

# ENRICHED CLASSICS

Curriculum Guide to:

## *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin*

by

Kate Chopin

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## *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin, Kate Chopin*

Dear Colleague:

*The Awakening* may no longer shock its readers, as it did 100 years ago, but it continues to raise questions and produce emotional responses. The challenge to teaching Kate Chopin's novel today arises from an overabundance of material: Chopin fills her novel with remarkable passages just demanding to be studied, and students come away from the text with urgent questions about Edna Pontellier's personal discoveries and the boundaries she encounters.

The best solution may be to follow the students' lead. The lessons here ask students to respond to the novel and Chopin's short stories in a variety of different ways, and all of the activities can be adapted to address the topics and passages your students find most interesting. Because literature is always informed by the world around it, some lessons draw on other texts from the time, specifically Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and a newspaper review from 1899. Hopefully, students will come away from *The Awakening* with an understanding of the movements influencing Chopin—and with a few more questions to consider.

Julie Kachniasz

Each of the five lesson plans in this packet includes:

- Step-by-step instructions
- Materials needed
- Standards covered
- Questions students should be able to answer when the lesson is over

## Curriculum Plan #1

### "The Evils that Beset Her" (A Lesson in Criticism)

*The Awakening* shocked its readership when it was released in 1899, and Chopin was criticized for exploring questions of female independence and sexuality. Today, we tend to recognize the oppression Edna faced and to read the novel within the context of late nineteenth-century social change. In this lesson, students will discuss questions of Edna's representation and respond to a review written at the time of the novel's publication.

This lesson will take one fifty-minute class period.

#### **NCTE Standards Covered:**

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

#### **What To Do:**

1. Assign students a brief (5-10 minute) pre-writing activity: Do you think Edna Pontellier immoral? Explain.
2. Now, distribute Handout #1, which is a quotation from a review of the novel in a St. Louis newspaper, and/or write it on the board.
3. Break the students into small groups and ask them to read the quotation and the last few pages of the novel closely and discuss the following questions: 1) Do you see Edna's suicide as a "prayer for deliverance"? If so, why? If not, why not? 2) Do you believe that her "evils" are of her own creating? If so, why? If not, where do they come from? 3) In your mind, what are the "evils" that beset Edna? Would you call them "evils"? Why, or why not?
4. Now, ask the students to take what they've learned from group discussion and pen a one-page response to the review, as if they were writing a letter to the editor. (You may want to have some examples of letters to the editor on hand to show students.) They should be sure to specifically address the points, if any, with which they agree, as based

on their reading of the text. If they disagree, they should defend their argument with passages from the text.

### **What You Need:**

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* (0743487672) for each student

Copies of Handout #1

Examples of Letters to the Editor from a newspaper

### **How Did It Go?**

Were students able to express their own questions about Edna's response to her society? Were they able to work within their groups to understand the quoted passage and respond to it? Did they consider why they did or did not agree with specific points in the passage? Could they acknowledge possible contradictions? Did they base their responses in the text? Were they able to write a coherent response and to defend their opinions?

## Curriculum Plan #2

### "A Bird with a Broken Wing" (A Lesson in Imagery)

Many images recur throughout *The Awakening*: lovers, the sea, and birds. This lesson encourages students to read these images as clues about Edna Pontellier and her situation. They will examine the many references to birds and seek possible interpretations of the bird imagery. Along the way, they should achieve a better understanding of the composition of Chopin's complex novel.

This lesson could be adapted for a study of any of the recurring images in the novel. It will require one to two fifty-minute class periods.

#### NCTE Standards Covered:

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

#### What To Do:

1. Tell the students that birds appear throughout the text. Give the students about five minutes to scribble down positive and negative associations with birds.
2. Together as a class, have students share their ideas and discuss the many ways birds are represented in literature, songs and even movies. To get them started you may want to mention Hitchcock's film "The Birds," Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.
3. Now, place students in small groups, hand each group a copy of Handout #2, and ask them to find at least five references to birds in the novel. They may find the passages listed below, among others:

- "A green and yellow parrot, which hung in cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: '*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!* That's all right!'" (p.1)
- "There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water oak..." (p.9)
- "His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him." (p.38)
- "They could hear the long sweep of the pirogue through the glistening moonlit water, the beating of birds' wings, rising startled from among the reeds in the salt-water pools..." (p.108)
- "When I left her to-day, she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. "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.'" (p.127)
- "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water." (p.176)

4. Be sure the students copy out their quotations onto the handout. Beside each quotation, they should provide context for their phrase and address what additional information the description of the bird might provide. For example, in the third excerpt above, Edna describes what she imagines when she hears Mademoiselle Reisz play "Solitude." The bird might symbolize the flight or escape the man desires but can't achieve.

5. Ask each group to share its findings and compare passages.

6. Then, ask each student to complete the following sentence: "Edna Pontellier is like a bird because..."

7. For homework, have students find three passages in the novel that support or challenge the sentence they created in step 6—their thesis statement—and write a 2-page essay that examines their three passages. Encourage the students to consider whether or not their thesis statements are still accurate in light of the passages they chose and to revise them accordingly.

### **What You Need:**

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* (0743487672) for each student

Copies of Handout #2

### **How Did It Go?**

Were the students able to identify the bird imagery in the text and infer what the images might symbolize? Could the students provide a conclusion to the sentence as supported by the text? Were the students about to construct an essay that examined the imagery and symbolism? Did their essay reflect their thought process and the evolution of their thesis?

## Curriculum Plan #3

### Darwin and Chopin (A Lesson in Naturalism)

Kate Chopin's writing displays many inspirations, among them the writings of Charles Darwin and *naturalism*, the literary movement his studies influenced. This lesson is designed to introduce students to a literary movement, while placing the novel within its historical context, and it strives to help students see the ways in which various disciplines are interrelated. Here, students will read passages from Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and then relate the theory of *naturalism* to Edna in *The Awakening*.

This lesson will take two fifty-minute class periods (with some time to begin writing).

#### NCTE Standards Covered:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

#### What To Do:

1. Distribute copies of Handout #3 to students. It features a passage from the introduction to Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859.
2. This is a dense passage, so ask students to read it for its most important information. Students should determine that, according to Darwin, animals were not "individually created" but evolved to their current form over time.
3. Now, tell students that Darwin's theories—and their implications for human life and social interactions—shocked many late nineteenth-century Americans. Invite students to

suggest why these ideas might have been troubling. Do they challenge religious beliefs? Do they put into question man's sense of superiority in the natural world? Do they imply that biology—instead of free will or divine intervention—determines destiny?

4. Introduce students to some of the elements of *naturalism*, the literary movement that drew much from Darwin: 1) an objective, rather than imaginative and escapist, study of human beings; 2) a belief that a person is governed by his or her passions, heredity, and surroundings and is often subordinate to the social environment of which s/he is a part; and 3) a base, often pessimistic, view of life.

5. Next, delve into the novel. Ask students to find at least three examples that might be used to claim *The Awakening* is a *naturalistic* novel. Is Edna governed by her passions? Is her life controlled by her surroundings? Does she seem fully able to determine what life she will lead?

6. Divide the students into small groups and have them share their examples with one another. They should discuss how well their examples adhere to the principal ideas of *naturalism* and note where they think they deviate.

7. Tell the students that Chopin's novels borrow from many artistic and scientific movements and that while the novel has elements of *naturalism* it is not a purely *naturalistic* text. Once they understand this, give students the following assignment: In what ways does this novel exhibit characteristics of *naturalism* and how does it deviate from the theory? Discuss, providing detailed explanations of examples from the text, in a 3- to 5-page essay.

### **What You Need:**

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* (0743487672) for each student

Copies of Handout #3

Optional: BBC Web site on Charles Darwin, for additional information:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/darwin>

### **How Did It Go?**

Were students able to read a scientific text for essential information? Could they infer information about *naturalism* from what they learned about Darwin? Did the students see the ways Darwin's text and Chopin's novel were connected? Were they able to read a passage from *The Awakening* in response to *naturalism*?



## Curriculum Plan #4

### "The Very Passions Themselves Were Aroused" (A Lesson in Literary Analysis)

When Mademoiselle Reisz gives her concert on Grand Isle, the narrator describes the “passions... aroused within [Edna’s] soul” by the music. It’s a powerful passage and one students often find striking. This lesson asks students to examine this passage and others in the novel that suggest awakenings. They will look closely at descriptive language in the text and consider the “awakening” Edna undergoes.

This lesson will take one fifty-minute class period.

#### **NCTE Standards Covered:**

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

#### **What To Do:**

1. Direct students to the passage that describes Edna's response to Mademoiselle Reisz's piano recital on Grand Isle:

"The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column.... She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her." (p.39)

2. In pairs, have the students circle all of the words that describe physical sensations (e.g., tremor, beat, choking). Ask students to glance over the words they've circled. How would they describe Edna's experience?
3. Next, ask students, still working in pairs, to identify which of Edna's senses are hindered by the music and which are heightened? Why might these alterations be important to or appropriate to her situation?
4. Remind students of the novel's title. Is this a form of awakening? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. Now, ask the students to find at least three examples of "awakenings" in the novel and to make a note of these passages. Like in the class example, they should look for the descriptive language and consider the physical and emotional effect on Edna.
6. Give the students this sentence from the novel: "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (p.19). For homework, ask them to respond to the sentence. What is this "light"? What way does it show? Why does it then forbid that path? The passages they chose should help them in this exercise.
7. Optional lesson extension: Ask students to take the words they circled in one of their passages and, using these words, create a poem about some aspect of the novel.

### **What You Need:**

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* (0743487672) for each student

### **How Did It Go?**

Could students find the descriptive language in the passage? Could they infer information about Edna from the language used to describe her experience? Did they work with their partner to find other examples of possible awakenings in the novel? Were they able to consider the questions raised by the writing prompt?

## **Curriculum Plan #5**

### **Where Does the Story Begin? (A Lesson in Character)**

The short story “A Pair of Silk Stockings” often leaves students puzzled. Chopin’s clues about her protagonist are subtle, and students often struggle with what to think of Mrs. Sommers and her seemingly frivolous spending. This lesson encourages students to directly confront their many questions. By reading the text closely for various clues into Mrs. Sommers’s character, they will infer answers to their questions and write their own opening to the story.

This lesson will take one and-a-half fifty-minute class periods.

#### **NCTE Standards Covered:**

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

#### **What To Do:**

1. For homework, have students read “A Pair of Silk Stockings” and write down the five questions that remain when they’ve finished the story.
2. In class, ask students to share their questions with one another. What questions come up again and again? Are students curious about the source of the \$15? Do they want to know what change occurred in Mrs. Sommers’s life? Are they puzzled by her shopping spree? Do they wonder how she went from planning purchases for her children to buying luxuries for herself?

3. Now, ask the students to look at their texts again and to describe Mrs. Sommers. What do they know about her? What clues do they get about her life? How does she act? What are her thoughts? Write down the students' observations on the board or overhead.
4. Do students notice a contrast between what they *know* about Mrs. Sommers's life from the narrator and the way they *feel* about her actions in the story? Ask students why this might be. Encourage them to speculate about Chopin's intentions.
5. Give the students the following assignment for homework: Write the first page of Chopin's story. Be sure to introduce Mrs. Sommers and to answer the questions you initially set forth. Use what you learned in class discussion to inform your writing.
6. In class, ask students to exchange their writing with a partner. Have students share what they learned about Mrs. Sommers from their partner's piece. Do they have a different impression of her now than they did when they first read the story? Why, or why not? How did Chopin's original story lead them to their current understanding of Mrs. Sommers?

### **What You Need:**

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* (0743487672) for each student

### **How Did It Go?**

Were students able to identify their personal response to the story and articulate their questions? Did they read the text closely for possible answers? Could they take what they learned and develop it into a narrative? Were they able to recognize Chopin's technique?

Handout #1

**“The Evils that Beset Her”**

"At the very outset of the story one feels that the heroine should pray for deliverance from temptation, and in the very closing paragraph, when, having removed every vestige of clothes she "stands naked in the sun" and then walks out into the water until she can walk not farther, and then swims on into eternity, one thinks that her very suicide is in itself a prayer for deliverance from the evils that beset her, all of her own creating." – Anonymous, "Notes from Bookland," *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, 13 May 1899.

Handout #2

**Imagery in *The Awakening***

<i>Quotation</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Symbolism</i>

### **Darwin and Chopin**

“Although much remains obscure, and will long remain obscure, I can entertain no doubt, after the most deliberate study and dispassionate judgment of which I am capable, that the view which most naturalists until recently entertained, and which I formerly entertained—namely, that each species has been independently created—is erroneous. I am fully convinced that species are not immutable; but that those belonging to what are called the same genera are lineal descendants of some other and generally extinct species, in the same manner as the acknowledged varieties of any one species are the descendants of that species.”

– *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin, 1859

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