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KATE CHOPIN AND THE SEARCH
FOR A CODE OF BEHAVIOR

by
Bernard John Koloski

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I hereby recommend that this dissertation prepared under my direction by Bernard John Koloski entitled Kate Chopin and the Search for a Code of Behavior be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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SIGNED: Bernard John Kolbaki
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. CODES OF BEHAVIOR</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. AT FAULT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PLANTATION STORIES</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. NATURE STORIES: RELIGION</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. NATURE STORIES: SEX</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. THE AWAKENING</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin emphasizes in her best fiction the importance to an individual of a feeling of community, a feeling of being part of a social order within which a person can seek security and safety, selfhood and significance. For Chopin such a feeling is positively essential because through it an individual comes to perceive his identity in relation to his past, his physical environment, and his fellow man. In Chopin's fiction, the loss of a sense of community brings grave consequences upon a person—frustration, isolation, alienation, and sometimes death.

Both of Chopin's novels and several of her best short stories focus on a character who is seeking to develop some standard of conduct, some code of behavior which will let him find peace and self-fulfillment within his community. The early novel, At Fault, explores in particular the danger of chaos in human affairs by presenting a series of incidents which describe Thérèse LaFirme's attempts to maintain order, continuity, and peace both in her community and in her private life.

In stories which focus on individuals who are cut off from life as it once existed on a Southern plantation,
Chopin deals with the way in which a person might re-capture a sense of community at a time of rapid social and economic change. "A No-Account Creole," "Ma'ame Pélagie," "Tante Cat'rinette," and "Nég Créol" are the best of these stories, each exhibiting a deep concern with the quality of human relationships in an emerging technological society.

In stories which focus on individuals who are seeking a sense of communion with nature, Chopin deals with a person's urge to bring himself, on the one hand, in accord with primordial forces moving in the universe--forces that actuate the natural cycle of birth, maturation, reproduction, decay, and death--and his inclination to seek, on the other hand, a oneness with the members of his community who insist that he conduct himself in a manner that is often at odds with the direction in which those primordial forces are impelling him. The best of these stories are "Athénaise," "A Vocation and a Voice," and "The Storm," each of which deals with individuals who reach a communion with nature through a sexual experience. Other stories like "Lilacs," "A Morning Walk," and "Two Portraits" focus on people who seek a union with the physical universe through organized religion.
Chopin's late novel, *The Awakening*, describes Edna Pontellier's desperate and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to make meaningful physical and emotional contact with other people. Edna longs to be free from the restrictions and conventions she finds in society. Yet while she seeks freedom by isolating herself from her community, freedom is to be found in close participation in a community. Edna's yearning for independence leads her to an acute sensitivity to the rich possibilities of human life, but her isolation, her loneliness, her solitude finally draws her to her death.
CHAPTER 1

CODES OF BEHAVIOR

In 1968, the French priest-psychiatrist Marc Oraison referred to an insight which he called the "most important contribution" of modern psychology to our body of knowledge. "In observable human experience," Oraison wrote,

people exist as self-conscious beings only in and through their relationship to numerous others. . . . Those others, in their turn, only "become real" in relationships with other others. . . .

It is not I who have made me myself; or, more precisely, "I" am not something preliminary to my existence; even before the birth of the child who has become me, the dynamic structuring of my personality was in preparation through a complex network of relationships existing between my parents themselves, and between them and the world they were living in.1

This study is concerned with a different kind of expression of a similar insight. It deals with the way in which the nineteenth-century American realist Kate Chopin explores in her fiction the effect of human relationships upon the consciousness of an individual.

It deals, more specifically, with Chopin's emphasis in her two novels and her hundred shorter works upon the importance to an individual of what contemporary psychologists and sociologists would call a feeling of community, a feeling of being part of a social order within which, as one psychologist phrases it, a person can seek "security and physical safety, support at times of stress, and selfhood and significance" throughout his life. For Kate Chopin, such a feeling is positively essential because through it an individual comes to perceive his identity in relation to his past, his physical environment, and his fellow man. In Chopin's fiction, the loss of a sense of community brings grave consequences upon a person—frustration, isolation, alienation, and sometimes death.

The source of this study lies in my contention that Kate Chopin's best work deals with the subject of community. My interest in Chopin had been aroused by my reading of The Awakening (1898) and by my understanding


3 The dates cited throughout this study refer to the year in which Chopin completed the writing of the work rather than the year in which the work was first published. The publication dates can be misleading because while nearly all of Chopin's work was composed during the fifteen year period from 1889 to 1903, not all of it was published in the order of completion, and some
that the book is, as Kenneth Eble says, "a first-rate novel." I set out, then, to identify those earlier works of the author which share something of the quality of that one memorable book. Some of my choices, like the short stories "Athénais" (1895) and "A No-Account Creole" (1891) had already received, along with The Awakening, well-deserved praise from several critics. Others like "Tante Catrënnette" (1894) and the little sketch "Ripe Figs" (1892) had been largely ignored. Nearly all of my choices, however, struck me as pointing toward a consistent absorption on the author's part with themes related to the nature of or the loss of an individual's social identity, his sense of community.

Many of Chopin's short stories, for example, are about the breaking up of the great estates, the great plantations which played such an important part in the lives of Southerners throughout the nineteenth century. The author's treatment of her material, however, both in these stories and in her not entirely successful early

of the short stories did not appear in print until 1969. The dates are those listed by Per Seyersted in the appendix to his edition of The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, 2 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969). Seyersted includes in his appendix a full publication history for each work.

4 "A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's The Awakening," Western Humanities Review, 10 (1956), 262.
novel *At Fault* (1890) makes quite clear that her interests lie primarily in the effects that this economic change is having upon the lives of the human beings who have been displaced by the process. The many confused, hurt, and sometimes frantic characters who appear in *At Fault* and in those shorter works which I will call the plantation stories have lost more than a plot of land on which to live. They have lost their link to the past and their guide to the future. They are suffering from a condition which one present-day sociologist would call an "alienation from place and property," an alienation that "turns out to be, at bottom, estrangement from close personal ties which give lasting identity to each."

In similar fashion, many of her stories and *The Awakening*, to a large extent, deal with nature, yet for Kate Chopin that word has a social context which is nearly always recognizable. Characters in a number of short stories seek a communion, a oneness with nature, but they

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most often achieve something of what they are after through the medium of formally organized, community-oriented religion, or through a sexual experience. They manage to find a harmony with their environment by finding first a harmony with their fellow man. And for Edna Pontellier, the heroine of The Awakening, communion with nature, even when accompanied by a fully satisfying sexual union, is not enough. Unable to feel that she is a part of her community, she comes to perceive her position as being so completely set off from that of other people that at age twenty-nine she drowns herself.

Much of the power of The Awakening and much of the permanent value of some of the plantation stories and some of the nature stories can be traced to the author's treatment of various themes related to the concept of community. We need, therefore, to recognize that Chopin is fully aware of what she is about. We might, in fact, complain at times that she is too conscious of her themes, that she sacrifices some of her effectiveness in her determination to explore what she sees as the all-important implications of man's social identity.

It is, I suspect, this determination that constitutes the principal problem with At Fault. The book starts out simply enough. The plot revolves around the plight of Thérèse Lafirme, a young widow who, because of
her Catholic upbringing and her personal experiences, is convinced that she cannot marry a divorced man even though she loves him, because her doing so would help destroy a continuing tradition which provides essential stability and security for both herself and her community. The novel becomes, however, extremely complex as the author introduces a sometimes awkward apparatus in an effort to examine the complicated relationship between individual conduct and the social good. Lewis Leary, one of the few people to treat the book seriously, has good reasons for objecting to the presence in it of characters and scenes which do not further the plot, but for our purposes here, the novel serves as a fine illustration of the emphasis which Kate Chopin is willing to put upon her themes. An understanding of *At Fault* is, I think, indispensable for an understanding of the author's better work.

Chopin does not, we need to notice, change her emphasis in her later stories. She continues to probe the complex relation of man and community. But as she matured in her craft, she sought to weave her themes ever more skillfully into her narratives. And she sought at the same time to suggest more subtly something of the universal implications of her work. She was, for example,

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not entirely pleased to find that people, as they began to read her short stories, almost immediately classified her as a local color writer. In her 1894 review of Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols*, an essay written after she published *At Fault* and several of her earlier short stories but before she composed most of her best work, she seems to be addressing her own readers as well as those of Garland:

Mr. Garland undervalues the importance of the past in art and exaggerates the significance of the present.

Human impulses do not change and can not so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began. It is why Aeschylus is true, and Shakespeare is true to-day, and why Ibsen will not be true in some remote to-morrow, however forcible and representative he may be for the hour, because he takes for his themes social problems which by their very nature are mutable. And, notwithstanding Mr. Garland's opinion to the contrary, social problems, social environments, local color and the rest of it are not of themselves motives to insure the survival of a writer who employs them (II, 693).  

While we may harbor some doubts about her attitude toward Ibsen, it is difficult to quibble with the general sense of her comment. Chopin praised Garland for being "vigorous and sincere" (II, 694), but she sensed a danger for both him and for herself in a literary

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8 Volume and page references throughout this study are to Seyersted's edition of *The Complete Works*. 
theory which struck her as discounting the importance of universal human experience. She was perfectly willing to do as Garland had urged, to go to life and nature for inspiration, to write about that which she knew the best. Almost all of her successful work is set in Louisiana where she moved when she was married and where she lived for fourteen years. But she was most unwilling to limit herself to an attitude which she once labeled "provincialism" (II, 691). So while she concentrated on writing about the Creoles and the Cajuns, the mulattoes and—as she would call them—the Negroes of Louisiana, she did not seek to picture them as quaint curiosities. And while she portrayed her characters as struggling to find their places in communities that are under pressure from forces somewhat peculiar to the American South in the late nineteenth century, she sought through a wide variety of techniques to set that struggle into a broader perspective.

She had acquired—partly through conscious effort, partly through circumstance—such a perspective for herself even before she began to write. Her recent biographer, Per Seyersted, tells us that she had always read widely, not only in English but in French, which she knew from early childhood, and in German as well. Seyersted has compiled a list of authors whom she is known to
have read by the time of her marriage in 1870. His list includes Dante, Cervantes, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Mme. de Stael, Chateaubriand, Goethe, Coleridge, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronté, and Longfellow. The evidence suggests that she continued to read not only widely but well throughout her life. She translated eight Maupassant stories into English, and she published reviews of books by several contemporary authors, including Garland, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Hardy, and Zola. She apparently read Emerson, since she mentions him in both of her novels, and she quotes directly from Whitman in a short story, from Shakespeare in several works, and from Swinburne in The Awakening. When she points out in an essay that some writers are capable of "the 'vision' which gives us the great novel" (II, 720), we can feel confident that she is speaking with some degree of expertise.

Her own vision, however, is probably more deeply rooted in her personal experience than in her reading, and one central fact of that experience is especially significant here. Kate Chopin was born in St. Louis, grew up in St. Louis, and died in St. Louis. So far as we can tell, she wrote all of her published work there during the last sixteen years of her life. Yet she took

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as her subject matter not St. Louis but Louisiana, where she lived from the time of her marriage until 1884, a year after the death of her husband. She obviously understood from the very beginning of her career that it would be through stories about the kind of people she had come to know in Louisiana that she would have to express herself. The very first narrative she worked on when she began writing in 1888 was set in the Creole country of Louisiana.\footnote{The story, later called "A No-Account Creole," was first written, according to Per Seyersted, in 1888. It was rewritten in 1891 and published in 1894.} By the next year she was writing At Fault which is for the most part focused on the Creoles, and while she tried dealing with people from other areas of the country both early in her career and from time to time throughout the 1890s, she never turned away from Louisiana. The Awakening, needless to say, would lose a critical part of its effect without the atmosphere of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

It is, I think, the particular perspective that Kate Chopin brings to her Louisiana stories which gives the work its distinctive flavor and its enduring value. Her fiction reflects, on the one hand, an intimate familiarity with what most deeply concerns the people she writes about. She has herself experienced the instability
and the confusion, the violence and the bitter disappointments—all hallmarks of the Reconstruction Era in the South—which are so noticeable in *At Fault* and in several of the plantation stories. Her husband, Per Seyersted points out, was a member of the White League, a group of Louisiana Democrats which in 1874 clashed so violently with Republican Radicals that President Grant was prompted to send in federal troops.\(^{11}\)

On the other hand, there is in her work a sense of distance which reflects the fact that she is looking back on her Louisiana from a point that is both several years and many miles away. And what comes through most clearly across that distance is a realization that the people of Louisiana as she remembers them and as she portrays them have managed to maintain a strong affection for and an intense loyalty toward what can only be described as an intimate collective life, this at a time when the rest of the South is caught up in the rapid transition to a new style of existence. The author's Creoles, we are constantly reminded, live in small, close-knit, usually rural communities in which there are few social subdivisions other than families, in which social relationships are personal and enduring, and in

\(^{11}\) Seyersted, *Biography*, p. 42.
which behavior is regulated for the most part by custom and tradition. Yet never very far away and often making its presence felt is a life style that is vastly different. In St. Louis and in New Orleans, both of which appear frequently or are mentioned frequently in the stories, people live in communities that are noticeably a part of a much larger pluralistic society. Here there are, besides the family, a great many social subdivisions, including all sorts of professional, trade, educational, and economic groups. Social relationships are much more impersonal and less permanent, and behavior is increasingly regulated by formal law rather than by informal tradition.

Chopin's work is full of contrasts between the two ways of life. The very first story she worked on, a story later to be called "A No-Account Creole," depicts a young New Orleans businessman who feels at first a faint longing and then a strong determination to escape from the city so that he might try life on a plantation. At Fault shows how economic forces, including the emergence of the railroad, help force people to drastically alter the traditional communal life. Many of the short stories--"Nég Créol" is a particularly good example--picture isolated individuals who are frantically trying to carve out an existence for themselves in an environment that is cold and frustrating. Even The Awakening,
late in Chopin's career, sustains the contrast. While the novel deals with a woman who, unlike many characters in *At Fault* and in most of the short stories, has never known what a sense of community might be like, the author presents the heroine to us first in the company of an extremely close group of vacationing Creoles and then in the much more impersonal atmosphere of New Orleans.

Out of Chopin's contrasts, out of the perspective that her experiences and perhaps her reading make possible for her, emerges a body of fiction rich in its insight into a fundamental aspect of human life. Kate Chopin expresses fully some of the crucial implications of an individual's social identity. She shows us people seeking to apprehend their relationship with the community they are a part of. And the way in which such people in Chopin's work go about their endeavor is especially significant here.

The author, we need to notice, portrays individual moral judgment as a major basis of any social relationship, as the all-important link between self and community. Both of her novels and several of her best short stories focus on a character who is seeking to develop some standard of conduct, some code of behavior which will let him find peace and self-fulfillment. What he is seeking is sometimes extremely difficult to attain not only
because the traditional codes of his community may be undergoing rapid change, but also because he himself is changing, often—particularly in the later works—as a result of an increasingly deep understanding of his place in nature, in the broader physical, rather than the social, universe. Athénaïse, for example, the title character of Chopin's 1895 story, finds it impossible to live with her husband because her recent marriage and her subsequent moving away from her family and from the bayou environment that she loved so well has shattered the unity she had always felt both with nature and with other people. For Athénaïse, a code of conduct is the expression of a sense of communion, the expression of a total relationship with the universe, with the world of husband, parents, brother, plants and animals, and the yet-to-be-born child she discovers stirring within her body.

In like manner, Edna Pontellier, Chopin tells us in *The Awakening*, slowly comes "to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (II, 893). Edna articulates in the novel a feeling shared by characters in many of Chopin's short stories. "One of these days," Edna says,

I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think--try to determine what character of a
woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it (II, 966).

Edna exists—to paraphrase the passage from Marc Oraison quoted at the beginning of this chapter—as a self-conscious being only in and through her relationships to numerous others. And she is able to determine the nature of those relationships by measuring her conduct against the various codes—legal to some extent, but traditional for the most part—which regulate behavior in her community and in the larger society of which her community is a part. For Edna, the search for a code of behavior turns out to be a search for self-fulfillment through the realization of a sense of community.

It is, then, the constant concern with the significance of the collective life which most securely unifies Kate Chopin's work and which is the most important distinguishing characteristic of that work. We should, however, bear in mind that the author's fiction can profitably be viewed in other contexts. At Fault and some of the short stories, for example, occupy a well-deserved place in the plantation tradition of Southern literature which from John Pendleton Kennedy's Swallow Barn of 1832 evolved through the novels and stories of Chopin's contemporary, Thomas Nelson Page, among others, to emerge in the
twentieth century in the fiction of William Faulkner. The tradition is a rich and diverse one, and probably no single author embodies in his work all of what at one time or another were characteristic traits of plantation literature. But a good part of Chopin's work pictures what Henry Nash Smith tells us so impressed readers of such fiction in the 1870s and the 1880s--the "ugly adolescence of Big Business" and the way in which the older customs "embodied graces and social harmonies to which an urban industrial society could not aspire."\(^{12}\) And At Fault, we will find, takes up an important theme which Kennedy wove into Swallow Barn and which has retained a prominent place in much of plantation literature--a community's efforts to preserve some sense of stability and order at a moment of inevitable social and economic change.

We might, in addition, examine the author's work in the context of other Louisiana fiction of her time. Here again, there exists a considerable amount of diversity, but Chopin's stories are representative in some respects of what other Louisiana writers were dealing with. Chopin is not, for example, concerned, as is Grace

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King, with defending the integrity of the Creoles' way of life, but she chooses for her stories characters and settings that remind us a great deal of some of those of King. And Chopin does not, as does George Washington Cable, write about the Creoles from a frame of reference that leaves her critical of many of their values, that infuses her work with a feeling of social reform. She does, however, portray in her fiction a society very similar to that which Cable shows us in The Grandissimes (1880)—a society struggling to reconcile opposing cultural attitudes.

The author may, furthermore, as many critics have pointed out, be thought of as a feminist writer in the sense that her best work is about the needs and the problems of women, and, in such a light, Larzer Ziff's remark in The American 1890s is fully applicable to her:

To be a serious female author in the nineties was to be a writer of stories about women and their demands. The woman novelist was trapped by her affiliations to her sex in precisely the same manner as was the twentieth-century Negro writer in the 1950s trapped by affiliation to his race. The condition of women inescapably had to be the material of her art.13

Yet in a way Chopin transcends the subject matter of women much as she transcends the subject matter of the Louisiana

Creoles or that of the Southern plantation. If we are to think of her in relation to other writers, we would do well, I think, to compare her with people like Hawthorne and Melville before her and T. S. Eliot and Faulkner after her—writers who have a positive commitment to the inherent value of the collective life, along with an understanding of the individual's need to resist, at times, the pressures of such a life.

We might in this context consider outsider Edna Pontellier's alienation from her Creole community in relation to outsider Hester Prynne's estrangement from the people of Boston. While both heroines deeply desire some sort of oneness with their society, they both need in addition to balance that desire with the demands of their own nature, demands which propel them toward a condition of solitude. They share with characters like Melville's Ishmael and Faulkner's Joe Christmas an intense yearning for self-fulfillment and community, for self-fulfillment within community. T. S. Eliot admirably describes the conflict in his essay "Literature and the Modern World":

The person is no longer a person if wholly isolated from community; and the community is no longer a community if it does not consist of persons. A man is not himself unless he is a member; and he cannot be a member unless he is
also something alone. Man's membership and his solitude must be taken together.\textsuperscript{14}

The Awakening, then—along with At Fault and most of Kate Chopin's best short stories—is essentially a humanistic work. It is the work of a person who is disturbed with the clearly perceptible movement in the 1890s away from the closeness of communal life toward a concentration on industrial, technological, organizational concerns, rather than human ones. It is the reaction of a sensitive and creative humanist to the shifting—Chopin would, I believe, have said the deterioration—of important human values that was underway throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

Like Hawthorne and Melville, Eliot and Faulkner, Kate Chopin understood that each individual acquires his humanity through others, that human identity, fulfillment, and freedom are all products of an individual's contact with those others. Her fiction constitutes a continual striving for a form that would let her embody her insight, a form that would let her express what her experience had shown her to be true.

\textsuperscript{14} "Literature and the Modern World," \textit{American Prefaces}, 1 (1935), 20.
CHAPTER 2

AT FAULT

"The beginning of things," Kate Chopin writes in The Awakening, "of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing" (II, 893). At Fault is like that. The world which Chopin's vision reveals to her has its inception here, and the novel is, in some ways, all of what the author suggests we might expect. Yet it is not entirely a book which we would look for in 1890, not a book like the one which Chopin refers to in passing as "the latest novel of one of those prolific female writers who turn out their unwholesome intellectual sweets so tirelessly, to be devoured by the girls and women of the age" (II, 798).

At Fault is a complex and an ambitious novel, rich in the ideas it treats and rich in the techniques it uses to develop those ideas.

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1 Lewis Leary, for example, finds At Fault "more cluttered . . . with characters and with convolutions of plot" than The Awakening. "Other Novel," p. 60. Daniel Rankin says that "both in style and structure there is a break and a drop toward the end." Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1932), p. 128. Larzer Ziff feels that the book "contains little that should have made it a success," p. 299.
The book is about disorder, about the danger of chaos in human affairs. The earliest pages of the novel introduce the theme by presenting us with an incident which proves to be a critically important one in the life of the heroine. The thirty-year-old Thérèse Lafirme is pictured as being so completely overcome with grief after the death of her husband that she is entirely oblivious to what is happening at Place-du-Bois, the large, mostly wooded Louisiana plantation which is now, about 1880 we assume, hers to manage. While the people of the community understand well enough that discipline and authority have almost completely broken down in the absence of Thérèse's husband, the heroine herself becomes aware of the "disorder that gathered about her" (II, 741) only when an old servant comes to tell her that people are stealing even the cotton seed from the estate and that surely the cotton itself will disappear next. She reacts quickly. Her husband Jérôme had been, apparently, a tough and respected administrator, and Thérèse feels that she has inherited not only the land but also the "weight and sacredness of a trust" (II, 741) which is held by the Lafirme family. She must herself become now "the firm one," she realizes, so she moves swiftly to restore order to the realm, making herself as the title of the first chapter indicates, "the Mistress of Place-du-Bois."
Thérèse does not forget the experience. Nearly every incident in the remainder of the novel is related in some way to the heroine's efforts to maintain order, continuity, and peace both in her community and in her private life. She is determined to prevent a recurrence of the near chaotic situation that she faced when her husband died. She tries, therefore, to placate the half-Negro, half-Indian Joçint, who is furious because his father forces him to work at a sawmill and to give up the daily jaunts he once took in his beloved woods. She tries to rehabilitate her nephew Grégoire, who sets out to drink and brawl himself to death after he loses his nearby plantation to creditors. Most important, she tries--because she believes strongly in the necessity of those moral supports provided by traditional Catholic precepts--to salvage the marriage of David Hosmer, a man who loves her and whose love she reciprocates, by persuading him to return to the alcoholic woman he has divorced.

Chopin's carefully contrived two-part structure for the novel accurately reflects both the movement of the plot and the development of the theme. The twelve chapters of Part I depict Thérèse at her best for the most part, smoothly managing her estate. Joçint, while smoldering, retains his job at the sawmill. Grégoire, installed as overseer of the cotton crop, finds new
meaning in his life by falling in love with Melicent, David Hosmer's sister. And Hosmer himself, convinced by Thérèse that he may have been a coward to desert his wife Fanny when she needed him for support, journeys to St. Louis and prevails upon the somewhat deteriorated woman to marry him once again. As Hosmer and his wife arrive at Place-du-Bois in Chapter I of Part II, Thérèse has good reason to appear cheerful; she has achieved more successes than she had any right to expect.

The remaining sixteen chapters of Part II present a dramatically altered picture. Thérèse's world begins to crumble, slowly at first, then with a great rush, as if propelled by the rapidly rising Cane River which borders Place-du-Bois and which acts in the book as a kind of motif, appearing at intervals throughout the second section. Joçint, enraged because Hosmer, the manager of the sawmill, has sternly rebuked him, manages to set the mill on fire. He is, however, caught in the act by Grégoire, who kills him on the spot. But Grégoire appalls Melicent by taking the position that he should be praised rather than condemned for "having rid the community of so offensive and dangerous a personage as Joçint" (II, 824), and the girl quickly leaves Louisiana without so much as a parting word to her suitor. Having lost again any reason for living, Grégoire returns in despair to his
former ways and is fatally shot in a drunken brawl. Hos-mer's marriage, furthermore, goes from bad to worse as his wife resumes her constant drinking. An open conflict does not materialize only because Fanry in an alcoholic stupor refuses to leave an old cabin threatened by the ravaging river and is swept away to her death. The plot, then, which begins with disorder and moves in Part I through a period of relative calm, climaxes in chaos. It proceeds, however, to conclude on a note of hope as, a year after Fanny's death, Thérèse marries Hosmer, determined to accept what appears to be a state of personal, if not social, order and peace.

The theme of the novel is in large part integrated, it seems to me, with the details of the two-part structure of the plot. Yet we should note that both critics who have recently written at some length about At Fault raise objections to what they feel is the work's fuzziness of focus and its superfluous characters and scenes. Per Seyersted argues that the novel expresses Chopin's "irritation with moral reformers"; the theme, he says, "is a problem connected with marriage . . . the question of the responsibility of one spouse toward the other."

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2 Seyersted, Biography, p. 91.
3 Seyersted, Biography, p. 52.
He finds, however, that the main characters are "mere abstractions of the theme rather than living individuals," and he labels the book Chopin's "apprentice novel." Lewis Leary points to a theme of self-fulfillment and suggests that the work "speaks of marital unhappiness and of dangers which lie in wait for people who do as they want to do without concern for other people." But he finds fault with the presence of characters who "so far as movement of plot is concerned, are diversionary"; and "the principal fault," he says, "is that of not being able effectively to present any convincing reason why any character acts as he does."

By concentrating their attention upon Chopin's treatment of marriage and love, of freedom and self-fulfillment, both critics tend to understate, I think, the extent to which *At Fault* is unified, the extent to which the characters, the events, the imagery of the novel fuse with the theme to produce a reasonably coherent whole.

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6 Leary, "Other Novel," p. 60.
8 Leary, "Other Novel," p. 74.
9 Robert Arner, whose dissertation I came upon when this study was nearly completed, devotes about half
This is not to suggest that the book is without weaknesses. The climax especially, we will find, hurts the effectiveness of the novel. As Chopin herself tells us, the beginning of a world is necessarily vague and tangled. *At Fault* is not, however, without a clear focus. There are, it is true, a few characters—some of Fanny's friends who enter the scene when Hosmer goes to St. Louis—who do not, as Leary notes, have a direct role in the furthering of what we might call the major plot line. They have no significant effect on the relationship which exists between Thérèse and Hosmer or between Hosmer and Fanny. But the novel is about more than that three-sided relationship, and in the larger context of Thérèse's attempts of his chapter on *At Fault* to a discussion that credits the work with a sharper focus than does either Leary or Seyersted. While Arner finds the relationship between Melicent and Grégoire as the most interesting aspect of the book for a twentieth-century reader, he offers a helpful definition of one aspect of the novel's theme: "Therese [sic] comes in the course of the action," he says, "to accept the responsibilities and realities of the present, at the same time preserving certain traditions and institutions as a source of stability and time-tested values around which she can organize her life and with which she can give the present moment meaning."

"The theme which gives coherence to the novel, then, and which ultimately provides the imaginative framework within which to interpret the marriage of Hosmer and Therese has to do with the ideas of change and resistance to change. One important manifestation of this theme involves a contrast between an idyllic, pastoral landscape—representing typically order, coherence, tradition, and the past—and the landscape as altered by technology."

to preserve harmony in her own life and in her community, the St. Louis characters have a valuable function to perform. There is, it seems to me, little in the novel that is not organic if we follow the action closely in the light of what happens in those all-important opening pages.

Thérèse has, the first few chapters of *At Fault* make clear, a perfectly good reason for acting as she does. Shocked into a realization that she must of necessity assume the role of a major stabilizing force in her community, she sets out to avoid the bêtise which some residents of the area are expecting, and proceeds to bring order to the plantation by following successfully—the phrase is an important one—"the methods of her departed husband" (II, 741). Her subsequent actions constitute in large measure an attempt to deal with new situations as they arise by applying the "methods" which, she is convinced, Jérôme would have used. She cultivates, for example, her business sense and agrees, when David Hosmer approaches her, to allow the construction of a sawmill on the plantation. She works, in addition, to make herself into a clear-headed administrator and disciplinarian; it is not long before a guest at the plantation characterizes her as "positively a queen" (II, 760) in her demeanor.
Yet she understands at the same time the necessity for patience, tolerance, and flexibility—all in the context of a Southern gentlewoman who respects a generations-old tradition of ease and comfort. She is, as a result, well liked by the less than eagerly ambitious Negro servants, although visitors from St. Louis cannot comprehend why it takes so many Negroes at Place-du-Bois to do what one servant in their city would accomplish by himself. Very early in the novel we come to recognize Thérèse's perception that in order to maintain the "trust" which Jérôme has passed to her, she must carry forward as best she can not only the Lafirme methods but also the Lafirme traditions—traditions which have their roots in that which she has inherited, in the land itself and in the way of life which has evolved on the land. Several aspects of these traditions are significant here, not only because they offer a rationale for Thérèse's conduct but also because through them the author creates a more precise foundation from which she can define and explore her theme.

The traditions which Thérèse upholds—and some of them can be traced not only to Jérôme, but to the heroine's own New Orleans background as well—are essentially Creole, Catholic, and conservative. We discover just how much Thérèse is a product of her Creole upbringing when
Hosmer brings Fanny to live with him at Place-du-Bois. Thérèse responds with an open display of affection that startles the withdrawn, Unitarian Fanny in much the same way that the Grand Isle Creoles in *The Awakening* unnerve the Presbyterian Edna Pontellier: "Thérèse affected her forcibly. This woman so wholesome, so fair and strong; so un-American as to be not ashamed to show tenderness and sympathy with eye and lip, moved Fanny like a new and pleasing experience" (II, 801). Along with her patois and her predilection for things French—she spends six months in Paris after Fanny is killed—Thérèse exhibits the outgoing warmth that is noticeable in so many of Kate Chopin's Creoles.

Directly related to such warmth is the heroine's Catholicism and her conservative instincts. Thérèse is emotionally and culturally committed to an intimately close, communal life. She is—from all that we can tell—determined to preserve such a mode of existence on the plantation even though she must exercise her authority to do so. She "required certain conduct from others," we notice; "there was hardly a soul at Place-du-Bois who had not felt the force of her will and yielded to its gentle influence" (II, 754). Perhaps Grégoire, the heroine's nephew, best reveals the seriousness of Thérèse's determination when he tells a friend "that there was no better
woman in the world than his Aunt Thérèse, "W'en you do like she wants!" (II, 754).

What Thérèse wants is a community like that from which the Lafirme traditions emerged, a community in which people can live in peace and in harmony with one another, and we need to recognize that for her the two are inseparable—the old traditions make human order possible. Thérèse would feel, we suspect, a close kinship with a writer like Santayana who speaks wistfully in one of his essays of a time when "men had lived in compulsory unison, having only one unquestioned religion, one style of art, one political order, one common spring of laughter and tears."¹⁰ Thérèse tries, in fact, to bring a kind of "compulsory unison" to her realm by enforcing a code of conduct which is a clear outgrowth of her background. She turns doggedly to custom and tradition as guides for behavior, and she seeks actively to insure that other people do the same. When a friend tells her she is not an "individualist," she replies, "No, I'm no individualist, if to be one is to permit men to fall into hurtful habits without offering protest against it" (II, 746). She protests, therefore, doing her best to prevent "hurtful

habits" from appearing in her community, and for a time she succeeds remarkably well. "My!" Grégoire says early in the novel, "a man can live like a saint yere at Place-du-Bois, they ain't no temptations o' no kine" (II, 773).

Yet while Thérèse arranges life at the plantation so that it will not lead people into temptation, she acts out of something other than concern for the well-being of any individual's spiritual life. She is little interested in the private facets of religion, and her Catholicism is not, to any discernible extent, a matter of worshiping a godhead. We notice, for example, that she no longer attends mass, though she abides by the traditional forms. She proceeds to have masses said for Grégoire on discovering that he has been killed. Thérèse gives us a glimpse into what her faith does mean to her when she tells Hosmer that religion is not the reason she refuses to marry a divorced man. "A moral principle," she says, is "something peculiarly one's own." And when he suggests that her "principle" might be a "prejudice," she replies that "there are some prejudices which a woman can't afford to part with . . . even at the price of happiness" (II, 766). Religion for Thérèse represents, we come to understand, that body of moral principles which contribute toward making the close, communal life, and therefore the ordered life, a possibility. Divorce, she apparently reasons,
would weaken the underpinnings of that mode of existence and is, therefore, unacceptable to her.

Thérèse's attitude on these broad moral questions is similar in its general outlines to that of the author. Morality for Chopin, here in *At Fault* and throughout her work, means what Alfred Kazin tells us it meant for Tolstoy and for William Dean Howells--"the relation of man to his society."

The entire fabric of this early novel is woven around the heroine's dealings with a sizeable group of people. It is no accident, we should notice, that Thérèse is presented to us in the very first paragraph, the very first sentence of the novel through the eyes of her neighbors and that we are never allowed to lose sight of the way in which her actions affect the members of the Place-du-Bois community.

Chopin is deeply concerned in *At Fault*, as the title suggests, with an individual's responsibility for the moral choices he makes. Out of Thérèse's code and, more specifically, out of her application of it to other people at Place-du-Bois, the author fashions a thematic dialogue which soon comes to dominate the book, a dialogue that seeks to define the relationship between

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individual responsibility, individual conscience, and social order. As strongly, we notice, as Thérèse insists upon the necessity of a code of conduct which makes it possible for people in the community to live without fear of disruption and chaos, so strongly does David Hosmer, who comes to assume an increasingly important role in the novel, insist that such a code must not hinder a member of the community from seeking fulfillment in life. "The individual man," Hosmer's conscience tells him, must be free to "hold on to his personality" (II, 777). The resulting dialectic lies at the heart of the novel, as it lies at the heart of any civilized society. To what extent, Chopin asks in *At Fault*, must an individual restrain "the promptings of his character," as Hosmer phrases it (II, 746), for the well-being of the community he belongs to? How much latitude in behavior can a community allow each of its members before chaos breaks out?

The entire development pattern of the novel is built up of incidents and images which relate directly to these questions. Each character, each scene in the book illuminates in some way the consequences of or the rationale behind some aspect of Thérèse's moral choices. The book is, in that sense, a succession of contrasts which

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12 The words are in fact those of Homeyer, Hosmer's alter-ego. See p. 43 of this chapter.
gradually defines the nature of the heroine and the nature of the theme. Each of the contrasts offers us some insight into Thérèse's relationship with various members of her community, some insight into her code of behavior.

The heroine's most profound relationship is with David Hosmer, the man she comes to love, the outsider from St. Louis whom she allows to set up a sawmill at Place-du-Bois. Hosmer and his mill serve in the book as a focal point for most of the contrasting characters and incidents, and the mill creates problems for Thérèse from the very beginning. She would have dearly liked to avoid its presence on her land much as she would have liked to prevent the appearance of a railroad line on the border of the plantation. But when the railroad arrives in spite of her fighting it "with a conservatism that yielded only to the resistless" (II, 742), she has a new house built out of sight of the line—a house, we note, that avoids

13 Lewis Leary notes that, among other things, At Fault is about "how the railroad came and made available forests of uncut timber, bringing noise and disruption to the placid plantation land." While it is not entirely "obvious" or "confidently designated," he says, the fault "which dominates and gives title to the novel . . . may be interpreted as that of an agrarian, land-preserving South, lulled by traditions of ease and morality and religion, as it fails to respond to the industrial, land-destroying North whose morality is modern and utilitarian. Or it may be the other way around." "Other Novel," pp. 61-62.
"the temptations offered by modern architectural innovations" (II, 742) -- and she settles down to preserve what she can of the old way of life. The sawmill she accepts initially with the same kind of reluctance, but she grows in time surprisingly fond of the operation, partly, no doubt, because Hosmer is its builder, but partly, it would seem, because she comes to identify herself in some way with the finishing process that the mill performs.

She finds herself a favorite spot where she watches with intense concentration as each log is pulled from the water and transformed "to the clean symmetry of sawed planks" (II, 747). It is, apparently, the "clean symmetry" of the lumber that so fascinates the heroine, and we suspect that the mill appeals to her as a force which imposes something akin to her notion of order and harmony on elements of nature which do not inherently possess those qualities. Hosmer's sawmill, in its relationship to the trees of Place-du-Bois, fulfills a function not much different from what Thérèse perceives as her role in relation to the people of the plantation.

And Robert Arner, crediting the heroine with some unlikely insights, suggests that "in Therese's eyes at least, the cultivated ground stands for the viability and the vitality of pre-Civil War agrarianism, for a retreat from the reality of time and history into an imaginative realm where nature is immutable and the old way of life is preserved intact," p. 46.
Joçint, the son of old Morico, one of the aged residents of the plantation, seems to sense something of this aspect of the mill. But he hates the operation. Half-Negro, but also half-Indian, it is stifling for him to stack logs all day. His Indian heritage calls him toward a fellowship with the animals and the trees of the forest, but his Negro father forces him to stay on at the mill. Pushed to the breaking point, Joçint reacts in a way that reminds us of Faulkner's Ab Snopes. He sets fire to what we recognize is a physical counterpart of the system that has wronged him. Unlike Ab, however, Joçint is overwhelmed by the sudden force of the fire. Dazed and unable to run, he is caught by Grégoire and killed by a pistol shot.

Thérèse's belief at this point seems justified: chaos is indeed likely to break out if the code is not observed. But the larger moral question is clear. Should not Joçint have been free to follow the promptings of his own character? Thérèse is deeply hurt by the death

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14 Robert Arner's comment on Joçint is, I think, valuable: "Adherence to a primitive and anarchic way of life destroys Joçint; the nature that he represents is chaotic. Therese, who is associated with pastoral and orderly landscapes, is able to effect a compromise with the present as Joçint is not and to bring to the present the order of nature which acts as an antidote to the chaos of rootless, technological society. Her plantation represents the middle ground where wilderness and civilization meet," p. 53.
of Joqlnt as well as by the death of old Morico who suffers an attack of some sort upon finding his son's body. But there is no sign that she understands the intensity of the pressures which impelled Joqlnt to his death. That he might have found peace and security in his rifle, his Creole pony, and his jaunts in the woods does not strike her. The heroine seems to see no similarities between the moral convictions that drove Joqlnt and those that drive her.

Yet if Joqlnt points up for us a blind spot in Thérèse's understanding of, if not her concern for, those around her, another character related to Hosmer and his mill sets into perspective the genuine human warmth of the heroine. Like Thérèse herself, Melicent has what her brother Hosmer calls a "code" (II, 759), but no one including Hosmer understands the basis upon which Melicent forms her judgments, so no one can be sure that his actions at any given moment are not in violation of some principle which she seeks to uphold. We suspect that her opinions grow out of a blend of Unitarianism, an "unstable" daily existence (II, 748), and a romantic search for experience, while her actions reveal in her a solipsism that prevents her from relating to other people, or, as she admits, from caring about a society.
The imagery with which Chopin surrounds Melicent sets her off dramatically from Thérèse. Like the heroine, Hosmer's sister is fond of seeing natural objects arranged into patterns, but while Thérèse admires the "clean symmetry" of finished lumber, Melicent covers the ceiling and the walls of her cottage with such a wild collection of tree branches, bird wings, pine cones, and ferns, all mixed together with bits of man-made fabrics, that she stirs up the "savage instinct" (II, 755) of the Negroes who pass by.

Her decorations for the cottage give us an accurate indication of the way this counter-heroine acts. She enjoys being thought of as an eccentric, and she moves about, with no apparent purpose, to different sections of the country. She has been engaged several times, she carries on a trifling romance with Grégoire throughout most of the book, and she goes off in the closing pages to tour the West, seeking to acquire "a true knowledge of life as it is" by studying, among other things, California's native plants (II, 875). Her most precious experience at Place-du-Bois, it would seem, is her visit with Grégoire to the grave of old McFarlane, the man who, legend holds, was the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's
Simon Legree in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.  She looks forward eagerly to the experience and dresses herself for the occasion all in black, prepared as always to strike a dramatic pose. Her placing of a red geranium on McFarlane's grave is, we recognize, largely a matter of posing, of doing the unexpected, but we sense as well a faint similarity between this beautiful young girl and the long dead murderer of Negroes. She has about her a hard shell of indifference to human feeling that resembles in kind if not in degree the bearing of a McFarlane.

"Haven't you a spark of humanity in you?" asks Thérèse when Melicent refuses to speak to Grégoire after his murder of Joçint (II, 828). Everybody at Place-du-Bois knows how much the Creole loves Melicent, but she, unlike Thérèse and Hosmer, is unwilling under any circumstances to temper her aversion toward Grégoire with sympathy for him as a confused and deeply hurt individual. She contributes indirectly to his death, because having provided him with a purpose for living after he lost his ancestral home, her sudden and uncompromising decision to place principle above everything leaves him with nowhere to turn for support.

15 *Seyersted, Biography*, p. 36.
Grégoire himself, like Melicent and Joçint, functions as a direct contrast to Thérèse. He shares the heroine's aspirations; he too grew up among Creole, Catholic, and conservative traditions. He too is an aristocrat, a son of a plantation owner. But his foundations have been pulled out from underneath him by the death of his father, by the return of his mother to her relatives in France, and by his own loss of the family estate. Cut loose from his land, he is unable to find meaning for his life in the traditions which emerged from that land. When Melicent dismisses him, he sets out, as one of the Negroes explains it, to throw "into disorda an' confusion" the nearby town of Centerville (II, 833), and then moves on to do the same thing in little towns all the way to Texas, until finally he is killed.

Thérèse is sensitive, we suspect, to something of the significance of Grégoire's death. She is quick to perceive the way in which her nephew met his end: "So Grégoire was dead. She understood it all now. The manner of his death was plain to her as if she had seen it, out there in some disorderly settlement" (II, 851). As she has done since she inherited her estate, Thérèse connects a breakdown in the traditional code with the appearance of chaos and of destruction. "Out there," she is convinced, beyond Place-du-Bois, where the old
traditions no longer offer their supports, disorder prevails. Her nephew's death brings that disorder right to her doorstep once again.

"Oh, Grégoire," she had told him when Melicent left, "I see so much trouble around me; so many sad mistakes, and I feel so powerless to right them; as if my hands were tied" (II, 827). It is the speech of a woman who is developing serious doubts about the effectiveness of her actions, and when a Texan rides up on his mangy little pony to tell her of Grégoire's death, Thérèse's feeling of helplessness must become even more intense. Here, we realize, in this tobacco-chewing, sardine-praising Texan—with his complete absence of any notion of what an aristocracy might be, of what generations-old traditions might be—is the embodiment of some of those forces that stripped Grégoire of his land and which threaten the existence of the way of life that the heroine is trying so desperately to preserve. Thérèse has every reason to mourn for Grégoire. His death leaves her all the more alone in her defense of the Lafirme traditions.

Through Joçint, Melicent, and Grégoire, Kate Chopin delineates the nature of the heroine's character and ideals to such a degree that we can accept her refusal to marry Hosmer as fully in accord with her previous actions. Although she speaks of that decision as a matter of
individual moral principle, it is quite clear that her traditions enter into play as well: "With the prejudices of her Catholic education coloring her sentiment, she instinctively shrank when the theme [of divorce] confronted her as one having even a remote reference to her own clean existence" (II, 764). This closing phrase brings to mind Thérèse's earlier fascination with the "clean symmetry" of the processed lumber, suggesting that for her, divorce in some way defiles the pattern and the order she has established in her way of life. Hosmer's divorce is for her a cowardly act because he left "practically without moral support" (II, 769) a weak woman who had relied on him for help. Her advice to Hosmer--that he return to his ex-wife Fanny and try to restore order to his life--is precisely what we might expect. Thérèse asks Hosmer to do what she herself did when her husband died; she asks him to recognize and to respond to the claims that a community makes upon its individual members.

Hosmer accepts Thérèse's proposal largely because of his great love for her and because he cannot convince himself that there is not an element of truth in her words. But he revolts inwardly, and the time he spends with his ex-wife before her death is one of complete misery for him. Hosmer has a complexity about him that reminds us of the characters in Chopin's later stories,
in particular of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. He leads throughout the novel what Edna thinks of as "the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (II, 893). Though he portrays himself as a thoroughly business-oriented person, he offers opinions on a variety of philosophical subjects, yet insists on such occasions that he is quoting a friend whom he calls Homeyer. Thérèse early in the novel tells him that Homeyer is "a mythical apology" for his own "short-comings" (II, 746), and we, too, soon suspect that, as Lewis Leary points out, Hosmer's friend is a kind of alter-ego. By means of Homeyer, Hosmer projects his "inward life" into an "outward existence" of its own.

It is through Hosmer's Homeyer that Kate Chopin introduces important opposing terms of her novel's central thematic dialogue. Even before Thérèse opens herself to Grégoire on her helplessness to prevent the troubles which she sees around her, Homeyer declares flatly that there are in this world "rights to existence: the existence of wrongs—sorrows—diseases—death" (II, 777). The idea echoes throughout the book. We might, in fact, argue that Thérèse's marriage to Hosmer at the end of the novel—and her confession that she has come to see herself

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16 Leary, "Other Novel," p. 66.
as "at fault in following what seemed the only right" (II, 872)—is her acceptance of Hosmer's attitude. We might argue that the novel charts a full scale struggle between Thérèse's attempts to preserve, for the sake of peace in her community, a code of conduct that governs human behavior, and Hosmer's determination that there must be no "submission of a human destiny to the exacting and ignorant rule of . . . moral conventionalities" (II, 777).

Yet it is not entirely accurate to state the matter in such terms, because while the ideas, the views of life in the book are in competition, Thérèse and Hosmer are not; they find themselves increasingly more attracted to each other as the novel progresses. They are able to marry at the end of the book not because either has abandoned his principles but because the obstacle that originally blocked their marriage—Hosmer's former wife—has been removed. We are, therefore, justified if we see Fanny's death in the raging river as Chopin's use of a deus ex machina to pull together the elements of her plot without coming to terms with the thematic conflict she has set in motion, and we have good reason to feel disappointment in the novel's climax and conclusion. The final chapters are the work's least successful elements.

The fact, however, that the author does not resolve the thematic dialogue which lies at the heart of the novel
is not, in itself, a weakness. "Truth," Chopin says in one of her essays, "rests upon a shifting basis and is apt to be kaleidoscopic" (II, 697). While she is concerned in At Fault, as in so much of her work, with exploring the implications of human community, she is concerned, as Lewis Leary reminds us, with human freedom as well, and the novel possesses a complexity similar to that which George Arms points to in The Awakening. In her late novel, Arms notes, Chopin "presents a series of events in which the truth is present, but with a philosophical pragmatism she is unwilling to extract a final truth." The situation, it seems to me, is much the same in At Fault. The novel is designed not to resolve the philosophical differences that exist between Thérèse and Hosmer but to define carefully the nature of those differences.

While the two-part structure of the plot balances Thérèse's successes in Part I against her failures in Part II, the process of definition, of exploration, continues evenly from the start to the finish. The early chapters


of the novel concentrate for the most part on establishing the basis for Thérèse's vision of life and on contrasting that vision with Hosmer's. The greater bulk of both Parts I and II, then, turns to the illumination and the development of the two visions, first through the presence of such characters as Grégoire, Melicent, and Joçint, and then through the use of those characters that we meet late in Part I when Hosmer travels to St. Louis to call on his former wife Fanny.

The St. Louis characters might strike us as less directly connected to Thérèse than are Grégoire, Melicent, or Joçint, but once we recognize that the main plot line would run about as well without the presence of the three Place-du-Bois characters as it would without the St. Louis characters, we can keep a better sense of perspective about the way in which Chopin is developing her book. The scenes in St. Louis clarify and intensify the earlier and the subsequent scenes at Place-du-Bois. The two locations and the two sets of minor characters complement each other.

They are connected by the presence of Hosmer. It is not, in fact, until he reaches St. Louis that Hosmer begins to come into focus as a clearly characterized individual. We notice, for example, that the cool demeanor which he presents to Thérèse is only one side, the outside of his life. We get a glimpse of the inside when,
a few hours after marrying Fanny for the second time, he throws himself desperately on the grass of Forest Park and dreams about suicide. His imagination runs wild:

There were constant trains of cars speeding somewhere overhead; he could hear them at near intervals clashing over the stone bridge. And there was not a train which passed that he did not long to be at the front of it to measure and let out its speed. What a mad flight he would have given it, to make men hold their breath with terror! How he would have driven it till its end was death and chaos!--so much the better (II, 785).

Chaos and destruction, Hosmer feels, are preferable alternatives to the new life he faces with Fanny.

It is in such a frame of mind that Hosmer approaches Lorenzo Worthington, who, along with his wife Belle and their friends Jack and Lou Dawson, form a little social circle which includes Fanny. Mr. Worthington is, for our purposes here, the most important of the St. Louis characters because he comments most directly on Thérèse's concerns, and he finds occasion for such comment through his replies to the aggressively set forth opinions of Hosmer. Social laws, Hosmer proclaims to the frail Mr. Worthington, an ardent reader of Ruskin, Schopenhauer, and Emerson, are "only arbitrary methods of expediency, which, when they outlive their usefulness to an advancing and exacting civilization, should be set aside." And religions, he says, are merely "mythological creations
invented to satisfy a species of sentimentality—a morbid craving in man for the unknown and undemonstrable" (II, 792-93).

But Mr. Worthington counters in language that we recognize is Hosmer's own. "Religious sentiment" has a "peremptory right to its existence," he insists. Homeyer—to whom Hosmer has, of course, attributed his opinions—is, therefore, an "Iconoclast, who would tear down and leave devastation behind him; building up nothing." And the timid little man adds a statement that, like Hosmer's "rights to existence" speech, reverberates throughout the book. Homeyer, he argues, "would deprive a clinging humanity of the supports about which she twines herself, and leave her helpless and sprawling upon the earth" (II, 792).

Such justification of religion and, by extension, traditions as necessary "supports" for human beings is precisely the approach that Thérèse uses earlier in the novel to persuade Hosmer that he should return to Fanny. "You left her . . . without moral support," she says (II, 768-69). And it is the same position that Hosmer himself, apparently influenced by Thérèse and Mr. Worthington, takes later in the book after he is back at the plantation with Fanny. When Thérèse asks him whether, in light of their love for each other, he should consider
leaving Place-du-Bois, Hosmer replies that because of the great sacrifice and the great efforts he is making, he needs some outside help in order to continue. "It seems to me," he says, "that I have the right to ask you not to take yourself out of my life; your moral support; your bodily atmosphere" (II, 817).

Mr. Worthington's influence on the thematic dialogue in the novel is felt again in the person of his daughter Lucilla on the occasion of the Worthingtons' visit to Place-du-Bois. Lucilla attends the Sacred Heart Convent and, like her father, takes the subject of religion and moral law most seriously—so seriously, in fact, that she functions as a caricature of her father and of Thérèse as well. Throughout her visit at the plantation, she performs an endless series of "acts" that will, she is convinced, reduce the number of years she must spend in purgatory. She would prefer to be back in the convent which does not change and which protects her from the evils she experiences in a secular society like Place-du-Bois—from people, for example, who play cribbage and vingt-et-un. Like Thérèse, Lucilla believes in avoiding temptation; her stay at the plantation, she feels, has "tainted her soul with a breath of sin which she would not feel wholly freed from, till she had cleansed her spirit in the waters of absolution" (II, 848).
Lucilla demonstrates the effects of carrying some of Thérèse's convictions to their logical conclusions. She establishes the heroine at a philosophical point somewhere between Hosmer's "rights to existence" and the Sacred Heart Convent. Alongside of Lucilla, Thérèse appears far less out of touch with the realities of human conduct than she seems, for example, in her attitude toward Joéint. At no time in the novel does Thérèse lose sight of her own participation in her community or of her basic identity with other human beings. Such is not the case with Lucilla: "I'm going to be a religious," she tells Thérèse's servant, Aunt Belindy. The religious "don't live in the world like others." Aunt Belindy is quick to bring her back to earth: "Look heah, chile, you t'inks I'se fool? Religion--no religion, whar you gwine live ef you don' live in de worl'? Gwine live up in de moon?" (II, 841).

Lucilla's scenes in the novel emphasize Thérèse's openness to the influences of the people and the situations about her, and in so doing prepare us for the heroine's reactions to the events of the climax of the plot: immediately after the completion of Lucilla's role in the book comes the news of Grégoire's death, followed by the violence of the river that destroys Fanny and makes a union of Thérèse and Hosmer possible. And the scenes
prepare us as well for one final development of the theme, an important development which is closely integrated with the climax itself.

Lucilla's love for the convent which, she says, "never changes" (II, 847) turns our attention to Thérèse's awareness of the constant presence of change, not only in the people of Place-du-Bois, but in the land itself, in the plantation's physical dimensions. The movements of the Cane River, she is well aware, alter the boundaries of the land. The river is a perpetual worry for her because when it swells each year it carries off large pieces of land, forcing her to move back the fences and re-route the roads. The motion of the river is noted at several places in the novel and it becomes a central concern in Part II as the approach of Spring causes the rising water to become ever more threatening. The focus of attention, however, is on the cabin of Marie Louise, Thérèse's old nurse and attendant. This structure sits close to the bank of the river and is in imminent danger of being washed away, yet Marie Louise will not hear of having the cabin moved back onto more solid ground, and her reasons are intricately bound up with Thérèse's attitude toward the way in which change might affect traditions, toward, more specifically, the possibility of changing the tenets of a traditional code of behavior.
Since the people of Place-du-Bois change and since the plantation itself is subject to change, Thérèse herself cannot be inflexible and at the same time retain control over her domain. Diversity, as we have seen, she has always been able to accept; people as different as Grégoire, Melicent, Hosmer, and the Negro servants all respect her and remain loyal to her. Yet alterations in the foundations of her traditions, changes that would require her to make revisions in what she sees as the basic structure of the past—these she cannot come to terms with. And neither can Marie Louise.

For that reason, it is significant that Thérèse turns to her old nurse at the particular moment she does. The heroine has just been shaken by the discovery that Fanny seems to be once again in love with Hosmer, and since she herself, aware now of how poor a wife Fanny is, loves Hosmer even more than before, she is overcome with the feeling that love is being driven out of her life through her insistence upon following a traditional code of conduct.19 Her old nurse is the person Thérèse must speak with at this moment, we realize, because like the

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19 Lewis Leary says about the theme of the novel: "In simplest form, it concerns people's ability to get along with others or with themselves and the handicaps or help contributed by traditional or social forms, and what these do, or can do, to love." "Introduction," p. vii.
heroine, Marie Louise fiercely adheres to a Creole, Catholic, and conservative way of life. If this woman might be made to see the necessity of change, Thérèse seems to reason, then, perhaps, she herself might be able to rethink some of her moral convictions.

Thérèse therefore insists that Marie Louise agree to have her cabin moved back from the threats of the river. But the nurse will have nothing to do with such an idea. She has always disliked the plantation hands--ces nèges Américains, as she calls them--because they are "a restless lot forever shifting about and changing quarters" (II, 807). She will not change her residence. It was, she reminds Thérèse, Jérôme himself who years ago had put the cabin where it is, assuring her that it was far enough out of danger. Furthermore, she argues, the Catholic priest was recently there, and he blessed the house with holy water and gave her medals to hang up. The integrity of her cabin is, for Marie Louise, quite clearly interwoven with the integrity of her convictions. She is incapable of imagining the necessity of changing either.

Like each of the other characters with whom Chopin surrounds Thérèse, Marie Louise does her part to help clarify the actions of the heroine and to help define, at the same time, the thematic development in the novel.
Thérèse recognizes the need for change. It is obvious to her that while the old traditions may at times prevent disorder, they may at other times—at least if applied with the scrupulousness which Marie Louise insists upon—inevitably invite chaos. And Chopin points up the parallel that exists between the heroine and the old nurse. What would have happened, Thérèse wonders, as she approaches Marie Louise's cabin, if she had married Hosmer? "Were Fanny, and her own prejudices, worth the sacrifice which she and Hosmer had made?" (II, 808). The larger implication is suggested by the imagery of the climax. If the forces of nature—the river in this instance—alter the land, must not the traditions, the way of life, the code of behavior which evolved from the land be altered too?

Chopin does not allow the question to be answered, and the major weakness of the novel stems, it seems to me, from that fact. Fanny visits Marie Louise in a desperate search for the alcohol she needs to sustain life, and, having found some, refuses to leave with Hosmer. The river washes away the cabin and, in the process, not only destroys Fanny and Marie Louise but solves Thérèse's moral dilemma as well, leaving us with a feeling of disappointment. Fanny's death strikes us as artificial,
contrived, and, as several critics have suggested, melodramatic.

We need, however, to pay close attention to the way in which the author presents even her melodramatic scenes because the presentation has a bearing on a significant aspect of the novel. Chopin had earlier turned to melodrama in her treatment of the death of Joqint and the subsequent death of his father. Joqint is killed when the fire he sets immediately turns into a holocaust, leaving him helpless and defenseless before the enraged Grégoire. We notice that Joqint unleashes a powerful force of nature which destroys him, and which, at the same time, touches off some other natural power that kills his father shortly afterward. It is a similar toying with a dynamic force that results in Marie Louise's death and in Fanny's as well. Both are swept away by the river—Marie Louise because she refuses to recognize the power of the water, Fanny because she cannot control the power of alcohol. Like Joqint and, it would seem, like old Morico, Marie Louise and Fanny are overwhelmed by forces that are much too potent for human beings to manage once they are set in motion.

It is precisely this kind of situation that Richard Chase refers to in his well-known discussion of melodrama and tragedy in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. "Melodrama," Chase says, "might be called tragedy in a vacuum. What generates significance in a tragedy is the resistance which a culture and the hero who is its type are able to offer to forces finally beyond human control." The "resistance" which the heroine of *At Fault* can muster is inadequate to be able to prevent the destruction that such forces bring to some people of Place-du-Bois. Thérèse early in the novel acts with a degree of confidence that might produce a tragic heroine, but by the time of the climax, she displays the same "passive, stoic, and private" resistance to events that Chase points out as commonly depicted in other American novels. In order to have tragedy, Chase says, "the resistance must be active; it must bring the contradictions of experience to rest, even if at the moment of defeat, in a newly confirmed awareness of man's power of universally significant moral action." But Thérèse is frustrated by a recently discovered awareness of the "contradictions of experience," and she has developed

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22 Chase, p. 41.
serious doubts about the "power of universally significant moral action."

What Thérèse is experiencing in this novel of 1889 is what Alfred Kazin argues is happening throughout the country "in those dark . . . years of the 1880's and 1890's when all America stood suddenly . . . between one society and another, one moral order and another, and the sense of impending change became almost oppressive in its vividness."23 Thérèse clings to her code of behavior because—and Mr. Worthington reinforces the notion—it provides "moral support" for the individuals in a community, but by the end of the novel, Thérèse confesses to Hosmer, "I feel as if there were no way to turn for the truth. Old supports appear to be giving way beneath me. They were so secure before" (II, 872).

The melodrama of At Fault is, we suspect, an expression of Kate Chopin's sensitivity to the changes in the morality of her society and to the nearly insolvable personal problems that such changes had brought about. Chase's comment that "melodrama is suitable to writers who do not have a firm sense of living in a culture"24 is significant here because Chopin is fully aware as she writes

23 Kazin, p. viii.
24 Chase, p. 41.
in St. Louis that the Place-du-Bois community which Thérèse seeks to preserve intact is in serious trouble.

Thérèse is, in Chase's terms, the heroic "type" of her culture, but how is this cultural representative to offer convincing resistance to external forces if the structure of the culture itself is in an obvious and necessary state of flux?

Chopin turns, then, to sensationalism and to an atmosphere of contrivance because she can find no morally acceptable way to resolve Thérèse's problems within the context of the situation itself. She devises powerful forces to make it possible for the heroine to work out some sort of accommodation between her moral code and the challenge to it she has experienced. She attempts through melodrama to restore to her novel some of the unity that she is not able to perceive in the events themselves.

That is why Hosmer near the end of the book jokes that perhaps his sister Melicent will one day marry his friend Homeyer. Hosmer's inner and outer existence have been unified by his marriage to Thérèse. He no longer needs to project his beliefs into someone else; he no longer needs an alter-ego. That is also why Thérèse speaks to her husband of finding happiness out of a "past of pain and sin and trouble" (II, 872). She is able now to fully acknowledge her own doubts and failures. Her
union with Hosmer has, apparently, shifted her farther away from her traditional background toward his "rights to existence" attitude. She has, after all, changed her name; she is no longer "the firm one." The closing pages of the novel seek to establish the kind of unity that would have been much more acceptable to us had it been a natural outgrowth of Thérèse's ability to adjust herself to a changing community and a changing morality.

Yet we need to remind ourselves that At Fault has been, in spite of its conclusion, successful in several important ways. It is focused clearly. Its central character and its central theme are developed through a well conceived and well carried out structure of contrasts which the author will use again in modified form in The Awakening. Most important, the novel creates a world, depicts a vision of life that is true to Chopin's convictions about what is important in human existence, what is worth pondering over, and these convictions come through to a late twentieth-century reader as essentially valid.

Even the ending is not without its moment of insight. Although the book closes on a note of peace with Thérèse and Hosmer quietly contemplating the happiness they have found in each other, Melicent writes from St. Louis about the near fatal shooting of a philanderer by Jack Dawson, Fanny's former neighbor. Along with the
various other outbursts of violence described in the novel—the burning of the sawmill, the death of Joçint and Morico, the murder of Grégoire, and the destruction of Fanny and Marie Louise—the incident points up how brittle are the devices that preserve order and harmony in a community and how profound are the effects of an individual's seemingly private actions upon other members of a social group.

At Fault is, to be sure, as Per Seyersted tells us, an apprentice novel. Its problems, like many another apprentice work, are an outgrowth of the author's inability to carry through on all that she set out to do. What we need to remember, however, is that Chopin set out to accomplish a great deal, and while the book is not, taken in its entirety, a success, it is a remarkably clear blueprint for the rest of Chopin's career. As we look back on it after reading the short stories and The Awakening, we recognize that the foundations for the author's future characters, settings, patterns of development, themes, along with the foundations for the vision of life which she expresses in her best work—all this is laid out in her first attempt at a lengthy work of fiction.
CHAPTER 3

PLANTATION STORIES

Kate Chopin would have agreed, I think, with a statement about the nature of humanism which was published a generation after her death by the now famous "Twelve Southerners" in the introduction to their agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*. "Humanism, properly speaking," the statement reads,

is not an abstract system, but a culture, the whole way in which we live, act, think, and feel. It is a kind of imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition. And, in the concrete, we believe that this, the genuine humanism, was rooted in the agrarian life of the older South and of other parts of the country that shared in such a tradition. It was not an abstract moral "check" derived from the classics— it was not soft material poured in from the top. It was deeply founded in the way of life itself—in its tables, chairs, portraits, festivals, laws, marriage customs.¹

Through her own distinctive form of an "imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition," Thérèse Lafirme of *At Fault* hopes to establish in both her community and in her private life a sense of harmony and of order. And through a similar

life style, through an existence which is in some way "rooted in the agrarian life of the older South," rooted in the kind of humanism which the former Fugitives speak of, characters in a large number--perhaps as many as half--of Kate Chopin's short stories and sketches\textsuperscript{2} seek to find moment and substance for themselves.

Characters in four of the stories are especially significant for us, partly because the works in which they appear rank among the very best of Chopin's fiction, and partly because the stories, composed at approximately two year intervals, span that part of the author's career during which she wrote the great bulk of her work. The narratives let us trace, therefore, not only the development of Chopin's community-related themes, but also the development of her craft through the all-important decade between the appearance of her first novel, \textit{At Fault}, and the completion of her major work, \textit{The Awakening}.

All four of the stories deal with life--the Twelve Southerners would say with "a culture, the whole way in

\textsuperscript{2} I am following here Per Seyersted's groupings in \textit{The Complete Works}. Seyersted divides Chopin's work into "Short Stories and Sketches," "Essays and Comments," "Poems," and "Novels." I am calling "sketches" those one- and two-page works like "A Reflection" or "Ripe Figs" which are not so fully developed as are even the shorter "short stories" like "Nég Créol" (six pages) or "The Storm" (five pages).

I have made no attempt in either this chapter or in Chapters 4 or 5 to discuss Chopin's short stories in
which we live, act, think, and feel"--as it exists on a Southern plantation. "A No-Account Creole" (1891), the earliest of the four, takes place for the most part within the physical boundaries of an estate. "Nég Créol" (1896), the last of the group, is set in the French Market of New Orleans, but it is obvious to us throughout that the story's subject matter as well as its theme is directly related to the plantation way of life. "Ma'ame Pélagie" (1892) and "Tante Cat'rinette" (1894) are played out in a kind of twilight zone, on land which was once a proud plantation, but is now divided into little parcels, on land which exists as an estate primarily in the imaginations of the characters who live there.

All four of the narratives, in addition, deal with fears--much more forcefully expressed now than they were in At Fault--about the social and economic changes sweeping through the American South since the end of the Civil War. While pressures which are driving people off plantations and farms toward villages, towns, and cities are responsible, the stories suggest, for an emotionally harmful severing of formerly close family ties and for the loss

the context of their inclusion in Bayou Folk (1894) or A Night in Acadie (1897), the two volumes of short stories which the author published. I would not, however, care to argue that there may not, in fact, be some significance to Chopin's treatment of community in her selection of and in her arrangement of stories for the two books.
of an individual's sense of a oneness with nature, other pressures which reward competition, aggressiveness, and specialization weaken the individual's feeling of duty and obligation to both his family and his community. The forces set in motion by what the former Fugitives in their 1930 manifesto would call "the curse of a strictly-business or industrial civilization" are almost always noticeable in these stories, and they are at times—as in "Nég Créol"—embodied in grotesque forms.

The principal character in each of the four stories is cut off from life as he once knew it on a plantation and is longing to recapture something of what he has lost. The young heroine of "A No-Account Creole" has lived on a relatively modest post-war estate, while the fifty-year-old Ma'ame Pélagie spent her youth in a huge, marble-columned, ante-bellum manor house. Yet both of them, as well as the former slaves, Tante Cat'rinette and Chicot, the hero of "Nég Créol," are trying desperately to turn away from the economic realities of the closing decades of the nineteenth century—the time period in which all four stories are set—and to recapture the traditions and the customs of their widely varied but in

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3 Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand, p. xv.
each instance emotionally fulfilling experiences with plantation life.

A plantation for all of these characters is an ideal community in which to live. It acts as a standard against which they measure other cultures. It offers them, we come to realize, not only a sense of stability and security but also an opportunity for spiritual contentment. And they are not alone in their feelings. We find in Chopin's stories a great many characters whose personalities have been distinctly shaped by life on pre- or post-war Louisiana plantations. These characters embody qualities which—like Thérèse Lafirme's traditions—are very important for us to understand because the author uses them as a foundation upon which to build her plots and her themes.

Chopin's plantation characters, black and white alike, have, we need to notice, an especially deep-rooted need for close personal relationships within an intimate kind of family life, within an intimate kind of communal life. They have, therefore, a keen sense of loyalty toward members of their family and toward others who live on the plantation. They show a great respect for what they call "good blood," which gives rise in them to a natural acceptance of racial and class distinctions. They love the land which they know so thoroughly, as well
as the plants and the animals that live on the land. And, being for the most part Louisiana Creoles, they have a strong commitment to the teachings and the rituals of Catholicism and to anything at all that is French.

Yet we are always aware that while the plantation system to which these characters owe their mode of existence is still very much alive, it has never recovered from the ravages of the Civil War. Many of the estates in the stories are on the verge of economic collapse. Many of the manor houses are decaying or are in ruins. We often sense the inevitable confusion and disorder left over from the Reconstruction Era, outgrowths of the personal and social readjustments required of both blacks and whites. And we sense, too, a feeling of overall decadence affecting nearly everyone and everything at hand.

There is, as a result, a recurring atmosphere of opposition in the four plantation stories 4 which Kate Chopin expresses, we find, in terms of a tension within an individual who clings to the traditions and the customs

4 George Arms discusses Chopin's use of "opposition and resolution" in The Awakening and in several short stories. The result, he feels, is a complexity which reflects the author's view of truth "as constantly re-forming itself and as so much a part of the context of what happens that it can never be final or for that matter absolutely stated," p. 222.
of that "agrarian life of the older South" but who is, at the same time, either bound to or strongly influenced by a community which is rapidly reshaping itself so as to survive in a "strictly-business or industrial civilization." Through that opposition, through that tension, Chopin presents in each of the four stories aspects of—and more significantly—refinements of the thematic questions which she poses in At Fault. How, the author asks, can a person recapture a sense of social identity if his land and his community are destroyed or are disintegrating? How can a person make moral choices, how can he arrive at a code of conduct for himself at a time when the traditional codes and traditional customs are increasingly less workable because of industrial and mechanistic forces which are transforming both the land and the way of life that once existed on the land?

The four stories reveal, in short, what we find, it seems to me, in much of Chopin's best work—a deep concern with the quality of human relationships in an emerging technological society, a deep concern with the importance of maintaining in such a society a sense of human community. And they show us as well the rapid development of Kate Chopin's power as an artist. The earliest of the four is also the longest and the least intense. Each successive narrative is more tightly
focused. Each relies for its development increasingly less on authorial statement and increasingly more on dialogue and imagery. If "A No-Account Creole" reminds us of At Fault in its somewhat loose and rambling nature, "Nég Créol" reminds us of The Awakening in the inevitability of its outcome and in the sheer power of its imagery. All four narratives are lively and satisfying, but "Tante Cat'rinette" and "Nég Créol" are exceptional.

The earliest of the four, and Kate Chopin's first good short story, is "A No-Account Creole," written, according to Per Seyersted, in 1888, but worked into its present form in January and February of 1891, nearly a year after At Fault was completed. It is a love story, focused on Euphrasie, the daughter of poverty-stricken Creoles. When the heroine is ten years old, her mother dies, so Euphrasie grows up as a member of a wealthy planter's family, and her experiences with this family are all-important for her: she comes away with a deep and lasting respect for the plantation way of life--for, we suspect, the intimacy and the warmth she has discovered during her years at the planter's estate. At age eighteen, Euphrasie agrees to marry Placide Santien, a young Creole whose brother Grégoire, we recall, plays an important role in At Fault and whose former plantation, lost to New Orleans creditors, is attended to by the heroine's aged
father. When Euphrasie joins her father on the old Santien place, she is outraged by the way in which the creditors have allowed the estate to disintegrate, and she besieges their office with letters until an employee of the firm, Wallace Offdean, arrives to look into conditions.

The story describes how Euphrasie comes to love Offdean, and we sense early in the narrative that it is not only the man she cares for, but also the opportunity he offers her to live the kind of life she has set her heart on. While Placide takes a posture of indifference toward his lost estate and would have the heroine spend her life in a small cottage he has prepared for her in a neighboring town, Offdean comes to know and finally to love the plantation as much as does Euphrasie. We find that the growing affection between these two people is a part of their common commitment to the land, to the manor house, and to the traditional plantation mode of existence. When Placide, at the end of the story, breaks the engagement after Offdean has appealed to the Creole's pride by telling him that the best way to express his love for Euphrasie is to take into consideration her happiness, the heroine is free to accept both Offdean and the plantation he promises to purchase.

We come to understand Euphrasie in "A No-Account Creole" through the author's inclusion of scenes that
take place outside the consciousness of the heroine. Using a technique similar to that with which she sets in perspective the moral dilemma of Thérèse Lafirme in *At Fault*, Chopin outlines Euphrasie's attempt to cling to the plantation way of life by exploring the attitude toward that culture taken by each of the two men who love her. Placide, the Creole Euphrasie agreed to marry because she found at the time he proposed no better alternative open to her, is a fallen aristocrat like his brother Grégoire of Chopin's earlier novel. He believes that having lost his land, he has in some way lost his culture as well. His family has scattered, destroying for him the intimacy he once knew. He feels, therefore, little loyalty or obligation to those who were once part of his family's estate, and he chides Euphrasie, the daughter of poor Creoles, for aspiring to live en grand seigneur. Yet he is undisciplined, lacking in purpose, and ill-equipped emotionally and intellectually to devise a replacement for the way of life he has left behind. So he wanders about, again like his brother in *At Fault*, until he turns to painting houses for people in the village of Orville where he decides to buy a cottage in which he can live with Euphrasie. He has, we gather, let himself drift with the industrial and the business pressures which were in 1890 impelling Southerners to acquire
a specialized trade and to settle in towns and cities rather than on plantations.

The fact that Placide is considered a "no-account" Creole by the people who know him suggests to us that the plantation dwellers recognize that he has failed them. While they did not expect that he would become a planter or a lawyer, neither did they expect that this man of many talents who has "the best blood in the country running in his veins" (I, 84) would abandon his community. Placide has by his attitude also failed Euphrasie and is, perhaps, aware of it; he is half-conscious that Euphrasie's interest in the run-down condition of his former plantation may eventually lead to her rejection of him and of his new way of life.

Wallace Offdean, like Placide, turns his back upon the culture in which he was raised, but unlike his Creole rival, Offdean is fully aware of what he is repudiating and why, as well as precisely how he hopes to enhance his future. The nephew and employee of a commission merchant, Offdean is resolved that he will "keep clear of the maelstroms of sordid work and senseless pleasure in which the average American business man may be said alternately to exist, and which reduce him, naturally, to a rather ragged

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5 Robert Arner finds the "irony" of the title "purely verbal and of no very great significance," p. 58.
condition of soul" (I, 81). In refusing to accept the fetters imposed upon an individual by the prevailing economic currents, Offdean sets himself upon a course which, we soon become aware, runs counter to that of Placide. The very first scene in the story shows us Off-dean seizing an opportunity to escape from the city to what he hopes will be a setting conducive to reflection about how he might arrange his life in such a manner that it would allow him to "use his faculties intelligently" (I, 81). Euphrasie, Offdean senses, embodies the love and companionship which, together with the work of restoring and operating the old plantation would make possible a life he desires, one that "imposing bodily activity, admits the intellectual repose in which thought unfolds" (I, 97). Offdean reminds us--and a similar parallel, we will find, occurs to us often in some of Chopin's nature stories--of a Thoreau setting out to "live deliberately," to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."

We understand, then, that for both Offdean and Placide, Euphrasie is the key to the future. Placide needs her in a way his brother needed Melicent: to furnish a reason for existence. Placide has no purpose in life aside from his love for Euphrasie. Offdean, however, needs her as a guide and companion if he is to avoid the "ragged condition of soul" that attends life in the business
world and if he is to achieve an "intellectual repose" by pursuing a way of life which she can help him to realize.

Chopin shows us the heroine's need only indirectly. We know very little about Euphrasie other than what we infer from the thoughts and the actions of the two men who love her. We do, however, notice that while she does not remember having met Offdean at the previous Mardi Gras—he made no impression at all upon her when they were together in New Orleans—she is attracted to him almost immediately when she talks with him at the plantation. We notice also that Euphrasie comes to love Offdean during the weeks that he spends wandering with her through the fields and the forests of the old estate, as they inspect the cabins and fences, mark the trees which are to be sold to the neighboring sawmill, and, in one scene, watch a rainstorm from the gallery of the decaying manor house.

In addition, our impression that Euphrasie has come to project some of her love of the plantation into the person of Offdean is reinforced by the author's skillful descriptions of the two potential homes in the heroine's future.

That "little shell of a house" (I, 84), on a village lot surrounded by a fence, in which Placide plans to live with Euphrasie after their marriage takes on some of the Creole's poverty of spirit, his emptiness of purpose,
and, most important, his loss of a sense of community, when it is compared with the once resplendent manor house. Set in the midst of a thousand acres, the old Santien mansion is surrounded with an atmosphere of repose and of a rich if decayed plenitude, qualities which obviously appeal to Euphrasie. Yet either house, the author seems to tell us, is a kind of "shell," an incomplete framework inside of which a person can build a life for himself. The difference between the two lies in the quality of life which can be achieved within the framework; it lies in the possibilities which are present for emotional growth—for growth, we assume, which on the plantation might prosper within a hopefully reconstructed plantation community. Euphrasie senses that the arrival of Offdean makes what she considers to be the much more rewarding life on a plantation possible for her after all, and "A No-Account Creole" is the story of how she comes to reach for that sort of life through the love that emerges between her and Wallace Offdean.  

Many of Kate Chopin's stories of 1891 and 1892 deal in one way or another with plantation life, giving

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6 It is nevertheless true, as Per Seyersted points out, that Euphrasie "makes no attempt to influence her fate" and that she would have married Placide if Offdean had not appeared to declare his love for her within hearing of the Creole. *Biography*, p. 103.
us an early glimpse into what we come to realize is a duality in the author's treatment of the subject that must reflect in part the actuality of conditions on Louisiana plantations at the time. "A Wizard from Gettysburg," for example, presents us with an estate which, much like the one in "A No-Account Creole," is in serious economic difficulty but on which people will continue to dedicate themselves to preserving qualities that have traditionally made plantation life so worthwhile. This strain is evident throughout Kate Chopin's career, emerging as late as 1900 in the short story "Charlie," written after the publication of The Awakening.

We find, however, in a sketch like "The Bénitou's Slave" a picture of a plantation which has lost its identity. The people who once lived there have scattered; only a milliner and a broken old Negro remain to give testimony that the now parceled estate ever existed. And in "Ma'ame Pélagie" of 1892, Chopin's second artistically strong short story about the plantation, the author shows us a heroine who has managed to preserve the physical integrity of her land, but who has forgotten all but one aspect of the plantation culture.

For Ma'ame Pélagie, the dream of recapturing the security she once knew in her manor house comes to overshadow almost every other consideration, human and
material, isolating her from other people and blinding her to the possibilities of creating again the planta-
tion community on which that security was based. The heroine lives in the hope that one day she may be able to rebuild the great brick house which Yankee soldiers had burned almost to the ground thirty years earlier. For three decades she occupies a little cabin alongside the remaining pillars and walls, living there with only Pauline, her younger sister, and saving all that she can toward the day when the mansion may be restored. "Ma'amé Pelagie" is the story of the events that persuade the heroine to abandon her dream for the sake of Pauline, whom she had rescued during the war from the burning mansion. When it is clear to the older woman that Pauline can no longer stand the impoverished and empty way of life that the two of them lead, the heroine apparently repeats to herself the words that had once convinced her to carry Pauline, then an infant, from the great house, rather than give in to despair over the destruction of the estate and let both of them perish in the fire: "Il ne faut pas faire mal à Pauline" (I, 237). Ma'amé Pélagie proceeds

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7 Arner (p. 107) notes that "the first three sentences [of the story] present the contrast between things as they are and things as they were in terms of architectural imagery, which quickly develops into the dominant pattern of imagery in the story."
to have the ruin removed, and she spends what she has accumulated during thirty years of saving to build a modest wooden home where Pauline might taste some of the joy of life.

The final pages of the story are, however, a revelation for us. As we watch the heroine, dressed in black and looking extremely old since the construction of the new house, turn away by herself from the gallery and lawns where her sister Pauline, her newly returned brother Léandre, and her niece La Petite entertain neighbors with bright music and conversation, we become secure in our impression that Ma'amé Pélagie is not interested in recapturing the rich intimacy of family life and that she has no vision, as does Wallace Offdean, of the plantation being a medium through which a person might come to know his own mind. Most important, we become convinced that the heroine has for thirty years seen the reconstructed old manor house not as a framework for a particular way of life, but as a setting for her own death.

Ma'amé Pélagie is already fifty years old when we first meet her, but she is willing to wait another twenty

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8 Merle Mae T. Jordan says that the heroine is unhappy because her "values are false and hence worthless to a new way of life." She has been brought up, Jordan argues, to expect wealth and a large mansion. "Kate Chopin: Social Critic," M.A. Thesis Univ. of Texas 1959, p. 71.
years if necessary to rebuild the house, and while she is prepared to compromise on some details such as marble pillars and crystal candelabra, she is insistent upon restoring to its original condition the room in which her lover had bid her goodbye before leaving to fight and to die in the Civil War. She was herself anxious to die when Union soldiers set fire to the great house; she meant to show them how one woman could uphold the honor of Louisiana. The heroine turned her attention toward little Pauline instead, but since the day of the fire she had looked forward to seeing once again the room in which she last sat with her lover: "Even the sofa would have been there in the same spot, and Ma'amé Pélagie had meant all along, for thirty years, all along, to lie there upon it some day when the time came to die" (I, 237). We understand that the restored manor house represents a kind of death wish for Ma'amé Pélagie.

The pervasive atmosphere of death surrounding the old woman is brought home to us by the actions of Pauline and even more noticeably, by the actions of La Petite, the young, vivacious niece of the two sisters who acts as a catalyst in the story by coming to live with the heroine and Pauline. La Petite quickly discovers that existence in the shadow of the old house is draining her of her youth. When she first arrives at the cabin, her skin is
"tinged like the pink crêpe myrtle," but after a few months, her color changes to that of the "white crêpe myrtle that grew in the ruin" (I, 233-34). La Petite decides that she must leave her aunts, because, she says, further life on such terms would be a sin against her own nature, a sin, we infer, against the joy of life, perhaps against life itself. Pauline is more direct. She will die, she tells Ma'ame Pélagie, if La Petite leaves. At age thirty-five, Pauline has been for the first time in her life awakened to the possibilities of existence by the spiritedness of this savior-like youth. To return now to her former empty and death-oriented way of life with Ma'ame Pélagie, she senses, would destroy her.

The heroine, however, wishes for destruction, and Kate Chopin deftly probes the origins of that desire through a powerfully dramatic scene which puts us both inside and outside the consciousness of the old woman. In the closing pages of the story, we find Ma'ame Pélagie sitting alone late at night among the ruins. She has come for one final visit before the walls and pillars are torn down to make room for the new house. We are audience to her thoughts as she relives several crucial moments of her young womanhood. Her initial memories are pleasant ones, but they spontaneously give way to scenes of disorder and violence as first newly- liberated Negroes and then Union
soldiers destroy the peace and security that the planta-
tion and its people had offered her throughout her life.
The shattering of crystal, the curses of an ex-slave, the
roar of fire haunt her, and we sense that her passion
since that time for the restoration of the great house is
largely a yearning for the feeling of security which she
remembers from before the war and which she associates
with a quiet death in the room where she last held her
lover.

There is a deep despair in Ma'ame Pélagie at being
forced to abandon her hopes, but the author skillfully
pulls us back from the heroine's consciousness, revealing
in addition a pathetic, even an abhorrent quality in the
actions of this almost tragic old woman. Ma'ame Pélagie
prostrates herself for hours upon the stone flagging of
the mansion and then, embracing and kissing each of the
remaining pillars, whispers goodbye to her beloved ruins.
But as she makes her way back to the little cabin, those
ruins brood upon her "like a huge monster" (I, 238),
suggesting that her memories and her actions grotesquely
distort the idea of what a plantation could be. Her
obsession with the feeling of security which she remembers
in her old mansion blinds her to a rebirth of the planta-
tion culture, the plantation community, on the gallery
and the lawns of her new house.
And yet it is essential for us to bear in mind that Ma'ame Pélagie is willing to give up her dreams so that her sister might have the opportunity to live a richer and more satisfying life. In the best tradition of plantation culture, the heroine acknowledges the needs of another person, displaying a feeling of responsibility which Kate Chopin is much concerned about and which is made the subject of several of her short stories. In "A Rude Awakening," for example, a genial but shiftless Acadian farmer is shocked into a recognition of his moral obligations when his little daughter is nearly killed trying to do his work. And Wash, the little Negro boy in "For Marse Chouchoute," is mauled by a railroad train as he throws into one of the cars the mail bag which the title character, sixteen-year-old Chouchoute, had forgotten about. Wash idolizes his older friend, and he is "deeply conscious of the great weight of responsibility" (I, 105)

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9 Arner says, "No character in the story articulates the proposition that the past is useful and necessary to provide a perspective on the present, that it may serve as a repository of values other than sentimentality and romanticism. That idea is, however, implicit in Madame Pelagie's choice of family over building, of home over house. The family in any given moment of time is both a product of the past and a fact of the present. It unites Madame Pelagie, though shakily, to the rest of humanity (in this case the neighbors with whom she is conversing) through continuity in time, just as surely as her idee fixee had isolated her," p. 110.
that Chouchoute has assumed as a delivery boy for the U. S. Mail.

Chopin apparently realizes that while a feeling of responsibility is important to the functioning of any family and any community, it is absolutely essential to the plantation system which, like the medieval feudalism it resembles, depends for its very existence upon the recognition of mutual obligations between the planter and his workers, upon a sense of what we might call comitatus. While the Civil War seriously damaged the concept, as we have seen in Ma'ame Pélagie's memories of disorder among the plantation Negroes, much of the old feeling survived both the war and the Reconstruction Era, and the author explores in her stories ways in which pre-war notions of responsibility and duty might operate in the changing economic conditions of the 1890s. "Tante Cat'rinette" (1894), one of Chopin's best narratives, shows us one such way.

"Tante Cat'rinette" is the story of the response made by the title character, an old Negro, to the discovery that Miss Kitty, the daughter of her former master, is not only sick, but is living on a meager piece of land with her husband and children in conditions of near poverty. The heroine acts swiftly and decisively. She will sell the house which she owns, lend the money that
results from the sale to Miss Kitty's husband, and join the family in the capacity of nurse and servant. The story reminds us of "Ma'ame Pélagie": here again an old woman gives up something she dearly cherishes--Tante Cat'rinette is just as attached to her house as is Ma'ame Pélagie to the memory of her great mansion--so that another person might have a chance at a better life. But "Tante Cat'rinette" is an even stronger story. Kate Chopin explores here with sensitivity the complex motivation that leads to the heroine's abrupt resolution to help Miss Kitty. She shows us social, economic, religious, and personal influences that are at play. And she communicates her insights to us through rich imagery and through a sure control of the movement of her narrative.

Everything in the story is directed toward the climax, toward the moment when Tante Cat'rinette is returning home at dawn from the visit she has made to see the ill Miss Kitty. She has just emerged from a wooded area, and as she nears a river, she stops suddenly, looks at the one remaining star left in the sky, and begins mumbling to that star, addressing it as "Vieumaite." We see no more of what happens, but we are sure that the heroine makes her great decision standing by the river bank gazing at the star.
It is an artfully conceived scene. Tante Cat'rinette has traveled at night to see Miss Kitty because she is terrified by the thought that something unbearable would happen to her house if anyone knew she had left it. The authorities of the little village where she lives have condemned the house, offering her a thousand dollars for it, and the children of the village have taken to standing outside her window, singing to her of what will happen if she refuses to move: "Tante Cat'rinette, she go to town;/ W'en she come back, her house pull' down" (I, 338). But the heroine is furious in her response to the authorities: she will repel, with an ax if necessary, anyone who tries to evict her. Vieumaite, her former master, gave her that house, she argues, along with her freedom, many years ago because she had nursed Miss Kitty back to health after the doctors said the girl would die. Nothing less than an immediate danger to Miss Kitty could have prompted the heroine to venture away from her home, even at night, and as she returns to the village at sunrise, she is in a state of vivid emotional tension over the condition of her dwelling place.

She is, however, excited for other reasons, too. Her trip through the dark forest to Miss Kitty earlier that evening has, we sense, aroused in Tante Cat'rinette a longing once again for a closeness to nature. She has
spent thirty or more years in the village, and as she passes through the pines of the forest, she talks aloud as if she were greeting old friends. She speaks to the moon, to the snakes, rabbits, and frogs of the wilderness, and to an especially noisy mockingbird, whom she threatens to put in a cage if he doesn't keep quiet. Her conversations with the creatures of nature express to us Tante Cat'rinette's need for a personal involvement with whoever or whatever is around her, a need which we find also in her religious beliefs. The heroine carries on imaginary conversations in a Creole patois with Vieumaite, her master, the person in heaven whom she feels she knows best. Her religion, like her contact with nature, functions on an intimately personal level; she has always talked over her problems with Vieumaite, and she consults with him now as she passes at dawn near the river bank.  

We suspect that there is yet another reason for the heroine's excitement, one that plays an important part in convincing her to help Miss Kitty and to go to live with her and her family. Tante Cat'rinette seems to

10 Arner (p. 144), although he praises "Tante Cat'rinette," does not seem to grasp this most important aspect of the story. "Vieumaite," he says, "is the appellation by which she [the heroine] knows the god she believes in, a curious cross between the Roman Catholic and the voodoo cult deity." It is, I think, quite clear, beginning with the third sentence of the story, precisely who Vieumaite is.
project the culture of her former existence into the figure of her old master in order to keep alive for herself something of the plantation way of life, since village life in 1890 is particularly frustrating for her. She takes seriously the children's warnings about her home being torn down because, we recognize, the authorities of the town represent for her a power that is inexplicable and anonymous, a force which she is unable to deal with on personal terms, hence something to be dreaded. And we sense that the village has isolated Tante Cat'rinette. She lives alone in her two story, four-room house, and as we watch her early in the narrative standing on her second floor gallery hanging out her wash, talking to a neighbor on the street below, and asking passers-by to do her shopping for her so she will not have to risk leaving home, the heroine appears to us as a prisoner of her village environment. She is cut off from any personal intimacy, not only with nature, but with people as well.

When, therefore, Tante Cat'rinette hurries home through the forest, worried about her house, worried about Miss Kitty, conscious of the animals about her, and thinking, no doubt, of Vieumaite, the sudden appearance of the dawn seems to startle her and at the same time to comfort her with its beauty and peacefulness:
Across the narrow, quivering line of water, the delicate budding branches of young trees were limned black against the gold, orange,—what word is there to tell the color of that morning sky! And steeped in the splendor of it hung one pale star; there was not another in the whole heaven.

Tante Cat'rinette stood with her eyes fixed intently upon that star, which held her like a hypnotic spell. She stammered breathlessly:

"Mo pé couté, Vieumaite. Cat'rinette pé couté" (I, 343).

Out of the setting emerges the heroine's decision. She wants now, we gather, to pass on to Vieumaite's family the goodness that he once passed on to her. While she feels no call to obey the edicts of the village authorities, she is deeply moved by the plight of Miss Kitty's family. Duty and obligation are for her personal, not legal matters, and she reacts to what she considers her responsibility with an offer of all that she has and all that she can do. But Tante Cat'rinette wants also to be part again of a family group, part of a plantation community, even if it is only a rather feeble replica of the family and of the plantation she once knew. For her, the trip through the forest is a journey back to a community where she can be at one with the people and the creatures that she loves.

In terms of the duality expressed in Kate Chopin's plantation stories, we would have to classify "Tante
Cat'rinette" with "A No-Account Creole," because both heroines somewhat optimistically set about to make a life for themselves that will preserve as much of the pre-war plantation culture as seems possible. Both strive to create a code of behavior that is deeply rooted in ante-bellum concepts of family life and closeness to nature, a code which seeks to make few social adjustments to the times and which accepts only those economic concessions that are unavoidable.

We can, however, also classify "Tante Cat'rinette" with several other stories that focus on an individual who moves from some sort of isolation to a broader participation in the affairs of a community. One of the best of such stories is "Beyond the Bayou," whose heroine, La Folle, reminds us of Ma'ame Pélagie. Each woman has experienced moments of horror during the Civil War which have shocked her and driven her to seek protection in isolation. The Negro La Folle retreats to a cabin nearly surrounded by a bayou beyond which she will not travel. She maintains contact, however, with several visitors, and when a small boy especially dear to her is hurt near her cabin, La Folle overcomes her terror of the outside world and crosses the bayou to seek help. "The Lilies" and "After the Winter" deal with men who are moved--the one by a child and the other by Easter flowers--to renew
their interest in people. "The Lilies" is light and playful in tone, for the hero is cut off more from his poorer neighbors than from humanity in general, but M'sieur Michel in "After the Winter" has lived alone in the forest since he returned from the Civil War to find that his wife had been unfaithful to him. All three stories suggest that the individual will be successful in rejoining a plantation-like culture, but the author's 1896 short story "Nég Créol" raises the possibility that such a community may not much longer endure.

"Nég Créol," certainly one of Kate Chopin's most powerful stories, presents us with a grim vision of the plantation community dissipating in a larger business-oriented society of Italians and Sicilians, of Jews, Choc-taws, and Irish. The crippled hero is, like Tante Cat'rinette, a Negro almost completely cut off from the intimate family life he once knew. Chicot spends most of his day in the French market section of New Orleans among the fishermen and merchants of many nations and cultures, scaling red-snappers and cleaning stalls, doing what he can to collect in his gunny-sack the soup bones, shrimps, and handkerchiefs that the merchants reward him with.

Arner finds this story "so absolutely convincing in the reality of its characters and the pathos of its situation that it is difficult to forget," p. 143.
Like Tante Cat'rinette he is isolated by his life. Chiccot lives in a tarred-paper chicken-coop out on Bayou St. John; he creeps there by himself each night, ashamed to let his acquaintances learn of his home. And he practices a religion that is as personal in conception as is Tante Cat'rinette's. He believes that he was created not by "Michié bon Dieu" but by "Michié St. Pierre et Michié St. Paul." His young master told him that years ago, and he has clung to the conviction ever since, even though an Irish priest once beat him for expounding upon his notions. Chicot apparently cares no more for the edicts of Irish priests than Tante Cat'rinette respects the pronouncements of village authorities. His loyalty is to the family of his former master, Jean Boisduré, and his religion is but one facet of that loyalty. He buys a grigri from Mimotte the Voudou because he knows the charm will greatly irritate "Michié bon Dieu" who has allowed a member of his master's family to come upon hard times.

There is, so far as we can tell, only this one Boisduré left; she is the seventy-five-year-old Mamzelle Aglaé, whom people call La Chouette because, like the screech owl, she houses herself under the roof of a decrepit apartment house. Chicot lives only to serve Mamzelle Aglaé. He brings her each evening on his way to the bayou whatever he has gathered in his sack during the
day, and the two share together for a few pathetic moments something of the lost family intimacy as they discuss the old woman's rheumatism, the terrible pains she endures, and the impossible rudeness of the other residents of the apartment house. They love to argue about religion. Chicot will have nothing to do with Mamzelle Aglaé's "Michié bon Dieu," even though she insists that he watch her kneel each night before a crucifix as she recites her prayers. The old woman has no patience with Chicot's creators; she tears the pictures of Peter and Paul from her prayerbook. Yet we are conscious that it is the respect and affection between these two broken remnants of the plantation system that sustains them both, and "Nég Créol" becomes for us, therefore, the story of how Chicot reacts to the death of Mamzelle Aglaé.

We are shown from the start of the narrative a truth about Chicot that prepares us for his reaction. The hero has been trying for years to persuade his widely varied associates at the French market—and we need to notice the all-pervasiveness in the story of the vivid market-place atmosphere—that his master is survived by an immense number of wealthy and proud Creoles who inhabit the great mansions of the city. He insists that many of the elegant women who arrive in carriages to shop at the market are des tites cousines to Jean Boisduré.
Famous men among the citizens of New Orleans, he claims, are grandchildren of his master. It is of critical importance to Chicot, who is, we note, called by different names, who wears the discarded clothing of many people, women as well as men, and who lives in such intimate daily contact with such a broad range of people with such an immense spectrum of backgrounds, that he do all that he can to preserve the glory and the honor of the Boisduré family name. We realize that it is only through the memories of his former position in the family that he is able to maintain any semblance of order, value, and meaning in his life. Only through the Boisduré name can he create for himself an identity.

It is clear to us that Chicot's reaction to the death of the last Boisduré is--like the role he assumes daily at the French market--a desperate attempt to hold on to that identity. He would gladly have died himself if his death would have helped Mamzelle Aglaé, but he would not tell his associates at the market that he ministers to her each night because he senses that such a confession would help no one, and it would destroy the beauty of the memory he has worked so hard to build up. He tried his best to steal a pair of shoes for the old woman while she was still alive, for new shoes might have helped restore some of the dignity she has lost during
her years of poverty, but he will not say a prayer for her after she has died, because he has no confidence in a God that has neglected her for so long. Once Mamzelle Aglaé is dead, there is "nothing for him to do" in her behalf (I, 510). He would debase the honor of what he insists is a large surviving family by attending her pauper's funeral, so he turns his back on her coffin as it passes through the French market and concentrates instead on scaling his red-snapper.

The story closes still focused on Chicot, but the funeral procession of the last few paragraphs has a great impact, suggesting to us the gradual death of the plantation community in the midst of a thriving pluralistic society. A feeling of despair hangs over the scene as the last member of the Boisduré family is rolled with apparently little notice through the streets of the vibrantly alive market, past the stalls run by Italians and Irish and Jews. The vitality, Chopin suggests, is gone from the once proud tradition. All that remains is the self-serving rhetoric of a nég créol.

Everyone ignores Chicot; the fact is reinforced for us by the funeral cortege, which includes two actors. They testify to Mamzelle Aglaé's brief career as a player of minor parts, but they emphasize as well the role assumed by Chicot. While he tries his best during the
day to convince people of the worth of the Boisduré family, his departure from the market each evening is "like a disappearance from the stage of some petty actor whom the audience does not follow in imagination beyond the wings, or think of till his return in another scene" (I, 506). Chicot is, as his name suggests, a mere insect among the spirited Gascon butchers who "bellowed like bulls" and among the "young Dagoes" who "squealed like rats" (I, 506). The message he preaches is a weak buzz amid the raucous dissonance of the French market. The hero remains, as the story ends, the only person to whom the old plantation system has any significance.

Other stories and sketches that Kate Chopin wrote late in her career portray, like "Nég Créol," a dissolution of the plantation culture in general and of that quality of an intimate family life in particular. The old woman, for example, who runs the plantation in "A Family Affair" cares little for anything other than the wealth she has managed to hold on to, partly by stealing her sister's inheritance. The narrative is done in a light vein, focusing on the way in which a shrewd young niece restores for her mother some of that lost bequest, but there is throughout the story an underlying sense of a plantation family whose bonds of intimacy and responsibility have almost totally fallen apart. The family
mentioned in "The White Eagle" has also quarreled over an estate, albeit a small one, and the heroine of the story, even as an old woman, clings to her one momento of the long-dispersed family, a statue in the shape of an eagle that has--the phrase appears in both the first and last sentence--"an expression which in a human being would pass for wisdom" (II, 673).

Throughout much of her fiction--throughout four of her best short stories especially--Kate Chopin expresses a deep respect for what she sees as the wisdom inherent in the plantation system of the American South during the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. It seems reasonable to assume that, as Per Seyersted says, she "apparently disapproved of slavery," and there is evidence that she was aware of the horrors that could occur on an estate because of the position of Negroes. Yet we find in her work a vision of the plantation culture as a way of life which, like the manor house Euphrasie loves so much, offers an individual security and the possibility for emotional and spiritual growth. Many sorts of people, blacks and whites--from the simple Chicot to the college-educated, introspective

12 Seyersted, Biography, p. 93.
13 Seyersted discusses Chopin's treatment of the Negro in his Biography, pp. 78-80 and 93-96.
Wallace Offdean; from the vivacious, fun-loving La Petite to the religious, hard-working Tante Cat'rinette—could be comfortable on a plantation.

All four stories make clear to us that the plantation system is important to Kate Chopin not as a colorful remnant of the past to be preserved in fiction so that posterity might know what life in the South once consisted of, not as a subject matter to be exploited for its local color or its regional peculiarities. It is of importance to her because she sees in it what the Twelve Southerners think they see in the customs of the older South itself—a kind of humanism, a kind of "imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition."

Life on a plantation, Chopin suggests, made it possible for a person to do what Edna Pontellier in The Awakening needs so desperately to do, to "recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (II, 893).

It is, then, extremely frustrating for the author to find the entire culture being destroyed by the forces of the Gilded Age. While she is fully aware of what is being lost through the social and economic changes taking place, she seems unable to envision a satisfactory alternative emerging from her contemporary Southern society. Her feelings find their finest embodiment in a little
four paragraph sketch called "A Reflection," written in 1899, a year after her completion of *The Awakening*:

Some people are born with a vital and responsive energy. It not only enables them to keep abreast of the times; it qualifies them to furnish in their own personality a good bit of the motive power to the mad pace. They are fortunate beings. They do not need to apprehend the significance of things. They do not grow weary nor miss step, nor do they fall out of rank and sink by the wayside to be left contemplating the moving procession.

Ah! that moving procession that has left me by the road-side! Its fantastic colors are more brilliant and beautiful than the sun on the undulating waters. What matter if souls and bodies are falling beneath the feet of the ever-pressing multitude! It moves with the majestic rhythm of the spheres. Its discordant clashes sweep upward in one harmonious tone that blends with the music of other worlds—to complete God's orchestra.

It is greater than the stars—that moving procession of human energy; greater than the palpitating earth and the things growing thereon. Oh! I could weep at being left by the wayside; left with the grass and the clouds and a few dumb animals. True, I feel at home in the society of these symbols of life's immutability. In the procession I should feel the crushing feet, the clashing discords, the ruthless hands and stifling breath. I could not hear the rhythm of the march.

*Salve*! ye dumb hearts. Let us be still and wait by the roadside (II, 622).\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Seyersted reads "A Reflection" as the author's hurt reaction to the critics who so viciously attacked *The Awakening*. Biography, pp. 180-81. Arms says that in the sketch Chopin "contemplates an easy reconciliation of opposites which in her most accomplished work she does not attempt, even though she attributes this to those 'with a vital and responsive energy,'" p. 227.
There is a fierce bitterness in the sketch. The American businessmen with the "ragged condition of soul" whom Wallace Offdean shuns in "A No-Account Creole," the anonymous and dreaded town authorities of "Tante Cat'ri-nette," the bellowing and squealing merchants of "Nég Créol" become now the "crushing feet" and "ruthless hands" of an "ever-pressing multitude." All these people manage to "keep abreast of the times," but Chopin pictures them as moving along without any understanding. They set aside their contact with the grass, clouds, and animals of nature. While they are alongside of one another, there is no sign that they are with one another; there is no sign that they constitute anything that we might call a community. They take no notice of people—like Grégoire and Joçint of At Fault and Placide and Chicot of the short stories—who are trampled by their movement.

Yet they are, Chopin recognizes, impelled by a force that is beyond her ability to describe, a force not only industrial and commercial, but obviously social as well, a force that is, moreover, universal, in some way a part of the "majestic rhythm of the spheres."

She is frustrated, even frightened by what is happening.
CHAPTER 4

NATURE STORIES: RELIGION

There is in Kate Chopin's 1892 sketch "Ripe Figs" no feeling of opposition such as we find in the plantation stories. This narrative centers not on an individual's dealings with his community, but on what Emerson believed to be the poet's principal subject: man's relationship with nature—with the visible objects in the world outside himself. Like the transcendentalists, like Emerson and Thoreau in particular, and like several of Hawthorne's characters, Maman-Nainaine, the heroine of "Ripe Figs," clearly has a sense of communion with external nature. She promises to allow her goddaughter Babette to visit some cousins on the Bayou-Lafourche, but only at that time of the year when the figs ripen on the trees. The heroine waits patiently while bright sunshine and summer rains do their work, and one day Babette excitedly presents her with a platter containing a dozen purple figs bordered with green leaves. So Maman-Nainaine sends Babette off for her visit to the relatives on Bayou-Lafourche, and she sends also a message inviting the
family to pay a return visit—when the chrysanthemums blossom.

"Ripe Figs" is one of perhaps twenty-five Kate Chopin short stories and sketches which explore some aspect of man as a member of the natural—rather than the social—order, and the narratives are of great importance for an understanding of Chopin's total fiction. Like some of the stories discussed earlier, a few of these, especially "Athénaisè," "A Vocation and a Voice," and "The Storm," are surely among the best of the author's work. But even several of the less successful narratives are worthy of our attention because they help clarify for us a major facet of Kate Chopin's vision of life, one that is equal in significance to and complementary to that aspect which emerges so clearly in the plantation stories through the author's themes of alienation, isolation, disintegration, and death.

While "Nég Créol," among other works, shows us man reaching out to his fellow man, these narratives emphasize man in communion with, or in search of communion with, external nature. As might be expected, the two subject matters at times overlap—"Tante Cat'rinette," one of the plantation stories, is a good example; "Athénaisè," the very best of the nature stories, is another. We would, in fact, be quite properly
disappointed if there were no overlapping, because sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists have been telling us for some time that an individual's attitude toward nature is acquired through his association with other members of his community. "Our relation to the natural environment," Robert S. Platt noted a quarter of a century ago, "is one of intricate and perpetual association historically, culturally, and biologically. In addition, our very conception of the natural environment is molded by our history and culture."^1 The works which I call here nature stories are, then, ultimately stories about community as well, yet we find that the author's concern in these works is quite different from that in the narratives discussed earlier. It is, therefore, fitting to treat the two groups of stories apart from each other. By paying close attention to the way in which Chopin develops each of her concerns through her shorter works during the decade after her publication of At Fault, we can better understand how she brings them together brilliantly in her 1898 novel, The Awakening.

A large proportion of Chopin's nature stories presents us with characters who search for a sense of union

with the physical universe in one of two ways. Those works discussed in this chapter—in particular "Lilacs" (1894) and "A Morning Walk" (1897)—deal with individuals who achieve a feeling of oneness with nature through religion, through participation in the ceremonies of traditional Catholicism or Protestantism. The stories discussed in the next chapter—"Athénaisse" (1895) and "The Storm" (1898) among others—focus on characters who reach a new closeness to their natural environment through a sexual experience. And "Two Portraits" (1895), treated in this chapter, along with "A Vocation and a Voice" (1896), treated in the next, are concerned with people who seek nature through both religion and sex. Kate Chopin takes up the two subjects frequently throughout her career. Yet while it is true, as Lewis Leary points out, that even the author's early novel, At Fault, has noticeable sexual overtones,² we find that sex does not emerge as a persistent principal theme in Chopin's work until about 1895, three years before the completion of The Awakening. Religion, however, which is so important in At Fault and in some of the early stories, receives much less emphasis in the narratives the author composed after the mid-nineties. There is in Chopin's writings a gradual

² Leary, "Other Novel," p. 72.
but clearly perceptible shift away from religion and toward sex as a medium through which an individual might find his place in the natural universe, and the nature stories require, because of such a shift, treatment in two separate chapters of this study.

We can better understand Chopin's handling of both religion and sex in her narratives if we first turn our attention to "Ripe Figs," as well as to "The Recovery" (1896) and "The Unexpected" (1895)--three short sketches that set into a broader perspective the author's attitude toward nature. "Ripe Figs" is especially worthy of our attention, I think, because it deals with an individual who has found something of that inner peace which other Kate Chopin characters are seeking. As far as we can tell, Maman-Nainaine is fully at one with her surroundings. Her actions almost inevitably remind us of the transcendentalists, and in a way this little sketch sets the tone for several ideas that recur often in the author's work. If we remember that Mr. Worthington in At Fault reads Emerson, and if we notice that Edna Pontellier in The Awakening reads him too, then we are not surprised to find that Chopin is involved in this 1892 sketch with a subject that comes up in Part I of Nature. "The greatest delight which the fields and the woods minister," Emerson writes, "is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and
the vegetable." That relation seems capable of eliminating in Maman-Nainaine of "Ripe Figs" any tension that might develop over changes taking place in her environment. We notice, in fact, that the heroine regulates human behavior by those changes, that she measures time and even space against forces that move through the natural world. When the figs become ripe, she tells Babette, she may begin her trip to the Bayou-Lafourche, where the sugar cane flourishes.

Yet we can attribute to Maman-Nainaine very little of the sophisticated intellectual speculation which we commonly associate with the writings of Emerson. It would be perhaps more apt to think of the heroine as living the kind of life Thoreau sought to recapture at Walden Pond, a life that manages, in the words of R. W. B. Lewis, to "expose the individual again to the currents flowing through nature."³ Maman-Nainaine ties her life to such currents, ⁴ and we recognize that they are vastly different in character from those which operate in Chopin's plantation stories. Social and economic forces create


⁴ Per Seyersted says that Kate Chopin was probably impressed by James Lane Allen's "description of a man living in close contact with the timeless, ever-renewing urges in nature." Biography, p. 89.
changes that are, as Kate Chopin pictures them, essentially progressive, tending to destroy old ways of life in their striving to produce a new order. The changes portrayed in "Ripe Figs" and the ones Thoreau traces through the seasons of the year in Walden, are essentially cyclical, endlessly renewing life while maintaining a permanent order with which a person can in some way identify. The unity that exists between Maman-Nainaine and her environment provides a striking contrast to the isolation of a Chicot or a Tante Cat'rinette.

But not all Chopin characters are able to achieve such a sense of communion. The thirty-five-year-old heroine of "The Recovery" (1896), for example, who has been blind since she was twenty, seeks to deny an important part of the process of change in nature. She is filled with wonder when, her sight restored to her, she first looks out her window at green meadows and a blue sky. Her furniture, her carpet, and her clock are comforting too, she feels; nothing has been altered during her period of blindness. When, however, she looks into a mirror and sees what fifteen years have done to her own appearance, she is stunned and confused. Her newly found vision, combining with a sense of smell and of sound sharpened by her years without sight, produces for her an intense awareness of the beauty in nature, but she is
heartbroken by the sudden realization that time—which she had never before thought of as a powerful force—has robbed her of her youth.

The heroine of "The Unexpected" (1895) has a similar attitude. She resolves that she will never marry her fiancé after she has seen him emaciated by a prolonged illness. She rushes all alone into the countryside and presses herself to the earth, feeling "her pulses beating in unison" with her environment (I, 460), but she accepts, apparently, only one aspect of the life about her, denying a role in the natural cycle to disease, decay, and death. Both stories suggest that Kate Chopin is not unaware that nature can be seen as completely indifferent to the affairs of man. She would not, it seems likely, take issue with a comment that Hawthorne once recorded in his notebook:

Nothing comes amiss to Nature—all is fish that comes to her net. If there be a living form of perfect beauty instinct with soul—why, it is all very well, and suits Nature well enough. But she would just as lief have that same beautiful, soul-illumined body, to make worm's meat of, and to manure the earth with.  

Yet nothing so biting as Hawthorne's statement finds its way into Kate Chopin's work. She is in her

attitude toward nature consistently closer to Thoreau than to Emerson or Hawthorne. Her characters are, for the most part, little concerned with metaphysical thought, and they feel themselves drawn toward a nature that is pictured as largely free from the ambiguity we have come to expect in Hawthorne. Like the heroine of "The Recovery" and like Thoreau during his walks in the woods, many of the characters display a heightened awareness of their surroundings, an intensity in their reactions to the natural world.

In spite of such an awareness, however, Chopin's characters often seek their place in that world through a medium that Thoreau would have been unlikely to accept. They often seek nature through traditional, formally organized religion. It is, of course, true that a large proportion of the individuals in the author's fiction are Louisiana farmers and plantation dwellers and that their faith is as natural a part of their lives as are the plants and the animals that surround them. The young couple in "Love on the Bon-Dieu" (1891), for example, carry on their courtship almost exclusively on their way to and from mass on Sunday morning. And the title character of "A Little Country Girl" (1899) comes to understand her relationship with the natural elements only after she has a serious talk with her local pastor. The
priest convinces her that a recent violent storm had not been brought about by her prayers that something would happen to spoil a nearby circus which she was not permitted to attend. Yet we need to notice that even educated or cultivated individuals in the stories rely upon the medium of religion to bring them in touch with nature. The narrative, "Lilacs," then—its heroine a Paris sophisticate—is important because it is the best example of the extent to which religion permeates many of the stories.

Adrienne Farival in "Lilacs" (1894) experiences peace and contentment in the smell of lilac blossoms, in the sound of the wind, and in the response of the earth to the pressure of her feet, but these sensations are meaningful for her only when she returns on her yearly visits to the convent she attended as a young girl. For Adrienne, the convent supplies a harmony with nature and with God that is missing from her daily routine.

In Paris, where she lives in luxury while supporting herself as a singer and dancer, the heroine accepts a series of lovers and surrounds herself with the "picturesque disorder" of scattered sheet music and clothing (I, 361). She obviously enjoys her existence. Apparently she used to dream of just such a life; at the convent she was once punished for being caught sitting in the top branches of a tall tree doing her best to catch
sight of Paris. Yet four years before the story begins, she is seized by the urge to return again to the nuns, and each year since then she escapes from Paris at the first odor of spring lilacs and seeks fulfillment among the poultry yards and cabbage patches of her former habitat.

It becomes clear to us that in Adrienne's mind, order and religion and nature are all one entity. During the two weeks a year which she spends with the sisters, the heroine uncharacteristically takes meticulous care of her clothes. She attends mass each morning and then wanders about the grounds, listening to the birds, the insects, and the rivulet. Because Adrienne finds no spiritual satisfaction in sex, she strives to keep the social, economic, and physical life that she leads in Paris entirely separate from her days at the convent where "her soul was wont to come and refresh itself" (I, 365). Adrienne tells no one in the city where she is off to each spring, and she naturally keeps the details of her existence in the outside world a secret from the nuns. When, in the last pages of the story, she is refused admittance for her fifth spring retreat—the sisters, it would seem, have learned of her private doings—

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6 George Arms argues that Adrienne is not permitted to return to the convent because "the Mother Superior
heroine is left crying like a child. Half of her life has been stripped away from her. Adrienne, the author suggests, can find no spiritual fulfillment in nature alone because she cannot divorce herself from man-made systems of order. Since she is unable to abandon her reverence for the Christianity she knew as a child, only the convent can provide her with that "haven of peace" (I, 365) where she is able to drink "deep draughts of complacency and content" (I, 364).

The story is similar to other Chopin narratives, especially to "At Chênière Caminada" (1893), whose hero, a rough, clumsy young fisherman named Tonie, falls deeply in love with a beautiful, socially-prominent summer visitor to the island where he lives. Because Tonie recognizes that he has no chance at all to win the love of this girl--she is always surrounded by suitors--he succumbs, when she leaves for the mainland at the close of the summer, to a continuing state of listlessness. One day, however, he learns that the girl he loves has died, and after some time he begins "to live again, to be once more a part of the moving world about him" (I, 317) because her death, he feels, places him on an equal footing with her other suitors. In heaven, the hero's pastor has told looks upon her action as a self-indulgence that also gives her a too special place in the convent life," p. 226.
him, "there is no difference between men. It is with the soul that we approach each other there," so his roughness and coarseness will not matter. In heaven, Tonie believes, the girl "will know who has loved her best" (I, 318), and as a result he can once more take his place in the island environment where he has spent his entire life.

As is true for Adrienne Farival of "Lilacs," and for the heroine of "A Little Country Girl," Tonie's understanding of his place in nature is tied directly to a Christian view of the universe that was impressed upon him in his youth. Yet it is a growing lack of confidence in such a view which is responsible, we become convinced, for the shift in Kate Chopin's work away from an emphasis upon the importance of organized religion. The Christian belief that is so integral a part of life for Adrienne Farival and for Tonie, for Mamzelle Aglaé of "Nég Créol," and for Thérèse Lafirme of At Fault is seldom noticeable in the best of Chopin's fiction after 1896. A few characters continue to cling to their faith and to attend church services but--like Edna Pontellier in The Awakening--they do so more from the need for a sense of community than from the desire for spiritual satisfaction, for a communion with God or nature. And it is, then, significant, I think, that for one character--the hero of Chopin's narrative, "A Morning Walk" (1897)--religion is
little more than a coincidental factor in his ultimate realization of his position in the natural universe.

Archibald of "A Morning Walk" is a middle-aged man who has never found any satisfaction for himself in organized religion and who is not likely to become a church-goer in the future, but who discovers an entirely new way of looking at his life as a result of wandering into an Easter service at a church in the little village where he lives. The hero assumes in the story the role of an aloof spectator rather than that of a person genuinely involved in the activities of life. He studies insects and dissects flowers, but he does not remember the name of a comely twenty-year-old village girl when he meets her on his Easter morning walk. He has always had difficulty learning the names of people, no doubt because he has little to do with them, and he yearns for some system through which various young females might, like flowers and insects, be easily classified so he can tell one from another. Archibald takes pleasure in shaping nature to his own ends. On his morning walks, he captures butterflies and grasshoppers, and with his stick he displaces pebbles, stones, weeds, and flowers. Even his village is described as if it were meant to be an extension of his actions, a deliberate imposition upon nature:
the houses rest upon a lofty shelf chiseled into the side of a mountain.

Yet Archibald is not satisfied with his understanding of exterior nature. He seems unable to reconcile what he knows about the small world of insects and of flowers with what he senses in the larger community and the larger world about him. It is significant that he studies books dealing with "peoples long since gathered to the earth and the elements" (II, 567), because it is himself Archibald is trying to come to grips with; it is his own place in the universe which troubles the hero.

"A Morning Walk" depicts the hour or so in Archibald's life when he achieves a sudden insight. He has apparently been building up to this hour for years, and he seems to sense that something is happening to him. As he moves along the road, he "now and again . . . straightened his shoulders and shook his head with an impatient movement, as might some proud animal which rebels against an unaccustomed burden" (II, 566). The odors of flowers combine with the sounds and colors of spring to disturb him. He is moved by the pretty village girl whose lilies he offers to carry to the church. When he sits down, not understanding why, among the congregation, the words of the minister, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," penetrate his being. Archibald does not turn to
Christianity; he is, in fact, looking out the window, ignoring the service in progress, but the minister's sentence seems to bring into focus a multitude of thoughts which occupy him. Chopin's description of the "vision of life" which Archibald perceives at that moment is important because it strikes a chord which suggests to us, as does the earlier "Ripe Figs," Part I of Emerson's Nature.

Archibald's vision, Chopin tells us, is "the poet's vision, of the life that is within and the life that is without, pulsing in unison, breathing the harmony of an undivided existence" (II, 569). Emerson had used similar phrasing to express a similar thought: "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other." Emerson, however, ties his remark to an additional idea. "To speak truly," he says three sentences earlier, "few adult persons can see nature." The lover of nature is, for him, not only the person who has "adjusted" his "inward and outward senses," but also he who "has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."

We recognize that through his vision, the adult Archibald has come to "see" nature as he once must have seen it as a child. He has managed to rediscover a unity

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7 The heroine of "The Unexpected," we recall, feels "her pulses beating in unison" with nature.
between himself and his environment. Thoreau, we recall, despises the kind of person Archibald is before his moment of insight, the person who observes nature and classifies its objects, but does nothing more; Thoreau urges on his readers a return to a childhood closeness to the woods. Archibald manages to arrive at such a state of closeness, and he does so with only minimal help from the medium of religion: the words of the minister on Easter Sunday serve to enlighten Archibald about his own relation to the world outside, but they do not, so far as we can tell, motivate him to seek a closer relation with any God. Like Thoreau, the hero fastens himself—once again using the words of R. W. B. Lewis—to the "currents flowing through nature, rather than to the grace flowing down from supernature." 8

Yet "A Morning Walk" reminds us more of "Ripe Figs" than of the majority of Chopin's nature stories, because while Archibald ignores religion, he ignores sex as well. It is important for us to remember, I think, not only that many of Chopin's heroes characteristically seek their place in the natural universe through one or the other of these media but also that the increasing emphasis on sex in the author's later work is directly

8 Lewis, p. 22.
related to a decreasing emphasis on religion. Chopin composed several stories that explore the relationship of the two subjects, and one of these stories, "Two Portraits" (1895), is especially worthy of our attention. It can help us understand something of the significance of the sexual motif in the author's best nature stories.

"Two Portraits" describes, in Per Seyersted's words, "the double attraction of the sensuous and the religious" by portraying the effect that environment has upon a person's life. The story consists of two parts, and each begins with exactly the same paragraph:

Alberta having looked not very long into life, had not looked very far. She put out her hands to touch things that pleased her and her lips to kiss them. Her eyes were deep brown wells that were drinking, drinking impressions and treasuring them in her soul. They were mysterious eyes and love looked out of them (I, 462).

Chopin creates two entirely different people from the apparently orphaned child pictured in the first paragraph. Both sections of the story trace—in a form that reminds us of the notebook of some sort of naturalistic experiment—an Alberta's growth from the time when she is taken into the care of a guardian to a point in her young womanhood when the course of her life is firmly established.

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9 Seyersted, Biography, p. 112.
The first half of the story, called "The Wanton," explores Alberta's existence with an obviously insecure woman who alternately loves her and beats her, who exposes her to artists and students and to women who praise her beauty. "The Nun," the second part of the narrative, shows us a young Alberta living in the household of a deeply religious woman who teaches her about the goodness of God and about the way to control physical desires in order to purify the soul. Placing the two sections alongside each other produces a story that, as the title implies, resembles a double, hinged portrait which depicts on the one side, an Alberta grown into a wanton, and, on the opposite side, another, yet the same, Alberta in the habit of a nun.

Each Alberta adopts a mode of conduct that promises to maintain for her a way of life with which she is comfortable. Alberta the wanton is accustomed from her years with her "mama" to having the affection of many people; she is used to the constant appearance and disappearance of students and artists, and she learns that love between human beings is a temporary matter subject to frequent changes. When, therefore, she reaches age seventeen and takes the first in a series of lovers, she finds little that is new in the relationship, little that alters her manner of life. Alberta the nun, by contrast,
knows from her earliest days only the affection of God, so her adult existence in the convent is also an extension of her life as a child: she remains true to the "Supreme Love" (I, 464) who is everlasting and who fills her with ecstasy.

We sense that both Albertas are seeking by their conduct to retain a sensuous closeness with the natural universe. For the wanton, sex provides a continuation of the intimate contact with the world outside herself which she had previously experienced in the beatings of her guardian, in the petting of the women who admired her beauty, and in the fondling and kissing of the student who used to hold her on his knee as he taught her to read and to spell. Her body, Alberta recognizes, "was made for love" (I, 463), and through that body she keeps in touch with the only natural universe that she knows. Should her charm fade and men no longer desire her, Alberta would, we infer, destroy herself as her "mama" did, but until then, her hands which touch and her lips which kiss elicit the affection and the intimacy that she requires.

The nun also retains her infant need to sensuously explore those things which please her. While it is true that Alberta is regarded as the most holy of all the sisters because she becomes lost in ecstasy contemplating the suffering Christ, and while the nun closes her senses
to the sounds and the sights of her environment, seeing instead visions of an eternity to come, we notice that Alberta achieved her first insight into a future existence when she "pressed her lips upon the bleeding wounds" of the God she loves. And we find in the last sentence of the story that the nun is said to have cured people "by the touch of her beautiful hands" (I, 465-66). Sex or religion, Chopin seems to say, is a way of maintaining a childlike and, at the same time, a sensuous closeness to the visible world. 10

The author takes up the contrast between sex and religion once again in her lengthy short story, "A Vocation and a Voice," to be discussed in the next chapter. That narrative is the better work, it seems to me, partly because its hero, unlike Alberta, leads an "undivided existence"—to use the phrase from "A Morning Walk"—which forces him to choose between the demands of religion and those of sex. Yet a sense of opposition between conflicting, perhaps contradictory, paths to a union with nature is inherent, if not expressed, in "Two Portraits" as well.

10 Robert Arner points out that "the nun's ecstatic vision" is "merely an elaboration of the single theme of sexuality," p. 191. Arner deals at some length throughout his dissertation with various aspects of Chopin's treatment of religion. "Next to the marital theme," he says, "the idea that religion is an inadequate guide to human happiness is perhaps the most important theme in her writing," p. 18.
and it is in these two stories that Kate Chopin comes closest to expressing to us the fullness of what she sees as elemental truths of human existence. It is in these stories that she carefully explores one of the oldest and one of the most profound of human dilemmas: the individual's urge to bring himself, on the one hand, in accord with what we now recognize as primordial forces moving in the universe--forces that actuate the natural cycle of birth, maturation, reproduction, decay, and death--and his inclination to seek, on the other hand, a oneness with a God who, the members of his community insist, is his Creator and who demands that he conduct himself in a manner that is often at odds with the direction in which those primordial forces are impelling him. There was, perhaps, a time when no conflict between the two drives existed in an individual, a time when a community's understanding of God was as primitive and as close to the earth as were the individual's physical urges. Kate Chopin may well have wondered about that: we recall that Mr. Worthington in At Fault is fond of speculating about the origins of religion. But such a time, for almost all civilized peoples, has long since passed away. So a writer in the nineteenth century is likely to be conscious of a pair of loyalties in himself: one that drives him toward a way of life which the community tells him his
Creator desires, and another that urges him to accept the often contradictory yearnings he senses inside himself. Thoreau describes the feeling in the "Higher Laws" section of *Walden*: "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one." But Thoreau goes on to add—setting his dual instincts into their proper place within his concept of spiritual progression—"and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good."

Kate Chopin has a similar respect for, on the one hand, some of the traditional values of her times, as they are expressed in customs, laws, and, most important, religious practices, and for, on the other hand, a variety of primitive drives, from self-preservation to protection of the young, but especially for sex. And sex, we find, emerges in the mid-nineties not only as a major subject matter of some narratives but also as a life-force even more powerful than the religious instinct.
CHAPTER 5

NATURE STORIES: SEX

An understanding of Kate Chopin's best work is inevitably and inextricably linked to an understanding of the author's treatment of sex. The three complex and artfully conceived stories discussed in this chapter are all concerned in some way with the subject. "A Vocation and a Voice" (1896), like the earlier narrative, "Lilacs," contrasts the power of sex with that of religion. "The Storm" (1898) makes the sexual drive a natural and harmonious part of the physical universe. And "Athénaise" (1895), which is, I think, Chopin's strongest short story, explores sex in the context of not only its physical, but also its emotional and spiritual aspects.

It is, then, important for us to recognize that Kate Chopin almost always treats sex in association with nature. We sense this truth throughout the author's work. The early narrative, "A Shameful Affair" (1891), for example, presents us with a wealthy young girl coming to a recognition of her physical desires. But the girl discovers her attraction to a member of her social set not by meeting him through conventional channels, but by
mistaking him for a fieldhand working at the farm where she insists upon spending her summer months. She confronts him, we notice, in the open country, along the banks of a little creek. And "The Storm" (1898), one of the author's late stories, parallels the rising sexual excitement of the two lovers with the increasing fury of a cyclone. The lovers, Chopin suggests with her imagery, reach a union with their environment through a union with each other.

Yet because Chopin persistently makes sex a principal theme in her narratives only after she has dealt rather thoroughly with the possibility of approaching nature through religion, the lengthy story, "A Vocation and a Voice" (1896), has an especially significant place among the author's works. It is, I think, her best treatment of the relationship between sex and religion, but it is in addition the expression, some two years after "Lilacs," of a new attitude toward the nature of that relationship.

The story is about a boy's initiation into life, about a nameless fifteen-year-old orphan who through a close contact with external nature and through his first sexual experience suddenly finds himself no longer uninvolved with his environment and with his fellow human beings. Religion is an important force in the story, but
it is presented here not as a medium through which the hero might reach a communion with his universe but as a haven where he can set himself off from other people by refusing to face up to what his faith tells him is evil. The structure of the narrative is built upon this concept of religion: twice the boy breaks loose from his faith, but both times he is drawn back again. When, however, at the end of the story he turns away a third time by jumping down from the wall of a monastery and running after the singing of Suzima, a young woman who also encouraged him to make the first two breaks, we are confident that he has fully accepted for better or for worse his participation in the affairs of nature and of man.

Through most of this carefully structured story, we are aware of an attitude of aloofness in the boy that is apparently a result of his earlier life in the slum section of a large Southern city where his only comfort lay in his friendship with a Catholic priest. He has during his years in the slums seen the worst of human nature, and he considers himself in some way immune to the problems of others: "He knew the ways of men and viewed them with tranquil indifference, as something external to which no impulse within him responded" (II, 530). He does feel a sense of communion with God, but only when God is separated from the people in a
community, only when, on visits to the parish church, he is able to kneel alone before the red tabernacle light. The entire narrative builds, through a series of incidents, toward that moment several years later when the hero will for the last time cut himself loose from such a concept of God and of his own essential aloofness.

The boy's first break, however, takes place early in the story as he comes upon Suzima and Gutro, "movers" who wander about the rural areas of the Southern states. He accepts an invitation to accompany them on their travels and quickly becomes ecstatic with the new closeness to nature that he finds along the road. He feels as if he has entered another universe, a "native element" which had earlier been denied to him. There are days, he finds, when "the earth, sky, wind and water, light and color and sun, and men's souls and their senses and the odor and breath of animals mingled and melted into the harmony of a joyful existence" (II, 526-27). That harmony, however, does not extend to his relationship with people, and religion continues to attract him. When the movers decide to settle down for a month, the boy quickly manages to find a village priest and to develop a friendship with him.

Shortly after he makes his second break—setting aside once again the influence of a gentle priest in
order to stay with the movers—the hero stumbles into a little clearing by a pool where Suzima had earlier gone to wash some clothes. He sees her sitting naked on the bank, bathing her feet in the water, and her image flashes into his brain and shakes him profoundly. Suzima, having watched the boy mature during the months of their travels together, is stirred too. She turns to him a few nights later, and the two become lovers.

Sex, we notice, shatters the boy's indifference and aloofness by bringing him his first intimate contact—either physical or emotional—with another human being. He feels a sudden new closeness to the living things around him; he discovers fresh insights into the nature of his universe; most important, he feels himself bound to Suzima, fascinated by her movements, bewildered by the power of her singing, solicitous of her well-being. The "comfortable sense of irresponsibility" (II, 521) which he displayed at the beginning of the story is gone.

But his feeling that he is different from other people has also vanished, and it is that fact which causes him to flee once more to his religion. When he comes upon Gutro soon after he has seen the naked Suzima by the pool, he utters for the first time in his life a volley of curses, remembering, we suspect, the nights when "the Beast," as Suzima calls him, crawled into a tent with the
girl while he slept alone in the vagabonds' wagon. And not long after the night he spends with Suzima, he is infuriated by Gutro's attempt to strike the girl with a halter. He seizes a knife, and only the swift actions of Suzima keep him from killing the stunned vagabond.

The boy is sickened by the recognition that he is capable of physical as well as verbal violence, that he has the ability to commit murder:

He had always supposed that he could live in the world a blameless life. . . . he could not recognize in himself a propensity toward evil. . . . An overwhelming confusion of thoughts, fears, intentions crowded upon him. He felt as if he had encountered some hideous being with whom he was not acquainted and who had said to him: "I am yourself." He shrank from trusting himself with this being alone. His soul turned toward the refuge of spiritual help (II, 542).

He refuses therefore to go any farther with the vagabonds, and, after what seems to be a period of several years, we see him living as a comfortable and accepted member of a monastic community located along the road where he once nearly killed Gutro.

The last pages of the story skillfully crystallize the situation that has been inherent in the entire narrative. We find the hero working on a stone wall which he is building around the monastery grounds--obviously to protect himself from that "hideous, evil spectre of himself lurking outside" (II, 543)--but alert to a sound
coming from the distance; he recognizes the singing of Suzima and finally sees the girl walking alone down the road, leading a horse and a small wagon. We have here a literal representation of what we have seen figuratively throughout the story: the hero poised atop a divider, forced to choose between two ways of life. His consciousness ties him to his faith, to the concept of leading a "blameless" existence within the confines of religious dogma. But his body reacts powerfully to this opportunity to establish once again a harmony with exterior nature. When he elects to join the girl, when he runs toward the road to meet her, giving no thought to fears about his potential for violence, we feel a confidence that this time his willingness to bring himself in contact with the forces moving in nature will compel him to accept that part of himself which his religion seeks to deny.

"A Vocation and a Voice" is, then, an important story partly because it takes as its subject primitive instincts similar to those which contemporaries of Kate

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1 Arner (pp. 180-87) treats this story with greater respect and at greater length than has anyone else. He identifies Suzima with "the principle of natural fertility and fecundity" and sees both her and the other characters as mythic personages, p. 185. He also finds sexual symbolism in dreams that the boy has while he is in the monastery. "The irony of Brother Ludovic's wall," he says, "is that it attempts to shut out and ignore something which is already within," pp. 184-85.
Chopin like Frank Norris and Jack London often make major themes in their works. Yet "A Vocation and a Voice" juxtaposes those instincts with an almost equally powerful religious drive and creates, it seems to me, a unique picture of an individual who can find a oneness with his universe only by first rejecting his childhood reliance upon the medium through which he was taught to find unity with the Creator of that universe. And in spite of its emphasis upon sex, the story reminds us again of the transcendentalists in general and of Thoreau in particular in its portrait of a youth propelled toward and initiated into life on a primitive level, life lived in communion with all aspects of exterior nature.

"Athénaise" is an even stronger story, and though it was written in 1895, a year before "A Vocation and a Voice," it takes for granted a good part of what the later narrative seeks to illustrate. "Athénaise" deals with sex and love and childbearing, with the intimacy of family life, and with the individual's place in the universe, but religion is not an issue in the story. Like "The Storm," Chopin's 1898 treatment of man and the primitive forces of his world, "Athénaise" is built on the assumption that a person can work out his role in nature free from the concern about a deity that is present in many of the author's short stories.
The heroine of this beautifully composed narrative is, as one perceptive character observes, "self-willed, impulsive, innocent, ignorant, unsatisfied, dissatisfied" (I, 446). Because Athénaise grew up very close to her family and very close to the earth, she knows almost nothing besides the life she has led along rigolet de Bon Dieu. So we notice that while she loves Cazeau, her husband of two months, she has by her marriage disturbed that childlike, delicately balanced relationship of harmony with people and with nature which constitutes her only reality. She returns to her parents when she can no longer abide life with her husband—the heroine has never been one to conceal her feelings; she has a passion for honesty—but after a few days, Cazeau brings her back to their home. She flees again, this time to New Orleans where she lives for a month in seclusion at a small boardinghouse and where she meets an intelligent newspaperman named Gouvernail to whom she pours out her heart, communicating to him a good part of her dilemma. The city, however, is no solution for Athénaise. It cuts her off even farther from the life she knew on rigolet de Bon Dieu. She finds herself increasingly miserable, both mentally and physically until, through a long talk with her landlady, she learns that she is pregnant. The heroine is first stunned, then ecstatic with the discovery,
and she rushes back to Cazeau, not because she responds to a sense of duty, and not only because, as Larzer Ziff points out, "her pregnancy has, biologically as well as mentally, converted her into a woman" who suddenly feels herself drawn to her husband, but also because the living presence inside her body is, we become convinced, emblematic for her of a physical and spiritual unity that she now recognizes with Cazeau and, by extension, with her new environment. Ziff is correct in noting that the story is about a girl's "attempts to discover her nature," but we can add that it is a story of self-understanding achieved through physical and spiritual oneness with the natural forces of life.

We notice that a major source of the heroine's dissatisfaction is her inability to accept an important part of her new role as a married woman. It is clear to us that Athénaise has an intense aversion to sex, to her husband's physical expression of his love for her. When the heroine's brother Montéclin, her most intimate confidant asks her to explain what she dislikes about Cazeau,

2 Ziff, p. 298.

3 Ziff, p. 299. Per Seyersted notes that the story has its focus on "woman's role in the life cycle." Biography, p. 132. He emphasizes, however, the "deep protest against woman's condition" which is inherent in the story. See Biography, pp. 112-15, 130-32.
she can think of nothing except the fact that he is around her so much, that his clothing is in her room, and that she cannot stand "his ugly bare feet--washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes, ugh!" (I, 431). Her comment is significant because Kate Chopin uses the image of bare feet at several places in her later works to generate an aura of sexuality. Suzima in "A Vocation and a Voice," for example, attracts the hero of the story to her by lying down in the moving wagon and letting her feet stick out over the edge so that the boy, who is walking behind the cart and who has recently seen her sitting naked washing those feet in a pool of water, becomes sexually aroused. And Mariequita, a Spanish girl in The Awakening, has sand and slime between her toes, a detail which, in Per Seyersted's words, emphasizes her characterization as a "girl of the people who knows the facts of life." Athénaïse apparently knew little of such facts when she married Cazeau; complaining about his bare feet seems to be the closest that she can come to telling her brother about what is bothering her. But we notice that in addition to her remarks to Montéclin, she accuses her mother of deception in allowing her to marry, and we

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4 Seyersted, Biography, p. 153. Arner, too, refers to "the vivid, implicitly sexual image" of Cazeau's washing his bare feet, p. 131.
therefore suspect that Cazeau is right in his judgment that Athénaïse is "cold and unwilling" in her "submission to his love and passionate transports" (I, 438).

Sex, this force of nature that she has never encountered before, upsets the heroine immensely. She would gladly enter the convent and take vows of poverty and chastity, but she knows from experience that she could not keep a vow of obedience. Montéclin once rescued her from a convent after she could not endure her life there any longer, no doubt because, like her marriage, it cut her off from her existence on rigolet de Bon Dieu. We recognize, however, that Athénaïse embraces a substitute for the convent when she agrees to her brother's suggestion that she hide out in the city. New Orleans has much the same value for her that the monastery has for the hero of "A Vocation and a Voice." It isolates her from contact with a primitive force of external nature with which she cannot reconcile herself. It shelters her from what she feels is a repulsive part of human life.

Yet shelter and isolation are not what Athénaïse needs. During the month that she spends in New Orleans, she rarely talks of anything other than her life on rigolet de Bon Dieu. When Gouvernail offers her a magazine to read, she is pleased not by its prose, but by a reproduction of a Remington cowboy who looks to her like
Montéclin. And she is delighted when Gouvernail—who is rapidly falling in love with her—takes her one afternoon to the lake: the sight of water and of children playing in the grass apparently reminds her of home. Unlike the hero of "A Vocation and a Voice," Athénaïse cannot exist, even for a short while, free from close involvement with nature and with people. She spends much of her time in New Orleans weeding the flowers in the courtyard of the boardinghouse, while at the same time she does her best to be interested in a cat, a mockingbird, and a parrot which inhabit the area. Most important, however, the heroine turns for comfort to Gouvernail, and his presence in the narrative is very valuable for our understanding of the heroine's advancement toward self-understanding which constitutes the core of the story.

Athénaïse becomes fond of the newspaperman because she is able to develop a relationship with him that greatly resembles the kind of involvement she has had throughout her life with members of her family. Gouvernail does not put her in a position, as does her husband Cazeau, in which she must work out an entirely new role for herself; he does not force her to come to grips with a physical intimacy that frightens her. The heroine cannot imagine Gouvernail "loving any one passionately,
rudely, offensively, as Cazeau loved her," and when, upon her asking, Gouvernail tells her that he has never been in love, she thinks it "an admirable trait in his character" (I, 449). It is clear not only that the newspaperman becomes in the mind of Athénaise a substitute for a brother, but also that he is conscious of his role: when she throws her arms around him one day and cries on his shoulder, he strokes her hair, trying to imagine what Montéclin would do.

Gouvernail is significant in the story because he helps us place Athénaise and her dilemma into some sort of perspective. The heroine ironically does not know that as Gouvernail holds her in his arms stroking her hair and comforting her, he is eager to take her as a lover. The newspaperman, for his part, is only partly conscious that it is precisely because she is convinced that he would never dream of such a thing that Athénaise is in his arms at all; he does not understand what, specifically, the heroine is troubled about. He does, however, grasp better than anyone else in the story some aspects of her character: it is he who, on first meeting Athénaise,

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5 George Arms is, I think, wrong in suggesting that Athénaise "perhaps falls in love" with Gouvernail (p. 224), and there is, it seems to me, very little evidence in the story to support Larzer Ziff's remark—one echoed by Arner (p. 130)—that the heroine "came near having an affair in New Orleans," p. 298.
concludes that she is "self-willed, impulsive, innocent, ignorant, unsatisfied, dissatisfied." And Gouvernail sheds additional light on the character of Athénaïse if we notice that he appears in an earlier story called "A Respectable Woman" (1894). In that narrative, the newspaperman spends two weeks on the plantation of an old friend, expressing twice in the four-page story his conviction that the days he passes in the country, away from his newspaper office, are those in which he finds himself really alive. He tells his friend's wife that he has, over the years, acquired "a philosophic acquiescence to the existing order" along with "a desire to be permitted to exist." So, he adds, he looks forward "now and then [to] a little whiff of genuine life, such as he was breathing now" (I, 335).

While we are probably safe in assuming that Chopin did not expect that readers of "Athénaïse" would have read also "A Respectable Woman"--the stories were published a year apart in different magazines--we notice, nevertheless, that Gouvernail has the same attitude toward life in both stories, and that he provides, therefore, an excellent contrast to the heroine. Athénaïse always has about her an atmosphere of "genuine life"--to use the phrase from the earlier narrative--that is missing from the newspaperman. As we come to know him, he reminds us
a little of the hero of "A Vocation and a Voice" and a
great deal of Archibald in "A Morning Walk." Gouvernail
is more an observer than a participant in life; it is, in
fact, his profession to observe people and to comment on
their doings. When we first see him in "Athénaise," he
has just been introduced to the heroine, but he takes
almost no interest in her, even though they are sitting
together at a small table in an otherwise empty dining
room. He hands her a section of his newspaper and absorbs
himself in studying an editorial that he had written.
Aside from his work, Gouvernail spends his time reading
and, on Sunday evenings, exchanging "advanced" opinions
with a group of friends. So we find that his contact
with Athénaise is for him not much different from his
contact with nature during the two weeks he spends in the
country in "A Respectable Woman."

Athénaise is intimately involved with the forces
of nature that Gouvernail, except for an occasional vaca-
tion, does his best to remain aloof from. The newspaper-
man, by the contrast he provides for Athénaise, makes
very clear to us just how deep that involvement is, how
absolutely dependent the heroine is upon her countryside
and upon the people who share her way of life. When,
therefore, Athénaise discovers that she is pregnant, we
are prepared for her almost immediate understanding of
her new role in the natural realm. Self-knowledge reaches her precisely the way that the author earlier in the story tells us it would, "by no intellectual research, by no subtle analyses or tracing the motives of actions to their source. It would come to her as the song to the bird, the perfume and color to the flower" (I, 433). Athénaïse, we find, understands herself when she understands her place in nature.

We have arrived here at the very heart of what is probably Chopin's best treatment of man's position in the physical universe. The heroine's recognition of life inside her sets vibrating a new feeling that blends harmoniously with all that she knows of human existence. She is "steeped in a wave of ecstasy," and when she thinks of Cazeau, "the first purely sensuous tremor of her life swept over her. She half whispered his name, and the sound of it brought red blotches into her cheeks" (I, 451). The next morning, when Gouvernail accompanies her to the railroad station where she will begin her trip back to her husband, she is as "embarrassed as Eve after losing her ignorance" (I, 453) not only because she apparently perceives now what sort of effect she must have been having on the newspaperman with her displays of intimacy, but also because she has, we realize, come to a full knowledge of the essence of her world in much the
same way Eve did: by unwittingly severing the childlike harmony that once existed between her and her environment. Like Eve, Athénaise breaks what appear to her to be arbitrarily-imposed regulations, rules that come to her from outside. The story strongly emphasizes this point: the heroine is pictured as always having felt herself free to ignore, to violate, and to publicly express her contempt for the laws of society. Edicts of parents and teachers, customs of the convent and of married couples mean little to her—she is in a way a faithful representative of her Greek namesake: a virginal woman of war--but she has, as far as we can tell, always obeyed natural forces, laws that come to her from within.

We realize that marriage has destroyed Athénaise's ability to follow her instincts. Because she finds her nature cold to sexual intimacy, she comes to view her marriage and her entire relationship with Cazeau as something imposed on her by some power outside herself. But pregnancy represents, literally as well as figuratively, an inside force, an inside law, a natural, a primitive power that, as Chopin presents it to us, makes sex equally natural and restores the heroine's harmony with her husband and with her environment. She resembles, therefore,

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6 Per Seyersted also links Athénaise with the Greek goddess Athena. *Biography*, p. 114.
in one additional sense the world's first woman: like Eve, she discovers anew the primordial forces that unite her to the earth; she perceives—in the words Chopin used in "A Morning Walk"—"the life that is within and the life that is without, pulsing in unison."

"Athénaise" is, by virtue of the intricacy of its characterization, the beauty of its imagery, and the nearly total fusion of its theme with its content, an exceptional work of art, and Kate Chopin did not create another short story taking up the theme we have dealt with that rivals it in power until 1898, when she composed "The Storm: A Sequel to 'The 'Cadian Ball'" while she was waiting for the public's reaction to her recently completed novel, The Awakening. "The Storm" is an appropriate place to end this discussion because while man's relation to nature continues to occupy Chopin at times in the remaining eleven short stories and sketches she completed before her death, she did not again achieve such an artistically well presented treatment of the theme.

Almost all of the characters in "The Storm" appear in "At the 'Cadian Ball," a nine-page story written in 1892, relatively early in the author's career. "Ripe Figs," the seven-paragraph sketch discussed at the beginning of the last chapter, was also composed in 1892 and the two narratives share a concern with man's attitude
toward what Chopin in the longer work calls "the face of the Universe" (I, 227). Yet while "Ripe Figs" presents us with an individual who seems entirely at one with the forces of external nature, "At the 'Cadian Ball" is focused on a hero who is frustrated in his attempts to reconcile himself to the world about him, and who, at the end of the story, commits himself to a way of life that is destined to keep him at odds with at least some of the forces of his universe. Alcée Laballière is a wealthy young planter with a passionate temperament resembling that of Cazeau, Athénais's husband. He comes home from his fields one day and pants "a volley of hot, blistering love-words" into the face of Clarisse, the beautiful but cold goddaughter of his mother (I, 220). Although she is apparently in love with Alcée, Clarisse rebuffs him with a "par exemple!" and the next day, when a sudden cyclone destroys his entire rice crop, the planter concludes that since both God and Clarisse have rejected him, he will turn for comfort to Calixta, a Spanish girl whose passion, he suspects, matches his own. Alcée knows he can find Calixta at the 'Cadian ball being held nearby, and he rides off in the night to look for her. But Clarisse sees him leave the manor house and, realizing what he must be planning, follows him to the ball, interrupts his love talk to Calixta, and, leading him outside, declares her
love for him. As the story ends, it is clear that the passionate Alcée will marry the cold Clarisse and that Calixta, whose temperament is indeed very much like Alcée's, will marry a 'Cadian farmer who loves her but who does not stir her emotions.

"The Storm," written in 1898, picks up the narrative about five years after the pair of marriages has taken place. Calixta is at home alone as a summer cyclone draws near; her husband and her four-year-old son have decided to wait out the storm at a store in the neighboring village. Alcée, on his way home—his wife and children are spending their first vacation away from the plantation—and worried that he may be caught by the approaching cyclone, stops to seek shelter with Calixta. The two have not been alone together since the night of the 'Cadian ball. They stand quietly for a few moments watching the downpour through a window, but an extremely close bolt of lightning startles the already very nervous Calixta, and she falls backward into Alcée's arms. For both of them, this unexpected closeness revives memories of their earlier passion for each other. While the storm rages outside, they go into the bedroom, undress, and make love with a joyful abandonment. In time, Alcée rides off and Calixta laughs aloud as she bids him goodbye. The final few paragraphs of the story describe first the
return of Calixta's husband to his cheerful wife and then Alcée's letter to Clarisse, telling her she should feel free to stay longer if she is enjoying her vacation. "So the storm passed," the story ends, "and every one was happy" (II, 596).

We can hardly fail to be struck by important differences between the two narratives. In both, the appearance of a cyclone drives Alcée toward Calixta, but in the earlier story the hero sees the storm as the work of God; it came, we are told, "swiftly, without a moment's warning in which to light a holy candle or set a piece of blessed palm burning" (I, 221). He is exasperated, apparently unable to understand the nature of this God who, on the one hand, expects him to maintain a sense of honor by controlling his passions, yet who, on the other hand, is free to lash out at him by destroying his entire season's crop in one giant outburst which makes his own temperament appear timid in comparison. In the later story, however, Alcée takes an entirely different attitude. When the bolt of lightning strikes near Calixta's cabin, he calmly tells her not to worry, because her home is much lower than many of the trees in the area and it will not, therefore, be hit. The cyclone is for him now not the action of an inexplicable God, but a predictable, comprehensible part of his natural world, and he feels at ease with it.
"At the 'Cadian Ball" emphasizes not only the religious but also the social forces that are at work on Alcée. When he seeks a kindred spirit after his encounter with the coldness of Clarisse and the heat of the cyclone, he finds himself immediately hemmed in by other people. He is interrupted three times during the several minutes he manages to spend alone with Calixta, and we are constantly reminded of the 'Cadians' disapproval of the Spanish girl's ways with men in general and with Alcée in particular. Both Alcée and Calixta are prevented from consummating their passion for each other by their community's religious beliefs, which both of them seem to share, and by the social customs which are at least partly the outgrowths of those beliefs.

In "The Storm," social and religious concerns are almost completely set aside. The focus is on inner drives, on natural forces. Alcée first and then Calixta with him accept the cyclone in the same spirit that they accept their attraction to each other. The wildness of the storm makes Calixta laugh as she clings to Alcée. Here, even more clearly, it seems to me, than in the subtle and intricate "Athénaise," we find the perfect illustration of what Chopin meant by "the life that is within and the life that is without, pulsing in unison, breathing the harmony of an undivided existence." As Per
Seyersted notes in his excellent and thoroughly documented analysis of the narrative, sex, the way Chopin treats it here, "is a force as strong, inevitable, and natural as the Louisiana storm which ignites it." The story stresses, Seyersted says, "the momentary joy of the amoral cosmic force," and it depicts the manner in which the two characters "become one with another and with elemental nature."  

Alcée and Calixta reach what appears to be a genuine state of harmony with the world outside themselves. They act with a childlike naturalness that reminds us—despite what might strike us at first as a vastly different situation—of Maman-Nainaine's reaction to her environment in "Ripe Figs." And we should not leave the two works without mentioning that both of them—and many of the other stories we have examined here—reveal a kinship with a narrative like Frank Norris's McTeague in the way that the characters respond, often with little understanding, to the pressures of cosmic forces. But we must note in addition that, unlike Norris, Kate Chopin does not present her characters as if they were victims of those forces. The strength of "The Storm," for example, grows out of the fact that

7 Seyersted, *Biography*, pp. 166-68.
both characters are fulfilled through their contact with the primitive in nature. They gain insight into their existence; they "swoon together at the very borderland of life's mystery" (II, 595); they "live deep," using the words that Thoreau employs in the second section of Walden in describing his intentions, and try to "suck out all the marrow of life."

There is one final and important point to be made. We must not mistake these narratives for products of a facile optimism or of an incomplete grasp of the realities of life. The words that end "The Storm," for example, "so the storm passed and every one was happy," are as Per Seyersted notes, "of course ambiguous," because Chopin "covers only one day and one storm and does not exclude the possibility of later misery." The author shows us only a single aspect of human existence in "The Storm," and she does not deny that other aspects are equally important. In fact, as we noted earlier, the entire series of stories dealing with man and nature embodies only one facet of the author's vision of life; the plantation stories, we recall, offer us a vastly different picture of reality.

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8 Seyersted, Biography, pp. 166-67.
Throughout her short stories and sketches, Kate Chopin isolates her themes and deals with them separately. So most of the narratives we have examined make up part of an extended dialogue taking place in the author's fiction. And we should remember, in this context, George Arms's remark that Chopin is consistently "unwilling to extract a final truth." She is, we find, close to Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Whitman in her acceptance of contradiction as a permanent element in life. She is comfortable exploring in different stories various conflicting views of what is significant in human existence. In one work she shows us an individual reaching out for companionship, and in another a person in search of a oneness with nature. At times, economic pressures motivate a character; at other times social or religious or natural forces are at work, and the lines that distinguish one force from another are not always clearly defined. We sense, for example, that sex as Chopin pictures it in "The Storm" approaches a point where it becomes not only a primitive drive but also a medium of spiritual experience.

Yet a single overall vision of life informs the works. If we can assume that Kate Chopin is searching in

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9 Arms, p. 222.
At Fault, her novel of 1889, for some way to express that vision, then certainly we can say that the author manages between 1891 and 1900 to create short stories that embody several aspects of it. And we can add that a few of those stories are beautifully written; a few of them are exceptional works of art.
CHAPTER 6

THE AWAKENING

Early in The Awakening is a scene which is emblematic of the heroine's emotional and spiritual failure throughout the novel. Edna Pontellier has, after trying the better part of the summer, suddenly found herself able to swim. She is overcome with elation at her accomplishment, and she is immediately showered with praise by the group of people at hand. With her is nearly everyone who is important to her during the last seven months of her life, the period of time depicted in the narrative. Her husband is there, as is Robert Lebrun, the man she comes to love, the man who, together with the atmosphere of the Louisiana coastal resort where the scene takes place, arouses in her a sensuality that has lain dormant before. Also on the beach is Adèle Ratignolle, the heroine's close confidante, and present in spirit though not in person is Mademoiselle Reisz, the pianist whose music a few moments earlier had lifted the twenty-eight-year-old Edna to the emotional pitch that gives her the confidence to take her first independent strokes in the water. Only Edna's two children and Alcée
Arobin are not there. The children are asleep, and the heroine has not yet met Arobin, with whom she discovers, in the long absence of Robert Lebrun, the possibilities of sexual fulfillment.

Edna swims for the first time in her life. She will not, however, stay with the others:

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.

Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance—that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.

A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land (II, 908-09).

Edna's conduct during the few moments she is in the water is representative, it seems to me, of a pattern of experience which the heroine repeats over and over again, a pattern which reveals to us the principal reason for her failure to achieve emotional and spiritual satisfaction in her life, a pattern, furthermore, which dramatizes one of Kate Chopin's major themes. Just as soon as Edna learns to swim, she breaks away from her
companions to be alone, to "lose herself" in the "unlimited," but she very quickly recognizes that through her actions she has created an obstruction, a kind of "barrier" that separates her from other people and cuts her off from any sense of security and adaptation. The entire novel, recent critics have argued, tells the story of such a breaking away on the part of the heroine, the story of Edna's efforts to fulfill herself by escaping from the restrictions and conventions that she finds in organized society. Yet we need to notice that at the same time, the book focuses on what we get a glimpse of as Edna looks back to the shore—the heroine's recognition of her separateness, her awareness of her solitude and isolation. *The Awakening* deals in large measure, I think, with this latter concern, with the heroine's desperate and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to make meaningful physical and emotional contact with other people. The novel shows us an Edna who is yearning to establish for herself some sense of togetherness, some feeling of community. It presents us with a heroine who is trying to forge from the tumult of conflicting needs raging within her a code of behavior that will let her find some place in the company of human beings.

The brief scene at the beach, we discover, foreshadows the end of the book. Edna will perish because
she cannot reconcile her desire for personal fulfillment with her yearning for communion with other people.\(^1\) She will once again swim far out into the ocean, naked this time, completely free from even the most elementary of social conventions, and she will allow herself to drown because she has been unable to create a feeling of harmony in her relationship with her community, because she sees no way by which she might achieve such a harmony in the future.

It is essential for us to bear in mind as we read The Awakening a basic truth about human beings which D. H. Lawrence describes so well in his Studies in Classic American Literature:

Men are free when they are in a living homeland, not when they are straying and breaking

\(^1\) Various critics have briefly referred to this theme. Linda Wolfe says that Edna has "confused the release of sexual impulses with the release of the ego. It is the failure to locate herself within her society, and to locate these two forces within herself, that causes her death." "The Work of Kate Chopin: A Critical Evaluation," M.A. Thesis New York Univ. 1959, p. 17. Per Seyersted argues that "Edna is defeated in the sense that she cannot meaningfully relate herself to the people around her and in some way integrate her demands with those of society. . . . Not attempting to come to terms with her selfish drives, she is unable to reach that harmony, that feeling of creative cooperation and companionship with the people around her at which Athénaise apparently arrives." Biography, p. 149. And Lewis Leary speaks of a Kate Chopin theme which "concerns people's ability to get along with others or with themselves and the handicaps or help contributed by traditional or social forms, and what these do, or can do, to love." "Introduction," p. vii.
away. Men are free when they are obeying some deep, inward voice of religious belief. Obeying from within. Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Edna Pontellier has no part in a "living, organic" community. She attains neither the freedom nor the fulfillment that she yearns for. The novel is, therefore, concerned not only with freedom, as critics have suggested, but with a failure to achieve freedom, more specifically with a woman's failure to achieve that sense of community out of which freedom and subsequently fulfillment might evolve. While this theme is, perhaps, less immediately perceptible than is the emancipation motif, it is deserving of our careful attention because it acts as a powerful undercurrent running throughout the novel, one that is always present just below the surface. It is, certainly, the heroine's yearning for freedom that leads her to an acute sensitivity to the rich possibilities of human life, but it is her isolation, her loneliness, her solitude that finally draws her to her death.

We will be alert to the nature of Edna's failure, to the blind spot in what Chopin calls the heroine's "spiritual vision" (II, 972), if we take note that the

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author originally titled her book *A Solitary Soul* and that she perhaps wanted to retain the phrase as a subtitle when she or her publisher—"it isn't clear which—decided to name the work *The Awakening*. The present caption is, to be sure, very helpful in coming to grips with the book. Most recent critical evaluations of the novel take their direction from this title, seeing the narrative primarily as the story of Edna Pontellier's awakening to sex, to the emotional needs of her own nature, and/or to the possibilities of independence from the restraints and conventions of a patriarchal society. Kenneth Eble, for example, concentrates his attention on Edna and sex, on the heroine's "struggle with the sensual appeal of physical ripeness." Larzer Ziff points out that this 1899 novel "on the very eve of the twentieth century" raises the question "of what woman was to do with the freedom she struggled toward." And Per Seyersted argues that Edna "wants to be an absolute and create her own destiny," that she "is sure she is right rather than society."

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3 Seyersted, *Biography*, p. 221.
4 Eble, p. 268.
5 Ziff, p. 304.
Yet the original title, *A Solitary Soul*, is equally helpful in bringing us to an understanding of the novel. It suggests something of the author's often expressed concern about the subtle and easily damaged relationship that exists between an individual and both his society and his environment. The title helps us conceive of Edna as a character in the tradition of a Tante Cat'rinette or a Chicot, an Adrienne Farival or an Athénaise, a character who has in some way become disconnected from the means through which he might find his place in the universe. And the title is important in another way as well. It reminds us of the emphasis Kate Chopin is giving throughout the novel to the motif of separateness. Edna swims far out into the sea, we notice, so that she might "gather in an impression of space and solitude." And the beautiful refrain which appears in the first of two editorial chapters and which is repeated in the closing pages of the book begins: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude" (II, 893).  

Edna Pontellier has apparently been wandering in "abysses of solitude" throughout her life. She is and

7 The refrain is altered slightly when it appears again on p. 999.
nearly always has been cut off from her social and, to some extent, even her physical environment. She is as isolated as is Tante Cat'rinette or Athénaïse, understanding, we notice, very little about her own physical nature and coming only gradually to any sense that her pulses are beating—to use a favorite Kate Chopin phrase—in harmony with the exterior world about her. Yet Edna does not, like Tante Cat'rinette or Athénaïse, like the nég créol or Adrienne Farival, long for a return to a dearly beloved homeland where she might recapture a unity of being that had prevailed in some distant past. She reminds us more of the hero of "A Vocation and a Voice": she knows very little about what a closeness to people or to nature might be like.

Edna is the product of a stern Presbyterian heritage, and it is this heritage which is most directly responsible for her failure. It is her heritage which prevents her from achieving the sense of community which she so desperately needs. Though, like many Kate Chopin characters, she grew up on a plantation, Edna has no fond memories of her early life. Her father, it would seem, drove her mother to an early death with his heavy-handed discipline. The heroine remembers no satisfaction in

8 While we have no reason to doubt this information, it is ironic that we should have it presented to
her relationship with her father, with her two sisters, or with her friends at school; they were all cold toward her, perhaps partly because, as Per Seyersted points out, she herself "never learned to show affection." What pleasures Edna recalls came to her through a series of fantasies in which she imagined herself in love first with a cavalry officer, then with a young man who visited at a neighboring plantation, and finally, when she was in her early twenties, with a famous tragedian. We suspect that she sought to find in her fantasies the fulfillment that she could not attain in her everyday contact with other people.

The heroine's background brings to mind for us a person like Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August*. While Edna is burdened with none of the racial doubts that plague Christmas, she is, like him, an isolato, and she is, more specifically, an isolato whose mature life is inextricably bound up with the earlier influence of a Calvinist, a puritan vision of existence, with a somber Presbyterian upbringing. Presbyterianism combines for Edna with the coldness of her family to prevent her from developing a clear social identity. She becomes, us as an insight of Léonce Pontellier, who is so incapable of insight into his wife's loneliness.

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again much as Joe Christmas becomes, confused and unstable, a socially dislocated person. Our concern here is not, we should note, with the specific nature of Edna's background. It is not necessary that we attempt to define the philosophical tenets of the heroine's variety of Presbyterianism. The novel deals only indirectly with Edna's youth. Rather our concern is that which Cleanth Brooks voices in regard to Joe Christmas and other characters in Light in August—the matter of "whether one's relation to one's heritage permits participation in life or isolates one from life—whether it connects past with present or is simply a private obsession."¹⁰ Edna's heritage quite clearly cuts her off from life, prevents her from participating, destroys the link between past and present:

The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded (II, 927).

What Edna feels she had held is the love of Robert Lebrun whom she has known, so far as we can tell, only a few months. Her distant past, however, is meaningless for

the heroine. Her childhood, the full range of her cultural as well as her personal heritage, everything that has made her what she is—this past is "nothing to her."

The extent of the impact that Edna's childhood has upon her is brought into sharp focus for us by the physical and social atmosphere of Grand Isle. The sensuousness of the ocean and of the entire landscape at and about this resort where the heroine is spending her twenty-eighth summer appeals to her strongly. It joins with the attentions of Robert Lebrun, who keeps Edna company while her husband works weekdays in New Orleans, to arouse in the heroine a new and intense sensitivity to her own physical nature and to create in her as well a new feeling of closeness to her environment. Even when Edna returns to New Orleans later in the book, she maintains this awakened sensibility, continuing to desire the affection of Robert, who has withdrawn to Mexico, and continuing to seek out contact with nature. There are days she finds when she "was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day" (II, 940).

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11 Both the situation and the language here are strongly reminiscent of "A Vocation and a Voice."
The social environment has an even stronger impact on the heroine. At the same time that Robert and the ocean are leading her to an understanding of her position and her role in the physical universe, the Creoles, in whose company she is spending the summer months, are showing her something of the possibilities of human companionship, human warmth, human community. Although she married a Creole—partly because he appeared on the scene while she was enraptured of the tragedian, partly because her father, from whose influence she was determined to break loose, violently objected to the marriage—Edna has never spent very much time exclusively in the company of these people. They are, therefore, a revelation for her, and it is, I think, absolutely essential for us to recognize just how great is the influence of their way of life upon her actions throughout the novel.

The Creoles have a geniality in their speech and, more important, what Larzer Ziff calls an "easy openness" in their manners which reflects, we come to understand, their sense of togetherness, their feeling that they all

12 Ziff, p. 297. Ziff is referring here to the Creoles in Chopin's short stories, but his statement applies as well to those in The Awakening. A few of the Awakening Creoles have, in fact, appeared in an earlier short story.
belong to "one large family" among whom exists "the most amicable relations" (II, 889). In spite of the fact that a few of them—Mademoiselle Reisz and Alcée Arobin in particular, and perhaps Edna's husband Léonce to some extent—do not comfortably fit with the rest, and in spite of the fact that they have, as have all families, disagreements and occasionally battles among themselves, these people display the kind of freedom of expression and of action that is an outgrowth of belonging to what D. H. Lawrence calls a "living, organic, believing community."

It is, we suspect, the Creoles' togetherness, their sense of community which so affects the heroine. While she is embarrassed by their frankness in discussing pregnancy, while she is not at ease with their inclination toward physical contact as a means of expressing even the most commonplace emotions, while she may misunderstand the constant coquetry of the women and the flattering remarks of the men—all of which are indications of the richness and the freedom in the Creoles' way of life—it is her growing familiarity with the close companionship of this people that impels her toward a greater awareness of her own essential isolation.

Yet a crucial passage in the novel makes quite clear that Edna has always been conscious of an alienation
from her society: "Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (II, 893). The sentences reveal a characteristic of Edna which critics have often discussed—her desire to break free from those social restrictions which force her to conform. But they tell us in addition something even more fundamental about the heroine, especially if we are conscious of a close similarity in phrasing between the comment here and a remark in one of Chopin's earlier short stories. Archibald in "A Morning Walk," we recall, sits in church on Easter Sunday and is for the first time conscious of "the poet's vision, of the life that is within and the life that is without, pulsing in unison, breathing the harmony of an undivided existence" (II, 569). Those last few words, "the harmony of an undivided existence," express precisely that quality that is so conspicuously absent from Edna's life.

Like Archibald, Edna attains in the course of her story an intensely heightened—we might say an Emersonian—sensitivity to her position in the physical universe, but unlike Archibald and unlike so many other Kate Chopin characters—Athénaïse and Tante Cat'rinette, for example—Edna tries in vain to apprehend her position in the
society of human beings. It is significant in this context that Archibald should come upon his "poet's vision" as he sits in church in the midst of his townsmen. When Edna attends a church service early in The Awakening, she finds the atmosphere "stifling" and she is overcome with "a feeling of oppression" (II, 916).

We notice, however, that Edna wants to attend that service. She, not her companion Robert, takes the initiative in joining the few summer visitors on Grand Isle who travel by boat each Sunday to the mass at the Chênière Caminada. It is the morning after she has suddenly learned to swim and she is "blindly following whatever impulse moved her" (II, 913). That her impulses are impelling her toward the company of other people is an indication of the powerful influence that the island atmosphere and the Creole character are having upon her. Slowly, this woman who has until now seen her "outward existence" as a matter of maintaining the required forms, as a completely separate entity from the "inward life" which she shares with no one else, is finding herself caught up in a process of discovery, one that is forcing her to become ever more alert to the loneliness inherent in that "small life" which she maintains "all within herself."
Her new awareness of sex, it seems, suggests to her that her adolescent fantasies might find a real-life embodiment in her relationship with Robert Lebrun. And what we suspect is her gradual sensitivity to the significance of the Creoles' way of life, to the fact that these people are free to openly share many of their intimate moments with others, that they are, therefore, free from the necessity of creating an inner world for themselves, and, most important, that they are free precisely because they feel so secure among the others in their "living, organic, believing" community--such a sensitivity reveals to her the possibility of a unified existence. The heroine comes to understand for the first time that she just might evolve for herself a life in which she could act that which she feels and could feel all that her nature allows, a life in which she might fuse her inward impulses with the primordial forces operating in external nature, a life in which she might achieve the "harmony of an undivided existence."

Yet long before Edna swims to her death we become convinced that her attempts at creating such a new life are doomed to failure. The heroine is in one sense a victim of circumstances and of misunderstanding. Robert Lebrun clearly loves her, but he will not risk the loss of everything which his culture has taught him is
important by expressing his love for her or by seeking to consummate that love. He is, to be sure, thinking of her welfare as well as his own when he leaves for Mexico. He wants to safeguard her position in the community. But he has no concept of what is happening to this woman. He has no way of knowing that it is primarily through her relationship with him that she is coming to understand something of what community might mean. His abrupt withdrawal from her company has an effect opposite from that which he had intended. It results in her embarking on a series of desperate actions which further intensify her lifelong alienation from other people.

In a different sense, however, Edna's efforts to break through to a new life fail less because she is a victim of misunderstanding than because she is a victim of her past. She cannot, even after her summer at Grand Isle and her contact with Robert, free herself from the influence of her father and of Presbyterianism. She remains, like Faulkner's Joe Christmas, unable to establish a rapport between her past and her present. So while she continues to tell herself that in refusing to serve the interests of her husband and children she is shaking off a life of "blind contentment" (II, 938) and reaching for "freedom and independence" (II, 963), it becomes quite clear to us that she is at the same time plunging herself
back into her former isolation. We notice, for example, that while Robert is in Mexico, Edna gradually comes to think of him in the same way as she once thought of the men in her adolescent fantasies. Robert becomes for her a symbol of an existence lived away from the rest of the world—away not only from social obligations and restrictions, but from meaningful social relationships of any kind.

More and more throughout the second half of the novel, Edna is looking backward, looking to her past for a sense of comfort, for a sense of relief from the frustration she feels because of her inability to attain those great expectations which Grand Isle and Robert Lebrun had awakened in her. She rejects her husband and along with him many of the social restrictions and conventions which he represents for her. But through almost the entire last six months of her life, Robert is available to her only in her imagination. So the heroine is forced to return to the one way of life she knows. Unable to find fulfillment in the present and regarding the future as a "mystery" which she will not attempt to penetrate, Edna looks backward and sets herself on the pathway to her death.

Both Edna's father, who visits the heroine for a few days in New Orleans, and Mademoiselle Reisz, the
pianist whom Edna met at Grand Isle, help us understand the heroine's actions in the second half of the novel. Mademoiselle lives by herself in an apartment that is located, much like Edna's atelier, at the very top of a building, set off as far as possible from other people. She is, we gather, always the most unpopular person in her neighborhood; only her art and those who appreciate it concern her. Edna, therefore, appears vibrant and full of the promise of life and love when we first see her alongside of Mademoiselle. But when the heroine later in the book tells herself that Arobin would not be a permanently important part of her life and that the time would come when even Robert "and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone" (II, 999), we realize that only a matter of time separates Edna from a way of life that will resemble in its loneliness and isolation the existence of the pianist. It is significant that the heroine turns toward Mademoiselle Reisz for companionship, rejecting in the process the intimacy that she had begun to develop with Adèle Ratignolle. Edna and her new friend are kindred spirits. Neither is capable of sustaining a close human relationship.

If Mademoiselle Reisz gives us a glimpse into what Edna's future may be like, the heroine's father shows us something of the emotional experiences Edna must have
known as a child. "The Colonel," as he likes to be
called, upbraids Edna for her "lack of filial kindness
and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly
consideration" (II, 954) because she will not attend her
sister's wedding. Yet he himself displays in full measure
a coldness, an absorption with himself which must for
many years have had a profound effect upon his daughter
and which must be to a great extent responsible for her
aloofness toward her sister. At the dinner table the
Colonel recounts an incident from the Civil War "in which
he had acted a conspicuous part and always formed a cen­
tral figure" (II, 953). And when Edna takes him up into
the atelier to do his portrait, he sits "rigid and un­
flinching" (II, 950) and with his foot chases away Edna's
children who have come to observe the scene. We cannot
help wondering how many times years earlier he had
chased the heroine away from him with a similar brandish­
ing of his foot.

It is not, then, an exaggeration to say that a
good part of Edna's awakening is not realized. While she
is, in a sense, physically fulfilled through her sexual
encounters with Alcée Arobin, she continues to yearn for
Robert. Sex--even completely satisfying sex--has resulted
in her feeling no closer to Arobin than she does to her
husband. Only in her imagination, it would seem, can she
achieve a oneness with other people which her emotional inheritance makes so impossible for her in her "outward existence."

There is, in addition, a good deal of irony, as George Arms points out, in the fact that Edna does "an inordinate amount of sleeping throughout the novel, in spite of her underlying vitality." Yet more, I think, than irony is involved here. It is, after all, the heroine's stay at Grand Isle which is directly responsible for the "underlying vitality" that Arms speaks of. We notice, for example, that Dr. Mandelet, a longtime friend of the Pontelliers, finds Edna "palpitant with the forces of life" on her return from Grand Isle, whereas he has formerly thought of her as "listless" (II, 952). But Edna cannot sustain in New Orleans the impetus she had received during the summer months. The emphasis throughout the book upon sleep as a counterpoint to the imagery of awakening underscores, I think, the importance of Edna's past as a counterforce to her present efforts to change her way of life.

Nowhere, however, is the heroine's failure to break loose from the shallowness, the coldness, the isolation of her past more clearly or more dramatically

13 Arms, p. 219.
presented than in the scene which describes the party that she gives to celebrate her moving out of her husband's house. Edna is by this point simply pathetic, trying desperately one final time to reach out to other people. The very fact that she chooses to celebrate with a formal dinner her newly achieved freedom from her husband and from what she sees as social restrictions in general is in itself a revelation. She plainly wants and needs to be a part of some sort of society, and if she cannot accept the company of her husband and his business acquaintances, then she is determined to create a society of her own.

Yet it is important for us to notice that the people who attend Edna's party, the people she apparently feels will constitute a group within which she can take her part, are almost entirely people like herself. They are lonely people, isolated people, people who have only a very limited capacity for friendship or warmth. Many of them are, in fact, people whom Edna barely knows. She has, for instance, only a slight acquaintance with Miss Mayblunt and no acquaintance at all, from what we can tell, with that lady's escort for the evening--the newspaperman named Gouvernail who has appeared in "A Respectable Woman" and "Athénaise." She seems, in addition, only superficially acquainted with Mr. and Mrs.
Merriman and with Mrs. Highcamp, all three of whom strike us as chic but empty members of the smart set. Alcée Arobin and Victor Lebrun are, of course, familiar to the heroine, but both have devoted themselves primarily to the conquest of attractive, preferably married, women. Mademoiselle Reisz has already been drawn for us as an isolated and lonely soul. Only Adèle's husband, Monsieur Ratignolle--Adèle herself was invited but did not come--shows at least the potential for warmth.

The roster of party guests makes clear that Edna is firmly locked into a pattern of experience which we gradually come to recognize has characterized that entire part of her life which we know anything about. In spite of her great need for affection and companionship, the heroine consistently chooses to align herself with people who are unable to help her fulfill that need. She terminates, we have noted, the intimacy that was starting to develop between her and Adèle, and she makes a confidante instead of Mademoiselle Reisz. While it is true, in Per Seyersted's words, that Adèle is "a striking illustration of the patriarchal ideal of the submissive female who writes her history only through her family,"¹⁴ it is also true that she is both perceptive and outgoing. She

¹⁴ Seyersted, Biography, p. 140.
recognizes the heroine's loneliness and she reaches toward her with what we have no reason to doubt is a genuine gesture of concern and friendship. Yet Edna turns to the pianist instead. We notice also that while the heroine yearns for the love of Robert Lebrun who, like Adèle, has offered her a newly intense kind of intimacy, she enters upon a purely sexual liaison with Alcée Arobin at a time when she is fully aware that Robert is on his way back from Mexico and will soon be with her. Both Arobin and Mademoiselle Reisz are concerned primarily with cultivating their own tastes, and Edna is conscious that she feels little affection for either.

The heroine's choice of party guests is consistent also with her earlier selection of Léonce Pontellier as husband. Edna has for Léonce "no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth" even though she is "fond" of him (II, 898). The party scene demonstrates that the heroine's marriage to Léonce was not an isolated example of poor judgment. Edna's reaction to the events of the party is, we suspect, emblematic of the way that she feels at the moment about most of the important people in her life--not only about her husband, but in varying degrees about Adèle, Mademoiselle Reisz, and Alcée Arobin. But it is emblematic of other things too:
As she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed. There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable (II, 972).

The scene is striking—Edna alone in a room full of people, once again alienated, once again looking for something "unattainable." Even though a "feeling of good fellowship passed around the circle like a mystic cord, holding and binding these people together with jest and laughter" (II, 972), Edna cannot share in the experience. She tells Arobin after the other guests are gone, "I feel as if I had been wound up to a certain pitch--too tight--and something inside of me had snapped" (II, 976). It is, we sense, her existence which has snapped. Edna is half-conscious at this point that a new life is not, in fact, a possibility for her. The dinner was to have been "the grand event, the coup d'état" (II, 969), but she finds that nothing has changed; the "old ennui" is still with her, the old yearning for what she cannot have is as strong as it had been in her youth. While her physical being, under the influence of Grand Isle, Robert Lebrun, and the sexual advances of Arobin, continues to
be acutely alive—she responds when Victor kisses her hand and again when Arobin caresses her—something else inside her is dying. She is aware of "a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed."

An atmosphere of death hangs over the party, and we discover that Edna is not alone in being sensitive to it. Gouvenail, the newspaper editor who in two earlier short stories has played the role of the sophisticated observer, helps illuminate a significant implication of the aura of death which is so noticeable here. In "A Respectable Woman," the editor had recited in the presence of his friend's wife a seemingly innocent passage from Whitman's "Song of Myself": "'Night of south winds--night of the large few stars!/Still nodding night--'" (I, 335). But Lewis Leary is, I think, correct in pointing out that we need to call to mind those lines of the poem which immediately precede and follow the ones quoted: "Press close bare-bosom'd night . . . mad naked summer night." Doing that helps us recognize that this ever-alert newspaperman is sensitive to the sexual longings which are at the moment shaking his passionate but "respectable" companion.

In the party scene of The Awakening, Gouvernail quotes Swinburne. Watching Mrs. Highcamp, who has a predilection for younger men, weave roses into the hair of Victor Lebrun, the editor mutters to himself, "'There was a graven image of Desire/Painted with red blood on a ground of gold'" (II, 973). The passage constitutes the beginning of Swinburne's sonnet, "A Cameo," from his early volume, Poems and Ballads:

There was a graven image of Desire
Painted with red blood on a ground of gold
Passing between the young men and the old,
And by him Pain, whose body shone like fire,
And Pleasure with gaunt hands that grasped their hire.
Of his left wrist, with fingers clenched and cold,
The insatiable Satiety kept hold,
Walking with feet unshod that pashed the mire.
The senses and the sorrows and the sins,
And the strange loves that suck the breasts of Hate
Till lips and teeth bite in their sharp indenture,
Followed like beasts with flap of wings and fins.
Death stood aloof behind a gaping grate,
Upon whose lock was written Peradventure.  

The full text of the poem indicates that once again Gouvernail is awake, as he had been in "A Respectable Woman" and "Athénais," to the essence of what is happening around him. Swinburne's poem is concerned not so much with the presence of Desire, the kind of desire that Mrs.

Highcamp displays for Victor Lebrun, as it is with the aloof figure of Death who watches over all the activities taking place. The sonnet is, in fact, part of a series of poems in the volume which explore various aspects of man's attitude toward death. "Faustine," for example, which appears in Poems and Ballads immediately before the poem from which Gouvernail quotes, bears the aphorism, "Ave, Faustina Imperatrix, morituri te salutant." And the little verse which appears immediately after "A Cameo" is called "Song before Death." Edna's party, Gouvernail seems to sense, is reminiscent of the action in Swinburne's sonnet. Behind the sometimes wild activities of the guests is the brooding presence of death. It is not inaccurate, in this context, to think of the party as the heroine's "Song before Death," her last effort at articulating her need for the company of others.

The remainder of the novel confirms all that the party suggests. Robert returns from Mexico, but he rejects Edna's offer to consummate their love for each other. Even had he accepted, however, the heroine is aware that "the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone" (II, 999). Edna rushes to be present as Adèle gives birth to the child she has been carrying throughout the seven months of the narrative, but the moments
she spends with her Grand Isle friend are painful for her. Edna drifts farther and farther off by herself. Alfred Kazin says that Joe Christmas is "the most solitary character in American fiction," but the closing pages of The Awakening depict a state of loneliness the depths of which a reader does not easily forget. Edna's suicide, therefore, comes as no surprise for us. It is the logical outgrowth, the ultimate outgrowth of the entire fabric of the novel—of the heroine's movement away from contact with other people. We are fully prepared for the reappearance just before Edna dies of the earlier refrain, "the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (II, 999).

It is, however, necessary to add that in spite of the many failures and frustrations which drive Edna to her death, The Awakening is not, I think, a dark or a pessimistic book. George Arms is right to insist upon our

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18 Cyrille Arnavon is, I think, wrong on this point. He argues, "Quoi qu'il en soit--et c'est la faille essentielle de ce joli roman--le suicide 'poétisé' d'Edna est insuffisamment justifié." "Introduction" to Edna [Arnavon's translation of The Awakening] by Kate Chopin (Paris, 1953), pp. 16-17.

19 Per Seyersted finds a "note of pessimism" in the book. Biography, p. 149.
recognition of what Per Seyersted calls a "humor and light irony" in the treatment of characters. Such treatment results, Arms argues, in a "quality of tone that gives the work its final distinction." There is woven into the fabric of the novel, it seems to me, something of the cosmic optimism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, writers whose ideas we have seen paralleled in several of Kate Chopin's short stories. The death scene, for example, reveals in the description of Edna in the ocean little trace of a naturalistic attitude that nature is indifferent and by implication antagonistic to human beings. Although Edna has displayed shortly before her death a "flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature" (II, 995), and although the sea gleams tranquilly "with the million lights of the sun" as the heroine dies (II, 999), there is about the scene an atmosphere that reminds us more of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and of Faulkner than of, let us say, Stephen Crane. Human beings will endure, Chopin suggests, even though this particular human being did not manage to do so for very long. Other people, after all, people whom Edna thinks of during her last moments, people whom

20 Rev. of Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography, by Per Seyersted and The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, ed. and introd. Per Seyersted, American Literature, 43 (1971), 137.
Edna flees from as she swims into the ocean, manage to find satisfaction and fulfillment in their lives. The ocean will welcome her, "enfolding" her in its "soft, close embrace" (II, 1000), but those people on the land would have welcomed her too. She might, like her friend Adèle or like so many of the Creoles, have found some sort of oneness with nature and with her fellow men as well.

The Awakening's "light irony," its distinct "quality of tone" is largely the product, I think, of the paradox inherent in the novel. Edna's failures and her death are played out before a background which offers us constant glimpses into the rich possibilities of life: two young lovers sit inside an unoccupied children's tent talking devotedly to each other; Madame Antoine tirelessly retells to her listeners the Baratarian legends which she has gathered during her lifetime at the Chênière Caminada; Edna's children stack into their little wagon wooden chips for the fire of a lame old servant; Mariequita, Victor Lebrun's mistress, grows cheerful when her Victor threatens to beat up a potential rival. The earth can be a wonderful place, Kate Chopin seems to say--the beauty of much of the language in the novel contributes to this impression. Edna herself can be at times fully sensitive to the magnificence of life, but she is never able to achieve that degree of freedom which would let her extract
from her existence value enough to make continued living worthwhile. Because of her heritage, she misses the possibilities for friendship, love, and community that Grand Isle offers her, much as she was unable to grasp such possibilities earlier. While she is among the Creoles, she cannot feel herself to be part of the Creoles any more than she had ever felt herself to be part of a family. She acts at various times the role of daughter, sister, wife, or mother, but she remains throughout her life a solitary soul.

The novel's tone, then, is a product of that paradox which so well describes the heroine's failure. Edna cannot reconcile her need for personal fulfillment with her need for communion with other people. She reaches for freedom by isolating herself from her community, yet freedom is to be found through close participation in a community. Kate Chopin in 1898 is sensitive to both the significance of and the universality of that paradox, and she does not attempt to reconcile its terms. Instead she makes it an integral part of The Awakening, creating in the process a novel which speaks to us with great power and beauty.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Kate Chopin found her form in *The Awakening*. If short stories like "The Storm" and "Tante Cat'rinette" embody facets of Chopin's vision of life, the novel incorporates something of the totality of that vision, something of its universality, complexity, and depth. If stories like "Nég Créol" and "A Vocation and a Voice" fashion images that express aspects of an insight into reality, the novel creates an imagery to articulate the paradox which Chopin discovers at the very core of reality. *The Awakening* focuses and synthesizes; it distills the essence of Kate Chopin's work.

The novel shows us, as do some of the nature stories and some of the plantation stories, a group of people who, in the words of Larzer Ziff, "openly like one another, enjoy life, and savor its sensual riches. Their likes and their dislikes are held passionately, so that action bears a close and apparent relation to feeling."¹ Yet the novel proceeds, as do many of Chopin's other works, to tie the "sensual riches" these people

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¹ Ziff, p. 298.
enjoy directly to an intimate collective life—to a life which puts great value upon an acceptance of the traditions and customs governing behavior. By concentrating on such people and by placing in their midst a solitary outsider who is at the moment physically and emotionally prepared to come to an understanding of her position in the natural universe, the novel almost inevitably takes up the concern that is inherent in nearly all of Kate Chopin's best fiction. How, the novel asks, does a person seek selfhood and personal fulfillment while at the same time establishing or maintaining a sense of community, a feeling of social identity?

The Awakening's recent rise in popularity can, I think, be traced in part to the novel's skillful development of this concern. We sense that there is a lasting significance to what Kate Chopin sees in 1898 as she looks back from St. Louis to the Louisiana that she loves. The author's fears about the quality of human relationships in an emerging technological society come through to us as well-founded. Her pictures of the shifts taking place in important human values--her picture, in particular, of Léonce Pontellier largely ignoring the human warmth of his Creole environment in order to absorb himself in the intricacies of a national marketplace--such pictures are clearly and dramatically drawn. The novel illuminates
for us basic issues of Chopin's time that continue to occupy us in the last third of the twentieth century.

Yet *The Awakening* is even more meaningful for us if we set it in place among the rest of the author's fiction. We find, for example, that *At Fault* and the best of the short stories present us with various alternatives open to a person faced with problems like those confronting Edna Pontellier. While Edna dies largely because she cannot satisfy her need for human closeness, other Chopin characters with similar needs manage to survive, although, we must add, not always in a very satisfactory manner. Chicot of "Nég Créol," unable to return to a world that has vanished, creates an imaginary realm in which to seek comfort and security. Tante Cat'rinette finds her way back into a real life community, even though most of its former grandeur is gone. Thérèse Lafirme of *At Fault* tries her very best to preserve at Place-du-Bois something of both the community and its grandeur. And Wallace Offdean, himself an outsider like Edna, attempts in "A No-Account Creole" to find some place within a social unit by purchasing a small plantation.

Athénaisé, it would seem, emerges as the person best able to grasp what Edna Pontellier misses. She establishes her identity in a way that Edna cannot—through
the intimate relationships she maintains with other people. Yet at the same time she creates for herself a sense of personal fulfillment by pushing off from the code of behavior which her community insists she follow. She is, we recall, first for her family and then for her husband, a veritable holy terror—adamantly refusing to carry out the duties that are assigned to her. While she must escape from others in order to find herself after marriage has upset her former understanding of the role she plays in the social and the physical universe, she is able, having recovered her position, to go back to the community and to take her place once again among the people she left behind.

Athénaïse plays off the pressures of her own nature—those set in motion by the primordial forces in her universe—against the pressures of her people. She obstinately resists some aspects of the pull her society has upon her. The community, Kate Chopin suggests here, is essential because it helps an individual chart his identity in relationship to his past, his environment, and his fellow man, and because it offers in addition the necessary resistance against which a person can define his uniqueness. The community provides not only the obvious advantages of a physical and emotional huddling place but also the less obvious opportunities which Edna
Pontellier is unable to seize opportunities for working out a sense of selfhood, a sense of individual significance.

There is, however, another aspect of Chopin's earlier work that sheds light upon the character of the vision which we encounter in the 1898 novel. The best of the short stories, and At Fault as well, help us recognize that The Awakening is in part an artful distillation of the author's deepening insight into the universality of the need for community. If the old codes of behavior, the old traditions, the old customs are being challenged, if there are shifts taking place in the morality of the times, then such challenges, such shifts, Chopin has often suggested, are tied to the changes occurring during the nineteenth century in the land itself, in people's concepts of the land, and, therefore, in the nature of the communities that evolve on the land. And if those changes make it increasingly difficult for both the community in its efforts to maintain order or to prevent an outbreak of chaos and for the individual in his attempts to establish what the Twelve Southerners a generation after The Awakening were to call an "imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition,"²

² Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand, p. xvi.
then a deep feeling of isolation and alienation becomes increasingly common among the individuals living in the community.

Alienation, for Kate Chopin, is inevitably an outgrowth of a failure to achieve a sense of community. But *The Awakening* sets the matter into a larger perspective than does *At Fault* or most of the short stories by removing the cause of that failure from its nineteenth century milieu. Edna Pontellier is isolated from people partly because of religious attitudes which can be traced back hundreds of years to Europe and to the teachings of John Calvin. And other sources of the heroine's solitary condition are much more obscure, rooted in the largely inexplicable forces that shape human character. We come to suspect that Edna's story, in spite of the great importance of its Louisiana atmosphere, might after all be played out in any number of different settings. The heroine's finally pathetic attempts to reach out to other people transcend space and time and acquire a significance that can without exaggeration be called universal.

It is, we recall, this kind of significance that Kate Chopin is concerned about in her 1894 review of Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols* when she argues that "human impulses do not change and can not so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another
which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began" (II, 693). Throughout her writing career, Chopin has explored various facets of people's "relation to one another." She has concentrated her attention on the way in which human interactions affect the consciousness of the individual, the way in which such interactions color a person's attitude toward sex, intimacy, responsibility, tradition, duty, religion, social and natural change—toward, in a broader sense, society itself and nature itself.

_The Awakening_ works into an organic whole these various facets. It gives form to both the totality and the universality of Chopin's vision of life. Edna Pontellier's search for a code of behavior becomes that elusive search for self-fulfillment and identity, that search, in short, for community which is a permanent part of the human condition.
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