

KATE CHOPIN

It has been said that great fiction does not so much produce an effect as an after-effect, a lingering meditative mood that alters however mildly our sensibility.

She was born in Saint Louis in 1850 as Kate O'Flaherty, three-quarters Irish, but the remaining fourth was the imaginatively dominant element. Her Creole grandmother lived with the family in Saint Louis and exercised a great influence on Kate. The dominance of the Creole in her mind and imagination was sealed when she married Oscar Chopin in 1870 and was taken off to New Orleans by her husband, where they lived for nine years during which Kate had five sons. When Oscar met with hard times as a cotton broker, they moved to his family's property in Natchitoches Parish. Ensnared in Cloutierville, Kate had a daughter and it was there, in 1882, that Oscar died of malaria. In 1884, she returned with her family to Saint Louis.

When eventually she began to write, those fourteen years in Louisiana, particularly the three years in Cloutierville, provided the country of her imagination. She began writing short stories around 1890, using Creole settings and often the *patois* of her characters. Her writing career came to an end when her third novel *The Awakening* so shocked some readers that it was removed from the Saint Louis library and Kate was roundly condemned far and wide.

This is the woman who in recent years has been taken up by feminists and depicted as a celebrant of unbridled female passion and a woman's right to enjoy her body, etc. etc. Almost all recent commentary on Kate Chopin anachronistically enlists her in the gender wars. What did earlier readers make of her?

By and large, she wasn't read much. In 1941, a dissertation was written at Notre Dame, under the direction of the legendary Frank O'Malley, and there is an earlier important book by Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* that appeared in 1932. Given the spin that has recently been put on her work, it is interesting to see what earlier critics had to say about this remarkable woman and her literary career which lasted approximately ten years, from 1889 to 1899 when her controversial last novel appeared.

Like Willa Cather, Chopin often puts before the reader strong female characters. The influence of her grandmother and her own effort to continue running her husband's store after his death, gave her a practical sense of what a woman can do. But this is scarcely the only theme of her writing.

"Odalie Misses Mass" is a delightful little tale of a young girl's sitting with the senile Aunt Pinky while the others go off to Mass. The old Black woman, who had given her life to the family, murmurs to the girl that those she cared for do not visit her now. "Don' fret, Aunt Pinky -- I'm goin'

-- to stay with -- you." "No pussun nuva come back 'cep' you." The girl nods off and when she wakes the old woman is dead. Typically, Chopin lets the story speak for itself, no moral is drawn.

In such Creole stories, Kate Chopin puts vividly before the reader a vignette that means much more than it says. It has been said that great fiction does not so much produce an effect as an after-effect, a lingering meditative mood that alters however mildly our sensibility. With many of the Creole stories, Kate Chopin produces such an after-effect.

Stories like "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm", called a sequel to the former, prefigure the novel *The Awakening*. The sequel presents an adulterous interlude between Alcée and Calixta. The incident is told with frank detail and there are no consequences which diminish Calixta's acceptance of this moment of pleasure. Alcée writes reassuringly to his absent wife, telling her there is no need to hurry home, and the story ends with the wife reading the letter and reflecting that she can forego their intimate conjugal life for a time. "So the storm passed and everyone was happy."

It was Kate Chopin's presentation of a woman indulging her passions with impunity that caught the eye of feminists, some of whom seem to think that this had never before been done in fiction, forgetful apparently of the Brontes. Is it fair to this writer to see her as giving us "the exultation of passion in the dark heart of the wilderness?"

If "The Storm" leaves its sinners overtly unpunished, the same can hardly be said for the novel that elicited such a negative reaction. In *The Awakening*, Edna, a Presbyterian, marries a Creole Catholic, Leonce Pontellier, whose treatment of her is correct but empty, and her sense of dissatisfaction is given shape when she falls in love with Robert who, however, soon goes away. She then engages in a purely sensual affair with Alcée which leaves her even more dissatisfied. Robert returns, she declares her love to him and, in the midst of the declaration, is called away to assist at a birth. She ponders the claim of her children and her love for Robert, only to find that he has not awaited her return. His note reads, "Good-by -- because I love you." She then commits suicide by swimming out to sea until her strength gives out. The novel ends with her aware of sounds from shore. The end. No comment.

Kate Chopin was stunned by the shocked reaction to her novel. In a humorous response, she suggested that she had no idea Edna would make such a mess of things -- "working out her own damnation as she did" -- but by the time she realized it, the story was half done.

Rankin sees the influence of D'Anunzio and the morbidity of the *fin de siècle* on the novel he calls "exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation."

Somewhere between this estimate and the feminist assumption that she means to glorify passion may lie the real truth about Kate Chopin. She

was after all a Catholic who saw her heroine as damned. To show the plausibility of adultery and its fleeting attractions is hardly questionable. In many ways the novel prefigures Greene's *Heart of the Matter*. The feminist critic imagines that Chopin gives us in the heroine of *The Awakening* a model of female behavior, that the woman who betrays her husband and children, her lover and herself, is somehow the better for it. Surely it is libelous to attribute such nonsense to Kate O'Flaherty Chopin.