

Student Candidate: 10036

## **Diverse Definitions of Femininity**

A Portrayal of Kate Chopin's Female Characters

Bachelor's project in MLSPRÅK (ENG2900)

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Language and Literature



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## 1.0 Introduction

Known for her polemic literature, Kate Chopin is loved and criticised by many. Her thematic often examine love and relationships, freedom and individuality, as well as abandonment and loss. Chopin is known for writing for and about women, portraying both liberated women and constrained women. Her literature was written during the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, and her views on society were modern and broad-minded. In this thesis, I will examine a small fraction of Chopin's literature, more explicit three of her short stories; "A Point at Issue!", "The Kiss" and "A Pair of Silk Stockings". All three of the stories feature women from different backgrounds in divergent life situations. All of them do, however, depict women who in different ways defy what is expected of them by the norms of the society. Issues relating to sexuality, emancipation, adultery and freedom of responsibility are some of the matters unfolded in the stories. I have chosen to focus on these stories in particular, as they deal with several types of circumstances and communicate three different challenges relating to womanhood at the time of publication. In accordance with this, the thesis will focus on the diverse definitions of femininity and in what ways Kate Chopin portray her female characters.

## 2.0 Family, education and loss

Born in St. Louis, Missouri as Kate O'Flaherty in 1851, Kate Chopin was the third of five children in her family, though several of her siblings died at a very young age. At the age between four and five, Chopin lost her father and her remained living with her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother – all widows. Having both Irish and French roots, Chopin was heavily influenced by this in her writing, especially by her French descent. Chopin attended the Academy of Sacred Hearts sporadically (due to several profound losses) for 13 years and turned to literature both in times of joy and grief (Seyersted, 1969, pp. 13-23). A strict school full of rituals and tight scheduling, Chopin learned of French values, reading, writing, Bible history, as well as arithmetic and needlework (Toth, 1990, pp. 44-46). Though getting a broad education, most of her knowledge she acquired from her own reading. She preferred reading books in their original publication (English, German and French), so as not to lose native zest and notions. In 1870 she married Oscar Chopin, a man from a French-Creole family, followed by a three-month honeymoon in Europe where she learned of European culture and customs. Together they moved to New Orleans, where they had five sons, before moving to Cloutierville where they had their sixth child, a daughter. In 1882 her

husband died, and Chopin took over his husband's business, fast becoming a capable business lady. She sold it only two years later, when she moved back to be closer to her mother in St. Louis. In 1885, Chopin's mother died, leaving Chopin overpowered by grief (Seyersted, 1969, pp. 13-47). In the 1890's, Chopin started her writing career, publishing an assortment of literature until 1902, when her last piece was published. In August 1904, Chopin died of a brain haemorrhage with her children nearby (Toth, 1990, p. 393).

### 3.0 Literature and inspiration

Chopin's work was greatly shaped by her experiences with life; motherhood, death and loss, marriage and tensions between husband and wife, as well as social restrictions. Her work was therefore often seen as controversial and perhaps more progressive than the society she lived in, and she had to endure substantial criticism to several of her works, predominantly her novel *The Awakening*. Fortunately, Chopin did not only have to withstand criticism, as her work has also been praised by both the public and the private, especially by female readers relating to her stories and characters (Toth, 1990, pp. 353-374). Due to her controversy, not everyone was keen to publish Chopin's literature. *Vouge*, however, celebrated Chopin's talent and dared to be one of her stable platforms. In *Vogue*, Chopin published stories with a more advanced realism, a less happy view of the world, often about separation and loneliness. It became an arena where Chopin could experiment and express herself more truthfully – she even challenged her own readership with stories like “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (Toth, 1990, pp. 279-281). As Toth (1990) phrases it “*Vouge* allowed her to describe what she had seen, honestly and fearlessly. *Vouge* moved with her; other magazines refused” (Toth, 1990, p. 281).

### 3.1 A Point at Issue!

“A Point at Issue!” was written early in Kate Chopin's career and was her second short story publication. It was published in *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in 1889 and was later added the subtitle “A Story of Love and Reason in Which Love Triumphs”. Discerned from the subtitle, the story is about love and the uncertainties that sometimes come with it. We meet Eleanor and Charles, a highly educated married couple trying to sustain their love whilst remaining individuals. As Per Seyersted (1969) remarks, through her first three stories, Chopin states her major theme; woman's spiritual emancipation, being freed from restraint and tradition (p.

108). In “A Point at Issue!” such emancipation is found in Eleanor and Charles’ determination to start their marriage in two different continents, living for their own aspirations.

A good-looking, graceful and intelligent woman, Eleanor had fast grown to be Charles’ ideal of a woman. “She was that *rara avis*, a logical woman – something which Faraday had not encountered in his life before” (Chopin, 1969a, p. 49). Eleanor is surprising to Charles, different from other women he has met previously. He himself is a rational man, drawing conclusions through reason. Eleanor is, as well as logical, “able to grasp a question and anticipate conclusions by a quick intuition” (Chopin, 1969a, p. 49). Eleanor, though being educated, also has an innate kind of intellect, a mind and wisdom that immediately in the story is portrayed as unusual to most women. As Charlotte Rich (2010) explains, many were sceptical towards women getting higher education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to female intellectual inferiority and the fear that education would damage women’s reproductive capabilities (p. 154). Eleanor is an unconventional woman of her time, defying the standard social norms. Not only is she unconventional with her higher education from Plym Dale, but together with Charles they decide she can go to Paris, without him, to study French.

When deciding to marry, Eleanor and Charles were determined to not be governed by precedential methods.

Marriage was to be a form, that while fixing legally their relation to each other, was in no wise to touch the individuality of either; that was to be preserved intact. Each was to remain a free integral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws (Chopin, 1969a, p. 50).

Eleanor and Charles value their identities and choose to pursue their dreams instead of succumbing to conventional standards – despite the community being scandalised; “It was uncalled for! It was improper! It was indecent” (Chopin, 1969a, p. 51). Similar to her wedding announcement, Eleanor is not interested in sharing her private life with the public, and she is not interested in whether they approve of her nonconformist ambitions. Eleanor is choosing to think for herself, searching for freedom across the pond and breaking with the American traditions.

Though falling for Eleanor’s beauty, mind and will to be independent, in her absence, Charles feels an attraction to Kitty, the daughter of a colleague at the university. Kitty is by many



sorts very unlike Eleanor and what he describes as his ideal woman. Kitty is a rather traditional woman, “keeping the household under her capricious command” and delighting Charles with her girlish charms (Chopin, 1969a, p. 53). Here Chopin is presenting two kinds of women, the “New Woman” who we find in Eleanor, and the “True Woman” revealed in Kitty – symbols of modernism and tradition.

Considering honesty an important component of their marriage, Charles acknowledges his attraction in a letter to Eleanor while reasoning with himself; “was not Eleanor’s large comprehensiveness far above the littleness of ordinary women?” (Chopin, 1969a, p. 54). Naturally, this revelation causes a sting of jealousy in Eleanor. She reacts by not giving her usual reply but sending a delayed and rather cold response. Confronted about this by Charles, Eleanor confesses to the reason of the coldness, and Charles is astounded that her jealousy had become so predominant. As they settle the misunderstanding, Charles is thinking “I love her non the less for it, but my Nellie is only a woman, after all” (Chopin, 1969a, p. 58).

When previously thinking more highly of Eleanor than of other women, and seemingly trying to live with her as equals, Charles is here disregarding her as an equal, as well as the intellectual woman he first fell in love with – now seeing her as “only a woman”. Rich (2010) believes “this text thus dismisses the possibility of a “new” kind of marriage emphasising individuality” and leaving the conventional assumptions about gender to prevail (p. 154). Sanctimoniously forgetting his own jealousy of Eleanor when he thought she was having a fling with a handsome Parisian, Charles is being demeaning towards Eleanor – though he is only thinking it. Seyersted (1969) argues that “the idea of man’s superiority is emphasised as Charles falls back into the age-old concept that his wife is “only a woman”” (p. 108). Submitting to such thoughts puts Eleanor in an undeserved stereotypical box, making the reader wonder if this is a foreshadowing of their married years to come. It could be an insinuation that the marriage continuing forward will develop to a more traditional one, as opposed to the modern origination of their marriage. One can question if Kitty has played a role in Charles’ “new” perspective of women, or if the concept of jealousy is solely unfamiliar to him. Either way, it is somewhat paradoxical that he fails to recognise his own jealousy and faults, something the narrator draws attention to in the story’s last sentence; “With man’s usual inconsistency, he had quite forgotten the episode of the portrait” (Chopin, 1969a, p. 54).

Though Charles was honest in the letter about Kitty, giving Eleanor full disclosure of what was going on, he neglected to do the same when he was faced with the test of doubt and jealousy. Eleanor on the other hand, when confronted by Charles, gives no concealment of her feelings and is arguably the more confident of the two in their heart's strengths and weaknesses. Mary E. Papke (1990) argues that "Eleanor has surrendered her intellect to her emotions", and she decides to go home to the US with Charles (p. 41). Charles in his negligence of seeing his own faults, remains deluded in the end (Papke, 1990, p. 41). Seyersted (1969) argues that "as a result of these incidents, both retreat one step from their advanced stand" (p. 107). This supports the claim that the couple might be retreating to a more traditional marriage, leaving them uniform with the society.

Staying in Paris for their honeymoon, giving their advanced marriage a beginning in the "City of Love", one might expect Paris to be a stimulant for growth and prosperity. It is for that reason slightly ironic that Paris, "the City of Love", is an essential part of almost dismantling their love, and definitely an underlying factor in the change of their relationship. Chopin is clever in the way she gives the reader an underlying feeling of promise and assurance, and by the end of the story leaves the reader with a vague, bitter aftertaste.

### 3.2 The Kiss

"The Kiss", a short story first published in *Vogue* in 1895, tells the story of Nathalie and her two companions; Brantain and Harvey. Comprising of different qualities and features, Brantain and Harvey together embody most of what Nathalie seeks in her life. Through them, Nathalie can get pleasure and wealth, and this short story portrays how she plans to get it both ways.

The opening sentence of the story is designed to give the reader a foreshadowing of both Nathalie and Brantain's relationship, as well as clues about Nathalie's characteristics. "It was quite light out of doors, but inside with the curtains drawn and the smouldering fire sending out a dim, uncertain glow, the room was full of deep shadows" (Chopin, 1969b, p. 379). Nathalie has put up a façade using her admirable looks and her burning desire to live a comfortable life as a method of working her way into Brantain's heart. By acting interested and attracted to Brantain, Nathalie has been able to wrap him around her little finger. In a way, she has been utilising her inner fire as a means of bringing out her most seducing self – a

smouldering temptress. Despite eventually getting married, Nathalie and Brantain's relationship is full of uncertainties stained by Nathalie's dishonesty and secrecy.

In the beginning of their flirtation, Brantain is slightly diffident towards Nathalie. He sits in a dim room overtaken by shadows and he does not mind as "the obscurity lent him courage to keep his eyes fastened as ardently as he liked upon the girl who sat in the firelight" (Chopin, 1969b, p. 379). The shadows give Brantain a certain anonymity whilst providing him with confidence to gaze uninterrupted upon the woman he adores. It seems as Brantain knows they are an unlikely match, as Nathalie is someone poised and beautiful – qualities he does not possess. Nathalie is aware of his affection for her, and she is confident that Brantain loves her. Though neither handsome nor significant in Nathalie's eyes, she is waiting for Brantain to declare his love for her, as she aspires to live a wealthy life – a life that Brantain can provide her with. After Brantain has "sought her society eagerly and persistently" for the past two weeks, Nathalie is planning on accepting Brantain's proposal, even though she has been seeing their mutual friend Harvy on the side (Chopin, 1969b, p. 379). Though naturally hiding it from Brantain, Nathalie is not hesitant towards being unfaithful and she intends to keep having an affair in her marriage. According to Seyersted (1969), this amoral, detached attitude towards infidelity was new to how Chopin usually presented feminism (p. 111). Nathalie seemingly cares more for deep pockets than fondness for her future partner. She is self-assured and knows how she wants to live and how she can get it – a contrast to the ideal of the "True Woman" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who were supposed to be a keeper of morality and decency, while also being virtuous (Cruea, 2005, p. 188).

Unaware of Brantain, Harvy enters the room and gives Nathalie a kiss – a troublesome surprise to Brantain.

"I see that I have stayed too long. I – I had no idea – that is, I must wish you good-by". He was clutching his hat with both hands, and probably did not perceive that she was extending her hand to him, her presence of mind had not completely deserted her; but she could not have trusted herself to speak (Chopin, 1969b, p. 380).

Though Nathalie is not his yet, this is the first indication to Brantain that maybe there is more to Nathalie than meets the eye. The floundering speech and the sudden goodbye imply that Brantain is humiliated, thinking that there was something between them. The slip was unfortunate for the both of them, especially for Nathalie's plans, and she needs to be careful

not to break her character. Nathalie is not trusting herself to speak which demonstrates just how cautious she must be in order not to weaken or damage her carefully built relationship with Brantain. At the same time, Nathalie has been put in a demanding situation, as she and Harvy indeed care for each other. This is indicated by Harvy's use of the nickname "Nattie", suggesting genuine feelings and close relations. Still upset about the incident, Nathalie is confronting Harvy about his "intrusion". "It depends upon—a good deal whether I ever forgive you" (Chopin, 1969b, p. 380). Flustered by what has happened, Nathalie is blaming Harvy for something that was ultimately her own mistake. It was, after all, Nathalie who was being fraudulent both to Harvy and Brantain.

It does seem like Harvy knows about Brantain and Nathalie, though maybe not the extent of her plans. As Harvy is giving Nathalie an ardent and lingering kiss, we see yet another indication of the realness of their sexual and emotional bonds. It could therefore have been hurtful to Harvy that Nathalie is blaming him for an honest mistake, when she is the one being dishonest. Her anger at him is quite the surprise to Harvy, and he entreatingly and softly asks her to forgive him. Nathalie, who had not calculated for such a blunder will not forgive Harvy until she knows the degree of damage.

At their next reception, Nathalie approaches Brantain with the purpose of correcting the previous indiscretion. Almost weeping, Nathalie tells a rather manipulative tale of how miserable and uncomfortable she has been, and how she and Harvy are like brother and sister. Making it clear that Harvy was in fact not her lover, but a brother-like acquaintance, makes Brantain's face light up, looking radiant. Nathalie looks triumphant seeing how her story woke no suspicion in Brantain, distinctly indicating a blind affection for Nathalie. Her triumphant look suggests a cunning inner being, prepared to take the measures necessary in order to get the wealth she requires. Her craftiness is clearly pointed out as "she felt like a chess player who, by the clever handling of his pieces, sees the game taking the course intended" (Chopin, 1969b, p. 381). The course intended is a life filled with more than just money, as Nathalie is plotting to keep Harvy as her lover and thus fulfilling her emotional and sexual needs. The "True Woman" was valued for her heart and was portrayed as being delicate and weak. Too much emotional strain was discouraged, as this could be dangerous for her health (Cruea, 2005, p. 189). Nathalie is playing an emotional game where several people including herself could get hurt, thus acting contradictory to how women of the time were perceived to be.

Willing to betray Brantain even at their wedding, Nathalie encounters Harvy – “her lips looked hungry for the kiss which they invited” (Chopin, 1969b, p. 381). Unexpectedly, she meets a resolute Harvy, finally rejecting her and by that ending their liaison which leaves Nathalie contemplating; “well, she had Brantain and his million left. A person can’t have everything in this world; and it was a little unreasonable of her to expect it” (Chopin, 1969b, p. 381). Although losing the passionate relationship she had with Harvy, Nathalie acknowledges that a financially secure future is, after all, a win. Choosing to be in a passionless marriage was ultimately a choice Nathalie made when she decided to engage with Brantain. Being faced with the options of living a safe, practical life, versus an exciting, but economically vulnerable life, Nathalie chooses the more assuring alternative. Although Nathalie is portrayed as a sexually free, confident and independent woman, she is depending on a man for material wealth and luxury.

Albeit, Chopin has created an autonomous and bold character associated with the sexual awakening of the “New Woman”. The “New Woman” movement believed that women were entitled to the same sexual activities as men, the same sexual desire, and that sexual activity should not destroy a woman’s reputation (Cruea, 2005, p. 201). Nathalie is, like many other of Chopin’s characters experiencing freedom through her sexuality and sexual desire. Though it is unclear what her intentions are, we can see similar characteristics in Mrs. Baroda from “A Respectable Woman”. Mrs. Baroda is living a happy and fulfilling life with her husband, but finds herself attracted to Gouvernail, feeling an unanticipated lust for him (Chopin, 1969c, pp. 333-336). Janet Beer (1997) suggests that Gouvernail unknowingly works as a catalyst for Mrs. Baroda’s self-knowledge; changing her life momentarily and causing her sexual awakening (p. 50). As seen, this is not inconsistent with what Harvy brings out in Nathalie, a deeper desire than what she finds in Brantain. Chopin’s short fiction frequently encapsulate the phenomenon of the New Woman and is distinctive for its candid acknowledgement of female sexuality (Rich, 2010, p. 168). Chopin appears to have been ahead of her time in creating rebellious females, like for instance her painting of the scheming, disingenuous and sexually awakened character, Nathalie.

### 3.3 A Pair of Silk Stockings

“A Pair of Silk Stockings” was published in *Vouge* in 1897 and mainly revolves around one character; Mrs. Sommers. Mrs. Sommers is a sensible woman, who one day comes across an

unexpected amount of money. Mrs. Sommers has every intention to spend the money wisely, however, she gets a taste of her life before she became Mrs. Sommers, and the temptations around are merely too big.

After acquiring the money, Mrs. Sommers finds herself in a dreamy state, contemplating hard on how to spend her money most wisely. She is careful not to act hastily because she is afraid of doing something she might later regret. Mrs. Sommers is right away described as a realistic, reasonable and practical woman, and her immediate reflection leads to her children. The story does not specify whether Mrs. Sommers is married, a widow or if the husband is not around. It is, however, clear that the main responsibility for the children is hers, and it is important to her that the money will also benefit her children. “The vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives excited her and made her restless and wakeful with anticipation” (Chopin, 1969d, p. 500). Before her married life, Mrs. Sommers used to live a different lifestyle. This was a time when she had no need to carefully think of and calculate how to best spend her money. She could have gotten her children new clothes and shoes whenever she wanted to, but in this reality, being economical is essential. The thought of finally getting her children new things for the first time therefore makes her exhilarated. Providing this luxury gives Mrs. Sommers a taste of her former life and it takes away part of the shame associated with having little money.

A drained and fatigued Mrs. Sommers sits down by the counter and something soothing and pleasant touches her arm. It was a pile of silk stockings. Silk, a luxurious, elegant and costly fabric, serves as a reminder of the life Mrs. Sommers used to live. Representing the present time, is her old, worn out cotton stockings – a cheap and more plain kind of fabric. Caressing the soft and sleek silk fabric between her fingers makes Mrs. Sommers feel warm with enthusiasm. A sudden impulse wash over her, and Mrs. Sommers buys a pair of silk stockings and immediately put them on. The sensation of the silk on her skin is described almost sensually and can operate as a reminder of her femininity and womanhood, rather than the residing motherhood she has been subject to. The silk stockings glide “serpent-like” through her fingers, suggesting a symbolism for temptation, and gives the reader a foreshadowing of Mrs. Sommers’ extravagance.

She was not thinking at all. She seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility (Chopin, 1969d, p. 502).

Putting on a pair of silk stockings is, arguably, a small action, but not to Mrs. Sommers. The feel of the luxuriousness on her skin stops her from thinking reason, she abandons her cautious self and she immediately feels freed of responsibility. The silk stockings – the past – is a direct gateway to a lane of memories associated with freedom, ease and wealth. The purchase opens her mind to impulse actions, and Mrs. Sommers hastily moves on to the shoe department. Letting go of all restrictions, she does not mind spending an extra dollar or two on shoes, as long as it gets her what she wants. Looking down on her pretty legs and feet strengthens the desire for more luxury, for more indulgence. Mrs. Sommers gets fitted with gloves and buys high-priced magazines, items which had been ordinary to her “when she had been accustomed to other pleasant things” (Chopin, 1969d, p. 503). Mrs. Sommers carries the magazines without wrapping, an indication that she is comfortable in this skin, showing the world that she has the affluence to own such high-priced magazines. The notion of feeling like her old self is so absorbing, so welcoming, that Mrs. Sommers has lost all financial limitations.

Recognising how hungry she is, Mrs. Sommers follows her impulse to eat out instead of waiting to go home. She enters a restaurant with “shining crystals and soft-stepping waiters serving people of fashion” (Chopin, 1969d, p. 503). Her appearance in the first-rate restaurant creates no surprise neither to the customers nor to the waiters, unlike it had with the clerk at the shoe fitting. The clerk had not been able to make her out; luxurious stockings with old shoes. Now, though her exterior was spotless, she also carried herself in an entirely different manner. Mrs. Sommers’ whole being was light, content and relieved, something that reflected every aspect of her. She slid straight back to her fashion from her “better days”; cutting the pages of her magazine with her knife, eating mussels and drinking wine, not caring about the price any longer – “it was all very agreeable” (Chopin, 1969d, p. 503).

Allowing herself one last splurge, Mrs. Sommers goes to the theatre ingesting everything around her; the other guests, the sounds, the smells and the play. Laughing at the comedy and weeping at the tragedy, Mrs. Sommers is enjoying her time away to the fullest. Until this one, wonderful day “the needs of the present absorbed her every faculty (Chopin, 1969d, p. 500). Therefore, letting herself get swept away into a different world, feeling every emotion completely and forgetting the trouble and worry in her life is a plain manifestation of the need for liberation and escape. The burdens of motherhood, duty and responsibility whilst worrying about her financial situation has taken its toll, and to Mrs. Sommers it felt like a dream had

ended when the play was over. Sitting in the cable car on her way home, Mrs. Sommers wishes it would “never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever” (Chopin, 1969d, p. 504). Although it is apparent she loves and deeply cares for her children, Mrs. Sommers seems to have a suppressed longing towards her earlier life and the time when she could prioritise herself.

Expectations of Victorian women were often associated with being selfless and self-sacrificing, and this story portrays a woman who acknowledges the need of self (Rich, 2010, p. 164). Mrs. Sommers is facing the choice between fulfilling the expectations of society and satisfying her own needs and desires. One can draw comparisons between Mrs. Sommers’ need of living for herself, and that of Louise Mallard in “The Story of an Hour”. Arguably a bit more dramatical, Mrs. Mallard gets the message of her husband’s death and is suddenly possessed of a monstrous joy of freedom. “There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself” (Chopin, 1969e, pp. 352-354). Both characters represent longing and yearning for freedom – “inner conflicts which resemble those that many real and fictional New Women encountered” (Rich, 2010, p. 164). Chopin is presenting a definition of femininity which is not driven by sexuality or marital impediment, but a femininity where self-consideration is perceived as healthy and even necessary.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

Kate Chopin was an important predecessor for speaking the truth about what it was like to be a woman with “atypical” or unexpected dreams and longings. We see from the close readings above that some prevalent themes are those that encompass freedom and the right to think for yourself and to make your own choices. To some extent, all three of the presented female protagonists are versions of the New Woman movement in the way that they are trying to be independent. This is a pattern seen repeatedly through many of Chopin’s short stories and in her literature on the whole. Though she was a forerunner and part of evolving the modern views of society, Chopin also wrote stories of women engaging to conformity. A somewhat ambiguous example of this is the story “Athénaïse”. Athénaïse runs away from her marriage in order to feel free and like herself again. However, discovering she is pregnant transforms her life and her view of her husband; just thinking of him makes her cheeks flush with colour and her body is aching to be with him (Chopin, 1969f, pp. 426-454).



Chopin presents the readers with feminine definitions that varies from dynamic motherhood, to inner, sexual desires, to the need for alone time and autonomy. Much like herself, her characters are resourceful and bright, and it seems feasible that many of her characters are drawn from own life experiences and emotions. Though not spoken about by the masses at the time, her utterances were probably relatable to a considerable number of her womanly readership. Chopin therefore functioned and still functions as paragon to a broad spectrum of women and men in all kinds of circumstances of life.

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