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Kate Chopin's Life and Personal Influence

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Jasdomin Tolentino

Thesis:

Kate Chopin, raised in an unconventional and matriarchal Louisiana family, went against nineteenth century chauvinist society and used her own life experiences to embody her feminist views in stories like “The Storm” and “The Story of an Hour.”

I. Her Background

A. Her Family

1. She lived at home with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, all of them widows.
2. Kate Chopin’s great-grandmother, Mme. Victoria Verdon Charleville directed her mental and artistic growth (taught her piano lessons) until she died when Kate was eleven.
3. Chopin’s great-grandmother also cultivated in her a taste for storytelling, a relish for the intimate details about historical figures in Louisiana, and an unabashed, unhesitant, even unjudgmental intellectual curiosity about life.
4. She was one of three children, but her sisters died in infancy.

B. Her Environments

1. Kate Chopin was born in St. Louis, Missouri.
2. She was enrolled by her father, in the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart.
 - a. The academy exposed her to Catholic teachings and a French emphasis on intellectual vigor

- b. The academy also taught Chopin to think independently, but to be submissive to men.
 3. She met her husband, Oscar Chopin, on a trip to New Orleans and married him in June 1870.
 4. Chopin and her husband moved to Cloutierville after he suffered losses at his job.
 5. After Oscar died, Chopin moved back to St. Louis to live with her mother.
- C. Close people that died in her life
 1. Kate Chopin's father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was killed in a train accident in 1855.
 2. Chopin was eleven years old when both Mme. Charleville and Chopin's half brother George died.
 3. On December 10, 1882, Oscar died unexpectedly from a fever.
 - a. She became a widow at thirty, and with six children successfully ran her husband's business for a year.
 - b. Chopin's affair with Albert Sampite blossoms.
 - c. She moved back with her mother after the year.
 4. Chopin's mother died shortly after Oscar's death.
 - a. Chopin became depressed.
 - b. Chopin was encouraged by a doctor to write for solace.

II. "The Storm"

- A. Plot summary
 - 1. The story is about an affair between Calixta and Alcée, whom are both married.
 - 2. The sexual tension between Calixta and Alcée mirrored the storm that was occurring.
 - 3. The affair is depicted as a necessary escape from reality. The affair was necessary in order to maintain satisfaction in their marriages.
 - B. Calixta and Alcée
 - 1. Calixta and Alcée are both married to other people, and in the past knew each other and were attracted to each other.
 - 2. Calixta and Alcée both treat their spouses better after the affair.
 - 3. Both feel guiltless, joyful, and more understanding after the affair.
 - C. Connections with Chopin's life
 - 1. "The Storm" mirrored her own affair with a married man named Albert Sampite.
 - 2. "The Storm" continues Chopin's confrontation with the theme of women's sexuality and the complexities of the married state.
 - 3. Chopin takes from Albert's personality and name to construct the character Alcée.
- III. "The Story of an Hour"
- A. Plot summary
 - 1. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is the story of an hour in the life of Mrs. Louise Mallard.

- a. The story mirrors the life of Chopin's mother.
 - b. The tale is also about Chopin's own liberation.
2. As the story begins, the narrator reveals that Mrs. Mallard has "heart trouble."
- a. Josephine, her sister, and her husband's friend Richards go to Mrs. Mallard after hearing of a railroad disaster that has resulted in the death of Mr. Mallard.
 - b. Moreover, both are concerned that the news will make Mrs. Mallard ill and Josephine takes great care to tell her the news as cautiously as she is able.
3. After Mrs. Mallard hears the news, she is overcome with grief, but then realizes the freedom she'll gain.

B. Mrs. Mallard

1. Mrs. Mallard is a young woman with a "heart trouble."
2. She breaks down after hearing news that her husband has died.
3. She goes to her room and looks out the window and notices it is spring.
 - a. Chopin uses imagery to show how beautiful it is outside.
 - b. She sees the birds, trees, and sky and is reborn
4. Mrs. Mallard finally awakens to the fact that she is free and independent and can live for herself.
5. Mrs. Mallard dies in the end when she realizes that her husband is alive, and her dreams are shattered.

- C. Connections with Chopin's own life and views
1. As in "The Storm," Chopin forms her character from people who inspired her.
 - a. Louise sounds like her mother's name, "Eleeza."
 - b. The name Brently Mallard was constructed from two people who were thought dead in the same accident Chopin's father was in.
 - c. Eliza also has a sister named Josephine.
 2. "The Story of an Hour" represented the life of Chopin's mother, Eliza O'Flaherty.
 - a. Eliza's husband died in a train accident.
 - b. Eliza was also young and submissive to her husband, like Mrs. Mallard.
 - c. Eliza's marriage was an arranged marriage, so it could be a possibility that she enjoyed the freedom.
 3. Chopin was also liberated by her father's untimely death.
 - a. After her father's death, Chopin was able to come back from the boarding school her father enrolled her in.
 - b. The death of Chopin's father, kept Chopin from growing up in a typical nine-teenth century patriarchal household.

Where do authors get their inspiration? Many authors use their own experiences to influence their works. Some do it to fight for something they truly believe in, while others might do it subconsciously. Writers can get their inspiration from their upbringing, setting, or even traumatic experiences. For instance, Kate Chopin, raised in an unconventional and matriarchal Louisiana family, went against nineteenth century chauvinist society and used her own life experiences to embody her feminist views in stories like “The Storm” and “The Story of an Hour.”

Katherine O’Flaherty, later Kate Chopin, was born in St. Louis, Missouri on February 8, 1851. She was born to stable and publicly known parents, Eliza and Thomas O’Flaherty. Eliza O’Flaherty was of French-Creole descent, while her father was a native of Ireland. Unfortunately, when Chopin was only five years old, her father was killed in a train accident. As a result, Kate Chopin lived her preteen years in a female-centered household. She lived with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, all of whom were widows. Her great-grandmother, Mme. Victoria Verdon Charleville, “directed young Kate’s mental and artistic growth” and “cultivated in the young girl a taste for storytelling, a relish for the intimate details about... the earliest settlers of the Louisiana Territory, and an unabashed, unhesitant, even unjudgmental intellectual curiosity about life” (Davis par. 3). Therefore, her great-grandmother had a life-long influence on Chopin’s upbringing. She encouraged artistic growth by teaching her the piano, but also taught her “to explore unconventional ideas” (Davis par.3).

Chopin’s formal education at the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart also had a great impact on her life. She was five years old when her father enrolled her there, and for the next thirteen years she attended it sporadically. The academic program matched

what Chopin learned from Mme Charleville because “it mixed women’s wisdom, rigorous intellectual challenges, homely chores, and the celebration of women” (Toth, “Unveiling Kate” 15). The Academy also exposed her to “Catholic teachings and a French emphasis on intellectual vigor,” which helped her become an “inquisitive observer” (Seyersted 21). Chopin was taught to think independently, but also to be submissive to men. However, the fact that Chopin grew up in a household of women and was taught by nuns, did not prepare her “to accept completely the limitations on a woman’s autonomy that have traditionally accompanied wifedom.” Therefore, despite the fact that she was taught to be independent-minded she knew that she would eventually become a housewife. However, both at home and in school, she had only seen women exercising authority. Moreover, this “inconsistency between training and experience contributed to the” irony of her own happy marriage with the creation of her feminist female characters who felt trapped in their marriages (Skaggs 2-3). I agree with the fact that the inconsistencies in her life, led her to become independent through her writing, and even unconventional behavior.

Despite Kate Chopin’s unconventional upbringing, she married at the age of twenty-five to a man named Oscar Chopin in June 1870. They had a happy marriage, and she bore six of his children. During their marriage, Kate Chopin “fulfilled heavy social responsibilities” as the wife of a prominent broker (Skaggs 3). However, she did not always conform. For instance, she would take long walks unaccompanied, and smoke in public, when women were not allowed to smoke (Toth, “Kate Chopin” 125). She also did not conform in Cloutierville, where they had to move after Oscar’s business failed. For example, people gossiped about her way of dressing, since it was intentionally seductive,

and criticized her for not attending to her household chores, but instead choosing to “stroll up and down the street” and “lift her skirts higher than was necessary” when crossing the streets (Toth, “Kate Chopin 141). Despite all the criticism and gossip, Oscar did not mind. He actually enjoyed the fact that she was different. Unfortunately, he died a few years later of swamp fever on December 10, 1882. Not only did Chopin become both mother and father, she inherited Oscar’s debt and business, which she successfully ran for a year (Davis par. 7). However, I don’t find it shocking that Chopin was able to manage her husband’s business, while simultaneously caring for her children. After all, she did grow up in a house full of strong and independent widows. Her family has a history of women outliving their husbands, and aside from that she was introduced to that lifestyle since the age of five.

The losses in Kate Chopin’s life had serious impacts on her views and writing. For example, her father’s death inspired her to write “The Story of an Hour,” which was the imagined effect she thought it would have on her mother. Moreover, before she became a teenager, she had already endured the death of her half-brother George O’Flaherty and her great-grandmother, both of whom died a month apart. Her childhood was also affected by the early deaths of her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Their deaths “prevented her as she matured from experiencing in her own family the traditional submissiveness of women to men” (Skaggs 2). Unfortunately, the losses did not end there. She had to endure the death of her husband and her mother’s death shortly after. It is no wonder she became depressed, and wrote for solace (Toth, “Unveiling Kate” 105). I believe that Chopin’s losses only made her stronger. Many women during that time were not trained to survive without their husbands, but Chopin was different.

Moreover, in the midst of grief and debt following her husband's death, Chopin's affair with a man named Joseph Albert Sampite blossomed. Joseph Albert Sampite, mostly known as Albert, was married to a woman named Marie Lodoiska ("Loca") Sampite, and had two children. Around town he was known as a "womanizer," (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 166) and everyone, including his wife, knew he was pursuing Kate Chopin. Chopin and Albert had many things in common. For example, they loved horses, the outdoors, and were interested in land and farming (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 166-167), as opposed to Marie and Albert who shared little in common. Marie "was interested in home and family and children, while he preferred hunting, gambling, drinking, and riding about at night" (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 166). Albert and Chopin became very close friends. They not only shared common interests, he also helped her collect money owed to her from her business and discussed the adjoined land they shared.

Many of the townspeople knew of the affair, but whether it went on while she was still married is still unknown. Chopin left proof that her relationship with Albert was more than just friendship in her published writings (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 169). Even in her diary she confessed "that more than flirting had gone on in her life: 'I had loved-lovers who were not divine'" (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 169). Loca Sampite also knew of the affair, and her daughter "always said that Kate Chopin destroyed her parents' marriage" (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 169). However, the affair did not go on for long. According to the people that knew them, "the general talk was that he was in love with the pretty widow, and there were those who believed that she, too, was in love with him. And that may be why she suddenly gave up the store and the plantation and went back to St. Louis" (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 172). In the end, Chopin left to her mother's home, "choosing a mother's

love over a man's uncertain passions"(Toth, "Kate Chopin" 172). So, like many of her characters, Chopin eventually gave in to her desires but tragically also gave them up. I believe that the strong bond she had with her mother, and the freedom she enjoyed being single had a tremendous effect on her choice. After all, many people, including Seyersted, believe she loved the benefits that came with being alone (Hicks par. 8).

"The Storm" by Chopin was a story she created long after her affair with Albert Sampite. As she does with many of the names of her characters, she named the man in many of her novels and short stories after Albert, with only a few minor changes. For example, when Chopin wrote, "about men who kindle desire, and who devote themselves to sexual pleasure, she named them all Alcée" which happens to be "an abbreviated form of Albert Sampite: Al. S----- é and Alcée are both pronounced 'Al-say.'" (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 169). In "At the Cadian Ball" and "The Storm," which was the sequel, Alcée Laballière is "a handsome young planter" who plays cards and enjoys "talking crops and politics'-unless '[a] drink or two could put the devil in his head'"(Toth, "Kate Chopin" 169). Just like Alcée, Albert had a drinking problem and would become so violent that he would beat his wife. That could have also been a factor in the reason that Chopin ended the affair. However, the most notable use of Albert's name and character was seen in "The Awakening" where "Kate divided the name *Albert* between Edna's two lovers: ALcée and RoBERT" (Toth, "Kate Chopin 170). I think that even though Chopin could not be with Albert, that she vented out her frustrations and desires through many of her works.

"The Storm" by Kate Chopin mirrored Chopin's beliefs and experiences. The short story was about two married couple's; Calixta and Bobinôt; Alcée and Clarisse.

Calixta and Alcée are both married, yet have a brief affair. As Calixta's husband and son Bibi take refuge from the storm at a local store, Calixta and Alcée are giving in to each other's desires. However, Calixta and Alcée are not strangers. They knew each other in the past, and had even flirted before, but had not seen each other much since she married. As the title suggests, there was a physical storm, but ironically an emotional and sexual one as well. The rain started to pour as soon as Alcée entered the home. The rain was so strong it "beat upon the low, shingled roof with a force and clatter that threatened to break an entrance and deluge them there" (Chopin, "The Storm" 414). Calixta confirmed the rage of the storm by looking out the window. Her fear and anxiety got the best of her and she fell backwards only to fall into Alcée's arms. He assured her that her son was fine and that nothing would happen to the house. It was then that they reminisced about the past, and that the sexual tension that had been repressed since the storm began, was released. Despite the fact that storm worsened, "they did not heed the crashing torrents, and the roar of the elements made her laugh as she lay in his arms" (Chopin, "The Storm" 415). Therefore, Calixta and Alcée consciously and willingly gave into each other's wants, despite the storm, and their marital status.

The imagery Chopin used in "The Storm" not only described the weather, but Calixta and Alcée's affair as well. It is only when Calixta initially starts to feel discomfort and tension that the storm progresses. The storm overall is brief, just like their affair. Ironically, as soon as the affair was over and Alcée leaves, "the sun was turning the glistening green world into a palace of gems" (Chopin, "The Storm" 415). Even their actions reflect the day itself. In the beginning, there is tension, then sexual fulfillment, and ultimately happiness and satisfaction, as is reflected at the end when the sun comes

out. Afterwards they even feel happier, with no shred of guilt or regret. They also are more understanding towards their families, as seen through their actions. For example, when Bobinôt and Bibi came back they were greeted with kisses instead of arguments. Bobinôt and Bibi were not used to this treatment, after all Bibi had come back dirty. However, neither her husband nor son suspected anything, so, instead, they “began to relax and enjoy themselves” (Chopin, “The Storm” 416). Moreover, at the dinner table, “when the three seated themselves...they laughed much and so loud that anyone might have heard them as far away as Laballière's” (Chopin, “The Storm” 416). As for Alcée, he wrote his wife a love letter of “tender solicitude,” even encouraging her to take a longer vacation (Chopin, “The Storm” 416). Therefore, in the end, the affair helped their marriages, as opposed to damaging them. As the ending states, “So the storm passed and every one was happy” (Chopin, “The Storm” 416). So literally, nothing negative came out of the storm, except for deception. “The Storm” was depicted as a necessary escape from reality and even essential in order to maintain satisfaction in a marriage. As seen in Chopin’s life, it was no mystery why Chopin used Albert’s character in both The Awakening and “The Storm.” In both stories, Chopin’s character Alcée “awakens a woman to sexual passion she has never known before” (Toth, “Unveiling Kate” 98). After reading about Chopin’s life, I believe that although Chopin did not and possibly could not continue her affair with Albert, that she kept his memory alive through her writing.

“The Story of an Hour” also explores the complexities of the married state. As the title suggests, the story is about an hour in the life of the protagonist, Mrs. Millard. Mrs. Millard has a fragile heart, so when news came that her husband had died in a train

accident, her sister Josephine and her husband Richard had to be cautious in the manner in which they told her. Although they thought the news would negatively affect her health, the irony comes in that she finds freedom and liberation in his death. Initially, Mrs. Millard was overcome with grief, but afterwards all she could whisper is, "Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin, "Story of an Hour" 354). For the first time since her marriage, she is free to live for herself. She noticed things outside her window she had not before. She was reborn. Unfortunately, her joy was literally short-lived. In the end, her husband returns without the slightest idea about the accident. As for Mrs. Millard, she dies instantly after seeing him. Ironically, the ending phrase is that she died, "of joy that kills" (Chopin, "Story of an Hour" 354). However, her death was more of shock and disappointment.

Chopin used many literary elements to convey her message of liberation and the repression of marriage. For instance, she used personification when she wrote, "she was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression" to give the reader insight on how depressing her life and, more importantly, her marriage really was. Chopin also used imagery to show the reader what the character was seeing, and even feeling. For example, when Mrs. Millard looked out the window she saw that "the delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves" (Chopin, "Story of an Hour" 352). Chopin deliberately "tempers the emotional elements inherent in Mrs. Mallard's situation" and by using imagery and "the suspension of intelligent thought" she allows the reader to "remain an onlooker" (Hicks par. 7). Therefore, the viewer is allowed to see the change and

liberation Mrs. Millard undergoes, but not be part of it. The viewer gets to see the changes that transform within her. She is now able to see what she normally would have missed.

In real life, Chopin's inspiration came from her mother's loss. Therefore, like "The Storm," Chopin named her characters after people who inspired her. For example, "Louise" sounds like "Eleeza," the French pronunciation of Eliza's name; Louise, like Eliza, has a sister named Josephine" (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 10). Also Brently's last name, Mallard, is also similar to the name Bullard, which is the name of a man that died at the Gasconade (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 10). Also Brently Mallard's initials (BM), are the same as the "two men falsely reported dead at the Gasconade Bridge" Bryan and Moore (Toth, "Kate Chopin" 33). Not only are the names similar, but the situations as well. After all, Chopin's father died in a train accident at the Gasconade Bridge. Therefore, the story can also be read as the story of her mother's marriage. Eliza was barely sixteen when she married thirty-nine year old Thomas O'Flaherty. Moreover, the marriage had been arranged because Eliza's family lacked money and "marriage was the only respectable way for a young woman to acquire it" (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 5-6). So, I agree that the story was written about Eliza O'Flaherty's marriage. The story was about "the submission of a young woman to someone else's will," (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 10) and that definitely fit her description.

However, the actual story and life of Eliza have a few minor differences. According to Toth, Chopin had to disguise reality in order to "make her story publishable" (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 10). Therefore, it was necessary for Mrs. Millard to die at the end, instead of her husband. As Toth explains, "a story in which an unhappy

wife is suddenly widowed, becomes rich, and lives happily ever after--Eliza O'Flaherty's story--would have been much too radical, far too threatening, in the 1980s" (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 10). Toth also suggests the possibility that it could have also been the tale of Chopin's own freedom (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 10). For instance, the accident that killed Thomas O'Flaherty "liberated his daughter to come home, to be raised among the powerful women of her family" (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 10), as opposed to remaining at the boarding school that she was sent to at the age of five by her father. Furthermore, the accident "kept Kate O'Flaherty from growing up in the typical nineteenth century patriarchal household, in which a powerful husband ruled the roost..." (Toth, "Unveiling Kate" 11). This story deeply reflected both her mother's liberation and Chopin's.

Kate Chopin was indeed ahead of her time. She is the epitome of a feminist, and as a result, some of her stories were banned. Through her writing, she was able to give a voice to women that felt trapped in their marriages and in society. The fact that she was able to draw from her own experiences to mold her characters made her works even stronger. Both "The Storm" and "The Story of an Hour" liberate women from the constraints of society and marriage, while simultaneously drawing from Chopin's own life.

Annotated Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Storm." Lives Through Literature: A Thematic Anthology. Ed. Helene Levine Keating and Walter Levy. 3rd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001. 413-416.

Kate Chopin was an American author of short stories and novels. This book contained one of Chopin's short stories called "The Storm." This short story is about two married people, who despite their marital status have an affair. "The Storm" was essential to my research paper because I needed it in order to summarize the story. It also allowed me to show the similarities it had with Chopin's own life and beliefs.

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." The Complete Works of Kate Chopin. Ed. Per Seyersted. Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1969. 352-354.

Kate Chopin was an American author of short stories and novels. This book contained Chopin's short story, "The Story of an Hour." This short story was about a woman who thought her husband had died, and in it found freedom and liberation. This book allowed me to look through the story and see the similarities between the characters and Chopin's family.

Davis, Sara deSaussure. "Kate Chopin." Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 12: American Realists and Naturalists (1982): 59-71. Literature Resource Center. Gale. Pace Univ., Mortola Library. 3 Mar. 2008 <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/>>

The author has her Ph.D. in English (American Literature) from Tulane University and has published many works about Kate Chopin. She is also a chairperson in the Department of English in the University of Alabama. The article summarized Chopin's life, but mainly focused on The Awakening. This article has been very useful because it gave insight on Chopin's relationship with her great-grandmother and the effects the losses during her childhood had on her.

Hicks, Jennifer. An overview of "The Story of an Hour"(1997). Literature Resource Center. Gale. Pace Univ., Mortola Library. 3 Mar. 2008 <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/>>

Hicks is director of the Academic Support and Writing Assessment program at Massachusetts Bay Community College. In the essay she discusses the theme of female self-assertion as it relates to "The Story of an Hour." This article was very helpful because besides retelling the "The Story of an Hour," it established connections between her writing and upbringing (being fatherless at a young age and being raised by mostly women). It also showed how Chopin and her feminist characters saw individuality, freedom, and joy as important, and gave more insight on the imagery used.

Seyersted, Per. Introduction. The Complete Works of Kate Chopin. Ed. Per Seyersted. Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1969. 21.

This author is an assistant professor of American literature at the University of Oslo. He was educated at Harvard University and the University of Oslo. He has also published articles in American and Scandinavian Periodicals on Kate Chopin. The introduction gave a brief history of Chopin's childhood. However, it was extremely helpful because it connected what she learned at the Academy of the Sacred Heart with her character, and how it helped her become an excellent observer.

Skaggs, Peggy. Kate Chopin. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1985.

This author is a professor of English at Angelo State University and has a Ph.D. from Texas A & M University. This book briefly discusses Chopin's life and then delves into some of her most famous works. Even though there aren't specific chapters devoted to the "Story of an Hour" and "The Storm," the book does include an outline of Chopin's life and a very good summary of her life that's broken up into small phases in her life. That was helpful because it was easier to see possible connections between her life and work.

Toth, Emily. Unveiling Kate Chopin. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.

The author is a Professor of English and Women's Studies at Louisiana State University, and has written numerous books on Kate Chopin. This book, like Skagg's, discusses Chopin's life and a few of her works. However, there are a few pages devoted to "The Story of an Hour." Those few pages were helpful because it introduced the possibility that "The Story of an Hour" is a tale of her own liberation, and not just her mothers'.

Toth, Emily. Kate Chopin. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1990.

The author is a Professor of English and Women's Studies at Louisiana State University, and has written numerous books on Kate Chopin. The book contained very detailed accounts of Chopin's life and a detailed analysis of many of the stories she wrote. However, this book was most helpful because it established a connection between Chopin's affair with Albert Sampite (after she was widowed), and "The Storm." It also establishes a connection between Chopin's mother and aunt with the female characters in "The Story of an Hour."