

The Awakening by Kate Chopin

Reading Schedule:

Chapters I-XIII by Monday, September 13—class time devoted to working with group members

Chapters XIV-XXVI by Monday, September 27—class time devoted to working with group members

Chapters XXVII-XXXIX by Tuesday, October 18—class time devoted to working with group members

Group presentations October 22-24—15 minute presentation/group; audience should take notes

Group Study Questions for Presentations on “The Role of Women in the Novel”

Directions:

Each group (assigned by the teacher) will have class time on each reading due date in class to discuss their questions and to plan for a 15 minute (maximum) presentation of their topic of consideration. Groups should use textual evidence (quotations, references to the text) to *prove* their claims in fully answering/addressing their topics of discussion.

GROUP 1: How does culture and setting play an important role in *The Awakening*, especially realism, local color or regional literature? Use the following to guide you in answering this question.

In its literary usage, the term **realism** is often defined as a method or form in fiction that provides a "slice of life," an "accurate representation of **reality**."

— from the *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, emphasis added.

Literary realism is a 19th century conception related to **industrial capitalism**. In general literary realism refers to the use of the imagination to represent things as common sense supposes they are.

—from *Bloomsbury Guide to Literature*, ed. Marion Wynne-Davies

Although the terms *regionalism* and *local color* are sometimes used interchangeably and have similarities, **regionalism** generally has broader connotations. Whereas **local color** is often applied to a specific literary mode that flourished in the late 19th century, regionalism implies a recognition from the colonial period to the present of differences among specific areas of the country. Additionally, regionalism refers to an intellectual movement encompassing regional consciousness beginning in the 1930s.

In *The Awakening*, as well as her short stories, Chopin frequently focused on the Creole culture of Louisiana. Unique regional features included a heritage that drew from French and Spanish ancestry, a complex caste system, the settings of urban New Orleans and rural vacation retreats like Grand Isle (located on the Gulf Coast). Chopin's use of a culturally foreign protagonist—Edna was a protestant from Kentucky, rather than a French-speaking Catholic Creole like her husband—casts cultural differences into even sharper relief.

GROUP 2: Mother-Women:

Chopin describes the mother woman at Grand Isle:

"It was easy to know them fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels."

1. Articulate Adele's attitude toward her children, husband, and self. Identify both her specific and general actions that show her to be a mother-woman.
2. What is Chopin's attitude toward these women?
3. What is Edna's attitude toward them?
4. What is 19th-century society's attitude?
5. What is your attitude?
6. What, if anything, is missing from Adele's life?
7. What is there about Adele that makes her a friend of Edna's?
8. As she says goodbye to Edna after her' torturous delivery, Adele whispers, "Think of the children, Edna. Oh, think of the children!"
9. What children does she mean? What does her mother-woman advice mean?

GROUP 3: Edna as Mother:

The night Robert said goodbye, her children "appeared like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the sold slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them." As she swims out to sea at the end, she thinks of Leonce and the children as a part of her life but "they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul."

1. What does she mean in these two quotations?
2. How do they reflect on her as a mother?
3. By today's standards, how well-adjusted are Edna's boys?
4. Would they be considered neglected today?
5. Do her children need her? Does she need them? Love them?
6. Is Edna too uncaring as a mother? Support your stance with textual evidence—quotations, page numbers.
7. What is her response to Adele's warning to "think of the children"?

GROUP 4: Edna as Wife:

Leonce has certain expectations of his wife and is often disappointed. Edna is never surprised by him and is often disappointed. Chart their expectations and resentments.

1. Why did he marry her?
2. Why did she marry him?
3. In what ways is Edna a romantic?
4. Leonce was not looking for strength in a wife, but Edna is described as having strong limbs when she swims and strong white teeth. Mlle. Reisz tests her shoulder blades to see if her wings were strong enough to "soar above the level plain of tradition." In what other senses is Edna strong?
5. Does Edna ever really have strength? And if she does, does she ever lose it?
6. How do the caged parrot and the mockingbird in the beginning of the novel and the bird with the broken wing at the very end of the novel reflect Edna as a wife?

GROUP 5: Dr. Mandelet's Influence on Edna:

Dr. Mandelet appears three times in the latter half of the book: when he gives advice to Leonce, when he observes Edna at dinner, and when he gives Edna advice after the birth of Adele's baby.

1. When Leonce asks him what to do about his much-changed wife, what advice does the doctor give?
2. What question does he NOT ask?
3. During dinner, what change in Edna does he notice?
4. With what striking metaphor does he describe her?
5. The doctor tells a story. Assuming it is true, why does he choose this one to tell?
6. In what way is Edna's tale of "pure invention" a response to the doctor's story?
7. What does the doctor say as he walks home?
8. Why does he say this?
9. As they walk home after the birth, what warning does the doctor give Edna?
10. What comfort does he give her?

GROUP 6: Edna's Father, the Kentucky Colonel's Influence on Edna:

1. What physical descriptions of Edna's father seem also to suggest qualities of his character?
2. Leonce believes, during the Colonel's stay, that Edna is closely attached to her father. Is he right? Offer proof from text.
3. Notice the Colonel's response to Adele's coquetry and to Edna's refusal to attend her sister's wedding. What do these responses show about him? What advice does he give Leonce?
4. In Chapter 24, Edna is glad to be rid of the Colonel. Note the description of him given here. In what ways is he the prototypical Kentucky colonel?
5. Why is the Colonel included in this novel?
6. What does the Colonel lack that Edna possesses?
7. How did he lose his bluegrass farm in Kentucky?