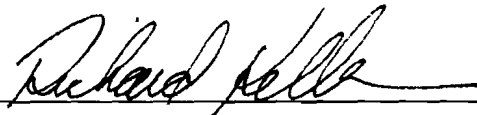


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Reappraisal

Abstract Approved: 

Women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century were revising the world view they had inherited from a society that said women mattered less than men did, a society that failed to recognize the authenticity of a woman's emotions, needs, and desires. These literary women often resorted to symbolic narratives to express their feelings of constriction, exclusion, and dispossession. Kate Chopin was one of the most daring and courageous female writers during this period, a fact which became the basis for a complete rejection of her works by a male-dominated society who misread and misinterpreted the implications she presents.

Chopin and her works were severely criticized because of her realistic portrayal of women's situations depicting ideas

which were not socially acceptable at that time. Chopin dealt with dangerous themes---dangerous, that is, to men and masculine vanity. She detailed assertive, unorthodox women characters, unsatisfactory marriages, the specters of illicit love, adultery, incest, and prostitution. She was the first woman writer in this country to accept passion as a legitimate subject for serious, outspoken fiction. Her truthful depiction of woman's life in American society brought the wrath of male critics to bear both on her works and on her personal life.

Chopin explores many themes, the most prominent of which is the awakening or reoccurrence of sexual passion in women and men. The carefully developed interrelationship between living up to society's expectations and escaping from its strictures is a dominant feature of her character development. Women have traditionally found their individual value through their relationships with men, in their marriage, as mothers, as friends of other women, and as members of a society and culture. Chopin challenges each of these conventions through the experiences of her heroines.

Kate Chopin was a twentieth-century woman writing to a nineteenth-century audience. A close assessment of her works discloses a panorama of human emotions better understood by modern audiences. Her rejection and subsequent silencing by male critics was a serious, but fortunately temporary, loss to American literature.

KATE CHOPIN'S FICTION: A TWENTIETH-CENTURY CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL

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CHAPTER I

CHOPIN AND HER LITERARY MILIEU

"To succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul, the soul that dares and defies."

Mademoiselle Reisz in The Awakening

Sandra M. Gilbert, in "What Do Feminist Critics Want?" states:

Women writers have frequently responded to sociocultural constraints by creating symbolic narratives that express their common feelings of constriction, exclusion, dispossession....these literary women were revising the world view they had inherited from a society that said women mattered less than men did, a society that thought women barely belonged in the great parade of culture, that defined women as at best marginal and silent tenants of the cosmic mansion and at worst guilty interlopers in that house. (35)

Such was the atmosphere surrounding Kate Chopin as she began to submit her writings to a male-dominated society.

"To be an artist includes much," Mademoiselle Reisz, the gifted pianist in The Awakening tells Edna Pontellier, "one must possess many gifts - absolute gifts - which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul, the soul that dares and

defies" (946). This daring and courageous soul, in combination with a vision all her own, belonged to Chopin.

The great achievement of Kate Chopin was that she broke new ground in American literature. She was the first woman writer in this country to accept passion as a legitimate subject for serious, outspoken fiction. Revolting against tradition and authority with a daring which the modern reader can hardly fathom and with an uncompromising honesty and no trace of sensationalism, she undertook to write the unsparing truth about woman's submerged life in American society. She was something of a pioneer in the amoral treatment of sexuality, of divorce, and of women's urge for an authentic existence (Taylor).

Much of Chopin's work was severely criticized in her day because of its very realistic portrayal of the situation of women, depicting ideas which were not considered socially acceptable during the era in which she wrote. Many of these feminine insights were apparently fostered during the early years of Chopin's life through her experiences with her family and acquaintances. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1851. Her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was a smart, successful Irish immigrant, a very liberal-minded man who exposed his young daughter to his business interests at a very early age. Kate grew up as one of the fortunate few of her time, surrounded by family love, money, education and leisure. She had rich cultural opportunity of every kind, and regular association with the most refined, stimulating and powerful people living in the city or

visiting there (Missouri Life 29).

At four she lost her father; he was among twenty-nine founders and financiers of the Union Pacific Line who went into the Gasconade River in a train on its inaugural run. At twelve, she lost her only sibling, a beloved half-brother, who was killed in the Civil War. This was also the end of male influence on Chopin until the year of her marriage. A French great-grandmother undertook Kate's training at home and she was a strong influence during these formative years. The great-grandmother made sure that Kate's education included more than the social courses considered adequate for girls at this time. Kate was enrolled in science courses as well as home decorating, and she was so well trained in French and German that she would enjoy reading and translating in both languages all her life (Missouri Life 29).

On June 9, 1870, Kate married Oscar Chopin, a handsome young man from a wealthy Creole family. They had the customary long European honeymoon, then went to live in a "galleried mansion" in New Orleans. Oscar Chopin must have had much in common with his dead father-in-law, for he took his young wife to see many things in which women of her day were not supposed to be interested. He apparently did not object to her wandering about alone, even in Europe, or to her spending days, after she was the mother of six, riding street cars in New Orleans, just observing people and happenings. She had a great curiosity about anything and everything around her. She indulged in cigarettes,

unconventional clothing, and long, solitary jaunts (Seyersted 15).

The family routine came to an end in 1880, when Oscar Chopin's business failed. They moved to one of the Chopin landed properties at Cloutierville, in Natchitoches Parish, in central Louisiana, where Kate Chopin helped her husband operate the family store and the 4,367 acre Chopin Plantation with its ninety-four freed slaves (Missouri Life 30). Oscar Chopin died in 1882 with swamp fever, and Kate continued to operate the plantation alone for almost a year before returning, with her six children, to live with her mother in St. Louis. Although she was still very attractive, she refused all offers of marriage. Her mother died in 1885; and three years later, at the age of thirty-seven, Kate Chopin began to write (Notable American Women 334).

The second half of the nineteenth century was characterized by the development of a national literature of great abundance and variety. New themes, new forms, new subjects, new regions, new authors, and new audiences all emerged from the literature of this half century. No longer was literature produced, at least in its popular forms, mainly by solemn, typically moralistic men from New England and the Old South. No longer were polite, well-dressed, grammatically correct, middle-class young people the only central characters in its narratives, and no longer were these narratives set in foreign lands and past centuries.

Self-educated men from the frontier, adventurers, and journalists introduced the rural poor and industrial workers, ambitious businessmen and vagrants, prostitutes and unheroic soldiers as major characters in fiction. These years also saw the development of what critic Warner Berthoff referred to as "the literature of argument," powerful works in sociology, philosophy and psychology (Baym 1114). Many of these works were propelled by a spirit of exposure and reform. Ambrose Bierce wrote scenes of pessimism, cynicism, nihilism, and gallows humor. Joel Chandler Harris drew on a mixture of African and European sources in his Negro folklore book, Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings (1881). Sarah Orne Jewett depicted the courageous response of women to frustration and loneliness in The White Heron (1886).

The three figures who dominated prose fiction in the late nineteenth century were Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James. Twain was the most popular of the three, but Howells was the most influential writer. Howells called for a literary realism that would treat commonplace America truthfully and expose the decay of American life under the rule of competitive capitalism. James believed that the writer should use language to probe the deepest reaches of the psychological and moral nature of human beings (Baym 1118). Together, these three writers explored new literary styles and helped form new definitions for writers, now described as "realists."

American writers adopted the new forms of writing in highly

individualistic ways. Stephen Crane, for example, believed that environment is important in determining human fate and exemplifies this doctrine in his novel Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893). Crane's Maggie is destroyed by an environment which she can neither escape nor conquer. Theodore Dreiser also believed in the new doctrine of "determinism" and espoused it in his works during this period. In Sister Carrie, Dreiser's Carrie rises to social and material position due primarily to her amoral attitude toward life. Crane and Dreiser created women who had difficulty accepting their own sexuality, or who succeeded in spite of their immorality. Though these works were shocking to readers, the authors were never subjected to the sensational criticism that was inflicted upon Kate Chopin. Their works were recognized and accepted into the American literary canon long before that of Chopin.

The literary precepts of the nineteenth century were a challenge to Chopin. This was the great age of the annual, "lady's book," and literary magazine. Many writers whose novels we now read--Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe and Twain--wrote a great deal for these publications. The short story was seen as ideally suited for the portrayal of rural subjects, regional life, simple people, and romantic figures. Chopin used many of these same devices as her earlier counterparts: folk humor, an interest in dialect, and a focus on one or two individuals (usually women) who are separated from their fellows because of some eccentricity or rebellion.

Influential critics of that day felt that fiction should be pleasant and avoid the horrifying, the indelicate, or the immoral. Chopin wrote her first novel about murder, drunkenness, and infidelity. Her women, particularly, were objectionable to editors. Her very first, Paula Von Stoltz, of "Wiser Than a God" (1889), refuses the "labor of loving" which a man wants to impose upon her, and becomes instead a famous pianist (TCLC Vol. 14, 61). Editors turned down a number of her stories as her women became more passionate and emancipated. The heroine of "Two Portraits" (1895), for example, insists on giving herself "when and where she chooses" (463).

"Mrs. Mobry's Reason" (1891), a story about hereditary insanity, was refused by many journals until a liberal New Orleans newspaper accepted it. "Miss McEnders" (1892), "Lilacs" (1894), and "A Vocation and a Voice" (1895) proved very difficult to place, and "Two Portraits" (1895) was rejected by every magazine Chopin approached.

R. W. Gilder, the influential editor of the national magazine Century, refused to publish "The Story of an Hour" (1894), "A Night in Acadie" (1896) and "Athénaïse" (1895) because he felt they were unethical, and Chopin rewrote her story "A No-Account Creole" (1888) to suit his request that she tone down her women characters (Seyersted 14).

Chopin had problems with editors and critics because she insisted on dealing with dangerous themes---dangerous, that is, to men and the masculine vanity. She detailed assertive,

unorthodox women characters, unsatisfactory marriages, the specters of illicit love, adultery, incest and prostitution. Publishing houses and magazine editors of the 1890's were particularly sensitive about any subject matter or tone which smacked of the new realism and naturalism which American writers were increasingly borrowing from Europe. Realism or naturalism, "the poison of Europe," was seen as a pernicious disease, a blight on that precious native American innocence. European literature was condemned for its representations of the worlds of poverty and crime, for morally lax and unregenerate characters, for dissolute men and women, and their involvement with seduction, illegitimate births, prostitution and adultery--along with an absence of Christian morality or saving grace. Chopin was influenced greatly by these European realists and she suffered censorship and condemnation for emulating them (Taylor 156).

Chopin had read many of the new scientific works which came from Europe also and was familiar with the writings of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer. She read widely in the works of Tolstoy, Flaubert, Hardy and Zola; echoes of and direct references to them appear in her own writings. Chopin's main European influence, however, was Guy de Maupassant, whose works she read exhaustively, translated into English, and studied in order to perfect her own technique. She learned from him how to write concisely, clearly, and economically. His preoccupation with love, sexuality, marriage and adultery undoubtedly emboldened

her to take on such themes, and his ironic, morally relativistic tone is one she mastered expertly. He probably was responsible for her detached, objective handling of subjects like suicide, madness and despair. She added to her study of Maupassant a capacity of her own for symbolic writing and her insight into the complexity of her women character's needs and motivation. Practically the only criticism leveled at her today by serious literary authorities is that she imitated Maupassant too much. However, some critics declare that she surpasses him (Missouri Life 29).

As a woman and a writer, Kate Chopin was outspoken, direct, independent and original. She scorned writers who philosophized through mouths of fictional characters. In a letter to a friend she said, "I try never to be guilty of giving advice." Sounding curiously 1970-ish, she said "Morality is man-made and relative," and "It's ridiculous to talk about equality as long as women have babies" (Missouri Life 32). She saw the idea of male supremacy and female submission as so ingrained that women might never achieve emancipation in the very deepest sense. Furthermore, she looked beyond this emancipation and saw the horror of an unsupported freedom. This vision, and her awareness of how the woman in particular is a toy in the hands of nature's procreational imperative, lend a note of despair to such a work as The Awakening (Seyersted 32).

The Awakening (1899), which traces the psychological and sexual coming to consciousness of a young woman, aroused great

hostility among contemporary reviewers, just as Whitman's Leaves of Grass, which she admired, had done half a century earlier. The "new woman" of the time, demanding social, economic, and political equality, was already a common topic of public discussion and subject for fiction. But the depiction of such an unrepentant sensualist as Edna Pontellier was more than critics of this time could allow. The book was described as "trite and sordid," "essentially vulgar," and "unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling" (Baym 1524).

In a letter to Herbert F. Stone in 1899, Kate Chopin commented on the strong criticism surrounding The Awakening:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (Seyersted & Toth 137)

Ironically, it was Chopin who was "excluded from the company" following the publication of this work. Until The Awakening appeared, reviewers had been practically unanimous in saying that Kate Chopin's technique was wonderful, even though her subject choice was often puzzling or even questionable. This last complete novel, which is considered to be her masterpiece,

deals with feminist views unpopular during her era. In this particular novel, the heroine, Edna Pontellier, is married to a wealthy man who occupies himself fully with business and exclusively male recreations and is unresponsive to her attempts to communicate her need for a more complete relationship. When she engages in a mild flirtation, he is unconcerned so she leaves his house and sets up a place of her own from which she leads a life that causes one of her friends to warn her that she is ruining the future of her children. Rather than return to a loveless marriage, she walks into the ocean to die.

Ordinarily, a character's struggle for freedom would touch a responsive chord in all readers. Even slaves who revolt are cheered for having made their bid for individual freedom. However, these responses did not seem to operate on critics in the case of The Awakening. Edna was not accepted as representative of the human spirit only because she is female. Readers were horrified and critics, to a man, were shocked at the theme of this book. While most still conceded that Chopin's writing was superb, they disapproved heartily of her suggesting that a woman's needs and desires are as important as a man's and that not every woman finds the traditional role fulfilling (Missouri Life 31).

Not surprisingly, Chopin's original title for The Awakening was A Solitary Soul. The underlying theme of the novel is the heroine's powerful drive toward personal freedom, to the state when her true identity can be released from the confines of

social roles and responsibilities. Many publications in Chopin's day refused to review The Awakening, and librarians, beginning with those in St. Louis, banned it. From the Los Angeles Times to The Nation, reviewers reacted: "Makes me sick of human nature;" "Poison!"; "Fails to teach a moral lesson;" "No repentance from the characters and no reproach from the author;" "Commits unutterable crimes against polite society, though in the essentials of her art she never blunders" (Missouri Life 35).

A review in Public Opinion (1899) stated:

The Awakening, by Kate Chopin is a feeble reflection of Bourget, theme and manner of treatment both suggesting the French novelist. We very much doubt the possibility of a woman of "solid old Presbyterian Kentucky stock" being at all like Mrs. Edna Pontellier who has a long list of lesser loves, and one absorbing passion, but gives herself only to the man for whom she did not feel the least affection. If the author had secured our sympathy for this unpleasant person it would not have been a small victory, but we are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf. (TCLC, Vol. 14, 57)

The Nation (1899), printed in its review that [Mrs. Chopin's] The Awakening is the sad story of "a Southern lady who wanted to do what she wanted to do." The review continued by commenting on the "disastrous consequences" brought about by

the desires of a woman who should have attended more to her role as a wife and mother. It concluded with the statement that

Had she [Edna] lived by Prof. William James' advice to do one thing a day one does not want to do (in Creole society, two would perhaps be better), flirted less and looked after her children more, or even assisted at more accouchments, we need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself. (TCLC, Vol. 5, 143)

Critic Percival Pollard writes scathingly of Chopin in 1909; she is "another lady who proved to us that dear Thackeray's scruples no longer worried her sex." Pollard compares Edna's awakening to "the growth of animalism in a woman" and makes reference to the fact that it is only men such as Balzac or Flaubert or Gautier who attempt to write "thoughts fit only for the smoking-rooms" (TCLC, Vol.5, 143).

Pollard continues his review of The Awakening by writing that it is inconceivable for a reader to be asked to believe that a young woman who had been married several years and had born children, had never, in all that time, "been properly awake." He compares Edna's awakening desires to the "ferment in new wine," and comments that Robert Lebrun would "at any Northern summer resort been sure of a lynching." Pollard writes that the relationship between Edna and Robert was only a "trifling encounter," after which Edna "becomes utterly unmanageable." His criteria for judging Edna as "unmanageable"

is the fact that "she neglected her house; she tried to paint -- always a bad sign, that, when women want to paint, or act, or sing, or write!" (TCLC, Vol. 5, 143-145).

Pollard continues:

Of course, she went and drowned herself. She realized that you can only put out fire with water, if all other chemical engines go away. She realized that the awakening was too great; that she was too aflame; that it was now merely Man, not Robert or Arobin, that she desired. So she took an infinite dip in the passionate Gulf...Ah, what a hiss, what a fiery splash, there must have been in those warm waters of the South! But--what a pity that poor Pontellier, Edna's husband, never knew that his wife was in a trance all their wedded days, and that he was away at the moment of her awakening! For, other men failing, there are, after all, some things that a husband is useful for, in spite of books like The Awakening. (TCLC, Vol. 5, 144)

Mr. Pollard's criticism details with exactness the major problems that Kate Chopin met in the reading public, particularly from the male viewpoint. Women of her day were not supposed to feel great emotion, sexual desire or, to use Mr. Pollard's definition, "animalism." These were thoughts saved for male-only discussions in the "smoking-rooms" which, we may assume, were very erotic places. Obviously, according to Mr. Pollard, the most dangerous of all activities women could pursue

included painting, acting, singing or, Heaven forbid, writing! Participating in any of these activities encouraged a woman to ignore her home, her children, her husband, and Mr. Pollard insinuates, lead her down the road of certain destruction toward Hell! Mr. Pollard was aware, it is certain, that while he was condemning Edna for these activities in The Awakening, he was also condemning Kate Chopin for the same activities, as she was an accomplished artist and musician, as well as a writer.

Kate Chopin died in 1904 and was unable to defend herself against this particular critic, a point no doubt useful to him. His essay, however, is typical of the reactions she received on the publication of The Awakening. Not only were the women in her stories attacked as "immoral" and "unrepentant," the same labels were attached to Chopin personally. Magazines stopped taking her work so readily, and critics say that during this period her style lost its grace and authority. Her greatest disappointment came when she was refused membership in a fine arts club she really wanted to join in St. Louis.

Because of the subject matter of her last few writings and the explicit passages detailing the inner conflicts and feelings of women as equals with men, Chopin was made a virtual outcast in social circles. Many publishers refused to accept any more of her writings and she finally stopped writing completely. Not long after this experience, her health failed and she died due to a cerebral hemorrhage.

Kate Chopin has a daring and a vision all her own, a unique

combination of realism and pessimism applied to a woman's immutable condition. The women she writes about must all struggle to know and accept themselves, but their predicament is more excruciating because of what she calls the "matrimonial yolk." Her stories openly criticize the unnaturalness of institutionalized marriage, but her characters do not contend with marriage in a uniform way. Some accept it after considerable anguish; some flee from it; and some manage to find illicit, but naturally innocent nourishment outside of the marriage (TCLC Vol. 5, 158).

Seyersted writes that Chopin was "too much of a pioneer to be accepted in her time and place" (3). He considers her efforts to project the sensuality and sexuality of women as the major cause of this rejection. I argue that Chopin's work was rejected because it aroused a male fear that women would change their subordinate role in marriage and society, thereby undermining male dominion. This fear surfaced and was recognized during the twentieth century feminist movement as Chopin's works were being reintroduced by Seyersted.

In the essay, "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," printed in Feminist Theory in Practice and Process, Christine Froula writes of an experience with Virginia Woolf:

In her speech before the London/National Society for Women's Service on January 21, 1931, Virginia Woolf figured the woman novelist as a fisherwoman who lets the

hook of her imagination down into the depths "of the world that lies submerged in our unconscious being." Feeling a violent jerk, she pulls the line up short, and the "imagination comes to the top in a state of fury":

Good heavens she cries--how dare you interfere with me...And I--that is the reason--have to reply, "My dear you were going altogether too far. Men would be shocked." Calm yourself...In fifty years I shall be able to use all this very queer knowledge that you are ready to bring me. But not now. You see, I go on, trying to calm her, I cannot make use of what you tell me--about women's bodies for instance--their passions--and so on, because the conventions are still very strong. If I were to overcome the conventions I should need the courage of a hero, and I am not a hero...

Very well, says the imagination, dressing herself up again in her petticoats and skirts...we will wait another fifty years. But it seems to me a pity. (139-140)

Kate Chopin's writings match Woolf's fisherwoman image perfectly. Chopin delves deep into her consciousness and finds women who sometimes will, and often will not, fight against the conventions within which society has placed them. It is in this feminine match of wits and wisdom that men find a threat to the male dominion.

The personal quest of Chopin's women is reality, in losing

the subordinate image. Their reality, the reality of all women's relation to the world in which they live becomes the central focus of their lives. Chopin once stated that her main interest as a writer was in depicting "human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it" (Seyersted 17). Chopin succeeded, both as a writer and as a woman, in unveiling her personal authenticity as she wrote and lived the life of a woman desperately trying to escape the conventions which bound her imagination and forced her into becoming a silent fisherwoman.

Chopin critics have centered attention primarily on her important novel, The Awakening; however, her many short stories deserve recognition. Each conflict of womanhood and the identity of a woman's role in life is juxtaposed with the social forces surrounding the heroine. The journey of life itself becomes the central force of each story, as often the reward is a disappointing one, both for the reader and the woman seeking to escape the conventions of society.

Chopin's women search for their authentic existence, for a new meaning in their lives, through the medium of exploring relationships with their surroundings. Women have traditionally found their individual value through their relationships with men, in their marriage, as mothers, as friends of other women, and as members of a society and culture. Chopin challenges each of these conventions and seeks to awaken all women's true

natures, whether traditional, emancipated, or a mixture of the two.

Chopin's characters are presented as women seeking authenticity while engaged in relationships with other people and influences. I will argue that these relationships were all pre-determined by a male-dominated society; therefore, each heroine is doomed to personal failure from the outset. Chopin recognizes this fact; however, she sets her characters at odds with their subordinate status and the reader is left to determine the degree of success.

CHAPTER II

CHOPIN AND MARRIAGE

"Human impulses do not change and cannot so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began."

Kate Chopin, 1894

In Becoming A Heroine, Rachel M. Brownstein proposes that "the idea of becoming a heroine marries the female protagonist to the marriage plot..." (xvi). She also adds: "Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women had little chance of living comfortable or fulfilling lives outside of marriage..."(81). Therefore, the modern reader expects the inevitable marriage stories in such novels. However, stories by Kate Chopin oppose such a patriarchal society.

Chopin's stories often turn on the question of whether a female character is leading an authentic existence, or whether her true nature is being suppressed through the demands imposed upon her by others. Her marriage stories turn on the problems which arise during the pursuit of this existence. No other experience so consistently exposes her to the demands of others or offers the most resistance to individual self-gratification. In Chopin's day this was particularly true for women, whose range of experience with the demands of others was, given the nature of nineteenth-century American society, largely limited

to marriage (Stein 164).

Kate Chopin is far ahead of prevailing literary convention in her understanding and portrayal of the passions of women, but neither the social nor moral implications are grist for Chopin's mill. She primarily concerns herself with whether the characters find gratification in their marriages. Her prevailing doctrine stresses that individual fulfillment is more important than the demands of the institution. Her heroines seek relentlessly for personal satisfaction, thereby encountering the problems that condemn some of them to destruction.

Just as Chopin sees that the problems confronting her sex are too complicated for easy solutions, she is also well acquainted with the manifold tendencies toward seeking these solutions in the women themselves. Her first story, "Euphrasie," (1888) is the story of a subservient feminine heroine, that is, a woman who accepts the patriarchal view of her role very pointedly expressed in the marriage sermon of Father Beaulieu of Cloutierville: "Madame, be submissive to your husband...You no longer belong to yourself" (832).

Seyersted comments that "in a society where man makes the rules, woman is often kept in a state of tutelage and regarded as property or as a servant. Her 'lack of self assertion' is equated with 'the perfection of womanliness,' as Chopin later expressed it in a story." He continues, "In the man's world, woman should accept a special standard for the 'more expansive' sex, and for herself, she should eagerly welcome the 'sanctity

of motherhood'." As Mme. de Stael's Corinne is told (in the novel Corinne): "Whatever extraordinary gifts she may have, her duty and her proper destiny is to devote herself to her husband and to the raising of her children" (103). These precepts are all clearly reflected in the civil laws of Chopin's period, in which a woman's possessions became her husband's property upon marriage and she could not conduct any business or sign contracts of any type. She, in fact, belonged to him.

Euphrasie is a dutiful daughter, and also a loyal fiancee as she tries to hide even from herself that she has suddenly fallen in love with someone else than the man she is engaged to. In the tradition of the feminine woman, she accepts the role of the passive, self-obliterating object as she makes no attempt to influence her fate. She is willing to break her heart and proceed with the marriage even though she considers it immoral to kiss her fiancee when she does not love him. As behooves a feminine woman, she lets the man decide her destiny. When her fiancee learns the truth by accident, he sets her free, thus saving her from the sin a marriage to him would have meant to her (Seyersted 104).

Chopin destroyed the next two stories she wrote. All that is known of these works is that the first was set on Grand Isle, and that the second, "A Poor Girl," was offensive to editorial eyes, perhaps because the author already was too open about untrained urges in women (Seyersted 104). Chopin was at this point beginning to suffer from the male-oriented censorship that

would ultimately destroy her creative urges.

In "Wiser Than a God," Chopin tells the story of a young girl who dreams, as do her parents, that she may someday become a great concert pianist. She is hired to play a performance at a society party, meets a young socialite, George Brainard, and they fall in love. Dedicated to becoming a great pianist, Paula has learned to sacrifice everything for her art. George is handsome, wealthy, kind, considerate, and intelligent, yet Paula realizes that she cannot be both Paula Von Stoltz, a great musician, and Mrs. George Brainard. To do so would be to lose her self-identity. Therefore, she chooses her own authentic existence, though it means she must sacrifice love.

Allen F. Stein, writing in After the Vows Were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism, states:

Certainly, were Paula Von Stoltz to marry the young man who proposes to her, she would not be showing the wisdom greater than a god's that the title of Chopin's first story touching on marriage attributes to her, for such a union would mean the end of her self-development.

He continues by asserting that though the young man has looks, charm, and wealth, and though Paula may well love him, her refusal of his offer is nothing less than an "affirmation of her own self and its needs". A brilliant pianist devoted to her music, Paula would, were she to marry George Brainard, a young socialite with a knack for the banjo, be consigning herself to a life spent amid those whose response to her playing

cannot go beyond the chorus of "How pretty!" "Just lovely!" and "What I wouldn't give to play like that" that greets Paula at the party. Further, as George's wife and a member of polite society, Paula would not be at liberty to make music her career, a dream long cherished by her and her late parents (166-167).

Chopin confirms Paula's decision when she reports that only a few years after the rejection Paula is a renowned pianist while George is perfectly content in his marriage to a "little black-eyed wife" whose forte when single was dancing Virginia breakdowns at parties. Chopin leaves open the possibility that Paula will marry as she writes that Paula's former teacher, Professor Max Kunstler, is pursuing her with an "ever persistent will--the dogged patience that so often wins in the end" (Seyersted 47). Marriage to Kunstler, who is as dedicated to music and art as Paula is, clearly would not suppress her true nature; rather, the two would nourish each other and the art they serve. Therefore, by being true to herself, Paula has been successful in her quest and her reward may be a lifetime of love with a man who is her equal. She may yet have the opportunity to overcome her subordinate status in society. Unlike many of Chopin's heroines, particularly Edna Pontellier, of The Awakening, Paula does have some options in life due to her talent, painful though they may be.

Mildred Orme, the heroine of Chopin's "A Shameful Affair," (1893) is a socially conventional young woman who represses her own sexuality. She visits the Kraummer farm to escape the

sexual demands made on her by a male-dominated urban society. Mildred represses her own sexual feelings until she meets Fred Evelyn, a "clumsy farmhand" (148). Mildred pursues Fred, even though she says that "farmhands are not so very nice to look at" (148). After Fred refuses to drive her to church, Mildred goes down to the river where she knows he will be fishing. As Fred kisses her, Mildred feels her sexual nature awakened, and she tells herself that the desire she feels for him is a "shameful whim that chanced to visit her soul, like an ugly dream" (152).

After temporarily succumbing to her natural instincts and desires, Mildred retreats into her usual repressive behavior. Returning to her room in the farmhouse, she decides to "give calm thought to the situation, and determine then how to act" (151). In "Chopin's 'A Shameful Affair'," Martin Simpson states that Mildred's consistent retreat from sexuality, associated with symbols of societal repression, causes her to become a troubled and confused young woman. She will never be a complete and healthy human being, Chopin is saying, until she comes to terms with the 'golden, undulating sea' of her passions. (60)

Mildred's quest is unsuccessful, as she is unable to allow her passions to resolve her problematic relationship with men. Therefore, she, also, loses the opportunity to overcome the conventions which bind her future.

With the novel At Fault (1890), Chopin establishes the context of amorality which will prevail in all of the marriage stories. Throughout this novel, Chopin stresses the folly of a

woman who, trying to overcome conventions, leaves the world behind for a life of devotion to inapplicable and life-denying ideals. The most damaging of such ideals in At Fault is the notion that any marriage--even a hideously unhappy one--must last as long as life. Chopin's protagonist, Thérèse, finally learns that a marriage should, on the contrary, last only as long as those in it are fulfilled. Because it takes Therese so long to learn this lesson, she causes herself and Hosmer, the man she loves, a good deal of mischief and indirectly brings about the death of his wife, Fanny. Though At Fault has been greatly criticized and Seyersted has commented that it is marred by "a lack of focus due to the many subplots and secondary figures" (8), this novel introduces the main theme behind all Chopin's subsequent stories and the quests of her women as they flee the traditional values of their heroine counterparts.

Allen F. Stein, in After the Vows Were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism, divides the Chopin marriage stories into three types, all of which have the notion that marriage, particularly for a woman, involves a certain amount of submission. One group presents characters--all women--who are able to find self-fulfillment solely in submission to the demands their marriages make upon them. A second shows the dangers inherent in refusing to rebel against the demands imposed in marriage when one fails to find an authentic existence in meeting them. And, finally, the third group presents some who, unable to find satisfying lives in their

marriages, rebel against them and their demands (176). Brownstein comments that there are actually only two courses of action open to a true heroine. She will either "get virtue's earthly reward, a rich husband, or be seduced and die of it" (81).

Chopin's stories of women whose quest leads them to discover authentic lives through marriage and the acceptance of the submission that marriage demands include "A Visit to Avoyelles" (1893) and "Madame Célestin's Divorce" (1894). Both of these stories depict women who find an authentic existence while living with husbands who are unworthy of their love and loyalty. "The Going Away of Lisa" (1892) and "Athénaïse" (1896) depict wives who leave their mates, but discover during their search that they can only fulfill the demands of their natures within their marriages, though not as entirely subordinate partners to their husbands.

In "Madame Célestin's Divorce" a pretty young Creole woman is deserted by her husband, a mean-tempered man who drinks and abuses her. Lawyer Paxton urges her to divorce the husband, but she hesitates to complete this action because of her religious convictions. Finally, her husband returns and promises her that "on his word an' honor he's going to turn ova a new leaf" (279). Though the reader is left with doubts as to the husband's future intentions, Célestin is apparently satisfied with his promise. She gives up all thought of the divorce and seems happy to remain married. Célestin's quest for self-fulfillment can only

be rewarded within the confines of a marriage that most people would find appalling. She becomes one of Chopin's few heroines who accepts the subordinate status of her existence. She is doomed to a life of subservience because of the restrictions placed upon her by religious and societal conventions. Chopin successfully placed this story primarily because her male editor agreed that Célestin had made a "wise choice" in returning to her husband.

"Athénaïse" is the story of a headstrong young woman whose pregnancy leads her to the realization that only in accepting the submission and restraints imposed by marriage can she find an authentic existence for herself. Per Seyersted, though accepting that "Athénaïse" is a story with a "happy end," depicting the "sensuous joys" available to women, asserts that it nonetheless "contains a deep protest against woman's condition"(9). The newly married Athénaïse feels a "sense of hopelessness" and "instinctive realization of the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution" (432) when her parents force her to return to her husband, Cazeau, after an early effort to leave him (Stein 180).

Athénaïse is an immature, childlike young woman who cannot adjust to the intimacy forced upon her by the institution of marriage. In a conversation with her brother she admits:

'No I don't hate [Cazeau]....; It's just being married that I detes' an' despise. I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an' would want to be Athénaïse Miché

again. I can't stan' to live with a man; to have him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet--washing them in my tub befo' my very eyes, ugh!' She shuddered with recollections, and resumed, with a sigh that was almost a sob: 'Mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Sister Marie Angélique knew w'at she was saying; she knew me better than myse'f w'en she said God had sent me a vocation an' I was turning deaf ears. W'en I think of a blessed life in the convent, at peace! Oh, w'at was I dreaming of!' and then the tears came. (431)

Discovering that she is pregnant brings Athénaïse to the apex of her quest for an authentic existence. Convinced by the maternal and domestic yearnings welling up within her that her place is with her husband, she returns to take her accepted place as his wife. She shows obvious affection for Cazeau on her return, demonstrating that she has put her own desire for personal freedom behind and found her identity as a woman, at least so far as society will observe. In finding what they seek, through marriage, Athénaïse and Madame Célestine ultimately find themselves, and Chopin depicts them both as reasonably happy with their discovery.

"The Storm" (1898) is another treatment of unconventional, impulsive behavior in marriage. Again, the impulses are associated with (and sanctioned by) larger impulses in nature,

with the storm of the title. An actual storm strands Calixta's husband and son while they are away from home, and she is left alone until Alcée Laballière, a former suitor, passes by and seeks shelter. A "storm" of sexual energy brings Calixta and Alcée together during the natural storm. There is no suggestion that the marriage of Calixta and Bobinôt is in any way unhappy, and when Bobinôt and Bibi arrive home after the storm, the reunion is joyful for all three. Bert Bender, in "Kate Chopin's Lyrical Short Stories," writes that

Calixta's adulterous encounter is accidental and innocent. It is simply that mysterious natural forces larger than the individuals or the marriage institution have worked to refresh all the parties of both marriages, Laballière's as well as Calixta's. Kate Chopin's principle here, as usual, is that freedom nourishes. (265)

"The Storm" is important for its daring depiction of sex as a pleasurable activity. Seyersted comments that "with its organic quality, its erotic elation, and its elemental nature, the story almost makes its author an early D. H. Lawrence" (168). Chopin wrote "The Storm" while awaiting publication of The Awakening. As a result of the scathing critical reactions to The Awakening she never tried to publish "The Storm." It was first published by Per Seyersted in 1969, reaching a new generation of receptive readers and critics.

Finding themselves through submission to the restraints of marriage is not always possible for the heroines of Kate Chopin.

Several of the married women in her stories fail to leave unpleasant marriages, choosing to attempt self-repression of problematic feelings. Chopin depicts these efforts to find an authentic existence as disastrous even while the women are denying themselves the opportunity for a meaningful life. These women try, unwillingly, to accept the conventions of society, though because of their true nature, they will never become successful.

One of the best examples of a woman who has a long-repressed desire for an authentic existence and the folly of self-denial is Mrs. Mallard in "The Story of an Hour" (1894). In this very short story, Mrs. Mallard, a married woman, "afflicted with heart trouble" (252), is told that her husband has been killed in a railroad accident. After her "storm of grief had spent itself" (252), Mrs. Mallard retires to her room to be alone with her grief. She is soon surprised to find her grief rapidly dissipating in the face of new feelings which are "approaching to possess her" (353). She strives to "beat it back with her will" (353), but gradually begins to yield to this new feeling.

Mrs. Mallard soon begins to realize that the feeling to which she is now yielding is exultation, a joy at the prospect of being "free, free, free" (353). Looking ahead to the years to come she realizes that

There would be no one to live for...; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers

in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature.... What could love, the unresolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being! (353)

Realizing that she no longer must play the role of subservient wife and happy over the realization that her quest for an authentic existence, answerable only to herself, was now possible, she sits whispering repeatedly, "Free! Body and Soul Free!" (354). She descends the stairs to join her worried sister, a look of "feverish triumph in her eyes" (354). At this moment, her husband, alive and completely unaware of the mistaken death report, arrives home. At the sight of him, Mrs. Mallard falls dead, a victim, according to her doctor, of "heart disease--of the joy that kills" (354).

Chopin depicts Mrs. Mallard as a woman who has denied her own needs and repressed her feelings to such an extent that, once opened, they cannot be recalled. After years of submission, the prospect of freedom, one that is ironically so short-lived, refuses to allow her to return to her former life. The "heart trouble" that kills her is more spiritual than physical, as she realizes that her quest has been for naught. She has lacked the courage to assert her real nature in the face of her husband and her marriage. Stein writes that Mrs. Mallard dies of "a desperation so terrible as to be beyond her capacity to

acknowledge it even to herself--the desperation of a thwarted life, of a freedom never directly pursued and, thus never attained" (188). The forces which direct her life toward emotional and physical freedom are too powerful to overcome. She has discovered that no amount of love and security can compensate for a lack of control over her own existence (Skaggs 53).

Unlike Mrs. Mallard, the heroine of "Désirée's Baby" marries for love and is totally devoted to her mate. However, Chopin depicts in this story that a woman's total devotion to a mate, all the while repressing personal authenticity, can also bring personal destruction. Désirée loves her husband to the excess that when he "frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God" (175). After the birth of their child, Désirée begins to notice "a strange, an awful change in [his] manner, which she dared not ask him to explain" (175). Others have already perceived that the child has Negro blood, and since Désirée was a foundling child, her husband now assumes that she is "not white." Armand, who cares more for his family name and reputation than anything else in life, rejects both Désirée and the baby "because of the unconscious injury she has brought upon his home and his name" (175). Désirée takes her baby in her arms and walks "across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds" and vanishes "among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of

the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again" (177), fulfilling Chopin's theory that a heroine must be able to overcome convention to survive; failure to do so results in death, both spiritually and physically. Désirée's desire to be submissive to her husband causes her death. In a surprising ending, Chopin then reveals that it is Armand, not Désirée who belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (178).

Elizabeth McMahan, author of "Nature's Decoy: Kate Chopin's Presentation of Women and Marriage in Her Short Fiction," writes that "Désirée's fate is ultimately the result of her character. Chopin also shows us that a woman who views herself solely as a wife seriously limits her options should her husband choose to discard her. Ironically, Désirée's suicide results from her lack of any sense of selfhood ..." (35). In both cases, that of Mrs. Mallard and that of Désirée, a marriage in which the wife is unable or unwilling to fulfill her personal quest for authenticity precipitates these tragedies.

The third group of Chopin's stories deals with women who pursue their quest for authenticity and flee decisively from problematic relationships with men and their marriages. Even though their courses may never be successful, the failure to pursue it for these women will lead only to self-deceit and frustration. The women in "In Sabine" and Chopin's best known work, The Awakening, seem to be on their way to such a pursuit.

"In Sabine" focuses on 'Tite Reine, a miserable young wife

whose husband cruelly mistreats her. Before her marriage, she had been a charming girl, with "her trim, rounded figure; her saucy coquettish eyes, her little...imperious ways...her ... nickname of 'Tite Reine, little queen" (326), the exemplary heroine figure. However, only a year after her marriage "her eyes were larger, with an alert, uneasy look in them...her shoes were in shreds" and her "little imperious ways" have changed into a submissive response to her husband's call: 'I'm comin', Bud. Yere I come. W'at you want, Bud?' (327). This is the 'Tite Reine that Grégoire Santien finds when he visits her in Sabine Parish. Emphasizing just how fully this wife lacks an authentic identity in being married to Bud is the fact that with him she even lacks her real name. Known as "'Tite Reine" before she was married, she now is called "Rain" by her husband. This wife, however, is unafraid to flout conventional standards if it serves her deepest needs to do so.

As Grégoire determines that 'Tite Reine has the courage to leave her marriage, he takes mercy on her and helps her escape to her old home. Peggy Skaggs, writing in Kate Chopin, observes that "the reader does not wonder much about what sort of place she will find awaiting her as a "feme sole" back on Bayou Pierre" (19). Chopin leaves the impression that the quest of 'Tite Reine for her authentic existence has really just begun.

Of The Awakening, Skaggs writes that Chopin "creates one tragic heroine who refuses to settle for less than a full and satisfying answer to Lear's question: 'Who am I?'" (88). There

There are three important female characters in The Awakening; however, not one achieves her full potential as a human being. Adèle Ratignolle settles for a self-determined happy existence as a wife-mother image, trying to adapt to her conventional destiny. Mademoiselle Reisz gradually becomes miserable with her partial existence as an artist, never really striving for the heroine image, and Edna Pontellier, who refuses to settle for less than full development as a person, finds failure and ultimate tragedy.

This story of an aroused wife, Edna Pontellier, is well known and has been analyzed by a host of Chopin's critics. Though there are many underlying, complex, and difficult emotional reactions that provide keys to Edna's behavior in this novel, the major complexities involve her relationship with the men in her life. One of Edna's sharpest early memories is of "running away from...the Presbyterian service read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (896).

Religion, and the men who purport its edicts, plays an important role in much of Chopin's writing, never more so than in The Awakening. Paralleling Joe Christmas's religious rebellion in Faulkner's Light in August, Chopin's Edna revolts against her strict Presbyterian childhood. However, as Faulkner demonstrates, Christmas, as a man, could resort acceptably to violence as he struggled against religious hypocrisy. Edna's only recourse is to flee to the shelter of a forbidden man. Conventions of a male-dominated society dictate the terms of her

revolt. In an interesting parallel, however, one finds that Christmas' violence actually gets him no closer to a successful resolution than does Edna's rebellion, as both end in eventual death.

In Becoming A Heroine, Brownstein states that one of the prerequisites of the heroine figure is a family organization in which "The parents of a heroine in a novel of courtship are often absent, unfeeling, or incompetent" (40). In another interesting parallel with Faulkner's Joe Christmas, Chopin writes that Edna's youth, spent under the repression of the strict Presbyterianism of that time, which her strait-laced father enforced, has the effect of exacerbating a rebellious streak of individualism within Edna, one that results in her marriage to Léonce. All that is needed to make Edna accept Léonce, "who pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired" (898), is such "violent opposition" as she receives from her father and sister to the notion of "marriage with a Catholic" (898). Stein observes that without such prodding to her innate tendency for individualistic rebellion as that exerted by Kentucky Presbyterianism, Edna might never have begun her long process of striving for the forbidden, one that culminates only with her death. (196)

She also suggests that Edna is seeking primarily for complete self-fulfillment and self-definition through her rebellion, and may not herself be aware of a definite

goal. Therefore, she moves from relationship to relationship, aware of her limited choices as a woman, until she ultimately finds a state of "perfect freedom, of unadulterated authenticity (196)."

Edna's religious rebellion, coupled with a desire to rebel against her strict father, leads her toward a journey into her inner self, a female bildungsroman. Frances M. Kavenik, writing in Austen and The Female Bildungsroman, compares the female heroic tradition with that of males:

The traditional definition of 'bildungsroman' is 'a novel about the usually early development or spiritual education of the main character'... Male heroes are invariably doers of deeds...female heroes participate in "journeys" which are, in part, an escape from a home which has become stifling and untenable...Ultimately these journeys constitute the beginning of the bildung process which is the basic interest of the novels...This process which begins with the first journey, ends in the heroine's awakening. (2-5)

Edna's bildungsroman leads, not only to her eventual awakening, but to an inevitable death. Edna's relationship with her husband, beginning as it does in rebellion, does not improve with marriage. Léonce, a man whose main interests are affluence and appearances, treats Edna as one of his many possessions. As Edna returns from the beach with a sunburn, Léonce looks at his wife as "one looks at a valuable piece of personal property

which has suffered some damage" (882). Léonce is much more concerned with his business ventures than with the innermost feelings of his wife, which leads him to ignore and neglect her as a person. Léonce wants to create a conventional image of his wife, even as she rebels.

During a summer vacation at Grand Isle, Edna falls in love with another man, Robert Lebrun. Robert is a Creole "ladies man," a flirt who entertains women on a very superficial level while their husbands are busy elsewhere. Mild flirtations are his specialty and he never has "serious thoughts" about life.

Edna does not understand the Creole society and takes Robert's actions and words as authentic. In Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest, Carol P. Christ writes that

Robert is more to Edna than the lover of romantic fantasy. He encourages her to learn to swim and thus opens her to the sea in which she discovers the infinity of her soul as well as the sensuality of her body. Their conversations prompt her to think about the meaning of her life, something married women are rarely encouraged to do. He also awakens her to the passions of her body and to the capacity for full sexual experience. (29)

Robert, though returning her love, is unable to flaunt the conventions of his society and escapes from its accompanying problems by fleeing to Mexico. Edna returns to New Orleans but is no longer satisfied with her domestic duties and

relationships. She begins to break away from the conventional wife image, becomes a fisherwoman, and delves deep into her imagination. She discovers her artistic abilities through painting, though her talent is not great and never offers her the economic option of Paula Von Stoltz's artistic success. She refuses to continue her social contacts with her husband's business associates, begins to develop a new group of friends, and discontinues sexual relations with her husband. Her husband, unsure of how to deal with this new situation, leaves on a business trip to New York for several months. The two Pontellier children go to visit Léonce's mother during this time, leaving Edna alone to pursue her fulfillment as a person and to form her escape from conventional social mores. She moves into a small house which she can finance independently of Léonce and becomes involved with another man, Alcée Arobin. Arobin also, however, begins to act as though he owns her, demonstrating to Edna that she can never completely escape the subservient role into which she has been placed by society.

Robert returns from Mexico and Edna informs him that "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say 'Here Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (992). Edna leaves Robert for a short time to go to the bedside of her friend, Adèle, who is giving birth, and when she returns she finds that Robert has gone, leaving a message that says "Good-by--because I love you" (997). Realizing that

Robert does not respect her right to govern her own life any more than do Léonce and Alcée, Edna goes to Grand Isle the next morning, removes her clothes, and walks into the "seductive" (893) sea.

Edna's quest is for wholeness, for a total sexual and creative life as a woman. Like recent feminists, she implicitly rejects the choice of either a conventional sexual life in a marriage that allows no time for her to express her creativity, or the solitary spinsterhood of a woman who is devoted to her art or career. Like men, she wants both. Her refusal to accept the nineteenth-century choice offered her marks Edna's quest as a particularly modern one (Christ 28).

Describing the men in Edna's life Christ writes:

The male characters in the novel also hold conventional values that prevent them from understanding Edna's quest. (35)

Christ writes that the men in Edna's life "expect that she will get over her discontent" (949). Mr. Pontellier adopts an attitude of "benign tolerance" toward Edna. Alcée, her lover, is a "conventional ladies' man" and considers her an "emotional female." Even Robert, whom Edna looks to for understanding, is weak and conventional.

Carley Rees Bogarad in "The Awakening: a Refusal to Compromise" asks concerning Edna:

What really are her alternatives in her historical moment? Chopin shows the only ones available: the

consuming life of Adèle Ratignolle or the lonely existence of Mlle. Reisz. For Edna these choices are equally impossible; they are compromises of the radical vision she has conceived. She has not the patience or masochism for the former or the ascetic discipline for the latter. In male novels of development the hero is expected to make the stoic choice which Mlle. Reisz has accepted; in female novels of development the heroine is expected to come to her senses and return to the cycle of marriage and motherhood which she has rejected. Edna will choose neither of these alternatives, and that is precisely the point of the book. (28)

Edna dies as a result of her fisherwoman image, because she has looked too deeply within herself and is unable to forget what she finds there. She sees within herself the possibility of an authentic, meaningful existence, one she has never realized existed. However, though she can see the possibilities, she can find no social role model or even friendly acceptance among her acquaintances for her actions. She cannot resolve herself to return to her former life, one of subservience to the men who control her existence.

Helen Taylor suggests comparisons between Chopin's The Awakening and the sole surviving book in Chopin's library, a curious, sardonic text, Elizabeth von Arnim's Elizabeth and Her German Garden:

For the first half, the novel appears to be a light

satire on marriage, with an absurdly misogynist patriarchal husband--called by the wife/narrator "the Man of Wrath"--from whom Elizabeth escapes to her beloved gardening. (188)

The second half of the book is primarily a prolonged discussion of woman's rights and duties. In Germany women are "literally nobodies," classified in law with "children and idiots"--the very status of women in the Louisiana Napoleonic Code. Elizabeth's husband rails unpleasantly against the vanity and gullibility of all women, to the considerable disgust of his own wife (Taylor 188).

Taylor notes several significant parallels existing between Elizabeth and The Awakening, which are worth noting since it is possible Chopin used its subject or tone for her own final novel. The relationship of both books with "feminist ideas" is strikingly similar: "Both protagonists find their husband's houses stifling and imprisoning", and both heroines "reject domestic labor and indoor child-care for the liberating atmosphere of the natural world". Both women "relish solitude (to the puzzlement of others around them)" and "define themselves in relation to Nature and aesthetic pursuits rather than as wives and mothers." Each woman has an oppressive husband, and children are referred to in both novels as "a troop." In both, a woman artist appears to offer a critique of patriarchal relations and attitudes, and most importantly, both novels "stress the right of women to be happy rather than their

ty to accept suffering and tyranny". Elizabeth and Edna are both considered eccentric, and they exult in that definition, which at least allows them "freedom to be different" (188-189).

Christ, like Seyersted, interprets Edna's death as a moral victory and a social defeat--the act of a brave woman who cannot sacrifice her life to her family, but will not cause her children disgrace by pursuing a scandalous course (TCLC, Vol. 4, 56). Chopin's argument in The Awakening asserts that women, as well as men, have the right to an authentic existence, and though society has always been willing to consider this acceptable behavior in a man, it is unable to compromise its conventions where women are concerned. Chopin stresses that the quest of women for self-fulfillment, though complicated through their relationships with men and their marriages, will continue as long as the human condition exists. Chopin's women, through their varied experiences while attempting escape from conventional images, personify new ideals for eighteenth-century women, ones better understood by the modern reader. It was precisely these "new ideals" which became grounds for her rejection by early critics.

CHAPTER III

CHOPIN AND MOTHERHOOD

"I would give my life for my children;
but I wouldn't give myself."

Edna in The Awakening

Ironic as it may seem to women today, in Chopin's era childbirth was considered a woman's noblest act; to write of it otherwise was unacceptable. Women now have many options; however, in earlier decades as Norman Mailer writes in Deer Park, "Women weren't born to be free, they were born to have babies" (Pearson 40). Heroines of early novels are "mothers-in-waiting", women preparing to become the perfect nurturers of their young. Mothers in the more typical novels represent unconditional love, protection, and paragons of virtue. As Carol Pearson argues in The Female Hero, "These women initially strive to fulfill society's ideals of wife and motherhood in order to gain the promised rewards--a sense of fulfillment, the love of one's family, and the respect of society" (46). It is this respect in a male-dominated society that Chopin's writing failed to seek or receive, which ultimately caused total rejection of her work.

Though many of Chopin's heroines struggle with the mother image, there is much evidence that Chopin knew and loved

children. In A Night in Acadie nine of the twenty-one stories center around children. In "After the Winter " (1896), the interference of children brings M'sieur Michel, the protagonist, back into contact with other humans after twenty-five years of alienation. "A Matter of Prejudice" (1895) tells of a proud Acadian woman who for ten years has refused to visit her son Henri because he is married to an "American" woman. Finally, a child's love becomes the agent which heals this breach between the generations (Skaggs). The stories "Mamouche" (1894), "The Millies" (1893), and "Odalie Misses Mass" (1895) also feature children as central characters in moving narratives of familial affection. However, Chopin's willingness to write of maternal situations which were less than perfect became an important factor in critical evaluations of her works.

Chopin's women are affected by the promises of the perfect "heroine-as-mother." Never truly fulfilled in their roles as mothers, many of her women make constant efforts to escape its limitations. Though few are successful in their quest, the majority of her stories concern women who make the effort to achieve an authenticity as women outside of their motherhood roles. These characters usually are permitted only to succeed in short-term existences free from wifedom and motherhood. Therefore, the flight from becoming a conventional heroine also entails a flight from self-sacrificing motherhood.

The wife and mother in "A Pair of Silk Stockings" is one of these struggling characters. This story details an experience of

woman named Mrs. Sommers, who, having received an unexpected amount of money, intends to spend it on clothes for her children. Instead, according to Kristen B. Valentine and Janet Larsen Palmer in "The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Feminism in Kate Chopin's 'A Pair of Silk Stockings'," she "succumbs to the almost forgotten sensual pleasure of buying fine silk stockings, shoes and gloves" (59). She then treats herself to expensive magazines, lunch, and a theater comedy performance. As she is riding home on the streetcar, she wishes it would "go on and on with her forever" (504). Valentine and Palmer describe the afternoon as one of "self-indulgence by an otherwise selfless woman" (60).

Mrs. Sommers is presented in this story as a woman who is very dedicated to her family. Chopin writes that "the vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives excited her and made her restless and wakeful with anticipation" (500). The reader empathizes with this character as she begins her fleeting experience with freedom from her traditional role. While shopping, she encounters the stockings, and realizes "How good was the touch of the raw silk to her flesh! She felt like lying back in the cushioned chair and reveling for a while in the luxury of it. She did for a little while" (502).

This encounter with the silk stockings leads Mrs. Sommers to pursue other self-indulgent interests. In the process, she becomes the one who is served rather than the server, her usual

le in society. The salesgirls help her with her purchases; the
oe clerk "served her" (502), and the waiter bows before her as
"she were a princess of royal blood" (503). As she attends
the theater, a "gaudy woman"(504) serves her a box of candy.
rs. Sommers is allowed this one brief day of freedom in which
o manifest her desire for the same freedoms which a man might
enjoy. She is able to spend her day in town doing whatever she
ishes, at her leisure, with no thought of home and family
responsibilities, even as a man would enjoy doing. Finally, as
he is returning home on the streetcar, the joys of the day fade
behind her, and she returns to her role as a mother. Chopin
plies that she will devote as much dedication to motherhood as
he previously has, in spite of her wish that her freedom might
go on and on with her forever"(504). However, the reader senses
that she will not be completely satisfied with her previous role
and that she has had enough of a fisherwoman experience to
enlighten her imagination for future escapades into freedom.

Though Chopin concludes Mrs. Sommers' day of freedom with a
return to her home and awaiting duties, women readers empathize
with her desire for masculine leisure from familial duties.
Certainly this is one of Chopin's most thought-provoking stories
for the modern reader.

Prospective motherhood becomes the key that releases pent-
up inner passions in "Athénaïse", as the discovery that she is
pregnant precipitates Athénaïse's return to her husband. The
news transforms her as "her whole being was steeped in a wave of

ecstasy. When she...looked at herself in the mirror, a face met hers which she seemed to see for the first time, so transfigured as it with wonder" (451). Viewing herself as mother seems much easier for Athénaïse than viewing herself as wife, as she finds in prospective motherhood a role in which she feels comfortable; however, she pays a price for fulfilling her emotional needs and becoming a conventional heroine. Peggy Skaggs, writing in Kate Chopin, argues that Athénaïse has "sacrificed her name and more; she has sacrificed also her autonomy, her right to live as a discrete individual. Athénaïse Miché exists no longer"(38). Athénaïse, however, is one of Chopin's few heroines who seems comfortable with this loss of individual identity. She is willing to submit to male dominance and her role as a mother for the sake of her child.

The perfect mother-figure heroine embodies selflessness and nurturing. Chopin's protagonists often have problems coming to a resolution of these attributes within their callings as mothers. As Edna Pontellier in The Awakening gradually becomes aware of the oppressiveness of her role as wife and mother, she is at first unable to pinpoint the source of her feelings. Unjustly reproached by her husband for being an unattentive mother, Edna is moved to tears in an attempt to cope with her frustration.

In her essay, "George Sand, Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, and the Redefinition of Self," Jeanee P. Sacken argues that not only is Edna frustrated, but that "Mr. Pontellier's own

dissatisfaction and frustration with Edna is equally hard to define. When he married the considerably younger Edna, he believed he was gaining a beautiful and perfect wife and mother for the children they would have--in short, a ideal 'true woman'"(22). Mr. Pontellier believes he has married a conventional heroine; however, it becomes increasingly clear that Edna cannot fulfill the idealized feminine role that he had anticipated when he selected her to be his wife.

As Edna spends the summer on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, Chopin writes that

The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harms, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (888)

In short, Edna is surrounded by conventional mothers. Edna, herself, cannot and will not become a "mother-woman." Thus, she rejects the role of a traditional wife.

Edna's close friend, Adèle Ratignolle, is as much a mother-woman as Edna is not. As a true representative of femininity and the motherly figure, Adèle is excessively devoted to her husband and to her children, that is, to her womanly role. Adèle's figure is "feminine and matronly" (894) and "there

There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (888).

In The Siren of Grand Isle: Adèle's Role in The Awakening, Kathleen Margaret Lant states that

Although Adèle by her physical beauty initiates Edna's awakening to her own physical needs, Adèle does not provide for Edna a model for a suitable self. Edna can admire Adèle's charm and can be stimulated and moved by it, but Edna cannot be Adèle. (171)

Adèle is a "mother-woman"; she lives to produce and care for children. Lant comments that "Adèle is a woman of a passing world and an ancient order" (171). Adèle serves as a reminder to Edna of society's ideal woman, which she, herself, finds impossible to reach. The impossibility for Edna of choosing a life like Adèle's becomes clear when Edna and Adèle have a "rather heated argument" over Adèle's excessive preoccupation with the accepted feminine role of wife and mother. While Edna loves her sons, she does not devote herself exclusively to them. She tries to appease her friend by explaining:

'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money. I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me'. (929)

In the process of discovering herself, Edna discards false

concepts of who she is and what she can do. Lant makes the point "that Adèle has simply assumed a role that conventional morality has designated as hers is revealed by her rejoinder, a rejoinder which demonstrates her complete failure to grasp Edna's point" (171). Adèle responds to Edna by stating that "a man who would give her life for her children could do no more than that--your Bible tells you so" (171). Adèle becomes an instrument of repression in this instance as she represents both an oppressive religion and the views of the mother-women.

Chopin describes Edna as a woman who "was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them" (899). When the children are visiting their grandmother Pontellier in Iberville, Edna "did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing" (899). When they are away from her, she feels "a sort of relief" which "seemed to free her of a responsibility she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (899). A major force in Edna's personal awakening becomes this realization that fate has not fitted her to be a mother-figure. Chopin asserts the fisherwoman discovery that perhaps fate has not fitted every woman with the great desire to become a mother; however, it becomes a part of their immutable destiny. She also intimates that fate may not have fitted all men with the desire to become fathers; however, men may choose to experience this fate, but women, biologically, are not free to choose. This inner rejection of the motherhood role

used male critics to condemn both Edna and Chopin as "unfit for the sacred role of motherhood," and "a poor representative of womanhood" (Missouri Life 17).

Edna's experience at the birth of Adèle's child crystalizes her predicament as a mother-figure. Lant proposes that "There is one role, one requirement, she cannot relinquish, and that is biological motherhood. Edna can reject the social role of mother-woman,' but she can never escape her biological connection to her sons; they are always with her, demanding" (174). Adèle focuses on this aspect of Edna's rebellion as she whispers: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh, think of the children! Remember them!" (995).

Although Edna herself has two children, the scene of childbirth leaves her shaken, and Doctor Mandelet insists on walking her home. During their walk the doctor tells Edna that 'Youth is given up to illusion. It seems to be a provision of Nature, a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost.'

'Yes,' she said. 'The years that are gone seem like dreams--if one might go on sleeping and dreaming--but to wake up and find--oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusion all one's life.' (996)

As Edna's own maternal responsibilities come flooding back

her, she becomes despondent and tells Dr. Mandelet "...I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample on the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others--but no matter--still, I shouldn't want to trample on the little lives" (996).

Unwilling to give up her individuality and become a conventional heroine, Edna goes back to the sea, scene of her rebirth. As she walks toward the water "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (999). The sea becomes the only way left for Edna to elude the men and the social roles of wife and motherhood that enslave her soul. For Edna, the discovery that she cannot live a male-dominated or child-dominated life triggers a resolve literally to give herself back to nature, as she swims into the sea.

Margaret Mitsutani in Kate Chopin's The Awakening: The Narcissism of Edna Pontellier discusses the reaction of society to individuals who, through the exultation of self-discovery, reject traditional roles:

Narcissism may be defined as a still, small voice within each of us that seeks to answer the demands of society with a resounding "no"; to refuse to play the role that society has prepared for us. Because this refusal to live according to society's plan ultimately threatens to create a fray in the social fabric itself, it tends to be

met with a mixture of fear and contempt. (4)

This is precisely the response that Edna Pontellier's rejection of the role of wife and mother received when The Awakening was first published in 1899. In choosing to die rather than return meekly to her allotted position as her husband's most prized possession, Edna appeared as a threat to the bastion of nineteenth century American polite society--the home--and was rewarded accordingly with ridicule and scorn (Mitsutani 4).

Chopin's women initially strive to fulfill society's ideals of the wife and motherhood heroine. However, each discovers society's expectations to be myths, unrealistic and destructive to the individual self. This discovery occurs when the characters try to fulfill an appropriate social image at the expense of their true natures. In The Female Hero, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope assert that:

Conventional literary portraits of women tend to celebrate and encourage the life-denying myths of female inferiority, virginity, romantic love, and material self-sacrifice; others demonstrate that the logical extension of each myth is a psychological prison of increasing self-distrust and self-denial. But in every period of literature there have been major female characters who have understood, at least initially, that they are valuable and responsible human beings, and that the traditional female role is too restrictive and limiting to accommodate their heroic potential. These

heroic women seek to fulfill both the requirements of society and the needs of the self by assuming the mask of the heroine. (49)

Ann Douglas, in The Feminization of American Culture maintains that the maternal mystique of the nineteenth century served largely unacknowledged purposes:

The cult of motherhood, like the Mother's Day it eventually established in the American calendar, was an essential precondition to the flattery American women were trained to demand in place of justice and equality. It offered them, of course, a very genuine basis for self-respect. It gave them, moreover, an innate, unassailable, untestable claim to charismatic authority and prestige, a sanction for subjectivity and self-love.

(18)

Kate Chopin's women, then, even while assuming the "mask of the conventional woman," inhabit a body of works which protest the condition of the wife-mother heroine image. This protest inevitably caused a general rejection of Chopin's characters by a society unwilling and unable to recognize their individual needs as authentic.

Mademoiselle Reisz tells Edna at one point in The Awakening that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (944). Chopin's body of works has strong wings as it soars out and away from the restrictions society has placed on its heroines. However, it is

at such a daring flight that causes a rejection of her works
her own ultimate death.

CHAPTER IV

CHOPIN AND LOUISIANA CULTURE

At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.

Description of Edna in The Awakening

Chopin uses various mixes of races and blood to heighten the plight of her heroines. Though other Southern writers such as George Cable and William Faulkner use the conventions of race and its inherent problems, Chopin uniquely employs these conventions in combination with a criticism of the role of women. Emily Toth, in "Kate Chopin and Literary Convention: 'Désirée's Baby'," states:

Chopin explains the powerlessness of women, both white and black, through using the Tragic Mulatto convention. The Tragic Mulatto, or Tragic Octoroon, convention is more often than not based on the idea that racial inheritance determines character....The Tragic Octoroon has a divided inheritance. In the most conventional literature, the Tragic Octoroon has a constant conflict between the passions (inherited from the black side) and the intellect (from the white portion). The male Tragic Octoroon is militant, rebellious, and melancholy, much like Harriet Beecher Stowe's George Harris in Uncle Tom's Cabin; the female is beautiful and usually self-

sacrificing, like Stowe's Eliza. She is often seen on the auction block, as in William Wells Brown's Clotel (1853) and Dion Boucicault's The Octoroon (1859), and her closeness to the white beauty ideal makes her the perfect vehicle for creating pity and terror in a white audience. (203)

The male of mixed blood has never been so interesting to writers as the female; and in fact, the term "octoroon" is rarely applied to men. Writers in the nineteenth century were dealing with racial love, particularly attraction between males on a level that became accepted in society as the 'innocent companion.' Several important novels relied on moving and ambiguous relationships between males for their chief meaning.

Leslie A. Fielder's "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck, Honey!" discusses the strange sort of love which binds together a young white boy and a run-away black slave. The boy, Huck, decides he will become a social out-cast and even "go to hell," choosing to follow the urgings of love rather than duty. The two lead a "life of mutual self-sacrifice--a love very different from the grand heterosexual passion at the heart of major European novels" (664). There are, however, many analogues to this unique passion in other great American books, especially in the nineteenth century. As Fielder points out, "in James Fenimore Cooper's Leather Stocking Tales, for instance, and in Herman Melville's Moby Dick, a white man and a colored man 'forsaking all others' find their sentimental and erotic

fillment in each other, thus constituting a Holy Marriage of
--which implies a flight from women and civilization, since
the American mind repressive society is represented by women"
(54).

Critics accepted the works of Twain, Cooper, and Melville as
representatives of the "great American novel." Critic Lauriat
wrote that Huckleberry Finn "is a story about real human
figures with genuine moral problems and decisions, placed in a
society with the flavor of authenticity, all presented directly
and realistically" (Bowen 357). These works were accepted
because they personified the male passage of youth into
maturity. The epic heroes of these male-dominated novels
embodied virtues valued by society, whereas the stories and
novels of Chopin questioned the validity and equality of these
same virtues. Chopin was very aware of the literary conventions
considered unacceptable by male critics and references to this
sexism appeared in several stories, one of the most notable
being "Désirée's Baby."

In "Désirée's Baby," Chopin appears to be writing about the
tragic female octoroon until the denouement reveals her actual,
unconventional theme. "Désirée's Baby" (1892) is about a
foundling child discovered by a man whose wife had despaired of
ever having a child of her own. Désirée grows up to be
beautiful, gentle, affectionate, and sincere. Armand Aubigny,
passing past her home, falls violently in love with her and
marries her, despite her unknown origin.

A short time after Désirée gives birth to a baby boy, Armond begins to change, as he notices that the child is not entirely white in appearance. Armond treats Désirée cruelly, even to the point of telling her she is not white. Désirée's adoptive mother tells her to come home and bring her child; however, she turns toward the bayou instead and is never seen again. Chopin strongly indicates that Désirée has committed suicide and that her baby has perished with her as a result of this traumatic event. After she is gone, Armond discovers a letter from his own mother proclaiming that she "belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (245).

"Désirée's Baby" concerns environment, the effect of slavery on men's character. It is also about the parallels between the roles of women and blacks or "persons of color." Toth writes that "Chopin shows that color caste and economic superiority develop certain unenviable but inevitable qualities in white masters" (205).

Désirée represents the code of behavior she has been taught: femininity, submission to a father, then to a husband. However, Armond's attitude toward her parallels that of his attitude toward his slaves. When their son is born, Armond is happy and Désirée reports to her mother that since the boy's birth her husband has not punished a single slave, not even one who pretended to burn his leg in order to avoid work. But after he discovers that his son is of mixed blood, "the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with

slaves" (242). His attitude toward his wife parallels his attitudes toward his slaves.

Toth states that Chopin admired Emerson, who wrote that the slave owner enjoyed "the existence, beside the covetousness, of a bitterer element, the love of power, the voluptuousness of holding a human being in his complete control (206). Chopin uses the power of the slave owner in her descriptions of husbands and their actions toward the wives in her stories.

Chopin depicts the virtues expected of women in society, in particular, submission, as paralleling those required of blacks in a slave society. Women are expected to love unconditionally, and obey their fathers or husbands. Blacks are to obey unconditionally and love their masters devotedly. Désirée does not object to Armond's sending her away, at least not overtly. The slaves do not rebel under his iron rule. The man who is imperious in one sphere is equally demanding in the other, for in each case he requires mastery (Toth 207). Chopin shows that a patriarchy of this type limits the development not only of the wife, but also of the husband. Armond, who was sensitive to power but not to emotions, destroyed his own happiness. He is a credit to neither of his races, and the last word of the story is "slavery."

Kate Chopin writes with a concern for the universal human condition, though she uses Louisiana settings and people to populate her stories. Chopin covers a wide range of Louisiana lore, that of the Creoles, the Cajuns, the Redbones (part-Indian

estry), the Negroes, and the Free People of Color, a distinct separate group. She demonstrates a great understanding of the lore and superstitions of the black people and the Cajuns, and she seems most fascinated with the Creoles in her Cane River stories and her New Orleans stories.

The Creole people of Louisiana's Cane River country have a varied and interesting history, one that is not generally mentioned in the study of Chopin. Even Seyersted has little to say about these people as he merely comments that after 1820 the number of "free mulattoes" increased in this area. Most critics of Chopin's day had never heard of these people, nor did they understand the Creole lifestyle, an understanding of which is vital to the understanding of most Chopin stories. This lack of understanding on the part of the reading public contributed greatly to the neglect of Chopin's works.

Even though some critics have been aware of the existence of the Creole people and their lore, most have not recognized the significance and influence of their lifestyle on Chopin's work. The beliefs, traditions, and folklore of the Louisiana people, however, can be seen as a key to the interpretation of many of Chopin's stories.

Marcia Gaudet, in "Kate Chopin and the Lore of Cane River's Creoles of Color," states:

A comprehensive study of the folklore and history of these people by Gary Mills, The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color, (LSU Press, 1977), shows that

not only is there documentation to support their legends, but the facts are sometimes more fascinating than the legends. According to legend and fact, the Isle Brevelle colony was started by a former slave, Marie Therese Coincoin, and her children. Marie Therese was a slave in the St. Denis household in Natchitoches Parish, and she had four pure Negro children when she met Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer in 1767. He was a young Frenchman stationed at the Natchitoches post. Marie Therese and Pierre Metoyer formed a liaison which lasted for nineteen years and during which nine children were born to them. Though the legend says that Marie Therese gained her freedom by curing Madame St. Denis of an almost fatal illness, the records show that Metoyer purchased her from Madame St. Denis after the birth of their fourth child. He also purchased their children from her. Prior to that she had lived in his household on a lease agreement. Metoyer then gave Marie Therese her freedom, she continued to live with him, and their last five children were born free. It seems according to legend that Metoyer would have married her had not marriage between a white person and a person with Negro blood been illegal. However, in 1786, they decided to end their liaison. Metoyer wanted legitimate heirs that he could recognize. By this time, he had become quite wealthy, and he gave her sixty-eight acres of land on

the Cote Joyeuse section of Isle Brevelle and a modest allotment for their children until he freed them. She planted tobacco and indigo, trapped bears, and manufactured folk medicines. She managed to buy her Negro children out of slavery, and she increased her wealth so that by 1812, she and her children owned 5,678 acres, some acquired through a Spanish land grant. All but one of her mulatto children married people of similar racial composition, some the offspring of prominent white planters. She and her children established a settlement that eventually became one of the wealthiest and most highly respected groups in Louisiana. One of her sons, Louis, built Melrose Plantation which was later owned by the Henry family, the family into which two of Oscar Chopin's siblings married, and with whom Chopin was on very close terms.

(46-47)

Mills points out also that:

Under the title of 'gens de couleur libre,' free part white Creoles were accorded special privileges, opportunities, and citizenship not granted to part-Negroes in other states. Often possessing more white blood than black, and quite often on good terms with and publicly recognized by their white relatives, most members of this third caste in Louisiana were reared to believe that they were a race apart from the blacks, who

occupied the lowest stratum of society. (47)

The economic factor in Louisiana supported this kind of community. Also, Louisiana's legal code provided a wider range of economic opportunities to free people of color than any other state. Though there were some white planters on Isle Brevelle, the Creoles of Color were the major property holders. By the time of her death, Marie Therese and her children had an estate of almost 12,000 acres and at least 99 slaves (Gaudet 47).

The Creoles of Color, like their French relatives, were Roman Catholic, the only religion acceptable on the Isle. Many of these people were strikingly attractive, and blue eyes and light hair were not uncommon. Also, many became well-educated and benefited heirs of large land-holders. The major limitation of these people became their social intercourse, as they were largely restricted to their own group (Gaudet 48).

The Creoles of Color lost their privileged position and much of their wealth as a result of the Civil War; therefore, they no longer enjoyed their former position during the time Chopin lived in Natchitoches. It is certain from her works, however, that she knew the legends and stories told of these people, and that they greatly influenced her view of all people of color.

In discussing Chopin's treatment of "colored people," Per Seyersted says:

While she occasionally falls into the sentimental melodrama when idealizing, she often manages to break

the regular pattern of the Southern stereotype....
That some of Kate Chopin's Negroes are stereotypes
is hardly surprising. What is remarkable, meanwhile,
is that she accepted the colored people as persons
worthy of serious study and that she in her writings
treats them as people and with little condescension.
(79)

In view of her knowledge of the Cane River Creoles of
Color, it is not remarkable that Chopin accepts and portrays
"colored people" as she does. However, this fact also helps
explain why many critics did not understand and accept her work
as legitimate portrayals of real people.

Chopin alludes to many connections between blacks,
particularly slaves, and women. The entire story "In Sabine"
(1893), of the rescue of a pretty Acadien wife from a brutal
husband, is a veiled reference to the common psychological
treatment of the two social groups. She is very aware of human
suffering in the world around her and prefers to study it in
individual cases rather than as a mass; therefore, she suggests
the plight of the Negro in countless stories, but describes the
agonies of slavery through the particular case of one black
woman in "La Belle Zoraïde" (1894).

She did not think integration could work, but she did see
blacks as individuals with the same problems as whites, plus
quite a few more. Her black characters usually exhibit far more
wit, understanding and kindness than the public wanted to credit

them with. They also demonstrate pride, vanity, exploitativeness and irresponsibility, just like whites.

When Kate Chopin deals with such problems as slavery, miscegenation, and integration, she concentrates on the psychology of the individual rather than the social issue as such. If she exposes the institution of slavery in "La Belle Zoraïde," she does so only indirectly as she depicts the pride of a woman who forbids her mulatto slave girl to marry a Negro. The subject is pride rather than race when Chopin writes of the mixed marriage in "Désirée's Baby," and when she treats segregation in "A Little Free-Mulatto" (1892).

Seyersted writes regarding Chopin's own attitudes that:

We may perhaps say there are indications that she condemns slavery in "La Belle Zoraïde"; belittles desegregation in the tale "In and Out of Old Natchitoches" (1893); reflects the sentimentality of her time about devoted former slaves in "Nég Créol" (1897); and suggests in "Ma'ame Pélagie" (1893) that the legend of the glorious Southern past should be discarded. But even in these stories, she is so much an author interested in human characteristics rather than issues or races, so much a detached observer that her own views never impose themselves upon the reader. (93)

Kate Chopin once spoke of "that child-like exuberance which is so pronounced a feature of Negro character" (Seyersted 93). The Negroes in her stories exhibit a devotion of life in the here

and now, compatible with a languorous Southern lifestyle. Creole, Cajun, and Negro alike have a talent for turning a gathering into a high-spirited, joyous affair, as seen in such stories as "Madame Martel's Christmas Eve" (1896) and "At the Acadian Ball" (1892).

Chopin's ten years in New Orleans gave her time to learn much of the Creole culture, as well as that of the Cajuns, or Acadiens, from whom the Creoles held themselves proudly aloof. The Acadiens, of French peasant stock, were descendants of those residents of Grand Pre, Nova Scotia, who were sent into exile by the English in 1755 and who later made the long trek to settle on the lands of southwest Louisiana. Their history has been immortalized in Longfellow's Evangeline (1847).

In "Kate Chopin and the Bayou Country," Dorys Crow Grover states that:

The Creole in her stories is a proud, graceful, handsome, aristocratic, and hot-blooded individual who sometimes could be tiresome and irrational in matters of love and honor. The Cajun is simple, honest, and God-fearing, and the Negro is superstitious, yet realistic and lively. Common to them all is an ambitious, complacent acceptance of conditions as they find them.

(30)

Chopin's very first work featured black characters and motifs around the themes of slavery and emancipation. Her story used the very term, "Emancipation: A Life Fable," and concerned

an animal who escapes nervously but joyfully from its cage. Particularly in her later works, Chopin uses oppression and symbolic bondage thematically to stress tension within her female characters.

Chopin's concern about "not forcing one's will upon another" emerges strongly in The Awakening. As Edna chooses to withdraw from the obligations of her marriage in order to pursue her own life, both Léonce Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle exert pressure on her to accept her traditional role. Edna does not allow another's will to be forced upon her, but she brings disaster upon herself as the final solution.

The Awakening is replete with environmental pressures brought to play against Edna's conscious decision. Edna is caught between the two societies of which she is a part. She was raised in the strict, restrained Kentucky Presbyterianism of her father. As a young woman, she rebels against this oppressing environment and chooses a mate from the cultivated, sensual, and Catholic society of the Louisiana Creoles. The more open Creole culture ultimately liberates Edna even while it also places restrictions on her life. Edna comes in contact with the "sexual play" of the Creoles for the first time as she spends the summer at Grand Isle. The figure of Robert Lebrun is representative in The Awakening of the Creole "gallant," who devotes himself to any "damsel in distress." Edna is not familiar enough with the Creole culture to understand that Robert's overtures are made as lightly and naturally as

breathing to him; therefore, she is fated to succumb to his charms.

Edna has been brought up surrounded by silence about sex, and the risqué jokes and conversation of the Creoles are all very embarrassing to her. She has not been prepared to deal with a man who speaks words of love without any thought of being taken seriously. The married Creole women are used to flirting with single men like Robert and consider it a form of play as long as it is understood that he had often spoken words of love to Madame Ratigolle without any thought of being taken seriously" (891). However, the use of sex as a basis for any verbal entertainment disconcerts and embarrasses Edna. When Robert makes his romantic professions to Madame Ratignolle, Edna "never knew precisely what to make of this serious-comic tone; at that moment it was impossible for her to guess how much of it was jest and what proportion was earnest....Mrs. Pontellier was glad he had not assumed a similar role toward herself. It would have been unacceptable and annoying" (891).

Edna's dilemma is recognized by Madame Ratignolle, who advises Robert that "she is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (900). As both Edna and Robert become confused with their roles in this relationship, Robert leaves for Mexico. Edna is left alone to continue her search for a meaningful existence.

Chopin writes around the problems of a Church-sanctioned marriage, and the ramifications of its dissolution in The

Awakening. Though brought up as a strict Presbyterian, Edna apparently converts to Catholicism when she marries Leonce. Chopin, however, satirizes the religious practices of Catholicism, as she shows the practitioners to be hollow shells of faith. The lady in black who follows the young lovers about on Grand Isle is an example. Chopin creates this character simply as a functional being; the reader neither sees her face nor hears her. She is simply there, perhaps as a dark reminder of an outworn custom or as a symbol of empty practices (Bonner 122). The range of her role is determined in only two passages of the book. The first satirizes the ornamentation which actually has no function within the church: "The lady in black, with her Sunday prayer-book, velvet and gold-clasped, and her Sunday silver beads was following them at no great distance" (913). The next passage refers to the legalism of church indulgences: "The lady in black had once received a pair of prayer-beads of curious workmanship from Mexico, with very special indulgence attached to them, but she had never been able to ascertain whether the indulgence extended outside the Mexican border. Father Fochel of the Cathedral had attempted to explain it; but he had not done so to her satisfaction. And she begged that Robert (who was going to Mexico) would interest himself, and discover, if possible, whether she was entitled to the indulgence accompanying the remarkably curious Mexican prayer-beads" (923-24).

Chopin searches for truth despite the sensitivity of

religious subjects. She uses many religious feast days, rituals and other representations of deity to heighten the plight of her women, particularly of Edna in The Awakening. Even the name of the island church, Our Lady of Lourdes, recalls the small community in France known for its miraculous cures and holy waters, and it is in water that Edna ultimately finds the cure that exists for her. The integrity Chopin shows concerning such topics becomes fuel for the critics' fire concerning her works.

Even the physical environment of Chopin's characters is brought to play in the affairs of her characters, as they battle, at times, both human and natural forces. Edna moves between two central areas: the slow-moving, drowsy life at Grand Isle, and the ordered, complex city life in New Orleans. Her perspective of life changes as she experiences the different lifestyles of these two locations.

In "Place, Perception and Identity in The Awakening," Suzanne W. Jones writes that:

The aspects of Edna's personality that made her a sinful Presbyterian when she was young--rebelliousness and sensuality--and that make her a negligent mother--impulsiveness and lack of concern for the future--are behaviors accepted by the hedonistic Creoles. By responding to their sensuality and expressiveness, Edna discovers similar traits in herself. (110)

She begins to find her true nature on Grand Isle, surrounded by the soothing, sensual effect of the water lapping

on the shore. Edna's summer on the gulf gives her a feeling of expanding horizons and of unlimited possibilities. It is only when she returns to the ordered life in the city that she realizes her horizons will never be expanded as long as she adheres to the conventionality of society. It is this blatant defiance of an ordered environment, a male-dominated environment, that roused the indignation of many of Chopin's critics.

Jones argues that:

Kate Chopin must end Edna's story with suicide because of her own inherited notions. She cannot reconcile her own ambivalent feelings about the traditional view of woman's role in society with the modern view of the individual personality....In 1899 when Kate Chopin wrote The Awakening, she was both looking back on the Victorian period, when a woman's self-fulfillment was said to be found in self-effacement and motherhood, and looking forward to the modern era, when self-fulfillment is said to be found in self-assertion and independence. Seeing the advantages and disadvantages of playing the traditional roles of wife and mother and of liberating oneself from such roles, Chopin is drawn in both directions. The two settings she chooses for The Awakening, New Orleans and the islands in the gulf, allow her to evaluate both the Victorian woman, whom she sees as repressed, and the modern woman, whom she

depicts as a victim of her impulses. The change in settings enables Chopin to expose not only the confusion that arises when a woman experiences a new place, but also the way in which a social setting controls thought and determines identity. (118)

The sea becomes the major medium of Edna's awakening. Walking by the sea, Edna senses the limitless potential of her soul and begins to question her life. Water has always been symbolically important in literary works. To ancient Egyptians it represented a primeval power. Chinese believe that all life comes from the ocean. In India, the waters are the beginning and the end of all things on earth. Water symbolizes the universal potential which precedes all form and all creation. Immersion in water signifies a return to the primordial state, with a sense of death and annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other, since immersion intensifies the life-force (Cirlot 365).

The last chapter of The Awakening is filled with dual imagery of defeat and rebirth. Swimming in the ocean becomes both a physical and a spiritual experience for Edna. She casts off her clothing and "for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun...She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (1000).

Edna enters the sea and swims far out to experience her rebirth. She remembers her earlier terror of death, but does not

turn back. She feels a spiritual liberation and the "touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (1000). She affirms that her husband and children will never possess her body and soul. She sees images of censure, bondage, fertility, and finally, a natural completion of life. Edna's death seems to confirm Chopin's view that the path to women's liberation will be difficult and complex and will require a soul stronger than many women possess (Christ 39).

Helen Taylor writes in Kate Chopin Portraits that:

Kate Chopin's 'local colour' setting was the South--that part of America which has been made into myth and symbol by many other writers before and since--from Uncle Tom's Cabin and Longfellow's Evangeline to Faulkner's creation, Yoknapatawpha County. It is a South of which, as Wilbur Cash describes it in The Mind of The South, 'the dominant mood is one of well-nigh drunken reverie...of such sweet and inexorable opiates as the rich odours of hot earth and pinewood and the perfume of the magnolia in bloom--of soft languor creeping through the blood and mounting surely to the brain'--a mood the sequel to which, he argues is invariably a thunderstorm. Extravagant though this description is, it captures the sensuousness which Chopin's stories suggest in their portrayal of Louisiana.

(12)

Whether or not such a generalization of the South is valid may be an arguable point; however, Chopin's characters seem to

feel a comfort with their bodies and a certainty about their physical realities that reflect the Southern culture. A realization of cultural contradictions between the Anglo-Saxon mind and the Louisiana Creoles is an important key to the understanding of the Kate Chopin canon, a key totally ignored by the critics who rejected her works.

CHAPTER V

CHOPIN: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

I would convey to thee some faintest gleam
Of what I dare not look, or speak, or dream!

Kate Chopin "If Some Day" (730)

The enigma of Kate Chopin as a woman and as a writer remains. She found most celebrities "depressing," she wrote in her diary. Yet she became a local celebrity herself. Newspapers called her "the most brilliant, distinguished and interesting woman ever to grace St. Louis," one who held "the nearest thing to a salon the city has ever seen" where one could meet "the most outstanding minds of the times." She was a good card player. She sometimes smoked her cigarettes in public if nobody objected. She liked young people and they liked her (Seyersted 27).

In writing style, Kate Chopin was clear and direct. In a time of flowery verbosity, she wasted no words. In a time of emotional moralizing, she drew no conclusions about her characters; she simply told what they said, did and thought. Her refusal to moralize, perhaps more than any other factor, brought the wrath of male-dominated criticism to her works. Her characters acted, instead of being acted upon, as those of many male authors, and were considered unforgivable for those

actions. This simple fact became the basis for a complete rejection of her works.

A thorough study of the complete works of Kate Chopin has left many a modern critic feeling that "the page ended all too soon" (Chopin, 1898). This talented writer left what would be considered by some a small body of works as her legacy; however, the writings she did leave have a forward-looking vision and daring all their own.

Chopin wrote 105 short stories, twenty poems, one play, and two important novels. Virtually all of these works suggest the quest pattern, presented from the feminine viewpoint. Each includes a feminine heroine embarking, often symbolically, on a mystical journey into her inner consciousness. Even as the archetypical hero journeyed into foreign lands, the women in Chopin's writings journey into the recesses of the psychological relevance of their individual lives.

The quest or personal relevance that Chopin's heroines seek is usually obscured, both to the reader and to the feminine character. Through various experiences, generally originating outside of themselves, these women are gradually allowed to come into touch with their real selves, creating, for the first time, an authentic existence. At this point in each story the woman loses her subordinate image and becomes a threat to male dominance.

Chopin explores many themes, the most prominent of which is the awakening or reoccurrence of sexual passion in men and

women. The carefully developed interrelationship between living up to society's expectations and escaping from its strictures is a dominant feature of Chopin's character development. Much early criticism of her writing deals with the problems presented in a society in which unbridled passions are released, regardless of propriety. This criticism notes the lack of "ethical value" in her writing and characters (Seyersted 24).

Daniel S. Rankin, author of the first book-length work on Chopin, Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories (1932), praises her weaker stories and condemns those with stronger sexual themes. As a Catholic priest, Rankin had neither the background nor the mind-set to understand Chopin's main focus as he criticized The Awakening for its "erotic morbidity" (Martin 54).

The most important event in Chopin studies occurred in 1969, when Per Seyersted wrote Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography and edited The Complete Works of Kate Chopin. Seyersted interprets Chopin's work from a modern perspective and makes her writings more accessible to other critics. He writes that she "insisted here that no author can be true to life who refuses to pluck from the Darwinian tree of knowledge and to see human existence in its true meaning." Also, to her, "nature was amoral, playing with man, and morality was man-made and relative" (23).

Seyersted argues that Chopin's works were rejected because she "attempts to put on record the real inner emotions of women in relation to their men and children, and it was this that made

the hair stand on end of those genteel readers of the nineties..."(14). He also writes that it was the moral implications of her work that "caused her to be reprobated by the so sniffishly moral reviewers of that era" (14). Seyersted is more in tune with Chopin's fisherwoman approach than her earlier critics.

Peggy Skaggs, in her book Kate Chopin, states that "Feminist critics have embraced Chopin enthusiastically... Feminist criticism has, in fact, been so effusive during the last decade that it has sometimes seemed to be turning Chopin's greatest art into a political tract" (7). Joan Zlotnik, in a brief article entitled "A Woman's Will: Kate Chopin on Selfhood, Wifehood, and Motherhood," asserts that her women often engage in a "desperate quest for freedom" (Rankin 3). This very definition defines Chopin's characters as threats in a male-dominated world and feeds fuel into the fires of early rejection.

In "The Ethics of Feminism in the Literary Classroom: A Delicate Balance," J. Karen Ray discusses the criticism of literature and the inherent problems for writers such as Chopin. She asserts that "because men have decided what values are important, what images best express those values, and, consequently, what books are accepted or denied entrance into the canon, students, both male and female, have a distorted or one-sided view of what constitutes effective literature and who has written it"(55). Ray also quotes from Virginia Woolf's "A

Room of One's Own" where Woolf observes:

Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are "important," the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes "trivial." And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawingroom. (55)

Chopin's work was judged by just such an unequal and unfair criteria.

Emily Toth has emerged as one of Chopin's most notable critics. In 1975 Toth founded the Kate Chopin Newsletter, which she continued to edit and publish until 1977, when she changed the journal's name to Regionalism and the Female Imagination. Toth has written several articles on Chopin including "Kate Chopin and Literary Convention: 'Désirée's Baby'," and "A New Biographical Approach." She also assisted Per Seyersted in editing the Kate Chopin Miscellany, a collection that includes every unpublished word that Chopin is known to have written. Toth sees similarities among Chopin, George Sand, and Alexandra Kollontai, as all three writers "confront the conflict between woman's desire for independence and traditional sexual restraints" (647).

Other critics approach the writings of Kate Chopin from a psychological viewpoint, most notably Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who

uses the psychological analysis process of Laing and Freud in her interpretation of The Awakening. Wolff's "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's The Awakening," details the fairy-tale quality of Chopin's novel, dwelling particularly upon the conventions of sleep, as does the fairy-tale "Sleeping Beauty." In Chopin's novel, during a day-long excursion to the Cheniere, Edna and Robert play the parts of the tale: they leave the real world and enter one of fantasy, where Edna falls into a long sleep. When she awakens, she asks, "How many years have I slept?" And Robert, as the fairy-tale prince answers, "You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers..." (Rosowski 28).

Wayne Batten approaches the problems of Chopin's heroines by portraying them as victims of illusion. In his journal article, "Illusion and Archetype: The Curious Story of Edna Pontellier," Batten writes of the scene in which Edna is escorted home by the kindly doctor Mandelet, after she has witnessed her friend Adèle Ratignolle give birth to her fourth child. The doctor counsels the lonely Edna by cautioning her that

'youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a province of Nature, a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost.'

'Yes,' she said. 'The years that are gone seem like

dreams - if one might go on sleeping and dreaming - but to wake up and find - oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life.' (Batten 73)

Kate Chopin apparently suffered from no personal allusions. Two late stories demonstrate a hopeful vision of woman in ideal relation to man and society and her rather gloomy feelings about the possible realization of that vision. While awaiting the publication of The Awakening, she wrote a short story entitled "The Storm," (1898) concerning a woman who has an unexpected afternoon encounter with an old lover and then spends a happy domestic evening with her child and husband, while the lover writes lovingly to his own wife. "The Storm" is as explicitly sexual as much modern literature, treating physical love, to quote later critics, "as a natural, joyful expression" (Missouri Life 31). Due to the adverse publicity which accompanied the publication of The Awakening, Chopin never tried to publish "The Storm." She realized it would never be accepted for the values which she had tried to portray. She did write one more story, however, in which she takes literary revenge on the males who have killed her creativity.

In "Charlie," (1900) she writes of a young heroine who is a tomboy, who gallops on the levee on a big black horse, cuts her hair short, wears "trouserlets," fishes, shoots, writes poems, and idolizes her father. As for him, "in many ways she filled the place of that ideal son he had always hoped for" (644). The

father becomes convinced as she grows older that Charlie needs to wear dresses and attend a proper girl's school. She protests greatly, but is sent away to school anyway. When her father is seriously and permanently injured in an accident, Charlie returns to run the plantation as she likes. Although Charlie fails at dance, music, and painting, the "proper" activities for a young lady, she succeeds as a poet, and at business.

Chopin gives Charlie independence, power, and control; however, she has to accomplish this by making her over into a "man," by giving her the behavior and dress that society deemed masculine, even to guns and spurs. The implications in this story suggest strongly that sex, love, and independence are mutually exclusive for a woman. She must either become "masculine" and lose her sensual life, or become "feminine" and lose her independence; in fact, to have independence at all a woman must become "male" (TCLC Vol.14, 81).

Many critics, including Edmund Wilson, have said Chopin is a genius and "the most individual feminine talent America has produced." Van Wyck Brooks called The Awakening, "A small perfect book that mattered more than the whole lifetime of many a prolific writer" (Missouri Life).

With The Awakening and her other published works, Kate Chopin made the supreme effort to dramatize the sentiments vocalized by another woman author, Charlotte Brontë. Brontë, writing under the male pseudonym, Currier Bell, writes in Jane Eyre (1847), that:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (101)

Chopin's works echo the fundamental female protest voiced by Brontë's Jane; however, Chopin also moves into the more sensual, sexual natures of her women characters. This fact, coupled with the objective nature of her writing, encouraged the disapproval of the whole guild of male nineteenth century literary critics.

One thing seems certain to most modern day American critics: the silencing of Kate Chopin was a serious loss to American letters. Critic Larzer Ziff has classed it with that of Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. Author/historian Per Seyersted comments that if The Awakening had gone on trial as many controversial novels have done, she would have been famous, with great influence on writers who followed her (Missouri Life 32). More important, probably at least a few literary greats would

have rallied to her defense and she would not have been allowed to stop working and selling. It is a great loss to our century in particular that Kate Chopin was not accepted in her own age, for had she been, it is quite probable that we would have more writings from this particular author, writings that would help lead the way for the acceptance and validity of a genre of feminist criticism and writings (TCLC Vol. 14, 65). That she was stopped by a male-dominated critical audience is probably the supreme tragedy of Kate Chopin.

APPENDIX

A COMPLETE LISTING OF LITERARY WORKS BY KATE CHOPIN

Short Stories and Sketches: (Listed by dates completed and dates published)

- Undated (1869-1870) "Emancipation. A Life Fable" Pub: 1963
- 1889 "Wiser Than a God" Pub: 1889
- 1889 "A Point at Issue" subtitled "A Story of Love and Reason in Which Love Triumphs" Pub: 1889
- 1889 "Miss Witherwell's Mistake" Pub: 1891
- 1889 "With the Violin" Pub: 1890
- 1891 "Mrs. Mobry's Reason" Pub. 1893
- 1888 (revised in 1891) "A No-Account Creole" Pub: 1894
- 1891 "For Marse Chouchoute" Pub: 1891
- 1891 "The Going Away of Liza" Pub: 1892
- 1891 "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" Pub: 1891
- 1891 "A Wizard from Gettysburg" Pub: 1892
- 1891 "A Shameful Affair" Pub: 1893
- 1891 "A Rude Awakening" Pub: 1893
- 1891 "A Harbinger" Pub: 1891
- 1891 "Doctor Chevalier's Lie" Pub: 1893
- 1891 "A Very Fine Fiddle" Pub: 1891
- 1891 "Boulôt and Boulotte" Pub: 1891
- 1891 "Love on the Bon-Dieu" Pub: 1892
- 1891 "An Embarrassing Position. Comedy in One Act" Pub: 1895

- 1891 "Beyond the Bayou" Pub: 1893
- 1891 "After the Winter" Pub: 1896
- 1892 "The Bênitous' Slave" Pub: 1892
- 1892 "The Turkey Hunt" Pub: 1892
- 1892 "Old Aunt Peggy" Pub: 1894
- 1892 "The Lilies" Pub: 1893
- 1892 "Ripe Figs" Pub: 1893
- 1892 "Croque-Mitaine" Pub: 1963
- 1892 "A Little Free-Mulatto" Pub: 1963
- 1892 "Miss McEnders" Pub: 1897
- 1892 "Loka" Pub: 1892
- 1892 "At the 'Cadian Ball" Pub: 1892
- 1892 "A Visit to Avoyelles" Pub: 1893
- 1892 "Ma'ame Pélagie" Pub: 1893
- 1892 "Désirée's Baby" Pub: 1893
- 1892 "Caline" Pub: 1893
- 1892 "The Return of Alcibiade" Pub: 1892
- 1893 "In and Out of Old Natchitoches" Pub: 1893
- 1893 "Mamouche" Pub: 1894
- 1893 "Madame Célestin's Divorce" Pub: 1894
- 1893 "An Idle Fellow" Pub: 1969
- 1893 "A Matter of Prejudice" Pub: 1895
- 1893 "Azélie" Pub: 1894
- 1893 "A Lady of Bayou St. John" Pub: 1893
- 1893 "La Belle Zoraïde" Pub: 1894
- 1893 "At Chênière Caminada" Pub: 1894

- 1893 "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche" Pub: 1894
- 1893 "In Sabine" Pub: 1894
- 1894 "A Respectable Woman" Pub: 1894
- 1894 "Tante Cat'rinette" Pub: 1894
- 1894 "A Dresden Lady in Dixie" Pub: 1895
- 1894 "The Story of an Hour" Pub: 1894
- 1894 "Lilacs" Pub: 1896
- 1894 "The Night Came Slowly" Pub: 1895
- 1894 "Juanita" Pub: 1895
- 1894 "Cavanelle" Pub: 1895
- 1894 "Regret" Pub: 1894
- 1894 "The Kiss" Pub: 1895
- 1894 "Ozème's Holiday" Pub: 1896
- 1894 "A Sentimental Soul" Pub: 1895
- 1894 "Her Letters" Pub: 1895
- 1895 "Odalie Misses Mass" Pub: 1895
- 1895 "Polydore" Pub: 1896
- 1895 "Dead Men's Shoes" Pub: 1897
- 1895 "Athénaïse" Pub: 1896
- 1895 "Two Summers and Two Souls" Pub: 1895
- 1895 "The Unexpected" Pub: 1895
- 1895 "Two Portraits" Pub: 1932
- 1895 "Fedora" Pub: 1897
- 1895 "Vagabonds" Pub: 1932
- 1896 "Madame Martel's Christmas Eve" Pub: 1969
- 1896 "The Recovery" Pub: 1896

- 1896 "A Night in Acadie" Pub: 1897
- 1896 "A Pair of Silk Stockings" Pub: 1897
- 1896 "Nég Créol" Pub: 1897
- 1896 "Aunt Limpy's Interference" Pub: 1897
- 1896 "The Blind Man" Pub: 1897
- 1896 "A Vocation and a Voice" Pub: 1902
- 1896 "A Mental Suggestion" Pub: 1969
- 1897 "Suzette" Pub: 1897
- 1897 "The Locket" Pub: 1969
- 1897 "A Morning Walk" Pub: 1897
- 1897 "An Egyptian Cigarette" Pub: 1900
- 1897 "A Family Affair" Pub: 1899
- 1898 "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" Pub: 1963
- 1898 "The Storm" Pub: 1969
- 1899 "The Godmother" Pub: 1901
- 1899 "A Little Country Girl" Pub: 1969
- 1899 "A Reflection" Pub: 1932
- 1899 "Ti Démon" Pub: 1969
- 1900 "A December Day in Dixie" Pub: 1932
- 1900 "The Gentleman from New Orleans" Pub: 1969
- 1900 "Charlie" Pub: 1969
- 1900 "The White Eagle" Pub: 1900
- 1901 "The Wood-Choppers" Pub: 1902
- 1902 "Polly" Pub: 1902
- Undated (Probably 1903) "The Impossible Miss Meadows"
Pub: 1969

Poems: (Listed by dates completed and dates published)

- 1889 "If It Might Be" Pub: 1889
- 1890 "Psyche's Lament" Pub: 1932
- 1893 "The Song Everlasting" Pub: 1899
- 1893 "You and I" Pub: 1899
- 1893 "It Matters All" Pub: 1932
- 1893 "In Dreams Throughout the Night" Pub: 1969
- Undated "Good Night" Pub: 1894
- 1895 "If Some Day" Pub: 1969
- 1895 "To Carrie B." Pub: 1969
- 1895 "To Hider Schuyler--" Pub: 1969
- 1895 "To 'Billy' with a Box of Cigars" Pub: 1969
- 1896 "To Mrs. R." Pub: 1969
- 1897 "Let the Night Go" Pub: 1969
- 1898 "There's Music Enough" Pub: 1932
- 1898 "An Ecstasy of Madness" Pub: 1932
- 1898 "I Wanted God" Pub: 1969
- 1899 "The Haunted Chamber" Pub: 1969
- 1899 "Life" Pub: 1932
- Undated (1895-1899) "Because" Pub: 1969
- Undated (1899 ?) "To The Friend of My Youth: To Kitty"
Pub: 1932

Novels: (Listed by dates completed and dates published)

- 1889 At Fault Pub: 1890
- 1898 The Awakening Pub: 1899

Note: The only source of the complete Chopin canon is The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, (1969) edited by Per Seyersted. This volume contains every work previously published or unpublished by Kate Chopin.

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