**Kate Chopin**

**Chopin, Kate** Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin is best remembered for her novel *The Awakening*, which was greeted by popular critics as scandalous when it appeared in 1899. The controversy centered around the main female character's dissatisfaction with married life and her romantic attraction to a younger man. Chopin, however, was never one to be bound by convention and had been raised and educated by a series of headstrong women. Her outlook granted her a freedom to write without an internalized social censor; however, society was not yet ready for her work.

**Early Life**

Born on 8 February 1850 in St. Louis, Missouri, “Katie” was one of five children. Her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was an Irish immigrant from County Galway, who escaped the Great Potato Famine and his father's real-estate business to seek his fortune supplying ships, soldiers, and explorers in the United States. He also was instrumental in bringing new technologies like the telegraph and railroad links to St. Louis. His wife Eliza Faris was twenty-three years his junior, and the marriage appeared to be more of a business arrangement than a romantic commitment. O'Flaherty provided well for his family: he owned four slaves, sent his son George to St. Louis University, and paid for Katie's early schooling at the prestigious Sacred Heart Academy.

When she was five, Katie lost her beloved father in the disastrous Gasconade train bridge collapse that killed thirty of St. Louis's leading citizens. Katie's mother, now a young widow with a decent estate, did not remarry. Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville, Katie's great-grandmother, took the child under her wing. She was an unusual woman for her generation, in that she was literate and largely self-educated. During the period of mourning, she took it upon herself to school her great-granddaughter in French, the piano, and the nuances of survival as an intelligent woman.

At age seven, Katie reenrolled at Sacred Heart, this time as a day scholar. There, she became best friends with Kitty Garesché, a neighbor child as daring as she was. The duo climbed trees, read novels, studied a rigorous, wide-ranging curriculum, and went on educational field trips together.

Just as some normalcy began to return to Katie's routine, the Civil War broke out. Neighbors became bitterly divided over slavery and secession, even though Missouri did not leave the Union. The O'Flahertys' sympathies were with the South. Katie's brother George joined the Confederate Army, later dying of typhoid. On more than one occasion, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart had to prepare their young charges to flee, but rumors that soldiers would capture the convent school's buildings and grounds never came to fruition. Shots were fired just blocks from Katie's home and school. The last straw came when a Union sympathizer hung an American flag—an act intended as an insult—on Katie's house. Incensed, she stormed over, ripped down the flag, and stashed it in the dirty laundry. Angry Union soldiers tried to arrest her, but a neighbor intervened. Thereafter Katie O'Flaherty was hailed as “The Littlest Rebel” of St. Louis. The O'Flahertys' slaves ran off as the war reached its climax, and news came that Katie's cousin, also a Confederate soldier, had been killed in combat. Crushed by this latest series of personal losses, the schoolgirl sought refuge in books and music.

Encouraged by a teacher, Mary O'Meara, Katie began keeping a journal. She filled it with character sketches, literary critiques, poetry, and copied passages about powerful women. In later years, Kate would deny she had any discipline as a writer, but this early training proved extensive. Katie also was a talented pianist with a gifted ear. She was known for hearing a piece one night and then performing it from memory the next day. She spent a year at a rival school, apparently only to study piano, and took up German.

In 1868, Kate O'Flaherty graduated with honors from Sacred Heart and made her social debut. Already, she was beginning to chafe at the role she was expected to play. On a trip to New Orleans, she took up smoking—taboo for women—and she complained in her journal about the duties of a debutante: “What a nuisance all this is—I wish it were over. I write in my book to day the first time for months; parties, operas, concerts, skating and amusements ad infinitum have so taken up all my time that my dear reading and writing that I love so well have suffered much neglect” (Toth, p. 87). The young writer finished her first serious short story during this time. *Emancipation: A Life Fable* (1869) is a very short piece about a caged animal—perhaps not unlike the young debutante who was eager to take up her pen—who finally, after several false tries, escapes through the cage's open door.

In 1870, Katie married the dashing Oscar Chopin, a cotton factor. After a honeymoon in Philadelphia, New York, and Europe, the couple settled in New Orleans. It was common practice at that time for wealthy Creoles (descendants of French and Spanish colonists) to live in town part of the year and to tend to the plantation at harvest time. In 1874, Oscar joined the First Louisiana Regiment, an arm of the Crescent City White League. The White League was a paramilitary group made up of Confederate veterans from New Orleans high society. No love was lost between Creole cotton factors, whose wealth depended upon slave labor, and the large free black population in New Orleans. On 14 September 1874, Chopin's regiment exchanged fire with the metropolitan police in the infamous Battle of Canal Street.

In 1879, Oscar's business failed, and he moved the family to Cloutierville (pronounced “KLOO-chee-vil”), a small town of about six hundred people on the banks of the Cane River in northeastern Louisiana. The Chopins took up residence in the house built by the town's founder, which is today preserved as a literary shrine to Kate Chopin, and Oscar opened a general store and ran the plantation.

Kate gave birth to six children, but Oscar soon contracted swamp fever (malaria) and died. The young widow continued to run the store and plantation; she was widely believed to have carried on an affair with a married man, Alfred Sampite. After a year, she moved with her children to St. Louis to be near her mother. Her mother died soon after; Kate was distraught. The family doctor urged her to supplement her small rental income by publishing her writing.

**Writing Career**

Writing for pay was a respectable occupation for well-to-do widows in the late nineteenth century. The feminist scholar Sandra M. Gilbert also says Chopin's motivation was “partly to supplement her income and partly to distract herself from her grief” (Gilbert, p. 10). However, the late scholar Nancy A. Walker challenges this assumption: “to suggest that writing was for her a compensatory activity…or that following the death of Oscar Chopin she was forced to find a socially sanctioned means of supporting herself and her children [is not] borne out by the facts of Chopin's life” (p. 2). After all, she was the beneficiary of both Oscar's and her mother's estates, so she was not writing to put bread on the table for her children. Walker points out that such a career choice would be highly unlikely for a woman at that time unless there was some preexisting ability and practice on the writer's part. Chopin had received a great deal of formal education and writing instruction as a girl. As an adult, she rarely revised her works, understood how to handle editorial criticism, knew how to sell a story, and learned quickly from her mistakes.

Chopin, like many nineteenth-century writers, first published poems and short stories in the popular magazines of the day. In 1889, Chopin's first published work, the love poem *If It Might Be*, appeared in *America*. Later that same year, she began writing her first novel, *At Fault*, and her first published story, *A Point At Issue!*, ran in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The following year, Chopin published one thousand copies of *At Fault*, ostensibly based on her rumored affair with Sampite, at her own expense. She finished the manuscript of a second novel, *Young Dr. Gosse and Théo*, in 1891. After several publishers rejected the manuscript, Chopin destroyed it. Her short stories began to appear steadily in *Vogue*, *Century*, *Short Stories*, *Harper's Young People*, and *The New Orleans Times-Democrat*, among other magazines and newspapers.

In 1894, Chopin published her first collection of short stories, titled *Bayou Folk*. This group included such local color pieces as *For Marse Chouchoute*, her first Cloutierville-inspired piece; *Boulôt and Boulotte*, a comic tale of childrens' values; *The Storm*, a passionate tale of an adulterous encounter during a hurricane; *Desirée's Baby*, which explores intersections of racism and sexism; *La Belle Zoraíde*, the tale of a light-skinned black woman who wants a dark-skinned baby, but whose cruel mistress removes the baby and convinces her the child is dead; and *At the 'Cadian Ball*, recounting a flirtation at a *fais-do-do* (Cajun dance).

A second short story collection, *A Night in Acadie*, continued in the local-color vein. *A Matter of Prejudice* depicts a French woman in New Orleans who refuses to cross Canal Street because the other side is occupied by “Americans.” In *The Lilies*, a child creates a match between a mother and a cranky bachelor. *A Little Free-Mulatto* is another effort to examine life through the eyes of African Americans: a man attempts to cheer his sad and isolated mulatto daughter by taking her to “L'Isle des Mulâtres,” which was where the free *gens de coleur* lived in Natchitoches Parish. There, the child is transformed by the joy of being among others like herself. This story, like “Desirée's Baby” and *La Belle Zoraíde*, offers a unique perspective from the *Littlest Rebel* who married a member of the White League.

***The Awakening***

One story that was too big for the confines of the short form, *At Chênière Caminada*, later grew into the novel *The Awakening*. The book opens in 1899 on Grand Isle off coastal Louisiana, where wealthy Creoles (descendants of French settlers) spend their summers. Edna Pontellier, a young wife and mother, is there with her two young sons and her husband Léonce. However, Léonce's business frequently calls him back to New Orleans. Edna, an *Americaine* who has married into Creole society, spends most of her time with Madame Lebrun, the resort owner; Adèle Ratignolle, a model self-sacrificing Creole mother; Mademoiselle Reisz, a piano-playing spinster; and Madame Lebrun's son, Robert, a single man who is known for choosing a married woman to squire about each summer.

Edna experiences culture shock in this French Catholic milieu. Because Creole women are considered above reproach, they are ironically free to flirt and to speak frankly. Edna is shocked at first but grows accustomed to the openness that Adèle and the other women on Grand Isle display. Robert takes up their company, and the three often venture down to the beach and chat. He begins swanning Edna about in an exaggerated chivalry. Soon after, the parody becomes flirtatious, and the two find themselves more and more attracted to each other.

As the summer progresses, Edna learns to swim, takes up her forgotten paintbrushes, and spends more time with Robert. This is the beginning of her “awakening.” Clearly, there is a spark between Edna and Robert, yet neither speaks of it.

Edna also is moved to tears by the piano playing of Mademoiselle Reisz, a spinster who lives a life of freedom, one to which Edna unconsciously aspires. Edna begins to dread spending time with Léonce when he is around; he in turn becomes more clingy and questioning. Robert feels himself on the edge of romance with Edna and leaves for Mexico so as not to interfere.

However, when the Pontelliers return to New Orleans, things have changed. Edna is obsessed with her painting; Léonce is troubled by her new self-assertiveness. He seeks counsel from the family doctor, who suspects an affair but tells Léonce to let this strange bout of noncompliance run its course.

While Léonce is away on business, Edna sends the boys to the country to stay with his mother. Free of family distractions, yet lacking any real role models, Edna dives into remaking herself. She rents a small cottage, nicknamed “the pigeon house,” moves herself and her few possessions, and calls remodelers into the Pontellier home. In the pigeon house, Edna feels in control of her own destiny. However, the local rake, Alcée Arobin, has taken note of her isolation and “befriends” her. They begin going to the racetrack. Although Edna still has feelings for Robert, eventually she is seduced by Alcée. She enjoys the pure physicality of their sex, but refuses to turn over her soul—to him or to any man.

Mademoiselle Reisz lives nearby, and one day Edna seeks her out. Mademoiselle tries to counsel Edna on the demands of the artist's life. She also tells Edna that she regularly receives letters from Robert. Edna is consumed with a desire to read the letters. Mademoiselle, knowing of their mutual attraction, finally allows her to see Robert's letters.

Eventually, Robert can no longer deny his love for Edna, and returns to New Orleans. By chance, they meet at Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment. He confesses his feelings for her yet insists that she belongs to Léonce. Edna counters that she does not belong to anyone but herself. She tries to convince Robert to live with her in the pigeon house, but his Creole sensibilities prevent him from launching into an affair with another man's wife.

As the two embrace, a messenger interrupts with news that Adèle Ratignolle is in labor and calling for Edna's assistance. Edna begs Robert to wait for her return; when she leaves, he writes a goodbye note and slips away. Meanwhile, Adèle urges Edna to think of how an affair would affect her children. The weight of Adèle's admonition is especially great because she is in labor, and Edna becomes consumed with guilt.

On her return to the pigeon house, Edna finds Robert's note. Suddenly, she realizes she is truly alone in the world. She can only conceive of one way to escape. She goes back to Grand Isle, strips, and swims into the Gulf. The ending implies Edna's suicide—an unforgivable sin in Creole culture—without ever actually passing judgment on it.

*The Awakening* has all the zing and spice of a contemporary novel. Unfortunately for Chopin, many of her readers in the final throes of the nineteenth century could not conceive of a woman breaking the social code this way. The third-person narrator never condemns Edna's behavior; readers inferred that Chopin herself approved of Edna's nonconformist actions. Chopin herself was a nonconformist, but the analogy between the author and her character is false: Chopin did not commit suicide (she died of a brain hemorrhage), nor did she leave her husband (she was widowed). Chopin herself wrote, “I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did” (Toth, p. 344).

The spark of scandal no doubt was fanned by Chopin's gleefully unconventional behavior. Chopin rolled her own Cuban cigarettes when it was considered unladylike to smoke; sauntered unaccompanied through the streets of St. Louis, New Orleans, and Cloutierville; wore purple; played cards; took over her husband's business; and rode astride her horse. This was not at all the behavior expected of a former Sacred Heart debutante, now a mother and widow.

Chopin's critics also objected to the tone of the novel. While portraying Edna's second adolescence, Chopin's narrator never condemned Edna's missteps and selfish acts. Critics, interpreting this as tacit approval of Edna's behavior, savaged the book. *The Awakening* also presented a more serious side of Chopin the writer than did her local color sketches. Ironically, the artist herself suffered a fate similar to that of her main character. Just as Edna's paintings were more than socially acceptable decorations for others' pleasure, so did Chopin's writing present a threat once she began to explore issues that were important to her.

Chopin was deeply wounded by the way St. Louis turned against her. The following year, her publisher refused to print the third collection of short stories, ostensibly as a result of the scandal that *The Awakening* caused. On 20 August 1904, Kate Chopin suffered a cerebral hemorrhage after having spent the day at the World's Fair. She died two days later, at age 54.

Chopin's work lay largely ignored for almost thirty years, until Father Daniel Rankin, a Catholic priest and scholar, rescued it from slipping into even greater obscurity. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of headstrong women rediscovered her work and praised its farsightedness. Today, both Chopin and her works are lively topics of scholarship, and *The Awakening* is required reading for many high school and college students.

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