

KATE CHOPIN 1851–1904

During the first half of the twentieth century, **Kate Chopin** was thought of as either a minor writer whose stories of Creole life in Louisiana were part of the local-color movement of the late nineteenth century or the author of a scandalous novel. Otherwise, her work was largely ignored until the 1960s, when a new generation of readers discovered the unrelenting Realism and provocative themes beneath the surface of her stories. Her most important work, the novel *The Awakening* (1899), is now recognized as one of the classics of American feminism.

Early On. As the daughter of a mother descended from the French Creole aristocracy and an Irish immigrant father who had become a successful merchant in St. Louis, Katherine O'Flaherty, born in 1851, had a privileged childhood. Even though her father died in a railway accident when she was four, she attended Catholic convent schools in St. Louis and made her debut in St. Louis society when she was eighteen. In 1870 she married Oscar Chopin, a Creole cotton trader. After a wedding trip to Europe, the Chopins settled in Louisiana, first in New Orleans and then in **Cloutierville**, in **Natchitoches** Parish, in central Louisiana. They had six children before Oscar died in 1883 of swamp fever. After her husband's death, Chopin, financially independent, moved back to St. Louis with her children, where she began her writing career in earnest, publishing her first poems and stories in 1889.

Local Color and Realism. The most important intellectual influence in her life was probably Frederick Kohlbenhayer, her physician in St. Louis, who became her confidant in the mid-1880s. An agnostic, Kohlbenhayer encouraged her to read Darwin and Thomas Huxley and to give up Catholicism. She also read the work of such American regional writers as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman,¹ local colorists who reproduced the distinctive dialects of their New England characters and described the customs peculiar to their region. Most important, Chopin also read the French Realists Flaubert, Zola, and Maupassant. This reading encouraged the Realist direction of her own writing, as she explored the ways in which her characters were influenced by their environment, as women caught in the social mores of nineteenth-century America, or as members of one of the ethnic and racial groups in Louisiana: Creoles, descendants of the French and Spanish colonists; Cajuns, descendants of eighteenth-century French Canadian immigrants to Louisiana; African Americans; and Native Americans. Maupassant was a particularly

KATE SHOH-pan

KLOO-chee-vil

NACK-uh-tish

www For links to more information about Chopin and quizzes on "The Story of an Hour" and "Désirée's Baby," see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

¹Jewett . . . Freeman: Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909), Maine local colorist, author of many works, including *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896); Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930), New England local colorist; author of *A Humble Romance* (1887), *Pembroke* (1894), and other works.

A Creole Bovary.

— WILLA CATHER ON
The Awakening

ah-kah-DEE

pawn-tuh-LYAY

luh-BRUN

RIGHS

important influence. Chopin translated several of his stories into English, and many of her stories, including “The Story of an Hour” and “*Désirée’s Baby*” use the same kind of irony, tight construction, and surprise turn at the end that typifies Maupassant’s work.

Works of the 1890s. Nearly all of Chopin’s literary work was published in the 1890s. She wrote several poems, nearly a hundred stories, and three novels during that decade. Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), set in the Louisiana backcountry, tells the story of a troubled relationship between a widow and a married man. More of her stories set in the same region began to appear in national magazines, and two collections of stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), were published. She wrote a second novel, *Young Dr. Gosse*, early in the decade, but later destroyed the manuscript after she could not find a publisher for it.

“A Creole Bovary.” Chopin’s reputation, both in her own time and since, has rested largely on *The Awakening* (1899), her third novel. It is the story of Edna **Pontellier**, a young wife and mother, who is awakened to her own desires and feelings through relationships with Robert **Lebrun**, a romantic man she meets while on vacation, and Mademoiselle **Reisz**, an artist. She neglects her social duties and angers her husband, has an affair, leaves her marriage, and finally ends her life by drowning. The novel shocked readers in the 1890s. Reviewers called it a “vulgar story,” one that

Edgar Degas, *Interior of the New Orleans Bureau of Cotton Purchasers*, 1873. Oil on canvas

Although Kate Chopin set nearly all her stories in New Orleans—during the first half of the twentieth century she was thought of as a writer of Creole life—there is an unrelenting realism beneath the local color of her stories. (Art Resource)



“should be labeled a poison.” Even Willa Cather² dismissed it as only “a Creole Bovary,” an imitation of Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary*, about a woman’s search for independence, which had similarly scandalized the French. *The Awakening* was banned from libraries, and Chopin was shunned in St. Louis society. Only in the last four decades has Chopin’s novel been recognized as much more than a shocking piece of conventional fiction or mock French Realism. In the novel, Chopin adopted the conventions of French Realism to study an American woman coming to an awareness of the confining social conventions that denied her full humanity. Although it is set in Louisiana, as many of Chopin’s short stories are, it is much more than a work of regional interest.

The Short Stories. Their Louisiana settings and the presence of dialect and local customs often led in Chopin’s own day to her short stories being relegated to the subgenre of local-color tales.³ More recently, critics have recognized that Chopin’s themes—the search for personal fulfillment, interracial relationships, the conflict between selfhood and sexual desire—transcend localism. These subjects, along with the lyrical conciseness and ironic intensity in her work, place Chopin in the mainstream of late-nineteenth-century Realism, along with Flaubert, Zola, and Maupassant.

“The Story of an Hour” could also have been titled “The Awakening,” for it, too, describes a moment of awareness when Mrs. Mallard realizes how she really feels about her life and situation. The news of her husband’s death shocks her into an awareness that seems to overtake her against her will. The tight focus of the story and the double surprise in the ending show that Chopin had learned her craft well from Maupassant. Mrs. Mallard’s awakening in “The Story of an Hour”—one of the Chopin selections that follow—allies her character with Nora Helmer, the heroine of Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, and the woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Yellow Wallpaper*, as one of the many “new women” in the literature of the period, women who sought to control their own lives rather than be defined by marriage and their relationships to men.

■ CONNECTIONS

E. T. A. Hoffmann, “The Mines of Falun” (p. 298); Higuchi Ichiyo, “The Thirteenth Night,” p. 1103. Hoffmann’s “Mines of Falun,” Ichiyo’s “Thirteenth Night,” and Chopin’s “Story of an Hour” all end ironically. Chopin’s story also has a surprise ending, one that’s unexpected but that makes sense. Do the other two stories have a surprise ending? What is the nature of the irony with which each of these stories ends?

Kate Chopin, author
of some of the
boldest and best
stories written in
America before 1960.

— PEGGY SKAGGS, *Kate
Chopin*, 1985

² Willa Cather: (1873–1947) Novelist and journalist from Nebraska; in such Realist novels as *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Cather developed themes about life on the American frontier.

³ local-color tales: Stories that seek to portray the people and way of life of a particular region by describing the speech, dress, and customs of its inhabitants.

Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*, p. 561; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 941. For many women in the nineteenth century, identity and one's place in society was defined by marriage. Mrs. Mallard's sense of liberation on learning of her husband's death is the counterpart to the bondage felt by the woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Yellow Wallpaper* and by Hedda in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Do any of these women have control over their lives? What is the nature of the confinement that each experiences? Do any of them escape?

Rabindranath Tagore, *Broken Ties*, p. 986. Understanding a work of literature from another culture often calls for recognizing a given author's cultural assumptions. In "Désirée's Baby," Chopin assumes that readers will understand the ways slavery worked in the American South, the unstated racial attitudes that lead to Désirée's banishment, and the surprise at the end. Look at Tagore's story of Nonibala in chapters four through six of *Broken Ties*. What cultural assumptions are made by Harimohan and Purandar? How does Tagore make these attitudes apparent to a non-Indian reader? Is the ending of Noni's story as surprising as that of "Désirée's Baby"?

■ FURTHER RESEARCH

Biography

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Petry, Alice Hall. *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*. 1996. A collection of reviews and contemporary critical essays on Chopin's work.

■ PRONUNCIATION

Kate Chopin: KATE SHOH-pan

Acadie: ah-kah-DEE

Armand Aubigny: ar-MAWND oh-bin-YEE

corbeille: kore-BAY

Coton Maïs: koh-TONE mah-EES

Cloutierville: KLOO-chee-vil

Désirée: deh-zi-RAY

L'Abri: lah-BREE

Lebrun: luh-BRUN, luh-BRENG

Natchitoches: NACK-uh-tish

Négrillon: neh-gree-YAWNG

Pontellier: pawn-tuh-LYAY

Reisz: RIGHS

Valmondé: vahl-mawn-DAY

The Story of an Hour

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

"The Story of an Hour." First published in *Vogue* magazine in 1894 and included in Chopin's third collection of stories, *A Vocation and a Voice* (1896), this story, like Chopin's major novel, could have been titled "The Awakening." Like that novel, it describes a moment of realization when Mrs. Mallard becomes aware of how she really feels about her situation. The news of her husband's death shocks her into a new consciousness that seems to overtake her against her will. The tight focus of the story and the double surprise of the ending show that Chopin had learned her craft well from Maupassant.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: “free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven’s sake open the door.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister’s importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister’s waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his gripsack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine’s piercing cry; at Richards’ quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.