ANALYSIS

"Athenaise" (1895)

Kate Chopin

(1850-1904)

"'Athenaise' (1895) is Kate Chopin's richest short story, a nineteenth-century classic. It shares with 'A Respectable Woman" the central presence of the sophisticated journalist Gouvernail and with *The Awakening* its structure shaped by a pregnancy. It is a tour de force of some of Chopin's major motifs and themes—going away and coming back, the presence of an outsider, the cultural construction of the natural. It is Chopin's most complex exploration of a person's instinctual reach for a life of abundant personal and social possibilities.

Its opening and closing reveal its fundamental direction. On the first page, Athenaise Miche is rebellious child, running from her husband of two months to her parents, raging about how she cannot be happy in her own way, focused on her frustration, confusion, and misery. On the last page, she is ecstatic adult, clinging to her husband, delighted with nature, other people, and herself, focused on the child she is carrying within her. The story is balanced between five sections set on the rigolet de Bon Dieu where Athenaise grew up and where she met Cazeau, the widower she chose to marry, and six longer sections set in New Orleans where she arrives at some perspective, sifts through her options, intuitively finds herself. It is permeated with a sense of ambiguity.

'Athenaise' has not been a favorite with some critics because of what they see as a disappointing ending in which a strong, vibrant woman desperately seeking a better existence settles for the ordinary satisfactions of motherhood and life with a domineering husband. But the story is consistent with the vision of life embodied in most of Chopin's best work. Athenaise sacrifices some of what a modern reader might see as the possibilities of an urban life in New Orleans, but those are not possibilities Athenaise considers for herself. And everyone in the story, not just Athenaise, makes sacrifices—certainly Cazeau, Athenaise's husband, and Monteclin, her brother, and Gouvernail, the journalist who becomes enchanted with Athenaise during her month in New Orleans.

Just how little people's decisions appear as reasoned or rational in Chopin's works is set forth brilliantly in 'Athenaise.' In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is pictured as having 'apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions' and as 'blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility.' Athenaise is younger than Edna, less experienced, much less conscious of what is happening to her. She knows only that she hates being married and is repelled by sex. 'I can't stan' to live with a man,' she tells her brother, 'to have him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet—washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes, ugh!'

Chopin uses the image of bare feet at several places in her works to generate an aura of sexuality. Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* notices that Mariequita, a Spanish woman with uncertain connections to both Robert Lebrun and his brother Victor, has sand and slime between her toes. Suzina in 'A Vocation and a Voice' attracts the boy in the story to her by lying down in a moving wagon and letting her bare 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, comes to her.

Athenaise feels lost, unable to cope with marriage, because she has 'an instinctive realization of the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution.' She does not see where to turn, what to turn toward: 'People often said that Athenaise would know her own mind some day, which was equivalent to saying that she was at present unacquainted with it. If she ever came to such knowledge, it would be 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.'

Athenaise does not understand why she chose Cazeau as her husband. In part, she thinks, it was because girls married when the chance came, but also because Cazeau would 'make life more comfortable for her' and because 'she had liked him, and had even been rather flustered when he pressed her hands and kissed them, and kissed her lips and cheeks and eyes, when she accepted him.' If Athenaise acts because of socialized dispositions deeper than conscious thought, so does her husband, Cazeau. 'I married you,' he tells her when she pathetically demands some explanation for her misery and the wretched state of their marriage, 'because I loved you; because you were the woman I wanted to marry, an' the only one…. I did think that I might make you happy in making things easier an' mo comfortable fo' you…. I believed that yo' coming yere to me would be like the sun shining out of the clouds.'

His sense of hopelessness is as profound as hers. When he brings her back from her parents early in the story, he is reminded of his father's returning a runaway slave, and a 'humiliating sensation of baseness' overcomes him, a 'terrible sense of loss,' a 'realization of having missed a chance for happiness,--a chance that would come his way again only through a miracle.' And he is especially pained when Athenaise leaves a second time, at night, secretly, because he believes he has not thrust himself upon her. He had lived alone as a widower for 10 years, rejecting women who pursued him, until Athenaise appeared and attracted him, he remembers, 'with eyes, with voice, with a hundred womanly ways, and finally distracted him with love which she seemed, in her timid, maidenly fashion, to return.' Cazeau has want Barbara Ewell calls a 'blunt integrity."

Even Gouvernail, the journalist Athenaise meets during her month in New Orleans, follows the promptings of his disposition—though ironically he is as fully conscious as person as exists in Chopin's fiction, the individual who comes closest to putting into language a vision of life that Chopin communicates implicitly in her stories. In other works, Gouvernail gives form to his insights by quoting fragments of poetry that reveal their intentions only to readers who can reconstruct their context—in 'A Respectable Woman' a piece of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself,' in *The Awakening* a sonnet of Algernon Swinburne. In 'Athenaise' he is aware that the charming, beautiful, but vulnerable woman living in the next room in his boardinghouse cannot be offered the kind of poetry he reads and apparently discusses with his circle of 'advanced' thinkers in the American quarter of the city. Athenaise has poured out her heart to him, and he understands that she adores her brother Monteclin and suspects that she adores Cazeau without knowing it. He sees that she is 'self-willed, impulsive, innocent, ignorant, unsatisfied, dissatisfied.'

All three men in the intimate circle around Athenaise yield to her instincts, adjust their own needs to hers. Her brother Monteclin will do whatever Athenaise asks of him, in part because he loves her, in part because he hates her husband, who has refused to loan him money. He secretly whisks her away to New Orleans, borrows money to keep her there, and brings her back to Cazeau when she asks, though he—like some modern critics—is disappointed that she ends up behaving in such an 'ordinary' manner. Cazeau writes to her, telling her that she is free not to come back to him 'unless she came of her free will…unless she could be the companion he had hoped for in marrying her, and in some measure return affection and respect for the love which he continued and would always continue to feel for her.' And Gouvernail, with Athenaise crying in his arms, struggles to control himself: 'He understood a thousand times better than she herself understood it that he was acting as substitute for Monteclin…'

Yet it is not to a man that Athenaise responds. It is to the new life with her, the recognition of which shakes her to the core. Now when she thinks of Cazeau, 'the first purely sensuous tremor of her life swept over her.' She whispers his name, 'and the sound of it brought red blotches into her cheeks. She spoke it over and over, as if it were some new, sweet sound born out of darkness and confusion, and reaching her for the first time…. Her whole passionate nature was aroused as if by a miracle.' The letter she sends to Cazeau she writes 'with a single thought, a spontaneous impulse,' and when she asks for money from her husband's merchants (at the brokerage house where Wallace Offdean in 'A No-Count Creole' works), she does so with 'an air of partnership, almost proprietorship' because she reaches for the life that will be most fulfilling for her, the life that offers her the greatest rewards, that she participates in as partner…

No one understands what she is doing so well as Gouvernail. He sees that she has forgotten him, learns why from their landlady, in whom Athenaise has confided, and is kind to her, helping her get on her way back to her husband. He has lost, he recognizes. Athenaise has chosen the better life. 'He was a man of

intelligence, and took defeat gracefully; that was all. But as he made his way back to the carriage, he was thinking, 'By heaven, it hurts, it hurts!'"

Bernard Koloski
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