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### Kate Chopin: The Name that Should Not Be Mentioned!

Like some women writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kate Chopin was unconsciously searching for her true place, voice and identity. Surrounded by a patriarchal atmosphere and setting, Kate Chopin creates a discourse ahead of her time. The Term Patriarchal “refers to power relation in which women’s interest are subordinated to the interests of men.” As defined by Chris Weedon in the Feminist Practice and Postructural Theory (Gamble 15). Not until after she died had she became, among many others, a revolutionary figure giving many writers the chance to carry on what she had always wanted to woman to have, an independent voice that can outstand all elements seizing the chance to demolish it. Of course it wasn’t an easy task. As it is widely known society reflects culture and culture reflects the deep rooted belief each and every individual carries within. There had to be some kind of censorship that kept all those little voices, like Kate Chopin’s, backstage. In this paper I aim at discussing why works by Kate Chopin weren’t that celebrated by critics and the role of censorship in restricting the publicity of her work.

There is a definite close relation between culture and censorship. In the late nineteenth century many political and social changes arose. However, the most notable is the discourse that occurs in Kate Chopin’s writing which shows the emergence of the new voice of woman

writers in the late nineteenth century. Many cultural materials were rotated and they encouraged woman to be silent in the face of male authority and so this new women's voice became the source of social instability (Cutter 3). Cultural materials such as "newspapers, cartoons, poems, and drawings were marshaled both to endorse and to critique this image (Cutter 3)". Such a new voice was feared because it reflected a new theoretical approach to "women's social and political empowerment" (Cutter 3). This is where censorship comes in. It eradicates all those unwanted ideas. Many critics assume that this new concept "the new voice" is rhetoric (discourse) rather than a reality (how people really lived and acted) (Cutter 3). One can only discover rhetoric through reality. However sufficient data is still missing for one to make any assumptions about domesticity in the nineteenth century (Cutter 4). If women weren't reading Kate Chopin, they were reading advice manuals. Many advice manuals planted many ideas such as "(purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity) into women's heads (Cutter 4)." All these censored books influenced women's formation of identity (Cutter 4). Some of the manuals were widely known such as E. H. Chapin *Duties of Young Women* (1848) and there are also several of anonymous contributors to Cotesworth Pinckney anthology/gift-book, *The Lady's Token* ( 1848) (Cutter 4). These censored books were not written by men only but they were also written by women such as Maria McIntosh and Lydia Sigourney who wrote McIntosh *Woman in America: Her Work and Her Reward* (1850) (Cutter 5). There was no place for a woman's lost voice. Speaking publically by women was looked down upon. Every word was followed. When these texts were followed by women, women's usage of those ideals is only an extension of the male psyche and nothing else (Cutter 6). Control of language was linked to that of women's sexuality as William Thayer *Life at the Fireside* ( 1857) expresses in his manual (Cutter 6). "To be in the

public sphere is to demand an unruly -- potentially sexual and certainly not submissive – voice (Cutter 7).<sup>1</sup>

Kate Chopin was born on February 8<sup>th</sup> 1850 in St. Louis Louisiana and she was already being pushed into the preconceived female role (Toth 3). Her father was an Irish immigrant and her mother was a half Creole. In her first portrait she was shown wearing an off the shoulder evening gown which seemed pretty “coy” and “incongruous” for a three year old (Toth 3). While other portraits and pictures give more details about Kate O’ Flatherty<sup>2</sup>. As an individual; she grew up to be “a dark-eyed young rebel sporting dishevelled ringlets and glowering at the camera” (Toth 3). Being so open to all that life brings, Kate Oflatherty wanted to know everything. She got to see those parts of the world that respectable young girls were not supposed to know anything about. She often escorted her father and this did not only bring her closer to him but also sparked a lifelong revolt against keeping “young ladies ignorant about the rest of the world” (Toth 4). At the age of five she was sent to a boarding school and that added fuel to the fire as she developed an even stronger personality as a writer and she became a difficult daughter to her father (Toth 6). Asking too many questions about the slave children and where her father went everyday were the most prominent two reasons she was sent to boarding school (Toth 8). One event that liberated Kate O’ Flatherty was her father’s death, where he was “riding the first train across the new Gasconade Bridge to Jefferson City” when it crashed and her father was among the thirty

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<sup>1</sup> The process of the advancement of women’s unruly tongue is visible in the establishment of “the World’s Congress of Representative Woman” where different women met and shared their rebellious voices (Cutter 9).

<sup>2</sup> This is her name before marriage.

men that were killed on that day (Toth 9). This event allowed her to return and to be raised up by the most powerful women in her family, among which is her mother Eliza Faris, a widow who had more power than any ordinary wife (Toth 9). Unlike many girls, she was surrounded by the voices of women and she didn't live in a patriarchal household any longer. Kate O' Flatherty was born into a special historical moment, for she her generation were the last generation of white babies raised by slaves (Toth 11). Her great grandmother, Victoria (or Victoire) Charleville, taught Kate O' Flatherty French. The greatest lesson Kate O' Flatherty was taught by her great grandmother was that woman had to be independent. This was a short glimpse into Kate Chopin's life and her background was important in building her identity and mentality.

Her two stories "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm" were published on different dates and "The Storm" can be read as a sequel. "At the 'Cadian Ball" was published on October 22, 1892. The storm was published on July 19, 1898. These two stories such as "depict a voice of pure resistance that attempts to locate itself *outside* of patriarchal discourse and culture (Cutter 98)." In both stories many themes are dealt with such as social class distinction, woman's desire as their new voice of individuality, and the battle of women against social conformity. Chopin's themes can only make sense through an examination of the historical and social context (Boynton 52). During her life Kate Chopin witnessed plantation life. She used to see slaves and she saw all kinds of social classes and like her grandmother she grew up criticising all that she observed. "At the 'Cadian Ball" takes place at the Louisiana plantation of Alcée Laballière and at the 'Cadian Ball. It tells the marriage story of Clarisse and Alcée, who are Creoles and Calixta and Bobinôtare, Acadians.<sup>3</sup> In "At the

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<sup>3</sup> Creoles were much wealthier than Acadians.

'Cadian Ball" Clarisse doesn't want Alc  e to go and meet Calixta at the ball. She follows him and asks him to go back for an urgent matter and then she confesses that she loves him. In the end Calixta marries Bobin  tare and Clarisse marries Alc  e. Heroines in Chopin's writings found a metalinguistic voice, other than the feminine one which "traverses and deconstructs patriarchal language, a voice that can be heard through the widening cracks of hegemonic discourse (Cutter 88)." This new voice refuses to silence, repress or erase (Cutter 88). In "At the 'Cadian Ball" female voices seem ineffective, "Calixta exhibits verbal dexterity, swearing "roundly in fine 'Cadian French and with true Spanish spirit" and wittily chiding Bobin  t for standing "*Plant   l  * like ole Ma'ame Tina's cow in the bog" (Cutter 99)." Her society didn't approve of her language (Cutter 99). "Calixta also behaves aggressively, slapping her friend Fronie's face when insulted, and eventually forcing Bobin  t to marry her (Cutter 99)." On the other hand Clarisse is both aggressive and calm; "Clarisse, too, is aggressive. She rides out alone in the middle of the night to "rescue" Alc  e from Calixta, and forces him away from her rival." Yet Clarisse is at the same time a soft-spoken, pure woman; "she is shocked, for example, by the "hot, blistering love-words" Alc  e pants in her face one day" (Cutter 100). Clarisse admits in the end that she loves Alc  e. She didn't want him to go to the ball. There is a sudden switch of discourse that shows this moment through the eyes of Alc  e:

"He began to wonder if this meant love. But she had to tell him so, before he believed it. And when she told him, he thought the face of the Universe was changed. . . . The one, only, great reality in the world was Clarisse standing before him, telling him that she loved him"

(At the 'Cadian Ball 277).

However, When Kate Chopin published her novel "The Awakening" she was "condemned as vulgar, morbid and unwholesome" (Cutter 87). The book was banned and Kate Chopin

was ousted from several social societies (Cutter 87). Unlike her short stories, this novel was literally the end of Kate Chopin's career. Cutter suggests that Chopin was treated as such because she "suggests that feminine desire is an aspect of women's search for voice" (87). This is obvious in "The Storm" where we see boring women such as Calixta are truly identified as individuals once their desire is achieved, which happens to her when she meets Alcée at her house on that rainy day at Friedheimer's store in Louisiana. Bobinôtare and Bibi are outside when a strong rain storm heads their way. Calixta is worried and she sees Alcée outside. She asks him inside, just until the storm fades away. This happens after five years of marriage. In this story desire is known as transgressive desire because it depicts a married woman's desire outside of marriage (Boynton 55). When Calixta claimed her desire she was actually claiming herself (Boynton 55). Publishing such works put Chopin's social life and career at risk.

Being part of a culture that censored most of its material placed Kate Chopin's social life and career in danger. Her association with taboo topics such as sexuality and the search for women's voice and other themes was another aspect that excluded her as a writer and as a lady from her society.

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