CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I

Kate Chopin was born as Catherine O'Flaherty on 8 February 1851, the daughter of Thomas and Eliza O'Flaherty. Born in Ireland in 1805, Thomas O'Flaherty had come to the United States in 1823. In 1825 he settled in St. Louis, where in time he grew prosperous as a merchant. In 1839 he married Catherine de Reilhe, a French-Creole girl, who died giving birth to their son, George; then in 1844 he married Eliza Faris, another French-American girl. Thomas and Eliza O'Flaherty produced three children, of whom Catherine was the youngest and the one we know as Kate Chopin.

Kate's mother Eliza Faris, was descended from two of St. Louis' oldest Creole families. Eliza's maternal grandmother was Victoiri Verdon Charleville, born in 1780, whose own mother, Marianne Victoiri Richelet Verdon, had operated a line of keelboats between St. Louis and New Orleans. Thus Kate's ethnic heritage was French and Irish.

So Kate O'Flaherty grew up as Eliza and Thomas O' Flaherty's little girl. But in 1885 her father died suddenly, in a train accident. The disaster transformed the bustling O' Flaherty residence. It now became a house of pious widows and children. The family was thrust into new relationships with each other and with the world. Barely five years old, Kate had to reshape her concept of herself. Not only was she suddenly deprived of the important relationship with her father, she was also forced into a new position with her mother, who ofcourse was herself forced into new roles as a widow. Kate's mother's widowhood at twenty-seven evidently drew her closer to her daughter, leading to an intimacy that lasted until Eliza's death.

Kate's family now included her widowed mother, a woman of beauty, intelligence and personal magnetism; widowed grand-mother and great-grandmother and her half brother, George O' Flaherty, with whom she was emotionally close. These close personal relationships marked Kate's developing years. Kate's great-grandmother significantly influenced her young favorite's education and upbringing. Madame Charleville nurtured two lifelong devotions in Kate by insisting that she always speak French and learn to play the piano. A third was encouraged by Madame's vivid tales of early St. Louis settlers, the seamier details of which her great grand-daughter was instructed not to judge..."God did that"

The years of the Civil War were troubling for the O' Flahertys. They were Southern sympathizers, and young George eventually slipped past the Union occupation to join

the Confederate army. Kate herself became St. Louis's "Littlest Rebel" when she tore down the union flag from the front porch, where the Yanks had tied it. But more solemn events soon followed. George was captured and exchanged, only to die of typhoid fever. His untimely death was closely followed by that of Mme Charleville on January 16th, 1863. Thus, death terminated several of Kate's personal relationships even before she entered her teens. The result was that she matured without experiencing the traditional submissiveness of women to men.

Kate's grandmother accepted the situation "with quiet resignation to the will of God". But, when her great grandmother also accepted the inevitable, it was, with a determination to be a guide to the child and to aid her "in understanding life and its vagaries". Her theories of education were distinctly unique for the day. She would teach the girl to face life and its problems without a trace of consciousness, hesitation or embarassement. She insisted always on the child speaking French to her, while she supervised eagerly the daily music lesson. She taught her not to rely on appearences. To guide her properly in the path of virtue, she told the child accounts of the early days of St. Louis. Her stories stirred Katherine's interst in the intimacy of people's lives and minds and morals. Kate thus learned to face all questions coolly and fearlessly, asnd grew to be self-contained, calmly possessed, and an enigma to her immediate elders.

In September, 1860 she started her formal education as a day student at the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart. It was here that she formed a friendship with Katherine

Garesche. This friendship lasted through childhood and youth, only to be inteerrupted by Kitty Garesche entering the convent in 1870. Kate was an omnivorous reader from an early age and remained one all through her life. The books she read with Kitty Garesche before 1863 included works such as The Pilgrims Progress, Blind Agnes, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Ivanhoe, and writings by Gray and Dickens. She also had a sound knowledge of the French classics. She was also active in school activies and she became noted for "her gifts as a teller of marvellous stories". Kate's own record of her literary tastes is preserved in a commonplace book she kept from 1867 to 1870. Containing both lists and excerpts of books, it includes several early compositions. For the most part, the writings are quite adolescent, yet they reveal glimpses of her dislike of Fontenelle, her admiration for Longfellow and her fascination for all things German. Kate's reflective nature is also evident in her journal.

In June 1868 Kate graduated from the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart. She then plunged into fashionable life and for two years she was, "one of the acknowledged belles of St. Louis, a fovorite not only for her beauty, but also for her amiability of character and her cleverness". But the social scene was definitely not Kate's cup of tea. She found herself thrust into another new role, adjusting again to new relationships with people and to a new image of herself. As her first season wore on, her personality asserted itself more and more. Reading attracted her more and more than social gatherings. Kate also completed a brief sketch, perhaps her first real fiction, entitled"Emancipation : A Life Fable" at this time. The piece is a provocative initial

indication of its author's later career and expresses her excitement at her own irrevocable entry into adulthood.

In June 1870 Kate married Oscar Chopin, the son of a French-Creole family from Natchitoches Parish in northwestern Louisiana. In October she moved with her husband to New Orleans, where her first child, Jean-Baptiste, was born in May 1871. She bore five more children in rapid succession. The Chopin's life in New Orleans was pleasant and Oscar's business as a cotton factor prospered. The family made prolonged visits to St. Louis and spent their summers at Grand Isle, a fashionable Creole coastal resort and later a principal setting of The Awakening.

Oscar was an indulgent husband and parent. He never restrained Kate's behavior, instead he seemed to enjoy it. Kate's independent attitude was a trial to her husband's more traditional circle of friends and relations. She often walked or rode alone, an unconventional activity for women of her time. She even smoked and wore distinctive apparel. But this did not disturb their conjugal understanding. In 1878-1879 Oscar's business failed and the family moved to Cloutierville, Louisiana. Oscar and Kate were readily absorbed into a relaxed and abundant social life and the people of the Cane River country made a powerful and sympathetic impression on her. However, their comfortable life ended abruptly. On December 10, 1882, Oscar died of swamp fever, Kate Chopin was thirty-two, a widow with six children. Her independent spirit now projected its practical dimensions. Thrust into yet another new role, of widow and businesswoman, Kate remained in Louisiana for more than a year, managing her

affairs with notable success. Then in 1884, after getting her Louisiana business affairs arranged, she moved with her children back to St. Louis to be near her mother. Mother and daughter were devoted to one another, but this "closeness" was not to last long. The older lady suddenly died in June, 1885, leaving Kate Chopin "literally prostrated with grief".[1]

Thus Kate Chopin's sense of who she was had once again to be shifted to adjust to the loss of family members and to her changing place in her family. That is why, perhaps many of her protagonists too, seem to be searching for self-understanding. In so far, as her biography reveals Chopin's self knowledge came largely from her relationships with her dear ones and family. Having lived in a milieu which was devoutly Catholic, it was taken for granted that she should submit to authority and behave in the traditional manner.

Having lost all her immediate relatives, Kate was now utterly alone with her deep sorrow. The only one who seems to have been able to help her in her grief was Dr. Kolbenheyer, her family doctor. A man with an active mind and wide learning, he was a specialist on such philosophers as Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer. A fascinating talker, the doctor began encouraging Kate to take up writing to fill the void left by her losses.

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1 Rankin, Daniel, S. Kate Chopin & Her Creole Stories (Philadelphia, 1932) p. 105

Kate Chopin revisited Natchitoches in 1887 and the following year she started to write. Her first effort was "If IT Might Be", an undated poem, which is an expression of a wish to join her dead husband. In 1889 Chopin began writing fiction seriously. No one knows exactly what influenced her. Perhaps, because she had always been a voracious reader, and secondly perhaps, she felt the need to provide for her large family. Whatever the reason, Chopin soon found her metier in the short story, which provided her with the major inspiration of her writing career, Guy de Maupassant. In June 1889 she wrote her first story"Wiser Than A GOd", followed by "A Point At Issue". The first of these is about a young woman who refuses to marry and becomes a famous pianist instead. In the second story, meanwhile, the heroine marries her suitor; they share an idealism about marital freedom, but circumstances soon force them back to a more conventional stand.

Chopin's next effort was <u>At Fault</u> a novel she completed in April, 1890. The theme is once again connected with marriage, involving the question of the responsibility of one spouse to the other. David Hosmer, the chief male character, is told by Therese the woman he loves that he should not have divorced Fanny his wife, when he found out that she drank, but instead have tried to help her. They remarry, on Therese's urging but he cannot prevent her from falling back into drinking. All three suffer, until the accidental death of Fanny enables the two lovers to remarry. Kate Chopin had spent nine months writing At Fault. She was impatient to see it published, partly because it would aid her in self-criticism and partly because her ambition was to become known

among the nationally important critics and hopefully have their encouragement. When the first publisher she approached refused the novel she immediately had a St. Louis company bring it out at her expense and she personally promoted it by sending copies to newspapers and magazines. She also sent a copy to William Dean Howells, whose writings she admired.

The praise given for At Fault stimulated Kate Chopin in her efforts and she began to work on her second novel, Young Dr. Gosse which unfortunately never saw the light of the day. In January, 1891 she started it on its rounds to the publishers. Unfortunately no one wanted it, even though William Schuyler described it as "her strongest work"[2], and finally Kate destroyed it in 1896. After completing this novel, she concentrated on the shorter forms of fiction, writing no fewer than forty stories, sketches and vignettes duringthe next three years. Local periodicals like the St. Louis Magazine, Spectator and St. Louis Life were the first to accept her writings. Her childrens tales, which appeared from 1891 in the Youths Campion and Harpers Young People were extremely successful. The vignette Boulot and Boulotte" pleased Howells, the editor of Harper's so much, that he wrote to Kate Chopin a letter of praise, encouraging her to send in more of the same kind. By 1892 her writings for adults began to appear. Two Tales published 'At The Cadian Ball' Vogue published "A Visit to Avoyelles" and "Desiree's Baby". Short stories now flowed easily from Kate Chopin's pen and they were avidly

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[2] Schuyler, William. "Kate Chopin" Writer. VII pp. 115 - 117

read and appreciated. What Chopin learned from Maupassant became evident in her stories; her own clear prose; her pointed use of details; the solid authentic folk that populate her fiction. She also adapted and used effectively the surprise ending, for which Maupassant is most often remembered.

In march 1893 she brought out her first collection of tales called Bayou Folk. It contained twenty-three tales and sketches, all set in Louisiana, with many of the characters appearing in more than one story. Discreet humour and warm understanding are displayed by the author throughout. The book was the first to deal with the Cane River country, and in scores of reviews, Kate Chopin was now welcomed as a new, distinguished colorist.

Between 1894 and 1897 Kate Chopin wrote nearly forty stories. They reflect the new strength and the new insistence on expressing herself fully which were now released in her. A Night In Acadie as this collection of stories is termed, was finally published in November 1897. It is in many ways a continuation of Bayou Folk, set in the same Louisiana localities and -reintroducing some of its characters. In these stories Chopin uses less of romance and mutes her happy endings. She examines human life more honestly. This collection contains some of Chopin's most distinguished stories..

Chopin's third and final collection of short stories was A Vocation And A Voice. It was never published during her lifetime but in many ways it represents the culmination of Chopins talents as a writer of the short story. H. E. Scudder once said to Kate Chopin:" Have you never felt moved to write a downright novel? The chance of success in such a case is much greater than with a collection of short stories". These words along with Chopins desire for both artistic and financial success resulted in what was to be her masterwork, The Awakening. Her fictional powers were at their height. Her succint, evocative style had been refined by the discipline of the short story. Even her behavior was now reserved. She did not easily project her moral judgements, but her confidence in dealing with convention, conscience and complicated sexual roles had definitely increased.

Kate Chopin was now forty-six and at the peak of her creative powers. Her fiction was widely known: she was the leading figure in St. Louis's "working literary colony", she had a comfortable circle of interesting, influential friends; and she had successfully reared six children to adulthood or nearly so. Chopin could now look back upon a highly productive decade: since 1888 she had written three novels and nearly a hundred stories and sketches, besides essays, poems and a one-act comedy. The author had never worked so energetically as she did on The Awakening, but the reviews the book recieved on publication had a chilling effect on Chopin. Her new novel was a scandal. The tide of critical reviews could not be stemmed and Kate's dejection became apparent in the silence of the following sixteen months which produced not a single new work. A

brief spurt of activity occurred in the winter of 1901-1902, and two very conventional stories appeared in Youths Companion the following summer.

Kate Chopin was struck by cerebral hemorrhage on the eve of 20th August 1904, after attending the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. She died around noon on 22nd August 1904 and was buried in the Chapel of St. Louis's New Cathedral. Kate Chopin died somewhat unsung and unhonoured, but the fiction she had created in her brief career retained a vitality that was not to be suppressed.The foregoing biographical account thus reveals the close relationship between Kate Chopin's life and her artistic compulsions.

II

Kate Chopin's literary reputation has had it's ups and downs. Her contemporaries praised warmly her early, often inferior stories, especially those collected in Bayou Folk and to a lesser degree those in A Night In Acadie. But their bitter denunciation of her fine second novel, The Awakening terminated her creative period and virtually banished her best work from critical consideration for half a century. In 1930 Dorothy Anne Dondore praised her in The Dictionary Of American Biography, saying that she "unveiled the tumults of a woman's soul" and that her having written The Awakening twenty years before its time was tragic. In 1932 Daniel S. Rankin published Kate Chopin And Her Creole Stories, but the work sparked little interest.

During the 1960's interest in Chopin increased markedly, and the most important events in Chopin studies occured in 1969 when Per Seyersted wrote Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography and edited The Complete Works Of Kate Chopin. Seyersted interprets both Chopin's fiction and her life from a more modern perspective, commenting that in much of her work Chopin "was keeping up a running dialogue with herself on

woman's lot"[3] With Seyersted having made the body of Chopin's works conveniently available, many scholars in the 1970's focused their attention on defining her place in the literary tradition. Even so, however, the irony that has always marked Chopin criticism continued, with critics during that decade describing her as a feminist, a local colorist, a regionalist, a romantic, a neotranscendentalist, an anti-romantic, a realist, a naturalist and an existentalist.

Many critics have compared or contrasted Chopin's work with that of other individual writers. According to Taylor Kate Chopin was less prolific than Grace King or Ruth McEnery Stuart. Of the three writers Chopin made the most conscious references to European writing and the most original intervention in late nineteenth century American letters. Her signifance says Taylor lies in her particular use of local color techniques, and of regional and historical themes and allusions, that challenged European male and female sexuality. She made an important contribution to debates about gender, of relevance to the South of the 1890's.

Although Chopin's works and personal writings point to a considerable critical engagement in questions of gender and the position of women, they indicate no such involvement in the problems of race and southern blacks, except in a few early

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3 Seyersted, Per. Kate Chopin : A Critical Biography
Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press 1969
p. 114

stories. Chopin by birth was southern half-Creole and had a pro-confederate family background. And yet Per Seyersted suggests that Chopin "disapproved of slavery ", but argues that she was " not interested in society and issues, but in the individual and character, and whatever views she held on southern problems she usually hid behind a serene objectivity"[4]. Taylor feels that Seyersted comes closer to the truth when he says that Chopin's attitudes on the subject " were well hidden". He argues that Chopin's racism is a central element in her writing and cannot be ignored or simply excused.

Taylor says there is a clear evidence of Chopins Southern orthodox views on race. In 1894, when Bayou Folk was published containing several typical portraits of black figures, William Schuyler wrote: "Her fathers house was full of negro servants and the soft creole French patois and the quaint darkey dialect were more familiar to the growing child than any other form of speech. She also knew the faithful love of her negro 'mammy' and saw the devotion of which the well treated slaves were capable during the hard times of the war, when the men of the family were either dead or fighting in the ranks of the ' lost cause.'[5] Like Grace King, Kate Chopin clearly expressed herself to close and sympathetic friends in terms of "an affectionate nostalgia for the intimate black-white relations of childhood. 'The Benitou's Slave',

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4 Ibid p. 93

5 Schuyler, William "The Writer" VIII (1894)

Desiree's Baby', A Free Mulatto', are but a few of the stories reflecting Kate's racial comments.

Lewis Leary in one of the rare comments critics have made about At Fault regards the earlier novel as a rough first design of "what later would be fashioned to art"[6] in The Awakening. And in an introduction to The Awakening And Other Stories by Kate Chopin, Leary finds Edna"a valiant woman, worthy of place beside other fictional heroines who have tested emancipation and failed_Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary or Henry James Isabel Archer"[7]. Joan Zlotnick asserts that Chopins fiction is a "call to self discovery" and that her heroines often engage in a desperate quest for freedom"[8].

Critics like Donald A. Ringe and Goodwyn Jones view Chopin's work as romantic. But Lewis P. Simpson, although finding romantic elements and pointing to parallels between Harriet Beecher Stowe and Chopin, says that unlike Stowe, Chopin "explicitly grasped the nature and consequences of the worship of home and fireside '. He aligns Chopin with Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman in sharing a consciousness "of the vacuous condition following upon the loss of a transcendent

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6 Leary, Lewis. " Kate Chopin's Other Novel", The Sourthen Literary Journal (Autumn 1968) p. 74

7 Leary, Lewis Introduction to The Awakening and Other Stories By kate Chopins (New York, 1970), viii, xvii

8 Zlotnick "A Woman's Will : Kate Chopin on Selfhood, wifehood and motherhood", Markham Revie 3 (October 1968) : 5

meaning for human existence". Simpson notes also that, notwithstanding the psychological realism of George W. Cable and Mark Twain Chopin is the first writer to focus on the "sexual identity of the family and the individual in Southern settings"[9]. He believes that Twain by writing "The Mysterious Stranger" tried to bring under the control of art his despair over the world; and that Chopin wrote The Awakening under the same impulse. Because Twain, except through the persona of Huck Finn, never achieved the detachment of the modern literary artist, he left 'Stranger' unfinished; but Chopin did successfully achieve such a perspective.

Sarah Patricia H. Lattin agrees with Simpson that Chopin's "method" is that of the realistic movement, but declares that her "vision is not ". This critic asserts that Chopin's "solution to the romantic alienation of the individual and her understanding of the process of achieving selfhood often reflect a late nineteenth-century form of transcendentalism"[10].

Thus different critics have viewed Chopin and her works from different angles. Several critics compare and contrast Chopin and Dreiser, with a few even identifying Chopin as a thorough-going naturalist. Seyersted says that Chopin concentrates on biological

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9 Simpson, Lewis P. Foreword to " The Art Of Kate Chopin : Apprenticeship and Achievement", by Robert Arner, Lousiana Studies 14, No. 1 (1975) : 5 -10

10 Lattin, Sarah, Patricia Hopins "Method And Vision in Kate Chopins Fiction" (Ph.D. Diss.; University of Kentucky, 1977). as quoted in Peggy Skaggs : Kate Chopin, p.9

aspects of woman's situation while Dreiser, Norris, Garland, and Crane all concentrate on socio-economic forces shaping her life. Jerome Klinkowitz in "The practice of fiction in America" brings together various perspective on Chopins place in the tradition; he observes :

> "Chopin's development as a writer.....reflects in microcosm the larger movement in American literature from romanticism and local color to realism and naturalism..... Chopin's stories and novel reflect. ..... clearly the general trend in American literature of that era. Her theme is a romantic imaginative awakening; the catalyst for it is drawn from the materials of local color; and her methods of following actions is naturalistic".

Chopin herself was very critical about the reviews her works received. She was not satisfied with praise "per se", however, but wanted perseptive discriminating criticism. In a diary entry of June 7, 1894 she wrote :

> "..... I am surprised at the very small number which show anything like a worthy critical faculty. They might be counted upon the fingers of one

hand. I had no idea the genuine book critic was so rare a bird.....".

The review of Chopin criticism that has been taken here however shows that atleast after her death Kate Chopin has evoked a large number of discriminating, perceptive reviews.

III

A glance at the fictional world of Kate Chopin shows that she handled boldly the hottest issues of her day from temperance to sexuality, from divorce, to miscegenation. Also the explosive issue of female infidelity and the stunning candor of sexual desire and its gratifications. The nineteenth century society was both afraid of and not ready for change.. These topics were of unflagging interest to Kate Chopin not only because of her strong heart but also because of her firm moral view point. She believed in relativity of morals even though this strength proved to be her tragic flaw in the context of contemporary orthodoxy. Chopin's education and temperament prepared her to interpret 'the cry of the dying century' which she heard very firmly, says Per Seyersted. No doubt, the fictional world of Kate Chopin projects a wide variety of themes ranging from innocence and racialism to the problems of the feminine self. The present dissertation however is a modest and limited attempt to provide a critical focus on a major theme which is pervasive in her fiction-the complex theme of man-

woman relationship and the bearing it has on the nature of feminine identity. The thesis thus seeks to make a critical statement on Kate Chopin's search for the emancipated self. The primary objective of the dissertation is to attempt a critical statement on the theme of man-woman relationship as explored by Kate Chopin in her stories and novels.