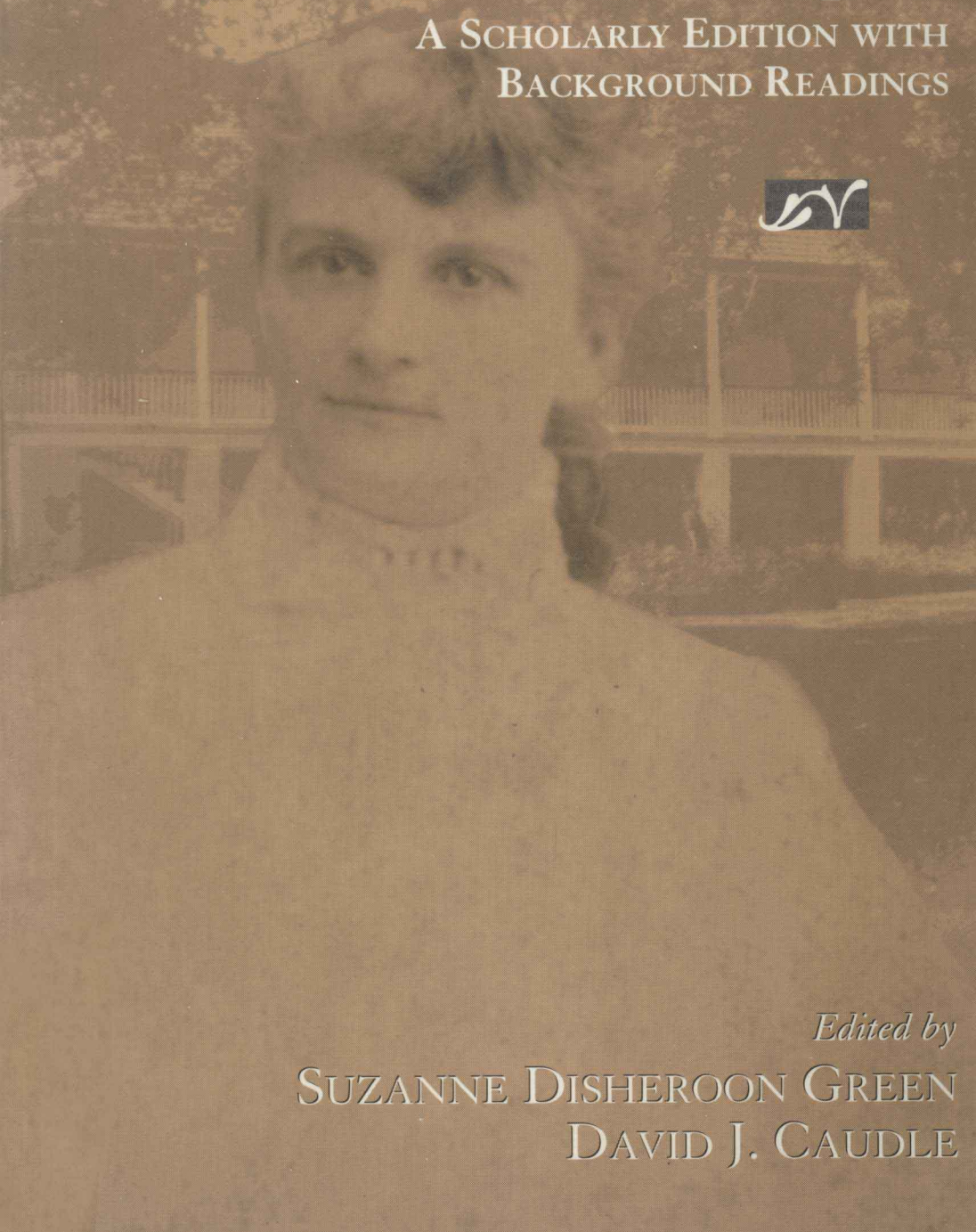


AT FAULT

Kate Chopin

A SCHOLARLY EDITION WITH
BACKGROUND READINGS



Edited by

SUZANNE DISHEROON GREEN
DAVID J. CAUDLE

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PREFACE

Despite its relative obscurity, Kate Chopin's first novel, *At Fault*, has received increased attention from literary critics in recent years. Although perhaps lacking some of the artistic qualities of her later masterpiece, *The Awakening*, and at times a bit didactic for the taste of modern readers, *At Fault* is an important piece of the Chopin canon. Surprisingly, given the significance of this novel in terms of evaluating and understanding Chopin's complete body of work, *At Fault* has not been widely available, except as part of Per Seyersted's *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, since shortly after its initial publication in 1890.

This volume originally was intended simply to make the text of *At Fault* available in a more affordable and accessible form for scholars of American, southern, and women's literature; the general reading public; and students in college classrooms. However, as we began to develop this project, it became clear that the cultural milieu that surrounds this novel is quite different from that of either *The Awakening* or most of Chopin's short fiction. Certainly, Chopin draws upon many of the same elements that characterize her later work: recurring characters; a fictional community based upon the Cane River region of Natchitoches Parish in Northwestern Louisiana; Creole dialects; and Louisiana landscapes, to name just a few. However, she develops themes that remain relevant today, despite the fact that at the time *At Fault* was written, Chopin clearly was not the polished writer she would become later.

The narrative of *At Fault* revolves around a young Creole widow who runs a plantation on her own, despite her neighbors' expectations that she would soon remarry and assume a more traditional role. Her story illustrates both the development of railroad systems in the rural South and its effect upon the agrarian provincialism of small town life in Louisiana. *At Fault* also documents the threat felt by those who had lived in these rural regions their entire

lives upon encountering such profound and unstoppable changes. Chopin also documents—none too subtly—her opinions of the urban *nouveau riche*, the Temperance Movement, and several renowned contemporary writers.

At Fault is quite an ambitious undertaking for a first novel, and we realized that to make this novel truly accessible, especially to readers who are unfamiliar with the gumbo that is Louisiana culture, it would be necessary to examine the context within which Chopin placed her novel. Accordingly, this volume consists of two parts: the text of *At Fault*, with explanatory notes; and a collection of supplementary materials—many of which were available and familiar to Chopin herself—assembled to provide context for the novel. These materials allow a fuller reading of *At Fault*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any volume of this scope, the list of people and organizations to whom we owe a debt of gratitude is extensive. Without the help of these, and doubtless others whom we have inadvertently neglected to mention, this volume would not have been possible.

We owe particular thanks to our families, who provided not only moral support and encouragement, but in many cases economic support as well. Their generosity made possible several extended research trips. Jay Caudle, Jolene Caudle, Fred Disheroon, Diane Donley, Charles L. Green, Elaine Green, and Richard Green have been instrumental in the completion of this volume. Special thanks also go to Kathryn Amanda Green and J. Alexander Green for their patience with a mom who too often said that she had to work instead of going outside to throw baseballs or paint flower pots. J. Alexander Green also helped proof-read some of the manuscript materials, and Kathryn Amanda Green took on extra chores, especially cooking, to help.

Without the help of our tireless, unflagging, and uncomplaining editorial assistant, Susie Scifres Kuilan, we undoubtedly would have pulled each other's hair out and possibly our own as well. She was invaluable in helping to get the manuscript together, spending countless hours—even on her days off—typing, correcting, and organizing our material. She deserves a substantial measure of credit for the successful completion of this volume. We also thank the Department of Language and Communication at Northwestern State University of Louisiana for providing institutional support for Kuilan's services. The students in English 3150 (Spring 2000) provided feedback on material that we needed to annotate in the text of the novel.

Our dear friend and colleague, Lisa Abney of the Louisiana Folklife Center, Natchitoches, Louisiana, not only contributed an original essay to the volume, but also went out of her way to secure photos of maps from Special

Collections, Louisiana Collection, Tulane University Library. We still owe her and her new husband dinner at Antoine's for her efforts. Michelle Pichon contributed an insightful and thought-provoking essay created especially for this volume. The members of the weekly research and "save our mental health" group—Lisa Abney, Helaine Razovsky, Helen Sugarman, and Shelisa Theus—were kind enough to review the introduction to the volume and make excellent suggestions for revision. After we returned to Louisiana to finish writing the book, Jerry Alexandratos made several trips to acquire materials that were available only at the Library of Congress; he also assisted in clarifying several copyright issues. He too, will be the recipient of a Creole dinner and a bottle of Merlot.

Marie François Conin-Jones translated the French and Creole passages in *At Fault* with the same pleasing professionalism she demonstrated in working with us on our previous Chopin volume. We owe her a special *merci* for her patience with our lateness in getting materials to her. Shelley Svidal aided us in locating the Cicero quotation cited in the endnotes.


At the Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Library, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Archivist Mary Linn Wernet and Assistant Archivist Catherine Jannik helped us locate information about Chopin, her husband, and their family landholdings. Sonny Newton Carter made photographic copies of several maps in the Research Center collections on very short notice, and we are grateful. Bill Meneray at the Special Collections, Tulane University, was a great help in securing both maps of Louisiana and permission to reproduce them in this volume.

Charles L. Green and Anitra Kinder photographed many of the historical sites pictured in this volume and were instrumental in getting them developed and enlarged. Finally, Gary Hardamon, supervisor of photography at Northwestern State University of Louisiana, developed and enlarged several prints for us; he was extremely kind and efficient in doing so on short notice.

We owe thanks to the research librarians at the following institutions: the Library of Congress; the McKeldin Library, University of Maryland; Tulane University; Missouri Historical Society; and the University of North Texas Libraries. The staff at the St. Louis Cemetery aided us in locating the Chopin family plot.

Finally, the editors at the University of Tennessee Press—especially Joyce Harrison, acquisitions editor, who initially approached us about doing this volume; and Stan Ivester, managing editor—were extremely helpful throughout the editing and production process. They patiently answered our multitudinous questions and helped the publication process run smoothly.

EDITORIAL PRACTICES

his edition of *At Fault* conforms as closely as possible to the first edition, which was published privately in 1890 by Nixon-Jones Publishing. No substantial reprint has been undertaken until this time. A short-run reprinting of the first edition was issued by Green Street Press in 1986, but this edition has been out of print for some time. The only other version presently available is included in Per Seyersted's *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (1969), but the expense of this excellent volume makes its acquisition prohibitive for most readers.

No manuscript of the novel or author's notes related to the text are known to exist, and thus a true critical edition of this text is not possible. Chopin was notorious for destroying her notes and drafts, a reputation that is confirmed by the recently published *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*. This collection demonstrates that Chopin kept exacting financial accounts of both the disposition of her manuscripts and the fate of those manuscript pages after publication. Given Chopin's well-documented writing habits, new evidence is unlikely. Because of the lack of archival evidence, we have little alternative but to rely exclusively on the first edition, with a few minor deviations which are outlined below.

EDITORIAL CHANGES FROM THE FIRST EDITION

Perhaps because it was privately—and therefore inexpensively—published, the first edition of *At Fault* contains a number of irregularities in spelling, punctuation, and other usage. We have regularized spelling when such changes are not at variance with nineteenth-century conventions, and have verified these spellings using Funk and Wagnall's *A Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1899). Chopin's spelling inconsistencies—such as her use of *aint* and *ain't* interchangeably—have been modernized throughout the text.

We have made minimal changes in punctuation, because many changes of this nature could affect the reading of the text, and we have attempted to avoid such forced readings. Where punctuation *clearly* is a typographical error (e.g., a missing period at the end of a sentence), we have corrected it, and we have annotated any such changes in the endnotes to the text.

EDITORIAL CHANGES IN BACKGROUND PIECES

Because of copyright considerations, we have not corrected the few typographical errors in the secondary material included in this volume. However, we have noted such items where they occur. Many of these secondary sources were written contemporaneously with *At Fault*; hence many of the same types of irregularities in usage, spelling, and especially punctuation, occur. Several of these pieces, and most notably the excerpts from Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, employ spellings common to British English.

Most of the pieces in the "Backgrounds and Contexts" section are drawn from primary source material. However, in a few cases, we have taken excerpts from scholarly sources, each of which has its own documentation. In the interest of clarity, we have renumbered the relevant notes or tables so that they appear consecutively in the excerpt. Such changes in the numbering scheme of the original versions are indicated by brackets. Because of copyright restrictions, we have made no other changes to these essays.

EDITORIAL PRACTICES IN TEXTUAL NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, definitions of English words are paraphrased from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). French translations are the work of Marie François Conin-Jones of the University of North Texas, Denton, Texas. Explanatory notes, except where otherwise noted, are the work of the editors.

Introduction

A NEW GENERATION READS *At Fault*

At *Fault*, one of Kate Chopin's first efforts as a professional writer, was published in 1890 in a private printing of only one thousand copies. While on the surface *At Fault* appears to be a prototypical example of the nineteenth-century domestic novel or a light piece of local color fiction, Chopin's early effort transcends the limitations inherent in these genres. Indeed, *At Fault* addresses many of the same issues that would come to be identified as the hallmarks of Chopin's best fiction. In her first novel, she deals with the ideological questions arising from the redefinition of gender, race, and class roles that foreshadow the more explicit treatment of these themes in much of her short fiction and in *The Awakening*. In addition, she explores many of the issues that came to dominate America's Gilded Age: urbanization and industrialization, along with the resulting economic dislocation. Although these issues are not often considered from the perspective of vanquished southerners prior to the rise of the Vanderbilt Agrarians over thirty years later, in many ways these changes had an even more profound impact on the South than on other parts of the country. Chopin's novel depicts a traditional agrarian society in the throes of recovery from defeat in war and its adaptation to unprecedented subsequent changes in its economic structure. *At Fault* demonstrates that, even at the very beginning of her literary career, Chopin was already an astute observer of human nature, social relations, and historically and economically significant events.

At Fault introduces the reader to the Cane River region and its people—a community that provides the setting and characters for many of Chopin's later works. By the late nineteenth century, this isolated region, the earliest to

be settled by Europeans in what was to become the Louisiana Purchase, was home to a unique Creole culture infused with French, Spanish, Anglo-American, Native American, African, and Caribbean influences. These influences resulted in the development of a system of ethnic and social relations which was, because of its complexity, utterly foreign to that found throughout the rest of the American South. Chopin's realistic and detailed depiction of this unique society, whose heritage remains influential to this day, would of itself make *At Fault* an important contribution to American literature.

In addition to its importance as a work of cultural and historical documentary, *At Fault* provides a baseline for the study of Chopin's development as one of America's most renowned fiction writers. Many of her recurrent themes—including her somewhat cynical view of religion, shameless social climbers, and especially, her attention to the struggles of women to expand their social and economic opportunities—are further developed in Chopin's later work. Thus *At Fault* provides the reader with a greater understanding and appreciation of Creole culture, of American social and economic history, and of Chopin's development as a writer.

THE LIFE OF KATE CHOPIN

Kate O'Flaherty Chopin was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 8, 1850. She was the eldest daughter of Thomas O'Flaherty and his second wife, Eliza Faris. O'Flaherty was a well-to-do merchant and railroad executive in what was then a burgeoning city on the edge of the western frontier. Because of his Irish heritage in an era in which Irish immigrants were not held in high esteem by most Americans, he needed entrée if he was going to be accepted at the highest levels of St. Louis society. Faris, with her aristocratic French roots, provided this calling card.

O'Flaherty's position with the Missouri-Pacific Railroad led to his early death. To celebrate the completion of the first railroad bridge in St. Louis, the railroad executives boarded a train for a ceremonial trip across the structure. The bridge collapsed, plunging into the Gasconade River, taking with it three of the train cars and their passengers. The accident left Faris a twenty-six-year-old widow with two young children.

Kate Chopin's maternal ancestors numbered among the founders of St. Louis, and several came from Old World Huguenot stock. Chopin was immersed in the French-Creole culture that informs much of her fiction from the time she was a small child, spending a good deal of time with her great-grandmother who spoke only French. Chopin herself spoke fluent French from childhood, and her dialect was influenced by her great-grandmother's "soft Creole patois,

[which was] less sharp than the French of Paris.”¹ Chopin received her education at the Sacred Heart Academy, whose reputation for high academic standards, as well as for producing “better Catholic wives and mothers,”² was well known, and Chopin proved herself to be an able student who received numerous honors during her years at the academy.

Kate married Creole businessman Oscar Chopin in 1870 and moved with him to Louisiana, where he became a cotton factor in New Orleans.³ Oscar had already left the family plantation because of his distaste for his father’s harshness and rough handling of his slaves. The couple resided in New Orleans until Oscar lost his business, at which time they moved to Cloutierville, where he managed the town’s general store. Kate bore six children in nine years, and the family lived in relative comfort until Oscar contracted “swamp fever,” probably malaria, in 1882 and died, leaving Kate with a substantial debt and a house full of small children. She then worked diligently to pay all of Oscar’s debts, while conducting a semi-public affair with local planter Albert Sampite. She ultimately left Cloutierville to return with her children to St. Louis, where she lived, wrote, and published for the remainder of her life. She died of a brain hemorrhage in August 1904, less than five years after the appearance of her masterpiece, *The Awakening*.

CULTURAL CONTEXTS

At Fault reflects the many literary and cultural influences to which Chopin was exposed during her life and travels. In addition to being a talented writer of fiction, she was an astute literary critic, publishing a number of reviews and critical essays. She was an avid reader who also translated French literature, demonstrating a particular affinity for the work of Guy de Maupassant. Her frequent literary and philosophical allusions, many of which are annotated in this edition of *At Fault*, also attest to Chopin’s extensive knowledge of the literature, philosophy, and popular culture of her time. Numerous critics have remarked on Chopin’s familiarity with philosophical works, especially the German Romanticism of Friedrich Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. Also, she would certainly have been familiar with the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne and quite likely with his well-documented hostility toward women writers. Her satirical references to “The Custom House” in *At Fault* reveal a disdain for Hawthorne that would be consistent with a knowledge of this hostility. Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of nineteenth-century America’s preeminent philosophers and public speakers, appears to fare even worse in Chopin’s novels, although Chopin quotes from his work in her response to a reviewer of *At Fault*, included in this volume, whom she believed to be in error. In *The*

Awakening, Edna Pontellier quickly falls asleep while reading from a collection of Emerson's essays, and in *At Fault*, another Emerson volume is not only ridiculed by Belle Worthington, it is reduced to the status of a paperweight, serving as an anchor for dry goods airing on the roof of a St. Louis apartment building. The same unfortunate fate befalls a copy of John Ruskin's *Miscellanies*, one of the most popular critical works of the late nineteenth century. Clearly, prevailing literary and philosophical currents influenced the type of fiction that Chopin produced.

At Fault also demonstrates Chopin's knowledge of the local legends popular among the residents of the Cane River region, as illustrated by her references in *At Fault* to the graves of the alleged inspirations for Simon Legree and Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Emily Toth, in her first biography of Chopin, notes that Chopin's father-in-law purchased his plantation from Robert McAlpin, the real-life alter-ego of Old McFarlane in the novel, whose family retained some of the adjoining property. Toth also notes that the elder Chopin was sometimes mistaken for McAlpin as the model for Legree in local gossip because of his harsh treatment of his own family and slaves. This site, located in Chopin, Louisiana, is about five miles from Oscar Chopin's residence in Cloutierville and is still visited by residents of Natchitoches Parish.

In addition to this knowledge of local folklore, Chopin was also steeped in the Creole culture of Louisiana and was familiar with the economy of the region by virtue of her husband's business ventures outside of the family plantation and her own experiences settling his affairs after his death. Settling the estate required her to regain the legal custody of her children. Closing succession after the father's death when the custody of minor children was involved was a complicated economic and legal task because of the influence of the Napoleonic Code on Louisiana state laws. Upon Oscar's death, the legal guardianship of the six Chopin children automatically devolved to his closest male relative, his brother, Lamy Chopin. Kate Chopin was forced to petition the court, in a complicated and time-consuming ordeal, to gain full custody of her children, despite her brother-in-law's lack of opposition. When she was finally granted custody, Lamy Chopin was named "Under Tutor," which implied that her competence in the eyes of the law was still questionable.⁴

As *At Fault* shows, Chopin put her knowledge of business and legal issues, knowledge rare for a woman of her era, to good use in her writing career, as *At Fault* faithfully portrays the economic milieu of late nineteenth-century Louisiana. In the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the economic order of the Old South was in shambles due to the collapse of slavery and

damage from the war. The region was home to many displaced persons, both African American and white, who had no prospects and who benefited from no social support system. As a result, crime in northwestern Louisiana, ranging from petty theft to murder, reached its historic peak in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Thérèse Lafirme, the protagonist of *At Fault*, expresses well-founded trepidation about the coming of the railroad to northwestern Louisiana. Her concern is not born of simple nostalgia for a way of life whose time was soon to end, although she realizes that the railroad will quickly alter the economy, the social structure, and the landscape of the region. Chopin's depiction of the rapidly changing economy is realistic, as demonstrated by Thérèse's mixed emotions regarding the arrival of the lumber mill and David Hosmer. Though pleased by the financial windfall from the sale of timber rights on her property, she does not look forward to the changes to the land and the culture of her community that will inevitably follow. Joçint is even less pleased by the advent of the lumber mill and the regimentation of his formerly carefree lifestyle because of the demands of industrial labor. He longs for the time when his days were filled with hunting and fishing, and he resents the infringement of the production line into his way of life. His resentment leads him first to petty sabotage of Hosmer's mill and, ultimately, to arson. Hosmer himself represents the changing of the economic guard as well. *At Fault* illustrates that wealth and social prominence were no longer tied to land ownership and the patronage of a large number of agricultural laborers. Thérèse manages to maintain the status quo of the antebellum economy because of the income from her timber leases; however, such relief could only be temporary. In the future, the new money and the ability to acquire it quickly would come from the industrial exploitation of raw materials, not from agriculture. Thérèse's marriage to Hosmer becomes not only a love match but a symbolic representation of the shotgun wedding between agriculture and industry that was occurring all over the post-Reconstruction South.

The disruption of the established social order of late nineteenth-century Louisiana brought by industrialization was compounded by the fact that respect for the government had evaporated and legal authority was largely nonexistent. The few active law enforcement officials were held in disdain by most of the community, and for safety's sake, they seldom ventured far from the courthouse. Such a turn of events is not surprising, given that Louisiana had been under four different national governments and had survived a bloody Civil War, all within a single century. Furthermore, northwestern Louisiana did not suffer from the same vanquished mentality as the rest of the South

following the Civil War. The northwestern portion of the state was never overrun by the dreaded Yankees, nor did it suffer the same massive physical destruction inflicted on much of the rest of the South. The result of this escape from total subjugation was an attitude which approached invincibility on the part of the white male population. Not surprisingly, both property crimes, born of economic necessity, and crimes of violence, born of social disorder, were rampant. Court records indicate that, in the years immediately following Reconstruction in many Louisiana parishes, including those of the Cane River region, as much as one-third of the adult male population was either the victim or the perpetrator of a serious assault or murder. Local vigilance committees meted out most of the justice to be had, most often in the form of intimidation or lynchings. In addition, citizens were not only well armed, they knew how to use their weapons, and they were encouraged by the authorities to do so freely in the event of trouble. In light of this situation, the response, or lack thereof, to the murders of Joçint and Grégoire indicate the widespread social disorder which Chopin herself had experienced first-hand.

At Fault also illustrates the influence of the Temperance Movement on American society in the late nineteenth century. Begun in the early 1800s, this social movement grew in influence, ultimately resulting in the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919, the controversial Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution that banned the production and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States. The leadership of the abolitionist, temperance, and women's suffrage movements overlapped to a large extent, and their efforts were often coordinated; at one point, the leaders of these movements decided to defer the suffrage issue until abolition was accomplished. Following the Civil War, efforts directed toward women's suffrage and temperance increasingly gained momentum. The temperance cause was viewed by many, including many of its leaders, as an essentially female issue, since women's economic dependence on men, and their lack of protection under the law should a man victimize them, made women especially vulnerable to the consequences of excessive drinking.⁵ The physical abuse and financial irresponsibility that resulted from the excessive consumption of alcohol, more often than not, affected women and young children most dramatically. Chopin was also personally acquainted with these issues because of her relationship with Albert Sampite, a prominent Natchitoches Parish planter. In her recent biography of Chopin, Toth notes that Sampite, a charming man when sober, sometimes abused his wife when he had been drinking.⁶ *At Fault* accurately portrays contemporary attitudes with regard to the subject of temperance, and the fact that alcoholism leads to Fanny's divorce, and ultimately to her death, emphasizes this point. Grégoire's death is also associated with excessive

drinking, as his alcohol-induced aggression leads to the confrontation during which he is shot, as well as to several lesser altercations leading up to it.

Another aspect of late nineteenth-century culture reflected in *At Fault* is the popularity of exhibitions and fairs. Chopin herself was a fan of such expositions, as evidenced in part by her suffering a fatal cerebral hemorrhage after spending a day at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. These expositions began in Europe as a showcase for the technological advances of burgeoning industrial powers. Such events soon became popular in the United States as well, and St. Louis hosted numerous such expositions leading up to the year-long extravaganza in 1904. The excerpts from *Indescribably Grand*⁷ and *Louisiana and the Fair*,⁸ though describing the 1904 World's Fair, are representative of the scene that Hosmer would have witnessed on the Pike, or midway, following his remarriage to Fanny. The physical setting would have been similar as well, since in St. Louis expositions and fairs of all types were held in the same locale, Forest Park, and differed from each other primarily in their scale.

Chopin's novel is also deeply influenced by the rapid changes in social roles that accompanied industrialization and the transformation of the economy that led to the Gilded Age. By the end of the nineteenth century, St. Louis had become a major urban center, transforming in less than a century from a rustic frontier outpost into the fourth largest city in the United States, behind only New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. St. Louis was expanding rapidly in both wealth and population, and accordingly, offered amenities such as large, modern apartment buildings, telephones, electricity, paved roads, and public transportation. The middle class was on the rise, as corporate growth provided new career opportunities to those with skills and ambition. The contrast with the rural agrarianism of northwest Louisiana could not be more pronounced, as the social and economic changes transforming St. Louis were the barest of suggestions in Natchitoches Parish.

The plantation economy of which Thérèse is matriarch is a vestige of the Old South. As the novel opens, the static economic system of the plantation community—its social hierarchy little changed from antebellum days—is experiencing the first effects of industrialization. Thérèse occupies the unusual position of a woman who is both economically independent and upon whom many other people depend for financial support. With the exception of Hosmer's lumber mill, Place-du-Bois and the surrounding regions are an entirely agrarian society. The economic and social differences between St. Louis and rural Louisiana are best illustrated in the contrast between Fanny's lifestyle and Thérèse's. Chopin characterizes the “professional time wasters” of St. Louis as anti-intellectual, vulgar, and immoral, contrasting them unfavorably with the