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Symbols in The Awakening

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Symbols in *The Awakening*

Summary:

Edna grew up in a puritan-basic family and lived her twenty-eight-year life in a fatherhood society. At the very beginning of the novel, Edna was not aware of her own feelings at all. Therefore, she was always obedient to playing the role which society appointed to her. Besides, she accepted her marriage to her husband and felt at ease even if she did not really love him. However, her attitude toward her marriage does not mean that Edna's needlessness or unconsciousness of love. As a matter of fact, she was once very romantic and mentally and fell in love with a cavalry officer when she was still a little girl. Later, when she grew a little older she was again in love with a man who visited a neighboring plantation. After marrying her husband, Edna spontaneously thought of her marriage as the end of her passion and the beginning of her responsibility. Nonetheless, this kind of concept did not firmly root in Edna's mind; on the other hand, it shook and was abandoned by Edna as soon as she got along with new people and was affected by them, whose candor and liberation from tradition was totally different from Edna no matter in thoughts or behaviors, when she was in a new place during the vacation. Edna changed so much that even her husband could not get used to her, for she no longer satisfied what she had and what she was expected to be; instead, she refused to be obedient and realized what she really wanted—freedom, and made every effort to pursue it. What's more, she started recognizing her sexual desires and courageously faced them and acted on them regardless of the social or religious principles. Thus, this kind of development of Edna's changes is "the awakening" same as the title which already implies the theme of this novel. The followings are symbols found in this novel, which abstractly suggest Edna's awakening.

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In my opinion, the title, the awakening, is already a symbol itself because it means the mental awakening of the main character, Edna, whose thoughts, soul, spirit and mind gradually awaken, grow and change throughout the whole plot. Edna grew up in a puritan-basic family and lived her twenty-eight-year life in a fatherhood society. At the very beginning of the novel, Edna was not aware of her own feelings at all. Therefore, she was always obedient to playing the role which society appointed to her. Besides, she accepted her marriage to her husband and felt at ease even if she did not really love him. However, her attitude toward her marriage does not mean that Edna's needlessness or unconsciousness of love. As a matter of fact, she was once very romantic and mentally and fell in love with a cavalry officer when she was still a little girl. Later, when she grew a little older she was again in love with a man who visited a neighboring plantation. After marrying her husband, Edna spontaneously thought of her marriage as the end of her passion and the beginning of her responsibility. Nonetheless, this kind of concept did not firmly root in Edna's mind; on the other hand, it shook and was abandoned by Edna as soon as she got along with new people and was affected by them, whose candor and liberation from tradition was totally different from Edna no matter in thoughts or behaviors, when she was in a new place during the vacation. Edna changed so much that even her husband could not get used to her, for she no longer satisfied what she had and what she was expected to be; instead, she refused to be obedient and realized what she really wanted—freedom, and made every effort to pursue it. What's more, she started recognizing her sexual desires and courageously faced them and acted on them regardless of the social or religious principles. Thus, this kind of development of Edna's changes is "the awakening" same as the title which already implies the theme of this novel. The followings are symbols

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The first symbol I found is the caged birds which appeared at the every beginning of this novel. Madame Lebrun's parrot and mockingbird represent not only Edna's but also all Victorian women's being encaged. Although they seemed to live in big, beautiful, and abundant houses and had every thing that no one did not admire. However, they were nothing but like those birds being limited in gorgeous houses, being possessed and treated like private properties by their husbands and lacked of freedom which was one of the most invaluable and priceless things in the world. "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage." This kind of limitation gradually stimulated Edna's strength to fly away from the big house and to escape from the restriction of society which obligated women to sacrifice themselves in order to worship their husbands and idolize their children. Therefore, Edna decided to move to the pigeon house to enjoy the life of individual, independence, and freedom. However, the pigeon house served as another symbol of Edna's incapability of preventing herself from being caught by the enormous net of society, for the pigeon house was merely two steps away from her former house. "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." Mademoiselle Reisz reminded Edna that she must have strong wings if she wanted to pursue her love for Robert. "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water." Nevertheless, the broken-wing bird seems to be symbolic of Edna's committing suicide and being swallowed by the boundless sea. This image represents Edna's inability to fight against the conventions in the long run.

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The sea in *The Awakening* is another symbol which symbolizes Edna's escaping from society, her husband, and her children. Also, the sea is symbolic of Edna's awareness and pursuit of freedom and what's more, her sexual desires. "Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul." It represents Edna's spiritual rebirth and it seems that Edna never awakes until she learns how to swim. The sea is at the beginning of this novel described as "seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation." The vast boundless sea represents solitude that Edna was afraid to reach. However, as soon as she could swim, she was greatly in love with the feeling of being embraced by the expansive sea. "But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers and the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence." It is a symbol that Edna's first time to realize her own powers and it stimulates Edna's abilities to challenge. "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul." She was eager to breakthrough the repression and longed to act beyond other women who were absolutely submissive to society and conventions. "She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." That night, after Edna learned how to swim, she realized the value of being independent. Thus, Edna rejected her husband's desire, and it was the first time Edna refused to be submissive and obedient to her husband's compelling wishes. "She perceived that she will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant." The sea also plays an important role of inspiring Edna's sexual desire. "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace." Abstract as it is, it reveals Edna's beginning to be aware of her own desires. Besides, Edna once escaped from prayers and the Presbyterian service to a big green meadow and she compared this green

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meadow to the ocean. It seems that only in a place which is as big as the ocean can Edna breathe the air of freedom. "I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinkingly and unguided." It symbolize that Edna wanted to escape from the limitation of society, her husband, and her children.

The repeating appearance of the lady in black in *The Awakening* serves as another symbol. As a matter of fact, the lady in black stands for the traditional Victorian ideal of the widowed woman, who will not live her life independently until perfectly finishing her responsibilities as a wife. During that era, a widow is expected to devote herself to the memory of her dead husband in the rest of her life. Therefore, if Edna's husband died, Edna being a widow would also be expected to live her life in such a socially appointed manner. However, Edna was eager to live independently from her husband, but in that society only the lady in black could live such an independent life and only a widow's solitude is acceptable in that society. Moreover, this sort of solitude is entirely different from Edna's pursuit of the strength of self-government; instead, it represents that a widow must stop experiencing any pleasures of life once her husband passed away. In addition, at several scenes in the novel, the lady in black appeared following the young lovers, which obviously stand for Robert and Edna who should have gotten together before Edna married to her husband. What the lady in black's solitude and mourning symbolizes is the failure of every union and, that is, also symbolizes the failure of Robert and Edna's relationship.

There are several symbols which evidently symbolize the factors or the stimulations of Edna's awakening in this novel. However, at the end of this novel, Edna committed suicide and buried herself under the sea which was also the place giving Edna a lot of inspiration and sense of rebirth. This imagery represents that,

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eventually, Edna had no alternatives but to give in to the irresistible reality. In my opinion, her failure to attempt to swim far out, where no woman had swum before, and finally being swallowed by the sea represent that Edna fails to fight against social conventions and stands for her inability to accomplish her wish of transcending the society. That is to say, no matter how much she had made efforts to change the current situation, she could not help but have to go back to where she was before hopelessly. When struggling with the sea, Edna eventually realized that she had no place in the world around her, that is, she still could not find her position in the universe, for it took her so much strength to fight against the nature, but still in vain and ended up with sacrificing her own life in the long run.

Key Words: Symbols in The Awakening, The Awakening

