Name Louise Rennemo

Exploring the female self in the works of Kate Chopin: a study in nineteenth century literature, science and ideology

Master's thesis in English literature

Trondheim, May 2015

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

NTNU – Trondheim
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Domhnall Mitchell, who has given me such wise and knowledgeable advice during the writing of this thesis. I am also very grateful to my husband and family, who have patiently listened to my babblings and worries. Finally, I am indebted to Sienna and Sophia - two tiny bundles, who forced me to finish this thesis on time.

Louise Rennemo, Trondheim, May 2015

Table of Contents

Introduction

I first came across the works of Kate Chopin many years ago. The brevity of the author's style and the haunting message that often accompanied her writing left a deep impression upon me. I would return time and again to my memory of her short stories and novels, wondering how the female protagonists could have acted differently to avoid their fate or, at least, improve their lives. Some form of selfish consolation was found in the fact that these short stories were set in the late nineteenth century, long before my time, thus distancing the dilemmas these women experienced. However, I could not rest easy and the question of female identity and how Chopin's women adapted to their contemporary society became of more and more interest.

Further reading led me to realize the fascination Chopin had with the scientific discoveries of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and in particular his theory of natural selection. The question arose as to why her work is often laced with images and themes of Darwin's theory.

This thesis will look into the exploration of the female self and society in nineteenth century literature, based on Kate Chopin's works, with particular emphasis on science and ideology. Nineteenth century ideas, the general expectations women were guided by and the Cult of Domesticity will set the scene for further investigation into female identity and roles, particularly in relation to marriage. Nineteenth century developments and scientific thinking, with a focus on Charles Darwin's works and their influence on Kate Chopin will be introduced and develop the background needed to explain why the latter's work often shows traces of Darwin's theory of natural selection.

Finally, I will summarize my thesis by reflecting upon why women perform the roles that they do and develop into the people that they are, concluding with a prediction at the type of future that Chopin felt was awaiting them.

Chapter One

The Roles, Influences and Lifestyle of the Typical American Middle-Class Woman of European Descent in the Nineteenth Century

Then Edna sat in the library after dinner and read Emerson until she grew sleepy.[1]

The fact that Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's longest novel, *The Awakening* (1899), is described as falling asleep whilst reading Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on *Self Reliance,* is significant and unsettling.[2] Emerson's work, written in 1841, explains the need for individuals to stand up for what they believe in, regardless of public opinion, and makes it clear that:

> To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, - that is genius. (Baym 549)

The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 confirmed North America's independence from European interference or influence in their affairs and this doctrine was driven home to an even greater extent by Emerson's essay on *Self Reliance* and his insistence on trusting oneself and listening to one's own inner voice. Just as North America had succeeded by standing up for itself and believing in its own independence, so should mankind.

---

[1] Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (2nd Edition) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1994), p.70. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets

[2] Nina Baym, Robert S. Levine, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (Shorter Eighth Edition) (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2013), pp. 549–66. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

For Chopin's Edna Pontellier this is, indeed, an important message and one that she could be said to adhere to an ever greater degree as the novel progresses. Why, then, should she fall asleep when reading Emerson's work? Her drowsiness could well be accounted for by the fact that what she was reading had no relevance to her whatsoever and thus bored her. But Emerson never specifically mentions women in his appeal to his audience; all his examples are focused on males. By ignoring women, Emerson suggests that such ideas are inaccessible and still to be realized for the female species of society. By having her fall asleep, Chopin suggests that such an idea is a dream for women, hence Edna's own reaction of disinterest and fatigue on her reading of the novel. How dull and pointless it would be to read something that could never be achieved, due to the fate of destiny deciding your sex.

Before proceeding to a discussion of characters and themes in Chopin's literature that portray her view of marriage and women's rights, it is first necessary to establish the historical context of the time in which Chopin wrote and then delve into the roles, influences and type of life a typical, American middle-class woman of European descent belonging to this time would have been expected to adhere to.

Catherine O'Flaherty was born on 8th February 1850 in St. Louis, Missouri to Thomas and Eliza Faris O'Flaherty. Her birth occurred right in the middle of a century renowned for radical changes on both the political and social scene. Many major events happened shortly before and after Chopin's birth and, although she was too young to experience them or have any clear memory of them, they were undoubtedly relevant and had important influence on her later life.

Women's Rights

The period from 1840 to 1850 represented the start of 'major emigration to the far West'[3] in America. Two years before Chopin's birth in 1848, America had its first Women's Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls, New York, which inaugurated 'the modern feminist movement, with a resolution on women's rights prepared under the leadership of Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton' (National Park Service). In April of the same year, women had finally made some gains within property rights through the New York's Married Women's Property Act and, although this was an important, but 'far from comprehensive piece of legislation' (National Park Service), it did set the scene for a focus on women's rights and voices to be heard in the ever-expanding society of the nineteenth century.[4]

Based on the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments was drawn up in which Stanton underlined the inequality of men and women, listing 'eighteen injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman.'[5] Eleven resolutions were also drafted, arguing that women should be equal to men in all spheres. The convention took place on 19th and 20th July 1848 at the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls before an audience of approximately three hundred people, roughly eight percent of whom were male. Frederick Douglass, a former slave and eloquent speaker, 'swayed the gathering into agreeing to the resolution' (National Portrait Gallery) and all but one of the resolutions was passed. Woman suffrage was turned down, and would not be accepted until 1920, sixteen years after Chopin's death. The importance of this convention, however, was not to be disputed and paved the

---

[3] National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, *1840–1850* <http://www.nps.gov/jeff/planyourvisit/1840-1850.htm> [accessed 7 October 2014]
All further references are to this site, and are given by surname in brackets.

4 Law Library of Congress, Married Women's Property Laws <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/property_law.html>[accessed 7 October 2014]

5 National Portrait Gallery, The Seneca Falls Convention <http://www.npg.si.edu/col/seneca/senfalls1.htm> [accessed 7 October 2014] All further references are to this site, and are given by surname in brackets.

way for progress within women's rights and the importance of their contribution to society in the second half of the century, and to an even stronger degree in the twentieth century.

Five years before Chopin's birth, Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) published her proto-feminist work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845).[6] Fuller was a 'journalist, critic and advocate for many progressive causes in the United States such as women's suffrage, emancipation of slaves and prison reform'.[7] Rather like Catherine Beecher (1800–1878), she was very interested and involved in the education of women but, unlike Beecher, she did not just want women to control their domestic arena, she wanted them to show their influence in the public sphere and to realize their full potential within general employment and education. The emancipation of slaves and prison reform were two other areas in which Fuller engaged herself very keenly. She became involved in the Transcendentalist Movement and was invited as a guest speaker by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who subsequently asked her to edit the Transcendentalist journal, *The Dial* in 1840. According to her biography by the European Graduate School (EGS), Fuller was editor for two years and after that period still continued to contribute to the journal with articles, one of which was the essay, 'The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women' (1843) which formed the backbone of her famous work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. It was through this job as editor that she could voice female inequality to society, thereby spreading her message to many in America.

Drowned at sea with her small family at the age of 40, Margaret Fuller's promising career as a ground-breaking feminist abruptly came to a close, but her novel, *Woman in the*

6 Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845). Copyright © 1999 by Dover Publications Inc. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

7 European Graduate School EGS, Margaret Fuller – Biography <http://www.egs.edu/library/margaret-fuller/biography/> [accessed 8 October 2014] All further references are to this site, and are given by surname in brackets.

Nineteenth Century, still remained as the most important feminist document to have appeared in America at this time and set the scene for female emancipation in the forthcoming years.

Her desire for equality between men and women can clearly be seen at the beginning of her treatise when she compares the sexes to a tree that cannot blossom unless its roots are free from disease.[8] The disease she refers to is that of sexual inequality. Only when men and women achieve this, will society become a healthy place in which everybody will thrive:

> We cannot expect to see any one sample of completed being, when the mass of men still lie engaged in the sod, or use the freedom of their limbs only with wolfish energy. The tree cannot come to flower till its root be free from the cankering worm, and its whole growth open to air and light. While any one is base, none can be entirely free and noble. Yet something new shall presently be shown of the life of man, for hearts crave, if minds do not know how to ask it. (Fuller 6)

She blamed the existing inequality in American society on 'moral depravity inherited from Europe which was reflected by the American treatment of Native Americans and African Americans' (EGS). In addition to her demand for equality for women, Fuller was also making a very important point here that inequality was fundamentally an anti-American practice in itself, since it stemmed from Europe and that America should go to even greater lengths to avoid it, if not for just this reason alone. If women are given equality, she states, everything else that is unfair in society should fall into place as a result of this:

> Ascertain the true destiny of woman, give her legitimate hopes, and a standard within herself; marriage and all other relations would by degrees be harmonized by these. (Fuller 14)

[8] It is interesting to note that the poem of William Blake (1757–1827), 'The Sick Rose' (1794) contains similar imagery of nature reflecting social ills. If there is something fundamentally wrong with society, this evil or misdoing will reveal itself in nature.

She effectively and very credibly silences those who would use the female's physique as an excuse for not being able to take part in governmental affairs, deeming the sex as too frail and condemning her rather to the home. She shows their hypocrisy by describing their ready willingness to allow females to carry out very hard physical labour in the fields or at home:

> But if, in reply, we admit as truth that woman seems destined by nature rather for the inner circle, we must add that the arrangements of civilized life have not been, as yet, such as to secure it to her. Her circle, if the duller, is not the quieter. If kept from "excitement", she is not from drudgery. Not only the Indian squaw carries the burdens of the camp, but the favorites of Louis the Fourteenth accompany him in his journeys, and the washerwoman stands at her tub and carried home her work at all seasons, and in all states of health. Those who think the physical circumstances of woman would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for the negresses to endure field work, even during pregnancy, or the sempstresses to go through their killing labors. (Fuller 14)

Kate Chopin would never have met Margaret Fuller, since the latter died five months after Chopin's birth, but the legacy Fuller left behind her, particularly with regard to women, influenced many other females in the second half of the nineteenth century, Chopin amongst them. The insistence by Paula to continue her musical career despite George's pleas and society's sub-conscious demands on her to get married, are an example of the possibilities of female emancipation that Chopin wanted to portray to her readers through one of her short stories, 'Wiser than a God' (1889). The character of Paula reflected, in turn, Margaret Fuller's ideal of what a woman could achieve by being given the liberty to choose her own path in life (this instance being a career, rather than marriage).

The Cult of Domesticity

Other prominent figures in the nineteenth century who were influential in the advancement of women's rights and education were the Beecher sisters, Isabella Beecher Hooker (1822–1907), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) and Catherine Beecher. Isabella was the youngest of the three sisters and later in her lifetime became an activist for the American Suffragist movement. Catherine was the eldest and dedicated most of her life to the importance of the woman's role in the home and to the education of women.

As Glenna Matthews describes in her book *Just a Housewife* (1989) the mid-nineteenth century was designated as the 'Golden Age of Domesticity'.[9] The home became more than just a refuge; it became a place of value in which women were given a higher status than ever before within the realms of their role as a moral, gentle guider to their families. This, in turn, increased a woman's self-esteem about domestic work being important and her own role as being a vital one within her family and the community. As Matthews says 'by 1850 the home had become a mainstay of the national culture.' (Matthews 35) Books of advice on correct behavior and conduct for housewives, as well as books about the architecture and interior design of homes were very popular reading matter. Catharine Beecher and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote about domestic self-management, as well as Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), who wrote about the interior and exterior architecture of American houses, were popular authors, both to the male and female reader. Periodicals, such as *Godey's Lady's Book* (1830), published by Louis Godey (1804–1878) and edited by Sarah Josepha Hale (1788–1879), were also immensely popular as they gave

[9] Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America, 1830–1963* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 35. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

the reader a variety of advice through different styles of writing and informative articles. As Glenna Matthews states:

> *Godey's* contained fiction, poetry, needlework patterns, designs for model homes, and illustrations of the latest fashions, as well as Hale's editorials. In its pages appeared the writing of Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Homes, Catharine Beecher, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, to cite only a few of its distinguished contributors. At its height *Godey's* had a circulation of 150,000, with a growth paralleling the growth of the domestic novel. (Matthews 43)

These periodicals had a very great influence on mid-nineteenth century society, particularly for women. The educative books of Catherine Beecher and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, were also invaluable reading material of the day. As previously mentioned Catherine Beecher was a strong believer in the importance of women's role to society and devoted most of her life to the education of women. In her own day she was best known for her book, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841).[10] It was written as a repository of information for young women, 'at all times and in all places' (Beecher 2). She describes the book herself as a, '*text-book* for female schools' (ibid.) and her intentions were to teach women how to cope with domestic life and to see it as an education, something that should be studied and learned, thereby emphasizing how very important women were to both family and society. As Matthews explains, Catherine Beecher became, 'an important female progenitor as teacher, as home economist, as architect, and as theologian.' (Matthews 45)

Although Beecher wanted to elevate the life of women and make them realize how important they were to a well-functioning family and thus society in general, she did make it

[10] Catherine Esther Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (South Carolina: BibioBazaar, 2008). All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

clear that there were two areas from which women should refrain: civil and political life. These areas were reserved for males. She makes this clear in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*:

> In this Country, it is established, both by opinion and by practice, that woman has an equal interest in all social and civil concerns; and that no domestic, civil, or political, institution, is right, which sacrifices her interest to promote that of the other sex. But in order to secure her the more firmly in all these privileges, it is decided, that, in the domestic relation, she take a subordinate station, and that, in civil and political concerns, her interests be intrusted to the other sex, without her taking any part in voting, or in making and administering laws. (Beecher 23)

She subsequently goes on to declare that her opinion is supported by the French philosopher, Alexis De Tocqueville (1805–1855), someone who, according to her, 'ranks second to none' (Beecher 24) for his, 'intelligence, fidelity, and ability' (ibid.).

It is of no great surprise that she did not support women's emancipation concerning their civil and political rights and she was by no means alone in this train of thought. It is important to remember that she had been brought up in a Christian family with a Christian background, influenced by biblical teaching which had always emphasized the secondary position of women in relation to men. Many other female writers of the time, such as Sarah Josepha Hale, also believed that women belonged to the domestic sphere and should be spared from the trials of the political one. She, too, was against woman suffrage and 'believed in clearly delineated separate spheres for the two sexes' (Matthews 43). Hale

clearly states this in the section about men and women in her conduct book, *Manners; or Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round:*[11]

> Would it not be better if the sex were admitted to participate directly in the administration of government, voting and holding offices equally with men? No: I reply unhesitatingly, no! Feminine power is not coercive, but persuasive. However salutary moral influences may be, yet in civil governments the laws must, in the last resort, be upheld by material force. This duty women could not perform; nor could they share in the government, unless the other sex permitted. (Hale 358-9)

As Glenna Matthews describes, however, Hale did make huge efforts within other areas of women's lives to push for their progress, such as improved education, property rights and admission to the medical profession.

Catherine Beecher's sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was more political than her sister. Her work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is a shining example of this in its indirect, yet forceful reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote what many considered to be a masterpiece in challenging the appalling moral dilemma that this Act forced people into obeying. Much of the success of the novel was achieved precisely through the increased status of domesticity that existed at the time. Stowe used many descriptions of the housewife, mother and the home to emphasise her point of view that slavery was abhorrent. As Glenna Matthews explains, 'The elevated view of the home and the housewife gave her both a touchstone of values and the self-confidence to tackle so ambitious a topic as slavery.' (Matthews 49)

[11] Sarah J. Hale, *Manners; or Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round* (Boston: J. E. Tilton and Company, 1868) (Reprint Edition 1972 by Arno Press Inc.). All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote several other books regarding domesticity, such as *The American Woman's Home* (1869) as well as being the co-editor of a periodical called *Hearth and Home* that appeared in December 1868, giving domestic advice, agricultural help, current news, and also some quite feminist articles.

Despite their attempts to improve woman's lot, both the Beecher sisters and Hale still held on to a belief in the separation of male and female spheres. They felt that men should busy themselves with business and outdoor labour, whilst women were to be the, 'guardians of the home' (Matthews 46) and the moral beacon for its members. Both sexes should, however, work together with the one being dependent upon the other in order to make society function smoothly. The crux of this, though, was that women should be deferential to men. Kathryn Kish Sklar sums this up well when she says:

> Catharine's analysis of domesticity does not differ in purpose from that of Bushnell or Hale. All agreed that the isolation of women in the home and away from full participation in the society decreased the tensions and anxieties that characterized American life. […] The only requirement for a place on this cultural dais was that women reject aggression and embrace deference as a style of social interaction.[12]

It was in this area that these women differed radically from Margaret Fuller, who had advocated full equality so that the spheres could mingle and interact without one being dominated by the other.

The separation of the male and female spheres was far more accepted throughout society at this time than Fuller's ideal of equality. In a series of lectures on *The Sphere and*

[12] Katherine Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1976), p. 163. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

Duties of Woman (1848), George Burnap, a clergyman from New Hampshire, advocates this clearly when he says:

> But whatever may be the original equality of the sexes in intellect and capacity, it is evident that it was intended by God that they should move in different spheres, and of course that their powers should be developed in different directions. They are created not to be alike but to be different.[13]

Advice of all types was given to women through lectures, periodicals and conduct manuals, on everything from healthy food and the care of infants to the use of fires and lights and the construction of houses. All of this information intentionally guided women towards the realm that was to be theirs – domesticity; the sphere within which they were to feel safe and of which they were the masters. In Catherine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, women are guided, for example, in the importance of cleanliness and regular washing of the body and clothes:

> Moreover, it has been shown, that the skin has the power of absorbing into the blood particles retained on its surface. In consequence of these peculiarities, the skin of the whole body needs to be washed, every day […] the articles worn next to the skin should often be changed; and why it is recommended that persons should not sleep in the article they wear next the skin through the day. (Beecher 113-4)

She also refers to the importance of social etiquette when she says that women have 'the claims of society to meet, calls to receive and return, and the duties of hospitality to sustain.' (Beecher 151). Correct social behaviour was to be learned and then strictly adhered to. Sarah Josepha Hale dedicates several pages to the importance of this in her previously mentioned conduct manual book, *Manners; or Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year*

[13] George Washington Burnap, *The Sphere and Duties of Woman: A Course of Lectures* (Harvard: J. Murphy, 1848), p.45.

Round. The background to social visits and the best way to carry them out is explained in great detail, and women of the day would have been expected to have read such advice to help them in their social conduct. Hale delves into the correct hours of the day in which visits should be made:

> The main points to be observed about visits are the proper occasions and the proper hours. A friendly visit may be made at any time on any occasion. Among gentlemen, one is more welcome when the business of the day is over, in the afternoon rather than the morning; and you should, even as a friend, avoid calling at meal times. (Hale 218-9)

She also describes the roles of the hosts and how much attention should be paid to each visitor:

> A gentleman should never take the principal place in the room, nor sit at an inconvenient distance from the lady of the house. A well-bred lady, who is receiving two or three visitors at a time, pays equal attention to all, and attempts, as much as possible, to generalize the conversation. The last arrival naturally receives a little more attention; and the first comers, in such cases, should leave as soon as convenient. People who outsit two or three visitors are usually voted "bores," who do not know when you have had enough of their company. (Hale 219)

It is interesting to note that it is precisely this refusal to receive callers that is one of the first examples of Edna Pontellier's dismissal of society and its pressures. To refuse visitors, with no viable excuse or explanation, was an unusual thing to do at that time; Edna simply went out for the day and gave no excuse for her absence, as she explains to her shocked husband, Léonce:

> I found their cards when I got home; I was out […] No, I left no excuse. I told Joe to say I was out, that was all. (Chopin 49)

Having come back to New Orleans, she finds her life stifling and constricting. On Grand Isle she has a certain type of freedom from her husband, Léonce, and from her expected social duties. When in New Orleans, the first thing Edna rejects is this social convention, thereby making her own choices and demonstrating free will. She says no to society and her social self, cutting off the part of herself that is defined by society. Chopin is making a symbolic point here between biology (nature and the countryside) and culture (the city). Nature gives the appearance of freedom whereas the city evokes feelings of imprisonment, confinement and restriction. The freedom that Edna feels occurs when she is away from the city, walking on the beach, swimming in the sea or talking to the other Creole women on Grand Isle. The voicing of her thoughts to her Creole friend, Adèle Ratignolle, when both women were sitting on the beach, shows Edna's love of this natural setting on Grand Isle:

> First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. (Chopin 16)

A little later in the same scene, Chopin describes Edna in the following way:

> She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom. (Chopin 19)

It is as if nature allows her the liberty of admitting her true feelings for the first time. When she gets back to the city of New Orleans, however, it is as if her body and mind shut down and she wants to avoid contact with people and open places. This is shown clearly in her vacant and disinterested mood when she stands on the front veranda of the Pontellier house in Esplanade Street:

> Edna looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic. (Chopin 51)

The importance of the role of nature in Chopin's works will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

Divorce

Another aspect of nineteenth century society that should be considered when looking at the bigger picture of an average person's life at this time was the presence, and, ultimately, influence of divorce. As Norma Busch succinctly remarks in her book, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (2001), 'marriage was (and is) a metonym for the social order'.[14] To be married was often the sole object of an individual's life, a means of fitting into society and following its most important contract between a man and a woman. Basch describes the power and importance of marriage in this century when she says:

> In a century that elevated the concept of contract to unprecedented heights, marriage was a contract unlike any other. It was the simultaneously private and public contract that defined the obligations between husband and wife, bound their union to the political order, and shaped constructions of gender. (Basch 3)

Divorce, on the other hand, undermined marriage and 'rocked the foundations' (Basch 3) of this social order. It put into question the separation of the private and public spheres,

[14] Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (California: University of California Press, 2001), p.3. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

since the private, homely life of marriage was suddenly brought onto the public stage for everybody's inspection. Changes were made to the marriage laws in the nineteenth century. Previously, if a woman had decided to leave her husband, she would not have been given any access to the children, who were considered the husband's property.[15] In 1839, this state of affairs changed with the introduction of the Custody of Infants Act which allowed mothers 'of unblemished character access to their children' (Basch 3). In 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act allowed women to file for divorce, albeit in a limited way.

To obtain a divorce usually meant that the woman had to go to great lengths and suffer humiliation. For the husband who wanted a divorce, all that was needed was to prove that his wife had committed adultery. For the wife, however, it was necessary 'to prove her husband had not only committed adultery but also incest, bigamy, cruelty or desertion'.[16] In many ways, this course of events was not at all beneficial to a woman, particularly if she did not have her own income or financial means of support and was thus not independent. Newspapers from the nineteenth century show that divorce was written about and mentioned, but more in a scandalous or moralistic tone, as if they were trying to shock people into avoiding divorce. The *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* of November 24th, 1881, for example describes one particular divorce case as 'A Great Scandal' [17] and the divorce court as the

[15] It is interesting to note that the famous and highly-respected author, Charles Dickens (1812–1870), showed this patriarchal power in his cruel treatment of his spouse. Michael Slater in his book *The Great Charles Dickens Scandal* (2014) shows the unpleasant side of this national hero, as well as the powerlessness that women of the nineteenth century often experienced in their roles as cuckolded wives. Slater recounts how Charles Dickens banished his wife to another bedroom so that he could carry on extra-marital affairs, eventually abandoning his wife altogether and taking their children with him, leaving her with nothing.

[16] Loyola University, Kate Chopin – The Role of the Wife and the Mother <http://www.loyno.edu/~kchopin/new/women/motherhood.html> [accessed 19 November 2014]

[17] Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, (Milwaukee, WI) Thursday, November 24, 1881; pg. 8: Issue 281; col A. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/194/984/32979328w16/purl=rc1__0_GT3002944657&dyn=12!xrn_52_0_GT3002944657&bkm_14_> [accessed 18 November 2014]. All further references are to this site, and are given by the newspaper's name in brackets.

'prolific source of domestic wretchedness' (Milwaukee Daily Sentinel). In divorce trials, women were usually seen as the passive victims, either of men's adultery or general misbehaviour towards them. Basch makes an interesting point when she says that this very role of being the victim actually reinforced 'the authority of men' (Basch 155) and restricted woman's autonomy. The status of marriage was to be upheld as far as it was possible in order to maintain the status quo of society and Naomi Cahn, in her article on divorce in the nineteenth century, states that judges were conservative, not wanting to allow divorce if they possibly could:

> Judges saw their role as applying doctrine to improve society, and to uphold the marriage contract, rather than enabling the happiness of the individual family members seeking the divorce. It was only when one party had committed a grave fault against the other that a divorce could be issued.[18]

Despite this, there was an increase in divorce rates over the course of the nineteenth century, particularly from 1870 onwards, according to Carl Deglar.[19] Women had started to think in a more individualistic way, questioning their role and purpose in life as more than the moral stalwart of the home and the dutiful, obedient wife. As previously mentioned, their legal status went through quite a few important changes from the mid-century onwards, thereby supporting this increased individualism, whether intentional or not. In 1884, an amendment to the Married Women's Property Act allowed for a woman to be seen as an independent and separate person. Other Acts from the 1870s onwards gradually aided women in their search for individual rights. Christine Bolt recounts these different Acts and their consequences, listing them as follows:

---

[18] Naomi Cahn, 'Faithless Wives and Lazy Husbands: Gender Norms in Nineteenth Century Divorce Law', *G W Law Faculty Publications & Other Works*, U. Ill. L. Rev. 651, 14 (2002). <http://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/faculty_publications/333/ > [accessed 14 October 2014]

[19] Carl N. Deglar, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)

> The 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act permitted women to obtain separation orders through a magistrate's court and empowered the courts to grant maintenance to a woman 'whose husband had been convicted of an aggravated assault upon her. An aggrieved wife also became entitled to the custody of any children of the marriage under ten years of age.' In 1884, a further Matrimonial Causes Act outlawed the imprisonment by a husband of a wife who refused conjugal rights, and two years later the Maintenance of Wives (Desertion) Act authorised magistrates to grant maintenance orders, not exceeding £2 a week, to neglected or deserted wives.[20]

It is noteworthy that the topic of divorce is one of the main issues of Kate Chopin's first novel, *At Fault* (1890). The main character, the young widow, Thérèse Lafirme, becomes acquainted with David Hosmer when she sells timber rights to him. Hosmer soon falls in love with Thérèse, but when the latter discovers that Hosmer has been married and divorced, she decides not to speak to him again because she considers that he has failed in his duty as a husband. His only chance of regaining Thérèse's favour is to follow her moral code and thus return to St. Louis and remarry Fanny, his divorced, alcoholic wife. A series of disasters subsequently occur, resulting in the death of five of the characters, including Fanny. Hosmer, the widower, finally marries the widow, Thérèse.

The novel raises many social problems, but, as Donna Campbell comments, it is the issue of divorce that 'drives the action of the novel'. [21] If Thérèse had not insisted on taking the moral high ground concerning Hosmer's divorce, many of the tragedies would not have taken place. The novel has been considered by many as a social-problem novel in which Kate Chopin wanted to explore the issue of change and resistance to change on the individual level,

---

20 Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2014), p.137

21 Donna Campbell, 'At Fault: a reappraisal of Kate Chopin's other novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 33. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

by focusing particularly on the dilemma of divorce. It has also been said that her first novel closely reflected her own life in many ways. After her husband Oscar Chopin's death, Kate Chopin took over his business and ran it successfully, just as Thérèse did with the plantation. A couple of years after Chopin had become a widow, she left Natchitoches Parish to go and live in St. Louis. Rumour had it that she had been having an affair with Albert Sampite, a married man who was also a Catholic. Emily Toth, in her biography of Kate Chopin, hints that Chopin had never considered marrying Sampite, although she had been attracted to his charming personality when he was sober. Rather like her character, Thérèse, marriage to another man was out of the question for Chopin, but this time because the man in question was already married and even if he had obtained a divorce, it would not have been a viable proposition:

> If she had wanted to marry Albert, that was not possible. Among Catholics there was no divorce; under Louisiana civil law, if a divorce took place because of adultery "the offender may not marry his or her accomplice."[22]

Yet another of Chopin's works, the short story, 'Madame Celestin's Divorce' (1893), focuses on the possibility of the eponymous character applying for a divorce from her husband, Célestin. Although very short, the story toys with the idea of divorce as seen from the eyes of a Catholic. Chopin does this in a mildly amusing way by tantalizing the reader in her teasing, descriptive manner of a slightly flirtatious young woman; will she or won't she, is the continuous question at the back of the reader's mind throughout the story. Kate Chopin was, in the words of Emily Toth 'a renegade Catholic' (Toth 104) and, through this story, seems to be looking at the pros and cons of a situation that was, in fact, impossible for

[22] Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 98. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

Catholics to achieve at the time. Célestin echoes this reality when she describes her confidential talk with the bishop to Lawyer Paxton:

> "Ah, he's a eloquent man. It's not a mo'eloquent man in Natchitoches parish. I was fo'ced to cry, the way he talked to me about my troubles: how he undastan's them, an' feels for me. It would move even you, Judge, to hear how he talk' about that step I want to take; its danga, its temptation. How it is the duty of a Catholic to stan' everything till the las' extreme. An' that life of retirement an' self-denial I would have to lead, - he tole me all that."[23]

Both the reader and Lawyer Paxton (who falls more and more in love with Célestin as the story unfolds) are led to believe that the latter will go ahead and divorce her husband, but running parallel to this is an undercurrent of feeling that such a thing will ultimately not happen. Célestin, just as she flirts with the Judge, also seems to flirt with the idea of a possible escape from her marital dilemmas, neither of which turns out to be serious. This indecision running through the text seems to reflect Chopin's own thoughts about the sanctity of marriage and Catholicism; could it be a possible taunt to the Catholic Church and its patriarchal views of the dangers of abandoning one's husband, seen, as is interesting to note, only from a male (the bishop's) point of view?

Another aspect of Chopin's life, and one that is interesting to note while considering the role of divorce, is that none of the Chopin women ever had to go down such a path. Kate's great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and she herself all became widows at a young age, thrusting them into the solitary life of a single mother, as divorce would have

[23] Kate Chopin, *Kate Chopin. Complete Novels and Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: The Library of America, 2002), p. 252. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets and the editor's name. The reason for the editor's name being mentioned is to differentiate this collection of Chopin's works from her main novel, *The Awakening*.

done, but without experiencing the social stigma that divorce would have attached to it. As Emily Toth describes:

> These strong women also had an unusual talent for outliving their husbands. At a time when women often died in childbirth, Kate's female ancestors enjoyed exceptional longevity. Her great-grandmother died at eighty-three, and her grandmother at eighty-eight. By middle age, or sometimes even before, they had left or lost or buried the fathers of their children, and then gotten on with their lives. They were a demographic oddity, and they raised a young girl with a notably independent and quirky vision. (Toth 11)

Chapter Two

Gendered Identities

> As a general rule, a modest woman seldom requires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved of his attentions [...]. The married woman has no wish to be treated on footing with a mistress.[24]

In her book *The 'Improper' Feminine* (1992), Lyn Pyckett explains the main Victorian 'construction of woman' [25]as a respectable, chaste, sexually passive and ignorant species, content with motherhood and domesticity. Victorian theorists, such as William Acton (1813–1875), the nineteenth century gynaecologist, gave non-sexual representations of women, depicting them as if they were purely biological vessels of maternity and this picture, Pykett argues 'proved remarkably pervasive and persistent' (Pykett 15) in the mid-to late nineteenth century. The fact that a woman should require any form of sexual gratification for herself was totally contrary to the Victorian ethos of modesty as Pykett points out:

> Active and autonomous sexual feeling, on the other hand, denotes masculinity, or a deviant, 'improper' femininity. Women are either non-sexual, or they are omni-sexual, criminals, madwomen, or prostitutes. (Pykett 16)

Not everybody, however, agreed with this view. Amongst those who disputed it were the female sensationalists of the 1860s, the New Woman writers of the 1890s as well as the medic, George Drysdale (1825–1904). His book *Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion* (later

[24] William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (Philadelphia: Lyndsay and Blakiston, 1867), p. 145

[25] Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 16. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

retitled *Elements of Social Science*) appeared two years before Acton's work in 1855, published anonymously because Drysdale feared shocking his mother with his untraditional views. In clear opposition to the traditional, Victorian vision of women and sex, Drysdale encouraged the practice of 'healthy sexual exercise' (Pykett 17) for both women and men. As Pykett explains, he argued that 'strong sexual appetites are a very great virtue' (ibid.) as they reflected a healthy body and soul.[26]

As well as giving advice on sexual matters, Drysdale also proposed a very different view of marriage from the Victorian one. He saw this institution as basically harmful to women, robbing them of their freedom, financial independence and sexual expression:

[26] It is interesting to note that the poet, William Blake, reflected this thought of repression as being unnatural and incorrect for mankind more than fifty years earlier in his book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), with his famous line 'He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence.' William Blake, *Blake: The Complete Poems*, 3rd Edition, (Harrow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), p.113

> Marriage is one of the chief instruments in the degradation of women. It perpetuates the old inveterate error, that it is the province of the female sex to depend upon man for support, and to attend merely to household cares, and the rearing of children – a belief which is utterly incompatible with the freedom or dignified development of women on the one hand, and with the economical interests of society on the other. It is the emblem too of all those harsh and unjust views, which have given to woman so much fewer privileges in love than man, and have punished so much more severely a breach of the moral code in her case. For a man to indulge his sexual appetites illegitimately, either before or after the marriage vow, is thought venial; but for a woman to do so is the most heinous crime. The wife has been held, in the true spirit of the oriental harem, to be in a manner the *sexual* property of the husband, whom no one had a right to touch, and who had no right to have a thought for any one but her own lord and master.[27]

It is interesting to consider Edna Pontellier in this light. Such expectations are exactly what she struggles against; motherhood, and living life through her husband, in both thought and deed, were the norm. To *her* mind, however, it became more and more abhorrent. The novel begins with Edna's husband, Léonce, claiming ownership of his wife, reprimanding her for being sunburnt and looking at her 'as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.' (Chopin 4) It ends with her choosing sexual and economic independence, clearly seen by her act of moving out of the family home to a rented property, and by her statement to Robert that she belonged to nobody but herself: 'I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose.' (Chopin 102)

As Ann Heilmann explains in her essay '*The Awakening* and New Woman fiction' (2008), this self-determination shown by Edna is representative of 'nineteenth-century female

[27] George R. Drysdale, *The Elements of Social Science; Or, Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion,* 7th Edition, (London: E. Truelove, 1867), pp.355-56

traditions of writing', [28] especially the 'Anglo-American fiction of the New Woman.' (Heilmann 87)

New Woman Fiction

The New Woman writers of the 1890s reacted against the bourgeois picture of women and the patriarchal family, and Pykett describes them as reflecting a very real 'gender anxiety' or 'crisis of definition of gender' in their works (Pykett x). They aimed to counteract the 'angelic feminine ideal' (Pykett 6) by focusing on marriage rather than courtship, the latter being the subject of most Victorian novelists of the day. What actually happened to women after the romantic days of courtship, when the reality and everyday life of marriage had sunk in? This was what the New Woman writers were interested in revealing to the public. The term itself, as described in Carolyn Nelson's book *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles and Drama of the 1890s* (2000) was created by the author Sarah Grand (1854-1953) in her essay 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question' in 1894. As Nelson says:

> In the essay she uses the phrase "the new woman" to denote the woman who has finally "solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere.[29]

According to Ann Heilmann, the New Woman novel was often linked to the earlier genre of sensation fiction from the 1860s and had strong appeal for a female audience. Shocking plot elements, such as cross-dressing, prostitution and madness, were often used by the New Woman writers in their attempts to portray the dangers of marriage and sexual exploitation. Not everyone approved of these novels, since their contents often questioned

---

[28] Ann Heilmann, '*The Awakening* and New Woman fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 87. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

[29] Carolyn Nelson, *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Drama and Articles of the 1890s*, (Calgary: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), p.ix

traditional views of marriage, motherhood and sexuality, thereby interrogating the moral values of the average reader and ultimately questioning the male role within relationships and society as a whole.

To categorize Kate Chopin as a New Woman writer is far too straightforward. She was definitely interested in exploring the inner lives of women, their sensuality and self-awareness, but was not, as Ann Heilmann notes, the typical 'first-wave feminist' activist (Heilmann 92). She had no urge to tell people what to do; indeed, Heilmann explains that '"Thou shalt not preach" was her eleventh commandment' that she wrote about in an 'autobiographical piece of the 1890s' (ibid.). Per Seyerstad underlines Chopin's objective and non-didactic viewpoint in his *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (1969):

> In short, Mrs. Chopin appears to have achieved that thing – comparatively rare even today: to become a woman author who could write on the two sexes with a large degree of detachment and objectivity. [30]

She, in fact, went so far as to make fun of such reformist behaviour in one of her short stories 'Miss McEnders' (1897), in which the protagonist is made to look rather desperate and sad in her attempts to do good and improve society. She is described as a woman of 'not too nimble intelligence' (Gilbert 749) who:

> […] possessed ample wealth and time to squander, and a burning desire to do good – to elevate the human race, and start the world over again on a comfortable footing for everybody. (Gilbert 746-7)

She is shocked to discover that her seamstress has an illegitimate child and feels that the only appropriate form of action is to dismiss this person who, in Miss McEnders' eyes,

[30] Per Seyerstad, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 169. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

was a morally-depraved woman 'living in her sin […] with cool and deliberate intention.' (Gilbert 749). In a delightful twist at the end of the story, however, the reader discovers that Georgie McEnders' own world is turned upside down by the shocking discovery that the two most important men in her life, her own father and fiancé, were both social scoundrels in their own way, far from the respectable men that she had blindly believed them to be.

The same type of satire can be seen, as Heilmann explains, in Chopin's private diary entries in which she ridiculed an acquaintance 'who "wants to work to make life purer, sweeter, better" but whose good intentions always amounted to nothing' (ibid.).[31]

Chopin addresses many of the themes of New Woman fiction. As Heilmann mentions, women's conflicts within marriage, female independence and oppression were topics that she 'frequently engaged with' (Heilmann 93). Her short stories and novels present a varied picture of female identity, as well as giving an insight into the male role, though not as much as the female one. Young women who are engaged or courting, those who are unmarried (through choice or circumstance), married, divorced and widowed - all are portrayed in various ways in Chopin's fiction, but on the whole are seen in the light of marriage. That is to say, women in her works can be placed within these categories, with marriage being the ultimate goal which they strive towards, reach or steer well clear of. Looking at each of the categories in turn gives an idea as to the identity and role that both women and men had in the late nineteenth century.

[31] Chopin was not the only female author to be dismissive of reformers. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was similarly scathing. Elizabeth Petrino recounts an episode in which a reformer asked Dickinson if she would allow her poems to be published for charity and for the sake of feminine duty. Dickinson promptly refused, burnt the letter and heard no more from this particular person. In a letter to her friend, Louise Norcross, she vents her anger and ironically describes this do-gooder as 'extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch'. Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), p.45.

Pre-marriage

Amongst her stories of courtship and engagement, Chopin depicts several types of women and men. Whereas some experience joy and excitement in the flirtatious process of courtship, the majority suffer pain and unfulfilled dreams. Allen Stein's description of the courtship process as a type of 'predator' and 'prey' scenario is interesting to consider, particularly when one keeps in mind the Darwinian influence upon the author's writing.[32] Just as in the animal world when two creatures mate for natural reasons, human beings are often driven to each other because of urges that are biological and beyond their control. However, unlike Darwin's claim that sexual initiative is only taken by males, with 'the females remaining passive'[33], certain females also show flirtatious traits in Chopin's works.

In the short story 'The Kiss' (1895), Nathalie is hardly a modest, shrinking woman, waiting for a suitable man to sweep her off her feet and marry her. Instead, she falls into the category of female predators who unashamedly pursue their prey (men) until the latter are trapped. The protagonist in this story is determined to capture a wealthy husband; money and marriage must go hand in hand for Nathalie. She is excited by sexual passion in the form of Harvy, her handsome lover, who plants 'an ardent, lingering kiss upon her lips' without knowing that Brantain, Nathalie's future husband, is in the same room (Gilbert 775). Despite Brantain being 'insignificant and unattractive' (ibid.) in Nathalie's eyes, she is determined to engineer his marriage proposal, since he is 'enormously rich' (ibid.) and 'she liked and required the entourage which wealth could give her.' (ibid.) She resorts to deceit in order to

[32] Allen F. Stein, *Women and Autonomy in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 96. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

[33] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation in Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (6th Edition) (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1872), p. 249. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

marry Brantain and succeeds. Nathalie is the epitome of a ruthless and scheming woman, who would go to any lengths to marry a wealthy man, and is willing to forego any type of love or passion to attain her goal. Chopin ends the short story with a satirical comment that Nathalie at least had 'Brantain and his million left' (Gilbert 777) and that people 'can't have everything in this world' (ibid.), something which was 'a little unreasonable of her to expect' (ibid.). This comment shows not only the protagonist's ruthless streak, but also the author's own realistic observations as to the reason behind some women's need for marriage. Was wealth the only reason that women should agree to marriage? Should women really condescend to this role?

Nathalie's obsession with becoming rich through marriage would possibly have been put to the test had she been in Dorothea's shoes in 'The Unexpected' (1895). This tale of betrothal starts very hopefully with a couple who seem to be in love and have everything. However, Dorothea ends up fleeing from her fiancé, Randall, because she cannot bear the sight of his withering, diseased body after he had spent a spell abroad attending to business matters. Despite the prospect of a wealthy marriage, Dorothea finds her future repulsive and runs into the forest, where she was 'alone with nature' (Gilbert 792) and free to finally feel 'the delicious sensation of rest that overtook and crept tingling through the whole length of her body.'(ibid.) In the final sentence of the story, when Dorothea proclaims '"Never!" […] "not for all his thousands! Never, never! not for millions!"'(ibid.) one is given a clear picture of an independent woman who knows her own mind and is not swayed by the attraction of money. However, one could also question Dorothea's definition of true love in this story for, had she truly loved Randall, surely his illness would not have meant the end of their relationship? Chopin's depiction of Dorothea's dilemma indicates how dangerous and precarious courtship could be for a middle class woman in the late nineteenth century, in a

society that, as Stein observes, 'sees courtship and marriage as the only proper avenues available for a woman to follow in responding to the stirs of passion.' (Stein 106)

It is not only women who suffer in courtship; men's path to matrimony is also a rocky and emotionally unstable one. Polyte in 'Azélie' (1894) and Tonie in 'At Chênière Caminada' (1894) are both evidence of this. Common to these stories is the difficult entanglement of class and courtship, since both men fall in love with women outside their social class. The psychologically stifling and repressive aspect of men's emotions linked to love, lust and passion is another area into which Chopin delves, to show that courtship was sometimes just as difficult for men as it was for women.

Written in the third person, both stories focus on the lovesick male protagonist, allowing Chopin's readers an interesting insight into the male mind and identity. Polyte becomes obsessed by the little thief, Azélie, and ends up paying from his own pocket for the items that she intends to steal from the store. Azélie, described as 'wholly devoid of moral sense' (Gilbert 444) does not return his love, yet has no qualms in accepting his gifts. She eventually departs with her family, leaving Polyte totally downcast and desperate to see her again; so desperate, in fact, that he gives up his job to go in search of her, in the ever-absurd hope of making her his wife.

The love that Polyte feels is described as 'something that he was almost ashamed to acknowledge to himself' (ibid.), yet at the same time he 'knew that he was hopelessly unable to stifle it.' (ibid.) By describing a man in this way, as suffering so painfully and reduced to such a pitiful state, Chopin allows her readers into the heart and soul of the male species, proving that they, too, had emotions and were not simply the strong, masculine role models that society expected them to be. Moreover, she shows once more that desire is a natural drive or force for good and bad: it is not something that men or women can easily control.

Men and women are no more guaranteed to be successful than animals in their pursuit of mates; instead of idealised matches between soul mates, Chopin shows rejection, mutual unsuitability, and despair. This is not an absolute pattern, but Chopin does tend to favour stories of complication and unhappiness over success.

Another such character is Tonie, from 'At Chênière Caminada', who pines for a woman who does not return his love, or understands the strength of his emotions. His infatuation with Claire, who belongs to a higher social class, dominates his existence. When he finally hears of her death, he is first horrified, but then becomes unusually calm, admitting to his mother that he is 'glad' (Gilbert 484) that she is dead because now she would belong to no other man and there would be no class differences between her possible suitors. He states that heaven is 'where she belongs' because 'there is no difference between men' there (ibid.). Tonie's reaction creates both a feeling of unease and sympathy within the reader; unease, because of his obsessive mentality, his rather terrifying physical strength and the possible harm it could ultimately do if unchecked; and sympathy, because of the suffering he must have endured while she was alive.

By ending the story in this way, Chopin shows that love, at times, can be so destructive and dangerous for an individual (and in this case, a man) that a release from life (and thereby love) in the form of death can be a blessing.[34] Joyce Dyer also asks the interesting question as to whether one of Chopin's intentions in writing this story was to 'illustrate the dangers of repression'.[35] She adds that Edna Pontellier avoided this danger

[34] There are echoes here of Chopin's short story 'The Story of an Hour' (1894) which will be discussed in the following chapter.

[35] Joyce Dyer, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 65. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

'through her sexual awakening' (Dyer 65), something that Tonie never managed to do because he could never express his true feelings or consummate his love with Claire.

Unmarried

There are those who avoid the trap of love altogether, by remaining independent and unmarried. In her short stories Chopin describes several characters who fall into this category and for each person there seems to be an underlying reason for their choice, with hints being offered as to the wisdom of their decision.

Paula von Stoltz from 'Wiser than a God' (1889) is a woman who decides to embrace a single life, refusing the marriage proposal of George Brainard, a man who loves her dearly, could offer her everything and for whom she feels a strong passion. Despite this, she is determined to avoid matrimony so that she can dedicate herself to a career as a pianist. Stein comments that her decision to remain single seems to be 'tinged with a deep melancholy' (Stein 112) and this does seem to be the case, since she is obviously heartbroken by her own refusal. Chopin's point here is that the pursuit of a career and love are incompatible for women in the late nineteenth century. If she had married, her career would have been stifled, forgotten and ultimately abandoned - just as George's eventual wife was forced to do with her dancing, since it was 'incompatible with the serious offices of wifehood and matrimony.' (Gilbert 669) It took a certain type of bravery and temperament to 'go it alone' and choose another path than that of marriage. But note that whereas man can marry and retain a profession, women cannot – these stories reveal that women's choices often amount to a negation of one or other self, either the personal or the professional. They have the power, sometimes, to say no, but not to entertain several choices.

Another artist who does not marry is Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*. Like Paula, she dedicates her life to art and her 'beloved instrument' – the piano (Chopin 77), but,

unlike Paula, there are no signs that Reisz regrets her choice. As Dyer comments, Edna 'simultaneously loves and fears Mademoiselle Reisz'. (Dyer 97) The latter has made a conscious decision not to marry, following her credo that 'the artist must possess the courageous soul [...] that dares and defies' (Chopin 61) and there is no doubt that she has obtained a type of freedom from the very fact of being alone. James H. Justus aptly states however, that 'as a model for an alternative way of life, Reisz has certain disadvantages'[36]; her abode is dingy, unprepossessing and shabby, as is her person which is described as 'relentlessly anti-domestic' and as being 'annoyed by children' (Justus 110). Reisz is the antithesis of Adèle Ratignolle, who is the 'embodiment of every womanly grace and charm' (Chopin 9) with her adoration of her children and husband, as well as her natural beauty. Although Reisz enjoys the bold choice that she has made in following her art and remaining alone, Chopin's use of descriptive language in recounting Reisz's home and physical appearance would seem to be a veiled hint at society's dislike of such women.

We are told that Mamzelle Aurélie in the short story 'Regret' (1894) had 'never thought of marrying' (Gilbert 403) and at her present age of fifty, 'had not yet lived to regret it.' (ibid.) The fact that she 'had never been in love' (ibid.) seems a good enough reason for her not marrying and she seems like a contented woman, quite happy with her dog and farm animals for company. This is in stark contrast, however, to the ending of the story in which Mamzelle Aurélie is depicted as crying with 'sobs that seemed to tear her very soul.' (Gilbert 406) Her grief is brought on by the realisation of a past mistake: by not marrying, she has chosen the lonely path of a childless life. This decision, which she seemed so certain about before, struck her now as a tragedy in her later years as she bade farewell to the four small

[36] Justus, James H., 'The Unawakening of Edna Pontellier', *The Southern Literary Journal* 4: 2 (1978), 107-122, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20077590 > [accessed 23 February 2015]. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

children who had unexpectedly been left in her charge for a fortnight and for whom she had developed a deep affection.

Taken on its own, and at face value, the story would seem to support or even encourage women who marry and bear children. But there are other possibilities – Chopin may be pointing out the differences between a sentimental view of childcare involving a woman who is not charged with full-time parental responsibility and the realities for most women with offspring. Whatever the implications of the ending, Chopin's stories when read together show a complex range of responses to the topic of women and child-rearing.

Yet another unmarried character, but this time male, is Gouvernail, the journalist. He appears briefly in *The Awakening* as one of the guests at Edna's dinner party, but has larger roles in the two short stories, 'A Respectable Woman' (1894) and 'Athénaïse' (1895). In the former, his role is that of Mr. Baroda's friend who has come to stay with the Barodas for a short period of time. Mrs. Baroda, originally 'a little provoked' (Gilbert 506) and angry with her husband for inviting this stranger, soon realizes what an attractive and intelligent man he is. Although there is no direct flirting between the two, Gouvernail definitely arouses a sensuous desire within Mrs. Baroda. We are told that she watches him 'not thinking of his words, only drinking in the tones of his voice' (Gilbert 509), and that she wants to 'touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips' (ibid.). At the end of the story, Mrs. Baroda's remark to her husband that she will be 'very nice to' Gouvernail (ibid.) the next time he visits, hints at the beginnings of an affair between herself and the journalist.

In 'Athénaïse', Gouvernail plays the role of the bachelor who is ready to seduce Athénaïse, the wife who, disenchanted with marriage, has fled from her husband. In her article 'Gouvernail, Kate Chopin's Sensitive Bachelor' (1981) Joyce Dyer points out that

Chopin has created a character who 'possesses a perceptive and delicate sensibility', [37] has a much greater understanding of women than Cazeau (Athénaïse's husband), Léonce Pontellier or Robert Lebrun, and 'tolerates marriage' (ibid.) while regarding it 'with deep suspicion' (ibid.). He is not a scoundrel though - far from it; he has great manners and respects the choices and desires of females around him. He admits to finding Athénaïse very attractive and 'hoped someday to hold her with a lover's arms' (Gilbert 380), yet he shows great tact concerning her feelings and knows that flirtatious behaviour is inappropriate:

> When the time came that she wanted him, - as he hoped and believed it would come, - he felt he would have a right to her. So long as she did not want him, he had no right to her, - no more than her husband had. (Gilbert 380)

Dyer interestingly remarks that, despite Gouvernail's seemingly minor role in *The Awakening*, his presence is of utmost importance because he brings to the novel 'special and important information' (Dyer 51), particularly for the reader who has already become acquainted with 'Chopin's New Orleans journalist' (ibid.) in the two previous stories. The reader knows that he is:

> [...] a good-looking man who admires beautiful women; that he is keenly observant, with a quick, sensitive mind - at times a story's moral and intellectual center [...] and that he has a very liberal attitude about extra-marital relationships, tempered by a demanding moral code. (ibid.)

He has an innate knowledge of what is going on around him and is often far more finely attuned to situations than the characters themselves are. As Dyer remarks, even though he has not been taking part in the 'frivolity of the night, he has been watching others behave

[37] Dyer, Joyce, 'Gouvernail, Kate Chopin's Sensitive Bachelor', in *The Southern Literary Journal* 14: 1(1981), p.50. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

impulsively, foolishly, recklessly' (Dyer 52), and is totally 'aware' (ibid.) of the dangers that lurk behind the trappings of desire and 'passion that lacks intimacy and affection' (Dyer 53). The fact that his role is such a minor one, Dyer argues, is done intentionally by Chopin to criticize both the bachelor's and Edna's idealistic love. For Chopin's readers, Gouvernail's presence at the table functions as a critique of the affair between Edna and Arobin.

Bernard J. Koloski also points out that Gouvernail's cynical recital of two lines of poetry, whilst observing the drunken, flirtatious behaviour of Mrs. Highcamp towards Victor Lebrun, is a forewarning of Edna's imminent death. Yet again, Gouvernail is an accurate observer and, as Koloski puts it, is 'awake' to 'the essence of what is happening about him.' [38] The two lines that Gouvernail recites, almost as a whisper, saying 'There was a graven image of Desire / Painted with red blood on a ground of gold.' (Chopin 85) are from a sonnet by A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909) called 'A Cameo' from *Poems and Ballads* (1873). The sonnet belongs to a series of poems which 'explore aspects of man's attitude toward death' (Koloski 609). Gouvernail foresees murky waters ahead, hinting that Edna's party is 'reminiscent of the tableau in the sonnet' (ibid.) and that 'behind the sometimes wild activities of the guests is the brooding presence of death'. (ibid.)

Chopin's inclusion of Gouvernail as a bachelor, as opposed to the spinsters previously mentioned, serves several purposes. Not only does he give us an insight into the single male's perceptive view of marriage, he also shows that the choice he made to avoid this institution does not just cause happiness, but also hardship, reflected in his murmurs after accompanying Athénaïse to the train station and waving goodbye '"By heaven, it hurts, it hurts!"'. (Gilbert 384) His choice to be alone will never be an easy one.

[38] Koloski, Bernard J., 'The Swinburne Lines in *The Awakening*', *American Literature* 45: 4 (1974), 608-610 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924100> [accessed16 March 2015]. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

Married

She rose to His Requirement – dropt
The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable Work
Of Woman, and of Wife –

If ought She missed in Her new Day
Of Amplitude, or Awe –
Or first Prospective – Or the Gold
In using, wear away,

It lay unmentioned – as the Sea
Develop Pearl, and Weed,
But only to Himself – be known
The Fathoms they abide[39]

Unlike Chopin, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) remained unmarried. To describe the latter simply as a talented poet would seem an understatement. She was an extremely accurate observer of life, who wrote hundreds of poems yet was not publically recognized during her lifetime.[40] As Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller observes in her book *Liberty, A Better Husband* (1984), this poem shows Dickinson's recognition of the 'restraints of marriage on the growth of female imaginative power.'[41] The first verse shows how she consents to marriage, something that entails giving up previous fun and frivolities, known as 'The Playthings of Her Life' (Johnson 558) in order to start upon the intense and serious job

[39] Thomas H. Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1955), pp. 558-9. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

[40] Similarities arise here between Chopin and Dickinson regarding posthumous recognition of each author's work; just as Dickinson received posthumous public recognition for her talented poetry, so too did Chopin, finally, for her second novel, *The Awakening*, but not until fifty years after her death.

[41] Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, A Better Husband* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 60

of being a wife, something that is implied as being 'the honorable Work / Of Woman' (ibid.). The idea that marriage can lead to disillusionment, with unspoken thoughts and frustrations for a wife, is conveyed by the second and third verses, in which her mind is likened to the sea, her thoughts being hidden and unknown to anyone but herself, just like the depths of the sea and the contents of its bed. The sea is seen as a masculine entity and masculinity swallows women, making their lives invisible. There was much that was unknown about the institution of marriage to a new, innocent bride.

Chopin also delves into the implications for female identity within marriage, particularly in the Creole society of Louisiana. Dyer comments that these Creole women, although 'seemingly less constrained than other women, were actually among the most conservative members of their sex in the nineteenth century.' (Dyer 11) Edna, who comes from a Kentucky, Presbyterian background does not follow the female Creoles' commitment to 'family, chastity, husband, and children' (ibid.) as Adèle Ratignolle did.

Allen Stein's observation that 'Chopin's tales of married life are almost unremittingly bleak' (Stein 9) is indeed accurate. As mentioned in the first chapter, married women at this time had very few rights and were mainly considered the property of their husbands. This economic dependence was the main concern of another contemporary female author, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), known as 'one of the most important feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century' (Matthews 99). She published *Women and Economics* in 1898, encouraging women to become more economically independent. As Joyce Dyer explains:

> Gilman felt, as Chopin did, that relationships founded on economic dependence and expectations about the performance of household duties needed to be reexamined. (Dyer 6)

Both writers see autonomy for women as of vital importance: interestingly, Edna Pontellier has some. Thanks to a small inheritance, she had at least a certain amount of economic independence from Léonce, her husband, unlike Mrs. Sommers in Chopin's short story 'A Pair of Silk Stockings' (1896), who had known a better life before her marriage but now had to live within the economic constraints of her status as a wife and mother. On receiving a very small amount of unexpected money, Mrs. Sommers decides to spend a day indulging herself, purchasing silk stockings, shoes, gloves and magazines rather than spending the money on her children. Her wish is to escape the financial and psychological suppression of her life as a married woman for just one day, to experience the freedom and indulgence of an economically independent female.

This, however, is counter-balanced at the end of the day, by the depressing and stark realization that she now had no choice but to return to her restricted, married life and that the day had been 'like a dream ended' (Gilbert 820). Although Mrs. Sommers does achieve a very small degree of autonomy by going on a shopping spree, she is ultimately ready (albeit unwillingly) to go back to her familiar routine of marriage immediately afterwards. As Stein comments, she is just like too many women who 'are unprepared to know just what to do about their situation, unprepared to see in what directions fulfillment might lie' (Stein 71) and it is this type of dilemma that Chopin explores often in her work.

Athénaïse seems to be a bold woman who dares to go against convention and leave her husband, simply because she is unhappy and fed up with her married state, telling her brother that it is 'jus' being married that I detes' an' despise' (Gilbert 358). Cazeau, her husband, does not treat her badly, but Athénaïse 'can't stan' to live with a man; to have him always there' (ibid.). Rather like Léonce, Edna's husband, Cazeau does all the correct things a husband should do; he supports her financially, is not unkind (at least physically) and is loyal

and faithful. However, the ideal of a shared life is not what she had thought it to be and now she wants to escape.

But, unlike Edna, Athénaïse returns happily and willingly to her husband when she discovers that she is pregnant. She is like Mrs. Sommers in the sense that she makes a dash for freedom but ultimately returns to the traditional arrangement because she has few other means of supporting her child. Edna, on the other hand, chooses to defy the rules of marriage by leaving her husband and children, embarking on a love affair and generally refusing to 'tow the line'. None of Chopin's other married women are as daring as Edna.

Madame Célestin in 'Madame Célestin's Divorce' merely talks about applying for a divorce, but ends up choosing to remain married to her husband, despite his drinking and neglect of her and their children. The unnamed, dying wife in 'Her Letters' (1894) had been unhappy in her marriage and resorted to an affair, but had obviously decided to remain married. Liza-Jane in 'The Going Away of Liza' (1891) flees from her marriage to try a more exciting existence, but ultimately returns to her husband, in a bedraggled and sorry state.

These stories of women who return to their husbands, having experienced difficulties, do not simply confirm the 'happy-ever-after' scenario that the reader perhaps desires, affirming marriage as the only proper arrangement of life between adult men and women. Instead, the stories seem to question, as Stein says, 'whether marriage can allow a woman the latitude to develop as her own nature might demand.' (Stein 22)

This train of thought was taken one step further by Chopin with *The Awakening*. Edna seems to embody a small part of every married female character in Chopin's works up to that point in her authorial career. She longs to escape the 'dead walls of societal constraint that confront the unconventional woman at every turn' (Stein 22). All of the other wives return to their spouses, never succeeding in their attempts to free themselves of the patriarchal chains of marriage which give the reins of power to men - economically, physically and socially.

Edna bravely turns her back on this institution by starting to devise her own rules. She refuses to obey the social etiquette of receiving callers, does not take an overwhelming interest in her children, moves out of her married home, accepts a lover and refuses to be anybody's possession, clearly stating 'I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose.' (Chopin 102) The only problem is that she does not seem to know who 'myself' is. She does indeed seem to have many of the ingredients necessary for autonomy, yet still reflects an indecision that suggests that *The Awakening* is not only a novel about the institution of marriage, but the story of a character who seems not to know how to make herself happy, to know what she wants from life. It is clear that part of the problem is that she is not trained to ask the right questions or seek solutions, and that society does not offer enough choices. But it also seems as if Edna herself lacks the inner depths to look outside relationships for a sense of value and meaning.

Chapter Three

The Influence of Nature and The Body in Kate Chopin's Works

The nineteenth century was a time of profound and rapid changes. Not only did the Industrial Revolution (1820–1870) bring about great technological and industrial advances, causing many to wonder at the intricacies of science, but sensational claims were made about the creation of the world and human beings.[42] Charles Lyell's (1797–1875) *Principles of Geology* (1830), Robert Chambers' (1802–1871) *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) and Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) works *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) and *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) shook people's faith in the standard biblical accounts of creation. Up until the publication of Lyell's work, most people mainly subscribed to the 'Victorian belief that the universe was created by God.'[43] Religion and nature had been thought of as interlinking entities, with God creating and controlling nature. The Bible was all the evidence needed to support this theory and great faith was bestowed therein, clearly seen from the first chapter of Genesis in which the reader is told:

[42] The dates given here refer to the Industrial Revolution and its occurrence in America. The first Industrial Revolution took place in Great Britain and Europe in the late eighteenth century, spreading to America in the early nineteenth century. Kelly, Martin, 'Overview of the Industrial Revolution: The United States and the Industrial Revolution in the 19th Century', *About Education* <http://americanhistory.about.com/od/industrialrev/a/indrevoverview.htm> [accessed 7 March 2015]

[43] Cambridge Library Collection. Foreword. *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation: Together with Explanations: A Sequel*. By Robert Chambers (5th Edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

> In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth […] And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind.[44]

According to Dixon, Cantor and Pumfrey, it was particularly within the areas of geology and biology that scriptural testimony began to be questioned.[45] The publication of Robert Chambers' *The Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation,* created even more support and momentum within the scientific train of thought.

The Roman Catholic Church was particularly opposed to the intervention of science and its claims to the origin of mankind, clearly seen in the Syllabus of Errors issued by Pope Pius IX (1792–1878) in 1864. As Dixon, Cantor and Pumfrey comment, parts of the Syllabus 'directly limited free scientific or general intellectual inquiry' (Dixon, Cantor, Pumfrey 101). In the latter part of the nineteenth century Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903) went so far as to state that, 'it is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred.'[46]

Kate Chopin and her husband, Oscar, were both Catholics, albeit 'relaxed European' ones, 'often skipping mass' as Emily Toth states (Toth 60). As a widow, Kate stopped attending mass altogether. As Toth says, there were 'many reasons' (Toth 135) for this, particularly since her years in Cloutierville, which had 'turned her against the church's

---

44 The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles < https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1&version=ESV> [accessed 19 October 2014]

45 Thomas Dixon, Geoffrey Cantor and Stephen Pumfrey, *Science and Religion. New Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.106. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

46 Catholicplanet.com, Seven Words on the Inerrancy of Sacred Scripture < www.catholicplanet.com/TSM/seven-words-inerrancy.htm> [accessed 8 December 2014]

position on divorce' (ibid.) and also because she 'very much disliked having priests poke about in her business' (ibid.). This reaction to certain aspects of the church's dogma could well explain the added enthusiasm she felt for this new scientific explanation of human evolution. She had doubted and mistrusted the Catholic Church before; her written works would be an effective way of challenging yet another of the church's stubborn stances on contemporary developments; this time within the realm of science.

Ernst Mayr (1904–2005), one of the leading evolutionary biologists of the twentieth century explains the impact of Darwin's theory of human evolution on nineteenth century women and men:

> For most people, man was the crowning of Creation and differed from all animals in multiple ways, particularly by possession of a rational soul. Therefore, it came as a terrible shock to the Victorian age when Darwin, following his theory of common descent, incorporated the human species into the animal kingdom as a descendant of primate ancestors […] Darwin himself eventually gave a full account of his views on man's evolution in his *Descent of Man* (1871). [47]

William Schuyler argued in his article 'Kate Chopin' from *The Writer* (1894) that Chopin was very interested in scientific works:

> In the midst of all her labors she still found time to keep up her reading, which she had never abandoned, but the subjects which now attracted her were almost entirely scientific, the departments of Biology and Anthropology having a special interest for her. The works of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer were her daily companions; for the study of the human species, both general and particular, has always been her constant delight.[48]

---

[47] Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution is* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 233.
[48] William Schuyler, 'Kate Chopin', *Writer*, VII (Aug.1894), pp. 115-7.

The Origin of Species was followed twelve years later by his work *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* and it was this work that particularly interested, yet also provoked Chopin, as Bert Bender explains:

> She accepted but quarreled with Darwin, as Melville had quarreled with God, or Faulkner with the South […] She recognized him as the towering new authority on the reality of life and paid him the tribute of questioning him in a detailed study of his work. She never doubted his first revolutionary theory in the *Origin of Species* that mankind had derived from lower animal forms through the agency of natural selection. But, although she accepted in general the theory of sexual selection that he had presented at length in *The Descent of Man*, she rebelled against her mentor, drawing on the authority of her own self-knowledge as a woman.[49]

Closer inspection of her short stories and novels reveals Chopin's many references to the impact of nature on her characters, either directly, as in some form of physical contact with the elements (water and sun, for example) or insects such as mosquitoes, or indirectly due to external factors, such as the climate or countryside (this is something I will return to later in the chapter). The inclusion of such references reflects Chopin's interest and knowledge of Darwin's work on natural selection, as well as being a way of questioning and highlighting certain issues, particularly that of woman's place in the universe. Interestingly, in her diary of 1894, entitled 'Impressions', she describes her increasing love of nature, stating:

[49] Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871–1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 199. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

> Am I becoming more sensitive and susceptible. Things which bore me and which I formerly made an effort to endure, are insupportable to me. My love and reverence for pure unadulterated nature is growing daily.[50]

There is also an underlying suggestion as to whether nature offers freedom to women, or not, particularly when considering Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. Against this is the suggestion that nature – in the shape of physical restlessness and desire – works to bring her close again and again to men who can only compromise her quest for independence. Since she is attracted to a series of men, she is in a way forced to repeat a kind of self-entrapment, where she is caught up in relationships with people who fail to help her recognise who she is.

The Importance of the Body – Joy and Power

> Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body […] "Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering. (Gilbert 757)

The word 'body' occurs often in Chopin's stories and novels, as do detailed descriptions of body parts. The quote above is from the 'The Story of an Hour' (1894), and describes the protagonist's reactions to the news of her husband's death; her state of mind is in flux, but her physical reactions are also of utmost importance to the story's denouement since it is at the physical, natural level that she first realises her liberation, while later it is her body that ultimately fails her when she dies of a heart attack. In much of Chopin's work, the female body is seen as a site of conflict and compromise, offering pain as well as pleasure.

[50] Kate Chopin, 'Impressions. 1894' in *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, ed. by Emily Toth and Per Heyerstad (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 187.

In *The Awakening*, Edna's sense of ownership of her own body and the joy and power that this entails becomes clearer both to the reader and the protagonist herself as the novel progresses. She is likened to a child who 'of a sudden realizes its powers' (Chopin 27) when she has finally learnt to swim. It is as if her body is a newly-acquired tool that she has just learnt to master, making her 'shout for joy' (ibid.) with the first strokes of swimming. Chopin continues by saying that 'she lifted her body to the surface of the water' (ibid.). The result of being able to swim is, of course, that the body becomes buoyant and rises, but the author uses this as a metaphor for Edna's psychological rise to consciousness of the world around her and her place within it. No longer does she have to play the role of second fiddle in her existence as the dutiful wife and doting mother; her body has now shown her what power and freedom she is capable of possessing:

> She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water […] A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. (Chopin 27)

A little later, as she stretches out in her bed, this same sense of newly-acquired wonder and joy at the beauty of her body can be seen:

> She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed […] 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, observing closely as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. (Chopin 36)

As well as being almost animal-like with its mention of 'flesh' and 'limbs', Chopin's description of Edna's body is also sensuous and visually pleasing for the reader.[51]

The same type of wonder at the power of the body can be seen in the novel *At Fault* (1890) when the future lovers, Thérèse and Hosmer first touch each other:

> She gave him her soft hand to hold and as the warm, moist palm met his, it acted like a charged electric battery turning its subtle force upon his sensitive nerves. (Gilbert 29)

Chopin's choice of a simile concerning electricity reflects her interest in the contemporary development of science and its progress in the understanding of how the body works. The scientist, Luigi Galvani (1737-1798) discovered galvanism, the contraction of a muscle stimulated by an electric current, in the late eighteenth century,[52] and this scientific method was famously used by Mary Shelley (1797-1851) in her book *Frankenstein* (1818). Darwin, too, was interested in galvanism and mentions it in his *Origin of Species* when describing its effect on animals and plants, saying that 'the nerves and muscles of an animal are excited by galvanism'. (Darwin 243) Chopin implies that it is just such a scientific reaction that is happening here. The undeniable power and positivity of the body is present. It has the strength to attract and join two individuals through simple touch and is again described in sensuous terms with mentions of the 'soft hand' (Gilbert 29) and the 'moist palm' (ibid.). She makes the reader aware of its perfection, just as Darwin had done in *The*

[51] In addition, the question as to who speaks and who sees in the novel is highlighted by such descriptions of the body. The focus is on Edna, the main character. As she looks at her arms, we see them as she does. However, there is also distance here due to the use of the third-person narrator. We are told what Edna sees and therefore experience it ourselves through this account; the face, neck, arms, body, limbs and hair are described as Edna sees them, but at the same time there is distance because everything that is seen is done so from the outside. Chopin's narrative technique therefore serves to enhance, to an even greater degree, the wonder of the body.

[52] IEEE Global History Network, *Galvani and the Frankenstein Story* <http://www.ieeeghn.org/wiki/index.php/Galvani_and_the_Frankenstein_Story> [accessed 9 March 2015]

Descent of Man with his accurate description of the physical characteristics of all the animals, as well as the various groups of humans that he had studied and encountered. Although not of a sensuous nature, he gives detailed descriptions of birds' plumage, showing nature's perfection of one in its creations:

> The head is sometimes covered with velvety down, as with the pheasant; or is naked and vividly coloured. The throat, also, is sometimes ornamented with a beard, wattles, or caruncles. Such appendages are generally brightly-coloured, and no doubt serve as ornaments, though not always ornamental in our eyes; for whilst the male is in the act of courting the female, they often swell and assume vivid tints, as in the male turkey.[53]

When the former lovers, Alcée and Calixta, meet unexpectedly in the short story 'The Storm' (1898), their physical contact is described as if they had previously been unaware of the power and joy they could reap from their own bodies. The word 'flesh' is again used, giving a hint of the animal-like aspect of the human body:

> The contact of her warm, palpitating body when he had unthinkingly drawn her into his arms, had aroused all the old-time infatuation and desire for her flesh. (Gilbert 929)

As the lovemaking progresses, so too does the development of the storm. Their bodies' actions are paralleled by the storm's destructive path, as if Chopin wanted to say that giving in to the body's desire, failing to think through the moral consequences of physical gratification, is potentially disastrous. Or it may be that natural drives and urges are independent of us; these are impulses which cannot be easily denied, and the outcome of

[53] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (2nd Edition) (Leipzig: Amazon Distribution GmbH, 1874), p. 159. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

which are unpredictable deeds which will plough ahead and reach ultimate satisfaction, just as the storm must develop 'with sinister intention' (Gilbert 926) and eventually become 'distant and passing away'.(ibid.) Allen Stein questions Chopin's intentions here; was she implying that nature was 'merely indifferent to human well-being'(Stein 49), or was is something that was 'beautiful and enriching' (ibid.) and should be embraced, regardless of 'stifling convention'? (ibid.)

As previously mentioned, Chopin had disagreed with Darwin about women's role in sexual selection:

> With increasing intensity throughout her career, she questioned his interpretation of the female's role in sexual selection – especially his views on the inferiority of women and, most emphatically, his theory of the female's modesty: her passivity in the sex drama as a creature without desire. (Bender 197-8)

In *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin states that the 'sexual struggle is […] between individuals of the same sex, generally the males, in order to drive away or kill their rivals, the females remaining passive' (Darwin 249). It is clear from Chopin's writing that there is no doubt that Calixta made a definite choice to make love with Alcée. Nobody forced her into it, and it is clear that she greatly enjoyed their sexual encounter and was by no means the submissive partner. In response to Stein's query, it would seem that Chopin wanted to convey the message that women were independent, sexual creatures who were quite capable of initiating lovemaking.

The abundant references to nature, such as Calixta's lips being 'red and moist as pomegranate seed' and the 'warm and steaming' aspect of her face, serve to reinforce the closeness and importance of nature within human beings (Gilbert 928). The fact that the two lovers were from separate social classes was also a conscious decision of Chopin's to show

just how futile class allocation was. Social standing and its importance had no place whatsoever in this setting, for creatures of nature (as Calixta and Alcée had now become) are not ruled by the human trappings of society.

The Body – Pain, Horror and Helplessness

Just as the body is a site of joy and power, it is also associated with horror and helplessness. The colour of the body is of tragic significance in the short story 'Desirée's Baby' (1892) when the unexpected black hue of the baby's skin results in the ostracism and ultimate death of the mother, Desirée, and her infant. When she first realizes the baby's colour, Desirée's face is described as 'the picture of fright' and her body is likened to a 'stone image' (Gilbert 245-6). There is no sensuous picture here at all; rather, her body turns into a terrifying statue, frozen and totally foreign to her, with her blood described as being like 'ice in her veins' (ibid.). On hearing Armand banish her, Desirée turns away, almost like a reverse Madonna, as if 'stunned by a blow' (ibid.) and proceeds to leave the house, child in her arms, as if disengaged from her own body. In her mind's eye, it is this body that has failed her by giving birth to the cause of her unhappiness and it must now cease to function. Disregarding her mother's pleas to return home, Desirée wanders off with the child into the bayou, never to be seen again.

The surprise and shock for Louise Mallard in 'The Story of an Hour' is also too much for her body to bear when she realizes that her husband, thought to have perished in an accident, suddenly reappears. Far from the 'monstrous joy' (Gilbert 757) and delicious freedom that she gradually feels after the news of her husband's death, her body collapses and fails her on discovering his return. She is thought to have 'died of heart disease – of joy that kills', but the reader knows otherwise (Gilbert 758). This betrayal by the body is a common element in the lives of both Desirée and Edna Pontellier. The latter chooses to swim to her

death, thereby putting an end to her body and the pain that her presence within it causes, in a world to which she feels she cannot belong:

> She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on […] Her arms and legs were growing tired […] the shore was far behind her and her strength was gone […] She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again (Chopin 109).

This is a passage which has given rise to many different – and contradictory – readings. Joyce Dyer claims that it is the 'issue of motherhood' and her failure within this field that 'forces Edna into the sea' (Dyer 101), whereas Ann Heilmann believes that it is 'desire, not desperation, that attracts her to the water' and that the sea was 'irresistibly erotic'.[54] But perhaps the contradiction is the point. The body brings both pleasure and pain; the possibility and the impossibility of escape; birth, sex and death. There is something paradoxical about this last scene - she is strong enough to swim so far that she cannot swim back again.

Although the exact cause of Louise Mallard's death is ambiguous, she too could be said to have chosen her exit by allowing her body to fail her, thereby avoiding the doomed future that lay ahead of her with a husband who was very much alive. The only way of survival and true emancipation for these women is through physical death, thus relieving them of the demands that living within it puts upon them.

[54] Ann Heilmann, '*The Awakening* and New Woman fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 101. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

The Body - Pregnancy

It is interesting to note that Chopin's longest novel, *The Awakening*, takes place over a period of nine months. It starts at the same time as Adèle Ratignolle's pregnancy and ends at its completion, encompassing several seasons; it begins in the summer, moves on to winter and ends in early spring. This nine-month time span suggests different kinds of birth: a human one; a natural one, where the countryside and nature generally comes alive again after the dormant months of winter; and, finally, Edna's rebirth into an increased consciousness of who she is and what she is doing in life. When taking her last steps on earth, wading into the sea, she is actually described as feeling 'like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.' (Chopin 109) As Adèle's foetus gradually grows within her over the course of nine months, so too does Edna's self-realization. At the end of the gestation period, a perfect new baby gasps its first breath of life, as Edna drowns.

Time is significant because it draws our attention to different types of birth in the novel. In some ways, it could be argued that Edna attempts, or undergoes, a type of rebirth to make herself again, to forge an identity of her own, rather than having to abide by one that is assigned to her by her father or husband. The key scenes in the book involve different types of birth and a dramatic clash. When Robert returns from Mexico, for example, the reader experiences such a clash. Robert kisses Edna passionately for the first time and the reader thinks that Edna's happiness is going to be realized and that all will end happily ever after:

> He followed and took her in his arms, just holding her close to him. She put her hand up to his face and pressed his cheek against her own. The action was full of love and tenderness. He sought her lips again. Then he drew her down upon the sofa beside him and held her hand in both of his […] He kissed her with a degree of passion which had not before entered into his caress, and strained her to him. (Chopin 102)

However, the maid interrupts them to say that Adèle is in labour. Despite Robert's entreaties to stay, she goes and attends to the birth. Adèle insists on a natural birth, refusing chloroform and the pain and suffering she endures reminds Edna, unhappily, of her own experiences with childbirth:

> Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread. Her own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an *awakening* [emphasis mine] to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go. (Chopin 104)

Edna's thoughts and feelings evoked by Adèle's agony during childbirth are a type of protest against labour and the physical suffering and confinement of women in general. Her friend's pregnancy and labour reminds Edna of the potential consequences of love for women in the nineteenth century. There is the possibility of romantic fulfilment when she kisses Robert, but then she is called to the awful consequences of love by witnessing the labour scene of Adèle:

> With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene [of] torture. (Chopin 104)

Tellingly, this is also a moment of awakening, which echoes the title of the book. What Edna wakes up to, however, is the realization that she has contributed to 'the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go' (ibid.) She has continued the species, taken part in the cycle of reproduction and death. Rather than confirming her individuality at this point – the birth of a particular child by a specific mother – Chopin seems to deny it.

This scene in the book is a clear example of Naturalism (1880–1930), a deterministic theory of life in which nature is completely indifferent to human suffering. Eric Carl Link, in his article 'Defining American Literary Naturalism' (2012), states that:

> American Literary Naturalism is the phrase used to describe the thematic exploration, in American literature, of concepts arising out of post-Enlightenment developments in science and philosophy. Or, put another way, it is the literature born out of the tension between older, traditional belief systems and the new science of the post-Darwinian nineteenth century.[55]

Naturalism is to literature what horror is to films. It is devoid of any feeling. Humans are pre-destined; they are born, mate and die. Chopin seems to flirt with naturalism throughout the novel, particularly in Adèle's labour scene in which a strong feeling is conveyed that one cannot escape one's natural destiny. Women are compromised by biology; they fall in love, become pregnant and then go through horrific pain to produce an offspring, putting themselves at risk. Edna makes the connection between this new love with Robert that seems to offer escape from her husband, yet actually offers confinement in the form of a future pregnancy and the subsequent horror of labour with the accompanying threat of death lingering in the background. This dangerous side of nature, envisaged by the implications of Robert's passionate kiss, is a very clear step away from Emerson and his belief that nature was the means by which to secure autonomy. Here, it is dangerous. There is also an undercurrent of realism present in this scene, voiced by Doctor Mandelet, one of the few characters who seem to come close to an understanding of Edna and her dilemma, when talking to the latter just after Adèle had given birth:

[55] Keith Newlin, *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 71-2.

> "The trouble is," sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, "that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, or arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost." (Chopin 105)

In his analysis of Chopin's short story 'An Egyptian Cigarette' (1897), Bert Bender sums up the helplessness of Chopin's characters when faced with the seemingly uncompromising power of nature, when he comments on the narrator's desperation after being abandoned by her lover:

> Chopin projects an image of the new biological reality of individuals caught in nature's war, not only as creatures struggling to survive through natural selection, but as creatures in the conflict of sexual selection. (Bender 213)

Darwin's theory of natural selection is also interesting to consider here. As previously mentioned, Chopin was deeply interested in science and Darwin's new theories and was obviously exploring some of the implications of the theories of evolution for women. Edna's dilemma at hearing and seeing Adèle give birth shows that Chopin was opposing the nineteenth century's romanticization of reproduction with a much more deterministic perspective. Why, one may ask, does she not include mention of contraception in her novels or short stories? Birth control, although rudimentary, was practised at this time and was general knowledge, as Janet Farrell Brodie describes in her book *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-century America,* yet Chopin does not give any of her characters this option. [56] By doing this, she does not give any other choice than the main stages of life – courtship, marriage, motherhood, celibacy – as if to confirm Darwin's thesis of natural selection.

[56] Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 186

Pregnancy sets out to foreground the continuity of the species – humanity. But which individuals get passed on, and under which conditions? It is a very anti-Romantic idea because the individual is not the centre of the world, but is instead the one who carries genetic programming.

The Body and Water

In American literature, water often represents freedom and escape. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), for example, the Ohio River is a symbolic border between freedom and slavery. When Eliza and her son, Harry, are on the run from their owners, the Shelby's, Eliza's thoughts on the best escape route emphasise the importance of water as an element of freedom and escape; if they can cross this river, they will be well on the way to freedom:

> To go thither, to escape across the river Ohio, were the first hurried outlines of her plan of escape; beyond that she could only hope in God.[57]

Mark Twain's novel, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), plays on the same theme of water being linked to escape and freedom. Huck's journey down the Mississippi River is his path to freedom, away from the civilizing rules of Aunt Sally and the destructive behaviour of his abusive father. It is the great Mississippi River that is his redemption and it is this river that 'contributes to the novel's endorsement of freedom' as Claudia D. Johnson puts it.[58]

In *The Awakening*, water is a symbol of alternative space that seems to be inviting and offers greater independence and freedom to Edna, right from the beginning of the novel when she first learns how to swim, up until the very last swim of her life. Chopin introduces the

---

[57] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: George Routledge & Co. 1852), p.61

[58] Claudia D. Johnson, *Understanding Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), p. 1

idea of the sea as a comforting and tempting pathway to escapism at the start of the novel, when Edna changes her mind and decides to take a swim with Robert:

> 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 14)

A very similar description occurs at the end of the novel; again, the elements of warmth and comfort are there, but, due to everything we now know in the novel, in addition to the absence of the words 'for a spell' (ibid.), an element of finality has crept in:

> The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude […] The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (Chopin 108-9)

This repetition of the seductive and inviting role of the sea is an effective way of bringing the novel full circle to its close. But there is also a maternal aspect about the sea (and water), as if nature had become feminine, playing the role of a mother to Edna and allowing her to escape from the ties of an incomprehensible life, just as a mother would act in protecting a child from any type of danger.

Another freedom that the sea provides her with is that of a release from life. Considering the natural element of water (sea) in this way, it can be seen as a destructive force in that it represents the end of her life.[59] Ann Heilmann mentions this in her essay '*The Awakening* and New Woman fiction' (2000). As well as the sea being 'an emblem of female

[59] This would definitely seem to be the case for Edna as the sea becomes the force that ruins her life, although one could say that it ultimately saves her from this very same life in which she finds no peace.

passion', she also says that it is 'an elemental force driving women towards self-destruction.'[60]

In Chopin's short story 'At Chênière Caminada' (1893), echoes of the destructive force of the ocean – and thereby nature – can be seen. Tonie, the love-struck male protagonist, lost his older brothers and father to the sea when he was only ten years old, and it is towards the sea that his glance is directed 'across the water that glistened gem-like with the sun upon it' (Gilbert 484) while recounting his sadness at the death of Claire, the woman he had adored and worshipped. Although she did not die at sea, as Edna had, the memory of Claire is evoked by the sight of the ocean and the beauty of the water. It was on a boat trip alone with Claire that Tonie's infatuation with her began and it is towards the water that he looks for comfort when he tells his mother that he is glad of her death because she will now never be anybody else's property, and they will meet again in heaven. As Allen Stein comments, however, Chopin also creates a slightly uncomfortable feeling linked to Tonie's associations of the sea:

> […] the beauty of the water that seems to inspire the otherworldly vision he articulates seems now a beauty with a tinge of the sinister, as it is reflective of a nature that, for all its tempting attractiveness, is capable of terrible betrayal and destruction. (Stein 94-5)

This self-destructive element of water can also be seen in the novel *At Fault* when the storm-swollen river sweeps away Hosmer's alcoholic wife. The river, this powerful force of nature, fed by the heavy rainfall that 'mingled in a demon dance' (Gilbert 145) terminated Fanny's life. As well as being very destructive, the water could also be seen as having

[60] Janet Beer, *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 99. All further references to this work are to this edition and will be referred to with the page number(s) in brackets.

cleansing properties; the unhappy Fanny, who was ruining both her own life and that of Hosmer's because of her drinking, was literally washed away as if she had been something dirty. Her death signified a new start for Thérèse and Hosmer, who were now free to marry.

Chopin succeeds in portraying the ambiguity of nature. It is complex; nothing seems totally straightforward. Water, for example, can signify redemption for one individual and destruction for another. This is perhaps a critique of the Romantic emphasis on the individual in nature as being free to choose her or his own destiny?

Nature – Flowers, Insects and Birds

> "Good-by – because, I love you." […] the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone […] There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. (Chopin 109)

The last image in the novel *The Awakening* is of insects and flowers. As I have attempted to establish, Chopin's interest in science and Darwin's theory of natural selection can be seen throughout the book and it would therefore seem apt that such a reference is made in the final sentence. Even though Edna's life is about to end, nature will carry on regardless; the bees will continue to cross fertilize the flowers, just as Darwin had explained in his study of flowers and cross-pollination from *Origin of Species*:

> Bees will act like a camel-hair pencil, and it is quite sufficient just to touch the anthers of one flower and then the stigma of another with the same brush to ensure fertilisation. (Darwin 102-3)

Both the bees and insects are signs of springtime and the hope of new life and Chopin makes use of this association in many of her short stories, as well as her longest novel. Bees and flowers are often used as sexual imagery too. One then wonders which flowers are attractive and get to continue, and which will be an evolutionary dead-end? If one considers

Edna's own propagation, it is interesting to note that Chopin gave her protagonist two sons, meaning that a 'little Edna', in the form of a daughter, was not a viable solution. Mademoiselle Reisz is described as tapping Edna's shoulders several times in the novel, and one wonders whether Chopin's intention here is to hint at the evolutionary success of Edna as a species. When chatting with Arobin, Edna particularly remembers Mademoiselle Reisz' comment to her earlier that day, and says that 'she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong' (Chopin 79). Reisz is doubting Edna's capabilities of survival, not only as far as society's prejudices are concerned, but also as far as her own evolutionary capabilities are concerned.

Youth, beauty and those in love are often described in scenes that contain references to flowers. In the short story 'At Chênière Caminada', the young girls are said to be 'budding each spring like flowers to be plucked' (Gilbert 477) and in 'The Locket' (1897), the young soldier, Edmond, thinks back to happier times, and in particular to 'a certain spring day when the bees were humming in the clematis; when a girl was saying good bye to him.' (Gilbert 884) Such descriptions have an almost erotic feeling to them. However, also comparing humans to flowers makes them just another species which is driven to propagate and die.

Chopin makes an interesting differentiation between real and artificial flowers in *The Awakening* in her description of the female characters. Mademoiselle Reisz wears 'a bunch of violets' (Chopin 76) that are 'shabby artificial flowers' (ibid.) in her hair, whereas the other women wear real flowers on their body. We also learn that Reisz is physically the opposite of Edna; she is unmarried, eats little, has 'wiry fingers' (Chopin 60) and when she holds Edna's hand, does so 'loosely' and 'without warmth' (ibid.). Her appearance, with flowers in her hair, suggests that she is acknowledging her gender, but their artificiality shows that she, as a woman, is controlling nature, instead of being controlled by it. She will not indulge in natural

things as other women do because, unlike other women, she is not prepared to indulge in the full natural cycle of reproduction. She is outside nature – that is what she is controlling. But there is a sense of gain and loss here; an artificial flower cannot reproduce. Reisz gives up an emotional or sexual life to be an artist.

Another differentiation is made between flowers which grow in the open and those cultivated in pots or cut flowers. At Mademoiselle Reisz' apartment, we are told that the 'window frame was filled with pots of flowers' (Chopin 92). Her apartment was dingy and rather shabby and the flowers themselves, rather like the physical appearance of their owner, obviously needed attention as Edna is described as picking 'the dry leaves from a rose geranium.' (ibid.) Natural flowers growing outdoors, however, are visually and sensually pleasing to Edna. She likes to pick different types to decorate her home, enjoying their scent and colours. Jasmine, or 'jessamine' in the novel, is frequently mentioned in association with the protagonist. She likes to cut sprigs from the flower to wear:

> She stood on the front veranda as he quitted the house, and absently picked a few sprays of jessamine that grew upon a trellis near by. She inhaled the odor of the blossoms and thrust them into the bosom of her white morning gown. (Chopin 51)

As anyone who has smelt the flower is aware, it has a very strong and sweet fragrance and is beautiful when in bloom. Chopin seems to be making a point here that, just like the flowers, Edna too is beautiful and on the verge of blooming, or awakening, to a new phase in her life. She is as delicate and fragile as the flowers, but, rather like the jasmine whose splendour will only last for an hour or so in her gown, having been cut off from its stem and life source, so she too could, as a middle-class married woman, be damaged if she were removed or too distanced from the main branch of society, something that ultimately does happen to her. Mademoiselle Reisz seems to have understood this dilemma and therefore

wears artificial flowers so that she will never be truly connected to men or society; nor, however, will she be totally disconnected from them.

There is much mention of insects and birds in the novel *The Awakening*, as well as in other short stories by Chopin. When considering insects, it is interesting to keep in mind Darwin's description of the industrious and/or parasitic life often led by such creatures within nature. In *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, Darwin asks the reader to ponder on the struggle for survival that has been going on for years in the insect world:

> […] what war between insect and insect – between insects, snails, and other animals with birds and beasts of prey – all striving to increase and all feeding on each other (Darwin 91)

He describes insects and other organic beings as behaving like 'a parasite on its prey' (Darwin 91) and this is particularly interesting when considering the references made to mosquitoes in Chopin's works. When they are present, they are portrayed in an annoying and uncomfortably persistent way, just like a parasite, often attacking the character who is talking or thinking. Edna is described as being attacked by mosquitoes when sitting alone on the porch, after an argument with Léonce. She feels unhappy and weighed down 'with a vague anguish' (Chopin 8). The sudden invasion of the mosquitoes who 'made merry over her, biting her firm, round arms and nipping at her bare insteps' (ibid.) suddenly snaps her out of her fleeting depression and forces her inside. Chopin then goes on to say:

> The little stinging, buzzing imps succeeded in dispelling a mood which might have held her there in the darkness half a night longer. (ibid.)

It is as if the mosquitoes were a nagging reminder of her role and social duties as a woman; if this role was not fulfilled, the consequences would be as dire, just as they would be for a human or animal infested with parasites. Action was needed to avoid too much

contemplation and in this case, the action required was to return to her husband in the house and carry on with her dutiful role as a spouse.

A little later on, however, when Edna starts to show the first stages of defiance towards her husband, ignoring his 'impatience and irritation' (Chopin 30) at discovering her wishing to sleep outside, the very same mosquitoes were nowhere to be seen:

> "You will take cold out there," he said, irritably. "What folly is this? Why don't you come in?"
>
> "It isn't cold; I have my shawl."
>
> "The mosquitoes will devour you."
>
> "There are no mosquitoes." (ibid.)

The absence of the biting insects marks the beginning of her refusal to accept her role as a wife and conventional woman. She refuses to be bullied by her husband's desires and starts instead to realize her own.

In the short story 'At the 'Cadian Ball' (1892), Chopin uses mosquitoes to emphasise women's premonitions of unease and betrayal. When Clarisse learns that Alcée has gone to the ball, she is described as being attacked by mosquitoes:

> The mosquitoes were indeed attacking Clarisse's white feet savagely. She had unconsciously been alternately rubbing one foot over the other during the darkey's recital. (Gilbert 305)

Clarisse's jealousy is represented by the mosquitoes' biting and stinging of her feet. As Allen Stein comments, Chopin was a keen reader of Darwin and drew parallels between the discomfort felt by both animals and humans when one or the other is on the attack or being attacked. He says that:

> Chopin's reading in Darwin made her well aware that men and women, as parts of nature, are as vulnerable to both its external and internal buffeting as any beast or plant. (Stein 85)

Clarisse is vulnerable both to nature, in the form of the mosquitoes, and to her husband's adulterous behaviour. It is as if the mosquitoes represent the painful awareness of female fragility and powerlessness in the face of love and men. When Edna defied her husband, by refusing to come inside, the mosquitoes stopped troubling her. Clarisse, on the other hand, was powerless to defy her husband's wish to attend the 'Cadian ball, and the stinging of the mosquitoes was a symbolic reminder of her futile role as a wife, and of the control held by men. Mosquitoes penetrate the skin, although it is only the female mosquito that actually bites and sucks blood. Even though these insects that attack Clarisse are female, they are used symbolically as male.

In *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin allots a large section of his work to the description and role of birds. This fascination with birds is also reflected in Chopin's work, but often in a rather cleverly disguised way by means of names given to characters, places or things within her stories or novels. She also refers to birds in certain situations when concentrating on the mood or action of the scene.

The Awakening opens and finishes with descriptions of birds. In the first sentence of the novel, the reader is told that 'A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating' (Chopin 3) the same phrase; in one of the last paragraphs of the novel, a bird 'with a broken wing' is described as 'beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.' (Chopin 108) There is a clear comparison here between the trapped bird in a cage, senselessly repeating an order, and the free bird which had been damaged and was falling to its death. Chopin is mirroring nature with mankind here, in much the same way as she does with flowers and insects. The caged parrot is similar to Edna in her

role as Léonce's trapped wife. She looks beautiful, as parrots do with their bright colours, but has no real freedom in her life; she must say and do the correct things in order to fit in within society and its expectations. Once freed and no longer trapped by her husband, by other men or by social demands, she can soar up to the heights, just as the final bird did, but cannot be guaranteed of success as a free woman in a patriarchal world and, like the bird, may well become injured and die.

The protagonist of 'The Story of an Hour' is called Louise Mallard, a surname that she shares with a particular species of wild duck. Chopin could have chosen any name for her lead character, but opted for mallard because of her knowledge of Darwin's work and the implications that could thus be drawn from choosing this name. In his description of wild ducks in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin says that the wild duck 'pairs with a single female' and is 'certainly monogamous' (Darwin 95). This is very apt because it reflects Mrs. Mallard's own situation; she is monogamous, as is her husband, and yet this is perhaps the precise cause of her unhappiness. She longs for a different type of life, although she does admit that she 'had loved him – sometimes' (Gilbert 757), although 'Often she had not' (ibid.). Being married to the same man for rest of her life, however, is slowly killing her. In many ways she wishes to be like a truly wild creature that can fly away and experience something new. The terrible shock of having to return to a life of enforced monogamy horrifies her when she sees him standing at the bottom of the stairs. Her only exit from this type of life is to die, because the mallard must be faithful and stick with the same partner for ever.

Chopin's use of the name pigeon is also done intentionally with a view to her knowledge of Darwin and nature. In his studies on birds, Darwin found their various

behaviour fascinating, particularly that of the female pigeon. He says the following about this type of bird:

> Female pigeons occasionally feel a strong antipathy towards certain males, without any assignable cause […] a female pigeon will occasionally take a strong fancy for a particular male, and will desert her own mate for him. (Darwin 171-2)

As part of her assertion of sexual independence, Edna moves out of the family home and into a house called the 'pigeon-house' (Chopin 89), where she has an affair with Arobin and experiences the first passionate kiss with Robert. Just like a female pigeon, she feels a strong disdain for her partner and much prefers living in the pigeon-house which 'pleased her' (ibid.) and 'added to her strength and expansion as an individual' (ibid.), a place where her 'own soul had invited her' (ibid.). Edna is driven by natural impulses in her desire for Robert and other men, but at the same time recognises a need for solitude and autonomy. So nature doesn't offer her uncomplicated freedom: she wants emotional and sexual pleasure, but those drives are not controlled by her - they are almost controlling her. She is at the mercy of her genetic programming.[61]

[61] In Sandra M. Gilbert's critical essay 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite', in which she argues that Edna is like the powerful goddess of love and beauty, the author makes a pertinent point when she comments that Chopin's heroine is 'running into the wild openness of nature'. Her quest ultimately leaves her at the mercy of nature, enveloped and drowned by one of its strongest elements, water. Sandra M. Gilbert, 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite', in *The Awakening* (2nd Edition), ed. Margo Culley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 273

Conclusion

Elaine Showalter says in her book *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the fin-de-Siècle* (1993) that it is male authors 'who come most readily to mind' when most people 'think of the literature of the *fin de siècle*'.[62] We could go further and argue that it is not only male authors but also very often male characters who come to mind as well. Kate Chopin was one of the exceptions – she was a woman writing about women. Her short stories and novels feature very different fictional characters, but as I have tried to argue in this thesis those fictional lives represent the *diversity* of female experience – not just that of one woman, but many. Love, sexual attraction, work and society's expectations about women were all things with which Chopin was profoundly familiar. But also wrote about what she saw around her.

Unlike Margaret Fuller and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Chopin was not interested in writing only proto-feminist literature: she has protest stories, but also other kinds. Although she faced all kinds of challenges in her life and writing career that most men did not have to contend with, she nevertheless wrote from a position of strength: her own life experiences meant that she knew what it took to survive hardship, having to bring up her six children alone while supporting herself mainly from the proceeds of her writing. Rather, she was more interested in what made women tick. Through her writings, she developed a sociological study of women at the end of the nineteenth century with a detached, observant eye, often witnessing but not necessarily aligning herself with a single view of women. She captures them in their full humanity. The female married self was an area that concerned and

[62] Elaine Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1993), p. vii

fascinated her, as well as the latest scientific developments, including Darwin's theories of natural and sexual selection.

The Darwinian struggle for survival is often the backdrop for many of her short stories and is definitely a decisive presence in her final novel, *The Awakening.* Chopin disagreed, however, with Darwin's representation of women as being submissive in their sexual desires and needs, and in their lives generally. It was the demands of society and its rules on marriage that put unrealistic constraints on women, denying them sexual and political autonomy. Combined with this was the importance of the individual woman's responsibility for her own choices in life. The pressures of society and the natural desires of the female as part of the human species would play into the equation of each woman's life, but neither could be totally responsible for how the middle-class woman behaved or chose to live that life.

The century was coming to a close and a new one beginning as she wrote her last and most shocking novel, *The Awakening*, which would also become her most famous. It is as if she knew something major was 'brewing' for women and, by writing this novel, provided the reader with a variety of female types, silently begging the question as to which one would survive into the next century.

In *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, Emily Toth concludes with a very apt description of the author's achievements, saying that 'when we read her, we know that she opened windows, and she gave us wings.' (Toth 244). Her stories and novels are undoubtedly windows from which the reader can see the restrictions that were placed in the path of women in the late nineteenth century, the challenges and hardships, but also, remarkably, the possibilities and opportunities. Like a scientist, she was interested in how different women responded differently to a variety of situations. Her writing is a laboratory where she experiments with personalities under different social and political conditions. And what she seems to have

found echoes the lyrics from the theme song for a recent television series about a woman who escapes unlawful imprisonment and reclaims her life: 'Females are strong as hell'.[63]

.

[63] 'Females are as Strong as Hell' from the Netflix series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix 2015)

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Kate Chopin, 'Impressions. 1894' in *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, ed. by Emily Toth and Per Heyerstad (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998)

Kate Chopin, *Kate Chopin. Complete Novels and Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: The Library of America, 2002)

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (2nd Edition) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994)

Secondary Sources:

A.C. Swinburne, 'A Cameo', in *Poems and Ballads*, 5th Edition (London: John Camden Hotten, 1873)

Allen F. Stein, *Women and Autonomy in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2005)

Ann Heilmann, '*The Awakening* and New Woman fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871–1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996)

Carl N. Deglar, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)

Carolyn Nelson, *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Drama and Articles of the 1890s*, (Calgary: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000)

Catherine Esther Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (South Carolina: BibioBazaar, 2008)

Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (2nd Edition) (Leipzig: Amazon Distribution GmbH, 1874)

Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation in Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (6th Edition) (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1872)

Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (London: Penguin Books, 1997)

Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2014)

Claudia D. Johnson, Understanding Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996)

Donald Keesey, *Contexts for Criticism* (Second Edition) (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1994)

Donna Campbell, '*At Fault:* a reappraisal of Kate Chopin's other novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin,* ed. Janet Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Elaine Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1993)

Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885,* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998)

Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999)

Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution is* (New York: Basic Books, 2001)

George R. Drysdale, *The Elements of Social Science; Or, Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion*, 7th Edition, (London: E. Truelove, 1867)

George Washington Burnap, *The Sphere and Duties of Woman: A Course of Lectures* (Harvard: J. Murphy, 1848)

Gilbert, Sandra M., 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite', in *The Awakening* (2nd Edition), ed. Margo Culley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994)

Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America, 1830–1963* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: George Routledge & Co., 1852)

Janet Beer, *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-century America,* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994)

Joyce Dyer, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993)

Katherine Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1976)

Keith Newlin, *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2012)

Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, A Better Husband* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984)

Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine,* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992)

Nina Baym, Robert S. Levine, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (8th edition) (New York and London: Norton, 2013)

Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (California: University of California Press, 2001)

Per Seyerstad, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969)

Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation: Together with Explanations: A Sequel* (5th Edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty – A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989)

Sarah J. Hale, *Manners; or Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round* (Boston: J. E. Tilton and Company, 1868) (Reprint Edition 1972 by Arno Press Inc.)

Thomas Dixon, Geoffrey Cantor, Stephen Pumfrey, *Science and Religion: New Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Thomas H. Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1955)

Walker, Nancy, 'Feminist or Naturalist?', in *The Awakening* (2nd Edition), ed. Margo Culley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994)

William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs,* (Philadelphia: Lyndsay and Blakiston, 1867)

William Blake, *Blake: The Complete Poems,* 3rd Edition, (Harrow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2007)

Digital Sources:

Bible Gateway, The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 <*https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1&version=ESV* > [accessed 19 October 2014]

Cahn Naomi, 'Faithless Wives and Lazy Husbands: Gender Norms in Nineteenth Century Divorce Law', *G W Law Faculty Publications & Other Works,* U. Ill. L. Rev. 651 (2002). <http://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/faculty_publications/333/ > [accessed 14 october 2014]

Catholicplanet.com, Seven Words on the Inerrancy of Sacred Scripture

< www.catholicplanet.com/TSM/seven-words-inerrancy.htm> [accessed 8 December 2014]

Cengage Learning, *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, (Milwaukee, WI) Thursday, November 24, 1881; pg. 8: Issue 281; col A. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/194/984/32979328w16/purl=rc1__0_GT3002944657&dyn=12!xrn_52_0_GT3002944657&bkm_14_> [accessed 18 November 2014]

Dyer, Joyce, 'Gouvernail, Kate Chopin's Sensitive Bachelor', *The Southern Literary Journal* 14: 1(1981), 46-55. < http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067777> [accessed 8 February 2015]

IEEE Global History Network, *Galvani and the Frankenstein Story,* <http://www.ieeeghn.org/wiki/index.php/Galvani_and_the_Frankenstein_Story> [accessed 9 March 2015]

Justus, James H., 'The Unawakening of Edna Pontellier', *The Southern Literary Journal* 4: 2 (1978), 107-122 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20077590 > [accessed 23 February 2015]

Kelly, Martin, 'Overview of the Industrial Revolution: The United States and the Industrial Revolution in the 19th Century', *About Education* <http://americanhistory.about.com/od/industrialrev/a/indrevoverview.htm> [accessed 7 March 2015]

Koloski, Bernard J., 'The Swinburne Lines in The Awakening', *American Literature* 45: 4 (1974), 608-610 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924100> [accessed16 March 2015]

Law Library of Congress, *Married Women's Property Laws* <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/property_law.html> [accessed 7 October 2014]

Loyola University, *Kate Chopin – The Role of the Wife and the Mother* <http://www.loyno.edu/~kchopin/new/women/motherhood.html > [accessed 19 November 2014]

National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, *1840–1850*. <http://www.nps.gov/jeff/planyourvisit/1840-1850.htm > [accessed 7 October 2014] (Timeline of US in 19th century – first chapter)

National Portrait Gallery, *The Seneca Falls Convention* <http://www.npg.si.edu/col/seneca/senfalls1.htm> [accessed 7 October 2014]

Prometheus Books, *The Elements of Social Science: Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion A Classic Treatise on Victorian Sexuality* <http://www.prometheusbooks.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=2003&zenid=omo08sfpkvkng34hptheldg0q6 > [accessed 2 March 2015]

Film Sources:

'Females are as Strong as Hell' from the Netflix series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix 2015)