

Kate Chopin's Early Fiction as a Prologue to the Emergence of the New Woman

Ali Khoshnood^{1*}, Rosli Talif² and Pedram Lalbakhsh³

¹*Faculty of Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Payame Noor University, PO Box: 19395-3697 Tehran, I.R. Iran*

²*Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

³*Department of English Language and Literature, Bagh Abrisham, 6714414941, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran*

ABSTRACT

Despite the revival of interest in Kate Chopin's works during the twentieth century, her early fiction has not yet elicited as much critical appreciation as *The Awakening* has. The aim of this study is to show that Chopin's first novel, *At Fault*, and the tale, "Lilacs", exhibit the same genius and modern forms and features of her later fiction. Chopin's authorial voice, strongly but covertly, addresses society's flaws which are rooted in the illogical demands of the Christian religion and male moral philosophy. This study attempts to demonstrate that Chopin's hidden anti-religious sentiment is one of her earliest attacks on the role of the Church in prescribing religious codes and social mores and that Chopin blames the Church for being indifferent to women's needs. Although Chopin portrays female characters who feel constrained by the societal definition of their duties and responsibilities, she shows them enjoying various means of satisfaction and fulfilment. In spite of that, however, they experience a decisive transformation in their religious lives and mentality. The protagonists that Chopin depicts share some traits, ideals and visions of the New Woman, but their interests diverge according to their different needs. This study attempts to introduce Chopin's portrayal of her protagonists as early versions of the New Woman that can promise fuller and a more complex emergence in her later fiction.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 11 November 2011

Accepted: 14 August 2012

E-mail addresses:

thisali42@yahoo.com (Ali Khoshnood),

rtalif@upm.edu.my (Rosli Talif),

pedram_lalbaksh@yahoo.com (Pedram Lalbakhsh)

* Corresponding author

Keywords: Autonomy, Christianity, New Woman

INTRODUCTION

Chopin wrote *At Fault* in April 1890 but she was not able to find a publisher and

had to print and distribute her first novel at her own expense. She sent a few copies of it to “some periodicals and newspapers in New York and Boston in hope of gaining the attention of nonlocal reviewers” (Toth, 1990, p. 189). Except for a brief review in the *Nation*, *At Fault* received attention only from newspapers in towns where Chopin had lived. *At Fault* is set in the Cane River district of northern Louisiana. *At Fault* is a book about the “changing social world of the post-Reconstruction South and its effect on the people who inhabit it” (Ringe, 1987, p. 28). The major change is the intrusion of modern industry into the agricultural world of the plantation. Donna Campbell, also views *At Fault*, like many social-problem novels, as a tale about change and resistance to change.

This article tries to show Chopin’s latent intention to develop female characters who feel constrained by the societal definition of their duties and responsibilities. Along with *At Fault*, “Lilacs” (1894) is discussed in order to explore the function of religion in the protagonists’ lives and destinies. The feminist subtext of her early fiction is a kind of critical protest against society’s flaws, which are rooted in what appears to her to be the illogical demands of the Christian religion and male moral philosophy. *At Fault* and “Lilacs” are undoubtedly part of a series of texts challenging women’s position within marriage and society. With the advent of industry and modernity, Chopin attempts to view the Church from a different perspective, and she combines her hidden anti-religious stance and undertones with modernism to awaken women to what she

sees as the oppressive agenda of organised religion. Perhaps Chopin intends to inculcate a more liberal belief in her characters’ minds, that the rapid technological changes require social change and, eventually, changes and updates to their mindsets. Yet in this selected fiction, Chopin tries to create female characters who experience the dilemma of whether to stick to or depart from Victorian propriety and the religious code. Much of Chopin’s short fiction that was published throughout the mid-1890s tends to portray varieties of female experience. In “Lilacs” Chopin compares the protagonists’ ideals, satisfaction and fulfilment through erotic desire and frequent religious rituals. The protagonists that Chopin depicts share some traits, ideals and visions of the New Woman¹, but their interests diverge

¹In 1894, Sarah Grand published an essay entitled ‘The New Aspect of the Woman Question’ in the *North American Review* to “mark a sense of modern discontent with the traditional stay-at-home life of marriage and motherhood deemed appropriate for middle-class women” (Gamble, 2006, p. 259). According to Grand, the New Woman had solved “the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy” (p. 271). Even in terms of physical appearance the New Woman bears a different image from contemporary women. She goes for solitary urban walks, she smokes cigarettes, she rides a bicycle in public, she likes to travel, she explores her sexuality and she has no nostalgic feeling of maternity. She rejects the confinement of marriage and the renunciation of sex. Irrespective of stereotypes, the New Woman rejected the dominant ideology that insisted men and women were meant to occupy different spheres based on gender. “She insisted that the separate spheres ideology was a societal construct as opposed to

according to their different needs. They may not represent the full-fledged manifestation of the New Woman's attributes, but Chopin portrays them as early versions that can promise fuller and more complex emergence in her later fiction.

DISCUSSION

Part one of *At Fault* begins on the Place-du-Bois plantation. The narrator introduces Thérèse Lafirme as the "Mistress of Place-du-Bois," who has recently lost her husband, Jérôme Lafirme. The neighbours are curious to learn about the fate and management of the plantation of four thousand acres at the hands of a young widow. However the only wonder is that Thérèse takes on the responsibility to own and to manage the plantation using the "methods of her departed husband ." As Thérèse, now chatelaine of the plantation, is close to fulfilling the pastoral role, her black servant, Uncle Hiram, informs her that "things is a goin' wrong" (Chopin, 1969, 741). She

a biological imperative, and demanded women be given the same opportunities and choices as men" (p. 26). Ostman sees "a shift from the angelic, domestic woman of the Victorian age to a more independent, self-sufficient woman for the new age" (Ostman, 2008, p. 6). The New Woman rejects traditional stereotypes of women as being delicate, passive and domestic. She saw in higher education an opportunity for intellectual fulfilment and for an autonomous role outside the patriarchal family. The New Woman (fictional or real) challenged prevailing *Victorian attitudes* and posited an alternative to the accepted and acceptable True or Ideal Woman. Her claims are for self-ownership and she considered matrimony and maternity to be decisions, not duties.

soon recovers her equanimity and, in an effort to regain control of the plantation and its workers, she quickly moves into action and assumes the role of the traditional plantation owner and pastoral master. The narrator details the many social, cultural and technological changes facing the Cane River community. Thérèse discovers that the war has irrevocably changed the genteel orderly plantation life to which she is accustomed. Industrialisation, modernity and the consequent advent of the railroad have also brought changes and she views these as a threat to her old way of life and her property. Although Thérèse desires to dominate her surroundings, by clinging to tradition and resisting change, she grudgingly recognises the inevitability of change to the domain of her plantation. Chopin describes that the technological changes force Thérèse to accept the encroachment of the railroad upon her "serene existence" and that this requires her to surrender a portion of her land. She decides to abandon the old plantation homestead near the river and the railway tracks and rebuild a new home far from "the inroad of progressive civilization".

In constructing her new abode, "she avoided the temptations offered by modern architectural innovations, and clung to the simplicity of large rooms and broad verandas: a style whose merits had stood the test of easy-going and comfort-loving generations" (p. 742). From the early descriptions of the narrator the reader notices Thérèse's initial tendency to resist change and modernity and her adamant wish to hold onto her settled life-style of

the past. The reader also discovers that she exerts her great ability to preserve her sense of personal control over the environment. In contrast to her view of retaining her old mode of life, once she is seen to have succumbed to the allure of progressive civilisation and modern tools. Here it appears that she develops an ambivalent or dual perspective, both resisting modernity and embracing it. In her reluctance to accept change she feels “comfortable satisfaction,” surveying her land, when she is armed with an instrument of technology, a field-glass. With this instrument she can not only sweep her “gaze from cabin to cabin; from patch to patch; up to the pine-capped hills” (p. 742), but also monitor an “endless procession of intruders forcing themselves upon her privacy” (p. 742).

Part one of the novel progresses by showing Thérèse’s success in upholding the prevailing order and stability in her plantation and establishing happiness and comfort for her community and for her nephew. However, the limitations of Thérèse’s rigid control and dominance over her plantation become apparent when David Hosmer presents a contract paper from his St. Louis firm to build a saw-mill two miles into Thérèse’s woods. David offers her a large sum of money “for the privilege of cutting timber from her land for a given number of years” (p. 744). Thérèse does not wish to change her philosophy or old ideals but does realise the stark reality that Place-du-Bois can no longer remain a traditional pastoral setting, free from industry and outside influence. A shrewd businesswoman,

Thérèse, ultimately agrees to David’s proposal and welcomes the technological changes that will affect her land.

There are some external factors that put Thérèse in a dilemma of whether to stick to her Creole heritage, which positions her as a figure of the South’s old order, or to adopt the new modern order. The demise of Jérôme Lafirme who represented the old South order contributes to the advent of the new North order represented by David. This enables her to step aside from her former domestic vocation and successfully perform a masculine role. She enters into the job sphere which formerly belonged to and was occupied by males and did not welcome women to assume such professions. Along with rapid industrialisation, now David introduces another modern external influence to Place-du-Bois that perpetuates change in the setting and its characters. His lucrative proposal for a timber industry enables Thérèse to develop her business acumen and helps her to overcome the conflict between resisting change and embracing modernity.

Chopin does not suggest that Thérèse’s deceased husband left any male heirs to claim or assume the responsibility of his plantation; however, by doing so she automatically makes Thérèse be the sole owner of the plantation and this ownership allows her to sign a commercial contract with David’s firm. She views another fruitful dimension of modernity that allows her to work and to be her home breadwinner. Thérèse’s acute sense of provision, to expand her source of income and ensure

the financial prosperity of her plantation, helps her to allay the anxiety of future sustenance, and she establishes the means of her independent maintenance without the presence and support of her husband. Chopin creates a female character at a time when employment discrimination based on sex still prevailed in Louisianian society. In this sense Thérèse emerges as a version of 'New Woman' who rejects the dominant ideology that insists that men and women are meant to occupy different spheres of activity according to their biological sex. Thérèse is childless and it seems she is unencumbered with motherly duties and domestic upkeep, but the interest of 'New Woman' diverges according to different needs. She is about to contest traditional stereotypes of women as delicate, passive and domestic. She paves the way to exit from domestic space and transcend gender boundaries. Thanks to the demise of her husband she has no wifely demands on her to inhibit her progress towards entering a masculine space and profession. In this context a woman who questioned the traditional female role was tagged a 'New Woman'.

David's sister, Melicent, visits him to spend the summer in Louisiana. She is twenty-four years old, tall, slender, attractive and "conscious of the impression she makes upon others, knows well how to attract men" (Skaggs, 1985, p. 78). The narrator describes how she has lived "an unstable existence, free from the weight of responsibilities" (Chopin, 1969, p. 748) and enjoyed uninterrupted summer sojourns from North to West or East as an "alternating

caprice prompted" her. However, her extensive travel and independence have been assured by David's lavish financial help. At the plantation she meets and befriends Thérèse's nephew, Grégoire Santien who takes her for a stroll in the woods. One day in the pirogue, Grégoire tells Melicent, "you got to set mighty still in this pirogue" (p. 748), but since it is not Melicent's "fashion to obey a word of command" (p. 749), she ignores him until she sees the reason for the order: an alligator that Grégoire promptly shoots. A few minutes later, he warns her to pull down her veil without explaining that a gray swarm of mosquitoes is about to attack. Declining for the second time to obey without questioning, Melicent is bitten by mosquitoes and, symbolically, by the reality that she refuses to accept. From this scene the reader senses that Melicent is capricious, selfish and adventuresome and that she refuses to obey or accept her male companion's commands or advice at the first time of asking. She resents being defined and positioned like the stereotypical passive and meek women who are expected to be fully obedient to their husbands or male chaperons. She tries to portray the features of a modern American woman who relies on her own choices and decisions.

Grégoire has fallen in love with Melicent and as the novel progresses the narrator describes further Thérèse's gracious and kind personality. Thérèse shows a warm interest in the concerns and problems of other people and wants everyone to feel her own pleasure in the "good things of life". She has established

herself as a self-appointed moralist and an autonomous woman, who “requires certain conduct from others” (p. 754). Thérèse extends her generous hospitality and care to David, and the attraction between them grows steadily though it is not surprising to notice that Thérèse’s relationship with David is conducted entirely on her own old ethical terms.

In chapter four, we see Thérèse riding Beaugard, her beautiful bay mare, to inspect and control the territory of her plantation. David meets her at the cottage of Jocint’s old father, Morico, and informs her that he had almost dismissed Jocint for deliberately mishandling logs. Then they ride their horses together. During their ride through the woods David says he prefers living in the country to city life, and hints at liking her, but she rebuffs his impulsive declaration of love by spurring her horse forward and then monopolising the conversation. Later, when she accidentally learns from Melicent that David is divorced, she decides that their relationship is “simply a thing to be summarily dismissed and as far as possible effaced from her remembrance” (p.764) before ever hearing his side of the story. David decides to go and talk to Thérèse and finds her in her secluded parlour, whereupon he is rebuked for being reticent about his divorce and is demanded not to ever repeat his declaration of love for her . Thérèse’s Catholic upbringing prompts her to object to his divorce, which her religion forbids, and she emphasises that “love isn’t everything in life; there is something higher” (p.769). She specifies that religion does not

influence her reason and she does not want to base her “prejudice” on religion but on her own personal moral principles. Thérèse’s reaction to David’s account of the cause of his marriage failure reveals her staunch adherence to her religious temperament.

Despite Thérèse promises not to misjudge him, she declares that he has failed in his duty to his wife and has disrespected the sanctity of the institution of marriage. She adds, “You married a woman of weak character. You furnished her with every means to increase that weakness” (p.768). Thérèse speaks the last words with intensity, calling him a coward for having ended his first marriage rather than living up to his vows at the altar. She blames him “for not providing his wife better moral support and for not being man enough to face the consequences of his action” (Gale, 2009, p. 13). Obedient to his lady’s precepts and believing in her moral superiority, David pleads with her to tell him “what is right” . Her remedy is to resolve social disunity by reuniting David and Fanny and, in a twinge of conscience, he agrees to remarry Fanny and bring her back to live on the plantation. Thérèse’s world is within the context of the nineteenth-century Southern rural life of Roman Catholics who are known to be conservative and attached to their religious code. This world shapes her strong moral and religious conviction, which deters her from accepting the marriage proposal of a divorced man whose wife is still alive. Maureen Anderson also refers to her Catholic education and her impeccable adherence to the morals of her culture, and

the "old world ethics and [her] position as a pastoral master which prevent her from pursuing a relationship with the divorced David" (2001, p. 10). The reader senses the protagonist's awareness of a social problem and her idealistic programme of reform according to her own religious doctrines. Batinovich also stated that *At Fault* is about "Thérèse's determination to set her lover straight with church, to cleanse his soul and to help him to see where he went wrong in divorcing his wife" (2008, p. 75). David's "blind submission" to Thérèse's interpretation of moral duty emanates from his perception that she has keener moral observation than he does and, more powerfully, from the romantic love he harbours for her.

On the surface, the novel mirrors sentimental romance and the denial of love, but Chopin aptly uses the form of the sentimental novel to express her message that questions the Catholic Church's stance against divorce as a moral means of solving marital problems. In fact, Chopin creates what Per Seyersted recognises as "the first American novel to treat divorce amorally" (as cited in Hotchkiss, 1994, p. 32). The subtext of the novel is an apparent criticism of women and men who blindly accept the illogical demands of the Church and allow societal expectations and religious codes to govern their judgment. "Thérèse is the personification of the church; she is inflexible and demanding of those over whom she has power" (Batinovich, 2008, p. 75). But "eagle-eyed readers" will question the legitimacy of Thérèse's role as a moral

arbiter who appropriates the traditional male prerogative realm of making judgements. Although in her condemnation of divorce in this scene Therese "echoes the prevailing view of the Catholic Church, her spirited defense of an alcoholic wife runs counter to the prevailing cultural views of the time" (Boyd, 1995, p. 22). Thérèse does not perceive his wife's alcoholism as a sufficient reason to put an end to their conjugal ties. She emerges with dual perspective, because although she struggles to establish the prevailing view of the Catholic Church regarding the sanctity of marriage, her defense of David's inebriated wife runs counter to the dominant cultural view of the time. A 'True Woman' at that time was deemed not to consume alcohol and so a woman who drank heavily was labelled as one demonstrating unwomanly decorum. Here she appears liberal and it seems she advocates some of the traits of New Woman. She does not see such a habit as immoral or a real threat to the institution of marriage, rather, particularly for this matter, she tends to be indifferent to tradition and the cult of religion.

Part Two of the novel introduces Fanny's first night at Place-du-Bois. Meanwhile Grégoire and Melicent's romance fades and Thérèse, recognising his unrequited love, advises him to leave the plantation temporarily. Despite Thérèse's "watchful supervision of her comfort" (Chopin, 1969, p. 798) Fanny remains aloof and miserable, and soon tires of the isolated country life; she makes no effort to revive her life and continues to lie, to be unpleasant to David

and eventually finds Marie Louise's home a place of succour in which to relapse into alcoholism. In the course of the novel, as Thérèse gains in "knowledge of life as it is" (p. 875), and as she observes their remarriage deteriorating, her thinking process begins to change.

Also, as the novel progresses, the reader discovers that Thérèse gradually fails to control and dominate her environment or maintain the happiness of and stability among the members of her plantation. She also comes to realise that Fanny's innate insolence doubled with her drinking makes her one of the few people on the plantation who cannot be dominated. Jocint rebels against the job Thérèse has found for him in the saw-mill and "protest(s) the mill's regimentation by burning it to the ground" (Campbell, 2008, p. 29). Jocint's sabotage stems from his dislocation from the land caused by David's new intrusion. With Jocint's death the primitive past is dismissed, the mill is rebuilt and change continues at Place-du-Bois. Chopin hints that Jocint could not stop the advance of modernity, and she suggests that this continuation should occur in order to dismantle the vestiges of the old order and help foster change in the mindset of the people.

In Chapter Ten, when Thérèse is left alone, growing self-doubt develops and she wonders how "right" her order was that culminated in David's obvious wretchedness and unhappiness. Thérèse's emerging awareness of his melancholy and her own pain at being apart, as well as her slow recognition of the hollowness of David's

marriage, erodes her confidence in the moral rightness of her decision. In St. Louis, Melicent reads her "visiting book", recalls a euchre party with several "cackling" women, and instructs her maid to tell Mrs. Van Wycke, an unpleasant cheating visitor, she is not at home. Such "people whom she frequented were all very tiresome" (Chopin, 1969, p. 855). Melicent attends women's Guild meetings and dislikes most of the members. This scene foreshadows Edna Pontellier's desire to disregard social convention and disengage from the routine of callers. In Louisiana most people know about the couple's "misery" and David, who is inured to this deteriorated marriage and who has been "stoically suffering for his sacrifice, reacts impetuously, which causes Fanny to flee to Marie Louise's cabin during a storm" (Witherow, 2006, p. 109). There, Fanny again revels in a drinking binge and refuses to return with Hosmer. The climax of the novel occurs when the cabin, "precariously poised on the eroding river's edge", is submerged in the raging river by the storm, and when David swims to rescue her, a house beam knocks him unconscious and Fanny drowns.

One year later, Thérèse returns from Paris and she stumbles upon David at the train station. Chopin reunites them on the train returning to Place-du-Bois, thus reuniting them on the instrument of modernity and progress – the railroad – that brought David and his business to the region. The narrator opens the chapter in the symbolic season of spring and all its promise of rebirth and new life. It signals

renewed hope for a relationship to finally bloom between Thérèse and David now, after Fanny's death.

In this scene, Thérèse is shown alone, wearing a stylish Parisian attire and gloves, and unescorted by any male chaperon. She has travelled to Paris, a city which is known as the centre of the Enlightenment movement and a place for individuals seeking intellect, art and fashion. Her solitary travel and new stylish dress, brought from a worldly city such as Paris, mark her cultural and social change, and the reader may assume that the cultural and intellectual ambience of Paris could help her modify her inflexible religious idealism and emerge as a New Woman by adopting a more realistic perspective. She adopts one of the New Woman's features by embarking on a trip independently, with no male chaperon. While she is on the train with David, returning to Place-du-Bois, Thérèse holds his hand and confesses that she has been "at fault" in "following what seemed the only right", she tells David. "I feel as if there were no way to turn for the truth. Old supports appear to be giving way beneath me. They were so secure before" (Chopin, 1969, p. 872). Chopin suggests that Thérèse has learned a lesson about the perils of relying too heavily on social convention and moral etiquette to determine one's personal beliefs. She has now developed some insight into how one evolves from a "staunch believer" to a liberal thinker. As she listens to the voice of her heart she learns that it has its reasons too. Thérèse's warm heart and her "clear mental vision," not to mention her sexual and emotional needs, are no longer at odds.

In no time they get married. Of significance in the discourse of their reunion is David's recognition and acceptance of Thérèse's role in overseeing her plantation. Contrary to cultural dictates concerning a woman's place and role, he does not want her confined to a solitary domestic sphere after their marriage. When she invites him to help with the plantation, he responds: "I'll not rob you of your occupation" (p. 874). Chopin hints that their reunion should not demand that she relinquish her autonomy for the sake of a happy marriage, relegating her to the traditional female realm of domesticity. While their love is still in a state of "overmastering happiness", David receives a letter from Melicent asking him to finance a scientific trip for her to California. She also reveals the scandal that Fanny's friend Lou Dawson has been caught out in an affair with Bert Rodney, but her compassion goes to "poor, poor Mrs. Rodney, who is after all the one to be pitied". She does not condemn Lou Dawson's betrayal and it seems she is foreshadowing one of the New Women's credos of free love. Earlier, we learnt that Melicent had had five broken engagements and her rejection of Grégoire portrays her as a modern woman desiring a perfect union with a man on par with her sociocultural level. She is not a docile and traditional homemaker, rather she travels extensively and wishes to explore and make new scientific discoveries. Although Chopin does not fully develop Melicent's personality and her true needs in detail, a discerning reader can detect her interest in learning new knowledge by planning adventurous trips under the

bright Mrs. Griesmann's supervision, which is one of the New Woman's demands, that is, education. "Melicent, restless and emotionally detached where Thérèse is calm and emotionally engaged, is an example of the New Woman who seeks social and intellectual parity with men. She lives by her ideas of freedom" (Campbell, 2008, p. 35).

The reader learns that Thérèse's initial reception of and reaction to modernisation is unpleasant; on the other hand, we notice that Thérèse has successfully entered into the modern male cultural and economic zone. Wintle states that in the fin-de-siècle the riding of horses was implied as being absolutely masculine; horses, after all, belong primarily to the worlds of work, military action and ceremony, and to the masculine sports of racing and hunting. By the early nineteenth century, "writing about women riding horses for pleasure, already offered a fruitful way of registering female physical energies" (Wintle, 2002, p. 67) but Thérèse is riding her horse, Beauregard, as a means of transportation to supervise her plantation and monitor the workers. Mastery of horses was generally associated with power, status and masculinity. "Although women and horses figured significantly in pre-New-Woman nineteenth-century fiction, New Women themselves were much more likely to ride bicycles as an individualised mode of transport" (p. 66). From the setting of the novel the reader can understand that the bicycle was still less readily available for female use in that particular time and place of Louisiana. Women usually rode in a one-horse carriage but, in rare instances, rode horses. In one scene, while Thérèse and

David are riding their horses towards the hill side spring, David takes the opportunity to express his love for her but we observe Thérèse's mastery of horse riding when she makes Beauregard spur forward into a "quick canter, leaving Nelson and his rider to follow as they could" (Chopin, 1969, p. 758). She not only flaunts her power in horse control but also changes the subject of conversation by monopolising and dominating the talk during the remainder of the ride. The reader observed how Thérèse was physically active in managing and supervising the plantation. Also, in the Victorian era, riding horses was associated with the idea of physical freedom. Melicent's five failed betrothals also reflect her worry about the entrapment of traditional marriage and the loss of individuality.

The short story "Lilacs" unfolds an "ocean away from Louisiana". It is set alternately in Paris and in a nearby cloistered provincial convent. "Lilacs" concerns Adrienne Farival who, each spring when the lilacs are in bloom, returns to the convent where she was raised and educated. Adrienne Farival is an actress, opera singer and career-orientated New Woman who lives a glamorous and secular life in Paris. She has several discouraged suitors who are still struggling to win her heart. Although Adrienne is largely happy with her frivolous life, she lapses into a "heaviness of heart" and "despondency" (p. 357-358). One day when she is feeling disconsolate on a noisy Parisian boulevard, a girl comes past with blooming lilacs, the fragrance and aroma of which "buoyed her and made her think of the convent- sunlight on stone wall, bird notes,

humming insects and especially lilacs in thick-leafed branches" (Gale, 2009, p. 94). In fact, it is the scent of lilacs and the lure of nature that draw her to the convent. Her visits over four consecutive years to the nunnery afford her a peaceful atmosphere in which to relieve her depression and rejuvenate her soul, especially in the company of Sister Agathe. Koloski argues that "it is the pull of an individual nun as much as the appeal of the communal life that impels Adrienne to seek out the convent each spring" (Koloski, 1996, p. 59). The convent sisters eagerly anticipate Adrienne's fortnightly visits from Paris. She arrives with a bunch of lilacs and generous gifts for the convent. She pays her formal respects to the Mother Superior who is rigid, unaffectionate and cold.

By and large, "Lilacs" explores the relationship between two women, Adrienne and Sister Agathe, her old school friend. It seems Sister Agathe is trying to establish a kind of sisterly bond between Adrienne's secular perceptions and her religious obligations; however, "her joy at the light and life associated with Adrienne reveals the incompleteness of convent life" (Skaggs, 1985, p. 42). Both of them need to maintain their "nourishing contact" with each other's world to fill the void that each feels in her life. Adrienne seems to find some sort of spiritual satisfaction and fulfilment in the convent and during her stay, she follows the convent regulations, for instance, folding her simple clothes "with great care, placing them on the back of a chair as she had been taught to do when a child" (Chopin, 1969, p. 360). However, this religious obedience

and tendency cease when she leaves the convent. As the largest part of her life is "engulfed" by the secular world of Paris, she must leave temporary spiritual fulfilment behind. She is accustomed to the luxurious armchair and "picturesque disorder" of her apartment in Paris where her "charming négligée, puzzling and astonishing-looking garments" are "thrown carelessly around" (pp. 360-361).

The reader can sense Chopin's hint that while Adrienne goes to the convent to seek spiritual fulfilment within its convent, her annual commute also carries a message for the convent denizens to be aware that life can offer fulfilment other than that which comes from being devoted to convent life. Her dual paths suggest that the New Woman can also cross the borders between secular life and religious life and show the emulative method to acknowledge both spiritual and physical desires. After a fortnight's stay Adrienne returns to her sumptuous apartment in Paris to resume her trendy life. Once in her room, and "reclining indolently" on her armchair, surrounded by musical scores, disordered garments and an open piano, Adrienne receives her maid's complaint. Sophie informs her that her manager was annoyed at her mysterious departure. But Adrienne is indifferent to her career demands and domestic obligation and orders Sophie to fetch her wine, crackers and cigarettes to perpetuate the leading of her dual life.

Charlotte Jennifer Rich has made an extensive study of Chopin's short fiction and novels to reveal "her preoccupation with the

themes of female agency and independence that were the touchstones of the New Woman's [quests]" (1998, p. 97). She traces Chopin's portrayal of many female characters, seeking modes of independence and types of fulfilment that draw the New Woman's vision or ideals. In each short story she examines the heroine's different methods of fulfilling the New Woman's aspirations. In examining Chopin's story "Lilacs", she discusses the condition and licentious lifestyle of Adrienne Farival, a successful artist and entertainer. She finds that Adrienne's luxurious lifestyle, her routine travel to Paris, her "charming négligée" and her habit of drinking and smoking a cigar before her male admirer position her as one of "the racy New Women of the decadent 1890s" (Rich, 2010, p. 161).

A year later, Adrienne returns to the convent with her newly fashionable puffed sleeves, anticipating happily "the warmth and tenderness" of Sister Agathe's embrace. But to her surprise she sees the gate is closed and no nuns waiting to greet her, except for a lay sister who delivers a package containing the gifts she has given the convent during her previous visits and a letter full of "bitter reproachful lines that banished her from this haven of peace" (Chopin, 1969, p. 365). While Adrienne is stunned by the Mother Superior's mysterious order, the lilacs fall from her arms onto the stone portico; she weeps and walks away. The narrative ends with Sister Agathe sobbing and kneeling beside Adrienne's empty convent bed and a lay sister sweeping the lilacs from the convent door step. It seems someone has

revealed Adrienne's exotic and scandalous city lifestyle to the Mother Superior and this news prompts her to bar Adrienne from the convent. She discovers Adrienne's hidden identity as a modern and urban female dancer and singer and perceives her presence as an intrusion that might affect and change the nuns' routine of rituals.

It is not going too far to suggest that the Mother Superior sees Adrienne as a threat and source of potential corruption to the pious and obedient nuns, particularly Sister Agathe, who has been so affectionate towards Adrienne. The Mother Superior's letter of dismissal, the return of her annual gifts and the act of the lay sister in removing the lilacs from the convent entrance are all symbolic of the intention to eliminate all vestiges and marks of Adrienne's presence and memory from the convent. Adrienne's dichotomy lies in her worldly sophistication and her urge to maintain the duality of her paths, but the language of the Mother Superior who represents the Church's ideology determines that Adrienne's two paths are incompatible and so she is ultimately forced to choose only one direction that the Church has imposed on her. Howell says that Mme. Farival grieves at the end, when she is turned away from the convent, for "her failure to incorporate and possess two forms of experience that are not compatible" (1979, p. 108).

Adrienne's problem is that she attempts to simultaneously reassimilate into a culture that cannot accept her privileged secular language while wanting to keep her licentious city lifestyle neatly apart. Even

when she returns to the convent she does not try to digest the religious language of Sister Agathe; she simply ignores her words by changing the subject.

Women in Chopin's era were expected to cherish and maintain the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity in order to be a True Woman. These virtues were also applicable to the nuns but to a stricter degree. The first virtue is religious piety, which is not Adrienne's ideal in her worldly life in Paris. The narrator hints that Adrienne is a widow and is surrounded by a parade of lovers and men. It seems she is unchaste and does not possess the second virtue, purity. She also fails to adopt the third virtue, which is submission to the authoritative religious centre. The language of the Church is foreign and outside her worldly discourse. Domesticity was the fourth virtue of the angelic True Woman. Women's silent work was to be done in the home or in the domestic sphere. Instead, she adopts a vocation outside her domestic realm. The "picturesque disorder" of her room indicates that she is not the "older and wiser" widow performing the "household duties" that the nuns had thought she was. In a way, the story of "Lilacs" deplores the inflexibility of the Church that exerts its dictates and expects certain choices of human beings, rather than granting each individual the freedom to make them on their own.

CONCLUSION

The subtextual or underlying meaning of *At Fault* addresses the issues of marriage

and divorce and the role of the Church in prescribing religious codes and social mores. *At Fault* seems to echo John Milton's fervent plea to the Church authorities to approve divorce. Similarly, Chopin's early novel strongly but insidiously implies that divorce should be legally granted, not only on the grounds of the partners' incompatibility but also as a legitimate alternative when the marriage is simply bereft of mutual love and respect between the couple.

The evolution of technology and David's timber industry are the purveyors of change and insight into the sociocultural setting of the Cane River settlement. Chopin's novel addresses society's flaws and thus invites her contemporary readers to view the Church from a different, realistic and more liberal perspective. Chopin indirectly attacks the inflexible agenda of organised religion that creates staunch believers such as Thérèse, whose strong moral and religious conviction against divorce prevents her from marrying a divorced man. Her ideal programme is to reform the social problems among her community and cleanse her lover's soul by dictating that David remarry his wife and resurrect the institution of the American family. Chopin blames the Church's strictures in inculcating false religious idealism in Thérèse.

As long as Thérèse is physically and mentally located in her plantation setting and clings to her old past beliefs, her reasoning capacity remains tenacious and undeveloped. Thérèse exemplifies many traits of the traditional Southern belle, yet she capably runs her plantation and tries to direct her community people along the

right path. Thérèse's return from her trip to Paris marks her cultural and social change and evolution. The cultural and intellectual ambience of Paris leads her to moderate her inflexible religious idealism, and the reader senses that in an epiphanic moment she has realised her mistake.

Thérèse shares some features or traits of the New Woman such as the tendency to embrace modernity and occupy a different job sphere, her independent management of her deceased husband's plantation, riding a horse, embarking on a trip to Paris without a male chaperon and wearing stylish Parisian clothing. However, her religious upbringing thwarts other aspects of New Woman ideals, such as being a free thinker. Thérèse's relocation from her old ethics to a city known for its intellectual and artistic pursuits awakens her to adopt a set of new ideas and to be more open to the New Woman's visions that have been suppressed by her religious ideology.

Melicent does not represent the cult of the traditional woman and relies on her own choices and decisions. Melicent is wary of marriage and tends to prioritise her intellectual and recreational aspirations and scientific exploration over traditional marriage and domestic concerns.

"Lilacs" introduces Adrienne Farival, an opera singer and actress in Paris, who annually retreats from her secular and glamorous Parisian life to the convent in order to alleviate her boredom and seek another option for satisfaction and fulfilment at the nunnery. Her annual pilgrimage may carry the message that the nuns should

not necessarily dedicate their whole lives to the ideals of convent and that they can cross the border and at least emulate her dual path. Adrienne has adopted a language and a type of conduct which are a foreign discourse and not permissible in the convent. In her Paris apartment she leads a luxurious and independent life and does not wish to sacrifice her autonomy, freedom and unconventional lifestyle for a life of domesticity. Her routine commute to the convent without the escort of any male chaperon and her habits of drinking and smoking cigars in Paris position her as an indecorous New Woman.

Chopin wrote her early fiction as a prologue to pave the way for the fuller and more complex emergence of her heroines who could challenge the institutions of marriage, domesticity and motherhood and the religious and societal codes of South America. Chopin's anti-religious sentiment is mysteriously reflected in this fiction, and foreshadows the religious conflict and discontent of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. These protagonists stand as harbingers or precursors to Chopin's other long and short fiction.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, M. (2001). Unraveling the southern pastoral tradition: a new look at Kate Chopin's *At Fault*. *Southern Literary Journal*, 34(1), 1-13.
- Batinovich, G. A. (2008). Storming the cathedral: The antireligious subtexts in Kate Chopin's works. In Heather Ostman (Ed.), *Kate Chopin in the Twenty-First Century: New Critical Essays* (pp.73-90). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Boyd, V. D. (1995). The rhetoric of gender politics in *At Fault* and selected short stories of Kate Chopin. (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Texas, Texas.
- Campbell, D. (2008). *At Fault: A reappraisal of Kate Chopin's other novel*. In Janet Beer (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin* (pp. 27-43). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Gale, R. L. (2009). *Characters and plots in the fiction of Kate Chopin*. Carolina: McFarland and Company Publishers.
- Gamble, S. (2006) Ed. *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Grand, S. (1894). The new aspect of the woman question. *North American Review*, 158, 448, 270-76.
- Hotchkiss, J. (1994). Confusing the issue: Who's "At Fault"?" *Louisiana Literature: A Review of Literature and Humanities*, 11(1), 31-43.
- Howell, E. (1979). Kate Chopin and the pull of faith: A note on Lilacs. *Southern Studies*, 18, 103-109.
- Klein, S. (1998). *Writing the "Solitary Soul": Anticipation of modernisms and negotiation of gender in Kate Chopin's The Awakening*. Retrieved from <http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/klein.html>.
- Koloski, B. (1996). *Kate Chopin: A study of the short fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Milton, J. (1959). The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce . In E. Sirluck (Ed.). *Complete Prose Works of John Milton. Vol II: 1643-1648*. (pp. 107-139). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ostman, H. (2008) Intro. Ed . *Kate Chopin in the twenty-first century: New critical essays*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars.
- Rich, C. J. (2010). Kate Chopin. In Alfred Bendixen and James Nagel (Eds.). *A Companion to the American Short Story* (pp. 152-170). Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell Publication.
- Rich, C. J. (1998). *The new woman and the fiction of Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Georgia, University of Georgia.
- Ringe, D. A. (1987). Cane river world: *At Fault* and related stories. In Harold Bloom (Ed.). *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Kate Chopin* (pp. 25-33). New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Russell, K. E. (1995). *The hidden darkness: Landscape as psychological symbol in Kate Chopin's fiction*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Atlanta, Emory University.
- Skaggs, P. (1985). *Kate Chopin*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Toth, E. (1990). *Kate Chopin: A life of the author of The Awakening*. New York: Morrow.
- Wintle, S. (2002). Horses, bikes and automobiles: New woman on the move. In Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (Eds.). *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin de Siecle Feminisms* (pp. 66-78). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Witherow, J. (2006). Kate Chopin's dialogic engagement with W. D. Howells: "What cannot love do?". *Southern Studies*, 13(3-4), 101-16.

