Edna Pontellier’s Inner Desires

“She wanted something to happen- something, anything: she did not know what” (Chopin). In Kate Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, the reader is introduced to Edna Pontellier, a passionate, rebellious woman. Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent how unsettled Edna feels about her life. The reader can identify this by her thoughts, desires, and actions, which are highly inappropriate for an affluent woman of the time. In the novel, Edna has an awakening and finds the courage to make the changes she sees necessary. Kate Chopin is able to make quality connections in order to symbolize her innermost desires. Chopin does this by providing references to the sea, and the birds, and then using them to foreshadow Edna’s end of life decision.

The sea is typically used in order to express strength, life/ death, and calmness. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin uses the sea as a way to communicate Edna’s strength and empowerment. Two references that examine this idea are made available: one for the transformation of her body and one for the transformation of her mind. Edna’s learn-to-swim experience transforms her body during her awakening. Overcoming her fears and learning to swim is a significant experience because it shows how she is able to gain control over her body: “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul” (Chopin). This is a powerful statement due to the fact that it represents how Edna undergoes a dramatic change in character. She goes from listening
and acting upon the influences of society, to following her own mind and innermost desires. These both play a large part in understanding Edna’s personal transformation from a quiet and fearful girl to an empowered and independent woman.

Across many forms of art, birds are often used to symbolize the future and freedom: “Their ability to soar high into the sky and their proximity with the sky makes them desirable for humans who cannot fly without substitute wings” (Mascarenhas). In The Awakening, Edna finds herself yearning for this type of freedom and independence. She desperately wants to be relinquished from her stagnant life of wife and motherhood. Kate Chopin chooses to represent Edna’s desires through these symbolic birds. These solid references are scattered throughout the novel. They are first seen in chapter one, when Mr. Pontellier enters Madame Lebrun’s: “A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door” (Chopin) and, “…the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (Chopin). These are, arguably, the two most significant pieces of symbolism in relationship to birds. This is because the parrot and mockingbird are in cages, representing the idea that Edna feels trapped by her current life. Also, the birds are squawking at Mr. Pontellier, representing the voice Edna is unable to express for herself early on in the novel (Shmoop Editorial Team). The next reference to birds appears when Mademoiselle Reisz says to Edna: “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (Chopin). This is understood to mean that if Edna truly needs her freedom and independence to be happy, then she must be courageous enough to go against the norms of society (Shmoop Editorial Team).
In literature, foreshadowing is a tool used to suggest upcoming events. Kate Chopin utilizes this tool throughout *The Awakening*. She does this by the usage of symbolism, in both relation to the sea and the birds. There are two significant references in the novel connecting the sea to Edna’s eventual suicide. First, “A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water” (Chopin). Second, “She began to look with her own eyes: to see and apprehend the deep undercurrent of life” (Chopin). These are both important to recognize because they show a direct relationship between the sea and her upcoming death. As for foreshadowing Edna’s death by use of birds, two significant references can be understood. They both appear in the opening text: “A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, keep repeating over and over. ‘Allex vous-en! Allex vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!’” (Chopin). This is first seen by Kate Chopin’s selection of the word “hung” as opposed to “sitting.” The word “hung” has a negative connotation and has the ability to lead to thoughts of death and suffering by suicide. Second, this occurs by the interpretation of “Allex vous-en! Allex vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!” This can be translated to, “Get out! Get out! Damnation! That’s all right!” (Garrett Brown 2). This startling and dark introduction leaves the reader with thoughts of sin, entrapment, and the idea that freedom may result in death (2).

Through the examination of Kate Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, it can be determined that Chopin chose to incorporate symbolism to show how the main character would evolve. This character is Edna Pontellier. As the novel progresses, an awakening can be observed. This awakening greatly transforms Edna’s body and mind. Kate Chopin makes this evident by her use of references to the sea, the birds, and the foreshadowing of Edna’s end of life decision.
These quality connections show the suffering, empowerment, and innermost desires of Edna throughout the novel, *The Awakening.*
Works Cited


