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The Silent Characters in Her Works

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Dr. Prenshaw

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The female ancestors of Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin greatly influenced her as both a woman and an author. By examining the stories of Chopin's great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and Chopin herself, the literary works Chopin patterns after each of these stories, and the historical influences on both these realistic and fictional tales, one clearly sees the emergence of Chopin's ideas on marriage and how, as an institution, it is so intricately connected to female identity. Kate Chopin grew up surrounded by her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother, all of whom had seen their marriages come to an end in one way or another. Chopin herself saw the demise of her marriage, and later dealt with the desire to see another's marriage also dissolve, namely that of her lover's. This institution permeated almost every facet of Chopin's life, bringing her some of her greatest joys and worst sorrows.

The influences of marriage were not confined just to the biographical boundaries of Chopin's life, however; they repeatedly surface in her literary works, too. So many of her female characters are recreations of the women in her life. The pages of her novels and short story collections are filled with marriages, divorces, separations, and widows. There is no denying the overwhelming importance Chopin places upon marriage, how it affected her family and how it affects her heroines. The difficulty comes in ascertaining the connecting factor between the real-life marriages in Chopin's family, the impressions and influences these unions left upon her, and her depictions of marriage in her works. Each of these tenets seem to be linked together by Chopin's realization that marriage, for both men and women, is a means of identifying one's self. Tradition seems to dictate that such an identification, especially on the part of the female, finds its roots in the spouse. Chopin, a consistent advocate of the untraditional, however, uncovers a connection between a woman's identity and her choice to remain or not to remain within the

confines of an unsatisfying marriage. For Chopin, this connection may have served a literary purpose, but its motivation was also personal. Chopin uses the wives and widows of both her life and her works to face and to understand her failed personal relationships. In depicting the past lives of her female ancestors within the present tales of her heroines, Chopin is searching for a future peace as both a woman and a widow. For Chopin, this search evolves into a struggle within herself as she attempts to make sense out of the past experiences of her female family members and the current trends in society's outlook on marriage and divorce.

The first chapter is a recounting of how Chopin's great-grandmother, Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville, first introduced a young and impressionable Kate to the progressive-thinking and independent women of her ancestry. Through her tales of her ancestors and through her own life, Madame Charleville influences her great-granddaughter's writing, particularly her first novel, At Fault. This influence is especially evident in Chopin's treatment of divorce and marriage in these works. It is both the past actions and thoughts of those women who came before her and the present day ideologies of the society she lived in that contributed to Chopin's personal notions and feelings toward the legal dissolution of the institution of marriage.

The second chapter moves down the family tree and to the story of Chopin's grandmother, Marie Anne Athenaise Charleville Faris. Though Athenaise did not play as active a role in her granddaughter's life as her mother had, her life still echoes through the pages of Chopin's literary treasures. Again Chopin uses her ancestors' stories to probe the subject of ending marriages, this time with the action of separation. Her short stories, such as "Athenaise," are reflections of these familial influences and certain historical and sociological influences.

The third chapter covers the life of Eliza Faris O'Flaherty, Kate's mother. O'Flaherty, like

the women who came before her, saw her marriage come to an end with the death of her husband. Chopin explores her mother's marriage and subsequent widowhood through stories such as "The Story of an Hour." Chopin, the author, continues to examine and evaluate her family's experiences and the social mores of her time in an attempt to understand the institution of marriage, and its effects on women.

The final chapter culminates in an attempt to look at Chopin as both a woman and an author. As a woman, she faced marriage, widowhood, and adultery, and as an author, she relived all of this in the lines of what is considered to be her greatest work, The Awakening. Chopin's personal struggle to find some sense of all the actions of her female ancestors, the historical conventions of the day, and the reflections of her own actions in the characters of her works comes to a climax in The Awakening. For its author the novel was both a serious literary undertaking and a means of balancing her own personal past and present.

Chapter One

The presence of strong-willed women in Kate Chopin's family tree went back several hundred years. Chopin learned about her ancestors first-hand from her great-grandmother, Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville. Madame Charleville played an intricate role in her great-granddaughter's education, including her family history, language, and storytelling (Toth 34). Chopin's great-grandmother took her under her wing after the tragic death of Kate's father and began her instruction of the young girl with the colorful tales of their family's ancestors.

The first of the New World Charleville women to spread her wings and soar in her independence was Marthe L'hauteux Chauvin. In her biography of Kate Chopin, Emily Toth details the life of Chauvin and the impressions she made on both her family and society (36). Chauvin turned her back on the traditional in 1658 when she ran off to Montreal to be a "frontier bride." Kate would learn, however, that Chauvin was not alone in her unconventional ways. Less than fifty years later, Marie Briard Rivard, another matriarch in the Charleville family, came to Louisiana with a group of unwed Frenchwomen. Marie, along with her fellow "Pelican Girls," lead the "Petticoat Rebellion of Mobile" on the Governor's home because they could not cook with the unfamiliar resources of their new environment. A solution and eventually a happy ending came when one of the governor's servants taught them how to make "file," according to Toth, "the spicy, tingling powder that was the soul of the soup they called 'gumbo'" (36).

Kate's great-great-grandmother would continue her family's tradition as she took the city of St. Louis by storm with her own version of "file" -- a spicy marriage and an even spicier ending to this union. Marieanne Victoire Richelet had already been married and widowed once when she wed Joseph Verdon. Verdon was twenty years older than Victoire and after four

children they realized they simply were not compatible. Toth quotes the historian Frederick Billon concerning this explosive relationship, "Eventually they held 'a council of war and decided that for the salvation of their souls they had better live apart the balance of their days'" (36).

After this council and the realization that divorce was not an option because of their Catholic religion, Kate's great-great-grandmother and her husband were given the first legal separation in St. Louis history (Toth 37). Victoire got everything except for a few of her husband's personal possessions and proceeded to become one of the city's most powerful people. She established a trading business between St. Louis and New Orleans and watched it prosper as she adopted the nickname, "La Verdon." "La Verdon's" power was not only useful to her in the business world, but the social world, too. For instance, when she gave birth to a son four years after her separation from Joseph, her situation was not labeled scandalous as normal custom would have dictated because of her wide authority.

Along with this vast authority, Victoire passed down a sizeable fortune and her independent spirit to her daughter (and Kate's great-grandmother), Victoire Verdon Charleville. Madame Charleville certainly lived up to the standards set by her avant-garde mother and in some ways surpassed them. Again, it was through marriage(both hers and others') that Madame Charleville found the medium to express her opinions and develop a sense of herself. She was married to Joseph Charleville (yet another unsuspecting Joseph) in 1797, and their first child was born five months later (Toth 37). Madame Charleville was following in the untraditional footsteps of her mother and continued to do so through her eighteen years of widowhood.

Kate's great-grandmother, however, did not limit her "racy" stories to personal accounts

because she also shared with her pupil the soap-opera like dramas that would have filled the tabloids of St. Louis had they existed. Such tales included the story of the mother of one of the city's founders who left her husband for the other city's founder. Madame Chouteau lived with her lover and bore his children, but never married him. In addressing the effects of such a scandal on a young Kate, Toth writes, "Kate's later attitudes toward adultery suggest a realistic, if not amoral, attitude on the part of her great-grandmother: The famed Madame Chouteau, like the Charleville women, did not follow duty blindly. She outlived Laclide (her lover) by thirty-six years, never remarried and was a tough businesswoman who drove a hard bargain" (38). The parallels between Madame Chouteau and Chopin are striking with both living longer than their partners, neither marrying again, and both becoming successful businesswomen. Madame Chouteau chose a different path than Chopin, however, when she created a life out of her adulterous affair. The question becomes whether Chopin regarded such a choice with condemnation and relief that she did not do the same or whether she respected such a decision, and maybe even felt a twinge of jealousy, that she did not follow the same path.

Madame Charleville also educated her great-granddaughter in the language of French, insisting she use it in conversation, and she gave her piano lessons each day (Toth 35). It would be the life-educating stories of her ancestors and the women of St. Louis, however, that would have the greatest impact on Kate's life and career.

The influences of her great-great-grandmother's actions and her great-grandmother's tales appear most evident in Chopin's treatment of the idea of divorce and marriage. Her first novel, At Fault, centers upon divorce and how it is regarded by society and by men and women

individually. At Fault is the love story of Therese Lafirme, a Southern widow, and David Hosmer, a Northern businessman. Their romance blooms until Therese discovers David has been married before and has divorced his wife, a drunken and ill-tempered woman. Therese, who is vehemently opposed to divorce, immediately insists David go back to his wife. The two remain separated until David's wife's death, when after waiting the proper time, they marry.

Upon discovering David's previous marriage, Therese tells him, "A man owes to his manhood to face the consequences of his own action" (II, 769). Therese expresses and represents the traditional perspective of marriage with this statement because in effect she tells David that whether he is happy or not, he has an obligation to stay with his alcoholic wife. According to Robert Arner, Chopin uses landscape to make this correlation between Therese and the ways of the past: "The simplicity and security of life in this pastoral setting are directly associated with Therese's idea concerning divorce and marriage" (34). Just as Therese has always been reassured by the land surrounding her Cane River plantation and its promises of crops, so she clings to the security of the past conceptions of marriage and divorce. She was raised to believe that marriage was dissolved only by death because divorce was an unacceptable act both religiously and socially. Arner comments on this resistance to change, "The novel implies that Therese's unwillingness to break from the past and her inability to accept the legitimacy of the human need for divorce are connected with the same narrow vision that sees only one side of nature and attempts to preserve pleasant, unreal landscapes in the face of history" (35). Therese has never seen (or at least has never wanted to see) the other side of nature with its dissatisfying marriages and miserable spouses until David Hosmer comes into her life.

It takes a Northern industrialist from St. Louis to expand her vision and to help her

understand that rigidity is not always advantageous and change is not always detrimental.

Hosmer is a symbol of technology and progression as he brings his timber industry to Louisiana, and along with it some fairly radical social ideas. After Therese forces Hosmer back into his pitiful wife's arms and they return to Louisiana, she witnesses first-hand how unhappy the Hosmers are and begins to see how a broken marriage can sometimes only find relief in its own dissolution. She tells David, "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 away beneath me" (II, 872).

This collapsing of "old supports" and the changing landscape in the novel such as the river washing away one of the plantation's slave cabins, are indicative of how nature, Chopin's symbol of the past, is not the permanent fixture Therese once imagined it to be. David responds to his love, "The truth in its entirety isn't given to man to know. . . . But we make a step towards it, . . . when we learn to know the living spirit from the dead letter" (II, 872). In marrying Hosmer, Therese takes such a step because she moves away from the romanticized ideas of the past and closer towards a realistic future characterized by open-mindedness and flexibility. In her soon-to-be husband's terms, this Southern widow seems to earnestly realize that a marriage such as the Hosmers' only yielded "the dead letter," and that in order for David and his wife to possess "the living spirit," they must free themselves from their unsuccessful union. Therese's realization brings her to the same level of thinking as so many of Chopin's female ancestors, especially her great-great-grandmother and her great-grandmother. The women of Chopin's family were far ahead of their times concerning the issues of marriage and divorce.

In order to understand the "how's" and "why's" behind the thoughts and actions of these women, both the fictional and real-life ones, it seems necessary first to examine some of the social conceptions of women, marriage, and divorce in the latter half of nineteenth-century America and certain statistics about divorce of this same time period. Willystine Goodsell's A History of Marriage and the Family, published in 1934, is a good source of such conceptions because Goodsell incorporates the opinions of a wide variety of nineteenth and early twentieth-century commentators. For example, Goodsell describes the attitudes toward marriage expressed in 1845 by the American writer Edward Mansfield, who "attributed the denial of legal personality to married women to the scriptural saying that a man shall 'cleave unto his wife and they twain shall be one flesh'" (465). This kind of biased and backward thinking was what influenced Therese Lafirme to send her true love spiraling back to his former wife and what prompted "La Verdon," Chopin's great-great-grandmother, to separate from her husband and create a prosperous business on her own. Chopin's ancestors realized something that her fictional heroine did not until the end of her story --- marriage was no longer a sacred institution incapable of failure.

For years prior to the Civil War, marriage was the only option for women and once they submitted to this predetermined fate, they lost all property, parental, and legal rights (Goodsell 463). In 1912, Scott and Nellie Nearing wrote in a collection of essays entitled, The American Woman: Who Was She?, "To how many men, I wonder, has it ever occurred that for the vast majority of women marriage was until very recently the only means of support in which they retain the respect of the world?" (150). Even Alexis DeToqueville, who represented the viewpoint of an outsider looking in on American society in his commentary, Democracy in

America, recognized this lack of options: ". . . the independence of woman is irrecoverably lost in the bonds of matrimony" (999). Unfortunately, these social mores continued into the twentieth century. Even as late as 1930, seventeen states, including Louisiana, did not grant wives the same rights concerning real estate property that they did husbands (Goodsell 470).

Divorce was regarded with an even harsher eye than the rights of women in marriage. From a legal standpoint, divorce in the United States has existed since colonial times and was granted by most of the colonies for reasons as desertion, adultery, and bigamy (Jones 17). Mary Somerville Jones explores, however, the changes surrounding divorce in her dissertation, An Historical Geography of the Changing Divorce Law in the United States. She reveals, without much surprise, that the Southern colonies did not permit divorce for any reason with the exception of a few limited situations (18). According to Jones, even after the American Revolution when other states were enacting new divorce legislation, "The Old South was still resistant to change. Although absolute divorce was permitted in most states, the South tried to follow the English Parliamentary model of allowing divorce only by special act of the legislature. . ." (20). From a social standpoint, none of the colonies looked upon divorce favorably because of its religious implications and because of the widespread views of women and marriage already expressed.

Kate Chopin grew up in this type of environment in which a woman's options were limited. It was with these same influences that Chopin also attempted to express her viewpoints through her writing. On one hand, Kate's mind was filled with all the tales of her female ancestors from Marie Rivard's storming of the governor's home in the "Petticoat Rebellion of

Mobile" to "La Verdon's" obtaining of St. Louis' first legal separation of marriage. In contrast, her eyes witnessed limited legal rights for married women and social ostracizing of divorce, regardless of the circumstances that may have prompted it. Kate's Therese Lafirme began her story as one of the creatures of the past, subscribing to certain ideals simply because those who came before her did. Before her encounter with David Hosmer, Therese thought there was only one right way to handle things, with no room for variation. By the end of the story she is challenging the status quo, ready to throw up her petticoats and march along side Marie Rivard. It was no accident that Chopin introduced her heroine as a status quo believer, and not a free-thinking rebel, like so many in her family. Chopin realized that the prevailing ideas about women and marriage during the nineteenth century were very influential because either women were supporting these ideas or they were doing little to refute them. Chopin recognized that such attitudes characterized her audience and she would have to appeal to them from their standpoint. Therefore, Therese, a representative of the "average" nineteenth century Southern woman, was born from the pen of Chopin, and her creator used her to show women that progression and change, even in the form of divorce, are viable and sometimes recommended options.

Even in her push for change, Chopin was still aware of the strong ties binding a woman's identity with her marriage. On one level, it seems the author agreed with such a connection because it was natural for someone to draw some of their identity from their spouse and the union they had made with them. Chopin was also quick to see the danger involved, however, if someone's entire identity was consumed by their marriage. Both the stories of her later relatives and her works reveal how Chopin continued to grapple with this precarious balance between

being a woman and being a wife.

Chapter Two

Chopin's grandmother, Marie Anne Athenaise Charleville, also played an important role in her granddaughter's life, especially evident in the reference made to her in "Athenaise," one of the short stories in A Night in Acadie. Athenaise Charleville's marriage was an unhappy one indeed, and her situation prompted many questions by her granddaughter, as reflected in this particular short story. In some ways it seems Chopin uses the story of "Athenaise," the fictional character, to fill in some of the gaps of her real-life counterpart's own life. The sadness and loneliness which characterized her grandmother's marriage prompted Chopin to try and to make sense of the discrepancies existing between women, marriage, and identity through her writing.

Marie Anne Athenaise Charleville followed the well-traveled paths of her female ancestors when she married Wilson Faris. Faris could not claim many reputable or noble branches within his family tree because it was heavily characterized by "Virginia rogues and renegade Protestants" (Toth 26). Even his father, who had achieved some political power as a state representative, was more widely known for his night job---owner of an infamous boardinghouse (Toth 26). Besides his disreputable family history, Faris was also seriously lacking as a businessman. Despite receiving a good education, Chopin's grandfather still had no business sense and often found himself on the losing end of deals (Toth 26). With such a less-than-sparkling family heritage, an inept mind for business, and a Protestant American background, it is no surprise that Athenaise's father was quite disgusted when he learned his daughter was to marry Faris. According to Toth, "Joseph Charleville had never forgiven his daughter Marie Anne Athenaise for marrying an 'American'" (26). The spirited and stubborn Athenaise, however, proceeded with her marriage. Unfortunately though, the union did not

flourish and "eventually Wilson Faris abandoned his wife and seven children, leaving them with very little money" (Toth 26). Athenaise never remarried, and instead reared her children and remained close to her mother, daughter and granddaughter.

This closeness between grandmother and granddaughter becomes obvious in Chopin's short story, "Athenaise," written sometime between 1895 and 1897. Toth notes the apparent importance and subsequently the difficulty with which Chopin regarded this story. It was on her mind as early as 1893, when she referred to the marriage of Athenaise Miche in her story, "In and Out of Old Natchitoches" (274). There is no doubt that Chopin echoes some of her grandmother's thoughts and feelings through the words and actions of Athenaise Miche. The plot of the story involves a young girl, Athenaise Miche, who marries an older widower, Cazeau, and then quickly becomes disenchanted with the idea of marriage. The first time she leaves Cazeau she goes to her parents' home, whereupon her husband comes and retrieves her. The second time she leaves him she flees to New Orleans where she meets the charming Gouvernail. Before she gives in to the attraction between her and Gouvernail, she learns she is pregnant and immediately returns to her husband with a renewed sense of passion and commitment.

Chopin's fictional "Athenaise" is a young Cane River girl filled with confusion and contradiction at the opening of the story. When she runs away for the first time back to the safety of her parents, she can not really explain why she wants to leave her husband or for that matter why they were married in the first place. She thinks to herself:

Why in the name of God had she married Cazeau? Her father had lashed her with the question a dozen times. Why indeed? It was difficult now for her to

understand why, unless because she was supposed it was customary for girls to marry when the right opportunity came. Cazeau, she knew, would make life comfortable for her; and again, she had liked him. (I, 430)

Athenaise feels as though she were trapped into getting married by social traditions, and her sense of entrapment only grows after the wedding ceremony. It is almost as if she was fooled into believing she was making the choice to marry, but in reality the choice was being made for her by tradition and society. She saw marriage as a way out of her parents' household, but was unprepared for the effects it would have on her identity and her own daily life. With a sense of desperation, she tells her brother, Monteclin, "It's jus' being married that I detes' an' despise. I hate being Mrs. Cazeau; an' would want to be Athenaise Miche again. I can't stan' to live with a man; to have him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room"(I, 431). Some of these concerns may be prompted by the young Athenaise's immaturity, but her worries about "being Mrs. Cazeau" and her lack of privacy are quite legitimate. It has only taken her two short months to realize that within the bonds of her marriage and the walls of her husband's home she has little identity and even less authority. Athenaise's first departure from her marriage only further exemplifies these conditions because of her hopeless submission to her husband's orders to return home. The young wife thinks to herself, "Her husband's looks, his tones, his mere presence, brought to her a sudden sense of hopelessness, an instinctive realization of the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution" (I, 432). Even a naive and unworldly young girl like Athenaise Miche realized that marriage, even her own, was ruled by the societal conventions of the time.

The idea of marriage as an institution in which the husband has the authority and the wife has little identity is not only expressed by Athenaise, but her husband, as well, though in less direct terms. When the two are returning home after Athenaise's first escape, they pass an old oak tree that reminds Cazeau of an incident many years before when Black Gabe, one of his father's slaves, had attempted an escape, but failed. His father, who was known for being a fair master, had allowed Black Gabe to stop and rest under that same oak tree. Everyone had expressed wonder at why Black Gabe would want to run away from such a good-hearted master (I, 433). Both Peggy Skaggs and Robert Arner state that this memory established a direct correlation between the institutions of marriage and slavery. Each critic places this connection in different contexts, however, thus labeling it with varying meanings. Skaggs interprets the memory as a signal for Cazeau that he is being the fool and that he will never bring Athenaise back home against her will (37). She supports her interpretation with a later passage in the story: "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" (Skaggs 37). In actuality, Cazeau is the dupe in the story because instead of realizing that this entire situation is really about his wife, he attempts to shift the focus to himself. Athenaise does not leave her husband because he has done something wrong. Rather, she is fleeing the constraints placed on her by the institution of marriage and its standardized regulations. This is where Cazeau makes his foolish blunder because in thinking he is the cause for his wife's actions he allows his pride to rule his decisions. Like anyone who feels the shame of a hurt pride, Cazeau irrationally makes the blanket statement that he will never give in to his wife's runaway escapades again. Cazeau is being a fool, but not for the reason he thinks---bringing his wife back home. He fails to look

beyond his wife's actions and thus understand her motivations. She truly wants their marriage to work, but not at the expense of her identity. Athenaise is searching for that optimum balance between being Ms. Miche and Mrs. Cazeau. By no means is such an endeavor trivial or unnecessary. The only one being foolish is Cazeau for not helping and supporting his wife as she attempts to uncover the source of her unhappiness.

In contrast, Arner views the oak tree memory from a totally different perspective. Instead of the memory leading Cazeau to see himself as the fool as Skaggs suggests, Arner says it is an indication for Cazeau that Athenaise is the fool (72). Just as everyone could not understand why a foolish Black Gabe would have wanted to break the chains of slavery that his kind master had bound him in, Cazeau sees Athenaise's escape from his safe and secure home as idiotic. Arner further comments, "The parallels are not totally lost on Cazeau, and this moment is crucial to his growing awareness that a successful marriage demands that a woman be permitted freedom to develop her own personality and not be regarded merely as an extension of her husband's ego" (72). Such a realization by Cazeau seems progressive on the surface, but the fact that it grew out of his characterization of his wife as a fool seems to negate any supposed progression. It is certainly encouraging that Cazeau understands that his wife does not want to be just a part of him, but because he does not see the reasoning behind her feelings, he only seems to think this in order to pacify the "silly little woman." Even as an adult, Cazeau still fails to see that Black Gabe tried to escape because he was restricted by slavery and that, regardless of the kindness of his father, slavery was still an institution denying him his freedom and identity. These things were more valuable to Black Gabe than a few handouts from a benevolent slavedriver. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Cazeau could not truly understand Athenaise's

desires for individuality and identity and that the institution of marriage was the very thing denying her these longings. Until he begins to give consideration to the feelings and thoughts of his wife, Cazeau will remain lost in the darkness of oppression and ignorance.

Unfortunately, historical data reveals this same darkness in the nineteenth century's perceptions of the rights of a wife and the framework of marriage. According to Elizabeth Bowles Warbasse, ". . . a married woman at the beginning of the nineteenth century found herself in an inferior legal position" (275). Though Warbasse goes on to identify some of the nation's progressive legislation concerning the legal rights of married women occurring in the nineteenth century, there is no denying that the rights of a married woman were still severely limited at the close of the century. For example, even as late as 1861 some states still adhered to common law tenets that "adopted the fiction that husband and wife were one person." Warbasse points out that in practice "the married woman lost her legal identity as well as her right to hold property; unlike the single woman she could no longer contract, sue, or make a valid will" (282). Surprisingly, Louisiana was one of the eight states that did not subscribe to such common law, but rather was a community property state (Goodsell 471). Such a change in the law's label of identification, however, did not translate into dramatic differences in its effects on married women. Under these laws of a community property state, the property gained after marriage was owned by both spouses, but the husband alone controlled it and acquired all benefits reaped from it, including his wife's earnings (Goodsell 471). Such legal limitations placed on a woman entering the marriage union were truly travesties of justice, but these travesties extended beyond the legal system as they permeated the very foundations of society--- public perceptions.

Examples of these perceptions and responses to them were compiled by Anne Scott in The American Woman: Who Was She? In an essay written in 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes, "On the economic side, apart from all the sweetness and truth of the sex relation, the woman in marrying becomes the house servant, or at least the housekeeper, of the man" (137). Such a servant-master relationship as the defining context of a marriage could have been in no way respectful of or appreciated by the wife. Suzanne LaFollette takes this idea a step further in her essay, "An End to Slavery," when she equates the institution of marriage and that of slavery. LaFollette writes: "Until very recently, indeed, the woman who secured the benefit of marriage did so at the price of virtual slavery. . . . Her property and her labor became her husband's. . . . She was subject to his will and liable to his chastisement. . . . In short, she was, figuratively speaking, bound hand and foot and delivered over to such protection as institutional marriage afforded her" (154). The image of a woman being tied up and handed over to her husband is not one usually captured in wedding photo albums, but the validity of it becomes quite apparent after an examination of the legal limitations placed on nineteenth century wives and some of society's gross misconceptions of marriage during that same time period.

This was the political and social climate that Athenaise Charleville and her fictional namesake found themselves in as wives, mothers, and women. The similarities between these two women revolve around the fact that both married young because they saw it as their only option and consequently both discovered the constraints of marriage and the unhappiness stemming from it. In modern society, the solution to such a problem would be simply to separate from the husband initially, and if no appeasement can be worked out, eventually to seek a

divorce. The fictional "Athenaise's" brother, Monteclin, attempts to help her pursue such a course of action as he probes the inner workings of her marriage: "'Thenaise, you mus' explain to me all about it, so we can settle on a good cause, an' secu' a separation fo' you. Has he been mistreating an' abusing you, the sacre cochon?'. . . Does he drink? . . . Does he ever get drunk?'" (I, 430-431). Monteclin's search for a solution to his sister's dilemma is unsuccessful. He is described as feeling "disconcerted and greatly disappointed at having obtained evidence that would carry no weight with a court of justice. The day had not come when a young woman might ask the court's permission to return to her mamma on the sweeping ground of a constitutional disinclination for marriage" (I, 431). On the surface it may seem Chopin is being humorous with this last sentence, but it is actually a satirical statement because both the fictional Monteclin and his creator, Chopin, realize a woman's happiness was virtually unimportant to the male-dominated judicial system during the nineteenth century. One can almost picture Chopin shaking her head in astonishment and disgust as she considered the fact that the courts could only understand a wife's wanting to leave her husband if he were abusing her, cheating on her, or drinking too much. They could not conceive of the idea that a woman may have wanted a separation or divorce because her marriage was unsatisfying emotionally or because she felt she maybe losing her own identity at the hands of her husband.

It is uncertain whether Chopin knew the details of her grandmother's marriage, specifically the reasons why her grandfather abandoned his wife and children. In writing "Athenaise," however, Chopin certainly offers some subtle commentary on her grandparents' marriage and the effects its ending had upon her grandmother. On the surface, the ending of the story of Athenaise Miche seems like a fairy tale because she gets the prince, the castle, and the

promise of a child so it would seem everybody is to live happily ever after. If one looks at the story of Chopin's grandmother and the social conventions of marriage for that time period, however, one begins to question just how happily ever after everything would have been for the fictional "Athenaise" if their story had continued. When Athenaise decides to return to her husband, she has just left the arms of another man after coming dangerously close to committing adultery with him. Her motivation for going back to her husband centers around her discovery that she is pregnant. Athenaise uses this discovery of impending motherhood to avoid the sexuality within herself that Gouvernail offers to reveal to her (Skaggs 38). Peggy Skaggs comments on this avoidance: "Learning to view herself as mother seems much easier for Athenaise than learning to view herself as wife" (38). Athenaise may be getting the fairy tale dream, but one must consider all she gives up to get it. When she throws herself back into Cazeau's arms, he has said nothing nor has he done anything to show that he understands why Athenaise was so unhappy in their marriage that she felt compelled to leave him. Cazeau has yet to acknowledge Athenaise as a woman with an identity separate from that of her marriage. Like Athenaise, he has simply transferred her identity from that of wife to that of mother. In addressing what Athenaise gives up by going back to an unchanged Cazeau, Skaggs says, "She has sacrificed her name and more; she has sacrificed her autonomy, her right to live as a discrete individual. Athenaise Miche exists no longer" (38). Athenaise Charleville, however, did maintain her existence.

Athenaise Charleville and Athenaise Miche are similar in several ways, but the endings of each of their stories reveal the wide differences between these two women. While Miche

adopts the role of mother as simply another label, Charleville uses motherhood as a way to enhance and strengthen her identity. Athenaise Charleville did not fall to pieces when her husband left her, as one surely thinks Madame Miche would have done. Instead, Charleville pulls herself up by her bootstraps, provides a home for her children, and establishes herself as an individual capable of making it on her own. It seems very likely that Chopin was quite proud of her grandmother and her incredible courage to take a path in life that most avoided and some never even found. Then, of course, one wonders why Chopin would equate her grandmother with a fictional character who succumbs to the status quo. Chopin knew enough about the magazines she was writing for and the women who were their audience to realize her grandmother's full story would have never made it to press. Athenaise Charleville did not comply with society's conceptions of the traditional roles of wife and mother so her granddaughter wrote about a woman who would fit into these molds. In writing this short story, however, she uses irony and sarcasm to expose Athenaise Miche's weaknesses, and therefore praise her grandmother's strengths. One can only imagine how difficult it was for Athenaise Charleville to be a single woman trying to raise five children on her own. Kate Chopin was able to imagine this life and turn her imaginations into a short story that subtly praised and recommended those women who, instead of sacrificing themselves, made marriage and even motherhood simply a part, not the whole, of their identities. Chopin again combined her family history and the social expectations of her time period into a literary work in order to suggest to women that they could have identities outside the bonds of marriage.

Chapter Three

The next woman in Kate Chopin's life was the one who in fact gave her life --- her mother, Eliza Faris O'Flaherty. Eliza, like the female ancestors before her, particularly her mother, married a man whom her father strongly disapproved. In her autobiography of Chopin, Emily Toth tells the colorful tale of Thomas O'Flaherty, the undesirable suitor in the eyes of Eliza's father, and the marriage between Thomas and Eliza (26-30). In 1823, O'Flaherty left a life of hopeless poverty and dismal promises in Ireland to come to America. He travelled around the country for a while and finally made St.Louis his permanent home because of its potential business opportunities. One such opportunity became a reality when Thomas married the daughter of an upper-class merchant. The union was a brilliant step for the Irishman both financially and socially as he earned new standing in the city's social hierarchy. Thomas' first young bride, however, died four years later, leaving him a widower and searching for another potential "business deal." O'Flaherty would make such a deal by courting and marrying Eliza Faris (Toth 29).

In assessing the marriage of these two, however, Toth notes that this marriage was as much a business move for Eliza as it was for Thomas. The biographer writes, "Why Eliza married a man twenty-three years her senior, a widower and an Irishman, is obvious: As the eldest child, she did it to provide for her family. After her father's desertion, Eliza's marriage solved the Farises' desperate need for money" (Toth 29). Like Eliza, Thomas' motivations for marriage were not love, but rather, his desire for permanent position in the St. Louis social ranks. Both Eliza and Thomas fulfilled these desires when they were married on August 1, 1844. In the years that followed, Thomas continued to grow in wealth and prestige as he earned membership

in the elite group known as "'the solid men of St. Louis'" (Toth 30).

Thomas' success was to see its culmination on November 1, 1855, when he and the other "solid men" of St. Louis were to ride on the first train crossing the Gasconade Bridge. As the train made its way across the bridge, some of the wooden tracks broke under the pressure. A number of the cars plummeted into the river, while others dangled from the cliff. Only one car remained on the tracks. Reports of the train wreck included horrifying descriptions of the wounded passengers in need of assistance and the bodies of those who died instantly from the impact. O'Flaherty was among those who died in this tragic disaster. As Toth notes in her account of this devastating accident, it was in fact the first time Kate was faced with the death of someone close to her(31). She did, however, bravely stand by her mother during the funeral and the period of mourning following.

Thomas O'Flaherty left his family financially secure, especially his wife. She could take care of her children and live comfortably with no worries. Eliza would end up living the remainder of her life as a widow. However, money was not the sole reason for this decision. As Toth writes, "She had not married for romantic reasons, and she had already buried at least one infant --- and a widow mourning the loss of her husband was always respected in society" (32). Like her mother and grandmother, Eliza never committed herself to the institution of marriage again. She had entered into her first marriage out of necessity, and such a necessity never arose again in her lifetime.

Thomas O'Flaherty's awful death at the Gasconade Bridge had a huge impact on his daughter--personally and artistically. Kate would directly parallel this event, along with the

marriage of her parents, in her short story, "The Story of an Hour," written in 1894. Chopin's fictional story involves the reaction of Louise Mallard to the news of her husband's death in a train wreck. At first, the "widow" is stricken with grief as she escapes to the solitariness of her room. After reflecting upon the impact of her husband's death on her life, however, she realizes that this is an opportunity for her to recapture her freedom as an individual that she had lost within the confines of her marriage. Louise reaches a state of elation only to descend the stairs and watch her husband stroll through the front door. Brently Mallard had been mistakenly reported aboard the ill-fated train and upon seeing him, his wife fell to the floor dead. The doctors determined the "supposed widow" Mallard died from heart disease, though the implications of the story suggest the disease may have been with Brently Mallard himself, and not his wife's heart. Barbara Ewell points out how Louise's heart disease appears in the first lines of the story and then moves from that of a physical inconsistency to a far-reaching emotional problem (89). The first sentence of the story describes Louise as "afflicted with a heart trouble" (I, 352). As the story progresses, however, Ewell's point about Louise's disease being more than just physical is substantiated in the following lines: "There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime" (I, 353). It is evident that Louise's ailments ran much deeper than the doctors' misguided analysis.

Louise Mallard was unhappy in her marriage to Brently because he suppressed her self-will and left her empty inside,. Pers Seyersted regarded the theme of this particular story as "crucial self-assertion" because he saw it as a repressed wife's final opportunity at escaping an

oppressive husband (57). Up until this point, Louise had allowed herself to be the object of such degrading and dehumanizing treatment that she had never had a chance of freedom. Ewell comments, "Her submission to his (Brently) 'blind persistence' has been the guise of Love, that self-sacrificing Victorian ideal. Glorified in fiction Chopin had often decried, this love has been, for Louise and others, the primary purpose of life" (89). Louise had never known any other kind of husband or marriage. All she had ever seen were the stereotypes that society often subscribed to, and she assumed her marriage was normal and acceptable. Her husband's supposed death offers her a window of opportunity to look out and see the other side with its potential for freedom and individuality. This window comes to her, alone in her room, shortly after receiving the news of her husband's death:

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully, What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her. . . . She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will. . . . When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" (I, 353)

Louise has tasted the sweetness of freedom, and now she begins to look upon her future with a much more hopeful and optimistic outlook. She literally and figuratively opens up her arms to embrace what she sees as forthcoming happiness for herself.

For a brief moment, Louise experiences true joy; however, Ewell notes that her vision is in actuality unattainable because the limitations of her traditional marriage simply do not allow

for freedom and identity. Louise can open up her window of opportunity within the solitariness of her own room. She can not, however, grasp this same opportunity for freedom in the everyday world because all of the oppression she has experienced has weakened her beyond any kind of revitalization. Louise does make a noble attempt at revitalization, as reflected in the following lines, "What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!" (I, 353). Unfortunately though, she fails to realize that one's identity is not a byproduct of love, but rather is a requirement for the existence of love (Ewell 89). Any person, regardless of gender, must first acknowledge and maintain his/her own identity before one can be happy with oneself or with another.

Louise had lived with oppression for so long that she had lost all sense of her self and was unable to regain it even when the occasion presented itself to her. The conventions of the day had created an insurmountable obstacle for this young wife, and therefore the return of her husband leaves her with only the promise of a dismal future. Her doctors attributed her death to "the joy that kills," (I, 354) but ironically Louise feels no joy at the time of her death. Rather, she is only disgusted with the sight of her husband because it means a return of his repression and a bleak future void of any bliss.

The similarities between "The Story of an Hour" and the account of Thomas O'Flaherty's death are uncanny, making it evident that the fictional story is a recreation of the actual events. The most obvious likeness is the train wreck; however, Chopin also employed some very specific details from the real-life event into her story. For example, the name, "Brently Mallard,"

sounds like the name of one of the real-life victims of the Gasconade, Artemus Bullard (Toth 33). Toth also points out that this same male character's initials stand for the names of two men, Bryan and Moore, who were mistakenly thought to have died in the Gasconade tragedy (33). Chopin took this name device even further because the way Eliza's family pronounced her name very much sounded like "Louise," and Eliza, like Louise, have sisters named Josephine (Toth 33). There is no denying that "The Story of An Hour" is Chopin's literary forum for coping with the loss of her father and for reexamining the relationship between her parents based on her mother's reaction to her father's death.

Both Eliza O'Flaherty and Louise Mallard married and maintained their marriages under the strict limitations dictated by society. As discussed previously, women, even more specifically married women, possessed very few rights and even less power. They were quite simply extensions of their husbands, having been denied any identity other than that of wife and mother. There is little reference to her mother's feelings toward her husband and their marriage in the biographies of Chopin. Based on the incredible similarities between the situations of Eliza and Louise, however, it seems highly likely that Kate used Louise as a voice for her mother's frustration and animosity toward both her husband and the conventions of society. Though Eliza never entered into her marriage with much interest other than financial, one might infer that, based on the actions and thoughts of the fictional Louise, she was probably quite unhappy and dissatisfied in her marriage to Thomas.

Like the other strong-willed women in Kate's ancestry, Eliza had a powerful sense of selfhood and did not appreciate anyone's attempting to suppress it. Unfortunately though, like her mother and grandmother, Eliza lived in a society that condoned and even encouraged male

domination of women. She married to ensure her financial security, lived by the unwritten rules of society, and, like Louise, found a sense of freedom for herself in the death of her husband. In some ways, it seems that Eliza found a way to circumvent the system of the day and ultimately protect herself.

As previously mentioned, Barbara Ewell reads the character of Louise as having been repressed by her husband for so long that even the freedom she discovers in the moments following his death do not give her enough strength to handle his return. In this respect, Eliza was probably stronger than Louise because she took her newly-found freedom and renewed selfhood and made a life for herself. She never subjected herself to the confines of marriage again because she was strong enough then to provide for herself and her family. She placed whatever dependencies she may have had on other women, specifically her mother and grandmother. Unlike Louise, Eliza found "a joy that lives" in the death of her husband.

Chapter Four

These three generations of women shaped and influenced Kate Chopin because they colored both her life and her writing. Kate, like her ancestors, did not always follow the conventions of the day. Sometimes she marched to the beat of her own drum and sometimes she did not even worry about the drum, but just marched. Chopin grew up in a household of women, attended an all girls Catholic school for most of her education, and at the age of twenty she married Oscar Chopin. Kate drew upon her own experiences of marriage in writing her novel, The Awakening. Her years of marriage to Oscar Chopin are critical to her experiences with marriage, widowhood, and adultery. For Kate, these years and those following Oscar's death turn out to be the most influential in her life and she uses these life-changing experiences to create what most critics consider to be her best work, The Awakening.

Kate's personal awakening from the life of a single young woman to that of a mature, married woman took place in June 1870, when she wed Oscar Chopin, a New Orleans businessman (Skaggs 3). Emily Toth compares Oscar to one of Kate's literary characters who had fulfilled "'the usual things which young men do who happen to belong to good society'" (92). Oscar attended college, made the social circles, traveled extensively, and apprenticed under his uncle in a brokerage firm. Toth goes on to note, however, that Oscar's life was far from ideal because he was the product of a joyless marriage in which his father, a doctor and plantation owner, physically and mentally abused his wife (122). Dr. Chopin would lock his wife up in the house and refuse to let her visit her family and friends. He was also very miserly and denied his wife even such a simple pleasure as having the piano she loved to play tuned. This brutality, according to Toth, extended beyond his wife to his children and his slaves (123). As the eldest

son, Oscar was often the target of his father's abuse. Dr. Chopin would try to make his son manage the slaves using abuse and cruelty. At one point, it was so difficult for young Oscar that he fled to a relative's home to live. It is almost certain that the effects of such a dysfunctional family came back to haunt Oscar as he became a husband and a father.

Neither Oscar nor Kate left any written evidence concerning their meeting, though Toth suggests they met at one of the Chopin parties at their estate, Oakland, while Kate was visiting New Orleans in 1869 (94). After the couple was married in St. Louis, they took an extensive honeymoon trip as they traveled to places such as New York, Paris, and Switzerland. Along the way, like a good writer, Kate kept a journal describing these places and a limited number of her experiences in these distant lands. In one such tale, Kate relates how she walked the streets of Geneva alone and even went so far as to drink a beer (Ewell 12). Ewell comments on this escapade and others, "The modest daring of such little adventures previews the venturesomeness evident in her later life and work" (12). Before such adventuring began, though, Kate entered the next phase of her life --- motherhood (an adventure in itself).

Kate had five sons and one daughter within the eight year period in which she and Oscar lived in New Orleans and Cloutierville, Louisiana (Skaggs 3). Toth writes about Kate's motherhood:

Kate Chopin was now a mother, and entered a phase of her life with ecstasies, doubts, and fears that she described many times in her fiction . . . But having a child meant that Kate Chopin was herself no longer a child, her time and creative energies all her own. For the rest of her life, she would do what Edna Pointellier finally refuse to do: 'Remember the children.' (128)

While Kate was always attentive and dedicated to her children, she retained her independence and in many ways continued to shock the conventional society of her day. For example, one of Kate's greatest pleasures was walking around the city of New Orleans alone and smoking cigarettes (Toth 125). Kate's unorthodox and shocking behavior was always a source of gossip for the New Orleans society and eventually it became one for the small town of Cloutierville, too.

Oscar's cotton business began failing in 1878, and within a year he decided to relocate his family to Cloutierville, a small Louisiana town in which both he and Kate had family connections. As Skaggs observes of this stage in Kate's life, "when financial problems forced Oscar to move his family to Cloutierville, Louisiana, his wife probably retained little of Kate O'Flaherty, the St. Louis belle, in her mental image of herself" (3). Kate may have closed the chapter on her debutante years in St. Louis, but she continued her march through life with her own beat and her own drum. She still smoked her rolled Cuban cigarettes, though instead of her scandalous strolls she rode through the streets of Cloutierville on horseback, a practice considered very unladylike by the small town gossipers (Ewell 15). Little did the Cloutierville residents know that this was just a glimpse of what was to come of Kate and her shameful ways.

Things began to change in the Chopin marriage after the couple had been in Cloutierville several years. Specifically, Kate began to change. Kate had always been a strong woman who was unafraid to express her opinions, unaffected by others' disapproval, and uncomfortable in the company of women because she preferred associating with men. It was not, however, until she came to Louisiana that the underlying temptations always dormant began to come to the surface. Toth reads Chopin's state of mind in inferences from the fiction: "As she showed later in The

Awakening, it was very possible for a woman in her late twenties, who had married without passion, to discover her own deep desires in the sensual atmosphere of Louisiana" (154).

Unfortunately, Kate's sensuality was not being awakened by her husband. Oscar was in almost every respect a decent man who for most of the marriage had provided financial stability for his wife and family. After eleven years of marriage, however, he had become redundant and unexciting, especially to his wife who wanted to know about the world that lay outside of the confines of their marriage --- "a world of whiskey and gambling and swift, violent attacks and brutal loves" (Toth 155). Oscar would never learn about this world that so tempted his wife because on December 10, 1882, he died from malaria (Ewell 16).

Kate was thrust from the role of wife into that of widow on that cold, December day. Oscar had left her with a suffering business, a mountain of bills, and six children. In customary form, however, Kate took all the demands in stride and followed another nontraditional action. Toth explains, "She had grown up in a house full of widows who managed their own lives and their own money --- and her decision to run Oscar's businesses was not an unusual step for the great-great-granddaughter of the steamboat entrepreneur 'La Verdon'" (163). Such a move may have gone against the traditions of society; however, it was very much in accord with the actions of Kate's female ancestors. There came much sympathy and solicitations, particularly from the men of Cloutierville, with Kate's widowhood and business responsibilities. The women of Cloutierville were disturbed by all of the attention showered on Kate, especially by the obvious pursuit of her by one man in particular -- Albert J. Sampite (Toth 164). Sampite was well-known in the community because of his deep family ties in Cloutierville and his successful plantations. In researching the history of Albert Sampite, however, Toth uncovered layers of ancestry and

business that reveal a somewhat different identity of this Creole plantation owner from the one commonly known in Cloutierville (165). After being exposed to and surviving the horrors of the Civil War as a Confederate infantryman, Albert returned to Louisiana where he owned and operated three plantations and eventually married Lodoiska DeLouche, or "Loca." Sampite was a strong, good-looking man who had the reputation of being a ladies' man even after he said his vows. By the 1880s, Toth notes, "Albert Sampite was also restless and unhappy at home, although much of that unhappiness may have been of his own making" (166). Albert would often let his anger get the best of him, especially during his frequent drunken fits, and he would physically assault his wife.

According to Toth, this was the man who amidst all the others was able to capture the heart of Kate Chopin, both as a woman and later as a writer. Albert and Kate found common ground in their business dealings, their admiration for horses, and their love for late night walks during the warm Louisiana nights. Although Toth never offers proof that the two were engaged in an adulterous affair, she does report confirmations by townspeople and family members of many "chance" meetings between the two (168). She finds further confirmation in Chopin's writing of a recurring presence of Albert, also known as Alcee in her fiction (Toth 170). There is little doubt, according to Toth, that Kate and Albert were lovers, but it did not take Kate long to realize that this liaison would never work. As mentioned previously, Louisiana law prohibited an adulterer from marrying his/her lover even after a divorce had taken place for as long as the other spouse was still alive. Finally, Kate did return to St. Louis to live with her widowed mother. While she was in Louisiana, Kate had played many roles from wife and mother, to widow, to mistress. Through it all, however, she had deeply registered her experience, and she

was ready to join together the experiences of her female ancestors and her own memories to create stories that would challenge tradition and encourage change.

The story that would challenge tradition the most would be Kate's masterpiece -- her novel, The Awakening. There has been much written about this novel since the rediscovery of Kate Chopin in the 1970's. Though credit must be given to Per Seyersted for his groundbreaking work on the life and works of Chopin as early as the 1930's. Seyersted laid the foundation for other writers such as Skaggs, Ewell, and Toth. So much of what is known today about Kate's life comes from his research. In reading research such as Seyersted's about the history of Kate's family and the life of Kate herself alongside the story of Edna Pointellier, one may derive a theory concerning the relationship between Kate and Edna. This theory, based on the marriages of women in Chopin's family, is that Kate is not attempting to create Edna as an image of herself; rather, Edna is the next generation in this line of strong-willed women. The parallels between these two women run throughout the story of The Awakening and eventually help explain some of Chopin's own internal conflicts.

One such similarity that exists between Kate and Edna is their marriages. At the opening of the novel, Edna has been married to Leonce for six years and has found no reason to challenge her husband because she sees nothing wrong with her marriage (Skaggs 98). According to Skaggs, Edna married for "love, place and autonomy" and though her husband fulfills the first two qualifications, it is the third one that becomes "the unsatisfied need that finally drives her to give up the love and place provided by her marriage" (98). Edna's marriage to Leonce interferes with her ability to be an individual and control her fate. She is in many ways a pretty statue for

her husband to show off and occasionally polish when he so desires. His idea of his wife as a piece of property is quite evident from his comments at the beginning of the novel, "'You are burnt beyond recognition.'" The omniscient narrator adds that he looks "at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage" (II, 882). In Leonce's eyes, Edna is merely a pet that he can patronize and pacify with bonbons and peanuts.

This kind of treatment worked for the first six years of their marriage as Ewell observes: "But, eventually recognizing 'no trace of passion or excessive fictitious warmth' in her affection for Leonce, Edna feels assured of a prosaic performance in her marriage and calmly accustoms herself to this lesser reality"(146). Edna thinks she can marry and put her dreams behind her; however, she discovers "years later they can suddenly flare up again" (Seyersted 139). One wonders if Kate thought the same thing when she married into a comfortable "place" next to Oscar. In describing Oscar, Toth writes, "He was a good husband, and Kate no doubt recorded the general view of Oscar when the Creoles in The Awakening agree that Leonce Pontellier is 'the best husband in the world' and Edna Pontellier is 'forced to admit that she knew of none better'" (154). But Kate and Edna grew bored with their husbands and restless in their marriages as they began to yearn for the temptations that arose in the arms of other men.

These temptations suggest a second parallel between Kate and Edna, for both women turned to men other than their husbands to satisfy the sexual desires awakened in them. For Edna, it is Robert Lebrun who first shows her that even as a married woman she can have sexual yearnings. One night as they sit together, Edna thinks, "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (II, 911). Skaggs characterizes Edna's choice of Robert as much like that of her decision

to wed Leonce; both are a matter of convenience (101). Robert happens to be the one sitting beside her as she thinks about this desire to find love, and therefore she falls in love with him. The man that Edna does eventually give herself to sexually, however, is by no means a choice of convenience. Alcee Arobin is a handsome and charming man who takes a fancy to Edna at the racetrack one day. Edna knows what his intentions are from the beginning, and she is in fact deliberate in the actions she takes with him in order to submit to these intentions (Skaggs 107). She even thinks to herself after an afternoon at the track, "Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her" (II, 960). That he is, however, part of what she needs to fulfill her awakening is evident in the following lines, "It was the first kiss of her life to which nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (II, 967). Perhaps Albert Sampite lit this same torch in the heart of Kate Chopin.

It does seem likely that Alcee Arobin is in many ways a fictional representation of Albert Sampite. The outward indications of such a connection include the similarity in the names of the two men and their common physical characteristics. The role that each of these men play in Kate and Edna's lives also suggest parallels between Albert and Alcee. Both possessed a certain flaw that seemed to contribute largely to the departure of each woman from their lives. Albert was a violent man who often abused his wife. Kate deplored such abuse, and, along with the fact that they would probably never be able to marry legally, it played a distinct part in Kate's return to St. Louis.

For Edna, her cue to leave Alcee comes early on, but she chooses to ignore it until it receives absolute confirmation in the period following their sexual encounter. As Skaggs notes,

"Immediately he assumes a proprietary air as authoritative as Leonce's. . . . Even Alcee Arobin, who 'was absolutely nothing to her,' believes that he owns Edna" (108). Both Kate and Edna seem to realize from the beginning that these men are not healthful for them emotionally, but their desires are guided by their hearts, not their heads. In giving into their hearts, each woman discovers the wide valley of difference existing between love and sexual desire (Ewell 149). This valley becomes evident after Edna gives in to Arobin, when she feels "as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (II, 967). Kate doubtless understood this same widening between love and passion during those warm, sultry Louisiana nights with the lustful Albert Sampite at her side.

In creating the character of Edna Pointellier, Kate drew upon many of her own experiences and emotions, including her marriage, her husband, and her adulterous lover. These parallels stop, however, at the point at which Kate depicts Edna as walking into the sea, taking her own life. When Kate came to this same crossroads in her life, she packed her suitcases and returned to St. Louis. Inevitably, then, one must question why Kate writes a suicidal ending for Edna.

I would suggest that, for Kate, Edna is the next generation. Chopin has seen what the women in her family have gone through and how, despite their resistance to society's expectations, they still often found themselves trapped by the institutions and limitations of society. Edna is Kate's vehicle for showing women that their sole identity does not have to be that of a wife and a mother and her suicide is the means. This idea of identity is expressed in

Edna's thoughts prior to her suicide, "She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul" (II, 1000). Skaggs writes of Edna's final impressions, "So her thoughts as she walks into the sea comment profoundly on the special identity problems Chopin believes that women face. . . . Unable to have a full human existence, Edna chooses to have none at all" (110). This is a drastic choice, even by Chopin's standards, but in Edna's desire to solve the struggle going on within herself, she must have thought of it as her only choice. Edna's suicide is Chopin's means of emphasizing that a woman should be able to be a wife and a mother, and still maintain her own identity, separate from these perceptions.

Despite Edna's choice to take her life, I think The Awakening is a source of hope for women. The women in Chopin's family and in her writing are symbols of progression because they attempted to break down the barriers society built around them. Edna may not have had the courage to break down all of society's barriers; however, she certainly succeeded in chipping away at many of these obstructions. Edna walks the path of her fate with her head held high, knowing she is a woman, a wife, and a mother. I suggest that this is a walk of hope because the shadows of Chopin's female ancestors, her characters, and even Kate, herself, follow Edna, knowing they, too, are women, wives, and mothers.

Conclusion

The life and works of Kate Chopin offer insight into the personal life of a woman and the fiction she created as an author from her experiences. Chopin came from a line of women who were all widowed or separated from their husbands by the age of thirty. Each of their stories offered Chopin a means of delving deeply into the connection between marriage and a woman's identity. After losing their husbands for one reason or another, her ancestors all decided to remain single; none of them remarried. This decision was in some ways a sign of strength because it meant they had to survive on their own both financially and emotionally. It was also an indication of their desires to establish themselves as individuals.

Based on the biographies of Chopin and the content of her stories, one may infer that the marriages of her ancestors were not completely fulfilling, especially for the wives. It seemed as though none of their marriages allowed these women to maintain much of an identity outside that of wife and mother. These limiting forces were ordained by both their husbands and society's view of marriage. Society vested very little purpose and even fewer rights in women during this time. Kate struggled with these limitations both in her own life and in her writing.

Therese, Athénais, Louise, and Edna are all manifestations of this struggle. Through each of them, Kate reveals her desire to be a woman first and a wife and mother second. By no means does Chopin solve this struggle for either herself or for womankind. This conflict is one women today still grapple with because they are often regarded as a wife or mother first and an individual last. As Chopin showed, this battle is waged both externally and internally. It is not just men who limit the individuality of women; often it is the woman who restricts herself. In portraying her ancestors in her works, Chopin suggests that women must be the ones to make the

first step in establishing themselves as individuals. They cannot wait for society or men to give them their identities. They must make that walk into the sea with Edna to find their identities, but unlike her, they must return to the shore to live with these new identities as wives, mothers, and women.

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