

Edna takes flight: the symbolism of birds in the awakening

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Creating a social sensation when it was introduced in 1899, *The Awakening* was labeled one of the first feminist novels as it fell into tone with the rapidly rising group of young women who demanded political and social equality. The reader witnesses Edna Pontellier's transformation from a caged beautiful parrot to a disabled bird that flies freely. The avian symbolism in the novel is apparent as the readers mark her tribulations from one bird to the next as she forges an unheard-of path in her upper-class world but eventually finds that she is unable to survive in this new environment of feminist individualism. The novel is introduced with the image of a colorful parrot squawking words of rage. Two translations of its dialogue are "Go away! Go away! For goodness sake!" and "Get out! Get out! Goddammit!" Either phrase conveys an unpleasant environment, as a parrot traditionally repeats overheard words spoken by humans. To set a tone for the story, the parrot, though beautiful and well taken care of, isn't free and is unhappy. Its position resembles that of all women in the male-dominated world at the turn of the twentieth century. More specifically, however, the bird represents Edna and the lack of true attention that she receives from her husband Leonce (Bookwolf 1). She is discontented in her marriage, though no outward activity can presuppose this, as her husband provides her with ample money and sends her many gifts. Although he is very devoted, he provides no passion in the marriage as he expects her to assume the typical role as a wife of a wealthy New Orleans businessman. Edna's spirit is too wild and free to succumb to a life of subservience, and she will soon learn that she would rather forsake the many social benefits that she enjoys for a life of liberty. Accompanying the parrot in a separate cage is a homely mockingbird whose

song is much more beautiful but whose appearance is dull and plain in comparison with the parrot. This mockingbird represents Edna's friend and advisor, Mademoiselle Reisz, a dowdy old spinster whose awkward social skills and gruff mannerisms leave her virtually friendless. Her extraordinary music, like the mockingbird, impresses all, however, and Edna is mysteriously drawn to her piano-playing as they form an understood kinship. Though Edna is flocked by friends, Mlle. Reisz is the only one to recognize Edna's desire to break free the parrot "could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence" (Chopin 468). The parrot, like Edna, is well-accomplished, though its own language could only be interpreted by the mockingbird that is recognized solely for its musical skill. Leonce's reaction to the birds' songs drives him inside, as he is obviously upset and disgusted by their commotion. The contemporary man of this time would likely be appalled by a woman who considered herself equal to him, voicing her own opinions and neglecting the immediate desires of a man. Radical views such as these were not only thought to be unchristian, but were so socially unacceptable as to endanger the family's business. His leaving the porch also represents a man's ability to discard women whenever they ceased to be entertaining, implying that women served the sole purpose of being seen and not heard (Fleischman 1). A few weeks later, Edna and Mlle. Reisz have come together at a social gathering on the beach. The atmosphere is full of typical happiness: children playing, people enjoying delectable treats, and adults dancing. Although Edna seems to be enjoying herself, she is in the

presence of all that she inwardly despises: the conventional society from which she longs to break free. The parrot is again present and squawks the same disapproval that was expressed in the first lines of the novel. During a recital by the Farival twins, two girls who represent perfect children as they are dressed in blue and white to represent holiness, the parrot “ was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that summer.” (Chopin 485) Its “ venom of nature” was released as it interrupted the supposedly lovely act of the twins. Although she has yet to admit it, Edna despises their duet as well, as it stands for everything in her life that rejects her character. These sentiments are later echoed by Mlle. Reisz who, when asked about her summer replies that it was “ rather pleasant, if it hadn’t been for the mosquitoes and the Farival twins” (Chopin 506). Later that evening, Mlle. Reisz plays for the audience, and during her performance, Edna finds herself in a daze as she is transported to another place on the wings of Mlle. Reisz’s notes. One certain piece, entitled ‘Solitude,’ conjured another image of a bird in which we can assume Edna’s position represents. “ It was a short, plaintive, minor strain. When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him” (Chopin 487). She is one of very few women of her time that believes in her own rights, hence the title of the piece and the solo flight of the bird. However, she has finally realized that she can’t survive her present lifestyle as devoted wife and mother. Like the bird, she must fly away from the strains of society and

her family, represented by the man standing on the shore who is looking desperately towards her flight. The bird is strong and not looking back: Edna has taken her first step to freedom. It is on this night that she first admits to herself her passions for her friend Robert and the first time that she denies the demands of her husband. Upon her return to New Orleans, Edna is once again entrenched by the strains of society and motherhood, and she gradually denies them all. Firstly, she is unavailable to receive callers because she is out, evoking much rebuke from her husband. The last straw is pulled when she moves from her elaborate mansion to a more modest dwelling. She has not forgotten her understanding companion, Mlle. Reisz, who supports her lover for Robert, and she frequently makes trips to see the elderly lady. It is during one of these visits that Mlle. Reisz feels Edna's shoulder blades to 'see if her wings were strong', saying "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (Chopin 533) Mlle. Reisz seems to be the only one who truly knows Edna, realizing that she will attempt flight by leaving the confines of society. Although Mlle. Reisz warns her of failure, she continues to provide advice, encouragement, and an ideal model as one who can survive without being a successful wife and devoted mother. (Smollett 2) As she moves to her smaller, more comfortable house around the corner, Edna appropriately names it the 'pigeon house.' Here, she is free to act in a manner improper to a woman of her social standing as she has denied the wishes of her husband and keeps company with a younger suitor. Her new abode reflects her desire to reject convention and settle in to a lifestyle all

her own. During her time spent dedicated to her new house, a romance is kindling with an acquaintance, Alcee Arobin. Based solely on lust rather than love, their time spent together is yet another rejection of the social ideal. Upon close inspection of his name, Arobin is pronounced slowly as a- robin, a bird known for its free flight and ability to live in close proximity to humans. “Arobin matches this description, for he, as his name implies, flies freely through society and as his reputation suggests becomes close with many women. Clearly he disregards the restrictions and “ rules” that society has set up. Edna admires his ability to live carelessly, as Arobin obviously enjoys himself and succeeds socially. Their relationship is one of mutual pleasure, thrown in the face of the upper class. He sees her company as the conquest of a married woman while she longs pursues him in her quest for adventure, a kindred spirit, and free wings. When her true love, Robert, presents himself and confesses his mutual affections for her, she realizes that she is unable to survive without him. In the real world, however, she could never live freely with Robert, and she resorts to tragedy to end her sorrows. She takes to the sea, where her desperation first became alive that summer, and commits suicide by drowning. As she wades in, she catches sight of a bird with a broken wing, unable to fly and falling down to the ocean. Its descent represents Edna’s inability to survive the social mores with her desire to live an independent life. The scene mirrors that which was invoked when Mlle. Reisz played the piano. This time, however, the bird has failed, and its flight, though begun so magnificently, is doomed. Edna, standing naked on the shore just as the man was, can now admit to this and realizes her defeat. Her miserable end can also be seen as freedom, as an awakening. She has finally

broken from her family and her upper-class New Orleans lifestyle, and can now fly freely (Dyer 131). Another bird that makes an appearance twice throughout the novel is an owl that marks two stages of Edna's progress in her awakening. In the third chapter, the reader sees the first mental breaking of Edna as she mourns her situation, crying to herself after her husband has reprimanded her for being a neglectful mother. "There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night." (Chopin 471) Representing wisdom, the owl seems to lament her sorrowful situation as Edna has yet to understand the actions necessary for happiness. When she has eventually given into her desires, admitting feelings for Robert and swimming for the first time, the reader notices the changes in Edna's mannerisms. She is carefree as she drops all pretension and finally submits to her own desires. Edna has come into her own, and she no longer needs sympathy as signified in Chapter 39 when "The old owl no longer hooted" (Chopin 492). Her life seemed to be perfectly in order, but a closer look only revealed the worst. Edna Pontellier could never be satisfied with convention, with following the rules, and with doing what was socially right. But in the end, her wings could not support her flight of freedom. Whether her will was not strong enough or a bird of her spirit could never survive on Earth is up to the reader's interpretation. But her happiness depended on her awakening. In order to have flown, she had to be free.

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