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Kate Chopin: A Different Look

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Senior English Honors

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin? Who is she? This is a common response of many people who are not familiar with this outstanding woman writer of the late 1800's and early 1900's. In fact, this same question would more likely have gone unanswered then than today. For the most part, many of her contemporaries are prominently discussed and read today because they enjoyed popularity while they were alive. They not only established literary vogues; in many cases they gave the public what it wanted to read. Such writers include Mark Twain and Stephen Crane as well as Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow. Kate Chopin, on the other hand, did not receive wide-spread publicity during her lifetime. Some of the works she produced were accepted graciously into various magazines in the 1800's. Others, however, were rejected, not because they were inferior but because they were believed to be

too candid or too risqué. These particular works, of which some will be discussed later in depth, would not even be given a second glance today as far as their suggestive aspects are concerned. As the years pass, attitudes change.

Since her death in 1904, Kate Chopin has become more and more accepted and appreciated. In the 1960's, there was a tremendous resurgence in her popularity, as she was being rediscovered as a Realist. She had written many short stories dealing honestly with women's unvarnished thoughts and emotions. Among her themes were extramarital affairs, premarital sex, and a tremendous amount of emphasis on the idea of female independence - subjects viewed as unacceptable during the years she wrote.

Perhaps one reason for Chopin's belated celebrity is that many of her contemporaries and their successors seem to have perpetuated the impression that life was pure and innocent during the period in which Chopin lived. According to this naive view, there was no premarital sex. There were no passionate love affairs. Everyone chose a mate and respected the lives they were to share to eternity. For present day readers, it is impossible to believe such infeasible assumptions. As modern readers of

Kate Chopin, we know with certainty that blazing affairs and flaming romances were as much a part of her era as our own. In some of her stories these romances were actually experienced, not just dreamed about. What a bold woman she must have been to step out and write about such things that her society was not ready to accept!

Not only was society subjected to topics such as these, but they were written about by a woman. During this period, for a man to write about such matters would have been shocking enough, but for a woman to produce such works was horrifying. Making such a bold stroke meant stepping completely out of the accepted role of the stereotyped "lady." This is what makes her success so astounding. It has taken all of these years for her stories to come into an age which has given them the credibility they deserve. Of course this has been easier with the passage of time. Not only do her modern readers appreciate the honesty of her writing; they also applaud her strength to write about such things at a time when the subject was considered taboo. But her stories are much more than fiction; they are reality. She presents us with

actuality and attempts to persuade people to see and accept that such things were and are a part of life.

One of Kate Chopin's greatest works is The Awakening (1899). It is one of her few novels, and it has received a tremendous amount of attention. However, the basic aim of this paper is to concentrate solely on her short stories, which fill three volumes. During the time in which Kate Chopin was writing, the short story was perhaps the dominant form of literature produced, though it is not so popular today.

Like many of her contemporary writers - especially in the South - she produced a large body of short fiction. It is interesting to notice the form that Kate Chopin uses in these short stories. She is not typical in her plotting with a beginning, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion. Instead she focuses primarily on her characters as the main attraction of the story. Not only is the exploration of their minds and thoughts the central point of interest; they are also the means by which Kate Chopin evokes elements of local color such as surroundings and personal views of society at that time. This understanding is facilitated

by the fact that she usually concentrates on one or two individual characters.

Another aspect covered in the study of Kate Chopin and her short stories deals with her influences. These range from her childhood, through her marriage, into the period of her widowhood. As a widow she began reading a considerable amount by the French Naturalist, Maupassant. He plays a key role in the shaping of her works. Her family likewise proved to be crucial in her artistic development. To trace this influence is important because the reader is able to comprehend why she thinks the way she does and how she is similar and different from the writers who influenced her. For it is finally her originality - that is, what she expresses over and above the influences of those writers she most ardently admired - that is the most outstanding gauge of her independence.

It is important, however, to see what other authors were producing at the time Kate Chopin was writing most fluently. Many authors of her native South were writing about the Civil War, slavery, and Reconstruction. It is particularly interesting to see who was following the popular local color tradition and

and who was centering on women. Both of these areas are specialities for Kate Chopin.

Another interesting aspect of her work is how she perceived society and how society perceived her. Comparing what she wrote to what the magazines and readers wanted to read, was she willing to let down her standards, or did she put up a fight and continue to write the way she wanted?

All of these aspects play a very significant role in the life of Kate Chopin. Each will be taken into consideration as to how it reflects what she wrote. Her personal life, her influences and the unique characteristics of her writing promise a key to understanding her better as an artist.

## II. LIFE AND INFLUENCES

Thomas O'Flaherty, Kate Chopin's father, was born in 1805 in Ireland. An adventurous young man, at the age of eighteen he set out for the United States. He eventually settled in St. Louis, Missouri in 1825. He did not marry until 1839 and when he did, it was to a young French-Creole woman named Catherine de Reihle. Unfortunately, she died giving birth to their first child - a son, George. It was not until 1844 that Thomas O'Flaherty decided



to marry once more. Her name was Eliza Faris, and she too was partially French like his first wife.

Together they had three children. They had a son who took his father's name, Thomas. Unfortunately, he lived only a relatively short life. He was born in 1848 and died twenty-five years later in 1873. They also had two girls, one of whom died early in life; the other was named Catherine O'Flaherty, most likely for Thomas' first wife. Kate, as we know her now, was the youngest born.

When Kate was five years old, her father died. Even though she may have been rather young to comprehend the loss of her father, it was a jolt for her. It left her with no father figure in the home, except for her brother, Thomas, and her half-brother, George. But George, with whom she became quite close, died in 1862, when Kate was only eleven. She grew up in a rather crowded home. Not only did her immediate family reside with her, but also her grandmother and great-grandmother, both of whom were widowed. Therefore, through her adolescent years, Kate's home was without a father figure. She saw women as the leaders of the family. She had three generations of widows in her home. This, it is certain, contributed to her attitude and feelings in her

works and life. She probably saw relationships that her mother and grandmother had with men, but at the same time was reared with the proper motive of a woman of her time and station - or rather a "lady" - implanted in her mind.

Not only did she grow up in a household of women, but she also attended a girls' school in St. Louis called the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart. Here she had female teachers too, for they were nuns. She apparently became rather popular after graduation. In a sense, she was another Scarlett O'Hara. She knew how to dress, look, and act. It was the time of her life for courting. The question was whether she would be able to handle marriage and a family life after she had grown up being surrounded by "women actually exercising authority" (Skaggs 2).

Two years after graduation Kate O'Flaherty became Kate Chopin. She had met a gentleman from New Orleans named Oscar Chopin, a "Creole cotton broker" (3). They married in June of 1870 and had their first child in May of 1871. She was thrown out of the carefree life of a Southern belle into the strenuous life of a homemaker and inevitable mother of six, five boys and one girl. This must have been a tremendous change for her not

only in her responsibilities but in living in a household where a man, a father figure, was present. She had to adjust to this. It may have been difficult, but then again it may have been easier for her to accept because she had someone to share the responsibilities and leadership of her family. She could exercise the same control her mother had, but with the aid of a husband.

Kate and Oscar had twelve years together as husband and wife before his death in 1882. It is really ironic that for four generations Kate, her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother all were widowed. The predicaments of Kate and her mother are doubly ironic because they lost their husbands at such an early stage of their marriage. The irony is seen in the subjects Kate Chopin chooses to focus on in her writings. On top of this, Kate and her daughter, Lelia (her youngest child, born in 1879), both lost their fathers at an early age - Kate when she was five, and Lelia when she was but three. Figuratively, this seems to be something almost hereditary for several generations of the females in this family line.

At the time of Oscar Chopin's death, Kate and her immediate family had been living in Cloutierville, Louisiana. They had

lived here for the past three years because Oscar's business had failed in New Orleans. Being faced with widowhood, Kate was saddled with even more responsibilities. She was thirty-two years old, the mother of five boys and one girl, living away from her mother in Louisiana with the sudden responsibility of keeping her family clothed and fed. It may be a blessing that she had grown up and was educated without a father figure, because she soon realized that a woman could hold on to her domain and keep control of her family. After two more years in Louisiana, Kate returned to her home in St. Louis. She probably was at a loss of what to do financially as well as emotionally; so she returned home to be with her mother.

After settling with her family in St. Louis near her mother, she was faced with another shock. In 1885, only one year after Kate returned, her mother died. One can only imagine the trauma and loneliness she must have felt during this time in her life. She had lost both of her brothers as well as her sister, and she had lost her husband. She had gone from daughter to single woman, to wife, to mother, to widow in such a very short span of time. It is easy to understand that "many of her protagonists seem to

be searching for self-understanding" (3). It is possible to see more than a little of Kate in her own characters. However, it has been suggested by personal friends that Kate's marriage was not questionable in the least. She was happily married to a man who was just as loving and warm as she. The conflict and doubt expressed by many of her characters may not be a reflection of the Chopins' marriage, but it could be a reflection of what was going on in her mind as she shifted in responsibility, in roles, and in her image of herself.

In 1889, four years after her mother's death and seven years after that of her husband, she began to write. Just why she turned to literary expression at this particular point in her life is not totally clear. It is true that she had been an avid reader, especially of Maupassant, the French Naturalist. It is also possible that she saw writing as a means of easing financial burdens. But a more likely explanation lies in the direction that her life took after the deaths of her husband and her mother. In a diary entry for 1884, after stating that she would gladly give up everything that had come into her life since their passing if she could only be with them again, she speaks of the preceding

twelve years - which comprise the beginning of her writing career - as containing her "real growth."

Though she never defines this "real growth" explicitly, other diary entries offer likely explanations. Interestingly, one of the most telling is dated 1870, from a trip which she and Oscar had made to New York. On the train from Philadelphia, they had met a woman from New York who talked intelligently of business to Oscar and gave Kate an important lecture on the role of the modern woman. The advice consisted of warning Kate not to get into the rut of becoming an everyday housewife, but instead to go out into the man's world to explore and to learn. Though the woman spoke mainly of politics and related subjects that belonged to the traditional masculine role, there was an over-all emphasis on an individual woman's independence. Kate apparently never forgot the advice of this unnamed stranger. After she lost her mother - a woman who had exemplified some of the values of independence and fortitude emphasized in the New Yorker's advice - Kate seems to have looked to herself with confidence as being able to carry on the roles of matriarch, mother, and even bread winner.

All the stories that Kate wrote were ultimately accepted for publication, which is remarkable, considering that literature was a new endeavor and that she had never trained to become a writer. One key to this success can be found again in excerpts from her diary. The date is May 12, 1894, and Kate has just finished reading a work written by her neighbor. She criticizes the work in her diary but further explains that she would not tell her neighbor such things, possibly because she is too old to change her ways. She explains that if her neighbor were a little younger then she would advise her of these weaknesses and suggest some criticisms for her to read. Ultimately, her neighbor's biggest problem was her attitude toward her own works. Kate Chopin thinks this woman is a little too confident in herself because she will read stories in the recent magazines and believe that she can write better than these authors can.

There is another entry in her diary that reveals the personal life of Kate Chopin after the death of her husband. We know that he was very important to her and that she would do anything to be with him again, but what was her love life actually like after his death? We must consider this in reference to her stories

dealing with passionate affairs and rendezvous. The entry was dated May 22, 1894 and she had just finished a short story entitled "Lilacs." She mentions having gone to a convent a couple of weeks before with a friend. She wrote, "I do not know whether she could see that I had loved lovers who were not divine - and hated and suffered and been glad." After leaving the convent, the friend commented on how wonderful a life Liza ( a nun) must lead. Chopin, passing a dog at that very moment, responded that she "had rather be that dog" (Toth et al. 92). It is through this entry that one may assume that Kate Chopin did not remain idle as a woman in her widowhood. She continued her life as normally as possible as far as relationships are concerned.

Through observing the not very well documented childhood she had led along with the entries in her diary, one can begin to determine some of the reasons why Kate Chopin wrote about the people she did or rather, why she created the characters she created. They are sometimes uncertain about themselves, the same as Kate must have been throughout the traumatic times in her life when everyone who was ever close to her was dying.

Kate Chopin was forced to be strong in this period of her life.



She was no longer dependent on anyone. Instead, she had others dependent on her. Even though she has been described as a very happy, outgoing woman, one can only assume the opposite. Deep down Kate Chopin was a very sad woman. This is seen through her works as well as through her diary entries. With each death of a close relative, she received a scar - an emotional scar that would never disappear.

While in grief and sorrow she began to engage in activities and letters with a doctor who had been her obstetrician, but now was her family doctor. His name was Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer. He was Austrian and had come to St. Louis in 1870. He could easily be described as very intelligent and somewhat worldly. His interests lay in science, philosophy and journalism. In fact, while in St. Louis he became close friends with Joseph Pulitzer, who "made him Vice-President of his St. Louis Post-Dispatch" (Seyersted 48).

Dr. Kolbenheyer's visits and conversations with Kate Chopin proved to be very influential in that he was a major factor in the alteration of her religious beliefs. Both by discussing current trends in theology and by furnishing her with scientific

reading material, Kolbenheyer caused Chopin to question her life-long religious beliefs. Born a Catholic and having reared her family in the church, she soon dropped all religious interests and remained a Catholic in name only.

But Kolbenheyer's chief influence was felt in an area quite different from either religion or science. After reading several letters she had written him, he detected a hint of latent literary talent in her descriptions of certain events and objects. By now a close friend, he realized that Kate was still grieving for all of her lost loved ones. He also knew that should his surmise be correct, she might find in written expression a vehicle for venting her anguish as well as a source of income for her large family. Moreover, writing could be done in the privacy of her home.

Kate's earliest works were the result of Kolbenheyer's suggestion that she attempt to write creatively. One of her first efforts is a two-stanza poem ostensibly addressed to her husband. Though the date of the composition is not known, it was published in America, a Chicago magazine, on January 10, 1889 as "If It Might Be":

If it might be that thou didst need my life,  
 Now on the instant would I end this strife,  
 Twixt hope and fear, and glad the end I'd meet  
 With wonder only, to find death so sweet.

If it might be that thou didst need my love,  
 To love thee dear, my life's fond work would prove,  
 All time to tender watchfulness I'd give;  
 And count it happiness, indeed, to live (48).

But if Dr. Kolbenheyer was the immediate impetus for Kate to try her hand at authorship, there were more important influences on the nature of what she was to produce. Always an avid reader, she claimed to have accidentally discovered the works of the nineteenth-century French Naturalist Guy de Maupassant. After she had read one of his novels, he soon became a favorite author and ultimately her greatest source of literary inspiration. She admired him because of his unconventional approach to fiction. Instead of following the conventional rules of plotting, so popular with his contemporaries, Maupassant focused upon character. Moreover, as she discovered from the first of his novels she read, he treated such supposedly taboo topics as sex and suicide.

Soon she began translating his works into English. A good example of the Maupassant influence is his short story "A Crisis." It concerns a married couple who have an agreement that they can see other people, but that for the sake of their only child they must remain under one roof and attend social gatherings together. On a particular evening, the husband claims to have fallen in love with his wife. She, like a typical Chopin heroine, takes the upper hand and thus gains control of the situation. She tells

him that the only way he can have her is if he pays her the equivalent of what he spends on his mistress in a month. He protests and complains, but in the end his wife wins and is a thousand francs richer in the bargain.

The story has no real beginning, middle, or end. The reader is forced to focus on the two main characters, especially the woman, who has retained independence throughout her marriage. While Kate Chopin was reading and translating stories such as these, she developed ideas of her own and began to write similar stories of women controlling their own lives and marriages.

As one can see, then, influences played an important part in the beginning of a new and successful career for Kate Chopin. Whether it is Guy de Maupassant or Dr. Kolbenheyer, someone got this woman started in a career that was ideally suited for her and her audience. By writing she relieved her own sorrows while entertaining her growing audience.

### III. CHOPIN AND HER LITERARY MILIEU

In order to understand the difficulties and challenges Kate Chopin faced in her writing career, it is important to view others who were writing during that same period. Chopin was very similar to some, but she did not follow in their exact paths nor did she conform to their rules of what subjects to write about.

One of the main literary themes during the late 1800's was the Civil War, which had ended in 1865. In its aftermath, American industry began to get back on the track again. Yet, at the same time, people were trying to relive the past and there was a great attempt to revive the Old South, which resulted in a Romanticized local color. Still, there was a movement away from Romanticism developing along with this increase in industry. People were becoming more interested in Naturalism. A keen sense for the sciences was developing in many readers. Also as these things increased so did the popularity of the short story. More and more authors were writing short stories about the past, about the new developments in their society since the war, and how people were coping with the mass changes of their lives.

This atmosphere of change and flux is suggested by the works of Kate Chopin. She has, however, been considered one of the best local colorists of her time. Her main area of concentration was the Red River of Louisiana in Natchitoches. By mingling among the natives of this area, she had picked up their ways of acting and speaking. In the process, she made friends in all levels of the society, in the poor as well as in the well-to-do sections. She developed and maintained not only a friendship with these people but also a keen eye for observing their mannerisms. Since Kate Chopin lived in Louisiana for fifteen years, she had a considerable amount of time to become very knowledgeable about this ambience.

Kate Chopin writes of three particularly different types of people: the Creoles, the Cajuns, and the Negroes. A Creole is of European descent while a Cajun is of Acadian-French parentage. The Creoles are described as "proud, graceful, and aristocratic, hot-blooded and irrational in matters of love and honor" while the Cajuns on the other hand are seen as "simple, honest, and God-fearing." Finally, the Negro is seen as "superstitious, yet realistic and lively" (Seyersted 75-76). All three seem somewhat different from one another, but they all appear to be content with what life is offering them now. They seemingly have no goals, or in other words they have no desire for advancement in themselves.

The Creoles and the Cajuns appear in many of Chopin's short stories. The French descent of these people accounts for the use of French names as well as the many French phrases that appear and reappear throughout her stories. Also she herself, being part French, had spoken fluent French since she was a child, and had first lived in Missouri in an area populated with French and thus had an opportunity to learn about their culture. Moreover, Kate's husband, Oscar, was Creole. With such a deep personal background dealing with the French and the French culture, it is no wonder she was perceived as an authentic local colorist.

At approximately the same time Kate Chopin was writing stories about New Orleans and Natchitoches, others were breaking away from the norm of writing about the Civil War and

comparing antebellum and postbellum life in the South. George Washington Cable was very much like Kate Chopin in that he was writing about "Creoles and the quadroons of New Orleans" (80). Like her, he did not concentrate so much on the war.

Aside from Cable, there were various women writing as local colorists. Although Kate Chopin may have been recognized as one of the best there were other women who were brave enough to step out and reveal their talents also. One of these was Grace King. Unlike Kate Chopin she primarily treats the war period and how people coped with it and rebuilt their lives afterwards. However, she is somewhat like Kate Chopin in viewing her material through the eyes of "old Creole women" (80).

A third local colorist of Louisiana and another woman is Ruth McEnery Stuart. Her main area of concentration is the Negroes in Louisiana and their life on the plantations. She also deals with courtship among the Negroes. In this respect she is like Chopin in her choice of subject so to speak.

While a majority of people were writing about the most recent major event of the country, Kate Chopin was not alone in her choice to steer away from the soon-to-be exhausted topic of the Civil War. She wrote, in a sense, about her own life, reflecting her French heritage as well as her home life. At this point not only can the reader connect Kate Chopin with the characters she creates in a personal sense, but they can also get a taste of what her home life was like. For example, the French phrases and

expressions sprinkled throughout her English add realism and vigor to her stories. Small aspects such as these in her stories reflect an even sharper image of local color as far as her personal life is concerned.

#### IV. FINDING HER OWN WAY

Not only does Kate Chopin break out of the prevailing habit of writing about the war; she also breaks away from the usual form of contemporary short stories. Like Maupassant, she makes her characters the center of the story. She does not fall into the monotony of making each story she writes systematic with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead, she digs deeply into her main character's soul. The content of the soul becomes the substance of the story. Her readers are able to do this because of the subjects Kate Chopin writes about - such as women's independence, women's societal views, and women's romantic views.

The female characters are very strong and play an important role in almost all of her short stories. Her main characters, usually female, tend to share certain similarities. They all appear to have one thing in common: as Peggy Skaggs suggests, "They seem to lack a clear concept of their own roles and purpose in life, a constant groping for such self-knowledge shaping their personalities and actions" (Skaggs 1). This statement refers to all of Kate Chopin's major characters; however, it is especially



directed towards the females and how they reflect her own personal life. It has already been suggested that Kate Chopin herself had been uncertain as to her own role in life. Her roles as a woman changed rapidly as she went from daughter to widow. During these changes in her life there is no doubt that confusion must have taken over her mind each time one she depended on passed away. She was probably afraid to turn to anyone else after her mother died, fearing that she might be left alone again. Her only way to resolve this was to start anew. Precisely how she was going to do this was probably uncertain at this juncture, but with the help of Dr. Kolbenheyer she began to write, which represented a new release as well as a new beginning.

Her new beginning required one important quality to be fulfilled, and that was strength. Surprisingly, perhaps, as she continued writing, she seemed to develop an optimistic attitude. She is not a sentimentalist, yet she is carefree about growing old. For one of Dr. Kolbenheyer's birthdays she wrote in her diary that she was and probably always would be as young at one age as she was twenty years earlier. Her writing obviously allowed her to dispel a tremendous amount of grief and she was becoming able to express herself freely (Seyersted 61).

There are a couple of short stories in which we can see Kate Chopin unusually clearly through her characters. One of these is Mrs. Sommers in "A Pair of Silk Stockings." Mrs. Sommers dreams that she is no longer dependent and that she can step out on her

own. She imagines that she is only responsible for herself and no one else. This is comparable to Chopin's attitude at the time she became a widow. Kate Chopin never remarried after the death of her husband. It is certain that the choice of her staying unmarried was all her own. She was described as a very pretty and well-liked woman. Many people simply assumed that she had loved her husband so much that she believed no one could replace him. Was this actually the reason, though? Perhaps she was afraid to get involved with anyone else so closely because so many of her loved ones loved had died. Mrs. Sommers dreamed of being independent. Could it be that Kate Chopin also dreamed of being independent at some point in her life even while she was married to Oscar? She now had her writing. Having her career soar as it was doing, her mind remained occupied and she had a new sense of fulfillment.

There is another Chopin short story in which it is virtually impossible not to see the author herself. The story, entitled "Madame Martel's Christmas Eve," concerns a widow who is described as missing her husband very much; her grief is overwhelming. She wants him back in her life very much. The only way that she can approximate this, however, is to see her husband as living in her children. However, they too grow up and disappear in different directions. Maybe this is one reason Kate Chopin was so close to her own children. She saw Oscar through them. Also, this helps to have a better understanding of why she always wrote while

sitting with her children in the sitting room. She must have felt comfortable seeing Oscar as well as herself in the faces of those children.

It should not be assumed that through Kate Chopin's stories, readers may see a total idea of strict independence or the beginning of the women's liberation movement. For example, in "Madame Martel's Christmas Eve" we get a sense of feminine warmth and love. Her heroines are a part of both. Some want to stay home to play the role of mother and wife while others want to break away from society's demands on women. Several of her heroines have both characteristics. Wasn't this the way Kate Chopin lived her life? She is close with her children, yet independent enough to leave them and go out to work with others or rather on her own concerns when the need arises. This is not to say that she disshunned the role of motherhood; rather, it suggests her capability of being both a mother and a writer. She needed strength to survive, to search for a concrete life and certain self identity. Her writings helped her to convey these qualities especially through individual characters.

According to Peggy Skaggs, there are three needs that Kate Chopin feels every individual has to have met in order to know exactly who they are and where they are positioned in life: "The drives for a feeling of belonging, for love, and for a sense of individual sovereignty" (Skaggs 1).

This sense of belonging can mean various things. It may be the need of belonging to society and being an essential part of it. On the other hand it may simply be the need to belong in one's own family. There are often times when people feel they do not belong in a certain place, but it is crucial to one's own self and soul to belong in one's own family. This overlaps with the necessity of love, as it is through the family that we obtain most of this love. And by returning this love, one develops a sense of belonging. The two are directly connected.

"Individual sovereignty" includes the need to realize one's self-identity. Once this has been established, one may place oneself in society with a better sense of where one belongs or better yet, where one wishes to belong. Once has conquered all questions and conflicts of such nature, the goal of individual sovereignty has been reached.

As we search for our identity and attempt to discover who we really are, we look at our relationships with other people. We perceive how we behave towards them as well as how they respond in behaving towards us. Our identity slowly develops in its own way through this perspective. Unfortunately, this can come into conflict with the idea of individual sovereignty and belonging. We are forced to be very careful in developing any sort of relationship with anyone.

These qualities and suggestions are frequently found in Kate Chopin's short stories involving women who are either involved in

a personal love affair or those who are considering it. Stories such as "The Storm," "A Respectable Woman," and "The Kiss" are all good examples among Kate Chopin's stories containing this theme.

A particularly telling example is "The Storm." Though written in 1898, it was not allowed to be published until 1969, as it was considered too risqué for the readers of her time. "The Storm" concerns a father and son who leave the mother alone while they go into town. While there, a storm develops. The mother begins closing up the windows in the house when she catches a glimpse of an old lover riding through the rain towards the house. He asks her for some shelter just until the storm passes. She allows him to stand on the porch, but as the winds begin to increase, he enters the house. As the storm progresses so does the old relationship between the two ex-lovers. They eventually make love just as the storm is at its worst. As the rain passes and the wind begins to die down, the man leaves with no expression of guilt on his face, and there is none on hers. The father and son return and the woman behaves as if nothing has happened. As the storm passes, so does the secret rendezvous. The reader is led to believe that this is not the end because the ex-lover is shown writing a letter to his sick wife requesting that she stay where she is for as long as she wants, as he wants to be certain of her health.

Kate Chopin once wrote in her diary that she could not "yet discover any serious significance in the present craze for the hysterical morbid and false pictures of life which certain English

women have brought into vogue" (Toth et al. 91). With this story she is announcing her feelings on the above subject. She wants to break away from the painted picture and get to the heart of what is really going on in the lives of women.

The woman in this particular short story knows exactly who she is. In this story Kate Chopin created a character who had enough confidence in herself to control her feelings just the way she wanted. She apparently has all three of the necessary qualities to have acted so suavely and coolly at the end of the story. She has love from her family, but she also has another sort of love - a kind of infatuation. Her old lover comes in and they relive the past for a short time. For once she is living what she has probably been dreaming of or at least remembering for a long time.

This woman also holds the sense of belonging. She belongs to a family. She is needed by them and in return she reveals to them her need to have that sense of belonging. On the other hand, she is independent enough to break away from these norms and set out on her own instantaneously. She had the strength and the courage to go through with what she wanted to experience. She also had the strength and confidence in herself to cope with life with her family afterwards.

This woman has proved her ability to cope with her own decisions. Realizing that she wants to be with her former lover, she goes ahead and fulfills her desires. She is maintaining her individual

sovereignty by doing what she wants to do. She has placed herself in society as a wife and mother, but she is deriving much more out of life than is afforded by the stereotypical life she leads. She is going beyond society's expectations of her and engaging in a life she wants to lead. Her individual sovereignty leads to the security of independence and self-identity. The attitude of non-guilt she develops after the rendezvous simply reveals her success at obtaining this individual sovereignty.

Not only did Kate Chopin create such a character who can hold such a strong identity, but she also made her attractive and well-liked. Why, for instance, would the ex-lover have written a letter to his wife telling her to stay where she was? He obviously has plans to see this woman again. Kate Chopin has shown her readers that this will be a continuing affair.

Another story that contains the three prerequisites of finding one's self-identity is "Madame Celestin's Divorce." In this story, Madame Celestin is a married woman with two children who has not seen her husband in six months. He is out gallivanting around while she is at home rearing the children, giving music lessons and doing some sewing for income. Every morning she is out in her front yard sweeping or pruning or something of that nature and a particular lawyer by the name of Paxton stops by to socialize with her. He learns, after several daily visits, of her predicament with her husband and encourages her to divorce him. She takes to the idea casually at first, but finally one

day decides she will go through with it. She speaks with Paxton about it in a positive manner for several days until one day Celestin comes back. He tells her he is willing to turn over a new leaf for her. This is all she needs to hear. All thoughts of a divorce disappear. Paxton, of course, is upset because he has been dreaming of her becoming his wife.

Madame Celestin exhibits her sense of belonging as well as individual sovereignty when Lawyer Paxton emphasizes how much work she is doing, "doing God knows what in the way of manual labor to support yourself and those two little ones" (Works, I, 276). Not surprisingly, as a Kate Chopin character, "Madame Celestin's pretty face beamed with satisfaction at this enumeration of her trials" (276). She knows that those children depended on her and that she belongs there with them. She also realizes from this statement, if she has not realized it before, that she is successfully independent. Her husband has left her with no income, no help, a house and a family to maintain, alone! The smile that Madame Celestin shares with Lawyer Paxton is one of great satisfaction in herself.

She is receiving love from her family as well as an unrevealed love from Lawyer Paxton. In the end we see that she is loved by her husband after all. Or is she? All of this could be some sort of ploy that Celestin is pulling just to keep her from seeking a divorce. Whether it is or not, Madame Celestin has her strongest sense of belonging in her family. The idea of her family being



together is so important to her that she is willing to take another chance with her husband.

Madame Celestin is like the woman in "The Storm" in that there seems to be a value in the idea of family. This can easily be portrayed as a sense of belonging. If one does not belong in his/her family, then where can one belong? This, again, incorporates the idea of love. Madame Celestin seems to be loved by everyone (with the possible exception of her husband), including Paxton, the lawyer. This is expressed by the kindly advice which she receives both from him and from her family.

"A Respectable Woman" involves three characters - a married couple, the Barodas, and a friend of Mr. Baroda, Gouvernail. Mr. Baroda's old college friend, Gouvernail, has sent word to the Barodas that he is coming for a visit. Mrs. Baroda has been entertaining guests for a long time and is eager for a rest. Unlike her husband, she is not looking forward to this visit in the least. She has always heard a lot about Gouvernail, but had never actually seen or met him and does not care to, either. When she finally meets him, she feels attracted to him so much that to maintain her image of respectability, she resists all temptation and leaves. She stays with her aunt until Gouvernail leaves their home. Later, her husband wants Gouvernail to return for another visit, but Mrs. Baroda says no. She persists in saying no everytime the subject is brought up until one day she decides yes. Her husband is joyful beyond imagination. Her

explanation for changing her mind is that she has overcome everything. "Everything" is the key word here because she has plans of even overcoming the image of respectability.

Like Kate, Mrs. Baroda has had a struggle in conquering her self identity. She has had to decide between what she wants for herself and what society wants her to be. It is a long and hard struggle that she and most of Chopin's women go through, but it is one that Mrs. Baroda deals with alone and one that she resolves independently. Mrs. Baroda's sense of belonging and love fall in the category of obedience to her husband. As a normal loving wife she plays hostess for his benefit and "belongs," in a sense, as his wife.

Her struggle with individual sovereignty is much more complicated than Madame Celestin's or the woman in "The Storm." While they make a decision rather smoothly with few emotional complications, Mrs. Baroda drives herself away from her own home in order to set her mind straight. She has a decision to make and in lieu of making it, she avoids the situation. While avoiding it she apparently comes to a realization of who she actually is. Once this identity is determined, Mrs. Baroda realizes that she is not being herself. She is not content living a life by the rules of society as opposed to her own rules.

Mrs. Baroda's independence, therefore, is expressed when she returns home and allows her husband to invite Gouvernail back again. She has overcome "everything," even the so called respec-

tability she has maintained. The reader is led to believe that Gouvernail will return undoubtedly and that he and Mrs. Baroda may engage in an affair.

Kate Chopin "openly criticizes the unnaturalness of the institutionalized marriage, but her characters do not contend with marriage in a uniform way" (Bender 262) as we can see through these stories. They take sex casually, marriage for granted, and tend to ignore the oath they took at the altar. All of these attitudes towards marriage reflect Kate's attitude toward life in general as a widowed female writer. She has to be strong. She has to have the feeling of belonging and being loved. Most importantly she has to have that individual sovereignty in order to be a success in her private life. She has to be a success in her own eyes before she can be a success in the eyes of the public.

This next story is somewhat different from the rest. However, it was probably very well accepted by society at that time because it is a story with a lesson. The name of it is "The Kiss." The story begins with Brantain, an unattractive yet rich young man and a girl sitting in a dark room lit only by a fireplace. Brantain has intentions of marrying this girl. As he is engaged in a conversation with this girl, the door suddenly flies wide open and in comes Mr. Harvey, a man very familiar to Brantain. He enters not even noticing Brantain, approaches the girl, and kisses her. Brantain, shocked, leaves, with the girl following him explaining that Mr. Harvey is just a friend of the family.

Content with this explanation, Brantain marries the girl. At the wedding he insists that Mr. Harvey kiss his bride to show others as well as himself that he has overcome this foolish jealousy. Mr. Harvey goes over to the girl and explains the circumstance. The girl puckers her lips waiting for her kiss, but he refuses to kiss her. Obviously the girl has intentions of "having her cake and eating it too." Mr. Harvey settles his score when he resists kissing her.

The main struggle in this story is the girl's struggle to decide whether or not to marry this rich man who has proposed to her or to continue her relationship with Mr. Harvey. She looks at herself and at what she wants most, which is ultimately money; thus she rejects a possible future with Mr. Harvey. After explaining to Brantain that Mr. Harvey is a friend of the family, she expects to maintain her friendly relationship with Mr. Harvey, but he prohibits her. Nevertheless, she maintains her individual sovereignty after Mr. Harvey declines his chance to kiss her, for she in return refuses to let it bother her. It is as if she had expected it all along.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Kate Chopin relates to these characters just as we can. Even though it may not be in the same way, we all yearn for a sense of belonging, love, and independence. Kate Chopin went

through a long traumatic period of finding out just who she was and where her place in the world was, but she eventually discovered it, as is shown through her main characters. Her women are strong, but most importantly they are themselves. They do not hide behind the rock of what society wants of them; they step out and face their own personal desires. Her works may not have been overwhelmingly accepted during this period of her life because of her candid and somewhat unorthodox revelations . She was, in a sense, out of her time. Fortunately, as time has passed and attitudes have changed, Kate Chopin has slowly but surely become appreciated more and more by contemporary readers.

She has shown herself to readers through the magnificent short stories she has created. Not only is it understandable that she went through a period of questioning her place in society, but it is also known how she coped with such stressful conflicts. Through her stories one sees that in order to conquer one's self-identity one must feel the sense of belonging as well as love along with a courageous attainment of individual sovereignty. When these issues are met, self-identity is reached.

Kate Chopin felt her sense of belonging. She felt it through her children as well as her influences, but most of all she felt it through her writing. It was through her pen that she was able to release all emotions and become the strong person that her readers believe her to have been in her day. By writing she

belonged within society, because she made it possible for people to relate.

She felt a sense of love through her family. Her mother was obviously very close to her and she, along with her grandmother and great grandmother, played an indirect influence on Kate. It was through them that she received role models. Also, the love she received from her children must have been very inspirational to her as she lived the life of a widow, for it was in their presence where she most comfortably wrote.

These senses of love and belonging eased Kate Chopin's way into realizing individual sovereignty. With the help of Dr. Kolbenheyer and the works of Guy de Maupassant, Kate began to realize who she actually was. Expressing herself through that first poem was the beginning of a huge breakthrough for this Southern short story writer. Her success should be considered inspirational to any person pursuing a career in writing or not.

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