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Chopin's **The Awakening**

By **Maureen Kelly**

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- Preview an Introduction to the Novel
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LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

Personal Background

Kate Chopin was born Catherine O'Flaherty in St. Louis on February 8, 1850. Her mother, Eliza Faris, came from an old French family that lived outside of St. Louis. Her father, Thomas, was a highly successful Irish-born businessman; he died when Kate was five years old. Chopin grew up in a household dominated by women: her mother, great-grandmother, and the female slaves her mother owned, who took care of the children. Young Chopin spent a lot of time in the attic reading such masters as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and the Brontës. Her great-grandmother taught her to speak French and play piano, and related stories about her great-great-grandmother, a woman who ran her own business, was separated from her husband, and had children while unmarried. This woman great example for young Katie of a woman's strength, potential for independence, and the real workings of life's passions.

Like the rest of her family, Chopin grew up strongly pro-Confederate, a sentiment enhanced by her beloved half-brother's death in the Civil War. In fact, 13-year-old Chopin was arrested when she tore a Union flag from her family's porch that had been hung there by the triumphant Union troops. She became known as St. Louis's "Littlest Rebel"—a trait that marked Chopin's behavior as an adult, when she attended her own interests more closely than society's arbitrary and sexist dictates.

Education

Chopin attended a St. Louis Catholic girl's school, Academy of the Sacred Heart, from ages five to eighteen. There, the nuns continued the female-oriented education begun at home by her great-grandmother, providing a forum for their students to express their thoughts and share their opinions.

Marriage and Children

After finishing her education at Academy of the Sacred Heart, Chopin entered St. Louis society, where she met Oscar Chopin, a French-born *cotton factor* (the middleman between cotton grower and buyer). She married Oscar in June 1870, and they moved to New Orleans. Between 1871 and 1879, she had six children. Like Edna and Léonce Pontellier, the Chopins vacationed during summers on Grand Isle, to avoid the cholera outbreaks in the city of New Orleans. Also like Edna, Chopin took long walks alone in New Orleans, often while smoking cigarettes, much to the astonishment of passersby.

When Oscar's cotton brokerage business failed due to drought and his mismanagement, they moved to the small French village of Cloutierville, Louisiana where Oscar had family and a small amount of land. Chopin was distinguished in this tiny town by her habit of riding horses astride rather than sidesaddle, dressing too fashionably for her surroundings, and smoking cigarettes—all of which were considered unladylike. Many of the locals found their way into her later stories.

Oscar ran a general store in Cloutierville until he died in 1882 of malaria. Upon his death, which left his family in great debt, Chopin ran the store and their small plantation, a highly unusual move for widows at the time. Not until 1884 did Chopin take the usual course for widows, when she and her children moved back to St. Louis to live with her mother. Before she left Cloutierville, Chopin had an affair with a local married man who is said to be the prototype for Alcée Arobin in *The Awakening*.

Her Later Years

A year after Chopin moved her family back to St. Louis, she began to write, publishing first a piece of music called "Polka for Piano" in 1888 and then a poem called "If It Might Be" in 1889. She then turned her attention toward fiction and concentrated on that genre for the rest of her life.

Resenting the expectation that she was to spend her days making social calls on other women,

Chopin began St. Louis's first literary salon, a social gathering one evening a week where both women and men could gather for some intelligent conversation. Through these salons, she fulfilled the social requirement to entertain regularly but did so under her own terms. A benefit of these salons was professional advancement: Publishers and reviewers alike attended Chopin's salons, providing a fertile network for the ambitious Chopin to pursue additional publication opportunities.

Chopin published almost 100 short stories, three novels, and one play within twelve years—after she began writing, she pursued it with the same business sense she displayed while running her husband's general store after he died.

In her last years, health problems made writing difficult, although many people attributed the decrease in her writing as a result of the storm of negative publicity that accompanied *The Awakening* publication in 1899. Her death came suddenly; she died on August 22, 1904 of a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

Literary Writing

Chopin's first short story was published in 1889; she began her first novel, *At Fault*, that year as well. Chopin was assiduous about submitting manuscripts and cultivating relationships with influential editors. Her stories appeared in prestigious magazines such as *Vogue* and *Atlantic Monthly*, and two collections of her short stories were published in book form, as *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Both of those books were well received, although regarded by many reviewers and critics primarily as "regionalist" work, meaning it had little literary value beyond the portrait it presented of the Louisiana/Missouri region.

Her most famous work, *The Awakening*, appeared in 1899. As in much of Chopin's writing, this novel concerns itself with issues of identity and morality. Unlike the rest of her work, it created a tremendous controversy. While many reviewers deemed it a worthy novel, an equal and more vocal number condemned it, not simply for Edna's behavior, but for her lack of remorse about her behavior—and Chopin's refusal to judge Edna either way.

A well-regarded author at the time of her death, despite the controversy surrounding *The Awakening*, Chopin's work fell into obscurity for many years as regional literature fell out of literary favor. Chopin's work did not come to the attention of the established literary world until 1969, after almost 70 years of obscurity, with the publication of Per Seyersted's critical biography and his edition of her complete works. The 1960s feminist movement in America had a great deal to do with her newly found fame as well; that movement brought to attention the work of women who had been excluded from the literary canon by its male creators. Today, her work is part of the canon of American literature.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

Introduction

The Awakening has enjoyed a strange success: At the time of its publication, critics condemned the novel for its heroine's unrepentant drive for independence and emotional, sexual, and spiritual awakening. Although contrary to legend it was never a banned book, the novel fell into obscurity for 70 years. Read in the radical context of the 1960s, *The Awakening* was received enthusiastically as a valid work; the scandal that destroyed its chance of success at the time of its publication seemed absurd.

A scandal usually secures a book's success, particularly when a book is accused not only of describing immorality but also of promoting it—typically in such a situation, everyone wants to find out what they're not supposed to hear or know. This phenomenon did not occur with *The Awakening*, however, possibly because Edna's story was just too depressing: She is not a character made two dimensional by excessive virtue or vice; rather, she achieves a certain realism in her character's mixture of flaws and features. She's too real, and readers found it too sad that she must kill herself to finally elude society's demand that she be a mother first and a human being second. Female readers in 1899 did not find an easy escape out of their own lives when they picked up *The Awakening*—entering Edna's life, they were forced to understand her choices and lack of them, and re-encounter the same limitations that marked their own lives.

Many male reviewers condemned *The Awakening* primarily out of fear of the very real shifting in the social order. Women were still required by society to live and uphold the mother-woman role, but at the same time, they were increasingly choosing to work outside the home. The suffrage movement was in full swing, threatening the masculine grip on the realms of politics and economics. While Edna is no suffragette, evidencing no interest in any cause other than her own intensely personal agenda, her rejection of the mother-woman role, exploration of her sexuality with men other than her husband, and indifference to the opinions of mainstream society make her threatening indeed to those readers who wished women would remain at home.

The suffragettes were not the only force making waves for the mainstream. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote the groundbreaking *Women and Economics*, published in 1898, which viewed marriage with an economic perspective: A wife pays for her room and board in her husband's house by bearing his children, rendering sexual reproduction an economic function and the American family nothing more than a system of barter. Edna attempts to exit this system by funding her own little household but still cannot escape its grip—hardly good news for those women who agreed with Gilman's analysis.

Edna's status as a *trophy wife*—a woman whose life of leisure is a testament to her husband's financial success—is essential to her development, however. Because she has servants to attend to necessary household tasks and take care of her children, she can devote time to art, solitary reflection, and the influential relationships. Reviewers from the 1970s until the present note that the servants in Edna's household are rarely heard to speak, and frequently their names are not given. The lack of attention in the novel to the servant women's perspectives tells a great deal in the omission—if Edna could not free herself from the role society cast her in, how much more difficult must it have been for those women trapped in Louisiana's elaborate racial caste system. Only a few short decades after the Civil War, Louisiana retained its intensely bigoted environment and practices.

In addition, the sexism associated with the antebellum South was alive and well for Chopin and Edna. In highly conservative Louisiana, women were expected to behave as stereotypical Southern belles, pure of heart and chaste in action. Such a role symbolically prohibited an active place in public life. Literal constraints were in place, as well, such as the law that declared married women, along

with children and the mentally ill, incompetent to initiate or complete legal contracts. As an independent-minded woman and native of St. Louis, Chopin drew on her own experiences as an outsider in Louisiana to flesh out Edna's portrait as a scandalously independent woman. Like Edna, Chopin sought to create her own life, such as instituting a literary salon to replace all the other social visits society expected her to pay. However, unlike Edna, Chopin was very much at home in her independence.

Literary Limitations

Part of the scandal surrounding the novel was Chopin's bold choice of female self-discovery and self-reliance. Women writers, throughout the United States but particularly in the South, were expected to stick with ladylike subjects; a portrayal of female sexuality or intense dissatisfaction with their married lives was not on that list. Further, because Chopin used Louisiana so frequently in her stories, she was marginalized as a *regional writer*, a term used for writers who vividly describe the local color but don't necessarily produce great literature. When male writers, such as Mark Twain, drew heavily on their surroundings for character or theme, their work was understood to be literature that made use of certain regional characteristics to great effect, rather than simply a description of those characteristics, as is the case with regional writers. As a woman, Chopin's status as a writer was severely limited by the expectations of an intensely chauvinistic public. When she shattered all expectations by producing a work that clearly transcended not only regionalism but also the established list of sentimental subjects thought suitable for women, the furor was intense.

In Edna Pontellier's America, female sexuality was an utterly taboo subject. For women, sex was supposed to be a means to one specific end: making babies within the context of marriage. Part of the reason Edna's behavior seemed so scandalous at the time was that her sexuality neither began nor ended with her husband as the times dictated it ought; she discovered it with other men after she was already married.

Further, Edna advances not only in knowledge of her sexuality but also in awareness of her spirituality: Upon moving into the pigeon house, she has a sense "of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual." This increase in her spiritual stock occurs *after* she has begun her affair with Arobin, a point at which a standard heroine of the times should have felt irredeemably shamed and certainly less spiritually advanced.

Edna's sexual awakening is doubtless a reflection of the sexuality glorified in Walt Whitman's landmark poetry of self-celebration, *Leaves of Grass*, the imagery or influence of which is frequently found in *The Awakening*. One of Whitman's most famous lines reads "If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it." That sentiment is manifest in Edna's new appreciation for her body that occurs during her day at Madame Antoine's. *Leaves of Grass* outraged the public's puritanical sensibilities in 1855 with its male author's celebration of sensuality; how much worse for a woman to celebrate her self and sexuality, even 44 years later.

Another troubling factor for Chopin's contemporaries was her refusal to condemn Edna. She describes Edna's actions and reactions without passing judgment, a literary device that precedes the modernist literature of the 1920s by two decades. After kissing Arobin for the first time, Edna felt "neither shame nor remorse" and Chopin doesn't suggest that she should. Instead, using a narrative voice distant and ambiguous in tone, she presents Edna's development and decisions without the moralizing that was expected from novelists. Book and magazine editors of the time routinely asked writers to maintain a certain moral tone in their work, or at least provide endings for their heroines that were in keeping with the accepted avenues: Women were to be married off or, if left solitary, remain virginal. Many reviewers described Chopin's novel with terms such as "unhealthy" and "morbid." One review declared that "*The Awakening* is too strong drink for moral babes, and should

be labeled ‘poison.’”

The Influence of Science

Part of Chopin’s reluctance to pass judgment using the established moral codes may have stemmed from the scientific advancements of the last half of the 1800s. The work of Charles Darwin and his supporters fundamentally changed, or at least challenged, the way people thought about who they were, where they came from, and where they were going. The very idea of evolution necessitated a fundamental shift in thinking, casting previously ironclad ideas into doubt. So, too, does Chopin depict Edna’s shift in perspective as causing an irreparable break with her former life, disallowing the possibility that she can simply move back into Leonce’s house and resume her limiting life.

The Influence of Naturalism and Romanticism

Given Chopin’s approach to the novel, there can be no happy ending for Edna, and this feature places *The Awakening* in the naturalist school of writing. Established in the last half of the nineteenth century, Naturalist and the closely associated Realist literature held that writing should offer an objective, empirical presentation of the human experience. Naturalism required an amoral stance towards a character’s actions and aspirations—but nonetheless expected the worst both for and from the character. The influence of Darwin’s theories on naturalism resulted in the sentiment that humans have little control over themselves or the forces that shape their lives, but must struggle to survive, prospering only at the expense of others. As if to emphasize that she is consciously including that school’s principles or approach in her novel, Chopin has Edna reading a novel by the realist writer Edmund Goncourt.

In stark contrast with naturalism was the much older school of romanticism, which promoted the idea that anyone’s life or worldview could be transformed by idealism and self-knowledge. American romanticism put an emphasis on the role of art in such a transformation. Ironically, *The Awakening* was heavily influenced by this school, as well: Chopin presents a character whose relationship with art both engenders and indicates her life’s transformation. Although Edna is not a serious artist, her art does reflect her growth as a person. Her focus on developing her spiritual rather than material state is in keeping with the related transcendentalist philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau; in fact, Edna is shown reading Emerson her first night alone in the mansion. Transcendentalist writers, themselves influenced by the romantics, have an optimistic view about human potential and express the need to appreciate independence in spirit and action, even when in conflict with mainstream expectations. As Edna learns her own mind and follows her heart, defying her culture’s traditions and orthodoxy, she is exemplifying the values of transcendentalism.

By presenting a heroine who attempts to transform her life but ultimately feels overwhelmed by those around her and defeated by herself, Chopin depicts the dark side, what cynics would call the *realistic consequences*, of Edna’s romantic impulse to reconfigure her life according to her own true principles.

Chopin’s novel arrived at a pivotal juncture in time: The roots of feminism had been established in the 1890s but the future of women’s economic, political, and personal independence was far from determined. Just so Edna’s life, which indicates the real possibility of a new independence but does not promise that such independence will be easily won or maintained.

A Brief Synopsis

The Awakening explores one woman's desire to find and live fully within her true self. Her devotion to that purpose causes friction with her friends and family, and also conflicts with the dominant values of her time.

Edna Pontellier's story takes place in 1890s Louisiana, within the upper-class Creole society. Edna and her husband Léonce, and their two children are vacationing for the summer on Grand Isle, an island just off the Louisiana shore near New Orleans. They are staying at a *pension*, a sort of boarding house where each family has their own cottage but eat together in a main dining hall. Also staying at the *pension* is the Ratignolle family; Madame Ratignolle is a close friend of Edna's, although their philosophies and attitudes toward child rearing differ fundamentally. Madame Ratignolle is the epitome of a "mother-woman," gladly sacrificing a distinct personal identity to devote her entire being to the care of her children, husband, and household.

In contrast to Madame Ratignolle's character is Mademoiselle Reisz, a brilliant pianist also vacationing on Grand Isle. Although Mademoiselle Reisz offends almost everyone with her brutal assessments of others, she likes Edna, and they become friends. Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performance stirs Edna deeply, awakening her capacity for passion and engendering the process of personal discovery that Edna undertakes—almost accidentally—that summer.

Another Grand Isle vacationer is the young and charming Robert Lebrun. Robert devotes himself each summer season to a different woman, usually married, in a sort of mock romance that no one takes seriously. This summer, Edna is the object of his attentions.

As Edna begins the process of identifying her true self, the self that exists apart from the identity she maintains as a wife and mother, Robert unknowingly encourages her by indulging her emerging sensuality. Unexpectedly, Robert and Edna become intensely infatuated with each other by summer's end. The sudden seriousness of his romantic feelings for her compels him to follow through on his stated intention to go to Mexico to seek his fortune.

Edna is distraught at his departure, remaining obsessed with him long after she and her family have returned to New Orleans. As a result of her continuing process of self-discovery, she becomes almost capricious in meeting her desires and needs, no longer putting appearances first. Always interested in art, she begins spending more time painting and sketching portraits than on household and social duties. Léonce is shocked by Edna's refusal to obey social conventions. He consults Dr. Mandelet, an old family friend, who advises Léonce to leave Edna alone and allow her to get this odd behavior out of her system.

Edna continues her friendships with Mademoiselle Reisz and the pregnant Madame Ratignolle. Mademoiselle Reisz receives letters from Robert, which she allows Edna to read. Meanwhile, as a result of her awakening sexuality Edna has an affair with Alcée Arobin, a notorious womanizer. Her heart remains with Robert, however, and she is delighted to learn that he is soon returning to New Orleans.

She has grown ever more distant from Léonce, and also become a much better artist, selling some of her work through her art teacher. These sales provide her a small income, so while Léonce and the children are out of town, she decides to move out of the mansion they share and into a tiny rental house nearby, called the "pigeon house" for its small size.

Much to her distress, she encounters Robert accidentally, when he comes to visit Mademoiselle Reisz while Edna happens to be there. She is hurt that he did not seek her out as soon as he returned. Over the next weeks he tries to maintain emotional and physical distance from Edna because she is a married woman, but she ultimately forces the issue by kissing him, and he confesses his love to her.

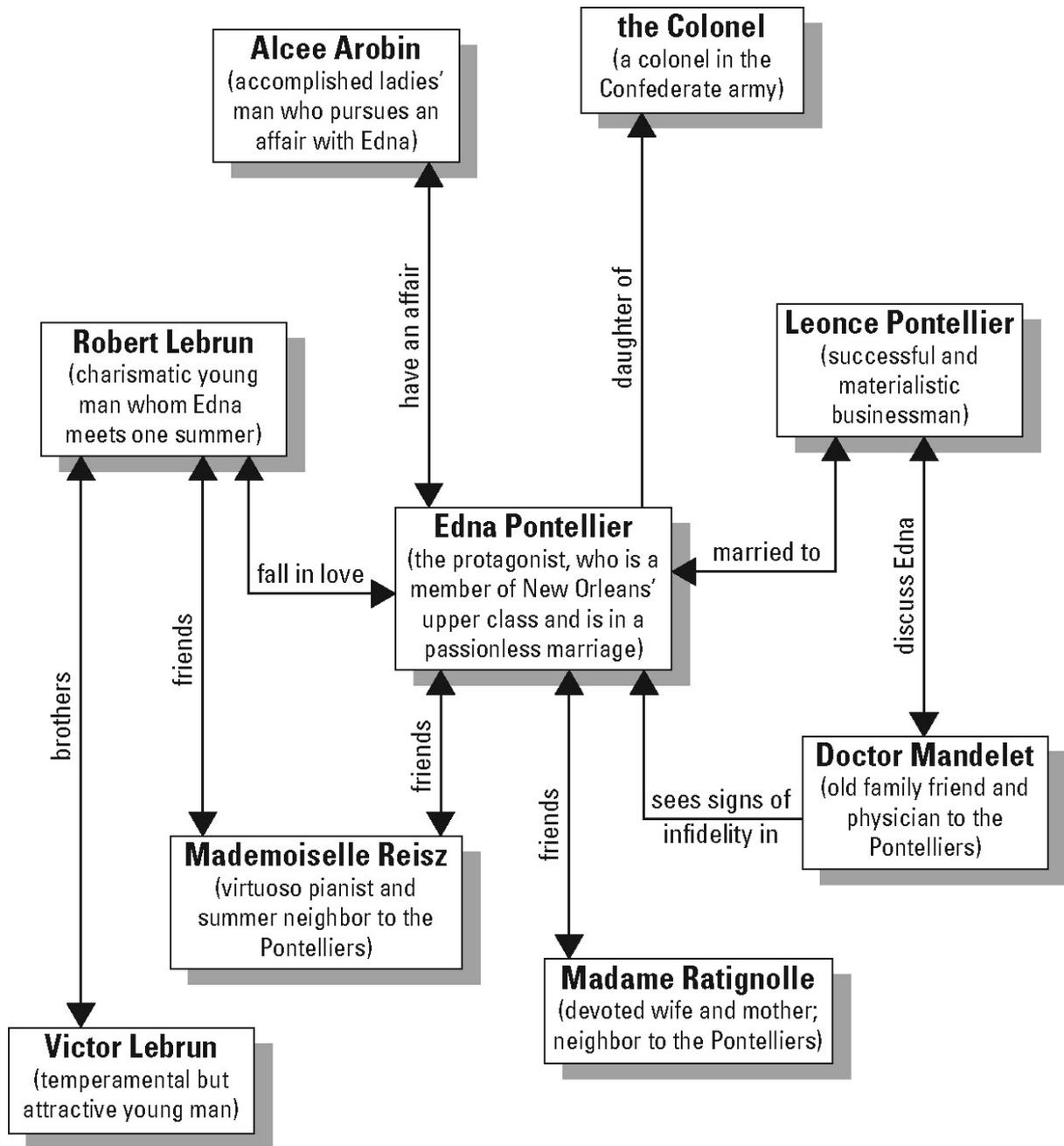
Edna tries to express to Robert that she is utterly indifferent to the social prohibitions that forbid their love; she feels herself to be an independent woman. Before she can explain herself, however, she is called away to attend Madame Ratignolle's labor and delivery, at the end of which Madame Ratignolle asks Edna to consider the effect of her adulterous actions on her children. Edna is greatly disturbed to realize that her little boys will be deeply hurt if she leaves Léonce for another man. To this point, she had considered only her own desires.

When she returns to the pigeon house, Robert is gone, having left a goodbye note. Crushed, she decides to kill herself, realizing that she cannot return to her former life with Léonce but is also unwilling to hurt her children personally or socially with the stigma of divorce or open adultery. The next morning she travels alone to Grand Isle, announces that she is going swimming, and drowns herself.

List of Characters

- Edna Pontellier** Main protagonist who, while in a passionless marriage to Léonce Pontellier, falls in love with Robert Lebrun and has a brief affair with Alcée Arobin. A member of New Orleans' upper class, she has artistic leanings.
- Léonce Pontellier** Edna's husband, a successful and materialistic businessman.
- Robert Lebrun** Charismatic young man who falls in love with Edna during her summer on Grand Isle; has a history of maintaining mock romances with unattainable women.
- Alcée Arobin** Accomplished ladies' man who pursues an affair with Edna.
- Mademoiselle Reisz** Virtuoso pianist whom Edna meets on Grand Isle. Upon returning to New Orleans, Edna visits her to hear her play piano and read letters that Robert has written to her.
- Madame Adèle Ratignolle** The epitome of the "mother-woman," a devoted wife and mother whom Edna befriends on Grande Isle; their friendship continues while back in New Orleans.
- Monsieur Ratignolle** Madame Ratignolle's husband, a successful pharmacist.
- Madame Lebrun** Owner and hostess of the Grand Isle boardinghouse (called a *pension*); mother of Robert and Victor.
- Victor Lebrun** Temperamental, strong-willed, and spoiled but very good-looking son of Madame Lebrun.
- Mariequita** Flirtatious Spanish girl who has a crush on Victor and possibly on Robert, as well.
- Etienne and Raoul Pontellier** Edna and Léonce's young sons.
- The quadroon** Nanny to Edna's children.
- Dr. Mandelet** Old family friend and physician to the Pontelliers, whom Léonce consults about Edna's strange behavior. The doctor knows but does not tell Léonce that Edna is in love with another man.
- Mrs. James Highcamp** Middle-aged society woman who enjoys the company of fashionable young men; spends time at the racetrack with Edna and Alcée.
- Mrs. Merriman** Friend of Mrs. Highcamp and Arobin; Edna comes into contact with Arobin through Mrs. Merriman and Mrs. Highcamp.
- The Colonel** Edna's father, a retired colonel in the Confederate army.
- Janet** Edna's younger sister, whose wedding Edna refuses to attend because of her distaste for marriage.
- Margaret** Edna's older sister, who raised Edna after their mother died.
- The lady in black** Highly devout, elderly woman staying at the Grand Isle boardinghouse, usually seen with a prayerbook or rosary in hand.
- The lovers** Courting couple on Grand Isle usually seen by themselves, enthralled in their new romance.
- Monsieur Farival** Elderly gentleman vacationing on Grand Isle at the boardinghouse.
- The Farival twins** Monsieur Farival's granddaughters who repeatedly practice on piano a duet from the opera *Zampa*.
- Celestine** Edna's live-in servant at the "pigeon house."
- Laidpore** Edna's drawing teacher and art broker; he sells her work, allowing her a small income.
- Montel** Old family friend of the Lebruns' whom Robert meets with in Mexico to seek his fortune.

Character Map



CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

Chapter I

Summary

The novel opens with Léonce Pontellier, a vacationer on Grand Isle (which is just off the coast of New Orleans), reading a newspaper and surveying his surroundings. He is annoyed by a caged parrot loudly repeating its stock phrases, and so leaves the main building of the *pension* (boardinghouse) for his own cottage. Léonce's wife, Edna Pontellier, and her friend Robert Lebrun return from their swim in the Gulf of Mexico and join Léonce. He soon departs for billiards and socializing at the nearby Klein's hotel.

Commentary



Already Chopin establishes some key symbolism in the novel: Edna is the green-and-yellow parrot telling everyone to “go away, for God’s sake.” Unable to leave the cage, the parrot must ask everyone to leave when it would prefer to simply fly away.

The parrot knows not only French, Spanish, and English phrases but also “a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door.” The mockingbird represents Madame Reisz (a character who is introduced in Chapter IX), the only character who is successful at making Edna tell the truth about her love for Robert that develops throughout the novel. Later chapters show how Madame Reisz’s piano playing speaks to Edna’s soul as if that music were the language her soul had been waiting in silence for. Mockingbirds have a reputation as obnoxious birds, and Madame Reisz shares a similar reputation as a rude, ill-tempered woman. The description of the mockingbird also sets the tone for Madame Reisz’s independent behavior within the confines of the insistently polite upper-class Creole society; she too whistles her own tune “with maddening persistence.”



The nature of Edna’s relationships with Léonce and Robert is established in this first brief chapter, as well. Léonce, noting his wife’s sunburn, expresses not concern for her potential discomfort but instead regards her “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property that has suffered some damage.” Yet Léonce and Edna have built between them a working familiarity that allows them to communicate wordlessly, such as when he hands her rings to her at her simple wordless gesture of holding out her hand. Such nonverbal communication is a tremendous bond between a couple, and is often an indication of their unity.

At the same time, Edna clearly has a bond with her platonic friend Robert that excludes her husband—this bond is represented by the adventure that she and Robert share during their swim, the joy of which they cannot communicate to Léonce. While Léonce is familiar, Robert is fun and lively. At 26 he is only two years younger than Edna, while Léonce is 12 years older. Ironically Léonce is clearly not threatened by Robert’s friendship with his wife: When Robert declines Léonce’s invitation to accompany him to Klein’s hotel, stating “quite frankly that he preferred to ... talk to Mrs. Pontellier,”

Léonce simply tells Edna to “send him about his business when he bores you.”



Another motif set up in this chapter is the significance of music in Edna’s life and in the novel. Two twin girls, children of other vacationers at the *pension*, can be heard practicing a piano duet from an opera in which a character drowns at sea—foreshadowing musically Edna’s ultimate fate.

Issue of class and race are implicitly addressed, as well: Edna’s own children have a quadroon (meaning she is one-quarter African) nanny. She attends to Edna’s boys “with a faraway, meditative air.” However, while she may be entertaining the same thoughts of independence from society’s demands that Edna later has, she lacks the economic freedom to pursue life on her own terms, particularly in the intensely bigoted atmosphere of 1890s Louisiana. Like most of the servant characters, she is not named and her voice is never heard.

Glossary

(Here and in the following sections, difficult words and phrases are explained.)

“*Allez vous-en! Sapristi!*” French phrases meaning “Go away! For God’s sake!”

Grand Isle an island off the Louisiana coast, about fifty miles south of New Orleans.

Zampa an opera written by Ferdinand Herold in which a character drowns at sea.

telling her beads praying on her rosary.

pension a term used in France and other continental countries for a boardinghouse.

Chênrière Caminada a small island lying between Grand Isle and the Louisiana coast.

lugger a small vessel equipped with a lugsail or lugsails.

quadroon a person who has one black grandparent; child of a mulatto and a white.

sunshade a parasol used for protection against the sun’s rays.

lawn sleeves sleeves made from lawn, a fine, sheer cloth of linen or cotton.

Chapter II

Summary

As Edna and Robert continue chatting on the porch of the Pontelliers' cottage, they reveal more of their backgrounds and personalities. Robert has long had youthful intentions of going to Mexico to seek his fortune but has yet to follow through and so remains at his modest job in his native New Orleans. Edna speaks of her family and their homes in Mississippi and Kentucky. Then, while Edna gets ready for dinner, Robert plays with her two young boys.

Commentary



Edna's physical description seems to provide insight into her character: "Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features. Contradiction and frankness underlie her imminent rejection of the society that she comes to feel is imprisoning her.

Chopin describes Edna with the potent phrase "She was an American woman"—an identity that differentiates her from the Creoles around her, who maintain multilingual ties to their French and Spanish heritage. In contrast, Edna's French background was "lost in dilution." The term "American woman" evokes all the qualities that stereotypically characterize Americans: independence, boldness, and a desire to conquer new territory. Yet those qualities were not welcome in American women of the 1890s, when women—particularly those of the leisure class to which Edna belongs—were rewarded for passivity, dependence, and staying at home.



While, as a man, Robert is free to seek his fortune in Mexico, he has not yet followed through on this frequently stated intention. Instead, he has always "held on to his modest position in a mercantile house," seemingly content to keep hold of a safe job within his native city and spend summers with his mother. His youth and inexperience are highlighted in this chapter; Chopin describes him as talking much about himself because "He was very young, and did not know any better." At the same time, Edna "talked a little about herself for the same reason." Their relationship seems based more on harmless mutual entertainment than on an emotional or intellectual connection. Rather than discussing any topic with depth or insight, they instead "chatted incessantly," a phrase that brings to mind a couple of schoolgirls rather than a pair of potential lovers. The lack of depth in their relationship at this point may indicate a falsity at the root of their later passion.

Glossary

countenance the look on a person's face that shows one's nature or feelings.

"The Poet and the Peasant" an operetta by Franz von Suppé (1819–1895), Austrian conductor and composer of popular operettas.

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