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"I give myself where I choose": The Irrepressible Power of the Drive for Authenticity and Selfhood in Four Selected Stories of Kate Chopin

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"I want to be all that I am capable of becoming."
Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923)

In the first half of the nineteenth century, industrialization brought fundamental social and economic changes to America. The traditional agrarian society of the eighteenth century was rapidly transformed into a new urban, commercial, and industrial society. The emergence of this new capitalist and urbanized society greatly altered traditional family life and the relationship of the home to economic production. According to Rosemary R. Ruether, the basic economic processes of daily life had been traditionally centered around the home. Industrialization gradually separated economic production from the home. Male work "became increasingly disconnected with the home and was collectivized in a separate sphere. Women more and more lost their productive work, as well as their integration with male work" (196-97). Their functions were reduced primarily to that of consumer, child-rearer, and domestic care-taker. Thus, "[a] split between the masculine work world and the feminine domestic support system arose" (23).

Of course, women had been traditionally viewed by men as different and inferior creatures. Since classical Greece, men had insisted that "man represented the mind, woman the body, man the creative principle, woman the reproductive impulse, man the heaven-born aspect of human nature, woman its earth-bound component" (Smith-Rosenberg 258). Women, throughout history, had been subjected to a secondary and dependent existence. Nineteenth-century industrialization depleted women's "productive functions that had been theirs in pre-industrial society" and confined them "exclusively" to the home sphere. As a consequence, "a new type of family and a new definition of woman's 'place' that had never existed before in so narrow a form came into being for the bourgeois woman" (Ruether 197).

Using the new language of science and biology, nineteenth-century men reaffirmed traditional gender distinctions and developed elaborate justifications for women's separateness and subservience. They formulated the Cult of True Womanhood, which transformed the nonproductive women into "angels in the home" and "paragons of virtue." A "true woman" was supposed to possess the four

cardinal feminine virtues of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 152). She was innocent, modest, and very content with the warmth and security of the home. She was beautiful, elegant, and capable of amusing her husband, bringing up the children, and managing the household. Above all, her religious piety and her moral purity enabled her to inspire man to a more spiritual life. In the words of Anne Scott, she was expected to be "a natural teacher, and wise counselor to her husband and children" (5).

In his widely read and influential essay "Of Queens Garden," John Ruskin reaffirms this high Victorian ideal of woman. Using traditional gender distinctions, Ruskin relates man's characteristics as active, speculative, and creative: "He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender" (135). He is fitted for adventure, for war, and for conquest; whereas, woman is not fitted for this kind of outside activity. She should be protected from the dangers and anxieties of the "open world" (136). "Her intellect is not for invention and creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (135). She is to "rule" in the home and make it "a sacred place, a vestal temple," where all temptation, vice, and chaos are shut out, and all the moral, spiritual, family values are located (136-137). In order to run this idealized realm of the home, Ruskin argues that she must combine womanly submission and natural wisdom:

> So far as she rules [in the home], all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise--wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service--the true changefulness of woman (137).

Ruskin's prescription of True Womanhood, which clearly sums up late nineteenth-century social expectations of woman, became the cultural norm against which society judged all women.

True Womanhood was, in fact, a patriarchal ideology that expected woman to be perfect in her virtues but denied her autonomy as a human being. It extolled her as an angel but limited her role narrowly to the home sphere as a subservient caretaker. Women, especially middle-and upper-class women, who were bound by their socially prescribed role, became idle and decorative. They were what Olive Schreiner called a "sex parasite," or what Thorstein Veblen called a "conspicuous consumer" (77; 83). Published in 1899, Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* studied the lives of the middle-and upper-classes in the late nineteenth century. According to him, in a capitalist economy, middle-and upper-class women were constructed to appear autonomous but really were ornamental creatures, whose "conspicuous consumption" signifies men's wealth and power (83).

Just as there were women who unquestionably accepted their socially constructed role and tried hard to live up to the ideals of True Womanhood, there were also women who felt confined by their narrowly defined place and openly

defied patriarchal oppression. Increasingly, women, who found their traditionally inferior role intolerable, began to unite and fight together for equal rights and equal opportunities. At the Seneca Fall Convention in 1848, which officially marked the beginning of the women's right movement in the United States, Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared that the history of mankind had been "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman" and called for woman's suffrage and her equal participation in various trades, professions, and commerce (70-73). Within the next four decades, numerous national and countless state and city organizations of women sprang up all over the country. Among them, the National Woman Suffrage Association, the American Woman Suffrage Association, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Council of Women, the National Woman's Trade Union League were the best known and most powerful. Under the banners of these organizations, middle- and upper-class women of the late nineteenth century marched the streets, demonstrated their strength, demanded social reforms, and struggled for the improvement of their own status.

Repudiating conventional gender distinctions and restrictions, the women's-right activists became a novel-social and political phenomenon. They were the New Women of the late nineteenth-and the early twentieth- centuries. According to Smith-Rosenberg, the New Woman originated as a literary phrase popularized by Henry James, who used it to describe young and unmarried women who refused to submit themselves to social conventions and sought to live autonomous lives. In short, the New Women were highly educated, mostly single, and economically autonomous. Resenting restrictions that society imposed upon women, they began to create an alternative self-image around the issues of female intellectual power, self-fulfillment, and non-domestic roles. They argued that gender distinctions were artificial, man-made constructions, and thus changeable. They asserted that women were as intelligent as men and therefore entitled to a career and to a public voice. They defied traditional proprieties and pioneered new roles for women. They were self-conscious feminists, who had rejected the idea of True Womanhood and openly challenged patriarchal ideologies of maleness and femaleness (Smith-Rosenberg 245-246). Between the 1890s and 1920s, the New Women, argues Smith-Rosenberg, "amassed greater political power and visibility than any other group of women in American experience" (256).

"Who, specifically," Smith-Rosenberg asks, "were the New Women?" She considers women educational reformers, physicians, women writers and artists the most visible of the New Women. Kate Chopin is one of the writers who takes on perhaps one of the most important issues associated with the New Woman: her right to self-freedom, self-gratification, and self-fulfillment. Coming to her age and artistic maturity in the Era of the New Woman, Chopin was inextricably connected with the women's movement of her time. Like many of her female contemporaries [Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Mary Austin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, and Gertrude Stein], Chopin resented and courageously fought against patriarchal social oppression. She revolted against the

ethos of True Womanhood and struggled to emancipate herself from the confinement of the traditional female sphere, and became a professional writer. She created a new identity for herself as an alternative to the captive lady of the leisure class, and lived the economically and socially autonomous life that Smith-Rosenberg deems necessary for a New Woman. More important, through her literary creation, Chopin studied woman's social and economic status in late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century America and relentlessly criticized society's subjection of all women. Knowing that the code of the "perfect woman" in the home functioned to deny and suppress female consciousness which was essential to woman's emancipation, she sought to subvert and challenge true womanhood ideology in her work and to create alternative bases of consciousness by not only emphasizing female subjectivity and female experience outside the home but also by allowing women to envision, however vaguely, another way of being. Her works challenged the conventional view on female status, temperament, and role, and created new images of women as strong and intelligent human beings outside of the domestic world. Indeed, Kate Chopin was a conscious rebel of the patriarchal social order, a significant New Woman writer at the turn-of-the-century who portrayed in her fiction women with a new psychological complexity, having not only intellectual and physical desires and great sensitivity, but dissatisfaction and anxiety in the roles as wife and mother.

Kate Chopin's fiction, which contains some of the most significant responses in American literature to the ideals of the New Woman, reflects aspects of her own life. Her enjoyment of rather unconventional activities for women in her day, such as smoking cigarettes and taking long rambles and streetcar rides alone in New Orleans, has been well documented since the revival of interest in her began in the 1960s. Emily Toth suggests that, as a young widow in Cloutierville, Louisiana, Chopin had an affair with a married Creole man, Albert Sampite, before moving back to her native St. Louis to pursue a writing career (168-70). The biographies of Chopin by both Per Seyersted and Toth describe her brief contact with one of the most noted, if infamous, partnerships associated with the women's movement in nineteenth-century America. In 1870, Chopin recorded in her journal that while on the train to New York at the beginning of her wedding journey to Europe, she met a "Miss Clafflin [sic], the notorious 'female broker' of New York." She described Miss Claflin as:

> A fussy, pretty, talkative little woman, who discussed business extensively with Oscar, and entreated me not to fall into the useless degrading life of most married ladies--but to elevate my mind turn my attention to politics, commerce, questions of state, etc., I assured her I would do so--which assurance satisfied her quite (Qtd. in Seyersted 33).

Kate Chopin's assurance to Miss Claflin that she would avoid the empty, superficial life of many leisured Victorian wives--the lifestyle that Charlotte Perkins Gilman would openly criticize a few years later in *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898) is an early indication of Chopin's fictional responses to the ideals of the New Woman.

Not only did Chopin avoid that life herself, but she wrote of several women who sensed its limitations as well.

Focusing her attention on male and female relationships in contemporary America, Chopin wrote on the constraints women suffered in patriarchal society and their struggle for a free and meaningful life. Her fiction reveals her commitment to the problem of freedom as an existential fact for all creatures, and to the unremitting war between the promptings of the sensuous self and the demands of society. Her concern in her writing was always to communicate "human existence in its subtle, complex true meaning, stripped of the veil with which the ethical and conventional standards, have draped it," as she says in her description of the proper province of art in the report she wrote on "The Western Association of Writers," published in *Critic* on July 7, 1894 (*Complete Works* 691-92). What she primarily concerns herself with in her fiction is the dilemma of desire versus duty, self-realization versus socially sanctioned self-sacrifice. Repeatedly, a Chopin story revolves around the question of whether a character is leading an authentic existence, an existence, that is, in which one acts to gratify the deepest needs and impulses of his or her nature, those that if denied and unmet kept one from attaining mature identity and a chance for happiness and contentment. Thus does Chopin's fiction become her fullest depiction of the irrepressible power of the drive for authenticity and self-gratification.

Chopin's first known work, a brief sketch entitled "Emancipation: A Life Fable," shows her early preoccupation with the concept of society, and its imposition of myriad restrictions, as a prison within which the solitary soul lies in wait to be free. In this sketch, a caged animal, "opening his eyes upon life," sees that the door of the cage stands open by some accident. The beast goes repeatedly to the door, "seeing each time more Light," and suddenly he leaps out. Chopin's language in describing his experiences thereafter is significant:

> On he rushes, in his mad flight, heedless that he is wounding and tearing his sleek sides--seeing, smelling, touching of all things; even stopping to put his lips to the noxious pool, thinking it may be sweet. . . . So does he live, seeking, finding, joying, and suffering. The door which accident had opened it is open still, but the cage remains forever empty! (*Complete Works* 37-38)

While the creature in this fable is male, the experiences described here anticipate those of many of Chopin's female characters in her short fiction. The awakening to the light, the departure from the cage, and the willingness to be wounded or suffer in pursuit of knowledge of the greater world are important to her protagonists. Chopin's choice of a cage as the constricting element in this tale is significant for its connection to a pervasive metaphor in late nineteenth-century literature for the New Woman: the bird that is either caged in or allowed to soar free.[1]

[1] Besides *The Awakening*, other American novels that employ the image of the New Woman as a bird include Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Story of Avis* (1878), Ellen Glasgow's *The Wheel of Life* (1906), and Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915).

Kate Chopin's short fiction portrays some of the most vibrantly alive characters in nineteenth-century American literature. It is governed by a vision that is intelligent, bold, thoughtful, and compassionate, far ahead of its time in the late nineteenth century and, in ways, still ahead of its time today. Chopin published over one-hundred short stories between 1880 and 1903 in prominent local and national magazines and newspapers as well. Her first book of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, appeared in 1894. *A Night in Acadie* was published in 1897. Chopin wrote a third volume by the title *A Vocation and a Voice*, but it was never published during her lifetime. Tangled romances, convincingly life-like personalities, chronicles of marriages and marital relationships, tributes to self-assertive women, all are handled with stylistic clarity, subtle wit, and unusual grace, and all are elaborately suggestive, radiating numerous meanings, psychological and cultural. Needless to say, Chopin was a short story writer of considerable skill, one for whom the story was a natural form of expression. "A Story of an Hour," (1894) "A Pair of Silk Stockings," (1896) "Wiser than a God," (1889) and "Charlie," (1900) to name only a few, are important stories of exceptional merit that are typical of Chopin's best works. These selected stories are a good sample, for they are cleverly conceived and ingeniously tailored. Dominated by the same subjects explored in her novels, they show Chopin's unmistakable ability and passion for telling a tale and give her work continuity and strength. In essence, they not only establish Chopin as a short story writer of great sympathy and talent, but they also complement her novels and give additional range to her fictional world. To be sure, a good number of Chopin's short stories rank alongside these of America's most revered writers of short fiction, such as Mark Twain, Henry James, and Edith Wharton.

"A Story of an Hour," "A Pair of Silk Stockings," "Wiser than a God," and "Charlie" are typically Chopinian stories because they probe female psychology And development and record distinctive and poignant female experiences and voices. In all her four stories, Chopin, as usual, depicts the plight and struggle of four high-spirited and strong-willed women, Louise, Mrs. Sommers, Paula, and Charlie, who learn to develop rather than to hide the powerful personalities within them, to break through the molds of standard relationships for women, to establish their own identities, and to form new and regenerative relationships in which to grow and to emerge lucidly into life as powerful and self-actualized women who find their voices and assert their preferences. In Louise and Mrs. Sommers, she creates two women who defy the cultural expectations of selflessness for Victorian womanhood. Although both their stories end ambivalently, Louise and Mrs. Sommers come to acknowledge needs of the self and to awaken to their own individuality and to a new perception of reality. In delineating Paula and Charlie, Chopin represents two independent women who defy and violate several of the conventions on nineteenth-century Southern womanhood and femininity. Paula and Charlie are, in some part, a revision of nineteenth-century notions about femininity and marriage. In them, we see the creation of a truly evolving female character who has an independent power to learn more of the world, to shape her own course, and to force her separate sovereign way.

On the whole, Chopin peoples her four stories with women who clearly understand the True Womanhood vision of proper social relationships and concurrently go against it. She depicts women who come to awareness of who they are, accept themselves as entities, develop their power to the fullest, and cultivate their individuality. Regardless of the cost, her four characters long for independent self-fulfillment that comes when human beings are free to make meaningful choices rather than respond only as someone else's daughter, sister, wife, or mother. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton proclaimed in her speech to the 1856 Women's Rights Convention, "The *Woman* is greater than the wife or mother; and in consenting to take upon herself these relations, she should never sacrifice one iota of her individuality" (*Proceedings* 89). As Stanton declared her discontent with women who sacrificed their individuality, so did Chopin with regard to women's conflict between self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice. Like Stanton, Chopin communicates to her readers that woman's first duty is to herself. In consequence, her women characters come to endorse female autonomy and to testify to the enduring power of the strength of the female.

"The Story of an Hour" is undoubtedly Chopin's most well known and intense reading of a woman's yearning and awakening to self-desire and freedom to a more fulfilling life. It depicts Louise Mallard's recognition of her desire for freedom and solitude after she hears that her husband has died in a train wreck. The imagery, as Louise sits alone in her room contemplating her widowhood, suggests not loss but expansion and rebirth: she is delighted at the prospect of "spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own" (*A Pair* 54). Louise is merely letting impressions of the outer and inner worlds elevate and uplift her spirit. Clearly, she is physically and spiritually depleted, but she is still sensuously receptive. She sees "the new spring life" in blooming trees, smells rain in the air, hears birds singing as well as a man "crying his wares" (*A Pair* 52). Her response is atypical and questions the assumption that news of a husband's death should be devastating to the True Woman. It is true that she experiences grief but it is only for a fleeting moment until she comes to realize that now, without her husband, she can "live for herself" because she is "Free! Body and soul free!" (*A Pair* 53).

As she sits in "a suspension of intelligent thought," (*A Pair* 53) Louise feels something unnamable coming to her through her senses. It is frightening because it is not of her true womanhood world; it reaches to her form the world outside and would at any moment "possess her" (*A Pair* 53). Of course, the unnamable is her budding self-consciousness that is embraced fully once she names her experience as true emancipation and not destitution: "She said it over and over under her breath: 'free, free, free!' . . . Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body" (*A Pair* 53). It is at this crucial point that she begins to undergo a distinct change of heart and to feel great joy in her freedom. Although she had not before been aware of her oppression and repression in marriage, she now revels in the "monstrous joy" (*A Pair* 53) of self-fulfillment, beyond ideological strictures and the repressive effects of love:

> 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. . . . What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being! (*A Pair* 53)

She, who only yesterday "thought with a shudder that life might be long," (*A Pair* 54) now prays to be granted a long life.

The traditional role does not mean for Louise, as it does for true women, an ordering of experience and the promise of life, but rather negation, chaos, and death. After her powers of reflection have been repressed and stunted, she suddenly awakens to a new state of being and to new possibilities and choices. Unlike women in her day who did not seek self-determination and who did not question whether they had any identity outside of marriage, Louise acknowledges the birth of her individual self, seeks a gratifyingly authentic existence, even within the context of her husband's disastrous death, and breaks out of the mold of the Victorian myth of exalted wifehood. Chopin believes, as I have noted, that the repressed desires will ultimately unfold themselves with a directness that is overpowering and that self-denial is a folly that can lead women to abysses of darkness. Beginning to recognize her prospect of being free, Louise overcomes the constraints of her past life, embraces her new sense of personal and spiritual freedom, and leaves her room, carrying herself "like a goddess of Victory," with a look of "feverish triumph in her eyes" (*A Pair* 54).

Though Louise is granted a prospect of freedom, she falls dead when she sees her husband walking through the front door, blissfully unaware of the misinformation that has preceded him. Seeing him, Louise dies of shock. That shock is more likely at the sudden loss of this opportunity for freedom than at the sudden appearance of her husband. Admittedly, the narrator's final comment is brilliantly ambiguous: "When the doctors came they said she had dies of heart disease--of joy that kills" (*A Pair* 54). On the one hand, the narrator may be merely echoing the words of the doctors in earnest, with the implication that a woman would undoubtedly be so happy at the unexpected return of her husband that she would die of shock. After all, this view fits with dominant nineteenth-century conceptions of the "womanly" woman as defined by relation to husband and family rather than by individual identity. On the other hand, the narrator may be using the doctor's words ironically to imply a very different interpretation: that the woman's "joy" was because of her newfound freedom, and that this joy killed her when it was crushed by her husband's reappearance.

Certainly, Louise cannot withstand the reimposition of her husband's patriarchal definitions of womanhood and her forced return to the self-destructive limits of wifehood. Clearly, Louise is defeated in her quest for a self, but just as clearly, she is victorious. She does achieve and preserve a female self--the essential, which Victorian women were categorically denied. Louise may have lost her physical life, which is so absorbed by the desires and needs of others, but she has

clearly won an inner victory of knowledge and of authenticity and the new identity she has chosen. This is a woman, Chopin implies, who has refused to abandon her newfound self and to settle quietly for a life of only partially fulfillment after seizing her own life and asserting her real nature. Her story posits individual freedom as the highest good, transcending all socially derived satisfaction and all moral considerations. Undeniably, her struggle to achieve selfhood is part and parcel of a woman's dream to achieve the selfhood that Emerson described as the most sacred task of a human being. For Louise, then, to be a female self is to be no longer selfless, which is the essential condition for all True Women. What Louise can give up is her life (selflessly), sacrificing her body and fictitious self while preserving her essential self. Indeed, the guise of the True Woman must be cast off before the story of a truly New Woman could be told.

Continuing to reflect the theme of freedom and self-fulfillment, Chopin introduces, in her widely anthologized story "A Pair of Silk Stockings," a young widow and mother who is quite willing to defy obvious or implied social rules in her quest for self and fulfillment of desire. In this story, as in "The Story of an Hour," the unexpected happens: Mrs. Sommers inherits fifteen dollars, which she at first plans to spend on her children. Like Louise, she is physically and spiritually depleted when she arrives at the moment of contemplation and action. Here, the reader begins to see more clearly Chopin's definition of the usual effect of True Womanhood ideology: self-depletion and negation. Chopin's understanding of and compassion for the woman who, bound by social convention, nevertheless, hears another voice within, and for a brief moment, listens and follows is demonstrably evident. Again, just like Louise, Mrs. Sommers experiences a sensuous moment which reawakens her female self, an experience which engulfs her in exultation and joy from which there is no desire for escape. Governed by rigid, sancitified institutions and attitudes, Mrs. Sommers nevertheless yearns for a deep and profound experience available only as social constraints are removed, and craves for a fulfillment frequently expressed as the abandonment to self-direction and personal fulfillment. She relinquishes the strenuous exercise of self-discipline and martyrdom and impulsively spends on herself the fifteen dollars she had allotted for her children's needs. She indulges herself and buys silk stockings, the luxurious feel of which reminds her of better times, as well as new stylish shoes, luxurious gloves, two expensive magazines, a restaurant lunch, and theater tickets. As she buys each successive item, her confidence expands. Her new purchases give her a feeling of assurance, a sense of belonging to the "well-dressed multitude" (*A Pair* 57).

Mrs. Sommers seems to be one of the type of women later described in *The Awakening* as the self-sacrificing "mother-women," those who idolized their children . . . and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves" (10). She dreams of outfitting her four children in new clothes: "The vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives excited her" (*A Pair* 55). But Mrs. Sommers goes beyond her immediate life as mother and martyr and spends the entire sum on personal luxuries for herself. After she buys and puts on the

stockings, she feels she is free and sensuously alive. Her vitality is no longer sapped by the demands of children, for "she seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility" (*A Pair* 57). Evidently, Chopin is fully aware of the limitations of motherhood and seems to suggest that the demands of family and marriage are opposed to a woman's achieving her own personal selfhood, for they are likely to take their toll on the physical and emotional vitality of a woman. She makes no mistake about defeating the myth that marriage and motherhood are a woman's *raison d'être* and an obligation which she ought lovingly to give up her self for. Chopin shows us that a woman who views herself solely as a self-sacrificing mother/woman seriously curtails her potential and limits her expansive options.

When Mrs. Sommers slips away from the dominant role society has provided for her, her intrepid spirit begins to surface from its submerged existence. She finally finds her voice and asserts her preferences in the patriarchal world she inhabits. She exults in the feeling of being served, rather than serving. The salespersons are helpful; the shoe clerk "served her" (*A Pair* 57), and the waiter bows before her as if "she were a princess of royal blood" (*A Pair* 58). Mrs. Sommers becomes comfortable in her new role and enjoys it tremendously. At the theater, the narrator tells us, "It is safe to say there was no one present who bore quite the attitude which Mrs. Sommers did to her surroundings. She gathered in the whole--stage and players and people in one wide impression, and absorbed it and enjoyed it" (*A Pair* 58). Finally, as Mrs. Sommers rides home on the cable car, she goes with a "powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever" (*A Pair* 59). Though Mrs. Sommers might be "filled with regret," (120) as Barbara Ewell notes, her powerful longing that the cable car would go on and on cannot be brushed or closed off so easily.

One simply does not know just how far Mrs. Sommers's incipient rebellion against her role will go or what its consequences will be. Will her awakening to the demands of the self be the culmination of a quest for authentic selfhood or at least the springboard to such a quest, or will it lead to some new form of entrapment? Such questions as these are unanswerable within the framework of this story, but, because of Chopin's skill in showing the early stages of the awakening of what was clearly a conventional woman to a sense of her own needs, they are fascinating and worth considering. What one can say, however, is that Mrs. Sommers has had the courage to follow her deepest longings by seeking the freedom her passionate nature desires. Stifled in its normal development, her longing for self-assertion and freedom manifests itself in a self-indulgent frenzy and in a hatred for a role that is restricting. Besides, the awakening and self-indulgence of Mrs. Sommers make her story as, at the very least, a rich apprentice work for Chopin's extensive treatment of a fuller awakening in her account of Edna Pontellier.

Another story dealing with the concept of freedom and selfhood is the more fully developed "Wiser than a God." Paula Von Stoltz is a talented young pianist whose Austrian parents raised her for a career as a virtuoso, but she must subsist,

"'pending the appearance of that hoped for career,'" (*Complete Works* 39) by playing for dances at society parties. She falls in love with George Brainard, a wealthy young man at whose home she is hired to play, but when he proposes to her, she refuses him. She explains that a marriage typical of this social class "'doesn't enter into the purpose of my life,'" asking him passionately, '"What do you know of my life? What can you guess of it? Is music anything more to you than the pleasing distraction of an idle moment? Can't you feel that with me, it courses with the blood through my veins?'" (*Complete Works* 46). Through this speech, in which she rejects the role of ornamental, leisure-class wife, Paula becomes an important prototype for another famous New Woman artist, opera-singer Thea Kronborg in Cather's novel *The Song of the Lark* (1915). Thea also feels that music is part of her essential self and, like Paula, she turns down a marriage proposal in order to pursue her art. Though Thea does finally marry, this fact is mentioned only in the final chapter, receiving small notice alongside the discussion of her artistic success.

Like Thea Kronborg's suitor in Cather's novel, George Brianard is persistent, and by appealing to her passion for him, he manipulates Paula into letting him return to propose again. However, when he arrives at her home, he learns that Paula has gone to Germany to pursue her musical studies. Paula simply leaves because she cannot give up her music or her ambitions. She realizes that she cannot be both Paula Von Stoltz, a great musician, and Mrs. George Brainard. Certainly, were Paula to marry George, she would not be at liberty to make music her career, a dream long cherished by her. In thus opposing the traditional female duties and limitations, Paula affirms her own self and its authentic needs and becomes the embodiment of the emancipated woman who exerts a conscious choice to choose the kind of life she wants to lead. Unlike other artist heroines, she does not shuttle miserably back and forth between kitchen and theaters, but eagerly and emphatically rejects one for the other. Indeed, Paula is not a "nest-building bird." The truth is that the world being what it is, a woman cannot commit herself to others and to art because each requires an exclusive commitment. A woman must choose--love or muse. As Willa Cather once wrote, "In the kingdom of art, there is no God but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few men born of women who are strong enough to take the vows" (417). In "Wiser than a God," Chopin shows us that Paula is strong enough to take the vows.

The idea of a young woman's choosing, and being free to choose, a destiny that does not include marriage and family was daring in the nineties and is only slightly less so now. That Chopin values the decision of her character to achieve, autonomously, identity and success is made apparent in the story's penultimate sentence: "You may have seen in the morning paper, that the renowned pianist, Fraulein Paula Von Stoltz, is resting in Leipsic, after an extended and remunerative concert tour" (*Complete Works* 47). With her is her former music professor, Max Kuntzler, who, also in love with Paula, has followed her there "with the ever-persistent will--the dogged patience that so often wins in the end" (*Complete Works* 47). Clearly, marriage to Kuntzler would entail for her a suppression of her nature; rather, it would establish a union of two independent, self-fulfilled individuals,

fulfilling themselves as they nourish each other and the art they serve. It seems that the only possible partner in life for Paula, and perhaps for many other independent women, is a man who is willing and ready to take her on her own terms and respects her need to put her artistic career first.

Chopin's late story "Charlie" (1900), which was never published in her lifetime, contains one of the most independent of Chopin's female protagonists, a tomboyish, rebellious young woman who defies and violates several of the conventions of nineteenth-century southern womanhood. Charlotte Laborde, or Charlie, is everything a little girl should not be: she loves riding and shooting, puts on a pair of bloomers she calls "touserlets," and refuses to fit into the mold of the obedient and demure southern daughter. As the story begins, she appears tardily in the plantation study room, having been out riding her horse: "Her hair was cut short and was so damp with perspiration that it clung to her head. . . . She wore a costume of her own creation, something between bloomes and a skirt which she called her 'trouserlets'" (*Complete Works* 639). Charlie's behavior recalls that of Chopin herself while in Cloutierville; when pressed for time, Chopin would jump astride her husband's horse, tied outside Oscar's general stores, and ride off to the surprised stares of townspeople (Toth 141). Moreover, Charlie rides a bicycle, the emblem of the New Woman's liberation.

Still more, Charlie refuses to follow her other six sisters in learning to dance and play the piano. She also resists the oppressive order of the tutor her father has hired for his daughters. She even coaxes her sisters into persuading her father that he should not remarry. What she enjoys best and most is the unladylike hobby of shooting at targets and of fishing. She had taught herself to be "untiring and fearless," thereby filling the place of "that ideal son" her father "had always hoped for and that had never come" (*Complete Works* 644). However, when she accidently grazes the arm of Firman Walton, who is visiting the plantation on a business mission, she finds herself "in disgrace" (*Complete Works* 650), and in a conciliatory effort she agrees to enter a New Orleans Convent school where she can acquire social graces and learn to be a lady. A young friend, Gus Bradley, is devastated at the news of her departure, but Charlie does not notice. She finds herself suddenly adopting more feminine ways to capture the attention of young Walton. In fact, with characteristic determination and self-direction, Charlie has "made up her mind to transform herself from a hoyden to a fascinating young lady" (*Complete Works* 658). As time passes by, Charlie is about to fulfill her goal, having grown out her hair and pampered her hands until they become soft and white, when she receives news that her father has been injured. She rushes back home, and, finding that her father's arm must be amputated, she resolves to stay and run the plantation for him. She maintains her more feminine ways until she hears that Walton has become engaged to her lady-like sister, Julia, whereupon she appears once again in trouserlets, boots, and leggings and angrily gallops off on her horse.

Charlie quickly overcomes her disappointment, however, and gives her mother's diamond ring to her older womanly sister, thus relinquishing any hope for a future marriage. She also discards a hand cream that she has been using to render

her hands white and flawless and abandons all traditional feminine norms of behavior. She avoids being shackled and welcomes the opportunity to manage and run the plantation admirably with the help of Gus Bradley. At the end of the story, Gus declares his love for Charlie, and she admits to Gus that "It seems to me I've always liked you better than anyone, and that I'll keep on liking you more and more" (669). On the other hand, Charlie also asserts, through a mischievous pun, her duty and desire to keep working: "'I couldn't dream of leaving Dad without a right arm'" (*Complete Works* 669). As with Professor Kuntzler and Paula in "Wiser than a God," it appears that the future of Charlie and Gus can only be in a new or companionate marriage that will allow her to have non-domestic pursuits.

Charlie is one of the strongest and most original characters in nineteenth-century American literature. In her rejection of True Womanhood, she finds an alternative to stereotypical feminine roles and grabs the opportunity to do something different with her life. For the Victorian woman and for women well into the first quarter of the twentieth century, "womanhood was a vocation in itself," but it certainly was not the case for the gutsy Charlie. Her inner directedness dictated to her that she must follow a different course in life. Thus, she resolutely steps out of her culturally-imposed restrictions, takes on the burden of work in the sense of self-development, holds the reins in her hands, and becomes mistress of the plantation. But first she must go through the personal pilgrimage before she can arrive at her own pursuit and assume the role of leadership in the family. As always, and like no other nineteenth-century writer, Kate Chopin fully explores the choice and conscious efforts on the part of the female hero to achieve fulfillment through avenues other than, or in addition to, marriage; that is, through a career.

The selected stories by Kate Chopin are rich and complex, the best of their kind in American literature. They break with a nineteenth-century literary tradition that essentially upheld domestic ideology and tended to present female characters as either pious or shameful objects of pity or scorn. They testify to the truth of Fred Lewis Pattee's assertion that Kate Chopin "must be rated as a genius, taut, vibrant, intense of soul. . . . Without models, without study or short-story art, without revision, and usually at a sitting, she produced what often are masterpieces before which one can only wonder and conjecture" (325-27). Kate Chopin is, without doubt, an extraordinary bold and thoughtful writer who explores women's instinctual reach for a life of abundant personal and social possibilities. She is one of the first women writers to debunk most of the Victorian Myths about womanhood and to provide us with a window to new women's lives.

Chopin's female heroes are not architects of the cult of domesticity. They actually dare defy convention and reach out for what they desire. As we watch Louise, Mrs. Sommers, Paula, and Charlie, we see women who experience the severe turmoil of contending emotions, women who are capable of seeking self-determination. These women are expansionist rather than reductionist in temperament. They come to shatter the boundaries of the ideal woman and the restraints placed upon them by the prevailing ethos of True Womanhood. Significantly, her female heroes prove the truth of Ernest Earnest's perceptive

observation that the fictional portraits of the American woman in the nineteenth century "were vastly more lively, able, full-blooded and interesting human beings than we have been able to suppose" (270). Kate Chopin is valuable as an individual writer and also as part of a larger tradition. Her fiction lives not only because it presents interesting views of women's changing roles but also because it taps into human experience. In the words of Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt, Kate Chopin "had the courage to write her own story, and, in doing so, she has helped women today to write theirs" (23). To be sure, her fiction both records and transcends the struggle of what Marge Piercy has called "unlearning to not speak" (38).

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