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AP Literature
Teaching Unit™

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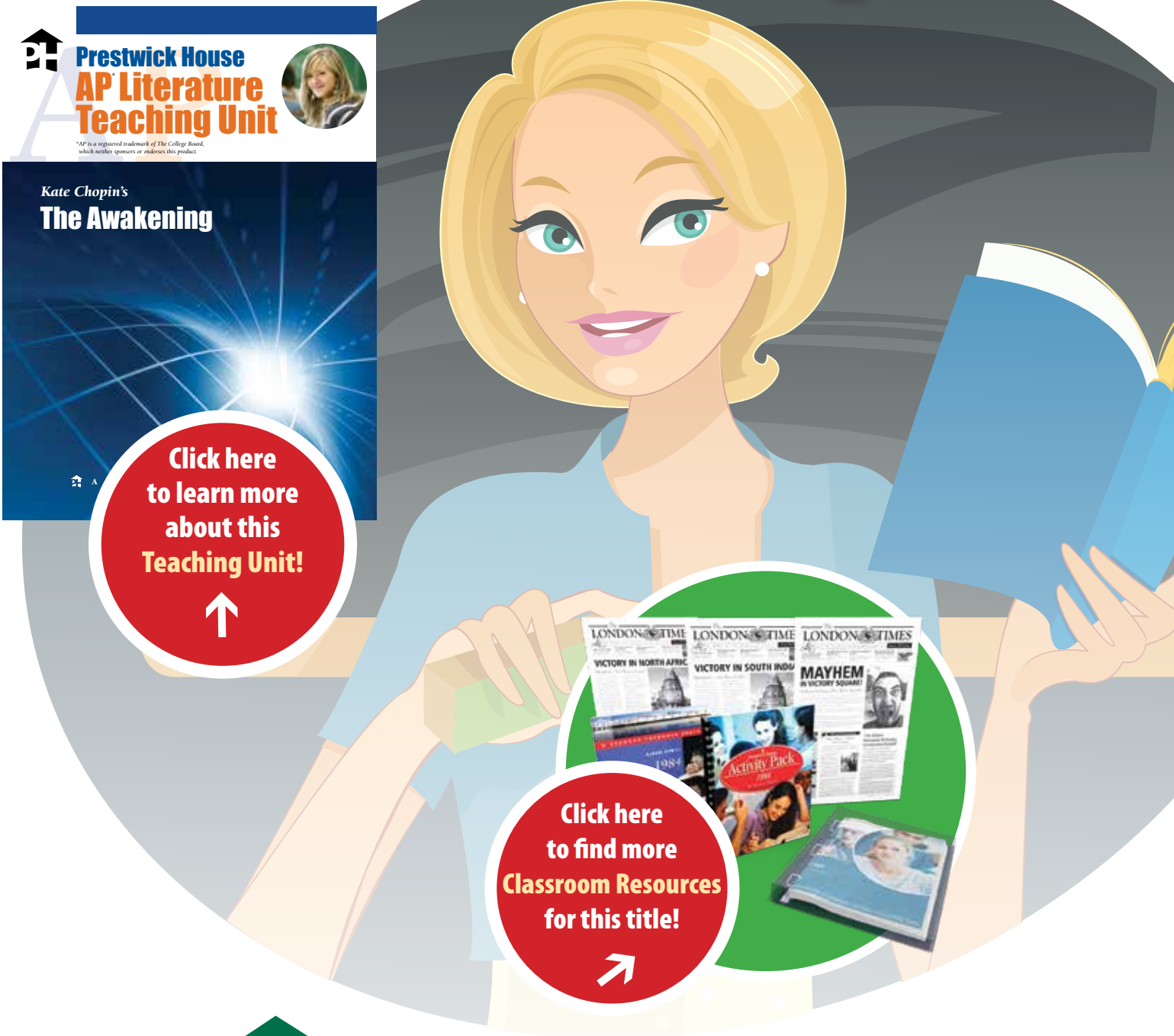

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Teaching Unit

The Awakening

by Kate Chopin

Written by Pete Boysen

Prestwick House

Item No. 300096

The Awakening

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. discuss nineteenth-century social attitudes toward women, children, and family.

2. identify and analyze the types of women present in the novel.

3. compare and contrast Edna Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle in their roles of wife and mother.

4. trace the stages of Edna's awakening.

5. discuss the impact of figurative language, symbolism, and imagery on the meaning of the book.

6. analyze the significance of the specific settings on the meaning of the book:

   - Grand Isle / New Orleans
   - Léonce's house / the "pigeon house"

7. analyze the roles of various men in Edna's life and their contribution to Chopin's social commentary:

   - the Colonel
   - Léonce Pontellier
   - Dr. Mandelet
   - Robert Lebrun
   - Alcée Arobin

8. discuss the ambiguity of the end of the novel and support multiple interpretations of Edna's final act.

Lecture Notes

Note to the Teacher: This novel deals with adultery and suicide; therefore, it may be necessary to consider the maturity of students before assigning this work.

THE SETTING AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Grand Isle, Louisiana and New Orleans, Louisiana—circa 1899 are the two settings for this novel. New Orleans—Catholic, French, with a great deal of interracial mixing—is a relatively easygoing society. Husbands are not overly jealous of the attentions their wives receive from other men. Women do not place too much credence in these attentions. Edna comes from the more structured and rigid society of the Protestant South.

Edna is a southern Presbyterian while her husband, Léonce Pontellier, is Creole. At one point, there were no fewer than thirty definitions of "Creole." Descendants of early French and/or Spanish settlers born in Louisiana are called "Creole." Another definition is a mixture of African and French and/or African and Spanish born in Louisiana. A third definition is the "Gens de Couleur Libres" or "Free People of Color" who had lived in New Orleans alongside European settlers from the city's founding.

New Orleans was established in 1718 as a French-Canadian outpost. Its location near the mouth of the Mississippi River led to rapid development. Its unique social structure began to evolve with the first mass importation of African slaves in the 1720s. By the end of the eighteenth century, the port city was flourishing, and was an attractive haven for smugglers, gamblers, prostitutes and pirates. The growing population included British-Americans escaping the American Revolution and aristocrats fleeing the Revolution in France. The city also became a refuge for whites and free blacks—along with their slaves—escaping the slave revolts in Saint-Domingue.

The Spanish, French and free people of color worked together, lived next to one another, and intermarried, creating a distinctive Creole culture with its own traditions and ways of life, its own regional dialect, and a cuisine that drew on its African, European, and American Colonial roots. New Orleans was already a multi-faceted city when it was sold to America under the Louisiana Purchase. The Americans who migrated there were unwelcome in the "Creole city"—today's French Quarter.

This apparent enmity between Creoles and Anglo-Americans was not long-lived. They fought side by side in the 1815 Battle of New Orleans, the final battle of the War of 1812. The victorious general, Andrew Jackson, became a national hero—and eventually U.S. President. His motley volunteer army was made up of Anglo-Americans, slaves, Creoles, free men of color, and Native Americans—as well as pirates supplied by the notorious Jean Lafitte.

Before the Civil War, New Orleans experienced an economic "golden age" as a port and finance center for the cotton industry. This came to an end, however, by the long Union occupation of the city and the Union blockade of the port.

The Awakening

Chapter I

1. Explain the significance of the parrot and the mockingbird at the beginning of this chapter.

2. Why would Chopin have thought it important to include this detail in her brief mention of the children's nurse?

3. Why would Pontellier consider his suntanned wife to be a "damaged piece of property"?

4. Who is Robert Lebrun?

5. What is his relationship with Edna?

Chapter X

1. What realization does Edna come to as she walks to the water with her husband by her side?

2. How are images of sound and smell used as a backdrop to this scene?

3. How does Edna respond to swimming successfully for the first time? What happens that can be considered symbolic or foreshadowing?

4. What is ironic about Edna's swim and her fear of being unable to return to shore? What might this indicate?

5. What realization are Robert and Edna arriving at on the porch of Edna's cottage after the midnight swim?

Chapter XX

1. What purpose does the long, detailed narration of Edna's search for Mademoiselle Reisz serve?

2. How is Victor a kind of exaggeration of Robert?

3. What does Edna learn about Robert while she is there? Why does this depress her?

4. What has changed in Edna that Victor would notice and comment on?

Chapter XXX

1. Some critics have likened Edna's grand dinner party to the Last Supper as recounted in the four Gospels. In what ways is it similar?

2. Who are the guests who attend the dinner?

3. Who was invited but did not attend?

4. Consider Edna's behavior at the party. Has she become an independent woman?

5. What does the following quotation indicate about the evening?

   "The voices of Edna's disbanding guests jarred like a discordant note upon the quiet harmony of the night."

6. How might this chapter turn out to be a climax to the story?