

Kate Chopin

1850 – 1904

Early Life

Born in St. Louis – Catherine O’Flaherty

Father: Thomas O’Flaherty, born in Ireland, immigrated to US. He was a humorless, driven patriarch.

Mother: Eliza - Creole, mixed French or Spanish, African/Native American ancestry, family ties to Louisiana.

Thomas had a son George from first marriage. His wife had died in childbirth. He needed a new wife to care for his surviving son, and Eliza’s family needed money. So six months after his wife died, he married Eliza. He was 39. She was 16. He was older than her father. He insisted they name their first daughter after his dead wife Catherine. So Kate had an older brother Tom, and then two younger sisters Marie and Jane. Marie died.

Thomas sent Kate to boarding school when she was five, in part because she was very curious and had started asking questions about the children of a slave in their home. He is believed to have been the father of the women’s two children, one and three years younger than Kate. From the biography *Unveiling Kate Chopin* by Emily Toth, “Five years later, though, a slave family appears in the records for the O’Flaherty household: a twenty-three-year-old slave woman with two little girls, aged four (a year younger than Kate) and one (a year younger than Jane). Both girls are listed in the Census Book as ‘mulattoes,’ or light-skinned—and we do not know who their father was....The two little slave girls may very well have been Thomas O’Flaherty’s children, living under the same roof with his wife and his white children....If Thomas O’Flaherty fathered the slave children in his household, he was legally within his rights. But five-year-old Kate, the outspoken child who demanded to know where her father went, would certainly also wonder where the slave children came from” (7-8).

Soon after Kate had been sent to boarding school, Thomas was killed in a train wreck: “All Saints’ Day, November 1, is a holy day of obligation in the Catholic calendar, but Thomas O’Flaherty was dedicating the day in 1855 to another kind of obligation. Because of his wealth and carefully chosen civic activities, he was among the dignitaries riding the first train across the new Gasconade Bridge to Jefferson City, heralding a new opening to the West. It was a gala, flag-fluttering occasion when the men boarded the trains, cheered by a huge crowd and serenaded by brass bands. For the immigrant Thomas O’Flaherty, who had come to the New World with nothing but his own drive, it was the culmination of his American dream. But as the first car chugged over the Gasconade in a driving rainstorm, the new bridge, the symbol of Missouri’s pride and progress, shuddered, wavered—and collapsed. Cars tumbled helplessly

over each other, with shattering glass, grinding metal, and shouts of pain and horror. Mangled tracks and bloody remains rained down below, followed by a deadly silence. Thirty men were killed, and one of them was Thomas O'Flaherty" (9). This event was the influence for "The Story of an Hour," written 40 years later.

Soon after Thomas' death, Eliza brought Kate home, where she was raised by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, Madame Charleville: "Katie O'Flaherty's roost was ruled entirely by women....As a girl, Kate was surrounded by the voices of women—from her mammy to her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, to the Sacred Heart nuns (Kate attended Sacred Heart Academy sporadically for 13 years), to her best friend Kitty Garesche. Many of the voices spoke French, some of them exclusively. The deep, blustering voices that dominated most nineteenth-century households were absent from the O'Flaherty/Faris/Charleville home. It was a world of women" (11). Her great-grandmother saw to it that she learned perfect French and piano. Her great-grandmother was also an incredible story teller, and loved gossip about the lives of local women: "The best stories were about women. Victoire, Madame Charleville's own mother, had emigrated to the Louisiana colony from an island off the coast of France, married a carpenter named Verdon, and given birth to four children—but husband and wife 'kept matters pretty lively at home with continual bickering and quarrels,' according to one historian. Eventually, in 1785, 'for the salvation of their souls,' they got a legal separation—the first one ever granted in St. Louis. Then, nearly five years later, Victoire Verdon gave birth to another son, whose father's name is lost to history. (Out of mischief, she listed her estranged husband as the father). Although she could neither read nor write, the canny Victoire created her own market niche, with products appealing to women: she traded buttons, pins, and utensils in short trips downriver. She learned to sign her name with a flourish: "La Verdon" and eventually ran a very profitable line of trading vessels between St. Louis and New Orleans. By listening to women's voices and needs, the formerly battered wife had become a tycoon. The women in Katie O'Flaherty's family loved their mothers and mourned their passing. Just a year after the death of 'La Verdon,' her daughter—evidently looking for love, and already four months pregnant—married Joseph Charleville. Half a century later, that same Madame Charleville was encouraging young Katie not to judge people rashly, but to face truths fearlessly. Madame Charleville, in short, was very French. Like the French in Louisiana, where she had many relatives and where prenuptial agreements were the norm in bourgeois marriages, Madame Charleville understood that marriage was a practical arrangement, undertaken for social standing and security. Romantic love might come later. Madame Charleville knew all about the strongest motives of human existence: greed, power, lust, and maternal love. But the greatest lesson, one her great-granddaughter repeated so tellingly in her later stories, was that a woman had to be independent" (14-15).

In 1860, Eliza still owned slaves, and the family had sided with the Confederacy. In 1863 Kate's great-grandmother died and her half brother died in the War of Typhoid fever. Kate was 11-15 during the Civil War. German/American soldiers invaded Eliza's home and forced her to display

the Union Flag. It is unknown whether the women in the home were molested (Eliza, her mother, two sisters and Kate). However, after the war they moved to a different home in St. Louis.

Before moving on to the next lecture, think about the difference it made in Kate's life to be raised by women after her father's untimely death. How would her life have turned out if her father had not been killed?

Adulthood

In 1869 Kate made her first trip to New Orleans. Back in St. Louis after that trip, she met Oscar Chopin, who was from Louisiana. Oscar was a cotton factor (a middleman between banks and planters). They married and honeymooned in Europe, where Kate showed her independence: "Even when they could, the newlyweds did not spend every waking moment alone together. When Oscar went off once [on his own], Kate wrote in her diary: 'Dear me! I feel like smoking a cigarette—think I will satisfy my desire and open that sweet little box which I bought in Bremen.' In Zurich, she boldly went outside alone, rowing on the lake and boasting, 'I find myself handling the oars quite like an expert.' She took walks by herself, and in Switzerland she even drank a beer alone, in public" (59).

They settled in New Orleans, in 1870. Kate had six children before the end of 1879--five boys, and one girl. She broke the rules yet again when she used chloroform to give birth: "Until Queen Victoria chose to use chloroform for the birth of her eighth child in 1853, American and English physicians (all male) had resisted using the drug, arguing that women should 'bring forth children in sorrow,' as the Bible ordered. The pain in giving birth was supposed to make women love their babies more. But [Kate's doctor], like his twenty-one-year-old patient, was no slave to old customs that were cruel to women. Exactly twenty-three years later, on May 22, 1894, Kate Chopin described her son's birth in her diary: 'I can remember yet that hot southern day on Magazine street in New Orleans. The noises of the street coming through the open windows; that heaviness with which I dragged myself about; my husband's and mother's solicitude....[the doctor,] the smell of the chloroform, and then waking at 6 in the evening from out of a stupor to see in my mother's arms a little piece of humanity all dressed in white which they told me was my little son!'" (69).

Later Life

In 1879 financial trouble led the couple to leave New Orleans and they moved to a small village in Louisiana, where Oscar opened a general store. Kate was seen as scandalous in the small town. She took long walks by herself, smoked, and rode astride a horse, not side saddle. In 1882 Oscar died of malaria after it was mistaken for yellow fever. This left Kate a widow with children ages 2 – 11. She spent 15 months settling Oscar's debts: Under Louisiana law, Kate Chopin had to petition to be named legal guardian of her children; otherwise Oscar's brother

Lamy inherited custody. Four months after Oscar's death, she was officially named 'Tutrix' of her children, by which time she was also running Oscar's store and the plantations very skillfully. She corresponded with New Orleans' cotton factors, drew up contracts with local planters, farmers, and sharecroppers, stocked the store, kept careful financial records, and got people to pay their bills—which no doubt caused some resentment. There was not enough money, though, to pay all the debts. A year and a day after Oscar's death, Kate held a public auction selling \$8,100 worth of land, along with all the real and personal property she could spare—but it was still not enough. She owed money to lawyers, along with many other smaller debts, and it was a full fifteen months after Oscar's death—March 1884—before the final accounting was finished" (94).

She then had an affair with a married man – Albert Sampite (Al Bear Sampitay). The character of Alcee (Al-Say) is based on him in *The Awakening* and in the short stories. He was charming when sober, but violent when drunk, and had beaten his wife. In 1884, Kate left the scandalous environment and returned to her mother's house in St. Louis. Her mother died in 1885. After her mother's death, Kate's doctor encouraged her to write to deal with her grief, depression, and the struggle to raise her children alone. She was 36 when she began publishing short stories and poems.

The major question Chopin asks in each of her works is this: Can a woman be married, yet retain an independent self?

From the late 1880s – 1899 she published numerous stories; then came *The Awakening*, the tale of a wife and mother who begins to realize that her life is unfulfilling and meaningless. She turns to art and adultery, but neither one satisfies her hunger. Ultimately she figures out how to elude everyone's demands, and she commits suicide. She knew when she published it that it would be scandalous. Before its publication, she wrote a poem in a man's voice, predicting what was to come:

The Haunted Chamber

Of course 'twas an excellent story to tell

Of a fair, frail, passionate woman who fell.

It may have been false, it may have been true.

That was nothing to me—it was less to you.

But with bottle between us, and clouds of smoke

From your last cigar, 'twas more of a joke

Than a matter of sin or a matter of shame

That a woman had fallen, and nothing to blame,

So far as you or I could discover,
But her beauty, her blood, and an ardent lover.
But when you were gone and the lights were low
And the breeze came in with the moon's pale glow,
The far, faint voice of a woman, I heard,
"Twas but a wail, and it spoke no word.
It rose from the depths of some infinite gloom
And its tremulous anguish filled the room.
Yet the woman was dead and could not deny,
But women forever will whine and cry.
So now I must listen the whole night through
To the torment with which I had nothing to do—
But women forever will whine and cry
And men forever must listen—and sigh—

The critics were brutal when *The Awakening* was published: "The male critics and gatekeepers who controlled editing and publishing would never accept her vision of women's ambitions and passions, nor did they even notice her celebration of women's friendships. None of them noticed Edna's learning about herself, gaining trust in her own voice, in a world of women. Scarcely anyone praised Kate Chopin for writing with intelligence and maturity about a fascinating subject she had been studying all her life: how women think" (226).

While she did continue to write after *The Awakening*, she lost some of her passion for it. She was a woman ahead of her time, and her society wasn't ready for her. She never even tried to publish some of the stories she wrote, including "The Storm." She died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1904 after spending a day at the World's Fair in intense heat.