

The Dual Nature of the Sea in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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The sea is often used in literature as a setting to convey certain emotions and to further character development in specific ways, and it is often connected to the development of female characters. For both Anne Elliot, the protagonist in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and Edna Pontellier, the protagonist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, the sea is both a place of loss and a place of personal growth and newfound self-awareness. It rejuvenates both women and offers them a different perspective on their confined and constrained lives. The sea is given a personality that interacts with the two protagonists and while it breathes new life into both Anne and Edna, it also takes away from both characters, and forces the women to navigate this loss as well as balance their newly found self-awareness with their loss.

In both *Persuasion* (1817) by Jane Austen and *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin, the sea plays an important role in the development of the female protagonists' self-awareness and personal renewal and rejuvenation. In *Persuasion*, the sea returns Anne Elliot's youthful appearance and pushes her life forward toward a life of her own choosing. In *The Awakening*, the sea offers Edna Pontellier freedom and an awakening to her own desires and needs. The sea setting in both novels is essential to the plot, as significant events take place in this setting and the female protagonists enter a new stage in their self-aware lives, including new life and loss. Therein lies the dual nature of the sea; the sea breathes new life into the female characters but it is also a place of loss, and the characters have to navigate this loss and balance their newly found self-awareness with their loss.

Persuasion has a much different structure than Jane Austen's other novels: while her earlier novels "depict the process by which two people gradually come to realise their mutual affection, *Persuasion* begins belatedly, years after the more familiar procedure has been tried

unsuccessfully".¹ The heroine is Anne Elliot, a withdrawn and timid twenty-seven year old woman – again, another aspect of *Persuasion* which sets it apart from Austen's earlier novels, because Anne is so much older than the other heroines whom are in their late teens and early twenties – who appears old before her time. The world Anne lives in is achingly familiar; Kellynch-hall and Uppercross and their inhabitants have changed little over the years and the pattern of life, while upset toward the beginning of the novel due to monetary troubles, does not affect her as much as it affects her father and sister Elizabeth, who have grown accustomed to a certain lifestyle. Anne, too, has fallen into a routine, but it is a routine not drastically altered by the absence of money. Her life has been static since ending her engagement with Frederick Wentworth eight years before, and she has resigned herself to growing old unmarried. Anne is merely existing while those around her are living.

The unexpected trip to Lyme Regis halfway through the novel marks a pivotal

¹ Matthew P. M. Kerr, "A 'First Return to the Sea' in *Persuasion*", *Essays in Criticism* 64 (2014): p. 180.

moment in Anne's revitalization and self-awareness. The seaside, often hailed for its healing atmosphere, reawakens the pleasures of life and love for Anne. This seaside location is the moment when "repetition and variability begin to be thought of as possible complements, as though the proximity of the sea encouraged Austen to imagine an apparently static relationship, like the one between Anne and Captain Wentworth, finding a potential for renewal or reacquaintance".² The sea, a continually changing, ever-moving force, directly contrasts the static nature of Anne and Wentworth's relationship and pushes them forward. "Anne's first tentative steps out of the confining circle of Kellynch and Uppercross are to a place that is wholly unfamiliar" and Anne begins to embrace the unfamiliarity and relax out of her set ways.³ Anne's physical appearance is improved and softened by the sea air, restoring the "bloom and freshness of youth" and bringing her out of the static life she led up to the trip to Lyme.⁴ Wentworth notices this, and begins to see the return of the Anne Elliot he wanted to marry all those years before. Wentworth is not the only man to notice Anne during their trip to Lyme; Anne catches Mr Elliot's eye – a first for her in many years – because the sea has given her a new sense of energy, a new sense of life, which means she has lost her previous lethargy and exhausted appearance.

Anne's face caught his [Mr Elliot's] eye, and he looked at her with a degree of earnest admiration, which she could not be insensible of.

² Kerr, "A 'First Return to the Sea'", p. 181.

³ Rebecca Posusta, "Architecture of the Mind and Place in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*", *Critical Survey* no. 1 (2014), pp. 85-86.

⁴ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013, p. 75.

She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced. It was evident that the gentleman, (completely a gentleman in manner) admired her exceedingly. Captain Wentworth looked round at her instantly in a way which shewed his noticing of it. He gave her a momentary glance,—a glance of brightness, which seemed to say, "That man is struck with you,—and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again."⁵

It is this moment that cements Wentworth's continued affection for Anne; Wentworth is even a bit jealous that another man – and a stranger, at that – finds Anne attractive. This acknowledgement of affection and birth of jealousy is all prompted by the sea, and for the first time, both Anne and Wentworth begin to move forward toward each other, losing this stagnant state in which they have been trapped. Whereas Kellynch-hall and Uppercross dwell on the past, the sea at Lyme gives Anne and Wentworth an opportunity to look forward for the first time since ending their engagement due to Anne's family's disapproval of Wentworth's social status, which is below their own.

While the sea is a place of renewal and regeneration, Austen also hints to its dual nature: it is also a place of loss. The saying "the sea gives and the sea takes away" applies very well to *Persuasion*. When the Navy goes out to sea, the endless expanse and yawning horizon effectively swallow them up, leaving their families on shore to wonder whether they will ever see them again, much like how Captain Harville

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

describes a sailor's hollow feeling of leaving behind his wife and children without knowing when they will see each other again.⁶ Another example of the sea as a place of loss is Louisa Musgrove's fall from the Cobb, when Anne sheds her feeling of being unvalued. After Louisa falls and lies motionless on the ground, all but Wentworth stand frozen in shock. When everyone is jolted into movement again, it is Anne that takes charge of the situation and Anne that Wentworth and Charles Musgrove look toward for direction: "'Anne, Anne,' cried Charles, 'what is to be done next? What, in heaven's name, is to be done next?'"⁷ Wentworth all but begs Anne to stay and nurse Louisa, and Anne takes comfort in knowing she is needed. This is the first time in the novel that the reader sees Anne step up and speak with authority and courage and this "demonstrate[s] a significant alteration in her knowledge and understanding of her place".⁸ After being ignored and pushed aside, suddenly she realises that there is a time and place for her to be recognised and needed, which is a new experience for her, but one she will not let go of easily. "Having had her value recognized at Uppercross, and particularly after the Lyme incident, she is recovering her self-possession and independence of mind".⁹ Anne's short stay at Lyme results in emotional, psychological, and physical changes for her; these significant changes "help her to realize that she has indeed been improved by the fine sea air, an outside and unfamiliar force".¹⁰ It

is important to note that the sea is "an outside and unfamiliar force", particularly since it is Anne's first visit to Lyme. It is not only Anne's first visit to Lyme, but it is also the reader's first visit there in the novel.

Austen spends a great deal of time describing the seaside and its surroundings, and draws attention to the fact that the party is visiting during the offseason several times: "They were come too late in the year for any amusement or variety which Lyme, as a public place, might offer; the rooms were shut up, the lodgers almost all gone, scarcely any family but of the residents left".¹¹ Like Richard Ayton described during his tour of Great Britain's coastline in the early 19th century, Anne, like Lyme, has been "unaccountably neglected",¹² by her friends and family, if not by the public. Austen uses this setting to convey more than just an image of the seaside; she uses particular words and phrases to express something more than just a description of the seaside. Despite being "deserted" and "melancholy-looking",¹³ the sea continues to fluctuate and ebb and flow. This parallels Anne perfectly; despite being ignored and appearing weary and older than she is, she continues on with her life, still experiencing the ebb and flow of emotions in the same way she would if she was surrounded by admirers. "If Austen uses the sea to suggest flux and permanence in imaginative contact, she resembles many other nineteenth century writers both Romantic and Victorian".¹⁴ Kerr cites examples from Tennyson and Byron's descriptions of the sea in their works, and a distinct theme

⁶ Ibid., p. 166.

⁷ Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 80.

⁸ Posusta, "Architecture of the Mind and Place", p. 86.

⁹ Linda Bree, "'In a State of Alteration, Perhaps of Improvement': Form and Feeling in *Persuasion*", *Women's Writing* 23, no. 3 (August 2016), 393.

¹⁰ Posusta, "Architecture of the Mind and Place", p. 86.

¹¹ Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 68.

¹² Richard Ayton, "Introduction", *A Voyage Round Great Britain, Undertaken in the Summer of the Year 1813*, vol I, London, 1814-25.

¹³ Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 69.

¹⁴ Kerr, "A 'First Return to the Sea'", p. 186.

emerges: man cannot tame, control, or steal the freedom of the sea. *Persuasion*'s narrator even explicitly draws the reader's attention to "Lord Byron's 'dark blue seas'",¹⁵ as though to cement this connection. After Anne's visit to Lyme, she has become more like the sea: more confident, self-aware, independent, and free from her previous secluded, patterned life.

Austen's word choice when talking about the sea and the landscape around it conveys a lot about the two major characters of Anne and Wentworth. Austen describes the Pinny as having "green chasms between romantic rocks".¹⁶ At first glance, there doesn't seem anything remarkable about this small description, but upon closer inspection, this seemingly insignificant description becomes a description of Anne and Wentworth. There is a huge chasm of life (green, thriving, lush life) between Anne and Wentworth, yet they are both "romantic rocks" because their outward appearance is one of hardened rock, calm and reserved, but inwardly, they are both incredibly romantic. They are both slightly aware of this chasm's existence, but must bridge the gap, and the sea pushes them toward it.

The way Austen describes the sea and the landscape around it also focuses on sight and how the characters see the sea. "Austen is interested in the way in which the sea encourages us to see. When she describes the Uppercross party's first glimpse of the seashore, [...] she is intent on showing the ways in which the sea provokes those who visit it to 'linger'. In *Persuasion*, it is the 'gaze' in particular that is captured and held":¹⁷

The party from Uppercross passing down by the now deserted and melancholy-looking rooms, and

still descending, soon found themselves on the seashore; and lingering only, as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, who ever deserve to look on it at all, proceeded towards the Cobb [...] ¹⁸

The sea commands both the characters' and the reader's gaze. Austen connects the sea with vision and sight during the entire Lyme section to draw attention to the characters' gaze on Anne; Mr Elliot sees Anne and is immediately taken with her, Wentworth sees Anne as becoming more like her past self, the Uppercross party sees Anne as competent and level-headed during an emergency, and the reader sees the sea rejuvenate and breathe new life into Anne. *Persuasion*'s narrator even comments that "a very strange stranger it must be, who does not see charms in the immediate environs of Lyme, to make him wish to know it better",¹⁹ which can also be applied to Anne; even strangers (like Mr Elliot) notice her appeal. After Lyme, the characters – and the reader – see Anne in a different light. The sea's irresistible power changes Anne dramatically.

Jane Austen herself found the sea irresistible, like many people of her day. In a letter to her sister Cassandra, she describes twice her swim in the sea, eventually commenting that she may have "staid in rather too long".²⁰ Austen translated this profound allure and pull of the sea to *Persuasion*, and made it as inescapable for her characters and her reader as it was for her.

Much like Jane Austen, Edna Pontellier, the heroine of *The Awakening*, published eight decades after *Persuasion*, found the sea irresistible. In the novel, author Kate

¹⁸ Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 69.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Deirdre Le Faye, ed, *Jane Austen's Letters*, 4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 96-99.

¹⁵ Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 78.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁷ Kerr, "A 'First Return to the Sea'", p. 186.

Chopin describes the sea with a romantic – almost sensual – word choice throughout the novel, touting the sea as a breathing, living being. The “seductive”²¹ sea symbolizes empowerment, freedom, escape, and renewal, but the word seduction carries with it negative connotations, and Chopin does not neglect to include them. Similarly to how the phrase “the sea gives and the sea takes away” applies to *Persuasion*, it also applies to *The Awakening*. The sea gives Edna Pontellier her first real awakenings but at the end it also takes her life.

There is no one awakening in the novel. Edna experiences many types of awakenings: awakenings to other people's plights, awakenings to her true self and her sexuality, awakenings to physical and social realities, and awakenings to the power of nature. Many of the awakenings take place on Grand Isle, an island in the Gulf where the Pontelliers have a summer home. The most important feature of this island is the sea. The sea is inescapable. If the sea is not in view, “the seductive odor of the sea”²² reminds the characters and the reader of the sea's presence. Edna finds comfort in the Gulf; the leisurely climate of Grand Isle reminds Edna of her home, “familiar in its suggestions of possibility, its promise of fulfilled desire, its reassurances of rest and safety”.²³ It gives her confidence. At first Edna dreads the ocean, but learning to swim brings feelings of “exultation” and joy and a desire to follow her passions, unlike most women of her time. When she learns to swim, she gets her first firm grasp of the intensification of self-awareness; she feared

her death ““out there alone””.²⁴ The use of the word “alone” puts into perspective just how vast and daunting the sea is. By learning to swim, the sea teaches her that she has control over her own body. “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”.²⁵ The sea gives her a sense of freedom and a new joy of being alive and helps her become herself²⁶ – a more independent, confident woman who learns to be proactive in getting what she wants and making her life as happy as she can. “Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails”.²⁷ While critics have called Edna selfish and narcissistic for neglecting her household and motherhood “duties” in order to prioritise her self-care, the fact remains that Edna was trapped within the societal and cultural constraints of her time and that in *The Awakening*, Chopin is emphasising the freedom of the sea and how it ignites a fire within Edna; it helps her realise that she loves Robert and wants to spend more time making herself happy. This is not selfishness, but self-care. The sea intensifies Edna's self-awareness to the point where she begins to wake up out of a “grotesque, impossible dream”²⁸ and she thinks to herself that “she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before”,²⁹

²¹ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Other Stories*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 14.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

²³ Barbara Claire Ewell and Pamela Glenn Menke, ““The Awakening’ and the Great October Storm of 1893”, *The Southern Literary Journal* 42, no. 2, 2010, n.p.

²⁴ Chopin, *The Awakening*, p. 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

thereby challenging the societal and cultural norms around womanhood and motherhood of the day. Edna sees the sea as an escape, a way out.

Like in *Persuasion*, a lot of the description of the sea is connected to how the characters look upon the sea. Edna is constantly gazing out at the sea; when she is on Grand Isle, her life revolves around it. It permeates her every waking hour, and Chopin wants the reader to think of the sea continually as well. In her last moments, before she swims out into the sea and drowns, Chopin focuses the reader to Edna's gaze out over the sea: "The water of the gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude"³⁰.

Like in *Persuasion*, the sea is also a place of loss for the characters in *The Awakening*. While the sea gives Edna her self-awareness, in return it takes away her family and friends, and, in the end, takes her life. Chopin draws attention to the inward turmoil versus outward calm of the sea and how this applies to Edna throughout the novel. The surface of the sea may be calm, but there's no way to know for certain what is stirring underneath. When Edna strips naked on the beach – when she literally exposes her vulnerability – she feels like a "new-born creature";³¹ this is like a phoenix rising from the ashes to start a new life, which is reminiscent of going to heaven or the afterlife. Edna's drowning is her rejection of Victorian womanhood and her inability to be understood by those around her. The sea claims Edna in the end.

Persuasion was published in 1817 and *The Awakening* was published in 1899, and it is important to consider when comparing and contrasting the two texts that not only

were these novels written with a span of over eight decades in between, they were also written in very different parts of the world, meaning different climates, cultures, and societies existed between the two. The scenes at Lyme Regis take place in the off-season and the scenes at Grand Isle take place during the popular tourist season, each of which is fitting to both stories, since Anne is desolate, just like the off-season, and Edna is joyous and chaotic, albeit internally, at the seaside in the summer.

In *Persuasion*, the sea enhances Anne Elliot's appearance, making her look more like her younger, happier self, and ends Anne and Wentworth's static lives without each other. In *The Awakening*, the sea represents freedom and causes Edna Pontellier to realise her own desires and need for self-care. The sea pushes the female protagonists into a new life, but it also takes something away from them, and both Anne and Edna are forced to navigate the balance between loss and self-awareness. The sea also symbolizes an outward expansion into the infinite as well as the sharp intensification of self-awareness that results from finding oneself completely alone in an apparently limitless sea.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

³¹ Ibid.

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