A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF NARRATION IN KATE CHOPIN'S
AT FAULT, THE AWAKENING, AND SELECTED SHORT STORIES

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by

Holly Hartman Finnegan, B.S.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1990

Master's Examination Committee: Approved by
Debra Moddelmog
Marlene Longenecker

Advisor
Department of English
To Mom
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Debra Moddelmog for her guidance, insight, and patience. Dr. Marlene Longenecker has my gratitude for her helpful suggestions. Thanks go to all of my family and friends for their support. And finally to my husband, Mark, thank you for your confidence in me.
VITA

MAY 6, 1966 . . . . . . . . . . . Born - Newark, Ohio

1988 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . B.S., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1988-1990 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field: English
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ........................................ ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................. iii

VITA ................................................ iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................. v

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS ......................... vi

INTRODUCTION

Realigning the Focus: The Need for a Rhetorical Analysis of the Work of Kate Chopin .... 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. At Fault: The Rhetorical Functions of Narrational Variation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. &quot;I would rather ask the stars&quot;: The Disclosure of Themes through First-Person Narration</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The Awakening: The Creation of Ambivalence Through Narration</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION

Growing Complexity: Audience, Narration, and Layers of Meaning in Chopin's Writing .... 66

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................... 71
# TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations used in the citations are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CW</td>
<td><em>The Complete Works of Kate Chopin</em> edited by Per Seyersted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KC</td>
<td><em>Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography</em> by Per Seyersted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

REALIGNING THE FOCUS: THE NEED FOR A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WORK OF KATE CHOPIN

The fiction of Kate Chopin was dismissed, almost forgotten, until 1932, when her reputation was revived by Daniel Rankin, the author of a biography entitled Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories. In the years since 1932, the criticism of Chopin's work has fallen into several divergent, yet overlapping categories. The first of these categories is criticism that notes the influence of other authors on Chopin's work--such as Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman--and that which compares her narratives to the fiction of other authors--such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Washington Cable, Mark Twain, Willa Cather, and Sylvia Plath (Peggy Skaggs 6-11). Another category is criticism which attempts to relate Chopin's work to local color fiction or specific "isms," such as feminism, regionalism, romanticism, neotranscendentalism, antiromanticism,
realism, naturalism, or existentialism (Peggy Skaggs 7). A third category is criticism that deals almost exclusively with themes and characterization in Chopin's fiction, an approach that is very popular with feminists such as Sandra Gilbert, Joan Zlotnick, and Pamela Lorraine Parker, as well as with structuralists such as Robert Arner and Bernard Koloski.

While these approaches seem quite diverse, they do share one common element: all focus on the text as a limited communication—between author and text, or between text and reader. Although these approaches do acknowledge the quality of the works, they cannot do justice to the careful craftsmanship of the author and her awareness of audience. What is needed at this point in the study of Chopin's work is rhetorical analysis, defined by James Phelan as a method which "foregrounds the text as a communication between author and reader" (8).

To this end, I propose to look at Chopin's handling of narration in her two novels, At Fault and The Awakening, and in four first-person stories, "The Night Came Slowly," "Juanita," "Cavanelle," and "Vagabonds." My object in this investigation is to explore the effects of point of view on the reader, eventually proving that Chopin consistently manipulates narration in order to control the reader's experience with the text, emphasizing specific themes and ideas. In choosing to work with the novels and stories noted above, I am in no way asserting that they are the best of Chopin's work or that they are the only works
worthy of study. Instead, my intent is to examine a
variety of Chopin's narrational choices (the fully
omniscient narrator, the intrusive omniscient narrator, and
four different first-person narrators), to analyze both
short stories and her longer works, and to note the growing
complexity in narration from her first novel, written in
1889-90, through her short stories, written in 1894 and
1895, to her last novel, written in 1897-98. Obviously
this study is by no means exhaustive, and perhaps will
finally serve as a model for further rhetorical analysis of
Kate Chopin's work.

Central to my investigation are the rhetorical models
constructed by James Phelan in Reading People, Reading
Plots, and by Wayne Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction. In
discussing her works, I am assuming that Chopin (or to be
more specific, the implied Chopin of the texts) has a
certain agenda, a number of themes, ideas, and emotions she
wishes to convey to the authorial audience, defined by
Phelan as "the ideal audience that an author implicitly
posits in constructing her text" (5). The communication of
themes, ideas, and emotions--the movement of the narra-
tive--is referred to by Phelan as progress, in which "we
are concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop,
and resolve readers' interests in narrative" (15).

Chopin's use of different types of narrators plays an
important role in the progression of her narratives.
Through the narrators, she creates specific effects that
control the readers' experience with the text.
While I depend on Phelan for my conceptualization of movement in the text, I look to Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* for a model of the study of narration. In this very influential work, Booth notes that, "To say that a story is told in the first or the third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects" (150). In studying Chopin's work, I will analyze this relationship between narrators and effects using many of the categories delineated by Booth, such as dramatized and undramatized narration, reliable and unreliable narration, commentary, inside views, distancing, and mood manipulation. To a great extent, Booth and Phelan seem to overlap, and I think it is more than fair to say that Phelan's theories complement Booth's earlier preoccupation with the transaction between author and reader.

Perhaps the reason that there have been few rhetorical analyses of Chopin's work has in part been the attitude of the author herself. In an article published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1899, Chopin explained her own writing style by telling of the time she "took pains":

I had heard so often reiterated that "genius is a capacity for taking pains" that the axiom had become lodged in my brain with the fixedness of a fundamental truth. I had never hoped or aspired to be a genius. But one day the thought occurred to me, "I will take pains." . . . I read volumes bearing upon the history of the times and people that I proposed to manipulate . . . . I took notes,—copious notes . . . I
handled the words in that story [like a mosaic craftsman], picking, selecting, grouping, with an eye to color and to artistic effect,—never satisfied . . . . But the story failed to arouse enthusiasm among the editors. . . . I am more than ever convinced that a writer should be content to use his own faculty, whether it be a faculty for taking pains or a faculty for reaching his effects by the most careless methods. (Seyersted, CW 704; ellipses mine)

This suggestion of carelessness was echoed by Chopin's daughter, Lelia Hattersley—"She always wrote rapidly . . . (and) when finished, she copied her manuscript in ink, seldom changing a word, never 'working over' a story or changing it materially" (quoted by Rankin 116)—and again by Chopin herself in an essay published in 1899 in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch:

There are stories that seem to write themselves, and others which positively refuse to be written . . . 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. (Seyersted, CW 722)

It seems as though many of the scholars throughout the years have taken these statements at face value, assuming that Kate Chopin was indeed the haphazard writer that her comments indicated.

For example, in 1932, Daniel Rankin commented that Edna Pontellier's explanation that she would "give up the unessential . . . give my life for my children; but I
wouldn't give myself" (Seyersted, CW 929) only "sounded clever because it was paradoxical" (Rankin 172). Given that Rankin was writing before Chopin's work had been closely studied, perhaps his view is understandable. It is perhaps also understandable that he could ask of The Awakening, "Is it at all important? Did Kate Chopin by her art reveal a fresh beauty of vision or aspiration?" (Rankin 175), and apparently answer "no." It seems extraordinary, however, that a critic writing in 1987 (and, indeed, introducing a collection of essays on Chopin's work) could state that Chopin's short stories "are very mixed in quality, but even the best are very slight," could call The Awakening "a flawed but strong novel, [that many feminists] weakly misread . . . ," and could make the blanket statement that "Chopin had no mastery of style" (Bloom 1). This type of commentary needs correction, a task that can best be accomplished through an approach that acknowledges Chopin's careful craftsmanship--a rhetorical analysis.

In this thesis, I will focus on the rhetorical effects of Chopin's manipulation of narration--how her narrators convey themes, evoke specific responses to characters, and engage us in the text. In chapter one, I will analyze Chopin's first novel, At Fault, which contains a variety of narrational styles and techniques. My intention is to refute critics who view the novel as a failure by examining the effects of reliable omniscient narration that becomes inconsistent midway through the novel, returning to full
omniscience only at the end. In the second chapter, I will turn to Chopin's short stories, concentrating on the thematic duality created by first-person narration. This effect has been virtually ignored by the critical community, causing misreadings of the stories. In the third chapter, I will analyze narration in The Awakening, noting how the narrator's seeming partiality for Edna is contradicted in the second half of the novel, creating a deliberate ambiguity. The resulting ambivalence we feel toward Edna is a measure of the strength of the novel, its ability to convey themes that lie outside the narrative itself.
CHAPTER I

AT FAULT: THE RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS OF
NARRATIONAL VARIATION

At Fault was not Chopin's first literary work--she had completed at least four short stories and some poetry in the two years before the novel was published (Seyersted 51-52)--but it was her first attempt at longer fiction. The story centers on Thérèse Lafirme, a widow who is sole owner of a Louisiana plantation, and David Hosmer, a businessman from St. Louis, who fall in love. The relationship is complicated by the fact that Hosmer is divorced, a circumstance that disturbs Thérèse. In order to regain Thérèse's approval, David remarries his alcoholic ex-wife, but the resultant situation pleases no one--Fanny Hosmer relapses into alcoholism when she realizes that her husband is in love with Thérèse, David becomes disgusted by his wife, and Thérèse begins to feel that she has made a mistake in forcing David "to face the consequences of his own actions" (Seyersted CW, 769). The situation is resolved when Fanny drowns, and the story ends with Thérèse and David happily married and living on the plantation. One major subplot in the novel involves the relationship
between David's sister Melicent, a superficial society belle, and Thérèse's nephew Grégoire, a hot-tempered, careless young man. Their romance ends when Grégoire remorselessly kills a young worker who has set fire to Hosmer's mill, an action that horrifies Melicent. Grégoire's bewilderment over her subsequent departure from the plantation sends him on a rampage which ends with his death in a barroom quarrel.

When the novel was published in 1890 (at Chopin's expense), the reviews were mixed, but quite a few contained favorable remarks about the humor, the characterizations, and the detailed descriptions (Seyersted 53). Since then, however, many critics have been less approving. For example, Seyersted states that "the novel as a whole shows that she was not ready for the longer forms of fiction" (119). Apparently in agreement, Rankin attempts to excuse Chopin by asking, "What first novel reveals an author's surest skill and literary cunning?" (128). More recently, critics have suggested that _At Fault_ lacks "a sense of timing, of economy, [and] of focus" (Leary 191), as well as "unity of effect" (Peggy Skaggs 73).

I do not want to suggest that the novel is perfect, because _deus ex machina_ episodes such as Fanny's drowning obviously present problems. Also, because Chopin seems to be writing for a commercial audience of the nineteenth-century, the plot of the narrative seems trite to twentieth-century readers. However, by analyzing the rhetorical functions of the variety of narrational styles
Chopin uses in *At Fault*—from the non-intrusive, undramatized omniscient narrator who often effaces herself to allow others to tell the story, to the dramatized omniscient narrator who editorializes on misery—I do hope to demonstrate that the novel is more accomplished than many critics have recognized. In reaching this goal, I will show that several scenes which Leary and others term "diversionary" are actually vital to the progression of the novel, and prove that Chopin's extensive descriptions are not superfluous, but crucial for the communication of ideas, themes, and emotions to the reader.

The novel is broken into two sections: in the first half Chopin establishes the conflict, and in the second half she complicates and then resolves all discord. By the end of Part One, most readers will experience at least three strong emotional and intellectual reactions toward the major characters in the novel: sympathy and respect for the heroine, Thérèse; an immediate interest in the hero, David Hosmer; and a growing distaste for the impediment to their happiness, Fanny Larimore Hosmer. Chopin's narrator plays an integral role in creating these reactions through judicious description and subtle evaluation, by adding commentary at some points and effacing herself at others.

At the very beginning, Chopin introduces an omniscient narrator who describes the heroine and sets forth the moral and intellectual norms for the novel. The first sentence is a view from the outside world: "When Jerome LaFirme
died, his neighbors awaited the results of his sudden
taking off with indolent watchfulness" (CW 741). At least
two ideas are conveyed by this statement. First, the
narrator introduces information about the immediate society
with the oxymoronic "indolent watchfulness," indicating
that their concern for the widow consists primarily of
hoping to see their expectations fulfilled. The second
piece of information relates to the narrator, whom we
immediately see as a clear-sighted reporter, someone who
can discriminate between true concern and selfish interest.
Also, by using the oxymoron, Chopin creates a bond of
shared knowledge between the narrator and the perceptive
reader. Thus with the first sentence, Chopin has begun to
reveal the narrator's character, to build a trusting
relationship between the narrator and the reader, and to
establish the moral and intellectual norms of the novel
through the devaluation of superficial concern.

Chopin reinforces and builds on these responses
throughout the first paragraph:

It was a matter of unusual interest to them that a
plantation of four thousand acres had been left
unincumbered to the disposal of a handsome,
inconsolable, childless Creole widow of thirty. A
betise of some sort might safely be looked for. But
time passing, the anticipated folly failed to reveal
itself; and the only wonder was that Thérèse Lafirme
so successfully followed the methods of her departed
husband. (CW 1)

Here, the narrator strengthens our knowledge of societal
expectations by telling us that the situation is "unusual"
and that mistakes are anticipated. She also describes Thérèse, creating tension that alerts the reader to later possibilities. Important words in the description—"handsome," "inconsolable," "childless," "Creole," "widow," and "thirty"—have connotations that pull the reader in different directions. "Handsome," "childless," and "thirty" indicate the possibility of Thérèse's remarrying, while "inconsolable" and "Creole" suggest her emotional and perhaps cultural reluctance to do so, giving early clues to some of the main conflicts in the story.

Chopin capitalizes on our immediate trust in the narrator to influence our emotional reaction toward Thérèse Lafirme. As the narrator describes and evaluates Thérèse in very positive terms, with careful regard for the beliefs and prejudices of the late nineteenth-century commercial audience, we begin to feel sympathy for her. The narrator enables us to sense Thérèse's personal strength, while maintaining our respect for her "womanliness"—those self-effacing, self-deprecating qualities expected in a woman of the late 1800s—by stating that Thérèse felt "the weight and sacredness of a trust" (CW 741) so that her control of the plantation is seen as merely the acceptance of a duty imposed by her husband. Thus, the observation that this acceptance "awakened unsuspected powers of doing" (CW 741) doesn't carry strongly feminist overtones, but gives us a sense of Thérèse's inner strength. Further evidence of Thérèse's adherence to tradition appears in the form of an example: "In building [a new house], she avoided the
temptations offered by modern architectural innovations, and clung to the simplicity of large rooms and broad verandas . . . " (CW 742). "Avoided the temptations" and "clung" convey a sense of Thérèse's goodness and her devotion to the old ways.

The narrator's physical description of Thérèse, laced with quiet commentary, also influences our perception of and sympathy for this character:

. . . she was fair, with a warm whiteness that a passing thought could deepen into color. The waving blonde hair . . . grew away with a pretty sweep from the temples, the low forehead and nape of the white neck that showed above a frill of soft lace. Her eyes were blue, as certain gems are; that deep blue that lights, and glows, and tells things of the soul . . . the color was in her cheek like the blush in a shell. (CW 743; ellipses mine)

The images here are very poetic, especially the comparison between Thérèse's eyes and gems, and the comparison of her cheek color to "the blush in a shell." This calculatedly positive physical description inspires sympathy and approval for Thérèse.

The second intellectual and emotional response evoked in Part One is an interest in the hero, David Hosmer. The narrator creates this interest by presenting Hosmer as something of a mystery. Physically, he is not appealing, being "thin and sallow," with graying hair and a "face marked with premature lines" (CW 743), but he seems to have an inner fortitude which has a strong effect on the women who see him. The narrator heightens our interest in David
Hosmer by seeming to efface herself, allowing us to form judgments on the basis of Thérèse's conclusions—"'A serious one,' was Thérèse's first thought in looking at him. 'A man who has never learned how to laugh or who has forgotten how'" (CW 743)—and her servant Betsy's words—"'Lor'-zee folks,' exclaimed the observant Betsy on re-entering the kitchen,'dey'se a man in yonda, look like he gwine eat somebody up. I was fur gittin' 'way quick me'" (CW 744). In the latter case, although the narrator withholds her own judgment, she is careful to assure the reader of the credibility of Betsy's testimony by calling her "observant." Also, the narrator assures us of her own reliability by reporting the judgment of a person other than herself. The narrator then supports Thérèse and Betsy's conclusions by furnishing inside information about Hosmer, such as his disregard for "the comforting things of life when presented to him as irrelevant to that dominant main chance" (CW 743). Chopin uses this showing-before-telling technique very effectively, deepening the mystery surrounding Hosmer by presenting widely divergent judgments of his character.

To introduce Fanny Larimore Hosmer, the third major character in the novel and the primary source of conflict, Chopin uses several different types of narration, from simple telling to the more subtle showing by association. This variety of methods emphasizes Fanny's negative qualities, thus strengthening our dislike for her. Our first introduction to Fanny is a second-hand account of her
alcoholism from Hosmer, a story which encourages pity, especially given Thérèse's scathing denunciation of Hosmer's actions: "You married a woman of weak character. You furnished her with every means to increase that weakness, and shut her out absolutely from your life and yourself from hers" (CW 768). The narrator's description of the "pathetic weakness" of Fanny's face adds to this feeling of pity:

... "merry blue eyes" [had] faded and sunken into deep, dark round sockets; [he stared] at the net-work of little lines all traced about the mouth and eyes, and spreading over the once rounded cheeks that were now hollow and evidently pale or sailow, beneath a layer of rouge that had been laid on with an unsparing hand. (CW 777)

However, pity turns to distaste when the narrator relates Fanny's first words to Hosmer, "'What did you come for, David? why did you come now?'", and describes her as showing "peevious resistance to the disturbance of his coming" (CW 778). The word "peevious" tells us a great deal about Fanny's character, forcing us to question any positive feelings we may have toward her. The narrator builds on this indecision by indirectly contrasting Fanny with Thérèse Larimore. Unlike Thérèse, Fanny's hallmark trait is weakness: "'It would be the same thing over again,' she reiterated, helplessly ... Fanny Larimore's strength of determination was not one to hold against Hosmer's will set to a purpose ... " (CW 778; ellipses mine). Because the reader is already fully aware that
Thérèse held out against Hosmer's entreaties, Fanny suffers by comparison.

In addition to showing Fanny's weakness by comparison, the narrator also damns her by association in the scenes with her friends, the Worthingtons and the Dawsons. Although Thomas Bonner criticizes these scenes for causing "problems in coherence and creat[ing] a certain obscurity of focus" (11), their effects on our perception of Fanny are manifold and important. Through the other characters, we are given a clearer picture of Fanny Larimore, without the narrator's jeopardizing our respect for David Hosmer's judgment. In other words, when we hear about social atrocities such as Mrs. Worthington's "yellow hair ... with a suspicious darkness about the roots, and a streakiness about the back" (CW 779) and about moral transgressions such as Mrs. Dawson's "sideward look ... [which] told Mr. Rodney as plainly as words, that ... he might count upon her for a tete-a-tete" (CW 784), we are disgusted, having already accepted the norms of the novel which venerate honesty, morality, elegance, and taste. Our disgust is also directed at Fanny because she is a friend of these women. Our positive opinion of Hosmer, however, remains unchanged because the negative qualities are not in the woman he chose to marry, but in the friends she has chosen to keep since their divorce. Thus Chopin's introduction of these other characters allows her to manipulate the readers' feelings about Fanny without changing the opinions that have already been formed about
Hosmer.

Maintaining the readers' interest and engagement with the text is another important function of the scenes with Mrs. Worthington and Mrs. Dawson. The contrast between the brassiness of these ladies and the elegance of Thérèse, or even the charm of Hosmer's sister, Melicent, is very humorous. The narrator delicately describes Thérèse as having "a roundness of figure" (CW 743), while she responds to Belle Worthington's exaggerated "... you might knock me down with a feather" in the following manner: "A highly overwrought figure of speech on the part of Mrs. Worthington, seeing that the feather which would have prostrated her must have met a resistance of some one hundred and seventy-five pounds of solid avoirdupois" (CW 780). The narrator conveys her contempt for the character (and thus reinforces the moral norms of the novel) by calling Belle's statement "highly overwrought" and by describing her weight as "solid avoirdupois."

The narrator also entertains us by relating frank conversations between Mrs. Worthington and Mrs. Dawson, such as when the latter comments on Belle's patchouly fragrance, "'I wish you'd let up on that smell; it's enough to sicken a body'" (CW 781). The contrast between this type of blunt realism and the more romantic and playful conversations that take place between the inhabitants of the plantation, Place-Du-Bois, again reinforces the norms that the novel is operating under—a respect for poise, intelligence, courtesy, and morality; and disapprobation
for the opposites.

Chopin ends the first section of the novel with a philosophical discussion between Mr. Worthington, a reclusive scholar, and Hosmer, a discussion which alerts the audience to some of the themes and later action in the novel. Worthington suggests that Hosmer's friend Homeyer would "deprive a clinging humanity of the supports about which she twines herself, and leave her helpless and sprawling upon the earth" (CW 792) by abolishing religion, but Hosmer replies that Homeyer believes in "natural adjustment," stating that "what we commonly call laws . . . in society, [are] only arbitrary methods of expediency, which, when they outlive their usefulness to an advancing and exacting civilization, should be set aside" (CW 793). In this scene, Chopin turns us toward the second half of the novel, going beyond the small concerns of Hosmer and Thérèse to call into question the nature of society, but at the same time foreshadowing the events of Part Two. We make the connection between the setting aside of social laws and Thérèse's attitude toward marriage and divorce, and therefore expect a change in Thérèse's attitude. To reinforce the idea of impending unhappiness, Chopin allows the narrator to become intrusively omniscient, stating flatly that "They [the Hosmers] did not leave when they had intended," and then asking rhetorically, "Need the misery of that one day be told?" (CW 793).

Having gained our attention in the first half of the novel by ensuring our partiality for Thérèse and David and
our bias against Fanny, the narrator maintains our engagement in the second half by upsetting those ordered responses. The narrator abandons her leadership role in the second section, presenting inside views of all of the characters, and alternating between intrusive omniscience, deliberately limited omniscience, and second-hand reporting. As the foreshadowed adversity becomes reality, the shifting narration parallels the chaotic action in the subplots, intensifying our discomfort and thereby increasing our desire for resolution.

Chopin opens Part Two of the novel with a chapter entitled "Fanny's First Night at Place-Du-Bois," immediately indicating that the Hosmers' relationship is in trouble:

... when [David] returned, Fanny sat with her head pillowed on the sofa, sobbing bitterly. He knelt beside her, putting his arm around her, and asked the cause of her distress.

"Oh it's so lonesome, and dreadful, I don't believe I can stand it," she answered haltingly through her tears.

And here was he thinking it was so home-like and comforting, and tasting the first joy that he had known since he had gone away. (CW 795)

On viewing this scene, we recognize a basic incompatability between David and Fanny, but our sympathy is for David because the narrator allows us an inside view of his thoughts and emotions. The narrator's prefixing these thoughts with the phrase "And here was he thinking"
conveys a certain irony, as well as a sense of the wry surprise felt by Hosmer. The use of a one-sentence paragraph also emphasizes the importance of this divergence of opinion, purposely separated from David's calm and caring response, "It's all strange and new to you, Fanny; try to bear up for a day or two" (CW 795).

When we receive another indication of the distance between Fanny and David at the end of that chapter, however, the narrator describes Fanny's emotions and thoughts rather than David's. Fanny mysteriously wakes in the middle of the night and realizes that David is not beside her:

She slid from bed and moved softly on her bare feet over to the open sitting-room door. . . . [There she] discovered her husband seated and bowed like a man who has been stricken. Uncomprehending, she stood a moment speechless, then crept back noiselessly to bed. (CW 798)

This time Fanny, rather than David, feels alienated, shocked by her husband's depression. This careful presentation of both Fanny's and David's disillusionment creates uncertainty in our responses to these characters. We begin to question our lack of sympathy for Fanny because the narrator allows us to gain an inside view of her.

Our dismay is heightened by Thérèse's growing uncertainty about her actions. "A sudden faint glow--an unusual animation" (CW 805) on Fanny's face when she looks at Hosmer distresses Thérèse, causing her to question her interference in other's lives:
[Thérèse] gave herself up to doubts and misgivings. . . . Did the good accruing counterbalance the personal discomfort into which she was often driven by her own agency? What reason had she to know that a policy of non-interference in the affairs of others might not after all be the judicious one? (CW 807-8; ellipsis mine)

Here we wonder exactly who is "at fault" in the novel, suspecting it may be Thérèse, and feeling uncomfortable because we have previously accepted Thérèse as the arbiter of moral and ethical issues. The use of questions by the narrator, rather than direct statements such as "Thérèse wondered if a policy . . .," reinforces our feeling of discomfort by effecting an ambiguity that allows us to attribute the questions to both the narrator and Thérèse. These questions could be either narratorial comment or indirect discourse. The narrator compounds the distress we feel at Thérèse's uncertainty by seeming to question Thérèse's actions herself, contradicting the partiality she's shown before.

The narrator adds to the readers' anxiety throughout this section by switching from omniscience to a more limited viewpoint. When describing David's attentiveness to Fanny's needs immediately following their remarriage, the narrator deliberately limits her own omniscience, asking, "Was there some mysterious power that had soon taught the man such methods to a woman's heart, or was he not rather on guard and schooling himself for the role which was to be acted out to the end?" (CW 794). Rather
than confirming the reader's suspicions about David's motives, this information creates uncertainty.

Later, the narrator leaps into full omniscience, explaining reasons for Fanny's acceptance of her new surroundings that even Fanny is not aware of. She notes that Fanny's homesickness has lessened, but "not by any determined effort of the will, nor by any resolve to make the best of things." Instead, the narrator attributes the change to "outside influences meeting half-way the workings of unconscious inward forces" (CN 801), indicating that there is little hope for success in the Hosmer's relationship.

This shifting from full omniscience to limited omniscience and back again disconcerts the reader, a feeling that increases with the narrator's total withdrawal in the eighth chapter of the second section, in which the narrator allows a plantation worker, Pierson, to tell the story of Grégoire's drunken rampage through the town. Lewis Leary refers to this scene and others as "more pictoral than necessary" (191); however, I believe this scene—and others like it—serves a number of functions. One of these functions is, of course, to keep the readers engaged in the narrative, through both our enjoyment of the carefully rendered dialect as well as through our interest in the information being conveyed. The reader smiles at the description of Grégoire's actions and at the digressions in the conversation:

"He jis' holla out fu' somebody bring dat hoss tu de steps, an' him stan'in' 's big uz life, waitin'. I
gits tu de hoss fus', me, an' he gits
up dat hoss stidy like he ain't tetch a drap, and he
fling me a big dolla."

"Whar de dolla, Mista Pierson?" enquired Betsy.
"De dolla in my pocket, an' et gwine stay
dah..." (CW 831-2)

This scene also distances us from Grégoire. We are unable
to feel much sympathy for him because Pierson can give no
inside information about his anger and pain at Melicent's
refusal to forgive him for killing Jocint. This scene is
hardly "more pictoral than necessary"; rather, this
indirect reporting sets us adrift, trying to determine
(without the guidance of the omniscient narrator) the
thematic implications of Melicent's careless toying with
Grégoire's emotions and his subsequent self-destructive
rampage. Thus our confusion parallels the chaos in the
narrative.

The narrator again uses second-hand reporting in the
disclosure of Grégoire's death, through the introduction of
what Leary might term one of the "superfluous characters
[who] come and go" (191), a lanky Texan named Rufe Jimson.
On first reading, this scene seems to be merely another
demonstration of Chopin's ear for dialect; however, Chopin
presents this outsider's view to build suspense, so that we
experience the same frustration that Thérèse endures as we
wait for Jimson to tell his story:

Thérèse rather impatiently gave him the desired
information, and begged that he would disclose his
business with her.

"Wall," he said, "unpleasant news 'll keep most
times tell you're ready fur it. Thet's my way o'
lookin' at it."

"Unpleasant news for me?" she inquired, startled from her indifference and listlessness.

"Rather unpleasant ez I take it. I hain't a makin' no mistatement to persume that Gregor Sanchun was your nephew?"

"Yes, yes," responded Thérèse, now thoroughly alarmed, and approaching as close to Mr. Rufe Jimson as the dividing rail would permit, "What of him, please?"

He turned again to discharge an accumulation of tobacco juice into a thick border of violets, and resumed. . . . (CW 850-1)

This pattern of alternating short comments—complete with the narrator's careful indications of who made each remark and his or her physical or emotional reactions—extends what would otherwise be a quick conversation, slowing our reading and building the suspense.

The notification of Grégoire's death marks the beginning of the end of the novel, the resolution of both the narrative and the reader's anxiety. The narrator resumes her full omniscience and systematically reiterates specific themes about human nature and the ways of the world while closing each of the storylines. In the scene in which Melicent receives Thérèse's letter notifying her of Grégoire's death, the narrator describes her petty, expensive boredom, causing our bad impression of her to worsen. The narrator later criticizes Melicent's "exaggerated way of expressing herself" (CW 855) and paints a very telling portrait of her by saying that she found all the people whose company she frequented "tiresome," except
"Miss Drake who had been absent in Europe for the past six months [and] perhaps Mrs. Manning too, who was so seldom at home when Melicent called" (CW 855-6). Thus, the reader views Melicent's reactions to the news of Grégoire's death--cancelling social engagements and deciding to "wrap herself in garb of mourning and move about in sorrowing" (CW 857)--very cynically. The themes that emerge from this episode include the condemnation of superficiality in people and relationships, Melicent and Grégoire's infatuation standing in direct contrast to Thérèse and David's love.

The narrator also criticizes society and human nature in the conclusion of the novel, both by describing the reactions of the community to Grégoire's death and by adding an extended monologue on misery. Immediately following the news of the death, the narrator notes, "None could remember but sweetness and kindness of [Grégoire]. Even Nathan, who had been one day felled to earth by a crowbar in Grégoire's hand had come himself to look at that deed as not altogether blamable in light of the provocation that had called it forth" (CW 853). Here, the narrator carefully describes an act that we view as unforgivably cruel, and then explains that the victim has forgiven Grégoire, leaving us to shake our heads over the vagaries of human nature, the inconsistency that allows a person to forgive a crime simply because the perpetrator is dead.

The narrator criticizes human nature even more overtly in a page-long monologue on "Misery" that prefaces a major
argument between the Hosmers. The monologue takes the form of a conversation between two faceless, nameless people, the narrator first assuming the role of a platitudinous friend:

My friend, your trouble I know weighs. That you should be driven by earthly needs to drag the pinioned spirit of your days through rut and mire. But think of the millions who are doing the like. . . . If you be quivering while the surgeon cuts away that right arm, remember the poor devil in the hospital yesterday who had both his sawed off. (CW 858; ellipsis mine)

The narrator then takes the role of the sufferer, saying, "Oh, have done, with your mutilated men . . . What are they to me? My hurt is greater than all, because it is my own" (CW 858). The narrator's use of extended commentary, a pronounced stylistic change, has several effects on the reader. First, this passage reinforces the themes about the inadequacy and undesirability of superficial societal responses by looking at an abstract emotional situation from two sides, that of the sufferer and that of the consoler. Readers see clearly that knowing that others have endured greater pain is not a solution to an abstract dilemma, or to David, Fanny, and Thérèse's dilemma. The monologue on misery also indicates that the tension between the Hosmers has reached an unbearable peak, and it sets the tone and emphasizes the significance of the confrontation between Fanny and David that immediately follows.

The narrator ends the relationship between Fanny and David through an action that has almost universally been
termed a *deus ex machina*, Fanny's sudden drowning when a river bank gives way. Thomas Bonner remarks that the scene "does appear contrived, if only for the fact that her death removes every obstacle from the path of Hosmer and Thérèse" (11). While this is admittedly true (and perhaps the greatest flaw in *At Fault*), we do feel a sense of closure, for our tension is relieved when the seemingly unresolvable situation is resolved. Also, although the scene seems like the simplistic escape of an author who wasn't certain how to end her story, Chopin carefully ensures our continued respect for David by showing his heroism in jumping into the river to save a woman he hates and exonerating him completely by having him reach Fanny and hold "her fast--close to him" (*CW 868*) before being knocked unconscious.

The ending, though not completely satisfying, shows Chopin's close attention to the expectations of her audience. After the decorous space of a year--a mourning period respected by the late nineteenth-century readers--David and Thérèse marry, reaffirming the theme that titles the chapter, "To Him Who Waits" (*CW 869*). The final chapter contains the narrator's dramatic description of the emotions David and Thérèse share--"a generous love and a rich one in its revelation" (*CW 873*)--and a statement of David's respect for Thérèse's abilities--"I'll not rob you of your occupation. I'll put no bungling hand into your concerns" (*CW 874*). The narrator emphasizes the quality of their relationship by introducing a letter from Melicent,
in which she relates some gossip about an affair between Lou Dawson and Bert Rodney and a subsequent shooting. The unsavory quality of this disclosure contrasts greatly with the wholesomeness of the love between Thérèse and David, leaving the reader with very positive feelings toward "true love," the new Hosmers, and the novel.

Although as Bernard Koloski notes, At Fault "lacks the intensity of The Awakening" (89), the problem does not seem to lie in the quality of Chopin's writing, but in the expectations of the audience for whom she's writing. For example, Chopin created a strong heroine in Thérèse Lafirme, but her strength is always shown in "feminine" ways--accepting the control of the plantation as a duty imposed by her husband and sending Hosmer away in the name of morality. Thus Chopin's own agenda that may have included feminist ideas is tailored to fit the expectations of her nineteenth-century largely commercial audience. Even with the restrictions of this audience, however, the variety of narrational strategies, including showing and telling, commentary, editorializing, and second-hand reporting, and the complex effects that they create show that Chopin was very aware of the power of narration. Although the audience may not have been sophisticated, the techniques Chopin uses to sway that audience are very complex. Thus the popular notion that At Fault is only significant as a precursor of The Awakening denies the merit that it deserves as a novel that broke from the local color tradition to delve into the intricacies of
narratorial method.
CHAPTER II

"I would rather ask the stars": THE DISCLOSURE OF THEMES THROUGH FIRST-PERSON NARRATION

After the initial success (albeit limited) of *At Fault*, Chopin wrote another novel, *Young Doctor Gosse*, but destroyed it when it was rejected by several publishers. From 1891-1897, Chopin put most of her effort into writing shorter fiction, and in this genre she received much acclaim (Seyersted, KC 53-73). Some of the recurring themes in her stories and sketches are sensuality versus morality and expectations versus reality, oppositions found in many of the pieces that were included in Chopin's second collection, *A Night in Acadie*, and her unpublished third collection, *A Vocation and a Voice*. Four works to which I will give special attention are "The Night Came Slowly," written July 24, 1894; "Juanita," written July 26, 1994; "Cavanelle," written July 31-August 6, 1894; and "Vagabonds," written December, 1895 (Seyersted, CW 1017-1026). These pieces are important to the study of narration in Chopin's work because they are the only four short stories written in the first-person.
In my analysis of *At Fault*, I focussed on the effects of the variety of narrational styles and choices contained within one narrative; however, in my examination of some of Chopin's shorter fiction, I will focus on the skill with which Chopin subtly manipulates the readers' responses with one type of narration in each story. Though the stories I will examine all use first-person narration, the narrators themselves are vastly different—three are reliable and one unreliable—and they vary in the extent to which Chopin "dramatizes" them, making them into characters as well as narrators. Also, the stories vary in the degree of sophistication Chopin expects from her audience, the importance of our understanding her narratorial techniques.

Chopin wrote "The Night Came Slowly" and "Juanita" within two days of each other, while vacationing at a Missouri resort (Ewell 192). Because the stories originally appeared in her diary and seem to deal with events in her own life (Seyersted, KC 217; Ewell 101), interest has been focussed on the way the stories can define the author's personality. However, in my analysis of "The Night Came Slowly" and "Juanita," I will examine the narrators in the stories, who are almost antitheses of each other. Also, because the stories were published together under the title "A Scrap and a Sketch" (Rankin 163), I will explore the effects created by their pairing, another aspect that the critics have largely ignored.

The most striking difference between "The Night Came Slowly" (*CW* 366) and "Juanita" (*CW* 367–8) is in tone.
Although both are presented as prose pieces, "The Night Came Slowly" is much more poetic, due to both the subject matter and the narrator's delivery of the material. From the first line, we are aware that the context is very different from that of other Chopin stories. First, the speaker in the story is "I," a very unusual point-of-view for Chopin, and she is "losing [her] interest in human beings; in the significance of their lives and their actions" (CW 366). Immediately, this concern (or unconcern) for humanity sweeps us into a philosophic frame, one in which the narrator begins to ponder abstract issues. The first sentence of "Juanita," by way of contrast, reads, "To all appearances and according to all accounts, Juanita is a character who does not reflect credit upon her family or her native town of Rock Springs" (CW 367). The concern is more societal than philosophical, the comment impersonal rather than individual, and the sentence much more prosaic than poetic. Thus for each of the pieces, the narrators create a very particular frame of reference for the reader, setting up expectations for the rest of the narrative.

The narrator fulfills the expectations in "The Night Came Slowly" by seeming alternately and contemporaneously romantic, poetic, passionate, and sensuous. She asks, "Can [men and books] talk to me like the night--the Summer night? Like the stars or the caressing wind?"; she personifies the night, saying that it "came creeping, creeping stealthily out of the valley, thinking I did not notice"; and she states that her "whole being was abandoned
to the soothing and penetrating charm of the night" (CW 366). Finally, on the heels of a romantic description of the wind that "rippled the maple leaves like little warm love thrills," she asks passionately, "Why do fools cumber the earth! It was a man's voice that broke the necromancer's spell. . . . Shall I ask a young fool who was born yesterday and will die tomorrow to tell me things of Christ?" She then ends softly with, "I would rather ask the stars: they have seen him" (CW 366). Even more than the content of the sentences, the arrangement of the lines gives a sense of poignancy, long phrases followed by short, and long paragraphs followed by one-sentence paragraphs. This technique creates a cadence that is almost hypnotic in its appeal.

"Juanita" fulfills its initial promise of more societal concerns by furthering our acquaintance with the narrator, who again is an "I." The similarity between the two stories ends there, however, because as Joyce Coyne Dyer states, "the voice of the 'I' in Chopin's scrap is very different from that of the 'I' in "Juanita" (79). Where the narrator in the first piece is passionately contemptuous of the "fools (who) cumber the earth," the narrator in "Juanita" is hypocritically contemptuous of Juanita. She pretends an interest and a sympathy for Juanita--calling her a "poor girl" and asking for news of her three years later--but her unflattering description of Juanita belies her concern. She calls Juanita's attempts to efface herself "hopeless," given that she is "five-foot-
ten, and more than two-hundred pounds of substantial flesh . . . [always] clad in a soiled calico "Mother Hubbard," says that her face "had a certain fresh and sensuous beauty, though I would rather not say 'beauty' if I might say anything else," and notes that it was said "with some amusement, that Juanita was not so unattractive to men as her appearance might indicate" (CW 367; italics mine). Through this condescension and criticism, we learn as much about the narrator as we do about Juanita, and the sketch begins to turn in upon itself, becoming the story of a woman telling a story.

Chopin works to broaden our growing disapproval of this narrator to include the whole race of intolerant, superficial people by switching the source of the narrator's information midway through the sketch, from personal experience to second-hand gossip. Our view of the narrator and the community of "Springs" worsens as the narrator tells us that "There were many ready to tell me of Juanita's career since I had seen her." The disdainful description of Juanita's love life that follows reflects badly on all parties, as when the narrator says, "there suddenly appeared on the scene a one-legged man; a very poor and shabby, and decidedly one-legged man" (CW 368). The addition of the adjectives "poor" and "shabby" (almost as an afterthought) focuses attention on those judgments, indicating an intrusive interest on the part of the persons relaying the story to the narrator or prejudicial embellishment on the part of the speaker. The phrase,
"decidedly one-legged" seems to be the narrator's subtle attempt to assure that we view the man's handicap in a negative way, and Chopin's subtle attempt to assure that we see the speaker's intolerance and insensitivity.

At the end of this story, lest the reader have missed other clues to the narrator's judgmental attitude, the narrator states her position clearly: "For my part I never expected Juanita to be more respectable than a squirrel, and I don't see how any one else could have expected it" (CW 368). When this direct condemnation is added to what we already know about the narrator, we see that this sketch is working in much the same way as a poem such as Browning's "Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister," in which the narrator reveals his own meanness and spite while attempting to condemn another monk. Although this narrator is ostensibly telling the story of Juanita, attempting to convince us that the girl is amoral, she is only revealing the small-mindedness of an individual and a community wholly concerned with their own conception of morality. Thus in the end, Juanita's reputation remains untarnished, while the narrator has discredited her own.

In her article entitled "Techniques of Distancing in the Fiction of Kate Chopin," Joyce Coyne Dyer points out that "the mood of ['The Night Came Slowly'] and its message . . . informs our reading of 'Juanita'" (79), a very important observation, given the fact that the two pieces were published together; however, Dyer sees the connection between the works in the acceptance of
sensuality and nature displayed by the narrator of "The Night Came Slowly" and by the title character in "Juanita." I believe the connection lies not in any similarity between characters, but in the dissimilarity of the narrators and their attitudes toward sensuality and morality.

In presenting the reader with "The Night Came Slowly" first, Chopin conveys a set of intellectual and emotional norms which include a respect for the superiority of what Ewell calls the "transcendental path" (93) to knowledge and for the value of sensuality and nature. Having accepted these norms in Chopin's "scrap," readers enter into the second piece with a liberal attitude, only to be surprised by the prosaic nature of the opening lines. The situation presented, that of a girl named Juanita in the town of Rock Springs, is entirely different, yet the narrator is again the first-person, "I." Our immediate assumption is that is that the narrator will have the same passionate voice, yet we quickly find that this is not the same person we heard in the first story. Through the juxtaposition of the philosophic first-person narrator and the judgmental first-person narrator, we begin to suspect that the second narrator is unreliable—departing from the implied author's norms (Booth 159)—which causes us to look at the story more carefully, noting the irony of a narrator who condemns herself in an attempt to condemn another. And once we scorn the pretensions of the second narrator, it becomes almost impossible to accept the intellectual and societal norms she represents. By presenting "The Night Came
Slowly" and "Juanita" together, Chopin assures that her readers will react positively toward sensuality and negatively toward societal intolerance, almost subconsciously convincing us that we should accept the norms of the first narrator. Thus in these stories, Chopin expects her readers to have a certain degree of sophistication in order to recognize that the second narrator is unreliable, yet the pairing facilitates this task.

Another first-person narrative, "Cavanelle," is similar to "Juanita" in that it works on two levels, the first containing a sketch of Cavanelle, a man who finds fulfillment by sacrificing himself for others, and the second giving insight into the psychology of the narrator. Rather than showing the narrator's unreliability, however, here Chopin seems concerned with convincing us of the narrator's reliability in such a way that we are led to conclusions about human nature much as the narrator has been led to these conclusions by circumstance.

Chopin introduces a first-person narrator in "Cavanelle," but after the first paragraph the narrator's voice fades while Cavanelle's voice strengthens, a technique which seems designed to validate the narrator's judgments. The first paragraph of the sketch introduces the reader to the bright, spirited first-person narrator who calls Cavanelle an "innocent, delightful humbug" (CW 369) after describing his obsequious manner: "I was always sure of hearing something pleasant from Cavanelle . . . .
If he was not mistaking me for the freshest and prettiest girl in New Orleans, he was reserving for me some bit of silk, or lace, or ribbon of a nuance marvelously suited to my complexion, my eyes or my hair!" (CW 369). She ends the paragraph rhapsodically, noting that "he always began to talk to me of his sister Mathilde, and then I knew that Cavanelle was an angel" (CW 369). Through this description, we gain as much insight into the narrator's character as Cavanelle's, because her commentary tells us more about her impressions of the man than about the man himself.

In order to lend credibility to these impressions, in the next paragraph we begin to hear Cavanelle's voice, as when the narrator says, "But for a sister whose voice needed only a little training to rival that of the nightingale, one might [sacrifice oneself] without incurring reproach" (CW 369). Although the words are still attributed to the narrator, the tone is much different from that of the first paragraph, more formal and less spontaneous. Also, the comparison of Mathilde's voice to that of a nightingale is clearly a reflection (if not a repetition) of Cavanelle's opinion of his sister's voice. The paragraph that follows contains comments from Cavanelle himself, allowing us to verify the narrator's judgments. Although the quotations are obviously the remembrances of the narrator, it seems as though we are receiving first-hand information that supports her conclusions about Cavanelle's character. For example, to confirm her statement that Cavanelle was an angel for caring for his
sister, the narrator relates his plans for Mathilde, in his own voice: "It is my intention to sen' her for the summer to Gran' Isle . . . . An artiste, voyez vous, it is not to be treated like a human being of every day . . . gran' opera is what I aspire for my sister" (CW 369-70). In the next paragraph, the narrator resumes telling the story, but the pattern is repeated--giving her own analysis of Cavanelle, using indirect repetition of Cavanelle's words as a transition, then giving direct quotation to support and further elaborate on her judgments. Through this orchestrated rise and fall of voices, the narrator convinces us of her own credibility, and by enabling her to convince us, Chopin emphasizes the narrator's reliability--her compliance to the norms of the implied author (Booth 158).

Another technique Barbara C. Ewell has noted in the text is the use of "self-conscious lapses" (101) by the narrator, a technique which again seems designed to convince us of the narrator's credibility. When the narrator confuses the streetcar she took to Cavanelle's house ("The green car--or was it the yellow or blue one?" [CW 370]), when she forgets the song Mathilde presented ("Heaven only knows what she sang" [CW 372]), and when she states, "I cannot recall what I said at parting" (CW 372), we feel that the narrator is telling a true story, only omitting those details that are unessential and unremembered. The additional effect of the narrator's forgetfulness is that it focuses our attention on the
intellectual and emotional aspects of the story instead of the social or physical. For example, when the narrator says that she has forgotten the song Mathilde sang, adding, "it made no difference then, nor can it make any now" (CW 372), we immediately understand the narrator's disappointment, rather than being distracted by specific information about a song and Mathilde's performance problems. Similarly, when the narrator says, "I cannot recall what I said at parting--doubtless conventional things which were not true" (CW 372), we not only (paradoxically) have proof of her honesty, we also appreciate her confusion about the appropriate response to Mathilde's poor performance.

Another characteristic Chopin assigns to the narrator is a critical awareness of her own foibles, as when she states, "How well I knew [Cavanelle was a humbug] and how little I cared!" (CW 369). This quality makes our reaction to this first-person narrator extremely different from our reaction to the narrator of "Juanita." While the latter narrator provokes negative feelings, such as contempt for her intolerance, the narrator of "Cavanelle" inspires understanding and sympathy by acknowledging the faults common to us all. This technique has its greatest impact in passages in which the narrator critiques her emotional and intellectual speculations about Cavanelle's motivations, focusing our attention on her expectations. For example, when stunned by Mathilde's poor vocal performance, the narrator admits that she wondered "is
Cavanelle a fool? is he a lunatic? is he under a hypnotic spell?" before realizing that "Cavanelle loved Mathilde intensely, and we all know that love is blind, but a god just the same" (CW 372). She even adds a sheepish "strange that I did not think of it before" (CW 372), indicating that her experience hadn't previously included such unselfish behavior, though perhaps it should have. These low expectations, as well as the narrator's self-deprecating attitude, emphasize one of the major themes in the novel, the incredulity of society when faced with sheer altruism.

Chopin repeats this scenario in the second half of the story, allowing the narrator to reveal her expectations through what Ewell terms a "digressive fantasy" (101) in which the narrator imagines that after Mathilde's death she will find "great changes in Cavanelle," including "a suit of clothes or two of modern fit and finish . . . . a brightened eye, a fuller cheek . . . and perchance, even, a waxed mustache!" (CW 373). But the narrator again indicates her mistaken expectations, admitting, "So did my imagination run rampant with me" (CW 373). The narrator also repeats her admission of her own mental and emotional vacillation on learning of Cavanelle's benevolence, this time toward his aunt. She describes her "exasperation" but calls it "unreasonable," and notes that "the conviction that Cavanelle was a hopeless fool seemed to reconcile me to the situation and afforded me some diversion." This conviction is short-lived, however, and she repents in the
following paragraph by referring to him as "my poor Cavanelle." Finally, the narrator reiterates her conviction "that Cavanelle was an angel" (CW 374).

Although many critics have studied "Cavanelle," they have shown a marked inattention to the two levels of information it presents. Peggy Skaggs concludes that Cavanelle is simply an "interesting study of fraternal love" (31); Seyersted calls "Cavanelle" one of many stories describing "acts of kindness and devotion" (KC, 77); and Merrill Maguire Skaggs seems to have missed the point entirely, feeling that Chopin "hints at complicated psychological relationships [between Cavanelle and his sister and aunt] and then fails to explore them," because in his aunt, he has found someone worthy of his devotion (198-99). Through careful attention to the narrator's rhetoric, however, we see that Chopin is indicating that we are part of a society that pretends to expect goodness, yet is shocked, annoyed, or disbelieving when presented with an example such as Cavanelle.

In analyzing the fourth of Chopin's most prominent first-person short stories, "Vagabonds," critics have returned to the assumption that the narrator is the real Kate Chopin. Per Seyersted seems to have caused this phenomenon when he wrote that "Vagabonds" is "obviously based on a conversation she had had with a vagabond while managing the Cloutierville store" (KC, 71), a statement for which he offers no evidence. Peggy Skaggs, relying on Seyersted's information, assumes that Chopin "may have
longed for such control of her own life [as the vagabond has over his], even though she clearly enjoyed her family ties" (58). Again, as is the case with "The Night Came Slowly" and "Juanita," attention centers on the way that the story can define the author's character, rather than on the way the the author manipulates the elements of the story for specific effects. While emphasizing this autobiographical component of the story, critics have ignored the themes which are conveyed through a narrator who can be designated as largely reliable with a slight hint of unreliability, following Booth's conclusion that "many of the great reliable narrators indulge in large amounts of incidental irony, and they are thus 'unreliable' in the sense of being potentially deceptive" (Booth 159).

Chopin opens the story with the narrator's attempt to explain her reason for going to speak with Valcour, the vagabond, in which we immediately sense irony. Although this woman firmly and dramatically states, "It never would have entered my mind to put myself the least bit out of the way for the sake of a rendezvous with Valcour; he might have waited till the crack of doom," she explains that she did go to see him, because "it was the hour for my afternoon walk and I did not mind stopping on the way . . ." (CW 470). Tension is apparent in the conflict between the narrator's ostensible beliefs and her behavior, and we sense that the narrator is attempting to justify her actions. Thus Chopin hints at the difference between the narrator's words and her true feelings which will soon
become apparent. We find this tension throughout the story, sometimes because the narrator's expressed thoughts and actions are in conflict, and other times because her judgments are ambiguous.

For instance, although the narrator first informs us that she doesn't want to give Valcour any money, saying, "I was glad that he showed no disposition to shake hands . . . [because] he might have discovered the dollar bill which I had slipped into my glove in case of emergencies" (CW 470), and then tells Valcour the same, drawing his attention to her old shoes and dress while telling him that she "ain't much better off" than he is, her later actions indicate that she might have given him money if he had been in need. When Valcour gives proof of his temporary affluence by pulling his coins out of his pocket, the narrator says, "I was glad to see them and thrust the dollar bill further into my glove" (CW 471), indicating the she was prepared to give him the dollar, a generosity that was intimated by her carrying money "in case of emergencies" when she was only going for an afternoon walk. Chopin also gives clues to the narrator's true emotions through the narrator's ambiguous pronouncements, as when she says, "There exists a tradition outside the family that Valcour is a relation of ours. I am the only one, somehow, who does not strenuously deny the charge" (CW 470). Although the sentiment shows the narrator's generosity, she refers to the tradition as a "charge," as if it is a criminal offense to be related to a vagabond.
These tensions lead us to certain conclusions about the narrator, one of which is that she is wryly laughing at herself for enjoying the company of Valcour. This conclusion is supported by the contradictory information we are given. The narrator says to the vagabond, "W'at you mean ... by sending me word you want to see me. You don't think fo' an instant I'd come down here o' purpose to see an object like you" (CW 471), then feigns surprise at Valcour's laughter, saying, "He is the only soul who discovers any intention of humor in my utterances. He refuses to take me seriously" (CW 471). Here, because we have already realized that the narrator has some affection for the man, we find ironic humor in the idea that she meant her comments to Valcour in a negative way. Instead, it seems as though a teasing friendship exists between the two. She continues hiding her true feelings, saying that Valcour has "again mistak[en] cynicism for humor" when he "almost rolled off the log in his hilarious appreciation of the insinuation [about his kissing Joe Poussin's wife]" (CW 471). However, she admits that "his laugh was contagious and I could not help joining him," and even relates her further insults about his sexual desperation, given only to fuel his mirth (CW 471).

The narrator reveals her feelings to a greater extent as the story ends, asking Valcour "how he fared, what he ate and where, and how he slept," even admitting to the readers that she envies his freedom: "I called him names; but all the same I could not help thinking that it must be
good to prowl sometimes; to get close to the black night and lose oneself in its silence and mystery" (CW 472).

However, the narrator cuts short all reflection on her feelings toward Valcourt and ends the story on a defiant note--"I was glad the vagabond did not want money. But for the life of me I don't know what he wanted, or why he wanted to see me" (CW 472) --an action indicating her need to distance herself from the vagabond and to deny her own attraction to Valcourt.

This story is similar to Chopin's other first-person narratives in a number of ways--the narrator reveals herself as she describes Valcourt, much as the narrator in "Juanita" reveals herself; the story requires a certain amount of sophistication from readers in order to fully understand implications of narration, as do all of Chopin's first-person stories; and Chopin juxtaposes actions and words to expose the narrator, as she juxtaposes sensuality and morality in "A Scrap and a Sketch." However, in "Vagabonds," Chopin also shows movement toward an even greater neutrality in her writing, an ambiguity that Seyersted calls the "absence of moralizing" (KC, 239). Although readers of "Vagabonds" see the irony of a person who denies her own feeling, intuiting themes of societal and emotional repression, Chopin gives no implicit instruction as she does, for example, in presenting "Juanita" after "The Night Came Slowly." Instead, she allows us to draw our own conclusions through close attention to her narratorial techniques. This reliance on
the sophistication of her audience becomes very important
in her most skillfully written narrative, *The Awakening*. 
CHAPTER III

THE AWAKENING: THE CREATION OF AMBIVALENCE THROUGH NARRATION

In 1897, while waiting for the acceptance of her third collection of short stories, A Vocation and a Voice, Kate Chopin began what is considered by many to be her greatest work, The Awakening. This novel tells the story of Edna Pontellier, wife of a Creole financier, who while vacationing on Grand Isle begins to "awaken," falling in love with young Robert Lebrun, the son of the pension's owner. These feelings set off a psychological chain reaction that causes her to question her relationship with her husband, her children, and the rest of society. After Robert leaves the island and Edna returns to her home in New Orleans, her dissatisfaction with her role in life continues to grow, and she throws off conventional responsibilities to follow her own instincts. She ignores social obligations, attempts to become an artist, begins a physical relationship with a womanizer named Alcée Arobin, and leaves her husband's house to move to her own small residence. Finally, when Robert comes back, but refuses
to enter into an affair with Edna, she commits suicide in the waters off Grand Isle.

Although the plot of the novel seems conventional—even biblical in its retribution for the sinner—The Awakening created a great deal of controversy from the moment of its publication. The reviews following The Awakening's publication were predominantly negative. One anonymous critic's review in the St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat is representative of the popularly held opinion of Chopin's contemporaries: "[The Awakening] is not a healthy book, if it points any particular moral or teaches any lesson the fact is not apparent [sic]" (quoted in Springer 183). The confusion about the novel's message persisted even into the 1930s, when Rankin repeatedly asked of Edna's awakening and suicide, "cui bono?" (for what benefit or purpose?) (176-77).

Strangely enough, many critics of the 1960s and '70s went to the opposite extreme, each contending that The Awakening conveys specific themes that supersede all other critics' theories. One of the most-often disputed events is Edna's suicide, some arguing that her death "is not a noble one" (Holland 37), while others claim that Edna's suicide "is the crowning glory of her development" (Seyersted KC, 150). In the course of the century, critics have moved from the assumption that there is no message in The Awakening to the assumption that there are very specific messages and themes.
However, a handful of critics over the years have fallen somewhere between the two groups, noting that *The Awakening* contains many unresolvable contradictions and ambiguities. One of the earliest such comments comes from George Arms, who lists the contrasts in the novel—"of purpose and aimlessness, of romance and realism, and of sleep and awakening" (222)—suggesting that "precisely this complexity may be what Mrs. Chopin is trying to achieve . . . [seeing] truth as constantly re-forming itself . . . [something which] can never be final or for that matter abstractly stated" (222). Kenneth Rosen, indicating his agreement with Arms in an article entitled "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: Ambiguity as Art," expands on Arms' argument by speculating that *The Awakening* "gives no definite answers because the function of a myth is to present simply that which is universally complex and which rarely lends itself to resolution" (198).

In this chapter, I will discuss the major role that narration plays in creating ambiguity. Specifically, I will explore the techniques Chopin uses to inspire our approval of Edna and her "awakening," and then discuss the methods of distancing Chopin employs to keep our emotional and intellectual responses toward Edna in a state of fluctuation, a response that parallels the vacillation Edna experiences.

Chopin chose a very difficult task in deciding to create a heroine who, if looked at objectively, is not an attractive person. Edna seldom knows what she is doing or
why, she displays a mercurial love toward her children, she betrays both her husband and her lover, she acts out of what seem to be entirely selfish motives, and she finally commits suicide. In order to generate sympathy for such a woman, Chopin employs a technique she used in *At Fault* to generate sympathy for Thérèse Lafirme. She engages and maintains our attention by introducing an omniscient narrator who explains and justifies Edna’s actions, acting as a liaison between the character and readers throughout the first few chapters of the novel.

Rather than immediately describing Edna, however, the narrator focuses on the conditions of Edna’s life—her marriage to Léonce Pontellier, her relationship with her children, and the expectations of Creole society. By painting an unpleasant picture of these conditions, criticizing them both covertly and overtly, the narrator ensures our sympathy for Edna before ever delving deeply into her consciousness.

The narrator offers a precurative justification for Edna’s unhappiness by describing her husband with seeming objectivity, but covertly revealing her own sympathy for Edna and her situation. Léonce Pontellier’s first words to his wife in the novel are in rebuke—"What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" and "You are burnt beyond recognition" (*CW* 882)—statements which could be interpreted as showing his concern for his wife’s welfare until the narrator adds a suggestive simile: "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal
property which has suffered some damage" (CW 882; emphasis mine). The narrator’s use of the phrase "personal property" is calculated to inspire our vicarious indignation toward Leonce, and thus secure our sympathy for Edna.

Even more persuasive, and even more dispassionate, is the narrator’s presentation of Léonce’s patriarchal dominance in chapter three of the novel, and later in chapter eleven. In the former scene, Léonce returns from the hotel after a late night of gambling, "in an excellent humor, in high spirits, and very talkative" (CW 885), awakening his wife who is "fast asleep," simply to tell her about his evening. The narrator reports his response to her sleepiness, again, with seeming objectivity: "He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (CW 885). Although the narrator adds no overt commentary, we see the contradiction between this claim that Edna is "the sole object of his existence" and his previous actions--his leaving before dinner to spend the whole evening gambling with other "New Orleans club men over at Klein's" (CW 884) and his waking Edna when she was "fast asleep" (CW 885). This selfishness colors our interpretation of his motives for then checking on the children. We suspect that his concern is a retaliatory action, a conjecture supported by the narrator’s noting that he "had forgotten the bonbons and peanuts for the
boys" but "notwithstanding he loved them very much" (CW 885). Thus when Léonce reproaches Edna for "her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (CW 885), it comes as no surprise to us that Edna finds her sons in perfect health and comfort. The scene ends with Léonce fast asleep "in half a minute" (CW 886) and Edna wide awake and crying. The subtlety of his cruelty as it is presented by the narration underscores Edna's need for some type of personal power, and we respond with sympathy to her plight.

The later scene is narrated in a similar manner, but with a significant difference in the amount of information we are given about Edna's feelings. In this case, Edna actively defies her husband's authority after gaining a certain degree of "power of significant import" (CW 908) by learning to swim. When Léonce returns to the cottage to find his wife lying in a hammock out front, he calls her into the cottage, but she refuses. The narrator tells us, "another time she would have gone in at his request" (CW 912), alerting us to the significance of her action. As Léonce persists, the narrator states that "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant" (CW 912), emphasizing the action by specifically noting Edna's recognition of her own response. The narrator shows Pontellier's impatience—-noting that he drank some wine, smoked two cigars, went inside for more wine, and returned to smoke more cigars—-then tells of Edna's defeat by describing the feeling of
"realities pressing in her soul . . . her spirit left . . . helpless and yielding to the conditions which crowded her in" (CW 912). The narrator also reveals the reversed positions of the spouses, Edna asking her husband to come in the cottage, and he responding, "Just as soon as I have finished my cigar" (CW 913). Though this scene is very similar to the first, the impact is much greater because the narrator gives us an inside view of Edna. In the first scene we perceive the need for Edna to have some type of power and we feel sympathy for her, but in the second scene we see her purposeful attempts at independence crushed, the narrator deepening our sympathy by giving us selective insight into Edna's emotions and thought processes.

The narrator also increases our sympathy for Edna by turning a possible flaw into a positive quality, convincing us that self-absorption is preferable to motherly devotion. She accomplishes this by infusing a combination of sarcasm and exaggeration throughout her description of a mother's role. The most striking example of this is the description of the mother-women who "seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle":

It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (CW 888)
This excerpt is a masterpiece of derisive exaggeration, the narrator hinting at the hysteria of these over-protective women with the phrase "real or imaginary," and using religious diction to point out the misplaced allegiance of these mothers. When the narrator states firmly that "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (CW 888), our response can only be positive.

The narrator reinforces our positive response toward Edna and our negative response toward the mother-women by introducing Adèle Ratignolle with exaggerated, fairy tale-like imagery and tone. Adèle is "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm," with "spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain," her "blue eyes like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit . . . " (CW 888). The narrator swears extravagantly that "If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture" (CW 888). This idealistic description—especially the latter quotation—causes us to view Adèle as a "type," rather than as an individual. The narrator gives up her customary omniscience with the word "If," thus allowing us to interpret the sentence more generally as saying that any wife such as the one she has described deserves adoration. The overall effect of the implied comparison between Adèle and Edna is not, as some critics have argued, one of superiority and inferiority, but one of an impossible dream and reality. Here Chopin is suggesting
that the "angel in the house" stereotype is an impossibility, a patriarchal dream. In the descriptions of both the "mother-women" and Adèle Ratignolle, Chopin manages to circumvent a traditional positive response for these Victorian stereotypes through subtle narrational commentary.

Chopin also builds on our previous negative responses toward Léonce Pontellier to create a positive view of Edna, beginning her description of Edna from Léonce's point of view: "It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or anyone else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children" (CW 887). The narrator utilizes the negative feeling we develop toward Léonce in the opening section of the novel to introduce the difference between Edna and other women without prejudicing us against her. We rebel against accepting the judgment of a man we've determined to be a petty tyrant. Also, by adding "or anyone else's" to the above quotation, the narrator indicates that his judgment does not seem warranted. The narrator goes on to support our rejection of his opinion by explaining that Raoul or Etienne, rather than running to "mother's arms for comfort" when hurt, would more likely "pick himself up . . . and go on playing" (CW 887), a reaction the narrator assures us is preferable by following this passage with additional negative commentary about mother-women.
Although evoking our enmity for Léonce and our contempt for mother-women is an effective means of engaging our sympathy for Edna, perhaps the most convincing technique Chopin uses is the one underlying the others—showing the narrator's approval of Edna. In chapter six, a chapter wholly comprised of commentary, the narrator describes the revelations taking place in Edna in terms loaded with positive connotations. She describes the changes as "a certain light . . . beginning to dawn dimly within her" (CW 893), light and dawn being traditional images of knowledge and growth. She says, "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being . . ." (CW 893), a claim which sounds melodramatic in isolation, but appropriate in the context of "the beginning of things, of a world especially is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!" (CW 893). By using the word "us" the narrator creates a sense of community between the readers, herself, and Edna that promotes an almost automatic sympathy.

Although Chopin uses her narrator in The Awakening to promote sympathy for Edna, she does not leave the reader with a completely positive attitude toward her, and any argument to this effect is a misreading of the text. Having gained our sympathy for Edna in the first section and thus ensured the progression of the novel, Chopin then sets out to challenge our sympathy in three ways: first,
she changes the narrator's stance, causing her to show less partiality (occasionally even completely reversing her original stance to condemn Edna); second, Chopin introduces "correctives" (Booth 249-53), changes in point-of-view that clarify hidden truths and foreshadow trouble; and third, Chopin adds specific imagery that indicates Edna's failure, even as the narrator's commentary suggests her victory.

After creating sympathy for Edna in the first half of the novel, Chopin juxtaposes the narrator's positive commentary with more unanalytical reporting of Edna's questionable thoughts and actions. The telling which excuses and justifies Edna's behavior becomes showing, allowing us to interpret Edna's actions through our own emotional, intellectual, and moral norms, as well as those of the narrator. This change can be noted by examining two similar situations in which our response would normally be negative. For example, in the first section of the novel Edna shows signs of rudeness when she leaves the beach abruptly, "paying no further heed to [the] renewed cries which sought to detain her" (CW 909), a behavior which Madame Lebrun calls "capricious" (CW 909). Here the narrator excuses Edna by attacking Madame Lebrun, setting her judgment down to selfishness by saying that Madame Lebrun "was amusing herself immensely and feared that Edna's abrupt departure might put an end to the pleasure" (CW 909).
However, in the second section of the novel, when Robert leaves for Mexico, the narrator offers no justification for Edna's pettish complaining. When asked by Adèle to join the group at the main house in telling Robert goodbye, she rails at "the idea of Robert starting off in such a ridiculously sudden and dramatic way!" (CW 925) and refuses to go, the narrator describing her manner as "a little sullen . . ." (CW 925). Edna also tells Robert that his plan is "perfectly preposterous and uncalled for" (CW 926). The most confusing aspect of this scene, however, is the narrator's reporting of Robert's quickly stifled answer to Edna's complaint that she had looked forward to meeting in town over the winter—"'So was I,' he blurted. "Perhaps that's the--'" (CW 926). Although cut off, Robert's statement seems to indicate that he is operating under a code of ethics, leaving because he fears their growing intimacy. Edna's unjustified rudeness in the face of Robert's difficult ethical stand forces readers into a position of conflicting emotions and intellect, our previously gained sympathy warring with our negative response to her conduct. Thus the narrator not only fails to defend Edna, she also condemns her by reporting her rejection of Robert's half-expressed morality.

Perhaps the greater test of our sympathy, however, is the untempered presentation of Edna's affair with Alcée Arobin. In Edna's earlier relationship with Robert, the narrator diffuses our negative response by preceding all
mention of the affair with a justification, describing her husband's insensitivity and his complete dominance of their relationship, and thereby defending her need to seek fulfillment outside the marriage. Thus when she begins an affair with Robert, our sympathy causes us to suspend moral judgment.

However, when Alcée Arobin enters the scene, applying "the flaming torch that kindled desire" (967), the narrator makes no attempt to explain or justify Edna's actions. On the contrary, the narrator specifically indicates that neither of the two feels any true emotion for the other. She states that Alcée's "manner was so genuine that it often deceived even himself" (960), and allows us an inside view of Edna, explaining that "Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her" (CW 960). In a very short chapter of commentary, she describes Edna's emotions:

... There was the shock of the unexpected and the unaccustomed. There was her husband's reproach looking at her from the external things around her which he had provided for her external existence. There was Robert's reproach making itself felt by a quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love ... Above all, there was understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, here was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her,
because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips. (CW 967; ellipsis mine)

This information complicates our response. Although the narrator says that Edna felt her husband's and Robert's "reproach," she then carefully notes that Edna also felt "neither shame or remorse," only "regret" that "it was not the kiss of love which had explained her . . . " (CW 967). Although the narrator does give us an inside view of Edna's "conflicting sensations," she gives no complementary commentary--such as rhetoric about "bourgeois morality"--that would provide justification for Edna's actions. Our attitude toward Edna at this point is decidedly ambivalent.

Another technique Chopin uses to distance the readers from Edna, causing us to question our sympathy, is the presentation of "correctives," characters outside the major action who provide "objective" analyses of the situations. Chopin provides a corrective to our blind empathy for Edna in the character of Dr. Mandelet. When Léonce visits him to discuss Edna's behavior, he immediately puts his finger on the problem, wondering but not daring to ask, "Is there any man in the case?" (CW 950). Later, when he has dinner with the Pontelliers, Chopin puts the narrator's partiality into perspective by juxtaposing the narrator's description of Edna's after-dinner story with the inner workings of Dr. Mandelet's mind. The narrator describes the "hot breath of the Southern night" and the "faces of the lovers, pale, close
together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness . . . " that Edna's listeners could see, then abruptly changes the scene to the "chill and murky" night in which Mandelet realizes "He was sorry he had accepted Pontellier's invitation. He was growing old, and beginning to need rest and an imperturbed spirit. He did not want the secrets of other lives thrust upon him" (CW 953). The doctor's sympathy is apparent as he mutters, "I hope it isn't Arobin . . . I hope to heaven it isn't Alcée Arobin" (CW 953), but his feelings about the matter are obviously gloomy. This is, perhaps, the way Chopin wants the readers to feel about the problems Edna creates--sympathetic yet not completely so.

Another corrective in the novel is Mademoiselle Reisz, who presents the most objective view of Edna by noting both her strengths and her weaknesses. When Edna tells her she has become an artist, Mademoiselle Reisz replies, "Ah! an artist! You have pretensions, Madame" (CW 946). When Edna wonders if the woman doubts her ability, Reisz says, "To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts . . . the artist must possess the courageous soul . . . that dares and defies" (CW 946). In this exchange, we see the possibility of both Edna's success and her failure in the "art" of awakening. Another of Mademoiselle Reisz's comments reiterates these possibilities. In the midst of a conversation between Edna and Alcée in which Edna wonders "what character of a woman I am" (CW 966), Edna
suddenly tells Alcée that Mademoiselle Reisz "put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said," and then Edna quotes Reisz: "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (CW 966).

Through the metaphor created by Mademoiselle Reisz, that of a bird with strong wings, Chopin again challenges our sympathy, the imagery that ends the novel seeming to incontrovertibly establish Edna's failure. As Edna walks down to the beach, the narrator describes "a bird with a broken wing . . . reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (CW 999). Yet even as we come to a conclusion about Edna--seeing her weakness in the face of losing her lover and finding out the truth about herself, that "the day would come when [Robert] . . . would melt out of her existence," that "tomorrow it will be someone else" (CW 999)--the narrator describes her feeling that she is "a new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (CW 1000), a very positive image. These contradictions leave us wondering whether she has asserted her independence by deciding to take her own life or whether she has given up.

This uncertainty, this vacillation that we experience throughout the narrative, parallels Edna's irresolution throughout the novel. For instance, Edna rebels against her husband's authority throughout a large part of the
story, stomping on her wedding ring at one point and
telling him to "Let me alone; you bother me" (CW 939) at
another. However, when he gets ready to leave her to go
to New York, she grows "melting and affectionate,
remembering his many acts of consideration and his
repeated expressions of an ardent attachment" (CW 954).
Later, though, she tells herself that her actions will not
be controlled by her husband, saying, "It doesn't matter
about Léonce Pontellier . . ." (CW 999). Edna shows the
same inconsistency in her dealings with her children,
"[weeping] for very pleasure when she felt their little
arms clasping her" (CW 978), yet considering them
"antagonists who had overcome her" (CW 999). Due to the
method of narration, however, instead of merely reading
the story of a woman who vacillates, being certain of her
feelings at one moment and uncertain the next, we
experience the vacillation, paralleling Edna's indecision.

At this point, it becomes obvious that Chopin is
writing for an extremely sophisticated audience, skilled
readers who will interpret our own emotional and
intellectual responses to the novel as well as the text
itself. Our uncertainty--as well as the fact that Chopin
has purposely created this emotion in us--conveys a theme
which seems to lie outside the text, a theme about the
complexity and ambiguity involved in all interpretation
and judgment. Even as Edna seems unable to decide what
she wants from life, we are unable to decide whether to
approve of Edna and her behavior or condemn her. As we
question her actions, we begin to question the validity of any interpretation of her actions, our own or the narrator's or the author's. Thus the ambivalence we feel at the end of the story is not a measure of the lack of resolution, but a measure of the effectiveness of Chopin's skilled narration which asks us to question our relationship with all that we are "certain" about.
CONCLUSION

GROWING COMPLEXITY: AUDIENCE, NARRATION, AND LAYERS OF MEANING IN CHOPIN'S WRITING

Although Kate Chopin claimed to be a spontaneous author, "reaching . . . effects by the most careless methods" (CW 705) and "preferring the integrity of crudities to artificialities" (CW 722), I have demonstrated in this thesis that she handled narration very skillfully. From her first novel to her last, Chopin seems to have written for increasingly more sophisticated audiences, modifying her narratorial strategies accordingly. Perhaps this change can best be shown by tracing the levels of meaning Chopin creates in each of the works I have examined.

In her earliest novel, At Fault, Chopin wrote for a less sophisticated audience, one that was perhaps more familiar with the works by authors Chopin called "those prolific female writers who turn out their unwholesome intellectual sweets so tirelessly, to be devoured by the girls and women of the age" (CW 798). Thus Chopin creates a single layer of meaning, using an omniscient narrator to emphasize the themes which are conveyed by the action of the plot. For example, we can infer from the plot that
individual happiness should take precedence over societally-determined responsibility when the relationship between David and Fanny Hosmer sours, finally leading to Fanny's death. This theme is emphasized and clarified by the omniscient narrator's allowing us an inside view of Thérèse as she wonders, "Did the good accruing counterbalance the personal discomfort into which she was often driven by her own agency?" (CW 807). More complexity exists in At Fault than the majority of critics have admitted (specifically in the narrator's switching from one point of view to another and from fully omniscient to partially omniscient in order to mirror the chaos of the plot); however, Chopin uses the narrator primarily as an aid to progression (i.e., to generate and sustain our interest in the narrative), as a means rather than an end. In other words, when the narrator describes Thérèse Lafirme as a paragon of beauty, virtue, and strength she engages our sympathy and thereby keeps us interested in the events in the novel--Chopin has no underlying meaning to this description, as she does when she describes Adèle Ratignolle in a similar manner. Throughout the novel, the audience is seldom called upon to infer themes from the narratorial methods themselves.

In her later works, however, Chopin uses the narrators and narratorial methods to convey specific themes, expecting a more sophisticated audience to make appropriate inferences about reliability and unreliability, to see the dual layering that occurs in the first-person short stories in which we have not only the themes that the story suggests,
but also themes which are conveyed by the way the narrator is telling the story. In "The Night Came Slowly" and "Juanita," the narrative method is the key to our accepting sensuality and realizing that the latter story's narrator is intolerant. These themes are conveyed not by the action of the text, but by the interplay between reliable and unreliable narrators. In "Cavanelle," Cavanelle's repeated devotion reveals that self-sacrifice is its own reward, but we also understand through the narrator's description of her conflicting emotions that we are hypocritical in pretending to expect goodness, yet being shocked when we find it. In "Vagabonds," Chopin again creates these dual layers of meaning, the plot describing the narrator's meeting with Valcour, and the narrative method showing us the contradiction of attraction and denial.

The authorial audience for *The Awakening* is obviously made up of even more sophisticated readers, who must infer themes not only from the text, but also from their own responses to the text. In *The Awakening*, the action seems to indicate one theme, that a woman's attempt to move beyond her biological role is negative, while the commentary and reporting of the narrator seems to both affirm and deny that theme. At one point the narrator compares Edna's awakening to the "beginning of . . . a world" (CW 893), but later she shows her to be selfish and capricious. The narrator engages our sympathy for Edna Pontellier by devaluing traditionally positive qualities, such as selfless mothering, and enhancing the qualities Edna possesses, such
as her "noble beauty" and "graceful severity of poise and movement" (CW 894). However, she then challenges that sympathy so that our shifting emotions parallel those of Edna Pontellier. The readers are left with the task of determining the import of this technique, because Chopin gives no further indication of how we are to view Edna or the novel as a whole. Thus we see that Chopin expects her audience for *The Awakening* to be very sophisticated readers.

As Chopin's authorial audience changes, the focus of her work from *At Fault* to *The Awakening* seems to shift from concerns that are internal, contained within the narrative world, to concerns that are external, changing the way the audience feels and thinks. Thus in Chopin's last and possibly greatest work, we have three levels: a level of action and a level of narrational commentary which work against each other, and a third level that exists outside the text, a tension which conveys a theme of ambiguity, the possibility that every action and emotion can be both positive and negative. By creating this complexity, Chopin shows quite clearly her compelling mastery of narrative method.

Late in her career, Kate Chopin published an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* entitled "In the Confidence of a Story-Writer" (Rankin 158). In it, she made the following statement:

*Every writer, I fancy, has his group of readers who understand, who are in sympathy with his thoughts or impressions or whatever he gives them. And he who is content to reach his own group, without ambition to*
be heard beyond it, attains, in my opinion, somewhat the dignity of a philosopher. (CW 705)

From the critical attention that Chopin has received over the century, it is obvious that a great number of readers "are in sympathy" with her thoughts, a response she created by her thorough knowledge of the expectations, the emotions, and the intellect of her authorial audiences, and by her masterful handling of one of the writer's most subtle tools—narration.


