

The Awakening Seminar Questions

“I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself.”

Instructions: Please read all the seminar questions carefully, and then choose three specific questions to answer in detail.

For each question, write a fully-developed paragraph to explain your ideas, and provide specific evidence from the novel to illustrate your ideas—including at least one significant quotation from the novel for each of your three paragraphs.

1. Tragedy

In *Poetics*, the earliest essay of literary criticism, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle defines a number of key features of tragedies. According to Aristotle, here are two important traits of tragedies:

- ❑ The hero—a person of noble character and/or elevated social position—undergoes profound suffering and loss, but through this suffering and loss, the audience or reader also gains illumination, wisdom, or a new perspective.
- ❑ The hero’s downfall is often at least partly the result of his or her own human failures or errors—defined by Aristotle as *hamartia* for “human imperfections or shortcomings”—which many critics have labeled the hero’s “tragic flaw.” (Note: Not every contemporary critic agrees with the term “tragic flaw,” since it suggests that the downfall could have been prevented if the tragic hero were only “perfect.”)

To what degree can *The Awakening* be understood as a tragedy? How do the key features of tragedy apply to the novel and contribute to our understanding of the novel’s larger meaning or impact? For starters, what are the greatest traits or most significant aspects of Edna’s character? Moreover, what sort of hamartia (or “human imperfections, failures, or errors”) in Edna’s character contributes significantly to her demise? Is her “greatness” as a character in any way related to her *hamartia* and her downfall, or are these two elements of the novel unrelated? Finally, given these aspects of Edna’s character, what sort of “illumination, wisdom, or a new perspective” are we able to glimpse about human life and relationships through Edna’s downfall?

2. The 3rd-Person Limited-Omniscient POV

Kate Chopin’s use of the 3rd-person limited-omniscient narrative point of view allows readers continual access to Edna’s consciousness; in addition, this technique occasionally allows us access to the consciousness of Leonce Pontellier, Adele Ratignolle, and even Doctor Mandelet. **Why is the 3rd-person omniscient point of view central to the impact and meaning of *The Awakening*? What are we readers able to understand about Edna that other characters are not able to understand? Among the three other characters whose consciousness we are allowed to enter, which character understands Edna most fully? Why might this fact be important to the impact and meaning of the novel?**

3. The Ocean and Swimming

What is the complex significance of the ocean and Edna’s relationship with it in the story? What functions does the ocean itself seem to serve in the story? If it takes on symbolic meanings, what aspects of human life does it represent? Also, why does swimming—the “power of significant import [that] had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul” (36)—ultimately become Edna’s means of ending her own life? In addition, in what metaphorical ways does *Edna swim out too far*?

4. Art and the Artist

When playing piano for the guests at grand Isle one night, Mademoiselle Reisz wants to know what music Edna would like to hear. When Edna is very moved by the music, Mademoiselle Reisz says to her: “You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!” (34). Later in the novel, when Edna declares to Mademoiselle Reisz, “I am becoming an artist,” Reisz questions this declaration and tells Edna: “To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul.... The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (83-84).

Why are the concepts of art and the artist of central importance in *The Awakening*? Consider not only Mademoiselle Reisz’s character traits and her observations on the subject, but also Edna’s own efforts to become an artist.

5. The Doctor’s Observations about Nature (including the Instinct to Choose a Mate)

The Awakening is partly a story about natural human impulses and instincts—in particular, the impulses and instincts that bring two human beings together into sexually intimate relationships. The emotional and sexual realities of the novel come together near the novel’s end, when Edna and Robert’s discussion of their love is interrupted by Adele Ratignolle’s struggle to give birth. After Edna attends her friend Adele, Doctor Mandelet asks whether Edna plans to leave the country when Leonce returns (evidently to avoid damaging her family’s reputation, given her recent choices). To this inquiry, Edna replies haltingly: “I’m not going to be forced into doing things.... I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right—except children, perhaps—and even then, it seems to me—or it did seem—” The Doctor understands “her meaning intuitively,” and he then tells Edna: “The trouble is...that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, or arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost” (147). **What exactly is the Doctor saying about Nature, biology, and human instincts—and about their relationship to societal bonds and commitments (such as marriage)? Moreover, why does Doctor Mandelet use the words “Nature,” “illusions,” and “decoy” to talk about marriage and motherhood? Is he suggesting that Edna was somehow fooled by “illusions” and tricked into marriage by some sort of “decoy”? Moreover, why does he say that Nature has no regard for the “moral consequences or arbitrary conditions which we create” and which we “feel obliged to maintain at any cost”? Ultimately, is “Nature” (and the biological impulses and instincts that it programs in us) Edna’s adversary, Edna’s ally, or neither?**

6. A Sympathetic, Unsympathetic, or Morally Ambiguous Protagonist?

One question we can ask about a character is whether an author presents a character in a **sympathetic or unsympathetic** light. We find a character to be **sympathetic** when we identify with the character in some way—perhaps because we admire actions or attributes of the character, because we feel compassion for the character, because we recognize the common humanity we share with the character, etc. In contrast, we find a character to be **unsympathetic** when we do not identify with the character or when we judge the character negatively because the character possesses qualities or commits actions that we dislike or that we cannot understand. **Does Kate Chopin present Edna Pontellier as a sympathetic protagonist, an unsympathetic protagonist, or a morally ambiguous protagonist? Which particular words, actions, events, and aspects of Edna’s character contribute most strongly to this presentation of Edna, and why is this presentation of Edna central to understanding her story?**

7. Doubles, Twins, Pairs, Parallels, and Polar Opposites

The Awakening contains many dualities—many doubles, twins, pairs, parallels, and even polar opposites.

For example, here is one duality evident in Edna's character: the contrast between Edna's outer life and early social conformity vs. her inner life and her still-unexpressed thoughts, feelings, and impulses.

Moreover, we can recognize dualities in the novel's pairs of foil characters—including

- (a) Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz,
- (b) Robert Lebrun and Alcee Arobin, and
- (c) the unnamed young couple and the woman in black.

There are also other dualities to be found in the novel's paired images, settings, events, and motifs.

What is one meaningful duality in *The Awakening*—one set of doubles, twins, pairs, parallels, or even polar opposites—and how does this element's presence in the novel contribute to and help illuminate the story's impact and meaning for us?