In 1894, a little more than a decade after her husband Oscar's death and nine years after her mother's, Kate Chopin reflected, "If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel I would unhesitatingly give up everything that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs." Although doing so, she says, would mean "I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth—my real growth," she assures herself that she could make this sacrifice "in the spirit of perfect acquiescence." Perhaps she could have. But then again, both the terms in which her contemplation of the return of her loved ones is couched and the bulk of her writing, before and after 1894, lead one to believe that her devotion to husband and mother, though undoubtedly genuine, might not have weighed as heavily with her as her "real growth" and that the "perfect acquiescence" with which she envisions herself turning her back on this progress may well be an unwonted bit of sentimentality in this usually unsparing delineator of things as they are. The realization implicit in her phrasing that existence with the traditionally dominating figures of husband and mother precludes for her the possibility of such personal development as is reflected in her burgeoning literary career and virtually demands self-suppression (note the immediate association of a stance of "acquiescence" with the return of the pair) makes it not entirely unlikely that actually confronted with the choice on which she muses, Chopin would leave husband and mother in the realm of sacred memory. This impression is reinforced by the recurring lesson in her works that, soon or late, people will inevitably seek self-gratification rather than self-suppression. In any case, it is clear that by this time Chopin knew that whatever choice she might make if given the op-
The choice between self-assertion and self-repression posited in Chopin’s 1894 diary entry is the central choice posited in most of her significant work, particularly in the marriage stories. Repeatedly, a Chopin tale turns on the question of whether a character is leading an authentic existence, an existence, that is, in which one senses and acts to gratify the deepest needs of his or her nature, those that if denied and unmet keep one from attaining mature identity and a chance for happiness. Though Chopin believes that self-denial can rarely be permanent, for one’s nature will almost inevitably assert itself, she regards it as dangerous nonetheless because, so long as denial or repression of self lasts, it engenders pain and frustration. Further, when the drive to self-assertion at last manifests itself after long suppression, it can do so with a force so potent from pent-up pressure as to be exceedingly dangerous. Understandably enough, problems involving the pursuit of authentic existence arise most readily when one is confronted with demands imposed on oneself by others; and it is on such problems that Chopin’s best work so often focuses, perhaps nowhere so powerfully as in the marriage stories.

Certainly, no other realm of experience so consistently exposes one to the demands of others, and, therefore, none offers such a consistent threat or prod, as the case may be, to self-gratification. This, of course, was in Chopin’s day particularly true for women, whose range of experience with the demands of others was, given the nature of nineteenth-century American society, largely limited to marriage.

Leading Chopin to the conclusion that one’s pursuit of authentic existence is less a matter of choice than of necessity is her fundamentally deterministic vision of human nature. Though Per Seyersted suggests that Chopin believed that people have “at least a modicum of free will and ethical responsibility,” the bulk of her writings presents a different view, one that Seyersted himself characterizes as perceiving people and society “as forever ruled by the gospel of selfishness which makes basic improvement impossible.” Whereas such a vision of human selfishness might conceivably make a
writer a moralist, it leads Chopin to an amoral outlook, one emphasizing the folly and futility of seeking to restrain or rail against an impulse as ingrained in human nature as the drive to gratification of the self's needs. As a result, her marriage stories touch little on either the social or moral implications of marriage. For Chopin, morality does not seem to obtain in a context of necessity, and social forms are of little consequence in comparison with the implacable human will to authenticity. What she primarily concerns herself with in her marriage stories is whether the figures she presents find gratification in their marriages. If they do, well and good, the marriage is a success. If they do not, the marriage is a failure, and best left behind.

Despite Chopin's apparent lack of interest, though, in judging whether marriage itself is a good thing, her prevailing doctrine that individual fulfillment is more important than the demands of the institution is inevitably inimical to the social outlook that fosters marriage and is in turn reinforced by it, an outlook that, obviously, emphasizes the maintenance of order, the acceptance of responsibility, and fidelity to commitments made to others. As such, Chopin is, in effect, implicitly attacking marriage itself, which by its very nature does not place individual fulfillment above ties to others. Indeed, it is in her treatment of marriages, even happy ones, that one sees most clearly the essentially anarchic amoralism into which Chopin is led by her deterministic vision of the inexorable drive to self-fulfillment. Its lack of a transcendent dimension notwithstanding, this anarchic amoralism stressing individualistic growth links Chopin less with the realists than with the sort of romanticism espoused by the Emerson of such essays as "Experience," "Fate," and "Power," who promulgates the doctrine that the great good, attained through self-reliance, is self-fulfillment, and that it is not freely chosen but happens to an individual who, for some unknown reason, is prompted to growth by the Oversoul. There is for Chopin no vestige of the belief in the possibility of freely chosen moral growth in matrimony that Howells and James sought to maintain. Nor is there here as there is in James and Wharton at least the possibility of such moral free-
dom as resides in the free choice to accept the limitations of a
determined lot. There are only driven men and women here, 
sometimes finding happiness in marriage, sometimes not, as 
they are pushed on toward self-fulfillment, a goal that for 
most realists ought never to be final, but that is all there is 
here. This rather bleakly deterministic vision Chopin main-
tains is not nearly so apparent in the nonmarriage stories, for 
in them there is generally no institution against which her 
characters may push, always in the name of their own free-
dom and always, seemingly, with, if not their author’s ap-
proval, at least her tolerance.

Chopin’s earliest stories dealing with marriage, “Wiser 
Than a God” and “A Point at Issue!” both published in 1889, 
reveal from the first her tendency neither to defend nor at-
attack the institution but to focus instead on the extent to 
which marriage enables a given character to attain an au-
thentic existence. That the former story presents marriage 
as a threat to such existence and the latter, written just two 
months later, shows it to be an experience fostering authen-
ticity for a newly married pair typifies Chopin’s resistance to 
generalization about matrimony and her concern with ques-
tions involving the fulfillment of those confronting it. As I 
noted, though, such an orientation carries inevitably an in-
herent judgment of its own, devaluing marriage as charac-
ter-shaping and society-sustaining institution and seeing it 
as worthwhile only insofar as those in it perceive it to be a 
means to their own self-development.

Certainly, were Paula Von Stoltz to marry the young man 
who proposes to her, she would not be showing the wisdom 
greater than a god’s that the title of Chopin’s first story 
touching on marriage attributes to her,5 for such a union 
would mean the end of her self-development. Though the 
young man has looks, charm, and wealth, and though Paula 
may well love him, her refusal of his offer is nothing less than 
an affirmation of her own self and its needs. A brilliant pi-
anist devoted to her music, Paula would, were she to marry 
George Brainard, a young socialite with a knack for the 
banjo, be consigning herself to a life spent amid those whose
response to her playing cannot go beyond the chorus of "How pretty!" "Just lovely!" and "What wouldn't I give to play like that" (1:43-44) that greets Paula when she completes her hired performance for the society party at which she first meets her importuning suitor. Further, as George's wife and a member of polite society, Paula would not be at liberty to make music her career, a dream long cherished by her and her late parents.

The rightness of Paula's refusal of George is confirmed when Chopin reports that only a few years after the rejection Paula is a renowned pianist while George is perfectly content in his marriage to an inane little chatterbox whose forte when single was dancing Virginia breakdowns at parties. George, Chopin goes on to note, is "as handsome as ever, though growing a little stout in the quiet routine of domestic life," and has "quite lost [the] pretty taste for music that formerly distinguished him as a skillful banjoist" (1:47). Though still single, Paula may indeed end up married herself, for her former teacher, Professor Max Kunstler, is pursuing her with an "ever persistent will—the dogged patience that so often wins in the end" (1:47). Clearly, marriage to Kunstler, one who, as his name presumably signifies, is as dedicated to the creation of beauty as Paula is, would not entail for her a suppression of her nature; rather, it would establish a vital union of two "persistent wills" fulfilling themselves as they nourish each other and the art they serve. Not a story dealing extensively with married life, then, "Wiser Than a God" establishes Chopin's predominant marriage story theme, the idea that wisdom entails avoiding a marriage that will involve suppression of the authentic needs of one or the other of the partners.

In the witty "A Point at Issue!" a newly married couple attempt, perversely enough, to turn their marriage into one that will suppress their natures, and it is only the irresistible assertion of their genuine need for each other that keeps them from succeeding. A man who prides himself on his rationality, Professor Charles Faraday, finding in Eleanor Gale "that rara avis, a logical woman—something which [he] had not encountered in his life before" (1:49), decides, as any ra-
tional fellow might, to marry her. Marrying, the pair envision a future together spent “looking for the good things of life, knocking at the closed doors of philosophy,” and venturing into “the open fields of science” (1:50). Further, with the perfect logic that characterizes them both, they resolve that their marriage is to be a “form,” which, “while fixing legally their relation to each other,” will in no way “touch the individuality of either.” Each will remain “a free integral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws.” Making possible such union, each believes, is “trust in each other’s love, honor, courtesy, tempered by the reserving clause of readiness to meet the consequences of reciprocal liberty” (1:50). In the interest of Eleanor’s intellectual development as a “free integral of humanity,” the newlyweds decide that she is to stay in Paris “indefinitely” in order to acquire a thorough speaking knowledge of French, with Faraday returning each summer “to renew their love in a fresh and re-strengthened union” (1:50). All goes according to plan until mutual jealousy replaces the mutual trust to which their impeccable logic brought them. Faraday’s passing reference in a letter to the charms of Kitty Beaton, the daughter of his friends, awakens bitter suspicions in Eleanor, which are soon paralleled by those aroused in Faraday when circumstances lead him to believe that Eleanor has a lover. Elated and relieved when he discovers both that the supposed lover is merely a painter commissioned by Eleanor to do a portrait of herself for him and that Eleanor herself has been troubled by jealousy, Faraday takes a willing wife back to America to embark on an old-fashioned marriage.

Clearly, the Faradays’ scheme for a new-style, purely rational marriage fails because such a union is an attempt to deny the basic need for each other that, whether they know it or not, led them in the first place to marry. The dangers inherent in the effort to live solely in the mind are apparent in this story not merely with the Faradays but also with Kitty Beaton’s older sister, Margaret, whose “timid leaning in the direction of Woman’s Suffrage” leads her into “the fashioning and donning of garments of mysterious shape, which, while stamping their wearer with the distinction of a quasi-
emancipation, defeated the ultimate purpose of their construction by inflicting a personal discomfort that extended beyond the powers of long endurance” (1:52-53). Apparently, Margaret, as Chopin sees it, would be better off overthrowing the joyless yoke of idea and living in her whole being with “bubbling happiness” (1:53) as Kitty does. While rewarding her in the present, this might also assure the girl such contentment in the future as that attained at present by her mother, “a woman whose aspirations went not further than the desire for her family’s good” and whose “bearing announced in its every feature the satisfaction of completed hopes” (1:52). Though, indeed, efforts at the denial of the needs of one’s nature do inevitably extend, like the discomfort caused by Margaret’s clothes, “beyond the powers of long endurance,” they can, even in the short run, achieve terrible mischief.

At the beginning of “A Point at Issue!” Chopin notes, curiously enough, that the Faradays’ wedding announcement appeared in the newspaper “modestly wedged in between” a statement that subscribers vacationing from home in the summer months might have their papers sent them at no extra fee and a “somber-clad notice” (1:48) from a monument company advertising its stones. The point of this, I suspect, is not to posit any sinister linkup of marriage and death; rather, the linkup involves all three items cited and makes marriage seem as inevitable a part of the nature of things as death and the rhythm of the seasons. Marriage, Chopin implies in this work, has come to seem such an essential part of the natural continuum of things because it answers the needs of so many people; and, consequently, any effort to evade it, such as that made by the Faradays when they seek to have a marriage that, in effect, is no marriage, must be one in response to needs stronger and more authentic than those that marriage can satisfy. Thus, because Paula Von Stoltz’s rejection of marriage is indeed just such a response to the most vital imperatives of her nature it carries far greater authority than the rejection attempted by the Faradays, which, in reality, runs counter to the direction of their natures. The decision of the Faradays to end their ill-advised experiment
marks an entry into the continuum, an entry prompted by their whole beings. Significantly, Chopin notes that Eleanor's jealousy, which prompts her readiness to adopt a conventional mode of marriage, grows out of her "woman's heart, backed by the soft prejudices of a far-reaching heredity" (1:55). Neither an attack on the conventional woman nor an ironic criticism of man for holding back woman's development, this statement simply suggests that Eleanor Faraday's essential makeup, for whatever reason, does not allow her to be content outside the usual course of a late-nineteenth-century American woman's life. Similarly, Faraday's convenient forgetting of his own jealousy and his condescending thought, "I love her none the less for it, but my Nellie is only a woman, after all" (1:58), entail not an oblique criticism by Chopin of male smugness but merely a late-nineteenth-century American man's comfortable commitment of himself to a conventional pattern of husband-wife relations in which, in this particular marriage anyway, both partners will assuredly find happiness.

More explicit than either "Wiser Than a God" or "A Point at Issue!" in developing Chopin's view of marriage is her first novel, At Fault, on which she was already working at the time of the latter story. With At Fault she establishes clearly for the first time the context of amorality in which all her subsequent depictions of marriage will occur. When Aunt Belindy, a knowing old black servant on Thérèse LaFirme's plantation, asks sharply of a romantic young girl prating of "leaving the world" to enter a convent, "Religion—no religion, whar you gwine live ef you don' live in de worl'? Gwine live up in de moon?" (1:841), she speaks for Chopin, who portrays throughout this novel the folly of leaving the world behind for a life of fatuous devotion to inapplicable and life-denying ideals. The most damaging of such ideals in At Fault is the notion that any marriage—even a hideously unhappy one—must last as long as life. That a marriage should, on the contrary, last only as long as those in it are fulfilled by it is what Thérèse finally learns in this novel and is the lesson behind all Chopin's subsequent marriage fiction.
Because it takes Thérèse so long to learn this lesson, she causes herself and Hosmer, the man she loves, a good deal of mischief and indirectly brings about the death of his wife, Fanny. And, contrary to Per Seyersted’s comments that *At Fault* is marred by “a lack of focus due to the many subplots and secondary figures” in it and by Chopin’s inability “to fuse her local color with her theme,” every subplot and secondary figure and virtually every detail of local color work to show that life and human nature resist the imposition of such absolutist moral ideals as Thérèse’s commitment to the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage.

Typical of the local color details that contribute to Chopin’s development of her themes in *At Fault* is “McFarlane’s grave,” the burial place of a particularly nefarious old villain, whose ghost, according to local legend, haunts the region. The grave itself is used by Chopin as a sinister reminder of a timeless evil, ineradicable even by Christianity. She notes that its “battered and weather-worn cross of wood . . . lurched disreputably to one side—there being no hand in all the world that cared to make it straight . . .” (2:772). Here, Hosmer’s sister, Melicent, and Thérèse’s nephew, Grégoire, infatuated with each other, stay “till the shadows grew so deep about Old McFarlane’s grave that they passed it by with hurried step and averted glance” (2:774). Making this setting so functional in the novel is the fact that Chopin links it with two couples whose relationships end badly when the lesson of the timelessness and inevitability of human weakness conveyed by the gravesite is ignored. Melicent’s subsequent rejection of Grégoire because of his frailty and Hosmer’s misguided attempt to save Fanny from alcoholism by remarrying her despite his love for Thérèse are both closely tied to the gravesite, the former by the younger couple’s stay at the scene (the only time in the novel that this setting is presented) and the latter by Chopin’s juxtaposition of Grégoire and Melicent’s talk at the gravesite, which closes chapter 8, with Hosmer’s surprise return to Saint Louis in chapter 9 to remarry Fanny.

The subplot involving Melicent’s rejection of Grégoire and its unhappy result, like the gravesite setting, is an element
tangential to the main story of *At Fault* that nonetheless illuminates it. When Melicent, a girl of the foolishly romantic, novel-reading sort, depicted so well by Howells, learns that Grégoire has coolly killed Jocint as he discovered that reprobate in the act of burning down the mill on Thérèse’s plantation, she concludes that he is a fiend and refuses ever to talk to him again. Her brother, on the other hand, though certainly not approving of Grégoire’s action, is realistic enough to perceive that “heredity and pathology had to be considered in relation with the slayer’s character” (2:824), or, to put it as Aunt Belindy shrewdly does, he knows that, as a hot-blooded Creole, “Grégor gwine be Grégor till he die. Dats all dar is ’bout it” (2:833). With this realization that there is an inevitability to people’s behavior (a realization, one might note, applicable, as well, to the incurable malignity of Jocint and the blind love for him of his father, Morico), Hosmer has no difficulty in continuing to get along with Grégoire. Melicent, though, ever the unremitting idealist, cuts Grégoire and returns home to Saint Louis, leaving him to the grief that prompts a frenzy of self-destructive behavior culminating in his violent death. When Melicent hears of Grégoire’s end, the foolish girl passes her time in bittersweet, romantic reminiscences of him that have as their main function the assuagement of her usual boredom. Her idealism, then, like that of most as Chopin sees it, is fundamentally life-denying, full of all the sterility of self-dramatization and devoid of real self-fulfillment.

The marriages of Fanny’s Saint Louis friends, the Dawsons and Worthingtons, which are seen briefly, serve, like the gravestone setting and Melicent-Grégoire subplot, to point up how severely misguided Thérèse is when she rejects Hosmer, whom she loves, and persuades him to sacrifice himself by remarrying Fanny. Neither marriage even resembles a successful one. The coarse wives “were two ladies of elegant leisure,” Chopin notes sardonically, “the conditions of whose lives, and the amiability of whose husbands had enabled them to develop into finished and professional time-killers” (2:781). Mrs. Worthington, whose timid, bookish husband is of so little consequence to her that she uses his books to prop
up furniture, invariably speaks of the poor fellow “present as of a husband absent” (2:848); and Mrs. Dawson’s husband, a crudely convivial traveling salesman, is usually absent in fact. In killing the great deal of time available to them, the wives become gossipy haunters of the more glaring theaters and restaurants, far more familiar than they ought to be with the good-time fellows their brassy looks attract. Chopin’s only purpose in bringing this pair into the novel is to emphasize both the inevitability of Hosmer’s failure to save Fanny from her alcoholism by remarrying her and the folly of Thérèse for thinking he is morally obligated to try. The vulgarity of Mrs. Dawson and Mrs. Worthington and the failure of their marriages are somehow built into the system of things. Thus, it is in no way surprising that when last seen, Mr. Worthington, sitting quietly, “lost” in reading about “asceticism, martyrdom, superhuman possibilities which man is capable of attaining under peculiar conditions of life” (2:846), is more distant from his wife than ever or that, according to last report, Mr. Dawson shot the man his wife was seeing while he was out of town. Clearly, when Fanny is seen to be an intimate of such women as Mrs. Worthington and Mrs. Dawson, her initial refusal to remarry Hosmer because “it would be the same thing all over again” (2:778) seems far more convincing than his rejoinder, “It will not be the same. . . . I will not be the same, and that will make all the difference needful” (2:778), particularly when one recalls that his proposal to her has been demanded, in fact, by the woman he really loves. In short, Hosmer seems bound and determined to pursue just such a course of “asceticism, martyrdom, and superhuman possibilities” as that of which the ineffectual Mr. Worthington reads so raptly. The results of such an effort by an ordinary man are, unfortunately, all too predictable.

Another secondary figure in *At Fault* whose role is significant in conveying Chopin’s theme is Homeyer, friend and adviser to Hosmer. Though Homeyer is never seen (indeed, this fact and the similarity in names makes him seem virtually a symbolic projection of the suppressed commonsensical side of Hosmer’s nature), his advice is heard, and it
AFTER THE VOWS WERE SPOKEN

pointedly suggests Chopin’s own thinking on denial of self. Warning Hosmer against remarriage with Fanny, Homeyer, as Hosmer recalls, railed at “the submission of a human destiny to the exacting and ignorant rule of what he termed moral conventionalists” (2:777). Hosmer remembers too Homeyer’s assertions that “the individual man [must] hold on to his personality,” must not sacrifice it for an abstraction or even possible benefit for another, and that, if at all redeemable, Fanny might best be aided through “the capability of [Hosmer and Thérèse’s] united happiness” (2:777). Hosmer’s rejection of Homeyer’s largely deterministic and amoral outlook wins him no plaudits from Chopin and no happiness in his life. On the contrary, it merely leaves him open, as Chopin perceives it must, to unremitting pain.

Inexorably bearing out all that subplots, secondary characters, and aspects of setting reveal about the futility and folly inherent in the quixotic idealism that denies self is Hosmer’s second marriage to Fanny. Symbolizing all that is wrong with this union is the “demoniac” and “grotesque” dream Thérèse has on the night Grégoire kills Joçint. In it, “Hosmer was in danger from which she was striving in physical effort to rescue him, and when she dragged him painfully from the peril that menaced him, she turned to see that it was Fanny whom she had saved—laughing at her derisively, and Hosmer had been left to perish” (2:821). Unfortunately, of course, this nightmare is painfully close to the truth, as Thérèse’s effort to rescue Hosmer (and herself) from the danger of what her religious and moral convictions tell her is an illicit attraction almost destroys him.

Despite Hosmer’s sincere efforts to be a more attentive husband to Fanny than he was in their first marriage, when their basic incompatibility led him to immerse himself in business and her to indulge her constitutional weakness for strong drink, he cannot make a success of their second marriage any more than Joçint could keep from burning down the mill or Morico could refrain from mourning deeply for his worthless son. Sensing the joylessness behind her husband’s efforts, Fanny again turns to drink. Her resultant querulous and abusive behavior finally leads Hosmer into
pessimism and bitterness that nearly give rise to violence and do lead indirectly to Fanny's death. Reacting viciously to Fanny's taunting him with her suddenly intuited insight that he loves Thérèse, Hosmer grabs her roughly, clutches a clasp knife, and slowly tells her in words "weighted with murder, 'By heaven—I'll—kill you!'" (2:860). When, shocked with himself, Hosmer releases his terrified wife and dazedly hurries away, she, typically enough, needs a drink. Going to an old black's riverside shanty to get it, Fanny dies when the fast-moving current undercuts the bank on which the shanty stands. Hosmer's frantic effort to save her from drowning is as much in vain as his earlier efforts to redeem her from alcoholism by salvaging their marriage. Like the river's eating at the ground under the shanty, to which Chopin purposefully alluded early in the novel, Fanny's alcoholism has a sinister inevitability to it, is productive solely of pain, and is apparently irremediable.

Just as inevitable as the disastrous conclusion of Hosmer and Thérèse's unnatural course of idealism is the fact that after some time they should again turn to each other. Indeed, Chopin closely links their avowal of love for each other with the beautiful new springtime about them, coming in with an inevitability of its own. When Hosmer meets Thérèse again after his long stay in Saint Louis following Fanny's death, "the air was filled with spring and all its promises. Full with the sound of it, the smell of it, the deliciousness of it." Chopin goes on to declare that this "sweet air" is "soft and strong, like the touch of a brave woman's hand" (2:869). Now, like the "brave woman" she really is, Thérèse will no longer allow worn-out conventions to come between her and nature. Aware now of the folly inherent in her attempt to resist gratifying her authentic needs, she can agree with Hosmer's assertion after their marriage that although "the truth in its entirety isn't given man to know," we can "make a step towards it, when we learn that there is rottenness and evil in the world, masquerading as right and morality—when we learn to know the living spirit from the dead letter" (2:872). Presumably, they will now, no longer perceiving themselves to be "at fault" for doing so, pursue that "living spirit" in the
marriage that should have come so much earlier, and would have, had not Thérèse and Hosmer forgotten that the only place for them to live, after all, was "de worl'."

At Fault, then, is Chopin's first work to present marriage explicitly as an experience that is valid only insofar as it allows individuals to attain self-fulfillment, an assumption underlying every subsequent marriage story of hers, no matter how dissimilar to each other these stories may otherwise be. Generally, these stories fall into three types, all of which have as a virtual given the notion that marriage, particularly for a woman, involves a certain amount of submission. One group presents characters—all women—who are able to find self-fulfillment solely in submission to the demands their marriages make upon them. A second shows the dangers inherent in refusing to rebel against the demands imposed in marriage when one fails to find an authentic existence in meeting them. And, finally, the third group presents some who, unable to find satisfying lives in their marriages, rebel against them and their demands. Apart from the fact that the last two marriage works Chopin wrote, The Awakening and "The Storm," occur in the last group, perhaps betokening an increasing rebelliousness in her, there is no chronological pattern discernible to her marriage stories, and, therefore, I shall discuss them solely in terms of these three groupings.

Chopin's stories that show women who find gratifying, authentic lives in accepting the submission that marriage demands include "A Visit to Avoyelles" (1892) and "Madame Célestin's Divorce" (1893), both of which present women who, surprisingly enough, find contentment with husbands who give every evidence of being curs, and "The Going Away of Liza" (1894) and "Athénaïse" (1896), which depict wives who leave essentially unexceptionable mates but return to them, finally, when they discover that they can only fulfill the demands of their natures within their marriages. Whatever course these women take, be it clinging blindly to mates who are unworthy or finally returning to those who are in fact good husbands, Chopin neither praises nor blames. Again, she merely shows that the inevitable propensity of
men and women to seek authenticity renders beside the point conventional moralistic assumptions about matrimony.

Certainly, at first glance, one would not suspect that matrimony offers fulfillment to Mentine, the much put-upon wife of the lazy, impecunious, and arrogant Jules Trodon, in "A Visit to Avoyelles." All that Doudouce, Mentine's rejected suitor, sees on visiting her confirms that seven years of marriage have left her "suffering in a hopeless, common, exasperating way for the small comforts of life" (1:228). Cruelly overworked on her husband's ramshackle farm, hopelessly overburdened with children who seem as numerous and unmanageable as the mangy dogs prowling about the place, the slovenly Mentine that Doudouce sees bears little resemblance to the girl he once asked to marry him: "He would have known her sweet, cheerful brown eyes, that were not changed; but her figure, that had looked so trim in the wedding gown, was sadly misshapen. She was brown, with skin like parchment, and piteously thin. There were lines, some deep as if old age had cut them, about the eyes and mouth" (1:229). Convinced that Mentine cannot be happy in such circumstances, loving her "fiercely, as a mother loves an afflicted child" (1:231), Doudouce leaves, thinking "he would have liked to thrust that man aside, and gather up her and her children, and hold them and keep them as long as life lasted" (1:231). His thoughts in this direction are short-lived, however, for when, in the last lines of the story, he looks back at his lost love, he finds that "her face was turned away from him" and that "she was gazing after her husband, who went in the direction of the field" (1:231).

Seeing Mentine's fixed gaze after Jules cannot, one suspects, fail to clear up Doudouce's own vision, which, both figuratively and literally, has been blinded by love. Indeed, just before he sees Mentine looking after her husband, Doudouce has been stumbling "over the rough ground because of tears that were blinding him" (1:230); and he made his visit in the first place because reports of Mentine prompted a dream in which, in her wedding dress, Mentine was holding out her arms to him, imploring him to save her, clearly a vision of things that is blind to the facts. And the facts are, of course,
that Mentine, oddly enough, finds self-fulfillment in submis-
sion to Jules. Though it may not accord with the saccharine
vision held by the sentimental Doudouce, the simple truth is,
Chopin knows, that people will, often, be happy doing what
others might find to be singularly unproductive of joy.

"Madame Célestin’s Divorce" depicts a situation markedly
similar to that of "A Visit to Avoyelles." Madame Célestin, a
pretty, unpretentious young Creole woman, has been de-
serted by her husband, an ill-natured lout who drinks and
who has abused her. Lawyer Paxton, himself increasingly
drawn to Madame Célestin, urges her to divorce the scoun-
drel; but she continually procrastinates, assuring him that
she is on the verge of doing so but is hesitant about flying in
the face of the religious convictions in which she was
brought up. Finally, her husband returns, promises her, as
she relates, "on his word an’ honor he’s going to turn ova a
new leaf" (1:279), and she contentedly gives up all thought of
divorce.

Like Mentine, then, Madame Célestin finds self-fulfill-
ment in a marriage that would appall most people. Submis-
sion—even to a brute such as her husband—is apparently
what her nature demands and thrives on. Always seen
"plying her broom" (1:278), tending her rose bushes, or sew-
ing, Madame Célestin is one who feels most herself when
captured up in the domestic round and deferring to her hus-
band and to community standards. Though the "deep rings"
(1:279) made in the palm of her hand by the broom-handle
may well symbolize mutilation, imprisonment, or sexual de-
pendence on her husband, the situation remains the same:
Madame Célestin is most herself under the dominion of her
marriage. Again, Chopin neither approves nor disapproves;
she merely describes an example of things as they are.

Unlike Mentine and Madame Célestin, Liza-Jane Rydon
finds happiness in submission to her marriage only after
leaving her homespun husband, Abner, and their simple life
in Bludgett Station, Missouri, in a vain effort to seek fulfill-
ment elsewhere. Chronically dissatisfied because, as she
grandly declares to one of her acquaintances, she “craves to
taste the joys of existence” (1:113), an inane, idealized concep-
tion of which she has picked up from silly novels of aristocratic life, Liza-Jane, after a series of what one of the townsfolk calls 'everlastin' quarrels what's been a imbitterin' their married life' (1:113), deserts her husband. Obviously, the "higher life" for which she leaves Abner and his mother "an' thur life of drudgery what was no ixistence" (11:113), as the same townsman sardonically puts it, eludes her; for as the thoroughly embittered Abner sits quietly with his mother on a stormy Christmas Eve, a tired, sick, and hungry Liza-Jane returns. Once Abner sees her "big dark eyes greedily seizing on every detail of homely and honest comfort that surrounded her" and notes how "whatever sin or suffering [that had] swept over her had left its impress upon her plastic being" (1:114), he yields to the gentle proddings of his mother and the feelings of his heart. "With unsteady hands" he lifts the "wet and tattered" shawl from his wife's shoulders, kneels upon the floor, and takes "the wet and torn shoes from off her feet" (1:115), a gesture that, closing the story as it does, seems to imply, obviously, as does the Christmas setting, that the marriage will be a good one for them both from this time forth.

Every detail of the story makes clear that Liza-Jane's only happiness can come in returning to her marriage. The foolish sound of her high-flown clichés when quoted by her rustic townfolk indicates all of the fatuous pretentiousness underlying her quest for the "higher life," as does the clumsy, folksy sound of her name itself, which stands in comic juxtaposition to her tin-plated visions. Too, the domestic scene to which she returns, significantly in the midst of a storm and, even more significantly, on Christmas Eve (not a subtle story, surely), is one powerfully redolent of the joys of hearth and home. With Abner quietly reading, his mother knitting, and a fire cheerfully giving of its warmth against the storm outside, the Rydon farmhouse seems not only a logical and inevitable, but even a delightful, place to be for a girl with Liza-Jane's background. When her husband kneels before her, it becomes practically unthinkable that this young wife could ever be happy elsewhere. Thus, with all elements of the story working to point up the folly of Liza-Jane's
AFTER THE VOWS WERE SPOKEN

attempt to evade her basic nature and its imperatives, Chopin presents another marriage that will presumably satisfy the needs of those in it. Liza-Jane, though, will not be the last of Chopin’s women to leave her marriage, nor will all those who leave return or seem foolish for not doing so.

Markedly similar to Liza-Jane, both in her urgent need at first to leave her husband and in her no less urgent longing at last to return to him, is Athénaïse, a headstrong young woman whose pregnancy leads her to realize that only in accepting the submission and restraints imposed by marriage can she find an authentic existence for herself. Per Seyersted, though accepting that “Athénaïse” is a story with a “happy end” that depicts the “sensuous joys” available to a woman, asserts that it nonetheless “contains a deep protest against woman’s condition,” implicit in the newly married Athénaïse’s “sense of hopelessness” and “instinctive realization of the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution” (1:432) that arise when her parents force her to return to her husband, Cazeau, after an early effort to leave him. However, were Chopin using Athénaïse’s early despair as a means of showing the lamentable condition of nineteenth-century woman, she would, one suspects, present the bitter young wife as something other than the callow, histrionic sort she is until she discovers her pregnancy; and she would present Cazeau as something other than the compassionate man he is, one who “did not slight nor neglect” (1:434) his wife and whose “chief offense seemed to be that he loved” Athénaïse, a woman who refuses “to be loved against her will” (1:434). Thus, the repugnance Athénaïse feels at first toward her marriage seems prompted less by the poignant desire for freedom felt by a generous-spirited young woman than by her ignorance of her own nature and its deepest needs.

A close look at Athénaïse’s makeup and her initial response to her marriage—a marriage she had not been unwilling to make—reveals just how jejune her longing for perfect freedom is. Her loving parents, Chopin notes, “had hoped—not without reason and justice—that marriage would bring the poise, the desirable pose, so glaringly lacking in Athénaïse’s character. Marriage they knew to be a wonderful
and powerful agent in the development and formation of a woman's character; they had seen its effect too often to doubt it” (1:434). Unfortunately, from the first, Athénaïse, about whose very features and expression “lurked a softness, a prettiness, a dewiness, that were perhaps too childlike, that savored of immaturity” (1:432), is unable to adjust to married life. It is not Cazeau who troubles her, as she tells her hot-spirited fool of a brother, Montéclin, but the intimacy enforced by marriage itself, an intimacy that she finds constricting and nauseating (partly, perhaps, because it strikes her, whether she realizes it or not, as an omnipresent reminder of sexual demands on her):

“No I don't hate [Cazeau] ... ; It’s just being married that I detes' an' despise. I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an' would want to be Athénaïse Miché again. I can't stan' to live with a man; to have him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet—washing them in my tub befo' my very eyes, ugh!” She shuddered with recollections, and resumed, with a sigh that was almost a sob: “Mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Sister Marie Angélique knew w'at she was saying; she knew me better than myself w'en she said God had sent me a vocation an' I was turning deaf ears. W'en I think of a blessed life in the convent, at peace! Oh, w'at was I dreaming of!” and then the tears came. (1:431)

That she had, in fact, rebelled against parents and nuns by having Montéclin spirit her away from the convent that she now recalls so fondly typifies her flair from the first for the histrionic and her inability to accept restraint. More, the very fact that she recalls her sojourn at the convent so fondly is a clear manifestation of her penchant for escaping aspects of reality that she finds unpleasant to acknowledge.

Unable to accept that she is indeed married to Cazeau, Athénaïse repeatedly runs off to her family, seeking escape from commitment, responsibility, and physical intimacy with a man, all of which she finds so disturbing, finally, that she can even convince herself against all evidence that she has a calling to be a nun. Despite her parents' criticism, she enjoys being home and takes uninhibited pleasure, as any unmarried child without a vocation might, in the round of merry parties and dances she finds there and, as well, in the bountiful por-
tions of her mother’s cooking on which she gorges herself. When each regressive sojourn ends with Cazeau’s coming to take her back to her adult lot as a wife, Athénaïse determines to make a lasting break with him, and, once more delving into her past, she calls on Montéclin to rescue her from imprisonment.

The circumstances in which this last escapade places Athénaïse are all too obviously unsavory ones. Montéclin’s excitement as he realizes that “eloping with one’s sister was only a little less engaging than eloping with someone else’s sister” (1:441) does not quite smack of the incestuous, but it does cast an unwholesome aura over the whole affair, making it seem, at the least, an ill-advised excursion into the irrational, the immature, and the vulgar. Nor does her settling alone in New Orleans palpably improve Athénaïse’s situation, for there she becomes increasingly vulnerable to the amatory advances of the genial cynic Gouvernail, a “liberal-minded fellow,” in that “a man or woman lost nothing of his respect by being married” (1:444). Though he knows that when Athénaïse hugs him and tearfully pours out her grief he is serving “as substitute for Montéclin” (1:450) and though he suspects too that “she adored Cazeau without being herself aware of it” (1:446), he nonetheless hopes “some day to hold her with a lover’s arms” (1:450), an event that, genial fellow as he may be notwithstanding, would be Athénaïse’s undoing, consigning her to a life of chaos and prolonged adolescence rather than the mature womanhood that her nature demands she attain.

Only her discovery that she is pregnant brings Athénaïse to herself. Convinced by the maternal and domestic yearnings welling up within her that her place is with her husband, she orders Montéclin to come to New Orleans and take her to Cazeau. Though her call to be brought back is issued to her brother rather than her husband, the implication of this is not that Athénaïse still needs Montéclin more than she does Cazeau but that she feels as if a certain propriety must be observed in the manner of her return. It was Montéclin who took her off; therefore, it must be he who will take her back on what is, in effect, a self-prescribed retracing of her
adolescent course in an effort to pass beyond both it and all that Montéclin represents. Her obvious affection for Cazeau on her return and the maternal attention she lavishes on a crying black baby make clear that she has indeed put childish things behind herself and found her identity as a woman.

Throughout the story Cazeau's behavior contrasts strongly with that of Athénaïse, showing invariably the folly of the young wife. A man of quiet dignity, Cazeau refuses to rail either against his fate or his wife when his marriage sours. His suggestion to Athénaïse that although things have gone wrong they ought to see the marriage through as well as they can reveals him to be a mature man who can face facts openly, avoid needless recrimination, and maintain a good deal of affection even for a wife as wayward as his:

"I married you because I loved you; because you were the woman I wanted to marry, an' the only one. I reckon I tole you that befo'. I thought—of co'se I was a fool fo' taking things fo' granted—but I did think I might make you happy in making things easier and mo' comfortable fo' you. I expected—I was even that big a fool—I believed that yo' coming yere to me would be like the sun shining out of the clouds, an' that our days would be like w'at the story-books promise after the wedding. I was mistaken. . . . I reckon you foun' out you made a mistake, too. I don' see anything to do but make the best of a bad bargain, an' shake han's over it." (1:435)

There is a poignancy to this speech that indicates the kindness and warmth under Cazeau's quiet demeanor. And it is these traits that lead him finally, when Athénaïse goes off to New Orleans, to pursue his wife no more. Remembering the dreadful scene of his father brutally hauling back a runaway slave, Cazeau decides that he cannot put himself any longer in a situation analogous to his father's by bringing back a runaway wife against her will. Cazeau's self-respect and compassion are qualities Athénaïse might well come to emulate as she grows into the womanly identity she has at last acknowledged as her own.

Thus does Athénaïse, like Liza-Jane, ultimately find the self-gratification inherent in learning who she is and what are her needs. Both women seek some vague, ideal freedom,
but their pursuit of it leaves them open only to the barrenness, loneliness, and confusion attendant upon suppressing their authentic natures, which seem as much shaped to find satisfaction in married domesticity as are those of Mentine and Madame Célèstin. In finding what they want, then, through marriage, these women find themselves. That they do so with these marriages does not, however, bespeak any defense of matrimony on Chopin’s part; for many women find authenticity outside marriage, many are, in fact, hindered by marriage in their pursuit of it, and at least two of the women in these four stories find it with mates whom many might regard as less than desirable.  

Finding themselves through submission to the restraints imposed by marriage is, as I have noted, an impossibility for some of Chopin’s married women. When such women fail either to leave their marriages or to acknowledge their problems to themselves and try forthrightly to seek authenticity somehow, even within the context of their troublesome marriages, the results of such attempts at self-repression can be disastrous. Attempting to resist the imperatives of one’s nature, Chopin shows, brings not the inner peace that moralists proclaim comes with the renunciation of self but, instead, all the bitterness of frustration. More, she believes, as we have noted, that, all efforts to the contrary notwithstanding, the repressed desires will ultimately out anyway, perhaps with a directness that is dangerously overpowering, perhaps with an obliquity that can lead dangerously astray.

Virtually a cautionary tale revealing just how troublesome long-repressed desire for gratifyingly authentic existence can be when it finally manifests itself is Chopin’s depiction of the folly of self-denial “The Story of an Hour” (1894). In this brief account, Mrs. Mallard, “afflicted with a heart trouble” (1:252), is told gently that her husband has been killed in a railroad accident. After her “storm of grief had spent itself” (1:252), Mrs. Mallard, “pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul,” retires to her room to grieve in solitude. Once alone, though, she is surprised to find her grief rapidly dissipating in the face of something else, which is “approaching to pos-
KATE CHOPIN

'sess her" (1:353). Beginning to recognize it, she strives to "beat it back with her will" but finds the latter "as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been" (1:353) and gradually yields. What she yields to, what possesses her, is, of all things, exultation, a joy at the prospect of being "free, free, free" (1:353). So given over is she to this new feeling that she is beyond wondering whether her sudden happiness is "monstrous." A "clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial" (1:353). Calmly, she envisions the years to come: "There would be no one to live for . . . ; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. . . . What could love, the unresolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!" (1:353). Happy at last, herself at last, she sits comfortably, whispering repeatedly, in almost incantatory fashion, "Free! Body and Soul Free!" (1:354). Then, answering her worried sister's importunings, she descends the stairs to join her, carrying herself "unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" (1:354), a look of "feverish triumph in her eyes" (1:354). At this moment her husband, indubitably alive and blissfully unaware of the misinformation that has preceded him, lets himself in the front door. Seeing him, Mrs. Mallard falls dead, a victim, say the doctors, of "heart disease—of the joy that kills" (1:354).

An ironical story, certainly, perhaps heavy-handedly so, and what is significant is that the irony is directed so intensely at the unfortunate Mrs. Mallard, whose very name, which conjures up associations of free, far-ranging flight and union with nature, stands in ironic contrast to the constricted life she has forced herself to lead. This is a woman, Chopin implies, who has left herself open to the trick of fate that destroys her by never attempting bravely to seize her own life and live it. Though she leaves her room in response to her sister's call with a sense of having won a great victory, she has, ironically, won nothing; she has merely been granted a prospect of freedom, one to which she cannot cling in the face of her husband's return. Again ironically, the intensity
itself with which she grasps for that brief prospect, her fancy "running riot" through a vision of "spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own" (1:355), reflects—as does the melodramatic phrasing, which conveys a sense of how febrile her longings are—just how severely repressed Mrs. Mallard has allowed herself to be. Had she tried to "reach into her soul" long before the inaccurate report and her consequent physical exhaustion, the self-repression might never have taken so strong a hold on her and a sudden prospect of freedom might not, therefore, have engendered so dangerously feverish a response. Clearly, the final irony of the tale—beyond the doctors' crude misinterpretation— involves the fact that the "heart trouble" that kills her is more spiritual than physical. She has lacked the heart, the courage, to assert her real nature in the face of her husband and her marriage.

Though the unnamed wife in "Her Letters" (1894) seems not nearly so repressed as Mrs. Mallard, it is apparent nevertheless that despite entering into an illicit affair she too has never had the requisite courage to follow her deepest longings by leaving her marriage and seeking the freedom her passionate nature desires. Stifled in its normal development, her longing for self-assertion and freedom manifests itself in a frenzied sexual attachment and in a hatred for her husband that is so subtle that she is unaware of it herself. Stricken with a fatal illness after the close of her affair, the woman finds that she cannot bring herself to burn her love letters even though her inability to do so may bring about discovery of the affair after her death, when her husband goes through her papers. Her husband's "tenderness and years of devotion had made him, in a manner, dear to her" (1:399), and she tells herself that she does not wish to cause him possible hurt; but she thinks too "how desolate and empty" her remaining days would be without the letters, "with only her thoughts, illusive thoughts, that she could not hold in her hands and press, as she did these, to her cheeks and heart" (1:399). Consequently, in order to keep her precious letters and, as she tells herself, to spare her husband the possibility of a painful discovery, she appeals to his sense of honor by writing on her
packet of letters, “I leave this package to the care of my hus-
band. With perfect faith in his loyalty and love, I ask him to
destroy it unopened” (1:400), a behest with which he com-
plies, throwing the packet into the river; but it is not many
months later that, tormented ceaselessly by the doubts of his
wife’s faithfulness that the packet has aroused in him, he fol-
lows it into the river as he takes his life by jumping from a
bridge.

Close scrutiny of this grim tale reveals that just such a con-
summation for her spouse may be what the dying woman de-
voutly wished for, that, in fact, her passion for her lover is
not as elevating and her concern for her husband’s well-being
as sincere as she believes them to be. Indeed, her devotion to
her lover seems marked by an almost revolting and finally
imprisoning frenzy, seemingly growing out of the suppres-
sion of her real identity in order to keep up the appearance,
at least, of the conventionally faithful wife. A woman calm
and gratified in the assurance of knowing herself and an-
swering the imperatives of her nature would not turn love
letters into sexual totems, in what is little less than an ob-
scene parody of the communion service, by taking one of the
“most precious” ones, kissing it “again and again,” and then,
with her “sharp white teeth” tearing off the corner where
the name is written and tasting it “between her lips and upon
her tongue like some god-given morsel” (1:399). Further, she
would not “encircle” the letters in her arms, and lie “breath-
ing softly and contentedly with the hectic cheek resting upon
them” (1:399) or regard her former lover so extravagantly as
to envision him as one who “had changed the water in her
veins to wine” (1:399). Similarly, a woman knowing herself
and at peace with herself would never be so self-deluded as
to think such a posthumous appeal as this woman makes is
intended to spare her husband pain. So fully has she un-
knowingly committed herself, in fact, to her plan for the ex-
quise torture of this man who is, “in a manner,” dear to her
that she dies clutching the key to the desk in which she has
sequestered the packet. The virulent hostility she directs to-
ward him, like the virulent passion she feels for her lover and
for the artifacts she associates with him, can only come from
a desperation so terrible as to be beyond her capacity to acknowledge it even to herself—the desperation of a thwarted life, of a freedom never directly pursued and, thus, never attained.

For Chopin such self-repression as exhibited by Mrs. Mallard and the wife in “Her Letters” is tantamount to self-consignment to death, and in “A Lady of Bayou St. John” (1893), she presents in Madame Delisle a woman who almost literally weds herself to death through her inability to seek mature womanhood. On the verge of running off to Paris with a young man while her husband is away fighting in the Civil War, Madame Delisle receives word that her spouse has been killed. Quickly dismissing her would-be lover, she dedicates the rest of her life to veneration of her husband’s memory in the shrine into which she transforms their home. The reason for this sudden decision is neither hard to see nor admirable. Exceedingly childish, young Madame Delisle, before her husband’s death, romps with puppies, teases parrots, demands bedtime stories from her maid, stares lovingly at herself in mirrors, and imagines herself capable of great love and sacrifice. For such a woman, ordinary married life holds few attractions, but either elopement with a lover or nunlike self-renunciatory adoration of a fallen hero-husband offers virtually limitless possibilities for self-dramatization. Though both the planned elopement and the endless veneration of the lost husband arise from childish, sentimental romanticism rather than the arousal of a nature seeking to know and fulfill itself, the former course might well have led this fatuous young woman to find her mature identity; for, unlike the similarly childish Athénaïse, Madame Delisle manifests no capacity whatever for finding adult womanhood in her marriage. Such conflicts and difficulties as would have inevitably arisen in an adulterous elopement might possibly have awakened in her impulses toward the development of such an authentic identity. By yielding to convention and channeling her longings for romance into what is merely an extended elaboration of the standard role of the grieving wife, this young woman, who now refuses to acknowledge to herself that she was dissatisfied in her marriage, permanently im-
mures herself in a state of arrested development so deathlike that it precludes for her, alone among Chopin's protagonists, the possibility of any outburst of long-repressed authentic needs. At last report, Chopin notes, she has become "a very pretty old lady" about whom there "has never been a breath of reproach" (1:302), one whose prettiness and spotless demeanor bespeak, one guesses, an insidiously successful job of self-embalming.

More direct than the dissatisfied wives at whom we have just looked, those in "In Sabine" (1893), "A Respectable Woman" (1894), "The Storm" (1898), and, of course, in Chopin's best-known work, The Awakening (1898) either pursue authenticity decisively or seem to be on their way to such pursuit. Though such a course may never be successful, may, in fact, leave one vulnerable to a whole panoply of dangers and, perhaps, may not even be a consciously willed one to begin with, failure to pursue it can lead, as we have seen, only to self-deceit and frustration.

"In Sabine," markedly similar to "A Visit to Avoyelles," differs from it in one crucial particular, that being that the much put-upon wife in this story does leave her husband. In each story the husband is an overbearing, shiftless boor and the wife a former beauty now haggard with overwork. But because the wife in "In Sabine," unlike Mentine in the earlier work, finds no happiness with her husband, she rides off at the close of the tale with a dashing Creole rescuer. In the earlier story, Chopin enabled the reader to credit the wife's devotion to her husband by pointing up the sentimental folly of Doudouche in imagining himself a sort of bayou Lochinvar swooping down to gather Mentine up from her misery; but in this work, what she seeks to make plausible is the wife's departure, and she does this primarily by focusing on the brutality of the husband. By emphasizing (perhaps too much so) Bud Aiken's shortcomings—his rootlessness, slovenliness, drunkenness, and his sadism, which manifests itself in his forcing his wife to ride his vicious pony and in his broad hints that he will take her to the wilds of Texas and there desert her—Chopin makes it seem improbable that any
woman with self-respect could stay with such a man. Indeed, pointing up just how fully the wife here lacks an authentic identity in being married to Bud is the fact that with him she even lacks her real name. Known, because of her imperious nature, as "Tite Reine" before she was married, she now finds herself called "Rain" by her husband and actually has become as tearful and passive as her new cognomen implies. Her spirited identity stifled, her only recourse is escape; and when she rides off with her rescuer, one's sympathies are just where Chopin wants them to be—with the wife who is unafraid to flout the conventional standards if it serves her deepest needs to do so. Chopin's concern here, just as it is in "A Visit to Avoyelles," is with whether or not her protagonist is fulfilled by the marriage. If so, as we have noted, Chopin believes staying in the marriage is right, even if sentimentalists might think otherwise; if not, she believes leaving is right, though all convention might call the departure waywardness.

Waywardness is something Mrs. Baroda, protagonist of "A Respectable Woman," never finds at all attractive until a dose of moonlight and Whitman with her husband's close friend awakens hitherto dormant elements in her nature that impose demands on her that she seems to find impossible to resist. Though a relatively slight story, "A Respectable Woman" is an interesting anticipation of The Awakening. As with the novel, one finds a woman at first singularly unaware of her own boredom and repression, a woman whose marriage, though pleasant and unexceptionable, relegates her to a life in which she is merely the object of her husband's affectionate condescension. The arousal of Mrs. Baroda, through a surge of passion for another man, to an incipient awareness of what her conventional training and typical marriage have made her is rendered with a subtlety and ambiguity that mark this story as, at the very least, rich apprentice work for Chopin's extensive treatment of a fuller awakening in her account of Edna Pontellier.

From the first, Mrs. Baroda's response to the visit of her husband's vacationing old college-friend, the journalist Gouvernail (whom we remember from "Athénaïse"), is a com-
plex one. Picturing him before she meets him, she envisions Gouvernail to be “tall, slim, cynical; with eyeglasses, and his hands in his pockets” (1:333), as someone too whom she expects not to like at all. Finding that, except for his slimness, he meets none of her expectations, she discovers that she likes him and, even more, that she is “puzzled” and “piqued” because he makes “no direct appeal to her approval or even esteem” (1:333). What is so intriguing in all this is what it reveals of the depths of Mrs. Baroda’s longing to confront a way of life that subverts her own. Knowing that Gouvernail is a journalist and not a “society man” or a “man about town” (1:333) and, thus, not part of the round of “mild dissipation” (1:333) that the Barodas move in when they winter in New Orleans, Mrs. Baroda is exceedingly quick to shape him in her imagination as the virtual cliche of the iconoclastic journalist, a type that she presumably has never known but that she assures herself she would dislike. Though her indulgence in such image-making might seem to bespeak a fervent loyalty to the way of life at which her stereotyped journalist would invariably sneer, the readiness with which she resorts to it and her certainty that she will dislike this fellow she has never seen indicate, as subsequent events in the story show, an uneasy defensiveness about her way of life and an incipient desire to test it against another vision of things. When she finds that Gouvernail, though not the odious cliche she has convinced herself he would be, is someone nevertheless whose very nature calls her own way of life into question, the uneasy but strong interest she manifests in him reveals just how powerful her underlying need to scrutinize her life has been.

It is exactly Gouvernail’s lack of concern for appealing for her approval and esteem that reveals to Mrs. Baroda, apparently, an independence in him that sets him apart from the type of man she knows and understands. More, it seems to reveal a respect for her own independence because such attempts to appeal for her approval and esteem as she has known have doubtless been all too like those of her husband—based, that is, on the assumption that what women most approve and esteem are men who genially repress them
by treating them with the patronizing air that one would di­rect toward a generally amiable child. Disturbingly typical, one suspects, of Mr. Baroda’s behavior to his wife is his re­sponse to her assertion that something about Gouvernail disturbs her. Taking her “pretty face” between his hands, he looks “tenderly and laughingly into her troubled eyes” and tells her jocularly, “You are full of surprises, ma belle . . . . Even I can never count upon how you are going to act under given conditions” (1:334). Used to such treatment as this, Mrs. Baroda is, not surprisingly, both drawn to, and un­settled by, Gouvernail because of his behavior.

Finally, she is charmed intensely by Gouvernail when, alone with her one evening, he recites—typically enough, more to the night than to her—Whitman’s apostrophe, “Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! / Still nodding night—.” Aroused physically by the passion in the poetry, the beauty of the night, and her nearness to this man who, unlike all others, does not patronize her, she “wanted to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips. She wanted to draw close to him and whisper against his cheek—she did not care what—as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman” (1:335). At last, as the impulse grows stronger still, she draws away from him. Shaken, she is tempted to tell her husband of “this folly that had seized her” (1:336). But she does not yield to this temptation, for “beside being a respectable woman she was a very sensible one; and she knew there are some battles in life which a hu­man being must fight alone” (1:336). When, months later, an­other visit from Gouvernail is proposed by her husband, her response to his stated hope that she has overcome her initial dislike for his friend is, “I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him” (1:336).

It is difficult to accept Seyersted’s contention that these last words of Mrs. Baroda, which end the story, are “won­derfully ambiguous to the reader.”11 Strictly speaking, of course, they are ambiguous in that one cannot be totally sure of what Mrs. Baroda means by “nice,”12 and this obviously adds to the resonance of the story. Nonetheless, all indicates
that such niceness as she will show Gouvernail is far from what one might normally expect of a "respectable woman." Indeed, the repeated emphasis itself on Mrs. Baroda's respectability finally strikes the reader as more than a little ironic, particularly when the respectability yields so readily before the onslaught of Mrs. Baroda's "sensible" desire to keep her fit of passion from her husband. Further, because she is a "sensible woman," one suspects that the "everything" that Mrs. Baroda has "overcome" is every restraint that might hold her back from what Chopin conceives to be the eminently sensible course of gratifying her passionate longing to become intimately involved with the first man to speak to the authentic, mature woman long latent in her. What ambiguity there is in this story resides not so much in the immediate import of Mrs. Baroda's last words as in their ultimate import. One does not know just how far Mrs. Baroda's incipient rebellion against her "respectability" will go or what its consequences will be. Will the affair with Gouvernail that seems to loom ahead be the culmination of a quest for authentic selfhood or at least the springboard to such a quest, or will it lead to some new form of entrapment, some personal disaster? Such questions as these are clearly unanswerable within the framework of this story, but, because of Chopin's skill in showing the early stages of the arousal of what was ostensibly a permanently conventional woman to a sense of her own needs, they are inevitable and fascinating.

Though one can only speculate about Mrs. Baroda's destiny, what ultimately becomes of that other aroused conventional wife, Edna Pontellier, in The Awakening, is well known. It is what motivates her and what one is to make of her that are open to speculation. From the early reviewer who, self-professedly baffled by the novel, asked "Cui bono?" in concluding his discussion of the work to more recent commentators, who disagree about such matters as whether it is a "problem" novel or a detached account of one troubled woman and whether Edna's suicide is an act of childish regression or one of heroic renunciation, The Awakening has been a work unsusceptible to easy interpretation. As a result, "Ah! si tu savais," the snatch of song that so haunts
Edna, becomes increasingly resonant, haunting the reader as well. If one only knew what, then what? What, one asks, does Edna know, if anything, that might explain her and perhaps many another? And if she knows nothing significant in this line, is she merely a pathetic victim of a vague malaise of no intrinsic consequence that she allows to precipitate in her a course of irresponsible and self-destructive behavior or is she a courageous quester after identity and understanding? Clearly, as the diversity of critical response indicates, Chopin’s account of this desperate woman who, almost in response to the parrot’s call of "Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!" (2:881) that opens the novel, swims farther than most women ever do from the safe shores of domesticity is not without its ambiguities, ambiguities that finally seem irresolvable. There is, in short, no evidence in the novel to indicate whether or not Chopin admires Edna; nor is there any conclusive evidence that Edna herself either understands fully the implications of her behavior or fails to do so. All that is clear in this difficult work, as it is so often clear in other Chopin works, is that Chopin believes that people will generally do as their authentic natures demand that they do—this is as true of the other characters as it is of Edna—and that she thinks moral judgment of a situation such as Edna’s, in which a woman is driven implacably by the imperatives of her aroused deepest needs, is an indulgence in egregious irrelevancy. Indeed, not just Edna’s behavior and motivations but the cultures to which she has been exposed—her marriage, her husband, her love, lover, and friends, and even some of the key imagery—are presented in terms so redolent of ambiguity as to suggest that Chopin means to drive home upon her readers the realization that examination of complex human behavior involves one inevitably in so many tangled strands as to make moral judgment impossible. Difficult to attain, certainly, but not beyond human reach, though, are understanding and sympathy; and it is these, Chopin implies, toward which one should strive in looking at the case of Edna Pontellier.

Though Edna’s difficult, complex, perhaps incomplete, awakening is keyed by a marriage that is not without its own
complexities, it actually finds its origins in the days of her youth. That there is a marked influence on Edna of a girlhood in a Kentucky that was not long past frontier exigencies and of a Presbyterianism that still rigorously maintained hardest-line Protestant doctrines is undeniable, but whether that influence is on the whole a good or a sinister one as Chopin sees it is a great deal harder to ascertain. Repressive though they were, the Presbyterian training Edna received and the narrow Kentucky context in which she received it were, for better or worse, crucial factors in fostering her "awakening" years later. As a Calvinist religion, Presbyterianism, particularly in the time of Edna's youth, by its very doctrine thrust one back upon oneself into an intense, unending drama of self-scrutiny that for many—as it does for Edna—might outlast the hold of the dogma itself. Also, such repression as the Presbyterianism of that time and place might have enforced could well have had the opposite effect of exacerbating a rebellious streak of individualism in one, like Edna, who may be rebellious by nature to begin with. This might be all the more likely in nineteenth-century Kentucky, permeated as it still was by the frontier propensities for a potentially chaotic code of rugged individualism and for romanticizing the self's struggle for fulfillment in a difficult world—propensities implicitly evident in Edna's strait-laced father's un-Presbyterian love of betting on horse races. Such, at any rate, is the situation with Edna, as the particular form of repression with which she was faced in her girlhood prompted a rebelliousness and a heightened sense of the drama of her existence that resulted in her marriage to Léonce and then, after lying dormant for years, precipitated the "awakening" with Robert.

Unmistakably, Chopin shows, the latter stages of rebellion are implicit in the first. Thus, one of Edna's sharpest early memories has her, significantly, "running away from . . . the Presbyterian service read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (2:896) into a meadow in which the grass was so high as to make her feel as if she were swimming. She cannot recall whether she was "frightened or pleased" (2:896), but remembers that she felt an exhilaration
akin to nothing she had ever felt before. This sense of strange, lone voyaging, with its concomitant sense of drama and romance into which her repugnance for Kentucky Presbyterianism brought her, clearly stayed with her long thereafter, sparking infatuated longings for a somewhat elderly, "sad-eyed" cavalry officer (who looked something like Napoleon), for a young man engaged to a lady on a neighboring plantation, and for a "great tragedian," whom she had never met but whose face and figure nonetheless "began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses" (2:898). Indeed, even her marriage to Léonce, stultifying as it now seems to Edna, grew out of reaction against her background. All that was needed to make Edna accept Léonce, "who pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired" (2:898), was such "violent opposition" as she received from her father and her sister to the notion of "marriage with a Catholic" (2:898). Clearly, then, without such prodding to her innate tendency for individualistic rebellion as that exerted by Kentucky Presbyterianism, Edna might never have begun her long process of striving for the forbidden, one that culminates only with her death. The specific embodiments of the forbidden change, of course; but the ultimate goal, full self-definition and complete self-fulfillment through hard-won triumph over conventional restraints—a goal of which she might not ever be completely aware—is constant. Hence, be the object of her immediate longing an older man, a spoken-for man, a man of disreputable calling or of unsanctioned religious background, or, be it, as it is after her marriage, soul-mate or merely bed-mate, what Edna is finally seeking, though perhaps known to herself only at the last, is an ineffable state of perfect freedom, of unadulterated authenticity. Her search culminates in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, but its origins in the sealike meadows of Kentucky are, as we have seen, presented by Chopin as multifaceted, complex, and, thus, no less impervious to moral judgment than are the final stages.

Just as unsusceptible to easy moralistic evaluation is the Creole culture in which Edna's potential for "awakening,"
implanted in her by her nature and background but long dormant, becomes aroused. Obviously, it is not merely gratuitous that it is in precisely this culture that Edna awakens to her obscure personal quest. By its very nature, Creole life, particularly in the relaxed form in which it presents itself to her at the resort at which she is summering, is an unsettling experience for Edna, with its "freedom of expression" and "entire absence of prudery" (2:889) at first striking her as "incomprehensible" and then as nothing short of a "shock" (2:889). Consequently, although Adèle Ratignolle's relation in company of "the harrowing story of one of her accouchements withholding no intimate detail" (2:889) and the propensity of Creole women for free discussion of such books as Edna "felt moved to read . . . in secret and solitude" (2:889-90) are not difficult for her to reconcile with the "lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (2:889), they do nevertheless contribute to an atmosphere of repose and lack of restraint so different from anything to which her early background exposed her as to shake her and thereby prompt long-somnolent forces deep within her to sudden and profound stirring. Had Edna never come into contact with Creole ways, then, her "awakening" might never have taken place; but whether the fact that it is, in large part, keyed by the Creole way of life somehow for Chopin legitimizes Edna's quest is again impossible to say. Creole life as Chopin presents it here is at once appealing and distasteful. Easygoing as it may be, devoted to good conversation, light entertainment, and the maintenance of the pleasant order of things as it may be, it is also devoid of passion or aspiration and hedged about with restraints and hypocrisies that, unfortunate in themselves, are particularly onerous to a woman of romantic spirit. In violating the precepts of the very culture that keys her quest, Edna, consequently, is leaving behind what may be both a pleasant order and an insidiously comfortable form of repression for anyone who seeks more than unexamined repose. Such a studiously balanced picture as Chopin presents here of Creole life is obviously calculated to show how difficult monolithic judgment
of life as it is really lived is and, implicitly, how exceedingly
difficult judgment of Edna becomes once one perceives the
complexity of the influences that shape her course.

In no way geared to making judgment easier is Edna's mar-
riage. Though it becomes increasingly intolerable to Edna as
her "awakening" develops, her marriage to Léonce is not de-
picted as an experience that the vast majority of women in
her time would find a hideous one. Léonce, manifestly, is no
monster. Affectionate to his wife and children, free with
gifts, chary of complaints, blatant demands, and threats,
Léonce is, with some justice, regarded by most who know
him as a good husband, "the best . . . in the world" (2:887),
as the group at the resort declare. Be that as it may, however,
there is also much in this marriage that might lead others to
believe, again with some justice, that escape from union with
Léonce and the Léonce type generally is an entirely legitimate
option for a woman who needs to awaken to herself. The
marriage, like Creole life itself, may be altogether too pas-
sonless, too freighted with conventional usages, and, finally,
too dominated by the husband to meet the authentic needs
of one such as Edna Pontellier. Typifying, perhaps, all that a
woman of awakening authentic needs might find onerous in
such a marriage is the scene, early in the novel, in which
Léonce, returning in high spirits from a jolly evening at
Klein's with some of his gentleman friends, clumsily awakens
Edna from a deep sleep and despite her drowsiness bores her
by recounting the insipid gossip and anecdotes he picked up
through the evening of hilarity. As he talks on, absolutely
oblivious to the desire of his wife for rest, he casually empties
his pockets, pulling out "a fistful of crumpled banknotes and
a good deal of silver coin, which he piled on the bureau indis-
criminately with keys, knife, handkerchief . . . " (2:885).
The act, innocuous as it seems, is a significant one; for these
items, so nonchalantly tossed upon the bureau, are little less
than the symbols of Léonce's domination of his wife and mar-
riage. Money, possession, power (the knife), and decorum
(the handkerchief) are the tools of Léonce's control. Were
these contents of his pocket meant to have less sinister as-
associations here, one suspects that Chopin would not have
linked them in this scene with Léonce's total lack of concern with his wife's manifest desire to be left alone at this point or to the grating reproaches he soon delivers to her about her care of the children; nor, it is obvious, would their enumeration so closely precede Chopin's reference to the terrible sense of "indescribable oppression" (2:886) that Edna feels as, now thoroughly unable to sleep, she lies beside her contentedly sleeping mate.

Such a scene as this, soon followed as it is by one in which Léonce tries insistently and irritatedly to assert his authority by ordering Edna to come to bed (one assumes for sexual relations) when she lies in her hammock, feeling the lure of the nighttime sea, makes it difficult for one to condemn her rebellion out of hand. The lure of the sea with all that it represents in terms of compelling quests, freedom, beauty, and mystery seems, consequently, not as outrageous an alternative as it might at first to a life spent in meeting the demands of Léonce Pontellier. Then, of course, one must remind oneself that Léonce's criticism of Edna for neglecting the children is not baseless and that a man is not necessarily a beast for wanting to chat with his wife or to be physically intimate with her—particularly when he does not, as Léonce does not, force himself brutally upon her. Nothing is one-sided in this novel; nothing is easy; nor, obviously, does Chopin want anything to be.

Fully as shrouded in ambiguity are the physical changes Edna undergoes as she rebels against Léonce, her marriage, and conventional restraints. The voracious appetite she develops and her increasing need for long naps may well be token that she is living now with such vigor and intensity that she needs more nourishment and rest than she has ever needed in the past. Or, less admirably, they might be the manifestations, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests, of a regressive longing for an unencumbered childlike state, a yearning that is only gratified with Edna's self-destructive immersion into the seductively womb-like sea. Still another possibility is that Edna's ravenous appetite for food and sleep is indeed childlike but symbolizes not regression but rebirth and new identity. All these explanations seem plausible, as
might others, with the result that certainty again eludes us, save for the certainty that, whether admirable or not, deep forces are aroused in Edna that she is powerless to resist as they drive her increasingly into behavior strikingly unconventional for a wife and mother.

Similarly manifesting childlike tendencies is the immediate object of the "aroused" Edna's longings. Charming, devoid of stuffiness and pretension, refreshingly unconventional, Robert is also, perhaps, more than a little flighty. Seen posing as an inconsolable lover with Adèle, planning vaguely to go to Mexico to make his fortune, being casually dismissed by Pontellier as nothing but a slight playfellow for his bored wife, Robert seems not at all out of place "surrounded by a troop of children" and followed by "two nursemaidens" who look "disagreeable and resigned" (2:889). Nor does it seem merely gratuitous that at one point Robert "sat down upon a stool which the children had left out upon the porch" (2:925). Significantly too, the most recent photograph taken of Robert shows him about to leave for college, "with eyes full of fire, ambition, and great intentions" (2:928)—none, presumably, carried out. Robert may well strike the observer, then, as a case of arrested development, alternately playful and full of the romanticism of the perennial freshman, stopped short of adulthood. Such childlike tendencies as he manifests can, like Edna's, be construed as betokening either liveliness, charming authenticity, and a winning nonconformity or, less flattering, weakness, puerility, and lack of adult development. One's view of Edna must in part hinge on one's view of this man who means so much to her, but here as elsewhere the information necessary for shaping one's vision is complex, contradictory, irremediably ambiguous.

Nor is there sufficient evidence for clearcut judgment on the other person to whom Edna is most drawn at the resort, Adèle Ratignolle. Preeminently a "mother-woman" (2:888), Adèle seems at first a faintly bovine, blind adherent to convention, one so caught up in submitting to the demands of husband and family that she fails to have an identity of her own. Further, her major choices seem to involve such matters as which chocolate to choose from a proffered box, and
her major worries seem typified by her concern about how the candy she finally chooses will affect her “condition” (pregnancy), about which she is “always talking” (2:889). Nonetheless, this woman is perceptive enough to warn Robert that Edna’s lack of understanding of Creole ways makes his flirting with her a dangerous matter. More, she is courageous and selfless enough to think of Edna in the midst of her own difficult labor in childbirth and, using her pain as a vivid reminder of what she sees as the sacred office of motherhood, warn her, “in an exhausted voice” to “think of the children!” and “Remember them!” (2:995). Thus, both limited and fulfilled, unthinkingly devoted to the conventions and sharply perceptive, absorbed in her familial sphere and devoted to the welfare of her friends, Adéle Ratignolle is a character whose presence in The Awakening adds to the difficulty of passing moral judgment on Edna’s quest. Edna’s own inability to paint what she considers to be a likeness of Adéle indicates, one suspects, her inability to understand Adéle’s essential character. Whether her inability to grasp the makeup of this “mother-woman” is something Chopin believes admirable or unfortunate in Edna is impossible to say. Similarly, the outcropping of latent hostility toward Adéle and her way of life that may be inherent in Edna’s crumpling-up of her attempt at Adéle’s portrait could well be construed as a sign of childish petulance or as poignant manifestation of Edna’s frustration as she dimly perceives her friend’s sort of happiness, knows she does not want it, but does not know what she wants in its stead. If, as Lewis Leary notes, the other characters in The Awakening “appear only in their relation to Edna Pontellier,” the light they project from their own complex natures is so multihued as not to clear things up but merely to shroud them in further ambiguity.

Three lesser figures in the novel whose presence makes judgment of Edna’s behavior no less difficult are Robert’s brother Victor, Alcée Arobin, and Mademoiselle Reisz. Victor, a loudmouthed, self-indulgent buffoon, and Arobin, a crude womanizer, are, unlike the others in the book, figures lacking in complexity. Both seem to be used, however, for a relatively complex purpose. Calling into question as they do
by their very natures the commitment to self-gratification, they seem set off by Chopin against Mademoiselle Reisz, who, by and large, seems to legitimize the pursuit of self-gratification. Obviously, this setting-off or balancing does little to clear up ambiguity. Nor is Chopin’s portrayal of Mademoiselle Reisz merely a one-sided one, for Chopin seeks, apparently, to compound ambiguity with ambiguity. Thus, Mademoiselle Reisz, the brilliant pianist, seems to show what a free woman, on her own and assured of her identity and needs, can accomplish, and thereby seems calculated by Chopin to make one more sympathetic to Edna’s quest for authenticity. But, as soon becomes evident, Mademoiselle Reisz has one thing that Edna, like most people, lacks—and that is real talent, even genius. Therefore, her irascibility and self-absorption, her tastelessness and isolation from life, as typified by the “rusty” black lace and artificial violets she wears, though certainly not admirable are excusable, deriving as they probably do from the very forces and tensions that make her the artist she is. When Edna, on the other hand, manifests similar traits, such as in her refusal to go to her sister’s wedding, the effect is not to make her seem akin to Mademoiselle Reisz but to point up the major difference between them and make Edna seem merely petulant. Moreover, even the pianist is shown to be partially limited by her self-absorption, at least insofar as it leads her to underestimate others. For example, when she plays for the group at Klein’s, she is positive that of them all only Edna can appreciate her work; but, in fact, “she was mistaken about ‘those others.’ Her playing had aroused a fever of enthusiasm” (2:907), one typical comment being, “That last prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!” (2:907). Her obvious undervaluing of commonplace folk and her habitual self-imposed isolation from them, then, may serve as an implicit criticism of Edna, who seems to reveal the same failings without such extenuation as Mademoiselle Reisz’s genius provides. Then again, though, it may simply show that by their very makeup large natures, unfortunately, are unable to fit comfortably into the context of usual life. As a result, neither the presence of the woman of genius nor that of the two blocks of banality, Vic-
tor and Arobin, makes judgment of Edna any easier to formulate.

Finally, working with Chopin’s depiction of Edna’s background, Creole culture, and the other characters to convey fully the complexity and ambiguity of Edna’s experience is the imagery Chopin associates most vividly with the “awakening.” Though the sun and the sea that lure Edna so powerfully have an undeniable beauty, that beauty is not without its sinister overtones. The “slimy lizards” that Edna hopes to see “writhe” (2:915) in the sunshine at Grand Terre, the sun to whose “mercy” (2:1000) she consigns herself when, naked, she walks to the sea for her final swim, the “foamy wavelets” that “curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles” as she steps into the water for the last time, all seem to imbue her quest with an aura of the insidious as well as of the free and inviting. Too, is the bird with broken wing “reeling, fluttering, circling . . . down, down to the water” (2:1000) meant to convey a sense of Edna’s weakness, of her bravery in fighting against all the odds, or of her foolishness in fighting what is inevitably a losing battle?

Because Edna’s behavior is so unconventional, one’s immediate impulse is to judge it somehow; but all in The Awakening, as we have seen, is calculated by Chopin to show how difficult, even impossible, it can be to make moral judgments about complex behavior. What appreciation of the ambiguity pervading this novel does, ultimately, is push the reader away from Edna to the requisite detachment that makes understanding, if not judgment, possible. From this position of detachment, one sees that, for Chopin, Edna, like all others perhaps, cannot, by virtue of the dominant needs within her, do other than what she does. “Fate,” Chopin notes, “had not fitted” Edna for the “responsibility she had blindly assumed” (2:899) of being a mother. Similarly, when Edna refuses to leave her hammock and come to bed as Léonce demands, Chopin states, “Edna perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted” (2:912). Later Chopin declares of Edna, “She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands
After the vows were spoken for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (2:913). When, still later, Edna yields to Arobin, Chopin's phrasing makes clear that what takes place grows not from any decision that Edna freely makes but from an unavoidable answering to the irresistible imperatives of her nature. When Arobin kisses her, "it was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (2:967). Finally, even Edna's last walk to the sea is presented almost entirely in terms of her physical actions, never in terms of a decision consciously reached by a woman in control of her destiny. Thus, although Edna asserts herself aplenty in the course of her quest for authenticity and self-fulfillment, the drive to assertion is itself not a freely chosen course but an inevitable response to voracious demands aroused within her. 

As inexorably as the happiness of the young lovers briefly seen at the resort will ultimately give way to the grimmer reality represented by the woman in black who seems invariably to shadow them, Edna, like most, as Chopin views it, must yield to the reality of her nature. To resist its demands is impossible, and to think that some moral or social code can enable her to do so is, for Chopin, the rankest folly. Hence, for two reasons, then, one cannot pass moral judgment on Edna as Chopin perceives it. First, her self-assertive behavior itself can seem, like the behavior of virtually all in this novel, either justifiable or reprehensible depending on one's angle of vision; and second, it is determined behavior anyway, beyond the realm of ethical choice, in a universe that Chopin apparently regards as devoid of moral absolutes. Judgment out of the question, consequently, one can only observe, learn, and sympathize in response to Edna's plight.

Thus does *The Awakening* become Chopin's fullest depiction of the irrepressible power of the drive for authenticity. As such, it becomes, implicitly at least, her strongest attack on marriage. Though she once again offers no overt criticism of the institution and once more shows a distinctly happy marriage—that of the Ratignolles—in terms that are only slightly, if at all, deprecating, her emphasis on the impossibility of repressing authentic impulses to self-gratification, even
if yielding to them may destroy a marriage, certainly constitutes no defense of matrimony. Further, when Chopin links this emphasis to an essentially deterministic vision, as she does here, the result is an outlook that tends to undermine almost every assumption on which marriage—and, I might note, the outlook informing literary realism as generally conceived—is based, assumptions involving beliefs in free will, moral responsibility, and the virtue of compromise with those around one. This cutting of the ground from under marriage is, of course, evident in Chopin’s earlier work, but it is more pronounced here because of the greater length and force of *The Awakening* and because the determinism is more explicit and extensive than in the earlier works.

Chopin’s last marriage story is “The Storm,” in which Calixta and Alcée, two young Creoles strongly attracted to each other before their marriages (as seen in the earlier tale, “The ‘Cadian Ball”), meet again when Alcée takes refuge at Calixta’s house during a tempest and cannot resist going to bed together as they had longed to do years before. Here, unlike in *The Awakening*, no one seems to be hurt by the surrender to authentic needs. Calixta is jovial and deeply loving to her husband and son when they return after Alcée’s departure. (Apparently, unlike the wife in “The Letters,” an interlude of sexual authenticity is all Calixta needs to be herself, not a complete break with her marriage.) Alcée’s wife, receiving word from her husband that she and her child may stay a bit longer at the resort to which she has gone for a rest, is not at all displeased by the prospect of a brief extension of her respite from “their intimate conjugal life” (2:596). Thus, all seems to go well with these four marrieds when Calixta and Alcée finally surrender to the deep proddings within themselves. Coincidentally too, as they near the climax of their lovemaking, the storm increases in its fury, abating and passing only when they reach satiety, an indication, one suspects, that, for Chopin, their act has all the naturalness and inevitability of an elemental force of nature. When Chopin closes the tale with the quiet comment “So the storm passed and everyone was happy” (2:596), she leaves one with the unescapable impression that both marriages would have been
somewhat less happy had Calixta and Alcée had to endure the frustration of never gratifying their longings for each other. An unconventional impression to convey, certainly, but, as we have seen, convention for Chopin ever has little to do with the facts of human nature.

Chopin once stated that her main interest as a writer was in depicting "human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it." The "true meaning" that she believes these standards cloak, one suspects, is the central human truth that one ought not to attempt the futile endeavor of repressing the drive to authenticity. It is in her marriage stories that she presents this doctrine most tellingly. Here people are in the most intimate contact with others, tied to them in presumably lasting commitments—for most women of her day the most pressing social commitments they will ever know—and when Chopin thrusts that contact and those commitments aside as impotent in the face of the individual's will to self-assertion and self-gratification, one sees how little her outlook is in accord with the prevalent literary realist thought of her day. Indeed, as I noted at the outset, one is forced, in taking an overview of Chopin's work, to speak of its romantic tendencies, for certainly the propensity to set convention at naught compared with the demands of the individual is something many romantics would fully understand; but nonetheless, there is in Chopin's work something else, something that sets her apart finally, from most romantics as well as most realists, and it is most apparent in the very marriage works at which we have been looking. It is a fundamental inability on Chopin's part, ultimately, to see people as anything more than automata. Though it is clear that Chopin has it in mind to assert the unique worth of each individual in the face of the restraints and repressions of convention, the effect of her work is invariably to do otherwise. Instead of a world in which people and the choices they make matter, she presents a bleak scene in which they bounce off one another chaotically in unending, unthinking response to impulses over which they have no control and
little understanding. Nor does she maintain the ethical framework that redeems from moral chaos those essays by Emerson such as "Experience," "Fate," and "Power" of which her work is in its emphasis on the deterministically ordered pursuit of self-fulfillment more than a little reminiscent. Her very insistence that moral questions are irrelevant to the ways in which people live undercuts her obvious effort to point up that individuals count for something and makes for an implicit condescension to her characters and their dreams that comes through in everything she wrote. No intellectual, apparently unable or unwilling to think her impressions through, Chopin, in spite of herself, presents in her pieces on married men and women as bleak a picture of the human conditions as one can find in late-nineteenth-century American writing.


2. Some stories not depicting marriage that deal with the necessity of self-assertion include "The Maid of St. Philippe" (1892), "A Shameful Affair" (1893), and, most notably, the powerful tale of a young priest's inability to forget his past and suppress his passion for a certain woman and the freedom she represents, "A Vocation and a Voice" (1902).

3. Seyersted, p. 85. Chopin's poem "Because" supports Seyersted's contention here, but the belief in free will and its concomitant moral responsibility expressed in this poem is clearly atypical of the outlook usually expressed in Chopin's work.


5. Chopin uses as epigraph to this story the Latin proverb "To love and be wise is scarcely granted even to a god." The text of Chopin's works that I am using is Per Seyersted's edition of The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, 2 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). All page references to Chopin's work are to this edition and will appear in the text.

6. Seyersted speaks of Chopin's intense "irritation with moral reformers" (pp. 90–91). Note too that Margaret's commitment to reform seems merely an intellectual one, not a reflection of the needs of her whole being. Hence, she makes the same mistake that the Faradays do.

7. Seyersted, ignoring—wrongly, I think—the subscription notice, sees here a "surprising juxtaposition of marriage and death," which seems to him to imply that Chopin regards marriage as an institution that represses women and that "she wishes the Faradays success in their venture to live as perfect equals" (p. 107). Though it is clear that Chopin often did see marriage as repressive, it is apparent nevertheless that in this story she regards the Faradays' experiment as ludicrous and as more repressive than their marriage ever could be.

AFTER THE VOWS WERE SPOKEN

9. Seyersted, p. 113. Another who sees the conclusion in somber terms is Lewis Leary, who regards it as depicting the forced submission of a young woman who has been involved in a "battle against becoming only a useful household possession" (Introduction, *The Awakening and Other Stories by Kate Chopin*, ed. Lewis Leary [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970], p. x).

10. "Désirée's Baby," more a story of race relations than of marriage, presents a woman who *would* find happiness in submission if her husband's racism did not intercede and destroy them both.


12. Chopin's choice of the word "nice" here is a marvelously apt one. In addition to its prevalent meanings of "fastidious" and "agreeable," modes of conduct that, of course, might in some contexts be at odds with each other, "nice" once meant "foolish" or "wanton." Though both of these latter meanings were probably obsolete in Chopin's day, she may well have been aware of them.

13. The full range of critical views to which I have alluded is well represented in the essays Margaret Culley reprints in her edition of *The Awakening* (New York: Norton, 1976). The early reviewer I quote is an anonymous commentator for the *Mirror*. His review, originally published in the *Mirror*, 4 May, 1899, is reprinted in Culley's edition, pp. 145-46.


16. Adding to the sense of inevitability surrounding Edna's death is the bit of foreshadowing provided by the duet from "Zampa" played on a piano early in the novel. This romantic opera, as Margaret Culley notes, "includes a lover's death in the sea" (Culley, p. 4).