

The Kate Chopin Effect

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

Dr. Loren Schmidt

Heritage University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree of

Masters of Education

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Fall 2011

FACULTY APPROVAL

The Kate Chopin Effect

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ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin was an American writer who wrote from her heart and attempted to tell her stories from an honest, natural, feminist point-of-view. She was at heart a story-teller who studied the art of literature until it revealed to her its nature, and her own. She took her insights, experiences and skills, and created ground-breaking studies of the lives of those she saw around her. Decades later, when societal norms caught up with what she knew to be true, her writings were finally recognized for what they were, uniquely American characters, in uniquely American settings, attempting to fully capture their nature in a society created to subjugate them.

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A Chronology of Key Events in Kate Chopin's Life

1850 Kate Chopin (Katherine O'Flaherty) born on February 8 to Thomas O'Flaherty, an Irish immigrant, and Eliza Faris, a Creole. (Even though most give the year 1851)

1855 Kate's father dies in a rail accident. Kate begins school at Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Louis.

1863 Kate's great-grandmother, Victoire Verdon Charleville, dies. Kate's half-brother, George O'Flaherty, a Confederate soldier, dies of typhoid fever.

1868 Kate graduates from the Academy of the Sacred Heart.

1869 Writes "Emancipation: a Life Fable" unpublished

1869 Kate visits New Orleans in the spring.

1870 Kate marries Oscar Chopin on June 9 in St. Louis. Their honeymoon in Europe is cut short by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. The couple moves to New Orleans in October.

1871 Jean Chopin, the first of Kate's six children, is born on May 22.

1873 Oscar Chopin Jr. born.

1874 The Chopins move to the Garden District of New Orleans, and visit Grand Isle in the summer.

1879 Oscar's cotton business fails, and the Chopins move to Cloutierville, Louisiana. Her last child Lelia Chopin is born, her only daughter.

1882 Kate's husband dies of malaria.

1884 Kate moves back to St. Louis to be closer to her mother as well as to break her relationship with Albert Sampite.

1885 Eliza O'Flaherty, Kate's mother, dies in June.

1888 Kate writes her first poem, 'If It Might Be,' and begins the story 'Euphraise.'

1889 "If It Might Be" is published in the literary and political journal *America*. Two stories, "Wiser than a God" and "A Point at Issue" published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

1890 Kate's first novel, *At Fault*, is published privately.

1891 Kate unsuccessfully submits the novel "Young Dr. Gosse" to several publishers. She later destroys the manuscript.

1893 "Désirée's Baby" published in *Vogue*.

1894 *Bayou Folk* published; a collection of short stories. Kate writes "Story of an Hour."

1895 "Athénaise" written.

1896 "Athénaise" published.

1897 *A Night in Acadie* her second collection of short stories published. Kate begins work on *The Awakening* in June.

1898 Kate completes *The Awakening* in January.

1899 *The Awakening* is published, to scathing reviews.

1900 Kate writes "The Gentleman from New Orleans", and is listed in the first edition of *Who's Who in USA*.

1904 Kate suffers a stroke and dies two days after she visits the World Fair in St. Louis on August 18.

Introduction

Kate Chopin's life, her influences, her resourcefulness in becoming a strong female in her own life, was all reflected in the female characters she created. The gender differences during her time were deep and wide and were the foundation of the society she lived in and wrote about. She brought to the everyday people as well to the literary world conversations about the racial and cultural differences of the diverse populations living in her generation in the Southeast, especially their influence and the pressure they brought to bear upon the women of her time. She was what we now know to be as an ecofeminist writer, a woman who exposed the exploitation of both women and nature, as they experienced domination from a male-centric society. She did not and could not know the impact that she was going to have on future generations of women.

In reading the notes she wrote later in life, many questions are brought to light as to her own motives for writing and her opinion of the feminist quality of her works, leaving room for honest debate among those studying her work. Whether she intended to create a big splash in the literary pond of her day or was content to quietly break the smooth surface is not clear. Her works were earthshaking from the beginning, yet her family remembered her saying that she never considered herself a feminist. This could be due to her upbringing, in that what others consider radical feminism was commonplace in her role models.

Whereas women's literature in recent years has become far more accessible and acceptable to readers and to a much wider spectrum of peoples (gender, race and class), women of Chopin's time were not viewed as "serious," especially in the field of literature. However, there were a few women that set aside public scrutiny and proceeded to write from their hearts anyway, such as, from a previous generation, Mary Shelley, as well as the next generation, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Willa Cather. Kate Chopin is one of these female writers who

played a pivotal role in shaping literature for women, by women, by ignoring societal norms and writing groundbreaking stories from the point-of-view of real women, giving voice to long overlooked and suppressed stories of everyday situations. Whether her intention was simply to expose the wrongs of her time, or to bring about their change, is left for us to decide, as she would obviously never see her tremendous effect on future generations of women. Chopin's early successes, her popularity decline and its revival after her death demonstrate the effect she had on her female and male audiences. She exposed, through her characters, how and why women were kept tamed and the shame and guilt they felt when trying to escape the cage, however well gilded, their society had created for them. Whether it was to reconnect with themselves as women to nature or to liberate themselves, the desire to feel complete overrode the pressure that male dominance had put on them. Kate Chopin's honest retelling of life as she knew it, although absent in the popular literature available in her time, was recognized by her readers, who could instantly relate to it, with both positive and negative reactions.

Now, Chopin's works, seen through the prism of historical context, have been re-read, studied and critically analyzed to the point that it is obvious that her impact is inarguable. Her views on how men had, hand in hand, attempted to subdue the female gender and conquer this virginal American land, were as shocking as they were astute. In the dozens of books, essays and on-line criticisms I have read, it is apparent that the ripples created by Chopin have yet to subside and I believe we as a society, both men and women are better for it. Whereas, in her time, it was a revolutionary step to simply mention any of the myriad of societal injustices that she exposed as common place, through her work and that of others we are now to the point where they are not only recognized and debated, but we as a people have decided that they are unacceptable, and now the issue is not whether they exist but how do we correct them. I will show that when

speaking of American feminism and more specifically American ecofeminism, there is simply a time before the Kate Chopin effect and a time after.

Part One

The Shaping of a Young Kate

Born to Eliza and Thomas O'Flaherty in 1850, Kate Chopin entered the world surrounded by strong female influences and, for her time especially, an enlightened and supportive father, who enjoyed her inquisitiveness, and encouraged her to roam, both physically and intellectually, following her curiosity. Although her time with her father was tragically cut short by his death when she was five years old, the freedom he instilled in her impacted her entire life. Young Kate's life after her father's death was molded most directly by three strong independent women; her mother, her maternal grandmother and her maternal great-grandmother.

Kate's mother, Eliza, had enjoyed the life provided her by Thomas, who was a successful merchant and real estate investor prior to his death, and his estate allowed her to comfortably raise Kate and Kate's three brothers. Kate's grandmother, Athénaïse Charleville, a financially independent and intellectually progressive woman, shared in the day-to-day upbringing of the family. In my opinion however, the greatest impact on who Kate became was made by her French-Creole great grandmother, Victoria Verdon Charleville, a strong willed and fiercely independent woman who did what she wanted, when she wanted. Victoria had continued a family heritage of women who successfully took control of what life presented them with, at a time when this was even more difficult than it was rare, as her own mother was the first woman granted a separation in St. Louis and still managed to raise five children and run a shipping business on the Mississippi River.

In contrast to what her home life taught her about who and what a young woman should do and could become, Kate's instruction from age five at Sacred Heart Academy attempted to remold her into what her society considered to be a proper lady: obedient, self-sacrificing and

submissive, the type of woman who really could not voice their own opinion, let alone their desires and wants. One can only imagine how the mind of a five year old could deal with the contradiction of what the nuns at school were telling her and what her own eyes had seen to be true at home. This is not to say that these formative years at school were entirely negative. Strong female friendships were born there, her instruction included a thorough exposure to classical literature and, within religious and societal boundaries, she was given her first real encouragement to write. Even though this encouragement was directed at maintaining a journal of bits and pieces of the classical literature taught young ladies at this time, it none the less planted the seeds of Kate's ability to transfer what she felt to be important, from her mind to paper.

From birth into her teenage years Kate was blessed with both unconventionally successful female role models and as much of an education as the society in which she lived allowed as proper. Her role models proved to her that society's cage had no door, her education allowed her to fly through it. Having the opportunity to break from the "conventional role" would in time allow Chopin to express her strong-willed, free spirited independence in her writing. As one can see from her home life, she came by this honestly.

Part Two

New Experiences: Young Wife and Mother

Graduating from the academy at the age of 18, Kate made her social debut. It was a tradition that she followed, but not one that she enjoyed. Writing in her diary she states, “I dance with people I despise...return home at day break with my brain in a state which was never intended for it... – I am diametrically opposed to parties and balls; and yet when I broach the subject – they either laugh at me – imagining that I wish to perpetrate a joke; or look very serious, shake their heads and tell me not to encourage such silly notions” (Chopin et al. pp 82-83). Her very first story, from her journal, about freedom and restriction was written during this time;

“Emancipation: A Life Fable”

There was once an animal born into this world, and opening his eyes upon Life, he saw above and about him confining walls, and before him were bars of iron through which came air and light from without; this animal was born in a cage.

Here he grew, and throve in strength and beauty under the care of an invisible protecting hand. Hungering, food was ever at hand. When he thirsted water was brought, and when he felt the need to rest, there was provided a bed of straw upon which to lie; and here he found it good, licking his handsome flanks, to bask in the sun beam that he thought existed but to lighten his home.

Awaking one day from his slothful rest, lo! the door of his cage stood open: accident had opened it. In the corner he crouched, wondering and fearfully. Then slowly did he approach the door, dreading the unaccustomed, and would have closed it, but for such a task his limbs were purposeless. So out the opening he thrust his head, to see the canopy of the sky grow broader, and the world waxing wider.

Back to his corner but not to rest, for the spell of the Unknown was over him, and again and again he goes to the open door, seeing each time more Light.

Then one time standing in the flood of it; a deep in-drawn breath – a bracing of strong limbs, and with a bound he was gone.

On he rushes, in his mad flight, heedless that he is wounding and tearing his sleek sides – seeing, smelling, touching of all things; even stopping to put his lips to the noxious pool, thinking it may be sweet.

Hungering there is no food but such as he must seek and oftentimes fight for; and his limbs are weighted before he reaches the water that is good to his thirsting throat.

So does he live, seeking, finding, joying and suffering. The door which accident had opened is opened still, but the cage remains forever empty!

On June 9, 1870, Kate married Oscar Chopin. After their honeymoon in Europe they moved to New Orleans. Following their first year of marriage their son Jean was born, then Oscar in 1873, George in 1874, Frederick in 1876 and in 1878, Felix. The Chopin's moved to Oscar's family's land in Cloutierville, Louisiana in 1879 when his failed business. It was here in December of that year Lélia, their only daughter, was born. Here Kate rolled and smoked Cuban cigars, took solitary walks, and rode horses: "But thanks to her big city ways, cigarette smoking, flamboyant fashions, and tendency to flirt with other women's husbands, Kate Chopin was a Cloutierville scandal" (Chopin et al. p. 126). Obviously, she did not sacrifice her freedom or conform to the societal rules that were expected of women at that time, marriage did not cage her in!

Unfortunately, Oscar died of malaria in 1882 leaving Kate with six children, all under the age of eleven. He also left her with \$12,000 worth of debt from his store and his failure to pay property tax. In *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* Emily Toth and Per Seyersted state that it was at this time Albert Sampite first "...offered help and comfort." She and Albert became romantically linked, although how far it went is unknown. Writing about what she experienced then, her characters in *The Awakening*, "At the 'Cadian Ball'" and "The Storm" where to some extent based on Sampite, his wife and herself. Their relationship was a dead-end situation for Kate, as he was a brutal man and divorce and remarriage was not an option allowed by her

religious background. At this time Kate's mother, much like the loving mother in her story "Désiré's Baby," urged her to come home to St. Louis, for both her well being and better schools for her children. This move was retold in the last part of *The Awakening*, when Edna left her lover to be with a "mother", the ocean. (Chopin et al. 126 - 127).

Kate Chopin started writing short stories in 1892, enjoyed a moderately successful career, and was able to break the literary mold of women of that time. Having little or nothing in common with the other writers of her era, such as Charlotte Perkins, Henry James and Emile Zola, Chopin's style was singularly different. In Elmo Howell's article "Kate Chopin and the Creole Country" he discusses her writing methods on page 211: "Her aim in writing reached beyond theirs, into the inner lives of her characters. She used the material at hand, but was always aware that the experience of living is more important than political atmosphere and parade of dress and manners, which made up the fare of most writers of her generation." Just like Chopin herself, her characters are good-looking, strong-willed and have a brilliant desire for life "... when they defer to their husbands (as they usually do) it is because of their own decision to do so" (Howell 212). Oscar, her husband, had always understood Chopin's disposition and "allowed her "a degree of freedom and gratification of whim that was displeasing to many of his relatives" " (Rankin in Fletcher 120); for the most part she simply did as she pleased. Similarly, Edna Pontellier, the main character in *The Awakening*, questioned society's regulations and the effects they had on her well-being and began to act upon her desires: flirting, falling in love with a man outside of her marriage, and beginning an affair with yet another, only to learn that none of this will bring her the life she desires. Howell explains, "Edna Pontellier's problem is not external, to be solved by new laws or a change in attitudes. If there is a solution it is to be found within" (215). She battles with her internal self, and her solution is to end this struggle by

leaving the land and its imposed restrictions attempting to cage her in and swimming out to sea, in an attempt to escape, reconnect to nature, and reclaim herself.

At the time of her awakening/death Edna has become one with the sea, whose voice she has heard throughout the book.

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul.

The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft close embrace.

(Chopin 654).

Edna had imagined “bringing together the two parts of her ‘dual life’ by casting off her maternal responsibilities [motherhood does not embody individualism] and living out her romantic dream — freedom, on the one hand, and merger with the beloved, on the other” (Schweitzer 173).

When she realized that the society she lived in would not grant her this freedom, she became conscious of the action she must take to achieve this autonomy and needed to return to from where she had come. Again, just as Kate had done.

Part Three

Kate the Writer

In 1885, shortly after returning home to St. Louis, her mother passed away of cancer. Kate, only 34, was grief-stricken and unsure of which direction to take her life in because of her obligations to her children. She bought a house, her very own, and set out to create a new life for herself and her family (Chopin et al. 129). Dr. Kolbenheyer, a close friend and the family doctor, encouraged her write. While there were several reasons why he pushed for her to write, in *Kate Chopin A Critical Biography*, Per Seyersted states on page 49, “But the Doctor’s main reason for encouraging her to take up writing was probably that he hoped it would give her some relief from the emptiness and deep despair to which her losses had reduced her and from her longing for the Louisiana that was so intimately connected with Oscar.” Seyersted goes on to propose that “If It Might Be,” an undated (sometime after 1887) poem was possibly the expression of a wish to join her dead husband.

If it might be that thou didst need my life,
Now on the instant would I end this strife,
“Twixt hope and fear, and glad the end I’d meet
With wonder only, to find death so sweet.

If it might be that thou didst need my love,
To love thee dear, my life’s fond work would prove.
All time, to tender watchfulness I’d give’
And count if happiness, indeed to live.

A magazine in Chicago called *America* published this poem in 1889 marking her first published material.

In comparison, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, ten years younger than Kate, had had the opposite experience. After Charlotte had given birth to her daughter, she had hit an all time low,

becoming severely depressed, so her husband took her to see Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who recommended a “rest cure,” where she was to do nothing, not even write, which she desperately needed to do! Years later, after she and her husband divorced, she wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a response to her experience, even sending a copy to Dr. Mitchell. Interestingly, from that point on Dr. Mitchell never again prescribed the “rest cure,” although he never publically admitted that her story/experience was the reason why.

The opportunity to live a life different than other women gave Chopin a particular insight into the psyche of the South and its women. Semantics of word usage is as diverse as society and can often expose gender bias. In her article “The Cane River Characters and Revisionist Mythmaking in the Work of Kate Chopin” Sylvia Shurbutt writes,

One of the threads weaving its way through the writing of women from Amelia Lanier to Virginia Woolf is the attempt to recast into a more palatable form traditional Western myth with its patriarchal point of view—a point of view which molds our realities, fixes our values, and limits the vision of individual possibilities. A sizable portion of feminist literary criticism in recent years has been devoted to discovering and decoding those female retellings of archetypal human experience and to explaining how the process of revisionist mythmaking works as women from the past have tried to “rewrite” their stories (14).

Chopin is one of the better examples of regional stories, with her Creole characters in *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, and the Natchitoches folk, all of whom are forthrighteous and lacking sophistication, but are absolutely genuine and true to their actual selves. Especially in her female characters; their natural personas, physical desires and sexual selves are made apparent by Chopin, who had seen them displayed throughout her life (Shurbutt 15). It is striking that the

closer Chopin's characters live to an unaltered natural environment, the more freedom they display in their personal actions.

Turning from the traditional patriarchal ways was a path Chopin frequently took in her writing, as well as in her personal life, as she could not tolerate "the saccharin myths that molded the lives of men and women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century" (Shurbutt 15). Ignorance of equality baffled Chopin as it seemed so lucid to her. In reflection on this injustice she writes "{in their} garden of Eden, the disturbing fruit of the tree of knowledge still hangs unplucked." Shurbutt goes on to describe "Chopin has many of her Creole characters purposefully pluck "the tree" in order to discover their own awakenings; in so doing she revises accepted myths about duty, marriage, and sexuality in order to achieve a more realistic understanding of the human condition" (Shurbutt 15). Chopin knew of what she wrote and wrote of what she knew.

Stumbling across Guy de Maupassant's works, Kate felt as if she had found herself. Here was someone who wrote how she felt and how she wanted to write, Kate had found a literary role model in this French author and she began translating his literature. His stories were "amoral stories of women and men, divorce, suicide and madness" (Chopin et al. 130). In Koloski's "*Awakenings*", Mary Papke's essay "So Long As We Read Chopin" states; "As we know of her papers, she began serious study of Maupassant's fiction around 1888 and then labored on the translations from 1892 to 1898, the period of production of her greatest work preceding *The Awakening*. Chopin chose stories that elaborate intensely disturbed states of mind, what the characters themselves refuse to admit maybe sociopathological states of being but in some cases clearly are"(85). Many of Kate's stories follow the same design. Her stories are also straight forward, real and to the point unlike any of the storytellers of her time. Kate destroyed her story

“Poor Girl” after she received a letter from *Home Magazine* telling her that for it to be published she would need to change it. Obviously, what was in it we’ll never know, but no doubt it contained a disturbing storyline. This did not discourage her as she went on to publish “Wiser Than a God” and “A Point of Issue,” both stories about the choices a woman makes with her life, specifically marriage. In the essay by Thomas Bonner “My Life with Kate Chopin” he concludes after he, “examined Chopin’s translations from French fiction. The fact that she had systematically over a decade translated Guy de Maupassant and Adrien Vely at the same time that she was making significant changes in her approach to writing short stories and developing *The Awakening* in a manner far different from her first novel, *At Fault*, suggested that those translations were critical to her writing” (Koloski 103-104).

At Fault was Kate’s first novel and she completed it in 1890. Due to the controversial subject matter it was declined by publishers, so Kate paid to have it published and distributed it herself. The heroine, Thérèse, is willing to sacrifice her love and happiness for the sake of what she feels right in her faith; she is deeply grounded in what is morally right and concerned with the judgment of others. Bonner later writes, “her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), with storytelling qualities amid the Maupassant-like structures. She was working with form...but in the next four years after the novel was published she had begun the intense work of translating Maupassant’s short fiction” (Bonner 107). Whereas in *The Awakening* Edna’s anxiety over what others think is diminished by her finding her true self, Thérèse is not so fortunate, possibly lacking the self-confidence or maturity available to Kate in her later years. Thérèse sets the starting point from which we gauge Chopin’s literary growth, freedom and the reflecting of her true self through the rest of her career. The vivid contrasts from Thérèse to Edna show not only the French influence and her personal maturity, but the creation of her own individual style, feminism as realism.

Chopin's heroines are Southern women, "Many of these heroines are from the middle or even the "poor-white" class and therefore have little or no formal education or gentle rearing" (Fletcher 118). Societal norms for the place of Southern women at this time are, "still in the home rather than in politics or the professions; marital fidelity and strong maternal feelings, which keep home and family intact, are just axiomatically demonstrated" (Fletcher 118). Chopin's female characters, while burdened with these expectations, felt the need to escape them completely, even if they could do nothing more than fantasize or experiment cautiously outside of these norms, but in the end were pressured into returning to their acceptable place.

To reflect the times, more authors were writing realistic fiction, leaving the romance of pre-Civil War behind. Chopin's writing exhibits this style of the time as well, her Southern women characters were real. Daniel S. Rankin states, "that she never gives "a mere factual transcription of life," for her writing is "poetic realism, in the sense that it does not only reflect, but illuminates the narrowly circumstantial lives she portrays"" (Fletcher 119). At this point in her life Chopin is becoming herself a living example of what we would now call an ecofeminist. She begins living her life true to herself as a woman, naturally, as much as the environment she lived in would allow. "She avoided, as far as possible, the formal claims of New Orleans society. For the most part, she simply ignored the prejudices of the time and lived as she pleased, exploring the city, visiting Oscar's place of business, often wandering alone in strange and unfamiliar places, and even smoking cigarettes when the custom did not bother her associates" (Rankin quoted in Fletcher 120). In "Kate Chopin and the Future of Short Fiction Studies" Susan Lohafer writes, "Yes, of course, she has had her place as a regionalist; later, she was recognized as an early naturalist, and, as this volume will testify, she continues to be an inspiration to readers craving an honest portrayal of female experience" (Koloski 157).

Part Four
The Legacy Lives On

Unsurprisingly, today we mostly view Kate Chopin's writing through the lens of the feminist critic, which has been, and still is, the lens of the realist. Realism, along with naturalism started coming into its own during Chopin's time. Emily Toth's essay, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Feminist Criticism," was written in 1976 and received both backlash and critical acclaim for its viewpoint. Sarah Klein has taken the feminist criticism a step further by bringing *The Awakening* to today's contemporary women's movement. Klein's presentation at the South Central Women's Studies Assoc. Conference, at Tulane University in 1999, addressed how Emily Toth made a "definitive case legitimizing *The Awakening's* potentials as feminist criticism" in her essay "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Feminist Criticism" Klein quotes Toth: "that after all, Edna is a woman and what happens to her would not have happened to a man" (Klein 1). Toth justly describes the need to view Chopin's work this way, arguing that it, "moves us because it illustrates the need for women's psychological, physical, social and sexual emancipation – the goals of feminists in the twentieth century as well as the nineteenth" (Toth in Klein 1).

Taking a look at *The Awakening* through the ecofeminist lens, we see the unending cycle of women's struggles for equality and how each generation of women through history takes the gains of their predecessors and in turn leaves their own for the women who follow. Klein puts our efforts to the test with these three questions: First, what have we learned from the past centuries struggles? Second, what are the critical issues currently effecting women's lives and what are we doing to address them? Third, how can we continue to work together across all of our differences to shape the world we want to bequeath to future generations? "To place this

novel in the context of the contemporary ecofeminist conversation, I believe, is to celebrate Chopin's work in light of these guiding thematic questions – to make the conversation contemporary, to cross boundaries, to make connections.” (Klein 2). Ecofeminism embraces “the relationship between women and nature and the role of ecology in feminist philosophy and politics” (Klein 2-3). This is demonstrated in the powerful connection that Edna has with the sea, one of an intimate level. “It is when Edna enters relationship with her bodied, speaking lover the ocean that she begins to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This way seems like a ponderous weight of wisdom...” (Klein 5). Far from liberating herself this realization brought to a point the unnatural pressures Edna had accepted from the society she lived in. While this realization was necessary for her becoming the natural woman she needed to be, a way for her natural woman to co-exist in the male dominated culture she lived in was not as easy to find. In the end Edna choose to join her natural self to her natural lover for eternity, as it seemed the only true place for her to be. No matter how clear this solution was, it was obviously not an easy path for Edna to choose.

Ecofeminists view nature in its entirety; from the geological structure of the earth, to the sand and the sea, and the plants and animals that inhabit it. Chopin's use of Southern landscapes and weather can be found throughout *The Awakening*, such as “There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day” (Chopin and Adams 67). One of Chopin's most vivid visualizations in this story, brings her femininity back to its animalistic core; “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a

familiar world that it had never known” (Chopin and Adams 133). Oddly enough, the climax of Chopin’s short story “Désiré’s Baby” is much like that of *The Awakening*, when Edna walks out into the sea, where the “wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles” (Chopin and Adams 133,) and she is gone, whereas Désiré also, “disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again” (Chopin and Adams 159).

Conflicts created when her nature collides with her upbringing abound in Edna, self vs. other, as well as self vs. self, and Chopin uses nature itself to express them. As Klein states in Radcliff-Umstead, the seasons in this novel “qualities of human experience rather than an objective recounting of temperatures and climatic condition that...express the drama of a woman coming alive to a physical world that she must quit rather than accept the daily compromises of society.” Chopin blurs the lines between the physical conditions of the sweltering summertime heat and Edna’s state of mind (Radcliff-Umstead in Klein 7).

Another colorful illustration of Chopin’s ecofeminism is in her short story *The Storm*, as the rolling in of the storm matches the “storm” roiling within Calixta and Alcée. Using the storm, Chopin foreshadows the intense emotional, physical feelings between Calixta and Alcée: “She hastened out to gather them before the rain fell. As she stepped outside, Alcée Laballière rode in the gate” (p. 218). Later as the storm starts to drown out all reality, “A bolt struck a tall chinaberry tree at the edge of the field.” As the blinding light flashed and the thunder filled the room, “Calixta put her hands to her eyes, and with a cry, staggered backward. Alcée’s arm encircled her, and for an instant he drew her close and spasmodically to him” (p. 219). Soon their passion was as fanatical as the storm raging outside:

They did not heed the crashing torrents, and the roar of the elements made her laugh as she lay in his arms. She was a revelation in that dim, mysterious chamber; as white as the couch she lay upon. Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the un-dying life of the world (Chopin and Adams 218 -220).

Just as quickly as the storm had swept in, it ended, leaving a calm over the landscape, “The rain was over; and the sun was turning the glistening green world into a palace of gems” (Chopin and Adams 220). After the storm, there came a calm over everyone; Chopin’s last line, “So the storm passed and everyone was happy” (Chopin and Adams 222).

While *The Awakening* uses landscapes and weather throughout to express Chopin’s storyline, animal representations are rarer. Klein points out however, Chopin uses them effectively with Edna; “this unfolds with a description of Edna as a preening animal:

She bathed her face, her neck and arms...She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other. (Chopin 562)

Again when Dr. Mandelet sees Edna upon her return from New Orleans, she reminds him of “some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun” (Chopin 601). Klein states, “Again, these descriptions simultaneously reveal the underlying cultural objectification of both woman (and nature) that Chopin rejects, while they also play with these constraints, to make of the woman, and the animal a self-aware, active subject. Or at least to blur the lines” (6). Ending her

presentation Klein brings us back to Emily Toth's essay to conclude that the true gift of *The Awakening* is "its meaning for us as part of our widening knowledge of women's past", and that "because it expands our field of vision, *The Awakening* is the best kind of feminist criticism" (Klein 12). Kate Chopin's writing remains a look into the past, an honest view of the present and a road map to shaping the future. Marlene Springer postulates at the end of her essay "The Death of Edna Pontellier and the Card Catalog" that:

...it is difficult to even speculate about the future of Chopin studies. The focus has evolved radically over the years, through local colorist, to short story writer, novelist, feminist, radical, conservative. Yet the abiding theme remains: Edna Pontellier and her fellow characters are as intriguing today as they were in the nineteenth century, and the human dilemmas they confronted, the love and sorrow they experienced, the fatal solution they sometimes sought are eternally relevant. Such universal topics are limited only by the human imagination, which in itself is unlimited and incredible. (Kobolski 139)

Part Five

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

Kate Chopin was a trailblazer for women writers. I see that the world she was born into, the family she was blessed with and how she choose to live her life, are all as important to the birth of ecofeminism as what and how she wrote. *The Awakening* did not come to be in isolation of who Kate Chopin was, it was both inspired by, and crafted by, who Kate was, how she lived and her exposure to French literature which was not available to the vast majority of the women of her age. *The Awakening* is the culmination of her personal journey, the effect of her literary influences and the confidence she had achieved in her previous works. Edna, her husband, her lovers and her determination to find her true self parallels Kate's own life. "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin 33). Chopin had, through both nature and nurture escaped her own time and created a place from which she could write this ground-breaking story.

Feminism in her time was almost entirely defined by the first baby steps of women's rights; the right to own property, the right to a voice in politics, the right of self-determination in social standing, the right to be taken seriously as a human being, with intellectual and professional abilities and an entire set of gender based feelings, gifts and desires, to be nurtured, not subjugated. As foreign as this sounds to us in our time, this role imposed upon the women of Chopin's time was to the great majority of her contemporaries, especially in her social class, accepted, if not celebrated. The most privileged class of women happily lived out their lives,

raising families, running households, entertaining family and friends as their husband's wives. Whether this was simple acclimation to existing norms, or more sadly, ignorance and/or indifference to the life available to a woman who chose to be true to herself; her gender and her nature, is and will remain unknown to us. What we do know is that in Chopin's example, when these attributes she displayed in her life, and in her work, were nurtured; in her youth, her education and her married life, works such as she wrote are the inevitable result of an intelligent, educated, inquisitive female mind that is allowed to blossom naturally. As much as male domination through both arrogance and ignorance had, has, and will continue to undervalue, underestimate and overlook the unique, inescapable and incredibly invaluable voice of an entire gender, occasionally such a voice survives the attitude that says "women were only to obtain personal fulfillment through their domestic duties" which permeated Kate's era.

Being an unconventional woman, Kate Chopin chose to write about unconventional women much like herself, and in so doing, changed the landscape of women's literature forever. It was not only her characters and her stories that influenced other female writers, Kate's life was the true influence. She showed that it was not only possible but vital for a woman to follow her passions, using all the gifts women uniquely possess. In order to obtain the fulfillment nature designed for them, and the voice to express it, the entire world needs be open to investigation, education and the freedom to research any avenue that intrigues them. When the cage door is left open, singularly beautiful things, both unknown and unavailable to the male gender, will naturally occur. Nature cannot exist, and will not allow anything to survive, when one of the two sides of life is artificially dispossessed of its place. Although it's understandable that the masculine side of nature, by its design, will always attempt to overpower and dominate in order to secure its prize, inevitably the female side will always be strong enough to impose its own

necessary virtues; i.e. nurturing, child-rearing and community building, etc... in order for any society to survive, much less progress. The amazing thing to me, exemplified in Chopin's life and work, is that when these virtues are given the freedom to blossom, it is not only the natural functions of the female gender; to physically give life, rear life and build life, but the uniquely feminine artistry required to accomplish this, that discovers its amazingly beautiful voice, a voice that cannot be suppressed and deserves to be heard.

As obvious as this fact is to me, it has yet to be accomplished, even in the academic world which would seem to be the first to embrace it. In discussing this paper with a personal mentor, a woman with multiple post graduate degrees, including a Ph.D., a professional educator, teacher and department head, a woman who embodies successful feminism to me, I was unfortunately not shocked when her first reply to my description of it was, "Okay so now you will want to kill me – but who is Kate Chopin?" This is not to her shame but ours. Those of us in the field of education, from primary to secondary, to graduate and post-graduate, who do know who Kate Chopin is have obviously not fulfilled our responsibilities in passing along the ground breaking work this unique American trailblazer has gifted us with. It is true she was ahead of her time, but she was not ahead of ours. We live in an environment where the works of Kate Chopin are instantly recognized by modern, empowered women for what they are, and I believe our duty is to ensure that future generations of young women will be taught not only who Kate Chopin was and what she wrote, but who they can be and what they can do; freely, naturally, with not only society's permission but its insistence, that their place is and must be, one of true natural equality. Emily Toth in *Unveiling Kate Chopin* writes, "Kate O'Flaherty grew up with the sound of women's voices telling her that it is good for a girl to be smart, to be shrewd, to manage her own money, to be independent, to have opinions, and to tell her own

stories in her own way.” As Kate grew into a young woman she did exactly that in her stories, not only freeing Edna and herself, but ultimately all of us: “But a century later, when we read her, we know that she opened windows, and she gave us wings” (244).

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