Kate Chopin: Writing the Body and Female Sensuality in 19th Century American Literature

by

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The body and how to write about it has become a site of controversy in the field of feminist literary criticism, with both French and Anglo-American feminists taking up the issue of female embodiment in texts. Because women have suffered the repression of their bodies as well as their creativity by society, these two forms of repression are linked; the body becomes a source of inspiration for the creativity of the woman writer. To write the body in literature is to write women into history, into literature, writing the body unmasks female experiences and validates them as well.

Kate Chopin was an American writer who dared to live as a body, her personal experiences heavily influencing the creation of the female characters in her stories. Chopin, a widow not immune to desire, pursued an affair with a married man from which the storyline of *The Awakening* is derived. Her short story, "The Falling in Love of Fedora" that tells of a passionate kiss between two women (only one is willing) is suggested to be derived from a personal experience within the Chopin family. Daring to break the rules in real life led to a world of fiction in which women were free to explore their sensuality and autoeroticism.

No discussion of feminist literary criticism would be complete without mentioning Virginia Woolf's contribution to the field. Her essay, "Professions For Women," defines the difficulties of writing the body for the female writer and is useful in demonstrating the

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1 'The references to Chopin’s historical background and that of her texts was found in Emily Toth’s introduction to *A Vocation and A Voice* and her book, *Kate Chopin.*
revolutionary nature of Chopin’s work and her difficulty in finding an audience for her work. As a British writer who began to write several years after Chopin, Woolf struggled with the need to write about her body and the social constraints that kept her from doing so. Indeed, it is possible to see the similar tensions that exist in the works of both women regarding the expression of the female body, and the strong social constraints of the period that denied women real life and literary embodiment.

Virginia Woolf writes of the ideological “Angel of the House” that ruled a woman’s world during and prior to the time in which she was writing, the early 1900’s. It was an ever-present force that acted as a conscience to her actions. She describes the “Angel of the House” as “immensely charming. She [is] utterly unselfish. She excel[s] in the difficult arts of family life....She [is] so constituted that she never [has] a mind or wish of her own” (285). Much the same can be said for women’s bodies. To be an “Angel of the House” is to deny possession of one’s body, to be a disembodied “angel.” Woolf’s essay details how she and other women in the early 1900’s were controlled by this force, denied the right to think for themselves and to express themselves as physical beings apart from the domestic realm.

Woolf concludes in her essay that she has not solved the problem of “telling the truth about [her] own experiences as a body” (288). In fact, she doubts that “any woman has solved it. The obstacles against her are immensely powerful” (288). Chopin was not able to get all of her work published in her lifetime, particularly her short stories featured in A Vocation and A Voice; although written between the years 1893-1900, several stories were not published until 1969. In the short stories that proceeded the creation of The
_Awakening_, her heroines are able to explore their physical pleasures without the grim consequences that are apparent in her later work. In “The Unexpected,” Dorthea flees from her betrothed and a delicious sense of freedom takes over her body upon her escape, and “The Falling in Love of Fedora” recounts the story of Fedora’s passionate kiss with her future sister-in-law, with both stories ending on notes of pleasure. And, this is true of Chopin as well, as her later works, in particular her novel, _The Awakening_ (1899), and the short story, “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (1897), end on rather dismal notes, negating the previous period of physical pleasure. There is a sense of delusion regarding the expression of the female body in these works when compared to her earlier works. The issue of the body, then, is a source of tension; the heroines of these works have experiences of the body that cannot be integrated into their lives and the alternatives for these women are grim indeed. But, unlike Woolf who “killed” the “Angel of the House,” Chopin’s later heroines can only return to the drudgery of their former existence, secretly longing to escape or choose death.

Woolf’s essay highlights the difficulties facing women writers during that period of history, explaining the problematic issue of writing the female body. The need to write the body derives from the need to write women’s stories and experiences. Rarely at that time were women’s stories told from their perspective; stories that were accepted and celebrated were written by men. There is a crucial link between stories and selves as well as with identity and the ability to voice it. Women have not had their stories told. Consequently, they have been denied an active role in shaping and expressing their experiences of self, body, or life. To write the female body into literature is to write women into history.
During her lifetime, Kate Chopin was able to break down some, but not all, of the barriers facing women writers, succeeding in expressing the needs of the female body, and creating a standard of experience with which women can identify and measure their experiences. Carol Christ and Elaine Showalter have theorized that *The Awakening* is a solitary and revolutionary work that expresses the depth and importance of female sensuality and spirituality. While Christ perceives women’s associations with the body to be negative as it denies women spirituality, Showalter begins to make some headway with the importance of female embodiment in literature. However, it is the work of Helene Cixous that celebrates women’s association with the body and emphasizes the importance of Chopin’s revolutionary writing. I will be looking at these three approaches in what follows.

**Body and Spirit**

Carol Christ focuses on women writers and the quest for spirituality in her book, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, believing that “women’s stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience....Without stories [a woman] cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been spiritual or religious” (1). The telling of stories creates an existence and validity of women’s experiences of the body and the soul. “Without stories there a sense that a woman is not alive” (6); by “continually trying to fit her possibilities into stories where her reality is not acknowledged, a woman experiences nothingness, and perhaps contemplates suicide” (7).

In her analysis of *The Awakening*, Christ sets up two kinds of quests that are part of Edna’s awakening, the social and the spiritual. Women’s social quests concern the
“struggle to gain respect, equality, and freedom in society—in work, in politics, and in relationships with women, men, and children....She searches to find nonoppressive sexual relationships, new visions of mothering, creative work, and equal rights as a citizen” (8).

The social quest is deeply rooted in the realm of the body. The spiritual quest, on the other hand, is concerned with the depths of the soul and position in the universe, and involves moments of solitude and contemplation. Christ places her emphasis on the spiritual quest as she views women’s historical associations with the body to be negative as well as detrimental to women’s souls as they have been denied spirituality. She envisions the experiences of the physical body to be the fountainhead for the experiences of the soul.

Edna’s spiritual awakening is mediated through experiences of sexuality and sensuality, ultimately leading to a deeper experience of her soul and a desire for wholeness, a total sexual and creative life as a woman. Her suicide at the end of the novel brings to an end this search for wholeness. The ending is ambiguous, wavering between defeat and triumph, and Christ “suggest[s] that the clue lies in the distinction between the spiritual and social quest. Edna’s suicide reflects spiritual triumph but social defeat. Chopin’s novel shows that spiritual awakening without social support can lead to tragedy” (27).

Consequently, Christ believes that “Chopin’s choice of physical death for her character rather than the alternative of spiritual death by returning to a conventional life reflects Chopin’s courageous affirmation of women’s awakening” (39). However, Edna’s experience with the sea does not transcend the body. Instead, the experience is extremely physical, sensual and sexual, revealing the power of her body.
While Christ recognizes the importance of the physical experience, she gives precedence to the experiences of the soul. Her analysis is a fitting discussion of the novel as a singular Chopin work. However, her theory begins to falter when applied to Chopin’s works as a whole. Applying Christ’s analysis to “A Pair of Silk Stockings” results in a determination that the ending is a spiritual death for Mrs. Sommers. Edna might be seeking spiritual fulfillment, but it is the experiences of the body that become a recurrent theme. It is the life of that body that gives life to the soul; wholeness depends upon the awakening of the body.

Awakenings to the Body: Autoeroticism and Female Friendship

“Chopin went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women’s longing for sexual and personal emancipation” (Showalter 170) and this is a theme that appears not only in The Awakening but in her short stories as well: “the nineteenth-century idea of female ‘passionlessness’--the belief that women did not have the same sexual desires as men--had advantages as well as disadvantages for women. It reinforced the notion that women were the purer and more spiritual sex” (172). Yet, the homosocial world between women allowed for much intimacy between women. Hence, the exploration and representation of female sexual pleasure and sensuality were not to be found in relationships between men and women, but rather between women.

2 Christ, however, does say that the ambiguous and “tragic ending seems to reflect Chopin’s view that the path to women’s liberation is far more difficult and complex than some nineteenth-century feminists had alleged and requires a soul stronger than many women possess” (39).
3 Elaine Showalter believed The Awakening to be a radical book that explored female sexuality, a topic unheard of at the time, focusing her discussion entirely on the novel and not taking into consideration Chopin’s earlier work. Showalter writes, “we have only these tantalizing fragments [reference to a poem by Chopin to her friend Kitty Garesche] to hint at the directions Chopin’s work might have taken if The Awakening had been a critical success or even succes de scandale, and if her career had not been cut off by an early death” (188).
It is therefore not surprising that Edna is awakened first by a woman and not a man. It is Adele Ratignollet that arouses a physical response in Edna. Indeed, “the excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty” (32).

Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little fondly with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, “Pauvre cherie. The action was at first a little confusing for Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole. (35)

This physical moment at the beach puts Edna on the path to self-awareness. Being with Adele makes Edna feel alive and intoxicated.

What exists between Edna and Adele is something more than physical attraction, it is a “bond... which we might as well call love” (32). The relationship between these two women is so strong that Edna is willing to leave the man she has lusted after the entire novel to be with Adele. Chopin breaks what Cixous calls the “taboo of the pregnant woman” with her realistic and physical description of childbirth. Adele’s face “is drawn and pinched, her sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural” (130) and the sweat begins to “gather in beads on her white forehead” (131). The birth scene allows for an even greater moment of intimacy than that shared on the beach. Edna is witness and a part of a life/death scene, feeling Adele’s pain and causing her to realize that her relationships with her husband,

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4 Although Showalter emphasizes the significance of the relationships between women, she suggests that the relationship between Adele and Edna is purely maternal and sisterly whereas the motives of Mademoiselle Reisz are “pervasive” and sexual in nature.
Arobin, and Robert have been meaningless. Significantly, it is Adele’s words and the intimacy that they have shared that Edna remembers on her last trip to the sea.

"Most important, where previous works ignored sexuality or spiritualized it through maternity, *The Awakening* is insistently sexual, explicitly involved with the body and self-awareness through physical awareness" (Showalter 178). This novel celebrates the female body and its experience through Edna’s discovery of herself as a sexual being and her longing for autonomy. Edna begins to see herself as a body on *Cheniere Caminada*, exploring its limits and desires. "She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh" (55-56). Her sensuality is masturbatory as she begins to explore the terrain of her body and at the same time she begins to exude a sensuality that others begin to notice; Dr. Mandelet describes Edna as “some beautiful animal waking up in the sun” (90), and others note the glow in her skin and suppleness of her body.

**Cixous and the Celebration of the Female Form**

Cixous’ theory is highly applicable to Chopin, since it explores the female realm that Chopin created in her texts, one that emphasizes the female body and recognizes its primacy in female experiences. To begin looking at Helene Cixous’ theory of writing the body is to tackle a vast amount of theory and ideas. Indeed, I am only looking at “Sorties” in *Newly Born Woman* and “The Laugh of the Medusa,” part of which appears in *Newly Born Woman*. Thus, it is somehow necessary to make a general explanation of her work and the sections of it that I am using in this essay. Cixous’ concept of feminine writing is related to
differance, that *écriture féminine* is based on the difference of women's bodies from that of men, and undermines the binary oppositions in language and phallocentric logic. Her theoretical project is an effort to proclaim woman as a source of power to create a new feminine language that will subvert the patriarchal binary schemes that oppress and silence women. She finds this subversion of the symbolic in the connection between the writing by women and their bodies. Woman is entirely present in her text and it becomes an extension of her body; there is something primal and maternal in her voice.

The term “writing the body” has as duality of meaning: writing the language and rhythms of the body, which seems to be much of the focus of her works, and literally writing the female experience of the body. While I realize that much of Cixous’ work deals with linguistics and the realization of a feminine language, in this essay, I am focusing on the latter to avoid some of the essentialism of the first and to serve as a resonator for Chopin’s texts. Cixous’s discussion of the body opens doors for deeper interpretation of Edna’s experience and the experience of the woman writing the text. Chopin based several story lines on her own experiences of her body and Cixous’ theory demonstrates why it is so important that Chopin has done what she has done.

In society, discourses are gendered, and the split between the mind and the body creates a binary in which men are identified with thought and reason, and women with body and emotion. What Cixous’ theory creates is an affirmation of these associations. “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display--the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions”
(Laugh 338). Because of patriarchal binaries, women have never truly owned their bodies or been given choices; to reclaim the female body is to strive for power.

In the preface to Helene Cixous: A Reader, Cixous writes, “I scrutinize ‘the movements of the soul,’ from close up, I observe the passions at the moment they manifest themselves such as they express themselves, translate themselves, first of all in our bodies” (xix). Passions and spirituality stem from the body, and Cixous wishes to study the source of these movements. The body, not spirituality, has been repressed in women, and generating from the repression of the body is a driving force, a need to write and express the experiences of the female body.

Her manifesto for writing the female body appears in Sorties:

To write—the act that will “realize” the un-censored relationship of woman to her sexuality, to her woman-being giving back her access to her own forces; that will return her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her vast bodily territories kept under seal; that will tear her out of the superegoed, over-Mosesed structure where the same position of guilt is always reserved for her (guilty of everything, every time: of having desires, of not having any; of being frigid, of being “too” hot; of not having both at once; of being too much of a mother and not enough; of nurturing and of not nurturing...).

Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. (97)

The binaries of excess and lack that Cixous writes of are the very binaries that Chopin manipulates in her text. The two options for women at the time that Chopin was writing were motherhood and the full devotion of one’s body to others represented by Adele
Ratignolle and the life of a spinster and denial of the life of the body as seen through Mademoiselle Reisz. Caught in the middle is Edna, wanting possession of her body and the right to share it with others at her will.

Kate Chopin creates the character of Edna, who does not conform to the model of Woolf's perfect and all-giving Angel who lives for everyone but herself, and must struggle with societal backlash as a result. Edna is seeking to define herself as an individual separate from the men and children in her life. Physical freedoms from men, sexual encounters, and sensory pleasure are some of the bodily issues that Chopin writes about in the novel. Edna is seeking to define her own sexuality and autonomy, to become aware of her body through sensual experiences, and awaken herself to the world around her and to the one that exists within.

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier cannot conform to the role of being a self-sacrificing woman. She views her children as parasites who wish to rob her of body and soul; she generally avoids her husband. On the shores of the Grand Isle, she undergoes a transformation in which she discovers herself as an individual. At the time Chopin was writing, it was believed that women should “idolize children, worship their husbands, and esteem it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (26). This perfect woman, the ultimate “Angel” is Adele Ratignolle, the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (9). During her pregnancy she is blissful and beautiful. Her hands are exquisite, a “joy to look at...when she threaded her needle or adjusted her gold thimble...as she sewed away on the little night-drawers or fashioned a bodice or a bib” (9). Adele attends to the every need of her children happily and lovingly.
Adele acts as a conscience to Edna and women like her when she calls out “Think of the children....Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (104) to remind her to be a dutiful mother, an important component of being a woman. Inscribed by patriarchy, Adele cannot control her own pleasure; it must come from being a dutiful mother and wife, whereas Edna begins to write her own pleasure in her paintings and her lifestyle.

Mademoiselle Reisz represents the other end of the womanly spectrum as a decayed and unused body, taking on the qualities of a witch or sorceress. Leading the solitary life of an artist and a spinster, she has denied advances from both men and women. She is “a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She ha[s] absolutely no taste in dress, and [wears] a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair” (44). Mademoiselle Reisz has an abhorrence of water, children, and people, with only Edna and Robert able to penetrate her disagreeable and distant nature. Her apartment is dusty, dingy, and in disarray, having only herself and her music. She leads an unclean and unhealthy lifestyle subsisting on a diet of chocolates. However, it is through Mademoiselle Reisz that Edna is able to explore her artistic temperament, learning that a life of solitude and bodily denial is too much of a compromise.

Cixous writes that “a woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being a servant of the militant male, his shade. We must kill the false woman who is breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman” (Laugh 338). Decidedly between the two options of bodily denial represented by Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna takes control of her body and becomes a fighter, a lover, an artist, and an independent woman. Cixous writes of jouissance, pleasure, that when applied to a woman,
is considered to be a different type of pleasure than that of a male. Thus, for a woman’s “joyous benefits she is erogenous; she is erotogeneity of the heterogeneous: airborne swimmer, in flight, she does not cling to herself; she is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the woman that she will be” (Cixous *Laugh* 345).

*Jouissance* carries with it notions of fluidity and diffusion; it is orgasmic pleasure that ebbs and flows, gives and receives, without boundary or closure.

This notion of fluidity and diffusion includes bodies of water in literature. The sea can be equated with the feminine body; it is the medium for Edna’s awakening to her body, befriending it as she would another woman. It becomes her lover as well as her partner for eternity in suicide. For her, the:

voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in 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 (32).

The sea speaks to Edna as no human being has been able; it touches the very depths of her being and awakenings her to the movements, the *pusions* of her body, teaching her desire and the limitlessness of her body.

The sea takes on the qualities of a lover exploring Edna’s body; the foamy wavelets coil “like serpents about her ankles” (137), no part of her body is left untouched or unexplored by the water. The sea-lover awakens her to the desires of her body and to her capacity for physical and sexual experiences. Edna is the only woman in the novel who is
truly living; she is a whole woman filled with *jouissance*. Cixous uses the metaphor of the sea to express the *pulsions* of the female body and the feminine⁵: “Seas and mothers. But that’s it—our seas are what we make of them, fishy or not, impenetrable or muddled, red or black, high and rough or flat and smooth, narrow straits or shoreless, and we ourselves are sea, sands, corals, seaweeds, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves...seas and mothers” (*Sorties* 89). Because Edna has been given life by the sea, she herself becomes a sea of emotion, passions, and pleasures. She is a part of the soil and water, a swimmer in the feminine. The touch of the wind, the taste of food, and the sound of music become anew and stimulate pleasures in her body that resound within, awakening the senses to the needs of the flesh.

Edna and the sea are spiritually linked, the sea births Edna as a new Aphrodite, borne on foamy waves to become almost an ethereal creature exuding intense sensuality. The sea is her mother and she herself is a sea. The voice of the sea speaks to Edna and 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” (31-32). When she first learns to swim on her own, she feels as if some power has overtaken her. She becomes confident, intoxicated by her strength and power, wanting to swim out “where no woman has swum before” (46). In this encounter Edna feels for the first time that she has possession and control over her body and her self-awareness is raised. She emerges goddess-like, the only

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⁵ For Cixous "as for countless mythologies, water is the feminine element *par excellence*: the closure of the mythological world contains and reflects the comforting security of the mother’s womb. It is within this space that Cixous’s speaking subject is free to move from one subject position to another, or to merge oceanically with the world" (Moi 117).
one to have control over her body and soul. And, her sensual experiences of the body have awakened the inner life that exists within her.

At the end of the novel, Edna gives her body to the ocean. Her last moments of life are intensely physical and sensual as she submits to the embrace of the sea. “When she [is] there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast[s] the unpleasant pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she st[ands] naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her” (136). By removing her clothing, she is shedding the constraints of patriarchy; she is freeing her body. Therefore, in this reading, it is significant that Chopin chooses to have her heroine drown. Drowning brings to mind further analogies between the female body and liquidity. The female body being prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid becomes analogous with bodies of water. Hence, in drowning, Edna becomes immersed in a feminine element; her body becomes one with a larger element.

Thus, we arrive at the crux of many interpretations of the work. Edna’s suicide as interpreted by both Christ and Showalter is a positive affirmation of femininity. She has become a whole woman and her death is a triumph as she is returning to the female element. However, I would believe that Cixous would have wanted her to fight for her body, to move against the channels of society, and claim her body as her right. In death, all of her bodily pleasures become negated; this is a form of defeat. The barriers opposing Chopin in writing female sensuality were immense, and the grim end for Edna is a death for Chopin as well. It is the end of her battle to defy the constraints of society in her writing.
"A Pair of Silk Stockings"

The sensual and limitless pleasures that Edna experiences of her body in Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, are experienced by other female characters in Chopin's short stories. Just as Edna renounces her role as a mother and is awakened to the needs of her body, so too does Mrs. Sommers in "A Pair of Silk Stockings" reject that role. Mrs. Sommers has followed the path of the angelic female figure, but eventually falters when she chooses to spend an extra fifteen dollars on herself instead of her children, choosing her personal happiness over that of her family. Mrs. Sommers initially agrees with Adele's beliefs about children and womanly duties, as much of her life is concerned with the needs of her children and the household. Thus, her initial reaction when she comes into a sum of money is to spend it on the children.

However, Mrs. Sommers has known "better days" in her youth before she was married. She has no time for the pleasures of the past as the "needs of the present absorbed her every faculty. A vision of the future like some dim, gaunt monster sometimes appall[s] her, but luckily tomorrow never comes" (527-28). Looming deep in her subconscious mind is her desire to think of herself first; that is a motivating factor in her decision to spend the money on herself. For Mrs. Sommers, a pair of silk stockings immerses her in a sensual pleasure that allows her to forget her domestic role. The stockings are "soothing, very pleasant to the touch" (528). She revels in the feel of the raw silk against her flesh as they
slide “serpent-like through her fingers” (528). As she moves through the department store, she is:

not going through any acute mental process or reasoning with herself, nor [is] she striving to explain to her satisfaction the motive of her action. She [is] not thinking at all. She seem[s] for a time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility.

(529)

Mrs. Sommers indulges all of her senses. She wiggles her toes in her silk stockings, dines out at an expensive restaurant where everything is laid out before her in a royal manner, and she also attends the theatre. She immerses herself in a fantasy world of pleasure in which her body rules her actions. These moments of sensual pleasure facilitate the process of self-awareness. When Mrs. Sommers first looks at her foot and ankle in her new stockings and boots “she could not realize that they belonged to her and were a part of herself" (529). The stockings, boots and gloves that she has purchased have a tremendous effect on her sense of being. They give her a “feeling of assurance, a sense of belonging to the well-dressed multitude” (530).

Mrs. Sommers readily succumbs to sensual pleasure, forgetting her family and her financial difficulties. The dream-like state she operates in allows her to recapture the happiness of her youth and the freedom of her former single life when she had no one to think of other than herself. By acknowledging the needs of her body, she feels alive and vibrant, as if she has been transformed into another person. However, this escape is only
temporary. Mrs. Sommers, like Edna, realizes that the world does not condone such “selfish” behavior in women. At the end of the play, Mrs. Sommers feels as if a dream has ended. Knowing that she has to return to her former existence, she boards the cable car, and has a “powerful longing that [it] would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever” (531)

A Vocation and a Voice

I realize that at this point this essay appears to be in chronological disarray, but my reasoning for this is twofold. First, I wanted to focus on Chopin’s major work in keeping with the tradition of giving primacy to the novel. Second, I wanted to challenge the existing criticism that seems to perpetuate the idea that Chopin never wrote anything of significance prior to The Awakening, or after for that matter, and the critical assumptions about the end of the novel. The fact of the matter is that Chopin was a prolific writer of short stories and, at the suggestion of her publisher, she wrote the novel as it would be a more profitable endeavor. When analyzed as a single piece, many perceive the ending of the novel to be a positive affirmation of female sensuality, and as Christ suggests, female spirituality. However, when additional Chopin pieces are added, a clear conclusion is not as easily found. It would appear that her earlier stories that often were not well received possessed an element of sensuality and freedom not to be found in the novel and suggest that Edna’s suicide reflects Chopin’s frustration with society’s constraints on her writing and female sensuality.

At this point, I will look at two of her early short stories that appear in the collection, A Vocation and a Voice. Chopin wrote “The Falling in Love of Fedora”6 in

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6 This short story was first published as “Fedora.”
1895 and published it under the pen name “La Tour” in 1897. “The Unexpected” was published in 1895. These pieces are similar to the works discussed earlier in the essay and suggest that a change occurred in Chopin’s writing style and perhaps her attitude towards her experiences as a woman writer. It is these pieces written before The Awakening that have a sense of limitlessness regarding female expression of the body, highlighting the jouissance that Cixous describes: passion is without bound and no subject is taboo.

Fedora’s passion for her beloved’s sister resembles that of Edna’s for Adele. The desired women are described as having similar physical features, and Dorthea’s escape from the drudgery of her life is a joy that Mrs. Sommers is unable to attain.

The bodily exaltation the women characters feel in these two short stories is in solitude or in the company of other women. The contumelious Fedora, infatuated with Young Malthers in “The Falling of Love of Fedora,” passionately kisses his sister instead of him. Her desire for Malthers is abated by her desire for his sister. “She felt a desire to see the girl, to be near her; as unaccountable, when she tried to analyze it, as the impulse that drove her, and to which she often yielded, to touch his hat, hanging with the others upon the hall pegs....There was no one near, and, obeying a sudden impulse, she buried her face for an instant in the rough folds of his coat” (116). Fedora, an austere and prim woman, is driven by unaccountable impulses to touch and smell, impulses that are nothing short of passion.

Upon meeting her sister-in-law, she is immediately taken by the girl:

“You know dear child,” said Fedora, in her usual elderly fashion, “I want you to feel completely at home with us.” They were driving through a long,
quiet, leafy road, into which the twilight was beginning to creep. “Come to me freely without and without reserve—with all your wants; with any complaints. I feel that I shall be quite fond of you.” She had gathered the reins into one hand, and with the other free arm she encircled Miss Malthers’ shoulders. When the girl looked up into her face, with murmured thanks, Fedora bent down and pressed a long, penetrating kiss upon her mouth.

(117)

This scene is a wonderfully passionate moment that did not and could not occur between Edna and Adele. Chopin chose to publish “The Falling in Love of Fedora” under a pen name, perhaps because she knew that this was not appropriate subject matter for a woman, and the very same societal constraint kept her from emphasizing the “love” between women in The Awakening. Both Fedora and Edna become fascinated with the lips of their female friends, suggesting that they both have a desire for physical intimacy with another woman. Adele’s “two lips...pouted,...[and] were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit” (26), while Fedora notices “above all...the firm, full curve of her lips” (116). However, it is only Fedora that is able to fulfill this desire. The passions and attractions are the same in both pieces, but only Fedora is able to fulfill the passions of her body.

Dorthea escapes from an unwanted engagement in “The Unexpected” when her betrothed becomes ill and nears his deathbed. Instead of nursing him and spending her life in misery with a sickly husband, Dorthea flees, rejoicing in a freedom that she has never known before. “She sped along the familiar roadway, seemingly borne on by some force
other than mechanical--some unwonted energy--a stubborn impulse that lighted her eyes, set her cheeks aflame, bent her supple body to one purpose--that was, swiftest flight" (92).

Dorthea’s drive for freedom parallels Mrs. Sommers’ “mechanical impulse that directed her actions” in the department store, causing her mental desertion of her family. Both of these women are fueled by an internal, unexplainable desire that inspires movements and pleasures, the *jouissance* of the body.

However similar the compared works are, the endings are vastly different as the two earlier short stories have positive endings for the heroine. Freed from an oppressive relationship, Dorthea finds strength in solitude and communion with nature. “She was alone with nature; her pulses beating in unison with its sensuous throb, as she stopped and stretched herself on the sward. Every muscle, nerve, fibre abandoned itself to the delicious sensation of rest that overtook and crept tingling through the whole length of her body” (93). Freed from the constraints of the patriarchal society and the man that was to control her body, Dorthea finds a freedom in the pleasures of her body and a kinship with nature, vowing never to return to society. Mrs. Sommers, however, must return to her former life and is left longing never to return. These are two decidedly different outcomes for the same female desire.

As we can see, there is a marked change in Chopin’s treatment of female embodiment in her texts throughout her career. In her early works, represented by “The Falling in Love of Fedora” and “The Unexpected,” the plot lines and experiences of female sensuality and pleasure are much the same as those in her later works, *The Awakening* and “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” with only the endings becoming more tragic as her career
progressed. One explanation of this phenomenon is that the dispair and anguish of her later heroines is reflective of Chopin’s difficulties as a woman writer during the nineteenth century, her having to respond to extreme amounts of societal backlash and criticism for her daring portrayals of women. Perhaps, like Woolf, she was able to kill the “Angel,” but it never went away entirely; it loomed like an ugly beast and posed an insurmountable obstacle to the freedom of her expression and her writing of the female body.

Conclusion

“The fate of The Awakening shows only too well how a literary tradition may be enabling, even essential, as well as confining. Struggling to escape from tradition, Kate Chopin courageously risked social and literary ostracism” (Showalter 188). However, this was a struggle that in the end she was not able to surmount. As an American woman of the nineteenth century, she would never come to know how well the works the of a French woman would come to echo the desires and goals of her writing. “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. “Woman must put herself into the text— as into the world and into history— by her own movement” (Laugh 334). And, Chopin was able to write the female body and women into history, but was removed from the literary canon for some time, out of print and unknown.

In writing the female body, Kate Chopin was a pioneer and a radical in nineteenth-century American literature. The Awakening is probably now her most popular and well known piece, with the ending attracting much attention and criticism. However, examining
her entire writing career unearths some interesting interpretations of this major piece of work. Her heroines begin to change, and there is a sense that it is Chopin’s attitude as a writer that begins to change, that the forces of society were too powerful.

Chopin’s last poem written in 1900 to her friend Kitty Garesche, invites us to look back.

*To the Friend of My Youth*

It is not all of life

To cling together while the years glide past.

It is not all of love

To walk with clasped hands from the first to last.

The mystic garland which the spring did twine

Of scented lilac and the new-blown rose,

Faster than chains will hold my soul to thine

Thro’ joy, and grief, thro’ life—unto close. (188)

This poem says nothing of the passion and emotion that existed in her early works. Her heroines rejoice in the pleasures of their bodies that seemingly have no end. Like *The Awakening*, this poem foretells a closure, of death, of an end to the feelings for her friend. Following the shift in Chopin’s writing demonstrates the difficulties facing the woman writer of the nineteenth century: how to write the experiences of the body without social remonstration and ostracism. In the end, writing the female body is a problem that continued to exist years after her death.
Bibliography


