

Michael Worton

OUT OF PLACE, OUT OF TIME? READING KATE CHOPIN THROUGH CONTEMPORARY FRENCH FEMINIST THEORY

Introduction

Much critical work on Kate Chopin has focused on the historical, geographical and personal contexts to her writings, illuminating her work by reference to social practices in Louisiana, the world of the Creoles, the myths of the Bayou and her own upbringing and adult experiences. Of particular interest to critics has been the issue of literary influence, with much attention being paid to French writers. Contemporary reviewers compared her unfavourably with such minor French writers as Paul Bourget,¹ and Willa Cather's labelling of *The Awakening* as 'a Creole Bovary'² continues to dominate much critical thinking, even though Edna Pontellier is very different than Emma Bovary and Chopin's use of descriptive language and of direct and indirect speech is very different from that of Flaubert. More recently, Per Seyersted asserts that Chopin was influenced by 'the 'feminism of Madame de Staël and George Sand and by the realism of Flaubert and Maupassant,³ and Eliane Jasenas emphasises the importance of Flaubert and Maupassant and asserts Baudelaire as an important influence.⁴ Chopin herself includes references to French writers, with the result that suppositions are made about their influence on her. However, the fact, that for instance, she refers in *The Awakening* to a novel by Daudet (890) is in itself not directly meaningful, since it could be either one of his charming stories of southern France, a Zolaesque novel such as *Fromont Jeune et Risler aîné*, or *Sapho*, which anatomizes bohemian French society.

This essay represents a shift from a focus on the author's readings and influences to a reader-centred approach, wherein Chopin's work is read through the prism of contemporary French feminist theory. While this may seem wilfully anachronistic, readings that centre on 'influences' all too often privilege the critic's rather than the writer's readings (for which there is little precise evidence). and therefore are spuriously speculative, however plausible they may initially seem. What interests me in Chopin's work is the fluidity of her thinking and the kaleidoscopic nature of her presentations of life, be it that of urbane Creole society, or of the Bayou folk. My metaphors of 'fluidity' and 'the kaleidoscopic' may seem too harsh a juxtaposition, too radical a mixing of metaphors. However, for me, Chopin's work is characterised by both, in that she writes in sensuous prose and foregrounds thematics of birdsong and seas, whilst also swinging between standard American English and jagged representations of the language of the Cajuns, Creoles and Acadians in her portrayals of domestic life in different classes and cultures.

Underpinning all her work is a concern with the authenticity of woman's existence and the importance – and the possibility – of choices. She is much more than the author of *The Awakening*, just as she is much more than the author of short stories such as 'Charlie' or 'Bayou Folk'. Her work is less a manifesto of emancipation than a multi-faceted exposition of quests for enduring relationships. Reflecting the tensions and the temptations between

Worton, M. (2008), Reading Kate Chopin Through Contemporary French Feminist Theory' in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*. (Series: Cambridge Companions to Literature). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 105-117. ISBN 9780521709828

insiders and outsiders, between the individual and society, Chopin anatomises relationships in order to foreground the importance of the relational. Indeed, I would argue that in her work, what I call 'relationality' is even more important than the independence, sexuality, or even authenticity of women.

Culturally, women are associated with the home, defining it, but crucially not owning it, as is seen notably in *The Awakening*, where Edna is defined essentially by her relationship with the home and its upkeep and by the raising of children; she is 'a valuable piece of personal property' (882) for her husband Léonce. In 'A Family Affair', Madame Solisainte maintains her despotic authority over her household by keeping the keys to the cupboards and her niece Bosey liberates the household and creates her own future by taking over the keys and thus the management of the house. In 'Regret', Mamzelle Aurélie, an old maid of fifty, discovers the joys of (surrogate) motherhood, after her cook tells her brusquely that she must learn how to 'manage' her neighbour's children that she is temporarily fostering. She learns the joy of caring and, later, the pain of loss when the children go back to their parents, leaving her crying: 'Not softly, as women do. She cried like a man, with sobs that seemed to tear her very soul.' (378).

In most cultures even today, the home is conceived as the locus not only of stability but also of a unifying identity, and at the heart of the home is the woman, and *a fortiori* the mother. Manager of the house, but not head of the household (that role is reserved for the husband and/or father), a woman has no space of her own, in the sense that she has no time for her own thinking, her own growing, her own inwardness, and above all her own selfness.

Simone de Beauvoir famously argued in *The Second Sex* that domestic work is a form of exploitation and of oppression. She asserted that the obligation to undertake or oversee household tasks leads women to constant activity that does not actually produce anything. For her, domestic work simply perpetuates the status quo of women and imprisons them in immanence. On the other hand, men are free to live in movement, in progress, in becoming. In other words, they have transcendence in that they can express and live out their individual subjectivity.⁵ Building on, whilst also critiquing, Beauvoir's work, Irigaray has argued that a woman puts the home at the disposition of the man without actually disposing of it herself, since her role is to manage it but not decide what happens to it: men want women to *be* the place of home without enabling or allowing them fully to inhabit or possess it.⁶ Thus, while the man sets up the family home and the woman runs it, her real task is to reflect the man's identity back to him, maintaining and strengthening the development of his subjectivity at the expense of her own.

This is clearly seen in the case of *The Awakening*, where Mr Pontellier, 'the best husband in the world' (887), cannot understand why Edna does not want simply to behave as all wives should do, notably her friend Madame Adèle Ratignolle, whose 'domestic harmony' is, however, for Edna no more than 'colorless existence' (938). Where Beauvoir is blinkered, and this is not wholly surprising given her own historical context, is in her identification of housework only with immanence. This means that she is – or chooses to be – blind to the household work of maintenance and preservation, which is richly creative and socially cohesive. Indeed, in his seminal 1951 essay 'Building

Dwelling Thinking', Martin Heidegger argued powerfully and poetically that to be a human being is to dwell, and that dwelling is that which defines humanity. For Heidegger it is through building that Man builds a place for himself in the world, an identity, a history. In other words, building is essential for the creation of subjectivity. He identifies two key aspects of building and dwelling: construction and preservation. While Heidegger's essay has been read as privileging construction, I would refute suggestions that building is exclusively male and patriarchal, whereas preservation is or can be female and matriarchal: Heidegger's argument about dwelling is more complex and less narrowly binarist than this. Some feminists define the very idea of house and home as totalising, imperialistic and patriarchal,⁷ and the home can undoubtedly be the site of repetitive drudgery, with socially determined gender roles often a prison-house for women. On the other hand, the home is also the locus of the preservation of the family, and a place of security, privacy – and potentially of individuation and growth. It is also, in all cultures, a real and symbolic place of safety.

In her ongoing creative engagement with, and critique of, Heidegger, Irigaray emphasises that man's need to construct and build is a means of creating himself and the possibility of his own subjectivity – as well as creating for himself the comfort of another maternal home to replace the one he has lost. However, in a radical turn, Irigaray leads us to re-think the temporal relationship between construction and preservation: while the building of the house must come before the preservation of it, woman must precede (and make possible) building and ultimately male subjectivity.⁸ The real question is not who or what precedes whom or what, but why precedence matters so much in the determination of social, societal and individual roles.

For Heidegger himself, building is also an act of gathering, of bringing together disparate objects and surroundings, which have no centre or relationship until they are gathered in and around the building. Contemporary French feminism increasingly recognises the complexity of women's relationship with the home, emphasising that home-making is much more than constructing walls and a roof: it is about furnishing it and personalising it with objects that have, or acquire, meaning. And here the role of the woman, and especially of the mother, is crucial: it is she who creates the nurturing space that her husband and children shall cherish as the primal and symbolically eternal home.⁹ So, Woman can be positioned as Mother and as incarnation of the home or protectiveness, and also as the focus of nostalgia and lost oneness. She has a vital role in the imaginary and symbolic lives of men, yet there is always the danger that whilst fulfilling this role, she nonetheless remains an object of men's fantasies. Edna may be 'the sole object of his [Mr Pontellier's] existence', but he nonetheless finds it 'very discouraging' that she 'evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation' (885). In other words, a woman will be the central focus of a man's thoughts and fantasies only insofar as she is an object of his fantasies and devotes her energies to maintaining and bolstering his subjectivity.

What is interesting in much of Chopin's fiction is the fact that she creates female protagonists who are much more than simple rebels against either materialism or patriarchal oppression. For instance, Edna 'liked money as well as most women' (887), and little Mrs Sommers in 'A Pair of Silk Stockings' 'knew the value of bargains' (501). What is important in many of

the tales is not so much the success or failure of individual women to achieve autonomy, either emotional or financial, but that they start on a journey towards a greater sense of selfness. When Mrs Sommers spends her windfall money on herself and goes to the theatre, she is seized on her way home by 'a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever' (504). She is returning home, but she has also begun to realise that the house belongs to her husband and children and not to her. She has colluded in being the 'spirit of the home' and will undoubtedly continue to play that role, but the seeds of selfness have been sown. Marianne Laronce in 'The Maid of Saint Phillippe' is one of Chopin's most dramatic heroines. Named after the symbol of France and its Revolution, she is ablaze with a fierce sense of independence. Yet the story foregrounds duality and ambiguity, as when, after the death of her father, Marianne is presented as simultaneously alone and not alone, with solitude and sociability intermingling. When Captain Vaudry offers to take her to France and luxury, she replies: 'I have sometimes thought I should like to know what it is that men call luxury; and sometimes have felt that I should like to live in sweet and gentle intercourse with men and women. Yet these have been but fleeting wishes' (122). Like so many of Chopin's women she is interested in material things as well as in emotions and instincts; more significantly even, she has been drawn to the prospect of dialogue with others. While her final decision is a melodramatic commitment to freedom with the Cherokees, the encounter with Vaudry has opened her to greater understanding of difference: this is a victory almost as important as her decision to cling to a romanticised freedom.

Indeed, it is the small triumphs of opening to selfness and otherness that make Chopin's work so important today, rather than the 'momentous' choices, such as Edna's forced suicide, or Marianne's theatrical 'death rather than bondage' (122). Indeed, one could see Chopin's stories as charting in a variety of ways the coming to terms with complexity, which is the beginning of a recognition – and assumption – of selfness that is never unitary but always fluid and shifting. In 'Athénaïse', the eponymous heroine rebels against marriage not because she hates her husband: 'It's jus' being married that I detes' an' despise. I hate being Mrs Cazeau, an' would want to be Athénaïse Miché again' (431). A strong Chopin heroine, she seeks to rebel against the 'social and sacred institution' or marriage (432), even although she realises that it is futile. Her first alternative is memory of 'a blessed life at the convent, at peace' (431). Similarly, Adrienne in 'Lilacs' returns to 'the haven of peace, where her soul was wont to come a refresh itself' in the company of 'pure and simple souls' (355-6). For the wife Athénaïse and the courtesan Adrienne, the convent is a fantasy of peace; it is also a fantasy of sorority, where women can choose enclosure and escape the tyranny of patriarchy and men's projections. However, the convent is never a solution in Chopin's world, because her women do not have the essential ingredient: a true religious vocation. The convent is a fantasy offering the prospect of safety, but a safety from otherness – and the fantasy is essentially one of regression to childhood. Athénaïse and Adrienne need in different ways to 'grow up' and accept the choices they have made and must learn to work at living in complexity – which is not necessarily compromise or defeat.

After running away from home to New Orleans, Athénaïse learns to think seriously about her choice of life, realising that while she had been ready

to embrace the vows of poverty and chastity, the vow of obedience was well nigh impossible for her (442). She finally realises that she loves Cazeau, and wants to return to him of her own volition. When she returns home, it is to begin a true marriage in which she and her husband are happy to be together and to have chosen each other. Athénaïse has learned that she has the right to choose her life; more importantly, she has also learned to choose in reality and in difference. Analogously, Cazeau, whilst experiencing an overwhelming sense of loss after she has fled their home, considered that ‘the loss of self-respect seemed to him too dear a price to pay for a wife’ (438). This is not patriarchy speaking; it is an individual recognising that love can exist only in difference and that difference can exist as true dialogue only when selfness and self-respect exist on both sides.

Motherhood is an important theme in many of Chopin’s stories, notably in *The Awakening*, where Edna scandalises Madame Ratignolle by telling her that ‘she would never sacrifice herself for her children or for anyone’, elaborating ‘I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me’ (929). In this respect, Edna is regarded as strange, even unnatural. Earlier, we learn that: it would have been a difficult matter for Mr Pontellier to ‘define to his own satisfaction or anyone else’s wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children’ (887). A few lines later, the text proclaims ‘In short, Mrs Pontellier was not a mother-woman’ (888). Mother-women are somewhat ironically characterised as ‘women who idolised their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels’ (888), the most perfect embodiment of such women being Adèle Ratignolle. What is interesting in the novel is that motherhood is always perceived and described from an adult point of view. Even when we learn that her sons tend simply to pick themselves up, brush themselves down and go on playing after a fall, rather than rushing in tears to their mother’s arms, this is related from an adult point of view. In other words, motherhood in the novel is always conceived and presented as an institution rather than a relationship. This is brought home forcefully when Edna has to leave Robert just after she has confessed her love for him, in order to attend Adèle’s labour. She attends ‘with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture’ (995), and when bending to kiss her friend goodbye, ‘Adele, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: “Think of the children Edna, oh think of the children! Remember them!” ’ (995). It is, of course, not the children whom she must remember, but the institution of motherhood.

Later, she tries to explain her position to Dr Mandelet: ‘But I don’t want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others – but no matter – still, I shouldn’t want to trample on the little lives (996). This is no monster speaking, simply someone who is trying to understand what she wants and why she wants it so badly. When she asks the doctor not to blame her for anything, it is not because she fears his moral judgement or that of society; rather, she is recognising evermore that she has different attitudes from those of her entourage. In western societies, women who abandon their

children are invariably stigmatised as monstrous or emotionally stunted or inadequate. Society judges such mothers harshly, without allowing them the right to an individuality and identity that emerges from within themselves rather than from their roles as mother/wife-woman. Already in 1977, Julia Kristeva pointed out in 'Stabat Mater' that the Virgin Mary, who for centuries had been the central icon of self-sacrificing motherhood, was becoming less and less appropriate a model for women in the late twentieth century,¹⁰ and, in 1979, in 'Woman's Time',¹¹ she stressed that motherhood is creation in its highest form, an activity which entails being deeply attentive to a child, bonded to it in enveloping gentleness and in a love that is forgetful of the self. However, she stresses that this selfless love should neither necessitate nor imply the sacrifice of the mother's own self, be this emotional, intellectual, or professional. Kristeva proposes a notion of motherhood which is certainly selfless in the love for the child, but which also strengthens the selfness of the mother. This maintenance of selfness is, for Kristeva, to be seen not as a source of guilt, but as a source of creation and creativity in all senses of the term.¹² More recently, Élisabeth Badinter argued that modern women can exercise more choice than Beauvoir ever imagined and that they can now conceive of motherhood as a fundamental part of their lives, which is nonetheless only a part, a parenthesis between their lives before and after motherhood.¹³ Badinter's use of the term 'parenthesis' is to be read not only in temporal but also in emotional and conceptual terms. A mother does not begin and end her motherhood at particular times; rather, the amount of attention she can focus on herself and her own becoming is greater when her children are less dependent on her and she needs to recognise that she has responsibility for defining herself,

When Edna and Adèle argue about self-sacrificing motherhood, the narrator alerts us to the fact that Edna is beginning to understand the reality of difference: 'the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language' (929). And as well as learning about difference, Edna is beginning to learn about selfness.

On the evening when she finally swims out into the sea, she is presented herself like a child: 'That night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realises its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence' (908). This is a strangely inappropriate metaphor to use for someone who is learning to swim, yet this very strangeness draws attention to the issue of motherhood, for in her decisions Edna is like a motherless child with no one to help or guide her, and with no one to share proudly in her journey towards selfness.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva considers the role of the mother in the child's development: 'Toward the mother there is convergence, not only of survival needs but of the first mimetic yearnings. She is the other subject, an object that guarantees my being as subject'.¹⁴ So from the child's point of view as from the husband/father's, the mother is to be an object, and her subjectivity is restricted by the fact that the child wants her to be the guarantor of its subjectivity rather than recognising her as the centre of (an)other subjectivity.

As Edna swims out ever further, again like a child wading through a blue-grass meadow, 'She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body

and soul'; her last thoughts are 'Goodby – because, I love you' (1000). In sense and in syntax this is odd, the comma acting as both bridge and hiatus between justification and statement to herself, leaving the reader to speculate rather than arbitrate on her choice of suicide.

As Adrienne Rich argues in *Of Woman Born*, we need to differentiate between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as a series of individual experiences and practices. It is with the institutional dimension that Chopin mainly engages in her fiction. However, it is interesting to note that she also gives examples of motherhood as creative and reparative, especially when motherhood is an adopted rather than natural role. As already seen, for Mamzelle Aurélie, the elderly spinster of 'Regret', to tend and care for her neighbour's four young children, despite all the disorder they bring, is to learn the joy that comes from mothering as well as the ache of her own loneliness. In 'A Matter of Prejudice', Mme Carambeau lives irritatedly with her widowed daughter Cécile Lalonde and her grandson, tolerating only grudgingly that Gustav be allowed a birthday-party every year. Her own lack of interest as a mother is demonstrated by the fact that she has not spoken for a decade to her son Henri, because he had married an American girl and decided to live in the English-speaking suburbs of New Orleans. During the party, a little girl runs into Mme Carambeau's room and leaps into her lap, throwing her arms around the old lady's neck, and stays there, 'panting and fluttering like a frightened bird' (283). Irritated, Mme Carambeau tries to remove the child, but the little girl does not understand French and stays resting her cheek against the old lady's dress. Realising that the flushed child has a fever coming, she decides to look after the child in her own house until she is well enough to be sent home. Although the child is 'sweet [...] gentle and affectionate' (285), she inevitably cries a lot throughout the night. To this is added the fact that 'Madame in all her varied experience with the sick, had never before nursed so objectionable a character as an American child'. (285). However, she gradually realises that the only 'objectionable' dimension of the child is the fact that she is not Creole and does not speak French, and her prejudices are dispelled by the 'touch of the caressing baby's arms [...] and the feeling of the hot lips when the child kissed her believing herself to be with her mother' (285). The sick child is in fact her son Henri's daughter, and eventually the family rift born out of prejudice is healed due to the therapeutic powers of surrogate motherhood

If surrogate motherhood can liberate from prejudice, in 'Beyond the Bayou', it liberates from personal trauma and emotional scarring. Jacqueline, 'la Folle', a thirty-five year old black woman had been 'frightened literally "out of her senses" in childhood' when the young master on the plantation had staggered into her mother's cabin, 'black with powder and crimson with blood' after being shot in the Civil War (175). Manic in that she refuses to leave the area around her cabin or cross the bayou, La Folle is nonetheless often visited by the children of the young master who now owns the Bellissime estate, and especially by his ten-year old son, Chéri, who one day shoots himself in the leg, close to her cabin. Desperate to save the boy whom she calls '*Mon bébé, mon bébé, mon Chéri*', La Folle realises that, despite 'her fear of the world beyond the bayou, the morbid and insane dread she had been under since childhood' (177), she has only one choice and must wade across the bayou with Chéri in her arms. Her surrogate motherhood drives her

on until she can finally lay the boy in his father's arms. Then suddenly 'the world that had looked red to La Folle, suddenly turned black – like that day she had seen powder and blood' (178). She collapses and awakes only to find herself at home. She recovers quickly and then returns to cross the bayou again to visit the boy she saved. Having made a choice as to who she is and what she loves, she has learned the power of autonomy and selfness and can now, like many of Chopin's heroines, discover and exult in the beauty of the world around her: 'All the world was fair about her, and green and white and blue and silvery shinings had come again instead of that frightful fancy of interminable red!'.¹⁵

In 'Charlie', Charlotte, the seventeen year-old second daughter of an often silent father is a tom-boy, who 'filled the place of that ideal son he had always hoped for, and that had never come' (644). However, after accidentally shooting a young man in the forest, she is sent to a private boarding-school in New Orleans to learn to be a lady and gradually acquires the appropriate social skills. She also develops an infatuation for her accidental victim, and when she discovers that he is in love with her elder sister Julia, she flies into a rage, fulminates against her sister's treachery and tears off on her horse across the country. The mad ride paradoxically soothes her and she experiences shame, regret and 'humiliation such as she had never felt before' (667). This leads her suddenly to grow up: 'The girlish infatuation which had blinded her was swept away in the torrents of a deeper emotion, and left her a woman' (667). After her father is severely maimed in an accident at the sugar mill, Charlie takes the reins of their home, and 'with all the dignity and grace which the term implies, she was mistress of Les Palmiers' (669). She has made a choice and becomes surrogate mother to her younger sisters, the main support of her father and the partner in running the estate of Mr Gus, who has long been in love with her and finally dares to propose to her. Her response is that they should wait, 'since she couldn't leave of dreaming of leaving Dad without a right arm' (669), and also could not leave the twins because 'I have come to be a sort of mother to them instead of a sister, and you see I'd have to wait til they grew up' (669). However this is no refusal masquerading as a deferral. She has learned about herself and about what she can, must and chooses to do. She thus has grown into selfness, as well as into a certain (chosen) selflessness, telling him that 'It seems to me I have always liked you better than anyone, and that I'll keep on liking you more and more!' (669). She has found and chosen her place in the world and knows that she will go on growing.

Chopin's fictional world can appear to be a very hierarchical one. Men are masters of society, the Creoles are superior to the Anglophone Americans', 'old money' families look down on 'new money' families, the land owners (usually) look after their servants well but live in a world above and apart from them. However, in this world, Chopin's women are often learning that relations are more complex and varied than society's traditional vertical power-relations and can be horizontal, fluid, and changing. If awakening is a key theme in much of her work, the nature of the awakening is more subtle and complex than is often recognised, being about coming into a sense of relationality than into strengthened oppositionality: her women are learning about how to engage with the world rather than simply impose themselves as autonomous, self-driven individuals within that world.

Early in *The Awakening*, we find a statement about Edna that applies to many of Chopin's characters: 'In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. [...] But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic and exceedingly disturbing' (893). Edna's emotional journey is one of learning to make connections, as when she suddenly sees the connection between the ocean and a meadow, between swimming and walking (897). This is equally a journey of the discovery of differences, a journey shared by many of Chopin's heroines, albeit in different ways.

Edna's quest is not one 'primarily for sensual experience',¹⁶ nor is she drawn into 'anti-feminism', wherein she has 'accepted a masculinist definition of selfhood', betraying all women as 'she is gradually revealed as a woman who cannot really like or value other women'.¹⁷ Much has been made of the difference between Edna and Adèle. However, the two are united in a sororal friendship that is precisely built on difference: Edna's 'sensuous susceptibility to beauty' (894) draws her to Adèle, who is drawn to Edna because of 'the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd' (894). Their friendship grows mysteriously out of difference – which makes possible a genuine dialogue and sympathy: 'who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love' (894).

In Chopin's world, women have no male other to whom they can relate: the men are usually distant or absent and offer no dialogic otherness, or even the potential for such dialogue. Irigaray argues that 'women almost always privilege the relationship between subjects, [...] the relationship between two', whereas 'man prefers a relationship between the one and the many, between the I-masculine subject and others: people, society, understood as *them* and not as *you*'.¹⁸ Her insistence on relational identity illuminates the reading of Chopin's world, where women struggle with their solitude and where they essentially seek not so much sex or sensuality or even independence, but someone with whom to *dialogue in difference*. This is why Mlle Reisz becomes a privileged interlocutor for her: not only because of her artistry as a pianist, but especially because she makes Edna think – and think differently.

A counter-example can be found in the ironic 'At Chênrière Caminada', where, when Claire Duvigné finally realises that the fisherman Tonie is infatuated with her, 'a feeling of complacency took possession of her with this conviction. There was some softness and sympathy mingled with it' (314). Her sympathy can rise only because he now has some presence for her in his radical difference from all that she is and stands for. Of course, she has no real interest in him and he is left with 'a terrible, and overmastering regret, that he had not clasped her in his arms when they were out there alone, and spring with her into the sea' (315). Plunged into depression, Tonie becomes his bright self once more only when he discovers that Claire has died and can therefore never have suitors or a husband, but is in heaven where 'there is no difference between men. It is with the soul that we approach each other there. Then she will know who has loved her best' (318). In their individual ways, both Tonie and Claire live in the realm of fantasy; they recognise difference in each other, but have no sense of the similarity within difference that is essential to true intersubjectivity. What is lacking in both their emotional

make-up is the sense of what Irigaray calls a 'relationship-to', which is built on the desire for the other as other and on the recognition that s/he will always remain irrevocably different.¹⁹

Irigaray's notion of 'in-direction' between two individuals, of transcendence and mutual respect aids us to understand the frequent failure of Chopin's women to achieve full selfness - because for them there is often no real other. They want to be individual subjects who both desire and are desired in their difference. In Irigaray's terms, they want to be able to say 'I love to you' rather than simply 'I love you'; they want to experience caresses that are awakenings to intersubjectivity and to 'a life different to the arduous everyday' rather than modes of 'ensnarement, possession and submission of the freedom of the other'.²⁰ Yet frequently, they adapt meekly to the role of mother-woman and the pleasures of conjugal life. Yet even here, there are occasional moments of escape, as in 'The Storm', where Calixta finally gives in to her desire for Laballière, then enthusiastically welcomes back her husband and son, while Clarisse Laballière happily agrees to her husband's suggestion that she stay away a month longer, as she can rediscover for a while 'the pleasant freedom of her maiden life': 'devoted as she was to her husband, their intimate conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forego for a while' (596).

Edna and Charlie are important heroines precisely because they come to a sense of selfness through recognising difference in others. In Charlie's case, full union in difference is deferred but promised, as she and Mr Gus, as well as she and her father (and even her sisters) have learned to respect difference and bring it into their lives. As for Edna, she come to understand the nature of the 'soul's slavery' in which she could be imprisoned by her children and her husband, and discovers the way to 'elude' her children (999); more importantly even, she has learned to dialogue in difference with both Adèle and Mlle Reisz. Yet, this is not enough, for she needs more than difference in sorority. She needs difference-in-equality with a man. However, she realises that 'there was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert' (999), and she knows equally that even he will eventually vanish from her thoughts. She is alone, in a solitude that she perceives as absolute, hence her swimming out into oblivion, into fusion with the sea, which for all its seductive sensuality is ultimately the abolition of the possibility of individuation though and selfness in differentiation.

Chopin's tales are very much of their time and place; therein lies their charm. However, as we read her today through various lenses, and especially through that of contemporary French feminist theory, we discover a world that speaks powerfully to us of the difficulties of ever finding selfness, but also of the abiding need to establish it and to discover ourselves in our relations with others.

-
- ¹ See Alice Hall Petry, *Critical Essays*, 58.
- ² See Petry, *Critical Essays*, 14.
- ³ Per Seyersted (ed.), *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, 32.
- ⁴ Se Eliane Jasenas, 'The French Influence in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*', passim.
- ⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 451-2, 470-80.
- ⁶ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 52.
- ⁷ See, for instance, Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Feminist Politics : What's Home Got to Do with It?', and Bonnie Honig, 'Difference, Dilemmas and the Politics of Home'.
- ⁸ See Irigaray, *Ethics*, 52 and 101. For insights into Irigaray's more recent thinking on dwelling spaces, see, for instance, 'How can we live together in a lasting way?', *Key Writings*, 123-133.
- ⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries du repos*, 102 and passim.
- ¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', 160-86.
- ¹¹ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', 188-213. I am grateful to Gill Rye for her insights on motherhood and mothering in contemporary French literature and thought: see her forthcoming book, *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* (forthcoming).
- ¹² Kristeva, 'Women's Time', 206.
- ¹³ Élisabeth Badinter, 'La revanche des mères', 4.
- ¹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 32.
- ¹⁵ This sentence does not appear in the *Complete Works* (1969), but is to be found in Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Other Stories*, 171.
- ¹⁶ Paul Christian Jones, 'A Re-Awakening: Anne Tyler's Postfeminist Edna Pontellier in *Ladder of Years*', 276.
- ¹⁷ Katherine Kearns, 'The Nullification of Edna Pontellier', 76.
- ¹⁸ Irigaray, 'The Wedding Between the Body and Language', *Key Writings*, 13.
- ¹⁹ *ibid*, 17.
- ²⁰ *ibid*, 20.