Kate Chopin's independent women: the evolution of Edna Pontellier

Denise Jeanne Anne Holck
Iowa State University

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Kate Chopin's independent women: the evolution of Edna Pontellier

by

Denise Jeanne Anne Holck

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Neil Nakadate, Major Professor
Constance Post
John Schuh

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Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Denise Jeanne Anne Holck

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
To Alan
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Introduction

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me,
shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

Whitman, *Song of Myself*

"Surely, no writer has been the subject of more dissertations over the past 22 years: 99 for an impressive average of 4.5 per year!" Terry Oggel remarked about Kate Chopin in his essay on late-nineteenth-century literature (274). That this is so cannot be surprising for several reasons. Although Chopin was a late-nineteenth-century writer, she has only entered the collective consciousness of scholars fairly recently. Her major work, *The Awakening*, was out of print from 1906 until 1964, when it began to receive significant critical attention. Per Seyersted, a Norwegian scholar studying at Harvard with Cyrille Arnavon, became interested in the work and, in 1969, edited *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*. The publication of Seyersted’s compilation of Chopin’s work coincided with the second wave of the women’s movement; Chopin was immediately embraced by feminists and was more likely to have been read in a women’s studies course than an American literature class throughout the 1970s. Chopin has only recently come to hold “a secure position in the canon that is arguably equivalent to nineteenth-century writers of the stature of Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Emily Dickinson” (Green and Caudle 13). One hundred years
after Chopin's death, the relative novelty of her work has no doubt contributed to the collective interest in it.

In her second biography of Chopin, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999), Emily Toth asserts that Chopin's writing was, to a large extent, autobiographical and conjectures about the actual individuals and incidents that Chopin may have modeled her short stories and novels on. In doing so, Toth gives too little credit to Chopin's creative abilities and the profound influence of the French realists on her work. Yet a familiarity with the details of Chopin's life is necessary in order to fully understand the themes that recur throughout her writing. The most important of those themes explore woman's relationship to society and her independence within and without the confines of marriage and motherhood, the female imperative of motherhood as a justification for marriage, and the role erotic desire plays in motivating women. Chopin's exploration of those themes will be examined more closely in this thesis.¹

Since its rediscovery in the 1960s, *The Awakening* has been considered Chopin's masterpiece, yet standing on its own, it is a highly ambiguous work. Much has been written about it, and a review of Chopin scholarship will demonstrate that there is little agreement among scholars as to its meaning. Placed in the context of her first novel and more than one hundred short stories, it becomes less obscure. That Chopin herself considered *The Awakening* as an integral, not isolated, expression of her thinking is evidenced by her use of recurring tropes and characters in her short and long fiction. Those tropes and characters serve as a bridge between the two forms; the contexts in which they occur in the short fiction suggest that the stories make *The Awakening* possible.
Chapter I
Chopin as Wife, Mother, Reader and Writer

Kate Chopin was, by all accounts, a remarkable woman who lived a life that was atypical for a middle-class widow and mother of six children during a period of great change in American culture. This only adds to her allure as a subject of scholarship. Born in 1850, Chopin grew up in St. Louis. Her father, Thomas O’Flaherty, was an Irish immigrant who prospered as an outfitter and merchant. When his first wife died, leaving him with a young son, O’Flaherty married sixteen-year-old Eliza Faris. She was the daughter of a prominent, but impoverished, family that traced its heritage to the original French settlers of the Louisiana Territory. O’Flaherty was killed in a train accident in 1855, the same year five-year-old Chopin began her formal education as a boarder at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Louis. Following her father’s death, Chopin returned home and was schooled there by her great-grandmother. She returned to the academy as a day student in 1857, completing her formal education at age eighteen. Chopin’s mother, only twenty-seven at her husband’s death, never remarried. Chopin grew up with her stepbrother and brother in an otherwise largely female household with her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and several aunts all together under one roof. She became a voracious reader. Throughout her later school years she kept commonplace books, detailing what she read. The list included works by Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Corneille, Molière, Jane Austen, Walter Scott, Charlotte Brontë, and many others. Often, Chopin would copy passages from her reading into her commonplace book, remarking on her impressions of the text. Recording her thoughts about works she had read and the world around her was a habit Chopin kept intermittently
throughout her life. Her diaries show a critical, independent mind and are often acerbic in tone. At least in the comparative privacy of her diaries, Chopin did not suffer fools gladly.\(^3\)

One of the events recorded in Chopin's diaries is her engagement to Oscar Chopin, son of a wealthy French-born physician and plantation owner.\(^4\) Although born in Little River, Louisiana, Oscar had spent the years of the United States Civil War at school in France and was something of a playboy. While in France, he failed his baccalaureate exams but enjoyed the company of local prostitutes. After their St. Louis wedding on June 9, 1870, Kate and Oscar Chopin spent an extended honeymoon touring Europe. Chopin wrote regularly in her diary during the trip; it is clear that she enjoyed their honeymoon and the personal freedom marriage and travel provided, engaging in activities that would have been scandalous in either St. Louis or New Orleans for a young bride from a well-to-do family. Under Oscar's tutelage and with the Franco-Prussian war breaking out around them, Chopin took up smoking, drank beer in German beer halls, and began taking long solitary walks through the European countryside. While in Paris on Sunday, September 4, 1870, Chopin wrote in her diary, "What an eventful day for France—may I not say that for the world? And that I should be here in the midst of it....I have seen a French revolution!...."*Aux Armes, Citoyens! Formons nos Bataillons*" (Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers* 119-20). As the Chopins' honeymoon ended in Paris, the Second Empire was overthrown.

The Chopins set up housekeeping in the Garden District of New Orleans. Oscar was a cotton broker and Kate a mother, giving birth to six children—all of whom survived to adulthood—over the course of the next eight years.\(^5\) Although Chopin continued to write in her diary, it has since been lost and little is known of their life in New Orleans. Oscar's cotton office was in the same building as that of the Degas family, and it seems likely the
Chopins were acquainted with French artist Edgar Degas who made long visits to his family in New Orleans during that time.6

The Chopins spent long periods of time apart while Kate traveled to St. Louis for extended visits, summered with the children at Grand Isle, Louisiana, and Oscar returned to France and traveled elsewhere. In 1879, Oscar’s New Orleans cotton factoring business failed and the family relocated to Cloutierville, Louisiana, a town along the Cane River in the rural northwestern part of the state and close to the plantation owned by Oscar’s father. Chopin also had relatives in Cloutierville. Although the area would have been fairly populous in the late 1800s due to the largely manual nature of cotton and timber production, life in Cloutierville must have seemed like exile to Chopin. To support his family, Oscar opened a general store in there and managed it with Chopin’s assistance. She also dressed fashionably, smoked Cuban cigarettes, drank, flashed her ankles at townsmen, and otherwise offended the sensibilities of the staunchly Roman Catholic and parochial community (Cheneault 2).

Oscar died of what is now believed to have been either malaria or yellow fever in December 1882, leaving the thirty-two year old Chopin with six children ranging in age from two to eleven years old, thousands of dollars of debt, and substantial unpaid taxes. Chopin remained in Cloutierville. Under Louisiana law, which was patterned after the French civil code, she was required to petition to be named the official guardian of her children. This Chopin did while continuing to run the store and managing her properties until she was able to pay off Oscar’s debts. Chopin biographer Emily Toth alleges that during that time period Chopin had a scandalous affair with a local planter, Albert Sampite, who was known for being particularly cruel to his wife (Toth and Seyersted, Private Papers 126). The affair has
never been verified, but persists so strongly in the local imagination that personal effects of
the supposedly adulterated wife have been entered into the Chopin House and Bayou Folk
Museum there. During her years in Cloutierville, Chopin continued her habit of reading,
especially the works of Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, whose views
on biological and social evolution must have contrasted starkly with the prevailing values of
the small, Roman Catholic community.

In 1884, Chopin moved with her children to St. Louis at the behest of her mother,
who then lived with the young family until her unexpected death in 1885. Chopin was
extraordinarily close to her mother and experienced a long period of grieving following her
death. It was during that time that Chopin established a literary salon that met regularly at
her home. Some of those who attended her salons were journalists. Those who seemed
closest to her included Charles Deyo, George Johns, and William Reedy of the Post-
Dispatch; and Sue V. Moore, editor of St. Louis Life. William Schuyler, a poet, also attended
as did Austrian-born anarchist Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer. Kolbenheyer was a complex man
who had been her mother’s neighbor, Chopin’s obstetrician, an associate of Joseph Pulitzer
(editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch), and was a writer himself. It was at his urging that
Chopin began to write professionally. From all evidence, Chopin was extremely intelligent
and attractive. She had many close male friends, but Sue Moore was one of her few close
female friends. Yet Chopin never remarried after Oscar’s death, and although rumors persist
regarding several romantic liaisons, no evidence to substantiate them has survived. Writing
in her 1894 diary, Impressions, Chopin expressed her longing for the return of her mother
and husband, but made it clear that she attributed her growth as a writer to the period
following their deaths, saying “I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up everything that has
come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs. To do that, I
would have to forget the past ten years of my growth—my real growth” (Toth and Seyersted,
_Private Papers_ 183). In short, Chopin had concluded that the great personal loss she had
suffered with the deaths of Oscar and her mother had freed her to pursue her personal
intellectual and artistic goals.

In October 1889, the _St. Louis Post-Dispatch_ paid Chopin $16.00 to print her short
story, “A Point at Issue!” It was the second story she had written, but the first to be
published. Although it was awkwardly written in many places, Chopin used the story to
explore a theme that would be central to many of her subsequent short stories and would
culminate ten years later in _The Awakening_: a woman’s need for intellectual freedom within
marriage. And, as later in _The Awakening_, Chopin gently mocked the women of the suffrage
movement. Unlike her later work, “A Point at Issue!” did not emphasize a southern setting;
the action shifts between Paris and an unremarkable community in the northern United
States.

Chopin’s first novel, _At Fault_, was published at her own expense in 1890. Lacking
the grace of her later work, the novel satirized late nineteenth-century social conventions,
demonstrated a religious skepticism, and revealed her “participation in literary dialogues of
the late nineteenth century” (Walker 62). Although _At Fault_ is under two hundred pages, its
length relative to the stories Chopin had been writing gave her more room to experiment with
variations in setting. As she had in “A Point at Issue!,” Chopin explored the ways in which
geography and local society could inhibit or liberate her characters. The dramatic action in
_At Fault_ alternates between St. Louis, portrayed as corrupt and artificial, and a pastoral
setting in rural Louisiana that is uncorrupt. In only one of her local color stories,
“Athénaïse,” does Chopin juxtapose place so starkly, but it is a theme she returns to again in *The Awakening*.

Chopin continued to write short stories for both adult readers and children. Through her literary circle, she had close ties to the St. Louis newspaper that had published her first story but wanted to reach a broader audience. Sending her stories to New York and Boston editors as soon as she had written them, Chopin saw her work published in a diverse group of periodicals with national distribution: *Century, Vogue, Youth's Companion, Young People,* and *Harper's*.

Twenty-three of her stories were collected in *Bayou Folk*, published in 1894. Chopin had noted the popularity of the Louisiana local color writers George Washington Cable, Grace King, and Ruth McEnery Stuart; making use of her close observation of life in Cloutierville and New Orleans, she began to give her stories Louisiana settings. All of the *Bayou Folk* stories are situated there. The collection was widely praised for its charm and in comparison to the work of other local color writers. A second collection of her Louisiana stories, *A Night in Acadie*, was published in 1897.

Toth has suggested that Chopin patterned *At Fault* after her alleged love affair with Albert Sampite and that he partially inspired portions of Chopin’s local color stories, later serving as the model for New Orleans roué Alcée Arobin in *The Awakening*, as well (*Private Papers* 126). People who knew Chopin during her years in Cloutierville also felt that she modeled her stories after real acquaintances—for a period of years the copy of *Bayou Folk* owned by the local library had the names of Chopin’s characters scratched out, and their supposed real life names penciled in instead (Cheneault 2).
As Chopin’s reputation as a writer became established, the associated demands on her time grew. She was often called upon to give readings in St. Louis, where she continued regularly to host her literary salon, and to write essays and book reviews. After The Awakening was published in 1899, Chopin continued to write short stories—albeit at a slower pace than before—as family responsibilities took more and more of her time. By 1902, her three oldest sons, now adults, had moved from her home, but a year later two moved back, one requiring nearly full-time care following his collapse at the death of his wife and child in childbirth. A third collection of Chopin’s short stories, A Vocation and a Voice, was returned by the publisher who had previously accepted the work. Many of the stories included in the collection were published separately in periodicals during the last years of Chopin’s life.

The World’s Fair came to St. Louis in August 1904. Chopin, with her insatiable curiosity, spent several days touring the fair in extreme summer heat. After one such day, she suffered a brain hemorrhage and died two days later on August 22, 1904, at the age of fifty-four.

At Chopin’s death, obituaries and memorials appeared in newspapers as far away as Boston. Most focused on her accomplishments as the author of Bayou Folk and A Night in Acadie. In her biography of Chopin, Nancy Walker writes, “even the testimonials of two of Chopin’s St. Louis friends serve as reminders that women were judged as much by their personal as by their intellectual qualities.” Walker particularly notes an obituary in The Hesperian that described Chopin as an “unpresuming and womanly woman.” Chopin’s close friend William Reedy wrote in the Mirror that she had achieved genius “without sacrificing the comradeship of her children” (Walker 158-59). Considered by many today to be
Chopin's masterpiece, *The Awakening* was reprinted following her death only once, in 1906, then rested with Chopin in obscurity until 1969.
Chapter II
Chopin and The Awakening:
In and Beyond Her Time

Unlike Chopin’s two collections of short stories, which were generally admired, The Awakening provoked strong and varied responses from readers. A review placed in Book News by publisher Herbert S. Stone in March 1899—one month before The Awakening was initially published by that firm—described the novel as “an intimate thing, which in studying the nature of one woman reveals something which brings her in touch with all women—something larger than herself” (Monroe 161). That the review was written by a woman, Lucy Monroe, a reader and editor for the publisher, is noteworthy. Toth and Seyersted credit Monroe for the book’s acceptance for publication, describing her as an “art critic, a member of the Chicago literary circles, and a ‘New Woman’ who cared passionately about opportunities for women” (Private Papers 295). Monroe may presage the advocacy of late-twentieth-century scholars, but she did not foreshadow the reactions of her contemporaries, who were largely offended by Chopin’s novel. Chopin had a history of disagreeing with her reviews; on June 7, 1894, she wrote in her diary, “In looking over more than a hundred press notices of ‘Bayou Folk’ which have already been sent to me, I am surprised at the very small number which show anything like a worthy critical faculty. They might be counted on the fingers of one hand” (Toth and Seyersted, Private Papers 187). Her sentiments changed little after reading the initial reviews of The Awakening, as a letter written by Chopin to her publisher in June 1899 demonstrates: “I enclose a notice which you may not have seen—from the Post-Dispatch. It seems so able and intelligent—by contrast with some of the drivel
I have run across" (Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers* 211). The review Chopin referred to
was written by close friend Charles Deyo. In it, he described *The Awakening* as "all
consummate art" (165), but acknowledged "there may be many opinions" regarding the story
(164). Many opinions there were.

By June 1899, *The Awakening* had been reviewed by newspapers and magazines
across the country. The *New York Times* included it in its review "100 Books for Summer"
on June 24; on the same weekend, but a continent away, the *Los Angeles Sunday Times*
carried a review as well. The *New York Times* review was quite brief, but essentially
positive, noting Chopin’s "cleverness in the handling of the story" (169). Deyo’s article in
St. Louis and the *New York Times* mention were the only two really positive reviews. Most
were negative. One of the most pointed reviews of the work was written by another author,
Willa Cather. Writing for the *Pittsburgh Leader*, Cather praised Chopin’s style as "exquisite
and sensitive," but damned *The Awakening* by asking why Chopin would devote so "well-
governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme" (Curtin 697). In what must otherwise have
seemed a great compliment to Chopin, Cattier compared *The Awakening* to Flaubert’s
*Madame Bovary*, but found "there was, indeed, no need that a second *Madame Bovary*
should be written" (697). Most reviews followed the pattern established by Cather: praise of
Chopin’s style and condemnation of her topic. What the reviewers considered her topic to be
varied considerably from newspaper to newspaper. The *Chicago Times-Herald* called *The
Awakening* "sex fiction" ("Books of the Day" 166). Edna’s failure to recognize her "moral
obligation" to her husband and children as well as Chopin’s failure to censure her heroine are
the focus of the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* review ("New Publications" 167). Though no
other critic treated Chopin as harshly as Cather had, she was soundly rebuked in a number of
reviews for daring to write beyond the boundaries established by what *The Nation* called her “agreeable short stories” ("Recent Novels" 172). The *Chicago Times Herald* suggested *The Awakening* was not necessary and that the “creator of sweet and loveable characters” was the “real Miss Chopin” ("Books of the Day" 166).

In the context of late twentieth and early twenty-first century mores, Chopin’s portrayal of adultery and suicide no longer qualifies as “sex fiction.” And yet, *The Awakening* is still controversial. Scholars are divided, not on the literary merits of the novel, but on its ultimate meaning. A century after the initial publication of *The Awakening*, it is still an ambiguous work. In her essay “Where Are We Going? Where Have We Been? Twenty Years of Chopin Criticism,” Suzanne Disheroon Green sees criticism of *The Awakening* falling into four categories as scholars attempt to elucidate the novel: “(1) biographical studies; (2) ‘ism’ studies—scholarly endeavors which argue for the placement of Chopin’s work within literary movements such as Naturalism, Realism, or Modernism; (3) studies drawing on feminist scholarship and thought; and (4) ethnographic studies” (13-14).

In large measure, Green is correct. Scholars have tended to focus on Chopin’s novel exclusively. When considered at all, her short stories have been studied as a separate body of work. Yet, segregating Chopin’s biographers from the rest of her critics as Green does, obscures the full scope of the work of Seyersted, who argued with some success for Chopin’s recognition as a realist, and Toth, who has argued Chopin’s character Edna Pontellier is the “embodiment of nineteenth century feminist criticism and that *The Awakening* is indicative of the growing feminist consciousness during that era” (Green and Caudle 15). Likewise, Green’s analysis tends to attach too much importance to the work of the relatively few scholars who suggest Chopin’s work is either modernist and naturalistic, and those who
suggest it best serves as a cultural study. A more balanced approach to current Chopin scholarship would suggest a division into three more nearly equal categories: (1) those scholars who have argued that Chopin be counted among the nineteenth-century realists; (2) feminist scholars; and (3) those who more closely associate Chopin with Emerson and Whitman, arguing *The Awakening* is a romantic novel.

That Chopin was familiar with and influenced by the work of Emerson is clear; she often places his writing in the hands of her fictional characters and refers to Emerson in her essays. Yet, the effect Emerson had on Chopin’s thinking and writing is not entirely clear to her scholars. Joyce Dyer suggests it is Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” that Edna reads to put herself to sleep in chapter XXIV and that the essay’s sections on solitude inform the entire work (107-8). Pamela Knights sees this passing reference to Emerson as a satiric reference to the unreadability of his writing and his advocacy of “separate spheres” for men and women (380 n81). Whitman’s influence on Chopin is equally clear to many scholars. Harold Bloom called *The Awakening* “a Whitmanian book, profoundly so, not only in its echoes of his poetry, which are manifold, but more crucially in its erotic perspective” (1). Robert Arner notes the “sun, sea, wind, and sand images which, as much as or more than any human lover, stimulate the development of Edna’s sexual identity” (105), and closely links Chopin’s use of those images to the poetry of Whitman and Swinburne. Conversely, in elucidating the strong romantic imagery in *The Awakening*, Donald Ringe acknowledges the influence of the transcendentalists but ultimately argues that Chopin presents Edna “in terms suggesting Melville—as a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender” (227).
Kenneth Eble, who noted the influence of Flaubert and the other European realists on Chopin's work, was one of the earliest critics to argue for her consideration outside the boundaries of regionalism and local color that had until then restricted the critical interpretation of her work. Seyersted, identifying Chopin as a "realist who opposes self-assertive and self-forgetting females" (American Literary Realism 158), amplifies Eble's argument, suggesting further that Chopin has created "a more powerful female realism" (Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography 99).

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her often reprinted essay "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's The Awakening," undertakes a Freudian analysis of Edna Pontellier, concluding she has returned to an infantile state. Marianne Hirsch agrees, arguing that "paradoxically, Edna eludes her children by becoming herself a child as well as mother in her fusion with the ocean"(45), yet Hirsch argues Wolff's interpretation of the suicide as a regressive act is inaccurate. Instead, Edna's "feelings of suicide are identical to those that define the initial awakening... Death becomes an escape from female plot and the only possible culmination of woman's spiritual development" when Edna realizes her life would consist only of an endless repetition of frustration and passionless lovers. (44). Susan Rosowski argues that The Awakening is Bildungsroman, but where the masculine apprenticeship novel recounts the sensitive protagonist's acquisition of a philosophy of life and the art of living, the female protagonist's version teaches the "realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to these limitations" (49). At the other end of the spectrum of feminist scholarship are Sandra Gilbert and Dyer, who each argue the power of myth in The Awakening. In her well-known essay "The Second Coming of Aphrodite," Gilbert asserts The Awakening is a "female fiction that draws upon and revises fin de siècle
hedonism to propose a feminist and matriarchal myth of Aphrodite/Venus as an alternative to the masculine and patriarchal myth of Jesus” (91). Dyer agrees with Gilbert that Edna is “Diane/Artemis, Eve, Venus/Aphrodite, and Ariane” (56), but argues that sexual rebirth alone is unsatisfying, “that female biology can liberate, but its reproductive aspect can enslave” (72). Finally, Martha Cutter argues that Chopin uses female desire as an “aspect of woman’s search for voice” (87), in a world where language is white and male.

That such disparate opinions have gained acceptance among Chopin scholars may, in part, have occurred because historically few have considered the full body of Chopin’s work, limiting their analysis to The Awakening. Bloom summarily dismisses her short stories, describing them as “very mixed in quality,” and says “even the best are fairly slight” (1). Yet it was the short stories that gave birth to The Awakening; Chopin’s novel is imaginatively descended from them. As Chopin began writing professionally in 1889, she used the popularity of local color writing as a vehicle to gain an audience for her stories. A decade later, she used the conventions of realism as a framework for The Awakening. Just as quaintness and charm of local color writing were only the context for her stories in their explorations of societal and marital relationships, so the conventions of realism were inadequate for the exploration of female self-determination and sexuality Chopin undertook in The Awakening. She exploded realism by centering the text on a romantic protagonist and permeating it with an eclectic vocabulary of imagery and symbolism. The result was a highly ambiguous, yet subversive, text grounded in the female experience.

Chapter III

Chopin Develops as a Writer
Chapter III
Chopin Develops as a Writer

Within Chopin's private world in St. Louis, the desire and need to write coincided. She had the habit of a critical mind, which she had continued to refine through her reading while living in Cloutierville, and the habit of writing regularly. None have survived, but the letters Chopin wrote to Kolbenheyer in St. Louis while living in Cloutierville were of sufficient quality that he encouraged her to write professionally. Although she owned property in both Cloutierville and St. Louis, Chopin's need to supplement her income may be surmised by the debts she assumed at Oscar's death, the large family she had to support, and the financial condition of her mother's estate. Chopin's mother, Eliza Faris O'Flaherty, had been well provided for at the time of her husband's death in 1855, but by the time of her own death in 1885 most of the money had been swindled from her by an unscrupulous money manager who preyed upon wealthy widows. Chopin's interest in the financial aspects of writing is clearly demonstrated in her manuscript account books. She meticulously created a record for each of her short stories and novels, usually noting the date the work was completed and always recording the title, the name or names of periodicals or publishers to which it was submitted, and whether it was accepted or rejected by them. The money she earned for each piece that was accepted is carefully recorded by the date she received payment, with a tally of all funds received toted annually by month. Chopin's extreme care in recording the business aspects of her writing is at odds with the effect otherwise created by the journals she kept at that time. As she grew older, Chopin's handwriting progressed from the carefully formed, easy to read script she learned at the convent school to a very
expressive, often difficult to decipher, blur. Her spelling and punctuation were frequently egregious. Chopin’s correspondence with her publishers stands as further testimony to her interest in the financial aspects of writing. Her letters often contain subtle and not so subtle financial negotiations. For example, in January 1895, Chopin wrote to A.A. Hill at the American Press Association in New York that “Five dollars per 1,000 words seems to me quite fair enough compensation” for two stories they would publish. By March of that year, Chopin had changed her mind about the fairness of the rate, writing to another publisher, J.M. Stoddard of Variety magazine, also in New York, “I would ask $20.00 a thousand words for stories offered to the latter publication, which is the price paid to me heretofore by the Century and Youth’s Companion. Vogue pays something less” (Toth and Seyersted, Private Papers 207-8). Later in the same letter Chopin tells Stoddard that the American Press Association will shortly be printing two of her stories, but shrewdly does not mention they paid her only one-quarter the amount that she is asking from Variety.

Outside St. Louis, the world was changing and conditions were developing that would make it possible for Chopin to realize her ambition to become a professional writer. By the late nineteenth century, writing had become one of the few professions open to women who wished to earn money. Chopin had role models she could and did emulate, particularly Sarah Orne Jewett, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, all of whose work she studied closely. At the same time, the short story, which Chopin considered her true métier, was becoming increasingly popular with the American reading public. As early as 1880, literary magazines were turning away from the serialized novel in favor of short stories and were using them to balance longer articles (John 163). And, although still considered a
masculine form, fully one-third to one-half of all short stories published between 1820 and 1900 were written by women (Brown xvii).

The rift between the Union and former Confederate states that remained after the Civil War was also a factor in Chopin's success as a writer. *Century* magazine used its editorial stance and prestige in an attempt to heal the national wound by becoming a “leading force in urging reconciliation of North and South during the latter half of the Reconstruction era, and it was a pioneer in providing postwar southern writers with a national audience” (John x). In addition to the work of Twain, Henry James, and Howells that *Century* was already publishing, the magazine promoted the work of southern local colorists Cable, King, Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and McEnery Stuart, among others. Under the editorship of Richard Watson Gilder, who “preferred the charming to the real” (Kreyling 114), the work of the southern local color writers began to comprise such a large portion of the *Century*’s pages that in 1890 the magazine received letters of complaint from writers in other parts of the country who felt their work was being overlooked. When writing in the diaries that are extant today, Chopin never wrote openly of a driving desire to see her work published in *Century* or the *Atlantic Monthly*, the preeminent literary journals of the late nineteenth century. In her account books, however, Chopin did detail the submission of her work to the various periodicals she hoped would accept it, and it was to *Century* first that the great majority of her stories were sent, then on to the *Atlantic Monthly* when rejected by *Century*. Most of Chopin’s stories were rejected numerous times before finally being accepted at a newspaper or magazine, and her writing was not published by *Century* until January 1894. Even so, she had already benefited from *Century*’s attempts to reconcile the nation. Beginning in 1890, Chopin set her work in Louisiana and began to use the popular
local color genre in her writing. Substantially all of her writing from that period forward was located in Louisiana, and her two story collections clearly capitalized on the public’s demand for the novelty and quaintness of the seemingly exotic southern setting.

Another magazine, *Vogue*, also played a crucial role in Chopin’s success in achieving national recognition for her work. Founded in 1893, *Vogue* founder and publisher Arthur Baldwin Turnure wrote in the inaugural issue of the magazine that it would be a “dignified and authentic journal of society, fashion and the ceremonial side of life” (Chase 31). As it had at *Century*, however, the strong personality of the editor would profoundly affect the direction the magazine would follow. Josephine Redding, the first editor of *Vogue*, had a somewhat differing view of the magazine’s potential. Described as a “violent little woman, square and dark, who in an era when everyone wore corsets didn’t” (Harlen 104), Redding disapproved of male privilege and patriarchal society, writing in one *Vogue* editorial, “Any romantic notions that a woman may entertain regarding the stern sex are apt to be very badly damaged if she meets them outside of domestic and social circles….the aboriginal man, divested of conventional veneer, stands forth in his true colors as a very fallible, commonplace human being” (Chase 37). Under Redding’s editorship, *Vogue* devoted a large portion of each issue to poetry and fiction, but thoroughly rejected what Timothy Morris has described as the “whole range of Victorian fiction from sentimental to naturalist,” and that which “accepts the assumptions of patriarchy and capitalism, encoding them in the explicitly managed narratives” of the male short story (33). Chopin was one of the first writers whose work was published by Redding, with two stories, “A Visit to Avoyelles” and “Desirée’s Baby,” in the magazine’s second issue.
The value of Redding's support of Chopin's writing cannot be overestimated. It came at a time when most popular women's magazines were publishing short stories that espoused a strongly paternalistic point of view that often mocked women as well as allegorizing the "surrender of independent work and autonomy at marriage" (Garvey 91). Many fashion and other magazines targeted specifically toward women published short stories. That Chopin never submitted her work to any but *Vogue*, and was willing to accept less than the usual pay she earned from other magazines to be printed there suggests that it offered her something the other magazines did not: a forum in which she could openly explore her artistic preoccupations with female independence and sexuality. More than half of the stories in which Chopin explicitly explores those concerns were first published in *Vogue*. In total, the magazine published sixteen of her stories between January 1893 and May 1900.
Chapter IV

At Fault and Chopin’s Short Stories

The first of Chopin’s stories to be published anywhere were written during the summer of 1889. “Wiser that a God” revolves around an attractive young German-American woman—Chopin’s female protagonists are always attractive—named Paula who had trained since a child to become a concert pianist. Following the death of her musician father, Paula must support her ailing mother and herself by playing the piano at society parties. It is at one such gathering that Paula meets the wealthy young man she will fall in love with. After the party, he accompanies her home. When they arrive at the house Paula shares with her mother, she learns that her mother has died while she played lighthearted music at the party. The mother’s death is paradoxical for Paula: she is at once freed of the need to support her mother financially and trapped by the compulsion to live up to her parents’ expectations that she become a concert pianist. When the young man later proposes marriage, Paula refuses, citing her dedication to her career. When he presses her to reconsider his proposal, Paula replies, “Would you go into a convent, and ask to be your wife a nun who has vowed herself to the service of God?” to which he responds, “Yes, if that nun loved me; she would owe it to herself, to me and to God to be my wife” (Gilbert 668).9 In that exchange, by demonstrating that Paula was expected to forsake her goals in order to satisfy her would-be husband, Chopin neatly captures the essence of late nineteenth-century debate concerning roles women would be permitted to play in society.

“The Cult of True Womanhood,”10 is what scholars today identify as the prevailing nineteenth century cultural ideal of woman. It was promulgated through sermons, doctors,
newspapers, popular magazines and books, and “enjoined women to display piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Wright 133). In the closing decades of the century, a new ideal began to receive some attention. The new ideal was not promulgated through sermons or the white male social establishment. Rather, a group of English novelists conceived it and through the writing of George Egerton, Sarah Grand, and Grant Allen, it made inroads into the thinking of an educated minority. Dubbed the “New Woman,” the ideal described a woman “who was better educated and trained than the woman of the past; willing and able to earn her living... and hence under less pressure to marry,” according to Robert Reigal (Cutter xv). Writing four years before those novelists, Chopin situated her first female protagonist on the fulcrum point of the two ideals. As a daughter, Paula denied her own aspirations, if any, in order to fulfill the dreams of her parents that she become a pianist. As long as her mother lived, Paula was an obedient and loving daughter, sacrificing the aspirations she had assumed from her father that she become a concert pianist, in order to support her mother by playing at parties. Free of financial obligations following her mother’s death, Paula resumes the burden of her father’s dream, and to achieve that goal, refuses to marry the man she loves. As the story closes, Chopin still balances Paula between the two ideals. On her own in Leipzig, Paula has become an artistic and financial success but is on the verge of marriage to her piano instructor. Chopin uses music which, like writing, was one of the few socially acceptable career possibilities available to nineteenth-century women, to create a seemingly independent female character but is unable to bring a resolution to her story without placing the character back within societal expectations of marriage and family.

In “Wiser that a God,” Chopin experiments for the first time with the use of regional dialect. The German-American idiom Paula uses when she speaks to her mother helps to
underscore the class tension between Paula and the people she entertains with her piano playing. The effect is stilted but so is most of the dialogue throughout the story. Chopin also experimented with the use of satire in describing the musical tastes and abilities of the family Paula entertains. She uses it to demonstrate that, despite their wealth, they lack artistic education and sensitivity. Like her use of dialect, however, the effect is awkward.

The capitulation to societal norms that Chopin makes at the close of "Wiser than a God," foreshadows the ending to her second story, "A Point at Issue!" In it, Eleanor, the attractive female protagonist, has determined to be apart from her new husband a portion of every year so that she may live in Paris where she will learn to speak French with native fluency and develop her mind. Her husband, a college professor, encourages her wholeheartedly. In the end, both Eleanor and her husband become jealous, each thinking the other has fallen in love with another. When their mutual suspicions prove groundless, Eleanor decides she has learned enough French and cuts short her stay in Paris in order to return home with her husband.

As in her first story, Chopin experiments with satire in "A Point at Issue!" The effect is still somewhat heavy-handed, as when she tells the reader the newspaper announcement of the couple's wedding was placed by the paper next to an advertisement for a "large and varied assortment of marble and granite monuments" (670). The story contains very little dialogue and Chopin's authorial voice is intrusive in places, particularly when she writes, "Marriage, which marks too often the closing period of a woman's intellectual existence, was to be in her case the open portal through which she might seek the embellishments that her strong graceful mentality deserved" (672)—a passage that closely mirrors Chopin's diary entry describing her own period of intellectual growth. For the fictional Eleanor, Chopin has
created an opportunity for true growth within marriage that seemingly did not exist in her own marriage. Taking advantage of the intellectual and physical freedom she has in Paris, Eleanor is transformed from that “rara avis, a logical woman” (671), into a “goddess” (677) who has grown more beautiful with a “richness of coloring and fullness of health” (678) that life at home had never bestowed.

To become a concert pianist, Paula is transported from an unnamed community that closely resembles late nineteenth-century St. Louis to Leipzig. Before becoming an intellectual goddess, Eleanor moves from a small, northern college town to Paris. That both traveled to Europe, a destination especially remote and seemingly exotic when the only way to reach it was by ship, is noteworthy. In order to effect the transformations of both women, Chopin had to remove them physically from middle class American culture. Even so removed, neither is able to remain autonomous after achieving her goal, and both revert to a more conventional life as the stories close. The containment of Paula and Eleanor mirrors the events of Chopin’s own life. Pregnant with her first child when she and Oscar returned from their European honeymoon, her life quickly began to follow a more mundane path. Based upon her experience, it seems possible that at that early point in her writing career, Chopin could not envision another course for her protagonists.

During the summer of 1889, when Chopin was writing “Wiser than a God” and “A Point at Issue!,” she also began to write *At Fault*. The novel is crowded, with too many characters and plot lines, as though Chopin were bursting with ideas she wanted to express. Relating the intertwined stories of four central pairs of characters, it touches on the themes of economic independence for women, intellectual freedom and growth within marriage, and female self-determination that Chopin had begun to examine in the two stories, and
introduces a number of new themes as well. In a rebuttal she wrote to a review of *At Fault* published in the *Natchitoches Enterprise*, Chopin identifies what she considered to be the principal theme of the novel, the “blind acceptance of an undistinguishing, therefore unintelligent code of righteousness by which to deal out judgments” (Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers* 202). In her rebuttal, she also suggests a study of Emerson has informed the entire novel, quoting him in support her premise that the female protagonist, Thérèse Lafirme, is the character at fault: “Emerson says…. 'It were an unspeakable calamity if anyone should think he has a right to impose a private will on others. That is a part of a striker, an assassin’” (202).

*At Fault* was the first of Chopin’s works situated in the postbellum South. The novel opens with Thérèse Lafirme, a “handsome, inconsolable, childless Creole at thirty” (5), successfully managing the four thousand acre plantation she had inherited at her husband’s death five years earlier. From the veranda of her plantation house, she is able to survey the world through binoculars and is mistress of all she sees. Thérèse had initially resisted the intrusion into her life of a newly-built railroad, but it traverses her property and with it comes the inexorable march of northern industrialization. This includes David Homeyer of St. Louis, who arrives with an offer to purchase the rights to mill the plantation’s extensive forests for lumber. That Thérèse and David will fall in love is a foregone conclusion.

David’s sister Melicent lives with him in a cottage on the plantation. While David and Thérèse become acquainted, Melicent is in turn courted by Thérèse’s heavily-accented Creole nephew. The northern Melicent is amused, but not tempted by her southern suitor: “It could not be thought of, that she should marry a man whose eccentricity of speech would certainly not adapt itself to the requirements of polite society” (42). Grégoire pursues her
with a dogged persistence, but Melicent has a long history of broken engagements and a dislike of being kissed. When not being pursued by Grégoire, she spends her time actively pushing the match between her brother and Thérèse, and in a moment of over exuberance, lets it slip to Thérèse that David is divorced. For Thérèse, this news alters everything. When David explains it had been a mistake to marry the alcoholic Fanny, Thérèse tells him “You married a woman of weak character. You furnished her with every means to increase that weakness...you left her then as practically without moral support....It was the act of a coward” (37). Thérèse convinces David he must return to St. Louis and remarry his divorced wife. The second marriage is as disastrous as the first, but David brings Fanny to live with him in the cottage on Thérèse’s plantation, in hopes the new environment will cure her alcoholism.

Death permeates *At Fault*. Thérèse’s husband has just died as the novel opens and David and Fanny have lost a young son; by the novel’s end, there are four more bodies and one ghost. Joçint, a man-beast who lives with his aged and impoverished father in a cabin in the woods that are being harvested, is shot by Grégoire when he tries to burn the mill. Grégoire, shunned by Melicent after killing Joçint, is killed in a gunfight in Texas. Joçint’s father dies of grief when he finds his son’s body at the burning mill. Fanny drowns in a raging flood she crosses in desperation to obtain more alcohol. Through it all, the ghost of old McFarlane haunts the plantation by night.¹¹ None of these deaths is random. Each of the adult dead is culpable, or at fault in his or her own death, which resulted from the manifestation of the flaws inherent in each of them. Death is also a release, for both the living and the dead. Those who die are freed from the lives their flaws had trapped them in. Those who live have been released from the societal constraints that prohibited them from
leading the lives they instinctively chose for themselves. At her husband's death, Thérèse has been freed from the limitations placed upon the activities of plantation wives and awakens "unsuspected powers of doing" (5). David is freed from his bondage to Fanny. Together, they are free to marry, and do. Melicent enters into a long period of mourning for her would-be lover. With an ambiguity that would become characteristic of Chopin, the cause of Melicent's grief is unclear, but one reading would suggest that Melicent uses the convenience of Grégoire's death as a reason to shun all suitors as she begins to pursue a life unencumbered by societal expectations that she marry.

At Fault is Chopin's first piece of Southern local color. In the opening paragraphs she quickly incorporates four of the tropes that identify it as such, "loyal and subservient black people, noble white planters, antebellum nostalgia, North-South antagonism" (Ewell 212). Thérèse is roused from her grief at her husband's death and motivated to manage the plantation successfully by Uncle Hiram, a loyal black servant, and she is perceived as lady bountiful to the poor, a just employer who sheds the light of righteousness on all. When she rebuilt her house to make way for the railroad, Thérèse "avoided the temptations offered by modern architectural innovations and clung to the simplicity of large rooms and broad verandas: a style whose merits had stood the test of easy-going and comfort-loving generations" (6), and she keeps a large dog whose job is to protect her from incursions of northern tramps.

Nature and a sense of place frame the dramatic action of the novel. Chopin creates geographic settings that serve as places of personal liberation or constraint, and nature ambiguously becomes a place where man succumbs to animal instinct and a place of spiritual salvation that the evils of an industrializing society are rapidly destroying. In addition to the
four central pairs of characters, two superfluous couples representing the dissolute society of St. Louis are crowded into the novel. Through one of those couples, Chopin explicitly introduces the work of Emerson into the narrative. The ineffectual customs house clerk Lorenzo Worthington has a volume of Emerson's essays in his small but highly prized library. Chopin cannot resist satirizing Worthington's voracious reading habits that allow him to accumulate and repeat vast amounts of information without fully understanding any of it. Worthington is contrasted against Thérèse Lafirme and David Homeyer, who are transformed by their experiences, and who, in the end, come to an altered understanding of the world. That contrast was important enough to Chopin that she raised it again in an 1896 essay for the Atlantic Monthly, mocking those whom she referred to as “thinkers and disseminators of knowledge and propounders of questions,” who lack a real understanding of life (Seyersted, Complete Works 702).

During the Civil War and the years that followed, many Southern women found themselves fulfilling new roles as a result of both the tremendous cost the war exacted in male lives and the economic upheaval caused by the end of the slave labor system and Reconstruction. Yet as Wright suggests, “despite the fact that both opportunity and necessity conspired to place her in new positions of authority and publicity, she felt compelled to present at least a surface appearance of retiring domesticity” (137). Chopin plays upon those cultural expectations by placing Thérèse in opposition to them. Following the death of her husband, Thérèse's neighbors expected her to remarry quickly and turn the management of the plantation she inherited over to a new husband. She disappoints their expectations by running the plantation successfully herself, and does not live in a state of “retiring domesticity.” Rather she governs the plantation regally and travels throughout the
countryside fearlessly. It is she who pursues a romantic liaison with David who, until Thérèse finally breaks through his self-absorbed misery, would prefer to spend his evenings tabulating accounts at the mill and conversing with his imaginary friend Homeyer.

With Thérèse, Chopin continues to explore the possibility of an independent female character who rejects society’s expectation of marriage as the primary goal for women. Like Paula in “Wiser Than A God,” who refused marriage to a man she loved in order to pursue her career as a pianist, Thérèse refuses marriage to a man she loves for moral and philosophical reasons. As *At Fault* ends and she and David finally do marry, Thérèse acknowledges her reasons for initially refusing to marry him were ill-conceived; she has achieved an intellectual enlightenment, but not capitulated to societal expectations.

Unlike the two short stories which end on a note of subversion having been contained, *At Fault* ends with the subversion only partially contained. When Thérèse and David reunite a year after Fanny’s death, it appears a fairy-tale, happily-ever-after ending is in the offing. The ending at first seems to be patterned after a trope of late nineteenth-century Southern writing in which the female protagonist maintains an “‘unreconstructable’ attitude toward all things Yankee, often by having female characters either reject northern suitors or marry northern men and then persuade their husbands to accept their ideas” (Wright 137). David has moved permanently from St. Louis to the plantation and it appears he has accepted a southern standard. Chopin resists that trope, however, and rather than pursue an agrarian way of life, David maintains his close ties to the industrial North by continuing to mill the timber on Thérèse’s property. It is Thérèse, not David, who gives up her previously held ideals, acknowledging “I have seen myself at fault in following what
seemed only right. I feel as if there were no way to turn for the truth. Old supports appear to be giving way beneath me. They were so secure before” (154).

Chopin also resists the trope of patriarchal control of the retiring and purely domestic wife. Thérèse offers to turn the management of the plantation over to David at the time of their marriage, a move that would contain her subversively independent character in much the same way that Paula and Eleanor are restored to cultural norms at the close of the short stories. In *At Fault*, however, the old order is emphatically not restored. David refuses to take over management of the plantation, asserting that Thérèse is a far better manager than he could be. As if to confirm that her failure to contain Thérèse is intentional, Chopin brings Melicent back to the fore in the closing pages of *At Fault*. Under the cover of her grief for Grégoire, Melicent repudiates society and is ready to embark on a journey through Yosemite and California with another woman, in order to study “certain fundamental truths and things” (157). In a manner that parallels her treatment of Emerson, Chopin differentiates between women who support themselves and act independently, and those who dabble in women’s suffrage but continue to be economically dependent on their husbands or fathers and otherwise adhere to the norms of patriarchal society. This is consistent with her earlier writing where she treats the self-sufficient concert pianist Paula with respect in “Wiser than a God,” but describes with derision a minor character in “A Point at Issue!” who had a “timid leaning in the direction of Woman’s Suffrage” that required her to don “garments of mysterious shape, which, while stamping their wearer with the distinction of a quasi-emancipation, defeated the ultimate purpose of their construction by inflicting a personal discomfort that extended beyond the powers of long endurance” (675). Chopin treats Melicent with a mocking tone that is consistent with the tone in which she describes suffrage
supporters elsewhere, but nonetheless closes the novel with Melicent as a woman who has chosen to remain unmarried and who, rather like Huckleberry Finn, is last heard from happily departing for adventure in the West.

In *At Fault*, Chopin also began to develop a symbolic vocabulary based on imagery. And, as she did with the number of characters and plot lines, Chopin crowds the text with her new vocabulary. In a shift from her early stories, light and dark are important concepts that she will continue to explore throughout her career. She refers to those concepts repeatedly in *At Fault*, as the brightly-lighted, cultivated plantation, where business and economics dominate, is contrasted against the cooling shade of the plantation house where Thérèse’s benevolent domesticity reigns. Light and shadow are highly nuanced within the natural world where good and evil each try to dominate. The “rank and clustering vegetation” of the swamp (15) and the “settling gloom” (16) of the southern forest at twilight presage Grégoire’s failure with Melicent and his death. In contrast, the brightness of an “advancing white sun-shade” (7) juxtaposed against the dark green of the fields heralds the approach of David, and with him love and transformation to Thérèse. The “shadows of the magnolias were stretching in grotesque lengths across the lawn” (20) before Thérèse has an unpleasant confrontation with Joćint, but moments later when she and David meet in the pine wood the “sparkling spring water” nourishes their horses (25). Absolute darkness is reserved for Joćint, hanging about him “like the magic mantle of story,” as he creeps through the woods at night to burn the mill (95). Similarly, Chopin uses the animal kingdom to differentiate symbolically between good and evil. Mosquitoes plague the doomed Grégoire and Melicent. Thérèse is accompanied by her loyal dog Hector as she goes into the benign wood of daytime, but bats and serpents populate the wood Joćint steals through on his way to burn the
mill. In an act that symbolizes his complete repudiation of the world represented by Thérèse and David, Joçint strangles his dog who has faithfully followed him into the night.

Chopin's early fiction explored themes relating to women and marriage that she would pursue for the rest of her career. The conventional happily-ever-after endings of both "A Point at Issue!" and "Wiser than a God" may stem from Chopin's own inability to imagine an ending where the female protagonist is able to successfully continue her life of unconventional independence, a desire on her part to produce material that would be attractive to magazine editors, or both. The ending of *At Fault* is less conventional than the endings of Chopin's first two stories, and that, combined with the work's uncondemning acceptance of divorce, may have been among the reasons the book was rejected by publishers. The symbolic vocabulary she began to develop in the novel adds nuances of meaning to the work that are not found in her first stories.

After completing *At Fault*, Chopin began using southern local color in her short stories. In many of them, Chopin revisited the themes of her early writing; five stories in particular are derivative of that work. The first of those, "A Lady of Bayou St. John" (1893) is the story of Madame Delisle whose husband is away fighting in the Civil War. She is a woman so "beautiful that she found much diversion in sitting for hours before the mirror" (325). Very young, she is desperately lonely and unhappy in her marriage. A handsome French neighbor visits her regularly and awakens her passion. At first, unwilling to acknowledge her feelings, she runs from him. After he writes a long letter describing his passion, she changes her mind and decides to flee married life and go to Paris with him. The night before their departure she learns of her husband's death. She will not go to Paris, and henceforth is devoted only to the memory of her dead husband. Arner correctly notes the
letter and French lover strongly prefigure aspects of *The Awakening*, but in suggesting that
the woman's devotion to her dead husband represents merely "the complex enigma of a
woman's heart" (59), he overlooks Chopin's previous use of that plot device with Melicent in
*At Fault*. Amer also overlooks Chopin's subtly ironic tone throughout the story, such as
when the widow tells her former lover "my husband has never been so living to me as he is
now" (328). That Chopin revisited the female character who uses a façade of grief at the
death of an unwanted lover or husband to remove herself from further male companionship
suggests it was intriguing to her on some fundamental level, particularly since both she and
her mother had become widows at a young age and neither remarried. Like Chopin's
mother, the widow of "A Lady of Bayou St. John" inherited substantial property, and
economic freedom gave her personal freedom, as well.

Eight months after Chopin completed "A Lady of Bayou St. John," she wrote another
story that bears an even more striking similarity to events in Eliza O'Flaherty's life. "The
Story of an Hour" (1894), tells of a woman whose husband has been killed in a train accident
not unlike the one that claimed the life of Chopin's father. Upon learning of her husband's
death, the woman's emotions quickly progress from a "storm of grief" (756), to a dawning
recognition that she was "free, free, free...! Body and soul free!" (757). In a plot reversal
that did not occur in Chopin's own life, the woman's husband returns home that evening,
having been nowhere near the wreck. The woman collapses, dead, at the sight of him.

"The Story of an Hour" is brief, but it coincides with the point when Chopin
"stumbled upon Maupassant" in her reading, and marks a profound change in her writing
style. Chopin wrote about that influence in an essay written at the request of Walter Hines
Page, then editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In it, she said she found in Maupassant's stories
“life, not fiction; for where were the plots, the old fashioned mechanisms and stage trapping” that she had felt necessary in her own stories. Rather, Maupassant “looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes… and in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw” (Seyersted, Complete Works, 700-01). As a result of her study of Maupassant, Chopin’s style became less openly subjective and her use of satire much more veiled. In “The Story of an Hour” Chopin’s narrative voice has become mimetic, departing from the conventions of local color. Although Mallard, the surname of the central character, was the name of a prominent New Orleans furniture maker who was active around the time Chopin lived there, the story is not situated in any specific locale. Mrs. Mallard looks backward to Chopin’s earlier protagonists in that she, like the young bride in “A Lady of Bayou St. John” and David in At Fault, is (seemingly) freed from marriage by the sudden death of her spouse. In the few moments Mrs. Mallard has to imagine her future without marriage, she collapses into a chair by her bedroom window, her grief marked by the “physical exhaustion that haunted her body” (756). Then, through the open window, she sees the sensuousness of spring unfolding, with the “tops of trees that were all aquiver” (756), and the possibilities of her new life awaken within her, transforming Mrs. Mallard into an unwitting “goddess of Victory” (758), a transformation that recalls the metamorphosis of Eleanor in “A Point at Issue!” during her period of intellectual and personal freedom in Paris.

In At Fault, Chopin hints at her artistic concern with the dichotomy between an externally expressed grief and an internally felt joy as David and Thérèse strictly adhere to a one year period of mourning after Fanny’s death before marrying. In “The Story of an Hour,” Chopin further articulates that concern, collapsing it into Mrs. Mallard’s instinctive understanding of the divergence of her emotions; her love for her husband, for whom she
“would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death,” is contrasted against her new “possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being” (757). Chopin’s Emersonian point-of-view and concern with Mrs. Mallard’s right to self-assertion reiterates the concern she had expressed in her 1889 rebuttal to the review of *At Fault*. “The Story of an Hour” was written four years after *At Fault*, but only eight months after “A Lady of Bayou St. John.” That the two stories were written so closely together suggests Chopin’s strong and continuing preoccupation with the issue of liberation from marriage. “The Story of an Hour” provides an unambiguous expression of the central character’s interiority that Chopin did not create for the more enigmatic protagonist in “A Lady of Bayou St. John,” and comes to a more ominous conclusion: that one’s own death is preferable to a life lived on another’s terms.

Chopin wrote yet a third story addressing her concern with marital boundaries during the same eight month period in which she wrote “A Lady of Bayou St. John,” and “The Story of an Hour.” Like them, it was published by *Vogue*. “A Respectable Woman” (1894) tells the effect on Mrs. Baroda of a visit paid to the Baroda sugar plantation by her husband’s close friend Gouvernail. Gouvernail had for many years been a close friend of Gustave Baroda’s, but his wife had never before met him, and he is not what she expected. Before his visit ends, she flees the plantation for her aunt’s house in New Orleans in order to escape the confusion of her erotic feelings for him. After Gouvernail concludes his visit she returns home, forbidding her husband to invite him again. As the story closes, however, Mrs. Baroda has asked her husband to invite Gouvernail for another visit, promising that this time she “shall be very nice to him” (509).
As in the two related stories, Chopin intimates a lack of individual identity women experience in marriage by not providing any of the three central characters with first names. They are merely Madame Delisle, Mrs. Mallard, and Mrs. Baroda. Unlike Madame Delisle and Mrs. Mallard, however, Mrs. Baroda is happily married, enjoying a sociable and tender relationship with her husband. Despite this, Mrs. Baroda is aroused by Gouvernail, something "she could not explain satisfactorily to herself when she partly attempted to do so. She could discover in him none of those brilliant and promising traits which Gaston, her husband, had often assured her that he possessed" (506). Chopin later wrote in an 1898 essay for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that one "never knows the exact, definite thing which excites love for any one person.... I am inclined to think that love springs from animal instinct, and therefore is, in a measure, divine" (Toth and Seyersted, Private Papers 219). This preoccupation with the inexplicable nature of sexual attraction and its effect on the marital relationship was an ongoing artistic concern of Chopin's.

In order to describe the climate of sexual tension between Gouvernail and Mrs. Baroda, Chopin employs a language of symbolic imagery similar to that which she first used in At Fault, and the nuances of light and dark become very important signifiers as the story closes. Late one night near the end of Gouvernail's visit, Mrs. Baroda sits under the canopy of a large tree. As she tries to sort through her confused feelings for Gouvernail, the "approaching red point of a lighted cigar" (508) comes toward her, and she realizes it is he, otherwise obscured by the night. The white gown Mrs. Baroda wears becomes a beacon, drawing Gouvernail to her in the darkness. At Gustave's suggestion, he has brought her a "filmy white scarf" (508), but Mrs. Baroda does not cover herself with it. Rather, she remains symbolically unveiled, and in a moment of self-awareness admits to herself for the
first time the intensity of her physical desire for Gouvernail. Gouvernail, in turn, with the glowing ember of his cigar signifying the warmth of his passion, begins to quote from section twenty-one of Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, “Press close bare-bosomed night—press close magnetic nourishing night” (508). Sitting beside Gouvernail, Mrs. Baroda battles her physical desire for him. The “stronger the impulse grew to bring herself near him, the further, in fact, did she draw away from him” (509). Like Mrs. Mallard and Madame Delisle, Mrs. Baroda experiences a conflict of emotions. In this case, the internal passion is subdued, at least temporarily, by an outward conformity with societal norms. The ambiguous ending, wherein Mrs. Baroda encourages her husband to invite Gouvernail back to visit the plantation, promising “I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him” (509), is much more successful than the unsatisfying ambiguity of “A Lady of Bayou St. John.” In that story, the reader has few clues to extrapolate from in determining the cause of Madame Delisle’s newfound devotion to her dead husband. In “A Respectable Woman,” the reader may reasonably speculate about which direction Mrs. Baroda’s niceness will follow and infer either the maintenance or cessation of marital harmony in the Baroda household once Gouvernail returns.

“A Respectable Woman” is situated on a Louisiana plantation, but Chopin has dropped the façade of her earlier local color writing. None of the characters speaks in dialect (although Chopin does include several tender French phrases between the Barodas), and the other tropes of the genre are clearly missing. Without camouflage, Chopin focuses the story on the erotic desires of Mrs. Baroda and her transformation from a complacent wife to one who may or may not have conquered an inner turmoil. In contrast to Thérèse Lafirme, whose expression of sexual interest in David was limited to laying “her hand and arm—bare to the
elbow—across his work” (10) in *At Fault*, Mrs. Baroda’s desire to draw close to Gouvernail and “touch him with the sensitive tips of her finger upon the face or lips” (509) is very clearly expressed. That explicitness and the frankness with which Mrs. Baroda acknowledges her feeling to herself mark a profound change in Chopin’s writing and her willingness to address female sexual desire, a topic she had previously hinted at, but not written about straightforwardly. Surprisingly, the only contemporaneous criticism of the story, published in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, mentioned Chopin’s “subtle irony” (Evans 245), but not the then unconventional story line.

As in *At Fault* and the stories discussed here, Chopin’s concern with the transformation of her female characters is evident in “A Respectable Woman,” but more subtly so. When Mrs. Baroda proposes her husband invite Gouvernail back to the plantation, she clearly has managed to overcome her earlier inner tumult, but her relationship to her husband and to her marriage has been affected permanently. Even so, Chopin doesn’t explicitly define the nature of Mrs. Baroda’s change the way she does for Thérèse in *At Fault*, nor does she transfigure Mrs. Baroda as she metamorphoses Eleanor in “A Point at Issue!” and Mrs. Mallard in “The Story of an Hour” into goddesses at the moments of their spiritual conversions. That Chopin wrote the more didactic “Story of an Hour” three months after completing “A Respectable Woman” suggests that she may not have been wholly comfortable with a more subtle style.

Chopin frequently portrayed children and parents in her local color stories, but it was not until September 1894 when she wrote “Regret,” and seven months later in April 1895 when she completed “Athénéaise,” that she linked motherhood with her stories of female independence and sexuality. “Regret” concerns Mamzelle Aurélie, a fifty-year-old woman
who refused the only proposal of marriage she ever received and has never been sorry that
she did, living and farming alone except for a few servants and her dog. A neighbor’s crisis
requires that she care for the woman’s four young children for an extended time. At first,
Mamzelle Aurélie is angry at the intrusion, but when the children finally return to their
mother, she finds the house strangely empty. As the story closes, she breaks down and cries
“like a man, with sobs that seemed to tear her very soul” (406).

A marriage that young Athénaïse says she regrets is the central plot line of the story
bearing the same name. Athénaïse believed she loved the widower Cazeau, a much older
farmer who loved her dearly, but finds her romantic notions of marriage have little to do with
its reality. After two months of marriage, she returns to her parents. Cazeau retrieves her
without incident, but riding across a long field on the way back to his plantation, he
remembers a time when he was a child and his father captured a runaway slave, trotting him
home across that same field. The memory is so repugnant to Cazeau that he vows he will
never pursue Athénaïse again, and from that point he stops treating her like a possession and
accepts her as an independent human being. Despite Cazeau’s efforts to reach a domestic
truce, she runs away again. With the help of her brother, Athénaïse goes to live in a boarding
house in New Orleans. She lives quietly, afraid someone from home will find her. Another
boarder, Gouvernail, gradually falls in love with her, but Athénaïse views him merely as a
stand-in for her brother. At the end of a month, she feels unwell and the proprietor of the
boarding house tells the “very ignorant” Athénaïse she is pregnant (381). Athénaïse thinks of
Cazeau, and the “first purely sensuous tremor of her life swept over her” (381). She joyously
returns to her husband the next day.
In both “Regret” and “Athénaïse,” Chopin’s concern for the role children play in a woman’s life dominates the story, and she appears to conclude that children justify a marriage which would otherwise be untenable for the woman. Examined more closely, the stories suggest Chopin’s continuing preoccupation with Darwin, and an exploration of the ways in which a desire for children and a biological urge to reproduce drives the course of a woman’s life.

Chopin’s view was not completely sanguine. That it was not, is demonstrated by the imagery she embeds in the stories. The evocative power of fragrance, symbolic associations of color, and animal-based metaphors begin to figure prominently in them, providing Chopin with a symbolic vocabulary that functions at first to amplify, then to subvert conventional understandings of the text. In “Regret,” she begins to refine her symbolic vocabulary, exploiting juxtapositions of light and dark that recall her use of those tropes in At Fault, and introducing elements of mythology and Biblical references. The color white is used repetitively: “white sunlight” beat down upon the “white old boards” (404) of her house; the children brought “little white nightgowns” (405); Mamzelle Aurélie put on “white aprons that she had not worn for years” (405), suggesting at once cleanliness and virginity. Chopin’s reference to Mamzelle Aurélie’s chaste manner of living is augmented by “the pleasant odor of pinks in the air” (404). The suggestive power of the flowers’ fragrance further evokes ordered domesticity, for only an organized and prosperous farm would enjoy the luxury of a flower garden; more importantly, however, “pinks” is a common name for dianthus, the flower of Diana, the virginal Greek and Roman goddess of childbirth, hunting and the moon. That Chopin depicts Mamzelle Aurélie both as a complacent woman who is not sorry to have turned down the offer of marriage she had received years earlier, and a self-
sufficient, hearty woman who often hunted chicken hawks surrounded by her dogs, heightens the association with Diana, who was often depicted in art and literature accompanied by her dogs and carrying game birds she had killed. Chopin mixes her metaphors, however, when the children are dressed in their white gowns and Mamzelle Aurélie, evoking a strong Biblical image, washes each of their “little tired, dusty sunbrowned feet... sweet and clean” (405), before going to bed. In a return to her use of light and dark imagery, Chopin closes the story with Mamzelle Aurélie, sobbing as her dog licks her hand as the “evening shadows were creeping and deepening around her solitary figure” (406). Rather than a goddess, the ending depicts a mortal woman who has experienced a conversion from her unrepentant solitude to an awakened state of loss that the fidelity of her dog will never overcome.

Chopin’s ending for “Regret” is conventional, validating the cultural convention that woman is incomplete without offspring, and is consistent with her earlier containment of female central characters who have resisted cultural norms. That she is less bold in “Regret” than in “A Respectable Woman” and “The Story of an Hour” may also be attributable to the differing editorial viewpoints of *Vogue* and *Century*. Chopin submitted “Regret” only to *Century*, and in comparison to her work in *Vogue* she appears to have moderated her rhetoric in response to *Century’s* much more conservative editorial stance. Yet in what initially seems a straightforward tale of a woman’s longing for motherhood, Chopin presents another strong female character, one who refuses marriage and is happily living a life unbounded by social convention. Concurrently, Chopin revisits her discursive Darwinian debate begun with Mrs. Baroda in “A Respectable Woman.” Mrs. Baroda’s strong erotic impulse, not grounded in the maternal urge, diametrically opposes Mamzelle Aurélie, who may have her
first sexual impulse as a result of her desire to reproduce. At the same time, through her use of imagery, Chopin draws the reader into powerful associations of ancient myth.

With the more complex storyline and greater length of “Athénaïse,” Chopin experiments more extensively with her developing symbolic vocabulary. While maternal concerns are central to the resolution of the story, Chopin simultaneously links Athénaïse to her earlier female protagonists, using her as a vehicle to further explore artistic concerns relating to sexual desire and female independence within marriage. That “Athénaïse,” like “Regret,” was not submitted to Vogue, but published in the more conservative Atlantic Monthly (after being rejected by Century), may explain Chopin’s use of a central character who is much less self-aware and straightforward than her earlier characters. Gouvernail describes Athénaïse as “self-willed, impulsive, innocent, ignorant, unsatisfied, dissatisfied” (375), and she is foolishly romantic and immature as well, especially in comparison with the calm and introspective Mrs. Baroda. Athénaïse’ character faults serve to mask her actions, and it is in those actions that Chopin expresses her deeper concerns. Athénaïse, motivated by her dislike of marriage, becomes a comparatively independent woman, willing to live outside her accustomed social milieu in order to rebel “against a social and sacred institution” (359) and desirous of becoming financially self-sufficient, even if ill prepared for that task.

The language Athénaïse uses to describe marriage, “a trap set for the feet of unwary and unsuspecting girls” (362), echoes a comment Chopin made in her diary concerning marriage shortly before writing “Athénaïse,” that the truth about marriage “is certainly concealed in a well for most of us” (Toth and Seyersted, Private Papers 185). In contrast to At Fault, where Chopin is openly supportive of divorce, in “Athénaïse,” marriage is “a thing not by any possibility to be undone” (355) although both Athénaïse and Cazeau acknowledge
to each other that it was a mistake. Just as Chopin uses Athénaïse's romantic illusions to mask a relatively independent woman, Chopin uses the characters' beliefs about divorce to highlight the parochial nature of rural life; once Athénaïse has been transported to New Orleans, the impossibility of divorce is no longer an issue and she succumbs to the "comforting, comfortable sense of not being married" (373). A change of setting has accomplished what could not have been done conventionally. That setting has caused this transformation is emphasized by Athénaïse's close association with Gouvernail, a consummate bachelor and a "liberal-minded fellow," who believes "a man or woman lost nothing of his respect by being married" (373). Acknowledging the existence of marriage, Gouvernail discounts its sacredness.

With "Athénaïse," Chopin also continues her exploration of psychological transformation. The two male characters who come most in contact with Athénaïse are changed, albeit in very different ways. To effect the transformation of Cazeau, Chopin interjects metaphor taken from both mythical and Biblical imagery. After Athénaïse has run away to her parents, Cazeau lies alone in their bed; the moon shines in upon his solitary figure. As it was in "Regret," the moon is an important precursor to change. The slave whose image so forcibly affected Cazeau as he retrieved Athénaïse the following day was named Black Gabe. In the Bible, Gabriel is the messenger of God and the herald of birth, so Black Gabe can be seen as a strong signifier of Cazeau's spiritual change and a foreshadowing of the story's end. That Chopin intended to place special importance on Cazeau's epiphany is indicated both by the three day period Cazeau waits before retrieving Athénaïse, suggesting a Christian epiphany, and by her re-use of moon imagery. As Cazeau and Athénaïse return to their house, a black servant, Felicity, stands bathed in moonlight,
awaiting their return. Her blackness compounds the image of the slave in Cazeau's mind; her name and the transformative moonlight suggest that if Cazeau's epiphany is real, happiness will be possible. Cazeau has realized that for the "companionship of no woman on earth would he again undergo the humiliating sensation of baseness that had overtaken him in passing the old oak tree in the fallow meadow" (366).

Gouvernail, who "was not one who deliberately sought the society of women" (374), is awakened to his physical longing for Athénaïse in a scene that closely parallels the moonlit interlude between he and Mrs. Baroda in "A Respectable Woman." The "shimmer of her white gown" leads him to Athénaïse, and later, moonlight and fragrance prefigure his transformation: Athénaïse sits watching the moonlit garden, surrounded by the overpowering fragrance of cape jessamine when Gouvernail finds her. He is overcome by his desire for her and will never regain his detachment, realizing the pain of unrequited love: "By heaven, it hurts, it hurts" (384).

On the surface, the ending to "Athénaïse" appears to be the traditional happy ending of a romantic fairy tale. Chopin suggests that association to the reader with Cazeau's speech to Athénaïse before she runs away the second time, "I believed yo' coming here to me would be like the sun shining out of the clouds an' our days would be like w'at the story-books promise after the wedding. I was wrong" (363). Throughout the story, Athénaïse says it is not Cazeau, but their marriage that is offensive to her, and Chopin creates a happy ending of sorts. When Athénaïse returns home, Cazeau is a different man than the one she left, and their marriage will be different. When Athénaïse does return to Cazeau from New Orleans, it appears Cazeau's fairy-tale ending has been achieved, albeit a little later than he expected. Chopin, however, using the symbolic vocabulary that she had been developing since writing
At Fault, subverts the traditional ending by interjecting images that serve as metaphors for repression and ill omens for the future. A caged mockingbird and a parrot that does nothing but swear "hoarsely all day long in bad French" (380) appear in the narrative at a point when the reader suspects Athénaïse's pregnancy, but she herself does not. The garden where the mockingbird and parrot reside is also populated by a black cat, a traditional harbinger of misfortune, and the garden walls themselves serve as metaphor for Athénaïse's entrapment. Her instinctual, and therefore animal-like, rather than intellectual, response to learning of her pregnancy is consistent with Chopin's caged animal metaphor.

One measure of Chopin's growing audacity was her willingness to highlight the inhumanity of slavery in a seemingly romantic local color story. Although other Southern local color writers, particularly Cable, had been outspoken against slavery before this, "Athénaïse" represents a marked change from Chopin's early writing, reflecting the great importance Emerson's writings on personal freedom had on her. It also demonstrates an increasing willingness on her part to subvert societal norms. By making Athénaïse a woman who would flee friends and family rather than be subjected to a social convention she could not tolerate, Chopin further reveals her growing boldness. Even so, she still carefully contains her subversiveness by keeping it largely in the subtext, making Athénaïse appear foolish and immature, and strictly adhering to nineteenth-century conventions regarding race except for the vignette of Cazeau's epiphany.

When Chopin completed "Athénaïse" in 1895, six years had elapsed since she had begun to write professionally. During that time, more than sixty of her stories were published in newspapers and magazines across the country, and her style progressed from the didacticism and heavy-handed use of satire of At Fault and "Wiser Than a God," to the
mimetic and subtly ironic style of "A Respectable Woman" and "Athénaise." Yet, the anomaly of Chopin’s writing at this point is that as her audacity and subversiveness waxes, her clarity wanes. She becomes far less constrained in her exploration of female sexuality, but her parallel preoccupations with female intellectual and emotional freedom, and female self-determination are increasingly obscured by her move away from realism toward symbolism to articulate those concerns.
Chapter V

The Awakening

Chopin temporarily set aside her artistic examination of female roles in relation to social convention, in order to participate in the ongoing literary dialogue on naturalism, just as she had participated in the realist dialogue earlier. She never fully succumbed to the “influence of Darwin and French fiction, the notion that man is a brute and life a struggle, the belief that we are but ciphers in either a cosmic storm or a chemical process” as described by Donald Pizer in an essay on naturalism (40), but over a two-year period after completing “Athénaise” Chopin focused her work more narrowly on the animal instinct she hypothesized motivates human behavior and forms the basis for sexual attraction.14 Yet the late-nineteenth-century theories of human social behavior propounded by Huxley and Spencer that were loosely fashioned after Darwin’s scientific observations cannot have been wholly satisfactory to Chopin. In late 1897, as she wrote The Awakening, she began to coalesce the female protagonists from At Fault and the short stories discussed here into one complex and divided central character, Edna Pontellier. The tension between Chopin’s two muses, Emerson and Darwin, is palpable in the amalgamation. To achieve the interweaving of the eight prototype characters into Edna Pontellier, Chopin revisits their struggles: a search for intellectual independence and autonomy within marriage, the need for economic independence, erotic desire outside of marriage, and a willingness to live outside the boundaries of social convention in order to maintain or regain control of one’s life. Chopin also addresses the role motherhood plays in determining a woman’s future. As she revisits each of these concerns, she reprises many of the plot elements, metaphors, and symbols used
in *At Fault* and the stories. In *The Awakening*, however, those concerns are more fully informed by her preoccupation with the balance between the life of principles and triumph of the mind espoused by Emerson, and the life that alters itself in response to random external change that was envisioned by Darwin.

Intrinsic to Chopin’s articulation of the tension between the ideals of Emerson and the hypotheses of Darwin is the disassociation of Edna’s intellectual and social selves, “the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (535), combined with a parallel disconnection of Edna’s emotional and physical selves, her ability to be “inwardly disturbed...without causing any outward show or manifestation on her part” (539). That early description of Edna revisits Chopin’s concern for the division of the female self as it was expressed in *At Fault*, “The Story of an Hour,” and “A Lady of Bayou St. John,” and forewarns the reader: Edna’s external actions and reactions may have no bearing on her internal realities. Edna’s duality is further mirrored by the divisions within Chopin’s own writing of the novel. Setting *The Awakening* in Louisiana and moving the dramatic action between the seaside resort of Grand Isle and New Orleans allows Chopin to mask her universal concerns of female sexuality and intellectual and emotional freedom behind a screen of local color writing. The screening is minimal, as Chopin avoids any notes in *The Awakening* of quaintness or charm, or a romantic history to be sustained, as is traditional in Southern local color writing. Instead, by highlighting Edna’s status as an outsider in Creole society, describing her as an “American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution” (525), Chopin identifies Louisiana as a stimulating foreign place where dangerous and unsettling things may happen. At the same time, Edna’s status as both an American and a Presbyterian in the Roman Catholic Creole society she
inhabits with her husband provides Chopin the opportunity to place the social mores of a society in which she herself had lived as an outsider under a microscope while maintaining the façade of local color.

The symbolic vocabulary that Chopin turned to in resisting the tropes of Southern local color writing was one she devised. A self-educated writer who shunned scholarship, or what she described as “an earnestness in the acquirement and dissemination of book-learning” (Seyersted, Complete Works 691), Chopin chose instead to learn from her own observations of life.15 In rejecting formal study, she echoed Emerson, who believed that “organized study deadens the mind, and that genuine insight arises spontaneously from the soul” (Menand 58). Yet Chopin was a voracious reader. In the way that Emerson skimmed “works of literature and philosophy, of all types and from all cultures, with an eye to ideas and phrases he could appropriate for his own use” (Menand 58), she absorbed what she read, and from that created a symbolic vocabulary that was unconventional and in many ways highly personal as well.

In that vocabulary are the many symbols and metaphors from her earlier writing that Chopin reintroduces into The Awakening. Most important among those are her frequent use of the color white to describe objects and qualities of light associated with women; the parrot and mockingbird that figured in “Athénaïse,” and open The Awakening, reappearing as jarring subnotes throughout the text; the mosquitoes that descended upon Melicent and Grégoire in At Fault, and then torment Edna; the spurs that “jangled at every step” Cazeau took walking on the gallery (354), and the “spurs of the cavalry officer” that “clanged as he walked across the porch,” forming Edna’s last memory (656); and the “pleasant odor of pinks in the air” in “Regret” (404), contrasted with the “musky odor of pinks that filled the air”
(655), as Edna drowns. The only one of these images Chopin makes reference to in her personal writings is the parrot—she despised them—but each image seems to reference something very personal to her. For example, the mosquitoes that “made merry” over Edna, “biting her firm, round arms and nipping at her bare insteps” (527) in the first scene in which she is alone, portray Edna’s psychic discomfort. More than that, they portend her destruction. When one considers that Oscar Chopin died of a mosquito-borne illness, they form the most poignant and personal of Chopin’s symbols.

Similarly, Chopin reprises certain scenes. The “advancing white-sunshade” that heralded the arrival of David in At Fault becomes the “white sunshade that was approaching at snail’s pace from the beach” (522) in the opening lines of The Awakening, marking the grand entrance of would-be lovers Robert and Edna. Moments later, Léonce leaves the resort under the white umbrella, leaving the couple alone. Chopin’s connection of the white sunshade to the arrival and departure of love is intimated in those associations, but it is more explicitly expressed when she describes the “subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love,” that Adèle and Edna feel for one another as they “went away one morning to the beach together, arm in arm, under the huge white sunshade” (536). The strength of that love is very powerful. The triangular relationship it creates between Edna, Robert, and Adèle culminates with Edna’s flight from Robert’s embrace to Adèle’s accouchement, precipitating his departure and Edna’s suicide.

Two other scenes that Chopin recasts from the short stories are revealing as well. The first comes from “Athénaïse.” For Edna, as for Cazeau, personal transformation begins with the triggering of an intense childhood memory. In the case of Cazeau, his memory was recalled by riding across a fallow field after Athénaïse. In The Awakening, the setting of
Edna’s memory is strongly reminiscent of Cazeau’s as she sits looking out over the ocean and remembers wading across a wide field of tall grass as a small child. That recollection triggers a series of memories that in the remembering allow Edna for the first time to admit the unhappiness of her marriage fully to herself and partially to Adèle Ratignolle. Cazeau’s epiphany is instantaneous, and Edna’s is gradual, but once she acknowledges her dissatisfaction, it begins to act on her and leaves her open to new sensations and emotions.

The second scene is a result of Edna’s newfound receptiveness, and is nearly a duplicate of the moment in “A Respectable Woman” when Gouvernail is attracted by the moonlight to Mrs. Baroda and brings her “filmy white scarf” (508) to her as she sits alone. After Edna has swum for the first time, she leaves the rest of the party at the beach to return alone to her cottage. Robert catches up with her, attracted by “her white skirts” that “trail along the dewy path” in the moonlight. He brings Edna her white shawl, but like Mrs. Baroda, she “did not put it around her” (554-55). Robert then sits beside her in the darkness smoking a cigarette, just as Gouvernail smoked his cigar. In “A Respectable Woman,” Mrs. Baroda sits silently and is nearly overcome by her desire for Gouvernail. Similarly, Edna and Robert do not speak, but the moment is “pregnant with the first-felt throbings of desire” (555). In *The Awakening*, Chopin is once again very open in suggesting the sexual desire of a married woman for an unmarried male character, and the fact that Chopin reiterates the two scenes from her earlier work is very suggestive. She may simply have been unhappy with the artistic effect produced in the earlier versions and have wanted to rework them. More likely, given the minimal differences between the early and late versions, is that Chopin was working to resolve an intellectual concern relating to moments of self-awareness. It is the
self-knowledge that each of the characters gains in these moments that ultimately drives their stories to resolution.

In addition to the symbols and vignettes that serve as markers of Chopin’s personal experiences, she infuses the novel with more conventional imagery and metaphor. Much has been written about her use of the romantic images of the moon and sea, which she repeats throughout the novel, but it is also important to consider the ways she inserts tropes she had experimented with in the stories. In them, Chopin repeatedly describes her female protagonists as goddesses, instantly transformed at the moment of their spiritual epiphany from mortal woman. (Mamzelle Aurélie is the exception: she is transformed to mortal from goddess at the point of self-awareness.) In *The Awakening*, Edna’s conversion to goddess is not instantaneous; Chopin articulates the process of transformation by allowing the mythical elements to act on Edna. Edna’s gradual change is marked by the myth-related images Chopin begins to insert into the narrative describing the night Edna learns to swim. Chapin also augments the moon and sea images with more subtle imagery that has been largely overlooked in studies of *The Awakening*. Among those images are the owls that call in concert with the murmuring sea and suggest Athena, goddess of wisdom. Chopin reiterates the theme of wisdom by her references to the self-knowledge that Edna is beginning to achieve, invited by the sea to “wander in abysses of solitude…in mazes of inward contemplation” (535). The result is that:

Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a
young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (535)

With the waves that undulate like serpents around Edna’s feet as she enters the sea to swim for the first time, Chopin introduces another myth-related image, one that will figure prominently throughout the remainder of the novel. Unlike her earlier use of the serpent image in *At Fault*, where Chopin used it to signify Joçint’s evil intent, snakes mark pivotal occurrences in *The Awakening*, pointing to moments of profound change for Edna. For example, the morning after Edna’s magical swim, she and Robert join the small group sailing to Chênière Caminada for Mass. Robert, succumbing to his growing desire to be with Edna, suggests they sail to another small island the following day where they would climb “up the hill to the old fort and look at the little wriggling gold snakes, and watch the lizards sun themselves” (560). Rather than remark on the unusualness of that pastime, Edna gazes toward the island and thinks “she would like to be alone there, with Robert, in the sun, listening to the ocean’s roar and watching the slimy lizards writhe in and out among the ruins of the old fort” (560). It is at that moment that the wriggling snakes, no longer mystical, but elemental golden snakes, signify Edna’s beginning acknowledgement to herself of her desire for Robert. Arner suggests the snakes Robert proposes to visit at Grand Terre with Edna are symbols she uses to censor her desire from herself, “but the penetration by the writhing lizards of the honeycombed ruins of the fort carries fuller meaning for both Mrs. Chopin and her readers” (114). In suggesting Edna is censoring her desire from herself, Arner obscures the gradual nature of Edna’s transformation. She has, in fact, begun to acknowledge her erotic feelings for Robert, and the phallic symbols that recall the earth goddess and fertility
rites of ancient peoples serve instead as a coded dialogue between the unmarried Robert and Mrs. Pontellier.

Chopin reiterates the colubrine association with fertility by including another serpent image at the pivotal moment when Edna rushes to be with Adèle at her accouchement, leaving Robert’s long sought for embrace. The “coiled...golden serpent” of Adèle’s plaited hair portends Edna’s recognition that bondage to her children is inescapable in life. With that recognition, her self-knowledge is almost complete—the golden coil serves as both a representation of Edna’s awakened sexual desire and a rope of bondage.

Chopin wants the reader to associate Edna’s transformation with myth. Her portrayal of the trip Robert and Edna make to Chênière Caminada for Mass the morning after Edna learns to swim explicitly points them to that conclusion. Part way through the service, Edna flees the small church where Mass was being read. Her flight echoes her earlier description of the childhood memory when she fled Presbyterian services to run in the field of grass. That memory, as told to Adèle, led to her growing recognition of the unhappiness of her marriage. As she flees the church service this time, Edna leaves the confines of the Christian tradition and becomes a novice to the pagan goddess Venus. Chopin uses the obvious trappings of fairy tale to signify Edna’s changed allegiance. From the church, Edna goes to the cottage of Madame Antoine, which must be enchanted, and sleeps “precisely one hundred years” in a bed of “snow-white” (562). While she sleeps, a handsome prince—in this case Robert Lebrun—guards her slumber. Upon her awaking, however, the world has not changed. Robert, who has been both complicit in and a pawn of her transformation, recognizes his growing love for Edna. Rather than compromise Creole conventions regarding sexual relationships with a married woman, Robert soon leaves for Mexico, a place
so far from Grand Isle that surely temptation cannot follow him. Edna must continue her gradual, painful transition to goddess, and she must continue alone.

When the summer season ends and the Pontelliers return to their home in New Orleans, location replaces myth as Chopin’s dominant trope. Grand Isle had served as a place where the realm of myth could act on Edna, a place where, in isolation from society and in close association with nature, she could begin the slow process of reuniting her dual selves. Once in New Orleans, Chopin dichotomizes geography. The Pontellier mansion on Esplanade Street echoes the cage with which Chopin opened the novel. It is a place of confinement and restraint for Edna, a place she resists. Conversely, the streets of New Orleans, where Edna walks endlessly—much as Chopin herself walked through the European countryside on her honeymoon—become a place of exploration. Not geographic exploration, however; the streets become the location of Edna’s exploration of the self.

Edna’s rebellion against the cage of her house (a metaphor for her marriage) passes through several phases: ignoring her traditional “at-home days,” which had been sacred to Léonce in his pursuit of social and business contacts; her attempt to smash her wedding ring; her dispatch of the children to their paternal grandmother’s care; and her ultimate marital rebellion, the affair with Alcée Arobin. As Edna’s rebellion mounts, she becomes increasingly aware of a need for artistic and intellectual expression, and painting begins to dominate her time within the house. This, too, is a form of rebellion. By spending her time sketching and painting, Edna no longer attends to the housekeeping which is so important to her husband. However, unlike Paula in “Wiser Thank a God,” who was a gifted and successful pianist, it is doubtful that Edna was an accomplished artist. The artificially composed paintings of Bavarian peasants she had never seen surely lacked any type of
artistic merit in an era of painting *en plein air*. Rather, Chopin, who had successfully run her husband’s business after his death, uses Edna’s artistic endeavors to mock a society that narrowly limited the professional occupations women could acceptably pursue. The gambling profits Edna must use to supplement her income from painting amplify Chopin’s intended irony.

After weeks of walking and rebellion, Edna’s metamorphosis appears to be complete, and she decides to move from the Pontellier’s mansion to a small house of her own. Edna purchases the house with money she inherited from her mother and winnings from the racetrack. The sense of freedom Edna feels at moving will not be long-lasting, however. Edna names her new home “the pigeon house” (619), ostensibly for its small size, but Chopin uses the name to reinforce her metaphors of caging, and in much the same way she did in “Athénaièse,” to signal Edna’s freedom will be short-lived.

As Edna becomes sexually awakened, she becomes intellectually awakened, as well. Alone at night, she read Emerson “until she grew sleepy” (605), and her self-assessment after she had decided to move from the house she shared with Léonce bears the imprint of that reading. For Edna, there was “a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual” (629). That feeling of self-sufficiency Chopin describes is informed by Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” and his assertion that society wrongly esteems men for what they have, and not by who they are although, “a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property….Especially he hates what he has if he sees that it is accidental—came to him by inheritance, or gift, or crime; then he feels that it is not having; it does not belong to him” (1063). In a way that Emerson could not have
anticipated because it was uniquely female, Edna achieves a complete reclamation of her self in the final scenes. No longer is she living a dual life and reconciling her separate selves. She has reclaimed the one that had been the hostage of a patriarchal society. Edna proclaims that unification, telling Robert, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (646).

As Edna moves to her new house, Chopin re-invokes the mythical imagery that had first acted on Edna at Grand Isle. When she hosts an elaborate dinner party at the Pontellier mansion on the evening she celebrates both her twenty-ninth birthday and her move to the pigeon house, Chopin uses the party to illustrate Edna’s complete metamorphosis into a goddess, and her therefore seemingly complete transformation from the vaguely unhappy woman learning to swim at Grand Isle. Unlike the short stories, where Chopin did not specify which pagan goddess her female protagonists were transformed into at their respective moments of epiphany, Edna becomes Venus. That the goddess of love and fertility fascinated Chopin should not be surprising, given the focus in her writing on female sexuality, motherhood, and independence. According to one of Chopin’s sons, she kept a statue of Venus where she could see it while writing, and her initial description of Edna so closely mirrors the representation of the goddess in Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, that it is not difficult to believe the painting was a model for Edna. In that portrayal, Chopin describes Edna, saying her “eyes were quick and bright; they were a yellowish brown, about the color of her hair….Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was handsome rather than beautiful” (523-24). Like Venus, Edna was “born” in the sea on the night of her first swim; she falls passionately in love with the handsome young Adonis-figure, Robert; and she cuckolds
Léonce as Venus did Mars. Venus adorned herself with jewels and red roses before going to her mortal lover Anichises, and Edna is thus adorned when she leaves the Pontellier mansion with Arobin the night of her dinner party. Later, when Victor Lebrun regales his lover with a description of the party, he tells her, “Venus rising from the foam could have presented no more entrancing a spectacle than Mrs. Pontellier, blazing with beauty and diamonds” (651). Unlike the short stories where Chopin explicitly noted the moment of the protagonist’s transformation, in *The Awakening* she wants the reader to make the association on his or her own, but later must make certain it was understood.

In her stories, Chopin was unable to sustain her female characters in the role of goddess: Eleanor leaves Paris for a more mundane life at home with her husband; Mrs. Mallard, upon learning her husband did not die in the train crash, collapses into an all too mortal death; and Mamzelle Aurélie succumbs to a very human desire for a child. Nor can Chopin sustain Edna in the role of Venus if she is to continue to live in the world of late-nineteenth-century New Orleans. As she did in “Regret,” Chopin begins to transmute her symbolism, exchanging the moon, sea, and serpent imagery for symbols with strong Biblical overtones. Gilbert has interpreted Edna’s elaborate dinner party as a Last Supper, “a final transformation of will and desire into bread and wine, flesh and blood, before the painful crucifixion of the ‘regal woman’s inevitable betrayal’” (103), but Edna’s transformation does not end with a Last Supper celebration. With Chopin’s characteristic ambiguity, the symbols begin to function as dual metaphors. The serpents suggest the Garden of Eden. As the eyes of Adam and Eve “both were opened” (Gen. 3.7) by eating the forbidden fruit, so Edna is “seeing with different eyes” (566) after succumbing to the forbidden fruit of self-knowledge. As a result, she is no longer content with the apparently Edenic world she had known with
Léonce and their two sons (Raoul and Etienne, representing Cain and Abel). Chopin’s description of the birth of Adèle’s child as a “scene of torture” (648) strongly recalls the Biblical words of punishment to Eve: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing” (Gen. 3.6). The bird that falls from the sky as Edna wades out to sea for the last time signifies her failure “to soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (617) with the wings Mademoiselle Reisz wished for her. At the same time, a bird flying heavenward at death would represent the soul flying to the hand of Jesus in Christian iconography; the downward spiral of this bird suggests the eternal damnation of Edna’s soul. Like Mamzelle Aurélie, Edna’s goddess persona disintegrates and she becomes all too mortal.

As did Thérèse in At Fault, Edna has overcome a conventional set of mores to arrive at a new intellectual understanding of herself and the world. With that understanding comes a determination to live on her own outside the boundaries of social convention. She desires to no longer be “forced into doing things” (649), and to no longer be the possession of another. However, that intellectual understanding will not sustain Edna, and the transcendence of her self is quickly overshadowed by biological realities. When she leaves Robert to attend Adèle in childbirth, it is a result of her overpowering biological maternal urge, an urge that supersedes the equally animalistic sexual and emotional attraction she feels for Robert. In a way that recalls Mamzelle Aurélie, Edna’s goddess-like demeanor begins to crumble with Adèle’s whispered plea to “think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them” (649). As Dr. Mandelet and Edna leave Adèle and her just-born baby, Chopin uses the doctor to repeat Athénaïse’s statement that marriage is a trap for girls. He tells Edna “youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race” (650). Unlike Athénaïse, Edna refuses to stay ensnared in the
trap. She remembers the children, but as "antagonists who had overcome her... and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (653).

In the end, it is the division of Edna's self between Chopin's two muses that makes it impossible for her to survive. Awakened from a spiritual slumber that had allowed her to be "a dupe to illusions" (650), Edna will not live in false conformity to social convention that life with Léonce and her children would require. At the same time, she has an intellectual understanding of her animal nature, that "to-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else" (653), and realizes nature will ultimately substitute one trap for another. Like Mrs. Mallard, Edna finds death preferable to an existence dictated by others, whether her husband or the needs of her children.

The critics who damned The Awakening and suggested that Chopin should have written instead about the "sweet and loveable characters," of her "agreeable short stories" would have been better served had they been more attentive to those characters. The Awakening is an amalgamation of Chopin's ongoing attempts to answer the fundamental questions of female experience. Each of the eight characters that served as partial precursor to Edna Pontellier furthered Chopin's exploration of the concerns she felt were central to that experience: economic independence, erotic desire outside of marriage, motherhood, and self-determination. Chopin's exploration is merely that, however. In the final analysis, she provides no answers, only a recognition that in the late-nineteenth-century imagination there could be no survival for a woman who sought to live outside conventional boundaries.
Notes

1 The relationships of blacks and whites in the reconstructed South, and an agrarian society in a rapidly industrializing economy are two themes that recur as well in Chopin's stories. "The Father of Désirée's Baby," "A Gentleman of Bayou Tèche," and "Ma'me Pelagie" are three well known stories that specifically address those themes.

2 Many Chopin biographies give her birth year as 1851, which is the year shown on her tombstone. Chopin biographer Emily Toth, however, has determined that Chopin’s baptismal record shows a birth date of February 8, 1850, and that she was included in the June 1850 US census.

3 These notebooks, along with substantially all of Chopin’s remaining papers, are housed at the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis. Chopin’s writing style and spelling are very expressive and the full import of her diaries and account books cannot be grasped in a transcription. For ease of reference, however, the Toth and Seyersted transcriptions of those papers have been cited within this text. It should be noted that in the transcriptions Toth has silently corrected many of Chopin’s more egregious language errors.

4 Oscar’s father, Victor Chopin, was reputed to have been an inordinately cruel man. Local legend in Cloutierville, Louisiana suggests he was the model for Simon Legree in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin. See Jean Bardot’s essay "French Creole Portraits: The Chopin Family From Natchitoches Parish" in Perspectives on Kate Chopin 24-45 for a complete recounting of the connections between Stowe’s novel and the Chopin family.

5 Lélia, the youngest of the Chopins’ children and only daughter, became moderately famous in her own right. Like her mother, Lélia was an excellent card player. She authored six books on bridge and backgammon. Almost six feet tall, she enjoyed creating a stir and would ride around Central Park in New York in a convertible making suggestive remarks to the men she passed. The Chopins’ five sons led more pedestrian lives: George was a physician; Oscar a newspaper cartoonist and friend of William Randolph Hearst; Felix an attorney in St. Louis; Fred—who was something of a black sheep—attempted a career as a concert pianist, but ultimately became a representative for a California candy company. Jean, the oldest, never fully recovered from the deaths of his wife and child. He died seven years after his mother.

6 See Christopher Benfey’s intriguing work, Degas in New Orleans: Encounters with the Creole World of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable, for a thorough discussion of the links between Chopin and Degas.

7 No explanation for the return of the collection has ever been uncovered, although two of Chopin’s biographers have each offered their own explanation. Daniel Rankin, whom Toth describes as “Kate Chopin’s shifty and unreliable first biographer” (Unveiling Kate Chopin 16), asserted the volume was returned because the publisher felt the scandal associated with The Awakening made the success of A Vocation and a Voice unlikely. Toth, for her part, states “with authority (although without documentation)” (Walker 139), that H.S. Stone, the publisher was cutting back on the titles it owned, not necessarily making a judgment about the collection.

8 Those few scholars who have studied Chopin’s short stories have tended to address them as a wholly separate body of work. For a brief analysis of Chopin’s long and short fiction as a cohesive whole, see Barbara Ewell’s essay in The History of Southern Women’s Literature, Perry and Weak, ed. (210-16).

9 All citations from Chopin’s stories and novels come from Kate Chopin: Complete Novels and Stories, Sandra Gilbert, ed.


11 Chopin’s ghostly character provides an interesting link to her own history. According to Gregoire, McFarlanes was “The meanest w’ite man thet ever lived, seems like. Used to own this place long befo’ the Lafirmes got it. They say he’s the person that Mrs. W’at’s her name wrote about in Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (16).

12 Although Chopin created fictional women who resisted "retiring domesticity," and she herself did not practice it, Chopin did her best to create that image of herself in the public eye. When interviewed about her writing, she suggested she wrote casually, without reworking her stories, stating that she wrote “in the morning, when not too strongly drawn to struggle with the intricacies of a pattern, and in the afternoon, if the temptation to try a new furniture polish on an old table leg is not too powerful to be denied” (Seyersted, Complete Works 721-22).
This is the first of three instances where Gouverneur, a well-educated and liberal-minded New Orleans bachelor, appears in Chopin's work. He is also a central character in "Athénais," and a minor character in The Awakening.  

Three of the twenty stories Chopin wrote between April 1895 and July 1897 that best exemplify her preoccupation with this theme are, "The Unexpected" (1895), "Fedora" (1895), and "A Vocation and a Voice" (1896). Each of the essays that Chopin wrote for publication touches upon this theme in some way. See particularly the draft essay "Confidences" she wrote in 1896 for the Atlantic Monthly in Seyersted, Complete Works 700-02. Knights has suggested the birds serve as "an image of the novel's multiple voices, and for metaphors of caging and freedom" (306), while Stephen Heath has connected them to Flaubert's satiric compendium, the Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues. There are connections throughout The Awakening to Flaubert's work, but in fact Chopin's own dislike of parrots may have been sufficient reason for her to include the birds as metaphor in her work. On May 12, 1894, she wrote in her diary of her intense dislike of them after a visit to a friend with one, "I have no leaning towards a parrot. I think them detestable birds with their blinking stupid eyes and heavy clumsy motions" (Toth and Seyersted, Private Papers 101).  

See both Ringe and Arner for extensive discussion of those images. Arner also notes the "abundance of Christian terminology in the book" (107).
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