Throughout time authors have established engagements with the organic, “natural” world as a means of better developing their plots and characters. Kate Chopin, Mark Twain and Walt Whitman are three great 19th century American writers who tapped into the organic world in an effort to enhance their stories. Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, are similar in their use of nature to symbolize their characters and represent freedom, escape and connection to spirituality but differ in their endings and their endings relation to the organic world.

Chopin, Twain and Whitman share similar qualities in their representations of nature. The characters in their stories are equated to nature. The organic world symbolizes their characters and their actions. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier and her transformation is represented by birds and the sea. In the very infancy of the story, a “green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage” personifies Edna (Chopin, pg. 535). Animals, a very basic and fundamental part of nature, function as themes and are employed by Chopin throughout her novel to represent her main character. The first bird, a parrot, represents Edna before her “awakening.” Like the parrot, she was a caged animal, bound by the restrictive structure of the male dominated Creole society in which her role, responsibilities, behavior and actions were dictated and monitored by someone other than herself. The parrot, “could speak…a language which nobody understood” (Chopin, pg. 535). This is precisely like Edna. She has ideas and envisions a life for herself that is socially unacceptable. The language she speaks, according to social norms, should not and cannot be understood because it is so radical. A woman of that time was supposed to be devoted to her husband and children. Any sort of wings was not to be used for her personal freedom; rather they were to be used to protect her family. A woman and her wings were to forever remain grounded with her family and could never fly. However, in not being able to sacrifice herself for her children, committing adultery and abandoning her family for her own personal interests, Edna finds her wings, shatters the bars of her cage and escapes her societal imprisonment. In the end of the novel, Edna’s confidant Mademoiselle Reisz again alludes to birds. Although Edna does get in touch with the natural world and finds her freedom wings, Mademoiselle warns her “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (Chopin, pg. 599).

Animals are not the only aspects of the natural world that Chopin employs to symbolize her characters. The sea is another extremely important organic aspect of the novel that represents Edna. Chopin uses the sea to describe Edna’s transformation (as will be discussed further in succeeding paragraphs). The shape of a wave mimics the shape of Edna’s “awakening” and outlines the plot of the novel. At first, a wave recedes back into itself, just as Edna slowly recedes into herself by rejecting her responsibilities and catering to her personal wants. In the middle of the novel, just as a wave builds up and gets larger and larger, Edna becomes more and more independent. The intensity of her rebellion and the novel’s plot increases. She is disobedient to her husband, has an affair with Arobin, picks up her painting and moves into the pigeon house. However, every wave eventually must crash. At the end of the novel, like a wave that has gotten too large,
Edna’s world comes crashing down on her. Not being able to lead the life she has created for herself, Edna commits suicide in the sea that represents her.

Mark Twain also used the natural world to represent his characters. In his regionalist novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the Mississippi River and the surrounding rural west serves not only as the setting but also represents the novel’s protagonist, Huck Finn. Like the meandering Mississippi, adolescent Huck does not know exactly where he is headed or what the future has in store for him. He is wild, fresh and boundless. Huck states, “We said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft” (Twain, pg. 187). Huck’s raft on the Mississippi River embodies his newfound freedom, innate open-mindedness and curiosity. Although at the end of the novel Huck is overcome by the societal norms of white supremacy when he returns to civilization, sides with Tom Sawyer and uses Jim as a plaything, when Huck was out on the river with Jim in the beginning of the story he is able to think for himself. The river, which Huck describes as looking “miles and miles across,” is expansive and limitless (Twain, pg. 129). The vastness of the river mimics the vastness of Huck’s mind. There is no pressure to think or function within the social constraints of what is deemed acceptable and moral. Represented by the river and physically located within it as well, Huck is free from civilization and racial prejudice and can be friends with Jim.

In Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, the narrator is entirely portrayed as being a part of nature. Every aspect of nature symbolizes and embodies his being; “My tongue, every atom of my body, form’d from this soil, this air” (Whitman, pg. 30). He views himself not only as a body but also as an organism. Organisms are what make up the organic world. As one of nature’s precious organisms, he can “see, dance, laugh, sing” (Whitman, pg. 32). His organs and their functions are mimicked by the activities of nature’s compartments. The lines “My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,” are immediately followed by and consequently mirrored with the lines “The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color’d sea-rocks, and hay in the barn” (Whitman, pg. 31). Nature is essentially who he is and essentially he is nature in return. When “A child said What is the grass?” the narrator again describes nature as a part of who he his as a human being (Whitman, pg. 34). Whitman’s response to the child is that everyone, not just the narrator, is a part of nature. The grass, “Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, /growing among black folks as among white” is everywhere and does not discriminate (Whitman, pg. 34). It symbolizes Whitman’s attempt to unite the nation. Not only is the narrator writing this poem. Rather, we are all the readers and composers of *Song of Myself*. Nature symbolizes not only the narrator and his body/organism but also everyone’s bodies together as one. Nature is not exclusive to one person. Instead we all live and breathe and eventually die within nature. It is nature that connects us through death and the ubiquitous grass, not matter how great our differences.

Chopin, Twain and Whitman all use the natural world as a means of escape, freedom and connection to the spirituality of nature for their characters. Their characters leave society to be closer to the organic world. The characters seem to wish to be one with nature. In *The Awakening*, the sea is Edna’s source of freedom. Vast, seductive and boundless like the art she adores, Edna looks to the sea as the inspiration for her “awakening.” Throughout the novel, the sea beckons to her, “The voice of the sea is
seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander
for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The
voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body
in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin, pg. 544). In the sea Edna can experience the feelings
of floating, scattering and possibility - all the emotions she was restricted from feeling in
the rigid Creole society. She no longer wishes to be part of her culture, with all the
“blindly assumed” responsibilities that “Fate had not fitted her” (Chopin, pg. 548, 549).
Instead, she wishes to be one with the sea. She wants to be enveloped by it and at its
mercy. She hopes that she can be directed by the sea and be contained in its order, for it is
a type of movement completely outside of civilization. To Edna, the sea represents the
glory of the independence that she wishes to experience.

Like Edna, Huck Finn hopes to attain independence via nature. In The Adventures
of Huckleberry Finn, the Mississippi River is Huck’s gateway to freedom. Both
figuratively and literally Huck is dependent on the river in order to survive. Cognitively,
Huck can find comfort with the river. Although the surroundings constantly change, the
river beneath his raft is so long and large that it seems almost endless. For a young boy
that already had various homes and parental figures, the consistency of the river is
comforting. It isn’t going anywhere. Huck can always escape back to the river with no
questions asked. The river is also a literal means of escape from his abusive father. After
making it look like he had been murdered, Huck “dropped the canoe down the river” and
was on his way to freedom (Twain, pg. 128). He sees endless independence on the river.
Going down the Mississippi River is the perfect way to escape society. Huck states,
“They wont ever hunt the river for anything but my dead carcass. They’ll soon get tired
of that, and wont bother no more about me. All right; I can stop anywhere I want to”
(Twain, pg. 128). On the river, Huck no longer has to be “cramped up and civilized” and
for once he can be free (Twain, pg. 123).

In Whitman’s poem Song of Myself, nature is a major theme. Nature is the way in
which the narrator can come in contact with his spirituality. The narrator wishes to be one
with nature and alludes to numerous aspects of the organic world, including grass, the sea
and the sun, when describing himself and his connection to it. The narrator clearly prefers
the organic world to civilization. The narrator seems to be cramped and restricted when
he states, “Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded
with/perfumes” (Whitman, pg. 31). Thus, although “The distillation would intoxicate me”
the narrator, opposing the indoor, “shall not let it” (Whitman, pg. 31). Instead, the
narrator finds freedom within nature for “The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has not
taste of the distillation, it is odorless” (Whitman, pg. 31). Wishing to stay connected to
nature he states, “It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it” (Whitman, pg. 31).
Remaining close to nature, the narrator will thus always be free and feel alive.

Although Chopin, Twain and Whitman are similar in their representations of the
organic, “natural” world in their stories, the three authors also differ from one another.
The endings for each character are different because the organic world influences and
affects them differently. At the end of Chopin’s The Awakening, Robert’s farewell note to
Edna signifies the enormity of her solitude. She also feels overpowered by society. No
matter who it is, she will forever be trapped by someone else’s dependence on her, “To-
day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it
doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne” (Chopin, pg. 624)!
escape her marriage, responsibilities and civilization all together, Edna turns to the natural world. The sea, which had offered her so much promise and pleasure, is also the site of her demise. In the end, Edna comes full circle. Her “awakening” began with the sea cleansing and baptizing her as a form of rebirth, and ends when the sea overcomes her. Her suicide solidifies her placement amongst nature. By drowning herself, Edna finally shows that she has final control over her life. However, just when she has achieved her “awakening” and all of her senses are alive, she can no longer live, for when you drown you lose all of your senses. The sea may have been the vessel to her independence but in the end, she is completely overtaken by it.

The conclusion of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is quite different from *The Awakening*. Huck is not overcome by the organic world. Instead, nature keeps its promise and Huck is finally free. Jim tells Huck that is Pap is dead when he says, “Doan’ you ‘member de house dat was float’n down river, en dey wuz a man in dah, kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn’ let you come in? Well, den, you k’n git yo money when you wants it; kase dat waz him” (Twain, pg. 294). Not only is Huck successfully able to escape using the river, but the river also carries with it another key part of Huck’s happy future – his dead, abusive father. In the end, Huck wants to remain one with nature. Instead of returning to society where “Aunt Sally” will “adopt” him and “sivilize him,” Huck decides to “light out for the Territory” out West and continue his flourishing relationship with the organic world (Twain, pg. 294).

The ending of Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* is a mixture of both Chopin and Twain. Like Chopin’s Edna, the narrator dies. However, like Twain’s Huck, the narrator continues to live on. Whitman writes, “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love” (Whitman, pg. 74). Death is not seen as something terminal. Instead, in the context of nature, death is about renewal and regeneration. Life and death function not as contrasting opposites, but as partners working together along the same cycle. “But I shall be good health to you nevertheless/And filter and fibre your blood” (Whitman, pg. 74). In this quotation Whitman portrays death as a connection rather than a separation. In death, whoever you are or whatever you are (man, plant, animal etc.), all parts of nature will meet and together be one. Although death follows life, it also fuels life. The narrator may be gone from one form of life, but he does not entirely vanish. “Missing me one place search another/I stop somewhere waiting for you” (Whitman, pg. 74). Like Huck, the narrator is still here. In the end, the narrator is not attempting to be one with nature like Edna. Instead, the narrator is nature.

The supplementation of the organic world in Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, is extremely important. Nature works to facilitate the stories as well as aid in character development. Thus, although they differ in their endings, Chopin, Twain and Whitman all used the organic world to symbolize their characters as well as provide a means of freedom, escape and connection to spirituality. Without nature, there would be something missing from each tale.