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Kate Chopin, Unfiltered: Removing the Feminist Lens

Chelsea Zea

“The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui.”

(*The Awakening*, Chapter XVIII)

In this brutally straightforward manner, Catherine O’Flaherty Chopin introduced her middle-class protagonist of *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, to her astonished readers in the 1890s. Several of Chopin’s female characters wonder if life beyond marriage and children offers greater satisfactions. Contemporary readers naturally wonder how Chopin could have known then about the social ills commonly recognized today in troubled families and especially about their emotional effects on women.

Many feminist readers and scholars claim Chopin as an early version of themselves. This essay will argue, instead, that Chopin’s outlook had little in common with feminism as it is understood today. Not believing in political, social, and economic equality of the sexes, none of the issues for which contemporary feminists fight were of concern to her. Those aspects of her life used to label her in this way, rather than feminist in inspiration, are better suited to understanding her as a writer. Chopin used writing as both a liberating and healing experience, a venue for self-expression and exploration. The very act of writing gave her a sense of personal identity. Viewing Chopin

simply as an author puts an entirely new perspective on her life and reveals a fuller, more authentic person—one that burst the limits of any label for her outlook or her work.

Though Chopin died in 1904, it was not until 1932 that Daniel Rankin wrote her first biography. More than thirty years would pass before the next one, by Per Seyersted, appeared.¹ Both of these biographers felt that Chopin only had value as a regional author. Chopin's first woman biographer saw her differently. In her 1972 dissertation, Peggy Dechert Skaggs was the first to interpret *The Awakening* as "a feminist plea for sexual freedom."² This description helped to revive interest in Chopin's work and that same year the novel was reprinted in its entirety in *Redbook* magazine.³ But it is not surprising that *The Awakening* caught readers' attention at the time it did. Members of the budding women's liberation movement were fascinated with a woman writing in 1899 who could sound so current. Interest in Chopin spread through word of mouth, and in the 1980s and 90s *The Awakening* was assigned as required reading in many college and high school classrooms. Today *The Awakening* is considered one of the great American novels, and the interpretation of Chopin's life through feminist criticism continues. The most recent biography, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999) by Emily Toth still ponders this seeming anom-

¹Lynda S. Boren and Sara deSaussure Davis, eds., *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayous* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 15.

²Bonnie Steppenoff, "Freedom and Regret: The Dilemma of Kate Chopin," *Missouri Historical Review* 81 (4 1987): 449.

³Barbara C. Ewell, *Kate Chopin* (New York: Ungar Publishing Group, 1986), 2.

ally of a woman in terms of the feminist tones of her writing. This paper differs from these authors because it takes Chopin out of both the “local colorist” and “feminist” contexts in which she has been placed and identifies her in the way she identified herself: as a writer. Connecting events from Chopin’s entire life to her writing, as earlier biographers failed to do, and removing her from a feminist context that Skaggs and Toth put her in, serves to flesh out a very private person.

Catherine O’Flaherty was born on 8 February 1850 in St. Louis, Missouri. She spent her very early years with her family at home, but at the age of five her parents sent her to board at St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart. It was rare for a wealthy family to send such young children to a boarding school, and the reason the O’Flahertys did so is uncertain. Toth suggests that Chopin’s mother, Eliza Faris O’Flaherty, suspected her husband, Thomas, of having affairs with slaves, and did not wish to answer the questions of an inquisitive and precocious five-year-old.⁴

Shortly after Chopin moved to the academy, she suffered the first great tragedy of her life. As a St. Louis dignitary, her father was eligible to participate in the inaugural train ride over the Gasconade Bridge on 1 November 1855. When the bridge collapsed and ten cars plunged into the ravine, Thomas O’Flaherty was one of the thirty men killed.⁵ Because he left no will or other instructions, Eliza immediately brought Chopin back home. Eliza realized the increased control over

⁴Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson, MI: U. Press of Mississippi, 1999), 8.

⁵Boren and Davis, *Kate Chopin Reconsidered*, 22.

her life she would have as a widow. “Widows controlled their property, as wives did not; widows also had legal control of their own children, as wives did not.”⁶ Thomas’ death meant that Chopin would have no patriarchal influence until she was past adolescence. Chopin would never witness marital violence or fighting, money disputes, or any other negative aspects of marital relations. Suddenly finding herself a wealthy woman and in charge of her own and her family’s affairs, Eliza invited her grandmother, Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville, to live with the O’Flaherty family and serve as Chopin’s teacher.

Chopin’s great-grandmother would prove to be her earliest source for “spicy” storytelling and French culture.⁷ One of the greatest gifts Madame Charleville passed on to her eager great-granddaughter was a love for gossip and storytelling, especially about women. Through her, Chopin discovered “a subject for intense, lifelong fascination, contemplation and delight: the lives of women.”⁸

Madame Charleville taught Chopin piano, French, reading, and writing. These four interests would remain with Chopin throughout her life and work their way into her stories. Chopin loved music and was known for her ability to play any piece by ear.⁹ It was a way to express her emotions, and several of her characters share this trait—including Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. Because she was “fervently commit-

⁶Toth, *Unveiling*, 9.

⁷Steppenoff, “Freedom and Regret,” 451.

⁸Toth, *Unveiling*, 13.

⁹*Ibid.*

ted to the life of the mind,”¹⁰ Madame Charleville imbued in her great-granddaughter a love of reading and writing and the belief that history was the stories of women “torn between duty and desire,”¹¹ a classic French literary theme. This premise permeates much of Chopin’s writing. She was influenced not only by her great-grandmother but her mother’s example as well—Eliza had married her philandering husband out of necessity, with unfortunate consequences. Other beliefs Madame Charleville passed on to Chopin included the idea that marriage was meant to be a practical arrangement, with romantic love to follow later; that God alone may judge the actions of others;¹² and perhaps most importantly, that life must be faced “clearly and fearlessly.”¹³ This last injunction would get Chopin through the difficult periods of her life, including the death of her beloved great-grandmother.

After Madame Charleville passed away in 1863, Chopin returned to the Sacred Heart Academy, a school staffed by French nuns, who espoused teachings similar to those that she had learned from her great-grandmother. It was there that Chopin first found encouragement to write for her own pleasure. She excelled in her studies and was “acclaimed for her essays and story telling.”¹⁴

The school raised well-rounded students “in the tradition of French intellectual women,” with a curric-

¹⁰Emily Toth and Per Seyersted, eds., *Kate Chopin’s Private Papers* (Indianapolis: Indiana State University Press, 1998), ix.

¹¹Toth, *Unveiling*, 13.

¹²Ewell, *Chopin*, 7.

¹³Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers*, 2.

¹⁴Emily Toth, ed., *A Vocation and a Voice: Stories by Kate Chopin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), x.

ulum for the older girls dedicated to creating “intelligent, active, unselfish women, with minds and hands trained for the sphere in which God has placed them, whether it be home-life or some wider social field,” as expressed in the school’s prospectus.¹⁵ The last phrase is extraordinary in that the Sacred Heart nuns gave their students options beyond matrimony and children.

At Sacred Heart, Chopin met her lifelong friend Kitty Garesché. Kitty would become a subject for Chopin’s future writing. The two were best friends and spent all of their time together, talking, reading, and climbing trees. They resembled each other in many ways, including their aristocratic French ancestry. With her unconventional family life, it is no surprise that Chopin liked to spend time with the Garesché family, which followed traditional patriarchal mores. Kitty’s father ran the household, and in spending time with them, Chopin discovered the family life of most American girls her age. Chopin would use contrasting versions of the family unit in many of her stories. Chopin also developed her love of gossip through her friendship with Kitty.

During her early years at Sacred Heart, Chopin kept a small autograph book entitled “Leaves of Affection,” in which her friends copied down favorite poems and quotes. Most of these had to do with romance. However, Chopin added at a later date (distinguished by different types of handwriting) certain phrases that indicated her growth as both an interpreter of poetry and as a writer. Next to several of the poems are notes such as “very pretty but where’s the point?” and

¹⁵Toth, *Unveiling*, 15, 36.

“foolishness.”¹⁶ The important aspect of “Leaves of Affection” is that it represented Chopin’s first attempts at self-expression in writing and that it showed how important she deemed feminine friendship to be. That she saved this little book of misquoted, “foolish” poetry for her whole life illustrates its value to her.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Chopin was removed from school. As a result of a traumatic experience with Union soldiers, Chopin experienced what psychologists now refer to as a “loss of voice,” a common occurrence among adolescent females. A “loss of voice” is not only a refusal to talk but also a sign of trauma that may include depression, insecurity, and a desire for solitude. To make matters worse the Garesché family had left St. Louis because Kitty’s father refused to take the Union oath of allegiance. Chopin might never have recovered—certainly not as quickly—had a teacher at Sacred Heart not intervened.

To encourage her talent in writing, Mother Mary O’Meara assigned Chopin to keep a “Commonplace Book,” where Chopin would copy down passages from books she read or whatever else caught her attention.¹⁷ The very first passage in Chopin’s “Commonplace Book” is an excerpt from Bulwer’s “My Novel.” Chopin copied the author’s opinions on writing:

When we look back upon human records, how the eye settles upon Writers as the main landmarks of the past! ...And yet, strange to say, when these authors are living amongst us, they

¹⁶Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers*, 5.

¹⁷Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers*, 9.

occupy a very small portion of our thoughts....¹⁸

Chopin, at the age of seventeen, may already have been thinking of what it meant to be an author. Subsequent copied passages include excerpts from Macaulay, Longfellow, Goethe, Hugo, and various definitions and paragraphs describing contemporary world leaders. Each of the authors she so copied was a romantic, revealing Chopin's specific interests at the time. The Commonplace Book also contains her first recorded original poem, called "The Congé," which highlighted her originality and ability for introspection. Some of the choices Chopin made in her recordings also reveal an attraction to realism and a disdain for bombastic writing styles—foreshadowing her later love of French author Guy de Maupassant. She also exhibited her interest in the French language. Several of the passages she chose to copy were in the original French. Significantly, there is scarcely anything in the book that directly correlates to women's rights. After her graduation from Sacred Heart, Chopin would use this book as her diary and travel journal for her honeymoon. Because Kitty, her personal confidante, was absent during this time, Chopin filled her Commonplace Book with pieces that reflected feelings she could not otherwise confide. But it was also during this time that she began growing closer to her mother.

A descendant of two of St. Louis' oldest and most respected Creole families,¹⁹ her mother presented a unique picture of marriage to Chopin. Eliza's father had died when she was sixteen, leaving a large family

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 13-4.

¹⁹Ewell, *Chopin*, 6.

in need of support. As she was the oldest and their mother was ill, it fell to her to find a solution to their financial straits. The most obvious option was marriage, but she still needed a good match. Thomas O'Flaherty was more than twice her age and an immigrant from County Galway, Ireland, both conditions that normally would have eliminated him as a suitable husband—but he had money. O'Flaherty's first wife had just died, leaving him with a young son. Marrying Eliza would give him prestige in St. Louis unavailable to him elsewhere, and she would find the support she needed for her family. This arrangement showed Chopin one type of marital calculation. She had a firsthand view of an unromantic, economic marriage. It also gave Chopin a subject for her writing. Her stories show many mother-like figures, all given positions of importance. Near the conclusion of *The Awakening*, Edna chooses to care for her maternalistic friend rather than heed the request of her husband to return home. This may indicate Chopin's own feelings about her mother; for like Edna, Chopin would leave her own husband at home for long periods of time to tend to her mother in St. Louis. Eliza was to prove the only constant source of comfort throughout Chopin's life.

Chopin's relationships with her great-grandmother, the teachers at Sacred Heart, Kitty Garesché, and her mother are used by scholars to show her feminist roots. Though these relationships were extremely important to Chopin's growth as a young woman, to turn them into the foundation for a purported feminism narrows their significance for her. These bonds contributed above all to her development as a writer.

After the Civil War, Eliza moved her family to a new

house filled with relatives. The move also allowed Chopin to witness other marriages and families first-hand. Eliza's sisters, Amanda McAllister and Zuma Tatum, lived in the new house with their husbands and children. Suddenly, Chopin, who had just reached puberty, no longer resided in "a women's household. ...Roger McAllister...was the kind of man who came home at night, and commanded family meals."²⁰ Chopin examined closely the practical marriage of her Aunt Amanda and the romantic one of her Aunt Zuma. She witnessed how an impetuous marriage like the Tatums' might start out beautifully but could just as easily and abruptly end in sadness. The uneventful, but solid foundations of the McAllister family were also not lost on Chopin. Both women were in their early thirties when Chopin first moved into their crowded home, which is the age she would give to the discontented wives appearing in her fiction.²¹ Her aunts represented the two types of wives that Chopin portrayed in her writing.

Upon her graduation, Chopin planned to make her debut into society. But this was not foremost on Chopin's mind because even more exciting for her was the fact that after a five-year absence, Kitty Garesché and her family had returned to St. Louis. The two had kept their friendship alive through correspondence and had planned to make their social debut together. Then another tragedy struck—this time, it was Kitty's father who died. Instead of celebrating her entrance into adulthood, Kitty would pass her first year after graduation in mourning. Chopin would once again be alone.

²⁰Toth, *Unweiling*, 35-6.

²¹*Ibid.*, 36.

But, unlike Kitty's departure the first time, Chopin was better equipped to face the world unaccompanied now.

As an intelligent and guileless young woman, Chopin was "already fast acquiring that knowledge of human nature which her stories show. ...She was a bit too smart, or too forthright, for high society."²² Chopin confided in her *Commonplace Book* that she detested all the balls that she had to attend and the artificial people she met there. She wrote:

there is no escaping—I dance with people I despise. ...I am diametrically opposed to parties and balls...I had a way in conversation of discovering a persons characteristics—opinions—and private feelings—while they no more about me at the end than they knew at the beginning of the conversation.²³

This method of entertaining herself during otherwise tedious events would no doubt serve her later as a writer. Without even trying, Chopin would become quite popular because she knew how to talk to people. She had acquired a reputation for cleverness, which in that era was not necessarily a compliment. A clever woman meant one who was neither afraid to speak her mind, nor afraid show her intelligence.²⁴ Chopin's unwillingness to hide the fact that she could think for herself may have gotten her into trouble.

In 1869 Chopin met and fell in love with her future husband: Aurelius Roselius Oscar Chopin, a hand-

²²*Ibid.*, 45.

²³Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers*, 82-3.

²⁴Toth, *Unveiling*, 45.

some Frenchman from Louisiana. She never mentions his name in her diary, but writes that she had found the “right man”²⁵ for her. In the diary entries very early in the marriage, she does seem happy, if a bit subdued. Possibly, this was because she realized “she would now be, forever, defined as a wife, and take her assigned, and much more narrowly defined, place in a patriarchal world. She was now, as she wrote, ‘Mrs. Chopin and not Miss Katy.’”²⁶

Oscar had been born in 1844 to a wealthy, aristocratic French family. His father, Dr. Victor Jean Baptiste Chopin, was an abusive, “angry, unregenerate Frenchman who loathed everything ‘American.’”²⁷ The only thing American of which he expressed approval was money. “One of his determinations was not to marry unless he could have a wife of genuine French lineage,”²⁸ and so he selected Oscar’s mother, Julie Benoist, a Creole heiress who had had both the required pedigree as well as a large plot of land.²⁹ As the master of the plantation, Dr. Chopin soon gained notoriety for his cruelty to his slaves and to his wife. It was his opinion, based in the Napoleonic Code of his homeland, that his wife and slaves were simply creatures he possessed.³⁰ After bearing five children, Julie finally had had enough, and escaped from her husband for a period of several years—most likely with the help of Oscar, her eldest son.

²⁵Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers*, 99.

²⁶Toth, *Unveiling*, 56.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 63.

²⁸Daniel Rankin, *Kate Chopin and her Creole Stories* (1932): 84, quoted in Boren and Davis, *Reconsidered*, 29.

²⁹Toth, *Unveiling*, 63.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 63-4.

Luckily, Oscar did not inherit any of his father's blatantly abusive tendencies, although he may have been a user of women, having had several affairs while he was abroad. He had spent the Civil War years in France, going to school and romancing all types women. "Oscar claimed to dislike aristocratic women ('prudes') and to prefer 'working girls' with their 'noisy and natural laughter and their bold looks.'"³¹ It may have been that he was too busy chasing women to study—he failed his baccalauréat exam, which made him ineligible to graduate. Upon his return to the United States, Oscar proved to be the perfect match for Chopin, partly because their similar backgrounds gave them compatible outlooks on life. "Oscar evidently had truly French values—for he appreciated not only the beauty of young women, but also their intellectual agility."³² Chopin chose Oscar because he allowed her to think, unlike the other men who courted her. He was not intimidated by the fact that she was clever; in fact, he appreciated this about her. In this way they were fairly unconventional, but not surprisingly perhaps, since they each had had an unusual childhood.

Chopin and Oscar were married in June 1870. Setting off on a three-month honeymoon in Europe, Chopin took her *Commonplace Book* with her and recorded everything that she found interesting. Her journal entries were like a writer's exercise—she was developing a personal style, a voice, and her own techniques. Her ability to "draw" people and places with words remained her greatest strength through the

³¹*Ibid.*, 52.

³²*Ibid.*, 53.

following years, a talent that first became evident during her honeymoon. She also continued to dislike all that was phony in people: "The new Mrs. Chopin liked to record colorful events, and especially things that were pompous, ridiculous, or venal."³³ Her penchant for authentic behavior and real people had followed her to Europe. One Chopin biographer is surprised that her honeymoon diary "discloses more about her itinerary than about herself,"³⁴ but this facet of her journal is actually very revealing of Chopin's character. It was more important for her as a writer to focus on her surroundings on her honeymoon than on herself and how she felt.

During her honeymoon, Chopin showed early signs of her later independence as a married woman. She did not spend all her time with Oscar; she even went out alone one day to row a boat, for which she congratulated herself: "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."³⁵ Chopin also developed a fondness for smoking while in Europe, a habit that would get her in trouble when she returned to the United States. From the evidence presented in her journal, it is not apparent that Chopin would have the experience to write about unhappy marriages. But she had had so much experience within her own family, and now stories about Oscar's, that it did not matter that her own marriage was a happy one. She had a talent for empathizing, and used this to her advantage when writing. "With

³³*Ibid.*, 58.

³⁴Ewell, *Chopin*, 11.

³⁵Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers*, 114.

Oscar, she was learning about the men's world that had been mostly invisible while she was growing up, and that knowledge helped her to develop a certain empathy with men, and especially with boys."³⁶ Oscar was good for her because he taught her that men too could offer friendship.

Chopin continued to assert her independence when the couple returned home from Europe. They moved to New Orleans, where Oscar worked as a cotton merchant. Though she did not feel it immediately, living in the city gave Chopin her first experience as an outsider. Even in Europe, she had felt socially at ease because she had her husband for company and because they had met friends, old and new, along the way. But "the new Madame Chopin was a thorough outsider in the eyes of Oscar's family. ... They regarded her with great suspicion and disapproval."³⁷ Chopin did not like most of her husband's family. She amused him by mocking and imitating them with great delight, and Oscar would only laugh—he liked her sense of humor.³⁸ Because his relatives lived in the country, Chopin was sheltered from their opinions while in New Orleans. Oscar also protected his wife. He "was a rare man who preferred an original woman, one who was neither quiet nor stay-at-home."³⁹ So for the time being, Chopin did not know how odd her habit of taking long walks seemed to her new relatives. Nor did she realize how they viewed her un-ladylike smoking. While in New Orleans, she lived her life the way she

³⁶Toth, *Unveiling*, 62.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 66-7.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 81.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 67.

wanted it, which involved frequent trips to visit her mother in St. Louis. The normal expectation of the era was that she would remain at home with her husband. When the delivery date for her first child approached, her mother, on whom she continued to rely, came to New Orleans to help.

When Chopin became a mother herself, she “entered a new phase of her life with joy and doubt and fear, emotions she describes over and over in her fiction.”⁴⁰ She pondered how the presence of a child cramped a mother’s space and stole her solitude. Chopin loved privacy. She almost always used the word “solitude” in a positive context, so her appreciation of time alone must only have increased as her family grew. In the fall of 1879, Chopin was expecting her sixth child and on the cusp of another life altering change of residence. After several years of poor cotton harvests, the family could no longer afford to live in New Orleans, and so retreated to Oscar’s family farm in the small village of Cloutierville. Chopin’s adjustment to small-town living would not be easy.

Now Chopin lived among the family members whom she had loved to ridicule. For the first time in her life, she had no other women to support her. The only friend she had in Cloutierville was Oscar, and he was often away. She was a big-city woman stuck in a small town, and whatever she did to console herself scandalized the local gossips. Though she had some blood relations among Cloutierville residents, “anyone not born and raised in Cloutierville would always be a foreigner, an... ‘étrangère.’”⁴¹

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 70.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 83.

Chopin tried at first to fit in. She and Oscar began attending church regularly and “did conform to Catholic expectations,”⁴² even giving her sixth child a saint’s name. Presenting herself as a good Catholic, and a French one at that, should have been enough to get Chopin into the good graces of the people of Cloutierville. It might have worked had she not insisted on wearing her fashionable city clothes, often a becoming purple, or taking her long walks, or riding horses, or smoking Cuban cigarettes. Some scholars describe Chopin’s eccentric behavior as the result of her feminist upbringing—she did what she wanted because she was strong and independent. But this only partially explains her actions. She did such seemingly odd things at first because she really did not know any better. Having spent her entire life in big cities, she failed to grasp what kind of statement her clothes and habits made. People of the area “measure[ed] a woman’s worth by her devotion to family, her self-abnegation, and her graciousness and charm in performing her social duties,”⁴³ while Chopin gauged people’s worth by how genuine she judged them to be. Though she did care for her family deeply, Chopin had never believed in self-denial for its own sake. The only thing she had to amuse herself was her reading. Among the more challenging authors she read were Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, but the only person with whom she could discuss them was her husband. Reading Darwin was

⁴²*Ibid.*, 84.

⁴³Pearl L. Brown, “Awakened Men in Kate Chopin’s Creole Stories,” *The American Transcendental Quarterly* 13 (March 1999): 69.

a form of intellectual escape—another thing Chopin did not share with her in-laws.

However difficult her life in Cloutierville, nothing equaled the tragedy that befell her in 1882. Oscar fell severely ill with what the doctors called “swamp fever” and died on December 10—not due to the illness, but to an overdose of quinine.⁴⁴ Chopin had to rely on her mother Eliza’s example after her father’s death. But the gravity of the situation exceeded what her mother had to face: not only was she a single mother of six young children, but Oscar had left huge debts—more than \$12,000. Widows of that era had two options when dealing with debt: either to remarry and let the new husband handle the money, or else to ask a male relative to handle finances for her. Because she had been around husbandless women all her life, Chopin took a different route. She assumed responsibility for her husband’s finances, and even for managing their general store in Cloutierville. She sold some land and called in debts owing to Oscar, thereby making herself even less popular in the town.

She did not act entirely alone. Chopin became friendly with a man from town by the name of Albert Sampite. They had known each other before Oscar’s death, and after began seeing each other frequently.⁴⁵ Conducting an affair with someone so soon after her husband’s death would have scandalous enough, but to compound problems, Sampite was married. Chopin later vented her frustration over the affair in her writing. Both Sampite and his wife, Loca, would become characters in Chopin’s fiction. Albert turned

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁵Toth, *Unveiling*, 97.

into Alceé, a name Chopin used in several stories. Loka became Loka, an ugly and unredeeming character. Her Alceé characters were always the same: handsome, rugged, and sensual. Despite some fond memories of Sampite, she ended up leaving Cloutierville. Responding to her mother's pleas to return home to St. Louis to be with her family, Chopin also knew that St. Louis had the best public schools in the nation. When decisions involved her children, their best interests always guided her. She spent the remainder of her life with her family and friends in St. Louis; perhaps owing to her unhappy affair with Sampite, she never remarried.

After paying off Oscar's debts, Chopin no longer worried about money. She could live off the revenues of the land they owned in Louisiana. She spent her time caring for her mother and her children, until in 1885 her mother died of cancer, leaving her "literally prostate with grief."⁴⁶ She never quite recovered from the great tragedies of her life, according to her daughter: "I think the tragic death of her father early in her life, of her much loved brother, the loss of her young husband and her mother, left a stamp of sadness on her which was never lost."⁴⁷ She needed some distraction to see her through her grief, however. Writing, a passion she had cultivated for years, came to her rescue. Once back in St. Louis and settled into a familiar setting, among people who had not witnessed

⁴⁶Heather Kirk Thomas, "A Vocation and a Voice": A Documentary Life of Kate Chopin." (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1988): 298, quoted in Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson, MI: U. Press of Mississippi, 1999), 102.

⁴⁷Ewell, *Chopin*, 17.

her troubles in Cloutierville,⁴⁸ Chopin began to write.

In January 1889, she published her first literary work, the poem "If It Might Be," in *America* magazine. In December 1889, nearly a year later, she finally sold a short story, "Wiser than a God," to *Philadelphia Musical Journal*. She then began behaving like a professional writer, following a certain routine each day. She even had her own writing studio. Her personal journals from this era are account books, recording each sale she made. Chopin quickly found that writing was more therapeutic than profitable, and she worked out many of her past difficulties through her stories. Her father and husband's deaths reappear in "The Story of an Hour" as she pondered what it meant to be a widow. Still unsure of her own position no doubt, Chopin wrote about a woman who has a weak heart and dies from the emotional turmoil caused by the death of her husband. Chopin realized that her freedom came at a price. Writing helped her overcome its obstacles.

Unfortunately, Chopin soon became disenchanted with her stories. She wanted something to distinguish herself from other authors—she did not want to become the pretentious sort of writer that she so thoroughly detested. It was then she discovered the French author Guy de Maupassant and his novels. Captivated by his style, she admitted to a literary revelation: "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

⁴⁸Toth, *Unweiling*, 102.

the art of story making.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Maupassant wrote about topics that interested her, like insanity, adultery, and suicide—hardly the sort of subjects stocked in the local public library. American writers avoided such topics, but Chopin intended to change that. What she especially liked in the French author was his refusal to judge his characters’ morals, telling “stories the way she wanted to...with a clear-eyed and unsentimental focus on reality.”⁵⁰ She learned from him to use clear prose and telling details. Because of him, Chopin found she could write about genuine, authentic people she met in her real life. She even adapted Maupassant’s signature surprise ending for her own purposes.⁵¹

As Chopin grew more confident in her writing, she also learned how to market herself. Unable to find a distributor for her first novel, *At Fault*, she published it herself. When a reviewer made a mistake in reviewing the contents of her novel, she was not above writing to admonish him. *Bayou Folk*, a collection of short stories, appeared in 1894 and received warm praise. Critics called it “charming,” “fresh,” and “glowing with intensity.”⁵² *A Night in Acadie*, Chopin’s second collection, appeared in 1897 and received similar praise—her style is even described as “delicious.”⁵³ Her remarkable usage of the Creole dialect and the imagery of the foreign bayou landscape earned

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁰Toth and Seyersted, *Private Papers*, 130.

⁵¹Ewell, *Kate Chopin*, 19.

⁵²Marlene Springer, *Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1976), 180-1.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 181.

the most laudatory comments.⁵⁴ People loved her stories. They looked into a fairy-tale land and felt they knew what it was about. So when *The Awakening* appeared in 1899, written in the harshly realistic style of Maupassant, the public was shocked. To her dismay, her most ambitious work met more surprise and disapproval than admiration.

Critics called *The Awakening* “gilded dirt.” Though they still approved of Chopin’s writing techniques, they no longer cared for her subject matter. She had not intended to convey anything world-shattering, but something more subtle: “a rarely expressed truth that Kate Chopin knew: that in many women’s lives, including her own, ambition is a bigger secret, and a greater spur, than adultery.”⁵⁵ Critics condemned the work as “morbid,” a “story not worth telling,” “brilliant but unwholesome,” and “totally unjustifiable.”⁵⁶ Though disappointed by the reviews and sales of the book, Chopin kept writing. Unfortunately, her publisher canceled her forthcoming book, *A Vocation and a Voice*, without explanation. No magazines would accept her stories for publication. Despite her continuing efforts, the only work she managed to get published was very conventional.⁵⁷

Perhaps what kept her going despite this rejection was the fact that, even if critics hated her new style, she had an effect on real women. She received letters from fans, telling her what a difference she had made

⁵⁴“Mrs. Kate Chopin, Author of Bayou Folk,” *Current Literature (1888-1912)*, XVI (Aug. 1894), 106.

⁵⁵Emily Toth, “Kate Chopin’s Secret, Slippery Life Story,” *The Southern Quarterly* 37 (Spring-Summer 1999): 45.

⁵⁶Springer, *Wharton and Chopin*, 182-4.

⁵⁷Ewell, *Chopin*, 26.

in their lives. She was invited to speak at a women's club luncheon in St. Louis, where she received congratulations on her work. Despite this encouragement, her ambition began to decline. She concentrated on taking care of sick relatives, until she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died in 1904.

However misguided their interpretation of her motives as a writer, Chopin's feminist admirers are owed a debt of gratitude. Without their attraction to her work, Chopin might have remained undiscovered by a public not interested in regional authors. But it does a disservice to the complex and many faceted forces that shaped this unconventional woman and author to see her only through the feminist lens of modern scholars. Chopin exhibited in 1899 what we would call a feminist consciousness today, not because of some kind of precognition, but rather owing to her unique life experiences. Although it was the feminist label that rescued Chopin from obscurity, that same label threatens to relegate her to the ghetto of "feminist authors." Chopin took what she saw around her: powerful women, a rich French heritage, and Catholic and Creole influences, and transformed all those forces into stories that remain powerful and timeless. To pigeonhole her as "feminist" is to miss the profound and universal themes of her work, and to diminish the uniqueness and complexity of her circumstances and her outlook.