

## ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

*The Awakening* (1899)



Kate Chopin

(1851-1904)

### I

The novel opens with symbolism rather than a conventional expository introduction, contrary to Victorian tradition and later a characteristic of Modernist fiction in the early 20th century. A caged parrot is repeating over and over, “Go away! Go away! For God’s sake! That’s all right!”--introducing the main theme of the novel: The parrot conforms to its cage, thinks it’s “all right” and exhorts emancipators to go away in the name of God. On the opposite side of the door, with an opposite attitude implied by its name, a caged mockingbird is whistling “with maddening persistence.” They disturb the acquiescent Mr. Pontellier reading his newspaper and, believing “they had the right to make all the noise they wished,” he gets up and moves over to his own cottage. He is preoccupied and responds to the birds much as he does to his wife’s unconventional behavior, with tolerant acceptance. The birds become a metaphor of “conflicting attitudes” in Edna Pontellier that, along with the inattention of her husband, eventually lead to her death when the mockingbird drowns out the parrot.

The setting on Grand Isle, famed as the headquarters of pirates earlier in the century, is a place of romantic escape and a resort for the rich. Edna Pontellier is the privileged wife of a wealthy man. The prose style introducing Mr. Pontellier is simple, direct and “closely trimmed” like him, a conventional Creole gentleman in eyeglasses, a cotton broker from New Orleans reading business news. He is Realism reduced to dullness, juxtaposed to Romance in the form of two young girls, the Farival twins, “playing a duet from *Zampa*,” a romantic opera involving the drowning of a lover in the sea, prefiguring the suicide of Edna. Twins playing a duet extend the motif of conformity introduced by the repetitive parrot. Madame Lebrun, the landlady who owns the parrot and the mockingbird and keeps them caged, embodies the prevailing conventions she enforces. She is the matriarch who governs, manages servants and is “always in white.” Madame Lebrun and two young lovers are contrasted to “a lady in black walking demurely up and down, telling her beads,” an ominous figure who becomes a motif in the story, like an omen of heartbreak in relation to romantic lovers.

Here at first though, nobody pays any attention to the lady in black and the “gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon.” Mr. Pontellier is unusually trusting for a husband because in

his Creole culture wives are faithful and their virtue is taken for granted, which contributes to his dullness. His wife is lolling around the beach with an attractive young bachelor, Robert Lebrun, the son of Madame Lebrun at that. The two are concealing themselves under a “pink-lined” umbrella and advancing “at a snail’s pace.” When they reach him relaxing on the porch, smoking a cigar, he exclaims “What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!” He is unaware of his own folly in disregarding the warmth of Edna for Robert, seeing only surfaces, noticing instead her sunburn, “looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.”

Edna has taken off her rings and forgotten them, another indication of her state of mind, and her husband returns them to her as if reaffirming their marriage. As to what may be going on between her and Robert, he belittles her feelings. Chopin uses his interpretation as a metaphor of his lazy complacency: “‘What is it?’ asked Pontellier, looking lazily and amused from one to the other. It was some utter nonsense; some adventure out there in the water...” He turns his back on her budding affair and Edna hands her husband the “pink-lined” umbrella to protect him during his walk over to the hotel to gamble--his form of romantic escape, but one in which he can afford to lose. She asks if he will come back for dinner and he answers perhaps yes, perhaps not, exercising a freedom he has as a husband that she does not enjoy. Pink is associated here with romantic escape and the novel ends with Edna’s escape into oblivion as “the musky odor of pinks filled the air.”

The first chapter ends with the introduction of the Pontellier children, who are to be so decisive in the plot: Mr. Pontellier seems a good father as he kisses them, and a generous provider, but whether the candy he promises will be good for them may be compared to whether their mother’s form of indulgence will be good for them.

## II

The chapter begins with an objective portrait of Edna Pontellier such as might be painted by a Realist—“She was rather handsome than beautiful”--using techniques of Impressionism such as vivid brevity and emphasis on color and movement, together with psychological interpretation. Robert “had a cigar in his pocket which Mr. Pontellier had presented him with, and he was saving it for his after-dinner smoke.” The parallelism in this short chapter suggests that Robert feels equally disposed toward Edna and the cigar. “In coloring he was not unlike his companion. A clean-shaved face made the resemblance more pronounced than it would otherwise have been.” This insistence upon resemblance implies that Robert and Edna are much alike otherwise: “They chatted incessantly... Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was young, and did not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason.” Chopin’s parallelisms and wit establish a tone of irony that extends throughout the novel.

In this, the overture to the awakening of Edna, the romantic Farival twins are playing the overture to “The Poet and the Peasant.” Parallelism suggests that the poet corresponds to Robert and the peasant to the obtuse Mr. Pontellier, who is poor in words and passion. The chapter ends with the focus again on the children, as Robert joins them playing croquet. They “were very fond of him,” which generates further suspense as to what will happen between him and their mother and how they may be affected. Chopin had six children herself--three times as many as Edna--and like the Victorians she gives children the highest moral priority, as evinced by concluding her first two chapters with them for emphasis. Edna is pointedly absent from both these scenes, just as her children are absent from her life most of the time.

## III

The ironic tone is sustained as Mr. Pontellier forgets the promise he made to his children to bring them bonbons and peanuts, then reproaches his wife for her neglect of the children. The sharpest irony here likewise diminishes his authority: “He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him and value so little his conversation.” Of course, Edna has the same complaint--another parallel. Husband and wife seem equally preoccupied with themselves, both under pink-lined umbrellas.

The point of view shifts to Edna after he reproaches her: “He talked in a monotonous, insistent way.... She said nothing and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her”--her first rebellion, which he

accepts. Then “in half a minute he was fast asleep.” It is a joke throughout *The Awakening* that the husband never awakens, whereas “Mrs. Pontellier was by that time thoroughly awake.” Thoroughly awake to her alienation from her husband. That her various awakenings throughout the story are all limited and that she is never fully awake at all is a major ironic theme.

Edna appreciates her husband’s kindness and devotion, yet cries in anguish from a feeling of “oppression”—“like a shadow.” The shadow, as in Melville and Jung, is an archetypal symbol of something repressed, in this case her discontent in a dull marriage without passion. “She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband”—she is not a feminist of that kind—“lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken.” This introduces the Naturalist theme of determinism, which is an issue throughout the story. Chopin clarifies the moral situation of Edna by making Mr. Pontellier a model husband, except for being passionless and dull. He demonstrates at least a limited belief in equality by giving Edna half the money he won at gambling, he proves his generosity by mailing her a box of delicacies and wine, and he is much respected, said to be a “great favorite” of everyone around: “And the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better.” The implied analogy between selecting bonbons and selecting husbands is an example of Realism in characterization, inclined toward the cynical.

#### IV

The presence of the quadroon nurse makes clear that Edna enjoys freedom from the usual responsibilities and burdens of motherhood, another fact that clarifies her situation. She “was not a mother-woman.” Chopin adopts the traditional iconology of the dark and fair ladies, still in force especially in Creole culture, to contrast Edna in the role of unconventional Dark Lady with the “women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.” Adele Ratignolle is “the fair lady,” the “bygone heroine of romance” and the Victorian “angel in the house”—the incarnation of social ideals. Yet in the next chapter, Edna sees Adele as “queenly” rather than effacing herself. “Mrs. Pontellier, though she married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles.” In fact, by nature she is the opposite of a Creole: She is shy whereas they have no prudery, yet they have a “lofty chastity” whereas she becomes intimate with men other than her husband.

#### V

On the romantic island, Edna and Robert have reached “a certain advanced stage of intimacy” while Mr. Pontellier is off at work in New Orleans. Robert has spent the past 11 summers flirting with “some fair dame or damsel,” evidence that his relationship with Edna is unlikely to be as deep as the Gulf. “She never knew precisely what to make of it.” Another parallel is made to Edna’s sketching: “She liked the dabbling.” She does not take it very seriously. Likewise she and Robert are dabbling in flirtation. When she attempts to sketch Madame Ratignolle, the picture “bore no resemblance” to her, indicating that Edna is no Realist and is unable to see the world objectively. She watches the three children of Adele rush forward and embrace their mother, in contrast to her own two children. Then she goes off with Robert to the beach, seduced toward the Gulf—her emotional depths, beyond her shallow feelings for her husband.

#### VI

Edna considers “the two contradictory impulses which impelled her” first to decline and then to go along with Robert to the beach, an echo of the two birds at the opening of the novel, caged on opposite sides of a door. She is beginning “to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her.” In particular, “The voice of the sea is seductive. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.” Robert has led her to the verge of an embrace both sensuous and liberating, as in Walt Whitman—except for those children.

#### VII

The “two contradictory impulses” within Edna are made explicit: “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life--the outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions”--as represented by the parrot and the mockingbird. Edna “prevailed upon Madame Ratignolle to leave the children behind” and come with her to the beach, a parallel to Robert persuading her to accompany him. They sit in the shade, with the lady in black on the porch of a neighboring bath-house and the two young lovers “exchanging their hearts’ yearnings beneath the children’s tent.” Associating young love and “hearts’ yearnings” with the inexperience of children is a comment on Edna.

Talking to Adele, she relives her childhood memory “of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water.” The meadow is equated with the ocean as a symbol of the infinite, for both seem to have “no beginning and no end.” The equation is a romantic illusion, since the meadow is pastoral and the ocean is deadly. “I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question.” This is an example of *synecdoche*, as it sums up the whole life of Edna, pointing to the end of it: “Sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided.” This feeling is among her last thoughts before she drowns herself. Even with the guidance offered by Mademoiselle Reisz and by Dr. Mandelet, to the end Edna continues to act upon impulse like a child.

Once again Chopin contradicts determinism by explaining of Edna that “Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate.” Edna ran away from church in childhood and she continues to rebel against the demands of family and religion: “we need seek no further for the motives.” Ironically, she thought marrying Pontellier would be accepting reality, “closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams.” At first she even found “some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection” for her husband. Inhibited by a Puritan upbringing, Edna lacked passion herself and chose a husband accordingly. At the same time, she is impulsive even toward her children and does not love them either: “She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them.” Edna is not faithful to anyone.

Robert arrives surrounded by a troop of children and carrying a little girl. The children interrupt the young lovers romancing in the tent, an event prefiguring the common effect of children in marriage--another instance of Realism contradicting Romance. Edna joins the children in the tent while Robert responds to Adele’s request and walks her to the main house, one of many images in the novel suggesting that Robert is more adult and conventional than Edna would like him to be.

## VIII

To the contrary, Adele wants Robert to be more responsible and “let Mrs. Pontellier alone.” His laugh in response is “boyish” and Adele tells him “You speak with about as little reflection as we might expect from one of those children playing down there in the sand.” Robert denies that Edna would ever take him seriously, while also insisting that he wants to be taken seriously rather than as a mere “comedian”--a contrast to the tragedian who infatuated Edna as a girl. When Edna does take him seriously, he precipitates her suicide.

Robert contrasts himself to Alcée Arobin the disreputable playboy and returns to the main house just as the lovers enter the grounds, rendered with vivid Impressionism. The lovers are a metaphor of popular romance, their transcendence--heads upsidedown--an illusion: “There was not a particle of earth beneath their feet. Their heads might have been turned upside-down, so absolutely did they tread upon blue ether. The lady in black, creeping behind them, looked paler and more jaded than usual.” The lady in black evokes the dark realities of life including disillusionment, heartbreak and death, which eventually will catch up with the lovers. She is the symbolic equivalent of the Puritans to the young lovers in “The Maypole of Merry Mount” by Hawthorne.

Up in the room of Madame Lebrun at the top of the main house, Robert visits his mother while she is busy at an old fashioned sewing machine, associating her with the past in contrast to Edna, who is becoming the New Woman. Madame Lebrun wants Edna to read a novel by Goncourt, a contemporary French realist who might induce her to be less romantic, and she asks Robert to deliver it. When Robert refers to Vera Cruz, Mexico, his urgency suggests he is thinking about getting away from impassioned Edna, an implication reinforced by his question in the last line of the chapter: "Where did you say the Goncourt was?"

## IX

On Saturday night the Farival twins, girls of fourteen "always clad in the Virgin's colors," again play a duet from *Zampa* and then again the overture to "The Poet and the Peasant." The parrot shrieks against this persistent romanticism: "Go away! For God's sake!" The parrot "was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that summer." The narcissistic twins are arrested in development and even physical movement: "Almost everyone danced but the twins, who could not be induced to separate during the brief period when one or the other should be whirling around the room in the arms of a man."

The extremely independent Mademoiselle Reisz is a true artist at the piano in contrast with the twins. She embodies the Realist perspective in the novel and is herself rendered with unsparing realism that debunks the popular romanticizing of the artist's life. She is a living contradiction of Edna's romantic notion of being a New Woman: "She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others." She is homely, she "had absolutely no taste in dress" and she wears artificial violets. Being such a dedicated artist is unnatural, it requires sacrifices of much that is natural and it is an alienated life of solitude. Ironically it is not Reisz the artist but the beautiful Adele Ratignolle with a family and large social circle who plays "Solitude," the original title of *The Awakening*.

Adele's music induces in Edna the vision "of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him." The identities of the naked man and the bird are uncertain until the end of the novel. Although Adele's music appears to stimulate her imagination without apparent significance, this vision turns out to be a premonition that Edna will choose to be the opposite of Adele. In contrast, Edna is deeply moved by the music of Reisz: "...perhaps it was the first time she was ready...to take an impress of the abiding truth." Her true deep feelings are released: "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body." The waves make the Gulf a symbol of her soul, but mainly her passions. Reisz has sublimated all the passion of her life into her art, like Emily Dickinson or Henry James or, to an extent, Kate Chopin. For among the exclamations of praise in response to the playing of Reisz is one that identifies her explicitly with the author: "I have always said no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz!"

## X

The music of Reisz inspires some to go out swimming in the Gulf under a "mystic moon." Robert "directed the way" yet "he himself loitered behind with the lovers," suggesting his lack of eagerness for depth. Significantly Edna has not learned how to swim. She has not learned to cope with her passions. She feels dependent: "A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her." But tonight, inspired, she becomes over-confident like a "child." And the plot of her story is summarized: "She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." She is "intoxicated with her newly conquered power... As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself." She nearly drowns, but she does not learn from her near-death experience, nor is she reborn spiritually. Edna is a Romantic who keeps on "reaching out for the unlimited." After their swim, the chapter ends with the first erotic scene, as she and Robert sit together quietly in the moonlight: "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more poignant with the first felt throbbings of desire."

## XI

Past midnight when Mr. Pontellier finds Edna outside in the dark and summons her to bed, she rebels again. Gender roles are reversed again as he must conform to her: "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant." She even orders her husband not to speak to her like that again. "Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream." The thematic motif of sleeping and awakening has varying implications in different contexts throughout the novel, sustaining irony, since Edna awakens to this or that without ever fully awakening because she refuses to think. While her body awakens, her head goes to sleep, her heart dreams and she follows her romantic impulses. The chapter ends with her husband reclaiming his dignity in the marriage by declining to go to bed when she does, but politely, as if merely trying to restore the natural order: "Yes, dear.... Just as soon as I have finished my cigar."

## XII

She awakens from dreams "of something unattainable." Emotionally, she is "at sea" in the Gulf. "She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility." The lovers stroll through again with the lady in black "following them at no great distance." This image prophesies the fate of Edna.

When she summons Robert, the parallelism, rhythms and repetition in the prose style convey her excitement: "She had never sent for him before. She had never asked for him. She had never seemed to want him before." Robert tells her "he had often noticed that she lacked forethought" and she says again that she does not blame her husband. In the background the lovers stroll through with the lady in black "gaining steadily upon them." On the boat crossing over to an even more romantic island the lovers "saw nothing, they heard nothing. The lady in black was counting her beads for the third time." People are said to be drowning after they come up for the third time, another prophecy of Edna's end.

Robert associates their excursion to attend church not with religion but with romantic tales of pirates and promises to take her out some night in a little boat in the moonlight, perhaps to find a hidden treasure. They have become parrots of popular romance. Their romanticism contrasts with the Realism of Chopin, expressed throughout the novel in her ironic tone and personified in Mademoiselle Reisz. They arrive at a Gothic church that reminds the reader of real life, the social context and its conventions. The chapter ends from the contrasting perspective of Mariequita, who disapproves of their romance out of jealousy. Mariequita is too poor to hire a nursemaid and be as romantic as Edna, yet because she is poor, ironically, she is more free than Edna to run away with a lover.

## XIII

During a service in the church, attended by the lady in black, Edna is overcome by a feeling of oppression. She has already told Adele about running away from church when she was a child. She and Robert go outside, yet remain "in the shadow of the church." In the village house of Madame Antoine, Edna lets her hair down and takes a long nap. She awakens feeling as if she has been asleep for many years and Robert plays along: "You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers; and for one hundred years I have been out under the shed reading a book." Robert casts himself as her hero in fairytale romance, encouraging her to have faith in him, while also betraying a self-absorption indicating that she would be foolish to rely on him.

Edna awakens very hungry, tearing bread with her teeth, indicating that her awakening is of the flesh not the spirit. Robert "was childishly gratified to discover her appetite, and to see the relish with which she ate the food he had procured for her." Childishly playing out their fairytale, they return to Grand Isle by sailboat in the moonlight with an evocation of pirates, romantic rebels against society like themselves--except that Robert is just pretending. They affirm a freedom which soon proves to be possible to them only in their imaginations.

## XIV

Waiting for her husband to return from his gambling at the hotel, Edna is involved in her own gamble. She "wondered why Robert had gone away and left her. It did not occur to her to think he might have grown tired of being with her the livelong day." It did not occur to her to think. She wants him with her all

the time, as if that were possible. She sings to herself the romantic song he sang in the sailboat in the moonlight with the emotive refrain, "Couldst thou but know." She is so infatuated with Robert she feels that because his voice is true, he will be too.

## XV

Edna is late to dinner, late in realizing that she is scaring Robert away and late in awakening to her own unfaithful nature. At the table when she is late in learning that Robert is going away to Mexico she does not realize why he is going. That he is taking a gamble romantic in its own way is implied by his setting out again by boat in the moonlight.

In one of her few scenes with her children Edna is so inappropriate as a mother that when she tells them a bedtime story, "Instead of soothing them it excited them, and added to their wakefulness." She leaves them in "heated argument" with her story unfinished, just as in the end she leaves them with her life unfinished. Her opposite, the good mother, the fair lady Adele Ratignolle, is satirized as provincial and unfair to Mexicans, but Edna is unfair to her own children, her primary responsibility, while she criticizes her quadroon nursemaid for "negligence."

As he is about to leave, Edna becomes intense with Robert, continuing to reverse gender roles as the pursuer. Chopin prefigures Edna's loss with a brilliant Impressionist metaphor: "The sudden and brief flare of the match emphasized the darkness for awhile." Pressed hard, when she says she was expecting to be with him that winter in the city, Robert responds "'So was I'... Perhaps that's the--'" Implicitly that is the reason he is going away--to end the relationship.

"For the first time she recognized anew the symptom of infatuation she felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman." Yet she does not adjust to Robert in light of this pattern in her life--as a temporary infatuation--until just before she drowns herself. "The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed.... The present alone was significant." Edna has become an American Eve, adopting the outlook popular later during the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. Like many other romantics who live only in the moment, she overdoses on impulse.

## XVI

Robert leaves "a void and wilderness behind him." In her Wilderness experience, however, Edna does not individuate. She is not reborn until too late. Pining after Robert, she keeps scolding her quadroon nursemaid "for not being more attentive" to the children, a motif that implicitly scolds her in return for hypocrisy as well as neglect. Edna declares to Adele, "I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself." Many teachers of this novel--many Ednas--accept this doubletalk in order to rationalize Edna's behavior and even her suicide. Rather than giving her life, Edna takes her life away from her children "to elude them."

That Mademoiselle Reisz the true artist has sublimated her passion in her art is symbolized by her "natural aversion to water." In contrast Edna has been spending "much of her time in the water since she had acquired finally the art of swimming." In the end, Edna fails in her art. As the voice of Realism in the novel, outspoken about the unpleasant, Reisz depresses Edna by informing her that Robert had a fight with his brother Victor over Mariequita. The chapter ends on a comic note of deflation with Reisz complaining that her summer has been "rather pleasant, if it hadn't been for the mosquitoes and the Farival twins." The song that Robert sang in the moonlight with the refrain that haunts Edna—"Couldst thou but know"--is the equivalent of the romantic piece from *Zampa* played by the twins.

## XVII

Edna lives in a house with furnishings that "were the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier." Her weekly receptions contribute to maintaining social connections necessary to her husband's business. When she decides to rebel against her role and stops giving the receptions, she gives no notice or excuse, snubbing her guests and insulting her husband's business associates. One evening she looks out the window into "the deep tangle" of her garden, an image of her

emotional tangle. She pulls off her wedding ring, flings it down and stamps on it. "But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet.... She wanted to destroy something." As the symbol of an institution fundamental to societies for centuries, the ring is too strong to be stamped out by the rebellious New Woman, who ends up destroying herself instead.

#### XVIII

Still "under the spell of her infatuation," she visits Adele Ratignolle and declares that she might study painting "with Laidpore." The word *laid* in French means ugly, Chopin's comment on Edna's artistic talent. Nevertheless, ironically, it is Adele, the polite and conventional angel in the house, who encourages her friend Edna to fulfill herself: "Your talent is immense, dear!"

The Ratignolles have the ideal Victorian marriage: "If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union." Edna is bored by "domestic harmony" and pities Adele "for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment." She pities Adele for being happy: "no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. Edna vaguely wondered what she meant by 'life's delirium'." Later we are shown that, contradicting Edna, Adele experiences anguish, 'life's delirium' and lifelong fulfillment in child birth and motherhood.

#### XIX

"Edna could not help but think that it was very foolish, very childish, to have stamped upon her wedding ring and smashed the crystal vase upon the tiles." Yet she persists in being childish: "She began to do as she liked...lending herself to any passing caprice." Mr. Pontellier begins "to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally." Chopin's next metaphor conveys that he is right: Edna is "becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world." As she becomes more delirious, the romantic New Woman is stripping herself naked. Rebels who go naked in public get arrested. Some are declared insane. As Mark Twain said, "Naked people have very little influence on society."

While she paints in romantic moods, Edna "found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested." But some days she lapses from life's delirium into nihilistic Naturalism, seeing life as grotesque and "humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation."

#### XX

Edna goes on a "quest" for the true artist Mademoiselle Reisz. To obtain her address, she visits Madame Lebrun, and the family home of Robert becomes a metaphor of his character as it would affect Edna in a marriage, though she remains unaware of this: It "looked like a prison, with iron bars before the door and lower windows...a relic of the old *regime*,--and...a high fence enclosing the garden." Robert is just as conventional as Mr. Pontellier and would undoubtedly be more possessive. As his wife, Edna would feel even more trapped than she does now, with her heart fenced in like the family garden.

Robert's younger brother Victor is to some extent a male counterpart of Edna--willful, impulsive and selfish. Unlike her he gets away with impetuosity because he is an unmarried young man. He seems to be a victor, but his type is defeated in love--as he is also in a fistfight over Mariequita--by the sensitive Robert. Victor is drawn to Edna, he finds her "ravishing," he senses her sexual liberation and he approves of the New Woman: "The city atmosphere has improved her. Some way she doesn't seem like the same woman."

#### XXI

At the apartment of Mademoiselle Reisz, the artist is frank with Edna: "I really don't believe you like me, Mrs. Pontellier."--because Reisz is a Realist like Chopin. "I don't know whether I like you or not," Edna replies. In a letter, Robert asks Reisz to "play for [Edna] that Impromptu of Chopin's." For the second time in the novel, Chopin identifies herself with Reisz as her medium. This sets up the exchange



that follows in which Chopin portrays the true artist as a soul that creates itself through art, the first expression of existentialism in American literature after *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Henry James.

Edna claims to be an artist herself and Reisz responds with scorn: "Ah! an artist! You have pretensions, Madame." Chopin declares her position on determinism through Reisz: "To be an artist...one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts--which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul...that dares and defies." The artist is both born (determined) and made by daring and defying--by assertions of free will, the essence of existentialism. Reisz plays Chopin for Edna, and also "the quivering love-notes of Isolde's song." Then she warns her on the way down the dark stairs: "Don't stumble." If she watches her step and does not stumble, Edna may still get what she wants. Her steps are choices.

## XXII

Reisz the Realist is countered by Dr. Mandelet the Naturalist, who has a reputation for wisdom. Chopin reverses gender stereotypes: Reisz the woman is dominated by her realistic head, Dr. Mandelet by his sympathetic heart. Neither of these exemplars is portrayed as perfect, quite the contrary, but they are implicitly the wisest characters in the book. The name Mandelet evokes both Mandalay in Asia and the Asian symbol of the mandala, suggesting that the doctor is worldly and "whole." His house "stood rather far back from the street, in the center of a delightful garden." He is centered in the garden of the heart, withdrawn from the values of the street like an Asian monk, except that he is further balanced by marriage.

Mr. Pontellier seeks the doctor's advice: "'She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women'." Mandelet jumps to conclusions at once: "'What have you been doing to her, Pontellier?'" Clearly the doctor is a biased partisan of women. At the same time he expresses amused disdain for feminists: "'Has she,' asked the Doctor, with a smile, 'has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women--super-spiritual superior beings? My wife has been telling me about them'." Mandelet advises Pontellier to let his wife alone: "'This mood will pass, I assure you'." However, his diagnosis proves to be incorrect, reducing his authority hereafter, as he underestimates the waywardness of the New Woman.

## XXIII

Edna's father the Colonel visits the city and they go to the race track together in "the modern spirit." At a dinner party, the self-centered Colonel tells a war story about himself and Dr. Mandelet tries to influence Edna by telling a story that parallels her own situation and ends with a woman returning to her "legitimate" partner. To his dismay, however, Edna tells "of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back"--which is more like Mariequita than Edna, who is dreaming again. Mandelet walks home worrying that Edna might take up with the playboy Alcée Arobin.

## XXIV

The overbearing Colonel "was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave." By contrast, Mr. Pontellier is tolerant, allowing Edna to "do as she liked." While he is gone on business and the children are gone with their grandparents, Edna is free to pursue "life's delirium." In the mood for self-development she reads Emerson, who is usually associated above all with the concept of self-reliance—"until she grew sleepy." Her development does not get very far. She is never fully awake nor strong enough to become self-reliant.

## XXV

She seeks fulfillment at the race track, where she is targeted by Alcée Arobin "the conventional man of fashion"--the one most dreaded by Dr. Mandelet. "Arobin caught the contagion of excitement which drew him to Edna like a magnet." Arobin is a stock villain in the sentimental tradition of fiction since *Pamela* (1740), the cad who seduces, exploits and abandons women. "Alcée Arobin's manner was so genuine that it often deceived even himself." His nature is implied by his frequenting the track and by his association with Mrs. Highcamp, who deplores her daughter choosing to attend a Dante reading instead of the horse races and who plays the piano without the art of Mademoiselle Reisz.

Edna's development, seen by her bewildered husband as "unbalanced," is mainly on her assertive masculine side: "She did not perceive that she was talking like her father." Chopin is one of the first writers to note the irony of women developing masculine traits they criticize in men. For Edna, "It was no labor to become intimate with Arobin," because in her "awakened sensuousness" she has become like him. At first she is ambivalent: "A quick impulse that was somewhat spasmodic impelled her fingers to close in a sort of clutch upon his hand." Then she orders him out of her house, saying, "I don't like you." The more like him she becomes, the less in the end she can like herself. "Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her"--in fact less than she is to him. By the end of this chapter, she is beginning to use him merely as a "narcotic."

#### XXVI

Arobin appeals merely "to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her" and she "drank liquor from the glass as a man would have done." There was nothing that "so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was there in the presence of that personality which was so offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free." True art—"divine art"--sublimates passion and liberates the soul. Edna tries to be a true artist, but Chopin implies that her paintings are merely commercial: "I have sold a good many through Laidpore"—Ugly-poor.

When Reisz tells her that Robert loves her and that he is returning from Mexico, Edna is so elated she sends her children a huge box of bonbons, a gesture paralleling her to her husband. In another parallel, to his being out of touch with *her* feelings, she writes a cheerful letter to him announcing her intention to leave him and to celebrate by giving a farewell dinner party. She even expresses regret that he is not here "to help her out with the menu and assist her in entertaining the guests."

#### XXVII

Edna tells Arobin that Mademoiselle Reisz "felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. 'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth'." This picks up the premonition she had previously of a bird soaring away from a naked man. When Arobin kisses her she holds "his lips to hers. It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded." Her nature is most compatible with Arobin.

#### XXVIII

After sleeping with Arobin she feels irresponsible but not ashamed, though she imagines being reprimanded by both her husband and Robert. Arobin awakens her body while Robert awakens her heart. Dr. Mandelet will try to awaken her mind.

#### XXIX

Edna moves into her own little house with her usual impulsive lack of forethought: "There was no moment of deliberation, no interval of repose between the thought and its fulfillment." She has some inheritance from her mother, but contrary to the spirit of Emerson and self-reliance, she remains dependent on her husband, who will be just around the corner: "I'll let Leonce pay the bills." Her agent Ugly-poor must be selling her paintings cheap. Her place is called the "pigeon house," suggesting that though she has escaped the marital cage of a parrot, she is still a kept bird--a pigeon, less cagey than a parrot. Dumb in fact. For though she knows that Robert is returning from Mexico, she invites Arobin to her dinner party and encourages him to expect further intimacy.

#### XXX

Edna is stripping herself more naked all the time in society. Nakedness, implicitly literal with Arobin, becomes a motif that culminates in her last swim. For her birthday, Mr. Pontellier sends her "a magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled" in her hair at her dinner party. Her husband has subordinated himself and she is now "the regal woman, the one who rules." Ironically, Edna proves to be a true artist not as a rebel in solitude but in the traditional role of the "true woman" in home and society--as a gracious hostess to dinner guests. Her party is a transcendent work of art: "A feeling of good fellowship passed around the circle like a mystic chord, holding and binding these people together with jest and laughter." Her only fine

work of art is shattered by Edna herself. Overtaken by longing for Robert and “a sense of the unattainable,” she cannot bear hearing Victor sing the romantic refrain that Robert sang and she forbids him: “She laid her glass so impetuously and blindly upon the table as to shatter it against a carafe”—spilling wine on her guests. In their conflict of wills, Victor is victor. Her naked emotion breaks up her party. “The voices of Edna’s disbanding guests jarred like a discordant note upon the quiet harmony of the night.”

#### XXXI

Edna is “disheartened.” The garden of her pigeon house, a metaphor of her heart, is “shallow” and “neglected.” Arobin fills her place with flowers and “she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties.” The reader wonders what she will do when Robert returns.

#### XXXII

Mr. Pontellier writes Edna a stuffy letter of “unqualified disapproval and remonstrance... He hoped she had not acted on rash impulse.” He is most concerned about “what people would say” and he covers up the situation by remodeling their house. Edna now has “a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual.” Her sense of rising is imaged in her premonition as the bird soaring away from the naked man, but in the end, she is the naked one and she is sinking not rising.

Visiting her children at the farm of their grandparents, “She lived with them a whole week long.” They are not high on her “spiritual scale.” When they ask about the effects upon them of her moving into a different house, “She told them the fairies would fix it all right.” By the time she has returned to her independent life in the city, she has forgotten her children again, leaving them to the fairies.

#### XXXIII

The mother-woman Adele Ratignolle, seen by Edna as arrested in development, says in agreement with themes of the novel, “You seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflecting which is necessary in this life.”

At the apartment of Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna is surprised when Robert walks in by accident. He admits that he has been in the city for two days without contacting her, leaning on piano keys and “bringing forth a crash of discordant sound”—like the guests leaving her party. Robert walks her home past the Pontellier mansion being remodeled, analogous to the family—“broken and half torn asunder.” Invited to dinner, he notices on her table a photograph of the notorious Alcée Arobin. Edna has exposed herself again. Then she speaks nakedly to Robert without thought to further effects, as when she broke up her party: “He’s a friend of mine.... I know him pretty well.”

She even mocks Robert by parroting his lovesick confession of “feeling like a lost soul.” She implies that she feels the same. On the contrary, Robert feels hopeless because she is married, whereas she is still pursuing her fairytale of unattainable independence. In the bird motif, the parrot and the mockingbird represent her “contradictory impulses.” Now she has become a kept pigeon, though she envisions herself as a free bird in flight. Her two contradictory sides are reconciled in her illusion of being a free bird. Her mocking makes her parroting insincere.

#### XXXIV

Arobin drops by after dinner and Robert is replaced by the playboy. Left alone later, Edna imagines Robert with a Mexican girl and feels jealous despite her own affair with Arobin. Ironically, Robert “seemed nearer to her off there in Mexico.” While there he was still the hero of her fairytale romance, whereas now she must face the real Robert, who did not even contact her when he returned.

#### XXXV

Once again she “felt she had been childish and unwise,” this time in feeling depressed about Robert’s “reserve.” She overestimates her strength, as she does in the end: His motives “could not hold against her

own passion, which he must come to realize in time.” While resolving to possess Robert, she strings her husband along with evasive letters and does not break off with Arobin: “All sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference.” Recklessly, she goes out on a date with Arobin: “She liked the rapid gait” of his horses, like those at the races. She is a New Woman with “the modern spirit.” Arobin is her vehicle on the fast track. She “unfolds under his delicate sense of her nature’s requirements like a torpid, sensitive blossom.”

#### XXXVI

Edna and Robert encounter one another in a garden outside the city, then go to her pigeon house. When he explains that he ran away from her to Mexico because she is not free to marry him, once again Edna speaks nakedly, declaring that, even if her husband should offer to give her to Robert, “‘I should laugh at you both.’ His face grew a little white.” Indulging her imperial sense of herself as an independent woman, she shatters his dream like she shattered her wineglass at her dinner party. Although the scene concludes with their mutual passion, Edna has left Robert with nothing to look forward to but heartache, mockery and the prospect of sharing her with other pigeons including Arobin.

Just before her last swim, she realizes that “the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence.” Edna could have had everything she wanted if she had used her head. She could have enjoyed her love affair with Robert until it played itself out if she had not been so inflated by liberation and nakedly outspoken in celebrating her rejection of marriage. In mocking his version of their fairytale romance, Edna is now the one pulling back and refusing to take their relationship seriously. Chopin was half French. Typically a European woman in Edna’s situation would sustain her marriage while having affairs rather than mock their lovers and drown themselves.

#### XXXVII

The ongoing contrast between Edna’s awakenings and Adele’s awakenings reaches a climax with the mother-woman giving birth again. Edna recalls childbirth as an “awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go.” Although she married into a culture that venerates the mother of God, Edna does not include motherhood in her “spiritual scale.” In her “revolt against the ways of Nature,” she resembles the radical feminist Zenobia, who likewise drowns herself in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Hawthorne. The comparable male rebel is Captain Ahab, who drowns in *Moby-Dick*. All three of these characters become solipsists, consumed by their own self-destructive emotions.

#### XXXVIII

In conversation with Dr. Mandelet, Edna says, “One had to think of the children some time or other.” Mandelet understands her “intuitively” and offers to help her, calling her a “dear child.” From the perspective of Naturalism, he sympathizes with her as a victim of deterministic forces of Nature. Edna replies with the line that diminishes her more than any other in the novel: “But I don’t want anything but my own way.” This is the narcissistic attitude of a child--a small child, about age two. “That is wanting a good deal, of course,” she admits, “when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others--but no matter--still, I shouldn’t want to trample upon the little lives.”

Edna begs Mandelet not to blame her for anything. And he begs her not to blame herself. Nor does he blame her husband or society for her problems--Mandelet blames only Nature. Naturalism is inspired by compassion, but its determinism absolves people of responsibility for their actions, thereby actually encouraging impulsive behavior such as Edna’s suicide. Throughout the novel Chopin repeatedly depicts Edna refusing to use her head, showing how such romanticism is self-destructive: “She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility... All sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference.” According to the Naturalism of Mandelet, Nature is Fate. He urges Edna to come and see him and “We will talk of things you never have dreamt of talking about before.” Dr. Mandelet would become her therapist and forgive her everything.

Filled with “the intoxication of expectancy,” she returns to her little house to be with Robert. Then her dream is shattered by his note. He has broken off with her because he loves her too much to share her. Edna sits up in the shock of reality all night and her fire goes out. She is more awake than ever before, yet is still unable to think: “Tomorrow would be time to think of everything.”

### XXXIX

The novel is sustained irony from beginning to end--Realism countering Romanticism--especially in the last chapter, where a satirical tone is set by a reference in the first paragraph to the Roman satirist Gaius Lucilius, who likewise ridiculed the indulgences of his society as expressed at lavish banquets. Talking to Mariequita at Grand Isle out of season, Victor compares Edna's dinner party to a “Lucillean feast” and she herself to “Venus rising from the foam”--ironically as it turns out. Venus and Edna move in opposite directions.

Mariequita thinks Victor must be in love with Mrs. Pontellier. When she threatens to run away with someone else, the reader is reminded of the irony that the poor girl is more free to be impulsively romantic than Edna. The simple directness of relations among common people, exemplified by the banter of Victor and Mariequita, contrasts with the complications of relations among the affluent. The ironic tone of the chapter is sustained as Victor insults and threatens to murder his rival for Mariequita's affections: “This assurance was very consoling to Mariequita. She dried her eyes, and grew cheerful at the prospect.”

Edna arrives at the hotel, surprising Victor and Mariequita. She asks what time dinner will be served and declares her intention to go swimming before dinner. She asks for towels, then expresses the hope that they will serve fish--a dark joke from Chopin as it turns out. She walks to the beach “mechanically”: “She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning.” She has done so little thinking that it is not presented in the text, only what thinking was “necessary”--apparently to decide what to do now. It is clear that she has finally awakened to her true nature: “To-day it is Arobin; to morrow it will be some one else.” As an existential artist, she has made herself a female counterpart of Arobin. Unlike him, however, she is a romantic in love and feeling sorry for herself even though she knows now that eventually she would have grown tired of Robert.

Childishly she blames her children for her own life choices, feeling they are “antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days.” Of course, that is absurd. They have spent most of the book with their nursemaid and their grandparents. She is making her children scapegoats for her guilt. Her children have become her conscience. “But she knew a way to elude them.” Edna is similar to Poe's William Wilson who tried to escape his conscience by murder, whereas Edna kills herself. Her commitment to “elude” her children indicates that it is in her mind at some level to elude them by killing herself, though “She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach.” Her requests for dinner and towels suggest that she is not *thinking* about killing herself. That makes her suicide seem impulsive, though she may already have decided to do it. In any case, by not thinking about it anymore, she has to some extent predetermined her own fate.

The lyricism of the prose style conveys the romanticism of Edna and the archetypal lure of the sea. “A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water”--analogous to her own descent. Mademoiselle Reisz cautioned her that she needed strong wings to defy society, whereas Edna is broken by losing her fairytale dream of Robert and by awakening to her true nature: “She felt like some new-born creature, opening eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.” Her awakened self cannot survive self-knowledge, which accounts for her odd “indifference” to her Fate at critical times, as she has occasional intimations of the truth.

As she swims out into the Gulf--now a gulf between her and the world--she immerses herself in cold water yet imagines that she is back in the warm meadow “she had traversed when a little child.” This contradiction sustains the ironic tone. Childishly again she accuses her husband and her children of thinking “they could possess her, body and soul.” In fact, her husband has followed Dr. Mandelet's advice and let her go her own way, and her children make slight demands upon her. “How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! ‘And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions,

Madame!” Having twice identified herself with Reisz, Chopin clearly wants to be understood as expressing her personal opinion of Edna through Reisz at the end, but she transcends her personal opinion in her art by including the perspective of Mandelet.

“Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him--but it was too late.” Mandelet has already displayed his ability to understand and not to blame her, but she is too impulsive to seek his help. Whether he could have helped her is questionable, since she has said that she only wants her own way. At the end, Edna thinks of Reisz and Mandelet in symmetrical contrast, representing contradictory perspectives like the two birds at the beginning of the novel. Chopin is egalitarian in offering Edna a male as well as a female guide, both of whom would disapprove of her suicide. Reduced by Edna’s thoughts to allegorical personifications, Reisz and Mandelet embody complementary modes of perception and poles of response. Solitaries, each of their perspectives is limited, but together they constitute a balanced view.

Edna demonstrates that she lacks the strength and courage necessary to live as a rebel. Her last thoughts are a sentimental regression to childhood and identify the primary motivating forces in her life as (1) rebellion against authority, as expressed by feeling “chained” like a dog and as represented by the voices of her father and her sister Margaret, which she associates with family conventions and the church; and (2) romantic longing for “the unattainable,” as first spurred by her infatuation with a cavalry officer wearing spurs. Chopin’s aesthetic vision, as distinct from her personal opinion, synthesizes the Realism of Reisz and the Naturalism of Mandelet with all the additional implications of the novel, expressing a synergy that is holistic and Modernist.

Michael Hollister (2014)