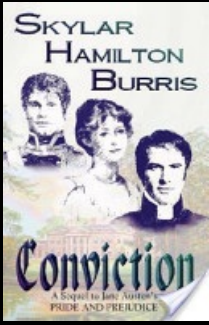
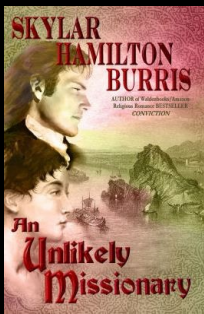


A Catalogue of Symbols in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*



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This is an academic exercise that takes a symbolic approach to Kate Chopin's novelette. My conclusions, drawn from the symbolism, amount to an anti-feminist reading of the text. This is not intended to be a well-developed critical paper, but it should prove a useful tool for examining *one aspect* of Chopin's work. It should also serve to help students learn more about the use of symbols and archetypes in literature and criticism. There are many other tools for analyzing literature, which students can learn about in my [overview of critical approaches](#).

Generally, Edna's "awakening" has been viewed positively by feminist critics and has been described as a sort of intellectual maturing or liberation. However, although some of the symbols catalogued below represent Edna and/or her "awakening" in a positive light, a great many of them imply that her "awakening" may be little more than a selfish delusion that causes her to lose a valuable, if conventional, life:

BLUE--Adèle Ratignolle eyes are described as "blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires" (527). According to *The Dictionary*, blue, at once the coldest and purest of colors, is "insubstantial in itself [and] disembodies whatever becomes caught in it." It is associated with calm, eternity, potentiality, and emptiness. This symbolism mirrors the ambiguity with which Madame Ratignolle is presented. On the one hand, she experiences "blind contentment"; she is utterly free from "anguish" and realizes, with her husband, the potential of "the fusion of two human beings." On the other hand, Edna sees her existence as "colorless" and as a "hopeless ennui." (552).

RED--Adèle's lips are red (527). *The Dictionary* says that dark red (and since Adèle's lips are described as being like cherries, they are probably dark red) is "nocturnal, female, secret," representative of the "mystery of life" and the color of the fire that burns within the individual. This tends to offset the negative aspect of the blue symbolism and to suggest that perhaps Edna is misjudging Adèle when she thinks of her as "colorless." Her domestic bliss, which Edna considers "hopeless ennui," may in fact be a manifestation of the "mystery of life."

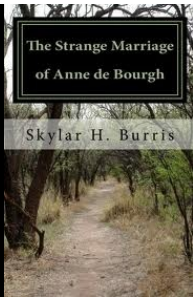
FOUNTAIN--A fountain can be heard at Edna's party (570). *The Dictionary* calls springs "symbols of motherhood." In traditional cultures, "springs are well known as symbols of the beginning of life and . . . of all beginnings, of genius, power, grace, and all good fortune." It is interesting to note, however, that the fountain's splash is described as "monotonous." This might imply that motherhood has become monotonous for the newly awakened and liberated Edna; but it may also suggest that her new beginning (which feminist critics consider to possess more genius, power, grace, and good fortune than her old, conventional life) is in reality simply monotonous, and that she deceives herself when she considers the domestic bliss of Adèle to be a "hopeless ennui," because the greater monotony is found in Edna's self-absorption.

YELLOW--Edna is repeatedly associated with the color yellow. Her hair is yellowish brown (524). At her party, the table has a pale yellow satin cover; the candles are burning under yellow silk shades; there are yellow roses; and Edna is wearing a gown described as having both a "golden shimmer" and a "yellow shimmer" (569-71). *The Dictionary* describes yellow as the most powerful of all the colors in its intensity and violence and says that it always overflows "the limits with which one tries to confine it." This is descriptive of Edna's awakened personality, which overflows the conventions of Creole society in an intense and, ultimately, violent way. Yellow, being a herald of death, may foreshadow Edna's suicide. Negatively, yellow is associated with adultery, overweening pride, an intellect which will feed only upon itself, cruelty, deceit, and cynicism. Thus, it may signify that Edna's "awakening" is really little more than a cruel, selfish rejection of the family she should instead cherish.

VASE--Edna breaks a vase (550). Significantly, *The Dictionary* tells us that to "break a vase is to destroy, through ignorance, the treasure for which it stands." Edna's shattering of the vase, then, could conceivably symbolize that she is throwing away a perfectly good life with a decent husband because of her misguided feminist notions.

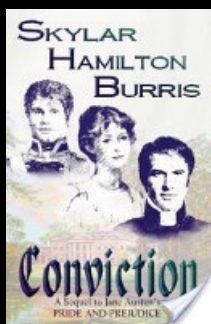
CAT--Edna finds a "drowsy cat" and spends time stroking it (578). Although *The Dictionary* concedes that the cat is viewed in a positive light by some cultures (such as the Egyptian), to the Kabbalist and Buddhist, it is an "emblem of 'sin and the misuse of the good things of this world.'" Edna's association with the cat may (like her breaking of the vase) symbolize her misuse (her ignorant rejection) of her life as a wife and mother.

LEAVES--A Far Eastern symbol of good fortune and prosperity, a bunch of leaves, says *The Dictionary*, "denotes a group as a whole in joint action or common purpose." The fact that Edna is picking "dead, dry leaves" may symbolize her bad fortune (i.e. her eventual



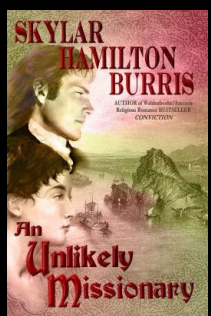
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suicide), which results from her rejection of the group, that is, the community of Creoles (561).

MOON--Edna is very often associated with the moon or with moonlight (536, 537, 538, 539,541). The moon, *The Dictionary* tells us, makes no light of its own and changes shape as it goes through its regular phases. "This is why it symbolizes dependence and, invariably, the female principle, as well as periodical change and renewal." It is a symbol of growth, life-rhythms, cold knowledge, fertility, sexual laxity (Mayan), dreams, and the unhealthy imaginings which that from the subconscious. Thus, Edna's "awakening" may be seen as something artificial; not a bird soaring high, as Madame Reisz desired her awakening to be, but an "unhealthy imagining," a self-deception, which grows out of her sexual laxity.

RINGS--Edna had given her husband her rings; when she returns from the beach, she "silently reach[es] out to him, and he, understanding, t[akes] the rings from his vest pocket and drop[s] them into her open palm" (524). Rings, according to *The Dictionary*, simultaneously bind and isolate. Therefore, the rings may symbolize Edna's feeling of isolation within the Creole community to which she is bound by marriage. "In Christian tradition, rings symbolize faithful affection freely given." But Edna's affection is not freely given; she does not marry for love. So her wedding ring becomes a lie, and she takes it off, flinging it to the carpet and stomping on it (550). But in Irish poetry, the force or bond of a ring could not be broken, even if the ring were lost. And Prometheus's ring "symbolized the fate from which no human can escape." Thus, the ring may symbolize that Edna can not free herself from the bonds she has formed, and her only escape, if she must insist on escape, is suicide.

DOG--Edna hears the "barking of an old dog" as she drowns in the suicide scene (584). *The Dictionary* describes several aspects of the symbolism of the dog: "culture-hero, mythic ancestor, symbol of sexual potency . . . seducer, lacking chastity, overflowing with vitality . . . or fruit of unlawful marriage." The dog, "the sage - or saint - purifies himself by devouring himself; in other words, by an act of self-sacrifice he finally reaches the last stage of spiritual self-mastery." The barking of the dog might symbolize Edna's purification; by devouring herself through suicide, she wisely escapes a conventional life, and thus becomes master of herself through death. However, it may also conversely symbolize her refusal to allow herself to be devoured for the sake of her children; she may be dying to escape that very self-sacrifice, and the barking dog may be a reminder of her selfish choice, which she makes because she lacks chastity and the will power to live as a faithful wife and mother.

BEE--When she dies, Edna also hears the hum of bees (584). This is one symbol that does not seem to fit the negative symbolic pattern. For *The Dictionary* calls the bee the symbol of the soul, of the afterlife, of resurrection, eloquence, poetry, and the mind. This implies that Edna's "awakening" is indeed a positive intellectual experience. On the other hand, the hum of the bees may be a cruel irony; for "bees collectively ensure the survival of their species," and Edna, having removed herself from the community, can now no longer survive.

BIRD/WING--When Edna goes to commit suicide, a bird with a broken wing flutters above (583). The bird, which stands in opposition to the serpent, can represent (according to *The Dictionary*) the soul or intellect escaping from the body, a forewarning or message from heaven, lightness and freedom from heaviness, or fate (*Koran*). "Those who offer sacrifice...are often described . . . as 'birds flying skywards.'" Negatively, birds might be seen as symbols of "distraction." Thus, it is possible that the bird with the broken wing in the suicide scene may symbolize either Edna's mental distraction and consequent inability to sacrifice for her children or her failure to liberate her soul and free herself from convention by continuing to live an awakened life. The latter view may be supported by the symbolism of WINGS, which are "an expression of rising to the sublime and of striving to transcend the human condition." But again, if "the human condition" is viewed as innately sinful, and pride is the original sin, then the broken wing could represent Edna's failure to transcend her pride by sacrificing herself for her husband and children.

WAVES--Edna tells Robert that she has been seeing the "waves and white beach of Grand Isle" while he was gone (576). Waves, says *The Dictionary*, may "be stirred to violence by external forces and their passivity is as dangerous as their uncontrolled activity. They stand for all the power of massive inertia." In the Old Testament they symbolize dangers of both the physical and moral order. In *The Awakening*, they may symbolize that rebellion against a conventional lifestyle ("uncontrolled activity") is just as dangerous as complete subjection to it ("passivity"). The waves' "massive inertia" may represent the inability of Edna to stop (and return to a conventional life) after once starting down the path of rebellion. They may also symbolize the moral danger she must face: the temptation to chose self-indulgence and individuality over self-sacrifice and community.



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CITY--The city is a fitting symbol for Madame Reiz (548). "Contemporary psychoanalysis," says *The Dictionary*, "regards the city as one of the symbols of the MOTHER in her dual aspect of protectress and controller. In general the city is akin to the female principle." Madame Reiz attempts to play this role of protectress and controller for Edna.

PARASOL--Edna can be found with a parasol (555). *The Dictionary* describes it as a symbol of heaven and an emblem of kingship. "The parasol attracts attention, not to the Sun above it, but to the Sun below it, that is to the individual concerned. It tends towards interiorization." This is appropriate for Edna, who begins a process of internalization, which leads her to withdraw from society and her husband, consequently drawing attention to herself by this unusual and unexpected behavior.

UMBRELLA--While Edna is associated with the parasol, Robert is associated with an umbrella (540). Unlike the parasol, it is associated with darkness, withdrawal, and protectiveness, according to *The Dictionary*. "Symbolically, it is more inclined to reveal a timid refusal of the principles of fecundation, either in physical or spiritual shape." This is fitting for Robert, who suppresses his desire for Edna for some time.

HORSE--Edna and Arobin go to the horse races together. Afterward, when she is alone with him, Edna finds that he "repel[s] the old, vanishing self in her, yet [draws] all her awakening sensuousness." This is appropriate considering that the horse is, according to *The Dictionary*, a carrier of both death and life and a symbol of "the onrush of desire."

FAN--Edna uses a fan (524). *The Dictionary* calls the fan a symbol of ritual sacrifice, an emblem of kingship, an instrument of bodily liberation, and a screen against evil influence. If Edna's awakening is viewed in a positive light, we might say that the fan symbolizes how her sexual liberation and awakening, which results in a ritual sacrifice (her suicide), manages to protect her from evil (a conventional life).

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Source:

The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols ed. Jean Chevalier and Alian Gheerbrant, Trans. John Buchanan-Brown, London: England, 1982.)

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