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**In Search of Eros and Freedom:  
Four Portraits of Women by Kate Chopin**

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## Introduction

When Kate Chopin's *Bayou Folk* was published in 1894, her Louisiana collection of short stories was presented as “artistic transcripts of picturesque local life” (“Literary Notices” 43). Five years later she was to shock her contemporaries with the novel *The Awakening*, which was seen as a *Madame Bovary* of New Orleans. The book was severely criticized and after Chopin's death in 1904, the writer was quietly forgotten. With Per Seyersted's edition of Kate Chopin's complete works in 1969, the author was not so much re-established as established for the first time as an important member of the canon of American literature, not really having been recognized before.

Chopin admired and was well read in both Zola and Maupassant, but she had no wish to produce writing as serious and gloomy as Zola's. Even though man is a never-changing brute ruled by selfishness in her view, he is still able to make the right choices. As Seyersted points out, Chopin saw her stories as characterized by “brightness and gaiety and life and sunshine” even if they are not without sadness (Chopin qtd. in Vol.I 23). Maupassant's introvert psychological realism inspired her ideal of an impersonal and invisible author, whose objectivity was combined with both sympathy and humour (Vol.I 24). Although Chopin did write about problems such as slavery and integration, she never focused on the social issue as such but concentrated on the psychology of her characters. According to Seyersted, Chopin's “significance lies in her artistry” and in being years ahead of time in her rather daring depictions of relationships between the sexes (Vol.I 31). In fact, as Linda Wagner-Martin observes, Chopin was “writing stories of the sexual – in an age that pretended the attraction that led to marriage was more intellectual than physical” (197). One remarkable feature in Chopin's writing seems to be her ability “to treat the most crucial of relationships between man and woman entirely without bias” (Vol.I 29). Perhaps this is the reason why Chopin's writing seems somewhat unique and feels surprisingly urgent, even to hardened twenty-first century readers.

Chopin's capacity for addressing the conjugal issue without prejudice is well illustrated in the works dealt with in this essay. We will concentrate on Kate Chopin's portraits of women in three short stories, 'The Story of an Hour' (1894), 'A Respectable Woman', (1895), 'Athénaïse' (1895) and the novel *The Awakening* (1899). The essay will show that even though the lives of these women are rather similar, their search for fulfilment and freedom takes very different shapes. It is the argument that the outcomes depicted can be seen as increasingly provocative and extreme and that the main conflict and ending of *The Awakening* is a development and combination of the conflicts and resolutions in the three short stories.

In the first chapter of the essay, the three short stories will be analysed. We will look into the

different marriages, first focusing on the husbands in question, and then on the conflicts and desires of the three wives. Finally we will look at the consequences for the protagonists, comparing the outcomes of the stories. The amount of space devoted to each story will vary, since they differ in both length and detail. 'Athénaïse' is the longest and most developed of the three, 'A Respectable Woman' is somewhat shorter and 'The Story of an Hour' the briefest. For the sake of the argument of the essay, the stories will be dealt with in parallel and not chronologically. In the second chapter, the novel *The Awakening* will be studied along the same criteria, and a comparison will be made with the short stories.

Since *The Awakening* is considered to be Chopin's masterpiece, most critics seem to have concentrated on the novel in their reviews. Both the Seyersted's edition and the Norton Critical Edition edited by Margo Culley have provided valuable insights into the novel. It is interesting to note that *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, edited by Janet Beer, was published this year, indicating that Chopin is of current interest in 2009. As far as the short stories go, there is less criticism to be found. Even though no critic seems to have focused on a similar comparison as in the present study, Bert Bender's essays on the parallels between Chopin's short stories and *The Awakening* have been particularly useful.

### Three Cameo Studies

As mentioned, all three short stories dealt with in this essay present women who express their desire for fulfilment and freedom in various ways. 'Athénaïse' deals with a young woman who runs away from her husband, only to return when she finds that she is carrying his child. Mrs Baroda in 'A Respectable Woman' is attracted to her husband's friend but seems to have found the means to handle her feelings at the end of the story. Having learnt that her husband has been killed in an accident, Mrs Mallard in 'The Story of an Hour' has a heart attack when he arrives home hale and hearty. Although these plots are different we encounter three women in rather similar circumstances. They all lead respectable lives together with their husbands, whose natural positions of power and control are coupled with love and respect for their spouses. Still, something happens in these women's lives, disturbing their presumed tranquillity, and the problems experienced need to be addressed.

At the starting point of the first short story, the very young Athénaïse has just been married to her husband Cazeau for two months. He has been a widower for ten years and is clearly a mature man, whose modulated voice, behaviour and reactions are marked by dignity and composure. Although his hands are rough, him being a Southern farmer, and he is clumsy with his knife and fork, he inspires respect and to some degree fear, symbolized by his spur that he does not remove when going indoors. His love for his young wife is infallible, however, and he treats her well at all times: "he had never scolded, or called her names, or deprived her of comforts, or been guilty of any of the many reprehensible acts commonly attributed to objectionable husbands" (Vol.I 434). Even when he comes to regard his marriage as a failure, he is still willing to make the best of it.

In 'A Respectable Woman' we are also dealing with a nice man and a good marriage. In fact, Mrs Baroda is looking forward to having her husband to herself on the plantation after a period of entertaining in New Orleans. When her husband's friend, Gouvernail, is invited to stay for a couple of weeks, she is quite put out. Mr Baroda shows his guest a "frank and wordy hospitality" being a considerate man, who unsuspectingly sends his friend out with a scarf for his wife, when she is seated out at night (Vol.I 333). Similar signs of affection are depicted in 'The Story of an Hour'. Here we encounter yet a third nice husband in the brief portrayal of Mr Mallard, whose face "had never looked save with love" upon Mrs Mallard (Vol.I 353).

Clearly, Chopin has no wish to condemn the male sex. She depicts agreeable fellows who have done nothing wrong to their women. Still, the three female characters display signs of discontent, openly and fiercely like Athénaïse, or subtly and half-unconsciously like Mrs Baroda in 'A Respectable Woman' and Mrs Mallard in 'The Story of an Hour'. Athénaïse has undoubtedly

married without giving much thought as to what she was getting into, since “it was customary for girls to marry when the right opportunity came” (Vol.I 430). After a few weeks as a wife, she rebels and calls marriage “a trap set for the feet of unwary and unsuspecting girls” (Vol.I 434). However, Athénaïse's dislike for marriage has nothing to do with Cazeau maltreating her. On the contrary, he does not neglect her in any way; his main offence seems to be the fact that he loves her and “Athénaïse was not the woman to be loved against her will” (Vol.I 434). When Athénaïse runs away to her parents' house, she openly denies having been mistreated by Cazeau, even though her brother entreats her to find reasons to secure a separation. She does not hate Cazeau; it is being married that she detests, and she declares that she wants to be the young unmarried girl again with her maiden name. She just can not stand living with a man, his permanent presence, “his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet – washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes, ugh!” (Vol.I 431).

In 'A Respectable Woman', we are dealing with quite a different conflict. The visit of her husband's college friend, Gouvernail, is the cause of some irritation to Mrs Baroda. Despite her negative attitude to his stay in the house, she can not help liking him when he does appear. However, she has difficulties in understanding why, since he sits “mute and receptive [... and] he made no direct appeal to her approval or even esteem” (Vol.I 333). After a couple of days, Mrs Baroda gives up her attempts to please her guest, feeling “piqued” and she leaves him and her husband be, only to impose her company on Gouvernail again, when she realizes that he does not seem to notice her action (Vol.I 334). From Chopin's subtle hints about Mrs Baroda's confusion and her erratic behaviour, the reader easily detects what is going on. Mrs Baroda seems to be falling in love with Gouvernail, without being aware of it herself, as she oscillates between attraction and recoil. Knowing that this attraction to the forbidden fruit is wrong, she has to get away, as soon as possible.

Similarly, in 'The Story of an Hour', a vague feeling of dissatisfaction is expressed in the portrait of Mrs Mallard, who has loved her husband sometimes but often not. She has a young, calm face, but its “lines bespoke repression” and she is used to a “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” (Vol.I 353). In Mrs Mallard's brooding over her marriage, we sense Chopin's own broad-mindedness. She lets Mrs Mallard consider that both men and women can be the victims of a strong-willed partner, reflecting that a “kind intention or a cruel intention made the act [of suppression] seem no less a crime” (Vol.I 353). In this particular marriage, we understand that Mrs Mallard has lived in the shadow of her husband for a long time, and that even if the oppression has been unintentional, it is still there.

The male protagonists' reactions to their spouses' expressions of discontent are marked by composure and good nature, an indication of Chopin's tendency to see things from a broader perspective. Although Cazeau's fury is betrayed by “the red spots flaming in his swarthy cheeks” when he comes to bring Athénaïse home and her brother provokes him, he retains outward calm and self-possession. However, when riding back conflicting feelings arise. On their way home, the couple pass an old oak-tree, where decades earlier Cazeau's father had caught up with an escaping slave. The parallel is too much for Cazeau, and when Athénaïse runs away again he decides to let her go: “For the companionship of no woman on earth would he again undergo the humiliating sensation of baseness that had overtaken him in passing the old oak-tree in the fallow meadow” (Vol.I 438).

In 'A Respectable Woman' Mr Baroda is all tenderness when his wife complains about the visit of Gouvernail, as they are “making a bit of toilet sociably together in [her] dressing-room”, an occupation indicating both intimacy and comradeship. The loving relationship colours his reaction as he “took his wife's pretty face between his hands and looked tenderly and laughingly into her troubled eyes”, totally unaware of any threats to his marriage (Vol.I 334). Mr Baroda is in fact all good nature but also strangely insusceptible to what is going on around him. In 'The Story of an Hour', there is, of course, no reaction from the husband since he is absent. Conversely, it is his presumed death that arouses Mrs Mallard's discontent, not with her bereavement however, but with the restrictions of the marriage she looks back upon.

A desire for freedom is clearly an important part of the discontent of our female protagonists, even though their consciousness of this fact varies. Athénaïse seems to inhale the first breaths of freedom when she secretly meets her brother on the cotton fields to plan her escape (Vol.I 437). On arriving in the house of Sylvie, a boarding house in New Orleans, Athénaïse seems to be able to breathe even more freely. She feels refreshed after a bath and unpacks her few belongings, intending to live on “indefinitely in this big, cool, clean back room”, and she plans to get some sort of employment to support herself (Vol.I 442). However, as the days pass she does get rather homesick, especially since she has little else to do but sit on the front balcony, watching the street below. At this stage Mr Gouvernail, who occupies the room next to hers, proves himself a valuable acquaintance. (Yes, we are dealing with the same gentleman as in 'A Repectable Woman', since Chopin to some extent uses the same gallery of characters; his presence in both short stories and in *The Awakening* bears no importance for the argument of the essay). As he runs little errands for Athénaïse, lends her magazines and converses with her, he supplies ample diversion for a rather bored young woman. He even takes her out on the lake and invites her to dine with him in a restaurant. Through the very sensible eyes of Gouvernail, Chopin portrays her protagonist as “self-

willed, impulsive, innocent, ignorant, unsatisfied, dissatisfied". She wants to be happy "in [her] own way" and in a rather confused manner, she is looking for means to be just that (Vol.I 446).

Gouvernail is certainly attracted to Athénaïse, but he accepts without bitterness the insight that he functions as a substitute for her brother, not her husband. In 'Athénaïse', Chopin depicts immaturity in a young woman, who just does not know her "own mind" yet (Vol.I 433). She seems to need the breathing space and freedom provided by her stay in New Orleans; she needs to be alone or with a stand-in brother, sometimes being utterly bored. Having been thrown into womanhood before her adolescence is over she needs time, if only just a month, to find herself.

In 'A Respectable Woman', Mrs Baroda also seems to yearn for freedom as she has "the feeling of a distinct necessity to quit her home" (Vol.I 335). Her husband's friend seems to have awakened something in her, a subtle wish to please, which she is barely conscious of herself. When her attempts to penetrate Gouvernail's reserve fail, she expresses a frustration which is as inexplicable to her husband as to herself. Without spelling it out, Chopin shows her protagonist's attraction to Gouvernail; she just can not leave him alone, as she hovers between her desire to please and her frustration. Mrs Baroda's desire has been awakened by another man than her husband. Her growing uneasiness in the presence of Gouvernail combined with her wish to be near him signifies an attraction she can do little to withstand. When he joins her on the bench, she becomes aware of her feelings as her "physical being was for the moment predominant". She does not hear what he is saying, since she is "only drinking in the tones of his voice", as she wants "to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips" (Vol.I 335). She wants to draw him close to her and whisper against his cheek, an impulse which forces her to walk away from him.

A sense of freedom is not the initial reaction of Mrs Mallard in 'The Story of an Hour'. The news that her husband has been killed in a train accident makes her weep in her sister's arms at first. However, when left alone she is overwhelmed by a fearful new feeling coming to her, "creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the colour that filled the air" (Vol.I 353). She whispers:"free, free, free!" with increasing pulse while "coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body" (Vol.I 353). Suddenly she sees a future where she can live for herself without oppression. She finds herself looking forward to her own spring and summer days, praying that life might be long. At the same time, she remembers how the day before she had dreaded having a long life ahead of her.

In all three stories, the outcomes seem to pivot around more or less dramatic-events leading to a clearer insight into the desires of the protagonists. When Athénaïse realizes that she is pregnant, her outlook on life changes abruptly; her "whole being was steeped in a wave of ecstasy". When she

looks at herself in the mirror, “a face met hers which she seemed to see for the first time, so transfigured was it with wonder and rapture” (Vol.I 451). As she thinks of her husband , “the first purely sensuous tremor of her life swept over her”. She is impatient to be with him as her “whole passionate nature was aroused as if by a miracle”, her pregnancy functioning as a kind of sexual initiation (Vol.I 451). Although Athénaïse had liked her husband during courtship and been “rather flustered when he pressed her hands and kissed them, and kissed her lips and cheeks and eyes when she accepted” she had hardly been aware of her feelings (Vol.I 430).

Hence we end up with a traditional and socially acceptable outcome of the short story 'Athénaïse', where the “inferior female submits to the dominant male” according to Bert Bender ('Kate Chopin's Quarrel', 103). Although Chopin lets her young and immature protagonist react to her dissatisfaction with married life by running off from her husband, trying to set up a life on her own and clearly attracting another man, she returns to him when she finds out that she is carrying his child. Her identity as a sensuous being has been awakened by her pregnancy, and her erotic feelings are channelled towards her husband as she returns a more mature woman in all respectability.

Paradoxically, the resolution in 'A Respectable Woman' can be interpreted as slightly less respectable. In actual fact, we are looking at an ending which is both more ambiguous and provocative, as Chopin addresses a woman's desire for another man than her husband. Mrs Baroda finds herself wanting to “draw close to [Gouvernail] and whisper against his cheek [...] as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman” (Vol.I 335). However, she is initially both respectable and sensible. Thus, she walks away, afraid of the temptation, she refrains from telling her friend and husband and she leaves the house for a few days, since “there are some battles in life which a human being must fight alone” (Vol.I 336). In this way she takes responsibility for her own actions and clearly can take care of herself. Mrs Baroda recognizes her own desire and acts accordingly, like a respectable and conventional woman. When Mrs Baroda's husband suggests the visit be repeated the next summer, Mrs Baroda is opposed to the idea.

However, the ending has a provoking twist and the interest in the story lies in this ambiguity. Before the end of the year, Mrs Baroda has changed her mind; she wants to invite Gouvernail again. Her husband is delighted that she has overcome her dislike. Chopin ends the story with Mrs Baroda's cheerful remark: “I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him” (Vol.I 336). This, of course, leaves us with a question: Has Mrs Baroda overcome her infatuation with Gouvernail and is indifferent to his presence, whereby a visit would not present a problem any more, or is she going to be nice in another sense of the word and plans to commit adultery? Most critics argue that Mrs Baroda is planning to be unfaithful to her husband. In

contrast to the conventional female depicted in 'Athénaïse', we are then dealing with a female who actively selects a sexual partner, according to Bender ('Kate Chopin's Quarrel', 110). Chopin has thus created "one of the most daring women in American fiction" during the 1890s ('The Teeth', 119). This solution to Mrs Baroda's problem, whereby her newly-awakened desire will be satisfied, provides a highly provocative ending to Chopin's short story.

The outcome in 'The Story of an Hour' is even more extreme. During the course of an hour Mrs Mallard tastes the sweetness of freedom all alone in her room: "Free! Body and soul free!" (Vol.I 354). She finds herself looking forward to a lifetime that will "be her own" (Vol.I 354). Although "she had loved him - sometimes" she realizes that "love, the unsolved mystery" is nothing compared to the "possession of self-assertion [...] the strongest impulse of her being" (Vol.I 353). In the new life she visualizes ahead of her, Mrs Mallard will be her own master, making her own decisions and choices. According to Bender, Chopin suggests in 'The Story of an Hour' that love is inconstant and ultimately of little importance compared to self-realization ('Kate Chopin's Quarrel', 111). Thus Chopin takes her provocation one step further. The solution for Mrs Baroda might have been to take a lover in secret, to free herself of discontent and unfulfilled desire. However, for a woman like Mrs Mallard, who strives for freedom as such and self-assertion, things look different. In fact, Chopin provides only one way out, when this desire for freedom can never be fulfilled. When Mr Mallard appears, alive and well, death is the inevitable solution for this female protagonist. Mrs Mallard dies a natural death from the shock, having a weak heart. In 'The Story of an Hour', Chopin seems to point at female self-fulfilment as more valuable to women than anything else, and without it, clearly, life is not worth living. This is, of course, a strong provocation, even today.

As we have seen, Chopin provides us with three case studies in her short stories. The lives of Athénaïse, Mrs Baroda and Mrs Mallard are initially similar. When exposed to different problems, things change in the lives of these women and their search for desire and freedom take different forms. Whereas Athénaïse finds traditional fulfilment in her role as a mother, Mrs Baroda seems to have found a way to handle her desire for her husband's friend. The most provocative ending is that of Mrs Mallard, who actually dies when she finds out that she is not free after all. Although the outcomes depicted can be seen as increasingly provocative/extreme, Chopin never seems to pass judgement on any of the parties concerned. On the contrary, she remains the cool observer of womanhood at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, letting her readers think and judge for themselves. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the importance of freedom, one of the main themes, seems to go hand in hand with increasing provocation: the more important the concept of freedom seems to be for the protagonist, the more extreme the outcome of the story.

### **Artistic Combination:-*The Awakening***

Having studied the different marriages, conflicts and desires of the female protagonists of the short stories and comparing the outcomes we now shift our focus to Chopin's novel. In *The Awakening* we encounter Edna Pontellier who leads a comfortable life in New Orleans, together with her husband and their two little boys, spending their summers on Grand Isle. After two love affairs and various attempts to work as an artist, Edna drowns herself in the sea. This does not seem to amount to much, and judging by a much-quoted review from 1899, the novel can hardly be recommended: "*The Awakening* is the sad story of a Southern lady who wanted to do what she wanted to. From wanting to, she did, with disastrous consequences; but as she swims out to sea in the end, it is to be hoped that her example may lie for ever undredged" ("Recent Novels 52"). This, of course, is a simplification of the novel, which is far more complex than the short stories presented in this essay. Although the conflict, desire for freedom and solution are easily recognizable from the case studies in the short stories, they all pivot around one character in *The Awakening*, giving us an insight into the complex development of Edna, a protagonist who is more active as an initiator of change in her life than the women in the short stories. We are also dealing with a longer time span in *The Awakening*, from late summer until early spring.

Three different phases of development seem to emerge, as we study the protagonist more closely. These phases can be named in accordance with their different settings: the Grand Isle stage, the Esplanade Street stage and the "pigeon-house" stage and seem to offer a kind of sonata pattern -- the first introducing and developing the conflicts and themes, the second being slower and more meditative and the third presenting an intensified development working up to a finale. Both the Grand Isle stage and the Esplanade Street stage leave matters unresolved, leading on to the next stage. During the course of the novel, the conflict and Edna's desire for freedom seem to grow more intense in every phase as she is torn between her role as a wife, lover, mother and ultimately as an independent self-fulfilled woman with her own interests. As is indicated by the ending of the novel, Chopin does not supply a happy compromise as a solution to Edna's problems.

Mr Pontellier has much in common with Cazeau, Mr Baroda and Mr Mallard. He is a man of forty who takes good care of his family's material needs, arranging in his absence for boxes of fruits and bonbons to be sent to his wife, as "the best husband in the world" according to the ladies in Grand Isle (Vol.II 887). It goes without saying, however, that he is the master of the house, and he values his possessions, deriving great pleasure from contemplating a painting or a statuette after he has bought it (Vol.II 931). Viewing his wife as she comes back from a swim in the sea, Mr Pontellier looks at her "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property", reminding us of the

runaway slave mentioned in 'Athénaïse' (Vol.II 882). Like Cazeau, Mr Pontellier has married Edna because he fell in love with her, not the other way around, a circumstance underscoring his natural position of power and control. Generally though, he is slightly disturbed at his wife's lack of interest in his conversation (Vol. II 885). He also finds that Edna is wanting as a mother, although he finds it hard to define how, feeling rather than knowing that something is not quite right (Vol. II 887).

Edna Pontellier seems to have a rather relaxed attitude to marriage, reminding us of Mrs Baroda, “one of Chopin's earliest efforts to create Edna Pontellier” according to Bender ('Kate Chopin's Quarrel', 109). Edna is friendly with her husband, but she realizes that “no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth coloured her affection” (Vol.II 898). In fact, she seems a somewhat cool, detached character with a high sense of integrity. We learn that even as a child, Edna “lived her own small life all within herself“, apprehending “instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions“ (Vol. II 893).

Characteristically, both Mrs Baroda and Mrs Mallard lead inner lives independently of their surroundings. Thinking back on her childhood in Kentucky, Edna remembers walking across a big field, seeing the stretch of green, feeling as if she must go on forever (Vol. II 896). This summer, Edna feels as if she were there again, a thought that will reoccur in the novel (Vol. II 897). Likewise, Athénaïse wants to return to her unmarried days and childhood, as she walks along the seemingly endless fields when she plans to leave her husband and be free, an image very similar to Edna's memory.

As we shall see, the elements of conflict, freedom and love for another man are present both in the short stories and in the novel. However, the combination and interdependence of freedom and love is a development to be noted in *The Awakening*. As Edna slowly begins to see herself as a free individual in the universe, she is also able to feel desire for the first time. In actual fact, it seems as if her sense of freedom is a prerequisite for her detachment from her husband and her attachment to Robert, the landlady's son at Grand Isle. At the same time, her warming feelings for him seem to trigger a series of changes towards an existence in freedom. Another new element brought into the novel is Edna's new bodily awareness, a result of her learning to swim and thus attaining control of her body.

In the first phase of Edna's development on Grand Isle, we see the first indication of conflict in her life when she cries in the night, after her husband has fallen asleep. Mr Pontellier has awakened her on his return from Klein's hotel and in failing to get her attention, he drags her out of bed to attend to one of the children, who presumably has a fever (Vol.II 885). Why her reaction is so severe she can not say, since the experience is not uncommon in her marriage, normally amounting to nothing compared with “the abundance of her husband's kindness” (Vol.II 886).

However, an “indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish” (Vol.II 886). In 'The Story of an Hour' Mrs Mallard's feelings when she looks back upon her marriage are easily recognizable in Edna's mood.

Somehow Edna's feelings of oppression seem to result in a sudden surge for freedom. We detect a first sign of her rebellion when she stays in the hammock outside and bluntly refuses to come back into the house with her husband that night. Before she would have acted according to Mr Pontellier's wishes, unthinkingly, but now she seems just to listen to her own heart. The issue as such is not important, but its implications are. Edna shows that she has a mind and wishes of her own and she intends to yield to her own desire rather than anybody else's. Nevertheless, Mr Pontellier seems to win the battle, by and large through his generous nature. Realizing that his wife intends to stay outside, he waits, drinking wine and smoking cigars together with her on the gallery, until her physical need for sleep overtakes her.

This first scene of frustration seems to set off a series of changes in the protagonist. During the family's stay at Grand Isle, Edna's companion is Robert. The couple, who are both in their late twenties, spend much time together, each being interested in what the other says (Vol.II 884). It is interesting to note that their relationship in no way seems to bother Mr Pontellier; on the contrary, he shows great tolerance at this stage and seems pleased that Robert takes care of his wife, himself being involved in business matters or playing cards (Vol.II 883). Clearly Mr Pontellier embodies the typical Creole husband who is never jealous; “with him the gangrene passion is one which has become dwarfed by disuse” (Vol.II 891). Here, of course, Mr Baroda in 'A Respectable Woman' comes to mind, a man who also encourages his wife's relationship with another man, too sure of his own position to suspect anything at all.

As Edna's relationship with Robert develops she is more confused than anything else. She wants to go to the beach with him but then she declines, showing the same erratic behaviour as Mrs Baroda. At this stage Robert sometimes keeps away from Edna under some pretext, only to come back more devoted than before. Edna misses him “as one misses the sun on a cloudy day without having thought much about the sun when it was shining” (Vol.II 907). However, as Edna looks at Robert in the night after her first swim, her attraction to him takes a definite turn, as the moment of silence is “pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire” (Vol.II 911). Here again, we are reminded of Mrs Baroda and her unvoiced desire for Gouvernail on the bench.

However, Edna's feelings are so much more complex than Mrs Baroda's, since her love seems to be related to freedom. She is in actual fact beginning to see herself as a free individual at the same time as she is falling in love with Robert. Edna's affair seems to be the “vague, tangled,

chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” beginning of personal development, as she begins 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” (Vol.II 893). Edna is overwhelmed by a feeling of freedom; as if “borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening” on the sea trip to mass with Robert the next day, (Vol. II 915).

In *The Awakening*, Chopin lets the sea play an important part, as a foil for Edna's restrained existence, its waves signifying both freedom and lust. As Ann Heilman points out, Edna's great attraction to the sea is “its limitless expanse [offering] welcome release from her feeling of domestic confinement” (93). All summer, she has been trying to learn how to swim. When she eventually succeeds, she is like a child who walks for the first time, suddenly realizing its powers. A feeling of exultation overcomes her and she grows “daring and reckless, overestimating her strength” wanting “to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Vol.II 908). She seems to be “reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (Vol.II 908). Clearly, the image of Edna learning to swim in the sea runs parallel to her yearning for freedom.

Learning to swim also has other implications. Being in control of her body, Edna becomes “aware of its potential for pleasure and learns to claim her right to self-determination” according to Heilman (87). It is as if her swimming and attraction to Robert have brought about a bodily awareness she has not experienced before; she seems to see her round arms for the first time as she rubs them together (Vol.II 918). The scene reminds us of Athénaïse, who seems to see herself in the mirror for the first time, on finding out that she is pregnant.

However, the sea does not only function as an image of freedom and bodily awareness. It also functions as an omen of what might happen if the quest for freedom be taken too far; as Edna looks back on the shore having overestimated her own strength on a swim trip, “a quick vision of death smote her soul” before she manages to swim back again (Vol.II 908). In 'The Story of an Hour', Mrs Mallard's first notion of freedom comes to her through an affinity with nature; the sky, sounds and scents fill her being as she looks into the future. Although Mrs Mallard's experience also forebodes death as in novel, the absorption by the forces of nature, as indicated by the sea in *The Awakening*, is clearly of another dimension.

In this first phase on Grand Isle, we have seen how a number of elements are intertwined, affecting Edna's development. A slight frustration with her marriage sets off Edna's rebellion and surge for freedom. These feelings in turn seem to wake her desire for Robert together with a new bodily awareness provided by the sea and her learning to swim in it. All three elements seem to go hand in hand, Edna's new feeling of freedom and bodily awareness being conditions for her love and vice versa. When Robert leaves for Mexico, Edna feels forlorn. She realizes that she has been

“denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded” and it seems as if the brightness and colour has been taken away from her life (Vol.II 927). We detect a Mrs Baroda who has come to the insight that she wants her husband's friend to visit again. As we reach the end of the phase at Grand Isle, nothing is resolved. However, things change with the family's return to the city.

The second phase of the novel is slower and more meditative. Edna seems to be drifting, contemplating her future. Back in Esplanade Street in New Orleans, Edna's quest for freedom slowly becomes the more dominating force in her life. Her summer experiences seem to have acted as a trigger for some radical development, as she sets about changing her life away from conventionality. In her, we begin to see an Athénaïse who is also an initiator of change on a small scale, and “something of [her] rebellious nature that Chopin was later to develop more fully in the worldly Edna Pontellier”, as Nancy A. Walker points out (221).

The first noticeable change is when Edna leaves the house on her reception day, simply because she feels like it. True to her usual habit, she has been receiving visitors every Tuesday for the six years of her marriage, but now she has just had enough of it. Edna also starts to neglect her household duties, wandering about the streets, going to the races and drifting about in search of freedom. This change is, of course, incomprehensible to Mr Pontellier, who worries about the effects his wife's behaviour might have on business (Vol.II 932). At this point, he is beginning to feel uneasy about Edna, and he just does not know what to make of things. Being concerned about her mental health, Mr Pontellier consults the family doctor, who advises him to leave his wife be. Clearly he wants what is best for his wife, and in his magnanimity he reminds us of Cazeau, who gave his wife time to make up her mind. Interestingly, this is one of the few places in the novel where Chopin interprets Edna's development, as she comments on Mr Pontellier's failure to see that “she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Vol.II 939).

Another irritating disturbance and cause of conflict to Mr Pontellier is Edna's growing interest in an occupation of her own. During the summer Edna is seen sketching and dabbling in an amateur fashion, something which offers her a sense of satisfaction no other employment gives her (Vol. II 891). Back in New Orleans, she takes up her painting again and seems to find satisfaction in the work itself (Vol.II 956). Satisfaction brought about by a creative process is something Chopin only describes in *The Awakening*. Edna's interest in painting increases as her life changes and she becomes more independent. In fact, like swimming, painting seems to become a means of expressing her desire for freedom. As Heilmann points out, painting is a way for Edna to “create her own private space” (93). Later, she sells some of her work, the little money it brings offering her some independence. In the three short stories, there is no mention of any occupation outside the

realm of the family, except for Athénaïse's naive plans to get a job in order to support herself. In 'A Respectable Woman' and in 'The Story of an Hour', individual interests have not been included in the protagonists' dreams of freedom; they never go that far in their personal development.

Another development in Edna's life is music. Although Edna does not play an instrument herself, music and its associations seem to become more important to her as her desire for freedom increases. When she listens to her friend, Madame Ratignolle, playing the tune "Solitude", she sees a man in her mind, standing naked on the seashore in "hopeless resignation" as he looks towards "a distant bird winging its flight away from him", an image of what is about to happen (Vol.II 906). Later, when Mademoiselle Reisz, the pianist, plays the piano, Edna's reaction has changed. She sees no pictures but the tones strike a tremor down her spine, and "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it" as she trembles, chokes and is blinded by tears (Vol.II 906). On hearing music that had been played during the summer, a mixture of desire and sadness fills Edna, as she thinks back of Robert. There is no mention of music in the three short stories, since, clearly, music as an enhancer of desire is a theme Chopin has developed in *The Awakening*.

So far, we have encountered a number of similar elements in both the short stories and in *The Awakening*. All the protagonists lead normal and harmonious lives but show signs of dissatisfaction. They all yearn for freedom and try to change their lives, with different consequences as a result. As in the short stories, the importance of freedom in *The Awakening* seems to go hand in hand with the protagonist's increasing rebellion and provocation. In the novel there seems to be an interdependence between love of another man and freedom, the latter becoming the more important element as the protagonist develops. The more important the concept of freedom becomes for Edna, the more extreme are her initiatives to change her life.

We begin to really see the interdependence of love and freedom towards the end of the second phase. When Mr Pontellier has left for New York and her children are at their grandmother's, Edna relishes being alone, breathing "a big, genuine sigh of relief" as an "unfamiliar but very delicious" feeling comes over her (Vol.II 955). She walks through the house, as if seeing it for the first time, making herself at home as Athénaïse did in the house of Sylvie. She thinks about the time which is completely her own, just like Mrs Mallard in 'The Story of an Hour', feeling restful as she has never done before (Vol.II 956).

In the third phase of the novel we find an intensified development, leading up to a grand finale as Edna seems to want her marriage to end. In search of outward freedom and independence, she eventually takes the scandalous step to move to the "pigeon-house" around the corner, away from the family's mansion that never seemed like hers. She only takes her own belongings and plans

to earn her own keep by selling sketches in addition to money from her mother's estate and the races. She is “resolved never again to belong to another than herself”, reminding us both of Athénaïse, who moved away to live by herself, and Mrs Mallard (Vol:II 963). She is clearly as fed up with her married state as Athénaïse, and when Madame Ratignolle suggests the idea that Mr Pontellier should stay home more, Edna replies: “What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other?” (Vol.II 951). Edna's view, that weddings are “the most lamentable spectacles on earth” reminds us again of Athénaïse thoughts about marriage (Vol.II 948). At the farewell dinner at her husband's house, Edna has changed into an almost “regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (Vol.II 972). As she sits at the table, she is overcome with a sense of longing for the unattainable, reminding us of Mrs Mallard in her chair.

When Mr Pontellier learns that his wife intends to move out of their house, he sends her a letter of disapproval. However, he handles the situation with his usual tact and businesslike manner, arranging for the house to be redecorated, whereby Edna's move seems part of the arrangement (Vol.II 977). Mr Pontellier's magnanimous and diplomatic behaviour falls well into the pattern of nice husbands, even though he first and foremost seems to have his own business interests at heart, wanting to avoid a scandal. Of course, the reason for Mr Pontellier's civility is not good nature alone. As head of the household, he has a natural position of power over the family's wealth. He takes care of Edna, as he does of his other properties, in the best way he sees fit. Again Cazeau comes to mind.

On hearing that Edna is moving out, Mademoiselle Reisz perceptively describes Edna's predicament. She touches her shoulder blades to see if her wings are strong, remarking: “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (Vol.II 966). Edna is defying conventions and Chopin reminds us of the difficulties facing a woman who goes against the current. However, as Edna descends the social scale, she has a sense of rising spiritually and as she relieves herself from obligations, her strength and growth as an individual increase (Vol.II 978).

Edna's new self-assurance, enhanced by her independent life in her own house, affects her relationship to other men. Although Robert is still close to her heart, the desire awakened by him has changed her attitude to the opposite sex. At this point she is described as being “devoid of coquetry” as compared to Madame Ratignolle and when one or two men awaken her interest, she selects them (Vol.II 951). When Edna meets Alcée Arobin on the race course, he notices the change that has taken place in her. She is not as “unapproachable” as he remembers, but the “fever of the game flamed in her cheeks and eyes, [getting] into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant” as he “caught the contagion of excitement which drew him to Edna like a magnet” (Vol.II 957). A

known womaniser, Arobin intuitively senses that Edna is ready to have an affair, anticipating her awakened sensuousness as he kisses her hand. Although he means nothing to her, “the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her” (Vol. II 961). Hardly a day passes without her seeing him as they become “intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps”, his appealing to “the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (Vol.II 961). Again Mrs Baroda comes to mind, when she can not move away from the sensuous voice of her husband's friend. Like her, Edna “will be determined to select the lover she desires”, according to Bender ('The Teeth', 120), who points out that eventually, and especially with Edna, “Chopin's women select on the basis of their own sexual desires” ('The Teeth', 119).

Edna's relationship with Arobin is a whole new experience for her and an erotic awakening. With Robert she feels the first tinge of desire; with Arobin she gives expression to her erotic being. When Arobin kisses her, it is the first kiss of her life to which her nature really responds, “a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Vol.II 967). As her attraction to Arobin increases she feels “as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes” (Vol.II 967). Arobin has “detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom” (Vol.II 989). However, a certain lethargy seems to overcome Edna, when she realizes that “it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her” (Vol.II 967). She seems to comprehend the difference between desire and love, as she “abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference” (Vol.II 988). According to Bender, she “will become depressed by what had only puzzled Mrs Mallard: the meaninglessness of love” ('The Teeth', 120). Edna has developed and is able “to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality” (Vol.II 967). She has come to the insight that desire does not necessarily include love and this newly developed perspicacity seems to depress her.

Even though Edna is intimate with Arobin, she still thinks about Robert. In a conversation with Mademoiselle Reisz, selection is mentioned again when she admits to being in love with Robert. Only this time, she disheartedly questions her ability to select when in love (Vol.II 964). It is important to note that selection as such is an issue for Edna, the fact that she is able to make her own choice, like Mrs Baroda selected Gouvernail. At the prospect of meeting Robert again, Edna seems to show the same broad-minded come-what-may attitude as Mrs Baroda. Robert's presence will just make her “feel glad and happy to be alive” (Vol.II 965).

When Robert comes back from Mexico, her feelings for him are unaltered. He looks at her with “the same glance which had penetrated to the sleeping places of her soul and awakened them” (Vol.II 982). However, he seemed nearer to her when he was in Mexico (Vol.II 987). Characterized by a new bodily awareness she takes the initiative to a kiss, “ a soft, cool, delicate kiss” (Vol.II

991). Clearly Edna loves Robert and her feelings are reciprocated. They are the reason for Robert having left her in the first place, and they are the reason why he leaves her again. Furthermore, Edna's new insight puzzles him: As Edna goes off to be with Madame Ratignolle when she gives birth, she tells him that she is no longer one of her husband's possessions to dispose of or not: "I give myself where I choose" (Vol.II 992). Certainly, Edna's relationships to Robert, the man she loves, and Arobin, her lover, have had great implications for her life. However Edna seems to have come to a very important conclusion: her freedom is more important. She is the one to decide when, how and to whom she gives herself.

In *The Awakening* Chopin clearly addresses the problem of motherhood, contrasting Adèle Ratignolle, "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm", who produces a baby every other year, with Mrs Pontellier who is not a "mother-woman" at all, her little boys having learnt not to run to their mother's arms for comfort (Vol.II 888). This does not mean that Edna does not love her children. She does in an "uneven, impulsive way", sometimes gathering them with passion to her heart. Knowing, however, that their material needs are met, she sometimes forgets them, feeling a relief in their absence (Vol.II 899). In a discussion with Madame Ratignolle, Edna shocks her friend with the insight she is slowly coming to, that she would not sacrifice herself for her children: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Vol.II 929). The phrase sounds familiar. Mrs Mallard looks forward to living for herself in her hour of freedom. However, in the three short stories discussed in this essay, motherhood has but one implication: this is what finally awakens Athénaïse's desire for her husband. Mrs Baroda and Mrs Mallard are both childless, and the problem of children in the lives of women desiring a lover or yearning for freedom is thereby avoided. At that stage of her development, Chopin did not dare to depict a mother's desire in Mrs Baroda, as she finally does in Edna, according to Bender (*Kate Chopin's Quarrel*, 110). It is in *The Awakening* that Chopin makes us acquainted with a mother, desiring both another man and personal fulfilment in her search for freedom, hereby presenting the complexity of women's lives to its full extent.

This complicated problem brings us to the end of *The Awakening*. We have seen how the novel has addressed the issues of the short stories, combined them, developed them and added to them. The end of the novel seems to be the inevitable conclusion: there is no reconciliation, no solution is possible; a "certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, -- the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (Vol.II 893). Interestingly, Chopin succeeds in conveying this message without pointing her finger at a culprit, without saying who is at fault and without making any moral judgements, according to Emily Toth (13). She just presents the problem of womanhood.

Leaving Madame Ratignolle in the morning after her delivery, Edna tells the doctor that she

is not going to be forced into doing anything (Vol.II 995). She looks back on years that seem like dreams; she has been sleeping but now she is awake. Edna does not want anything but her own way, even if this means that she has to “trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others” (Vol.II 996). One problem remains though: she does not want “to trample upon the little lives” (Vol.II 996) and she remembers Madame Ratignolle asking her to think of the children.

Back on Grand Isle, Edna “has done all the thinking which was necessary” as she walks down to the beach and, as Marianne Hirsch points out, she “can find no external person or place that could contain or comprehend her newfound self” (43). She has come to the conclusion that there would be others after Arobin and that even Robert will cease to be important to her. That life would be possible for her, were it not for the children, whose “power looms, memorably, in its most extreme form” according to Pamela Knights (51). The children “appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days” (Vol.II 999). The fact remains: Edna can give her life for her children but not herself.

Since she is not prepared to tread on her children and she can not give herself for them, she has to give her life. As for Mrs Mallard, only one solution is possible for Edna. The major difference is, of course, the development of thought, the logic and analysis supplied in *The Awakening* and the fact that Edna herself is as responsible for taking her own life, as she is for all the other changes in her life. However, we have travelled with Edna on her journey and we understand her until the bitter end. Thus, Chopin lets Edna return to the sea, that image of Eros and freedom described in the novel:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (Vol. II 893)

The voice of the sea is seductive, as Edna stands naked on the beach like a “new-born creature”. She is “at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her” (Vol.II 1000) When she walks into the sea she is returning to her youth, as Knights points out (53), “thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end”, just as she did in the beginning of the novel, just like Athénaïse (Vol.II 1000). As she sinks, she thinks that her husband and children should not have thought that they could possess her -- body and soul.

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to study Kate Chopin's portraits of women in three short stories, 'The Story of an Hour', 'A Respectable Woman', 'Athénaïse' and the novel *The Awakening*. Although the short stories are little masterpieces in their own right, we have looked at them in relation to the novel. Seen as case studies to be developed further in *The Awakening*, they have been compared in terms of the protagonists' search for fulfilment and freedom, and the increasingly provocative outcomes of the short stories. The essay argues that the main conflict and ending of *The Awakening* is a development and combination of the conflicts and resolutions in the three short stories.

As we have seen, there are a number of similar elements in both the short stories and in *The Awakening*. The main characters lead normal and relatively happy lives with agreeable husbands but seem dissatisfied nevertheless, something which leads to conflicts in the short stories as well as the novel. Athénaïse is an immature young girl who has married too young and just can not stand having her husband around all the time. In 'A Respectable Woman', Mrs Baroda's problem seems to be the visit of her husband's friend and the fact that she is falling in love with him, without being aware of it herself. Mrs Mallard in 'The Story of an Hour' realizes the repression in her marriage. In *The Awakening* Edna Pontellier's conflict is a combination of the three. She is irritated with her husband and feels oppressed by him. At the same time she falls in love with a another man.

As the female protagonists rebel, the concepts of fulfilment and freedom seem to be important to all four. However, there seems to be a difference in degree. Athénaïse runs away from her husband and seems to enjoy a few weeks of freedom on her own. Mrs Baroda leaves home in order to ponder the problem with her husband's friend and Mrs Mallard feels total bliss at the prospect of living a life in freedom after her husband's death. For Edna, freedom becomes increasingly important as she refuses to partake in the conventional life led by her husband and eventually moves out. Accentuating the concept of freedom in *The Awakening*, Chopin has also brought elements into the novel that are not present in the short stories: Edna achieves a new bodily awareness by learning to swim, she enjoys music as an enhancer of her feelings and she pursues her artistic talents by painting, something which also brings her a little income.

The sexual awakening of the protagonists is also increasingly provocative. Whereas Athénaïse is an innocent child, who is not able to detect any signs of sexual tension until the end of the story, Mrs Baroda's desire is awakened by her husband's friend. Gouvernail is present as a potential lover in both these stories, but no actual adultery is committed. Edna takes her desires a step further than the women in the short stories. She experiences the first tinge of desire with another man than her husband, she falls in love with him but she is awakened sexually by yet

another man, with whom she has an affair.

In 'Athénaïse' there is a conventional solution as the protagonist's pregnancy makes her give up her freedom and return to her husband. Interestingly, her condition also seems to awaken her desire for her husband. Mrs Baroda's solution is more unconventional in that she seems to be planning to commit adultery in a discrete fashion, finding freedom within the framework of marriage. The outcome of 'The Story of an Hour' is more extreme. On finding out that she is not free after all, Mrs Mallard dies a natural death on her husband's return. Having hoped for freedom for an hour, it seems as if she just cannot cope with the oppression of marriage any more. The outcome of *The Awakening* is, of course, a combination of the three and the most provocative. Edna has moved out, taken a lover or two and lives a free life. However, she comes to the conclusion that her life in freedom is impossible, because she has children. Since Edna can give her life for her children but not herself, only one option remains: she chooses to take her own life.

As we have seen, Chopin takes her ideas a step further in *The Awakening*, developing and combining the problems facing Edna. We find traces of the short stories all through the novel, some of which have been pointed out in the essay. In the *The Awakening*, there seems to be a heightened interdependence of elements, such as freedom being a condition for love and vice versa. The plot is also more complex and the protagonist goes through three different phases of development. Characteristically, the protagonist in *The Awakening* is more active as an initiator of change in her life. Clearly, Chopin's portrait of a female protagonist has undergone a change: Edna is a much stronger woman than the female characters in the short stories. Apart from the complexity of plot and character, there are also a number of new elements present in *The Awakening*, elements that all in some way seem to relate to Edna's quest for freedom: swimming, painting, music and, last but not least, the problem of motherhood. In the short stories 'Athénaïse', 'A Respectable Woman', 'The Story of an Hour' and the novel *The Awakening*, the author seems to have played with her characters, testing and trying out what might happen in a given circumstance. She seems to have grown bolder over the years as she combines her protagonists in Edna Pontellier, addressing the complex and intricate puzzle of womanhood, still unsolved today.

When Chopin's work was published in the 1890s, she was praised for her ability to depict the local and picturesque and criticised for the immoral ending of *The Awakening*. Since critical reappraisal of Chopin began in the 60s, the categorisation of her work has changed to a recognition of wider perspectives. From a 2009 perspective, Elizabeth Nolan draws our attention to Chopin's writing "in terms of its sophisticated engagements with romanticism, transcendentalism, literary realism, naturalism and New Woman fiction and as anticipating the concerns of feminism and literary modernism", considering Chopin a "ground-breaking artist"(Nolan 119). Although the

women studied in this essay move within the Creole society of the 1890s, their quests for freedom have larger implications beyond their gender, time and place. Even though her protagonists are women, it is important to note that Chopin's works do not only focus on the feminine issue as such. On the contrary, her writings are imbued with her unbiased views on humanity, and she does not take sides with either women or men. Thus, the dilemmas presented are part of the larger human problem of finding a compromise between our desire for freedom and our need for commitment. In this day and age of freedom for both sexes, this universal problem seems more urgent than ever.

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