

The long road to freedom

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* share a number of parallels in terms of character and setting, namely between Edna Pontellier and Huck and Jim, and the significance of the sea and river to the aforementioned characters. Thematically, the two novels also carry the same concept of a great journey. In *The Awakening*, Edna's journey, much like Huck's, is one filled with excitement and is mostly unplanned. While Edna abandons her wifely duties—such as attending her husband Léonce's weekly Tuesday receptions—to pursue a life that invigorates her, perhaps through her affair with Alcée, Huck makes a similar decision by forgoing his “civilized” (2) life with Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. He not only fakes his own death, but also runs away from the civilization he was brought up in, in a physical act of rebellion against society. Edna's acts of rebellion are comparably more subtle and limited, as her marriage binds her to more societal conventions than Huck's situation does.

Regardless of this, both of these characters share a common sense of connection to different bodies of water; whereas Huck feels most at ease drifting along the Mississippi River, it is the open sea that allows Edna to discover her true purpose and feel reborn. Symbolically, the flowing element of water represents healing and discovery, opening doors that allow both Edna and Huck to develop further understanding of themselves. Although Edna successfully realizes her new passion of pursuing art and subsequently devotes her time towards attempting to achieve true artistry, Huck does not seem to reach any further character development past his great moral dilemma of sending Jim back to Miss Watson. Once he reunites with his

friend Tom Sawyer, it's as though Huck's decision to "go to hell" for Jim was all for naught, as he reverts back to being Tom's adventure-chasing, thrill-seeking accomplice instead.

What this also reveals is that Huck has no strong sense of self throughout the entirety of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is portrayed through Huck's endless escapades in which he takes on false identities, such as "Sarah Williams" (58), "George Peters" (63), and "George Jackson" (99). Similarly, Edna desperately attempts to seek out her self-identity through spending great amounts of time with the pianist Mademoiselle Reisz and, her foil, the "mother-woman" Madame Ratignolle, two women who seem to be on opposite ends of a spectrum. Despite all these efforts made, it seems as though neither Edna nor Huck are fully confident in who they are as individuals, thus adding to how freedom and self-discovery are endless, repetitive pursuits, just as water seems to flow back onto itself in a ceaseless cycle that may one day bring about clarity.

As for Edna and Jim, both characters seek freedom from different societal conventions. Edna's lackluster marriage has left her bereft of excitement and passion, while Jim's status as a slave keeps him bound to his owner. This bars both characters from blossoming into full-fledged individuals, making them incapable of being in full control of their own lives and making their own decisions. Despite this, these two characters continue to persist as they feel as though they did not fit the roles they were assigned by society. Edna, though having married Léonce by choice in order to spite her parents, did not possess the mother-woman personality that was common among the

married women of her time. She was not one who “ idolized” (19) her children or “ worshiped” (19) her husband, as Madame Ratignolle may have, but she was not as distant and detached a character, as fully devoted to her art, as Mademoiselle Reisz was. She was “ different” (37), but in an indefinite manner.

Jim is similar in the sense that he was not the unintelligent, dutiful slave Huck expected him to be. He is capable of engaging in thoughtful conversation with Huck, and even delivers opinions that Huck cannot bring himself to argue against. Despite this, Jim’s goal was not to become a whistleblower for slave rights; all he wished was to travel north and free his family by any means necessary. This also presents another difference between Jim and Edna: while Jim has a clear goal set in his sights, Edna is, at times, obviously frustrated with herself and her own uncertainty towards pursuing freedom. She sees herself as the “ bird with a broken wing” (300), one who sought to explore but did not have the strength to.

The Awakening ends ambiguously, with Edna swimming out to the sea and allowing herself to succumb to her exhaustion, leaving her suicide up to open interpretation. As for *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is revealed in the final chapters that Miss Watson had set Jim free in her will after her death months ago, meaning he was a free man long before many of the novel’s events had transpired. Therefore, it can be said that both Edna and Jim’s journeys were a waste, as Edna eventually met her demise, while Jim was caught up in pursuing a freedom that had already been granted to him.