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TENTATIVE TRANSGRESSIONS: KATE CHOPIN'S FICTION AS A MODE OF SYMBOLIC ACTION

Winfried Fluck*

Anne Scott, in an essay called "The Ever Widening Circle," stresses the inadequacy and unproductivity of a clear-cut division of women into either pro- or anti-feminists. What she tries to underline instead is the dynamics of a major value shift in American culture that was generated by the changing self-perceptions of women in nineteenth-century America. In her view, this value shift can best be understood as a continuum which "has a place for the very large number of women who were not at either end, but somewhere in between, often holding some part of each set of values simultaneously." The notion of a continuum "also accommodates those who were in motion, moving toward the feminist end of the spectrum" but who for various reasons remained uncertain about how far to go. It is this large group of women being "in the middle or in motion" within an "ever-widening circle" which embodies the conflicts and dilemmas of the "changing state of women's self-perception and value structures" most poignantly, since "changes in the key values of a society or a social group rarely occur as sharp and sudden breaks with the past."¹

Kate Chopin's fiction, in its general development, but also in the narrative movement of its individual texts, reveals the conflicts and tensions of this state "in the middle or in motion" in an instructive way. Read closely her literary texts confirm Anne Scott's observation that "people have an astonishing capacity to hold ideas which reason and logic would call contradictory. In retrospect," Scott says, "the thought and behavior of women who were still attached to the older values while they were experimenting with the new has sometimes seemed paradoxical, but they were simply exhibiting the ambivalence which is common when values are in the process of change."²

In fact, one might argue that the "other world" of fiction offers specific possibilities in responding to such experiences of conflict and

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dissonance. In its freedom to arrange, construct, and interpret reality according to its own rules and interests, fiction can be seen as a mode of symbolic action, which implies, in Kenneth Burke's words, "the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations" in order to come to terms with them. In transforming such situations into fiction, the literary text provides a chance to re-enact disturbing experiences, to reformulate, complement, or oppose reality tentatively, and it is exactly this tentative, playful nature in which literature's specific usefulness as a mode of symbolic action can be found. In one way, the fact that the reader can try out new responses to an ever changing reality without having to confront their immediate consequences seems to be a major shortcoming of literature as a mode of action and has periodically given rise to charges of irrelevance. From another perspective, however, this seeming weakness can also be regarded as a source of specific potential.

For it is the fact of a tentative scenario that invites the reader's imaginary participation in experiences he has not yet undergone, is hesitant to undergo, or has been only vaguely aware of until now. Fiction's special status as an if-statement allows the expression of culturally unacknowledged wishes and fears, of experiences and impulses which have not yet found other means of expression or which could only be expressed under danger. For certain attempts at a new self-definition, fictional texts may thus provide the first or, occasionally, even the only possible entry into a culture. As such a view of literature implies, the text itself, in its narrative unfolding, may reveal aspects of which the writer may have been only dimly aware or not yet aware at all, making literature a marginal but potentially disruptive discourse of a culture in which certain experiences can be regarded, represented, and allowed to express themselves. Once they have been established in the public sphere as a possible mental or emotional choice, they may eventually inspire a more definite and direct course of action or practice. In other words, to stress the tentative, "non-serious" nature of fictional texts is not to say that they are without social functions. However, one might claim that their social function can only be usefully fulfilled in drawing on their potential as tentative, playful action.

Literature is a kind of testing ground in which conflicting or even contradictory impulses collide and interact. If something remains unsatisfactory about the many useful readings of Chopin's literary texts so far, it is a tendency to ignore their fictional, their "strategic" or "experimental" character. Instead of understanding them as texts that are centered around a conflict or tension, they are often discussed as more
or less successful illustrations of a stand that a writer with certain socially advanced views took. What ought to be stressed, however, is that, according to their status as fiction, Chopin's literary texts do not just illustrate something she felt sure of but deal with recurring problems that posed a certain emotional dilemma for her. The new woman, which her work is said to represent, is not offered as a definite role model; rather, in drawing on fiction's potential to explore and experiment, the possibilities of this role are again and again tried out and tested. Thus, her fiction in its sequence can be said to present significant stages of a process in which the tension between received values and certain disruptive impulses is constantly reassessed and the fictional strategy is accordingly rearranged.

In this context, it is her short fiction which gains a new interest as a significant part of her achievement. So far these stories have received little discriminating attention. Predominantly, critics have either emphasized their quaint local color flavor or have been satisfied to list those overt instances of successful self-assertion that occur in a number of them. Yet the significance that these stories hold as symbolic strategies goes beyond a mere interest in thematic transparency: what seems so striking about them is that taken together they provide the fascinating example of something like a laboratory of creative fantasy activity. Because Chopin focused on the recurring themes of female self-assertion and, closely linked with it, of social and sexual transgression, her fiction provides a chance to observe a writer at work who is testing a whole range of narrative responses for their usefulness in coming to terms with a set of conflicts and emotional tensions that tie her work to the social and cultural realities of American Victorianism. This does not mean that The Awakening, undoubtedly her best and most important work, should be kept out of the discussion altogether. On the contrary, it seems instructive to stress its interaction with her stories, as a project that was tried out various times, before it eventually took a more definite shape.

In the early part of The Awakening Edna's existence is described as "dual-life—that outward existence which comforms, the inward life which questions." The ensuing narrative, of course, is the story of how this inner self gradually awakens and shakes off the conforming self's control. It is also the movement that governs many of Chopin's short fiction: How far can a woman go in disregarding social restraints which restrict her own development and self-fulfillment? The question suggests the notion of transgression to characterize the common project of most of her stories: The crossing and violation of a border line which separates the realm of cultural norms from a tabooed, for-
bidden, or simply unknown area. Yet most of the time the transgression remains hesitant. It seems as if Chopin, through her fiction, is measuring and exploring the cultural space she has to negotiate without leaving the safety and security of Victorian values altogether. Literature proves its usefulness in enabling the writer to raise and explore notions of the female self which the woman "in the middle or in motion" could not raise in any other way within Victorian culture.

One of the best known and most highly acclaimed of Chopin’s stories, the brief “Story of an Hour,” can serve as a good example to introduce in more detail the ways in which conflicting impulses shape the logic and movement of her narratives. Since Kate Chopin’s rediscovery the story has been repeatedly mentioned as a supreme example of her writing and has been reprinted in several anthologies. Per Seyerstedt, her thorough and sympathetic biographer, considers it a “truly remarkable tale” and “an extreme example of the theme of self-assertion.” However, such a characterization implies a much more definite and self-assured stand than the story itself is willing to take. The goal may have been an affirmation of self-assertion, but the actual fictional unfolding of this project, in its textual choices and in the actual movement of the text, betrays the difficulties that stand in its way.

In terms of its histoire, it is the story of a wife, Mrs. Mallard, who is confronted with the sudden news that her husband has died in a railway accident. Her strong emotional reaction is mistaken by her family as genuine sorrow about the fatal accident, whereas in the loneliness of her own room it turns out to be a joyful expression of a newly gained freedom. At the end, however, the narrative takes another unexpected turn in which the mental transgression that stands at the center of the story is symbolically punished after all. Just as Mrs. Mallard is moving back into her family circle, the husband, believed to be dead, enters the house. As it turns out, he had missed his train, the information about his death had been mistaken. Mrs. Mallard, afflicted with heart trouble, collapses on the spot and dies. The joy of seeing her husband, everybody believes, had been too much for her.

In many ways, the story is like an illustration of the notion of symbolic strategy itself. Its point of departure is a central conflict that needs to be reassessed. In its relatively simple binary structure it reveals how literature inevitably implies a choice. In the language of the story it is the question of whether “love,” here in the sense of a moderate emotional relationship to her husband, or self-assertion is the strongest impulse in a woman’s life. The conflict by which the story is generated results from the fact that both have a certain hold and cannot be easily
dismissed. Were it otherwise, a simple statement in favor of self-assertion would suffice. But it is exactly because the choice between the two possibilities poses a dilemma that it becomes necessary to restructure and rearrange the dissonance in telling a story. This is not to deny that self-assertion receives a tentative priority in the story. But in view of the ending it remains an open question to what extent it can be realized. Because its claims still have a highly uncertain status, a compromise is sought between old and new values. Using various possibilities of fictional transformation, the story attempts to chart a course between the two opposing value orientations in such a way that their collision in real life is renegotiated in the story.

Such a reading of the story as the tentative formulation of a culturally “disruptive” impulse can help to explain some of its striking narrative details which Seyerstedt’s brief discussion ignores. Why, for example, must the movement toward self-assertion be linked with the death of her husband? The device recurs occasionally in female fantasies and its advantages seem immediately evident: It facilitates the acting out of the wish for self-assertion without putting the moral blame on the female and without having to associate her with adultery or other forms of overt moral transgression. In this way, the impulse toward self-assertion does not imply an overt rejection of husband or of the marital role (and, thus, of Victorian values). Rather, it is the fictional arrangement itself which does the work for the wish. The transgression is thus prepared for in a way in which possible reproaches have already been anticipated and dealt with.

Interestingly enough, in the context of the story the wish for self-assertion does not present a conscious choice but an unexpected breakthrough which seems to take hold more or less against Mrs. Mallard’s will. It is both striking and curious to see how, in its relative shortness, the story spends much time in tracing the exact ways in which she is gradually grasped and finally overwhelmed by the impulse. To begin with, it is brought upon her from the outside by seemingly emerging out of nature and by overwhelming her although she is trying to resist. The stages of her gradual conversion are carefully delineated: In front of the open window she plunges into a condition of complete physical and emotional passivity resulting in “a suspension of intelligent thought.” Her state resembles that of a child; what happens bears characteristics of a dream-like regression. Thus the fictional situation is prepared to have her, in a state of helpless surrender, grasped by a nameless impulse described as “this thing that was approaching to possess her” (p. 353).
In this context, another narrative detail seems significant: Although the story is one of a growing awareness, it largely avoids the description of mental processes during the moments of Mrs. Mallard's actual transformation. The changes she undergoes are, in the larger part, presented as seen from the outside and this makes for a certain awkwardness in the narrative since the description occasionally has to rely on vacant stares and heavy breathing to get its meaning across. But the choice also has its obvious advantages for the project at hand since it allows Chopin to keep hidden from the reader Mrs. Mallard's actual thoughts and, thus, also leaves open her heroine's responsibility for what is happening to her.8

Because in order to get to her own room she has to go upstairs, Mrs. Mallard’s movement from the family parlor, as the place in which the community’s moral standards prevail, to her own private room, in which the burden of public behavior can be suspended and the “private” self can emerge, is spatially underlined as ascent. Since the movement of the text, in order to cope with its underlying tension, is directed towards stating an impulse and then taking it back to a certain degree, an eventual re-descent back into family life, and into the realm of Victorian values, seems inevitable. Her sister asks admission to her room. The door which was temporarily and tentatively closed to social demands has to be opened again. In a way, Mrs. Mallard is changed, and yet certain statements such as “a feverish triumph in her eyes” indicate, in melodramatic convention, an unnaturally exalted state which cannot be upheld for long.

However, to read the ending as mere punishment of a repressed wish would mean to overlook its precise strategic location within the range of possible answers. To be sure, the story implies that the wish which generated the narrative cannot yet be maintained. It has to be taken back somewhat, for a state in which self-assertion would occupy an accepted, “normal” place is not yet imaginable within the world of the narrative. On the other hand, it is not taken back altogether or betrayed. After all, a mere return to the former marriage is also blocked. The conventional Victorian marriage emerges as another supposedly “normal” state which cannot be maintained, cannot be considered “normal” any longer. In a way, the reader’s associations are inverted. The death at the end is not a defeat but bears connotations of a comforting and attractive attitude of resistance. It permits the reader to disengage from the narrative while insisting on the wishes acted out. The impulse for self-assertion is not realized but its value and legitimacy are reaffirmed nevertheless.9 It is between these two poles that Kate Chopin’s stories negotiate.
Most of Kate Chopin's short fiction was written between 1889 and 1897 and collected in two volumes, *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, which established her reputation. A third collection had already been accepted for publication, but after the minor scandal caused by her novel *The Awakening*, the publication never materialized and thus some of the stories did not become publicly available until 1969 when her complete works were finally published.

Many of these stories are brief sketches and quite often they may strike the reader as script-like, not quite finished scenarios. Nevertheless, the way in which Chopin tried to achieve the direct and spontaneous expression of certain of her key concerns impresses and engages the reader. Thus, what critics may be tempted to call a lack of stylistic sophistication in her short fiction has to be seen in itself as the significant and deliberate stylistic choice of a mode of writing that served her specific purposes best. Historically, it marks a period of transition in which a new kind of writing (sparse, unelaborate, often using simple, declarative sentences) emerged as a kind of clearance of the Victorian prose, foreshadowing the modernism of Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway.

What is known about Chopin's method of writing affirms a view of her stories as relatively direct and unrevised fantasy scenarios. Most of them seem to have been written in one sitting, without subsequent revisions:

She refused to make anything but minor changes in the quick first drafts of her writings, and nearly all her stories were printed practically as they had first come to her. . . . This accomplishment becomes even more remarkable when we consider that her work was done in the family living room, where the children were swarming around her.10

“Story-writing,” Kate Chopin wrote in her diary, “—at least with me—is the spontaneous expression of impressions gathered goodness knows where. . . . There are stories that seem to write themselves, and others which positively refuse to be written—which no amount of coaxing can bring to anything. . . . I am completely at the mercy of unconscious selection. To such an extent is this true, that what is called the polishing up process has always proved disastrous to my work, and I avoid it, preferring the integrity of crudities to artificialities.”11 Her literary ideal, shaped obviously to a large degree by the reading of Maupassant, seems to have been to narrate “in a direct and simple way.”12 The traditional formal choice of the local colorist, the brief tale and sketch, thus assumed a new quality and function in her writing: In many cases it emerged as a convenient formal device for a
series of brief and concise revisions of the central theme of a tentative transgression. The theme is repeated again and again in the hope that a way will be found next time to reconcile more effectively the disruptive impulse with the demands of the cultural environment. Where the fictional solution remains unsatisfactory, plot and character constellation are re-arranged to try out and test a new version.

For example, one of her earlier stories, “Wiser than a God,” places the heroine, Paula von Stoltz, in a situation of choice between a career as gifted musician and a life of luxury as wife of rich George Brainard. Although she loves him and temporarily considers the idea of accepting his proposal, she finally decides to stay true to her vocation and eventually becomes a successful musician. Seyerstedt underlines “the theme of career versus marriage” and praises the story as “her most outspoken demonstration of the self-sufficient woman.” In a way, “Wiser than a God,” written five years before “The Story of an Hour,” seems to be the more radical and consequent version, for it allows its heroine a degree of self-assertion which is denied to Mrs. Mallard. However, a closer look at its function and place in the narrative shows that self-assertion is made possible only because the wish is projected into one of the few conventional figures in which it could be culturally tolerated and expressed at the time: That of the artist who, like the nun, has resigned from “love” and lives only for her own vocation. Self-assertion is gained, in other words, through the sacred aura of a higher cause of Victorianism, that of art and culture. Thus, the story avoids one of the main negative connotations of the impulse for self-realization, the suspicion of selfishness, which “The Story of an Hour” takes so much pain to deny. On the contrary, the dominant semantic structure of the text reveals that to give up her vocation and to marry would mean putting personal happiness over social and cultural duty. Like “The Story of an Hour,” “Wiser than a God” is structured along the opposition of love vs. self-assertion, but the connotations are somewhat inverted, for in this case it is love, not self-assertion, which generates the impulse towards transgression. Significantly, it is at the one moment in the story where Paula temporarily forgets her duty and is seriously tempted by George’s love that she is severely punished by the sudden death of her mother, as the heroine in a conventional women’s melodrama, who has morally failed, is often punished by the death or sickness of her child.

Imagining a life with George Brainard poses the temptation of a free, pleasant, comfortable life for Paula. On the other hand, many of the associations connected with a life devoted to culture as a vocation
remain unmistakably negative: Sickness, coldness, lifelong drilling, strict discipline, and even the German beer belly of Poldorf, the pianist. The one cause which vindicates all these hardships is a higher calling, "the life-giving energies of good music" bequeathed upon her through her parents' legacy. It is thus still in the service of higher spiritual values that self-assertion is defined, and this decision, contrary to "The Story of an Hour" or The Awakening, implies a sacrifice of sensual and amorous impulses rather than an unfolding. Quite conventionally, love is the realm of temptation and culture that of moral duty; the first implies self-indulgence, the second moral responsibility. Although Paula makes her own decision, the decision remains in accordance with the cultural division between love and profession. In the conflict between passion and duty, one might say, passion has to be suppressed, and this basic moralism is effectively disguised by turning "duty" into a vocation and a career.

That the criterion of an overt conscious choice for self-assertion cannot be sufficient for evaluating and characterizing the literary substance of her fiction can be shown by a brief discussion of one of Kate Chopin's earliest stories, "The Maid of Saint Phillippe." Evoking a highly romanticized frontier, it features another strong heroine who has to make a choice and chooses her independence and freedom against the prospects of marriage. Approvingly, Seyerstedt writes that the heroine "refuses to become a traditional housewife and joins the Cherokees for a hunter's life instead." And yet the story may safely be labeled one of the worst stories Kate Chopin ever wrote. What makes it unconvincing are not only clichéd descriptions such as that of her departure ("With gun across her shoulder she walked up the gentle slope; her brave, strong face turned to the rising sun" [p. 123]) but also that the clichés themselves indicate that Chopin had projected her thematic concern into an area unfamiliar to her own experience. Because her newspaper friends urged her to take advantage of the vogue of historical fiction in the nineties, the fantasy of self-assertion had been coded not primarily in her own stock of knowledge but in the familiar dichotomy between society (the realm of bondage) and wilderness (the realm of freedom). The inevitable result was that self-assertion was transformed into anarchic objection to all social ties in a way reminiscent of the well-known American male character who follows his impulse to escape from all family obligations into the wide unknown wilderness. Self-assertion is thus achieved by imitating a certain set of male fantasies that govern not only the plot but also the gestures of the heroine. Not surprisingly, the version fails to reach the
reader emotionally. It may even tempt one to irony because it strikes one so obviously as a lifeless imitation. Nevertheless, and interestingly enough, there remains one link with a central motif of Chopin’s other fiction. It is a point that recurs in her more interesting stories and ultimately bears important implications for a general discussion of her fictional project: The narrative of self-assertion is also one of a progressive fantasy of being deserted and left alone.

Another of her earlier stories, “Désirée’s Baby,” was Chopin’s most successful story during her lifetime. The reason may be that it takes the theme of social deviation and transgression back to the level of popular melodrama. It is the story of an accusation in which the beautiful, gentle woman (an image of true Victorian womanhood) stands accused when her baby begins to show Negroid traits. Her moral offense is that she supposedly is not white, a blame that can be translated into the suggestion that morally she is not pure but tainted. When her proud husband, Armand, indicates that he would be glad to get rid of her, she takes her baby and commits suicide by walking into the bayou. In the end, as her husband burns everything that reminds him of her, he discovers an old letter from his own mother to his father: “I thank the good God... Armand will never know that his mother... belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (p. 245).

The ironic ending, which transfers all the moral blame initially levelled at the heroine on to the one who blamed her, grounds the story in the popular melodramatic convention of a woman wronged. This is not to say that in this version, in which the heroine appears as mere victim, Chopin’s central concern with the movement of transgression cannot be discerned. It appears just more heavily disguised and taken even further back than usual. The fictional device by which this effect is achieved is one familiar from popular culture and other forms of fantasy activity: It is that of the false appearance that allows the reader to associate the heroine temporarily with an act of sexual transgression. The mere suspicion is enough to destroy her, an indication that the acknowledgment of such an impulse is considered to be highly dangerous and self-destructive. This in turn explains why the ending seems designed to provide an especially effective denial of all possible charges that could be brought against her. In this sense, the story’s gratification can be seen in a very indirect and highly displaced acknowledgment of impulses that are not openly admitted. The fear that transgression will result in self-destruction and that its eventual consequences may be madness or death is also acted out in another one
of the earlier stories, "Mrs. Mobry's Reason," where a moment of weakness shows its destructive potential some twenty-five years later when hereditary insanity breaks out in a woman's daughter at the moment at which the daughter herself undergoes a process of "awakening."

That the attempt to reconcile the impulse toward transgression with the role of the respectable Victorian woman remained a crucial concern of Kate Chopin's writing is shown by two stories, "A Shameful Affair" and "A Respectable Woman," which indicate a departure from the still conventional codification of the problem in most of her early fiction. The two titles taken together provide the cue for the way in which the central conflict is now "sized up." The question at stake is how can one give rise to seemingly "shameful" impulses and yet remain a "respectable woman"? Both stories indicate that Kate Chopin, while trying out a variety of popular and conventional narrative strategies, became gradually more daring in her fictional scenarios. "A Shameful Affair" involves the gradual "awakening" of a clever but slightly condescending young woman, following "exalted lines of thought," who meets a Whitmanesque young seasonal worker on the farm where she spends her summer holidays. One day they accidentally meet by the river, he kisses her and then runs away. But instead of being indignant as she should be according to dominant moral codes, the kiss, as an obvious expression of deeper impulses, awakens feelings of pleasure and delight: "All day long a hideous truth had been thrusting itself upon her that made her ask herself if she could be mad. She feared it. Else why was that kiss the most delicious thing she had known in her twenty years of life?" (p. 134).

The interest that this story and "A Respectable Woman" hold is how this realization is to be dealt with. The story leaves no doubt that the spontaneous attraction she feels cannot be indulged in freely but has to be suppressed: "But Mildred would not bend the outward conditions of her life to serve any shameful whim that chanced to visit her soul" (p. 135). If suppression of the impulse which is called "shameful" is still pertinent, the question that remains is what attitude should be taken toward the awareness that it nevertheless exists inside oneself. In an instructive moment in the story, its larger symbolic drama is re-enacted when the offender is coming toward her on a narrow path during one of the following days: "What could she do? Turn and run, as a little child might? Spring into the wheat, as some frightened four-footed creature would? There was nothing but to pass him with the dignity which the occasion clearly demanded" (p. 135). In a way, these
choices can be translated into literary strategies. While the melodramatic narrative employed in earlier stories could be equated with the reactions of the little child or the frightened creature, the heroine’s final decision reads like a program for forthcoming fictional versions, to encounter the seemingly shameful and disruptive impulse with “dignity.” In “A Shameful Affair” this leads to a cautious admission of the heroine’s passion. And yet it is necessary to keep in mind the grounds on which this admission is made possible: Its precondition is still the declared will to suppress it.

In “A Respectable Woman,” written three years later, the conflicting emotions between “shameful” impulse and respectable woman find expression in the encounter of Mrs. Baroda and the journalist Gouvernail. Mrs. Baroda loves her husband, but the semantic opposition used to describe the two men stresses characteristics like reason and control on the side of her husband and “living,” warmth, and physical attractiveness on the side of Gouvernail. One day in his company Mrs. Baroda suddenly feels the spontaneous impulse to touch his face or his lips. Although she suppresses the wish, the ending of the story remains ambiguous and thus carries its gradual admission a step further. For when her husband complains about her overt hostility toward Gouvernail, she tells him: “I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him” (p. 336). The negotiated compromise reaches a stage of sustained ambiguity. For the first time it is left open whether the heroine has suppressed her impulses or her inhibitions to act them out.

To what extent Chopin’s fiction is shaped by the movement of transgression is further indicated by two stories in which both the wish and the fear to transgress are displaced unto a spatial level and acted out as the crossing of a crucial geographical barrier. In “Beyond the Bayou,” the black woman La Folle has never stepped across a certain imaginary line which separates her bayou from the unknown region beyond. One day, however, an accident suffered by her favorite little boy compels her to overcome the dread of the unknown and terrifying area, and with initially extreme terror she ventures across the unfamiliar terrain only to feel deep satisfaction about the new world revealed to her. As in Chopin’s first story, “emancipation” is described as courage to transcend certain imaginary lines toward the Unknown. Once the dread is overcome, the gain is tremendous: It is the rediscovery of a whole new world and, subsequently, a whole new self.

There is no clear-cut dividing line in Kate Chopin’s writing which separates her more traditional stories from their more daring versions.
For a considerable period, both types co-exist.10 "A Shameful Affair," for example, was written before "Désirée's Baby" and both were published in the same year. Nevertheless, there is on the whole an unmistakable general direction in which her stories move. As one traces their development, one can observe a movement from an early and rather abstract assessment of self-assertion in terms of principles like "vocation" or "freedom vs. bondage" toward a gradual acknowledgment of certain disruptive or "shameful" impulses within the self. At the beginning, however, many of Chopin's female characters are still placed in moments of decision which they themselves have not sought and which are mostly decided for them by the narrative. Although playing temporarily with the notions of transgression, many of these early stories still stay within a cultural convention in which "immoral" impulses could be given expression as long as they served to teach a redeeming moral lesson or led to repentance and renewed submission. Thus it is not surprising that a melodrama of plantation life like "Désirée's Baby," written relatively early in her brief career, remained her most famous and popular story, as it is surely no coincidence that her local color fiction, as a culturally accepted form for the expression of slight but still acceptable moral deviance, formed the basis of her public recognition. In each case, the fictional disguise and displacement are far-reaching, and the fact that in "Desiree's Baby" the intrusion of supposedly shameful impulses is held at the level of false appearances indicates something about how far Victorian middle-class America was willing to go in admitting them publicly.

Many of the more interesting stories, on the other hand, ran into difficulties with the editors of the genteel literary magazines on which the reputation and income for a writer like Kate Chopin largely depended. Repeatedly, she had difficulties in getting her more unusual and daring stories published, among them "Mrs. Mobry's Reason," "A Shameful Affair," and "Miss McEnders." "The Story of an Hour" was refused by the Century as were "Athénaise" and "A Night in Acadie." A later story, "Two Portraits," was rejected by every publisher to whom it was offered. Generally, one might say that the fact that many of her stories were published in the prestigious Eastern magazines such as Century indicates that she initially still moved in the mainstream of Victorian culture. Her popular stories demonstrate how far one could go within this dominant cultural system. Where she had trouble finding a publisher, sensitive spots of that culture were touched; where it proved impossible to get the stories published, the negotiating space of the culture had been violated.
This was clearly the case with two stories that were not published in her lifetime, “Two Portraits” and “The Storm.” In “The Storm” a man seeks shelter in the house of Calixta, the woman he once loved, and the story does not fail to describe their subsequent brief sexual encounter in remarkable detail. What may strike the reader as even more surprising, however, is what follows: After her lover has departed, the woman’s husband, Bobinôt, and her little son return and since she is now in a very happy mood, the family soon sits around the table, laughing and having a good time. Her lover Alcée, on the other hand, writes a “loving” letter to his own wife, Clarisse, on that same evening and she in turn feels quite happy to have yet another month on her own. As the ending of the story has it: “So the storm passed and everyone was happy” (p. 596). It is not clear if this very explicit description of a transgression without any subsequent punishment should be taken for cynicism or genuine realism. It seems more adequate to see it as yet another step in the attempt to solve and rearrange the recurring conflict in Chopin’s fiction. The solution she finds this time seems both ingenious and yet simple: The tension and inner division of the self is overcome by setting it free as two independently acting selves or, more precisely, by assigning conforming and transgressing impulses the status of mere co-existence. As alternating moments of one and the same self they do not interfere with each other and thus do not have to be reconciled any longer.

The disjointed co-existence of two conflicting selves within one person is ever more obvious and finds a nearly programmatic expression in the story “Two Portraits.” This sketch provides two life stories of the same “self,” both of them beginning with exactly the same passage. The story of Alberta, an illegitimate child, is in one version raised by a “loose woman” and in the other by a nun. Predictably, she herself becomes, in the story’s own language, a lively “wanton” in the first portrait and an enthusiastic and devoted nun in the second. Although the story may look like a rather mechanical application of a Naturalistic theory of environment, its implications for Chopin’s recurring project are far-reaching. For again, the point of the story lies in the co-existence of two related, but now entirely independent, selves. Basically, identical energies just happen to be channelled into completely opposite directions: There may be a nun in a prostitute just as well as there may be a “loose woman” hidden in a nun. Yet it seems no longer Chopin’s narrative strategy to show and negotiate the two impulses in one character but to cut the “transgressing” self off and to remove it from its other half altogether. One realizes, in retrospect, how the problems and complications, the contradictory movements of
the earlier stories, arose from the attempt to somehow unite both conflicting impulses in one yet undivided self, a project that never resulted in a wholly satisfactory solution and thus made ever new versions necessary. On the other hand, however, the mere co-existence of the two selves brings the project to an abrupt halt and cannot really be considered as solution for the "woman in motion" either. The difficulties of the situation emerge most tellingly in *The Awakening*.

The most puzzling aspect of *The Awakening* is a contradictory narrative stance that manifests itself, above all, in a certain ambivalence in the ending. The moment of determined self-assertion is also that of Edna's withdrawal and death. Clearly, Edna's act bears connotations of a final victorious liberation and yet, at the same time, these feelings are tied to a deliberate act of retreat which implies that they cannot realistically be upheld in the social contexts of Edna's life. The text itself seems hesitant as to whether the ending is a victory or a defeat.

In trying to solve the problem it seems useful to start from the observation that in *The Awakening* it is still one self which is trying to solve the problems of self-assertion. What distinguishes the novel from most of Chopin's short fiction is that the ensuing conflict is now presented and worked through on a more conscious and comprehensive level. As a result, the dilemma of the heroine becomes a subject of conflict the author undertakes to measure in far more detail. The novel unfolds as a series of events in which Edna has to make her choices: She is placed between her husband and Robert; between Mme. Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz, the Mother-Woman and the artist; between her husband and Alcée; between Alcée and Robert; and, finally, between Robert and her children. Each of these choices implies another definition of the possibilities of female self-assertion. What before was rehearsed in different stories can now be drawn together in one fictional text. This also means, however, that the roles which are tested follow each other with an accelerating frequency and that the pressures on the self to negotiate them all in one coherent identity increase accordingly. Not surprisingly, Edna's eventual response seems to lie in a retreat from all of them.

In the attempt to assert herself, Edna sheds one role after the other: at first, the partial rejection of the roles of wife, mother, and artist still holds the promise of a more liberated synthesis of her conflicting impulses in which the courage and independence of Made- moiselle Reisz and the warmth and sensuousness of Madame Ratignolle would be included. In the final scene of the beach, the withdrawal
from all roles intensifies and touches upon those that seemed to emerge as positive alternatives in the course of the book: The role of the merely sexually liberated woman is recognized as shallow, the relationship to Robert is revealed as romantic infatuation that will wear off, and even the ties to her children are cut. This shedding of roles, of course, is symbolically expressed by the throwing away of her clothes. The regression to the state of a yet undivided self finds its ultimate and victorious expression in her final return to the sea. Thus, the movement of victorious self-assertion has also become the moment of retreat. Surprisingly, but unmistakably, the narrative of transgression becomes one of regression.17

This ending of the novel draws attention to the fact that similar states of regression function as recurring moments of peace and “freedom” throughout Chopin’s writing, starting with diary entries and reappearing in her fiction. In an early diary entry she writes:

I am losing my interest in human beings; in the significance of their lives and actions. . . . I want neither books nor men. They make me suffer. Is there one of them can talk to me like the night—the summer night? . . . The night came slowly as I lay out there under the maple tree. . . . My whole being was abandoned to the soothing and penetrating charm of the Night. The katydids began their slumber song. . . . How wise they are. They do not chatter like people. They only tell me: “sleep, sleep, sleep.”18

In “Loka” “freedom” for the heroine means “only to lie there for hours and watch the glistening lizards glide in and out . . .” (p. 215). In “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” the female character reacts to the dilemmas of acting selfishly or unselfishly by saying “I’d like to sit right on here and forget every thing and go to sleep and never wake up” (p. 591). One also recognizes the movement in “The Story of an Hour” where the child-like regression in front of the window brings about the realization of a freedom in which Mrs. Mallard would have the chance to live all for herself. Finally, it is already present in earlier stages of The Awakening itself, as Cynthia Wolff has pointed out: for example, in Edna’s references to the bluegrass meadow of her childhood and to the lovers lost amid the Baratarían Islands; later, on the island Cheniere when Edna falls asleep, or, in one of the most impressive scenes of the novel, when she is alone in their family mansion in New Orleans and, for the first time, feels free of all demands made on her.

This recurrence of a yearning for regression seems puzzling at first sight. Wolff, who first drew attention to the motif, tries to explain it psychoanalytically. But with regard to cultural implications,19 the regressive urge does not seem to imply a surrender of the ideas of self-
assertion and liberation of the female self. The moments of regression are also those moments in which the female character for the first time is all alone and possesses her self. This, however, is only possible by a retreat from all the roles she has encountered and tried out. Certain roles have been recognized as limiting and suffocating, but the story of gradual self-assertion leads to a number of other roles that ultimately limit and constrain the self as well. It is not that there is a lack of possibilities for (at least partial) self-realization; it is that these possibilities also threaten to divide the self and keep it imprisoned in one constraining definition. Thus, the only way to assert or defend that total self-hood which Edna has discovered in the symbolic act of swimming is through the refusal to commit herself entirely to any of the roles available to her. The only way to construct and to sustain a self on its own is to regress to a state in which she is not compelled to choose between conflicting selves and can still experience herself as whole and intact. Thus, semantically, her death does not appear as self-destruction but as self-preservation.

In Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter*, a bestseller written by one of the “scribbling women” of the 1850s, there is a scene similar to the one in which Mrs. Mallard sits in front of her window. In Chapter 18 of *The Lamplighter* the young heroine Gerty can be found in a comparable situation right after her discovery that Mrs. Ellis, the stern housekeeper, has played a mean little trick on her. Gerty’s first impulse is toward revenge and retaliation. Since the novel has the (highly successful) educational transformation of an unloved and untutored little orphan into a morally superior young woman as its theme, such an impulse would mean a relapse into the ungoverned self of her early years. The scene thus emerges as a crucial moment of crisis. Gerty’s discovery of the injustice done to her constitutes a test of how far she has already succeeded in disciplining her former self. Her choice is to follow her spontaneous urge for revenge or control her impulse and govern herself.

As in “The Story of an Hour” the moment in front of the window serves both to dramatize the struggle of two conflicting aspects of the self and to point the way to a solution. Not surprisingly, the solution Cummins seeks, however, lies in exactly the opposite direction from the uneasy path which Chopin explores through her stories. Nature in *The Lamplighter* is far from being the home of an “it” which grasps the heroine. Instead of stirring her up, the sights of nature coming through the open window check Gerty’s impulse and quiet her down. In front of the open window she regains her composure and wins a precious vic-
tory over herself: “This was the first instance of complete self-control in Gerty, and the last we shall have occasion to dwell upon. From this time she continued to experience more and more the power of governing herself; and, with each new effort gaining new strength, became at last a wonder to those who knew the temperament she had had to contend with.” The ultimate goal, not only of Gerty’s moral education but of the world of the domestic novel in general, is to learn to govern and control the self as completely as possible.

It is obvious how far Mrs. Mallard’s awakening, and that of Chopin’s subsequent heroines, is removed from this Victorian model of self-assertion. In many ways, the two moments in front of the open window not only reflect the contrast between the early stage of American Victorianism and its disintegration at the end of the century, they also embody two opposing strategies for self-realization. While Gerty becomes Gertrude by strictly governing herself, Mrs. Mallard’s assertion of the self begins exactly with the release from such restraints. To be sure, Cummins cannot be compared with Chopin artistically, yet the two scenes allow a comparison of cultural attitudes. Cummins’ novel may be hopelessly sentimental, but the values of self-control and moral discipline have a significance for the question of self-assertion which goes far beyond The Lamplighter’s genteel version of them. For self-control can provide strength, and it is this strength in female characters that explains the interest of Women’s Studies in the domestic novel, despite the sentimental ideology in service of which this strength is developed. Quite evidently, it is the same quality that is often admired in other strong heroines of literature who struggle for their own independence with determination. Chopin’s Paula von Stoltz could be mentioned as one example. To assert the female self in an adverse environment requires strict discipline and supreme self-control.

Clearly, Kate Chopin’s fiction complicates that view not only by revealing how closely such strategies are tied to Victorian fantasies of controlling the self but also by demonstrating to what extent self-control implies the suppression and denial of “disruptive” aspects of the self. For Chopin’s heroines, the prospects for self-assertion are therefore no longer sought in the promise to govern the self but, on the contrary, in various attempts to undermine and subvert its discipline. Independence and freedom, the feeling to truly “possess oneself,” are finally won when at the end of The Awakening the last remnants of self-discipline, together with Edna’s clothes, are cast off and abandoned. Yet this victory is by no means an unproblematic alternative to the strategy of self-control. It is part of the special achievement and
usefulness of Chopin's work that by working through the implications of her heroine's decisions to escape the control of Victorian values she also registers the potential gains and losses of that decision. Self-assertion based on strength and achieved through self-control bears the danger of self-suppression and self-denial. Where such discipline is abandoned, however, the self may gain a new sense of freedom, yet it may be able to preserve a sense of self only by subsequent stages of retreat and regression that stand in the way of an assertion of the self within society.

What Chopin's fiction and especially *The Awakening* set out to do was to free the suppressed inner self by casting aside "that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (p. 939). But in trying to articulate one meaning the text finds itself adding another. Instead of merely illustrating the fictional project, the actual narrative complicates its premises. For what constitutes the inner self that is to be freed? What at first sight looks like a straightforward act of resistance and liberation, a release of the inner self, gets entangled in the problem of how to get hold of and define that inner self. Chopin's fiction, in an ongoing fictional dialogue, reveals the tension that results from trying to integrate various emerging alternatives into one coherent identity. That the only way in which Edna eventually gains control of her self is by a movement toward regression reflects the complexity of the situation. There is no answer, just a "subversive" strategy of evading and thus cutting off an increasingly strenuous dialogue between conflicting demands within the self, which may prepare the ground for an altogether new beginning. It is the dilemma and difficulty of a cultural moment of transition in which the Victorian female self, in a transgressive effort, tries to open up and sustain an unconstrained space that breaks through in the ambivalent ending of *The Awakening* and provides it with its own cultural truthfulness and insight.
Notes


2Scott, p. 4.

3Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1973), p. 1. For a shorter version of Burke’s argument see also his essay “Literature as Equipment for Living” in the same volume. Some possible misunderstandings about the terminology used in this essay ought to be clarified in advance. To conceive of literature as a mode of symbolic action is to draw attention to the part human communication plays in acting on, and in, the world. Making sense of the world is an act with serious consequences and literature (with its own specific possibilities) is one of the forms available for such sense-making processes. To act “symbolically,” then, is not a second-hand, substitute action; rather the whole point of the concept is to assign literature the status of a different and independent, though not autonomous, mode of action. To call this act “tentative,” consequently, is not to imply that the writer is timidly resorting to a kind of Ersatz-action. The term is used here not in the sense of a hesitant commitment to “real” action but in the sense of an experimental mode of action. It is not that the writer does not dare to act, but that he is not yet quite sure how. In drawing on the resources of fiction, the writer tries to come to terms with a situation the nature of which is still uncertain, a situation which therefore has to be clarified and “tested” in the process of articulating it and investing it with meaning. As fiction, however, the text presents just an experimental commitment to this meaning; it is tentative in the sense of an as if statement. This is also the reason, to address a last possible misunderstanding, why the following discussion should not be misread as psychological speculation about Chopin. The essay wants to draw attention to a recurrent theme or fantasy in Chopin’s writing, not to use it for psychological inference. (The term “fantasy,” therefore, does not denote a mere daydream but the freedom fiction provides in constructing one’s own world.) Undoubtedly, all of Chopin’s fiction (as any other writer’s) must be related, in complex ways, to aspects of herself. Yet the literary text does not simply reflect these aspects, it uses fiction’s freedom to tentatively extend emotions and impulses in certain directions so that an altogether new dimension can be created in writing. It is this addition to and extension of reality by means of fiction which suggests and justifies the term symbolic action.


5The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, 2 Vols., ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), II, 893. All further references to Kate Chopin’s fiction, both in the text and in the footnotes, will be to this edition.

6To be sure, the subversion of the Victorian cult of true womanhood is not entirely confined to these aspects of individual self-assertion in her work. One of her stories, for example, “Miss McEnders,” is a brief scenario about social reasons why this role does not seem tenable any longer and points to the economic underside that underlies the theory of female moral guardianship. In a concise way, it catches central paradoxes of the age: It is only because her father and fiancee have acquired their wealth without moral scruples that Miss McEnders’ existence as a symbol of moral perfection becomes possible, even necessary.
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8An interesting parallel is provided by the story “A Pair of Silk Stockings” in which a formerly well-to-do, now impoverished woman is seized by the sudden impulse to spend fifteen precious dollars in one day’s extravagant consuming spree: “She was not going through any acute mental process or reasoning with herself, nor was she striving to explain to her satisfaction the motive of her action. She was not thinking at all. 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,” II, 502.

9One of Kate Chopin’s manuscripts, obviously written in March 1897 and first published in her complete works in 1969, a story called “The Locket,” looks like a late retelling of a similar fantasy of a woman who receives the news that her lover has been killed. In contrast to “The Story of an Hour,” however, the sketch remains a traditional love story. The heroine falls into shock and mourning, while the unexpected return of the supposedly dead man assures her happiness.

10Seyersted, p. 59.

11Seyersted, p. 117.

12Seyersted, p. 51.

13Seyersted suggests that she often created more traditional and more “modern” versions of the same conflict within a short period, thus, as he says, “keeping up a running dialogue with herself on woman’s lot,” p. 114. Additional evidence for a view of her stories as a series of interrelated narrative versions is provided by a number of instances in which Kate Chopin places the same person in more than one work. See Patricia Hopkins Lattin, “Kate Chopin’s Repeating Characters,” *MissQ*, 33 (1980), 19-37. However, Lattin is solely interested in the contribution of these characters in fleshing out “the skeleton of her central fictional world, creating a full and rich social reality” (p. 21) instead of perceiving their function as part of a recurring fantasy scenario.

14Seyersted, p. 117.

15Seyersted, p. 110.

16The dates of composition for her fiction discussed in this essay are: “Wiser than a God” (1889); “Mrs. Mobry’s Reason” (1891); “The Maid of Saint Phillippe” (1891); “A Shameful Affair” (1891); “Beyond the Bayou” (1891); “Miss McEnders” (1892); “Désirée’s Baby” (1892); “A Respectable Woman” (1894); “The Story of an Hour” (1894); “Two Portraits” (1895); “The Storm” (1898); *The Awakening* (1897-Jan. 21, 1898).

17See Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith, who point to “the double irony that a woman who wishes to awaken should nevertheless wish so often to sleep and dream, and that one who wants to find herself should be described as happily losing herself,” in “Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,” *SAF*, 1 (1973), 71.

18Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,” *AQ*, 25 (1973), 449-71. This is not to suggest a dichotomy between the two aspects or to ignore the fact that Wolff’s primarily psychoanalytic explanation has important cultural implications. Rather, I use the contrast to indicate that my interest in the context of this essay is to understand how Chopin’s obvious gestures toward regression can be related to the specific cultural situation of a “woman in motion” with which her fiction tries to come to terms.