In Kate Chopin’s beautifully poetic novel, *The Awakening*, there is much symbolism to be found “that serves to add meaning to the text and underlines some subtle point [that] Chopin is making” (Wyatt, para. 1). Many of these symbols have to do with nature and art: the birds, ocean, moon, and Edna’s own interest in painting. All of these serve a purpose in the chronological unfolding of Edna Pontellier as she gradually morphs into a woman aware of what she wants and who she wants to be.

Here we see Edna, a “typical” Southern wife and mother who has tried to adopt the Creole culture as her own. We see a beautiful and intimate culture on the one hand and an isolated and stifling one on the other, especially for a woman who was as full of life as Edna was. The metaphor which Chopin brings out in Edna’s clothes is a fascinating one, and one which I feel is more overlooked than the rest. There is a very unique connection between Edna and clothing throughout the book, both her own clothing and in some instances, the clothing of others. “Edna is fully dressed when first introduced; slowly over the course of the novel she removes her clothes. This symbolizes the shedding of the societal rules in her life and her growing awakening” (Wyatt, para. 5). There is a continual thread of connection between Edna and how she expresses herself by what she does or does not wear. The climax of course comes when she is standing on the beach at Grand Isle naked, and has “shed everything she has in her quest for selfhood” (Wyatt, para. 5). She defies the wealth and position that is hers through the successes of her businessman husband, who sees her as “nothing more than a household manager and nursemaid.” (Telgen and Hile 51-53) whose duty it is to “perform the social duties expected from the devoted wife of a highly-respected man,” which of course, includes dressing the part of a wealthy business man’s wife (Telgen and Hile 51-53). As the book unfolds, the reader gets the impression that Chopin does absolutely nothing by accident; every detail, even that of clothing, serves a purpose in revealing Edna’s journey to both physical and spiritual freedom.

Because Edna lived during the height of the Victorian era when women’s garments were a dizzying and complicated array of fluff and nonsense, and every accessory worn was of extreme importance, it is not surprising to find that “clothes are given social significance” in the novel (Sichel 46-48). A woman in Edna’s day (and especially a woman of social standing) could not randomly choose a garment from her closet when preparing for her day, but had to consider the occasion, time of day, season, color, and appropriate style. Was she going to tea? Then a “tea gown” must be worn, going “out” meant wearing a “promenade dress” for her fashionable perambulations about town (Sichel 46-47). There were recreational costumes and walking dresses, evening gowns, riding habits and bathing costumes (Sichel 46-48). Mentions of Edna’s clothes include her “Tuesday reception gown,” “house dress,” “street gown,” “white morning gown,” and “bathing suit” (Chopin 43,50,54,115). Being able to dress correctly for the right occasion must have been a daunting task in itself, and one that kept women conveniently preoccupied for much of the time. Indeed, it is logical to see that for women, especially of this period, “clothing defines, limits, and joins [them] in a materially focused singularity” (McCoy). Husbands such as Edna’s must have been more than happy to have their wives busily and contentedly occupied in something, anything, that would keep them completely out of the realm of “men’s lives” and in their own quiet and subservient domestic sphere.

The first most noticeable intimation which signifies Edna’s beginning rebellion towards a lifestyle which she considers stagnant and suffocating comes when Robert brings her to Madame Anoine’s house to rest that pivotal summer at Grand Isle. Here Edna “loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them” before falling into a luxurious sleep (Chopin 36). Here we see that Edna, “no longer trapped by her clothes [...] looks past the confines of societal roles, and sees her body as a part of her identity, not as her identity itself” (McCoy). In a symbolic gesture, she lays aside her clothes and in so doing begins both her “sensual and physical awakening” (McCoy). After this occurrence, Edna begins to realize that she is changing, and that after her “100 year nap,” as Robert puts it, her “present self [is] in some way different from the other self,” and like a butterfly that is being born, she is gradually
breaking free from her cocoon (Chopin 38). She begins to see her world with new eyes, “making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment […]” (Chopin 40). The colors of her life were growing brighter as she began to break free from the lovely prison that had been constructed for her.

The next major step which Edna takes on her road to freedom comes after she and her husband have gone back to their “charming home” in New Orleans when their summer vacation is over (Chopin 50). One Tuesday evening Mr. Pontellier, who never seemed to pay any particular attention to what Edna did, (unless she is doing something which he deems strange or out of step with protocol) took notice of the fact that she was not wearing “her usual Tuesday reception gown” but instead was wearing her “ordinary house dress” (Chopin 50). Receiving guests in the drawing room every single Tuesday “had been the programme which Mrs. Pontellier had religiously followed since her marriage, six years before” (Chopin 50). It was her social duty as Mr. Pontellier’s wife to entertain the wealthy wives and daughters of Mr. Pontellier’s contemporaries in the business world, those of equal or more desirable social status than their own. It was an important part of “the conventions” which he was so intent on adhering to with all his might and main. When being told that she had not felt like entertaining callers but had decided to go “out” simply because she felt like it, his astonishment seemed to be as great as if she’d just announced a desire to grow a beard! His immediate worry was for how this would look to those who had wished to call upon her and he tells her in no uncertain terms that he hoped she had “some suitable excuse” for her aberrant behavior (Chopin 51). Poor Mr. Pontellier; he did not realize that his wife has finally tired of “the masquerade” of her life, and that she was realizing that she could “no longer ignore her own desires, thoughts, and aspirations,” even though it meant being un-reconciled with the expectations of her public life (Telgen and Hile 51-53). Indeed, and instead of her growing “unstable,” as Mr. Pontellier thought, Edna was “becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we [all] assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin 57). It is as if Edna suddenly wads up her Tuesday reception gown, which represents her “old life,” and throws it in her husband’s face.

Amidst the transition which is going on in Edna’s life, we see an interesting contrast between the two female companions whose company she chooses to keep. First there is sweet, perfect, motherly Madame Ratignolle, who adores her children and worships her husband as a good Creole woman should (Chopin 8). Madame Ratignolle’s clothing is a picture of the woman that she is; demure, very feminine, all carefulness and ruffles and lace (Chopin 14-15). Then there is Mademoiselle Reiz, who is the complete polar opposite of Madame Ratignolle’s. She is an unpleasant woman who has “absolutely no taste in dress,” and exudes an almost palpable desire to be as out of step with the customs and fashions of the times as possible (Chopin 25). The ugly “black lace and artificial violets” (Chopin 62) that she always wears are in direct defiance of conformity. She knows she is an unattractive old maid but doesn’t seem to care, especially since she finds escape in the passion of playing her piano (Telgen and Hile 51-53). Edna is drawn to Madame Ratignolle because she knows instinctively that she is everything Edna is not. She admires her greatly but at the same time feels sorry for her and for “that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment […]” (Chopin 56). Edna also admires Mademoiselle Reisz, because she recognizes a free spirit who has chosen to march to her own music. Of her two friends’ lifestyles, Edna is most drawn to Mademoiselle Reisz’s because above all, she craves freedom, a freedom which she perceives that Mademoiselle Reisz has found in her own strange way.

Once Edna has chosen to make a clean break with her old life, which she does by deciding to move into a cozy little house all by herself, she decides to throw a “grand dinner” at the old house before the move is complete (Chopin 80). This is a climactic point in the novel: the grand and beautiful dinner party that Edna throws is both a celebration of her new life to come, as well as a symbolic “burial” of her old life. Perhaps for the last time Edna dons all the trappings which come along with being Mr. Pontellier’s wife. It is a pity that he was not there to have appreciated it. “The golden shimmer of Edna’s gown spread in rich folds on either side of her,” and the magnificent cluster of diamonds that Mr. Pontellier had sent especially for the evening sparked in her hair in queen-like fashion (Chopin 87,89). As she sat at the head of the table, which was gorgeously bedecked with “yellow satin” strewn with red and yellow roses, “there was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, looks on, who stands alone” (Chopin 89). Edna, though relinquishing her elevated position of being Mr. Pontellier’s wife and taking a step down in the social scale, is now free to rule her own life as she chooses. She has truly crowned herself queen of her own world, with herself being her sole subject.

In some ways it is difficult to understand why Chopin chooses to end her novel in the way that she does, with-
the impression that Edna drowns herself. Some may read the ending with a feeling of defeat, believing that Edna is throwing away her hard-won newfound freedom in life. However, it is also difficult to ignore the clear implications that Chopin gives when Edna is standing absolutely alone on the beach at Grand Isle and has finally “cast the unpleasant, prickling garments [of her bathing suit] from her, and for the first time in her life [...] stood naked in the open air” (Chopin 115). Aware of herself, her own body, and the call of the sea, Edna Pontellier feels “like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (Chopin 115). One could argue that Edna was truly “alive” perhaps for the first time in her life, and having thrown off the last vestiges of her old life through her clothing, had completed her journey to “re-birth.” With Edna’s nakedness, “the casting off of socially prescribed clothing, comes a spiritual revelation” (McCoy). What she chose to do with her new life after this journey was done is perhaps after the fact. She discovered herself, discovered freedom, and took it in the only way she knew how.

Works Cited