Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. Solitude as the Consequence of Independence - For Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of The Awakening, independence and solitude are almost inseparable. The expectations of tradition coupled with the limitations of law gave women of the late 1800s very few opportunities for individual expression, not to mention independence. Expected to perform their domestic duties and care for the health and happiness of their families, Victorian women were prevented from seeking the satisfaction of their own wants and needs. During her gradual awakening, Edna discovers her own identity and acknowledges her emotional and sexual desires. Initially, Edna experiences her independence as no more than an emotion. When she swims for the first time, she discovers her own strength, and through her pursuit of her painting she is reminded of the pleasure of individual creation. Yet when Edna begins to verbalize her feelings of independence, she soon meets resistance from the constraints—most notably, her husband—that weigh on her active life.

And when she makes the decision to abandon her former lifestyle, Edna realizes that independent ideas cannot always translate into a simultaneously self-sufficient and socially acceptable existence. Ultimately, the passion that Robert feels for Edna is not strong enough to join the lovers in a true union of minds, since although Robert's passion is strong enough to make him feel torn between his love and his sense of moral rectitude, it is not strong enough to make him decide in favor of his love. The note Robert leaves for Edna makes clear to Edna the fact that she is ultimately alone in her awakening. Once Robert refuses to trespass the boundaries of societal convention, Edna acknowledges the profundity of her solitude.

The Implications of Self-Expression - Edna's discovery of ways to express herself leads to the revelation of her long-repressed emotions. During her awakening, Edna learns at least three new “languages.” First, she learns the mode of expression of the Creole women on Grand Isle. Despite their chastity, these women speak freely and share their emotions openly. Their frankness initially shocks Edna, but she soon finds it liberating. Edna learns that she can face her emotions and sexuality directly, without fear. Once her Creole friends show her that it is okay to speak and think about one's own feelings, Edna begins to acknowledge, name, define, and articulate her emotions. Edna also learns to express herself through art. This lesson occurs in Chapter IX, when Edna hears
Mademoiselle Reisz perform on the piano. Whereas previously music had called up images to her mind, the mademoiselle's piano playing stirs her in a deeper way: "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." As the music ceases to conjure up images in Edna's mind, it becomes for Edna a sort of call to something within herself. Additionally, Mademoiselle Reisz has felt that she and Edna have been communicating through the music: noting Edna's "agitation," she says that Edna is "the only one" at the party who is "worth playing for." Once Edna is aware of music's power to express emotion, she begins to paint as she has never painted before. Painting ceases to be a diversion and becomes instead a form of true expression. From Robert and Alcée, Edna learns how to express the love and passion she has kept secret for so long. As with her other processes of language-learning, Edna finds that once she learns the "vocabulary" with which to express her needs and desires, she is better able to define them for herself. A pattern emerges—Edna can learn a language from a person but then surpass her teacher's use of her newfound form of expression. For example, while Adèle teaches her that they can be open with one another, Edna soon wants to apply this frankness to all areas of her life. And although Robert helps to teach her the language of sexuality, she wants to speak this language loudly, as it were, while Robert still feels social pressure to whisper.