

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Awakening

by

Kate Chopin

Book Information

Kate Chopin, The Awakening
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This book tells of a woman's abandonment of her family, her seduction, and her awakening to desires and passions that threaten to consume her.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for the College Bound; Romance, Romance (All); Women's Studies, Women's Studies (All)

Main Characters

Adele Ratignolle a Creole lady and Edna's friend
Alcee Arobin a young man with a reputation for being involved with married women
Doctor Mandelet a retired physician and friend of the Pontellier family
Edna Pontellier the story's protagonist; she undergoes a transformation in which she begins to remove herself from the responsibilities of her husband and children
Leonce Pontellier Edna's husband, a Creole businessman
Madame Lebrun the owner of the resort on Grand Isle
Mademoiselle Reisz an elderly pianist and Edna's friend
Mrs. Highcamp a society friend of Edna in New Orleans
Robert Lebrun the elder son of Madame Lebrun
the Colonel Edna's father from Kentucky, who is a horse breeder
Victor Lebrun the younger son of Madame Lebrun

Vocabulary

Creole a person descended from early French or Spanish ancestry in the U.S. gulf area
demented mad or insane

infatuation a foolish or extravagant affection
peignoir a woman's loose dressing gown
quadroon a person of one-quarter black ancestry
unessential not important or necessary

Synopsis

Edna Pontellier is vacationing with her Creole husband on the Grand Isle resort owned by Madame Lebrun. Madame Lebrun's flirtatious son, Robert, begins playfully seducing Edna when she is away from her husband. Everyone on the island knows that it is Robert's nature to tease the married women, and nobody is too concerned with his behavior. Meanwhile, Edna finds herself becoming disenchanted with her husband and children, but finds joy and relief by spending time with Robert and swimming in the ocean. One evening Edna learns that Robert is leaving the island for Mexico, where he hopes to find business success. Edna is crushed, because she has developed a real infatuation with Robert. After Robert leaves, Edna spends most of her remaining time on the island in the company of the other women. Edna shocks Adele Ratignolle, a respectable woman and devoted mother, by saying she would give up the unessential things in life for her children, but would never give "herself."

The Pontellier family leaves the island and returns to New Orleans, where Mr. Pontellier expects Edna to manage the wealthy image of his household so he can impress his clients. But on Edna's scheduled day to entertain visitors, she decides to leave the house and go out by herself. Mr. Pontellier is angered when he finds out and, after an ensuing argument, Edna stomps on her wedding ring and breaks a vase. The next day, Edna announces that she is going to start painting and become an artist. Assuming that Edna has developed some sort of mental illness, Mr. Pontellier seeks advice from Doctor Mandelet. The doctor tells Mr. Pontellier that it is probably just a phase in Edna's life and recommends that he remain patient. Secretly, however, the doctor suspects that there is another man in Edna's life.

Edna visits the home of Adele Ratignolle and is

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depressed by the satisfaction her friends seem to receive from their domestic lives. She then visits the home of Mademoiselle Reisz, an accomplished pianist, and feels a connection with the artist, whom she first met on the island. Mademoiselle Reisz reveals that she has been receiving letters from Robert, and she shares them with Edna.

Soon after, Edna's father comes to visit to find a wedding present for her sister. Edna and her father are invited to a party at the Ratignolle's home, where Edna is introduced to a young gentleman named Alcee Arobin, who has a reputation for associating with married women. Her father's visit ends with a heated argument over Edna's decision not to attend her sister's wedding. Her father angrily returns to Kentucky, Mr. Pontellier travels to New York on business, and the children are sent away to visit their grandmother.

Alone in New Orleans, Edna calls upon the company of Arobin. During this time, Edna also decides to move out of her husband's home and rents a small house down the street. She then visits Mademoiselle Reisz to give her the news, and she learns Robert is coming home from Mexico. For the first time, Edna admits to Mademoiselle Reisz that she is in love with Robert, even though she knows she should not be. She returns home in a joyful mood, which Arobin immediately recognizes that evening. Edna, so caught up in her excitement over Robert's return, engages in a passionate kiss with Arobin before he leaves her that night.

Edna eventually meets Robert again and spends her time visiting with Robert and going on dates with Arobin. Robert tells Edna that he went away to Mexico because she was not "free," but belonged to Mr. Pontellier. He says he often dreamed of Edna becoming his wife. Edna admits that she loves Robert, but also tells him that she is not a possession and does not belong to anybody. Robert does not seem to understand her and leaves when Adele Ratignolle's servant comes to tell Edna that Adele is in childbirth and needs her immediately. After Adele gives birth, she leans over to Edna and whispers, "Think of the children, Edna."

Edna returns home, expecting to find Robert, but instead discovers a note that says, "I love you. Good-bye -- because I love you." Edna travels to the island resort where she had spent the previous summer and makes her way down to the beach. She then removes her clothing and, in a final act of liberation, swims out to sea until her strength is gone.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why do you think Edna decides to swim out to sea at the end of the story, possibly ending her own life?

Students may refer to her restlessness with her position in society. Edna does not really have anyone to talk to about her feelings. Edna feels trapped by the gender roles and expectations placed on her life. She wants the freedom to make herself happy and to find joy away from her husband and children. She is not satisfied with her life as a wife or a mother, but she cannot find a way to escape from the restrictions and judgment of society. Edna considers the sea as the only free thing and seeks her escape there.

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Literary Analysis

How could Edna's early life contribute to her feelings of unrest and dissatisfaction in her married life?

Edna's parents seem to relate to each other the same way Edna relates to her husband. Her father commands obedience from his wife and treats her much like Leonce treats Edna. Also, Edna's mother died when she was young, so she did not have a mother to talk to about marriage. Her older sister, Margaret, accepts the role of the typical wife of the times, so Edna cannot talk about her feelings to her either. Being raised in a Protestant house did not prepare her for the strict Catholic background of her husband or the relationships that the Creole women and men on the island have between them. As a result, Edna's own marriage is one of rebellion from her father rather than love for Leonce.

Inferential Comprehension

In what ways are Edna Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle similar? How are they different?

They are similar in that both are young women in their late twenties married for six to seven years. And both have children, but Madame Ratignolle is a more affectionate mother. She loves to smother them with kisses and hold them. Edna, on the other hand, enjoys the children's company but is very relieved to have the quadroon take them away or send them to their grandmother's house. The women are also very different in their looks. Edna has yellowish brown hair and eyes, and is tall and slender. She does not consider herself a mother-woman. Adele Ratignolle is very beautiful with spun-gold hair, blue eyes, and red lips. She has a stout figure from having many children.

Constructing Meaning

What part does the sea play in this story?

The sea becomes a place of freedom for Edna. It is something to be conquered when she learns to swim. Then it is a place of contentment where she can float and let herself be at peace. The sea is not owned by anyone and this is how Edna wants to be completely free, too, like the sea.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors Have the students research the society of New Orleans at the turn of the century. Then ask them to give a short report to the class about what New Orleans was like during the time period of the story and how the culture was influenced by the different social classes of Creole people.

Comparing and Contrasting Have the students read Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Ask them to compare Nora's and Edna's feelings of self-worth. How do they deal with their problems at home and their struggles to achieve personal identities?

Recognizing Feelings Find a recording of Chopin's "Impromptu" or have someone play the piece for the class. Ask the students to draw a picture or write a short paragraph about the feelings it evokes or memories this piece of music brings to mind. Why does the music affect them in this way?

Responding to Literature Have the students research the feminist movement of the 1970's. What was the purpose of this movement? Instruct the students to identify which feminist principles Edna would have supported and which she would not have agreed with. Do they think Edna's life would have been different had she lived in today's society? Have the students write an essay that presents their views, supporting them with references to their research and to the novel.