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The Chopinian Heroine: A Role Model for the Self-Assertion of Women

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"The Chopinian Heroine:
A Role Model for the Self-Assertion of Women"

written by

Heidi Fite

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Thesis Director

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

THE CHOPINIAN HEROINE:
A ROLE MODEL FOR THE SELF-ASSERTION OF WOMEN

SUBMITTED TO
THE HONORS PROGRAM

FOR
SENIOR HONORS THESIS

BY
HEIDI FITE
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**The Chopinian Heroine:
A Role Model for the Self-Assertion of Women**

During the nineteenth century in America, women endured many restraints placed on them by society. These social restraints were often justified in the name of chivalry and the Bible. Fundamentalist religion, with its patriarchal nature and its strict moral code, hampered women's struggle for rights. The religious and social condemnation of divorce forced many women, rather than incurring the chastisement of society by seeking divorce from drunken and worthless husbands, to spend their lives in martyrdom.¹ Most women also resented the limitations the chivalric code imposed on the full development of their minds and personalities. This code of chivalry led to the development of a "cult of domesticity," which taught a woman to aspire to be "a beautiful, self-sacrificing being who made hearth and home her world, and lived only to nurture and inspire her husband and children."² This "cult of domesticity" also involved a set of virtues to be possessed by the ideal woman. The national popular ideal of womanhood--as depicted in sermons, educational tracts, and other prescriptive literature--consisted of the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.³ Together, these

virtues define a prescribed 'feminine nature' that many felt was contrary to woman's true nature. Some held that this prescribed nature was so entrenched as to render true feminine nature indiscernible.⁴

It was into this society that Kate Chopin introduced her writing. In an era repressive to both women and creativity, Kate Chopin became a female writer whose insights made critics agree that she dealt realistically with the situation of women. She distinguished herself from the prevailing romantic literature and developed into a realist, critical of Victorian prudishness and of the limitations placed on women--and women as writers--of her time. The prescribed women's literature of the day portrayed certain stereotypical women: the wife, the sweetheart, the nurturer, the sinner, and the chaste widow.⁵ Kate Chopin created her own heroine--a woman who would not be categorized, would transcend the limits of society, and would realize her true nature. This heroine possessed certain qualities all centered on the theme of self-assertion repressed by an imposing, patriarchal society.

Chopin resented the American literary limitations that suggested that she temper her heroine's quest for self-fulfillment. At first, she found a ready market for and "had notable success with her...Creole stories, which did not offend the Victorian code..."⁶--but that was before magazine editors and

critics realized the powerful statements that she was making with some of her more unusual stories. In 1894, when she began creating stronger, less conventional female characters (Juanita, Mrs. Mallard, Mrs. Baroda) who were tired of familial and social demands, her stories were not always well received. In 1897, she wrote a letter--it was not the first of its kind--to the editor of the Century magazine, informing him that she had "made certain alterations which [he] thought the story required to give it artistic or ethical value," which changes included the softening and tempering of the female's character by her harsh experience.⁷ Chopin sometimes had to revise her stories to suit editors' ethical sensibilities if she wished to publish them. Vogue, which had published many of her less conventional stories, only accepted "The Story of An Hour" (already rejected by the Century and Short Stories) after Chopin's success with Bayou Folk.⁸ "The Maid of St. Phillippe," a story about a young woman who rejects marriage, was rejected by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Century before Short Stories took it in May 1892.⁹ "Miss McEnders," probably because of its satire of the women reformers of that day, took her five years to publish.¹⁰ Chopin never attempted to publish "The Storm," which contains one of the most passionate scenes in all her writing.¹¹ Many ideas expressed in these short stories and embodied in her heroines have a direct correlation to events in her life.

According to the United States census of August 1850, Katherine O'Flaherty was born February 8, 1850. Her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was an "Irish gentleman of prominence and wealth," and her mother, Eliza Faris O'Flaherty, came from a French Creole family whose ancestors were among the founders of St.Louis.¹² Tom and Eliza had married when he was thirty-nine and she was sixteen. It was not common for women in her family to marry at such a young age, and the circumstances warranting this must have been out of the ordinary. According to Emily Toth, a biographer of Kate Chopin, why Eliza married a man twenty-three years her senior is obvious: As the eldest child, she did it to provide for her family. After her father's desertion, Eliza's marriage solved the Faris' desperate need for money.¹³

If Eliza ever regretted the marriage, she left no record; but she must have, on occasion, discussed with Kate the circumstances under which the marriage occurred. The social and financial reasons for her mother's marriage may have influenced Kate's later treatment of marriage in her short stories. Chopin presents marriage as "unnatural," purely a social contract; and her fictional wives are often discontented and attracted to other men, while some of them yearn for the freedom of their single days.

Orrick Johns, in defense of Chopin against critics condemning her treatment of marriage, claims that she was "the priestess of the monogamous relation, when it is true and when it is simple. Yet she was modern. She knew that even the best of marriages have their complexities--that marriage is not a condition but a progress. And she was the faithful guardian of the rights of women."¹⁴ But it was her guardianship of the rights of women that compelled her to portray marriage in the manner that she did. She felt that the most important right a woman had was the right to be an individual, the right to self-fulfillment. She also felt that many women had to surrender this right when they entered into marriage, and it was because of this that she condemned marriage as a hindrance to one's independence.

Kate Chopin's father died when she was five; and this event was to affect her life profoundly. At twenty-seven, the widowed Eliza now controlled a large estate. There were many reasons for a widow to remain single: She had not married for romantic reasons, and "a widow mourning the loss of her husband was always respected in society."¹⁵ Whatever her reasons, Eliza never remarried and spent the remaining thirty years of her life single.

There had always been a reluctance of the widows in Kate's family to remarry. Her grandmother Athenaise, a widow at thirty-six, lived for fifty-one more years after the death of her

husband. Her grandmother, Victoire Charleville, outlived her husband by eighteen years. Her great great-grandmother, Victoire Verdon, had outlived Joseph Verdon by nearly twenty years.¹⁶ These women had quite a zest for life, and they managed their own affairs and money with ease.

Living in a household of strong-willed widows with very little male influence greatly affected Kate's writing. In contrast to her negative stories concerning marriage, her widowhood stories (stories about women "wed[ded] to the dead" as in "A Lady of Bayou St. John"¹⁷) emphasize hope and promise, not bereavement and grief. In fact, in light of many of her short stories, marriage "to the dead" could be considered the ideal Chopinian marriage in that it was a socially acceptable way to be unmarried. Her positive outlook on widowhood was in contrast to the ideal of the American domestic cult in which a young girl's marriage was intended to confine her to "one sphere for life, if not beyond the grave."¹⁸

After the death of Kate's father, Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville, Kate's great-grandmother, took on the responsibility of her education and became one of the most influential people in Kate's life. Probably born in 1784, Madame Charleville was a French woman, not a Victorian.¹⁹ Because of this, her views about life and about women were in contrast to the views endorsed by society, and her refusal to promote society's ideas must have

nurtured the young girl's questioning of society's values. Because of her great-grandmother, Kate had a wider background to draw from than the "cult of domesticity." Whereas divorce and adultery were unthinkable in American ideology, Madame Charleville portrayed them with a matter-of-factness that allowed Kate to develop her own ideas about the subject. Kate's later attitude toward adultery suggests the realistic, if not amoral, attitude of her great-grandmother. Madame Charleville's diary tells of her careful outlining of Kate's reading and of sharing her own experiences and other stories to assure "sound values and contempt for pretension, to make her see life realistically and face it without fear, to look beneath the appearance and seek the truth, to give understanding rather than judgment"--in short, to see that morality is relative.²⁰

Chopin was influenced by her great-grandmother's stories of her ancestors and of the early days of St. Louis. Daniel Rankin, an early biographer of Kate Chopin, told of the stories that Madame Charleville had related to Kate as a child:

For her proper direction in the path of virtue, she told the child accounts of the early days in St. Louis. One story that was repeated over and over..was a vivid account that stirred Kate O'Flaherty's interest in the intimacy of people's lives, minds, and morals. ...That story narrated the supposed adulterous relations of Madame Chouteau [mother of Pierre Chouteau, the "Father of St.Louis"] with Pierre Laclede.²¹

Another story popular with the residents of St. Louis that Madame Charleville probably told the young girl was that of Madame de Volsey, a woman in St. Louis who carried on in such "open and shameless debauchery" that her husband succeeded in obtaining the city's first divorce.²²

Madame Charleville also related stories of the Charleville ancestors who had been in the New World for nearly two centuries. One story that may have been of particular interest to young Kate was that of her great great-grandmother, Marianne Victoire Richelet Verdon. She had married, given birth to two daughters, was widowed, and then married her second husband, Joseph Verdon.²³ After twelve years of "continual bickering and quarrels," they appeared before the Spanish governor in St. Louis and appealed for a separation. This was the first legal separation given in the Catholic town of St. Louis.²⁴ The governor awarded Victoire everything except Joseph's gun, two axes, and his bed. To support herself, she began to trade small household items of value to women down river for salt and furs. Her business expanded and she soon became very prosperous. She even took to signing her name as "La Verdon" --*The Verdon*.²⁵ Although it was scandalous that she had obtained a separation, the worst was yet to come--four years later, still not reconciled with her husband, Victoire Verdon gave birth to a son.²⁶

Madame Charleville's heroines were women torn between "morality and freedom, convention and desire,"²⁷ much as the heroines in Chopin's fiction would be. It is easy to see models for the women in Chopin's short stories in the tales of these independent women who defy social conventions and even run their own businesses. Emily Toth suggests that Chopin may have used information from the tales of her grandmother and may have embodied the "true spirit of Madame Charleville" in her short story "The Maid of St. Phillippe."²⁸

At the age of nineteen Kate O'Flaherty married Oscar Chopin. They resided for a while in New Orleans, but spent most of their married life in Cloutierville in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. Their relationship was unique in that Oscar Chopin never stifled his wife's impulses. She loved to take solitary walks and even took long walks around Cloutierville while other women were doing their household chores. While in Natchitoches Parish she learned how to ride horses and would even on occasion ride astride horses--as opposed to the traditional feminine sidesaddle position. Oscar's relatives, according to Daniel Rankin, "shook their heads in wonder or sternly advised him about his duty." To allow Kate to "go on, always in her own way" was "more than unusual, it was horrible."²⁹ But Kate had always been fascinated with women who dared to defy conventions, and she did not conform to social conventions if they did not suit her purposes. Kate

was sometimes deliberately provocative: Almost every afternoon she would parade on horseback up and down a Cloutierville street. When crossing the street on foot, she would lift her skirts higher than necessary, displaying her "pretty ankles."³⁰ At that time, women were not supposed to smoke in public--and ladies were not supposed to smoke at all. But as a young woman on a trip to New Orleans (where many women smoked then), Kate had learned to smoke cigarettes; and despite what others thought, she continued the habit.³¹

By some informants' accounts, Kate Chopin's marriage was a happy one. Whether this is or is not true, her experience of motherhood seems to have been a positive one. During the first ten years of marriage, Chopin gave birth to five sons and one daughter: Jean Baptiste (1871), Oscar Charles (1873), George Francis (1874), Frederick (1876), Felix Andrew (1878), and Lelia (1879).³² Her feelings about motherhood are demonstrated well in her diary entry of May 22, 1894. In this entry she recalls the birth of her son Jean twenty-three years earlier:

I can remember...waking up at 6:00 in the evening from out of a stupor to see in my mother's arms a little piece of humanity all dressed in white which they told me was my little son! The sensation with which I touched my lips and my fingertips to his soft flesh only comes once to a mother. It must be the pure animal sensation: nothing spiritual could be so real--so poignant.³³

To recall so vividly and with so much emotion and enthusiasm this event twenty three years later suggests that her experience of motherhood must have been a pleasant and rewarding one.

According to Rankin, she so enjoyed the presence of her children and so hated to shut them out, that she did her writing surrounded by them in the living room.³⁴

Chopin's positive motherhood experience shows itself in her writing through her portrayal of motherhood as positive, natural, and desirable. In her stories, the motherhood instinct is so strong and overwhelming that those who do not experience it will likely regret it, and those who are not married may choose (despite social condemnation) to experience it anyway.

Oscar Chopin died of malaria when Kate was thirty-two. Characteristic of the women in her family, Kate Chopin did not dwell on her husband's death. She had grown up in a house full of widows who had managed their own lives and their own money, and her decision to run Oscar's business was not an unprecedented step.³⁵ But, never one to conform to conventions, Kate caused quite a stir as she remained in Natchitoches Parish to run Oscar's plantation and store. According to the Natchitoches People's Vindicator, before his death Oscar had gone to Hot Springs, Arkansas, in the summer of 1881 to "recuperate his health."³⁶ He had been home barely a month when Kate left for St. Louis, where "she expects to remain for several months," the

People's Vindicator reported on October 8.³⁷ Despite some reports of Kate's happy marriage, this could be an indicator of problems. No one knows whether Kate Chopin and Albert Sampite had begun their affair before Oscar had died, but everyone agrees that the affair blossomed after Oscar's death.³⁸ It might also explain her escape trip to St. Louis and Oscar's stay at Hot Springs alone. The fact that she had some relations with other men is almost undeniably confirmed by her diary entry some eleven years later upon visiting her old friend Liza at the Sacred Heart Convent. She commented that she did not know if her friend, who was in a sense married to God, could see that "she had loved-- lovers who were not divine."³⁹

Kate's behavior toward Albert Sampite (a married man) had caused quite a scandal in the little town of Cloutierville. Her mother had been asking her to come to St. Louis; and probably wishing to escape the situation in Cloutierville, Kate gave up the store and plantation and went back to St. Louis in 1884.⁴⁰ She remained in her mother's house, caring for her until her death on June 29, 1885.⁴¹

Chopin didn't start writing seriously until 1889. Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, an eccentric European physician who had assisted in the births of Oscar and George, suggested that she write to bring herself out of her grief over her mother's death and to provide an extra source of much needed income.⁴² Her

great-grandmother's tales, her observations of other people, her reading, her marriage, and her experiences had by this time given her material enough to draw from. She had a "wide knowledge of the feminine psyche" and a "pronounced and very personal view of woman's existence" and she now had a compelling urge (and the financial need) to write openly about its various aspects.⁴³

Chopin's diary shows that from a young age she had a fascination with women writers and writings about women. In her *Commonplace Book*, Kate copied two passages from Anna Brownell Jameson's Sketches of Art in which Jameson discussed the differences in German and English women. Jameson stated that she "thought the German woman of a certain rank more *natural* [Kate's emphasis] than we [English women] are." When girls ventured to ask why they should not do something, Jameson accused English women of answering "It is not the custom...it is ridiculous!"⁴⁴ The idea of being natural and of being oneself was always appealing to Kate and would influence her writing in later years. The fundamental attribute of her female characters is the ability and resolve to follow their natural tendencies rather than succumb to the pressures of society. They act as they are naturally inclined, rather than trying to fit into societal gender roles.

In her *Commonplace Book* she also copied the following extract from Miss Dinah Maria Mulock's novel The Woman's Kingdom:

What is it makes a house so bright? pleasant to go to--to stay in--even to think of ...? ...If the servants never keep their places long and the gentlemen of the family are prone to be 'out-of - evenings'--who is to blame? Almost invariably the woman of the family. ...Its internal comfort lies in the woman's hands alone, and until women feel this--recognize at once their power and their duty--*it is idle for them to chatter about their rights*. [Emphasis Chopin's own, and she had underlined the word *rights* twice.]⁴⁵

In this extract, which described the domestic ideal of economy, cheerfulness, and order, one can see that Chopin was thinking about the role of women years before she came to write a critique of the domestic ideal.

From entries in her Commonplace Book, it can be discerned that she was greatly interested in Madame de Stael's two novels, Delphine and Corinne. One book is of a woman who does not care what the world says of her passion for her lover, and the other is of a female poet who leaves England to work unhampered by strict moral laws. In her Commonplace Book she copied an extract from "Lady Blessington's Conversation with Byron" in which "Byron observed that he once told Madame de Stael that he considered her Delphine and Corinne as very dangerous productions to be put in the hands of young women." He felt that "representing all the virtuous characters in Corinne as being dull, commonplace, and tedious, was a most insidious blow aimed at virtue."⁴⁶ Some

twenty years later, some of the same comments would be made about Chopin's short stories and novels.

Although she had been influenced by many women writers, if Chopin ever spoke about George Sand or confirmed that she had read her, it has not been recorded; however, "her daughter Lelia was convinced that she was named after George Sand's heroine in Lelia."⁴⁷ Many interesting comparisons could be made between the two, but one can only speculate as to the influence of George Sand on Chopin.

Another influence in Chopin's new writing career was the emerging feminist movement. Chopin felt the impact of the general emphasis of the 1880s and 1890s on sexuality and feminism. The rights of women were constantly discussed in the intellectual circles of the 1880s. A number of St. Louis women supported suffrage and chose not to marry but instead to direct their efforts to improving society (efforts that Chopin satirized in her short story "Miss McEnders"). The 1890s was the "decade of the single woman"--a greater percentage of American women remained single than in any other decade before or since.⁴⁸ In an atmosphere such as this, Chopin may have found it easier to speak out against traditional roles for women, such as marriage.

Kate Chopin never directly recorded her opinion of women's suffrage. According to her son Felix, unlike most feminists of her period "she was not interested in the woman's suffrage

movement. But she belonged to a liberal, almost pink-red group of intellectuals, people who believed in intellectual freedom and expressed their independence by wearing eccentric clothing."⁴⁹

Kate Chopin was never an activist, but her stories about women who create their own destinies have a distinctly feminist tone. She was no militant, stamping feminist proclamations into every scene, but she was definitely an advocate for liberation--of the intellect, of the emotions, of the *self*. July Waters, Chopin's niece, says that had Chopin been asked if she considered herself as a feminist, she "probably wouldn't have embraced the idea, but she wouldn't have been uncomfortable with it."⁵⁰ She favored genuine female emancipation--not the quasi-emancipation of the protesting women in the political realm--but true inner growth and independence. She was in revolt against tradition and authority. She wanted freedom of spirit for women. She projected these desires onto her heroines; these women embodied the feminist ideals of independence, self-assertion, and self-fulfillment.

THE CHOPINIAN HEROINE

In 1869, twenty years before the publication of Chopin's first short story, "A Point at Issue!," John Stuart Mill published as part of his essay "The Subjection of Women" perhaps

the most concise statement of the driving conflict in the body of Kate Chopin's fiction. "What is now called the *nature of women*," Mill wrote, "is an eminently artificial thing--the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others." However, when Mill went on to conclude that "I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another," the stage was set for a woman writer who could rely on introspection to supplement the shortcomings of the male Mill's observation.⁵¹ Mill's point was that as long as society did not allow women to express their nature, it was impossible for any member to observe or draw any conclusions about said nature. He interpreted the widespread inability of women to express a self-determined *nature* as evidence that society had socialized this nature out of them.

However, Chopin felt that the repression and distortion of a woman's nature were not equivalent to elimination. In fact, Chopin (in her fiction) did not endow society with the power to repress or distort this nature. Certainly it acted as a powerfully persuasive force, but ultimately a woman must make a decision between what her heart recommends and what society recommends.

Many of Chopin's short stories are portraits of women faced with such a decision as it relates to a certain aspect of their

lives. With a collective analysis of the qualities that Chopin investigates in this manner, a *Chopinian Heroine* emerges; a "superwoman" who, through complete self-assertion, transcends the limits of society to fully realize her nature.

The term "superwoman" may be misleading, in that it may be read as suggesting a fantastic quality. This is not the case. Although many protagonists used to illustrate isolated decisions fail to live up to certain qualities possessed by the *Chopinian Heroine*, all are very realistic portraits of women living in (near) contemporary society. Rarely is a main character a textbook *Chopinian Heroine*; rather, she is used to illustrate certain decisions and issues faced by women on the road to self-assertion or *Chopinian Heroism*. Marianne of "The Maid of Saint Phillippe"--although never faced with the issue of motherhood--is a possible exception to this rule. Whether Kate Chopin (or anyone) successfully modeled her life after the *Chopinian Heroine*, this *Heroine* was (and still is) an immediately attainable ideal, a realistic contemporary role model for women everywhere.

A conclusive list of all the qualities exhibited by the *Chopinian Heroine* would be virtually impossible to compile (some could even arguably be generated by extension) but they are all founded, as mentioned above, on the theme of self-assertion hindered by (patriarchal) society. However, to best investigate

this principle as it relates to the Chopinian Heroine, the present inquiry singles out seven major and recurrent issues that the Chopinian protagonists face. They are: 1) societal gender roles, 2) marriage, 3) motherhood, 4) the conflict and balance of emotion and reason, 5) independence/ autonomy, 6) societal imposition and imperialism, and 7) ethics.

SOCIETAL GENDER ROLES

Chopin uses her short story "Juanita" as a vehicle to explore a complete gender role reversal. "Juanita" reads as a model for the ideal Chopinian romantic relationship. This model will be explored more extensively in a subsequent investigation of marriage and the Chopinian Heroine. However, it is significant that the two protagonists Chopin employs to participate in this relationship exhibit essentially complete reversals of traditional societal gender roles. Such a complete reversal is unique to "Juanita" in that Chopin's attacks on society's system of prescribed gender roles usually suggest that no individual, male or female, possesses an entirely "feminine" or entirely "masculine" personality. Rather, it seems that the Chopinian Heroine ignores these prescribed roles altogether and is resultingly free to exhibit both "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics. "Juanita," however, is more or less the love

story of a wholly "masculine" woman and a wholly "feminine" man. Most likely this is because the apparent focus of "Juanita" is the relationship, and a complete gender reversal more clearly emphasizes the Chopinian belief that role-playing (i.e., unnaturally conforming to societal gender roles) is detrimental to a romantic relationship.

Chopin nearly always illustrates the gender-related attributes of her characters with a physical description. Predominantly "masculine" characters are often described as being 'big, strong, tall, large,' etc.; "feminine" characters as being 'small, delicate, beautiful,' etc. Such physical qualities are purely illustrative and indicative of gender role status and not presented as inherently desirable or undesirable. Basically--in oversimplified terms--there are four characters in Chopin's fiction: "masculine" males, "feminine" females, "masculine" females, and "feminine" males; the latter two are consistently presented more favorably than the former two. The Chopinian Heroine, as such, is usually described as 'big and strong,' however, apparently not because of the inherent virtues in these qualities, but because they suggest her defiance of socialized gender roles. Conversely, Chopin's favorable male characters do *not* possess these qualities for the very same reason. Since "Juanita" is one of the few instances in which Chopin employs a complete gender reversal, "masculine" physical qualities in a

female character appear to be more indicative of this defiance or nonconformity than of her actual degree of "masculinity." That is to say, a woman with all "masculine" physical attributes is not usually a woman who adheres to society's "masculine" mold, but simply one who refuses to adhere to society's "feminine" mold.

In the same manner that one cannot consciously determine her physical attributes, often the defiance symbolized by these attributes is unconscious. That is, often these characters illustrate the Chopinian doctrine that gender roles are unnatural and therefore "uncorrupted" individuals will exhibit an innate lack of adherence. For example, a *youthful* character as in "A Lady of Bayou St. John" or an individual *living apart from society* as in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" would not demonstrate the traditional roles because they have not been socialized to act in stereotypical ways. When this lack of adherence is intended to come about by the conscious design of characters fluent in the ways of traditional society, it is frequently illustrated by the consciously controllable physical attribute of clothing. A "man's hat," specifically, is worn by a number of such Chopinian women. There is an important distinction between these two types of gender role defiance. The Chopinian Heroine is true to her nature. This means not only that she ought to express any "masculine" attributes that she possesses, but also

any "feminine" ones. Often, conscious gender role defiers (or "man's hat" defiers) see that their nature does not conform to the repressive "feminine" mold and--as a result of their corruption by the concept of societal gender roles--conclude that they, therefore, must be totally "masculine" and proceed to conform to the somewhat less repressive "masculine" mold. While these characters succeed in portraying the Chopinian ideal of gender role defiance, they fall short of the Chopinian Heroine in their continued allegiance to the unnatural prescribed gender role *system* which forces them to deny certain natural "feminine" qualities which they also possess.

Exhibiting a rare complete reversal of roles, Juanita uniquely possesses both physical indicators and conscious defiance. She is unusually large ["five-feet-ten and more than two hundred pounds (367)"] and she dons the "man's big straw hat (368)." She is described as exhibiting "a certain...beauty"; however, the narrator (essentially a third-person "voice of society") qualifies that by adding that (s)he "would rather not say 'beauty' if I might say anything else (367)." The narrator's confusion results from the fact that Juanita can be (and is) naturally beautiful despite her failure to exhibit the qualities that society links to feminine beauty. Congruently, the narrator adds, "with some amusement," that Juanita was "not so unattractive to men as her appearance might indicate"; she has

had several offers of marriage (367). Juanita is large and therefore "masculine," and yet she is attractive to men and therefore "feminine." This seeming contradiction, emphasized by the narrator's confusion, serves to deconstruct the societal system of gender roles.

Juanita's partner in this ideal Chopinian romantic relationship exhibits, likewise, a complete gender role reversal (i.e. a wholly "feminine" male) even to the extent that Chopin employs obvious castration imagery in her physical description of him as "one-legged." He is not just one-legged, a fact which is pretty empirical information, but "*decidedly* one-legged [emphasis added] (368)." Much to the surprise of the community, Juanita prefers this "feminine" male to "the whole race of masculine bipeds (368)." Later this one-legged man is even referred to as "puny and helpless" when seen beside the much stronger character of Juanita (368).

He is also described as "poor and shabby," as opposed to his wealthy co-woosers (368). Wealth is an attribute often associated with men and masculinity in Chopin's work. In "A Maid of Saint Phillippe," Captain Vaudry, in an attempt to persuade Marianne to marry him, offers to take Marianne away to where "men barter with gold (121)." Considering the fact that women were just beginning to enter the work force at that time and that up to that point had no other means of support than the men in their families

(either their fathers or their husbands), it is logical that wealth--which men controlled and which women could only have access to through submission to the men in their lives--would be a masculine attribute in society and less admirable than the natural "wealth of...affections" possessed by women (368). Wealth to men is money; wealth to Juanita (women) is love.

Note that while these "feminine" qualities have a negative connotation when exhibited by Chopinian women, this is due to the fact that they are indicative of conformity. In a male character they are indicative of exactly the opposite and are resultingly presented as no less successful manifestations of self-assertion than Juanita's diametrically opposed qualities.

While Chopin provides the uncontrollable gender role defiance upon the characters' introduction, their more conscious defiances occur (as positive developments) throughout the story. Juanita was born (to be) large and, therefore, is naturally "masculine" in many ways beyond her control. However, as a product of society, even Juanita is made to repress certain of these tendencies. Contrary to the unrelentingly confident independence she exhibits at the story's conclusion, Juanita is initially described as being femininely "very shy" and sitting "in some obscure corner of their small garden, preparing vegetables for dinner or sorting her mother's flower seed (367)." It is later, upon her alleged marriage to the one-legged man,

that she makes a conscious decision towards self-assertion in defiance of society, and it is at this time that she first begins to wear the man's hat.

Similarly, the one-legged man, who presumably is so for reasons beyond his control, is initially presented as an "unhappy individual...soliciting subscriptions towards buying...a cork leg (368)." His desire to possess a cork leg is illustrative of his desire to conform to society's standards of masculinity. So just as the story began with the very masculine and assertive Juanita blushing and gardening, her ideal feminine mate, the poor, "castrated" man is laboring determinedly for wealth and a cork-leg/penis. However, upon his entrance into the relationship, he is described as "content with his fate which had not even vouchsafed him the coveted cork-leg (368)."

Another "man's hat" defier, Mamzelle Aurelie in "Regret," even more clearly exhibits the folly of "man's hat defiance" as an attempt to rebel against society's prescribed gender roles. Although she is presented as a strong, admirable character, the failure of her attempt to escape from the "feminine" gender role is obvious. Although she possesses the unconscious "masculine" attributes of a "good strong figure" and a "determined eye," her "man's hat," farm, and gun are indicative of a contrived male pose (375). In this case, Aurelie has chosen the masculine profession of farmer rather than a feminine one--such as a

mother. Her ultimate decision to ally herself with the "masculine" gender mold has prevented her from seeing the Chopinian Heroine potential to be both a farmer and a mother. The Freudian "gun" is also a recurrent device in Chopin's portrayal of women who choose to defy gender roles. The gun is a symbol of the masculine qualities that she consciously takes on.

Mamzelle Aurelie has never thought of marrying--and in typical Chopinian fashion--has "not yet lived to regret it (375)." But Aurelie confuses her disinclination to marry with a desire to renounce all feminine qualities in her nature and forces herself to deny her emotional (feminine) side. By doing this she gives up many things she might have enjoyed--for one, motherhood.

In "Regret," Chopin is attacking the *system* of gender molds. This system is exposed in the "masculine" and "feminine" methods of raising children. The wholly male approach is ridiculed by Mamzelle's "inaptness" at raising children. When asked to care for the children, she goes about her job in a very masculine way--she determines "a line of action...identical with a line of duty (376)." At night she tries to put the children to bed as she would have "shooed the chickens in to the hen-house (377)." She tries to raise the children as if she were running a farm, and even declares that she would "rather manage a dozen plantations" than care for children (377). Like men of Chopin's

time, she knows little about caring for children, and the advice given to her by others is probably worse for the children than what she would have naturally been inclined to do.

Through Ruby's and Marceline's ridiculous advice, offered when Aurelie runs into problems, Chopin discredits the wholly female approach just as she did the wholly masculine approach. She is informed by Marceline (one of the children she is keeping) that when one of the younger ones misbehaves, his mother always "tie[s] 'im in a chair" and that Mamzelle Aurelie should do the same (376). She is advised by Aunt Ruby, who claims to know much about the "raisin' an' manigement o' chillun," not to let the children play with keys because it "makes chillun grow up hard-headed (377)."

These unnatural stock molds (similar to the unnatural bondage of marriage in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe," discussed later) are shown as re-generative and inherited. When left to her own devices (or nature) as she was in her initial dealings with the children, Mamzelle Aurelie's self-assertion of gender is reflected by the fact that the male child exhibits a "passion for flowers (376)." It is because of this fact that Marceline intervenes with the observed advice, "you got to tie 'im in a chair. It's w'at maman all time do...(376)." With the assistance of Marceline and Ruby, by the end of the story the boy is found "putting an edge on his knife at the grindstone" while

the girls are "cutting and fashioning doll-rags in the corner of the gallery (378)."

Aurelie's personality does not change during or after her experience with the children, but she does come to recognize an emotional (feminine) side of herself which she had previously denied. She brings out the white apron that "she had not worn for years" and the "sewing basket which she seldom used (377)." When the children leave, she realizes some of the things that she has denied herself by feeling that, if she had some masculine characteristics, she had to act the whole part of masculinity as prescribed by society. She is aware of the need for a *merger* of masculine and feminine qualities as opposed to a *reversal* and a return to the societal woman mold. When she cries about not having become a mother, she does so "not softly, as women often do" but "like a man (378)."

In the "Maid of Saint Phillippe," Chopin illustrates a type of defiance that is more consistent with that of the Chopinian Heroine. Marianne, apparently as a result of her being born and raised in the wilderness of colonial America, succeeds in being non-"feminine"--as opposed to being "masculine" like the "man's hat" defiers, Juanita and Mamzelle Aurelie. She is "tall, supple, and strong" and "dressed in her worn buckskin trappings" so that "she looked more like a handsome boy than the French girl of seventeen that she was (116)." Her attire is suggestive of

qualities that society considers masculine, but they are not typical of a man of society (in the same a way a "man's hat" is). They are clothes that she made herself (in accordance with her "uncorrupted" nature) with no outside influence of society. The fact that to society they *appear* somehow masculine is simply indicative of the fact that, left to her own preferences, she *chooses* to dress in plain, functional clothing.

Just as Marianne's "masculine" clothing does not imply the same quality of Mamzelle Aurelie's man's hat, neither does her gun carry that of Aurelie's. While evidently inserted with the same Freudian overtones, Marianne "carried [her gun] *as easily as a [male] soldier might* [emphasis added] (116)." Marianne does not carry a gun because she is partially "masculine"; she is partially "masculine" because she carries a gun. Or, in Freudian terms, she does not unnaturally carry a gun as symbol of her masculinity; she *has* a gun.

However, although Marianne does not fit the societal definition of "female," this does not compel her to function as "male" either (as did Juanita and Mamzelle Aurelie). Marianne is "tall, *supple*, and strong [emphasis added](116)." Her arm is "strong [and] *shapely* [emphasis added] (119)." Neither Juanita nor Aurelie could be spoken of as "supple and shapely." Marianne is only as "masculine" as a "handsome boy." True to Chopinian Heroine form, neither Aurelie nor Marianne accepts her respective

proposals for marriage, but where the former "promptly declined (375)" hers, the latter responds with "quivering [eye]lids (122)." Marianne not only displays the unconscious feminine physical characteristics of "supple and shapely," she consciously responds in a feminine way to Captain Vaudry's proposal of marriage. Her refusal can then be presented not as a masculine quality, but as female self-assertion.

Marianne is not a man in a woman's body; she is, in fact, nearly the only woman in a woman's body. It is for this reason that Marianne is probably the closest a Chopinian protagonist comes to a Chopinian Heroine. What distinguishes her as an effective vehicle for this portrayal is her relative isolation from society and its effects. When Captain Vaudry poses to her the question, "You deny allegiance to England and Spain; you spurn France with contempt; what is left for you? (122)" certainly one answer is liberation from oppressive and unnatural gender roles and possibly another, self-assertion of Chopinian Heroism.

Chopin gives the gender role theme a unique spin in "A Respectable Woman" by portraying a societally-oppressed woman as being led towards self-assertion by a "Chopinian Hero" of sorts. Gouvernail is a male who has succeeded in self-asserting his natural "feminine" qualities. Contrary to Mrs. Baroda's expectations concerning a friend of her husband's, Gouvernail

"wasn't very tall nor very cynical; neither did he wear eye-glasses nor carry his hands in his pockets." Gouvernail is also referred to as "slim (333)." [All of these are recurrent "masculine" traits in Chopin's fiction. For example, Fedora, the lesbian figure in "Fedora," was "tall and slim...and wore eye-glasses (467)."] Gouvernail was "in no sense a *society* man [emphasis added] (333)."

For unstated reasons, Gouvernail is a tool and not a protagonist. Gouvernail appears to be--like the Chopinian Heroine--non-"masculine" as distinct from "feminine." He is, for the purposes of the story, puzzlingly self-asserted. The "puzzled" party is the protagonist, Mrs. Baroda. Her verbal interaction with Gouvernail illustrates a confused experimentation with gender role in an attempt to define their relationship "appropriately." Contrary to the predominant literary cliché of the day, Chopin used "chattiness" as indicative of "masculinity" [An example of this is the "group of men talking eagerly and excitedly together with much gesture and intensity of utterance" in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe (116)"]. For the most part, Gouvernail, a non-"masculine" character, is "mute and receptive (334)," however not dogmatically or contrivedly. "His periods of silence were not constitutional, but the result of moods (335)." Mrs. Baroda, on the other hand, viewing life from a black/white, male/female perspective

initially flirts with him as a "male" to his "female" with a "chatty eagerness," seeking "persistently... to penetrate the reserve in which he had *unconsciously* enveloped himself [emphasis added](334)." Mrs. Baroda is consciously trying to relate to Gouvernail in a masculine way because of his confusing (at least in her eyes) unconscious, non-masculine nature. Unsuccessful, she resorts to non-interactive femininity with equivalent lack of success. Then in a brief final encounter characterized as "not...self-conscious," both parties fluctuate from reticence to talking "freely and intimately" in accordance with their impulses and in defiance of her "respectability (335)." Here Chopin suggests that a self-asserted female can quite successfully romantically relate with a self-asserted male (if only during the brief endurance of their mutual attraction). As in "Juanita," such a male is proposed as the preferred romantic partner. Initially, Mrs. Baroda had refused the company of Gouvernail, but after some contemplation, she concludes, "I have overcome everything [i.e., my societal gender role]!... This time I shall be very nice to him (336)."

MARRIAGE

A second major social institution portrayed in Chopin's fiction as being contrary to her heroine's natural tendencies is

that of marriage. Throughout her work, the institution of marriage is consistently accompanied with images of bondage and slavery. Romance and emotion, as will be discussed later, appear to be allowed as natural tendencies and are not themselves assigned a negative connotation. However, emotions notwithstanding, marriage insists upon a curtailing of one's self-assertion, the cardinal vice in Chopinian ideology.

Marriage in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" is a self-imposed bondage, an oath of loyalty despite the inevitably resulting loss of independence. As the French native citizens of Saint Phillippe prepare to abandon the town upon its English occupation ["No Frenchman who respects himself will live subject to England (118)"], Jacques notes that "all are of one mind--to quit Saint Phillippe at once. All save one... Your [Marianne's] father (118)." Marianne's father is every bit the self-respecting Frenchman that Jacques and the others are. "'To be sure, we hate the English,'" Marianne says of them--"as though the fact were a self-evident one that needed no comment (118)." However, he has made an overriding commitment that obliges him to "live subject to England" and the inclinations of his will. He has taken an oath to be by his wife's side until his death, and since her prior death has rendered her immobile, he is bound to spend the remainder of his days in Saint Phillippe, come what may.

However, not only is Marianne's father bound; she is bound as well. Chopin seems to maintain that one can be born into this commitment of bondage. Much in the fashion of pre-Civil War African-American slavery, the daughter of a slave is a slave. In the case of marital slavery, the legacy of this self-imposed commitment to bondage is thrust upon the offspring of the marriage. Marianne's mother was in bondage to Marianne's father and thus Marianne, "...dressed in the garments that had been her mother's once," is born into slavery (119). Another analogy might be a financial debt legally inherited by a person's next of kin. And so, despite her fiercely independent nature, Marianne dutifully maintains, "My life belongs to my father. I have but to follow his will; whatever that may be...(119)."

Interestingly, as a result of this experience, when Marianne receives her own proposal for marriage from Captain Vaudry, it is not her own imminent subservience that frightens her, for she has spent her entire life living out her mother's bondage. The reason that Marianne immediately and emotionally puts forth for her decline is that "I was not born to be the *mother* of slaves [emphasis added] (122)." She knows that once she becomes bound to Captain Vaudry, her (female) children will be born into the same slavery under which she has suffered.

With her father dead, Marianne is no longer bound to a man, and she decides to go into the wilderness on her own. When

Captain Vaudry asks what is left for her if she gives up society, she replies, "Freedom is left for me!...Hardships may await me, but let it be death rather than bondage (122)." Marianne realizes that to enter into marriage would be to surrender her independence. While held in bondage for reasons beyond her control (e.g. her mother's marriage), she dutifully conforms to society's expectations. But when given the chance to make her own decision, she chooses freedom.

In "The Story of an Hour," when Mrs. Mallard learns of her husband's death, she finds herself released from the bondage that Marianne in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" so feared entering into. She had a face whose "lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength" as if her marriage had required a certain amount of endurance (353). Up in her room alone, mourning her husband's death, a change comes over Mrs. Mallard, and it seems as if a burden is lifted. She realizes in a "brief moment of illumination" that there will no longer be a "powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature (353)." She would be, in her own words, "Free! Body and soul, free! (354)" She, like Marianne, has also tied the idea of bondage to marriage. This is a bondage in which either the male or the female may be called upon to submit his or her will to the

other party. This is not only physical bondage; this is bondage of the "soul."

When the report of her husband's death turns out to be a mistake and he returns home, Mrs. Mallard suddenly dies. The doctors later said it was heart disease. Although the reader cannot know whether it was conscious or unconscious, Mrs. Mallard seems to have made the same decision as the maid of Saint Phillippe in preferring "death rather than [a return to] bondage (122)."

The death of a husband is again portrayed as a means of liberation from bondage in "A Lady of Bayou St. John." After the death of her husband, Madame Delisle has an epiphany similar to the one experienced by Mrs. Mallard upon her husband's assumed death. After some time alone to mourn for her husband, Madame Delisle ceases her flirtations with Sepincourt (her previous suitor), for she can see that this would only lead to marriage and further bondage. Through the death of her husband, she now has a chance for a socially acceptable freedom by "wed[ding] [her] young existence to the dead (301)." She is still in the socially acceptable institution of marriage, but she is, in essence, married to nobody--an ideal Chopinian marriage. This marriage to the dead is similar to an obviously sexual scene in "The Story of an Hour" in which Chopin portrays Mrs. Mallard as consummating her marriage to the dead:

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will-- as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body (353).

Because of the return of her husband, Mrs. Mallard does not get to live out the rest of her life in the kind of "wedded bliss" that the lady of Bayou St. John experiences. In Madame Delisle's case, the "memory" of her husband continued to "fill and satisfy her days (302)."

MOTHERHOOD

There is a certain amount of ambiguity with respect to what Chopin sees as the ideal familial arrangement for her Heroine. While she makes a persuasive case against marriage as a healthy and natural institution, it would be ridiculous to suggest that motherhood is unnatural. And, in fact, Chopin attempts to do no such thing. Quite the opposite. Clearly it follows that if

motherhood is natural to a woman, for a woman to evade motherhood is to contradict her nature (i.e., fail to achieve complete self-assertion). Kate Chopin sees motherhood as natural and desirable, but not as confined within marriage. It is society that says that motherhood should occur only within marriage. The ambiguity in Chopin is that she does not appear to have concluded on an adequate source (father) for these children, except to say that the father ought not to be a husband.

The concept of fatherhood in Chopin is not the male equivalent of motherhood. Fatherhood seems to be a purely biological role that completes itself upon conception. The raising of a child is solely the jurisdiction of motherhood. Mothers are consistently the only active parents throughout Chopin's work. However, this fact does not dispense with the need for "fatherhood," minimal a task as it may be.

Chopin cleverly avoids the dilemma of fatherhood in "Regret" by giving Mamzelle Aurelie the opportunity to play mother to the neighbor's children. In fact, part of the appeal of these children to Aurelie is that they "to all intents and purposes, might have fallen from the clouds (375)." One might argue that in the ideal Chopinian world all children would fall from the clouds (with no links to a father or a perspective husband) into the arms of self-asserted Heroine/mothers.

In "Regret" Mamzelle Aurelie has never fulfilled her natural desire to become a mother because she has "never thought of marrying (375)." In fact, because society has so tied the ideas of marriage and motherhood together in her mind, Aurelie never realizes that she has, or can have without marriage, a natural desire for children until she keeps her neighbors' children for a while. It is only because of the separation of the children from a father figure that Mamzelle Aurelie can feel any regret. She "had not yet lived to regret" the marriage proposal that she had turned down; it is not in her nature to enter into such an institution. But she comes to regret the fact that she has never experienced motherhood, and it is Chopin's feeling that society is to blame for tying the natural role of motherhood to the societal institution of marriage. Because of this, women who are not inclined to marry cannot experience motherhood without some disapproval from society.

Although "Regret" is Chopin's best treatment of the natural tendency toward motherhood as being congruent with the unnatural tendency away from marriage, it pays little attention to the question of fatherhood. That is to say, short of stealing the neighbors' kids or having children fall from the clouds, how can the Chopinian Heroine reconcile these two seemingly inconsistent tendencies? In the ideal Chopinian familial portrait that is provided in "Juanita," a baby is born to an apparently happy

unmarried couple that seems to be, at least currently, monogamous, but non-committal. The reader is left to assume that it will stay that way and led to presume nothing about the raising of the child.

Chopin looks more closely at single parentage through the character of Mademoiselle Salambre in "Miss McEnders." Mademoiselle Salambre, however, is without a currently monogamous, but non-committal other and is left to raise the child on her own. "Miss McEnders" illustrates through Mademoiselle Salambre's philosophy of raising children that, just as unnatural societal restrictions are passed on from generation to generation, so too can be their defiance.

True to Chopinian Heroine form, Mademoiselle Salambre lives in accordance with standards determined by her nature, but (as will be discussed later) in no way acts as a missionary on their behalf. She is like Juanita in that she lies to society about her defiance of its standards (Juanita claims to be married to the father of her child, and Salambre claims not to be a mother). This, however, is not done out of shame (for both women are exceedingly proud), but more out of a quiet confidence. The Chopinian Heroine rarely defies society conspicuously or symbolically. Mademoiselle Salambre lies to avoid unnecessary scandal and to provide for her child. But ultimately a defense of the principles that inspire her defiance is more important to

the child's well-being than a sewing job, and Mademoiselle Salambre clearly demonstrates this.

When Miss McEnders expresses curiosity about the child (who is described as acting, like her mother, "in seeming defiance...with instinctive mistrust") Mademoiselle Salambre calls her "the child of my neighbor down-stairs (206)." But when the child reacts by grabbing Mademoiselle Salambre's leg and referring to her as 'mother,' Salambre, without shame, hesitation or qualification, but merely 'annoyance' "called the child *Chene*, as she grasped its arm to keep it from falling (206)." When Miss McEnders attempts to voice her condemnation, Mademoiselle Salambre stands her ground in defense of the beliefs she is instilling in her child by returning, "Life is not all couleur de rose, Mees McEndairs; you do not know what life is, you! (206)"

Mademoiselle Salambre is, in this respect, if not the most ideal Chopinian portrait of a mother, at least the most realistic. She succeeds in realizing her natural desire to be a mother without compromising her natural desire not to be married, and she does so without the aid of children from the clouds or a life of frolicking in the woods. She lives within society for the sake of her child, but (also for the sake of the child) not according to society.

EMOTION AND REASON

If a woman's self-assertion works against marriage and conformity, Chopin seems to present emotion (predominantly love or infatuation) as working in favor of them. Logically it would seem to follow that in her self-assertion the Chopinian Heroine must deny or suppress emotions. However, emotions, Chopin agrees, are just as natural as a woman's more practical utilities (such as the yearning for independence), and, therefore, just as elemental to her self-assertion.

In the literature of Chopin's contemporaries, it was typical for a man's actions to be motivated by reason and a woman's by emotion, with sympathies toward either method. Obviously, Chopin did not embrace this system, which is founded solely in societal gender roles. The balance she seems to propose instead is a combination of masculine "foresight" and feminine "warmth." Her thesis seems to be that the folly of a wholly emotional existence is that women are finding their way into imprudent and oppressive relationships and the folly of a wholly rational existence is that it requires the abandonment of a woman's innate capacity for passion.

As a result, Chopin's characters are emotional, but they are also realistic about their approach to life. They may give in to their emotions, but they do not make life decisions based on

them. A Chopinian Heroine always acts in her own best interest without suppressing her emotions if possible. In "A Respectable Woman," Mrs. Baroda's emotions come into play as she sits talking to Gouvernail one evening. She becomes swept away by his talking freely and intimately with her, so much so that her mind only "vaguely grasped what he was saying (335)." It was not the words that were important; it was the feeling that they evoked inside her.

The feelings grew in her and made her want to "touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers" and "draw close to him and whisper against his cheek (335)." Gouvernail has aroused a passion she longs to act on. But Mrs. Baroda has not yet learned the lesson of the Chopinian Heroine that one may transcend the limits placed on one by society if it will lead to self-fulfillment. So, feeling the constraints of society and desiring to remain a "respectable woman," she does not act on her impulses--the "stronger the impulse grew" to move near, the further she moved away (336).

But besides being a "respectable woman," she was also a very "sensible one"; and she does not tell her husband of the incident (336). Mrs. Baroda is not ruled by her emotions; she is reasonable and practical. In time, she learns how to use her practicality so that she does not have to deny her feelings of passion. Later on she persuades her husband to invite Gouvernail

back, claiming that this time she will "be very nice to him (336)." She is going to submit to her emotions next time, but is not going to risk her marriage because of that. She realizes that love or passion (a natural emotion) is not marriage (a social institution). To let one's marriage restrict one's natural emotions is confining and unhealthy; to let one's passions rule one's life is ridiculous and unwise.

To convey the tempestuous nature of intense emotion, Chopin frequently employs storm imagery. This is most prominent in her portrayal of an adulterous encounter entitled simply "The Storm." Aside from its fleeting intensity, the most telling characteristic of a storm in this application is that the best course of action is first to make all attempts to prevent any potentially permanent damage, and then to ride it out, for resistance would be impossible.

At the outset of "The Storm," Calixta is consumed by her duties as a housewife so that she is unaware of the storm on the horizon (despite increasing humidity): "She sat at a side window sewing furiously on a sewing machine. She was greatly occupied and did not notice the approaching storm. But she felt very warm and often stopped to mop her face on which the perspiration gathered in beads (592)."

When she does become aware of the impending storm, her first concern is that no damage be done to the home and the family:

"It began to grow dark, and suddenly realizing the situation she got up hurriedly and went about closing windows and doors. Out on the small front gallery she had hung Bobinot's clothes to air and she hastened out to gather them before the rain fell (593)." This is in accordance with the same principle that governed Mrs. Baroda; emotion is natural and inevitable, but can be tempered with reason so as not to have an unwarranted impact upon one's life to follow.

It is at this point that Alcee Laballiere rides in at the gate and asks to come in out of the storm. Calixta handles this concernedly, but also calmly, as one might a recurring nuisance. There is the suggestion that, perhaps, it is not the first time that this has occurred. Later she observes, "My! what a rain! It's good two years sence it rain' like that," and *immediately* afterwards it is offered rather irrelevantly that she has been married for five years (593).

As the passion swells in this particular instance, however, "the rain...threatened to break an entrance and deluge them there," and it was "even necessary to put something beneath the door to keep the water out (593)." The passion is becoming intense, but is not yet out of hand. And while Calixta manages to indulge her passion, her reason maintains priority throughout. When Alcee embraces Calixta, reigniting unusually intense "old-time infatuation and desire for the flesh [note the rational,

non-romantic language], "Calixta's concerns for home and family rise: "'Bonte!' she cried, releasing herself from his encircling arm..., 'the house'll go next! I wish I knew w'ere Bibi was!' (594)" Alcee assures her that her family is in no danger and that "nothing can happen (594)." Having seen to the more practical aspect of her family life, she is now able to indulge her emotions, at least for the moment.

In the following scene, one of the most passionate in all of Chopin's writings, Calixta releases the "generous abundance of her passion (595)." But she is safe in doing so; she has already tended to the concerns of house and family. As Calixta and Alcee hear the storm "passing away," they are tempted to fall asleep in each other's arms--preserving the emotion as long as possible. but Calixta, in typical Chopinian fashion, "dared not yield" to emotion when reason was called for. "The rain was over," and it was time for Alcee to leave so that Calixta could return to her familial duties (595).

The conclusion of the story relates the relieving effect that the encounter has on both Alcee, Calixta, and their respective spouses. Calixta no longer acts as the repressed "over-scrupulous housewife (595)" that Bobinot expects, and Alcee writes an uncharacteristically sensitive letter to his wife described as "loving" and "full of tender solicitude (596)." In

conclusion, the reader is informed that "the storm passed and everyone was happy (596)."

Although this surrender to emotion can be cathartic, it can be dangerous if it threatens the independence or self-assertion of the Chopinian Heroine. Marianne, in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe," realizes the danger that her independence is in if she gives in to her emotions. When Marianne refuses to marry Captain Vaudry, she tells him that the desires for marriage and luxury are "but fleeting wishes" and that she cannot make life decisions based on such premises (122). Chopin's heroines are quick to realize that emotions are temporary and fleeting, and Marianne knows that to follow her emotions at this moment would only lead to marriage and a life that would not bring her happiness. Marianne is a reasonable girl, but she is not immune to emotion. Captain Vaudry's "talk and...looks of love" have before made "the strength...go from [her] limbs and [left her] feeble as a little child, till [her] heart would beat like that of one who has been stricken (122)." As the typical Chopinian Heroine, she realizes the naturalness and power of emotions, but she also knows that this is not the time to give in to emotion. When it comes to a choice between reason and emotion that will affect the state of the heroine's self assertion, Chopin's characters always make the decision that will leave them with their independence.

INDEPENDENCE/AUTONOMY

Because Chopinian self-assertion insists upon a certain degree of alienation, pivotal to its success is a certain amount of self-reliance. The Chopinian Heroine is largely self-contained. She is her own best friend and in that role she is the best person to turn to for both companionship and advice. Acting towards the benefit of one's self-assertion requires a great deal of introspection, and the introspection scene is a frequently recurrent image in Chopin's fiction. In accordance with the previous section, this introspection seems to be largely rational, but with sufficient attention given to emotional factors. A number of Chopin's stories fit the over-simplified skeletal structure of conflict, introspection, resolution. That is, the heroine is faced with a dilemma that is most often founded in a conflict between her natural desires and some social mandate. Often she is persuaded towards conformity by her socialized conscious and/or characters speaking on behalf of society. At this point the heroine is described as spending time--usually at her own adamant insistence--"alone." This is sometimes for hours, sometimes for weeks. More often than not, the reader, too, is not allowed in her presence (a device which can serve to stress the strictly personal nature of the decision process.) Finally she emerges with a quiet but firm resolution

that what is right for her is *what is right*. This resolution is backed by a somewhat mysterious, newly-emergent strength that apparently was also acquired as a result of her period of introspection.

In "A Respectable Woman," Mrs. Baroda is initially tempted to tell her husband about her encounter with Gouvernail, but she decides against it because "there are some battles in life which one must fight alone (336)." She leaves her home and goes to stay with her aunt for a while. During this time of introspection, the reader is given no information about the happenings in Mrs. Baroda's life. But upon her return, it is apparent that she has experienced some form of enlightenment concerning the situation with Gouvernail, for she tells her husband that she has "overcome everything" and that she intends to conduct herself differently with Gouvernail in the future (336).

A similar period of introspection occurs in "The Story of an Hour." After learning of her husband's death, Mrs. Mallard goes "to her room alone" with the Chopinian insistence that "no one follow her (352)." But this time, unlike in "A Respectable Woman," Chopin gives the reader a chance to observe the introspection process of a particular heroine. In her period of meditation, Mrs. Mallard knew that "something was coming to her and she was waiting for it (353)." Suddenly, in a "brief moment

of illumination (353)," she perceives her true nature. She realizes her desire for self assertion, and revels in the "long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely." Finally she would have the chance to "live for herself (353)." When she emerged from the room, there was "triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory (354)." Her newly emergent strength seems to be the result of her temporary withdrawal from societal influence, which has allowed her to access her true wishes and tendencies.

A similar desire for solitary contemplation occurs in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe." Marianne's father dies, leaving her "alone, with no will to obey in the world but her own (120)." Marianne, an already self reliant character, feels that she is now totally independent and free to live her life in her best interests. But Chopin soon makes the reader aware that "Marianne was not alone. Good...friends were about her (120)." In other words, she still has society looking out for her best interests rather than allowing her to make her own decisions. The priest (a voice of society) tells her that it would be "unseemly" now that her father is gone "to live alone in Saint Phillippe (121)." Jacques, too, attempts to persuade Marianne to follow the course of action that he sees as best for her by coming to St. Louis with his family. Marianne is experiencing the typical Chopinian conflict between her wishes and the wishes of society

for her. She tells both of them that before she can decide what course of action to take, she "must pass this night alone, and in thought (121)." The reader is not present with Marianne during the night that she spends in introspection, and after this night of solitary meditation, she makes her final decision. She receives one more entreaty to conform to society's wishes the following morning with a proposal for marriage from Captain Vaudry. But Marianne has made up her mind and will not be swayed by her emotions. She goes into the wilderness to make a life for herself as a "brave," "strong," independent, and self assertive woman (123).

In "A Lady of Bayou St. John" Madame Delisle is "alone *with her slaves*" because her husband has gone off to war (298). This would seem to be the perfect situation for the Chopinian Heroine, but during this time she is very "lonely and disconsolate (298)," for she has not yet had that "brief moment of illumination" that comes in total isolation and leads to self assertion. She soon becomes involved with a Frenchman named Sepincourt, who lives nearby and has not gone to the war. After Sepincourt asks her to go to Paris with him, she hurries away into the house and that night for the first time, she wants to be *totally* alone. She does not want her maid to come tell her stories before she goes to sleep, and she doesn't even light the candle that she had previously left burning all night as she slept. She wanted "to

be alone, to tremble and to weep (300)." It is during this period of isolation that she experiences personal growth and "become[s] a woman capable of love or sacrifice (299)." Sepincourt has aided her in becoming a woman, but she will shortly realize (just as Mrs. Baroda did) that as a woman there are some "battles" in life that she must "fight" alone. Soon after this incident, she learns of her husband's death, and she goes through a "long period of silence" in which she is alone and will see no one--not even Sepincourt (301). It is during this period of introspection that she makes some decisions that affect the course of her life and which no one, not even the reader, is involved in the process of. After weighing her emotional attachment to Sepincourt with more practical motives, she will not consent to go away with him, for she now has the chance, as a faithful widow, to be truly independent and reliant on no man.

SOCIETAL IMPOSITION AND IMPERIALISM

There is one "masculine" quality that it would appear Chopin does not want her Heroine to exhibit: imposition/imperialism. This is not so much that it is non-feminine, as that it is non-natural, the mortal enemy of self-assertion and autonomy. It is with this quality that Chopin distinguishes the "masculinity" of the traditional male and the "masculinity" of the Chopinian

Heroine. While both are portrayed as being fiercely confident and determined to assert themselves and their beliefs, Chopin juxtaposes the imperialistic assertion of traditional males with the personal assertion of her Heroine (i.e. 'what's good for me is good for you' vs. 'what's good for me is good for me').

Chopin frequently accomplishes this by employing rape imagery and language (a similar injustice perpetrated primarily by traditional males at the expense of females) to describe the former. Juanita, true to Chopinian Heroine form, has no intention of getting married and apparently never does. The 'masculine' male suitors who wish to marry her are, through their wooing, attempting to impose their beliefs upon Juanita. The language used to describe the wooing process very blatantly (even to the extent that the narration sacrifices fluidity) employs phallic and rape imagery. Coming "from the city by *train...*, [the suitors] *hung* on her fence..., *met her in the lanes...*, [and] *penetrated* to the store and back to the living room [emphasis added] (368)."

The self-asserted, 'masculine' Juanita does not entertain these propositions and instead initiates a relationship with a "helpless" and "one-legged" man (368). She, however, in accordance with her beliefs, does not marry the man. Her disbelief in marriage is apparently at least as strong as the 'masculine' suitors' belief, but Juanita (unlike the latter) is

willing to confine this belief to her own life. She does not make an issue of her 'non-marriage.' Although she is quite content with her decision, she lies about it to society with a questionable "story of a wandering preacher...; a secret marriage in the State of Illinois; and a lost certificate (368)." Juanita and her lover then depart from this society to enjoy what they have decided they enjoy ["They go off thus to the woods together where they may love each other away from the prying eyes... (368)"]. This is an example of how firm resolve in an ideal does not imply to the Chopinian Heroine the need to achieve its universality.

"A Lady of Bayou St. John" is a four page story in which the word *penetrate* is used four times. In this story penetration imagery is used to portray any conscious attempt to impose restrictions on one's own true nature or the true nature of another. As the relationship of Madame Delisle and Sepincourt develops, her husband becomes more and more alienated from her affections. Her husband caters to her emotions in no way (he is not even in the same state), but Sepincourt gives her attention, flatters her, is kind to her. Using the recurrent mist imagery to illustrate heightened emotion (as in, e.g., the "purple mist" of "Regret" that "hid [Mamzelle Aurelie's farm] from her view (378)" after her very emotional motherhood experience), it is said that "the living image of her husband had been receding

further and further into a mist which she could penetrate with no faculty or power that she possessed (299)." Her growing affections for Sepincourt and her receding affections for her husband are natural. The urge to reverse this natural process is based on societal concerns, and to do so would entail a forced "penetration." In this manner, patriarchal society is shown to penetrate or force itself upon the "true nature of women."

When the infatuation is at its mutual peak, Sepincourt decides it is time to formalize a bond between them. As a mere "girl" (used by Chopin to mean 'uncorrupted' as opposed to 'immature'), Madame Delisle had been enjoying her emotions for themselves and such a step had never occurred to her. The implication, by extension, being that affection is a virtue in and of itself and marriage does not follow (to Madame Delisle as a nature figure) naturally, but only as a result of societal imposition. So, even though, to fight her affections for Sepincourt requires penetration, when she realizes that Sepincourt is serious about his proposal (which had not initially occurred to her) "she saw it [his sincerity] at once in a glance that penetrated her own (299)." This scene marks the rape-like societal corruption of Madame Delisle, which interestingly is described as an induction into womanhood. Her reaction is that of a victim. First, "she withdrew from him, frightened," next,

"hurried away into the house," and, then, ran to her room "to be alone, to tremble and weep (299)."

Later, when she ultimately rejects his offer, she does it in a very consciously inoffensive statement of her own self-awareness and offers no advice or opinions about his own. She begins by asking him "calmly... 'Can you not feel---can you not understand, *mon ami*,...that now such a thought...is impossible to me?" and concludes with "Do not be offended, *mon ami* (301)."

Sepincourt, a man of society, is described as "wondering why she did not take the sword from her altar and thrust it through his body here and there (301)." But instead he finds himself "confused, enraged with pain" by a very unique instance of penetration. In this, the story's concluding instance of penetration, her declaration of her own self-assertion is referred to as "penetrating his *soul* like fire (301)." Here Chopin presents the idea that a person's true nature can penetrate its illusory societal counterpart--not, however, in the aggressive militant way that the unnatural societal nature is forced to, but by example. Her confident defiance of society in the interest of her own self-assertion penetrated his soul. In Sepincourt's conditioned opinion, penetrating his body with a sword "would have been infinitely more agreeable (301)." This final penetration image is employed to show the innate superiority of self over society by juxtaposing the violent rape-

like penetration of society with the passive penetration by example of self-assertion. Sepincourt knows, after experiencing the latter, that he would have been far 'less penetrated' by a sword in the manner of the former.

Another instance of penetration in "A Lady of Bayou St. John" draws a parallel between man's violent and patriarchal imposition on the nature of a women with patriarchal society's violent imposition on the nature of human(or woman)kind. The Civil War creates a gloom that is said to "penetrate...existence and deprive it of its joyousness (298)." Another instance of society's imposition is found is "Miss McEnders," when Chopin rather sardonically names the firm which employs Mademoiselle Salambre, as well as other women, "Push and Prodem" and identifies Miss McEnders' father as being "in the foremost rank in the interesting game of 'push' that occupies mankind (207)." The imposing nature of organized society, however, is probably most clearly outlined in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe." There is a conflict going on between the French, English, and Spanish kings (imperial patriarchal forces) over territory in the New World. The villagers have deserted the tiny French town of Saint Phillippe because of the "hated intrusion" of the English (119). But the villagers--hating the English more than the intrusion--flee to the city of St. Louis, only to be ruled by a French king. Marianne will not submit to such rule and declares that not only

will the English "never be masters of Marianne," neither will the French or Spanish (122). She denies allegiance to any country and refuses to submit to "treacherous kings," who are the embodiment of an imposing, imperial, and intrusive patriarchy (122).

Perhaps the best summary of Chopin's concept of societal imposition appears in "The Story of an Hour" regarding, in this case, the institution of marriage. Mrs. Mallard feels liberated after her husband's death when she realizes that there will no longer be a "powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women feel they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature (353)."

ETHICS

The most frequent attacks levelled against anyone who attempts to defy social conventions focus on the issue of ethics. In the case of the Chopinian Heroine, there are numerous qualities (e.g., single parenthood) that society on the whole would condemn as 'unethical.' However, Chopin draws a distinct line between 'unethical' and 'unsocietal.' Ethics, to Chopin, is founded in (human) nature and not society. It is so far distinct from society, that the two often contradict. As a natural quality, ethics (like motherhood, autonomy, etc.) is another

quality that must be introspectively accessed by the Chopinian Heroine.

One of the most striking illustrations of the contrasts between society and nature is the story "Miss McEnders." The societal ethics of Miss McEnders are contrasted with the natural ethics of Mademoiselle Salambre. Miss McEnders is involved in social reform, as were many women in Chopin's day, and this story can be read as a satire on women such as Miss McEnders who thought they were improving the moral condition of society but actually did not understand morals themselves. When she is first introduced to us in the story, on her list of things to do is joining a committee to "investigate the moral condition of St. Louis factory girls" and "read a paper upon 'The Dignity of Labor' before the Woman's Reform Club (204)." Miss McEnders, despite her good intentions, does not have the background needed to investigate the moral condition of factory girls for she has never been a factory girl and cannot know what that experience entails. Her presentation on 'The Dignity of Labor' is equally ridiculous in that she has never worked a day in her life but has been given everything she has by her wealthy father.

When Miss McEnders goes to visit Mademoiselle Salambre, who is working on Miss McEnders' trousseau, she draws her "invisible mantle of chastity closely about her" as soon as she realizes that Mademoiselle is an unwed mother (206). Miss McEnders has

been socialized to believe that marriage, which she herself is about to enter into willingly, is the only "moral" way to have a family--when in reality it is just the only socially "acceptable" way. Miss McEnders "hated [what she felt was] unrighteousness" and feeling that Mlle. Salambre was "living in...sin" she withdrew her contracted work from her (207). Miss McEnders' beliefs have been socialized into her primarily through organized religion. She feels a missionary-like desire to correct others who stray from the "moral" path (this is a cardinal sin in Chopinian ideology, which opposes the "masculine" trait of imposition). "When it pleased God to place the lash in her hand [Miss McEnders] did not hesitate to apply it" in whatever way she felt would teach the best moral lesson (207). Mademoiselle Salambre becomes aware of Miss McEnders' intent and informs her that "Life is not all 'couleur de rose'...you do not know what life is! (206)" She is right--Miss McEnders' morals are virginal, untested; Mademoiselle Salambre, on the other hand, has vast experience but still maintains an ethic of personal integrity. She embodies the dignity of labor for women in a way that Miss McEnders' paper could never present it. In this instance, Mlle. Salambre seems to have taught Miss McEnders a lesson about ethics. When she returns to her room and finds a box of "white spring blossoms" from her fiance (whom she has recently learned is a very unethical man), she "cast[s] the

spotless thing into the wide, sooty fire-place" and weeps bitterly about her newfound knowledge (211).

Another Chopinian Heroine who follows her natural impulses with behavior that is 'unsocietal' (but not 'unethical') is Juanita. The narrator comments that Juanita "to all *appearances* and according to all *accounts*" is one who "does not reflect credit upon her family or her native town of Rock Springs" because of her actions (367). Society has determined what in its eyes are moral actions, and because Juanita does not conform to these, she is branded as 'unethical.' The source of the social condemnation is Juanita's choice of a romantic partner and her style of life with him. Juanita has had a choice of several suitable husbands, but not only does she decide not to marry them, she chooses instead a "poor and shabby" lover and becomes involved with--but does not marry--him (368). Juanita's first transgression against society was her choice of a man to become involved with; her second was that she consented to be his lover, but not his wife. A third societal transgression is Juanita's motherhood. Since she is apparently not married, she is not legitimately eligible (in society's eyes) to be a mother. But Juanita and her lover have a relationship that will not be placed within society's limits. Chopin portrays the "naturalness" of the relationship as Juanita and her lover "go off thus to the woods together where they may love each other away from all prying

eyes, save those of the birds and squirrel. But what do squirrels care! (368)" Juanita and her lover are away from the condemning eyes of society while they are in the woods, and nature's eyes don't care. The narrator says that she "never expected Juanita to be more respectable than a squirrel" and she doesn't see how anyone else could have expected it (368). What on the surface may seem to be derogatory is really a compliment: To be as respectable as a squirrel (something in nature) is much more valuable than to be respectable in society's eyes.

Another character who defies (or at least plans in the future to defy) society's definition of respectability is Mrs. Baroda in "A Respectable Woman." This title suggests an attempt on Chopin's part to re-define 'respectability' in terms of natural as opposed to societal ethics. Initially Mrs. Baroda does not follow her natural emotional impulses to "reach out...and touch [Gouvernail] with the sensitive tips of her fingers...[or] draw close to him and whisper against his cheek (335)" because she is a respectable woman--in other words, an ethical woman in society's eyes. She is held under certain societal constraints and feels that there are some things that a woman just should not do. But later in the story, after she comes to realize her true nature and decides to assert herself, she undergoes a change of attitude. She now doesn't make ethical decisions based on society's views, but based on her own views of

what is right for her. She has overcome what her husband calls "her dislike" for Gouvernail, but she has also overcome more than that. She tells her husband that she has "overcome everything! (336)"--meaning that she had overcome the societal obstacles which made her desire to be a "respectable woman" instead of following her emotions.

The qualities exhibited by the Chopinian Heroine are all based on self-assertion hindered by an imposing, patriarchal society. When she asserts herself and faces each of these seven issues (societal gender roles, marriage, motherhood, conflict and balance of emotion and reason, independence/autonomy, societal imposition and imperialism, and ethics) a new strength emerges as she transcends the limits of society to realize her true nature. When faced with the issue of societal gender roles, the Chopinian Heroine demonstrates that no individual is wholly "masculine" or wholly "feminine." By transcending the limits placed on her by society, she is able to exhibit both the masculine and the feminine qualities that come naturally to her. When faced with marriage, the Chopinian Heroine prefers not to marry for fear that it will hamper her in her search for her true nature and in her practice of self-assertion. Any relationship that hinders one's self assertion is to be avoided. While marriage is seen as confining and unnatural, motherhood seems to be one of the most

natural desires that the Chopinian Heroine can have. She should not be limited by society's belief that motherhood can only legitimately exist within marriage. Although Chopin does not entirely resolve the question of how to attain fatherhood outside of marriage, fatherhood seems to be reduced to a purely biological role and Chopin illustrates a definite faith in the single mother. The Chopinian Heroine would seem to need to suppress her emotions in order to achieve self-assertion, but Chopin maintains that emotions are just as natural (and, therefore, themselves an integral part of self-assertion) as a woman's more practical reason. The characteristic of the Chopinian Heroine is that she is able to be reasonable and practical without denying her emotions. The Chopinian Heroine is also a woman who clings fiercely to her independence and who relies on herself to come to the right conclusions about the actions to take in her life. She usually goes through a period of introspection in which she rationally decides between her own desires and the desires of society for her. Chopin believes that a woman's nature is rather maliciously preyed upon by the imposition and imperialism of patriarchal society. The Chopinian Heroine matches this society in confidence and resolve, but not missionary zeal. She focusses her attention on self-realization and makes no attempt to universalize her personal ideals. These ideals, being congruent with a woman's nature, have a penetrating power of their own independent of the heroine. Society shapes individuals forcefully and unnaturally, the Chopinian Heroine by

appealing to their true self with passive example. The choices that she makes may not always be approved of by society, but the Chopinian Heroine follows her natural ethical tendencies and stands firm concerning what is right for her.

As stated before, the above is only a partial list of the qualities that emerge from Chopin's fiction to define the Chopinian Heroine. But the commonality between these and other characteristics is that they put forth self-assertion as the goal of women in contemporary society. Chopin built upon the increasingly accepted assertion that domesticity was a product of society and not of "the feminine nature," by setting out to define the feminine nature as liberated from societal prescriptions. This, she maintained, is the challenge that was to face the emerging woman in the generations to follow. This was the heart and essence of feminism--women being what they are and not what they are told they are. In the words of the author herself in "The Story of an Hour," "What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized to be the strongest impulse of her being! (354)"

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