

# Synthesis Essay

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### Wake Up

Is it possible to fall back asleep after you've been awakened? Although everyone knows just how easy it is to snuggle back into the warm covers after pressing "snooze" on an alarm clock, it's less easy to fall back asleep after being woken with a jolt. In a metaphorical sense, the term "awakening" refers to a key moment in which one's perspective is jolted - irrevocably altered. So, is it possible to live in a pre-awakened state after being awakened? Is it possible to conform to society and live a "normal" life after awakening?

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," characters experience a wide array of "awakenings," from sexual awakenings to artistic awakenings. While the phenomenon of awakening is a nebulous concept, the awakenings in these four texts do have something in common: they are all life-changing, perspective-altering, worldview-bending occurrences. In a sense, awakening is a resurrection from the death-like state of apathy into a more vibrant and engaging world full of potential, from "the trembling bridge" of indifference to the "firm land" of conviction and self-knowledge (Joyce 172). All of the characters who experience awakenings or epiphanies in the various novels experience life more fully and truly than their "sleeping" counterparts. For Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, this awakening is facilitated by art. Both are able to understand and appreciate the world more deeply through their understanding of art - in

Stephen's case, language, and in Edna's case, music and painting. The doorway Stephen finds through language enables him to understand and appreciate the natural beauty of the world. As Stephen gazes out across the ocean, a phrase comes to his mind - "A day of dappled seaborne clouds" - and, to him, "the phrase and the day and the scene harmonised in a chord" (Joyce 171). For Edna, both music and painting provide this channel for awakening. Edna interacts with Mademoiselle Reisz's piano playing differently than the other people listening, and this leads Mademoiselle Reisz to realize that Edna's taste is unique. In Edna, Mademoiselle Reisz recognizes another kindred spirit, another awakened individual, because of Edna's ability to truly experience the music with her whole being. Edna also finds joy in artistic endeavours, for, through her painting, she learns to "daily [cast] aside her fictitious self" (Chopin 75).

Now, although Septimus Smith from *Mrs. Dalloway* and the freed prisoner from the "Allegory of the Cave" don't experience awakenings through art, they do interact with the world differently as a result of their awakenings. This is because both Septimus and the prisoner, initially ensconced in the "cave" of normal society, manage to struggle into the light of true reality through trials by fire. In the case of Plato's prisoner, the process of awakening is a painful one: Plato predicts that the newly released prisoner "will suffer sharp pains" when "reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent" into the light (Plato). And Septimus Smith, too, experiences both physical and mental pain through his experiences in the war. Although Septimus believes his senses have been deadened, claiming that "beauty [is] behind a pane of glass," it is this very numbness that is the root of Septimus's psychological pain (Woolf 87). Septimus's marked separation from everyone else, his radically different worldview, causes him to conclude that "his body [is] macerated until only the nerve fibres [are] left," and this gruesome image highlights the subtle pain and division that Septimus feels (68). However, both Septimus

and Plato's prisoner are freed through the pain they experience, for their struggles awaken them to true reality. Septimus wonders at the vibrant, screaming beauty of the world after his awakening, at "the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper," concluding that "beauty, that [is] the truth now" (Woolf 69) just as Plato's prisoner is "dazzled" by the light of sun and "[pities]" the ignorance of "his fellow-prisoners" (Plato).

And why would Plato's prisoner pity his old cellmates? Because the shadows of the cave don't compare to the beauty of the outside world. With the knowledge of the existence of "all things good and right," the prisoner decides that he "would rather suffer anything than entertain [the] false notions" of the other prisoners (Plato). According to Plato, the trappings of society are "false notions," true only because the misguided prisoners agree that they're true - and this conclusion is reflected in Stephen's, Edna's, and Septimus's experiences, too. Each character has an epiphany that society shuns. Edna awakens to the truth that she, and she alone, is master of her self - but society is shocked at her refusal to embrace the "shadow" truth that, because she is Leonce Pontellier's wife, she is not "free" (Chopin 142). In fact, Mr. Pontellier is even "shocked" and "angered" by the disappearance of Edna's "tacit submissiveness" as she is awakened, even though Edna merely begins to exercise her freedom of choice and basic human dignity (Chopin 76). Stephen's decision to value his art above sectional politics is also controversial, and his classmates at the university mock his aspirations, saying, "'Do you feel how profound that is because you are a poet?'" (Joyce 232). Septimus is perhaps the most publicly alienated from society, for, though he "carries in him the greatest message in the world" as a result of his awakening, his ruminations are chalked up as crazy ravings by passerby and even doctors (83).

Once one realizes the existence of this “higher realm,” or truer form of existence through an awakening or epiphany, it is near-impossible to return to one’s old lifestyle. The “Allegory of the Cave” reveals the two reasons for this difficulty: first, the disappointment of the old lifestyle in comparison to the awakened lifestyle, and, secondly, the mountains of prejudice and judgement that one must face. In Plato’s philosophical discussion, he describes the difficulty the awakened prisoner would have when returning to the darkness and gloom of the cave from the light and clarity of the outside world. The prisoner’s eyes, opened by the light of the sun, would struggle to adjust to the dim, flickering firelight in the cave, and his limbs, freed to walk and run and leap for joy in the fresh air, would protest at confinement. The prisoner would feel trapped, would long for the simple pleasure of freedom he’d had in his awakened state, as Edna might long for her pidgeon house if she were forced to return to her old dwelling. Likewise, the prisoner’s way of thinking would be irrevocably altered. While the other prisoners marvelled over the shadows, the awakened prisoner would hardly be impressed. After all, how could looking at the shadow of a tree compare to sitting under a real tree? How could the constraints of society compare to the freedom of awakening? Could Edna Pontellier give up the joy she finds in steering her own future and return to being a backseat passenger? Could Septimus Smith erase the irrevocable experiences in the war that fundamentally changed his identity? Could Stephen put down his pen and his passions forever and commit to a life as a priest or a university intellectual? And, even if these characters could return to the state they were in before being awakened, would they want to?

For the unawakened state is, as Peter Walsh appropriately titles it, “the death of the soul” (Woolf 58). In returning to their pre-awakened existence, to the trappings of society and the close-mindedness of convention, one would have to kill that resurrected part of themselves, to

forget the journey that they made out of the “cave” to the light. Although each character experiences a different flavor of awakening - whether, as in Edna’s case, a sexual and behavioral awakening, or, as in Septimus’s case, an awakening to the nature of the very world around him - despite these differences, their awakenings are all profoundly life- changing. Therefore, it’s logical to assume that the reverse of such an impactful process would be similarly complex and difficult.

As a result, many characters flee the death of their soul, some even choosing to perish physically. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier tells Madame Ratignolle, “I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 62). Through this statement, Edna reveals the distinction she draws between physical life and the life of the soul, a distinction that is paralleled in the stories of other characters. Stephen, for example, singles out his soul as “soaring in an air beyond the world” when he discovers his calling as an artist, which he describes as “the call of life to his soul” (Joyce 174). While she groups her physical life with the “unessential,” (Chopin 62) Edna refuses to compromise the things that make her herself - in other words, she refuses to compromise the values, morals, ideas, and desires that make her who she is. Throughout the course of the novel, as Edna gradually becomes more and more awakened, the traits that are awakened within her begin to define her more and more. Chopin refers to the Edna of propriety and societal conformity, who would be repelled by Alcee Arobin, as Edna’s “old, vanishing self” (Chopin 101). The more Edna’s old self disappears, the more difficult it is for her to conform with society- and the less she wants to, instead preferring “to dream and to be alone and unmolested” (Chopin 76). Initially, the effects of awakening are gradual - manifested in Edna as an unwillingness to take callers on Tuesdays or in Stephen as the courage to report an injustice to the rector of his school. But, as time passes,

characters who experience awakenings are irrevocably changed. Take Septimus Smith, for example. After the war, Septimus is incapable of behaving with what might be called basic social propriety, instead making loud, public scenes, talking to his deceased comrade, Evans, and seeing things that aren't there.

And, tellingly, when both Edna and Septimus are confronted with a choice: being forced back into society or death, they both choose death. Robert Lebrun's refusal of Edna's "wild, impossible" proposition of love serves as a rude shock to Edna, causing her to realize that she has no way to escape the hold of society and its values other than the most drastic action possible (Chopin 142). With Septimus, he literally attempts to escape society, or "human nature" (Woolf 92), as physically manifested in the character of Dr. Holmes. Septimus characterizes Dr. Holmes as a ferocious monster, thinking "Human nature, in short, was on him - the repulsive brute with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him" (Woolf 92). To escape Holmes, Septimus commits suicide by jumping from his window, a powerful and symbolic display of the incompatibility of awakening with society. Edna, too, commits suicide by swimming out into the ocean, far from the shore, and surrendering to the waves. She feels in her final moments as though "it [is] too late" for her to be reconciled with society, for "the shore [is] far behind her, and her strength [is] gone" (Chopin 153).

Even the characters who don't attempt to escape from "falling back asleep" into their old lifestyles through suicide are distinctly set apart from the rest of society, clearly as incompatible with the world in their awakened states as oil is with water. Stephen Dedalus, while experiencing his epiphany, sees some of his classmates diving off of rocks on the beach and playing in the surf. But, while Stephen watches the boys, he remains "apart from them in silence," though they entreat him to join them (Joyce 173). His awakening is actually explicitly described as a

resurrection of sorts, as Joyce writes that “[Stephen’s] soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her graveclothes” (Joyce 174). Stephen feels an odd mixture of scorn and pity for his former equals, and he realizes that he has outgrown the frivolousness of society. With his epiphany, he has left that life behind him, and throughout the rest of the novel Stephen experiences a marked separateness, similar to divisions that Septimus and Edna experience before committing suicide, such as Septimus’s insistence that “he, Septimus, [is] alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth” (67). To each character’s awakening, there’s a certain aspect of superiority, a certain divinity in their self-awareness, which causes a divide between the individual and others. As Mademoiselle Reisz tells Edna, “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings,” evoking an image of a lone, self-sustaining pioneer and contributing to the sense of separation between the awakened and society (110).

Interestingly, while Stephen doesn’t end his life at the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he does end up leaving Ireland, the only home he’s ever known. So, in a sense, Stephen does experience a “death” as a result of his awakening, as he leaves the world he knows to “forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce 253).

In the “Allegory of the Cave,” Plato details another consequence of awakening, however. Not only does the awakened individual find returning to their pre-awakened state unbearable because of the superiority of their experiences after being awakened, but the “freed prisoner” also is often the target of animosity from the other unawakened prisoners. As occurs with characters such as Stephen or Edna, the freed prisoner, upon his return to the society of his fellow prisoners in the cave, is shunned as an outcast. In fact, the other prisoners even may react angrily to the new ideas and different perspective of the awakened prisoner. Take, for example,

Robert Lebrun's reaction to Edna's radical statement that she "give[s] [herself] where [she] choose[s]" and is the master of her own destiny (143). Although Robert doesn't react with violence, his actions wound Edna as much as harsh words or physical blows might, for Robert tells Edna "Good-by - because I love you," acknowledging that the barriers of societal convention are too high for him to climb (148). Stephen has to face more literal persecution in the form of taunts and criticism at the university, where his political ideology and artistic aspirations are called into question by his fellow students who scorn him, saying scornfully, "Look at him!... Look at Ireland's hope!" (232)

The very natures of awakening and society are like oil and water - while one is concerned with conformity and regularity, the other is just the opposite. Therefore, the altered perspective of one who has been awakened draws an irrevocable line between the two, for, in the words of Edna Pontellier, "[they do] not know; [they do] not understand" (153). Edna tells Doctor Mandalet, "Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life," but her declaration is completely misunderstood and is met with concern from Doctor Mandalet about her mental and emotional health (Chopin 147). Because, by its very definition, an awakening is such a life-changing event, it's difficult to reverse its effects and return to a normal, integrated lifestyle, and this trend is proved numerous times through the examples of Stephen, Septimus, Edna, and Plato's prisoner. In Stephen's words, after his awakening, he decides that he "will not serve that in which [he] no longer believes... and [he] will try to express [himself] in some mode of life or art as freely as [he] can and as wholly as [he] can, using for [his] defense the only arms [he] allow[s] [himself] to use -- silence, exile, and cunning" (Joyce 248). Stephen's resolution is echoed in the experience of the other characters,

inevitably leading to the conclusion that once you have been awakened to life, you cannot fall back asleep.

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