

merely “Potter’s Fields,” tombstones on which “doggerel epitaphs” are inscribed (818). We are in the biblical land of the “fallen” world no more. Melville leaves us with the doggerel couplet, “No more I peep out of my blinkers / Here I be—tucked in with clinkers” (818). Perhaps Melville succumbed to his desire to reduce the mystery of the unknowable to the everyday, even the ludicrous. Or perhaps, this is Melville’s acknowledgement that the attempt to translate this enchanted world of mystery will end in failure. Perhaps Melville’s final doggerel verse is his textual recreation of the “rotting” post offices (817). It is his recognition of the limits of communication, language, and translation.

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Chopin’s THE AWAKENING

Although most critics have interpreted the ending of Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* as indicating protagonist Edna Pontellier’s death by suicide, close examination of textual evidence calls attention to the fundamental indeterminacy of the novel, the basic level at which the novel refuses to provide incontrovertible evidence of suicide. The critical essays in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Awakening* provide a representative sample (upward of two dozen essays) of the best criticism of the novel, and the essays also reveal the pervasive tendency to assume that Edna commits suicide.

Despite this widespread assumption, the end of the novel is not at all clear. In short, most critics indicate that Edna commits suicide, but *The Awakening* itself does not. This element of indeterminacy is especially significant given that so much of the symbolic imagery of the novel seems just short of explicit (the recurring bird images and the repeated images of awakening, for instance). Reading *The Awakening* with an eye toward the fundamental indeterminacy of its ending affects readers’ interpretations of Edna’s character and the entire novel in profound ways. Such an approach makes readers realize that Edna’s intent is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to discern, and thus leads to a significantly different overall interpretation of *The Awakening*.

Readers’ interpretations of the novel’s final chapter are necessarily influenced by the description of the wounded bird that appears very near the end

of the novel: "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (108). Facile comparisons between the bird and Edna assume that the bird will drown and that Edna drowns. Although a broken wing would be a very serious hindrance for a bird and might well lead to the bird's death, it would not necessarily lead to death by drowning. If, for instance, the bird were a gull or some other waterfowl (which is quite likely if it is flying offshore), it could simply float on the water rather than drown.

Shortly before the passage that describes the wounded bird, the novel presents Edna's perception of her maternal role as profoundly unpleasant and confining: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them." Critics who interpret the novel's ending as a suicide typically cite these lines as evidence that Edna intends to escape her stifling maternal role by killing herself. Such interpretations undervalue the strange narrative moment in the following sentence, which (surprisingly) says, "She was not thinking these things as she walked down to the beach," thereby denying readers more helpful omniscience at a crucial moment that shapes most readers' overall interpretations of the novel (108). Even readers who choose to interpret the novel's final passages as indicating Edna's death by drowning must grant that the novel is willfully unclear about her intent.

Since the initial widespread negative reviews of the novel appeared in 1899, numerous critics have essentially found Edna guilty of a variety of moral crimes against her husband and her children, the most serious of which is her presumptive suicide. Thus, it makes sense to consider *The Awakening* by using terms from the world of law and criminal justice: intent and the elements of the crime. For certain crimes, intent is not one of the elements of the crime (the characteristics that help police, prosecutors, jurors, and judges decide whether a person's actions constitute a crime). Simply committing a physical act (speeding, for example) is enough to qualify the action as a crime regardless of whether the person in question intended to break the law. The law distinguishes between accidental deaths and suicides, and that distinction depends on the element of intent. Many deaths officially reported as accidental are perhaps in fact suicides, but in the absence of highly suspicious circumstances or proof of intent such deaths are routinely reported as accidental deaths, not as suicides, even in cases where the deceased showed surprising carelessness about his or her own safety.

For evidence of this type of carelessness in *The Awakening*, readers need only look at the scene early in the novel when Edna finally conquers her long-standing fear of the water and learns to swim in the Gulf of Mexico: "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" (27). Edna's overconfidence promptly leads her to swim out too far from shore without intending to do so. She is terrified when she realizes how far away she is from the land (though the novel makes it clear that the distance would not be a problem for an experienced swimmer rather than a beginner such as Edna), and even after managing to swim to shore safely she remains shaken by what the novel describes as "her encounter with death and her flash of terror" (28).

Talking about intent becomes more complicated if one admits the possibility of unconscious or subconscious desire and intent, though it would be a mistake to assume that Edna's complex metaphorical awakening includes an awareness or understanding on her part of any such desires. Contemporary readers must remember not to take for granted the kinds of basic psychological models of desire, repression, motivation, and self-awareness that might now seem all but self-evident to them. Chopin published *The Awakening* in 1899, well before Freudian psychological concepts became widely known in America, and there is no hint that Edna understands her own psychological struggles well. After all, the novel repeatedly portrays Edna as less than self-aware. Her motives, desires, reactions, and mental processes are often obscure even to her. If readers factor this pattern of very limited self-consciousness into a reading of the novel's ending, it adds another element of indeterminacy: the possibility that Edna intended only at a subconscious or unconscious level to commit suicide.

In other words, it is possible (perhaps even probable, given the novel's insistence that Edna is not especially aware of her own psychological issues and conflicts) that if at any level she wants to die, she is not conscious of this desire. The legal definition of intent functions only at the level of individual consciousness rather than at deeper levels of subconscious or unconscious currents (the existence or importance of which is a subject for debate by psychologists and psychiatrists more than it is subject matter for legal decisions). Given that classifying a questionable death as a suicide requires some proof of intent to kill oneself, *The Awakening* refuses to give readers sufficient evidence that Edna's implied death is a suicide. I say "implied death" because readers never encounter conclusive evidence that Edna actually dies (though her impending death seems very likely, as the novel's penultimate paragraph says, "it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone"), much less evidence that she intends to kill herself. Readers may be tempted to refer to the novel's final paragraph as Edna's life flashing before her eyes, but this cliché would not be accurate as Edna experiences sounds and smells "the musky odor of pinks [a type of herb]" instead of images (109).

Although an accidental death would still deprive Edna's young sons Raoul and Etienne of a mother and would still leave her husband Léonce a widower,

readers' moral reactions to such an unintended tragedy would likely differ significantly from their moral reactions to a clear (or rather presumed-clear) suicide. Outraged moral condemnation would generally subside, as would sympathetic critical attempts to explain Edna's death as a bold (though desperate) existential choice akin to that of Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary, the literary character to which critics have most often compared Edna. In this, rereading the novel's final scene leads not just to a more accurate understanding of Edna's complex character, but to a significantly different interpretation of the novel as a whole.

—SEAN HEUSTON, *The Citadel*
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Darío's LEDA

El cisne en la sombra parece de nieve;
su pico es de ámber, del alba al trasluz;
el suave crepúsculo que pasa tan breve
las cándidas alas sonrosa de luz.

Y luego, en las ondas del lago azulado,
después que la aurora perdió su arrebol,
las alas tendidas y el cuello enarcado,
el cisne es de plata, bañado de sol.

Tal es, cuando esponja las plumas de seda,
olímpico pájaro herido de amor,
y viola en las linfas sonoras a Leda,
buscando su pico los labios en flor.

Suspira la bella desnuda y vencida,
y en tanto que al aire sus quejas se van,
del fondo verdoso de fronda tupida
chispean turbados los ojos de Pan.

LEDA

In shadow the swan resembles the snow;
its beak is of amber, translucent with dawn;
the sleek early light which so quickly moves on
imbues the pure wings with a rosy glow.