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Exploring Kate Chopin, Robert C. Evans xiii

This introductory essay describes the structure and aims of the present volume. It outlines the contents of the "Critical Contexts" and "Critical Readings" sections, notes the nature and purposes of the scholarly "Resources" section, and explains the volume's dual focus on Chopin's two novels (especially *The Awakening*) and her widely read (and widely taught) major short stories. Seven of the included essays focus on *The Awakening*; seven others focus on some of Chopin's most important works of short fiction.

Introducing *The Awakening*: A Survey of Introductions to Editions of the Novel, Laurence W. Mazzeno xxiv

Since being "rediscovered" in the 1960s, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has been republished by dozens of popular and scholarly presses. Many of these volumes contain introductions, generally written to make the novel approachable to a wide audience ranging from students to professional scholars. This essay reviews twelve important introductions, including two key early ones that helped establish the importance of *The Awakening* in American literary history, seven by prominent literary scholars, and three by contemporary women novelists whose views represent the impact of the novel on practitioners in the genre.

Biography of Kate Chopin, Courtney Lane xlv

This deliberately brief survey of Chopin's life discusses such matters as her early years in St. Louis, her marriage and subsequent move to Louisiana, her early widowhood and several remaining years in the deep South, her move back to St. Louis, her growing

fame as a writer of "local color" short stories, the publication of her pathbreaking novel *The Awakening*, and the ways that book provoked both genuine praise and stinging criticism.

Critical Contexts

"Too Frenchy for American readers": Unreported Early Responses to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Robert C. Evans 1

Although Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is now regarded as one of the classics of American fiction, when it was first published it proved highly controversial. Some scholars claim, in fact, that the negative reactions the book often elicited helped break Chopin's spirit and kill her desire to write. This essay brings together much previously unreported evidence of just how variously the novel was received by its earliest readers and reviewers.

Introducing Chopin's Other Fiction: A Survey of Introductions to Editions of the Short Stories and *At Fault*, Laurence W. Mazzeno 19

The rediscovery of Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening*, coincident with the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, generated interest in her other work as well. Chopin's short fiction and her earlier novel *At Fault* have been reprinted in numerous editions during the past fifty years. Many are designed for the commercial market, but a number have been meticulously prepared by scholars to provide accurate texts and useful introductions and notes to help readers understand Chopin's themes and place her work in historical and cultural context. This essay examines several of these scholarly editions, providing concise summaries and explaining the various approaches taken to evaluate Chopin's achievements.

Why Did Kate Chopin Not Condemn Edna Pontellier? *The Awakening* and a New Moral Order of Life Without Free Will, Edwin Wong 38

Kate Chopin dismantles free will in her 1899 novel *The Awakening*. In that book, Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, gradually awakens into who she becomes. As she awakens, however, she discovers that she wants what she wills but does not will what she wants. Instead of being in control of her destiny, she is in thrall to accident, tricks of fortune, unaccountable thoughts, incomprehensible emotions, and other powers outside her control. Once

Chopin dismantles the notion of "Mrs. Pontellier" being a free agent, it becomes harder—if not impossible—to blame her for all the ways in which she goes against society's grain.

Fictional and Cinematic Points of View in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and *Five Stories of an Hour*, Darren Harris-Fain 70

In "The Story of an Hour" (1894), Kate Chopin convinced many readers that Mrs. Mallard deserved their sympathy despite her seeming joy in her husband's sudden death. That sympathy resulted partly from skillful use of point of view: readers are taken into Mrs. Mallard's thoughts and feelings, and *only* hers—a technique that helps build the story's subtle suspense and, for first-time readers, creates its surprise ending. In 1988, five different filmmakers produced, for one film, five different versions of the tale. This essay compares the use of point of view both in Chopin's story and in the five varied adaptations.

Critical Readings

Parentage, Pleasure, and Passion: Structure, Style, and Themes in Chopin's Stories, Nicolas Tredell 91

Kate Chopin was a prolific short-story writer, and a prominent admirer and proficient translator of the short stories of the French writer Guy de Maupassant. This essay examines how she developed beyond Maupassant's often misogynistic perspective to create her own distinctive manner of female-centered storytelling. It focuses on four major stories that exemplify key aspects of the structure, style, and themes of her short fiction—"Désirée's Baby," "A Pair of Silk Stockings," "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm"—and explores her use of the "twist" ending and of recognition and reversal, and her concern with parentage, pleasure, and passion.

Outside the Church Doors: Catholic High Holidays and Holy Days in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction, Heather Ostman 112

This essay explores the depiction of Catholic holy days within selected Chopin short stories, showing how the author used those days to contextualize her fiction and at the same time enable her characters to fulfill human desires outside of the Church. The essay focuses specifically on "After the Winter" (1896), "A Matter of Prejudice" (1895), "Love on the Bon Dieu" (1892),

"Madame Martel's Christmas Eve" (1896), and "At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892) and its unpublished sequel "The Storm," stories that feature both high holidays such as Christmas and Easter on the Catholic calendar, as well as feast days, such as the Feast of the Assumption. These holy days not only anchor the stories in time but also reveal Chopin's insights into human behavior, including human needs for love, redemption, and reconciliation, all of which are values espoused by the Catholic church, but none of which, in Chopin's stories, ironically are achieved within the context of the Church.

"Keep the skin soft and white": Skin Color and Slavery in the American South and Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby,"
Joyce E. Kelley. 131

This essay argues that "Désirée's Baby" is best understood in its mid-nineteenth-century historical context. Chopin darkly points out the arbitrary nature of an American plantation hierarchy based on a slippery category like race, where race, often thought discernable by color, can decide which persons are free and which are property. Although Chopin's ending is meant to shock the reader and expose the arbitrary nature of Armand's ingrained racism, the fact that Americans of African heritage could and did legally own slaves complicates Chopin's final point. The essay also contemplates the story's contemporary message for its initial readers in *Vogue* magazine and connects it to the landmark Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

"The anguish of maternity": Motherhood as Enslavement in Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde,"
Matthew M. Thiele. 151

This essay shows the effects of setting two of Kate Chopin's short stories about motherhood in antebellum Louisiana. Chopin moved from Missouri to Louisiana in 1870 when she married Oscar Chopin, and she lived there for about 15 years before moving back to Missouri as a widow. "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde" were both published well after her return to Missouri; setting them in antebellum Louisiana demonstrates how pervasive the influence of slavery was in America after the Civil War, and setting them in the deep South allows Chopin to directly relate ideas about slavery and enslavement to ideas about motherhood.

Freedom, Dignity, and Growth: Making Old in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction, Sue Norton 166

Kate Chopin's fiction is known for its recurring themes of female individuation; the constrictions of gender roles primarily on women but also on men; and social class distinctions in nineteenth-century America, particularly in the South and especially as related to race and ethnicity. One aspect of human life that intersects with all of her characters' story lines regardless of demographics is that of age and aging. This essay considers both the direct and the oblique ways in which Chopin causes her readers to reckon with the impact of the passage of time on both young and old in a selection of her short stories where compression of space makes more acute the effects of all character attributes, including age.

Edna and Emma: *The Awakening* and *Madame Bovary*, Nicolas Tredell 185

This essay closely compares the portrayals of Edna Pontellier in Chopin's *The Awakening* and Emma Bovary in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The plot similarities between these works have often been noted, for example by the novelist Willa Cather who, in her 1899 review, called *The Awakening* "a Creole Bovary" but wondered why Chopin had "devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme"—a complaint that echoes Henry James's observation that *Madame Bovary* itself was "really too small an affair." This essay challenges the view that these two outstanding novels are "trite," "sordid," and "small."

Aestheticist Poetics in *The Awakening*, John D. Kerkering 207

This essay argues that Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* engages with discussions about poetic representation occurring among contemporary practitioners of literary aestheticism, particularly Algernon Charles Swinburne. Focusing on the dinner party scene near the end of *The Awakening*, where one of the party's attendees quotes lines from a Swinburne sonnet that reference a "graven image of Desire," this essay demonstrates that aestheticists' concern with distinguishing representations from "graven images," or idols, informs the dinner party's unfolding dynamics and, in turn, the larger questions raised by the novel about how to embody—whether in poems or in one's person—genuineness and authenticity.

Seeking "Abysses of Solitude" in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening:* Examining Edna's Final Act Through the Material Imagination of Water, Anna Marsh 228

This essay argues that although Edna Pontellier's final swim in the Gulf of Mexico has often been interpreted in conflicting ways, ideas by Gaston Bachelard in his book *Water and Dreams* help reveal the swim as a transcendent act with transcendent motivations. The ending of the novel implies that Edna's life has been a process of perpetual self-awakening. She is not focused on any other individual in her final pursuit, not even Robert, the man she loves. Instead, her awakening culminates in a transcendence of earthly desires so that she enters forever the inviting sea, where her soul may wander for eternity in its solitude.

Winds and Waves of Death: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and the Horrendous Gulf Coast Hurricane of 1893, Robert C. Evans . . . 245

Various scholars have noted that almost all of Kate Chopin's fiction was written in the aftermath of one of the most destructive storms ever to hit the Gulf Coast. In fact, she deliberately set much of *The Awakening* in two specific locations that were nationally and internationally known to have been completely devastated by this storm. This essay gathers, in detail, much uncollected evidence (in both words and pictures) of the storm's horrific and famous impact. The essay first shows that Chopin herself almost certainly knew many details of the storm The essay then discusses the grimly ironic implications of such knowledge for any reading of *The Awakening*. Anyone familiar with the storm's extreme and deadly destructiveness can never again read *The Awakening* with an "innocent eye." It is a novel about a vanquished place and decimated way of life.

Resources

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