

# Edna's swim: the first step in her "awakening"

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



The central conflict in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is the self-discovery, or "awakening," of the protagonist, Edna Pontellier. Throughout the course of the novel she transforms from the bored, submissive wife of Lèonce Pontellier to a vibrant, independent woman with a powerful will of her own. The episode that launches Edna's awakening is her learning to swim. Edna's swim is a fresh and exciting experience for her and stimulates feelings of realization. Chopin's description of the event is a metaphor for Edna's awakening as well as a foreshadowing of the consequences of her self-discovery.

Edna's learning to swim is such an important event in the novel because she has accomplished something without outside help and solely for her own enjoyment. The observers of the phenomenon are surprised at the event; it was an "unlooked-for achievement," and "the subject of wonder," indicating that Edna's family and friends underestimate her (p. 27). Each of Edna's friends who in the past had attempted to instruct her "congratulated himself that his special teachings had accomplished this desired end" (p. 27). The other characters cannot accept that Edna has achieved something on her own; therefore, they attempt to give credit to themselves for the accomplishment.

The episode in the sea excites Edna and gives her a sense of power that is absent from her everyday life. The swim incites in Edna "a feeling of exultation," causing her to grow "daring and reckless" and to feel "intoxicated" (p. 27). These are emotions which she does not usually experience, and which would not be considered appropriate for a woman of her status to be feeling. In addition to these thrilling sensations Edna also

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feels empowered. Her “ newly conquered” skill causes Edna to feel “ as if some power of significant import had been given her soul” (p. 27)

While this passage marks the first step of Edna's awakening, it also serves as a metaphor for the various stages that she goes through during her transformation. When Edna laments the time she has lost “ splashing about like a baby!” she may also be lamenting the years she has lost leading the dull life of a bored, submissive wife; the years lost sleeping before her “ awakening.” Next, Edna turns “ her face seaward,” a metaphor for her turning to face her future (p. 28). The “ vast expanse of water” represents the endless possibilities Edna now sees in her life (p. 28). Edna swims and reaches out for “ the unlimited,” just as she will do in her everyday life from this point onward (p. 28). At the conclusion of her swim, Edna's adventure suddenly becomes frightening. Having overestimated her strength, Edna grows tired and “[A] quick vision of death smote her soul” (p. 28). This image foreshadows Edna's eventual suicide by drowning at the end of the novel as the final step of her awakening.

While the implications of Edna's accomplishment are for the most part positive, Chopin suffuses this passage with references to the unfortunate solitude which will result from her self-discovery. The author says that Edna wants to swim “ where no woman had swum before” (p. 27). This desire shows Edna's need to be different from the other women around her; she is no longer content to be only a mother and wife—she wants to be a woman first. She faces away from the beach in order to feel more alone and swims out in an attempt to “ lose herself,” another hint at her imminent suicide (p.

28). Even at this stage in her awakening, Edna is beginning to feel isolated from her friends. She looks back at the shore at “ the people she had left there” (p. 28). The water is “ a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.” Edna’s friends do not understand her need to be more than simply a mother and a wife; Madame Ratignolle and the other Creole women are content to devote themselves entirely to their children and husbands. Edna is absolutely alone in her awakening and, once it has begun, she will never again be satisfied with her previous existence.

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* is a novel about a woman’s self-discovery. In the passage describing Edna’s swim Chopin describes Edna’s feelings as she learns to swim and deftly reveals her frustrations with her current situation. Edna feels empowered by her newfound-skill and thus is launched on her path to her self-discovery. Chopin uses metaphors and descriptive language to foreshadow the consequences, both negative and positive, of Edna’s first step in her awakening.