

CHAPTER II

SEARCH FOR EMANCIPATION

II

The complex theme of man -woman relationship has always been a fertile ground for discussion. Kate Chopin's association with this theme is no exception, except that it becomes all the more significant, because of the period in which she expressed her views. She undoubtedly had her own set of social values, though often they were at variance with those of the ruthless money-making Gilded Age. America in the nineteenth century, specially the South was socially quite conservative in its image of a 'good woman'. A lady was expected to be indifferent to sex and confine her contentment to the narrow range of her womanly duties.

The literary precepts of the changing times were more of a challenge to Kate Chopin. Richard Watson Gilder felt that fiction should ~~be~~ pleasant and avoid the horrifying, the indelicate or the immoral. But Kate Chopin wanted to express herself freely. She concentrated on the immutable impulses of love and sex. To her, nature was amoral.

playing with man, and morality was man-made and relative. Kate Chopin implied that nice girls can have passionate natures and affairs of the heart. This created a furore in her times. When Hamlin Garland declared in "Crumbling Idols" that he preferred 'actualities' to literary masterworks of the past, and 'sociological' themes to a subject as love, Kate Chopin's reply was "Human impulses do not change," but social problems by their very nature are mutable. Since Chopin was thirty-nine years old before she published her first story, she had already matured and gained much experience of life. Her unusual degree of personal maturity is reflected in her stories dealing with themes of love, sex, man-woman relationships and infidelity. Stories in Bayou Folk and A Vocation And A Voice turn inwards studying human emotions and values. Power of sex and love drives an outwardly meek and contented woman towards self-assertion or into an extra-marital relationship. Her early stories proceed gradually from being mere conventional love stories to more mature studies of the man-woman relationship where the inward projection of the self by the fair sex is more dominant. The latter stories handled more subtly, project the woman as a 'being' with needs that go beyond mere love and physical satisfaction. "Emancipation. A Life Fable" is the story of an animal 'born in a cage', who 'opening his eyes upon life.....saw above and about him confining walls.'¹ He thrives in strength and beauty

¹ Chopin, Kate

The Complete Works of Kate Chopin.

Edited By Per Seyersted. Baton Rouge;

Louisiana State University Press. 1969. p.37

under the care of an invisible protecting hand. Food, water, rest and sunshine are all available to him. His is a world of gilded bliss. Then, one day someone accidentally leaves open the cage door. He first reacts with fear, but the 'Light' lures him with increasing force until ~~atlast~~ the 'Spell' of the Unknown pulls him out altogether, "and with a bound he was gone.

No longer protected by the cage, "on he rushes.....wounding and tearing his sleek sides, seeing, smelling, touching of all things."² Gone is the "invisible protecting hand," and the animal discovers that "hungering there is no food but such as he must seek and oft times fight for; and his limbs are weighted before he reaches the water that is good to his thirsting throat." He could return to the cage, but he does not: "So does he live seeking, finding, joying and suffering. The door which accident had opened is open still, but the cage remains forever empty."³ The animal, rejecting security within the cage, embraces life with all its suffering and sorrows.

The story can be seen as a metaphor for Chopin's literary sensibility which seeks to describe women characters moving from the fabled cage to the reality outside it, from dependence to freedom, from innocence to maturity. The effect of the Emancipation Bill in this direction was also a contributory factor. Woman was no longer a docile-

² Ibid p. 37

³ Ibid p.38

pampered' possession; she was gradually becoming aware of her needs and her identity. She loved, but she refused to become 'a shadow' as did Edna Pontellier or Mildred. Emancipation has been a constant theme with Kate Chopin herself. Her life and experiences as a woman affirm this theme and the truths she expressed first in the above story right down to her controvertial novel "The Awakening".

"Love On The Bon-Dieu" is a conventional sort of love story. Lalie is a poor young girl living with her disreputable aged grandmother in an old abandoned hovel on the Bon-Dieu. Azenor meets her at Pere Antoinnes on the eve of Easter. Lalie has come to get 'a piece of writing' from the priest for Monsieur Chartrand at the store. She is going to trade some eggs for a pair of new shoes and stockings.

Sensitive and kind-hearted Azenor is deeply moved by what the priest has to tell him about Lalie's poverty and ill-treatment at the hands of her grandmother. His interest is aroused and on Easter day, he awaits her as she leaves the church. Unlike, the other well-dressed people Lalie is in simple clothes and without easter eggs. Azenor offers some from his basket and Lalie selects a pink one with clover-leaves. Azenor's interest in the girl gradually deepens into love and he takes every opportunity of seeing her, as she passes his gate on her way to work.

Then suddenly Lalie stops coming and a frantic Azenor learns from the priest that she is severely ill. Unable to restrain his love, he goes to the Bon-Dieu and carries back

the critically ill girl to his house. Love and grief so overwhelm him, that he rages against the world for its unkindness to this helpless creature.

Though the story ends on the usual happy note, yet Kate Chopin with her feminine sensitiveness brings out the face of love very well. When Azenor stops at the stream to lave Lalie's hot cheeks and forehead with cold water, she revives a little. Seeing this Azenor plants a kiss on her parched lips, and in response Lalie opens her, tightly closed fist and lets the 'Easter bauble' fall to the ground, entwining her arms around her beloved's neck. Further, love's possessiveness and power is revealed when Azenor says to his lady servant Tranquiline, "She is going to live! Do you think I would let my wife die, Tranquiline?"⁴.

In A "No-Account Creole" the protagonist Euphrasie, almost waits too long before discovering her right place in life. Placide Santien, with a possessive attitude much like that of Leonce Pontellier in The Awakening and of numerous other Creole gentlemen in Chopin's fiction, has regarded Euphrasie as his own ever since she was placed in his arms on his sixth birthday. Years later, asking her to marry him, he demands to know, "Do you love anybody better?...Any one jus' as well as me?" She replies honestly, "You know I love papa better, Placide an' Maman Duplan jus' as well"⁵

⁴ Ibid p.163

⁵ Ibid p.86

. But knowing no reason to refuse to marry Placide, she accepts. Soon, however, Wallace Offdean arrives, and Euphrasie discovers within herself strange, new feelings — almost another person — as she becomes better acquainted with Offdean.

On night Placide kisses her passionately on the lips. Afterwards, "She sobbed a little and prayed a little. she felt that she had sinned. a fine nature warned her that it was in Placide's kiss"⁶. Placide, upon learning Euphrasie's feelings frees her to marry Offdean, her true love. Chopin comes close in this story to having her protagonist marry a man she does not love because of having committed herself before knowing her own heart. The story has nothing extraordinary about it to recommend itself. It reads like a conventional love tale, since Kate Chopin has not confronted the problems that could possibly result, if Euphrasie had married Placide and not Offdean. This minute analysis is evident in her later stories.

Even in these earliest stories, Chopin almost always creates with great economy a unified effect. "In and Out of Old Natchitoches" begins developing in one direction and then does an abrupt about face. The author apparently creates a dilemma for her characters that she is either unwilling to confront or unable to resolve in her own mind. The first part of this story places the central character, Mademoiselle Suzanne St. Denys Godolph, in conflict with Alphonse Laballiere. Suzanne, a school teacher of

proud Creole stock, refuses to accept as a pupil a mulatto child whom Alphonse, of equally aristocratic old South blood, tries to force into her school either simply to prove that he can do so or, perhaps to express his disgust that such a high-born lady should actually lower herself so far as to accept paid employment.

To resolve this dramatic situation, Chopin simply changes focal points in mid-story. Suzanne moves to New Orleans, where she falls a bit in love with a distant cousin, Hector Santien. Alphonse follows, uncovers the cousin's secret identity as a notorious gambler, and saves the girl in spite of herself. After exposing the cousin's vice-filled life, Alphonse returns to Natchitoches on the same train with Suzanne " He went to her. and held out his hand; she extended her own unhesitatingly. She could not understand why. It seemed as though sheer force of his will would carry him to the goal of his wishes"⁷. This scene echoes Euphrasie's earlier decision to marry Placide because "she saw no reason why she should not" and it foreshadows Edna's later decision to marry Leonce when he "pressed his suit". The women in both these stories seem incapable of individual decisions. They prefer to accept what the situation offers, feeling secure in the warmth of possessive love offered by their male counterparts.

Even though, these early stories of Kate Chopin are sentimental and superficial, yet many of them are a fine study of women in search of themselves, their responses to the opposite sex and their acceptance or rejection of male possessiveness.

In "Suzette", "Fedora" and "The Godmother" sexual feelings propel the protagonists toward strange, unnatural or even cruel behaviour. Suzette, the young coquette on hearing of the death of Michel Jardeau, expresses no emotion at the loss of her one-time lover. 'What a weariness that love had finally become to her, only herself knew' is the only thought that crosses her mind. Pavie, on the other hand, who loves Michel truly, on getting the news falls down in a faint. But Suzette is more interested in attracting the attention of one of the cowboys, driving the herd below her window. But when he does not even glance at her, she throws herself in frustration onto the bed and sobs. Both of them do not seek any loving relationship, they only desire physical attraction.

"Fedora" features a thirty years old spinster who has forged a place for herself among her brother, sisters and guests by assuming an elderly air of stern authority. She has known young Malthers for eight years, but is suddenly attracted to the big handsome man of twenty-three :

"the sudden realization came home to her that he was a man-in voice, in attitude, in bearing, in every sense--a man"⁸.

Of course, Malthers feels ~~no~~ such passions for Fedora, but she seeks his 'nearness' at all times. To satisfy her sexual attraction for the man, she lavishes her affections and even plants a kiss upon Malthers sister's mouth, whom she has collected from the station. Her action is merely an attempt to reconcile the conflicting emotions rising within her; even though her action is unnatural for a lady.

Love can develop strange relationships. The responses of the female mind to a complex situation are not easily predictable. "Caline" is the portrait of a young country girl whose perception of life is changed forever by a passing train when it stops near where she lies asleep, a young man gets off, paints her portrait and then resumes his journey. Soon she goes to the city and begins to look into the face of every passerby seeking the face that "awakened" her that day.

"A Visit to Aroyelles" is the story of a man Doudouce, who fancies that he can rescue his former sweetheart Mentine, from her worthless husband, Jules Trodon. But his impulsive visit to Aroyelles Parish, ~~only~~ makes him a disillusioned witness to the

power of sheer romanticism. Mentine now "in a manner fallen" appeals all the more to Doudouce and he loves her even more "fiercely" as a mother loves an afflicted child. Mentine, for all her poverty and premature age is neither an afflicted child deserving Doudouce's condescending pity nor the helpless bride of his dream, but a woman who has made her choice and stands by it. Just as Doudouce loves Mentine beyond her dismal appearance, so does she love Jules without regret.

In "At Cheniere Caminada" a shy young fisherman named Tonie falls in love with Claire Duvigne ----a beautiful popular girl who dies. For from grieving for her, Tonie rejoices because now Claire will not marry anyone else. An instinctive coquette, Claire had sensed Tonie's unspoken passion one day when she hired a ride in his boat. But "she did not dream that under the rude, calm exterior. his reason was yielding to the savage, instinct of his blood⁹. As a matter of fact, Tonie had come very close to killing both Claire and himself while they were alone on the lake that day.

The development of a strange and consuming passion also provides the central interest of "Azalie", another 1893 story. Polyte falls in love with Azalie, a poor Acadian girl who presents quite a contrast to Claire Duvigne: "the face was colorless but for the red, curved line of the lips. her black hair was plastered smooth back. There was no trace of. coquetry in her manner. He resented this as a token of

indifference toward his sex"¹⁰. Polyte at first dislikes Azelie, then he wishes she would go away, then he asks her to marry him, and finally he quits a good job to follow her and her family when they move away. What Polyte feels for Azelie, like Tonies passion for Claire, might more properly be called lust than love.

The man-woman relationship thread is seen running through almost all of Chopin's stories. As a woman and as an author she has always been impressed by the theme. However, stories as mentioned above and others like "A Wizard From Gellysburg", "Going Away of Liza" and "A Point At Issue" read in the conventional manner, where man meets woman, falls in love, are separated by misunderstandings and finally through fate come together in a happy union. But, even though on the surface "A Point At Issue" reads very much like a love story, yet there are underlying tones in it which point in a new direction and this is a more mature trend of thought that has begun to creep into Chopin's stories. Woman has a specific place ----she is not merely the prize possession of man, but a being with thoughts, feelings and desire for freedom ----and her placement in the context of the man-woman relationship marks most of Chopin's stories in her second volume A Night In Acadie.

In "A Point At Issue ", when Farraday finally asks Eleanor to be his wife, she laughingly assents, as she has thought upon marriage for a long time.

In entering upon their new life they decided to be governed by no precedential methods. Marriage was to be a form, the individuality. was to be preserved intact. Each was to remain a free integral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws."¹¹

In "A Shameful Affair" Chopin describes a shamefully impassioned kiss between virtual strangers--it is a kiss sought by the heroine Milred Orme. She is slightly attracted to a hand on a farm which she is visiting. Bored, she openly flirts with the man. He repulses her rudely, thus increasing her interest. She follows him to the river one day, whereupon he kisses her passionately. Mildred is shocked at her own pleasure, yet she refuses to avoid seeing him. When he apologizes and seeks her forgiveness, she replies enigmatically.

"Some day---perhaps, when I shall have forgiven myself"¹².

Mildred has violated conventional rules of conduct by throwing herself at a man below her status. Her action is prompted by sexual attraction rather than romantic love. However, Mildred's awakening interest in sex is also the beginning of her becoming an

¹¹ Ibid p.50

¹² Ibid p.136

autonomous being. Chopin's use of the adjective 'shameful' is full of irony here. What is shameful from the point of view of conventional morality is in fact a bold but authentic gesture from the point of view of open, individual morality represented by Mildred.

Thus her women characters begin to project themselves by stepping outside the image of a beloved, a wife, or a mother. They seek new identities as individuals or rebels.

Robert Arner calls Mamzelle of "A Sentimental Soul" -- "As unlikely a rebel as anyone may wish to meet". A devoutly religious spinister, Mamzelle falls secretly in love with a married man, Lacodie who is outspoken about his radical political opinions and intentions to "overcharge the prosperous". Much older than he, much taller, "Mamzelle" held no opinions". Her appearance too reflects a pinched repressed existence, expressing an appeal to be permitted to exist. Mamzelle seems as unlikely to be a lover as a rebel. But love raises a tumultuous storm within her. She is both apalled by her sinful emotion as well as exhilarated by the new feelings of joy and sweetness.

Mamzelle hurries to confession, where she shocks the priest: "A slap in the face would not have startled Father Fochelle more forcibly. Determining that Lacodie is

unaware of Mamzelle's love for him, the priest scolds her and tells her to "keep Satan at bay"¹³.

Soon Lacodie develops a fever and dies. Father Jochelle forbids that Mamzelle even go to the funeral, and she does not question his authority, or his ability to master the subtleties of a situation utterly beyond the reach of her own powers. She keeps Lacodie's picture and continues loving him. In the meantime Lacodie's young pretty widow takes up washing to support herself and her child. Spring comes, she grows flowers and buys a bird. Then she begins to sing with the bird. Soon she marries again.

The widow's remarriage shakes Mamzelle's soul :

"A terrible upheaval was taking place in her soul.
She is preparing for the first time in her life to
take her conscience into her own keeping".¹⁴

And so, Mamzelle Fleurette becomes a rebel. She now asserts her autonomy. She goes to a new church and confesses to a priest she does not know. But nowhere does she mention, " her love for Lacodie, the dead husband of another woman." She now

¹³ Ibid

p.391

¹⁴ Ibid

p.396

walks home from church with the delicious sensation of walking on air because now she has taken her conscience into her own keeping. She is free to make her own decisions and choices.

"A Respectable Woman" is the story of a lady initially repelled by her husband's houseguest, Gouvernail. But the ~~man's~~ physical attraction and charm finally breaks the lady's barriers and she succumbs to her physical urges.

Mrs. Baroda is a happily married woman who feels, "a little provoked" about her husband's friend Gouvernail visiting their plantation at a time when "she was looking forward to a period of. undisturbed tete-a-tete with her husband."¹⁵ But she finds Gouvernail disturbingly attractive, despite her strong love for her husband. Recognising what is happening she escapes to the city and remains there until he leaves the plantation. Mrs. Baroda flees the scene to make sure she remains faithful to her husband. But before the year's end, she suggests that Gouvernail be invited for another visit. Her husband declares his delight that she has "overcome" her "dislike" for his friend. She laughingly tells him, after pressing a long, tender kiss upon his lips, "I have overcome everything! This time I shall be very nice to him"¹⁶. The reader thus understands that she is going to risk losing ~~everything~~ ----her husband.

¹⁵ Ibid p.333

¹⁶ Ibid p.336

her marriage, her very happiness ---simply because she has awakened to the fact that she is more than just Mrs. Baroda, a wife.

"Athenaise" is another story about marriage from a woman's perspective. The protagonist is much younger and less experienced than the man she takes for her husband. Athenaise, ~~has~~ recently married Cazeau, a self-spoken but severe looking widower. From the word go, Cazeau realizes that the marriage is a blunder, yet he decides to make the best of a bad situation. When his bride does not return one evening after visiting her parents, "He did not worry much about Athenaise..... his chief solicitude was manifestly for the pony she had ridden".¹⁷ Cazeau, being very busy, has little time to concern himself about his wife's absence, but on the third afternoon after her departure "the task of bringing his wife back to a sense of her duty" becomes imperative.

Athenaise explains to her uncomprehending family that she does not dislike her husband, but simply the condition of being married. "I hate being Mrs.Cazeau, and would want to be Athenaise Miche' again"¹⁸. Thus Athenaise finds it impossible to perceive herself as a married woman playing a new role in life with a new name to which she must learn to answer.

¹⁷ Ibid p.426

¹⁸ Ibid p.431

On the other hand, whatever he might feel, Cazeau knew only one way to act towards a woman. He simply tells her what to do. And confronted thus, Athenaise yields helplessly. Her husband's mere presence brings to her a sense of helplessness and the futility of rebellion.

Some sense of how Athenaise feels comes to Cazeau, however, as they ride home. "the sight of a great solitary oak-tree..... brought vividly back to Cazeau. a scene of many years ago," when he had been a small boy. He and his father were on horseback, returning a runaway slave to their plantation. "Black Gabe was moving on before them at a little dog trot"¹⁹ and they halted beneath this oak tree to enable the negro to take breath. Cazeau's father was a kind master and Gabe was a fool to run away from him was the general opinion. But the memory makes Cazeau uncomfortable and he vows never to force Athenaise to return to him. For the companionship of no woman on earth would he again undergo the humiliating sensation of baseness that had flooded him, as he passed the oak-tree.

Athenaise flees once again, this time to New Orleans, where she spends a month enjoying the "comfortable sense of not being married" Gouvernail, her neighbour keeps her from becoming lonely. But the discovery that she is pregnant, saves Athenaise from being awakened by Gouvernail. The news transforms her and an ecstasy fills her.

being. She is transfigured with wonder. She views herself now as the mother of her unborn child, rather than Cazeau's wife. The role is definitely more appealing and satisfying. She willingly comes back to Cazeau ready to sacrifice her name and more. The prospective motherhood offers her a new perspective of herself as a human being.

Kate Chopin opens a new window on the institution of marriage. For her physical union is not sufficient for a happy arrangement between man and woman. The loss of identity ---her name that a woman suffers, needs to be compensated by much more than mere marital vows. Love, understanding, patience, compromises and spiritual union, undoubtedly go a long way to make marriage a success. But what is more essential is the sense of being needed, the urge to project oneself beyond the conventional image of 'a prize possession' and it is these sentiments that Chopin's women characters express. The author herself had never felt the 'repressive' bonds of the male sex in her life and to view woman as a 'slave' to man was beyond her comprehension.

"The story of An Hour" is an expression of release from what the protagonist evidently felt as repression or frustration, thereby freeing forces that had lain dormant in her. Louise Mallard's response to the reported death of her husband, Brently, in a train accident is highly unexpected. Grieving alone in her room, she slowly recognises that she has lost all the binding forces. The restrictions associated with her wife-hood are no more." Free! Body and soul free!" She kept whispering. She discovers that no

amount of love and security can compensate for a lack of control over her own existence.

Thus Chopin reveals with great subtlety that male possessiveness constitutes the pivotal problem with husband, wife and marriage. Chopin treats such possessiveness in most of her best works about man-woman relationships including "At the Cadian Ball", "In Sabine", "Desiree's Baby" "Athenaise", "Wiser than God" and ofcourse The Awakening.

Bobinot is a big, brown, good natured Acadian farmer, who loves the spanish girl Calixta, a beauty with ".... most tantalizing eyes and a full figure". She is attractive to every male eye, especially to the dare-devil Alcee Laballiere. Hence when Bobinot learns that both Calixta and Alcee will be present at the ball, he too decides to go.

Alcee has received the cold shoulder from his 'dainty as a lily' cousin Clarisse. When Alcee makes passionate love to her, like a true blood she disdains him with haughty ease. But love-making between Alcee and Calixta is a different cup of tea. Clarisse declares her love for Alcee while Calixta makes Bobinot a happy Acadian, after Alcee deserts her. Her reply to Bobinot's question, whether she still desires to marry him is, " I don't care,me".²⁰

There is much in common between the couples in terms of social status and life-styles. Both men have been treated coldly by their chosen brides yet they do not wish to marry other women with the same elements. This is because each man feels that he has acquired a prized possession.

"Desirees Baby" also pivots around male possessiveness and related matters of identity. Desiree a foundling has no identity, but the Valmonde family accepts her, offering love, security and a home. Even when Armand Aubigny desires her, he is warned that she is a 'nameless girl'. But he is ready to correct that by giving her one of "the oldest and proudest names in Louisiana."

But the question of identity arises once again when Madame Valmonde looks at Desiree's month old baby and exclaims, "This is not the baby!". But Desiree's is unaware of anything amiss and Armand too is a proud father because "it is a boy, to bear his name". But the fact that the baby has negro forbears becomes evident before long and Armand's answer to Desiree's query "look at our child what does it mean? tell me" is very aloof and cold --- "It means that the child is not white, it means that you are not white".²¹

Armand's pride in his wife and son has turned to bitter ashes. The same man who sought the 'nameless' girl, now no longer desires her and the only path open to the unfortunate mother and child is the swamp. At no point does Armand consider the fact, that the black ancestry comes from him, as is finally proved. The irony of the situation is that it is a man's world and hence it cannot be a tainted one'. Even if the truth had been known Desiree would have happily continued as the wife of this 'tainted man' and the mother of his child. But Armand, though his pride is wounded is not destroyed.

Such is the case with Hosmer in At Fault. He gave his wife all the material comforts of life except the warmth of his presence and love. When she finally degenerates into an alcoholic, he divorces her. His male ego is hurt and he deserts his wife without feeling any moral shame or responsibility. Therese answer to his question " Do you think that man owes nothing to himself" is very apt and truthful as she replies, " Yes, a man owes to his manhood, to face the consequences of his own action."²²

When even social norms favour the residence of a sense of superiority in the male, it is natural that the female in such a milieu is bound to be subdued and insignificant. But, can such a state of affairs lead to a successful man-woman relationship is a debatable point. Possessiveness is bound to lead to self-assertion. Nobody, even less

²² AT FAULT from The Complete Works of Kate Chopin. p.769

so a woman, is bound to rebel---to assert her identity at some time or the other, in one form or another.

"A Night in Acadie" portrays a girl named Zaida, who in her headstrong determination to live her own life foreshadows Edna Pontellier. The protagonist, a young bachelor named Telesphore, meets Zaida on a train and decides to go with her to Foche's Ball. The way the girl moves and acts captures Telesphore's interest: 'She carried herself boldly "with" an absence of reserve. ... yet..... no lack of womanliness'.²³ Zaida in her bold, sensuous ways and in her effect on Telesphore reminds one of Calixta in 'At The Cadian Ball' and 'The Storm'.

Her sensuousness rouses the maleness in Telesphore and he even stands up to her drunk and belligerent lover Pascal, who is nothing but a 'rascal'. Zaida enjoys the combat with the highest excitement, doing nothing to prevent the maiming or even death of either combatant, determined "to see fair play" between the man she has only that day met and the insulting drunk she had meant to marry despite the objections of family and friends. In an anticlimatic denouement, Telesphore after winning the fight asserts his masculine authority and drives Zaida home. Zaida "was like a little child and followed whither he led".

Through her stories Chopin exposes the fact that a woman's submission to a man's blind persistence is often mistaken for love --that self sacrificing Victorian ideal. And it is this glorified love, that Chopin decries in her works. But in the face of this possession of self-assertion Louise, Edna and Mamzelle Martel realize that this is the strongest impulse of their being. Chopin insists that love is not a substitute for selfhood, indeed, selfhood is love's pre-condition.

"In Sabine" focuses on Tite Reine, a miserable young wife whose husband mistreats her cruelly. Before her marriage she had been a charming girl, with her trim, rounded figure. 'saucy coquettish eyes, her little, ... queen.' But that picture contrasts sadly with the girl Gregoire Santien finds when he visits her in Sabine Parish only a year after her marriage: "24 her eyes were larger with an alert, uneasy look in them.... her shoes were in shreds. " Worse, her "little imperious ways" have changed into a habitual response to her husband's call: 'I'm coming. Bud 'ere I come w'at you want Bud'.25 Gregoire's manliness does not fail him and he decides to help the poor girl make good her escape. Tite Reine is all too happy to regain her freedom and without a second thought to what she will find awaiting her as a 'feme sole', she escapes while Gregoire plies Bud with whiskey.

24 Ibid

p.326

25 Ibid

p.327

"La Belle Zoraide", a sad love story, centres upon a pampered slave girl, who certainly has a secure place but no love and no autonomy at all. Madame Delariviere has reared Zoraide, the beautiful black protagonist, in her own image: "As charming and as dainty as the finest lady of rue Royale".²⁶ Zoraide does no work that might roughen her hands and even has her own black servant. Her mistress has undertaken to marry her with M'sieur Ambroise the body servant of Doctor Langle'. But Zoraide loves Mezor, a field hand with a body as straight as a cypress-tree and as proud looking as a king. But Madame only exclaims, "that negro ! that negro. ... " Zoraide pleads with simple logic: "Am I white, ne'naine ?"²⁷ But Madame is adamant. Power and possessiveness blind her to the natural instincts of her slave. To her the girl is a possession to be moulded as desired and not a human being with a will of her own.

In the contest between intelligence and power that ensues, power initially wins, for Zoraide seems to comply. A few months pass and Zoraide makes another confession, a confession of her disobedience and the impossibility of her compliance to Madame's command to stop loving Mezor. When Zoraide gives birth to a daughter by Mezor, Madame sends the baby away and tells Zoraide that the infant has died. Madame returns to her plan to marry the girl to Dr. Langle's body servant, and the slave girl seems to submit as though nothing matters any longer in their world". But Zoraide

²⁶ Ibid

p.304

²⁷ Ibid

p.305

manages to elude her owner's plans again. Shortly before the scheduled wedding, the young woman begins carrying in her arms a "senseless bundle of rags shaped like an infant".²⁸ All treatments, even returning to her arms her own baby prove useless, and the poor girl lives out her days imagining herself the mother of a pile of rags. " She was never known again as la belle Zoraide, but of ever after as Zoraide la folle".²⁹

This story thus illustrates one of Chopin's best themes: that tragedy results when a person is robbed of her right to be her own person and to love whom she will.

Like Zoraide, Madame Delisle in "A Lady of Bayon St. John" too finds her identity in an imaginary role. Madame's husband Gustave, goes away to the war, leaving a beautiful but childish wife behind. Sepincourt, a neighbour and the lonely lady fall in love and decide to run away together. But that very night Madame learns that her husband has died. Sepincourt impatiently waits until he can without indecency again speak of his love, but when he does go to her, she greets him "precisely as she. welcomed the cure, Clasp[ing] his two hands warmly and calling him 'Cher ami'. Her whole attitude brought the bewildering conviction home that he held no place in her thoughts. Nevertheless, he declares: 'I have come now. to ask you to be my wife, my companion, the dear treasure of my life'.³⁰ But Madame Delisle is very much

²⁸ Ibid p.307

²⁹ Ibid p.307

³⁰ Ibid p.300

satisfied with her role as a widow and her new place in life is equally comfortable. She refuses to give up her new found freedom and identity for the bonds of marriage.

Thus, when Madame Delisle had her opportunity to break away with convention and become an independent woman by running away with the man she loved, she pulled back into the safety of her ladyhood. Like Mildred Orme, she awakens briefly to the possibility of sexual fulfillment but retreats from it. Madame's dependence on fantasies of love provides her the anchor of her life. "Ah! I have memories, memories to crowd and fill my life, if I live a hundred years!"³¹ she exclaims.

Chopin's literary career was now well established. Her short stories were mature, the characterisation more firm and the drive towards autonomy more and more insistent in her characters, specially female characters. Stories dealing with the feminist self reveal the protagonist going beyond the conventional and seeking a place outside the context of the man-woman relationship. The question that Shakespeare's Lear asks when he stands naked on the heath in the centre of the tempest crying 'Is man no more than this?' is exactly what Chopin is trying to answer in stories like "Wiser than a God", "The Maid of St. Phillippe" and others.

"Wiser than a God" comes from the latin proverb "To love and be wise is scarcely granted even to a god". Paula Von Stoltz, falls in love with George Brainard, and he

with her. Dedicated to becoming a great pianist, Paula has learned to sacrifice everything for her art. But George, whom she loves passionately, has every quality a girl could hope for in a husband: he is handsome, wealthy, kind, considerate, and intelligent. Further, he does not ask Paula to give up her music or her ambitions. Yet Paula being "wiser than a god," apparently realizes that she cannot be both Paula Von Stoltz, a great musician, and Mrs. George Brainard. She chooses to remain the former, but doing so requires her to sacrifice her love.

Marianne the tall, supple and strong protagonist of "The Maid of St. Phillippe" also longs for freedom. When the eastern province of Louisiana was granted to England, the people of Sainte Phillippe prefer to leave the place of their birth and go and settle elsewhere, rather than be subject to England. But Marianne and her father are the only ones to remain behind. Marianne, like an unbroken filly lives a free life in the deserted village with her father Picole.

But when her father dies, the cure beseeches her to leave the empty village, as it is no place for a young girl. Jacques, who loves her, offers marriage, but Marianne refuses him. Captain Vaudry offers the luxuries of city life but Marianne is not ready to except anyone as her master. "I have breathed the free air of forest and stream, till it is in my blood now, I was not born to be the mother of slaves" is her reply to her suitor. What do you mean, Marianne?. what is left for you?" and she exclaims, Freedom is left for me, Hardships may await me, but let it be death rather than

bondage".³² Thus Chopins protagonists now go a step further in establishing their identity.

In 1896 appeared the story of another widow—"A Pair of Silk Stockings". Mrs Sommers, a poverty-stricken widow, unexpectedly receives fifteen dollars. She dreams of outfitting her four children in new clothes: "The vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives excited her".³³ Mrs Sommers seems at first to be one of the type of women who idolize their children and consider it a privilege to efface themselves for their dear ones. But Mrs. Sommers goes out and spends the entire sum on personal luxuries for herself, a pair of silk stockings ---"How good was the touch of raw silk to her flesh!" stylish boots, luxurious gloves, two expensive magazines. "Such as she had been accustomed to read in the days when she had been accustomed to other pleasant things,³⁴ lunch in a fine restaurant and a matinee theatrical performance".

But then, of course, "The play was over, the music ceased, the crowd filed out. It was like a dream ended. Mrs. Sommers went to the corner and waited for the cable car". Now she must return to the "real" world and to her "real" identity that of the

³² Ibid p.122

³³ Ibid p.500

³⁴ Ibid p.502

"mother-woman". But she goes with a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever".³⁵

Chopin at no point censures the mother for her act. There is no hint of selfishness in what she does. What the 'woman' does is a natural urge that she fulfils. At some point in life a realization of onself springs up, and the desire to express oneself in some way--either fine clothes, or a rebellious act or perhaps through a sexual act --- becomes urgent in a human being. This is just what the author expresses subtly through her various women-characters. Her stories look deeply into some characters or human experience trying to fathom exactly what comprises the fulfilled person or the adequate life, treating topics like religion, suicide, illusions, fate and the power of sex. Yet the impulse is towards self-assertion, towards seeking an answer to Lears question, "Who am I?".

Juanita, the protagonist of the study of the same name is a two-hundred-pound girl dressed in a dirty "Mother-Hubbard". She attracts men from far and near. A city gentleman, a wealthy Missouri farmer, a Texas millionaire have all been her suitors. She could have had anyone for the asking. But one day a poor, shabby, one-legged beggar appears. Juanita bears his child out of wedlock and "lavishes.... her undivided affections" upon him. Love thus proves again to be a strange force indeed, and a

woman's soul as unfathomable as the universe. Sex is such a natural urge, that like other aspects of nature, it exerts a force so vast and complex, it defies any comprehension. Hence Juanita's behavior is not only beyond her control it is also beyond an explanation. Perhaps it gives her a satisfaction to flaunt her attractions in the face of her suitors; and remain free of their bonds of riches and possessiveness. Similarly in "The Unexpected" the thought of sexual contact with her fiance Randall -- formerly handsome and well-built but now wasted from illness --repels Dorothea strongly. Even the thought of his immense wealth is in no way a temptation for her to enter into matrimony with him. She would rather be a free being, than be tied to an ailing man like an ideal slave. She realizes that wealth cannot compensate in any form for selfhood and freedom.

In "Two Portraits" Alberta, exists in a divided state. Chopin first sketches the character of Alberta the wanton, a young woman whose substitute mother, alternates between beating Alberta and indulging the child's every whim. Alberta also becomes a prostitute at an early age, and she takes good care of her body "for she knows it brings her love and gold to squander. So one tells Alberta to save her gold, warning her that she will not always remain young and beautiful. But Alberta, like a good many Chopin characters, knows a way to escape that which she cannot face: with death and oblivion always within her reach" She need never fear the "degradation" of age and "ugliness". Alberta the wanton, possessing no spiritual dimension, can end her existence whenever the "ugliness" of age threatens "degradation".

After completing her portrait of Alberta the Wanton, Chopin puts the same raw material into a different environment and creates by contrast Alberta the Nun, who needs a physical dimension as badly as her twin needs a spiritual one. Whenever the child tries to experience God with her senses, the mother figure tells her that one reaches God with the soul, not the body. This 'holy woman' teaches Alberta "that the soul must be made perfect and the flesh subdued".³⁶ Consequently, when this Alberta matures, she feels an overpowering impulse toward the spiritual, and so she enters the convent where she sees "visions" that seem to be at least as sensual as they are spiritual. Their effects are described through such terms as "ecstasy", "roused", "awakened", pressed her lips, "quivering contemplation, abandon herself." and "swooned in rapture". Thus Alberta the Nun, with her attention turned towards heaven, remains as pathetically unfulfilled as Alberta the Wanton, whose total existence centres upon the flesh.

"Lilacs" develops a theme much like that of "Two Portraits", but its protagonist, Mme. Adrienne Farival, parallels the wanton, although Chopin develops Adrienne's character more fully than Alberta's. Adrienne ---an actress, singer, object of devotion to a series of men ---lives an exciting glamorous life. But every spring when the lilacs first bloom, she goes to visit the convent where she once attended school. She arrives with

an armload of lilacs and an expensive gift for the convent; and she remains for two weeks, her pleasure in the quiet peacefulness revealing that her worldly life lacks something important.

Sister Agathe, like Alberta the Nun, looks forward to Adrienne's visits from one lilac-time to the next, declaring that "If you should onec fail to come, it would be like spring coming without the sunshine or the song of bird".³⁷ Her joy at the light and life associated with Adrienne reveals the incompleteness of convent life.

But one spring the Mother Superior apparently having heard about Adrienne's worldly life, writes a cold message forbidding Adrienne to enter again the convent's premises. When Adrienne arrives with her lilacs, a messenger silently hands her the letter and then closes the doors in her face. Consequently, Adrienne and Sister Agathe both suffer greatly. Each needs that brief but nourishing contact with the other's world to fill a bit of the void that exists inside herself.

"Her Letters" tells the story of a marriage largely through a man's behaviour and thoughts during a few years following his wife's death. The wife has lived a double life.

To her husband, she has never seemed to have had a secret. Even though "she had been cold and passionless, yet she was 'true and watchful of his happiness'",³⁸

The woman fondles a bundle of letters and kisses them again and again. They are the last sign of her affair with a man who "had changed the water in her veins to wine, whose taste had brought delirium."³⁹ The letters had sustained her and kept her from perishing, after her marriage.

The woman loves her husband, she knows she will soon die, yet she shrinks from inflicting pain on her man because his "tenderness and years of devotion had made him dear."⁴⁰ She finally wraps the bundle and on it writes: " I leave this package to the care of my husband, loyalty and his love, I ask him to destroy it unopened".⁴¹

The man's reaction on finding the letters is to destroy the bundle promptly as requested and as a sign of his devotion. Gradually, of course, the ensuing question comes to him: "What secret save one could a woman choose to have die with her?" And he now reacts rapidly: "As quickly as the suggestion came to his mind, so swiftly did

38	Ibid	p.401
39	Ibid	p.399
40	Ibid	p.399
41	Ibid	p.400

the man-instinct of possession stir in his blood".⁴² Thus Chopin reveals with great subtlety that masculine possessiveness constitutes the main problem with husband, wife and marriage.

The husband, does behave as his wife knew he would. He destroys the letters, but there upon becomes a driven man, seeking the answer to his mystery in every conversation and contact. Finally, after years of such torture, he throws himself into the river. Thus, like Edna he sheds his individuality (Edna tries to establish it) by becoming one with the elements.

"The Storm" for which Chopin is obviously indebted to French masters, depicts a gratifying sexual experience. The story does not criticise the inadequacies of conjugal love in bourgeois society, rather it shows the joyous possibilities of sexual communion. Ofcourse, such an unbiased treatment of sex in nineteenth century American literature was something unique. Chopin's portrayal of a woman's subjective experience of sex and her active involvement and pleasure in lovemaking was in defiance of the genteel literary restrictions of the day.

"The Storm" symbolises the 'human passion' roused in Calixta and Alcee. Calixta has been married to Bobinot for five years and is the mother of four year old Bibi. On the

other hand Alcee has been married to Clarisse for the same time duration and is the father of a baby. Both Calixta and Alcee meet in Calixta's home, where Alcee seeks shelter from the storm. Bobinot is held up in town with the child, due to the storm. Clarisse is away visiting friends.

The storm without soon becomes a storm within. For the first time, both Alcee and Calixta experience unalloyed, physical pleasure. Alce'e and Calixta experience unalloyed, physical pleasure. Alcee is still attracted to Calixta, as he had been at the 'ball'

"He pushed her hair back from her that was warm and steaming. Her face that was red and moist as pomegranate seed. Her white neck and a glimpse of her full firm bosom disturbed him powerfully..... there was nothing for him to do but to gather her lips in a kiss. It reminded him of Assumption."

In the lovemaking⁴³ that follows, Chopin shows the need of both individuals for their release. But with the end of the storm the encounter between them ends. Bobinot and

Bibi come home, where Calixta greets them with a warm affection and good humour. Alcee writes lovingly to Clarisee, telling her to remain with the babies at Biloxi another month if she wishes. Clarisse receives the letter with pleasure, because her "first free breath since her marriage" has made her feel again the "pleasant liberty of her maiden days", and "devoted as she was to her husband, their intimated conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forego for a while".⁴⁴

Dealing with the theme of emancipation of feminine self in its deeper sense, Kate Chopin in all these stories has explored the fundamental problems concerning need for love, marriage, autonomy, infidelity, divorce and identity. Her early stories more in the form of popular magazine fiction are weak, with timid characters, trying to cope with the needs for love and belonging. That is they reflect the conventional man-woman relationship as seen in "Love on the Bon-Dieu" and "A No-Account Creole". But Chopin's understanding of the human psyche, especially the female mind, progressed and matured rapidly as the seasons progress. This is revealed in her later stories, where her female characters seek something beyond love and possessiveness of their male partners. Stories such as "A Point-At Issue", 'Athenaise' and 'The story of An hour' portray characters trying to achieve selfhood. Kate Chopin thus proves her mastery in analysing feminine psychology, in stories such as "A Shameful Affair", "The Kiss", "The Storm", "The Unexpected" and "Two Portraits" where the female

protagonists step beyond the conventions of love, marriage, wifehood or motherhood. They now transcend the man-woman relationship in search of an authentic feminine selfhood and move towards frontiers of emancipation.