

Signet Classics

The  
*Awakening*  
and Selected Stories of  
Kate Chopin

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY BARBARA H. SOLOMON



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## Introduction

ST. LOUIS evenings in the spring of 1899 must have seemed far less soft and balmy than they had for many a year to Kate Chopin, who had just seen the publication of her second novel, *The Awakening*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even the lights of the elite houses she had known so long seemed to glitter with an indifferent hardness, for the appearance in print of her most recent work had brought her harsh criticism and condemnation, as well as ostracism from many of those who had always formed the close-knit world of St. Louis society. The reaction of outrage to this novel ought not to have been a surprise to its author. From the beginning of her literary career, Kate Chopin had been told by editors that they would be glad to accept her stories if only she would tone down the women she wrote about.<sup>2</sup> Exactly a decade before she finished *The Awakening*, her first completed tale had contained certain objectionable materials, according to the two editors who read it. Subsequently, Chopin destroyed the tale, so that we have been left only the title—"A Poor Girl."

During the same year, 1889, the first two of her stories to be published, "Wiser Than a God" and "A Point at Issue!", established the kinds of subject matter which would occupy the author over the next decade. Each explores a range of feminine experience in its depiction of an unconventional heroine who attempts to make intelligent choices about the lifestyle she wishes to adopt. In "Wiser Than a God," Paula Von Stoltz rejects George Brainard's offer of marriage because, as she attempts to explain to him, "it doesn't enter into the purpose of my life." And amazingly for that era, Chopin's heroine does not live to rue the day she rejected the

<sup>1</sup>The second novel in order of composition, *Young Dr. Gosse*, is no longer extant.

<sup>2</sup>Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 68.

handsome and wealthy young suitor—does not send for him to beg forgiveness for valuing her art and work more than his love.

In the second tale, “A Point at Issue!,” the heroine, Eleanor Gail, has chosen to marry Charles Faraday, but their union, both agree, must be tailored like a garment which never chafes or restricts, but provides comfort with ample room for growth and development:

In entering upon their new life they decided to be governed by no 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. And the element that was to make possible such a union was trust in each other's love, honor, courtesy, tempered by the reserving clause of readiness to meet the consequences of reciprocal liberty.

An outraged town discovers how unconventional the couple can be, for their married life is to begin with a long separation. After the honeymoon trip, Eleanor remains in Paris to study French while Charles returns to America. Their subsequent discovery of the limitations of marital trust and their decision to end the separation seem less important than their original idealism and view of marriage as an unfinished, incompletely defined institution. For the Faradays, being husband and wife means the continual making of new decisions, not the mechanical playing of ancient roles.

Very likely, the Faradays' recognition of the need for personal freedom within marriage was a reflection of the relationship between Kate Chopin and her understanding husband. Married in 1870 to Oscar Chopin, Kate O'Flaherty left the St. Louis of her active girlhood to live in the city which was her husband's home, New Orleans. She left behind the home where she had been raised by three widowed women—a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Her mother, Eliza Faris O'Flaherty, was descended from French families that

had settled in America in about 1700. Kate's father, born in Ireland, had become a well-to-do merchant after emigrating to America, first to New York and then to St. Louis in 1825. After a brief first marriage (his wife died in childbirth), Thomas O'Flaherty married Eliza Faris in 1844. Katherine, born in 1851, was the second of their children. The comfortable and pleasant childhood of Kate Chopin was abruptly shattered on a day which must have begun as a festive occasion. Along with other influential community leaders, Thomas O'Flaherty was aboard a ceremonial train making its inaugural run over a newly-built section of the Pacific Railroad when a collapsing bridge caused a catastrophic train wreck. O'Flaherty was among twenty-nine victims killed in the accident. Katherine, who was only four, had lost her devoted and vigorous father.

From the age of nine until she was graduated at the age of seventeen, Kate attended the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart. A year later, she met Oscar Chopin, who was twenty-five and had left his native New Orleans to work at a St. Louis bank.

Of Oscar's character not a great deal is known. One important element, however, in the formation of his attitudes toward the treatment of women may well have been the harshness of his father toward his mother. The relationship between Victor Chopin and his wife became so strained that for a period in the 1850's Oscar's mother left his father's household. The elder Chopin's cruelties also extended to the slaves he owned, and at one point in Oscar's life, the father tried to get the son to act as overseer of slaves who were chained together at their work in the fields. The boy would have none of it. Perhaps instructed by his father's inadequacies as a human being, Oscar was all the more sympathetic to his young wife's need for personal freedom and independence. At any rate, from the earliest days of her marriage, Kate appears to have retained a good deal of her liberty and to have been thoroughly supported by her husband when she chose to dress or act somewhat unconventionally.

Recorded in her diary during the couple's European honeymoon are some of Kate Chopin's descriptions of the numerous places she visited and activities she en-



joyed. One note in this diary suggests the extent to which she valued her own physical achievements as well as her opportunities for solitary experience:

I find myself handling the oars quite like an expert. Oscar took a nap in the afternoon and I took a walk alone. How very far I *did* go. Visited a panorama which showed the Rigi Kulen in all its grandeur—the only audience being myself and *two* soldiers. I wonder what people thought of me—a young woman strolling about alone. I even took a glass of beer at a friendly little beer garden quite on the edge of the lake. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The enjoyment of such walks about the city remained one of Kate Chopin's deepest pleasures throughout her life. They provided vivid glimpses into the varied lives of the multitudes who filled the streets of New Orleans. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier's assertion to Robert about walking seems an insight into the author's own view: "I always feel so sorry for women who don't like to walk; they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole." A less pleasant experience, recorded in Kate Chopin's diary, took place during a visit to the university at Bonn. The Chopins' guide was a woman who ostensibly was showing them what was to be seen, but Kate notes:

We saw nothing remarkably interesting—only a mass of copies from famous pieces of sculpture. The good dame would not take us through the hall in which the students were gathered, "for," she said, "the young gentlemen are not sorry when a young lady passes through their room." I ventured to suggest that my being married might in a manner abate the interest with which they might otherwise regard me; but my argument proved weak and failed utterly.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932), p. 72.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65.

The young wife had simply come up against one of the usual limitations of being a woman in a man's world, and at a men's university.

Upon their return to America, Kate and Oscar settled in New Orleans, where they were to remain for the next nine years. Here the young wife whose writing career was yet unthought of gave birth to a son, Jean, the first of her six children. Over twenty years later, she set down her vivid recollection of the event:

This is Jean's birthday . . . I can remember yet that hot southern day on Magazine Street in New Orleans. The noises of the street coming through the open windows; that heaviness with which I dragged myself about; my husband's and mother's solicitude; old Alexandrine the quadroon nurse with her high bandana tignon, her hoop-earrings and placid smile; old Doctor Faget; the smell of chloroform, and then waking at 6 in the evening from out of a stupor to see in my mother's arms a little piece of humanity all dressed in white which they told me was my little son! The sensation with which I touched my lips and my finger tips to his soft flesh only comes once to a mother. It must be pure animal sensation; nothing spiritual could be so real—so poignant.<sup>5</sup>

The years between 1871 and 1880 were filled with the responsibilities of childbearing and the raising of young children. The birth of Jean in 1871 was followed by those of Oscar (1873), George (1874), Frederick (1876), Felix (1878), and Lelia (1879). Kate, now the mother of six, was not yet thirty. Oscar pursued his career as a cotton factor and commission merchant. The failure of his business in 1880 because of poor cotton crops caused him to move his wife and children to a village called Cloutier-ville in Natchitoches (pronounced Nack-uh-tush) Parish, Louisiana.

Oscar purchased and ran a general store at Cloutierville; he also managed several of his own small plantations. In this region Kate absorbed a range of impressions of the

<sup>5</sup>Seyersted, p. 40.



rural population of Acadians (Cajuns) and developed her perceptions of the intimate details of their lives. Since over two thirds of her tales are set in Louisiana and most of these take place in Natchitoches Parish—which, as others have noted, functions in Chopin's fictional world much as Yoknapatawpha County does in that of William Faulkner—it might be well to distinguish here between her new group of neighbors and the French Creole society of New Orleans with which Kate was so familiar.

The somewhat aristocratic and well-to-do descendents of French emigrants to America (of whom Kate was one on her mother's side), the Creoles clung to the French tongue and to French culture from a sense of its superiority. In New Orleans, they clustered in one section of the city, and many resented the influx of newcomers to the "American" section. It is interesting to note that as a child, Kate Chopin may well have spoken French before English, since French was the language used in her family during her childhood.

The Acadians, on the other hand, did not come to America directly from France. They were the settlers of Acadia, once a French province in southeastern Canada, now known as Nova Scotia. Many Acadians left this colony in 1755 rather than become subjects of the British, to whom the territory had been ceded. Unlike the modern French spoken by the Creoles, the French of the Acadians dated from the seventeenth century and was combined with some quaint English translations. The resulting dialect is captured with great charm in a number of Mrs. Chopin's tales. According to Daniel Rankin, Acadians

slightly chant their phrases in agreeable Southern voices. Their Christian names are Evariste, Placide, Muna, Alcée, Artemise, Calixta, Fronie, Ozeme, Pelagie, Euphrasie; their best-known names are quite like Santien, St. Denis Godolph, Laballière, Benitou, Bonamour. They say "raiderode" for railroad, having settled in Louisiana before "chemin de fer" was known. They say of their Easter commu-

nion every year that it is "to make their Easters" because the French is "Faire de Paques."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Mrs. Chopin's earliest literary reputation, that of a local colorist, stems from the fascination of both readers and critics with the charming and unique Acadians and Creoles who fill her tales. Unfortunately, her categorization as merely a talented regional writer long blocked the wider recognition she deserves.

In 1882, Oscar died of swamp fever. Although Kate remained in Cloutierville for a time, managing her husband's business interests, she decided to rejoin her mother in St. Louis. Mrs. O'Flaherty's death in 1885 left Kate a thirty-four-year-old widow with no close relations other than her children.

Although Kate Chopin had lived in Cloutierville for fewer than five years, this rural Louisiana locale seems to have triggered her literary imagination long after she had left. She began her writing career in 1887, a year after a visit to Natchitoches Parish and at the urging of Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, her family physician and good friend. Impressed by the highly creative quality of the letters she had written to him from Louisiana, he recognized the importance writing might have as an outlet for the observant and energetic young woman who had experienced such tragic losses. His efforts could not have been better directed.

Once Mrs. Chopin had begun to write, she self-consciously analyzed the literary techniques of other short story writers such as Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, but the overwhelming influence on her style and technique was undoubtedly Guy de Maupassant. Some years later, in an essay titled "Confidences" she described the way in which, in about the year 1888,

there fell accidentally into my hands a volume of Maupassant's tales. These were new to me. I had been in the woods, in the fields, groping around; looking for something big, satisfying, convincing,

<sup>6</sup>Rankin, p. 137.

and finding nothing but—myself; a something neither big nor satisfying, but wholly convincing. It was at this period of my emerging from the vast solitude in which I had been making my own acquaintance, that I stumbled upon Maupassant. I read his stories and marvelled at them. Here was life, not fiction; for where were the plots, the old fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinking way I had fancied were essential to the art of story making. Here was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who, in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw.

Other sources attest as well to Mrs. Chopin's continued high regard for Maupassant.

Kate Chopin moved very quickly from her early short stories to the writing of her first novel, *At Fault*, published in 1890. By 1894, she had written over forty tales and sketches, achieved acceptance in the prestigious Eastern magazines, and published *Bayou Folk*, a collection of her stories and vignettes.

Five of the tales from that volume are reprinted in this collection. One of these, "Désirée's Baby," is probably her best-known story. Désirée Aubigny is among the Chopin heroines who exist entirely in terms of a traditional patriarchal role. Her traits are carefully catalogued as we are told how the abandoned orphan grew up in her new home "to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere." Her husband, characterized only briefly—but unpleasantly—rules the slaves of his plantation strictly, and the joy they had once known under his father has gone out of their lives. When he had been reminded before his marriage to Désirée that he had chosen a girl who was "nameless," his response had been that such a detail could not matter "when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana." His arrogance and possessiveness toward Désirée call to mind another aristocratic husband, Browning's Duke of Ferrara. The Aubigny name may not be nine



hundred years old, but Armand's family pride is certainly as great as that of the Duke.

After the birth of their son, Armand's pleasure and general satisfaction are expressed by his good-natured treatment of the slaves. Désirée is thrilled that the infant is a boy because she is convinced that her producing a son has pleased her husband far better than having a daughter would have.

Désirée's increasing awareness of a threatening atmosphere, which she does not at first understand, and the withdrawal of her husband's love, are sketched by Chopin with deft economy. The luxurious surroundings of Désirée's bedroom are a mockery of her bewilderment and isolation. Armand's angry accusation and Désirée's dependent nature can lead to only one conclusion. If the denouement of "Désirée's Baby" is somewhat melodramatic, the story nevertheless delineates very effectively the racial fears and vulnerability of Southern whites as well as the fate of woman as "damaged property."

"La Belle Zoraïde," another tale from *Bayou Folk* which deals with race and the bearing of a child, is the deeply sympathetic account of a mulatto servant prevented from marrying the slave she loves and robbed of a child she has conceived by him. Zoraïde, a slave whose "smooth skin was the color of *café-au-lait*," has fallen in love with Mézor. She humbly petitions her mistress (with whom she has grown up as a companion and friend) that she be allowed to "have from out of my own race the one whom my heart has chosen." But Zoraïde's love is a field slave whose body "was like a column of ebony," whereas Madame Delarivière has already chosen a husband for the girl—a light mulatto who is a neighbor's household servant. Because of Ambroise's almost white appearance and status in the hierarchy of slave society, the imperious mistress will hear of no other mate for her beautiful and graceful Zoraïde. Zoraïde, as the tale well demonstrates, is doubly powerless as a slave and a woman.

Mrs. Chopin uses a framing device in this story, in that Zoraïde's tragedy is related by a devoted black servant, Manna-Loulou, to her mistress, Madame Delisle. Each

evening, the former slave must soothe Madame by performing such tasks as bathing her feet and brushing her hair. But equally important, she must be prepared to tell a true tale in order to lull her mistress to sleep. The framework provides a Conradian richness, since after mentioning that Zoraïde and Mézor had been forbidden to see one another, Manna-Loulou comments: "But you know how the negroes are, Ma'zelle Titite. . . . There is no mistress, no master, no king nor priest who can hinder them from loving when they will." The ironies suggested by the framework are multiplied when we recall that Madame Delisle is the heroine of a slightly earlier tale, "A Lady of Bayou St. John." In that story we learn that she is a widow whose husband, Gustave, was killed during the Civil War. We also know that she has chosen to devote the remainder of her life to the memory of her dead husband, though she was on the verge of running off with another man and was stopped only by the news of Gustave's death. Her overwhelming sympathy for the sorrow and losses of another woman might justifiably be lavished on Madame Delisle's own life.

The two other tales reprinted here from *Bayou Folk*, "Madame Célestin's Divorce" and "At the 'Cadian Ball," deal in very different ways with a variety of courtships. In the first, lawyer Paxton engages in numerous sympathetic discussions with the charming Madame Célestin on the subject of a divorce from her absent and wayward husband. These conversations about her sufferings, as she sweeps her front porch, are transformed into an unusual ritual of courtship for the old bachelor. In "At the 'Cadian Ball," two courtships are resolved simultaneously, but the pairing of the sets of lovers might never have occurred had not Clarisse taken upon herself the role of aggressive "suitor" by following Alcée Laballière to the ball.

The subject of the match made between the aristocratic Alcée with his haughty Clarisse and that of the peasant Bobinôt with his sensual Calixta drew from Chopin a few years later a second treatment of the lives of her young characters. In one of her finest tales, "The Storm" (subtitled "A Sequel to 'At the 'Cadian Ball'"), Calixta and Alcée are thrown together for the first time

in more than five years. The passion which they had previously known is rekindled, and their subsequent sexual experience gives to both a quality of sensual pleasure unknown in their marriages. Chopin's description of their sense of fulfillment is remarkably explicit and contemporary in tone:

Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world.

The generous abundance of her passion, without guile or trickery, was like a white flame which penetrated and found response in depths of his own sensuous nature that had never yet been reached.

When he touched her breasts they gave themselves up in quivering ecstasy, inviting his lips. Her mouth was a fountain of delight. And when he possessed her, they seemed to swoon together at the very borderland of life's mystery.

The story was not published during Chopin's lifetime and, indeed, appeared only recently, when Per Seyersted's edition of Chopin's complete works was printed. The depiction in the story's concluding paragraphs of the general satisfaction of all the characters is marked by a modern sense of irony, as Chopin refrains from any authorial commentary on her characters' actions.

The three stories in this volume reprinted from Kate Chopin's second collection of tales, *A Night in Acadie* (1897)—"Athénaïse," "A Respectable Woman," and "Regret"—make for an interesting glimpse into the feminine experience at three different stages in life. Athénaïse, after two months of marriage to Cazeau, has discovered that she detests being married:

"I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an' would want to be Athénaïse Miché again. I can't stan' to live with a man; to have him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet—washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes, ugh!"



She returns to her parents' home for a visit and very reluctantly accompanies her husband when he comes to take her home. Cazeau, who is deeply saddened because he is not insensitive to his young wife's feelings, has an unpleasant twinge of memory on their ride back. They pass the old oak tree where as a small boy he stopped briefly with his father on their way home with Black Gabe, a recaptured slave. When Athénaïse leaves him for the second time, Cazeau determines not to search for her:

For the companionship of no woman on earth would he again undergo the humiliating sensation of baseness that had overtaken him in passing the old oak-tree in the fallow meadow. . . .

He knew that he could again compel her return as he had done once before,—compel her to return to the shelter of his roof, compel her cold and unwilling submission to his love and passionate transports; but the loss of self-respect seemed to him too dear a price to pay for a wife.

Cazeau keeps to his resolution, but Athénaïse's month spent hidden in New Orleans demonstrates how confining a routine will be allotted to a young woman alone in the city. She had hoped to find some means of employment, but as Chopin explains, "with the exception of two little girls who had promised to take piano lessons at a price that would be embarrassing to mention, these attempts had been fruitless." She relies heavily on Gouvernail, a fellow lodger at the Dauphine Street house, in order to go about the city. Homesick and isolated, Athénaïse discovers that she is pregnant, and this precipitates her return to her husband and her first passionate response to his embrace.

In "A Respectable Woman," Mrs. Baroda, who has been married a good many years, finds herself overwhelmingly attracted to Gouvernail (who appears in "Athénaïse"), an old friend of her husband's who has come for a visit of a week or two. Her relationship with her husband seems an excellent one, and she is even tempted to discuss her infatuation with him. She does

not, however, confide in Gaston, because, as Chopin tells us, "Beside being a respectable woman she was a very sensible one; and she knew there are some battles in life which a human being must fight alone." The tale ends on an effectively ambiguous note, for whatever course of action Mrs. Baroda has decided upon, she merely tells her husband that she is willing that his friend, Gouvernail, should visit them again. On his first visit, she had been somewhat rude and left home for a stay in the city, but now she assures Gaston: "This time I shall be very nice to him."

In the poignant "Regret," the fifty-year-old Aurélie is an independent, self-reliant figure who has never regretted her decision, made thirty years earlier, that she would not marry. A neighbor's emergency trip brings four young children to her household for a two-week stay. Aurélie finds that caring for the youngsters requires considerable change in her routine. At bedtime, for example, there are a great many details to be attended to:

What about the little white nightgowns that had to be taken from the pillow-slip in which they were brought over, and shaken by some strong hand till they snapped like ox-whips? What about the tub of water which had to be brought and set in the middle of the floor, in which the little tired, dusty, sun-browned feet had every one to be washed sweet and clean? And it made Marcéline and Marcélette laugh merrily—the idea that Mamzelle Aurélie should for a moment have believed that Ti Nomme could fall asleep without being told the story of *Croquemitaine* or *Loup-garou*, or both; or that Elodie could fall asleep at all without being rocked and sung to.

The tasks which begin as unfamiliar work come to give a great deal of pleasure to the "temporary mother." When the real mother unexpectedly returns and claims her brood, Aurélie experiences a wrenching loss. She sobs "like a man." The experience with Odile's children has brought with it a crushing knowledge of the softer elements which are lacking in Aurélie's life. And, of course, the story touches on the tragic experience of

many women, for even those who are mothers must face a time when the infants who needed them and gave purpose to their daily routine have grown up and are ready to leave home.

The breadth of Kate Chopin's vision of life and her understanding of the paradoxes of human existence are suggested if we compare the theme of "Regret" with that of a somewhat later tale, "A Pair of Silk Stockings." When Mrs. Sommers unexpectedly finds herself in possession of fifteen dollars, she immediately begins to calculate how best to stretch this sum in outfitting her sons and daughters. She carefully plans to purchase a gown, shoes, caps, and stockings—all for her children. We are given a glimpse into the life of an impoverished mother, an existence dominated by stratagems for mending and scrimping for the sake of others, with no thought of her own desires or deprivations. Even as she arrives at the store where she is to shop, she suddenly realizes that "between getting the children fed and the place righted, and preparing herself for the shopping bout, she had actually forgotten to eat any luncheon at all!"

Mrs. Sommers' temptation comes in the form of a pair of black silk stockings—luxurious, smooth, beautifully made. The esthetic, sensitive self, which has been dormant within her for so long, suddenly springs alive as the spontaneous purchase of the stockings leads Mrs. Sommers to spend more and more of the money on herself. Once she has replaced her old cotton stockings with the new ones, a startling change takes place:

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.

How good was the touch of the raw silk to her flesh! She felt like lying back in the cushioned chair and reveling for a while in the luxury of it.

After the purchase of shoes, gloves, and magazines—all for herself—she orders a tasty meal at a fine restaurant and delights in a matinee at a nearby theater. Chopin