notes for readers
English 11
Mr. Foster

notes & questions

Chapters I-X
pages 1-35 Signet (1976; ed. Barbara H. Solomon)
pages 1-40 Barnes & Noble (2003; ed. Rachel Adams)

Influence of Mothers

What the child needs pre-eminently above playthings, books, clothes, and every other earthly thing, is the presence and influence of mother. No other woman in the world can take her place. Many mothers farm their children out to nurses, and then give themselves to household duties, social pleasures, or possibly to duties which may be important in themselves, but which, after all, can only be secondary to the discharge of the all-important duties of motherhood. Many otherwise excellent women find the nursery a prison, and the care of their own children irksome, simply because they have a perverted mother-sense. The mother should have proper relief from the care of her children, but if she has the true mother-heart the companionship of her children will be the society which she will prefer above that of all others. (Sylvanus Stall, What A Young Husband Ought to Know [1897]; qtd. 123 Culley)

CHAPTER I
playing a duet from Zampa on the piano
Signet 2 / the paragraph beginning "Once in a while. . ."
Barnes & Noble 2
"A romantic opera by the French composer Ferdinand (Louis Joseph) Herold (1791-1833). The plot involves a lover's death in the sea" (Culley 3).

CHAPTER II (2)
"The Poet and the Peasant"
Signet 4 / the paragraph beginning "Mrs. Pontellier reached over. . ."
Barnes & Noble 4
"An operetta by the Austrian composer Franz von Suppe (1819-95), known primarily for his overtures" (Culley 5).

CHAPTER III (3)
Carondelet Street
Signet 7 / the paragraph beginning "The following morning. . ."
Barnes & Noble 8
"New Orleans's equivalent of Wall Street and the location of the Cotton Exchange" (Culley 8).

Signet 8
Barnes & Noble 9
At the end of this chapter, we read "Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she
knew of none better." No better what? And why does Chopin say Edna was
"forced"?

CHAPTER IV (4)
Signet 8 / the paragraph beginning "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not. . ."
Barnes & Noble 10
What is a "mother-woman"?

Creole
Signet 10 / the paragraph beginning "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married. . ."
Barnes & Noble 12
"A descendant of the original French and Spanish settlers who came to New Orleans
in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There was considerable intermingling
of races and nationalities to the point that some Germans, Irish, and blacks became
a part of this group. However, . . . the dominant cultural tone was and is French”—
and, Culley adds, aristocratic (Bonner 37, Culley 10).

Signet 10
Barnes & Noble 12
Edna marries Leonce, a Creole businessman. What is one characteristic of Creole
society that Edna finds particularly shocking?

CHAPTER VI (6)
Signet 15
Barnes & Noble 17
What "light" was dawning in Edna?

CHAPTER VII (7)
Signet 15 / the first paragraph
Barnes & Noble 18
What distinction does Chopin make between "outward existence" and "inward life"?

hair pillows covered with crash
Signet 17 / the paragraph beginning "Mrs. Pontellier had brought down. . ."
Barnes & Noble 20
"Hair" here refers to horsehair; crash is "a heavy linen fabric" (Culley 16).

a lateen sail
Signet 18 / the paragraph beginning "Edna Pontellier, casting her eyes about. . ."
Barnes & Noble 21
a triangular sail (Culley 16)

Signet 21 / the paragraph beginning "Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier. . ."
Barnes & Noble 24
What prompted Edna to marry Leonce?

Iberville
Signet 21
Barnes & Noble 25
"A village northwest of New Orleans, near Baton Rouge; or the parish ('county') of
the same name" (Culley 19).
CHAPTER VIII (8)
Signet 22
Barnes & Noble 26
Madame Ratignolle gives Robert a warning; what is the warning about?

the tenor of the French Opera
Signet 23 / the paragraph beginning "It isn't pleasant. . ."
Barnes & Noble 27
"The French Opera in New Orleans was one of the most distinguished opera companies in nineteenth-century America" (Culley 21).

she told him he was a bon garçon
Signet 24
Barnes & Noble 28
"A 'nice fellow.' Madame is making a pun, as in this context the phrase also means 'good waiter'" (Culley 21).

CHAPTER IX (9)
Signet 26
Barnes & Noble 30
How would you describe Mademoiselle Reisz?

notes & questions
Chapters XI-XVIII
pages 35-66 Signet

Reception Days

Let nothing, but the most imperative duty, call you out upon your reception day. Your callers are, in a measure, invited guests, and it will be an insulting mark of rudeness to be out when they call. Neither can you be excused, except in case of sickness. Having appointed the day when you will be at home to see your friends, you must, for that day, prepare to give your time wholly to them. The usual hours for morning receptions are from twelve to three, and you should be dressed, and ready for callers, at least half an hour before that time. (Florence Hartley, The Ladies Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness [1860]; qtd. 123 Culley)

CHAPTER XII (12)
Grand Terre
Signet 40 / the paragraph beginning "Let us go. . ."
Barnes & Noble 46
"An island adjacent to Grand Isle" (Culley 34).

the pirogue
Signet 41
Barnes & Noble 46
"A flat-bottomed boat designed for navigating shallow water, propelled by rowing or by sails, or . . . a dugout canoe" (Culley 34).

CHAPTER XIII (13)
Acadian
"How still it was..."

CHAPTER XIV (14)
the Baratarians
"The pirates, especially Jean Lafitte, who operated in Barataria, an area of marshlands and islands stretching sixty miles south from New Orleans to Barataria Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. The area abounded with legends of pirateeering, smuggling, and buried treasure" (Culley 38).

si tu savais
"The Irish composer and baritone Michael William Balfe (1808-70) composed a song with this title... but Chopin seems to have made up the words to the refrain" (Culley 39).

CHAPTER XV (15)
the prayer-beads "with very special indulgence attached to them"
"Roman Catholic belief in the remission of punishment (time in Purgatory) for sins committed; attached to certain prayers and sacraments" (Culley 41).

CHAPTER XVI (16)
"What does Edna mean when she tells Adele Ratignolle in Chapter XVI, "I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself"? (Bari Jean Dorman '09)

CHAPTER XVII (17)
Esplanade Street
"The most exclusive address of the Creole aristocracy. Called 'Promenade Publique' in the 1830s, it was a street of palatial homes shaded by live oaks, palms, and magnolias" (Culley 47).

reception day
"A day once a week when a woman was expected to be 'at home' to receive visitors" (Culley 48).

CHAPTER XVIII (18)
banquette
"a raised platform serving as a sidewalk" (Culley 51).
a dinner of herbs
Signet 66 / the paragraph beginning "As Edna seated herself. . ."
Barnes & Noble 75
"Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox [that is, one fattened in a stall for killing] and hatred therewith”—Proverbs 15:17 (Culley 54).

notes & questions
Chapters XIX-XXVIII
pages 66-99 Signet

CHAPTER XX (20)
Signet 69
Barnes & Noble 79
What is the significance of the fact that the LeBrun house in New Orleans looks to Edna like a jail? (Bari Jean Dorman '09)

the old regime
Signet 69 / the paragraph beginning “Their home from the outside. . ."
Barnes & Noble 79
"The Spanish regime (1766-1803)” (Culley 57).

CHAPTER XXI (21)
an old prunella gaiter
Signet 73
Barnes & Noble 83
A gaiter is "a button shoe with a cloth upper section" (Culley 59).

Isolde's song
Signet 75 / the paragraph beginning "Edna did not know. . ."
Barnes & Noble 86
"From Wagner's opera Tristan und Isolde, based on a medieval legend of ill-fated love. Isolde's song, known as her Liebestod ('Love-death'), is sung as she bids her dead lover farewell and falls dead herself in his arms" (Culley 61).

CHAPTER XXIII (23)
shot the grosbec / the paragraph beginning "Mr. Pontellier warmed up. . ."
Signet 82
Barnes & Noble 94
"Grosbeak, birds distinguished by their large bills" (Culley 67).

CHAPTER XXVII (27)
a low tabouret
Signet 97 / the paragraph beginning "Well, that ought to be reason enough. . ."
Barnes & Noble 110
A tabor is a small drum; a taboret is a low drum-shaped stool (Culley 79).

notes & questions
Chapters XXIX-XXXIX
pages 99-137 Signet

CHAPTER XXIX (29)
the pigeon house
Signet 100 / the paragraph beginning "'No,' she answered. . ."
Barnes & Noble 114
"A house or dovecot for the domesticated birds kept for show or sport. The breeds
kept by these fashionable hobbyists were elegantly colored, little resembling the
drab street pigeon" (Culley 81).

CHAPTER XXX (30)
a graven image of Desire
Signet 106
Barnes & Noble 121
"Lines from a sonnet by A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909) called 'A Cameo'" (Culley 85,
250).

There was a graven image of Desire
Painted with red blood on a ground of gold
Passing between the young men and the old,
And by him Pain, whose body shone like fire,
And Pleasure with gaunt hands that grasped their hire,
Of his left wrist, with fingers clenched and cold,
The insatiable Satiety kept hold,
Walking with feet unshod that pashed the mire,
The senses and the sorrows and the sins,
And the strange loves that suck the breasts of Hate
Till lips and teeth bite in their sharp indenture,
Followed like beasts with flaps of wings and fins.
Death stood aloof behind a gaping grate,
Upon whose lock was written Peradventure.

CHAPTER XXXIV (34)
patois / the paragraph beginning "A certain degree of ceremony. . ."
Signet 119
Barnes & Noble 135
"A dialect of archaic French mixed with English, Spanish, German, and American
Indian words spoken by the descendants of the Acadians" (Culley 95).

CHAPTER XXXVII (37)
Signet 129
Barnes & Noble 147
Chopin describes the braid of Adele Ratignolle's hair as "coiled like a serpent";
Hannah Hohenstein-Flack '11 notes, "This threatening image seems at odds with the
devoted, affectionate woman." Why does Chopin use such a threatening image?

CHAPTER XXXVIII (38)
Signet 133
Barnes & Noble 151
Robert closes his letter to Edna with "Goodbye—because I love you." Why "because"
rather than "even though"? (Kerri Friel '09)

CHAPTER XXXIX (39)
Lucilean feast
Signet 133 / the paragraph beginning "Victor, with hammer and nails. . ."
Barnes & Noble 151
"After the first-century Roman general Lucius Licinius Lucullus, who was noted for his banquets" (Culley 106). He was famous not only for defeating Mithridates, who had invaded Greece, in 86 BCE but also for "introducing the cherry to Rome from Asia Minor" (Rodgers 29, 484).

Venus rising from the foam
Signet 134 / the paragraph beginning "Victor, with hammer and nails. . ."
Barnes & Noble 151

Venus is the goddess of love (the Roman equivalent of Aphrodite). The scholar Pierre Grimal recounts some of the legends about her. She was a daughter of Uranus (the Sky), whose sexual organs, cut off by Cronos, fell into the sea and begot the goddess, "she who was born of the sea," or "she who was born of the god’s seed." . . . Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus, the lame god of Lemnos, but she loved Ares the god of war. Homer tells how the two lovers were caught by surprise one morning by the Sun, who told Hephaestus of the affair. The latter set a secret trap in the form of a magic net which only he could handle. One night when the two lovers were both in Aphrodite’s bed, Hephaestus closed the net over them and summoned all the Olympian gods, which caused them to rejoice exceedingly. . . At Poseidon’s earnest request, Hephaestus agreed to draw the net back and Aphrodite . . . fled to the isle of Cyprus. . . . Her favorite creatures were doves, a flock of which drew her chariot. Her plants were rose and myrtle. (Grimal 46-47)

In a myth about Aphrodite, her Greek counterpart, "she attempts to drown herself, ashamed of her love affair with a beautiful young man, but she is changed instead into a fish with a human face" (Culley 106).

houris
Signet 134 / the paragraph beginning "Victor, with hammer and nails. . ."
Barnes & Noble 151

"Virgin nymphs, everlastingly young and beautiful" (Culley 106).

Philomel
Signet 134 / the paragraph beginning "And if you can stand. . ."
Barnes & Noble 153

In classical mythology, Philomela was raped and mutilated by her brother-in-law, Tereus. Ovid tells the story in Book 6 of the Metamorphoses. When Philomela reveals Tereus’s crime to his wife, Procris, the sisters kill his son, Itys, and cook up his flesh to serve to Tereus. When he discovers this fact, he chases after the sisters with his sword, but the gods intervene, turning all three into birds. Why does Chopin allude to this grisly myth?

Now that you’ve finished the novel . . .

the sea
What might the sea symbolize? What might Edna's learning to swim symbolize? (Taylor Brown '09, Hannah Hohenstein-Flack '11, Anna Marinello '09)

Edna & Neddy Merrill
How can we compare Edna to Neddy Merrill, the title character in John Cheever’s short story "The Swimmer"? (Mateo Ward '09)
the romance pattern
Abbey Jones '09 asks if the novel adapts the romance pattern. Does it? And, if so, to what end?

the close of the novel (I)
What is the significance of the reappearance of avian imagery in the close of the novel? How can we compare Edna to the bird with a broken wing fluttering above the waves? What is the symbolic significance of the fact that Edna drowns? (Hannah Hohenstein-Flack '11, Kerri Friel '09, Alex Romano '09, Liliana Reynoso '09)

the close of the novel (II)
Why do the closing lines of the novel include a flashback to Edna's youth? Why does it include the image of an old dog chained to a sycamore tree? (Greg Heaton '09, Hannah Hohenstein-Flack '11)

the close of the novel (III)
Is Edna's death a victory over maternal and marital bondage? Or is it evidence of desperation? (Graham Craig '09, Anna Marinello '09)

the close of the novel (IV)
Consider the following editorial from The Daily Picayune, 8 October 1899, which Margo Culley quotes in the Norton edition of the novel:

The claim recently put boldly forth by a distinguished lawyer that a person has a right to die, when by means of disease or misfortune life becomes a burden, has provoked renewed discussion of the suicide question, and it is interesting, in this connection, to note that by far the larger number of suicides are among men. Women seldom take their own lives, and so we have the curious and contradictory spectacle of the sex that is universally accounted the braver and stronger, flinging themselves out of the world to avoid its troubles, while the weaklings patiently bear theirs on to the bitter end.

Nothing is more common than for the man who has speculated with other people's money and lost, and so brought ruin and disgrace on his family, to commit suicide. In fact, after reading of the trusted cashier going wrong, in one column, we almost expect to read in the next that he shot himself. No thought apparently comes to him of having any duty to stay and help lift the misery he brought on innocent people. In times of great financial stress, when a rich man has everything swept away, he, too, often solves the question of the future for himself by suicide, leaving his wife and little children to face a situation for which they are wholly unprepared. You never hear of a woman committing suicide and leaving her little children to the cruel mercies of the world, because she has lost her property. Instead, she feels more than ever that they need her care, and her help, and that she would be incapable of the unmentionable baseness of deserting them in such a crisis.

Yet if suicide is ever justifiable, it is for woman far more than men. She is always handicapped in the race of life. Sometimes with bodily infirmities, sometimes with mental idiosyncrasies, always by lack of training and business experience. Hard as poverty is for a man, it is harder still for a woman. Desperate as the struggle for existence is for him, it is still more desperate for her, limited by narrower opportunities, and rewarded with lesser pay. Terrible as are the tortures suffered by many a poor wretch, they are no worse than the life-long martyrdom that many a woman endures with never a thought of doing anything but bearing them with Christian fortitude and resignation until God's own hand sets her free.
There are many reasons why this state of affairs should exist. Woman's whole life is one long lesson in patience and submission. She must always give in. Men feel that they are born to command, to force circumstances to their will, and when circumstances can no longer be forced or bent, and they must yield to untoward fate, too many yield to the desire to avoid the misery they see before them by sneaking out of life. It is always a coward's deed. The babe salutes life with a wail, and the dying man takes leave of it with a groan. Between there is no time that has not its own troubles, and cares, and sorrows, and it is our part to bear them with courage, and it should be part of our pride in our sex that so many women sustain this brave attitude towards life under circumstances that might well tempt them to play the coward's part.

What light might this 1899 editorial shed on Edna's death? And on the themes of the novel?

I. vocabulary from the novel
The Roman numerals refer to the chapters, the Arabic to the page numbers in the Signet edition.

II.4 incessant
V.10 congenial
V.13 sonorous
VIII.22 solicitous
IX.24 capricious
IX.27 imperious
XVIII.57 alacrity
XXII.70 temerity
XXV.82 ingenuous
XXXV.111 despondent

II. understanding Edna
What might the following poems (two by the Victorian poet Emily Dickinson, one by the modern poet Linda Pastan) reflect about the characters and themes of Chopin's novel?

[We grow accustomed to the Dark]
c. 1862
Emily Dickinson

We grow accustomed to the Dark—
When Light is put away—
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye—

A Moment—We uncertain step
For newness of the night—
Then—fit our Vision to the Dark—
And meet the Road—erect—

And so of larger—Darknesses—
Those Evenings of the Brain—
When not a Moon disclose a sign—
Or Star—come out—within—

The Bravest—gropes a little—
And sometimes hits a Tree
Directly in the Forehead—
But as they learn to see—

Either the Darkness alters—
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight—
And Life steps almost straight.

[Much Madness is divinest Sense]
c. 1862
Emily Dickinson

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
‘Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur—you’re straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain—

Marks
Linda Pastan

My husband gives me an A
for last night’s supper,
an incomplete for my ironing,
a B plus in bed.
My son says I am average,
an average mother, but if
I put my mind to it
I could improve.
My daughter believes
in Pass / Fail and tells me
I pass. Wait ’til they learn
I’m dropping out.

nineteenth-century etiquette
Margo Culley, in her edition of Chopin's novel, includes ample quotations from
nineteenth-century etiquette manuals; these passages, some of which follow, shed
valuable light on values central to Edna's world—and Chopin's.

Duties of the Wife
On the wife especially devolves the privilege and pleasure of rendering home happy.
We shall, therefore, speak of such duties and observances as pertain to her. (Richard
A. Wells, *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* [1886]; qtd. Culley 122)

**Avoid All Causes for Complaint**

Never let your husband have cause to complain that you are more agreeable abroad than at home; nor permit him to see in you an object of admiration as respects your dress and manners, when in company, while you are negligent of both in the domestic circle. Many an unhappy marriage has been occasioned by neglect in these particulars. Nothing can be more senseless than the conduct of a young woman, who seeks to be admired in general society for her politeness and engaging manners, or skill in music, when, at the same time, she makes no effort to render her home attractive; and yet that home whether a palace or a cottage, is the very centre of her being-the nucleus around which her affections should revolve, and beyond which she has comparatively small concern. (Richard A. Wells, *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* [1886]; qtd. Culley 122)

**Beware of Confidants**

Beware of intrusting any individual whatever with small annoyances, or misunderstandings, between your husband and yourself, if they unhappily occur. Confidants are dangerous persons, and many seek to obtain an ascendancy in families by gaining the good opinion of young married women. Be on your guard, and reject every overture that may lead to undesirable intimacy. Should anyone presume to offer you advice with regard to your husband, or seek to lessen him by insinuation, shun that person as you would a serpent. (Richard A. Wells, *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* [1886]; qtd. Culley 122)

**The Street Manners of a Lady**

The true lady walks the street, wrapped in a mantle of proper reserve, so impenetrable that insult and coarse familiarity shrink from her, while she, at the same time, carries with her a congenial atmosphere which attracts all, and puts all at their ease.

A lady walks quietly through the streets, seeing and hearing nothing that she ought not to see and hear, recognizing acquaintances with a courteous bow, and friends with words of greeting. She is always unobtrusive, never talks loudly, or laughs boisterously, or does anything to attract the attention of the passers-by. She walks along in her own quiet, lady-like way, and by her pre-occupation is secure from any annoyance to which a person of less perfect breeding might be subjected. (John H. Young, *Our Deportment, Or the Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society* [1882]; qtd. 125 Culley)

**Places of Amusement**

Do not accept an invitation to visit any place of public amusement, with a gentleman with whom you are but slightly acquainted, unless there is another lady also invited. You may, as a young lady, go with a relative or your fiancé, without a chaperon, but not otherwise. (Florence Hartley, *The Ladies Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* [1860]; qtd. 125 Culley)
sources


---. "We grow accustomed to the Dark." *Final Harvest.* 99.


