2012 COLFA Research Paper Competition
Undergraduate Level
Majors: BA English with a focus on Creative Writing & BA English with a focus on Professional Writing
Supervising Faculty: J. Gregory Stone

Austin Bonecutter
9507 Brians Run
Helotes, TX 78023
The Awakening: Chasing Dreams

While some readers are disappointed by Edna Pontellier’s death in chapter thirty-nine of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, others see her suicide as a final release from the life that she is trapped in. Few readers, if any, look past the text of the novel to examine the psyche and motivations behind it. If a reader did so, he or she would see that the final chapter of *The Awakening* is not about Edna’s death, but her awakening as a free woman through a dream rich with symbolism.

The first suggestion that Edna might be dreaming comes in the chapter before the last. After she receives the note left to her by Robert, she sits down on the nearby sofa and stays up all night. At least, that is what the reader is led to believe. However, the story is primarily written from Edna’s perspective, and so her perception would likely be the one that is given. Assuming that she did, in fact, remain awake the entire night, there is a suggestion that she might have fallen asleep later. After a long night of ponderous silence, in which Edna is presumably ruminating over Robert’s flee from her love and what she will do now, Celestine enters the parlor through the kitchen door to light the fire (Chopin 622). It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the Doctor and Edna were speaking of the rising sense of women’s rights and dreams just before her long night of meditation. She must have come to one of two conclusions. Edna may have come to the conventional conclusion that she has lost everything in Robert’s love, and so she wants to live no longer. It is, however, possible that Edna does indeed become a free, awakened woman. The next hint that this chapter might be a dream comes with the sudden change of scenery without explanation or cause. The reader is immediately thrown from Mrs. Pontellier’s home in the New Orleans to Grand Isle. With a distance of 100 miles between them, a horse would take nearly seven hours to travel from one to the other. This is a considerable time to
travel without prompt, and although she asks Victor to prepare dinner for her, she claims that “[the water] would be too cold if I waited till this afternoon” (Chopin 623-624). In order for her to have arrived before noon, she would have needed to leave New Orleans at five in the morning. The next suggestion that Edna is dreaming comes with the unexplained change in perspective. Though the novel has always been through her point of view, suddenly the reader is thrust into Mariequita’s eyes. Perhaps it is because in the beginning of the dream Edna is Mariequita. She does not become herself until she is alone on the beach (Chopin 622-624).

Mrs. Pontellier certainly possessed the temperament to live beyond her life as a wife and mother. Although she has no practice with sketching, she has a natural talent for it and, despite the sketch’s apparent failure to represent Madame Ratignolle, her talent guides her to draw in new ways (Chopin 543). Edna also displays a certain ennui with her position in life that often is associated with artistic talent. Though she loves her children and her husband, she finds them more of a nuisance than a source of joy (Chopin 540). Instead she longs for freedom. She does not know precisely what she wishes to be free from, but she craves it nonetheless. At times, her longing turns to anger, such as the time when she smashes a vase and stomps on her wedding ring (Chopin 578). In the chapter before, she finds herself pitying Madame Ratignolle since her life is so boring and she will never taste “life’s delirium” (Chopin 578). She realizes that she does not know what life’s delirium is, and that the phrase unconsciously came to her mind.

Ratignolle often foils Edna in the novel. Where Edna is a secretive, passionate woman, Ratignolle is talkative and popular. She does not long for anything more in life than to be a loving mother to her children and a good wife to her husband. Even physically, the two are foiled; Ratignolle boasts a buxom form and Edna is thin, although both are beautiful in their own right. Chopin draws a strong comparison between creating a piece of art and giving birth. While
Edna is staying with Ratignolle for her delivery, her own memories are brought to mind. The context in the paragraph suggests that she is remembering the experience of giving birth, but the process is left ambiguous in the description. She remembers “an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to a great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go.” This process describes childbirth well enough, but it also can describe that artistic process of creating a new piece. Many artists and art critics claim that suffering makes great art, and more than a few great artists are famous for their prolific drug use.

Edna does not exhibit the normal signs of a suicidal person at the end of the novel. According to Suicide.org, people with suicidal tendencies exhibit a few of these symptoms:

- Appearing sad or depressed; talking or writing about death or suicide;
- withdrawing from family and friends; feeling hopeless; feeling helpless; feeling strong anger or rage; feeling trapped; experiencing dramatic mood changes;
- abusing drugs or alcohol; exhibiting a change in personality; acting impulsively;
- losing interest in most activities; experiencing a change in sleeping habits;
- experiencing a change in eating habits; performing poorly at work or in school;
- giving away prized possessions; writing a will; feeling excessive guilt or shame;
- acting recklessly. (Caruso)

While Edna does show some of these symptoms, most are not seen. In particular, it is strange that she would ask Victor to make arrangements for her dinner if she did not intend to return. She also asks him to bring her towels (Chopin 623). It seems that if she wanted peace and solitude to successfully drown herself, Edna should not have asked someone to possibly interrupt her by bringing towels that she will not need if she is dead. She leaves no letter or will
for her children, even though she loves them, or for her husband and friends. Some might say that Edna acted rashly in riding down to Grand Isle (in an impossible amount of time) in such a rush, but she had a seven-hour trip to contemplate her feelings. And, as a proper southern Victorian woman, she would not have been alone. At the very least, a helpful fishmonger might have let her ride in the back of his wagon as he drove to the coast. More likely, she rode in a carriage with a driver that she knew. Seven hours in a carriage is a long wait for her to be considered acting rashly.

The time in which Chopin was growing up and publishing was one of the most progressive in terms of psychological study and development. Freud was performing his research into the secrets of the mind during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, and his writing became the foundation of psychoanalysis. Freud’s work on dreams was published in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899; the same year in which Chopin published *The Awakening*.

If this final chapter of *The Awakening* is indeed a dream, then the beach is the most prominent symbol in it. Beaches, when the dreamer is viewing the ocean, are supposed to represent major changes in his or her life. Edna’s recent “awakening,” has changed her life dramatically. She sent her children away, slept with her friend, moved into a new house, and watched her friend give birth. The ocean symbolizes emotions in a dream, and drowning represents being overcome by emotions and repressed issues (Dream Moods). After a sleepless night spent mulling over her feelings for Robert, her husband, her friends, and possibly her children, Edna could certainly feel overwhelmed by her emotions and emotional issues. Her nudity as she enters the ocean is curious in Victorian times, but in a dream nudity suggests that the dreamer fears that he or she will be exposed (Dream Moods). This fear could pertain to Edna’s affair with Robert.
While beaches, nudity, and drowning are common dream themes, some specific symbols that Chopin includes in final chapter of *The Awakening* are notable. The first is an injured bird that falls into the ocean; a rare sight in nature, but entirely plausible in a dream (Dream Moods). Seeing an injured bird in a dream represents a unique outlook on love or a lack of understanding of emotions. Edna does not always seem to comprehend why she feels the way she does. When she is witnessing Madame Ratignolle’s delivery, she is overcome with the urge to leave. She feels as though she is watching someone being tortured, but she does not know why she feels this way (Chopin 620-621). As Edna is sinking, she hears her father’s and her sister Margaret’s voices. Since both characters are still alive at the end of the novel, they cannot be representative of Edna reuniting with lost loved ones as she dies. Along with the sounds of bees buzzing, a neighbor’s dog barking, and the mounted policeman, these noises are probably the sounds that she is hearing as she awakens. However, they could still be symbols within the dream. Bees symbolize activity, which Edna has had quite a lot of in the past night. Although cavalry officers are not listed in the dream dictionary, the meaning can be likened to that of a police car, since it is the officer’s vehicle (his horse) that is heard. Police cars signify that the dreamer is experiencing inner turmoil that he or she needs intervention to resolve (Dream Moods). The last bit of symbolism that Edna dreams is the smell of pink carnations. Flowers, especially in the Victorian age, carry a great deal of symbolic weight. Pink carnations were said to be born from Mary’s tears as she wept for her son Jesus as he died on the cross. They show a mother’s undying love for her children, yet the smell is described as musky. A bad association with the smell likely means that Edna finds her role as a mother distasteful.

While a reader cannot know how Kate Chopin wished for the final chapter of *The Awakening* to be read, he or she can use the clues left within to interpret the meaning. It is
possible to find Edna’s suicide at the finale of the novel. However, it is also possible to see past the text on the pages to glimpse into Edna’s, and perhaps Chopin’s, mind.
Bibliography


