

An Example of the Four-Step Analysis of a Prose Passage

The following passage appears in Chapter 10 of *The Awakening*, in which Edna first begins to swim by herself.

I have annotated the passage to illustrate the Four-Step Analysis method that we use for timed-writes.

Step 1 - Draw a horizontal line wherever there is a SHIFT or CHANGE (in setting, action, subject, time, tone, mood, etc.).
- Then number each section.

1 The people walked in little groups toward the beach. They talked and laughed; some of them sang. There was a band playing down at Klein's hotel, and the strains reached them faintly, tempered by the distance. There were strange, rare odors abroad—a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp, new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near. But the night sat lightly upon the sea and the land. There was no weight of darkness; there were no shadows. The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like the mystery and the softness of sleep.

Most of them walked into the water as though into a native element. The sea was quiet now, and swelled lazily in broad billows that melted into one another and did not break except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents.

2 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 near by that might reach out and reassure her.

3 But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water.

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 grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before.

Her unlooked-for achievement was the subject of wonder, applause, and admiration. Each one congratulated himself that his special teachings had accomplished this desired end. 3

"How easy it is!" she thought. "It is nothing," she said aloud; "why did I not discover before that it was nothing. Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!" She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone.

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.

4 Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.

A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land.

5 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."

"You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you," he told her.

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Step 2 - In the margin, label each section of the text (i.e., what it's about or what its focus is).

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the people walk to the beach and into the sea

2

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 near by that might reach out and reassure her.

Edna is unlike them; she can't swim

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But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water.

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For the first time, she can swim!

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Her unlooked-for achievement was the subject of wonder, applause, and admiration. Each one congratulated himself that his special teachings had accomplished this desired end.

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Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.

A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land.

She becomes scared for her life.

5

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."

"You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you," he told her.

She tells Leance about it.

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Step 3 - Now reread the piece closely. In each section, underline key language and details that express attitude. In the margins, identify the techniques being used and the effects.

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the people she walk to the beach and into the sea

the mood is mysterious and romantic, even enchanted, dreamlike.

Edna is unlike them; she can't swim

For the first time she can swim!

imagery personification diction

irony it's all males who take the credit

diction - it's "gone to her head"

metaphor away from the group, into something vast and unexplored

diction - her inexperience creates the illusion that she can't get back

diction - exhaustion, loss of strength, must force herself

She becomes scared for her life.

Irony

Leonce knows nothing of her inner life or the danger she experienced. ("blind" it?)

She tells Leonce about it.

Step 4 - Study the larger movement of the piece—i.e., the way the sections and their key details fit together to direct our perceptions of the subject. Is there a pattern at work in the passage and its movement?

Which key details, nuances, and complexities stand out now, and how do these details help us understand the author's attitude?

→ This is where you pull the whole passage together and formulate your essay.

- 1) It's an enchanted, dreamlike night with a sense of mystery and romance for virtually all the people in the group.
- 2) Edna has been an outsider among all these swimmers, unable to share in the experience, incapable of helping herself.
- 3) She becomes aware of her strength, amazed that she can do this on her own, and it goes to her head. She is "intoxicated" with "over-confidence" and rejects the group, preferring to use her new power to explore the unknown in solitude.
- 4) Her inexperience makes her think—perhaps inaccurately—that she has gone too far. She has barely the strength or the will to save herself.
→ "unaccustomed vision" and "unaided strength"
- 5) She feared for her life and thinks she almost killed herself (unintentionally), but Leonce is oblivious to her reality. Multiple ironies!!!