

## 6 CRITICS DISCUSS

Kate Chopin

(1851-1904)

"She began to write tales for children and the local-color stories for which she is noted. *At Fault* (1890) is an undistinguished novel of Creole life in the Cane River section of central Louisiana. Her importance in the local-color movement depends primarily, however, on her interpretations of Creole and Cajun life in her collections of short stories and anecdotes, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). These carefully polished tales are delicately objective in treatment and marked by a poignant restraint of which perhaps the greatest example is 'Désirée's Baby' in the former volume. Mrs. Chopin's last novel *The Awakening* (1899), caused a storm of criticism that ended her literary career because readers of the time were shocked by the realistic treatment of morbid psychology in this objective account of mixed marriage and adultery."

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(Oxford, 1941-83)

"The writing career of Kate Chopin, one of the shortest in the annals of the ordinarily long-lived regional writers, began in 1899 with some indifferent poetry and followed a meteoric course which ended a year or two before her death in 1904. What she did in that time had, however, an intensity, courage, vigor, and independence..."

She...wrote nearly a hundred short stories, about half of which were collected in two volumes, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). The best of these describe the Acadians in the mid-Louisiana parishes of Natchitoches and Avoyelles, regions with which Mrs. Chopin had become acquainted during her plantation days. Many of them (and there is possibly a connection here with Mrs. Chopin's own mild unconventionality) turn upon acts of rebellion: Zaida's attempted elopement during the Cajun ball at Pere Foche's; the refusal of Athenaise to settle into a dull marriage; young Polydore feigning rheumatism to escape work; Chicot, the *neg creol*, whose professed paganism contradicted his Christian practice.

At their best the bayou tales displayed a clean economy of line, and were rounded off with a kind of Gallic finesse which suggested that Mrs. Chopin's study of Maupassant had not gone unrewarded. She knew, better than many of her contemporaries among the regionalists, how to begin, develop, and conclude a story without waste motion or observable self-consciousness. Her feeling for character was supported by an almost instinctive grasp of form and pace. Like Miss Jewett, she knew how to use dialect for flavoring; with her it never became an obstacle... she knew where sentiment ends and sentimentality begins.

Yet many of her stories fell short of excellence because she wrote too swiftly and impulsively, leaned too heavily upon the suggestions of the moment, and impatiently shrugged off the burden of correction and revision. She rarely resorted to mere trickery, though it is a trick which mars her frequently anthologized (and not very typical) study in race relations, 'Désirée's Baby,' which satisfies the reader's sense of justice while disappointing him with a contrived conclusion. Even her failures are readable, and at her subtle and economical best, she challenges the workmanship of Mary Wilkins Freeman, analyzing the more exotic and passionate Cajun character or painting the humble romances of canebrake and cotton field with something of that control and candor which her Northern contemporary brought to her studies of New England nuns and village choristers."

Carlos Baker

*Literary History of the United States*, 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 858-59

"On her mother's side Mrs. Chopin was of French descent; when she married Oscar Chopin and moved to Louisiana she took a deep interest in the picturesque life of the Creoles and Cajuns. She returned to St. Louis after her husband's death, wrote for local papers and several children's magazines and finally won acceptance for her stories in *Harper's* and the *Century*. She also turned to novel writing, not with great

success. *The Awakening* (1899), which treated the themes of extramarital love and miscegenation, aroused a storm of criticism and practically silenced her for the rest of her life. In her short stories--twenty-three in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and twenty-one in *A Night in Acadie* (1897)--she produced several narratives that Fred Lewis Pattee describes as 'among the few unquestioned masterpieces of American short-story art.'

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

"*At Fault* is a story of love and of possibilities for freedom.... It recounts the story of a man from St. Louis who is married to an alcoholic wife whom he has come to detest. Having left her, he travels southward as representative of a timber company. In Louisiana he applies for and receives permission to cut trees from the woodlands surrounding the plantation of a young Creole widow with whom he falls in love. On one level it can be thought of as the story of the industrial North invading, conquering and being conquered by, the agrarian South; on another, it speaks of a person's right to freedom, and its cost. Other characters invade the plot, too many of them, for Mrs. Chopin had not yet learned economy, and the novel limps to a completely predictable conclusion: the alcoholic wife dies, the lovers marry....

'A Respectable Woman' is for the 1890s a particularly daring though subtly subdued sketch of a married woman attracted to a man who is not her husband. And the same worldly bachelor, who awakens her to expectations of escape from matrimonial restraint, will appear again briefly in *The Awakening* and appears also, more fully developed, in 'Athenaise,' which seems certainly one of Mrs. Chopin's more successful examinations of a young woman's battle against becoming only a useful household possession....The submission of women and their struggle against submitting is a theme which pervades much, perhaps all, of Mrs. Chopin's fiction--their shaking off of restraint to become what as women they actually are rather than what a man-managed society expects them to be: beneath the restraint there exists a questing animal."

Lewis Leary  
Introduction  
*The Awakening and Other Stories by Kate Chopin*  
(Holt 1970) vii, x

"What influenced her most was her experiences among the diverse cultures of Louisiana. Her fiction took as its home ground the lives of Creoles (descendants of the first French and Spanish settlers in the territory), Cajuns (progeny of the French immigrants who had been ignominiously expelled from Canada by the British conquerors in the eighteenth century), and the blacks and Indians of mixed blood who lived throughout Louisiana.

The history of Kate Chopin's reception by the reading public is a revealing one. The publication in 1894 of *Bayou Folk*, a collection of tales of rural life, earned her critical acceptance. *A Night in Acadie* (1897) confirmed her popularity as a teller of stories. Her readers were pleased by her attention to local customs and dialects. (They had taken in the same way to the tales of New England written by Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, which exerted a similar appeal with different material.) Newspapers and important national magazines, such as the newly formed *Vogue* and the well-established *Century*, featured her work. She had already written two novels of slight merit when *The Awakening* appeared in 1899. Almost immediately, her previously appreciative audience rose against her, not surprising when one realizes that the same middle-class readership had been unable to accept Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* in 1893 and would reject Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* when it appeared in 1900.

Chopin had long been a loyal reader of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and the portrayal in *The Awakening* of Edna Pontellier's aroused sensuousness is indeed Whitmanesque. The young woman's increasing resentment of the constrictions imposed by married life and her flirtations with an attractive roue brought condemnations to the novel and its author; both were dropped from libraries and genteel society. Naturally upset by her fall from favor, Kate Chopin attempted little more writing before her death five years later. *The Awakening* was rediscovered in the 1950s. What was once called bad behavior for a woman is now seen as good writing about a woman's turbulent feelings. During Chopin's lifetime, readers may

have been drawn to her piquant tales of the exotic yet recognizably human types found in Creole and Cajun culture, but there was hardly approbation for her novel. Today appreciation comes easily to *The Awakening*, while her brief, almost anecdotal stories continue to surprise readers with their arresting portraits of passionate lives. In her accomplishments, Chopin demonstrated the characteristic American talent for writing fine short fiction heralded by Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne."

Martha Banta  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row, 1987) 701-02

"Critics hardly knew what to do about the work of Kate Chopin, author of some of the boldest and best stories written in America before 1960. Hers were nineteenth-century stories exploring all sorts of taboo subjects--miscegenation, divorce, and even female sexuality.... She portrayed characters from all social classes of her time and place--aristocratic Creoles, middle- and lower-class Acadians and 'Americans,' mulattos, and blacks. Her stories explore relationships among these various classes and, especially, relationships between men and women....

Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), features an unusually strong woman as protagonist and dares to introduce not one but two topics then considered daring: divorce and alcoholism. The boldness that would end her literary career nine years later was already apparent, though little noted because the novel attracted almost no attention.... A number of Chopin's adult stories, including 'Athenaise,' 'A Pair of Silk Stockings,' 'The Story of an Hour,' and *The Awakening*, feature wives and mothers who feel enslaved. But she also created women who experience complete fulfillment in marriage, as Mentine does in 'A Visit to Avoyelles'; and she portrays others who come to realize the emptiness of a self-sufficient life without husband and children, as does Mamzelle Aurelie in 'Regret.'

Chopin dared to treat miscegenation in 'Désirée's Baby' and to portray the tragic life of a slave under even the kindest of mistresses in 'La Belle Zoraide.' In 'Lilacs' and several other stories, Chopin shows that both the physical and the spiritual dimensions of life are important. 'A Vocation and a Voice,' the title story of her unpublished collection, illustrates the writer's awareness that men as well as women face identity crises and conflicts between selfhood and sexual attraction. Two of Chopin's boldest stories are 'A Respectable Woman' and 'The Storm.' In both stories, a happily married woman feels strongly attracted to another man. 'A Respectable Woman' ends before the attraction culminates in a sexual encounter. But in 'The Storm,' the natural power and joy of sex run full course before the story's close, resulting in one of the most candid short stories in American literature. 'The Storm' also illustrates another of Chopin's strong points: her use of rhythms and images to reinforce her themes. Like many of her stories, 'The Storm' possesses a lyric quality, compressing enormous impact into a few well-chosen and well-expressed images.

Chopin wrote 'The Storm' while she was waiting for *The Awakening* to come out; but after the fury that greeted the novel, she seems to have realized that the short story was far ahead of its time and did not try to have it published. It remained unpublished, in fact, until 1969 when Per Seyersted edited *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*. After *The Awakening* was published, Chopin wrote little else of importance. The handful of stories that she wrote during the remaining five years before she died were more like her earliest stories than her mature fiction.

For many years, twentieth-century critics ignored *The Awakening*, anthologized a few stories like 'Désirée's Baby' and 'The Benitou's Slave,' and called Chopin a local color writer. But after her *Complete Works* became available, keeping her relegated among local colorists became untenable, and critics began attempting to place Chopin's works in their proper place in the canon of American literature. The influence of Hawthorne, Whitman, Henry James, and especially Maupassant on Chopin's work has been documented. Elements of romanticism, Transcendentalism, realism, and naturalism have been noted, thus placing Chopin squarely in the mainstream of nineteenth-century literary currents. Seyersted, in particular, shows that Chopin's works hold kinship with twentieth-century existentialism. And numerous critics have claimed that Chopin's most important achievement was as a prophet of twentieth-century feminism."

Peggy Skaggs

*The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2*  
(D. C. Heath 1990) 626-28

Michael Hollister (2015)