

## I

## Introduction

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**I**N a portrait of Kate Chopin (Katherine O’Flaherty Chopin, 1850–1904), her son Felix remembers her as being available to her three sons and three daughters at all times. Describing his mother as being constantly interrupted by her children as she read or wrote in her Morris chair in the living room that was filled with books and decorated with a few simple paintings, he notes that there was a statue of a naked Venus on one of the bookshelves.<sup>1</sup> This icon of female eros represents the primary concern of Chopin’s fiction – the celebration of female sexuality, and the tension between erotic desire and the demands of marriage, the family, and a traditional society.

Kate Chopin juggled the demands of her writing career and motherhood with extraordinary success. Although she often longed for privacy for her work as well as greater personal freedom, she carried out her domestic and social responsibilities with apparent equanimity. In spite of the fact that she was widowed in her early thirties and was left with six children to raise, she established a very comfortable home for her family and was known throughout St. Louis for her thriving household and her salon, which was frequented by the city’s most prominent intellectuals and artists. By the mid-1890s, Kate Chopin was a nationally recognized novelist, short story writer, essayist and reviewer. She wrote more than one hundred short stories, many of which were published in *Vogue*, *The Century*, and the *Atlantic* and were later collected in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Her best-known work, *The Awakening*, was published in 1899.

Born Katherine O’Flaherty in 1850 in St. Louis, Kate Chopin’s mother, Eliza Faris, was of French Creole ancestry and her father,

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Thomas O'Flaherty, was a prosperous merchant who had emigrated from Ireland in 1825. The O'Flaherty family life was lively, and Kate was a much-loved child. However, when she was four years old, her father was killed by the collapse of the bridge carrying the inaugural train of the Pacific Railroad into St. Louis. After Thomas O'Flaherty's tragic and untimely death, Kate grew close to her maternal grandmother, who spent many hours telling her granddaughter stories of Creole life. The sophisticated plots sometimes involved extramarital romance and interracial marriage, which gave the young girl an unusually complex view of the world.

When Kate O'Flaherty was nine years old, she entered St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart. Even though this was her first formal education, she was already an avid reader. Her grandmother's stories had kindled her interest in literature, and she knew all of the French classics as well as *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *Ivanhoe*, and much of Dickens. As she grew older she became increasingly sophisticated in her taste, and read Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Coleridge, Austen, and the Brontës as well. After graduating from the Academy in June 1868, she continued to be a voracious reader and became especially interested in the work of Madame de Stael. An entry in her commonplace book records a conversation between Byron and de Stael that explores the relationship between passion and virtue in their respective works. Apparently, the young student was fascinated by the fact that Byron – of all people – accused de Stael of undermining the morals of young women with her tales of unrequited love. During her late adolescence, Kate O'Flaherty had an active social life that included parties and balls, picnics, and the theater; at the same time, she felt guilty for spending so much of her time with social amusements. When she met Oscar Chopin, who was then twenty-five, she fell in love with the young French Creole from north-western Louisiana – Natchitoches – and agreed to marry him.<sup>2</sup>

After a three-month European honeymoon, Oscar and Kate Chopin moved to New Orleans, where she spent considerable time exploring the city, which seemed more Old World than American to her. The couple lived in New Orleans for nine years until excessive rain ruined the cotton industry in 1878–9. They then moved

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their large family to Cloutierville. Chopin describes the little town as a “French village” consisting of “two long rows of very old frame houses, facing each other closely across a dusty highway.” Apparently, she lived a reasonably contented life there and is described as being a gracious hostess with considerable leisure and enough time to travel to St. Louis for lengthy visits. When Oscar caught swamp fever – malaria – in 1883 and died suddenly, the thirty-three-year-old Kate Chopin took over the management of the Natchitoches plantation and directed the enterprise with considerable success. But after a year, she sold the business and moved her family back to St. Louis to be closer to her mother. However, this reunion was very brief; Mrs. O’Flaherty died in June 1885, and the loss of husband and mother in rapid succession was devastating. Kate Chopin’s daughter describes her mother as sinking into a depression from which she probably never fully recovered: “I think the tragic death of her father early in her life . . . the loss of her young husband and her mother, left a stamp of sadness on her which was never lost.”<sup>3</sup>

Chopin’s obstetrician, Frederick Kolbenheyer, was one of the few people who seemed to understand her during the period following the deaths of her husband and mother. He was an intellectual who was respected in St. Louis for his knowledge of philosophy and contemporary scientific theory, especially the work of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer, as well as Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer. Noting that Chopin was articulate and had descriptive abilities, Kolbenheyer urged her to write; he understood that writing could be a focus for her extraordinary energy, as well as a source of income. His influence on his patient was profound, so much so that Kate Chopin gave up her Catholic faith and embarked on a career as a writer. At first she wrote love poetry lamenting her husband’s death; these poems were extremely sentimental but were nevertheless published in *America*, a literary magazine located in Chicago in 1889. At this time, she also began writing short stories and was deeply influenced by the work of Maupassant, whom she credited with teaching her how to write:

I had been in the woods, in the fields, groping around; looking for something big, satisfying, convincing . . . [when] I stumbled upon Maupassant. I read his stories and marvelled at them. Here

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was life, not fiction; for where were the plots, the old fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinking way I had fancied were essential to the art of story making. Here was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who, in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw.<sup>4</sup>

What Chopin valued in Maupassant, then, was his skillful rendering of subjective experience and his emphasis on the importance of individual consciousness.

Chopin also read and admired Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and William Dean Howells and wrote a short story, "A Poor Girl," in an attempt to achieve the realistic texture that was characteristic of their work. This story was not accepted for publication but two others, "Wiser Than a God" and "A Point at Issue," were published in 1889. Both of these works explore the tension between artistic aspiration and social convention. In 1890, Chopin completed a novel, "At Fault," which she published and promoted at her own expense. Again, she explores the themes of emotional autonomy and the moral constraints imposed by society. Even though this first novel was published by a vanity press, it received a surprising number of reviews – including one in *The Nation*. Most of the reviewers objected to what they considered the questionable morals of the characters but admired its descriptive power and skillful characterizations.

Reinforced by the praise of "At Fault," Chopin completed another novel, "Young Dr. Gosse," two years later but failed to find a publisher for it. Turning to short fiction, she wrote at least forty stories, portraits, and vignettes that were published in local journals during the next three years. In 1893 Chopin's stories began to appear in Eastern magazines; the next eight years, *Vogue* accepted eighteen of her stories for publication. Most of her stories continued to explore the tension between emotional and erotic inclination and traditional social mores; for example, "A Shameful Affair," "A Lady of Bayou St. John," and "At Chenière Caminada" are unabashed explorations of eros and its consequences. Chopin's willingness to wrestle with taboo issues was unusual in a

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woman writer of her generation and earned her a reputation for striking boldness.

In May 1893, Chopin went to New York City to interest publishers in her second novel and in a collection of her short stories, and Houghton Mifflin agreed to publish *Bayou Folk*. Because this volume, published in 1894, consisted of twenty-three stories that take place in Louisiana, for the most part Natchitoches, Chopin earned the reputation of being an important new local color writer. However, several reviews, especially those in *The Nation* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, also praised her wider vision and stylistic expertise that transcended regional circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Encouraged by the attention her work received, Chopin wrote the truly daring “The Story of an Hour” in April 1894. The story describes the complex and certainly untraditional response of a woman who receives the news that her husband has been killed in a railroad accident; she weeps profusely and then exults that she is now unencumbered: “free, free, free!” she exclaims. The narration elaborates Louise Mallard’s excitement:

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial. . . . She saw a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe that they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature.<sup>6</sup>

Embedded in this text is an extremely radical, even subversive, view of the institution of patriarchal marriage and family, in which the power is traditionally held by husbands, not by wives and certainly not by children.

Apparently, this story signaled a more assertive phase of Kate Chopin’s development as a person and as a writer. In less than a decade she had published a novel, nearly one hundred stories and numerous sketches, essays, poems, and a one-act comedy, as well as having written a second novel that remained unpublished. A

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diary entry dated about a month after she completed “The Story of an Hour” indicates that she was pleased with her accomplishments and was living very much in the present:

How curiously the past effaces itself for me! I sometimes regret that it is so; for there must be a certain pleasure in retrospection. I cannot live through yesterday or tomorrow. It is why the dead in their character of dead and association with the grave have no hold upon me. . . . If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up every thing 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. But I would take back a little wisdom with me: it would be the spirit of perfect acquiescence.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Chopin loved the freedom she had to pursue her own interests, and the theme of freedom from binding responsibility recurs in many of her stories. One of the most striking examples of this preoccupation is “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” in which the female protagonist, Mrs. Sommers, longs to escape her responsibility to her children. In an afternoon of abandon, she treats herself to a luxurious lunch, the cinema, elegant gloves, and a pair of silk stockings. Other stories, such as “A Sentimental Soul” and “Madame Celestin’s Divorce,” are also excellent examples of the tension between self-effacement and self-assertion that is characteristic of Chopin’s work.

Many of the stories that were published in her second collection, *A Night in Acadie*, in 1897 continue to explore female sexuality and the lives of women who follow (or would like to follow) their erotic impulses. The heroine of “Athenaise” acts out of passion; Madame Farival of “Lilacs” has several affairs; Suzima in “A Vocation and a Voice” takes a young boy as a lover; and Alberta of “Two Portraits” has sexual liaisons “when and where she chooses.” Unlike most of her literary contemporaries, Chopin does not moralize about her heroines’ moral frailty. More important, she does not attempt to make her fiction acceptable by punishing her heroines for their unconventional sexuality. Frequently, she had difficulty publishing her stories because of her amoral style; R. W. Gilder refused to publish “The Story of an Hour” in *Century*

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magazine because he thought it was unethical. Even when Chopin toned down her work in an effort to appear in *Century* magazine (the protagonists in “A No-Account Creole” and “A Night in Acadie” were both chastened for flaunting convention), Gilder refused to publish them. However, when H. E. Scudder, the editor who accepted “Athenaise” for the *Atlantic*, suggested that she write another novel, she began work on *The Awakening*. Two years later, in April 1899, it was published by Herbert S. Stone & Company of Chicago and New York.

In recent years, critics have generally acknowledged the importance of *The Awakening* as an effectively crafted narrative of Edna Pontellier’s conflict between individual autonomy and social conformity, but the reviewers in the period immediately following publication of the novel condemned Chopin’s protagonist as weak, selfish, and immoral; most of them smugly gloated over her suicide. Frances Porcher announced in the May 4, 1899, issue of *The Mirror* that Edna has “awakened to know the shifting, treacherous, fickle deeps of her own soul in which lies, alert and strong and cruel, the fiend called Passion, that is all animal and all of earth, earthy.” Porcher concluded her review: “It is better to lie down in the green waves and sink down in close embraces of old ocean, and so she does.”<sup>8</sup> Six weeks later the reviewer in *Public Opinion* announced: “we are all well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf.”<sup>9</sup> Another review that appeared at the same time in *Literature* describes the novel as an “essentially vulgar” story and concluded, “the waters of the gulf close appropriately over one who has drifted from all right moorings, and has not the grace to repent.”<sup>10</sup> The reviewer of the *Providence Sunday Journal*, who singled out Chopin’s novel for the “Book of the Week” section, announced, “Miss Kate Chopin is another clever woman, but she has put her cleverness to a very bad use in writing *The Awakening*. The purport of the story can hardly be described in language fit for publication.”<sup>11</sup> And the reviewer from the *Los Angeles Sunday Times* complained, “the novel is unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling . . . when she writes another book it is to be hoped that she will choose a theme more healthful and sweeter of smell.”<sup>12</sup> The reviewer from the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, proclaiming the book “unhealthy,” objected to the fact

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that the book had no particular moral or lesson to teach but nevertheless admitted that the book handled “a problem that obtrudes itself only too frequently in the social life of people with whom the question of food and clothing is not the all absorbing one.”<sup>13</sup> C. L. Deyo in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* said that the novel was for “seasoned souls,” not for young readers; “it is sad and mad and bad, but it is all consummate art.”<sup>14</sup> The *Chicago Times-Herald* chastised Chopin for entering “the overworked field of sex fiction.”<sup>15</sup> The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* berated Chopin for failing to condemn her heroine’s behavior: “nowhere [is there] a single note of censure of her totally unjustifiable conduct.” This reviewer was particularly disturbed by the fact that Chopin seemed to condone extramarital involvement and chose the expression of individual preference over familial responsibility:

In a civilized society the right of the individual to indulge all his caprices is, and must be, subject to many restrictive clauses, and it cannot for a moment be admitted that a woman who has accepted the love and devotion of a man, even without equal love on her part – who has become his wife and the mother of his children – has not incurred a moral obligation which peremptorily forbids her from wantonly severing her relations with him, and entering openly upon the independent existence of an unmarried woman.<sup>16</sup>

The prominence of double negatives in the preceding quotation reveals the reviewer’s defensive uncertainty, as well as his effort to build linguistic bulwarks to shore up eroding traditions. Even Willa Cather, who was then a young journalist for the *The Pittsburgh Leader*, described the novel as a “Creole Bovary” and complained that Edna Pontellier and Emma Bovary “both belong to a class, not large, but forever clamoring in our ears, that demands more romance out of life than God puts into it.”<sup>17</sup> The *St. Louis Republic* denounced *The Awakening* as “too strong drink for moral babes, and should be labeled ‘poison.’”<sup>18</sup>

The flood of reviews condemning the book eventually led to its being banned by the Mercantile and St. Louis Public Libraries. In addition, Kate Chopin was shunned by many people who had formerly attended her literary receptions, and she was not admitted to the St. Louis Artists’ Guild. Chopin did have an opportunity to answer her critics in the “Aims and Autographs of Authors”



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section of *Book News* in July 1899, in which she wrote a brief paragraph that has often been construed as a retraction but that is more likely to have been intended as an ironic commentary on the narrow-minded response to her novel:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnations as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late.<sup>19</sup>

Chopin's disclaimer of responsibility for the controversial contents of *The Awakening* is a tactic often used by women to ward off hostile reviewers. Feigned innocence and conspicuous naiveté are traditional feminine gambits to gain the protection of men.

Among the papers in the Chopin collection at the Missouri Historical Society are letters from Lady Janet Scammon Young and Dr. Dunrobin Thompson that may not in fact be genuine (no scholar has ever been able to authenticate the documents, and in fact they could have been written by Chopin herself). Nevertheless, these letters are significant because they illuminate Chopin's intentions for her novel. The letter from Lady Young is dated October 5, 1899 (a few months after Chopin's disclaimer appeared in *Book News*), and bears a London address. In addition to affirming Chopin's exploration of female sexuality, it is a remarkable exposition on the nature of women's erotic impulses. In an imaginary reworking of Dr. Mandelet's advice to Leonce Pontellier, Young is quite emphatic in her insistence that women be perceived as passionate beings, not as sexless, ethereal creatures: "No woman comes to her full womanly empire and charm who has not felt . . . the arousing power of more than one man."<sup>20</sup> But, Young adds, it is essential that women learn to distinguish between sexual attraction and love, an impossible goal if female consciousness continues to be distorted by the ideal of female passionlessness that prevailed in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the letter written by Dr. Thompson counsels husbands to accept their wives' capacity for sexual pleasure and to celebrate this erotic potential, not condemn female desire as impure. These views were unusually advanced for Chopin's society;

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certainly the reviewers of *The Awakening* – for the most part, traditional men – did not share this perspective.

In an essay, “Reflection,” that Chopin wrote for the *Post-Dispatch* on November 26, 1899, during the discouraging period after the publication of *The Awakening*, she expressed her disappointment that *The Awakening* was not given more serious attention and that the libraries had banned it, lamenting that the “moving procession . . . [has] left me by the roadside.”<sup>21</sup> She continued to write in spite of the adverse reception of *The Awakening*; however, additional rejection further disheartened her. “Ti Demon,” a narrative of a young woman’s insistence on her right to flirt with whomever she pleases, was rejected by the *Atlantic* for being too “sombre.” (This story is clearly Chopin’s defense of her own artistic and social autonomy.) In February 1900 her collection of stories, *A Vocation and a Voice*, was rejected by Herbert Stone of the Stone and Kimball publishing company. This must have been extremely painful for her because she had been able to place her previous short story collections easily. The story – “Charlie” – that Chopin wrote in April 1900, just after these rejections, indirectly expresses her anger about the repression of female energy and the criticism of women’s accomplishments. This story reveals Chopin’s considerable hostility toward those critics who had chastised her for permitting her female protagonists to take the liberties that men have traditionally had. Charlie is a young woman who likes to wear boots and pants, tote guns, and manage her father’s plantation. One day, while brandishing her gun to coerce the men on her father’s farm to work, she shoots a young man in the arm. The embedded message in this text – the wounding and disabling of a man – expresses the rage and the desire for retaliation Chopin must have felt in the face of the negative reaction to *The Awakening* by male critics as well as to the wounding of her capacity for self-assertion. When Charlie’s gun is taken away and she is forced to give up her masculine clothes, she submits to the injunction that she behave like a proper young woman. This retreat into modesty is the penalty for female aggression. But the plot takes another ironic turn when her father loses his arm in a railroad accident and she is given the responsibility of running the plantation for him; in effect, Charlie becomes her father’s right-hand man. Once again,