

# Significance of the sea in the awakening

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In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, the sea symbolizes Edna's freedom from oppression. Edna feels suffocated by conventional society and has no interest in being a devoted wife or mother. She feels trapped with Leonce and her children, but does not have the abilities required to start a new life as an independent artist. Edna ultimately faces choosing between staying with Leonce, in which she would remain miserable, or breaking free from her marriage but having nowhere to go. The sea, though intimidating to Edna at first, allows Edna to escape the pressures of society, and brings Edna her best option and desired solitude in death.

Throughout the novel, the sea calls to Edna, inviting her to escape. "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (115). Edna wants to learn how to swim, and finally does so in Chapter X:

Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim. She had received instructions from both the men and women; in some instances from the children. Robert had pursued a system of lessons almost daily; and he was nearly at the point of discouragement in realizing the futility of his efforts. A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water unless there was a hand nearby that might reach out and reassure her. (27)

This paragraph is symbolic of Edna's journey to discovering her own inner strength. Others around Edna hold certain expectations of her role in society, including Robert, who throughout the novel is in fact "nearly at the point of discouragement." In this scene, swimming alone in the vast sea without someone to "reach out and reassure her" worries Edna. This indicates her

current state of dependency and submissiveness. " However, Edna becomes thrilled as she swims farther and farther into the sea: " A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul.... She wanted to swim out far, where no woman had swum before" (27). Here, Edna realizes her importance as a human and gets a taste of the independence she yearns for. " She turned her face seaward to gather in an expression of space and solitude.... As she swam, she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (28). The sea brings Edna the experience of a solitude she could " lose herself" in, which is very appealing to Edna as her character feels the need to get away from the pressures of her children, husband, and society. This thrill of being alone is soon interrupted by Edna's fear of death: " A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses ... She made no mention of her encounter with death and her flash of terror, except to say to her husband, ' I thought I should have perished out there alone'" (28). Edna's bliss while swimming alone suddenly turns to terror, indicating that she is not yet ready to be independent because she fears the consequences of breaking away from her old life. This scene foreshadows Edna's death at the end of the novel. As she is swimming away from the shore, " She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again." (116) At this point, however, Edna is ready to be alone, and she overcomes the terror she felt while learning to swim by finally giving into the inviting sea.

While speaking to Madame Ratignolle, Edna recalls a childhood memory in which she wandered aimlessly through a field, comparing it to swimming

through the ocean. "...of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water" (16). Edna recalls feeling strange, as if she could have walked through the field forever without it ending. " I don't remember now. I was just walking diagonally across a big field. My sun-bonnet obstructed the view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it. I don't remember whether I was frightened or pleased. I must have been entertained" (16). She remembers that she was in the field running away from the Sunday church service that she did not enjoy as a child. When Madame Ratignolle asks if Edna still finds herself running away from prayer, Edna defends herself, saying she is no longer impulsive. " ' No! oh, no!' Edna hastened to say. ' I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question... sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided'"(16). However, Edna's character is still as impulsive, whether she would like to admit it or not. She is conflicted by her impulses and undecided about whether or not to follow them. Running away from church symbolizes Edna's need to escape from conventionalities such as marriage and motherhood. Her journey to finding her true self feels as unguided as her walk through a meadow which was as vast as the sea. This memory is mentioned again at her death. " She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believe it had no beginning and no

end” (116). Edna continues to swim without looking back, because unlike the aimlessness she felt in the meadow, she is now certain that the sea will guide her to freedom.

The sea gives Edna a feeling of rebirth. “ How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (115). With Edna’s last swim, she is finally free of everything that had chained her down in the past, like marriage, her children, and her expected role in society. The sea allows her to be free of societal expectations and awakens Edna’s soul to the thrill of being independent and solitary.