

ANALYSIS

“A Respectable Woman” (1894)

Kate Chopin

(1850-1904)

“Although the title of ‘A Respectable Woman’ (1894) refers to Mrs. Baroda, the wife of planter Gaston Baroda, the narrative is propelled by a New Orleans journalist named Gouvernail, one of Chopin’s most memorable characters. He has a major part in ‘Athenaise’ and he mutters an ominous warning at Edna Pontellier’s housewarming party in *The Awakening*. Gouvernail is the most sophisticated of Chopin’s sensitive urban bachelors, men like Wallace Offdean of ‘A No-Account Creole’ or Hector Santien of ‘In and Out of Old Natchitoches.’ Like Offdean, who means ‘to use his faculties intelligently’ and to ‘keep clear of the maelstroms of sordid work and senseless pleasure,’ Gouvernail—something of a mature, literary Offdean—seeks balance in his life. He is visiting Gaston, his college friend, on his plantation this spring because he is ‘run down by overwork.’ ‘This is what I call living,’ he sighs as he sits on the portico smoking his cigar, listening to Gaston describe his experience as a sugar planter.

In ‘Athenaise’ Chopin presents what is happening in the narrative partly through Gouvernail’s consciousness. Here she presents Gouvernail through the consciousness of Mrs. Baroda, who, without being aware of it, seeks something more than what her life offers her. She and her husband ‘had entertained a good deal during the winter; much of the time has also been passed in New Orleans in various forms of mild dissipation. She was looking forward to a period of unbroken rest, now, and undisturbed tete-a-tete with her husband.’ She is not happy when her husband invites Gouvernail—whom she has never met—to visit and is convinced that she will not like him. He is not a society man, she reasons, and he is a journalist, so he is probably cynical and probably wears eyeglasses.

Yet though he does not seek her company and puts forth no effort to make her like him, Mrs. Baroda finds him a ‘lovable, inoffensive fellow.’ He is physically attractive, and, as Allen E. Stein points out, by his very nature, he ‘calls her own way of life into question,’ he forces her to examine ‘just how powerful her underlying need to scrutinize her life has been.’ Gouvernail apparently understands Mrs. Baroda’s position perfectly well. Sitting alongside her in the dark, he quotes aloud lines from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! / Still nodding night--”

Mrs. Baroda does not reply, but Gouvernail begins to talk ‘freely and intimately in a low, hesitating drawl’ about ‘old college days...of keen and blind ambitions and large intentions’ and about how he is left with ‘a philosophic acquiescence to the existing order—only a desire to be permitted to exist with now and then a little whiff of genuine life, such as he was breathing now.’ Mrs. Baroda’s ‘physical being’ becomes ‘predominant’: ‘She wanted to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips. She wanted to draw close to him and whisper against his cheek—she did not care what—as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman.’

When she leaves, Gouvernail ends his ‘apostrophe to the night’ from Whitman, which Chopin does not include for her readers but which reads, ‘Press close bare-bosomed night—press close magnetic nourishing night! / Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! / Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.’ The narrative stays focused throughout on the consciousness of Mrs. Baroda. She escapes her feelings by telling her husband that she does not like his friend and that she must make a shopping trip to New Orleans until after Gouvernail leaves, and she objects to her husband’s plans to have him return in the summer.

And then Kate Chopin, who orchestrates endings as well as any American ever has, describes Mrs. Baroda’s temptations to share her feelings with her husband, her realization that ‘there are some battles in life which a human being must fight alone,’ and her proposal, near the end of the year, to invite Gouvernail back. When Gaston tells her is glad she has ‘overcome’ her dislike for Gouvernail, she responds by giving

him 'a long, tender kiss upon his lips' and saying, 'I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him.' Whatever it is Mrs. Baroda means by those words, Gouvernail's visit has revealed to her options she had not much examined before."

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