

PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

# THE AWAKENING

by Kate Chopin



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

# THE AWAKENING



Kate Chopin



**Prestwick House**

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# THE AWAKENING

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Kate Chopin

## C O N T E N T S

7	Notes
8	Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights
11	Chapter One
15	Chapter Two
17	Chapter Three
21	Chapter Four
25	Chapter Five
29	Chapter Six
31	Chapter Seven
37	Chapter Eight
41	Chapter Nine
45	Chapter Ten
51	Chapter Eleven
53	Chapter Twelve
57	Chapter Thirteen
61	Chapter Fourteen
63	Chapter Fifteen
69	Chapter Sixteen
73	Chapter Seventeen
77	Chapter Eighteen
81	Chapter Nineteen
83	Chapter Twenty
87	Chapter Twenty-One

91	Chapter Twenty-Two
95	Chapter Twenty-Three
99	Chapter Twenty-Four
103	Chapter Twenty-Five
109	Chapter Twenty-Six
115	Chapter Twenty-Seven
117	Chapter Twenty-Eight
119	Chapter Twenty-Nine
123	Chapter Thirty
129	Chapter Thirty-One
131	Chapter Thirty-Two
135	Chapter Thirty-Three
141	Chapter Thirty-Four
145	Chapter Thirty-Five
147	Chapter Thirty-Six
151	Chapter Thirty-Seven
153	Chapter Thirty-Eight
157	Chapter Thirty-Nine
161	Glossary
165	Vocabulary

# Notes

## N O T E S

### What are literary classics and why are they important?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that says something important about life and the human condition—and says it with great artistry. It has withstood the test of time and is not bound by any specific time, place, or culture. For this reason, a classic is considered to have universal appeal and significance. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to readers when it was first written, and its power will continue to give future generations new perspectives on life.

*Kate Chopin*  
K A T E C H O P I N



Kate Chopin

Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 8, 1850. Her father, an Irish immigrant, was a successful businessman, while her mother, of French-Creole descent, was a well-known socialite. Chopin was thirty-five years old when both her mother and husband died, leaving her to raise her family of six children alone. Her experience as a widowed mother is said to have inspired her writing, as she embraced the themes of the Creole population of New Orleans, the idea of a strong-willed

woman, and the traditions of French writers such as Guy de Maupassant. Among her work are stories of rural Louisianan life, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). When originally published in 1899, *The Awakening* was poorly received by critics and the public because of Edna Pontillier's sexual and social freedom. Readers and audiences today, however, consider *The Awakening* to be Chopin's most significant contribution to American literature.



Kate Chopin House,  
Cloutierville, Natchitoches  
Parish, Louisiana.

# Pointers

## READING POINTERS

### Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. In order to fully grasp the literary significance and beauty of *The Awakening*, we need to first explore some of the traditional symbols Chopin uses.
  - a. **Music.** In turn-of-the-century literature, music is often used to reveal and interpret the dreams and hopes of the main characters.
  - b. **Children.** Children are traditionally symbols of innocence, naivety, and purity. They are also used as contrasts to adults, showing how life experiences change and shape a person's character and values.
  - c. **The sea.** The sea is a traditional symbol of rebirth and cleansing. It is also frequently used to symbolize freedom and escape, as it does in *The Awakening*. Moreover, the sea is often seen as perilous and filled with mystery, both of which need to be overcome to achieve the aforementioned freedom.
  - d. **Black and white.** Traditionally these colors symbolize the presence of evil and goodness. "The lady in black," mentioned in *The Awakening* exemplifies, in Edna's mind, someone who is evil and untrustworthy. Edna is still preoccupied with thoughts of the lady, though, suggesting perhaps her own leanings or thoughts about those less innocent than first presented.
2. As you read the novel, consider how and where the theme of self-expression arises. In this regard, also note the implications that the expression and the hiding of self have, not only on Edna, but on those around her as well.
3. Edna learns three "languages" in the course of the novel. Consider each of these new modes of expression and how each adds to her development as an independent woman. Note the learning of the communication amongst Creole women on Grand Isle, the acceptance and development of Edna's talent in art (and the new vocabulary that is associated with it), and Edna's adoption of the language of love and passion as her affairs with Robert and Alcée develop.



4. As Edna's tale unfolds, she travels at length and lives in a number of different houses. From the cottage on Grand Isle, to Madame Antoine's home on *Chênnière Caminada*, to her very own "pigeon house," Edna's residences often reflect her development as a character and as a woman. Consider the ways in which Edna's houses are symbolic reflections that mark her journey through life.
5. The image of a bird is frequently alluded to in *The Awakening*. As the novel progresses, note mention of the various birds in the story. What do you think these flying creatures may symbolize? How do the descriptions of the birds later come to parallel the life of Edna Pontillier?
6. As you read the novel, consider the narrator and the tone of the story. Is the narrator an objective voice, or does it sometimes reveal a bias toward Edna? Does the tone of the novel remain consistent throughout, or does it reflect the changes Edna encounters?
7. Consider the title of the novel, *The Awakening*. Who is experiencing the awakening in the novel? Is it Edna? Robert? Alcée? Is there perhaps more than one awakening? If so, is there a major awakening (i.e., a clear climax)?
8. A sub-plot of the novel involves Edna's attempts at learning to swim. What do you think is the symbolic meaning behind these attempts? Consider the descriptions offered of Edna as she heads to the beach for her first lesson and her final swim. What does the narrator's language reveal about Edna as a person?
9. Consider the frequent descriptions of clothing and garments throughout the novel. Think about the ways in which Edna's response to her clothing may reflect an inner desire to break from the constructs of the Victorian Era. In what ways can she be seen as rebelling against society by challenging the traditional norms of clothing?





# CHAPTER I

A GREEN AND YELLOW parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over:

“Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!<sup>†</sup> That’s all right!”

He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence.

Mr. Pontellier, unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust. He walked down the gallery and across the narrow “bridges” which connected the Lebrun cottages one with the other. He had been seated before the door of the main house. The parrot and the mocking-bird were the property of Madame Lebrun, and they had the right to make all the noise they wished. Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining.

He stopped before the door of his own cottage, which was the fourth one from the main building and next to the last. Seating himself in a wicker rocker which was there, he once more applied himself to the task of reading the newspaper. The day was Sunday; the paper was a day old. The Sunday papers had not yet reached Grand Isle. He was already acquainted with the market reports, and he glanced restlessly over the editorials and bits of news which he had not had time to read before quitting New Orleans the day before.

Mr. Pontellier wore eye-glasses. He was a man of forty, of medium height and rather slender build; he stooped a little. His hair was brown and straight, parted on one side. His beard was neatly and closely trimmed.

<sup>†</sup>Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

Once in a while he withdrew his glance from the newspaper and looked about him. There was more noise than ever over at the house. The main building was called "the house," to distinguish it from the cottages. The chattering and whistling birds were still at it. Two young girls, the Farival twins, were playing a duet from "Zampa" upon the piano. Madame Lebrun was bustling in and out, giving orders in a high key to a yard-boy whenever she got inside the house, and directions in an equally high voice to a dining-room servant whenever she got outside. She was a fresh, pretty woman, clad always in white with elbow sleeves. Her starched skirts crinkled as she came and went. Farther down, before one of the cottages, a lady in black was walking demurely up and down, telling her beads.† A good many persons of the *pension*† had gone over to the *Chênrière Caminada*† in Beaudelet's lugger to hear mass. Some young people were out under the wateroaks playing croquet. Mr. Pontellier's two children were there—sturdy little fellows of four and five. A quadroon nurse followed them about with a far-away, meditative air.

Mr. Pontellier finally lit a cigar and began to smoke, letting the paper drag idly from his hand. He fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the water-oaks and across the stretch of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. When they reached the cottage, the two seated themselves with some appearance of fatigue upon the upper step of the porch, facing each other, each leaning against a supporting post.

"What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. He himself had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed long to him.

"You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her lawn sleeves above the wrists. Looking at them reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm. She slipped them upon her fingers; then clasping her knees, she looked across at Robert and began to laugh. The rings sparkled upon her fingers. He sent back an answering smile.

"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, and they both tried to relate it at once. It did not seem half so amusing when told. They realized this, and so did Mr. Pontellier. He yawned and stretched himself. Then he got up, saying he had half a mind to go over to Klein's hotel and play a game of billiards.

“Come go along, Lebrun,” he proposed to Robert. But Robert admitted quite frankly that he preferred to stay where he was and talk to Mrs. Pontellier.

“Well, send him about his business when he bores you, Edna,” instructed her husband as he prepared to leave.

“Here, take the umbrella,” she exclaimed, holding it out to him. He accepted the sunshade, and lifting it over his head descended the steps and walked away.

“Coming back to dinner?” his wife called after him. He halted a moment and shrugged his shoulders. He felt in his vest pocket; there was a ten-dollar bill there. He did not know; perhaps he would return for the early dinner and perhaps he would not. It all depended upon the company which he found over at Klein’s and the size of “the game.” He did not say this, but she understood it, and laughed, nodding good-by to him.

Both children wanted to follow their father when they saw him starting out. He kissed them and promised to bring them back bonbons and peanuts.

## Glossary

### Chapter I - Chapter II

“*Allez vous-en! Sapristi!*” – [French/Creole] “Go away! For Heaven’s sake!”

**Grand Isle** – a smaller resort area across the bay from *Chêmière Caminada*; although it was on a peninsula, much of Grand Isle was marshland; therefore, the easiest way to get to church from there was by boat.

**telling her beads** – saying her prayers and keeping count of them by using the beads of her rosary

**pension** – [French/Creole] rented rooms or cottages

***Chêmière Caminada*** – one of the first places on the Gulf Coast to become a summer resort for the upper middle class of New Orleans; families would stay for the summer, and fathers who worked in the city would frequently spend weekends there with them. It was destroyed in a hurricane in 1893. Kate Chopin summered there several times with her family.

“***Quartier Francais***” – [French/Creole] “French Quarter”; the French first settled New Orleans as a port and trading center. They built their houses and businesses on the only high ground near the river. This area still exists today and has survived many floods.

### Chapter III - Chapter IV

***peignoir*** – [French/Creole] a woman’s dressing gown or robe

***friandises*** – [French/Creole] delicacies, special treats

***patés*** – [French/Creole] a spread made of meat for use on crackers, bread, etc.

“**condition**” – pregnancy; in polite society, ladies used such words to avoid what was then considered vulgar references to the body.

**Creole** – The early French settlers brought with them the French language, customs, and culture. As they became Americanized, they developed their own corrupted version of the French language, added traditions, and developed their own cuisine that created their own distinct sub-culture.

### Chapter V - Chapter VI

**Daudet** – Alphonse Daudet (1840–1897), a French author whose writing was influenced by the naturalistic philosophy

“***Par exemple!***” – [French/Creole] “For example!”

“***Passez! Adieu! Allez vous-en!***” – [French/Creole] “Goodbye! Go away!”

**gangrene passion** – Gangrene is a serious infection that leads to the decay and decomposition of the flesh. This phrase suggests that the passion felt is both dangerous and destructive.

“***Blagueur—farceur—gros bete, va!***” – [French/Creole] “You comedian—trickster—you beast! Go!”

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## Vocabulary

### Chapter I

**lawn sleeves** – sleeves made of very fine cotton or linen

**lugger** – a small sailing vessel

**quadroon** – a person having one-quarter African ancestry

### Chapter II

**dilution** – a weakening or thinning down

**infusion** – flavoring

**languor** – a lack of energy; laziness

**mercantile** – commercial, industrial

### Chapter III

**mules** – women’s slippers that are open in the back

**rockaway** – a lightweight, horse-drawn carriage

**tacit** – unspoken, understood

**upbraiding** – finding fault with, criticizing

**utterances** – things that are spoken

### Chapter IV

**accouchement** – confinement during childbirth

**atonement** – amends

**brood** – children, offspring

**chastity** – virginity

**diminutive** – tiny, small

**droll** – amusing, funny

**efface** – to erase

**impervious** – unaffected, unable to be affected

**insidious** – harmful, invasive

**iota** – one bit, a tiny amount

**save** – except for

**unamiable** – unfriendly

### Chapter V

**camaraderie** – a feeling of close friendship based on shared experiences

**contemptuous** – filled with hatred

**entreaty** – a request, appeal

**fathom** – to understand

**inconsolable** – a pitiable character

**prostrating** – lying on the floor to show humility

**seriocomic** – simultaneously serious and funny