revolutionary back then to suggest that women have sexual needs similar to men's.

CHAPTER 26

Arobin sends her a romantic letter of apology; to downplay its significance, Edna answers as though nothing much had happened between them, and invites him to come look at her work. From that moment on, they begin to spend a lot of time together—they see each other nearly every day.

Edna slips into a romantically charged friendship with Arobin as though by accident—in reality, through his careful manipulation. Her attempts at strength and independence are partially thwarted by a powerful and dishonest man.

For peace of mind, Edna often goes to visit Mademoiselle Reisz. One afternoon, Edna tells her friend that she wants to leave the house she shares with her husband and move to a smaller house in the same neighborhood; she wants to live on her own income, which comes from a small inheritance and from occasional sales of her paintings. A smaller house would also be more convenient. She decides to have a glamorous party just before she leaves.

Though Edna has faltered in her romantic independence, she takes an important step to achieving financial independence. Though she cannot get a divorce, she shrugs off the trappings of marriage one by one – romantic loyalty, financial dependence, living in the same house as her husband.

As usual, Edna reads the most recent letter from Robert while Mademoiselle Reisz plays piano. Robert does not know that Edna sees his letters; Mademoiselle Reisz tells her Robert does not write to her because he loves her and wants to forget her. This last letter says that Robert will be coming home soon. Seeing Edna's excitement, the older woman muses that she would fall in love with a great and famous man if she were young. Edna admits to Mlle Reisz that she is in love with Robert – not because of any particular qualities, but because of something intangible.

Here we learn about Edna's idea of romance, or at least one of her ideas. Real romantic feeling is not rational, and has nothing to do with even the most elevated worldly ambitions. It has nothing to do with the practical facts of the world, like marriage, career, reputation, or class; it is an impulse that is disconnected from the external world. In this light, Victor's carefree flirtations are more romantic than proper, marriage-oriented courtship.

Edna is very happy for the rest of the day. She sends candy to her children and writes her husband a pleasant letter, in which she tells him about her plans to move to a new house.

The news of Robert's return thrills Edna. Romantic love is in some way inextricable from her freedom and awakening.

CHAPTER 27

That night, Arobin notices her unusually good mood. She enjoys the careless way he touches her hair and her face. She wonders aloud whether she is a good woman or a bad one, but Arobin dismisses the thought. She remembers something interesting Mademoiselle Reisz had said about a wayward **bird** needing strong wings; Arobin has heard only unpleasant things about the pianist, and wishes Edna would pay attention to him instead. They kiss on the lips for the first time.

Edna's excitement and optimism is directed not only at Robert, at its source, as we conventionally assume about romantic feeling; it spills over into a letter to her husband and into her strange friendship with Arobin. Her love and energy are for herself, not for anyone else, and she will do with it what she pleases. But her emotional waywardness is also a kind of weakness, and recalls Mlle Reisz' warning.

CHAPTER 28

Edna cries when Arobin leaves. She feels assailed by her husband in the form of the house around her, and by her love for Robert. The kiss makes her see the world very vividly; her only regret is that this clarity did not come from love.

Edna's waywardness is freeing, but also confusing—it suspends Edna in an empty space without rules, without principles, without any sort of certainty.

CHAPTER 29

Edna rushes to arrange her move into the smaller house. She moves all her things and cleans and decorates the new house with the help of her servants. Arobin comes to visit her as she does work in the new house, and insists on helping with the manual labor. The party is scheduled to take place at the old house in two days' time: it will be very glamorous, and Edna will use Pontellier's accounts to pay for it. After the party, she will move to the new house for good. Soon after, Edna insists that Arobin leave her. She invites him to the party, but refuses to see him before then.

As her emotional and spiritual life becomes increasingly confusing and vague, Edna compensates with vigorous changes in her practical life. She enjoys her handiness and physical strength, and it briefly helps her recapture her spiritual firmness as well: she has the conviction to show Arobin the door, and to see him only on her terms, at her convenience.

CHAPTER 30

Out of the eleven invited, nine attend Edna's party: Arobin, Mademoiselle Reisz, Mrs. Highcamp, Monsieur Ratignolle, Victor Lebrun, and two couples—Mr. and Mrs. Merriman, a pretty woman and her dull husband, and Miss Mayblunt and Gouvernail, who are self-described intellectuals. The table is beautifully arranged, the food is expensive, and Edna herself looks splendid. It is her twenty-ninth birthday.

Edna's party is the culmination of her efforts at a controlled revision of her life. She can carefully arrange her party in every detail—the food, the guests, the dress and jewels. However, it should be noted that such desperate control over appearances often extends from inner vagueness and helplessness.

Monsieur Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz talk a little awkwardly about music, but the Mlle is mostly interested in the fine food and wine. Mr. Merriman tries to tell a story, but it falls flat. Mrs. Merriman talks about books eagerly with Gouvernail, who is not very forthcoming. Mrs. Highcamp is fascinated by Victor. Edna is glamorous and queenly, but a familiar vague despair overcomes her for no reason she can understand. All in all, the party is very happy.

Edna's mood changes so suddenly because she shifts her attention from the brilliant exterior to the cloudy interior, which is no more clear despite all the party's bright lights. The guests seem helpless too, with their clumsy conversation, transparent pretentions, and mismatched interests. The romance of the party is in its failure, not its success.

Monsieur Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz go home. Mrs. Highcamp drapes some flowers and her write scarf over Victor, who suddenly looks very lovely and statuesque. He begins to sing a French love song to Edna; when she claps her hand over his mouth, he kisses it passionately. Soon, all the other guests (except Arobin) drift home.

Victor is the model of spontaneity, romance, and callous boyishness. His romantic adventurousness is more innocent than Arobin's, who is calculating and deceitful. When Arobin rejects social conventions, he feels (and becomes) wicked; Victor blithely ignores them, and lives peacefully.

CHAPTER 31

When they are alone, Edna tells Arobin that she is ready to leave for her new home. She lets him bring her shawl, but refuses to accept flowers. She is silent when he walks her to her "pigeon-house." The living room is cozy and welcoming; it is filled with flowers Arobin had sent while she was away. She is tired and anxious. Arobin offers to leave, but he stays for a while to touch her face and shoulders: she accepts these attentions almost despite herself. It is implied that he seduces her, but the scene is very vague.

As the party's controlled atmosphere dissipates, so does Edna's strength and resolve. Though she rejects Arobin's advances at first, she becomes mesmerized by his manipulation of surfaces—his flowers in the living room, his touch on her skin. With Robert, romance connected her inner self with her physical body. Arobin touches her body without touching her self, and the self drifts out of sight even as the body succumbs.

CHAPTER 32

Pontellier writes Edna to say that he does not approve of her relocation—he is worried about what his business partners might think. To mask the awkwardness of the situation, he decides to remodel their house: such a project would serve as an excuse for Edna's move. Edna feels happier and freer in her new home.

Pontellier is more concerned with maintaining the appearance of a happy marriage than with the marriage itself. One might conjecture that the distinction between marriage and the appearance of marriage does not exist for him.

Soon after the move, Edna goes to visit the children, who are staying in the countryside with Pontellier's mother. She has a lovely time, and is sad to leave them—but when she returns to the city she is glad to be alone again.

Edna loves her children when she is with them, but she does not love them anymore (or thinks she doesn't) when they're out of sight. Without the glue of convention, her emotions are very inconsistent.

CHAPTER 33

Mademoiselle Reisz is not home one afternoon when Edna comes to visit her, so Edna lets herself in to wait in the living room. Earlier that day, Madame Ratignolle had interrupted Edna's painting with a social visit. She advised Edna not to spend so much time alone with Arobin—people had been gossiping about them. Then Mrs. Highcamp and Mrs. Merriman visited her and invited her to a card game.

Edna feels guilt about her relationship with Arobin because she does not love him, but she is invulnerable to society's reproaches – Madame Ratignolle's advice is irrelevant. She is unsatisfied by most of her friendships, because they are only skin-deep.

While Edna waits for Mademoiselle Reisz, she plays a song on the piano. Suddenly, Robert comes in. She is dismayed to hear that he has been back in New Orleans for two days without coming to see her. He is embarrassed and offers half-hearted excuses. He has come back, he says, because business in Mexico did not go well. Edna thinks she detects love in his eyes, but he is cool and polite. When she asks why he did not write to her, he avoids the question.

Edna is passionate and forthright, in the little attic room where she is usually free to act on her thoughts and feelings, but Robert conceals his emotions beneath a bland, polite veneer. Society has demanded that they act according to a complicated set of social rules; Edna has refused, but Robert has acquiesced.

Robert walks Edna home. He refuses her invitation to dinner, but decides to stay when he sees her dismay. He asks jealously about a photograph of Arobin on her living room table, and she explains that she had been sketching his head. When they try to talk about the few months they'd been apart, they confess that they've been doing little but thinking about the summer at Grand Isle.

Though he has determined to act properly, Robert teeters between politeness and sincerity. Edna's unhappiness and Robert's jealousy tip him into sincerity. Finally, they speak (almost!) openly about their feelings for one another. They are instantly close again.

CHAPTER 34

Edna and Robert talk pleasantly over dinner. Edna asks jealously about an embroidered tobacco pouch Robert had received as a present from a Mexican girl, and Robert assures her that she is not important to him. Arobin stops by with a message, and Robert quickly leaves.

Edna repays Robert's jealousy with jealousy of her own. Though she has turned away from the rubber-stamped possessiveness of marriage, she is seized nonetheless by the possessiveness of love—for this, she would yield some of her freedom.

Edna decides not to go to Mrs. Merriman's card game, and Arobin agrees to mail her note of apology. She refuses Arobin's invitation to go for a walk and ignores his flirtations. After he leaves, she thinks sadly of her incomplete reunion with Robert.

With Robert's visit, Edna remembers the warmth and depth of real romance and friendship, so she brushes away the unsatisfying substitutes.

CHAPTER 35

Edna feels a renewed cheerfulness the next morning, and thinks with pleasure of her future friendship with Robert. She receives letters from her son, her husband, and Arobin. She answers her husband, who had written to say he would take her on a long trip abroad, and promises to send the children candy. She paints energetically.

The warmth of Robert's visit cheers Edna, and allows her to more energetically engage with the social world, including her husband and children. It also fuels her painting, the expression of her inner self.

She is sad that Robert does not come to see her that day, nor any other day. She always hopes that he might come, but eventually she gives up expecting him. She lets Arobin take her out and receives his attentions with indifference.

In the absence of social conventions, Edna has no framework, no moral code, to live by. She dwells in something like emptiness, punctuated occasionally with strong feelings. Her awakening has freed her, but the restrictive social conventions of New Orleans society give her no place to land, no place to be herself in the wider world.

CHAPTER 36

Edna likes to visit a tiny, little-known café on the edge of town for good coffee and seclusion. Though she does not usually run into friends there, she looks up from her book one afternoon to see Robert. He seems uncomfortable, but she invites him to share her dinner. Edna presses him to explain why he has not come to see her, despite his evasions; he is almost desperate to avoid any intimate topics. Instead, they talk about the delicious coffee.

Though she still allows Arobin to see her, Edna tries to isolate herself from unwelcome company. Her friends neither fill nor distract from her emptiness. When Edna tries to talk to Robert openly, he rebuffs her with politeness. Like Pontellier, he wants to keep up appearances.

Robert walks Edna home. They come in without a word. Edna leaves for a moment; when she comes back into the living room, she kisses him. He puts his arms around her and admits that he has stayed away because he loves her and cannot have her. He dreamed of marrying her, but blamed himself for it. She laughs at him and tells him she does not belong to anyone any more. She is called away suddenly to help Madame Ratignolle, who is having some sort of crisis. Before she leaves, she tells Robert she loves him and begs him to wait for her.

Edna's kiss tips Robert again into sincerity and openness. He admits that he has been distant and formal with Edna because he cannot marry her: since he can't be with Edna in a socially acceptable way, he chooses not to be with her at all. When Edna tells him she does not belong to anybody, she means her soul is her own. But Robert still sees social convention. It is ironic that Edna's efforts to free Robert from social convention in order to be with her are interrupted by the social convention and female obligation she has been trying to escape: she must attend to her friend (whom she doesn't even really like) who is giving birth.

CHAPTER 37

Edna goes to see Madame Ratignolle, who, it turns out, is about to give birth; she is tired and inconsolable. Finally Doctor Mandelet arrives. As she watches Madame Ratignolle's suffering, Edna vaguely remembers her own experience giving birth, which was strange and dispiriting. She watches the birth take place with terror. Nature itself seems cruel and oppressive.

We have seen Edna react with discomfort and vague suspicion to motherhood, and we've heard her admit her own ambivalent feelings toward her children and toward motherhood itself. That unease sharpens suddenly into terror and disgust. Motherhood seems like a strange illness, a bondage to nature.

CHAPTER 38

Afterwards, Doctor Mandelet walks Edna home. He regrets that she had to be present for the birth, and asks if she plans to go abroad with her husband when he returns. She stammers yes and then no—she thinks no one has the right to force her to do anything—except, perhaps, her children? She can't come to a clear conclusion. Delicately, the Doctor suggests that love is a trap set by nature to ensure procreation, and marriage is a system we erect around that trap to make it respectable and rational. Edna seems to agree. She gives him a rambling, ambiguous, pained answer—she wants freedom, but she doesn't want to hurt anyone, especially her children. The doctor leaves her at her door, urging her to come see him.

Edna had felt the bonds of family only by charting onto them the rules of femininity and respectability. When those rules lose meaning, her family feeling disintegrates, and the chores and obligations that emerge from that feeling become meaningless burdens. Edna wants freedom from those burdens, but she feels guilt at the thought of abandoning her children, for whom she does feel genuine affection. Edna is not heartless by any means, but she never formed a worldview of her own, apart from convention, that included love for family. The doctor seems to agree, to understand her, and his gentle compassion seems to offer a way for Edna to eventually work with him to reconcile her newfound freedom with the rules of society.

Robert is not waiting for her at home. She does find a note from him: it says that he left because he loves her. Edna sits up all night, numb and sleepless.

But that possibility is shattered when Edna's brief absence gives Robert time to return to his senses. He remembers that he is not prepared to enter into a romantic relationship with a married woman, and abandons her. Edna now believes that she cannot be free and happy in society.

CHAPTER 39

Victor is repairing one of the houses at Grand Isle and telling Mariequita about Edna's glamorous party. She becomes jealous of Edna, and tells Robert haughtily that she could have many other lovers if she wanted to; Victor's passionate and obedient jealousy calms her down. Suddenly, Edna herself approaches them. She has come down to Grand Isle for a visit, and asks if she could have a room in the house and a seat at dinner. First, though, she wants to go for a **swim**.

Victor and Mariequita's flirtations are a bit silly, but they seem beautifully open and real compared to Edna and Robert's needless estrangement. The disappointment of the previous day makes Edna long for the depth and simplicity of the ocean, and perhaps for the place where her awakening once seemed like a beautiful thing.

After Robert left that night, Edna sat up thinking about her indifference for the people around her; even Robert, whom she loves, will one day fade from her life, and she will be completely alone. Her children want to drag her soul into love, but she doesn't want to sacrifice her soul to them. The **sea** in front of her is inviting and solitary, and a **bird** with a broken wing is circling overhead.

At first, Edna's restless sadness might have been focused by the issue of women's rights. Now, her despair has become something else –she can feel only emptiness. The bird with a broken wing symbolizes the young woman whose rebellion has taken her too far—who has failed to find a substitute for the conventions she rejected, who wishes to fly but can only go in circles because she has been hurt by the world.

Edna takes off her bathing suit and stands naked in the open for the first time. She loves the free feeling. She walks into the cold **water** and swims farther and farther out. She becomes very tired, then afraid for a moment, then she remembers vividly the smells of certain flowers form her childhood and the barking of an old dog. The reader must finish the sad story herself.

The only feeling that remains to Edna is love of freedom. When nothing is worth having, and everything is a burden, freedom and emptiness become identical. Just after the book ends, Edna drowns. Her death is not violent or self-hating; it is a gentle step toward the emptiness she loves best.

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