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Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

**Issues of Gender in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*  
and Short Stories**

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### Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

1. Studentka nejprve s využitím feministické kritiky a teorie uvede do problematiky zobrazování otázek genderu a do postavení ženy v americké společnosti 19. století obecně.
2. Jádrem práce pak bude aplikace tohoto teoretického rámce na zvolené povídky a román Kate Chopinové. Studentka se zaměří na roli ženy v rozličných kontextech a doloží, jak jsou tyto otázky zachyceny v prózách Chopinové. V práci se bude opírat o relevantní kritické zdroje, teoretické práce a primární texty.
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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is firstly to establish a general framework for this paper by means of depicting various aspects of women's position in nineteenth-century America. Secondly, the thesis traces and examines these aspects of their position during this time period as they are presented in Kate Chopin's fiction, one of the most remarkable female writers of that time. General roles of women in various American contexts will be analyzed in Chopin's masterpiece, *The Awakening* as well as using other short stories she has written. This thesis will also show that Kate Chopin was able to describe issues of women's question not only from the viewpoint of traditional social rules, but also from a nontraditional view, for which she was strongly criticized.

## **Key words:**

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, women's question, nineteenth-century American women, feminism, gender

## **Souhrn**

Cílem této diplomové práce je vytvoření obecného rámce postavení žen v 19. století v Americe zobrazením různých aspektů a následně vysledování a prověření těchto aspektů v díle Kate Chopinové, jedné z nejvýznamnějších ženských spisovatelek této doby. Obecné role žen v různých situacích budou analyzovány především v nejvýznamnějším díle *The Awakening* a v dalších vybraných povídkách této autorky. Tato práce také ukáže, jak Kate Chopinová dokázala vnímat a popsat problematiku ženské otázky nejen podle tehdejších společenských pravidel, ale také i z netradičního pohledu, za který byla silně kritizována.

## **Klíčová slova:**

Kate Chopinová, *The Awakening*, ženská otázka, americké ženy 19. století, feminismus, gender

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## **1. Introduction**

The nineteenth century brought many changes concerning the position of women in America. From the traditional point of view, women were perceived as self-less and had to behave according to their presupposed gender roles. An ideal woman of that time, who was also often called a True woman, should look like an angel and possess four cardinal virtues such as purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. These values and beliefs were very hard to change; however, there were many powerful women who did want to change their inenviable position and started to fight for their rights. Many uprisings, organizations and meetings were held in order to gain equality with men in the fields of education, politics, sexuality, society and many others. Women just wanted to point out that to be a female does not necessarily mean to be worse than a male. Obviously, women used various ways how to achieve their aim, although they were aware of the fact that their fight for equality was going to be a long and arduous one, they persistently kept fighting.

One of the ways to support this battle was to write various books, stories or articles concerning women's question and thus give notice to other women they are not alone in the patriarchal world of men's oppression. Among significant women writers of nineteenth-century America who were not afraid to dedicate all their time to writing about undesirable themes concerning female inferiority belongs undoubtedly Kate Chopin. This American female writer explored many taboo subjects of that time in her prose, such as miscegenation, marriage, divorce, female sexuality, independence, life and death. She was strongly criticized by her contemporaries for describing powerful and independent heroines, and that is why most of her work was refused by the public for its rebellious content. Kate Chopin was certainly a woman far ahead of her time for her bravery in demonstrating women's inferiority in her work and thus giving the basis for studying the gender roles in nineteenth-century America to many nowadays feminists.

## 2. Gender and feminism

The term gender is still sometimes mistaken for the term sex. Oates-Indruchová, a Czech feminist, explains that sex stands for biological differences between men and women, while gender is a social and cultural definition of human behavior, values, characteristics and relations as feminine and masculine; sex is considered to be inborn, while gender is constructed by society. (131) Simply, society has different expectations for males and females, and that is why not only Oates-Indruchová, but also other feminists affirm that an individual is influenced by society and learns to behave like a man, or a woman.

The stream of feminism represents the belief in the social, educational, economic, and political equality of the two sexes. Women have been proudly fighting for their equality throughout many centuries; many incredible women can be found in history who struggled against social stereotypes. Throughout the centuries, there were many protests and uprisings organized by women and due to them, many institutions committed to woman's rights and interests were established for their support. (Feminism) The very first mention of a women-organized protest dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. in Rome. The consul, Marcus Porcius Cato, commented about this uprising: "If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt? As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors." (The Ancient World) This example illustrates how unbelievably long and hard women have had to fight for their equality. It also supports the idea of men being afraid of women's strength not to become only equal, but perhaps even superior to them.

Feminism is basically divided into two main waves. The first wave was influenced by the English Enlightenment when many women started to talk and write about liberty, equality and natural rights; while the so-called "second wave" (dates from 1960s and 1970s) was focused more on the difference of the two sexes by claiming that to be different should not necessarily mean to be worse or better, and on good work positions of women and their wages at work. The first significant document of feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, was written in 1792 by the British author, Mary Wollstonecraft, who wanted to point out that men and women should be educated equally. (The Influence of the Enlightenment)



### **3. Women's position in the nineteenth-century America**

The nineteenth century was probably the most dramatic and dynamically changing time period in American history, due to the fact that it was a time of great changes and reforms. This century brought new ideas, new ways of thinking and more modern points of view into American society. That is why new reforms and movements were quite common as the century slowly proceeded. On the other hand, there remained society's strong values and beliefs, which were not easy to change. These values and beliefs were very much ingrained in American society and thus they forcefully influenced the position of women in various contexts. This century is also perceived as a time when women slowly began to awaken from the long-lasting "unpleasant dream" of men's oppression and started to fight for their equality with them.

Kate Chopin is a significant writer of the nineteenth century who addressed various issues of women's inferior position in America. This American writer was strongly criticized by her contemporaries for the fact that she often depicted taboo subjects of that time. Since she used a neutral narrative tone in her fiction and did not condemn her female characters' behaviour, her work was not accepted by the public for its rebellious content and was forgotten until the second half of the twentieth century when many feminists started to glorify her novels and stories. Since Kate Chopin wrote mainly about white middle-class women, all of the following contexts will be described from the viewpoint of the middle-class society.

#### **3.1 American society and family life**

American society was highly influenced by various events in history. One of the most important events was The American Civil War (1861-1865) fought between the Northern States and the Southern States. One of the reasons for this war was the abolition of slavery. Many women of that time acknowledged the fact that slavery was unjust and supported the idea of abolishment. Although slavery was finally abolished in 1863, Afro-American people were still perceived as an inferior race. Kate Chopin was certainly one of the most gifted local colourist in the South and her stories take place mainly in what was once a slave state, Louisiana. Occasionally she touches upon the issue of black people in her fiction.

Another major feature that influenced not only women's position, but also American society as a whole, was the economy. The nineteenth century brought many economical changes and reforms into American society. One of the changes concerned the movement of male jobs mainly from agriculture to industry, business and services. Before, the jobs were mostly done through home production, as time progressed men had to commute to their work, leaving their wives and children at home. Since men took for granted to be the only ones who could financially support their families, women had to stay at home and the house environment became their priority. (Greenwood, 28) This job movement also led towards class distinction which affected family life as well.

The innermost core of nineteenth-century American society was family and its crucial issue of privacy. As has been already mentioned, family life changed dramatically thanks to the migration of men from a family working environment into business companies and factories. "This tendency to go to work rather than work at home led to the virtual removal of men from the home environment, leaving it the sole province of the female." (28) That is why the most common traditional women's roles of the nineteenth century were housewives and mothers.

Family life is also closely connected to the one important virtue -- domesticity. Women's magazines during that time prized this virtue the most and declared that homes provided women with not only security from the world and its temptations and delusions, but also protected them from errors which could be done by some weaker unstable women. (Welter)

According to Barbara Welter, "a house wife was supposed to keep busy at morally uplifting tasks [such as] making beds [because] the repetitiveness of routine tasks inculcated patience and perseverance" (Welter). Women also had to make their homes pleasant places for their working and tired husbands so they could rest there and escape from their duties in business. This offers the idea of women's dual feminine function -- to be beautiful and useful at home, which Catherine Lavender mentions in her work. (Lavender)

### **3.2 Health and medicine**

The most interesting context which highly influenced women's positions concerned health and medicine. It was generally believed in the seventeenth century that women were biologically inferior to men for the traditional medical knowledge claimed that "female bodies were actually incomplete versions of male anatomy" (Spargo, 632). This inconceivable opinion outlasted even till the nineteenth century, when women were still considered not to be only physically but intellectually inferior as well. These ideas were supported by the observations, which proved that women had smaller and more primitive type of brains than men. What concerns the physical inferiority is that it was based on observations that women were generally physically smaller, they had less physical stamina, their nervous system was finer and they were kind of incapacitated every month because of their menstruation. "Menstruation was regarded as a periodic illness inflicted upon women and it was believed that menstruation could bring on temporary insanity in women." (Lavender)

From the view point of the twenty-first-century, medicine in the nineteenth-century may seem almost barbaric or at best elementary. "Diseases were a common part of daily life and medical practices struggled to control or cure them."(Greenwood, 198). The doctors of that time claimed that the female reproductive system was responsible for all female illnesses.

The current model of disease followed by physicians was called "reflex irritation," and assumed that any imbalance, any infection, any disorder or fatigue would cause a reaction elsewhere in the body. If one, therefore, had a headache or stomachache, or became irritable or faint, it was assumed that the problem was with the reproductive system. Women were subject to only one disease, then. The male reproductive system had no parallel degree of control over the male body. Men had headaches; women had 'female complaints'. (Lavender)

### **3.3 Sexuality and pregnancy**

Since the most important women's role was to give birth to their descendants, the issue of sexuality and pregnancy is worth mentioning as well. The nineteenth-century studies proved that "sexual feelings were strong in men, but absent in women (certainly in ladies)" (Lavender). On the contrary, "passion in women was feared,

because the demands it would make on men were insatiable and like a vampire, it was feared she would drain him of his life force” (Lavender).

In general, women were not seen as equals when comparing energy. When women did “waste” energy they were to become nervous, weak and would give birth to only neurotic and sickly children. Pregnant women were forbidden to do such activities in order not to bear handicapped children or to become insane themselves. (Lavender) All these ideas, which were modified by the nineteenth-century society in America, mainly concern the suggestions on how to behave for married women and young ladies.

Generally, women had to be sexually pure before the marriage. In popular literature of that time, the marriage night was described as follows:

“The marriage night was advertised as the greatest night in a woman’s life, the night when she bestowed upon her husband her greatest treasure, her virginity. From thence onward, she was dependent upon him, an empty vessel without legal or emotional existence of her own. A woman must guard her treasure with her life. Despite any male attempt to assault her, she must remain pure and chaste. She must not give in, must not give her treasure into the wrong hands.” (Lavender)

If a woman failed this convention, she was considered to be “a lower form of being, a ‘fallen woman’, unworthy of the love of her sex and unfit for their company” (Lavender). It was believed that unmarried women were punished by God by losing their illegitimate babies and going mad. The popular literature doomed these “fallen women” to a life of poverty, depravity and drunkenness. (Lavender) The only possible way how the seduced women could redeem their sins was probably by their death.

### **3.4 Religion and politics**

Religion belonged to the main core of woman’s virtue and it was also believed that it was the source of her strength. One article in *The Ladies Repository* magazine stated that “religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence” (Welter). This thought was supported by other authors as well who claimed that women without religion would be restless and unhappy.

Barbara Welter suggested in her work, *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*, four main attributes of a True Woman. These cardinal virtues are piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. If a woman did not possess all of these expected

virtues, she was not considered to be a True Woman by the society she lived in. (Welter)

Despite the idea of a True Woman, the nineteenth century brought an increasing number of women who became active in politics, yet, legal and political life seemed to be still quite distant for them. The well-known American Suffragist Movement intensively fought for the social, civil and religious rights of women and slowly achieved the victory of equality throughout the century. Since Kate Chopin did not really write about political issues, this context may seem irrelevant to mention in great detail.

More to the academic point is to describe the understanding of a True Woman. The most feminine virtue was considered to be women's submission to men and consequently, the True Woman was always aware of her dependence and inferiority to her husband and was grateful for his support and guidance. The True Woman knew that men should take care of politics while she should take care of her children. She would never agree with women who claimed that they should be active in politics, acquire the right to vote, right to possess or decide about their own property themselves and be legally responsible for their children. (Welter) Barbara Welter made a list of rights, which the True Woman of the nineteenth century was supposed to know by heart:

The right to love whom others scorn,  
The right to comfort and to mourn,  
The right to shed new joy on earth,  
The right to feel the soul's high worth,  
Such woman's rights a God will bless  
And Crown their champions with success.  
(Welter)

The idea of an accomplished lady was widely supported by various women's magazines and attempted to influence all women to behave in the prescribed way. Fortunately, not all the women of that time believed all of these proclaimed thoughts and opinions and started to fight for their rights and equality.

### **3.5 Education and arts**

Generally, education was perceived as meaningless for women for it was assumed that they only need to learn how to read the Bible and count their pocket money. To accept the idea of women using logic or common sense was beyond men's

imagination. While men were trained to think and taught how to become successful in their careers and life in general, women were prepared to be their husband's faithful companions as well as learning how to take care of their homes and children. (The American Woman) Evidently, the only educational aim for nineteenth-century American women was to become good housewives and mothers, and to act usefully and virtuously within their family circles.

Nevertheless, not all people agreed with inferior education of women and thus several female academies and seminaries were opened at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although practical education was still dominant, women were allowed to take part in various academic and cultural courses of "spelling and reading, moral and natural philosophy, arithmetic, chemistry, astronomy, geography, history, and drawing" (American Woman).

Regarding the arts, the most significant artistic activity women carried out was so called housewifely art which included domestic duties such as making beds, decorating houses as well as pouring out tea or coffee. (Welter) Women were also expected (or perhaps obliged) to play a musical instrument, in particular the piano. Women were supposed to use music as a tool to help comfort their husbands, children or even guests in order to create a pleasant domestic atmosphere, nothing more. Painting and drawing were also desirable activities within the family circle.

The field of literature was also accessible to women. "Middle- and upper-class women have long been recognized as the chief consumers of [literature]." (Greenwood, 182-183) However, they were allowed to read only morally acceptable writers because some inadvisable books could spoil young ladies' characters. (Welter) As for writing, American women were encouraged to write diaries, recipes, invitations, letters and short poems from within their homes. Writing of long essays or novels for public was, however, strictly criticized. It was an unacceptable activity for women to write for people and thus become active in the public sphere, which was dedicated to men only. Gender roles played a very important role in this area once again.

#### **4. Rise of women writers in the nineteenth-century America**

As has been previously mentioned, women were strongly criticized if they would start to write for general public. Despite this fact, many women writers appeared during the nineteenth century due to the reality that there was a shortage of educated men readers and thus women as well as young people formed the chief audience for imaginative literature. That is why publishers needed to find and cultivate authors who could write this kind of literature for them and surprisingly, they found them among women. (Baym, 289-290)

Although women authors were supported by male publishers to write literature, Nina Baym claims that female authors were still considered to be sexual monsters by their culture. On the contrary, even though respectable women were banned to work in public, writing was not considered to be something that was wrong because it was done at home. However, “women were advised [and also expected] to write only in popular, ‘lighter’ forms -- sketch, familiar essay, tale, novel (the genre had not yet been transformed into high literature), lyric and occasional poem -- rather than to attempt sermon, oration, treatise, history, or epic” (290). Nina Baym also points out that female writers generally held quite conventional views about their place and sexual difference and would never think of themselves as unfeminine in any way, thus the cultural assumptions about feminine nature were not disturbed in literature. (290)

During the nineteenth century, even women’s literature demanded reform. Many female writers started to be tired of writing the prescribed way and focused on various issues which were not very desired themes by the society they lived in. A great influence on women’s literature of that time was America’s foremost male political-social satirist, Finley Peter Dunne. He wrote a satirical “*Mr. Dooley*” sketch “*On the New Woman*” (1898) in which Irish Molly Donahue, the main female protagonist, rode a bicycle, demanded a right to vote and wore clothes unsuitable for a woman. Molly also proclaimed that she would never be a man’s slave. However, the sketch finished with Molly’s submission to her husband, which meant, according to the traditional male and female roles, was to stay at home and perform her domestic duties. (Tichi, 589)

Nevertheless, Dunne acknowledged the status of “New Woman” and thus confirmed her importance; moreover, he empowered the work of many women writers. Obviously, this powerful social-literary figure of the new woman changed the canon of

American literature. It affected writers' lives and inspired them to write about independent, outspoken and iconoclastic heroines, as well as to change literary forms, and themes. (590)

Naturally, the more honoured conservative women writers still tried to defend traditional roles and proclaimed the sacred doctrines of domesticity. They opposed the new-woman writers, who faced with such conservatism that they risked rejection, or even outrage. (595) Nineteenth-century society was not prepared to read about independent, energetic, successful, and self-assertive women; women who could choose their sexual partners in or out marital relationships. (591)

One of the iconoclastic new-woman writers was definitely Kate Chopin. This American writer had the tendency to write about taboo subjects and her main female protagonists were usually fighting against social stereotypes of the day. Although Chopin's life seemed to look like the model of a nineteenth-century woman, she was always considered to be a "little rebel" herself.

Kate Chopin was born Katherine O'Flaherty in 1850 to a wealthy Irish-born father and an aristocratic Creole mother. Due to the fact that she grew up in an upper middle-class family, she was allowed to attend St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart as a boarding student, where she received a strict Catholic education. Both the Academy and her very literate and largely self-educated great-grandmother greatly influenced Chopin's writing and education. From an early age, she was taught to speak fluent French, play the piano, and was expected to read French and British classics, luckily, she always loved reading and writing most of all. (Gilbert, 9-10) After being raised by her widowed mother, maternal grandmother, and great-grandmother who used to tell her many different lively stories where only female characters played the most important part, it is no wonder why Chopin decided to write mainly about female characters. (Toth, 17)

Since Chopin often used her own life-experience and the settings in her books were usually places which she had visited or even lived in, she was considered to be a regionalist (local colourist) as well as a new woman writer. Local colour literature deals with specific features of a certain geographical region or area and its inhabitants. This genre is considered to be a kind of realism although it is sometimes argued to be a combination of realism and romanticism; it reached its highest popularity in the last



quarter of the nineteenth century. For this thesis, however, is a viewpoint of a new woman writer much more essential.

Kate Chopin could not have been a typical housewife when she got married. She gave birth to six children, and followed her Creole husband everywhere on his journeys; however, Oscar Chopin did not try to suppress his wife's free spirit and independence. He let her dress unconventionally, take unaccompanied walks, and smoke Cuban cigarettes. (Howard) Their marriage gives the impression that she was an equal partner to him, which was an unimaginable idea for that time. As privacy was the main issue of family life, no one seemed to notice this fact. Since Chopin's early work seemed blameless as her life did, her first novel *At Fault* (1890) (printed on her own expense) received mostly favorable reviews. (Gilbert, 10)

After her husband's death, she began to run their general store and plantations, and carried on a secret romance with a married neighbour. Thanks to her marriage she experienced love and equality, and through her romance with the neighbour passion. In her work she used her own personal experiences and after her husband's death focused on writing even more. In 1894 she published a collection of her short stories, *Bayou Folk*, which received favorable reviews like her previous writings. Her stories appeared to be modest and yet charming; nevertheless, there was a deeper meaning beyond the subtle stories. (10) Generally, she used many powerful symbols which were meant to be hidden for those who did not want to see them. Even Per Seyersted, Kate Chopin's biographer, claims that her earliest stories were far more than delightful sketches; they were studies of emancipation, specifically of female emancipation. (Gilbert, 12)

As time progressed, she published the second collection of stories, *Night in Acadie* (1897) on which she obtained less numerous and more indifferent reviews than before. As Kate Chopin wrote more frequently and bluntly about forbidden issues of inferior women's position, she lost many readers and supporters. The critic DeSaussure Davis also proposes that Chopin's early stories were accepted by public for depicting different nations. Later on in her writing career, she started to write about nations much closer to her public what did not really approve. (201)

There is strong evidence supporting this fact as the public refused her masterpiece, *The Awakening* (1899), in which she explored the taboo of divorce, female sexuality and suicide. Society was still not ready to read about an American woman,

who had sexual longings, left her husband, found a lover and committed suicide at the end of the novel because there was no other way to escape from the strict social rules which did not allow her to live her own independent life. Any emancipated woman who would start to realize her inferiority was immediately banished from society and thus *The Awakening* provoked such a controversy. This novel was banned by libraries for its indecency and many critics commented harshly such as: “leaves one sick of human nature”, “it is not a healthy book”, or even “the purport of the story can hardly be described in language fit for publication” (Gilbert, 8).

Due to this book, she was also expelled from the St. Louis Fine Arts Club, even though she, as a writer, attracted distinguished artists and writers from all over the country. Always sensitive to criticism, Kate Chopin was hurt by such a response to her book, both personally and as a writer. (9) In order to defend her novel, she published her statement on *The Awakening* in *Book News*:

Having a people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (Chopin, 2002, 1052)

Kate Chopin died three years after publishing the “scandalous” book which meant such disastrous failure for her and it took many years before the public accepted this novel with such a theme. As has been mentioned before, this book was not honoured until the second half of the twentieth century when the general public was finally prepared for these kinds of taboo subjects.

Kate Chopin is the true example of a woman writer who did not only write about strong female protagonists but behaved as one of them as well. Thanks to her own personal experiences, she knew that to write about distinct male and female roles was too advanced and hoped that through her writings she would awaken women to some action; unfortunately, the society conventions were still more powerful and after the refusal of *The Awakening* she gave up. From the viewpoints of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, Chopin is recognized as one of the most important American women writers for the study of gender roles in the nineteenth century.

## **5. Gender issues in Kate Chopin's fiction**

Kate Chopin wrote in the time when women were perceived as self-less and were named only in terms of their relationships to men -- mother, wife, daughter, sister, widow -- or more specifically, in terms of their sexual relationships towards men: virgin, mistress, whore, spinster. (Ewell, 158) Chopin commented on society's viewpoint on women that a proper lady suitable for the community must behave rather unnaturally. "To succeed in life a woman must look like an angel, act like a saint and work like the devil." (Boren, 9) She rebelled against the stereotypes and in her work, she attempted to explore many forbidden issues of that time, for example she used her stories to ask and resolve questions concerning miscegenation, marriage, passion, independence, life, and death. She created various extraordinary stories of women in crisis and in fulfillment. (Toth, 23) It can be seen that Chopin surely dreamt of female selfhood for she depicted this issue to show what it meant to be a female and how hard it was to fight to gain self. Unfortunately, she also pictured how the female self can be defeated by its internal struggle and societal pressure. (Ewell, 159) In her later work, Chopin focused more on psychological realities and suggested that her heroines are strongest when they are alone. (Toth, 17) Chopin affirms the difficulty of the dream of female selfhood in a society that defines women as selfless. All the following examples from Kate Chopin's fiction acknowledge women who became aware of their unpleasant position and wanted to change their predestinated role. She also contrasted the difference among the awakened women challenging their position, and the typical obedient women satisfied with it. Chopin was certainly a brave woman for investigating such themes concerning women's role.

### **5.1 Chopin's opinion on women's position in society**

From the viewpoint of women's question, Kate Chopin metaphorically described women's position in nineteenth-century America through her very first short story, written in 1869, entitled *Emancipation: A Life Fable*. The story talks about an animal born in a cage, which has plenty of food and water that has been provided, and in whole the animal seems to be surrounded by all the possible comfort he can imagine. This can be understood as women's position at home; women were born under certain demands from society and had to behave according to their restrictions. The cage symbolizes the

societal rules and expectations which women had to fulfill without any possible lamentations or objections. According to nineteenth-century society, all the comfort which could be offered to women by their husbands was the most what they could reach upon or wish for.

Nevertheless, Chopin probably tried to point out that not all women had to be satisfied with their position. Women could seem contend with their roles, but perhaps most of them wished for their selfhood. In *Emancipation: A Life Fable*, the door of the cage was one day accidentally left opened. The animal is shy and keeps himself in the corner, but “the spell of the Unknown was over him, and again and again he goes to the open door, seeing each time more Light” (Chopin, 1984, 177). The world seems to be wider and offering more opportunities, thus the animal leaves the comfort and goes to seek his destiny. The story finishes as follows: “So does he live, seeking, finding, joying and suffering. The door which accident had opened is open still, but the cage remains forever empty!” (178)

The accident which opened the door may be perceived as women’s awakening from the long-lasting dream of men’s oppression and the Unknown symbolizes the other possibilities of the world for women than to get married and lead only a happy family life. Chopin also acknowledged the fact that once awakened, women of that time realized they were bound under society’s restraints and once free, they never wanted to return and to behave as expected again. Once breaking free from the chains of society’s perceptions on women these women were strong and could fight against their presupposed gender roles.

Sharon O’Brian agrees that Kate Chopin in her first short story described “a sleek, caged animal ‘awaking’ from the slothful ease of a protected life and escaping into the joys and hardships of independence” (O’Brian). She also suggests that it’s “title anticipated the mature writer’s preoccupation with restless, dissatisfied women who yearn for freedom and test the boundaries of Victorian social (and literary) conventions” (O’Brian). Other critics also believe that through this story, Chopin wanted to point out issues of freedom and restriction.

Chopin described a similar situation in her most famous novel, *The Awakening*, when the main female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, thinks she is a bird in a golden cage. She lives in an enormous house where she is supposed to fulfill her domestic duties and

take care of her family; however, she does not feel satisfied with her implicit gender role and expects something more from her life. For men, it was important to have a magnificent and nicely decorated house and a gorgeous wife who takes care of him and his possessions.

It was a large, double cottage, with a broad front veranda, whose round, fluted columns supported the sloping roof. The house was painted a dazzling white; [...]. The softest carpets and rugs covered the floors; rich and tasteful draperies hung at doors and windows. [...] The cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask which daily appeared upon the table were the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier.[...] Mrs. Pontellier, attired in a handsome reception gown, remained in the drawing-room the entire afternoon receiving her visitors. (Chopin, 1984, 99-100)

Using this example, it is obvious that the typical upper-middle class women were expected to accept visitors in their homes because their husbands wished other people to see their luxurious properties while also showcasing their beautiful, devoted wives. Thus, it can be seen that women were a prized trophy, which the men wanted to be proud of. Women of that time were displayed as a precious possession but they could not be perceived as an individual person and claim her rights.

Since Mr. Pontellier is a successful businessman in the novel; possessions, appearance and modesty mean a lot to him. Although he seems to love his wife, for that period of time it was probably more important to have an obedient and beautiful wife fulfilling all the required and expected duties. That is why he does not regard his wife to be an individual but she is seen as rather his own possession. This is evident from his comment on Edna's suntan: "You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage." (44) By this comment, Léonce demonstrates male superiority; in general, women were expected not to have personal expectations, to be dependent, and they had to live only for their husbands. "Despite social and political advances, women in the 1890s still encountered disadvantages in almost every aspect of their lives, and a majority of the populace still believed that a woman's most sacred duty was to be 'the angel in the house.'" (Culley, 1976a, 119)

As Edna Pontellier becomes aware of the fact that she is perceived as her husband's possession and, as the animal does, she escapes from her domestic duties (perceived as the cage) by moving to her own house, bought with her own money which

she inherited and earned by selling her pictures. Earning money was not very common for an upper-class woman of the nineteenth century, but she was certainly glad not to be financially dependent on her husband anymore. Edna tries to explain her moving: “I’m tired looking after that big house. It never seemed like mine, anyway -- like home. It’s too much trouble. I have to keep too many servants. I am tired bothering with them.” (Chopin, 1984, 134) By her moving, Edna tries to escape from the captivity in the world, which is not yet opened for the independent and emancipated woman.

She calls her new home the Pigeon house and describes it as “a little four-room house [...] so cozy, so inviting and restful, [...]” (134) In this house, she feels comfortable and lives there peacefully with her newfound independence. When her husband finds out of her intention to move out from their residence, he appeals mainly on the fact what people would say. He suspects that his wife turned mad, but he is not worried about her health as it would be expected by the loving husband; he is much more scared of being secluded from upper-middle class society. Mr. Pontellier brilliantly managed to hide the real reason of his wife’s moving:

[...], he grasped the situation with his usual promptness and handled it with his well-known business tact and cleverness. [...] And in an incredibly short time the Pontellier house was turned over to artisans. [...] Furthermore, in one of the daily papers appeared a brief notice [...] that their handsome residence on Esplanade Street was undergoing sumptuous alterations, [...] Mr. Pontellier had saved appearances! (150-151)

## **5.2 American society and family life**

Kate Chopin’s narratives usually take place in Louisiana, in the state created out of three different cultures. The writer describes predominantly Creole culture, which was slightly different from other two -- American and southern. It should also be mentioned that Creoles were the descendants of French and Spanish settlers born in Louisiana; Catholics in a Protestant country, which probably caused them some extra tension. (Wyatt, 1995a)

The Creole culture was described as very different from others, it was considered to be the most conservative groups in the nation. Creole young men were allowed to do what they wanted, they had mistresses, were allowed to own properties, they learned fencing, horse riding or playing cards, and to be dishonored was a great

shame for them. Typical Creole women were described as very conservative, honest and open in discussions about their marriages and children. They had large families and never interpreted it as a misfortune. They were also artistic by their nature, spoke several languages and were good housekeepers as well. Their absolute fidelity to their husbands and children had a deep personal and religious commitment. On the contrary, they were free to flirt with other men for their pleasure. (Wyatt, 1995a)

As it can be seen, the position of Creole women was basically the same as that of a typical American woman. With this said, the created framework of women's position in nineteenth-century America can be applicable on the Creole female protagonists in Chopin's stories without any obstacles.

In her masterpiece, *The Awakening*, she describes wealthy Creoles spending their holidays in a holiday district, Grand Isle. The main female protagonist, Edna Pontellier who comes from Kentucky, has married into Creole society. The Creoles seldom accepted outsiders to their social circle and that is perhaps the reason why she does not feel like one of them even after her seven-years lasting marriage with a Creole. Chopin describes the Creole society through Edna's eyes as follows:

There were only Creoles that summer at Lebrun's. They all knew each other and felt like one large family, among whom existed the most amicable relations. A characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable. (Chopin, 1984, 52-53)

Edna also experiences culture shock in this French Catholic company, due to the fact, that Creole women are ironically free to flirt and speak frankly. She has to get used to the Creole women's openness in discussions. (Parini, 285)

Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her *accouchements* [childbirth], withholding no intimate detail. She was growing accustomed to like shocks, but she could not keep the mounting color back from her cheeks. (Chopin, 1984, 53)

### 5.2.1 Motherhood

As has been already mentioned, due to the removal of men from the home environment, the most common traditional women's roles of the nineteenth century were housewives and mothers. Chopin described the behaviour of these two types, typical submissive wives and mothers as well as women who did not want to sacrifice their lives to their families. In *The Awakening*, she acknowledged both examples of women through the characters of Edna Pontellier, the main female protagonist of the novel, and Adèle Ratignolle.

The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. Many of them were delicious in the role; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture. Her name was Adèle Ratignolle. (Chopin, 1984, 51)

Madame Ratignolle represents the typical example of a self-sacrificial mother. She was able to display this to her children while also being devoted to her husband. In the book, she is a mother of three children and is currently pregnant with her fourth one. Chopin used Adèle to prove how a typical "True Woman" should behave in comparison with Edna, who is certainly not a mother-woman at all. Adèle symbolizes everything concerning the perception of womanhood and femininity of the nineteenth century. She is undoubtedly a mother type, since she is always busy by taking care of the needs of her family, loyal to her husband and she is absolutely happy with her role being a caring wife and mother; thus she represents an ideal wife every man wishes to possess.

As the most important women's role was to give birth, Adèle fulfills even this expectancy: "Madame Ratignolle had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one." (52) Adèle also enjoys talking about her pregnancy and reminds everyone of her condition by making it the subject of every conversation. Adèle's positive attitude towards maternity can be proved by another example as well. She sews little bibs and dresses for her children and when visiting Edna, she usually takes her sewing with her.



[...] she was busily engaged in sewing upon a diminutive pair of night-drawers. She had brought the pattern of the drawers for Mrs. Pontellier to cut out – a marvel of construction, fashioned to enclose a baby’s body so effectually that only two small eyes might look out from the garment, like an Eskimo’s. (51-52)

As Lavender highlighted the dual feminine function, Adèle fulfills both expectations too. She is useful at home, creating a pleasant home of solitude for her husband and children; and she is also very beautiful, attractive and elegant:

[...] the fair lady of our dreams. There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries [...]. She was growing a little stout, but it did not seem to detract an iota from the grace of every step, pose, gesture. (51)

Not only did Edna have a high regard for Adèle’s beauty and grace but she also admired her charm. “Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna.” (54) Although Adèle becomes Edna’s model of sensuality, she certainly does not fulfill Edna’s perception of how to behave. She respects Adèle’s personality, but she is not keen to become the same. Edna refuses to be a “True Woman” from the viewpoint of traditional standards; she simply wants to be womanly in her own way -- to keep her own identity, her goals, her artistry, and to live a sexual life, liberated from the binding conditions of social expectations.

Although she was a mother of two sons, all of the above mentioned Edna’s wishes proving that she is not the typical mother-woman. This can be demonstrated by an excerpt from the book where her children behave unlike the others:

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother’s arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. (50)

Edna’s husband, Léonce Pontellier, was not sure if his wife did not fail her duty towards their children. “It was something what he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement.” (50) Due to the fact, that Edna seems to be an ordinary obedient wife at the beginning of the novel,

it is hard to say for Léonce if she failed her duty or not; however, he still reminds his wife of her function:

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way. (48)

This example proves that the expected pattern of gender roles was really ingrained in society. Men assumed to be the only ones who can financially support their families and thus they often had to leave their families alone because of quite frequent business trips. Chopin also described examples of men's migration in the novel. "An unusual number of husbands, fathers, and friends had come down to stay over Sunday; and they were being suitably entertained by their families, [...]" (68) Dorothy Dix who was interested in women's position described in her work called *The American Wife* men's approach to their homes. All the men considered that earning the money was their whole duty and the rest of the housekeeping was purely left for the wives to accomplish. The men did not want to be bothered by any decisions concerning domestic problems. (129) Clearly, it was entirely on women to stay at home and fulfill their domestic duties concerning the household and children.

Looking again at Edna, she perhaps does not behave like any other typical mother-woman; nevertheless, she loves her children very much. Chopin described her relationship towards the children as follows: "She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them." (Chopin, 1984, 63) The new-woman writer suggested that although a mother loves her children, she does not have to always obey their wishes and to think of them all the time; she clearly needs some time for herself as well.

'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.' (97)

By this example, Chopin tried to point out that although Edna would sacrifice all her money and life for her children, she does not want to lose her newfound identity because of them. She wishes to see and look after her children but does not need to

spend all of her time with them. She might not want to be responsible for everything concerning their upbringing and education. Kate Chopin also proposed that self-sacrifice is the greatest thing a mother can offer her offspring due to the fact that it is required by society and religion.

'I don't know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential,' said Madame Ratignolle, cheerfully; 'but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that – your Bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that.' (97)

Since Edna does not act as a typical mother, she, as a literary character, did not approve. Chopin also foreshadowed that when a woman abandoned her husband, children belonged according to the law to their father. Thus, Edna has no chance to gain guardianship of her children. Not only did she lose her children, but she also lost a hope of living with her desired man. Loosing children might have been another reason that may have led her to have taken her life so tragically.

An entirely different approach towards motherhood that Kate Chopin used is described in the short story *Regret*. The story talks about an unmarried woman, Mamzelle Aurélie, who runs a farm and lives an independent life. Chopin portrayed the female protagonist as a strong and determined woman who behaves rather manly. It was so unusual and even unacceptable for a woman in that time not to marry; however, the main character of the story refused a proposal at the age of twenty and never regretted her decision. She never thought of marrying, perhaps due to the fact that she was never in love. Mamzelle lives a peaceful life until the day when her neighbour asks her to look after her four children for a while. Aurélie is not pleased with this idea at all and is truly bewildered by her new task.

With no previous experience, Mamzelle Aurélie is suddenly confronted with the needs of children who she first compares to her farm animals. Soon enough she realizes that "little children are not little pigs [and that] they require and demand attentions which were wholly unexpected by Mamzelle Aurélie, and which she was ill prepared to give" (Chopin, 2002, 404). Children themselves had to teach the childless old spinster how to deal with them. They taught her how to prepare food, get them ready for bed and not to forget to read stories before their bed time. She realizes that children actually require much more attention than her farm animals which she is not used to. Her cook advises her how to deal with them and Aurélie is "glad to learn a few little mother-tricks

to serve the moment's need" (405). Although it took some time to become accustomed to the laughing and the crying and to fall asleep in the bed full of children, she slowly starts to enjoy it. "[...] at the end of two weeks Mamzelle Aurélie had grown quite used to these things, and she no longer complained." (406) After two weeks of behaving like a proper mother, her neighbour comes to pick her children up without any previous mention. All the children were excited to see their mother again and left Mamzelle Aurélie to her peaceful life. "The excitement was all over, and they were gone. How still it was when they were gone!" (406) By the stillness, Chopin surely meant, that once an older lonely woman becomes used to someone's presence, it is hard to return to her life and perceive it as peaceful and independent like it was before. Once the children were gone she settled into her daily routine and it may seem too peaceful and perhaps even lonely.

She gave one slow glance through the room, into which the evening shadows were creeping and deepening around her solitary figure. She let her head fall down upon her bended arm, and began to cry. Oh, but she cried! Not softly, as women often do. She cried like a man, with sobs that seemed to tear her very soul. (406)

In this story, Chopin described the powerful and courageous woman who revolts against the social stereotypes and refuses her predestinated traditional role. The American female writer usually depicted the issue of women who slowly awakened from their unpleasant roles and started to rebel against their social status; this story, however, shows the contrary. Aurélie is aware of her position and enjoys her independent life but at the same time she feels lonely after the children's departure. She does not regret that she has disobeyed social expectations, but feels remorse for not having someone close to her heart. After the experience of being a mother, she surely changes her viewpoint on motherhood and perhaps even regrets that she did not join their line many years ago.

Critics admit that Chopin presented her character as a strong and independent person with masculine exterior; however, caring for the children awakens the feminine and maternal aspects of her nature and the reader finds out that she is truly a tender-hearted woman. (Kate Chopin's Regret) They also claim that the main idea of the short story *Regret* is that "even though independent people like Mamzelle Aurélie become used living alone, they still need affection and human intimacy" (The Importance of

Human Intimacy). Thus, the critics confirm the importance of human intimacy in everyone's life.

### 5.2.2 Marriage

According to the nineteenth-century American society, the main female function was to get married and bear children. All young girls were brought up to obey societal rules without questioning and simply to accept their duty. Despite many women instinctively acting as demanded, there existed a modest number of women who did not follow the traditions and remained single. Unfortunately, they led hard lives with society's disapproval. Kate Chopin was able masterly depict the issue of marriages in her work.

Chopin introduced two different approaches to marriage in her masterpiece *The Awakening*. Concerning the Ratignolle's marriage, Chopin described it as something idyllic and precious. Since Adèle Ratignolle represents the character of a True woman and behaves as a typical passive wife who obeys her husband's wishes and takes care and shows interest in the upbringing of their children, her marriage is considered to be a perfect match. "The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union." (Chopin, 1984, 106-107) Adèle simply feels entirely satisfied in her marriage and loves her ideal husband. "Mr. Ratignolle was one of those men who are called the salt of the earth. His cheerfulness was unbounded, and it was matched by his goodness of heart, his broad charity, and common sense." (106)

Their harmonic marriage, however, was based more on passive and obedient behaviour of Adèle, which Chopin implied in the text: "She would not consent to remain with Edna, for Monsieur Ratignolle was alone, and he detested above all things to be left alone." (88) It is obvious that Adèle would not go back home too soon if her husband did not mind staying alone. Yet, their marriage seems to fulfill all Adèle's expectations of her present life and she is more than content with her gender role within the family circle.

On the contrary, the Pontellier's marriage is not presented as a harmonic one at all. Edna's attitude towards marriage has inevitably changed due to the process of her awakening. Even after seeing such a perfect couple with the Ratignolles, Edna knows

that she would not be able to return to her presupposed role of mother and wife, and feels rather sorry for Adèle who sacrificed her life to her family.

Edna felt rather depressed than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, -- a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. (107)

Through the character of Edna, Chopin suggested to her readers that not all women had to be satisfied with their function. One might conclude that the writer hoped that some of her female readers could recognize themselves in Edna and perhaps fight for their potential freedom and independence. Society, however, banned the novel, so not many female readers had the chance of reading it in that time.

Kate Chopin described Edna's reason why she got married as follows: "She was a grown young woman when she was overtaken by what she supposed to be the climax of her fate." (62) Chopin pointed out that unmarried ladies in the age of twenty thought of themselves as being old and should be already married. That is why Edna finally decided to marry Léonce. After some time, she realizes that getting married was not a wise decision like it seemed beforehand.

Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, [...] He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, [...] He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. [...] As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams. [...] She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution. (62-63)

Léonce, as a husband, seems to be attentive and worships his wife as long as she follows her traditional role. Unfortunately for him, his wife has drastically changed and started to act inappropriately for an upper-class lady.

After Léonce yells at Edna for not acting like the typical female wife, she explodes in a silent uprising of her own. She cries, breaks a glass, and stomps on her wedding ring. This behavior is not that of a dependent, dainty wife. Instead it is a picture of a woman awakening to her unique femininity and foresight of independence. (Yagmin, Lieberman)

Edna's husband is confused by her radical change in behaviour and considers her to be insane. It was inconceivable that a woman would not be satisfied with her domestic life full of duties and children; and what more, to refuse husband's wishes or to be an equivalent opponent in discussions or quarrels. Chopin also highlighted the fact that Léonce had no understanding for Edna's independent behaviour. He suspects Edna to be mentally ill and hopes that she will return "normal" self again. The new Edna does not represent the wife he longed for and one might conclude that Léonce is afraid to look ridiculously and unmanly out in the public. Since he assumes that his wife is not going to behave as an obedient and dutiful wife again, her suicide may be perceived by him as the only solution from his uncommon situation and, in a way, saves his appearance in the society.

Kate Chopin was surely a master in depicting two very different approaches towards marriage within one novel. The ideal approach which was believed that it describes the true state of marriages; and the fictitious one perceived as unbelievable and unsuitable for the nineteenth-century society. It was believed that all the marriages must be happy and due to the fact that privacy was the main issue of a family life of the day, one can only imagine the real state of marriages.

Another interesting type of marriage Chopin described in her short story *Athénaïse* which, at the same time, is the name of the main female protagonist. The very young, inexperienced girl, Athénaïse, marries a much older man called Cazeau thinking "it was customary for girls to marry when the right opportunity came" (Chopin, 1984, 234). Unfortunately, she does not feel any contentment in marriage and calls it "a trap set for the feet of unwary and unsuspecting girls" (238). Basically, she perceives marriage as something unpleasant and an inevitable evil. After two months of being married, she leaves her husband and returns back to her parents' house wishing she has never married. She admits that she does not hate her husband but the social institution of marriage did not agree with her.

‘No, I don’t hate him,’ she returned reflectively; adding with a sudden impulse, ‘It’s jus’ being married that I detes’ an’ despise. I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an’ would want to be Athénaïse Miché again. I can’t stan’ to live with a man; to have him always there; his coats an’ pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet -- washing them in my tub, befo’ my very eyes, ugh!’ (234)

Chopin used her heroine in order to familiarize the fact that not every woman wanted to marry, and if they did so, they would not always have a satisfied marriage. *Athénaïse* shows how difficult and complex a marriage was for a woman, especially with such a vast age difference between the partners.

At the beginning of the story, Athénaïse’s husband, Cazeau is described as an unkind and demanding person, who gained “a good deal of respect, and even fear sometimes” (229). When his wife leaves him for the first time, he demands his wife to return to her duty. “[...] Cazeau had always so much to do; but among the many urgent calls upon him, the task of bringing his wife back to a sense of her duty seemed to him for the moment paramount.” (231) Although he has noticed his wife’s growing dislike towards their marriage, he wants to save it and make the best of it. Later on in the story, Chopin reveals that Cazeau does not represent the typical man of that time as it would be expected, but he loves his wife and wishes to make her comfortable in their marriage. He does not want to force her wife to act according to his needs only; he wants his wife to be equal to him. Chopin portrayed him as understanding his wife’s confusion and being patient with her attitude and escapes.

’But I can’t imagine w’at induced you to marry me. W’atever it was, I reckon you foun’ out you made a mistake, too. I don’ see anything to do but make the best of a bad bargain, an’ shake han’s over it.’ He has arisen from the table, and, approaching, held out his hand to her. (239-240)

Although Chopin described Cazeau as a tender and loving man, Athénaïse’s misery in her marriage culminates until she escapes to New Orleans with the help from her brother. When Cazeau wakes up in the morning and discovers that his wife has left him during the night “as if she had been a prisoner, and he the keeper of a dungeon” (243). He knows that he could force his wife to return as before, to compel her to her duties and submission to his love, but he does not want to lose his self-respect by making his wife obedient and submissive as other women are. He is aware of the fact that Athénaïse would never become the typical wife of the day and he did not even want



to. "Athénaïse was not one to accept the inevitable with patient resignation, a talent born in the souls of many women; [...]." (237) Cazeau has an inner struggle for letting go of the woman he loves and writes a letter to her where he says that she can return at anytime back to him but only if she came on her free will. Not all of the nineteenth-century husbands would show such understanding and respect for women's internal struggle with their presupposed gender roles and let them make their own mind about their marriages. Chopin evidently wanted to highlight that men did exist who did not wish to marry submissive women, but women who had their own mind and will, and would be equal partners with them.

Chopin acknowledged that although Athénaïse is aware of "the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution" (235), she risks her husbands' and her parents' disapproval and leaves to another city to feel "the comforting, comfortable sense of not being married" (250). Her parents feel embarrassed since they thought that marriage is "a wonderful and powerful agent in the development and formation of a woman's character; they had seen its effect too often to doubt it" (237-238). They knew that their daughter behaved rather unconventionally and hoped that thanks to the marriage their daughter would gain social manners suitable for a young married lady.

When Athénaïse arrives to New Orleans, she aims to seek a suitable and agreeable form of employment. Chopin, however, pointed out how hard it was to be a woman and find a job. In the novel, giving piano lessons is the only paying job Athénaïse is able to come across.

Not only was it hard for Athénaïse to find a job, she comes close to having an affair with a man who is "a liberal-minded fellow [and] a man or woman lost nothing of his respect by being married" (249). She spends most of the time with Gouvernail who slowly falls in love with her but at the same time he knows that he substitutes her brother to her and that she loves her husband not realizing it. "[...] he suspected that she adored Cazeau without being herself aware of it" (251). She probably felt respect and even love towards her husband but she was not yet ready to sacrifice her identity and space which she did not find in the marriage. She simply yearns for the freedom of her single days. (Toth, 21)

Athénaïse wants to overcome gender stereotypes by leaving her husband, however, when she finds out of her pregnancy, she fully realizes her love towards

Cazeau and that her marriage does not have to be an awful matter as she first perceived it. Maternal feelings make her passionate and she wants to return to her understanding husband as soon as possible. Chopin proves her love by stating that from then on she cannot think of anything else but him. Cazeau has never expected that his young wife could truly love him but feels it upon her arrival. "As he clasped her in his arms, he felt the yielding of her whole body against him. He felt her lips for the first time respond to the passion of his own." (Chopin, 1984, 261) The great female writer proved that if there is love and understanding in marriage, a married couple can live happily and peacefully. Clearly, Kate Chopin showed that she could describe various points of view on marriage, such as a blissful state for both not yet awakened women as well as for awakened ones; and an unhappy marriage for those women who did not have the luck of marrying an extremely understanding husband who would wish for an equal relationship as Athénaïse did.

Since Chopin was the master of hidden meanings, many ironies were often missed by her readers. (Toth, 19) Due to this fact, the ending of the story can be interpreted in another way. When Athénaïse finds out of her pregnancy, she is aware of the reality that a married pregnant woman who abandoned her husband would be highly criticized and her life with a child would be extremely hard in the strict society of the nineteenth-century America. Thus, the love which Chopin depicted can be understood as an inner illusion which Athénaïse creates in order to make her life easier for there was no other way for her than to return to her husband. The critic Emily Toth supports this theory when stating that Athénaïse's final resolution can be interpreted as expression of "woman's enslavement by her own body, her submission to motherhood"(20). Yet, most other critics see it as Athénaïse's final capitulation to a woman's traditional role and that is perhaps why the story was accepted by the public of that time. (Toth, 20)

### **5.3 Artistry**

One of the characters in *The Awakening* who also influenced Edna's self-realization in the world was certainly an artist Mademoiselle Reisz. Due to the fact that the pianist has never married as it was expected by the society, and lives an independent life, one might deduce that Chopin purposely described the pianist as an old ugly woman who is very eccentric and irritates people around her.

She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others. [...] She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair. (Chopin, 1984, 70-71)

Deborah E. Barker suggests in her article *The Awakening of Female Artistry* that Mlle. Reisz has developed her art at the expense of her physical desires. (72) Thus Chopin proves her ability to create various types of characters. Mlle. Reisz represents the type of woman who stands against the social stereotypes and prejudice and although she is considered to be an excellent pianist, as a person she is undesirable in the community. She is aware of this fact and that is why she tells Edna after her performance to be the only one worth playing for since she knows that Edna loves music and can appreciate real art.

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. [...] Mademoiselle Reisz perceived her agitation and even her tears. [...] 'You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!' (Chopin, 1984, 71-72)

The society appreciates more Madame Ratignolle's art who, as a woman, fulfills all its expectations. She is a wonderful mother and wife, and she plays the piano only for the comfort of her family or friends in order to create a pleasant atmosphere, never for business. That is the reason why Adèle is considered to be both a reputable lady as well as a great musician.

She played very well, keeping excellent waltz time and infusing an expression into the strains which was indeed inspiring. She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive. (69)

Since Mademoiselle Reisz represents undesirable type of a woman, she is described mainly by negative connotations to highlight the difference between her and Madame Ratignolle, the desirable type. Chopin probably wanted to emphasize how society can perceive two different personalities and that it is surely influenced by certain

social preconceptions of the nineteenth century. Wyatt supports this idea by stating that “the issue of the piano playing echoes the issue of placement in society. If you follow the rules and norms whatever you accomplish is considered great, if you defy those rules you are shunned and disparaged. Thus, the piano playing becomes a symbol of societal rules and regulations” (Wyatt, 1995b).

Edna’s field of art is painting; she enjoys it because for her it means a kind of self-expression and self-assertion. She asks Adèle to be her model when painting her first picture on Grand Isle. “She handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came, not from long and close acquaintance with them, but from a natural aptitude.” (Chopin, 1984, 55) Edna feels free when painting and after her return home to New Orleans, she turns the top floor of their house into an atelier. She spends a lot of time painting there, which her husband does not consider worthy and comments it: “It seems to me utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family.” (108)

Léonce reacts as a typical husband of that time. Everything that he expects from his wife is obedience, dutifulness, and self-sacrifice. He does not really deem it necessary for Edna to have any hobbies or interests, and moreover, he considers it madness to devote all of her time to painting and not taking care of him and their children as all women should be dedicated to.

As an artist, Edna is supported by both Adèle and Mlle. Reisz. Adèle admires her talent and appreciates her work even over its actual value. Edna knows that her friend is overestimating it, but feels pleased and satisfied.

’Your talent is immense, dear!’[...] ‘Surely, this Bavarian peasant is worthy of framing; and this basket of apples! Never have I seen anything more lifelike. One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one.’ (106)

Mademoiselle Reisz, who is the real artist herself, supports Edna with her internal struggle to become a full-time painter. Despite this, the professional pianoplayer warns Edna to be strong when fighting for her identity otherwise she can end up not very well.

'I am becoming an artist. Think of it!' 'Ah! An artist! You have pretensions, Madame.' 'Why pretensions? Do you think I could not become an artist?' 'I do not know you well enough to say. I do not know your talent or temperament. To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul.' 'What do you mean by courageous soul?' 'Courageous, *ma foi!* The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies.' (115)

This excerpt shows that Chopin through her character of Mlle. Reisz wanted to warn not only Edna but perhaps also other female readers that to become independent and to fight against the strict societal rules was very hard and demanding. Not all the women who realized their painful position in that period of time had enough strength to fight the stereotypes concerning gender roles. The American female writer described the character of Mlle. Reisz as a strong woman who had enough power to keep her artistic goals although she was deprived from American society. Since she refused to be a typical house wife of that time, she was said to be partially demented by the public. "'I've heard she's partially demented,' said Arobin. 'She seems to me wonderfully sane,' Edna replied.'" (138) Nevertheless, Mademoiselle Reisz enjoys living alone and independently without any care what other people think of her. Assumingly, this female protagonist was not very popular in the novel for her rebellious character.

Through her warning she wants Edna to realize if she possesses power to become independent and be able to defy her actions which from the viewpoint of the public would seem as unpremeditated. From her own experience, Mlle. Reisz knows Edna would have to lead a long and grueling fight. Although Edna seems to be successful as an artist, due to the fact she sells her sketches more frequently. Unfortunately, she is still somehow confused with what to do in her future and after the refusal of her desired man, she commits suicide.

Chopin was also a master in using many powerful symbols in her work and the one concerning art connected to the symbol of a bird. At first, Edna does not understand the sense of being compared to the bird, but later on in the novel she starts to comprehend Mlle. Reisz' subtle point.

'[...], she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.'" (138)

Critics comment on Edna's failure to become an artist and an independent woman simply because her wings were weak. Nevertheless, "through the process of trying to become an artist, Edna reaches the highest point of her awakening" (Wyatt, 1995b).

The very first story concerning artistry, Kate Chopin wrote in 1889 and called it *Wiser Than a God*. The main female protagonist, Paula Von Stoltz, chooses to develop her career as a musician rather than to marry the man she truly loves. Thus, it can be seen that Kate Chopin wrote stories about unconventional women from the very beginning of her literary career. In comparison with the appearance of Mlle. Reisz from *The Awakening*, Chopin dared to describe Paula as a young and pretty lady whose talent was well-known and highly appreciated by the public. It only took some years before Kate Chopin realized these independent types of women were highly criticized and that was probably the main reason why she intentionally described the artist Mlle. Reisz as an ugly old woman as the public perceived these so called career women.

The story opens with Paula and her mother having a discussion about Paula's immense talent. Her mother recognizes the talent and wishes her to become a real artist one day. Paula has inherited the musical talent from her father who, surprisingly for the men of that century, supported her career as well. The main character prepares for the party where she is supposed to entertain a community of very rich people by playing the piano. The mother comments it is not the proper career: "Well, it's not the career your poor father had in view for you." (Chopin, 2002, 660) Paula, however, admits that although she does not enjoy these occasions, they give her the opportunity to become famous. Despite the society enjoying Paula's music and appreciating her art, they are not aware of the fact how hard is to become a reputable pianist when being a woman.

Paula amiably consented, choosing a selection from the Modern Classic. How little did her auditors appreciate in the performance the results of a life study, of a drilling that had made her amongst the knowing an acknowledged mistress of technique. But to her skill she added the touch and interpretation of the artist; and in hearing her, even Ignorance paid to her genius the tribute of a silent emotion. (665)

After the performance, Paula is walked back home by George Brainard and their mutual attraction is felt by them both. Unfortunately, when they reach Paula's house, she finds out of her mother's death. She realizes how "the cruel [...] fate had dealt her whilst she had in happy unconsciousness played her music for the dance" (666). After some time, she throws all her energy into work "with the view of attaining that position in the musical world which her father and mother had dreamed might be hers" (666). Meanwhile, George comes to ask Paula to marry him for he loves her and knows that she does too. She answers him: "'I am speechless with joy and misery,' [...]. 'To know that you love me, gives me happiness enough to brighten a lifetime. And I am miserable, feeling that you have spoken the signal that must part us.'" (668) She shares with him that marriage "doesn't enter into the purpose of [her] life" (668). George is confused by her response but persists on marrying her. He promises their marriage would not change anything; he just wishes to share his life with her. Still, she rejects his proposal and leaves to Leipsic.

One might conclude that her refusal can be interpreted in two ways. Although George has promised her the potential freedom in their marriage, she is not sure whether he would grow tired of her career as a musician. She suspects that sooner or later he would increase his demands upon their marriage and she would have to become the typical obedient, self-less wife and end up with her career. She thinks he likes music only as "the pleasing distraction of and idle moment" (668) but for her, music represents an inseparable part of her life. "[...] it's something dearer than life, than riches, even than love" (668). Even though she loves him, she is not willing to risk her career. The second reason for refusing her desired man can be understood as her respect and perhaps even duty towards her parents who always wished her to become the prestigious pianist. She might not want to fail their hope and decides for the independent life as a full-time artist.

Although the very talented woman selects music over marriage, Kate Chopin left the ending open for discussion about this issue. The story finishes with an article in the morning paper announcing "that the renowned pianist, Fräulein Von Stoltz, is resting in Leipsic, after an extended and remunerative concert tour" (669). Chopin let her character reach her desired success in the world of music. She achieves this success as she is accompanied by her old friend, a talented composer Max Kuntzler, who

intensively has loved her for many years. “Professor Max Kuntzler is also in Leipsic -- with the ever persistent will -- the dogged patience that so often wins in the end.” (669) Chopin pointed out that marriage with a man completely devoted to music as well would not be such an evil for a woman with artistic needs.

#### **5.4 Awakening to one’s self**

Due to the fact, that gender is constructed by society and it is defined as a social and cultural definition of human behavior, values and characteristics as feminine and masculine; there is no wonder that an individual learns to behave like a man, or a woman, and is highly influenced by society. (Oates-Indruchová, 131) While men were brought up to be strong and dominant; women were brought up as submissive, passive, and obedient. Thus, it can be seen that society’s upbringing played the key role in division of traditional gender roles. Barbara Welter also described women’s role as follows:

Woman must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was, literally, an end to innocence. She was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it. (Welter)

This example proves that women were somewhat free in their childhood and marriage strictly stopped their independence. Yet still, according to the society’s expectations, they had to get married and become devoted wives and mothers. If a woman did not obey the demands on her, she was highly criticized and rejected by the society she lived in.

Kate Chopin was a master of depicting women’s characters who became aware of their unfavourable gender roles and sought to improve their role in society as well as their independence. These female characters who underwent the process of awakening (as Chopin calls the realization of women’s position) tried to fight against their presupposed gender roles, nevertheless not all of them won this long-lasting battle. For not following the prescribed way of behaviour they were usually considered to be mad.

The main process of female awakening, Chopin described in the novel with the same symbolic name *The Awakening*. One of the female protagonists, Edna Pontellier, becomes aware of her position as a wife and a mother and longs for a different life with another man she truly loves. Throughout the whole novel Chopin excellently described



various stages of Edna's slow awakening and the process which led the main character towards her independence.

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight -- perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (Chopin, 1984, 57)

Kate Chopin mentioned in the novel that the most obvious influence on Edna had been Adèle Ratignolle. They have created an intimate relationship between themselves. Edna is at first confused by such an affinity, nevertheless she grows fond of their relationship. "Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. [...] The action was at first little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress." (61) Some critics saw in their relationship the example of lesbianism; however, this judgment can not be agreed up entirely since Kate Chopin did not devote more time to this theme in her novel. The argument which should be considered seriously is Edna's approach to relationships as a whole. If she is allowed to have a close rapport with a woman, why can not she lead it with a man. (Joslin, 177)

Another very important character who influences Edna is Robert Lebrun, a young single man who the main protagonist finds very attractive and they both gradually fall in love with each other. Upon meeting Robert, Edna's senses are slowly opening to unexpected feelings of love outside her marriage. Both of them know their love is forbidden and there is no chance for a future together. Robert knows that she belongs to Léonce and in order to avoid a possible scandal, he escapes to Mexico leaving Edna to fall back into the gender role that has been stamped upon her -- to stay with her family. Lovelorn Edna feels betrayed by Robert and is depressed thinking he is too weak to fight for his true love as he seems more concerned with the law and social presumptions. Edna is again hurt by his second abandonment and can not believe that Robert did not understand that she could never become Léonce's obedient wife ever again. She would undergo all the sufferings connected with living with a lover and not have "a clean sheet"; however, Robert refuses it for conscience's sake. Chopin

expressed how hard their common fight would be in time with little or no understanding of divorce and abandonment of children for another man.

Another stage of awakening Edna reaches due to Mademoiselle Reisz's music. Edna's senses were ready to listen to the performance carefully and through each tone she realized her unpleasant expected role which she was not satisfied with. Chopin suggested that Edna becomes aware of the terrible truth that women are underestimated as individuals and perceived only as their husband's possessions.

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontelliers spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. (Chopin, 1984, 71)

Edna's husband, Léonce is confused by his wife's new independent and refusing behaviour. She neither obeys his commands nor wishes anymore: "This is more than folly,' he blurted out. 'I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly.'" (78) In response, Edna defiantly responded: "I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you.'" (78) This is the very first mention of Edna's refusal to her husband's orders. At the beginning of the novel Edna behaves like any other typical wife which Kate Chopin described as follows:

Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us. (77-78)

Chopin described Edna as not being always submissive but perhaps only passive and acting mechanically before the realization of her position. The female writer probably wanted to highlight that all women in the nineteenth-century behaved rather automatically according to their parents' upbringing and the certain prescribed manners. The ones who would question the reason why women had to follow these requirements were strictly criticized; they were immediately banned by societal circles and perceived as insane.

Edna is confused herself and does not know how she should cope with her new identity. "She could only realize that she herself -- her present self -- was in some way

different from the other self.” (88) She is aware of the fact that with her newfound independence she would be observed as “a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex.” (138) Chopin masterly depicted all of the society’s possible comments on a woman who did not behave dutifully and submissively. She also illustrated that for Edna’s habit of expressing herself, she was said to act unwomanly. On the contrary, the main female protagonist in *The Awakening* admits that “perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (171). Kate Chopin suggested that although the awakened women were strictly criticized, they did not want to live like the other passive wives anymore. Once they felt their independence, they felt sorry for other women who never had a taste sense of freedom. “I always feel so sorry for women who don’t like to walk; they miss so much -- so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole.” (165)

Another significant stage of Edna’s rebellious behaviour against the societal stereotypes is her moving out from her lawful husband. When she moves out her husband jumps to the conclusion thinking she is on the verge of insanity. A typical wife would never move out, it was something so unusual and unbelievable in that time that Léonce acted as any other man would do and thought of her wife as temporally demented. Edna suspects this fact and comments about it: “He will think I am demented, no doubt.” (135) Chopin presented the character of Edna in the way that she is aware of all the circumstances which her new independent behaviour would cause. Edna also revolts against the society by having a lover and does not care what her neighbours and friends would say. She feels remorse only because of Robert, the man she wishes to be with, but knows that he is too scared to have a relationship against society’s rules.

Learning to swim is also very important for Edna’s awakening and Chopin uses this concept as a symbol of empowerment. Thanks to swimming, Edna feels strength and joy. (Wyatt, 1995b) This symbol may be also interpreted as a sense of freedom which empowers Edna to try to fight against the stereotypes and to change her future.

But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. [...] A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given to her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (Chopin, 1984, 73)

By the very last sentence in this excerpt, Chopin probably wanted to point out that Edna felt empowered and at that very moment in the novel she felt strong enough to be successful on her way in gaining her own independence.

Unfortunately, after Edna's full realization of her position and Robert's refusal, she realizes that she has awakened into another world which. This world she awakens to is not ready for emancipated women. She does not know how to escape from the captivity of the world she lives in and as a result, Edna decides for what she perceives as the only possible way out -- to commit suicide. She longs to become free from society's unsatisfactory patterns which do not allow her to live her own independent life.

The short story called *The Story of an Hour* depicts the similar issue of a woman's realization of her position thanks to widowhood. Chopin always wrote about widowhood as a rather cheerful state of being and in this story, she presented this situation as a challenge and an opportunity for Louise, the main female protagonist. (Toth, 16) The story starts with an announcement of Louise's husband's death where a tragic train accident has taken place; Louise's husband has been sadly killed. She is at first shocked and cries, however, she starts to realize her independence and self-assertion for the future. Although she sometimes loved her husband, she can not help herself to feel free and looks forward to "a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome." (Chopin, 1984, 214) From that moment, she does not concentrate on her husband's death but only on her future. She still whispers the beautiful word: "[...] 'free, free, free!' [...] 'Free! Body and soul free!'" (214-215) Louise is really looking forward to her new life and prays for her life to be long. Sadly, her life may not last very long. Chopin played with her characters in order to find out all the possible ways on how to describe female's awakening. Consequently, already awakened, Louise dies when she sees her husband alive and entering the house. Her husband, who she once thought died in a

tragic accident, was alive and well. Chopin concludes the story with doctors' claiming "she had died of heart disease -- of joy that kills" (215).

Chopin suggested that people could believe that her main female protagonist died because of her great surprise of seeing her beloved husband safe and sound. It was understandable that all wives of that time would feel great sorrow upon losing their husbands and none of them would be satisfied in the state of widowhood. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of a women's question, one might conclude that Chopin foreshadowed her death as a brokenhearted by seeing her husband alive. Emily Toth supports this claim by stating that "Louise's death is an occasion for deep irony directed at patriarchal blindness about women's thoughts, Louise dies in the world of her family where she has always sacrificed for others" (24). If any woman remained single after losing her husband, the reason was believed to be of her husband's remembrance. Men probably did not think that a widow was aware of her potential freedom and did not want to marry another man in order not to become a submissive and dutiful wife again. Chopin herself enjoyed the state of widowhood for she valued the solitude of her own mind and, like her three female ancestors, she considered herself as a survivor who escaped patriarchal imperatives. (Toth, 24-25)

### **5.5 Issues of passion and sexuality**

Chopin described Edna's marriage as not the ideal one and thus the main protagonist in *The Awakening* was surely not satisfied even with her husband's sexual expectations. Due to the fact that she neither really loves her husband nor is she attracted by his physical appearance, one might conclude that Edna could not be satisfied and has to suffer when having sex with her husband. Since this point can be clearly interpreted as mentioned above, this can be one of the reasons why the nineteenth-century public did not accept the novel and considered it shocking and immoral. It was presumed that every wife had to be happy and well-contented in a husband-wife relationship, still, the sex between the partners was not considered to be anything astonishing. If so, then it was not suitable to speak or even write about this issue, and the wives had to suffer in silence.

The female writer went even further in depicting the issue of sexuality and passion. Edna falls in love with another man. Her desired man, Robert, returns her love; but he is too scared of having an affair with a married woman and leaves to Mexico in

order to avoid a possible scandal. After leaving her husband and Robert's abandonment, Edna admits that she does not want to belong to another man again. Consequently, she develops a sexual relationship with a young man with a dreadful reputation -- Alcée Arobin. "He has offered Edna another escape from solitude, the deliverance of the flesh." (Culley, 1976b, 226)

Thanks to this character of a lover, Edna experiences for the very first time in her life pure lust. She knows that she does not love this young man and is bewildered by having an affair based only on passion.

She felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity, [...] Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her. (Chopin, 1984, 132)

Chopin also brilliantly described Edna's confusion when she finally stops to struggle with herself and allows her passion to possess her body.

When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers. It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire. [...] There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips. (139)

According to the nineteenth-century studies, sexual feelings were supposed to be completely absent in women, and if any of them would feel passion, she was feared to drain the life force from men. (Lavender) One might deduce that Kate Chopin meant to highlight the issue of passion to prove that women can have exactly the same sexual feelings and needs like men and thus not all of them have to be satisfied in their peaceful husband-wife relationships. Through Edna she pictured a woman who at first fights against her desire and obeys the stereotypes; nevertheless, she fails this fight due to the fact that her nature struggles and opens to unknown feelings more and more. Despite her friends several warnings, Edna does not want to think about the possible consequences of such a relationship and carries on with it. Evidently, issues of passion and sexuality were strictly criticized by the society of that time for they were not really desirable themes which should be depicted in any literary form. It can be seen that Chopin rebelled in almost every context which concerned the women's position in the nineteenth-century America.

Another example of pure passion is described in a short story called *The Storm*. Due to the fact that issue of female sexuality was a forbidden theme and sexual desires could be experienced by men only, Chopin was highly criticized for open descriptions of such a topic in this story. Nonetheless, Cecelia Tichi claims that the idea of the new woman in literature was closely connected with women's sexual freedom in choosing sexual partners in or out of marital relationship, and that certain literary texts had argued that women's freedom was their prerogative. Chopin added that "a woman's extramarital sexual pleasure can coexist with a satisfying domestic life" (Tichi, 591).

Such a theme she depicted in *The Storm* where a married woman has an affair with a former admirer. This story is actually a sequel to another short story called *At the 'Cadian Ball*. Calixta, the main female protagonist, behaves rather atypically and society excuses her behaviour only due to the fact that she is from a different nation. She has a flirtation with Alcée Laballière who is attracted mainly by Calixta's physical appearance; however, he is in love with another girl. The story *At the 'Cadian Ball* finishes with both of these two protagonists making more suitable marriages. *The Storm* takes place many years later, when Calixta seems to be happily married to Bobinot and bringing up their son Bibi. Calixta now behaves as any other over-scrupulous housewife who does everything in order to comfort her family.

The story begins with an approaching storm, which makes walking Bobinot and his little son wait in the safety of a store until it is gone. Meanwhile, Calixta is left at home alone, but later on she is visited by her former suitor Alcée. She invites him inside and after a certain time it becomes obvious they are still physically attracted to each other and they make love together.

Alcée clasped her shoulders and looked into her face. The contact of her warm, palpitating body when he had unthinkingly drawn her into his arms, had aroused all the old-time infatuation and desire for her flesh. [...] Her lips were as red and moist as pomegranate seed. [...] He looked down into her eyes and there was nothing for him to do but to gather her lips in a kiss. (Chopin, 1984, 283-284)

Alcée leaves when the storm passes away; and Bobinot with Bibi returns back home. Calixta expresses satisfaction at their safe return and all three of them are happy to be together again.

Although this story was published posthumously, it surely had to cause negative public acceptance and Chopin was criticized for depicting such a taboo subject again.

This only proves that she, as a writer, was really far ahead of her time with her feminist viewpoints as many critics declare. Due to the fact that Chopin was great in using various powerful symbols, the critic Robert Wilson suggests that “Chopin’s title refers to nature, which is symbolically feminine; the storm can therefore be seen as symbolic of feminine sexuality and passion, [...]” (Wilson). Chopin highlighted the fact that passion does not have to be dependant on love but more on physical attraction and thus, women can have sex with other men although they enjoy their marriages.

## 5.6 Physical and mental health

As Spargo mentions in her article, women in the nineteenth century were considered to be incomplete biological versions of men. (632) On the basis of medical observations of the day, women were generally physically smaller, they had a more primitive type of brain, had less physical stamina, and they also had a finer nervous system than men and their reproductive system was responsible for all possible female illnesses. (Lavender) Kate Chopin brilliantly illustrated female physical health in her fiction with hidden hint of irony. Her female protagonists seem to often complain of faintness or tiredness, and need to rest quite often. In *The Awakening*, it is mainly the character of Adèle who complains of faintness.

She complained of faintness. Mrs. Pontellier flew for the cologne water and a fan. She bathed Madame Ratignolle’s face with cologne, while Robert plied the fan with unnecessary vigor. The spell was soon over, and Mrs. Pontellier could not help wondering if there were not a little imagination responsible for its origin, for the rose tint had never faded from her friend’s face. (Chopin, 1984, 56)

The pregnant heroines are usually warned not to overestimate their energy and strength:

Her little ones ran to meet her. Two of them clung about her white skirts, the third she took from its nurse and with a thousand endearments bore it along in her own fond, encircling arms. Though, as everybody well knew, the doctor had forbidden her to lift so much as a pin! (56)

From these two examples, it is noticeable that Chopin described female complaints in a humorous way. Society at the time underestimated women to be very weak and nervous, and thus Chopin exaggerated the depiction of female physical illnesses. This can be most obvious on the second example where Adèle is forbidden to



lift something as light as a pin in order not to lose any energy or even worse, to bear a handicapped baby as it was believed in that period of time.

Kate Chopin also adequately touched the issue of madness in *The Awakening*. Due to the fact that Edna behaves rather bizarrely after the return from Grand Isle to New Orleans, her husband thinks of her to be a lunatic. Edna begins to do what she likes, refuses her domestic and societal duties, skips church and cancels her usual Tuesday visits at home. Léonce senses that his wife has drastically changed when she increasingly continues to act according to her own personal desires. The critic Joslin suggests that she becomes unrecognizable to someone who sees her only through the traditional lens, so called social lens. (172) Edna often goes out alone, visits and meets new friends and seems to do everything she possibly can to upset her husband. Léonce tries to persuade her to act again as an obedient and dutiful wife. “He has difficulty dealing with his wife’s new independent nature and thinks of her to be mentally unstable.” (Yagmin, Lieberman)

It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier’s mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world. (Chopin, 1984, 108)

Chopin demonstrated how women who behaved unconventionally and did not act as obedient wives were not considered to be strong individuals, but people thought of them as being insane. Reasons why women were perceived as mad Chopin suggested in the novel. Although she seems to look very well, Edna’s husband describes why he thinks she is demented as she does not act like she once did before. She neither takes care of the household nor her husband or any other duties. All of this depicts proof of her insanity. She also tramps around a lot and returns back home in the evenings. Chopin further acknowledged Léonce’s confusion with his wife’s new attitude: “‘She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; [...]’” (118) Léonce asks his old friend and family physician, Doctor Mandelet, for help. After listening to Léonce’s arguments, the doctor immediately asks: “‘[...] has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women -- super-spiritual superior beings?’” (118)

One might conclude that Chopin highlighted various angles why women were perceived as an inferior race. The idea of intellectual women interested in eternal rights of women was perceived as the worst possibility how women could become absolutely insane. Due to the fact that Doctor Mandelet asks about this issue as first, it supports the suitability of the above mentioned claim. The physician further inquires if the temporary state of insanity is not hereditary. He suggests to Léonce that he should leave his wife alone for certain time, because he supposes that the mood will pass.

'Pontellier,' said the Doctor, after a moment's reflection, 'let your wife alone for a while. Don't bother her, and don't let her bother you. Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism – a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. Most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone.' (119)

After the old doctor takes a closer look on Edna, he starts to understand what is happening to her. Chopin used this particular character to show that even in that time there were a few men who understood women's inevitable position and perhaps pitied them. Doctor Mandelet perceives Edna as a wonderful woman who "reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (123). He is probably the only one who appreciates Edna's independence and does not condemn her for not acting as a True Woman, on the contrary, he knows how hard is to keep an identity for a woman. He is aware of the fact that all women are predestined to their traditional roles and explains it to Edna:

'The trouble is,' sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, 'that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mother for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost.' (171)

To conclude, Chopin was really a great female writer who managed to explore various aspects of women's position. Concerning physical and mental health, she evidently mocked all the nineteenth-century medical observations which confirmed that women were too weak and powerless when compared to men; and what more, they were extremely mentally unstable and any slight inconvenience could bewilder them.

Another interesting example of insanity Chopin explored in *La Belle Zoraïde*. She depicted the issue of a fallen woman who, in the popular literature of that time, was usually doomed to the life in depravity. A fallen woman was considered to be a lower form of being for having sex before marriage and becoming pregnant. As Lavender in her article states, it was believed that a seduced woman was punished by God by losing her baby and going mad. (Lavender)

In *La Belle Zoraïde* Chopin described the story of a mixed-race young lady who was raised and educated by her mistress as a fine lady of a certain position in society. The mistress wishes Zoraïde to marry Monsieur Ambroise who serves another plantation owner. Zoraïde is not keen on marrying him and falls in love with another man, Mézor, who is, unfortunately, the slave of the mentioned plantation owner as well. Zoraïde asks her mistress to let her marry a man she truly loves; sadly, her wish was not heard. “Doctor Langlé gives me his slave to marry, but he would not give me his son. Then, since I am not white, let me have from out of my own race the one whom my heart has chosen.” (Chopin, 1984, 197) Although the lovers know that their love is forbidden, they can not help themselves. When the mistress finds about their secret affection, she asks Doctor Langlé to sell Mézor into a different country. Heart-broken Zoraïde is pregnant and looks forward to her baby as the only remembrance of her lover. She overcomes her death only by her intense maternal longing, however, straight after the childbirth, the cunning mistress and a nurse tell Zoraïde a horrible lie about the death of her infant. Chopin commented on it in the story that their lie “must have caused the angels in heaven to weep” (199). She tried to demonstrate that religion respects the sacred relation of a mother and her baby, and it should be so even though the baby is illegitimate.

The mistress believed that Zoraïde can become the same like in the old times and, in spite of everything that had happened, Monsieur Ambroise still wanted to marry the beautiful mulatto girl. “A sad wife or a merry one was all the same to him so long as that wife was Zoraïde.” (199) This issue is, however, very interesting for she presented a fallen woman and still, someone wants to marry her. Since it concerns the inferior Afro-American race, it probably did not matter that evidently as it would with white women. Nevertheless, Chopin followed the scheme in literature of that time for a fallen woman and let her main female character be punished by God and that she would go

mad. “[...] the will of the good God, who had already designed that Zoraïde should grieve with a sorrow that was never more to be lifted in this world. La belle Zoraïde was no more.” (199) After several days of mourning, Zoraïde starts to pretend that her baby is alive as she looked after a bundle of rags. “In short, from that day Zoraïde was demented.” (199) For her great sorrow and madness, the mistress delivers her little baby-girl back to her mother; unfortunately, Zoraïde suspects her and refuses her own child giving priority to the rags. Since then, Zoraïde is called “la folle” and no one wants to marry her anymore. “She lived to be an old woman, whom some people pitied and others laughed at -- always clasping her bundle of rags -- her ‘piti’.” (199)

Kate Chopin portrayed the life of a so called fallen woman. She expressed Zoraïde’s powerful love towards a slave that she did not follow the society’s demands on young ladies’ virginity. She did not keep her treasure till the marriage night which was considered to be a disaster and what more, she became pregnant. Chopin also reflected societal beliefs that a fallen woman was surely punished by God by losing her baby. Although she mentioned God’s will concerning Zoraïde, in this case, God was not responsible for the baby’s removal and Zoraïde went mad because of her strong maternal instincts and intense longing. As it was believed, the only possible way she could redeem her sin was by her death; however, Chopin let this character live a life of insanity.

The critic Elizabeth Fox-Genovese understands the story as a depiction of a taboo subject such as miscegenation. She also states that true love does not have any chance if there is so much meddling and manipulating with people as Chopin depicted in this short story. She proposes that Chopin explored various dark gaps within a human soul which were parts of every human being. Within these gaps there was a constant battle against boredom. If someone looks only at the surfaces, he/she is not going to understand what people are about. Fox-Genovese further comments that “it’s a measure of both her talent and her character, her strength as a woman, that she didn’t find the depths of the human soul, even human depravity, threatening” (Fox-Genovese).

### **5.7 Depiction of death**

Kate Chopin often touched upon the issue of death in her fiction which is mainly depicted by female’s suicide. Her major work *The Awakening* finishes with the suicide of the main female protagonist who is lost in the world not opened for liberated women.

“Edna does not possess the strength to live her life alone and is therefore driven to seek the solitary security of death.” (Wolkenfeld, 222) After the man whom she desires abandons her, Edna returns to Grand Isle, goes to the beach, gets undressed and for the first time stands naked in the open air. “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.” (Chopin, 1984, 175) She steps into the seductive sea whose voice is “seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (175). Edna sees the longed-for completion of independency as she wades out in the sea and unconsciously continues to find her redemption. She swam without looking back until her arms grew tired. She knows that she failed her attempt to become independent and there is no reason to carry on with her life.

She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! ‘And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies!’ (176)

As Kate Chopin mentioned herself, she was not sure how her main female protagonist would end up. This can be also sensed from the novel when Edna arrives to Grand Isle. She announces to her friend to prepare dinner which sustains the fact that she planned to return from her swim. Edna probably realized her unpleasant position in the universe and when swimming she thought of her existence. For she loved swimming and saw in it her strength and power, perhaps her suicide was the immediate decision and a pleasant way on how to escape from the world.

Many critics speculate about the ending by stating that Chopin wanted to signify either rebellion or defeat of her heroine. The critic Barbara C. Ewell states that Edna fails her quest in finding her true self, but at the same time she is victorious. She achieves and preserves herself -- the essential, which women were certainly denied in that time -- and represents a woman who acts selflessly in giving up her life for her sons. Chopin thus affirms the difficulty of leading the life of female selfhood in a society defining women as selfless. (164) Other critics admit that Edna “is finally set free of everything around her and taking this in stride, spreads her wings and soars above the clouds of society” (Flight of Freedom). Edna knew she has awakened to the

world where she would never meet with understanding or help. “Her suicide is a regressive act coming from ‘a sense of inner emptiness’ and a failure to fulfill in real life her infantile yearnings for fusion.” (Wolkenfeld, 219)

One of the suggested reasons why she had committed suicide was not to be accused by her own children when they grow up. This reason is supported by constantly repeating advice of her friends to think of the children. The critic Helen Emmitt claims that “the drowning is read as liberation from the cage of marriage, societies’ rules, and family” (Wyatt, 1995c). Few critics, such as Manfred Malzahn or Peggy Skaggs, interpret the suicide from another point of view. They suppose that Edna was pregnant with Alcée Arobin, but they both admit that the pregnancy idea is hard to prove. The one fact supporting this claim is that Edna is horrified by Adèle’s labour and the recollection of her own pain when giving birth to her children might have returned. Since this is the last scene preceding the suicide, this interpretation can be considered seriously. “Edna revolts against nature by ‘destroying herself as a means of procreation.’” (Wyatt, 1995c) This opinion is, however, debatable because Edna asks Robert to live with her, what she probably would not if she was really pregnant with her lover.

Suicide was a common theme found in Chopin’s books as it is also found in a short story called *Désirée’s Baby*, but the reason for committing a suicide differs. This story analyses the issue of miscegenation and society’s prejudice towards the Afro-American race. The main female protagonist, Désirée, was raised by foster parents and grew to be beautiful, gentle, affectionate and sincere. Madame Valmondé is proud of her foster-daughter and does not care what other people think about her unknown origin. When Désirée reaches her eighteenth birthday, a wealthy plantation owner Armand Aubigny falls in love with her. Although he is warned about Désirée’s obscure origin, he is determined to marry her as soon as possible. Armand is known to be a very strict master under whose rule black people forgot how to be joyful. The change comes when Désirée bears a baby-boy. Armand “is the proudest father in the parish” (Chopin, 1984, 191) and changes his behaviour towards his workers what pleases his gentle wife who loves him dearly.

Désirée enjoys her married life and takes care of her lovely child. Later on, however, she starts to feel something to be in the air which is underlined by her

husband's changed manners towards her and their baby. She finally understands what is going on when she compares her baby to a mulatto boy who stands next to the cradle. She realizes that her baby is of a darker skin by which she is confused. She asks her husband for an explanation.

'Armand',[...] 'look at our child. What does it mean? tell me.' [...] 'It means that you are not white.' A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted courage to deny it. 'It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair,' seizing her wrist. 'Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,' she laughed hysterically. (192-193)

Since Désirée's ancestors are unknown, Armand immediately suspects his wife for being of an Afro-American origin. From his attitude towards black people it is visible that he hates them and to marry one of them means a disaster and shame for him. For sure, the character of Armand in the story represents an obstinate racist. His love towards his wife and their baby transforms into hatred. Heart-broken Désirée asks Madame Valmondé to confirm that she is white to Armand for she knows that without his love she can not live anymore. Madame replies to her dear Désirée to return to her house with the child. Désirée shows the letter to Armand and wants to know if she should leave him or not. He commands her to leave immediately; she goes to take her baby and sets off on her journey. Her steps, however, do not lead towards her previous home but in the direction of a deep bayou. Once she became aware of the fact that she is considered to be of an inferior race, she knows that her life would be much harder, and to imagine her life without her husband and the father of their son was too painful. To commit suicide even with her mixed-race baby was the only way out where she could escape from her husband's hatred and other people's prejudices towards both her and the baby.

By knowing Chopin's hints of irony, one might conclude, that a surprising ending is still to come. She did not mention any of Armand's remorse concerning the death of his wife and son as some readers might have expected, but pointed out that the baby's African roots did not have to come necessarily from Désirée's unknown predecessors. When Armand burns all her stuff, he accidentally finds a letter from his mother addressed to his father.

[His mother] was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love: -- 'But, above all,' she wrote, 'night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.' (194)

This example illustrates how ironically Chopin described Armand's nasty attitude towards his own race that he even forced his innocent wife to commit suicide by his suspicion of her being the one responsible for the colour of their son's skin. Unfortunately, Kate Chopin did not talk further about Armand's knowledge of the real truth and if he felt any responsibility for their death; thus, the reader can only guess what his state of mind was. Critics comment this example as the uncovered mystery of the source of the baby's mixed race. The discovery of the truth seems to them incredibly irrational in comparison with his feelings when Armand thought his wife came from a mixed race. For being the plantation owner with many slaves, he considers himself to belong to the master race; however, he finds out that he is no better than any of his slaves or his own son who he has rejected. (Coughlin, 2003b)

Some critics also claim that Désirée as a woman understands her expected gender role and in whole represents the inferior role of women in the patriarchal world of nineteenth-century America. They interpreted the story as Chopin's effort to emphasize women's need to gain their independence and achieve equality with men by depicting women's powerlessness and inferiority to men. Kate Chopin described Désirée as the victim of the dominant male society while also being discriminated. (Coughlin, 2003a) Désirée was seen as not having a place to live; this undoubtedly meant she was surrounded by society's strict demands and that is perhaps why Chopin let her female protagonist escape from the world by drowning.



## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, the nineteenth century was certainly the most interesting time period concerning women's position. Although women were still perceived as inferior beings who were rather selfless, there were many women who were brave enough to start the long-lasting battle for their equality and independence. From the traditional point of view, an ideal woman had to look like an angel and act virtuously within the family circle. In general, women who did not have any social rights but duties only, started to awaken from the long-lasting dream of men's oppression and wanted to be heard out in the public by organizing various demonstrations, uprisings and meetings. Simply, they aimed to point out that to be a female does not necessarily mean to be worse than a male.

Kate Chopin, the famous American female writer who explored women's inferiority in her prose, supported this battle by writing articles, short stories and novels. By depicting various taboo subjects of that time, she tried to let other women know that they are not the only ones dissatisfied with their position in the patriarchal world. Chopin's contemporaries criticized her work for describing powerful and independent heroines for which the society was not ready yet. All the critics who were interested in this American female author declare that she was definitely a woman far ahead of her time for her courage in demonstrating women's inferiority in various contexts, and thus giving the basis for studying the gender roles in nineteenth-century America to many feminists and historians.

The aim of this thesis was to introduce the traditional women's position in nineteenth-century American society. By choosing this particular topic the framework was laid out where it was an easy fit to choose various illustrations in Kate Chopin's work, such as her masterpiece *The Awakening* and other selected stories as *Emancipation: A Life Fable*, *Regret*, *Athénaïse*, *Wiser Than a God*, *The Story of an Hour*, *The Storm*, *La Belle Zoraïde* and *Désirée's Baby*. Kate Chopin was certainly a master in depicting her female heroines from both, the traditional point of view as well as nontraditional one for which she was highly criticized.

The first part of this thesis demonstrates the factual women's position in that time and most of the factors which strongly influenced it. One of the most important factors was definitively economics. Men started to migrate into bigger towns and cities

in search of a better job. With this said, they were leaving the burden of the house environment purely on their wives. Men took for granted being the only ones who can financially support their families; women were told their one single duty was towards their families. It was ingrained in the minds of the people that women had to take care of their children and housekeeping. Women who would not find fulfillment in their traditional roles were ridiculed and were immediately considered to be unfeminine and insane.

The following issue which influenced society's thinking was medical observation concerning female biological inferiority, their size of brains and way of thinking. For being physically smaller than men, women were considered to have even smaller brains and thus less intelligence or higher mental instability. Thanks to these observations, women's main role was to give birth to their descendants, take care of their household and be pleasant companions to their husbands in any situation. Women accepted their presupposed gender role for they perceived it as normal due to the fact that they saw the same sort of behaviour in their mothers and grandmothers. Fortunately, there were some women who became active in a political and social sphere which was privileged to men only as they started to fight for their equality on behalf of all women.

Although women were criticized when working in the public sphere, female writers were sought after because writing could be done in the privacy of their homes. Still, men recognized them as sexual monsters that possessed perhaps intelligence but physically they were definitely immature. Female authors were advised to write lighter forms of literature; however, as the time proceeded even the field of literature demanded changes; women started to depict taboo subjects in their work and risked rejection and outrage. The nineteenth-century society was still not ready to read about strong, energetic and independent heroines who became active in the public. All the female writers who explored various issues of women's inferiority were attacked not only by men but also by other conservative female writers who depicted only the traditional point of view on women and thus, they were considered to be much better authors by the society of that time.

As has been already mentioned, one of the female writers who depicted the so called New Woman in their prose was Kate Chopin. She was not afraid to write about

women who started to realize their inferior position in the patriarchal world of men's oppression and desired to change it. As it is proved by the examples of gender issues from Chopin's work, she masterly described the problem of women's question not only from an unconventional point of view but also from a traditional one in order to emphasize the difference between members of the same sex. She also used hidden irony and many powerful symbols in her writing style which underlined her super-temporal thinking.

In her last novel *The Awakening*, she explored the issue of divorce, female sexuality, independence and suicide; unfortunately, society was not yet prepared to read about an emancipated woman with sexual longings, who leaves her husband, finds a lover and at the end commits suicide because there is no other way how to escape from society's strict demands. This book was immediately condemned and banned for its immoral content which really hurt Chopin; nevertheless, she continued in her writing following three years before her death. Her writing was brought into the light in the second half of the twentieth century when the public was finally prepared to read such scandalous themes.

The second main part of this thesis is focused on examples of gender issues in Chopin's selected work. The chosen extracts concern author's approach towards female inferiority and show how she depicted them in various contexts. The examples demonstrate motherhood, marriage, artistry, self-awakening, sexuality, passion, physical and mental health as well as suicide. Regarding motherhood, this magnificent female writer portrayed three different approaches towards this issue in the selected fiction. She depicted three female protagonists when one of them presents the typical obedient mother who enjoys her gender role and does not identify it as something wrong; while the second one loves her children but still motherhood is unfulfilling for her and she yearns for independence. In another short story Chopin proposed the different attitude towards motherhood, where the main female protagonist lives a life of freedom and independence; however, one day she is confronted with the role of being a mother when she is supposed to look after four children. Her motherly instincts appear even after many years of a childless period and she becomes accustomed to their presence. When she returns the children back to their mother, she regrets the fact that she never wished to have her own child or someone else's presence or intimacy. All these three examples

prove that Chopin was able to describe one issue from various points of view and did not obviously criticize the traditional role only. It can be seen from the last excerpt, that Chopin did not assume motherhood as something wrong; basically, she saw in it women's natural state. Being a mother was not a bad deal after all as long as a woman would live in an equal marriage which Chopin had experienced in her own matrimony. The issue of marriage Chopin also illustrated from different angles. She illustrated fulfilled marriages as well as unfulfilled ones.

Concerning artistry, Chopin demonstrated two professional female pianists who love music most of all. While in her first story dedicated to artistry she dared to picture the main protagonist as a beautiful young lady, later on in the novel *The Awakening* portrayed the professional musician as an ugly old lady for she found out that society perceives these women as horrible creatures undesirable for their company. For comparison in the same novel, Chopin used another female character who is a desirable woman as well as an artist because she plays the piano only for the comfort of her family.

Since it was supposed that women had no sexual feelings like men, it was a great surprise for Chopin's contemporaries that she provoked them with themes like sexuality and passion in women. She also managed to explore these taboo subjects from various points of view as well. Heroines who have awakened from the long-lasting dream of men's oppression suddenly feel the physical need of someone's presence. The main protagonist in *The Awakening* does not find satisfaction in her marriage and is rather confused when she is sexually attracted by a man she is not in love with. A similar motif Chopin described in another short story where the main female protagonist is physically attracted by her former suitor and they both make love one afternoon although they are both happily married to different partners. Kate Chopin surely wanted to highlight that physical attraction towards different people can appear even in a happy marriage.

This American female author depicted in her work also issue of physical and mental health in which she mocked medical observations of the day. Pregnant women were forbidden to be physically or intellectually active in order not to bear handicapped babies or to become insane. She also pointed out those women who did not behave according to society's rules, were immediately identified as mad. She used this issue in

her masterpiece where the main protagonist starts to behave nontraditionally and she is perceived as insane by her husband. In a different story Chopin explores the issue of a fallen woman which means that a woman had sex before marriage and became pregnant. These women were expelled from society and it was believed that God would punish them by taking their illegitimate babies to Heaven or by their insanity. In her story Chopin describes the issue of mental health for the female protagonist becomes mad after the removal of her baby. The last issue concerns suicides of two heroines. In both stories the main female protagonists commit suicides by drowning, nevertheless, the reasons for their death differ. While one character gives up her fight for freedom and independency in the patriarchal world, the second character leaves the world with her baby for the racial hatred.

Kate Chopin indisputably belongs among the most famous and important women writers in nineteenth-century America for depicting women's question from various angles. Although she knew that she risks her writing career for portraying her female heroines as strong and self-assertive women, she did not give up the battle because she hoped that she would help other women to awaken and thus become active in the fight for equality as well. Chopin simply wanted to emphasize that women as human beings are the same individuals like men.

## 7. Resumé

Devatenácté století bylo díky velkým společenským změnám a reformám zřejmě nejdynamičtěji se měnícím obdobím americké historie. Toto století přineslo nové nápady, nové způsoby myšlení a modernější pohled na americkou společnost. Na druhou stranu zde stále převládala tradiční společenská pravidla, která nebylo lehké změnit, neboť byla v myšlení americké společnosti hluboce zakořeněna. Ženy byly vnímány jako podřadné bytosti bez jakýchkoliv práv, ale se spoustou povinností. Ideální žena měla vypadat jako anděl a chovat se zcela ctnostně jak v kruhu rodinném, tak i ve společnosti. Ačkoli tyto předsudky nebylo lehké přeměnit, existovalo mnoho žen, které si byly vědomy svého nezáviděníhodného postavení a chtěly dosáhnout rovnoprávnosti s muži. Toto období bývá také definováno jako století, kdy se ženy začaly pomalu probouzet z dlouhotrvajícího nepříjemného snu mužského útlaku a začaly organizovat různá shromáždění a demonstrace za svá práva. Ženy chtěly především zdůraznit, že být ženou neznamena být horší než muž, což byla v tehdejší době nepředstavitelná troufalost. Přesto však neustávaly ve zkoušení různých způsobů, jak dosáhnout svého cíle, i když věděly, že boj za rovnoprávnost nebude jednoduchý.

Jedním ze způsobů jak vyjádřit nesouhlas s postavením žen v té době bylo psaní různých románů, povídek a článků týkajících se této problematiky. Spisovatelky dávaly ostatním ženám najevo, že ve svém boji za rovnoprávnost v patriarchálním světě nejsou osamoceny. Jednou z nejvýznamnějších amerických spisovatelek devatenáctého století, které se nebály vyjádřit k ženské podřadnosti, byla nepochybně Kate Chopinová. Tato americká autorka se věnovala rozličným zakázaným tématům té doby jako například nespokojeným manželstvím, rozvodům, ženské sexualitě, touze po ženské nezávislosti, sebevraždám či míšení ras. Chopinová byla kritizována za zobrazování hrdinek jako silných a nezávislých žen a jelikož ve svém vyprávění používala neutrální tón, kterým vlastně neodsuzovala chování svých postav, některá její díla byla publikem odmítnuta. Próza této spisovatelky, která předběhla svou dobu, byla znovu objevena ve druhé polovině dvacátého století. Zobrazováním ženské podřadnosti ve svém díle Chopinová poskytla studijní materiál tehdejším feministkám pro zkoumání genderových rolí ve společnosti.

Cílem této diplomové práce bylo seznámit dnešní čtenáře s tradičním postavením žen v americké společnosti devatenáctého století a následně vybrat vhodné

ukázky z románu Kate Chopinové *The Awakening* a z jejích dalších povídek *Emancipation: A Life Fable, Regret, Athénaïse, Wiser Than a God, The Story of an Hour, The Storm, La Belle Zoraïde* and *Désirée's Baby*. Tato spisovatelka dokázala vnímat a popsat problematiku ženské populace nejen podle tehdejších společenských pravidel, ale i z netradičního pohledu, za který byla silně kritizována.

V první části práce je rozebrána skutečná pozice žen té doby. Jedním z nejdůležitějších faktorů, které měly vliv na tehdejší způsob života byla ekonomika, protože muži začali migrovat za prací mimo své domovy, a tím zanechali domácnosti pouze na bedrech žen. A jelikož muži měli za to, že poskytnutím peněz svým rodinám splnili veškeré své závazky vůči nim, na ženách zůstala povinnost postarat se o chod domácnosti a výchovu svých dětí. Tato povinnost jim zabrala veškerý čas, a tak jim pro sebe nezbyvala žádná volná chvíle. Ženy, které by se chtěly proti těmto zavedeným zvyklostem vzepřít, byly okamžitě kritizovány pro svou „neženskost“ a považovány za nenormální.

Další fakt, který ovlivnil společenské myšlení, byly medicínské studie na téma biologické podřadnosti žen týkající se stavby těla, velikosti mozku, způsobu myšlení či vysvětlení menstruace jako periodické nemoci. Ženy byly považovány za fyzicky podřadnější díky menšímu vzrůstu, což mělo dokazovat, že mají i menší mozek, a tím i méně inteligence a větší sklon k duševním poruchám. Jejich hlavní role měla spočívat v rození dětí, ve starosti o domácnost a v umění být příjemnými společnicemi svým manželům za každé situace. Ženy tuto skutečnost většinou přijímaly bez protestů, žily tak už jejich babičky a matky, a proto jim tato role připadala naprosto normální. Přesto se našlo několik žen, které se začaly objevovat ve veřejné sféře, jež byla privilegována pouze mužům, jako například v politice, v literatuře či v oblasti vzdělávání, ale bylo jich jen malé procento.

Přestože byly ženy kritizovány za působení ve veřejném životě, v devatenáctém století byl nedostatek spisovatelů imaginativní literatury, a tak vydavatelé museli hledat nové autory, které překvapivě našli mezi ženami. Psaní literatury nebylo tolik odsuzováno, jelikož autorky mohly tvořit svá díla v soukromí svých domovů, a tím nebyly tak na očích veřejnosti. I v oblasti literatury ovšem stále převažovaly předsudky mužů, kteří ženské spisovatelky nazývali sexuálními monstry tělesně nevyvinutými na úkor své inteligence. Ačkoliv ženy směly psát pouze jednodušší formu literatury,

v průběhu století se toto stanovisko postupně měnilo a ženy se samovolně začaly věnovat různým zakázaným tématům své doby. Začalo se více psát o nezávislých ženách, které chtěly získat rovnoprávnost, nosit mužské oblečení či se aktivně objevovat ve veřejném životě. Autorky, zabývající se takto ženskou otázkou, byly kritizovány nejen muži, ale zároveň i jinými, více konzervativními spisovatelkami, které stále ještě zdůrazňovaly tradiční zařazení ženy. Ženské autorky, které ve svých dílech popisovaly tzv. novou ženu, riskovaly odmítnutí svých prací či dokonce zavrnutí společností. Čtenářská veřejnost zkrátka ještě nebyla připravená číst o nezávislých, energických, úspěšných a sebejistých ženách.

Jednou z těchto statečných spisovatelek byla zcela jistě již zmíněná Kate Chopinová, která se nebála psát o ženách, jenž nebyly spokojeny se svým postavením v patriarchálním světě a začaly si uvědomovat svoji nezáviděníhodnou situaci. Chopinová dokázala bravurně popsat problematiku ženské otázky nejen podle tehdejších společenských pravidel, ale právě také i z netradičního pohledu, za který byla společností kritizována. Velký vliv na její psaní měly mimo jiné její velice vzdělané ženy v příbuzenstvu, se kterými vyrůstala, a které později také využila jako předlohu k některým svým dílům. Ačkoliv se Chopinová mohla zdát ideální manželkou a matkou šesti dětí, z jejího života je patrné, že ona v manželství zažila rovnoprávnost a lásku. Po smrti manžela se již nikdy neprovdala, neboť věděla, že být vdovou znamená mít jako žena určitou volnost. Poté se začala intenzivně věnovat psaní, kde využívala své zkušenosti a znalost míst, která navštívila. K tomu přidala skrytou ironii a mnoho silných a zároveň důležitých symbolů, které podtrhovaly její nadčasové myšlení.

Ve svém posledním románu *The Awakening* napsaném v roce 1899 se zabývá otázkou rozvodu, ženské sexuality a sebevraždy. Americká společnost tehdy ještě nebyla zdaleka připravená číst o emancipované ženě, která má sexuální potřeby jako muži, která opustí manžela, najde si milence a na konci románu spáchá sebevraždu, neboť není jiného úniku ze světa, který není takovýmto nezávislým ženám nakloněn. Toto dílo bylo okamžitě zkritizováno a zakázáno pro „nemorální“ obsah. Kate Chopinová byla zdrcena negativní recenzí na svou knihu, přesto v psaní neustala a pokračovala ve své tvorbě ještě další tři roky až do svého úmrtí. Její dílo bylo znovuobjeveno ve druhé polovině dvacátého století, kdy už byla veřejnost konečně připravena pro čtení děl s takovýmto obsahem.



Druhá hlavní část této diplomové práce je zaměřena na zobrazování různých situací týkajících se ženské otázky ve vybraných dílech Chopinové. Tyto úryvky se týkají především autorčina postoje k ženské podřazenosti a toho, jak ve své próze zachycuje určité kontexty, ve kterých ženy zažívaly největší příkoří. Příklady z děl jsou zaměřeny na mateřství, manželství, umění, uvědomování si své pozice, sexualitu, vášeň, na fyzické a mentální zdraví či sebevraždu.

Co se týče mateřství, Chopinová ve vybraných dílech dokázala popsat tři různé postavy, z nichž každá prezentuje jiný postoj k životu. Ve svých dílech čtenáře seznamuje jak s typickou obětavou matkou, která žije jen pro své ratolesti a starost o ně a rodinu ji nikterak nezatěžuje, tak i s matkou, která sice své dvě malé děti miluje, ale přesto trpí potřebou po volném čase jen pro sebe a mateřství pro ni není dostatečným naplněním. Posledním příkladem mateřství je postava starší ženy, která žije osamoceně, ale nezávislý život a rozhodně toho nelituje. Lítost se dostavuje až po zkušenosti, kdy se tato stará panna musí postarat o čtyři děti své sousedky. Mateřské instinkty se dostaví i po tolika letech a ona si zvykne na život s dětmi. Po odevzdání dětí zpět, si tato hrdinka posteskuje po blízkosti něčí spřízněné duše a lituje toho, že nikdy nezatoužila po vlastním dítěti. Chopinová dokázala bravurně popsat jak naplněná tak i nenaplněná manželství.

V kontextu umění zobrazuje dvě profesionální pianistky, které nade vše milují svojí hudbu. Zatímco autorka ve své první povídce týkající se umění zobrazuje hlavní hrdinku jako pohlednou mladou ženu, která je všude oblíbená, s odstupem času poznává, že společnost chce takovéto ženy vidět spíše jako škaredé a hrubé. Ve svém románu *The Awakening* proto popsala nezávislou umělkyni jako starou a společensky nevyhledávanou osobu. Jako její protiklad je zde postava, která jelikož hraje na piáno pouze pro zábavu svých dětí, manžela či společnosti, je považována za umělkyni a za společensky přijatelnou.

Jelikož se předpokládalo, že ženy nepocítují žádnou sexuální potřebu jako muži, pro všechny bylo překvapením, že Chopinová dokázala popsat i různé pohledy na toto téma. Postavy žen, které prošly tzv. uvědoměním si své nezáviděníhodné situace, si začínají uvědomovat, že mají stejné pocity jako muži a potřebují něčí tělesnou blízkost. Jedna z postav nenachází naplnění v manželství a je sama sebou zmatená, že ji sexuálně přitahuje muž, do kterého rozhodně není zamilována. Fyzickou přitažlivost popisuje

spisovatelka také v povídce *The Storm*. Zde pro změnu popisuje sexuální dobrodružství prožité během jediného odpoledne. Oba hlavní aktéři jsou celkem šťastni ve svých manželstvích, ale podle Chopinové může v tomto případě zafungovat fyzická přitažlivost a ani šťastné manželství není vždy zárukou věrnosti.

Kate Chopinová protestovala proti teoriím tehdejší medicíny, podle kterých těhotné ženy nesměly provádět vůbec žádné činnosti, neboť se věřilo, že by porodily hendikepované děti nebo by samy zešilely. Smýšlení tehdejší společnosti je pro dnešní čtenáře nepochopitelné. Ženy, které se nechovaly konvenčně, nebo-li podle společenských regulí, byly zákonitě považovány za šílené. Toto téma Chopinová rozebírá ve svém nejvýznamnějším románu, kdy se hlavní hrdinka začíná chovat „jinak“ a je okamžitě považována svým manželem za nerozumnou a šílenou. V jiné povídce se také zabývá otázkou tzv. padlé ženy, což znamená, že žena měla předmanželský sex a otěhotněla. Tyto ženy byly okamžitě vylučovány ze společnosti a věřilo se, že Bůh je potrestá úmrtím jejich nelegitimních miminek nebo zešílením. Ve svém příběhu Chopinová popisuje odebrání dítěte novopečené matce, která ze ztráty svého novorozeněte nakonec opravdu zešílí.

Posledním tématem této diplomové práce jsou příklady, kde autorka zachycuje smrt některých svých hrdinek. V obou vybraných ukázkách hlavní hrdinky spáchají sebevraždu utopením, ovšem důvod pro odchod z patriarchálního světa se liší. Zatímco jedna hrdinka vzdává svůj boj za svobodu a nezávislost, druhá páchá sebevraždu i se svým malým synkem z důvodu rasové nesnášenlivosti.

Kate Chopinová určitě patří mezi uznávané spisovatelky devatenáctého století v Americe, neboť dokázala bravurně popsat z různých úhlů postavení žen tehdejší společnosti. Přestože věděla, že psaním o silných hrdinkách riskuje svoji kariéru, svůj boj nevzdala, neboť zřejmě doufala, že svými díly pomůže k „probuzení“ z dlouhého snu mužského utlačování i dalším ženám.

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