

An Example Prose-Analysis Essay Focusing on a Passage from *The Awakening*

The best close-textual analysis essays on the AP test essentially “walk the reader through” the passage, from the beginning to the end, noting the author’s craft and the complex and nuanced ways the author presents the subject of the passage to us.

Writing Prompt:

In the following passage from Chapter 10 of *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, the novel’s protagonist, first begins to swim by herself.

In the passage, how does author Kate Chopin convey her attitude toward Edna and toward the experiences that Edna has in this scene? Discuss the importance of any literary techniques that contribute to Chopin’s portrayal.

Example Essay by Mr. Robel

(Note from Mr. Robel: Notice how I used my 4-Step Analysis of the passage to organize my actual essay; the essay mirrors the organization or structure of the passage itself.)

The passage begins with an image of multiple people going to the ocean in order to swim. It is an enchanted, dreamlike night with a sense of mystery and romance for virtually all members of the group. The author’s choice of details—such as the “strange, rare odors” in the air and the way “the night [sits] lightly upon the sea and the land”—creates an enchanted, dreamlike mood, in which the characters involved in the scene seem comfortable about what they are doing. This calm, comfortable mood explains why “most of [the people] walk... into the water as though into a native element.”

There is a notable shift in this imagery and the mood that it creates when readers learn that Edna is unlike the other people who are so comfortable going into the water. Edna is an outsider among all these swimmers, unable to share in the experience of moving herself through the water freely, and apparently incapable of helping herself. Being in the water makes Edna experience “ungovernable dread,” and this fact has made her desire “a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her” whenever she is in the water. Chopin’s diction and imagery show that Edna lacks confidence in her own skills; thus far, the ocean has been a realm in which Edna feels especially helpless. No man’s “instructions” or “system of lessons” has been enough to change Edna’s fear and dependence on others into confidence and independence.

However, everything changes for Edna on this evening. For no logical reason, this time Edna is suddenly able to swim on her own, without any assistance or lessons. (Of course, the reader may wonder if she learns to swim on this night precisely because no man tries to offer here instructions or lessons.) Chopin describes Edna as a toddler who “walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence,” and this simile reveals that the new possibilities before Edna inspire her to take risks that may be naïve or ill-advised. This suggestion is echoed by Chopin’s choice of the words “daring and reckless.” The reason

for Edna's "exultation" seems to lie in Chopin's analogy for swimming: "as if some power of significant import had been given to her to control the working of her body and her soul." Edna feels such exhilaration in swimming because she has discovered that she has a strength she never knew she had before this night. This "newly conquered power" makes Edna feel "intoxicated" and makes her swim out alone; Chopin's choice of words reveals that Edna's sense of power has gone to her head in some way—and that perhaps this sense of power may be too much for Edna to handle responsibly. Hence, as she swims out alone, Edna "seem[s] to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself"; metaphorically, Edna uses her new sense of strength not to join in the activities of the group, but to separate herself from the group and to place herself farther into something unnamed, vast, and unexplored. Edna's sense of power leads her to immediately pursue greater independence and even solitude.

Ironically, Chopin shows that Edna, as she swims, experiences a sudden change in perceptions and feelings as soon as she turns and looks back toward the shore. Though Chopin points out that Edna has "not gone any great distance...for an experienced swimmer," Edna's inexperience with swimming makes her think—perhaps inaccurately—that she has gone out too far. The irony here seems important, because Edna's impulsive and even reckless behavior has placed her in a situation that causes "a quick vision of death [to] sm[i]te her soul." One important detail on Chopin's part seems to be Edna's "unaccustomed vision"; Chopin's choice of these words emphasizes that Edna perceives her reality through a lens of inexperience. This lens of perception seems to make Edna go to extremes in her behavior and feelings—from a tremendous sense of personal power and autonomy to a terrible sense of helplessness and mortality.

The final section of the passage creates a lingering sense of irony for the reader because when Edna tries to share her experience—and its impact on her—with her husband, he reveals himself to be both condescending towards his wife and oblivious to the reality of her inner world. "I thought I should have perished out there alone," she tells Leonce, and this dialogue is important both because it is honest and because it is the only words Edna actually says aloud to anyone else in the entire scene. Edna's dialogue reveals she believes she has just made a mistake that was almost fatal. However, Leonce replies, "You were not so very far, my dear. I was watching you." Though Edna's inexperience in swimming and her "unaccustomed vision" may have caused her to think she was in greater danger than she actually was, Leonce reveals that he is essentially blind to how his wife sees her world. He has no idea what her experience is really like. One line from earlier in the piece seems to reinforce this irony: upon seeing Edna swimming by herself, "[e]ach [man present on the beach] congratulate[s] himself that his special teachings ha[ve] accomplished this desired end." Why do all the men on the beach desire to take credit for Edna's ability to swim, which to her seems like the power "to control the working of her body and her soul"? Perhaps they are all a bit arrogant and a bit oblivious to the journey that one woman among them has begun to take on this evening.