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For Connie
With Love and Gratitude

The far, faint voice of a woman, I heard,
'Twas but a wail, and it spoke no word.
It rose from the depths of some infinite gloom

–Kate Chopin's "The Haunted Chamber"

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Chapter I: Introduction

Kate Chopin's first short story ends with a young woman rejecting an unsuitable offer of marriage and going on to great success as a pianist. Her last piece of short fiction (other than two stories for children), eleven years later, ends with an elderly, never-married woman dying a lonely and painful death convinced that a statue of a white eagle that she has treasured since she was a girl has come alive and is "perched upon her, pecking at her bosom."[1] This shift to a vision of diminished and terrible possibilities parallels, of course, the shift that occurs in Chopin's two published novels. *At Fault* ends with a marriage in springtime, a union that seems to promise long-delayed fulfillment to its widowed protagonist. *The Awakening*, eight years later, ends, as all know, with a woman drowning herself, convinced that she can find fulfillment neither within her marriage nor outside of it.

Why the change? Why, in fact, do things work out so badly for so many women in Chopin's fiction? The beginnings of an answer may reside in a comment Chopin made in 1894 while reviewing Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols*. Garland, Chopin observes, is sadly lacking in historical perspective in that he is unaware that "human impulses do not change and cannot so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began" (693). One human impulse that she came to know had never changed was the desire for power, manifested first, of course, as a yearning for control over one's own life but also, for too many, as a yearning to impose one's will on other lives. Always dangerous, this impulse to power could be especially lethal, as Chopin's stories show, in the most personal of relationships established between men and women since "their existence began," those of courtship and marriage. Further, given the prevailing social realities, the ones who would most typically suffer, Chopin makes clear, when conflicts over power arise in these relationships (as they so often do) are the women. Her stories also reveal, though, that seeking to gain or maintain personal autonomy by avoiding courtship and marriage leads to no less difficulty for women, as soon or late the pressures of the prevailing social expectations and imperatives inevitably become too potent to resist or living on one's own exacts too painful a psychic cost.

It is not terribly difficult to see where Chopin's grim vision of the human struggle for power and its especially painful repercussions for women might well have begun. Thomas O'Flaherty, Chopin's father, was, Emily Toth observes, "a humorless, driven, rather sad man, who became a stern master," not least, presumably, to the young woman of sixteen he married when he was thirty-nine and who became Chopin's mother. Further, Toth suggests, he may well have fathered the slave children Chopin saw about the house in her earli-

est years, leading to "insistent" questions from little Kate about their parentage, "rude questions that infuriated her father (or horrified her mother)." Not surprisingly, there may have been "scenes of anger, or terrifying silences," perhaps offering an explanation as to why young Kate Chopin was sent off to boarding school with the Sacred Heart nuns when she was only five.[2] Chopin's mother, widowed by the sudden death of Thomas O'Flaherty in a railroad accident, never married again, and "her first act as a young widow was to bring her daughter Katie home." Toth notes that "for the rest of her life, Kate would brood over her father's sudden death, and what it meant for her mother," and she suggests that one likely result of that brooding was "The Story of an Hour," in which the long-repressed Mrs. Mallard finds herself surprised by her own joy at the death of her husband and the vistas of freedom it seems to open for her (10).

If her parents' marriage provided the first indications to Chopin that the struggle for power is a grim fact of existence and that women are particularly vulnerable in the struggle, brutal confirmation of those early suspicions came with the Civil War. Not only did her half-brother George die fighting for the South, but on one occasion Union soldiers in St. Louis threatened to arrest the thirteen-year-old Kate for defiantly taking down and hiding a national flag that they had hung from the O'Flaherty porch. And on another, probably even more frightening occasion, after the Confederate surrender at Vicksburg, Union soldiers actually invaded the O'Flaherty home at bayonet point and forced Kate's mother to display the flag as part of the victory celebration they demanded of all St. Louis. Toth suspects there is at least some possibility that Chopin herself or other women in the household may have been sexually molested by the soldiers, but whether this was the case or not, the fact remains that the young Chopin got to experience intimately a brutal manifestation of the human lust for power and especially of female vulnerability to male force. One could, I suspect, even speculate that the seemingly innocuous moment when an inebriated Léonce Pontellier empties his pockets at bedtime while trying to force a sleepy Edna to be responsive to his tedious chatter is an outgrowth (however tenuous) of Chopin's troubled memories of this wartime event, for one of the items that Léonce pulls from his pockets is a pen-knife. Obviously, this is far from wielding a bayonet; nevertheless, it is still a blade, still suggestive of male power to coerce women, and it is mentioned in the context of a husband's attempt to demand submission in a bedroom.

Given the repression Chopin may well have seen in her parents' marriage, in the two Civil War incidents she endured, and, presumably, in the convent boarding school, where, as Toth notes, one feature of the rigid system of discipline imposed was that "nonessential speech was forbidden" (15), it is not surprising that her first work of fiction would be "Emancipation. A Life Fable."

In this two-page piece written just about the time of her twentieth birthday, Chopin tells of an animal born into captivity who has known nothing of life save for the cage in which he lives comfortably with every physical need met. "Awaking one day from his slothful rest," however, he discovers the door to his cage has accidentally been left unlocked. Hesitant at first, he thrusts his head out, "to see the canopy of the sky grow broader, and the world waxing wider." Before long, after "a deep in-drawn breath"and "a bracing of strong limbs," he bounds out and is gone–out into an existence of "seeking, finding, joying and suffering," the cage remaining "forever empty" (37–38).

The captivity endured by the beast in this fable anticipates a repression imposed on many, especially women, in the works of Chopin's subsequent literary career, beginning two decades later, and the successful escape anticipates what so many of these captives seek but all too often fail to achieve. Rarely are the doors to their cages left unlocked, and those few who do manage by strength or chance to find themselves outside the bars–whether briefly or at length–rarely flourish, for, leaving one cage behind, they frequently find themselves, Chopin shows, trapped in another. Sadly, few do have the strength or the opportunity for "seeking, finding, joying and suffering." Few, in other words, have the power to achieve the autonomy necessary for a vital existence.

Chopin's developing sense that life may often be a doomed struggle to achieve and maintain autonomous existence in frequently inimical conditions was reinforced by her reading of Darwin and his followers. Indeed, *The Descent of Man* was published only about a year after "Emancipation" and must have found a ready audience in Chopin.[3] In this vein, William Schuyler noted of her in 1894 that "the works of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer were her daily companions; for the study of the human species . . . has always been her constant delight."[4] Bert Bender observes that over time the study proved, however, far from delightful for Chopin. Though initially Darwin's theory of sexual selection offered Chopin "a profoundly liberating sense of animal innocence in the realm of human courtship, especially for the Victorian woman," before too long this initial optimism "developed into ambivalence and finally into a sense of despair that Darwin had not expressed in *The Descent of Man*." Ultimately, she concluded, as Bender perceives it, that love "beats in self-assertion to the evolutionary time of sexual selection" and that, in consequence, "the human spirit had been denied its place not only in a Christian universe but also in the more limited sphere of human courtship and love."[5]

Certainly whatever satisfactions and consolations Chopin might or might not have found in her own married life, which began within months of her writing of "Emancipation," her close observations of others caught up in the "limited sphere of human courtship and love" were highly likely to foster in her this darker reading of Darwinian implications. For example, the father of

her husband Oscar was, as Toth notes succinctly, an "ogre" who as master of a plantation had "made the lives of his wife and slaves a living hell" (63). Oscar's mother had left this man for seven years before yielding to both social and religious pressure and returning to her marital bondage. Further, Albert Sampite, the married man and notorious womanizer with whom Chopin is thought to have had an illicit relationship in Cloutierville, was so brutal and threatening a sort that after his wife's legal separation from him on grounds of desertion, the woman found it necessary "to carry a big, black bullwhip for protection" whenever she had to see him. Nor did Sampite keep up with child support or maintain even his romantic loyalties, once giving a new lover a lamp that Chopin had given him. Sampite's wife's brother, another Cloutierville resident, was the "drunken, irresponsible" Sylvere DeLouche, a scandalous wastrel who made his wife so miserable that she left him, only to enter into a public relationship with her former sister-in-law's husband, the outrageous Sampite (140). Assuredly, nothing in all this or in, one presumes, many another relationship or marriage that Chopin observed, be it in Cloutierville, New Orleans, St. Louis, or elsewhere, would encourage a more hopeful reading of Darwin than the one she came to and which helps shape the grim context in which she places so many of her characters, especially the women.

If Chopin, setting out on her mature literary career a few years after Oscar's death, needed any encouragement in believing that a generally realist fiction could convey powerfully the difficulties confronting women as they struggled for autonomy in inimical conditions, she found that encouragement in the works of two contemporary American writers she particularly admired. As most know, Chopin cites Maupassant as exerting a profound influence on her work–and certainly that influence shows in Chopin's deft and striking economy of word and event and in her aversion to overt moralizing–but, as Elaine Showalter notes, the American short story in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century was the dominant form for exploring "the new feminist themes";[6] and if Chopin wanted, as Janet Beer suggests, "to problematize and complicate the business of courtship and marriage by bringing into the foreground the exigencies of desire,"[7] she could look close to home, to the short fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Jewett's and Freeman's works often showed the conflicts women faced between their desire for self-realization and the demands of convention and showed, as well, the thwarted, stunted lives forced upon too many women; and both authors were able to convey all this with what Per Seyersted characterizes as "a mixture of frank realism and artistic control," a mix for which Chopin had a strong affinity.

In May of 1894, in the midst of her literary career and on the occasion of her son Jean's twenty-third birthday, Chopin wrote a diary entry in which she took stock of her life since the deaths of her husband and her mother twelve

and nine years before. The statement, a poignant one, reveals implicitly all of "the new feminist themes" of which Showalter speaks, all of the foregrounding of the "exigencies of desire," that Beer sees in Chopin's thought, all of the conflict and all of the menacing possibility of life unlived that one sees in the fiction of Jewett or Freeman. In short, one sees, I believe, Chopin's own profound awareness of just how difficult it is for one, particularly a woman, to achieve autonomy and just how tenuous one's grip on it can be once one has achieved it. And it is an awareness that informs the portrayal of her most significant and troubling figures.

Though the diary entry reflects what must have been a good deal of intense retrospection on Chopin's part, it begins, oddly enough, with a dismissal of the past, as Chopin asserts, "How curiously the past effaces itself for me." She admits "I sometimes regret that it is so; for there must be a certain pleasure in retrospection," but then asserts quickly that such pleasure cannot be for her because "I cannot live through yesterday or tomorrow. It is why the dead in their . . . association with the grave have no hold on me." Be that as it may, just a few lines later she reveals just how strong the pull of the past can, in fact, be for her when she declares, "If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel I would unhesitatingly give up everything that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs." To do this, though, she believes, "I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth–my real growth." However, she insists, forgetting these ten years would not leave her utterly bereft, for in the very act of renouncing them something would have been gained: "But I would take back a little wisdom with me; it would be the spirit of a perfect acquiescence"[8]

The internal conflict revealed in this statement is striking. Claiming that the past "effaces itself" for her, she reveals nonetheless just how profoundly it is with her still. Husband and mother, who in their characters as grave-dwellers she insists have "no hold" upon her, are certainly intimate presences in her consciousness as she evaluates the direction her last ten years have taken. And though they lack any grip on her, she declares that "unhesitatingly" she would give up everything gained since their deaths to have them back. Wishing to "join" her "existence" with theirs, she nonetheless realizes painfully that this would entail a cruel loss to her own existence as an individual–note how her concession that she would have to forget the "past ten years of my growth" is followed immediately by the poignant exclamation "my real growth," a seemingly irrepressible lament from a troubled heart and spirit. Her use of "real" is especially wrenching as it suggests her admission that all personal development that she might have undergone before these ten years was somehow less than authentic. Further, she professes to find compensation in the wisdom such self-sacrifice would provide her, a wisdom of acquiescence, but offers no spe-

cific context in which such "wisdom" would manifest itself productively. Perhaps she could imagine none save as a numbing submission to the past and particularly to those two looming figures in it who she declares have "no hold" upon her. Finally, permeating all this, of course, are her mixed feelings about her husband and mother not as figures somehow emblematic of "the past" but as specific persons in her life and, no less troubling, her mixed feelings about her "growth" and the writings so inextricably tied to it.

Why should the lost pair and the growth be set in opposition? Why could she not have her lost loved ones and her ten years of development and work? It seems that she finds the confines of conventional life as dutiful wife and dutiful daughter as having been horribly at odds with the unfettered vision of a probing artist, and it seems, as well, that this realization genuinely tears at her. Clearly, then, Chopin herself knew personally, with a terrible intensity, how difficult a woman's course to autonomy, to a fully developed sense of selfhood, could be; and even she, in the very midst of forging her career as unsparing delineator of the bleakness that is often the lot of the striver, felt the strains of internal conflict, the disturbing stirrings of ambivalence. None of this was left out of her best work.

Thus, however Chopin may have come to her predominantly grim perception of the way in which men and women stand in relation to one another and the especially troubling ramifications for women in particular–whether through her own experiences, her reading, or her observations of those about her–most of her best work, I believe, presents that perception and conveys it unremittingly, courageously, and compellingly. It is the purpose of this study to examine this dark vision as it manifests itself in her short fiction. Unlike *The Awakening*, most of the short fiction has not received the extensive critical attention it deserves,[9] and close examination of many of the shorter works may not only reveal much more to us of Chopin's complexity as artist and forcefulness as social commentator but may also establish a fuller context in which to view her brilliant and disturbing novel. In exploring Chopin's portrayal of the difficulties women confront as they try to assert themselves in a continuing social framework inimical to such assertion, I shall look first at stories depicting marriage, then at stories presenting the vicissitudes of courtship, and finally at those that portray women trying to assert themselves independently of the confines of marriage and courtship. In each case, Chopin's first story in the category will be a relatively hopeful one–though not without its own grimmer possibilities–almost as if Chopin was at first somewhat hesitant to confront and express her own deepest misgivings; thereafter, perhaps encouraged by her growing command as an artist, she spared neither herself nor her readers the grimmest of her perceptions and suspicions, and the stories within each category have little mitigation of the overriding darkness. I trust

that close reading will show that these three categories of stories comprise the most successful part of Chopin's short fiction and a body of work of surpassing artistry and depth that has not been looked at fully enough–work of a vision no less compelling than that present in the most troubling short fiction of her predecessors Hawthorne and Melville or her contemporaries Crane and Wharton.

Notes

1. Kate Chopin, *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1969), 672. All page references to Chopin's fiction and poetry are keyed to this edition. The year of publication that I cite for each story is the year cited by Seyersted in this edition.
2. Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999), 4-8.
3. Per Seyersted suggests that Chopin "was familiar with Darwin as early as 1869." See Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 1969), 84.
4. Per Seyersted, ed., *A Kate Chopin Miscellany*, Natchitoches, LA.: Northwestern State University, 1979), 117.
5. Bert Bender, "The Teeth of Desire: *The Awakening* and *The Descent of Man*," *American Literature* 63 (1991), 460, 463.
6. Elaine Showalter, "Smoking Room," *Times Literary Supplement* 16 (1995), 12.
7. Janet Beer, *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 42.
8. Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin*, (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 241.
9. The only book-length study of Chopin's short fiction is Bernard Koloski's *Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction*, (New York: Twayne, 1996), a brief work that performs a valuable service in providing quick plot summaries of most of Chopin's short stories and some perceptive commentary but that rarely spends as much as a page or two on a given story. There have, of course, been extended commentaries by others on individual stories, but typically on the same few works: "Désirée's Baby," and "The Story of an Hour," and "The Storm," in particular, among them–and even these are works of sufficient complexity to warrant a good bit more study than they have yet received. Clearly, there is much more to be done with Chopin's short fiction.

Chapter II: The Marriage Stories

To put it bluntly, few marriages in Chopin's mature short fiction are either happy or rewarding experiences. Along with her contemporaries William Dean Howells, whom one commentator called "pre-eminently the novelist of late nineteenth century American mating and marriage,"[1] and Henry James, whose portrayals of marriage in such works as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*, among others, are of a subtlety and complexity previously unseen in American tales of married life, Chopin presents the most significant marriage fiction of her time. Unlike the works of the other two, though, Chopin's tales of married life are almost unremittingly bleak.

Where Howells, following his own anti-romantic predilections, might occasionally depict marriage as an evolving experience of affectionate comradeship, offering a couple a little realm of contentment, civility, and order in a troubled world, Chopin saw only a little realm of conflict and disorder that mirrored and even intensified the problems of the larger, troubled world. If Howells thought the lessons of mutual accommodation learned in the small society of marriage might make man and wife more civil beings, even more moral beings, in the larger society around them, Chopin typically saw nothing in the marital experience that might equip one to function more civilly, more humanely, with those one confronts outside the confines of one's marriage. And if Henry James, given what he called his "imagination of disaster," often portrayed the closeness of two spouses as an experience of genuinely tragic possibilities, he did stress that out of the pain and loss, one could grow profoundly in self-awareness, in perception of the true nature of things–a growth productive, he hoped, of an end to one's egocentrism. However, while Chopin's short stories of marriage present pain and loss aplenty, especially for the wives, the suffering leads to no new insights about oneself or anything else–the pain tends to be sterile, productive only of more pain and an increasing sense of desperation. Sadly and not too surprisingly, given the general run of things in Chopin's marital fiction, Edna Pontellier, her only married woman who perceives herself as gaining any real insight into the plight of women in marriage, is so overwhelmed by the sense of hopelessness it brings with it that she drowns herself.[2] It seems, in short, that the wives in Chopin's short stories of matrimony have but two options, neither at all appealing. They can submit, yielding to a husband and, indeed, to an institution that deny them anything approximating autonomy of thought, desire, or action, or they can rebel, only to find their rebellion short-lived and futile, as nothing in their experience or social context encourages the sort of personal latitude and growth for which they long. As Janet Beer notes aptly, marriage in the world depicted in Chopin's fiction is typically regarded as "the end, the completion of the woman, not something