THE SECRET THOUGHTS OF WOMEN:

AN ANALYSIS OF SIX LATE WORKS BY KATE CHOPIN

by

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Abstract

This essay explores the portrayal of women’s thoughts and desires in Kate Chopin’s later works. Chopin lived and wrote in a time when American women began to both challenge the patriarchy and question their lack of rights, especially in the late 1890s. Though Chopin separated herself from the movement, many of her works pertaining to female consciousness clearly address this idea of female empowerment. When we look to Chopin’s more daring works about women—those stories published in Vogue (specifically between 1894 and 1897) and her acclaimed novel The Awakening (published in 1899)—we can typify these women into two categories: the woman who pursues her desires despite social obligations and the woman who conforms to social obligations and neglects her desires.
In the nineteenth century, the recognition of women’s lack of rights began to permeate American ideologies, literature, and society. In response to the overwhelming masculine authority of American society, The Women’s Suffrage Movement was created to challenge the patriarchy and redefine women’s roles in society. During the nineteenth century, The Movement organized important events such as The Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 and gave way to “feminist” writings like Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s two-volume work, *The Woman’s Bible*. With the increased awareness of women’s lack of rights, the century saw more women enter the workforce as well as experienced the coining of the term “feminist” in the late 1890s. These “New Women,” the women who entered the workforce, were simultaneously inspiring and intimidating to American society. Besides the increased number of women in the workforce and the increasing advancements toward women’s rights, nineteenth century America also witnessed an increased number of female writers.

Amongst the swelling population of female writers in the nineteenth century stands Kate Chopin, a woman who differed from many of her peers in that she considered herself neither an activist nor a supporter of The Women’s Suffrage Movement. Despite this rather surprising fact, Chopin is immensely revered for her late works dealing with women’s consciousness and female desire (circa mid-late 1890s), which were influenced by the politics of her day. Readers find themselves drawn to Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, and other stories that so boldly portray these woman-centered themes. The guided question of the following analysis is, “How did this woman, who separated herself from the activists and ‘feminists’ of the time, write about the female in such a way that can be accused of holding feminist tendencies?”

One of the most fascinating aspects of this remarkable, prolific writer is her dedication to writing about the individual—especially nineteenth century, American women. Chopin’s
commitment to writing about the individual stems partly from Guy de Maupassant. The French author “Told stories the way she [Chopin] wanted to: without creaking, old-fashioned machinery, and with a clear-eyed and unsentimental focus on reality” (Toth and Seyersted 130). In Unveiling Kate Chopin, Emily Toth writes of Kate Chopin’s fascination with Guy de Maupassant because of his ability to write about “life, not fiction” (Toth 123). Chopin found Maupassant to be an archetype for her literary work; he “was the model Kate Chopin needed for writing as an adult—telling adult women’s stories, and surprising the reader with a lack of moral judgment” (123).

Through Maupassant’s inspiration—writing about life, not fiction, and lacking moral judgment in his writings—Kate Chopin began to write in such a way that resembled the true life of an individual. And writing based on what she knew, Chopin wrote largely about the life of the nineteenth century American female.

Kate Chopin often struggled to find magazines and journals that would publish these Maupassant-style stories without drastically changing the plots in order to fit their fixed expectations. In 1893, Kate Chopin found a publisher—Vogue magazine—that allowed her to write expressive, real stories about women. The “sophisticated woman’s magazine” represented a realm unto itself—a place that was for women and by women (Toth 171). With a female editor and a predominantly female audience, Chopin was able to submit her stories about “life, not fiction” without major edits to the stories’ plots (Toth 172). Often Chopin published her “stories of flirtation and desires outside marriage” in the magazine—neglecting the male-dominant publishers all together (Toth171). Ultimately, Vogue magazine became one of her central publishers, a place where Chopin published some of her most popular and daring stories depicting the true lives of women, female desires, and female consciousness.
Kate Chopin published nineteen stories in *Vogue* between 1893 and 1900; these stories have a wide variety of topics, focuses, and themes which range from disability, the coming-of-age story arc, the male perspective of women, and, of course, women’s consciousness. Out of the nineteen stories published in *Vogue*, five align best with the theme of female consciousness: “A Respectable Woman” (February 1894), “The Story of an Hour” (December 1894), “The Kiss” (January 1895), “The Unexpected” (September 1895), and “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (September 1897). These five *Vogue* stories and *The Awakening* typify a lens exposing the desires of the female character. Once these desires are established, the female characters can be categorized into two types: the female that consciously conforms to her societal expectations by suppressing her desires and the female that does not conform to her societal expectations by pursuing her desires. Through a realistic depiction of female thought and desire, Kate Chopin addresses a discrepancy between female self and societal expectations of the female. Though this depiction closely relates to the women’s rights disputes of the day, an analytical categorization of these female characters suggests that Kate Chopin was merely attempting to represent the nineteenth century female and was not participating in the discussion of women’s rights herself. My categorical distinction of these six female characters demonstrates the difficulties of both conforming to social standards and the ideological pursuance of desires within nineteenth

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1 I selected these five stories because they capture the thoughts and desires of women in regards to their place in society. There are other *Vogue* stories that capture elements of the female consciousness (*The Recovery, Her Letters*) but lack a certain focus on societal obligations. I believe the five I have chosen most closely align with the female consciousness depicted in *The Awakening*—one that deals with societal tension.

2 I purposefully chose to pair Chopin’s famous novel, *The Awakening*, with these five *Vogue* stories for several reasons. One being the novel’s evident connection to the subject of the paper and the fact that some critics, including Emily Toth, suspect that *Vogue’s* push to publish “fearless and truthful portrayals of women’s lives” may have misled Chopin into believing that America was ready for *The Awakening* (Toth 172-73). For this reason, I believe that *The Awakening* is closely associated with the *Vogue* stories and can easily be paired with them.
century American society. The establishment of this dichotomy does not indicate bias from Chopin herself but rather shows her desire to portray the pros and cons of both paths.

“A Respectable Woman”

Published in February of 1894, “A Respectable Woman” depicts a woman’s expectation to conform to societal standards and reject any existing personal desires that run contrary to these values. This narrative follows Mrs. Baroda, a dutiful wife to Gaston Baroda, as she grows increasingly interested in her husband’s friend, Gouvernail, when he comes to visit. A traveling journalist, Gouvernail offers mysticism and separation from society that greatly “puzzle[s] Mrs. Baroda” (Chopin, “A Respectable Woman” 334). Gouvernail’s inattention to Mrs. Baroda, his personality, and his reaction or lack thereof to societal formalities, all contribute to Mrs. Baroda’s puzzlement.

Once we understand Mrs. Baroda’s conflict, or puzzlement with Gouvernail, we can begin to understand how she consciously conforms to societal obligations. Perhaps the most noticeable glimpse into Mrs. Baroda’s consciousness occurs as she experiences a strong, sexual desire for Gouvernail. The mysterious journalist approaches Mrs. Baroda one night as she sits outside on a bench. Gouvernail begins speaking “freely and intimately in a low, hesitating draw that was not unpleasant to hear” (Chopin, “A Respectable Woman” 335). This moment alone with Gouvernail enhances Mrs. Baroda’s desires for him. Mrs. Baroda is careful to keep her physical body “predominant” over her internal feelings:

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3 I find that Per Seyersted has a decent overview of the nineteenth-century woman’s social standards. He says, “In a society where man makes the rules, woman is often kept in a state of tutelage and regarded as property or as a servant […] The female’s capital is her body and her innocence, and she should be attractive and playful enough for a man to want her […] she should eagerly welcome the ‘sanctity of motherhood’” (Seyersted 103).

4 The term “desires” will be used frequently within this essay, but it does not act as a synonym to consciousness. The realm of desires can influence and interact with one’s awareness of one’s physical being, but it does not necessarily classify or define the consciousness. In a sense, “desires” and “passions” act as words within a working definition of a term and not a synonym for the term itself.
She was not thinking of his words, only drinking in the tones of his voice. 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. (Chopin, “A Respectable Woman” 335)

The unveiling of Mrs. Baroda’s secret and sensual desire to touch Gouvernail and “whisper against his cheek” is promptly followed by a conscious decision to deal with these desires in reality. Mrs. Baroda’s choice is displayed toward the end of the excerpt—at the precise moment when her desire meets her awareness of the world around her. Though Mrs. Baroda longs to engage in a physical connection with Gouvernail, she consciously suppresses these desires and focuses on her reputation in society.

Mrs. Baroda recognizes her suppressed desires and works to ignore them so that she can remain a respectable woman; her only focus is how she must conform to society by fulfilling the title of “respectable woman.” If she were to think or dream of freeing these desires, her attitude toward them may have changed from the original: “as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman” to “as she might have done if she were free to do as she wished” (335). Mrs. Baroda must face the difficulties of suppressing her desires for Gouvernail as she conforms to her social expectations as Mrs. Gaston Baroda.

In response to this longing, which runs contrary to her “respectable woman” societal expectation, Mrs. Baroda leaves the presence of Gouvernail, but only when she can do so “without an appearance of too great rudeness” (Chopin, “A Respectable Woman” 336). Once again, the woman focuses on the social manners and her place within them before focusing on her own needs. Mrs. Baroda wishes to leave the situation, but only does so once she feels that her
exit is polite and not rude. This calculated decision further subdues Mrs. Baroda’s desires in order to conform to her duties as a wife and the manners that consume her world.

Mrs. Baroda struggles through the process of pacifying her yearnings to fulfill her social obligations. After her time with Gouvernail, Mrs. Baroda feels conflicted as to whether or not she should tell her husband about these strong impulses for Gouvernail. Rather than telling Gaston the truth, however, Mrs. Baroda remembers that she “is a respectable woman […] and she knew that some battles in life” must be fought alone (336). Once again, Mrs. Baroda remains alone with her thoughts and desires; she truly believes that she must keep everything a secret so she can remain a sensible and respectable woman. In order to suppress her sensual desires for Gouvernail and maintain her title, Mrs. Baroda leaves her home and stays in the city, where she can ignore her longing for her husband’s friend. She must continue to change and adapt her actions in order to keep her desires restrained.

Some may argue that the end of Chopin’s “A Respectable Woman” suggests that Mrs. Baroda has changed her conscious decision of conformity to pursuance of her desires. The closing lines, which read: “Oh […] I have overcome everything! you will see. This time I shall be very nice to him,” have a mischievous connotation to them (336). However, this quotation lacks a narrative insight into Mrs. Baroda’s desires. The story largely focuses on Mrs. Baroda’s actions toward and reactions to Gouvernail, which then provide insight into the relationship between her desires and her conscious actions in society. We learn of Mrs. Baroda’s wish to touch Gouvernail’s face and we understand how this desire is suppressed by a strong tendency to remain peaceful with her social duties—the glimpse into her secret desires is the foundation to understanding her conscious decision to follow her role in society rather than her true feelings. However, when we read the closing lines of the story, we lack this important, personal vantage
point—the perspective that leads us through Mrs. Baroda’s secret thoughts and desires. If Mrs. Baroda chooses to forgo her obligations and ultimately embrace her true desires, then the closing lines of the story would require further insight into Mrs. Baroda’s yearnings in that specific moment. The lines, “Oh […] I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him” do not provide any specific insight into Mrs. Baroda’s truest desires; they are only words that she says to Gaston (336). Furthermore, Mrs. Baroda’s intentions remain hidden due to the context of the story; she is simply assuring her worried husband (who wishes that she treat Gouvernail with kindness) that she will be “very nice to him” (336). Because these lines lack a connection to Mrs. Baroda’s desires and align with her husband’s wishes, we cannot surely know whether or not she truly overcame her desire and aims to please her husband or if she plans to embark on the journey of fulfilling desire.

Mrs. Baroda may have decided to pursue her desires rather than her social title at the end of “A Respectable Woman,” but this possibility does not alter her conscious decision to conform throughout the story. The narrative portrays a woman who recognizes desires, suppresses these desires because they do not fit with societal expectations, and struggles to subdue these innate yearnings. Mrs. Baroda, a woman who remains attached to her husband’s name for the entirety of the story, is a prime example of a nineteenth-century woman who experiences conflict between her sexual desires and her wish to conform to the title of “respectable woman.”

“The Kiss”

The portrayal of societal conformities and female desires in “The Kiss” is much different from “A Respectable Woman,” though each story depicts a woman who suppresses her desires and conforms to societal expectations. A need guides Mrs. Baroda’s subdual of longings to
conform to a certain title; “The Kiss” presents Nathalie consciously conforming to the limitations placed upon nineteenth-century women.

Nathalie is a young, “handsome,” southern woman who desires to marry Brantain because of his substantial wealth (Chopin, “The Kiss” 379). This short story focuses on Nathalie’s actions and her reactions to the reality around her—an attempt to survive her situation in the comfort of societal expectation, rather than through the risk of her desires. Nathalie’s thoughts and desires are displayed as we learn of her true feelings toward Brantain:

She knew that he [Brantain] loved her—a frank, blustering fellow without guile enough to conceal his feelings, and no desire to do so [...] The rather insignificant and unattractive Brantain was enormously rich; and she liked and required the entourage which wealth could give her. (Chopin, “The Kiss” 379)

Besides the unflattering description of Brantain, this excerpt of narrative reveals a glimpse into one of Nathalie’s desires: wealth. But this requirement for wealth does not elicit a quest to break social conformities. Nathalie recognizes this desire for wealth and understands that she must marry the “insignificant and unattractive” Brantain in order to fulfill this desire, thereby fulfilling the societal duty to marry, and to marry wealthily (379). But Nathalie’s description of Brantain suggests a different longing—one for beauty and significance in her partner—that he cannot fulfill. Though Nathalie fulfills the need for wealth in her marriage to Brantain, she lacks a sexual, and meaningful, connection with her partner. With this paradoxical situation, we gather introspect into an unmet desire of sexual longing within Nathalie.

Nathalie symbolizes a woman who accesses shadows of her yearnings through societally approved means. Rather than being a woman who dreams of monetary freedom and separation from the patriarchy—a problem faced by nineteenth-century, American women—Nathalie
attains monetary wealth through the societal conformity of marriage. Her consciousness presents no other outlet for her desires other than marrying the “insignificant” and “unattractive” Brantain. Though her marriage will be loveless, her pockets will be full, and that is enough for Nathalie.

After an unexpected kiss from Nathalie’s intimate acquaintance Harvy, in the presence of Brantain, Nathalie overcomes the tension with the latter and wins his forgiveness, which results in their marriage. At the wedding, Harvy—the symbol of sensual desire—says to Nathalie: “your husband…has sent me over to kiss you” (Chopin, “The Kiss” 381). When she hears this, Nathalie feels like a chess player who, by the clever handling of his pieces, sees the game taking the course intended. Her eyes were bright and tender with a smile as they glanced up into his [Harvy’s]; and her lips looked hungry for the kiss which they invited. (Chopin, “The Kiss” 381)

In this moment in the narrative, our previous glimpse of Nathalie’s desire for sexual longing becomes valid. Nathalie is “hungry” for Harvy’s kiss, a longing that Brantain cannot fulfill, a need that even wealth cannot solve. However, Nathalie’s sexual desire is never fulfilled, for Harvy says that he will not kiss her because he has “stopped kissing women” (381). Once Harvy makes this claim, Nathalie does not attempt to pursue her sensual desire further. She immediately conforms her mental awareness to this new information and does not attempt to pursue the yearning any further. She simply reminds herself that “she had Brantain and his million left” and that “a person can’t have everything in this world; and it was a little unreasonable for her to expect it” (381). Nathalie buries her desire for sexual intimacy by instead following social norms, and even convinces herself that having these desires is unreasonable in her society.
Nathalie represents a category of women who long for the wealth of the American Dream, but who cannot attain this monetary Dream without a husband. Nathalie desires wealth and prosperity, but does not dare to reach this goal on her own—she looks instead to Brantain, a man whom she is not sexually attracted, in order to live comfortably. And so, Nathalie lives with great wealth, Brantain as her husband, and a suppressed desire for sexual fulfillment—but at least she fits into societal expectations.

“The Unexpected”

In “The Unexpected,” Chopin portrays Dorothea as madly in love with her soon-to-be husband Randall. The two are forced to separate for a season, which causes the couple much grief (Chopin, “The Unexpected” 458). When a letter informs Dorothea of Randall’s sickness and how he will return to her before he spends “a season in the south,” Dorothea reads the letter “almost to tatters” due to her anticipation (Chopin, “The Unexpected” 459). Knowing that she would be in shock at his disposition and physical health, Dorothea remains in a state of “anticipation, a sensuous fever of expectancy” until Randall’s arrival (459). In these moments, Dorothea is a paradigmatic example of a devout lover, a woman who has not experienced any impulses (as far as we know) apart from those approved by society.

Once reunited with the sickly Randall, Dorothea instantly feels repulsion and an impulse that does not align with either her past feelings for Randall or the expectations of society. Dorothea looks as though she has seen an apparition—clearly appalled by her lover’s appearance and her changed feelings (459). The young woman begins to think about her lover’s “hideous transformation” and whether or not her contemplation of him is a “devilish transformation” itself
Dorothea finds that her love for Randall is “shuddering, shrinking, shriveling” as she looks at him (459). These thoughts are the first indication of Dorothea’s changed desires.

When the sick Randall proposes to her, Dorothea declines with a tentative “you will come back well and strong; it will be time enough then” (460). She internally denies any validity in this claim, by thinking “never, never, never!” (460). The discrepancy between Dorothea’s thoughts and actions demonstrate how she consciously conforms to her societal expectations and suppresses her repulsion for her lover. Though she momentarily declines Randall’s proposal—a step toward pursuing her desires—Dorothea refuses to deny the proposal completely and instead simply pushes it to a later time. Dorothea’s actions are grounded in societal anticipation; she is expected to love Randall through sickness and health, but the sight of him is repulsive. Attempting to conform to her expectations while still yielding to her desires, Dorothea simply pushes the proposal to a time when Randall is “back well and strong” (460).

One can argue that Dorothea is finding a balance between pursuing her desires and conforming to expectations as she denies Randall’s proposal, but we soon see that Dorothea cannot balance this relationship between self-desire and societal duties. As soon as Randall’s carriage leaves her presence, Dorothea finds herself glad,

there was no one present to compel her to speak. She stayed at the window dazed, looking fixedly at the spot where the carriage had stood. A clock on the mantel striking the hour finally roused her, and she realized that there would soon be people appearing whom she would be forced to face and speak to. (Chopin, “The Unexpected” 460)

After denying Randall’s proposal, Dorothea becomes increasingly worried with the thought of speaking to others—she worries that her secret thoughts will become evident to her social circle.
This event would suggest either an imbalanced relationship or Dorothea’s belief that her desire cannot function with her reality of obligation.

Dorothea’s response to her paranoia is to avoid the situation and flee from the house; she runs to a place with “no human habitation” (Chopin, “The Unexpected” 460). In this human-free, and thus society-free, environment, Dorothea is able to voice thoughts without the watchful eye of society. Once completely alone and isolated she says, “Never! [...] not for all his thousands! Never, never! Not for millions!” (Chopin, “The Unexpected” 461). Dorothea admits her deepest thoughts, but only once she is safely outside the confines of society. Despite the fact that Dorothea is far removed from society, she is only able to voice her thoughts as a meek whisper. This whisper may give way to a plethora of strong desires, but based on Dorothea’s story thus far, we can assume that this whisper is the only vocal recognition of her innate desires. Once Dorothea returns to the realm of society, she will most likely suffer through the suppression of her true wishes and the conformation to her societal obligations. If and when Dorothea reenters society, she will, based on the information in the story, return back to her typical pattern: bowing to society’s expectations. Dorothea has not stopped worrying about her situation and how she must express it to others—she has merely momentarily escaped it. And since this escape route is one that neglects rather than overcomes, Dorothea will reenter her society the same individual she left—one who does as she is told.

To a twenty-first century reader, Mrs. Baroda, Nathalie, and Dorothea may appear weak and frustrating as they conform to their expectations rather than their innate desires. But these qualities are not ones that Kate Chopin would necessarily want associated with her characters. In the essay, “Kate Chopin and the Dream of Female Selfhood,” Barbara C. Ewell explains that Kate Chopin’s “writing was a means of exploring and articulating what she saw—life—
particularly the life of women and their struggles to achieve selfhood” (Ewell 159). In actuality, Mrs. Baroda, Nathalie, and Dorothea represent a large subset of Southern women who were too scared, intimidated, and oppressed by their patriarchal society to truly have the ability to flourish in their innate thoughts and desires.

Mrs. Baroda represents Southern women who, seemingly happy in their marriage, experience lustful thoughts and hopes that cannot be shared with anyone. Nathalie represents the women who desire the American Dream of earning wealth, but can only attain this monetary goal through a loveless marriage rather than through working and marrying for love. Dorothea represents women who become so encompassed in social expectations that they become lost and scared when faced with desires that do not align with societal conformities. What Chopin demonstrates in these three stories is the dichotomy between the expected nature of the female and the actual nature of the female. Though these characters represent an array of women-types, each one suppresses her desires and instead obeys her expectancies laid out by society. Furthermore, these three women experience difficulties in their decision to conform to society. Though they remain peaceful with society, each woman suffers an internal conflict as she resists her desires and pretends to be someone she is not.

After analyzing three characters that conform to expectations rather than pursuing their desires, we can now turn to those Chopin characters that embrace their yearnings regardless of society’s expectations. This type of character dreams of a freedom divergent from the patriarchal society; and like the women who conform to society, experience great difficulties with their choice to pursue their desires.
“A Pair of Silk Stockings”

In “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” Chopin portrays Mrs. Sommers as a woman who lives, thinks, and breathes for her family—the ideal nineteenth-century wife and mother. Mrs. Sommers appears to suppress her desires and conform to her social obligations, just like Mrs. Baroda, Nathalie, and Dorothea. However, once we start to ease our way into Mrs. Sommers’ thoughts and consciousness, we learn that she does not consciously conform to her societal expectations, but rather pursues her own desires.

Upon finding fifteen dollars, Mrs. Sommers begins thinking of ways to best use and conserve her small and unexpected treasure. Her original plan is to spend the money on clothing for her children. But this plan soon shifts as Mrs. Sommers enters the department store. Rather than using the fifteen dollars for the “proper and judicious” use of taking care of her children, Mrs. Sommers starts to marvel at a pair of silk stockings (Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings” 500). After purchasing the luxury item, Mrs. Sommers “[does] not move in the direction of the bargain counter”—she has made the decision to neglect her reality and obligation to clothe her children, and instead pursues the different, more desire-driven world of society (Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings” 502).

Mrs. Sommers validates her shopping experience as “a rest from the laborious and fatiguing function” (perhaps motherhood), which allows her to abandon “herself to the mechanical impulses that directed her actions and freed her responsibility” (502). This moment is crucial for Mrs. Sommers. She begins to neglect her specific, societal duties in exchange for a strong yearning to do things the way she wishes to do them. Though she is still participating in
society, Mrs. Sommers does so in a way that is inappropriate for women of her rank and status. She ultimately indulges in selfish desire rather than focusing on her responsibility as a mother.

The more money she spends on herself, the further Mrs. Sommers withdraws from the responsible mother she was at the beginning of the story. Mrs. Sommers’ own self-awareness as a person functioning within the world has transformed from one that conforms to societal obligations (forgetting her riches of the past and focusing on the needs of her family) to one that enjoys the freedoms of selfishness, money, and self-indulgence. The moment Mrs. Sommers turns away from the bargain counter, she consciously turns away from her responsibilities as a mother.

However, by the end of her day, when she is out of money, Mrs. Sommers feels as if “a dream [has] ended” (504). Her fanciful escape from reality must come to an end with her money. At the conclusion of this dream of desires, on her way home from her day of shopping, Mrs. Sommers has a “poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever” (504). She felt the desire for freedom, experienced a small piece of that freedom, and now consciously dreams of freedom while ignoring her motherly duties. Consequently, Mrs. Sommers must exit her momentary dream and reenter her true reality as a mother of lower class at the end of the day. Mrs. Sommers can return without much difficulty because her ideological pursuance of desires hinges on the realistic monetary limit she has to spend. Once this limit is met, Mrs. Sommers understands that she must awaken from this dream and return to reality. Though her consequences are not as severe (especially when compared to the consequences of other Chopin characters such as Edna Pontellier and Louise Mallard), Mrs. Sommers still faces an unwelcomed end-result: returning to a reality that does not recognize or care for her desires.
Though her dream has ended, Mrs. Sommers still possess all of the goods she purchased throughout the day; as physical symbols of her brief venture into freedom, the frivolities will constantly remind her of that momentary freedom from obligation. Mrs. Sommers spends her day dancing through a dream of ideals, but when this dream ends she is left with the lingering reminders of purchased goods and fond memories. As Mrs. Sommers wishes for her train to never stop, readers are left in the ambiguity of whether she will continue to pursue newfound desires or dejectedly submit to her societal obligations.

“The Story of an Hour”

Like Mrs. Sommers, the main female character within “The Story of an Hour” also dreams of freedom and struggles from the decision. In the beginning of the story, Louise Mallard is defined solely by her marriage to Brently Mallard and her “heart trouble” (Chopin “The Story of an Hour” 352). When she hears of her husband’s death, Louise leaves the company of Josephine, her sister, and Richards, her husband’s friend, and goes upstairs to her room. Once in her bedroom, Louise begins to recognize and voice her newfound independence. However, when Louise finally rejoins Richards and Josephine downstairs, Brently—apparently very much alive—unexpectedly walks into the house. Louise immediately dies when she sees her husband alive.

On hearing of her husband’s (Brently’s) death, Louise undergoes a transformation of consciousness—one that begins to focus on personal desires and the freedom that comes from being a widow. Mary Papke reinforces this idea in her book, *Verging on the Abyss: the social fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*, when she explains that “The Story of an Hour […]
analyzes that moment in a woman’s life when the boundaries of the accepted everyday world are suddenly shattered and the process of self-consciousness begins” (Papke 62). From further analysis, we can understand that Louise’s room functions as the place where “the process of self-consciousness begins” (62).

Though her room functions as a space outside the realm of social expectations and as a place where she can process her thoughts, Louise spends her first moments alone focusing solely on her surroundings. During this time, Louise is described as having “a dull stare in her eyes” that “was not a glance of reflection” but one that “indicated a suspension of intelligent thought” (Chopin, “The Story of an Hour,” 353). This suspension of thought, when viewed considering the two categories of the Chopin female character, symbolizes the transition from one who conforms to expectations (or in Papke’s words, the boundaries of the accepted everyday world) to one who pursues innate desires and impulses (Papke’s self-consciousness). Louise feels “something coming to her,” and she waits for it “fearfully” (353). As a woman who had previously never experienced this change in consciousness, Louise struggles to name this thing that is coming to her; as a result, she attempts to “beat it back” (353). Once Louise abandons herself and allows this thing to overtake her, she utters the words “free, free, free!” (353). In this moment, Louise stops conforming to societal expectations as a wife and starts to focus on pursuing her desire for freedom.

This transitory moment is much more pronounced than Mrs. Sommers’ shift to freedom-driven consciousness (or a consciousness that pursues desires rather than obligation), not because Louise desires freedom more, but rather because her ability to experience freedom in society is much more realistic than Mrs. Sommers’ ability. Louise, unlike Mrs. Sommers, has no children.
and has a dead husband (or so she thinks); freedom is more long-term and tangible for Louise than it is for Mrs. Sommers.5

Immediately following this recognition of her freedom to pursue desires, elements of Louise’s physical demeanor change: her eyes stay “keen and bright,” and “her pulses beat fast […] the coursing blood warmed and relaxed her body” (353). The once dull, vacant eyes now show a certain vivacity that was previously absent. Similarly, Louise’s afflicted heart issues seem to counter the description of her now strong pulse and coursing blood. In a way, Louise’s pre-existing physical ailments can represent oppression—an element of unhappiness, a lack of freedom, and a subsequent suppression of desires. Her previously dull eyes symbolize her pessimistic outlook on life. Similarly, Louise’s heart trouble represents a suppression of her true and innate desires. Now, with the recognition of her current freedom and now attainable desires, Louise’s eyes glimmer with hope; her heart beats with a strong pulse.

After her physical improvements are accounted for, Kate Chopin directs us to Louise’s yearning for self-sufficiency by naming the actual thoughts that provoke desires. Louise’s desire for freedom remains relatively broad. She describes her life as “a long procession of years that would belong to her absolutely” (353). With no husband or children, Louise is given the advantage of owning property, establishing an income, and escaping a responsibility for or connected to children. Her life, as she pictures it, is one that solely belongs to her.

Mrs. Mallard’s desires continue to grow in strength as she revels in the fact that “she would live for herself” and that “there would be no powerful will bending hers” (353). While in her dreams of freedom and pursuance of desires, Louise is perpetually aware of her relation to

5 This idea originates from the roles of women in the late nineteenth century. When a woman became a widow, she was suddenly granted the rights to own land, manage finances, and remain self-sufficient (this is something Chopin experienced when she became a widow in 1883). Because Louise Mallard has no children and believes she is a widow, two prospects that Mrs. Sommers still has, she finds that her freedom has grown exponentially.
the world around her. She imagines her freed position in the physical world as she dismisses any “powerful will” that so often bent her will in the past, and instead sees herself as “body and soul free,” meaning that she expects freedom both physically and mentally (354). We can visualize Louise’s animosity toward her past social obligations as she descends the steps of self-consciousness back to reality. In this moment, Louise has a “feverish triumph in her eyes” and carries “herself…like a goddess of Victory” (354). Louise Mallard’s mental awareness of her relation with the world imparts victory, freedom, and independence despite the past expectations and oppressive wills, including her husband’s, she once faced.

But standing at the bottom of the steps, where she left him, is Richards, a physical embodiment of the patriarchal world to which Louise must return. Before we are able to learn how society responds to Louise’s refusal to conform to her societal expectations, the story’s focus is shifted to the door: Brently Mallard enters, and Louise dies. Referencing Louise’s death, Mary Papke comments that “Chopin’s analysis of womanhood ideology and quest for self here takes on a darker hue” (Papke 64). Louise’s freedom is founded on the belief that her husband is dead, but when she sees her husband alive, she drops dead. Louise’s newfound freedom is completely lost and remains unknown as the doctors say that she “died of heart disease—of the joy that kills” (354).

Louise Mallard’s story is tragic when we consider how close the oppressed woman was to actualizing her desires in reality. When we reflect on Louise’s desires, we can begin to understand how her desires are contingent on ideals. Her room, a symbolic realm that separates self from reality, is the place where Louise dreams of these ideal desires. She wholly believes that her newfound self-consciousness can keep the wills of others at bay. This desire to be free from the willpower of others is an ideal concept, and the ability to actualize this desire is simply
impossible outside Louise’s room. But Louise, tragically, does not grasp this concept so she takes these ideals, ties them up, and readies them for the transfer into her reality.

Consumed with the ideals of her desires, Louise, even if given the chance, could not adjust her desires to the reality around her. She longs for a life where no will bends her own—a challenging and impossible desire that cannot exist even among the most freed individuals. This idealistic desire for unlimited freedom consequently leads to her inability to handle the unexpected elements of society, namely Brently’s literal reentrance into her life. The “goddess of Victory” has rooted herself in ideals of unaltered, impenetrable will, and the ideology that she can exercise her desires freely and forcefully in society. With these strong aspirations, Louise is unable to function anywhere but within her own realm of autonomy.

“The Story of An Hour” was originally published as “The Dream of An Hour.” With its strong implications of the idealism of women’s rights, we can see how the original title justly frames the work as a whole. Louise Mallard, ready to pursue her innate desires of freedom, free will, and an altered presence in society, is so deeply rooted in her ideals that she can no longer function in reality. Her death is a sad moment in the story, but signifies the danger in living through ideologies rather than through a realistic lens. Similar to Louise Mallard’s tale of freedom lies Kate Chopin’s powerful novel of a woman with ideal desires: The Awakening.

The Awakening

Many people who read this brilliant novel find themselves consumed with Edna Pontellier’s sexual promiscuities, and fail to interpret them as Edna’s refusal to conform to society’s expectations. Instead, we can see these sexual acts as Edna pursuing her desires despite societal norms. While sexuality and the freedom that comes with it is a main component to
Edna’s pursuance of her desires in society, it cannot be treated as her single and only desire. Like Louise Mallard, Edna Pontellier desires to break the obligations of her society while pursuing her ultimate desire: freedom.

Early in *The Awakening*, Edna reflects on a time when “the face of a great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses” (Chopin, *The Awakening*, 898). When alone, Edna kisses the portrait of the tragedian, linking her imagination and desires with sexual ones (898). But this romantic fantasy masks the deeper context of Edna’s desires: Edna “cherishes” the “sinister reflection” that “anyone may possess the portrait of a tragedian without exciting suspicion or comment,” signifying a joy that comes from no one knowing her true acts (898). Edna is just as excited by the thought that society has no idea of her romantic fantasies with the tragedian as she is with the fantasies themselves.

The tragedian, trapped in the confines of a glass frame, has no control over Edna. This lack of power stems from both his physical representation (a flat portrait, merely a representation of a male) and the tragedian’s inability to speak or think. Edna is able to impose ideologies and thoughts on the tragedian without punishment or reciprocation. Furthermore, the tragedian is historically far removed from the social expectations and patriarchal influences of America in the nineteenth century; as an inanimate object, the portrait has absolutely no connection to the patriarchal influences of Edna’s world. Edna’s secret intimacy with the tragedian coupled with the tragedian’s physical and historical separation from the males of late nineteenth-century America, allows her to express a desire for independence and freedom completely separate from her own world.

Like her affection for the tragedian, the story Edna tells at a dinner party is a manifestation of Edna’s conscious desire for freedom. This story is about a woman and her lover
who paddle away from society and never come back, within which Chopin gives us two clues that Edna’s story is not just any story, but an expression of her desires for freedom (Chopin, *The Awakening*, 953). First we can consider Edna’s attention to the woman figure. The story is about “a woman who paddled away with her lover” and not about a man who paddled away with his lover.6 This minute detail places emphasis on the woman’s role in the plot—she is the subject that the verb connects to; she is given the action in the piece.

We are further clued into Edna’s longing for independence by the setting of the story. After paddling away, the couple is “lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this day” (953). To Edna, this story conveys a successful escape, not a tragedy of lost lovers. The couple seizes the opportunity to leave their lives and the moral expectations of society for a life that comprises solely of their love and freedom. This story emphasizes Edna’s desires for a similar freedom from social obligations.

Interestingly, Edna’s tale is not the only one told at the dinner party. The Doctor’s anecdote precedes Edna’s—he tells of “the waning of a woman’s love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest” (953). Of course, the story fails to impress Edna, a woman who desires an exploration of “new channels” without returning to her past life. Edna’s tale, when juxtaposed with the Doctor’s, actively works to diminish the necessity of societal expectations and augments the innate freedoms available to females.

Edna continues to associate herself with freedom. Her husband, Léonce Pontellier, tells the Doctor that “she’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of

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6 I emphasize “woman” because of its importance to Edna’s story. Edna gives her woman character full authority over her actions and merely places the woman’s lover as a separate, non-authoritative being. Furthermore, the lover is given no other title other than “her lover,” and this limited title mirrors women’s titles in Edna’s society: lover, widow, wife, mother, daughter. In other words, Edna is reversing the roles of women and men in this story by giving full power to the woman and reducing the man to his title relative.
women” (948). Léonce’s words clearly depict Edna’s desire to express her secret dreams of freedom. Alongside these desires for independence, Edna begins to experience strong tension between her internal self and her social façade, like “one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (912).

Edna’s expression of freedom within her physical world is one that often manifests itself in her affairs with Alcée Arobin, the acclaimed womanizer, and Robert Lebrun, the man whom Edna truly loves. However, these sexual desires and acts are only a small portion of Edna’s quest for independence. Her journey for freedom actually begins with minor interruptions of her social life. Edna “has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, thrown over all acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark” (948). None of these responsibilities pertain to Edna’s sexual desires, but all of them focus on Edna’s desire for independence and freedom. The twenty-eight-year-old woman begins her journey to independence by neglecting her social responsibilities. In doing so, Edna distances herself from society—attempting to eliminate any pre-existing expectations of her behavior.

Soon after neglecting her societal affairs, Edna takes her freedom a step further. She begins to disentangle herself from her husband by involving herself with Alcée Arobin. This relationship, however, is not the main manifestation of Edna’s pursued desires. Edna becomes more serious in her art, explaining to the mysterious artist, Mademoiselle Reisz that she “has sold a great many [paintings] through Laidpore” (963). With the income of her artwork coupled with money she earned from gambling on the races, Edna discovers that she “can live in a tiny house for little or nothing, with one servant” (963). Not only has Edna distanced herself from the confines of societal obligations, but she has also found a way to become independent from her husband’s home and money. These steps are pursued not because of her previous affair with
Alcée Arobin, but for the sake of personal, independent freedom. Edna tells Reisz that she will “like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence” (963). Further, Edna meditates on the prospect of living in the small house and selling her artwork, eventually coming to the conclusion that she will “never again… belong to another than herself” (963).

But the question of Robert’s influence over Edna’s actions still remains. This love interest reenters Edna’s life once she establishes herself as an independent woman. Upon discussing their dreams with one another, Edna soon realizes that Robert’s desires for their relationship are much different from her own; Robert admits to having “A wild dream of [Edna] some way becoming [his] wife,” recalling tales of “men who had set their wives free” (992). When she hears this dream, Edna responds,

> You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I would laugh at both of you. (992)

Though Edna loves Robert, she is not willing to relinquish her freedom in order to be with him. She is not willing to accept the societal conformity of marriage and postpone the pursuit of her independence for Robert. Edna wishes to love Robert while simultaneously remaining separate and free from him. When she finds that she cannot have both Robert and freedom, Edna chooses her liberty over love.

Edna’s longings for independence reach an unobtainable limit: they are hinged on the ideological premise of absolute free will, which continues to develop and grow throughout the novel. Per Seyersted, author of *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, expands on this concept when he writes,
As Mrs. Pontellier develops, she accepts nothing that hinders her from exerting her own free will and making her own rules; she wants to be an absolute and create her own destiny [...] she is sure she is right rather than society. (Seyersted 145)

Edna’s desires require an ideological foundation within the realm of reality. But this ideal relationship between self and world creates a toxic environment for Edna. She admits, “I don’t want anything but my own way,” a lofty, ideal desire that requires trampling “upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others” (996). Her desires surpass the realm of freedom and enter an intangible, impossible realm where only Edna’s will exists. At some point—perhaps during Robert’s goodbye or Adele’s plea to “think of the children”—Edna realizes that she cannot have the full spectrum of freedom that she desires (995). This realization creates a very real consequence for Edna—she will not and cannot live in a society that does not support her absolute ideals. Thus, her entrance into the ocean and the swim away from her societally encompassed life is a representation of Edna’s undying desires and escape from society.

Kate Chopin and The Women’s Suffrage Movement

Now that we understand two ways in which Chopin demonstrates women’s response to their desires, we can turn to Kate Chopin’s personal stance on the matter of the Women’s Rights Movement. To say that the opposition between Kate Chopin and the Women’s Suffrage Movement was about conflicting ideologies would be to miss the point—her issue with the Movement was the premise of ideological thought itself. As a woman whose "view of life was to a large extent independent of such important currents of thought as idealism, socio-economic determinism, and even religion,” Kate Chopin rooted her writing and thoughts in a philosophy close to realism (Seyersted 147). Having a strong tie to realism, Chopin is thought to have
believed that “new forms might emerge only from the individual’s struggles” and “not from social reform” (Bender, 105). Linking these two considerations—her connection to realism and the emergence of new forms—we can begin to understand why the writer did not associate herself with the Woman’s Suffrage Movement. Mary Papke reminds us that “for Chopin, there is never an easy resolution to woman’s quest for self and fulfillment of desire” (66). As a Movement that heavily looked to ideals for answers, Chopin most likely saw the Women’s Suffrage campaign as, to borrow a modern colloquialism, an attempt to patch a bullet wound with a Band-Aid.

The gap between Kate Chopin and nineteenth-century feminists and activists of the Women’s Suffrage Movement appears to expand as we remind ourselves of Chopin’s philosophies and positions during the era. But why do we, as twenty-first century readers and thinkers, associate the writer with feminist tendencies of the Movement? The answer is simple: we look to Chopin’s depiction of the secret thoughts of women and understand the discrepancies between these desires and social expectations. Chopin unveils a consciousness of her female characters that confronts the patriarchy—a seemingly feministic trait.

We readers cannot forget that though Chopin could “focus very sharply on the […] fundamental problem of what it means to be a woman […] in the patriarchy,” she did not write for feminist reasons (Seyersted 138). Instead, we must remember literary influences such as Maupassant and the example he provided to Chopin for writing about the true lives of individuals. Chopin was not a political activist; she was merely writing about the lives of women in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, with the Women’s Suffrage Movement constantly challenging the patriarchal regime of the century, some of Chopin’s female characters reflect women who thought about these ideologies and about their lack of rights in society. Though
these women characters differ in thought and personality, they all deal with desires that differ from societal expectations.

In short, those narratives that specifically focus on female perspective hone in on the discrepancy between the secretive but truthful thoughts of women and their roles in nineteenth-century American society. As Chopin reveals and explores these female characters’ lives, she provides a varied perspective of realistic female thought during the nineteenth century. Chopin’s depictions can be categorized in many ways, but an interesting typography is the dual categorization of women and their relationship within society—their decision to either act on personal desires or to suppress them. Though many of these characters display feminist tendencies, and the themes of the stories largely reflect issues with the patriarchy’s treatment of women, we must remember that Chopin advocates for neither the demise nor the success of either the woman who pursues her desires or the one who suppresses her desires. Instead, Kate Chopin’s works display issues with the ideological pursuits of the Woman’s Movement and the quiet submission to society’s expectations.
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