The Advantages of Distance: Teaching *The Awakening* in the Online Classroom
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**Abstract:** In this essay, I describe an approach to teaching Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* online that treats the novel as what Lawrence Buell calls an "arena of ethical reflection" (13) and exploits several types of distance characteristic of asynchronous online education, specifically in students’ interactions, identities and experiences, and between praxis and metacognition. Informed by care ethics, my pedagogy leaves space for receptive listening and meaningful student conversations that cultivate their diverse perspectives. I encourage students to question Edna Pontellier’s individualist understanding of her conflicts by introducing a relational understanding of autonomy that recognizes how Edna’s close relationships not only limit her options but also facilitate her awakening. Because of their own expanded social roles, online college students have the opportunity to ask difficult questions of, and in response to, a novel about a woman struggling to expand available social roles, and to explore possible answers in conversation with people working from varying life stages toward different goals and negotiating different commitments and limitations in their pursuit of higher education. Thus, emphasizing the development of the skills of ethical reflection through meaningful conversations, I argue that the online classroom can be an opportune space for students to critically reflect on the significance of the plight of Edna Pontellier as well as on the significance of their own responses to her situation.

Few novels prompt lively discussion as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) does, which the last fifty years of critical debate on the novel and my own teaching experiences bear out. Especially provocative is the ending of the novel, where Kentucky-born protagonist Edna Pontellier, wife of a Creole businessman and mother of two children, having awakened while on summer vacation to sexual passions and a desire for freedom from domesticity, rejects the limited possibilities of her turn-of-the-century life apparently to swim to her death. The final chapter of the novel leaves much ambiguous about the nature of Edna’s final actions. Before her swim, Edna sheds her bathing clothes in what reads as a statement of emancipation from social restrictions, "feeling like some newborn creature" as she prepares to exercise her newly acquired skill of swimming. Edna’s posture of independence recalls the image that she associates with a song she calls "Solitude," a naked man standing by the seashore. However, in Edna’s initial vision, the solitary man wears an attitude of "hopeless resignation" (26), which complicates the emancipatory significance of the connection, as does the image of a bird with a broken wing spiraling down into the ocean of the final setting. The bird suggests Edna’s experience of breaking from her domestic cage despite warnings that social rebellion requires extraordinary courage and strength. As Edna walks toward the sea, the narrator reports that she is no longer thinking of the things she had deliberated upon the night before, as though she is resolute; yet, right before she realizes that it is "too late," that she lacks the energy to swim back to shore, Edna wonders if Doctor Mandelet could have understood her predicament, suggesting that she had not fully considered alternatives before
acting. The novel concludes with an enigmatic chain of remembered sensory fragments from Edna's consciousness—a dog's bark, the clanging of a cavalry officer's spurs, "the hum of bees," and the "musky odor of pinks" (109)—the paratactic structure of which, in the absence of an ordering logic, seems to resist attempts to narrativize it.

With The Awakening's rich ambiguities, it is unsurprising that the large body of contemporary criticism about the novel does not cohere in a simple story. Though Edna's position as a woman at the turn of the century is central to many interpretations of the novel, critics have come to very different conclusions about the novel's treatment of gender, characterizing Edna's death as everything from a "triumphant assertion of her inner liberty" (Seyersted 149) that evokes the "feminist and matriarchal myth of Aphrodite/Venus" (Gilbert 20) to the tragic or inevitable consequences of a woman's attempts to defy social expectations in the face of a patriarchal reality and a "subtle, but intentionally crafted, warning" about rejecting all available social roles (Ramos, "Unbearable Realism," 147). Other critics dispute that gender inequality is an essential aspect of Edna's death. For example, Cynthia Griffin Wolff focuses on Edna's personal rather than social limitations to classify Edna as a "schizoid" personality who, having awakened to the reality of individual separation in the scene of childbirth, chooses the "ecstasy of death" over relinquishing her dream of "perfect fusion" (471). Nancy Walker highlights the naturalistic elements of the novel to attribute Edna's death neither to a repressive society nor to Edna's choices, arguing that Edna has "little control over her own destiny," and "that she is controlled by her own emotions, not by men or society" (256).

As Peter Ramos observes of the novel's body of criticism, The Awakening "has resisted any single, totalizing critical narrative over these many decades" ("Casting Aside," 244), which helps to explain why it is such a popular text to teach in a range of university-level courses. Drawing on a 1988 MLA survey, Bernard Koloski calls The Awakening "one of the most often taught of all American novels," assigned in a range of courses including American literature, women's literature, women's studies, composition, and folklore courses (Approaches, ix). When I taught The Awakening in the traditional classroom, in both upper-division women's literature courses as well as American literature survey courses at a state university, undergraduates engaged in lively debates centered on the significance of Edna's death. It was common for our discussions to spill out into the hallways after class was over. Unlike other popular American novels like The Great Gatsby and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Awakening is not commonly taught in high school, so most students encounter it for the first time in college and often respond strongly to it. I first read The Awakening as an undergraduate attending a large state university, and the professor introduced the novel to the class as the reason he kept a box of tissues in his office.

Reading The Awakening can be an emotional experience for many students because they readily make connections between Edna's life and their own. For instance, some of my students have explicitly attributed their responses to the novel to their experiences and identities as children with present or absent mothers, as parents, or as survivors of loved
ones who committed suicide. Because students are already explicitly relating their reactions to the novel to their particular identity positions, they are primed to further investigate how their own assumptions, understandings, and personal experiences—as well as sociohistorical factors shaping those responses—contribute to their perspectives on the novel and to study how different subject positions affect others' interpretations.

In addition to priming students to consider their reading responses in relation to their personal experiences, The Awakening provides the material through which students can deliberate upon social roles and the ethics of individual choices. Describing his own experience teaching The Awakening, William Bartley writes that "students, without prompting, never fail to wonder why Edna kills herself just as they never fail to offer some kind of judgment" (721, italics original). This is in part because, as Bernard Koloski observes: "Chopin makes no moral judgments about Edna Pontellier. She neither praises nor condemns her" (Critical Insights, 14). Noting of The Awakening that "Chopin's sense of a complex reality permits no easy answers to the moral questions raised by [the] conflict between the individual and social restraints," Barbara C. Ewell asserts that "by withholding the moral of this moralistic tale and leaving the nature and value of Edna's awakening essentially unresolved, Chopin delineates the difficulty of calibrating the appropriate relationship between the self and society" (143). Chopin's refusal to assert a moral or present an ideal path enables readers to consider the complexity of individual action and ethical choices. As more scholars of literature respond to the "ethical turn," we might encourage students to use The Awakening as an "[arena] of ethical reflection" (Buell 13). Instead of responding to the absence of authorial judgment with a hasty judgment of Edna and other characters, students can be encouraged to investigate the variables that comprise Edna's moral dilemma to appreciate the complexity of ethical decisions.

However, while many variables seem to be in place for students to have critical exchanges about The Awakening, in my onsite classes, discussions of the novel often stalled with fixed and unreflective responses. Mary E. Papke notes a similar unreflective response to the novel from her students (73). Although I typically encourage students to share their initial reactions to texts as the material through which they develop, through conversation and analysis, their more measured interpretations, in discussions of The Awakening, charged initial reactions quickly polarized. Because The Awakening is known and introduced in readily accessible web resources as a feminist text and because I taught The Awakening in a region where, for many students, feminism provoked fear and anger, some of my most outspoken students entered the classroom determined to prove that what Edna does and what feminists advocate are wrong. They argued that a mother of young children cannot morally choose to end her life, and their comments were often sharp with judgment about not only what all mothers ought to do but also what they ought to feel and think. They would dismiss Edna's conflicts as the result of her being selfish and coddled and often imply that the constraints and obligations of caretakers are ahistorical rather than shaped by social, gendered expectations and subject to individual choices. Offended by this characterization of Edna
because they sympathized with Edna and/or identified as feminists, other students would defend Edna’s actions using an imprecise understanding of gender inequality that elides Edna’s privilege and limited agency, Léonce Pontellier’s willingness to adapt, the particular setting of the novel, and the range of roles female characters in the novel occupy. Students who sympathized with Edna would often characterize her death as the inevitable result of patriarchal constraints or a happy escape, or they would express a desire for a romantic ending that Papke describes in her essay on teaching *The Awakening*: “Edna effecting a miraculous change in Robert or Léonce and living happily ever after, or Edna somehow achieving self-sufficiency somewhere sometimes” (73). The popular positions would overlook the characters of color who provide care and represent the sexual other against which Edna understands her emerging desires, and they would accept Edna’s vague conception of freedom as the absence of obligations to others.

In an onsite discussion, these readings were offered early and with certitude, polarizing the discussion. As a result, any student still grappling to understand Edna’s dilemma and ambiguous aspects of the novel entered the conversation on the defensive or stayed quiet. Despite my attempts to address this problem by having all students write down their initial reactions before discussing the novel and incorporating short informal writing assignments and different kinds of discussions questions, a widespread defensiveness against alternative readings continued to impede idea development and critical thinking. Although many students were voicing their feelings and ideas and although most students were fully engaged in the discussions, students were not carefully listening to each other and thus tended not to develop more nuanced interpretations.

One factor in this dynamic, I suspect, is the strong association that developed between certain interpretations and social identities. Once it was implied that identifying with Edna makes one a bad mother or selfish person or, equally frightening for some students, that sympathizing with Edna makes one a feminist, some students would distance themselves from those positions. On a couple of occasions, students would confide in me during office hours that they related to Edna, a common reader response that, due the climate of the larger class discussion, they had not felt comfortable sharing with the larger class. As a result, I would often feel disappointed when, after a few onsite sessions devoted to *The Awakening*, the course reading schedule nudged us on to the next reading. Students’ ideas about the novels had not significantly changed over the course of the discussion, many students felt uncomfortable sharing ideas that would challenge dominant readings, and the most popular interpretations often did not account for the complexity of the novel and the validity of other perspectives. I realized the need for discussions about the novel in which students would not only share and defend, but also listen, test, and revise their thinking, though I was not quite sure how to achieve this. Teaching *The Awakening* online helped me to realize the advantages of distance, the temporal and spatial distance that characterizes asynchronous online education, the distance between students’ diverse identities and experiences that can be bridged through meaningful conversation, and the distance of critical reflection and
metacognition that certain activities and configurations invite. Online, specifically on the Blackboard platform, I discovered new ways to prompt close reading and build critical reflection into threaded discussions, and I found that most students benefited from access to the student perspectives that asynchronous online education makes possible.

With certain configurations, threaded discussions—that is, discussions that are composed of written posts contributed over time—offer some advantages over synchronous discussions. Like onsite discussions, digital discussions can be used as a "site for invention" for formal writing assignment ideas (Yancey 109), with an added benefit that the instructor can have a sidebar conversation to help a student develop an idea without disengaging other students. The default in threaded discussions is student-to-student interaction, the de-centered classroom that teachers often have to rearrange chairs and desks in the onsite classroom to create. Also, threads provide a useful record so that students can refer to the specific language and reflect on logic of their own and other students' ideas, which the ephemeral quality of spoken comments makes difficult. Though I have tried to pause and rewind onsite discussions—"Wait, repeat what you just said"—often, just seconds later, the language or syntax of an earlier comment cannot be recalled. Because we think through the medium of language, language-based assumptions are difficult habits of mind to critically examine (Mezirow, Transformative Dimensions, 59). Threaded discussions and asynchronous activities provide the opportunity for students to study the formative role of language and culture in their developing interpretations, which the instructor, as a discussion participant, can prompt by reading students' posts closely and encouraging students to review posts for patterns in thinking and language.

Whereas in the traditional classroom, anywhere from a few students to all but a few students merely observe or even mentally check out of discussions, in threaded discussions everyone participates, albeit to different degrees, increasing the diversity of viewpoints. With the elastic space and time of an online discussion, more reserved and deliberate students participate even when other students post frequently and at length, and they can take courage in knowing that they will have time to think before responding to challenges to their ideas. Moreover, with only a postage-stamp-size image and short introduction associated with their names, students are not as strongly identified with their ideas as they are in face-to-face environments, so they can be encouraged to test ideas that are not popular or self-evident and offer dissenting posts to complicate a position. With more students participating and contributing different positions, students have the opportunity to engage with a greater range of points of view and ideas in threaded discussions.

These features of online discussions, then, challenge what Kristine Blair calls the "presumption of loss" that often characterizes discussions about distance learning, which she summarizes in this way:

…while online teaching may be a necessary evil to ensure enrolments, there will always be something missing in terms of course quality and interaction among the
students as well as between the students and the instructor. The content delivery will never be as clear, the discussions never as meaningful, and the ability of students to meet learning outcomes in terms of critical reading and writing never as strong. (72)

As someone who now teaches only online, I regularly encounter this presumption of loss, expressed by everyone from other academics to the mail carrier. “You teach online? But is it the same?” Over time, I have come to respond to this question by saying, no, it is not the same; it has drawbacks, but in some ways it is better. From their meta-analysis of distance education research, Bernard et al. conclude that distance education “can be much better and also much worse” than classroom instruction (1245), a conclusion that reveals the importance of the choices we make in our online classrooms, particularly the opportunities for and culture we build around interaction. Though much distance pedagogy has been developed in an attempt to approximate traditional classroom practices and it is common practice to measure online classes against the in-person standard, distance learning techniques and tools offer particular advantages, some of which can in turn be adapted to improve traditional instruction.

That said, one important advantage to teaching The Awakening online does not easily transfer to onsite teaching, and that is the access it provides for a broad range of students, including students whose disabilities and work and family obligations prevent them from taking onsite courses. Though some of my online students are recent graduates of high school who are contemplating what they want to do with their lives, many of them are full-time employees, including active members of the military, and caregivers of young children or elderly parents. Some of them are changing career paths while maintaining their current jobs or, having raised their children, preparing for work outside the home. Because these students participate in class activities during narrow windows of time during their day, after they put their kids to bed or during their lunch breaks, asynchronous education makes higher education possible for them.

While this diversity generally contributes to interesting discussions, it specifically enhances discussions about The Awakening. Most of my students do not fit the cultural idea of a college student, a role that economic and cultural realities are quickly eroding and that, like the mother-woman ideal of Edna’s milieu, we might argue has always been something of a myth: an eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old fresh out of high school with expanses of free time and few responsibilities, geographically removed from family to find space to grow, beholden only to his or her bright future. Even traditional students experience unexpected obligations and constraints from both chosen and given relationships and roles. In this sense, students benefit from recognizing in the novel what Edna experiences only vaguely as limitation in the course of her awakening: that individual change and personal autonomy are integrally social experiences, limited by sociopolitical conditions and caught up in our deeply felt relations with others. For the majority of my students, this reality is an unignorable part of their lived experiences, as they are working overtime to change their lives while maintaining their commitments to others: to pursue a more fulfilling career while still financially supporting
a family and to cultivate new interests and transform their understandings of themselves and
others while continuing to engross themselves in their children’s interests and goals or
residing in their family of origin. A commitment to meeting obligations to others while working
toward individual change brings many students to online education in the first place.

Investigating the variables that contribute to Edna’s ultimate inability to imagine a
future for herself among others, students like Edna who are working toward change from
within networks of care and through socially inscribed roles can contemplate the constraints
and possibilities of different conceptions of identity and autonomy. They can consider the real
limitations of what Ramos calls the "available social roles" of Edna’s milieu as well as the
possibilities for the creative transformation of such roles, possibilities Ramos argues Edna
ultimately rejects ("Unbearable Realism," 147). It is from the position of an expanded social
role that online college students have the opportunity to ask difficult questions of, and in
response to, literature, and to explore possible answers in conversation with people working
from varying life stages toward different goals and negotiating different commitments and
limitations in their pursuit of higher education. For these reasons, for traditional and
nontraditional students alike, the online classroom is an opportune space for students to
critically reflect on the significance of the plight of Edna Pontellier as well as on the
significance of their own responses to her situation.

Informing my approach to teaching in general and my approach to *The Awakening*
in particular is the ethics of care, a feminist, relational approach to ethics that Carol Gilligan and
Nel Noddings introduced in the 1980s. The ethics of care asserts that traditional moral
approaches, with their individualist orientation, neglect the moral actor’s embeddedness in
networks of care and his or her consideration, in making moral decisions, of the needs and
goals of closely related others, a consideration that Gilligan argues in her book *In a Different
Voice* informs especially women’s approaches to moral questions. Instead of viewing
individuals as ideally independent, care ethicists describe "relation as ontologically basic and
the caring relation [as] ethically (morally) basic" (Noddings, "The Caring Relation," 771). They
uphold caring relations such as the parent-child relationship as an ethical ideal, to which the
roles of the carer and the cared-for are both essential: the carer “on detecting an expressed
need, ... ‘feels with’ the cared-for and experiences motivational displacement; that is her
motive energy is directed (temporarily) away from her own projects and toward those of the
cared-for,” and the cared-for responds to acknowledge receiving the care (Noddings, "The
Language," 53). In positing the caring relation as primary, care ethicists challenge the notion
central to traditional ethical approaches of the disinterested, independent moral actor who
makes moral choices by weighing abstract principles and accessing a pre-social, authentic
self. Instead, care ethicists start with the "‘encumbered self,’ who is always already embedded
in relations with flesh-and-blood others and is partly constituted by these relations” (Keller
152). Humans survive into adulthood and develop their identities, values, and abilities through
their relations with others, in states of dependency and interdependency. For this reason, the
question of human flourishing, for care ethicists, is fundamentally about how we relate to particular others.

Critics have argued that the ethics of care validates subordinate roles for women, who traditionally have been socialized to take on the needs and projects of loved ones and to identify with others' goals and values at the risk of their own. It is easy to see how engrossment in the goals and values of significant others might jeopardize the autonomy and moral agency of the carer. In response to the question of how autonomy can be preserved while accounting for the interpersonal context of moral decisions and a relational model of moral agency, ethicists Diana Meyers and Jean Keller develop a conception of relational autonomy, which they define as a competency, a "repertory of coordinated skills" (Meyers 627). Relational autonomy includes the ability to imagine different courses of actions and their results; to attend to one's affective responses to these options, including "self-referential responses like shame and pride" (Meyers 152); and to critically reflect on those responses: "In sum, to the extent that individuals survey their options guided by their self-scrutinized feelings, values, goals, and the like, and then marshall the determination to follow their own counsel, they live autonomously" (Meyers 627). Keller adds: "To be self-governing, a person must first develop the capacity to reflect critically on one's reasons for action; that is, to question why one is acting in a particular manner and to assess whether it is really in accordance with one's actual beliefs, values, or desires" (156). A person does not need to escape deeply felt commitments to other people in order to practice relational autonomy, but instead decides with whom to maintain relationships, and to what extent and under what conditions, and may even exercise some of the skills of autonomy in dialogue with others, such as imagining the results of different actions and questioning the assumptions underlying affective responses.

Though I began teaching online before becoming acquainted with Gilligan and Noddings, through care ethics I have discovered new conviction about teaching online for the way it accounts for the giving and receiving of care in my students' lives. The ethics of care motivates me to work past constraints, particularly the dominant individualist orientation of Western culture and limitations of the online teaching modality, to create a virtual environment that not only is accessible to those who provide and receive care, but also promotes a "climate of care" (Noddings, "The Caring Relation," 777). Making care an explicit value in the classroom is a way of acknowledging the caring relations that are important components of most students' lives and identities and recognizing the complexity of our lives and decisions as encumbered adult actors. Noddings describes the central skills of the caring relation as "listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself" ("The Caring Relation," 771), and relational autonomy as Meyers and Keller define it includes critical reflection and meaningful dialogue. Bartley describes ethics as "a dialogue between rule and context, which becomes an exercise in testing and even revising received assumptions, challenged as they may be by unforeseen circumstances or rival conceptions of the good life" (720). As these skills are all instrumental
in the discipline of literary studies, the ethics of care can help frame the skills students are developing when they read, discuss, and write about literature with their relevance to various aspects of students' experiences.

While Noddings focuses on the teacher-student caring relation of the classroom, in my classes I emphasize the value of students' forming supportive relations with other students: to their attending to each other's claims and experiences, responding to help others develop their ideas and skills and consider alternative ways of understanding a text, and acknowledging the way others in the class have helped them to recognize or do something new. Through these meaningful conversations, students practice relational autonomy, reflecting on and reconsidering their own affective responses and assumptions as they integrate the insights and perspectives of their peers. Much of what students learn in a literature course comes from their engagement with other students' ideas, which starts with close listening and attention to context.

In fact, Noddings describes "receptive listening" as "the very heart of caring relations" as well as "a powerful strategy for learning" ("The Caring Relation," 780). By listening carefully to others, students can appreciate the content of and basis for others' ideas and also reflect on how different relationships, experiences, and habits of mind--their own and others'--shape interpretations of the novel. The absence of receptive listening leads to the kinds of problems I experienced in teaching *The Awakening*. Moreover, Patricia Cranton describes conversation with others and engagement with alternative perspectives as essential to transformative learning (36). In an online or onsite classroom where relationality and attentiveness are valued, students are more likely, through deep engagement with each other, to refine their reading strategies, considering alternative readings of *The Awakening* and attending to textual details in their claims about the novel.

Fostering a climate of care among students can be a challenge online. Even though the online modality accommodates the relationality and dependency that are central to the human experience, creating a pathway to learning for some non-traditional students, online teaching and learning is commonly associated with a lack of feeling or connection metaphorized in the "distance" of distance learning, due to the disembodiment of online learners and even professors. The many webinars on humanizing the online learning experience make this evident. And it is true that aspects of distance learning can be at odds with relationality. Because many students taking online courses have very limited time due to other obligations, they may perceive having to rely on other students to complete their coursework as an obstacle rather than a means to their education. To promote not only caring but also learning, in the online classroom even more so than in the onsite class, a teacher must make explicit the value of classroom relationality to learning and build opportunities and parameters for such engagement into the classroom.

Online teachers can foster relationality through common teaching practices such as making clear how students' ideas are in conversation even when students are not directly addressing each other. In my communications with students, I emphasize our responsibility
to others in the class and acknowledge ways we are developing our ideas in relation to each other's ideas rather than asserting and defending purely original claims. Public and private communications with students are opportunities to model receptive listening and reading. For instance, in discussions, I note when a post or exchange changed my thinking, and in announcements I highlight trends in the conversation to help students consider their own ideas and perspectives within a larger tapestry of ideas. I create asynchronous draft workshops in which students are asked not to evaluate others' work, but to read receptively, describe what they understand to be the writer's key intention, and ask questions. To offset the rigidity of the online format, I build open space into classes to give students a chance to pursue their own curiosities in their interactions with each other and empower the class to control the direction of threaded discussions. Though I provide discussion questions, students can pose their own questions and diverge from the original discussion topics as conversations develop if contributions engage with the assigned readings and course themes.

To help make the exchange of ideas rather than individually authored posts the center of threaded discussions, my colleague John Miller and I developed a simple protocol. We post multiple discussion questions in each discussion forum. When students address a question to which others in the forum have already responded, they are asked to reply to someone who has already posted on the topic rather than to start a new thread. In their posts, they are to address an aspect of what previous posters have said and also to advance the discussion in some way. In the class policies, I describe a variety of ways students can advance a discussion, including asking questions with no easy answers or questions that might extend or clarify a classmate's position; playing the devil's advocate or complicating a point under consideration; analyzing a relevant detail or passage of an assigned reading to explain how it relates to the point under consideration or offering additional support and explanation for an idea being discussed. With this protocol, posts are organized by conversation rather than individual student and students make it a habit to situate their ideas within a conversation, which prepares them to incorporate criticism in disciplinary writing. The class collaboratively controls the direction of the discussion, and students advance conversations in sometimes unexpected directions.

To foster collaboration and critical thinking, I treat threaded discussion participation as informal writing and require many response posts with distributed due dates, usually ten short responses per week spread over a few days. Though it is common in online literature courses to require formal discussion posts with the coherence and organization of essay body paragraphs or even short essays, and though I initially did embrace the opportunity to use discussions to incorporate more formal writing practice into my classes, such a requirement contributed to stilted discussions with minimal collaboration. Students would compose their posts offline and post them beside other students' posts. These parallel discrete posts would often be redundant because students wrote them in a vacuum, resembling onsite discussions in which students voice their opinions without synthesizing, making connections, or listening to what others say. In addition, as Miller asserts, structuring asynchronous discussions as
formal, extended writing assignments can lead students to commit to an early position and thus can impede critical thinking (281), reproducing problems I have encountered in onsite discussions in which students felt defensive of their original reactions rather than receptive to new ideas. Through many brief, informal posts, students have the opportunity to develop their ideas in relation to others’ ideas rather than viewing their ideas as possession that they should vigorously defend or merely present.

To head off stale discussions, I incorporate a meta-discussion into the first week of class in which students respond to questions about the best possible outcomes of threaded discussions, the best discussion practices they have observed of students and professors, and the pitfalls they have observed in past learning experiences. I have found that, perhaps because the role of online student is relatively new to many participants, students are open to reflecting on their threaded discussion participation and changing their orientation to discussions. Students have taught me in meta-discussions that one obstacle to meaningful engagement in asynchronous discussions is the belief that discussions are busy work, an assumption I never encountered in the onsite classroom. Some students also describe feeling uneasy in online discussions, particularly in the early days of the course, because they have been socialized to view discussion, as Brookfield writes, “as performance theatre, a situation in which their acting is carefully watched” (21). Not being able to keep an eye on an embodied teacher to gauge his or her reaction makes students feel especially unsure about how they are supposed to perform, which many respond to by offering especially “safe” posts. Both of these assumptions contribute to what teachers call “dreaded discussions,” as opposed to threaded discussions, in which students restate what others have said, summarize the reading, or generally respond without meaningful engagement.

My students and I use the meta-discussion to brainstorm ways to address the threaded discussion problems they have mentioned, to incorporate the useful practices they have described, and to set the guidelines for the course discussions, even to the extent that we delineate my role in the discussion. Students almost unanimously assert that they want a professor who actively participates in discussion. At times students characterize the professor as the person who settles intellectual disputes or who ought to participate so students know what to write in their papers, which is an opportunity for us to discuss the nature of the questions we ask in literary studies and for me to assert that, while there are better argued and supported positions, I want students to reason through questions and arrive at their own conclusions. They or I will often propose that we all try to play the devil’s advocate on occasion to introduce alternative positions without worrying about seeming disagreeable. Even more valuable than the practices students derive in the meta-discussion is the opportunity for students to reflect on their own role in the learning community—and the way their choices as participants affect others in the class as well as their own learning—and reconsider threaded discussions as a potentially meaningful activity in which they might mindfully participate and share some of the responsibility for their success. After the discussion, I outline the main
points for each of the areas we have discussed and post the outline as a collaboratively produced contract that expresses our shared purpose and models receptive listening.

Having outlined how I set up my online classroom to promote caring, critical thinking, and mindful engagement, I will describe some of the discussion prompts and a critical reflection activity I use when I teach *The Awakening* online in a post-Civil War survey of American literature. However, I will describe my rationale for discussion and activity prompts, share examples of topics we touch upon, and provide a few sample student comments in response to questions.

The first threaded discussion occurs before many of the students have completed the novel, with questions designed to prompt students to appreciate the complexity of the novel through the various literary movements it invokes and passages selected by students. I post five to ten questions in each threaded discussion forum, so many conversations occur in a single virtual space and students can easily move between conversations and read conversations in which they are not actively engaged. Some questions ask students to use details from *The Awakening* to explain how the novel typifies or complicates the tenets of naturalism, romanticism, realism, and local color; and, using examples from the novel, to explore how two different literary movements are brought together in the novel. Students can analyze a motif in *The Awakening* to explain what it reveals about Edna’s predicament that many readers might not immediately notice, or they can work with a specific passage to tease out how the setting contributes to its significance. Discussion questions often specify that students should work with textual details in their answers to practice supporting claims with close-reading. In this early forum, I want students to attend to details in the novel and begin to appreciate the complex vision to which they contribute.

In the few days between the first discussion on and the second, in which they discuss the novel in light of its ending, students participate in a reflection exercise designed to loosen their attachment to their initial responses so they can hear others’ ideas and reflect on the premises of their early interpretations. Henriette Lundgren and Rob F. Poell describe ‘premise reflection’ as "involv[ing] us in becoming aware of why we think, feel, or act in a certain way" (7). As we discuss a novel in which the protagonist awakens to strong desires to ultimately walk to her death with only a hazy sense of why she responds to her life in a particular way, I want students to develop the skill of critically reflecting on their own strong feelings and responses--in this case, their responses to Chopin’s and Edna’s choices--so they can more deliberately navigate class conversations and help each other challenge or refine their premises. Created within a Blackboard discussion forum, this reflection exercise is configured so students must post once before they can read others’ posts. This way, students do not censor their own reactions in response to classmates’ explicit judgments, though internalized judgements still might influence their readings; they cannot yet define their positions against others; and the class benefits from a variety of initial points of view informed by the diversity of students’ experiences. Students contribute to this forum after they have participated in the first discussion, focused on the first half of the novel, and after they have finished reading the
novel, yet before they discuss the conclusion of the novel. Though students might not be able to get very far in questioning their own assumptions at this point, I want to introduce a habit of thinking and give students a space to respond to the novel without having to align with or against an outspoken majority.

Questions for The Awakening Reflection Exercise:

- What are your initial responses to the novel, particularly the ending? If you responded emotionally while reading (e.g., with anger, sadness, frustration, sympathy), what thoughts, ideas, and identifications seem to contribute to your response?
- Had you heard about The Awakening or Kate Chopin before you read the novel? If so, what had you heard, and to what extent did it shape your reading of the novel?
- Did you enjoy reading the novel? Why or why not?

Students have shared a variety of reactions in these reflections. Some describe sympathizing with Edna in respect to her struggles with marriage and gender inequality, at times acknowledging the risk of doing so, as this student expresses: "I felt in some ways that I could relate to Edna's feelings - which I know is not an easy thing anyone would want to admit." Other students express disappointment and frustration with Edna in particular or the novel's conclusion. Students can read others' perspectives once they have posted. Because posts are not written to persuade or challenge others and students are not required to respond to others, this space fosters receptive listening based on genuine curiosity and primes students to more thoughtfully engage with different readings in the discussion.

The week after we complete our discussions about The Awakening, students return to the reflection forum to reread their posts and comment on if/how their thoughts about the novel have changed. This follow-up encourages students to recognize ways that listening to and conversing with others and engaging with the text itself have helped them to develop their initial ideas and validate, through reflection, the process of idea development. The follow-up prompts are already posted for students to read when they first post to the reflection exercise, setting the expectation that many students will change their minds in discussion and encouraging students to monitor their own thinking for evidence of those changes as they participate in the discussion.

Reflection Exercise Follow-up Post Prompts:

- Has your response to the novel changed at all over the course of the discussion?
- If so, what prompted you to see the novel in a different way, and what initial ideas have you examined and reconsidered? If it didn't, what values, commitments, and ideas underlie your response to the novel?
- Regardless of whether your reading has or hasn't changed, what new points did you consider through or after the discussion?
In their follow-up posts, students demonstrate some of the benefits of postponed judgment, such as the ability to assess chosen paths in relation to alternative paths and a more complex understanding of Edna's conflicts and Chopin's portrayal of them. One student who, in his initial post, offered that, though he related to Edna, he ultimately found her selfish, reflects on what he now sees as his "very harsh opinion of [Edna]" to conclude in his follow-up post that "perhaps [he] was missing the more subtle meaning," explaining that he had assumed a woman is obligated to care for her children. A student who expressed frustration with Edna in his initial post on second thought entertains the possibility that Edna's fate is determined by nature. Another student who initially exclusively focused on social limitations for women notes realizing that male characters in the novel also experience social restrictions, citing Mr. Pontellier's need to save face by excusing Edna's leaving as due to renovations to their home. A student who reported being "frustrated by the ending," which he related to his experiences as a police officer who has to face the aftermath of suicide, reflects after the discussion that he had "more of an understanding as to how society led her to feel as though there was no way she could possibly uphold their requirements as well as no way in which she could become the version of herself that she wished to be." Another student posts that her "feelings have shifted from being disappointed to feeling content with the ending." She offers that in her initial post she was looking "through the lens of a woman living in 2017" rather than understanding Edna's choices through the significant limitations she faces at the turn of the century: "It would have been so hard to live without a husband with a tarnished reputation. Instead of going further with her social suicide, Edna found escape in a literal one." She goes on to ask questions about alternative courses of action Edna might have taken such as returning to her marriage on her own terms. She concludes that there are "no easy answers to these questions."

Bookended by the reflection exercise, some questions in the second threaded discussion prompt students to reflect upon the premises of their interpretation and to compare their overarching understanding of the novel with other possibilities. I ask, what is the problem at the center of The Awakening? Is it resolved? This question provides material students can be prompted to reflect upon to understand their own 'meaning perspectives', defined by Mezirow as "the structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience during the process of interpretation" (Fostering Critical Reflection, 2) --and appreciate alternative meaning perspectives. My role in this conversation is to prompt students to examine how their language structures their responses, to notice assumptions embedded in their language, and to compare different interpretations to recognize their premises. We interrogate and complicate the binary assumptions underlying certain conclusions, such as freedom versus responsibility, relationship versus autonomy, and reason versus imagination.

The Awakening provides opportunities for students to study Edna's reflectiveness, and to compare Chopin's treatment of reflection to their own observations about the reflective practices built into the class. I ask:
Adele at one point says to her friend: "In some ways you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (91). As the novel presents it, what is the role of reflection in life? What impedes Edna's ability to reflect in certain instances, and what are the effects of her not reflecting?

In this conversation, we consider a reflective mode as the antithesis of Edna's state in the narrative past, which the narrator describes as an "unthinking" way of being distinct from "submission or obedience," a quality of "the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us" (30). Edna's refusal to go to bed when her husband beckons her in Chapter Eleven marks the beginning of her questioning her socially shaped habits and recognizing herself as someone with agency in the face of the expectations of others. However, Edna's ability to reflect on her habits and impulses does not come on suddenly as a lasting revelation, but unevenly with serious lapses, as students note.

As part of this discussion, to challenge the idea of reflection as an exclusively individual practice that is threatened by "noise" from others, I ask about relationships in the novel, particularly Edna's exchanges with Mme. Reisz and Adele, that facilitate reflection. In these interactions, including the one quoted in the reflection question, the other character not only serves as a sounding board but at times questions Edna's assumptions, reveals self-deception, and points out patterns in thinking. Though some students want to dismiss all caring as oppressive because of Edna's experience with the "mother-woman" ideal, I ask students to examine how caring relations help Edna to realize a new understanding of herself and her desires and thus partially enable Edna's awakening. Edna's ultimate dismissal of all relationships as inessential and her understanding of her self as threatened by others reveal both her recognition of the hostility of patriarchal society and Edna's acceptance of a masculinist understanding of selfhood— one that would be practically hopeless for a woman of her period to pursue.¹

We have a conversation about what Edna wants. Through what words, including in what tense, and images does she conceive of it? What social assumptions does she question, and to what extent does society determine what she imagines for herself? In this discussion, we analyze one of Edna's tortured and abandoned attempts to articulate her newfound understanding of herself: "But I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (105). Edna believes that her preferences and desires exist beyond, and in competition with, relations with others and others' needs, yet she does not know how to reconcile that assumption with the fact of her children as representatives of anyone who is dependent upon other people. And

¹ For more on this topic, see Amy Smith and Julie Wilhelm's forthcoming essay in Mosaic, "Care and Autonomy in The Awakening and Seo's 'Though Time Goes by.'"
so we ponder, can we be responsible for others and care deeply about the wellbeing of others and also have, and delineate, our "own way"? I ask students about Edna's desire to have her "own way." Because students sometimes have difficulty imagining, in the abstract, conceptions of freedom other than Edna's belief that freedom is solitude, I have found a comparative approach useful to open this inquiry. Early in the course, students compare Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" with an excerpt from Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the chapter "The Loophole of Retreat," on their different conceptions of freedom; now I ask them to think about how *The Awakening* compares to the two other texts. Bringing Jacobs into the conversation prompts students to consider characters in *The Awakening* with more limited options than Edna has, such as the quadroon nanny, for what they reveal about Edna's social position. I ask students, what role do the women of color serve in the narrative? How do the social roles available to them compare to those available to Edna? To what extent, if at all, does Chopin ask us to consider Edna's privilege relative to the women who serve her?

Many of my students aspire to be junior high and high school English teachers, so a popular discussion question is whether *The Awakening* should be taught to young people, and why or why not. Students respond thoughtfully to this question, often citing their own discoveries in the discussion as the reasons young people ought to read the novel. For instance, in the following comment a student emphasizes the importance of self-reflection in making commitments:

> Throughout the story, Edna … asked herself all of these important questions. And perhaps young people are asking similar questions...about their motives. Why do they want to go to a certain school? Why are they getting married at a young age? ... This story can teach a lesson that it is difficult to regain "freedom" from an important contract when it is too late.

Students will sometimes discuss whether it is responsible to teach *The Awakening* when many young people are choosing to take their own lives. One student writes, "I don't think that *The Awakening* glorifies suicide, especially when Edna's actions are met with the examination and discussions as to what caused her to take this action." With comments such as these, our discussion about whether to teach the novel often evolves into a conversation about how to best teach the novel and how different pedagogical approaches shape conversations about the novel.

I incorporate critics' voices into the question about the ending of the novel to authorize multiple interpretations and encourage students to think about their ideas as part of a larger critical conversation:

> Critic William Bartley attributes Edna's final swim to her inability to fashion "a suitable image of an attainable future" (722), while Peter Ramos attributes it to her
failure to inhabit and expand "available social roles or identities" ("Unbearable Realism," 158). Per Seyersted calls it a "triumphant assertion of [Edna's] inner liberty" (149). What do you think is the significance of Edna's final swim, and how do textual details support your reading? Does Edna achieve what she wants? Why or why not? Use textual details to support your response.

In their study on how to help students improve their reflective judgement skills, Karen S. Kitchener and Patricia M. King recommend giving students opportunities to practice negotiating the "ill structured problem," a problem with no certain answers, in which "all the parameters are seldom clear or available and ... it is difficult to determine when and whether an adequate solution has been identified" (164). As Edna starts to examine her life course and social conventions and faces a conflict with variables as complex and diverse as real-life problems, The Awakening offers up an ill structured problem. With a body of criticism that does not finally resolve the most prominent ambiguities in the novel and with diverse students responding to the novel in myriad ways, The Awakening is an especially useful text for helping students to develop critical thinking and reflective judgement, as students cannot simply defer to authority for a judgment; they must sift through evidence and decide which authority makes the best argument or come to their own conclusions. Learning how to make reasonable decisions in the face of many options, none of them ideal, is important for students to develop as a tool for not only interpreting literature but also navigating their lives and engaging with the complex problems of their local and global communities. I find that students are better equipped to approach the question about the significance of Edna's final swim after they have practiced critical reflection and prepared themselves to receive other perspectives.

John Dewey describes the discomfort of reflective thought, the "unrest and disturbance" that accompanies the suspension of judgment about a problem or question as one searches for materials to support or refute initial ideas (13). While it is tempting with a novel like The Awakening that provokes strong reactions and occasionally interpersonal conflict to resolve that discomfort by "accept[ing] any suggestion that seems plausible" (Dewey 13), instructors can help students keep interpretive questions open by fostering a caring environment and incorporating reflective practices into the classroom. Before students settle on a position, they can be encouraged, through dialogue, to receptively listen to and even voice multiple points of view and to fully consider the external constraints, desires, and thoughts that contribute to Edna's conflict and shape their own understanding of and reactions to the novel. They can be socialized to recognize that their ideas are not threatened by alternate perspectives, but developed through their engagement with others.

Because asynchronous interaction is characterized by intermissions between contributions and a written record of developing thoughts, online students have the opportunity to sit--sometimes uncomfortably and often worlds apart from others in the class—with their own and others' interpretations of The Awakening, as well as the diverse
experiences and perspectives that shape them, and to consider what it means to live well, not despite but in relation to others.
Works Cited


Papke, Mary E. "Chopin’s Stories of Awakening." *Approaches to Teaching Chopin’s The Awakening*, edited by Bernard Koloski, MLA, 1988, pp. 73-79.


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