

Chopin, Kate, 1851-1904  
from *Literature Online biography*

Kate Chopin (1850-1904) was an American writer who came to prominence at the fin de siècle with her short stories, many about Louisiana life. She was admired in her lifetime chiefly for her 'charming' depictions of 'local colour', and the work now regarded as her great achievement, the novel *The Awakening* (1899), was accorded a decidedly mixed reception. Since the late 1960s this novel has come to be regarded as a classic of American literature and is a staple of literature and women's studies university courses, though it is not yet very familiar to general readers. Bearing in mind *The Awakening*, the story of a woman's sense of oppression in conventional marriage and her burning desire (not uncomplicatedly fulfilled) for liberty, modern critics tend to value most highly those of Chopin's short stories that, in her lifetime, were regarded as distasteful and even unrespectable, dealing with sexuality and the less than fairytale aspects of relationships between the sexes. Chopin was not a campaigning author, for all that she foregrounded socially uncomfortable issues in a way that was considered 'advanced': though some of her characters chafe at conventional expectations, she carefully presented herself as a mother and homemaker, writing only in the interstices of domestic responsibilities; and her treatment of class and race is not always as enlightened as her modern critics would like. Sue Asbee has commented that 'there is a sense in which it is disappointing that such a forward-thinking woman campaigned for nobody's rights'.

Kate Chopin was born Catherine O'Flaherty in St Louis, Missouri, on 8 February 1850. Her parents were Irish-born merchant Thomas O'Flaherty and Eliza Faris, daughter of a prominent St Louis French family. Thomas was a widower with a son, George, who died whilst serving as a Confederate soldier during the Civil War; Kate was the second child of this second marriage. A defining influence on her childhood was her French great-grandmother, who taught her to play the piano and speak French, as well as the art of storytelling. The old lady oversaw her education for over a year, after her father's death in a railway accident in 1855 necessitated her temporary withdrawal from the convent school, the Academy of the Sacred Heart, where she studied from 1855 to 1868. At the age of thirteen, Kate O'Flaherty became a minor local celebrity after tearing down a Union flag attached to her house by Yankee soldiers. She left the Sacred Heart convent, where she was well-schooled both in feminine accomplishments and literature, in 1868. Her first known story, 'Emancipation: A Life Fable', seems to date from the following year, and while its prose bears little trace of Chopin's later artistry, it is significant in addressing one of her key themes, the desire for freedom -- in this case that of a caged creature -- no matter if the consequences are difficult or even fatal.

Kate was a 'belle', or debutante, in the season 1868-9, a round of social engagements that she found tedious but which resulted in her engagement to Oscar Chopin, the son of plantation owners. She married him in 1870 and after a honeymoon touring Europe the couple settled in New Orleans; their first son was born the following spring, followed, by 1879, by four more sons and a daughter. They were initially prosperous and lived a typical wealthy Southern lifestyle, its manners somewhat less inhibited than those of the East Coast -- for example it was not frowned upon for women to drink and smoke in moderation. Kate Chopin rejoiced after her marriage in her new freedom to walk the streets alone and to smoke cigarettes, and it seems that Oscar (unlike Mr Pontellier in *The Awakening*) afforded his wife a considerable degree of liberty. The New Orleans climate was not healthy, and the family spent the summer months on the Creole playground of Grand Isle, immortalised in *The Awakening*. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Oscar became a cotton factor, a lucrative but risky operation; his finances became parlous in the late 1870s and the couple moved in 1879 to Cloutierville, Natchitoches Parish in rural Louisiana where Oscar ran a store. He died of swamp fever, probably malaria, in 1882.

Kate remained in Cloutierville for two years after his death, running the business and punctiliously paying off her husband's large debts. In her business proficiency she resembled Thérèse Lafirme, the heroine of her first novel, *At Fault* (published privately in 1890), who ran her husband's cotton plantation after his death. In the novel, which blends conventions of nineteenth-

century romantic melodrama with Chopin's characteristic questioning of social pieties, Thérèse and David Hosmer are in love but she insists that it was immoral of him to divorce his alcoholic wife and that he must return to her; virtue then has its reward when Fanny Hosmer fortuitously dies in a flood, leaving David and Thérèse free to marry. Within this rather pious-sounding scheme, however, Chopin showed herself to be decidedly unconventional: her heroine's Catholic piety is shown to be a matter of social form ('the prejudices of her Catholic education') rather than conviction, and the moral force of her grand gesture is thus undermined as Thérèse begins to believe herself 'at fault' for her dogmatism; the presentation of Hosmer's wife's alcoholism, a taboo subject, also raised eyebrows. In the context of Chopin's biography, the depiction of Thérèse as a thoroughly independent widow is also significant: Chopin never remarried and, while the happiness or otherwise of her own marriage is unknown, biographer Emily Toth points out that 'few of Kate Chopin's widowhood stories are portraits of grief'. The best-known example is 'The Story of an Hour' whose protagonist, Mrs Mallard, being wrongly informed of her husband's death feels herself 'free, free, free!' and anticipates a future where 'there would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature'. What is certain is that it was only after her husband's death that, encouraged by the family physician, Chopin began seriously to write.

Among her first published pieces was the short story 'A Point at Issue!' which was published in the St Louis Post-Dispatch in October 1889. Like many of Chopin's works the story concerns a woman (Eleanor Gail) possessed by an idea of self-actualisation, and determined not to subsume her identity in marriage. Eleanor, with the agreement of her husband Charles, goes to live in Paris to learn French, heedless of society's gossip. The husband's reward for thus setting her free is, after some jealousy on both sides, that she returns happily to live with him, a conclusion that is echoed in other stories by Chopin. An example is 'Athénaïse', in which a young woman married to a planter feels so trapped by her marriage that she flees and sets up home alone in a boarding house; when she finds herself to be pregnant she experiences a change of heart and returns home, discovering that physical revulsion against her husband, Cazeau, has given way to passion. This tale, though its ending is morally satisfying enough for a nineteenth-century periodical, exemplifies Chopin's radical insights into the reality of marriage, her recognition, in particular, that love may be grown into and out of. Her awareness of the importance of conscious choice to personal and marital growth and of the ineffably powerful effect of the physical ('bodily perceptions' as she puts it in 'Wiser than a God') -- even to allude to Athénaïse's revulsion at her husband's feet ('his ugly bare feet -- washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes, ugh!'), or to the changes wrought by pregnancy -- was somewhat shocking in the 1890s.

'Wiser Than a God', Chopin's second published tale, concerns the determination of its protagonist, Paula, to pursue a musical career rather than succumb to marriage: she tries to make a suitor see the seriousness of her artistic vocation, asking him, 'Would you go into a convent, and ask to be your wife a nun who has vowed herself to the service of God?'. Women's striving for goals not tied up with marriage and children, and men's belittling of these efforts, is a recurring theme in Chopin's novels and stories. The most notable example is *The Awakening*, with its portrayal of a bored wife whose awakening sensuality is tied up with her painting. A more muted instance is 'Elizabeth Stock's One Story', in which a rural postmistress who has 'always felt as if I would like to write stories' cannot think of a plot that has not already been used and is mocked by her uncle for trying; ultimately the only 'connected or consecutive narration' found among her papers after her death from consumption is the unsensational narration of her own unfulfilling life. The triumph of 'renowned pianist' Paula in 'Wiser than a God' is not replicated in any of Chopin's later stories, in which women's ambitions are often thwarted or quashed: Susan ('Suzima') in 'A Vocation and a Voice', who longs to be an opera singer, is a late example.

*At Fault* was greeted by mixed reviews -- some praising the charm of Chopin's writing about rural Louisiana, others criticising perceived moral lapses. From 1890 she published regularly in periodicals, both the prestigious nationals ( *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Vogue*, from 1893) and more local journals, as well as publications aimed at children such as *Youth's Companion*.

The greater proportion of the stories printed in *Bayou Folk* (1894) had actually first been printed in young people's journals. These stories, including 'In Sabine', 'Beyond the Bayou', 'At the 'Cadian Ball', 'A Gentleman of Bayou Têche' and 'Desirée's Baby', peppered with Creole and French expressions and casual allusions to bayou topography, increased the tendency of reviewers to regard Chopin as a quaint regionalist, although this was a label she increasingly failed to live up to: only a few of the stories in her last collection, *A Vocation and a Voice* (1991; unpublished in her lifetime), have discernible Louisiana settings. 'A Gentleman of the Bayou Têche' reveals Chopin's awareness of the potentially patronising tendencies of the 'local colour' school. In it an artist visits rural Louisiana in search of 'local colour' and wishes to paint a portrait of the Cajun 'picturesque subject' Evariste; the latter's black servant warns him that the planned picture will be captioned 'Dis heah is one dem low-down Cajuns o' Bayou Têche' and Evariste proudly refuses to sit. Later, after he has saved the artist's son from drowning, he is offered the opportunity to write his own caption, and the result shows his insistence on his own individuality and dignity -- he is no representative Cajun but 'Mista Evariste Anatole Bonamar, a gent'man of de Bayou Têche'.

The customs and culture of Natchitoches Parish infuse stories such as 'At the 'Cadian Ball', but Chopin tried to individuate her characters and their joys and pains rather than presenting them as exotic specimens. While 'Beyond the Bayou' may be criticised for its contention that freed black people are nostalgic for the old South, it remains, as Walker has pointed out, a rare attempt by a white writer of the period to present seriously and sympathetically a black woman's subjectivity. 'Desirée's Baby', in which a young woman's black ancestry comes to light when she has a child, resulting in social ostracism, seems to indicate discomfort with racism, though Chopin is often accused of presenting black characters stereotypically. The fact that Oscar Chopin was a member of the white supremacist White League is an unavoidable fact of Chopin's biography, though her own views are ambiguous. 'For Marse Chouchoute' (in *A Night in Acadie*, 1897) is another tale in which a black character (Wash, the friend of the Creole Chouchoute who, entrusted with the Cloutierville mailbag, is distracted by a party from taking it to the rail station on time) is represented both sympathetically -- in his decision to take the bag himself and his resultant injury he is the story's hero -- and stereotypically -- he refers to Chouchoute as 'Marse' or Master, despite the fact that he is a friend not a servant.

During the early 1890s, as well as publishing dozens of stories in periodicals -- she wrote over a hundred in all -- Chopin worked on a novel, *Young Dr Gosse* (which was never published, Chopin eventually destroying the manuscript); a one act comedy, *An Embarrassing Position* (1895); and translations of Maupassant. She also became a local literary celebrity, noted for her Thursday evening soirées of artists and intellectuals. Reform movements of various sorts were rife in her class but Chopin maintained a distance from 'improving' schemes, memorably undermining them in her story 'Miss McEnders'. Here, the wealthy young lady protagonist is full of plans for improving factory girls but, after she sacks her dressmaker for having an illegitimate child, she discovers that her father's riches come from illicit whiskey trading, and her zeal is crushed. The story was not published for several years -- reform movements being deemed an unsuitable butt of mockery -- and eventually appeared under a nom de plume, as it was based on real St Louis characters. Another story that was somewhat scandalous was 'Mrs Mobry's Reason' which -- following Chopin's reading of Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* -- deals with hereditary syphilis; 'Dr Chevalier's Secret', about a doctor's provision of a decent burial for a dead prostitute in order to protect her family from the truth about her, was another early story that displeased prudish commentators.

*A Night in Acadie* appeared in 1897, including among its twenty-one tales 'Athénaïse', 'Azélie' and 'A Respectable Woman'. 'Azélie' is a powerful story of a young Cajun girl's resistance to the attempts of a man who is her social superior to tame her in marriage. Fewer of the stories in this collection -- only four, as opposed to twelve in *Bayou Folk* -- were originally published in young people's magazines; these include 'Polydore' and 'The Lilies'.

*The Awakening*, the work on which Chopin's reputation chiefly rests, was published in 1899. This

short novel in thirty-nine episodes of varying length, tied together by recurring imagery (of the sea for example), is the story of the sensual and psychological 'awakening' of its protagonist, Edna Pontellier, wife of the stolid but unobjectionable Léonce Pontellier and mother to his children. A summer vacation on Grand Isle leads to Edna falling passionately in love with another man, Robert Lebrun, an affair that is not consummated but which arouses such powerful sexual feelings that Edna, when parted from Robert, embarks on a physical affair with a man for whom she cares little, Alcée Arobin. She decides to become an artist and leaves the marital home and her family, heedless of scandal. At the novel's lyrical end Edna swims, naked, far out to sea, and presumably drowns. Whether this ending represents a triumphant final liberation or an admission of failure perennially baffles critics, but the conduct of this American Madame Bovary (as Willa Cather described her, not approvingly, in an early review) attracted a flurry of sententious reviews, Edna's chief sin being, as the novel puts it, that she is 'not a mother-woman'. Edna is not one of the idealised breed of women who 'idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels', and Chopin's ironic tone here led reviewers to feel -- despite her own exemplary lifestyle -- that she was promulgating dangerous attitudes. The novel was described by the Providence Sunday Journal as 'gilded dirt' and Edna's pursuit of 'selfish' urges, regardless of her family, was seen as almost sacrilegious. However, many of Chopin's friends admired the novel in private and a few in public: Charles Deyo in the St Louis Post-Dispatch said it was 'sad and mad and bad, but it is all consummate art', and the novel's impassioned lyricism is now regarded as genius. The novel offers various models of femininity, from the ultra-maternal Madame Ratignolle to the withered, ugly, crabbed, old musician Madame Reisz who has surrendered all hope of relationships in favour of her art. Edna's development may thus be seen against a backdrop of conventional expectations about women (the Madonna, the unnatural bluestocking), though her success as a character comes from her inability to live up to either or any role. A short story that can interestingly be read alongside *The Awakening* is 'Silk Stockings' a brief sketch of female 'selfishness' and the sense of liberation it bestows.

The generally negative response to *The Awakening*, probably combined with commercial cutbacks, led Chopin's publishers to decide not to proceed with the publication of her third collection of stories, *A Vocation and a Voice*, and in the last few years of her life her stories were only infrequently published in magazines: 'Alexandre's Wonderful Experience' (a children's morality tale) and the local-coloured 'A December Day in Dixie' were among her late publications. Stories intended to be included in *A Vocation and a Voice* include 'The Godmother', about the obsessive love of a godmother for her godson which leads her to shield him from justice after he commits a murder; 'The Lilacs', about a French actress's return to seek emotional solace in the convent where she was educated; 'The Dream of an Hour'; the 'decadent' tale of a vision fuelled by 'The Egyptian Cigarette'; 'Her Letters', and 'Recovery'. The latter two stories present bleak pictures of relationships between the sexes. In 'Recovery', a woman regains her sight after fifteen years of blindness only to reject the lover who has waited patiently to marry her: 'The blessed light had given her back the world, life, love; but it had robbed her of her illusions; it had stolen away her youth', and with it her youthful love for the man. In 'Her Letters', a man charged to destroy his wife's letters by a former lover after her death throws himself into the river after them, unable to bear the thought that 'this man had changed the water in her veins to wine, whose taste brought delirium to them both'. Chopin's descriptions of sexual passion in these late stories -- as making an impression like 'white hot iron' in the collection's title story, for example -- were too frank for some readers when they appeared in periodicals, so it is not surprising that 'The Storm', her most explicitly sexual story, in which a couple have an adulterous encounter whose passion is echoed in the tumultuous elements outside, was not published until long after her death. Another late story of interest, unpublished in Chopin's lifetime, is 'Charlie', whose androgynous and 'modern' heroine possesses feminine accomplishments, business acumen and skill with a revolver.

In the mid-twentieth century a rumour developed that *The Awakening* had been banned from St Louis libraries soon after publication and that Chopin had become something of a pariah, but in fact this was untrue (as revealed by Toth) and she remained a literary luminary until her death,

despite a slowing rate of publication. She had a reputation as a poet among her coterie, but critics today value her rather conventional and technically clumsy poems mostly for the biographical insights they provide. She attended the 1904 World's Fair in St Louis enthusiastically, and it was after a day spent exploring new inventions and jazz that she died, apparently of a brain haemorrhage, on 22 August 1904. *The Awakening* was reprinted in 1906 but Chopin then 'disappeared' for half a century, her work scarcely meriting a footnote in early twentieth-century literary studies. The French-born critic Cyrille Anarvon began the process of rehabilitation in the 1950s, and he encouraged his graduate student Per Seyersted to study and edit the works of Chopin (in the 1960s); Seyersted also produced a biography, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (1969). By the 1970s, Chopin was accepted as a major woman writer, and *The Awakening* appeared in a Norton critical edition in 1976. Chopin's translations of Maupassant , *A Vocation and a Voice* and a major biography by Emily Toth ( *Kate Chopin* , 1991) all appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Chopin is much-studied at universities: for example, the Open University volume *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Identities* (2001), edited by Dennis Walder, has two valuable chapters on *The Awakening* . Nancy A. Walker's *Kate Chopin: A Literary Life* (2001) is a good general introduction to her life and works.

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