

Understanding The Awakening Theme – Art

When Edna’s awakening begins, one of the first things she decides to do is resume her painting. It is very fitting that as soon as she feels that she has a “voice” that she should start experimenting with modes of expression. On her canvas she is allowed to express her deepest thoughts and desires in ways that words are sometimes unable to express. In addition, because she is a painter, and therefore requires a subject, she is able to get other characters in the novel to pose for her. This relationship between artist and model gives Edna a great deal of power over people that she has never had before. The ability to make someone sit for more than an hour at a time, stiff and still, and then to draw them in any way she wants is more power than she has ever had, and she seems to relish it. Imagine how it must feel for Edna to give orders to her own father, who has in many ways controlled her life, as he sits for a portrait, and then to be able to paint his features as she sees fit – to accentuate certain features over others, to make him look old or young, strong or weak, noble or corrupt. It must be similar to the power that Chopin herself felt as she wrote, reimagining scenes from her own life in more pleasing ways, redefining people from her life to suit her sensibilities.

Find five quotes that deal with Edna’s artistic awakening. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, describe her attitude towards art and why she seems to love it.

Quotes	Attitude
1)	
2)	
3)	
4)	
5)	

Understanding The Awakening Theme – Marriage

The marriages in the novel are very different from the way we think of marriage today, even though The Awakening was published at the turn of the twentieth century. At first look, it seems as if Edna loves Leonce, but then that love turns out to be more of a sense of duty or obligation, rather than an emotion or passion. The man who inspires the kind of romantic passion that we tend to think of as love is Robert. She loves Robert with the kind of emotion that people today tend to marry for. In New Orleans so long ago, however, status, security, and wealth, not love, were the common factors in arranging a marriage. Still, even though Edna feels that romantic passion for Robert, she does not seem to think of him in sexual terms. This desire she finally feels for Alcee Arobin. Part of the irony of the novel then is that Edna really does have all she needs from a man – except that her needs are split among three different ones. She has Leonce as her protector and provider, a man she certainly respects and admires, but doesn't love. She has Robert to provide her with romantic love, the "soulmate" who understands her and encourages her awakening. Finally, she has Arobin, who excites her sexually and satisfies her physical needs, even if he lacks Leonce's character or Robert's love. The ideal situation for Edna would be to have all of these things wrapped up in one man.

Find five quotes that deal with marriage. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, describe the attitude towards marriage – what does the woman really get from it?

Quotes	Attitude
1)	
2)	
3)	
4)	
5)	

Understanding The Awakening Theme – The Sea

In the novel, Chopin emphasizes the connection between the sea and freedom. Perhaps for her it is the vast openness of the sea that represents freedom, or perhaps it is the idea of swimming, forcing one's way through something so large and powerful. Perhaps it is simply the beauty and majesty of the ocean that reminds Chopin of the freedom that belongs to all of us. Whatever it is, it is obvious that the two ideas are connected. For Edna, the idea of learning to swim on her own, to become stronger and better at it, is part of the process of her own liberation. It is after her first real swim in the ocean that she decides not to follow her husband's command even if it means sleeping outside in the hammock. It is always the ocean that she associates with Robert and the freedom of desire and expression that she feels with him. Ultimately, when Edna finds herself most trapped and wants to free herself completely, to leave her life behind, it is to the sea she goes to find that freedom.

Find five quotes that deal with the sea. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, explain how the sea represents freedom in the quote.

- | Quotes | Explain |
|--------|---------|
| 1) | |
| 2) | |
| 3) | |
| 4) | |
| 5) | |

Understanding The Awakening Theme – Sexuality

Part of Edna's awakening is an awakening of her sexuality. Sexuality is usually associated with the sexual act, but it includes also one's attitude towards one's body, and a general sense of self that is attached to desirability and beauty. Through Alcee Arobin, Edna breaks the conventions regarding women's sexuality, first through flirtation and the verbal expression of desire, and later through the physical expression of sexual desire, albeit adulterous. At the time the book was first published, for a woman to behave as sexually bold as Edna does, or for a woman to write about sexuality as frankly and openly as Chopin does, were both so taboo that the novel caused a scandal. The Awakening was banned from many booksellers and libraries, and Chopin's already established reputation as a writer was considered tainted by the book. Still, Chopin's (and Edna's) boldness suggest that for a woman, sexuality is just as important in becoming a full person as education, family, or career.

Find five quotes that deal with sexuality. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, describe the attitude towards female sexuality.

- | Quotes | Attitude |
|--------|----------|
| 1) | |
| 2) | |
| 3) | |
| 4) | |
| 5) | |

