

**Patriarchal Representation and Domestic Liberation:  
The Home in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction**

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*“Today a woman who is lucky in her choice of a husband can have both—marriage and self-direction. But since in Chopin’s fictional world that option does not exist, she makes a powerful plea for it”* (McMahan 35).

Kate Chopin, a pioneering feminist writer, was writing at a time when women were confined to the private sphere of the home and were often denied participation in the public. Patriarchal attitudes dominated the minds of American people in the nineteenth century and Chopin’s work encouraged women to look at their situations from a critical point of view, one in which women were unfairly treated because of their status as female. In her short fiction, Kate Chopin portrays the oppression of women in the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century America through the quintessential Southern plantation home. By representing the domestic sphere, Chopin portrays women unable to fully embrace their own feminine ideas and express their own desires. A constant image in her stories, the plantation home is an image of domesticity that locates Chopin’s desire for women trapped in the private sphere to be able to have voice, portraying their fears and delusions as tied to a patriarchal society. In addressing how these women characters cope in domestic settings, Chopin both shows how these characters exercise agency and also how they are denied agency in nineteenth century America.

The nineteenth century fostered the growth of the “Cult of Domesticity” in American society. Alison Kemper, literary scholar and critic, explains: “the workplace was increasingly more centered outside of the home. Therefore, the family residence came to be regarded as a haven from the greed and corruption of the modern world. Many felt that women, as keepers of this refuge, should be set above, yet apart from, such a world” (11). These ideas brought about the idea of the public and private spheres of society in which the man went out into the public sphere to work to support his family while the wife stayed at home to take care of the domestic duties. Kate Chopin

chose to highlight this facet of everyday life because this was the life that she had been exposed to the most. In the beginning, she was confined to the domestic sphere simply because she was a female. These distinctions, however, were beginning to change as Katherine Joslin argues in her essay "Finding the Self at Home":

Kate Chopin's theme of female suffocation in the home arose from cultural changes taking place around her. The creation of separate spheres of life in nineteenth century America, the doctrine that relegated men to the world of work outside the home and the woman to work within, broke down late in the century. No longer content with the role of domestic angel, women grew more educated, more forceful, more visible outside the house (167).

Chopin was an example of the changing atmosphere in society as she began going against those conventions in her own life by smoking cigarettes and dressing unconventionally before women were allowed to do so. Chopin's surroundings created a tension that would lead her to write about the liberation of women. Her stories showed that finally women were beginning to realize that the patriarchal society that they lived in was the problem, the reason that they were being treated in a way that was less than men. The world that Chopin creates in her stories was obviously influenced by her own life as shown in the characters and the settings of her various works.

Kate Chopin uses many of her own experiences to shape her fiction and her views of female independence. Born on 8 February 1851 to an Irish immigrant merchant father and an aristocratic French-Creole mother, Katherine O'Flaherty was born into a secure and socially prominent St. Louis family. Growing up Chopin received an education from the Sacred Heart in St. Louis. Here she was "exposed to Catholic teachings and a French educational emphasis upon intellectual discipline" (Inge 90). She participated in St. Louis society as a belle for two years but was

introduced to the feminist social issues of the time and became very rebellious. When her father died in a train accident, Chopin's life was affected greatly because her mother was put in charge of keeping the family together and making decisions about her education. Chopin scholar Allen F. Stein states: "[Chopin's] parents' marriage provided the first indications to Chopin that the struggle for power is a grim fact of existence and that women are particularly vulnerable in the struggle" (2). This struggle was, to Chopin, a struggle being fought by women for female autonomy. Her views on life changed after her father's death as Helen Taylor explains: "She was brought up...in a household dominated by a great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother, none of whom remarried after widowhood" (141). By being constantly surrounded by women, Chopin learned to respect their independence, intelligence, and courage (Taylor 141). Figures such as these helped provide subjects for Chopin's work and many of her family members can be seen as characters in her later stories. In 1870, when Chopin was nineteen she married Oscar Chopin in New Orleans and they eventually had six children: Jean Baptiste, Oscar, George Francis, Frederick, Felix Andrew, and Lelia. The family eventually moved to a cotton plantation near Cloutierville, Natchitoches Parish, a reoccurring setting for her fiction. Oscar Chopin died in 1883 of swamp fever and Kate Chopin could not keep the family business from going under. She decided to move back to St. Louis with her mother who died a year later. A close friend and physician, Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, urged Chopin to start writing fiction because of the descriptions and details of the letters she wrote to him about Louisiana. Through these fictional stories Chopin was able to accurately describe the landscape and people of central Louisiana while also beginning to overcome the loss she felt after the death of her husband and mother. It was a combination of "her gift as a mimic with her talent as a musician" that allowed her to capture the "distinctive cadences, nuances, gestures, and diction of the residents of Louisiana..." (Davis 59). She wrote poems, short

stories, and long fictional works throughout her life but was condemned at the end of her career by the public for her “candid treatment of a young married woman’s sexual and spiritual awakening” (Bloom 1). Chopin died after a visit to the World’s Fair in St. Louis, Missouri from a cerebral hemorrhage on 22 August 1904. The dominant attitudes that surrounded Chopin about women and independence helped to cultivate the person that she became and undoubtedly affected the work that she produced. If Chopin had not experienced such a strong female presence in her life then her work would not have been as radical. She would not have had the courage to explore female independence if she had not been surrounded by it herself and shown that this was an agreeable lifestyle for women.

Modern readers of Chopin’s work consider her to be a local color writer. This distinction can be made because, as Marie Fletcher describes, her works “make use of the most colorful subdivision of Louisiana’s culture and realistic presentation begins to replace the earlier romantic concept of Southern womanhood” (119). This earlier concept was based on the writings of other Southern writers such as George Washington Cable and Grace King. Authors such as these helped to usher in the movement of Southern literature and Fletcher states, “the woman’s place, these works would assume, is still in the home rather than in politics or the professions” (118). This idea is prevalent throughout Chopin’s work because her women characters never really stray away from the home and when they do they are met with conflict; yet, when they stay in the home they are met with a desire to escape. These conflicting feelings are at the forefront of Chopin’s work.

While she experimented with various forms of fiction, Chopin’s “post-1891 work focuses more and more on the oppressiveness of womanhood ideology and the arduousness of woman’s quest for self. This development is particularly striking when one considers the popularity of her less adventurous work, her local color stories” (Papke 51). Kate Chopin began to go against the

romantic portrayals of Southern womanhood and chose instead to examine “the ideal southern woman as not just an imaginary distortion of male demands but a realizable construct of immense value to the patriarchy” (Papke 32). She chose to explore this societal construct through her short fiction by placing women within the home and exploring how this negatively affected their lives and livelihood. When Kate Chopin began writing she did not choose to write controversial stories that were condemned by literary critics and the public, like her final novel *The Awakening*. Instead, “early in her [Chopin’s] career, when she wrote charming Creole stories with happy endings, she had little difficulty finding publishers...as she developed herself as a writer, however, she found herself testing the limits of her publishers and her audience” (Cutter 18). This is an important distinction to note because her later works involved “heroines with strong desires and voices,” which caused Chopin to be rejected by many publishers and by her readers. Many scholars have claimed that Chopin was a woman before her time. The treatment of the women characters in her stories is radical and went against notions of femininity and domesticity of the century. Stein explains “Chopin’s developing sense that life may often be a doomed struggle to achieve and maintain autonomous existence in frequently inimical conditions was reinforced by her reading of Darwin and his followers” (3). Kate Chopin quarreled with Darwin’s works as explored in Bert Bender’s article “Kate Chopin’s Quarrel with Darwin Before the Awakening.” In this essay he states that Chopin never doubted Darwin’s first revolutionary theory in *The Origin of Species* but she questioned his interpretation of the female role in sexual selection, another theory presented by Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (99-100). The main problem that Chopin had with this theory was Darwin’s views on “the inferiority of women and, most emphatically, his theory of the female’s modesty, her passivity in the sex drama as a creature without desire” (100). These issues are explored in many of her works on love and sexual desire. Through her short stories, Chopin

describes her different interpretations of love, romantic and maternal, while examining how women dealt with their own sexuality and the act of sex itself. For Darwin to say that women were without desire and simply passive subjects in sexual acts was to Chopin preposterous and completely false.

The short stories analyzed in this study highlight the symbolism Chopin uses to illuminate the injustices women were experiencing in the nineteenth century. Allen F. Stein determined,

the wives in Chopin's short stories of matrimony have but two options, neither at all appealing. They can submit, yielding to a husband and, indeed, to an institution that deny them anything approximating autonomy of thought, desire or action, or they can rebel, only to find their rebellion short-lived and futile, as nothing in their experience or social context encourages the sort of personal latitude and growth for which they long. (9)

These stories are based around the image of the home as being the domicile of the woman and how this leads to the oppression of a wife by her husband. Chopin chooses to use symbolism to most accurately portray the oppression of women, predominantly in the form of the Southern plantation home. This oppressive image is easily recognizable in the area that she is writing about and so many people would be familiar with the plantation's presence in society. Her use of a familiar image would be more resonant to her audience of female readers. By showing the reader a picture that she can relate to, Chopin was showing the reader that she could actually be the subject of the story, even if she didn't realize it. Female readers would then be affected by these works and begin to think in revolutionary new ways in relation to their status in society.

Even though the first story is not set in a plantation house, the use of an ambiguous home helps to establish the argument that Chopin explores the home as a woman's place and how

limiting that can be. The ambiguity of the home in “The Story of an Hour” makes the action more resonant to readers, especially female readers. The story was published in 1894 and tells about the life of Mrs. Mallard, a housewife that discovers that her husband has been killed in a train accident. This accident proves to be a liberating experience for her as she begins to realize that she will live a happier life without her husband. Mrs. Mallard celebrates her newfound freedom, but then her husband walks back into the home, and she dies instantly of a heart attack. In her book, *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*, Mary E. Papke writes that Chopin “makes up her own continuum of females: woman as ‘true woman’, a seemingly helpless being who is defined only through relationships to and with men; woman as outsider, an artist of a new world view; woman as dual self, a female precariously balanced between submission and self-will” (34). This last distinction is where Mrs. Mallard should be categorized. Her actions after learning of her husband’s death are an unsuitable way for a woman to act. She “did not hear the story as many women have...with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance,” she reacts passionately and “wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister’s arms” (213). Papke’s distinct categories, while helpful in beginning to understand the different types of women Chopin wrote about in her stories, only begins to describe these women characters. They do not simply fall into one category or another. Mrs. Mallard does seem to be trying to balance her own self-will with her desire to please her husband but she also defines herself as Mr. Mallard’s wife and not by her own name, Louise. Papke goes on to say that in this story Chopin writes about a “very ordinary reality and conscientiously analyzes that moment in a woman’s life when the boundaries of the accepted everyday world are suddenly shattered and the process of self-consciousness begins” (62). While Mrs. Mallard’s world shatters after hearing of her husband’s death, to say that she is only now becoming conscious of her self is false. The text of the story reveals that Mrs. Mallard was aware of

her own oppression and had “thought with a shudder that life might be long” (215). She understood that now she was free to live her own life and “there would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature” (214). This understanding shows that Mrs. Mallard had considered her own fate and simply come to terms with her own oppression, that is until she was given a solution. S. Selina Jamil, another Chopin critic, explains in her essay “Emotions in ‘The Story of an Hour’” that “until her moment of illumination, Mrs. Mallard’s emotions have been stifled and suppressed to fit into the mold of hollow social conventions” (216). This explains her sudden outburst when she is told about her husband’s death. She feels that she is no longer being held back because of her husband and now she can enjoy a long and happy life, a life that she once was dreading.

The joy and liberation that Mrs. Mallard experiences is found in the “little whispered word” that she repeats over and over again: “free” (214). As Mrs. Mallard climbs the stairs in the beginning of the story, she is coming out of her own entrapment. Mrs. Mallard’s movements throughout the house mirror the social implications of a woman being elevated by her controlling husband’s death. Her husband is the only thing standing in the way of her living the life that she wants to live. In her own room, Mrs. Mallard can truly embrace her newfound freedom. Outside her window she can see a world “aquiver with new spring life” (213). Spring, a season of life and rebirth, gives the reader a feeling of hope about Mrs. Mallard’s new life. This sense of hope is quickly replaced by a feeling of shock as Mrs. Mallard suddenly dies. Jamil assumes that “Kate Chopin focuses on a late nineteenth-century American woman’s dramatic hour of awakening into selfhood, which enables her to live the last moments of her life with an acute consciousness of life’s immeasurable beauty” (215). Through this one moment in time, Chopin has illuminated a whole

different set of options for Mrs. Mallard, the option to finally live the life she wants, and just as quickly those options are taken away from her. By leaving the privacy of her own space, Mrs. Mallard lets her past oppressions back in and is shocked to find them again in the form of her husband who was unaware the train accident even occurred. Mrs. Mallard descending the stairs to her death is a literal interpretation of the home and the domestic sphere that women were confined to. It is symbolic that she came down the stairs and found her husband there because she was abandoning the freedom she had in her own room and was returning to the confines of the domestic sphere. Her death at the end of the story was her last chance for liberation and it is only in death that she is truly free from her husband. Allen Stein explains in his book *After the Vows were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism* that a “recurring lesson in her [Chopin's] works were that, soon or late, people will inevitably seek self-gratification rather than self-suppression” (163). It is apparent that Mrs. Mallard could only find this self-gratification through death, but this choice was not really made by her. Her body chose death over being oppressed because her heart condition is ultimately her escape from her husband.

Speculations over the last line of the story show that many interpretations can be made about what Chopin was going for in the last line of “The Story of an Hour.” The line “When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills” (215) can be read from two opposing perspectives. To read this sentence from a nineteenth century male perspective, the sentence can be understood as Mrs. Mallard being so overjoyed that her husband was alive that it was the “joy” that killed her. This interpretation also takes into account the fact that the doctors pronouncing Mrs. Mallard’s affliction were male doctors. They would be concerned with placing a patriarchal spin on her diagnosis and not making it seem like her husband’s oppressive nature caused her death. A deeper look at this sentence, however, shows that Mrs. Mallard did die “of joy

that kills” but at this point in her life death was the only way that she could have stayed truly happy. By experiencing those brief moments of freedom in her own room, she was refusing to return to the life that she had previously been living.

As an example of Kate Chopin’s biographical ties to her writing, Emily Toth writes in her biography, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, “the story [“The Story of an Hour”] can be read as the story of Eliza O’Flaherty’s [Chopin’s mother’s] marriage, the submission of a young woman to someone else’s will. It can also be read as a criticism of marriage itself, as an institution that traps women” (10). Even though the train crash in the story was false, the real train crash that killed Chopin’s father was Kate Chopin’s own form of liberation (10). Toth states: “[Chopin’s] father’s death kept Kate O’Flaherty from growing up in the typical nineteenth-century patriarchal household, in which a powerful husband ruled the roost” (11). This event is significant because if her father had not died, then Chopin’s life would have been drastically different. Her mother would not have inherited her father’s large estate and the power to make decisions about Chopin’s education. Kate Chopin could not publish the true ending of the story because the actual outcome of her mother’s success would have made “The Story of an Hour” a controversy to publish. This is because, according to society at the time, women were not capable of overseeing the affairs of the family like the husband did. According to Toth, “Kate Chopin had to disguise reality. She had to have the heroine die. A story in which an unhappy wife is suddenly widowed, becomes rich, and lives happily ever after would have been much too radical, far too threatening, in the 1890s” (10). This important fact leads one to believe that the works she produced at the beginning of her career were not really accurate in the pictures that they drew. Readers of Chopin’s later works might argue that Chopin was not being true to herself when writing earlier stories; an interpretation that could lead one to discredit the rest of her work as well. Later in her career Chopin chooses to go against this notion

of disguising the truth to create stories that would appease the American society and chooses instead to confront it head on. Her progression from charming story-teller to feminist writer provides many examples of Chopin's growth and her ability to become comfortable enough to express her feelings through her writing, a point that she was trying to make in her stories about marriage and oppression.

Before writing "The Story of an Hour," Kate Chopin published "Ma'ame Pelagie," a tale about obsession and a woman's failed search to move on from the past, a past shadowed by a ruined plantation house. This story is about Madame Pelagie's need to recreate the past glory of the plantation house in which she used to live. Daniel Rankin, Kate Chopin's first biographer, critiqued this short story as "an excellent depiction of a woman whose constricted life is dominated by a fantastic hope" and she "explores the destructiveness of war and the force of fantasy" (Evans 167). Madame Pelagie has created a world for her and her sister that makes interaction with the modern world impossible. La Petite, the niece of the two sisters explains that the sisters live in a "strange, narrow existence" (249). Madame Pelagie, however, has created this existence intentionally. She chooses to keep her family in "the shadow of the ruin" and to live each day "talking of the old times and planning for the new" (246). Madame Pelagie's inability to escape the delusions of her former life have affected her own life and, through this, she has also held her sister Pauline back from living a life of her own. Pauline remembers "Only a faint gleam here and there; the half-consciousness of a young, uneventful existence; and then a great crash" (189) and yet she feels indebted to her sister, so she remains in this unfulfilled life. This is important because even though Madame Pelagie is a woman, she is the patriarch of her family. The two sisters are not married and so Pelagie has undertaken the role of the husband. Pauline, as the wife, is being constantly oppressed by Pelagie's delusions and by the idea of the plantation home. However, to say that

Pelagie is unaffected by the plantation home is false, but it is notable to the reader to understand that in the absence of a male patriarch Pelagie has entered that role in this story.

At the center of Chopin's work is the desire for women to lead authentic lives despite their marital status. As Stein argues, "Repeatedly, a Chopin tale turns on the question of whether a character is leading an authentic existence, an existence, that is, in which one senses and acts to gratify the deepest needs of his or her nature, those that if denied and unmet keep one from attaining mature identity and a chance for happiness" (164). This is the dilemma that Madame Pelagie must break away from and at the end of the story she begins to accept the fact that the plantation house is not a way for her to escape back into a world that she has lost; she finally understands that she cannot live in a world of fantasy and must confront her delusions head on. In the story Chopin tells the reader: "[Madame Pelagie] was going there [the ruined plantation] for the last time to dream her dreams; to see the visions that hitherto had crowded her days and nights, and to bid them farewell" (245). Mary E. Papke asserts that "Despite the loss of home, wealth, and power, she clings tenaciously to the past and the dream of what once was" and "even though she [Pelagie] eventually perceives the falseness of her dream, the basic corruptness of that world view, she never renounces her past or her true womanhood conception of self as queen and martyr" (56). What this reading does not consider is the fact that Pelagie is never fully able to let go of the plantation home. Plagued by visions of the plantation's past grandeur, Pelagie returns to the house one more time at the end of the story to experience her visions for the last time. After this final vision Madame Pelagie is able to move on with her life, like the rest of her family, and yet the last sentence in the story shows that she has not moved forward in her life but simply become immobile: "While the outward pressure of a young and joyous existence has forced her footsteps into the light, her soul had stayed in the shadow of the ruin" (260). The last sentence of the story

shows that even though Madame Pelagie has said goodbye to her fantasies, she still finds herself stuck in the past. She cannot truly find happiness because she always returns to Cote Joyeuse and a life that has long been gone.

Another female character that is trapped in a home that she cannot escape is Athenaise. In a short story of the same name, "Athenaise" is about a young woman that has suddenly discovered that she has married for the wrong reasons and now she wishes to escape her husband. She runs away, with the help of her brother, to New Orleans where she finds company with another gentleman. It would seem that Athenaise has found a new home for herself until she suddenly realizes that she is pregnant and she returns to her husband, whom she now presumably adores. Athenaise's pregnancy at the end of the story explores her physical ties to the plantation house itself in that she feels she must return to the house because now she is not only Cazeau's wife but also the mother of his child. Kate Chopin seems to have taken her mentor's words to heart when writing the story of Athenaise. Madame Charleville, Chopin's tutor, spoke to her about many things concerning the lives of women and she [Charleville] "understood that marriage was a practical arrangement, undertaken for social standing and security. Romantic love might come later" (Toth 14). This notion of marrying for convenience or because of societal conventions shows that Chopin assumed that this was the case in most marriages of the nineteenth century. Chopin shows her concern about and deliberation on these conventions by choosing to publicly present them for women readers to see. It is obvious that Chopin wanted women to become aware of their status and of the fact that they could control their own lives by her sheer determination to write about women's issues in a male driven society.

Athenaise's confinement to her husband and her "marital disempowerment likens Athenaise 'indirectly...to a slave'" (Thomas 208). The plantation that she lives on during the two

months that she has been married has stripped away her previous freedoms as a single woman and has forced her into being a submissive housewife. Elizabeth McMahan, author of “Nature’s Decoy: Kate Chopin’s Presentation of Woman and Marriage in her Short Fiction,” writes that “Chopin’s young women appear to marry because society offers them no other options” and Athenaise, in return, “called marriage a trap set for the feet of unwary and unsuspecting girls” (33). The young woman in this story understands that she did not marry for love and she cannot help but feel like she is being held back in this marriage of convenience. Stein states:

Despite Chopin's apparent lack of interest in judging whether marriage itself is a good thing, her prevailing doctrine that individual fulfillment is more important than the demands of the institution is inevitably inimical to the social outlook that fosters marriage and is in turn reinforced by it, an outlook that, obviously, emphasizes the maintenance of order, the acceptance of responsibility, and fidelity to commitments made to others (165).

This struggle for individual fulfillment is the main struggle that Athenaise experiences after only a short time within her marriage. Stein goes on to explain, “Chopin is, in effect, implicitly attacking marriage itself, which by its very nature does not place individual fulfillment above ties to others” (165). Athenaise is constantly dealing with how she is supposed to stay true to herself while also catering to the needs of her new husband.

Forcing another person to compromise who he or she is in an attempt to fulfill one’s own selfish desires is inherently wrong. This was the issue underlying the action in this story and the patriarchal plantation culture of the South in the nineteenth century. Women had to hide or suppress their own desires and dreams so that their husbands and household could be successful. It did not matter to the society at large that these women were being forced to compromise who they

were. In this short story, Athenaise is searching for her own selfhood. Barbara C. Ewell states: “In the United States as in most nations and cultures, patriarchal customs explicitly defined women as self-less. They were named and described only in terms of their relationships to men—daughter, wife, mother, sister, widow” (Ewell 158). This idea relates to all of the women mentioned in this study, but none more so than Athenaise. Her main issue with the institution of marriage is that she cannot stay true to herself while still giving her husband everything he desires. Athenaise explains, “No, I don’t hate him [Cazeau]...it’s jus’ being married that I detes’ an’ despise. I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an’ would want to be Athenaise Miche again. I can’t stan’ to live with a man; to have him always there” (234). In this story, as in most cases, the institution of marriage has stripped away the woman that was there before and has replaced her with a submissive housewife. This issue is also addressed in a similar essay titled “Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*” by Margit Stange. In this essay based on Chopin’s most famous novel, Stange addresses the fact that “In her aspiration to self-ownership, Edna claims title to a self that exists only in relation to her status as the property of others” (Stange 21). This same idea can be applied to Athenaise in that after her marriage she can only see herself as “Mrs. Cazeau” and later as the mother of his child. This inability for Athenaise to relate to herself in any other way is the crux of Chopin’s argument for female independence. For women to break out of this need to relate to themselves as a man’s property, they first had to break away from the institutions that were perpetuating this cycle.

Another part of this cycle was the procreation of future patriarchs. In Ewell’s article she states: “Self-ownership,’ in the second half of the nineteenth century, signified a wife’s right to refuse marital sex—a right feminists were demanding as the key to female autonomy” (22). Marital sex in this story, however, is another way that Athenaise is tied to her husband, like property. The story “Athenaise” shows the depiction of a wife who leaves her essentially

unexceptionable mate but returns to him when she discovers that she can only fulfill the demands of her nature within her marriage (Stein 176). Athenaise's change of heart is sudden and takes the reader by surprise because in the beginning all she can talk about is how disgusted she is by her husband and then at the end of the story she can't get home fast enough. Motherhood, and the idea of motherhood, have instantly changed Athenaise's outlook on marriage and through her pregnancy she realizes that her place is with Cazeau. Athenaise has not discovered her true self at the end of Chopin's short story, she has simply placed herself in another category based around her relationship with her husband.

In another story about marriage, "Desiree's Baby," Chopin writes about a young woman that has a good marriage and the life she wants until her husband claims that her baby is not white and thus proceeds to abuse her by taking away his love. The home that the two characters share serves as a foundation for Desiree's oppression and Armand's argument. Armand is concerned about his family name and the plantation that has supplemented his family for generations. With the realization of his son's mixed birth, Armand realizes that his name and his home will be ruined. In the beginning of the story Desiree's "obscure origin" is not questioned because Armand Aubigny had fallen in love with her instantly, "the way all the Aubigny's fell in love" (189). Throughout the story Desiree shows that she loves her husband "desperately" (191) and it is obvious that she has truly married for love, a detail that makes this marriage different than the other marriages that Chopin explores. Of all the assumptions that Chopin makes about marriage, she also "suggests in this story that such total devotion to a mate can also prove disastrous for a woman" (McMahan 34). Desiree's sense of self is directly tied to her husband's happiness; Chopin tells the reader: "When he [Armand] frowned she [Desiree] trembled...when he smiled, she asked no greater

blessing of God” (191). Desiree’s inability to recognize herself as anything else but Armand’s wife leads to her eventual downfall in the story.

Desiree seems content with the idea that she is no longer her own woman. Now she can be categorized only as Armand’s wife and this proves to be detrimental to her well-being at the end of the story. Through this “Chopin is showing us that a woman who views herself solely as a wife seriously limits her options should her husband choose to discard her” (McMahan 34). This is exactly what Armand does when he discovers that his new son is not white. He chooses to hurt Desiree in a way that he knows will punish her for “the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name” (193). Desiree’s reaction to the change in Armand’s manner shows that she has no real sense of self and her happiness is dependent on bending to the will of her controlling husband. Mary Papke explains: “Once it becomes evident that their son is a mulatto, Desiree loses everything: Armand throws her from the pedestal on which he had placed her down to the lowest level of animal” (54). The reader begins to see a more accurate picture of Armand, one that shows him as the master of his plantation where he is strict and cruel. Chopin writes that “Young Aubigny’s rule was a strict one and under it his Negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master’s easy-going and indulgent lifetime” (190). As soon as he decides that Desiree is not white, he begins to reign over her just as he reigns over the other slaves on his plantation. This affects the life of not only his wife, but also his newborn son, in overtly negative ways and “since she [Desiree] has no concept of herself as a person apart from her husband, she considers her life not worth living after he shuns her” (McMahan 34). At the end of the story, the plantation home becomes a false image of security and truth for Armand and a looming image of oppression and hatred for Desiree.

While the plantation house itself is oppressive in nature, the plantation culture is also vitally important in the women character's lives and in their well-being. Without the plantation, a woman's household would have no real income in most cases. The wealthy lives and luxuries that women had were placed on the backs of slaves, another group of oppressed people. Published in 1893, "Beyond the Bayou" presents a different interpretation of the Southern plantation house. Another Chopin critic, \_\_\_ Bush explains, "like many stories by Chopin, this one focuses on an unconventional character whose chief impulse is affection. In this case, such affection is capable of healing a psychosis" (Evans 49). In this short story, Chopin writes about La Folle, an old slave woman who is unable to cross the bayou that separates her cabin and the plantation house because of an impenetrable fear of what lies beyond it. When one of her favorite charges is injured and La Folle must cross the bayou to save him, the plantation house serves as a positive, guiding force. This story shows that while the image of the plantation house is ever present in the minds of the characters and readers, the plantation can also be a sort of beacon to a person who is lost in an unknown world. La Folle has never experienced anything beyond her cabin on the other side of the bayou and now she finds herself immersed in a world full of danger and despair and her final destination is ultimately the plantation home.

While the plantation house in this story can be seen as positive, it is still a symbol for the oppression of women, in this case of slave women. La Folle is bound to this land by her status as the masters "property." La Folle's maternal love for the master's son, Cheri, is not overshadowed by the fact that she is a slave on his plantation and is bound to the little boy as much as to the father. Anna Shannon Elfenbein examines Chopin's treatment of women in her book *Women on the Color Line* and she explains that "Chopin depicts the destructive symbiosis of power and powerlessness, measuring the distance between romantic views of marriage and motherhood and the reality of the

lives of women on both sides of the color line” (117). This explanation accurately portrays the situation that La Folle is in. While she is a respected member of the plantation home, she is still a slave which means that she holds no power in the decision-making of the estate or in her own life. Mary E. Papke accurately states: “Chopin saw that for women of any color life in the antebellum and postbellum South was potentially abysmal” (33). This is evidenced in the story by La Folle's phobia of crossing the bayou. Through this fear Chopin creates a sense of worthlessness that was applied to females of this century, especially African American women.

The importance of this study was to show that the group of people that perpetuated the cycle of oppression examined in Chopin's fiction was the group that stood to gain the most, white male plantation owners. The actions that men took in an attempt to increase their own status is the reason that America's patriarchal society was formed. Man's greed is what caused this patriarchal mindset to become so ingrained in American society for so long. While the patriarchal elements of society have been eliminated, the mindset of male dominance is still prevalent in American society. With men and women competing for the same jobs, the cycle of injustice that Chopin was writing about will, of course, persist. Societal roles have changed for women since the time that Chopin began writing. Now it would seem like men and women share societal roles more equally. Women are no longer forced to stay at home or find jobs that are more feminine in nature, such as teaching, nursing, or being a housewife. Also, men are now able to be in these positions with no level of animosity. Women, on the other hand, are still treated differently by society when they strive to hold the same position as a man. The sheer number of lawsuits being filed for equal treatment and pay or the formation of more feminist groups upholding women's rights proves that women are still not on the same level as men. Chopin's exploration of the cycle of oppression can

still be expanded upon because it is obvious that her subject of marriage and oppression is still around even in the twenty-first century.

American society in the nineteenth century was based on the creation of two distinct spheres, the public and the private. Women were confined to the private because to the patriarchal society of the time, women could not be expected to manage the affairs of the family's well being as well as a man could. Women were confined to the domestic sphere in which their only responsibilities were to their husband and to the upkeep of the home. Kate Chopin was writing at a time when it was uncommon for women to be speaking out about their treatment by men and against men. The ideas that she was presenting in her short stories would have been radical to the publishers and readers of the time and this is why her work went unnoticed until the 1960s. Feminists have only recently begun looking at Chopin as a pioneering feminist in her fictional portrayals of nineteenth century women. These daring women, created by Chopin as a social statement, are now being recognized for their independence and enlightened states of mind. McMahan wrote that Chopin was "a woman much ahead of her time" (35). This statement now rings very true as scholars further explore the meanings in her short fiction. One idea that Chopin was concerned with was the idea that women were being oppressed in marriage and society by the patriarchal factors of the century. This is apparent in her portrayals of unhappy women that are trapped by their controlling husbands in marriages of convenience, not love. Most of these husbands seem to be owners of large plantations and the plantation home is an image that Chopin uses on numerous occasions to highlight the injustices done to women. The women in these stories are bound to the home in the same way that slaves were bound to the masters of the home. Through her exploration of Southern homes, Chopin uses elaborative symbols to show how deeply

ingrained in the American consciousness a sense of patriarchy is and that this mindset still, in some semblance, exists in the modern day.

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Chopin's fictional characters are subordinated and defined by traditional public and domestic spheres. While the public sphere is the true husband's haven, where he should devote his time and energy to create wealth and ascend the social ladder, home is the true wife's safe haven where she can demonstrate her fidelity, docility and domesticity.Â (24) Other women in Chopin's short fiction meet the characteristics of the New Woman whose independent souls are: Able to manage their lives while looking for their own interests and desires.