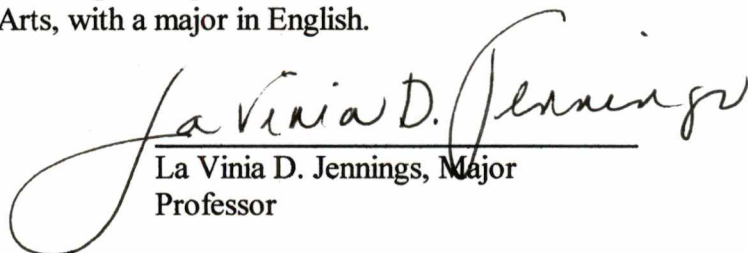
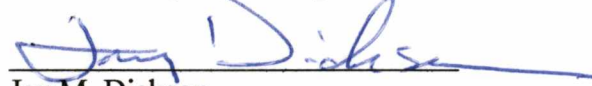


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by David Shane Wallace entitled "Other Wise: Locating the 'Evolution' of the Construction of Whiteness in Kate Chopin's *At Fault*, 'Désirée's Baby,' and *The Awakening*." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


La Vinia D. Jennings, Major
Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance


Jay M. Dickson


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Accepted for the Council:


Interim Vice Provost and
Dean of the Graduate School

**OTHER WISE: LOCATING THE "EVOLUTION" OF THE
CONSTRUCTION OF WHITENESS IN KATE CHOPIN'S
AT FAULT, "DÉSIRÉE'S BABY," AND
*THE AWAKENING***

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

David Shane Wallace
August 2001

~Dedication~

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Frances Elizabeth "Betty" Clifton Wallace
who taught me to fly

and

Frank Lamar Wallace
who provided a place to land

*How much better is it to get
wisdom than gold! and to get
understanding rather to be
chosen than silver!*
Proverbs 16:16

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Lastly, but most importantly, I would like to thank God for his guidance and for giving me the ability and the strength to achieve so much. I am truly blessed.

~Abstract~

Within her fiction Kate Chopin constructed and reconstructed whiteness as a means of allaying her own fears about the permeability its boundaries. The first chapter provides a detailed discussion of the way in which the concept of America as a "Melting Pot" was being addressed by scholars in the late nineteenth century. By looking at the ways "turn of the twentieth century Americans" were attempting to establish an ideology in response to the freedom of a population of people who had been present as slaves for several hundred years, it becomes less difficult to understand the social setting in which Chopin was creating her work.

The second chapter provides a chronological look at the ways in which whiteness is constructed and reconstructed in Chopin's *At Fault*, "Désirée's Baby," and *The Awakening*. The early American self-identifying concept of "not free and thus not me," which applies to this particular author in terms of both gender and race, pervades her literature. The construction takes place both consciously and unconsciously, simultaneously expressing and questioning the idea of the "universal." At various intervals whiteness encompasses not only race and heritage but also morality, acceptable social behavior, freedom, personal sacrifice, sexuality, power, civilization, and voice.

The third chapter provides a picture of what appears to be Chopin's views on over-identification with the Africanist or non-white Other by "white" women. The author presents motherhood, chastity, sobriety, and moral obligation as synonymous with white womanhood, which is at once an exclusive privilege and counterproductive to female self-actualization and freedom of choice. Within Chopin's pages sexual awakening and freedom are presented as immorality and rejection, respectively. In her fiction, the two states of being are mutually exclusive; they cannot exist in one individual simultaneously, but rather must be exchanged for one another. Emblematic of the Victorian concept of the woman, female sexual awareness and freedom from patriarchal definitions of morality belong to women of the lower classes, who in America are the non-white and un-whitened, and who pay for their freedom with the denial of white privilege.

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Introduction

In the past three decades, an increasingly sizeable amount of critical scholarship has been devoted to the literary accomplishments of Kate Chopin. Originating with a renaissance of *The Awakening* in 1956 by Robert Cantwell and Kenneth Eble through extensive appreciative essays, the once controversial novel has been established as a formidable component in the American literary canon thanks to research and articles contributed by numerous scholars (*The Awakening*, Editor's Note 143). *The Awakening* is currently an eminent text in the field of feminist literary criticism and the attention the work has received has spilled over onto Chopin's almost equally famous short story "Désirée's Baby," which is a mainstay in college level readers. Unfortunately, despite the widespread attention Chopin's works have received from those within literary circles in terms of tradition classification—realism or romanticism—artistry, imagery, narrative posture, psychological analysis, and feminist critique, until now there has yet to appear an examination of the author's contribution in the construction of literary whiteness (*The Awakening*, Editor's Note 143). An investigation of Chopin's role in this formation is beneficial, if not essential, to the understanding and appreciation of the ways by which American authors have played a decisive role in the creation of an ideology of whiteness in the minds of their audiences.

A child of critical race theory which emerged as a discipline in the late 1970's through the groundbreaking works of scholars such as Derrick Bell and Alan Freedman and expanded with more recent invaluable contributions from Richard Dyer, Eric Lott and Cornel West, White Studies now exists as a significant body of scholarship that

analyzes what it means to be white (Delgado xvii-xviii). However, while scholars in the field of White Studies have provided priceless contributions to the understanding of whiteness, it is the celebrated author Toni Morrison who originally and most convincingly concentrated her investigation of the phenomenon of whiteness within American literature. It is Morrison to whom I turn in explaining the methods I employ in my exploration of the literature of Kate Chopin.

Currently, an examination of whiteness and the way it is constructed in American literary works is beginning to sweep the world of critical White Studies greatly propelled forward by Toni Morrison's essays, collected and presented in book form as *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). Morrison correctly notes that "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (xii). The concept that to be white is to be figuratively and literally (despite and because of the ever changing classifications on U.S. census forms) race-free or "universal" is an accepted tenet in the field of White Studies.

Playing in the Dark briefly addresses the effects the belief in a white or race-free readership have on non-white authors, and further delves into the influence the same race-free principle has on authors, both psychologically and creatively, who claim membership in the "universal" or undefined race. Among the questions Morrison's book raises is what ways does the assumption of a "universal" race, among writers and/or readers, shape the way a literary text is constructed and how does the construction reflect upon the "humanistic" field of literature? Morrison describes how her involvement as a reader, rather than a writer, brought her to the revelation of the non-white or Africanist

presence in essentially white American literature. She explains that as an African American "neither blackness or 'people of color' stimulates...notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread" (x). Therefore, the underlying racial coding in the works of a writer such as Chopin's, is lost on those readers who do not, "...hold these truths to be self evident," and share the author's ideas of the Other.

As a means of looking at the all-important Africanist presence, Morrison points to the ways in which it is represented in the works of white American authors. Echoing the words of Sigmund Freud, she reveals her discovery that "the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the [white] writerly conscious" (17). Therefore, by looking at white authors' representations of African and Africanized or non-white figures in their literature, one can determine how these authors struggle to define whiteness in the social as well as personal realm.

To explain the epiphanic moment that led Morrison to the realization of the Africanist presence, it proves useful to refer to the post-structuralist notion of *representation*. In effect, in *(re)presenting* the essence of the original is lost. The *representation* therefore becomes a unique entity, a construction...a fiction of the *representer's* own making. A writer takes as material his/her perceptions of the Other and filters these perceptions through a subjective lens, shaping and distorting them in order to familiarize and make comprehensible that which exists outside of the self. Thus the characters, which appear in fiction, cease to be the original, but rather the "dreamstuff" of the author.

Morrison goes on to question the American literary historians and critics who claim that the Africanist "presence—which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture—has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature" (5). Throughout her text Morrison explores the ways in which the Africanist presence, existing in the margins of white American texts, has functioned in the shaping of these literary works. For as she points out, by closely reading these white texts one is able to see how the racial identities of the characters (and their creators) are established in relation to the ever-present African who (although perhaps ostensibly absent from the work) undoubtedly looms just in the back of the white American consciousness. Additionally, Morrison employs her knowledge as a writer in the understanding of the process by which ideas, both conscious and unconscious, are woven into an author's literary creation.

In discussing the canonical works of the nation, Morrison proposes the idea that "the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population" (6). Morrison explains that the value of reading American literature for the Africanist presence "is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary 'blackness,' the nature—even the cause—of literary 'whiteness'" (9). The unearthing of literary whiteness is essential to the understanding of the white consciousness, for as many scholars have pointed out, whiteness is defined not by what it *is*, but rather by what it *is not*. Although the concept of the establishment of whiteness can be applied to numerous cultures, especially those of Europe—by means of colonial expansion and histories of cultural oppression, whiteness is highlighted within the United States because it is "the oldest

democracy in which a black population accompanied (if one can use that word) and in many cases preceded the white settlers" (8). Further, the intersection of class and race in the United States is considered unique. Historically, in European nations, cultural identification rather than skin color determined one's "racial" classification as can be seen in the well documented treatment of the Irish under the Penal Laws by the English, who while using similar racial terminology as the United States, have no visible difference in skin pigmentation but rather in class and religious affiliation. However, following the enslavement of an entire race of "inferior" people in the United States, the Emancipation Proclamation provided a group of newly "freed" individuals who had not only been disenfranchised since the founding of the country and thus immediately lower on the socio-economic ladder but who also had different skin pigmentation. Thus, a ready-made, easily identifiable lower class for the white establishment to define itself against emerged. Therefore, it can be deduced that in the defining of American "literary blackness" a definition of "literary whiteness" surfaces. The long indefinable comes closer to being defined.

Using the methodology of *Playing in the Dark*, I attempt to expose both the construction of "literary whiteness" and the underlying fears and desires, which go into the art of one of America's marginally canonical authors, Kate Chopin. I have, I must admit hesitantly, included the undeniably loaded word "evolution" in the title to highlight the way in which Chopin's literary depiction of whiteness, not unlike the definition accepted by the majority of the American population, is anything but stable. In fact it is ever-changing. Simultaneously, the term "evolution," relying heavily on familiarity with

Charles Darwin's controversial work *The Descent of Man*,¹ lends itself well to tracing Chopin's literarily chronological movement from the primal or savage, black Other to the civilized and less easily visually distinguishable Other, as well as to the formation of the privilege, responsibility, and power of whiteness.

In her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), the earliest published of the three works discussed in the following pages, the racial lines are clearly drawn and uncontested. While there do exist characters of mixed blood, there appears no confusion, visually or otherwise, as to which characters are white and which are not, for the white individuals are simply the ones not described otherwise and who serve as the primary focus of the novel. Quite differently, the plot of "Désirée's Baby" (1893), essentially hinges on the concept of racial identification and the permeability of the established boundaries of whiteness. Herein Chopin rather cleverly exposes the (mis)correlation between skin pigmentation and bloodlines. In response to her own disturbing narrative, in terms of identity, the author defines whiteness by negation, locating blackness through character traits and familiar tropes of the individual of mixed race: the all too present (in nineteenth century fiction) tragic mulatto. Indeed, a reverse reading of the text leads the close observer to the character that Chopin has designated as having miscegenated blood through the author's description of demeanor and actions rather than any discernible physical attributes.

Appearing at the end of a literary career veritably plagued with the racial question, Chopin's only other extant and final novel *The Awakening* (1899) fails to

¹ In his controversial work *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin traces the evolution of the human species from the savage and primal early man to the civilized and essentially "whitened" modern man.

address overtly any concern with racial classifications *per se*.² However, white responsibility, privilege, freedom, and fear are all clearly constructed against the non-white presence in the narrative. *The Awakening* places the white American reader in a difficult ideological position. For in Chopin's text, it is the doomed *white* "American" protagonist Edna, who is positioned as Other by the Creole establishment and who in turn Others the non-white characters in the novel.

In order to facilitate a complete understanding of the forces at work in the evolution of whiteness in Chopin's writings as I have proposed, Chapter One provides a detailed discussion of the way in which the concept of America as a "Melting Pot" was being addressed by scholars in the late nineteenth century. By looking at the ways "turn of the twentieth century Americans" were attempting to establish an ideology in response to the freedom of a population of people who had been present as slaves for several hundred years, it becomes less difficult to understand the social setting in which Chopin was creating her work. William Andrews dutifully notes the great impact the issue of miscegenation had on American literature in his essay "Miscegenation in the Late Nineteenth Century American Novel."

It is important to remember, . . . that the possibility of miscegenation as a consequence of the new post-Civil War racial 'equality' in America was a question which a great many literary people, white and black, felt obliged to address in fiction . . . their novels reflected and influenced most of the positions taken in national debate over the moral, social, and political

² In 1890, in addition to *At Fault*, Chopin wrote a novel entitled *Young Dr. Gosse*, but after ten rejections she gave up on having the book published and destroyed the manuscript (Toth 245-46).

ramifications of black assimilation into the mainstream of white American life. (13)

A close inspection of the information presented by Emily Toth in her biography of the Chopin also provides much fodder for this discussion by highlighting the author's identifications and encounters with as well as exclusions (as both subject and object) from various ethnic groups and traditions. Further, Raka Shome notes in "Whiteness and the Politics of Location," that "Studying whiteness from the perspective of 'politics of location' is important because it provides us with yet another way to particularize, localize, and historicize the discourse of whiteness and in the process disrupt its claims to universality and normativity" (127). Shome adds that, ". . . the specificities of Eurocentricity/whiteness take on significantly different meanings in different spatial and historical sites" (126). Therefore, as the product of a slaveholding, Irish, immigrant father and a mother from an old, well established, Creole family, Chopin, growing up in what was likely a miscegenated household in the ideologically divided city of St. Louis in the aftermath of The Missouri Compromise and during the American Civil War, had numerous avenues from which her fears and desires may have begun to germinate.³

Subsequently, as the wife of her distant Creole cousin Aurelian Roselius "Oscar" Chopin, living first in the notoriously racially mixed city of New Orleans and then on a working, post-civil war plantation in the Cane River Valley of northwest Louisiana,

³ While the term Creole was originally defined as a person of French and/or Spanish descent born in the West Indies or Spanish America, the word evolved to include a person descended from or culturally related to the original French settlers of the United States. When the emphasis is placed on the cultural similarities rather than the lines of descent, it is possible for the definition to include a person containing Negro ancestry. Kate Chopin relies on many definitions of this word as well as the reader's knowledge of the difference between the French-Creole people, who claim pure European descent and the black Creole people in her works; in this case the term refers to their cultural heritage and/or their language not their bloodline. For the purposes of this discussion I will use Creole when referring to those who claim pure French/Spanish descent and black Creole when referring to the Negro characters.

Chopin dealt with the issues of the definition of whiteness, white authority, and white superiority. Upon her return to the city of her birth following Oscar's death, Chopin began a literary career that became a depository for her fears, desires, and beliefs, which not only shape but also ultimately control her texts.

The social climate in which Chopin created her art established in Chapter One, I then provide in Chapter Two a chronological look at the ways in which whiteness is constructed and reconstructed through these three representative works. The early American self-identifying concept of "not free and thus not me," which applies to this particular author in terms of both gender and race, pervades her literature. The construction takes place both consciously and unconsciously, simultaneously expressing and questioning the idea of the "universal." At various intervals whiteness encompasses not only race and heritage but also morality, acceptable social behavior, freedom, personal sacrifice, sexuality, power, civilization, and voice.

In my approach to Chapter Two, I envisioned Chopin's texts stripped of their all-important Africanist presence. Therefore, I found Douglas Turner Ward's 1966 play *Day of Absence* an indispensable tool for elucidating the construction of whiteness in Chopin's literature. In Ward's play, all of the characters with black blood of an imaginary town, both those designated as black and those "passing" as white, vanish for a twenty-four hour period. The town is literally unable to function. Needless to say, Chopin's "white" literature unravels under such an investigation. The dreamer's dream of the self, filled with the fears and desires of the subconscious, has no "dark" Other onto which it can be projected. Without these essential non-white characters and their enmeshed connotations, perceptions of morality, freedom, power, and civilization have no counterpoint; in

essence they cease to have meaning. Theoretically, there is no darkness to define the light.

With an understanding of Chopin's literary construction and her essential components of whiteness firmly established in the previous chapters, Chapter Three provides a closer inspection of the consequences of the formation of an ideology of whiteness in regards to the three "white" heroines of the author's texts, who are defamiliarized, unwhitened, and repositioned in the realm of the non-white. The third section highlights the psychological and physical violence these characters suffer and likewise exposes an ideology of negation in regards to the Africanist presence. The ever-evolving boundaries of whiteness become at once exclusive and claustrophobic, salvational and damning. They are a means of personal gain and personal loss, structured and rigid, keeping out that which is undesired while denying those firmly within these boundaries experiences of self-realization. The recurring patterns present in her works as its focus, Chapter Three provides a picture of what appears to be Chopin's views on over-identification with the Africanist or non-white Other by "white" women. The author presents motherhood, chastity, sobriety, and moral obligation as synonymous with white womanhood, which is at once an exclusive privilege and counterproductive to female self-actualization and freedom of choice. Within Chopin's pages sexual awakening and freedom are presented as immorality and rejection, respectively. In her fiction, the two states of being are mutually exclusive; they cannot exist in one individual simultaneously, but rather must be exchanged for one another. Emblematic of the Victorian concept of the woman, female sexual awareness and freedom from patriarchal definitions of

morality belong to women of the lower classes, who in America are the non-white and un-whitened, and who pay for their freedom with the denial of white privilege.

The three chapters provide a look at whiteness following closely the shape of an inverted pyramid. Beginning with the larger issue of the social forces which shaped Kate Chopin's evolutionary whiteness, proceeding on to the ways in which whiteness is constructed in her fiction and culminating with the specific white characters who are affected by this limiting construction, the unity of these chapters lies in the exposure of a rhetoric of whiteness and an ideology of the meaning therein.

Chapter One *Forming an Ideology of Whiteness*

In order to understand fully the forces which shaped Kate Chopin's fiction, an exploration of the social climate in which she was born, reared, and lived her adult life as a wife, mother, and widow must be conducted. Chopin's formative years were spent in St. Louis where her Irish Catholic ancestry caused her family to live at the margins of whiteness. As an adult, her identification with her matrilineal Creole heritage and the Creole community, from which her husband Oscar was descended, brought about a second wave of marginalization when American post-Civil War confusion over the term "creole" by outsiders caused the *entire* heterogeneous Creole establishment to be (mis)associated with black ancestry. Essentially, Chopin's personal fears about her own "whiteness" manifested themselves in her literature. Therefore, as a means of allaying these fears and locating an outlet for her typically "unwhite" desires, Chopin created an Africanist presence against which she could reaffirm her own concepts of whiteness.

Katherine Chopin *née* O'Flaherty was born on February 8, 1850 to a wealthy, Catholic, slaveholding family in St. Louis.¹ Her father, Thomas, then thirty-nine, was an Irish immigrant who had left Galway in 1823 and become a successful boat store merchant upon settling in St. Louis. He married Eliza Faris, twenty-three years his junior, a French-Creole from a somewhat impoverished yet aristocratic background in 1844, only a year after having buried his first wife who died in childbirth. O'Flaherty brought a four-year-old son, George, to the new marriage. The union produced an

¹ There are conflicting dates regarding the year of Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin's birth. As Emily Toth notes in her biography, "According to most biographers, Kate O'Flaherty came into the world on February 8, 1851, but according to the United States Census, taken in August 1850, Katherine O'Flaherty made her appearance a year earlier (24). The author herself seems to have chosen 1851 as her year of birth, for in 1894 she comments in her diary that she is 43.

additional son, Thomas Jr., four years later and three daughters, Kate, Marie Therese, and Jane. Both Marie Therese and Jane died in infancy.

Tragedy struck the O'Flaherty family again on November 1, 1855, just a few months prior to Chopin's sixth birthday; her father was killed as he rode the inaugural train of the St. Louis-Jefferson track over the Gasconade Bridge which collapsed. Eliza O'Flaherty had all of her financial means met by the astute business investments of her departed husband and remained a wealthy widow for the duration of her life. Her mother's decision not to remarry left Chopin with no primary masculine influence until her own marriage fifteen years later.

Although Chopin had been enrolled in St. Louis's Sacred Heart Academy since September of 1855, shortly following Thomas O'Flaherty's death, her maternal great-grandmother, Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville, already well into her seventies, took over the young girl's education. The arrangement lasted for the next two years and, according to Toth, greatly affected Chopin's feminist ideology and her later literary career. "Unlike other 'Americans,' Madame (Charleville) decided, Kate would learn to speak and write French well. Kate and her great-grandmother had daily conversations in French, and in later life Kate was always at home in French" (Toth 35). Madame Charleville's emphasis on the importance of French is a direct product of the ill feelings much of the population of St. Louis, an old Creole settlement, felt toward the encroaching English-speaking (American) nation. These negative views of "Americans" were passed on to Kate through intriguing stories related by her great-grandmother. The acknowledged "un-Americaness" of both Thérèse Lafirme in *At Fault* and Adèle Ratignolle in *The Awakening*, both symbols of Creole wholesomeness, further attest to

Chopin's continuing aversion for Americans who were not of French or Spanish descent.

As Emily Toth points out in her biography of Kate Chopin,

[w]hen the Americans took over in 1804, after the Louisiana Purchase, the French-speaking population believed that moral decay had immediately set in. As the French viewed them, American men were a churlish, drunken, brawling lot, with none of the French respect for manners and breeding. (39)

Madame Charleville, like many other Creoles of St. Louis and likewise Louisiana, still considered herself a French citizen and did not welcome inclusion into the Union in 1820 following the Missouri Compromise. Further, the concept of being an "American" involved a conscientious decision to put aside, if not all, at least some of one's ancestral customs and ties to the "old country," across the Atlantic in continental Europe and further to embrace laws and ways of thinking which were incompatible with the established Creole way of life.

Seemingly contrary to the condemnation of "American" licentiousness by the women in Chopin's family are the many iniquities concerning the promiscuity of its own men. Chopin's great-uncles were reported as not being the most morally correct French gentlemen; "One fathered two half-Indian children by an Osage woman he never married; another, in a liaison with a mixed blood woman, fathered the quadroon Louis Dunois...part of 'The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis'" (Toth 39). To compound matters, it is likely that miscegenistic tendencies on the parts of the males on both sides of Chopin's family surfaced again during the author's own early childhood. Toth notes the possibility of Chopin's father, half-brother George, and/or young uncle Charley

committing the same "sins" of which the older male family members had been guilty, when she relates that

[i]n 1860, the widowed Eliza Flaherty owned six slaves: a male, sixty-four years old; four females aged twenty-eight, seventeen, nine, and six; and a male baby, six months old. The three oldest were recorded by the census as 'Blacks,' while the three youngest, the baby and the nine- and six-year-old girls, were designated as 'mulattoes,' raising the possibility that their mother was the twenty-eight-year-old and their father a white man in the neighborhood—and maybe even in their own household....The first two 'mulattoes' were born while the elder Thomas O'Flaherty was alive...but when the baby was born, George and Charley were twenty and nineteen, working as clerks and living in the family home on Eighth Street. (57)

The true paternity of the mulattoes in the O'Flaherty household is indeterminable, for during the period, under American law, the names of slaves' fathers were not recorded, since children automatically inherited the free or enslaved status of the mother. If these mulatto children were in actuality related to the O'Flaherty family by blood is questionable, however, their mixed ancestry could not be overlooked. Obviously, it could not be denied that the mixing of races had been taking place in America. In fact the offspring of black and white sexual unions were abundant. Despite the common American belief of the period that no white person could possibly wish to copulate with a member of the Negro race, laws against intermarriage had been in place in Virginia and other southern colonies as early as 1662 in an attempt to prevent just that (Kinney 5).

Undeniably, miscegenation was a part of a Southerner's existence: "Miscegenation for [Southerners] was a fact of life enmeshed in family histories....[It] conjured up patriarchal sins, incest, sectional guilt, [and] ancestral racial fears" (Aaron 178). Kate Chopin, like George Washington Cable, Mark Twain, and many other distinguished contemporary white authors, was the product of a Southern culture in which racial mixing could hardly be ignored. In response, all three included characters of mixed blood in their literature.

Evidence shows that the sexual conjoining of whites and blacks, both enslaved and free, was by no means restricted to Chopin's family, St. Louis, or to the South. W.E.B. DuBois, in a 1908 study of the black American family, cites figures from the U.S. census, which

[f]ound 405,751 mulattoes in 1850, and 588,352 in 1860... [and] these figures were, moreover, without reasonable doubt below the truth, as 'mulatto' was probably taken to mean a person, visibly at least half white. Probably one-fifth of the slaves in 1860 had distinct traces of white blood. (qtd. in Zack 35)

Given these numbers it is unsurprising that the knowledge of miscegenation, whether within or outside the O'Flaherty family, was a part of the everyday life of the young, future author, and it is no revelation that characters of mixed ancestry regularly appear in her fiction. Although obviously a prominent feature of American culture, the intermingling of blood outside of a sanctified relationship was in no way morally or socially acceptable, especially to members of the Catholic Church, to which Chopin's family firmly belonged. The prevalence of extra-marital miscegenation further

heightened the author's already "French" distaste for the ever-increasing decadence of the United States.

Playing into the American fears of an ever-growing mixed race, in 1864 the anonymously authored tract entitled *Miscegenation. The theory of the blending of races applied to the American white and negro* was published, introducing the word "miscegenation" into the English language. The word combines "two Latin words, *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (race) to denote the abstract idea of the mixture of two or more races" (Aaron 171). The pamphlet, a hoax meant to embarrass the Lincoln administration for its liberal approach to the institution of slavery, proposed the salvation of the American population by mixing the blood of whites and blacks. Although, the pamphlet was essentially disregarded the new designation (replacing amalgamation) remained and the very real issue of race mixing became even more fervently debated. Moreover, it was believed that individuals of mixed race posed a greater threat to the white population than did those of pure African descent, because the African in his "original beast-like" state was more easily trained than those who had been "mongrelized" by the admixture of white blood (Aaron 173). Chopin's subscription to the blood mixing ideology is evident in her portrayal of the racially mixed character Armand Aubigny in "Désirée's Baby" whose erratic behavior is a direct result of his mongrelized status.

The argument against miscegenation, while erroneously guised in moral conviction citing the "unnaturalness" of race mixing, was in effect the result of a shifting power structure. Dating back to the dawn of slavery in the English colonies, miscegenation had taken place in America and the Caribbean with little or no

consequence for the white fathers. As Linda Brent (a.k.a. Harriet Jacobs) recounts in her 1861 autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, under the slave system black women were chattel and "non-human," thus easily accessible to white men and were forced to suffer untold sexual molestations at the hands of white aggressors. The system proved advantageous for the white slave owners for a number of reasons. The black women had no right to deny the men sexual access; the men did not have to worry about impregnating their white wives (during a time when the only reliable means of birth control was abstinence), and the offspring from these unions increased valuable slave holdings. White women, second-class citizens themselves, had no recourse against the sexual and psychological abuse of slave women and were forced to maintain their silence, complete with the knowledge of the sexual intercourse taking place between the slaves and their husbands, brothers, fathers, and/or other male relations. The white women's powerlessness contributed to an intense helpless, jealous hatred for the black women. Chopin creates just such a scenario between the slave mistress Désirée and the slave La Blanche in "Désirée's Baby." In the story, Désirée mentions her husband's presence in or near La Blanche's cabin, leading the reader to speculate on Désirée's naive resistance to the knowledge of a sexual liaison between the two. Moreover, white males had the option of assuming as much or in most cases as little responsibility for their mixed children as they chose. With historical accuracy Armand sends Désirée and their son away. It was not until the threat of emancipation and black enfranchisement that the moral argument against the practice of miscegenation gained a bit more ground.

In the thirty years prior to Emancipation, powerful political and church leaders began to realize the threat the middle caste of mixed blood individuals posed to the white

power structure. In response, these leaders instituted an outright legal campaign against miscegenation. The antimiscegenistic attitude had far-reaching affects, especially for the population living in the territories acquired from France in the Louisiana Purchase, which included St. Louis. As historian James Kinney points out in his book *Amalgamation*, the difference between Louisiana's early French laws and the American laws which supplanted them had a great impact on the Creole population.

Under French Napoleonic Code, children took the status of their father, and thus most mulattoes were free. Under the Americans, however [the] courts decided in 1832 to enslave the children of slave mothers.... Finally, in 1857, Louisiana prohibited the emancipation of mulatto children, despite protest from French and Spanish creoles. (11)

The white Creole response to these new laws and customs can be traced to differences in ideology and shifting political power in Louisiana and Missouri. American views on racial classifications greatly differed from those held by the predominantly Catholic Creole society. French laws provided no actual condemnation of racial mixing as long as the parents were in a long-term union and/or the fathers took responsibility for their offspring. However, under American control and ideological influence a polarized approach to racial categories supplanted the older French system. Creole people were now faced with laws that insisted on affiliation with only one of two distinct racial categories: black or white and disenfranchised or privileged.

The designation of *creole* became one focus of the racial debate; the term has an interesting, although continuously evolutionary history. The origins of the word are either from the Spanish word *criollo*, used to designate *all* locally born persons of

nonnative origin, or from the Portuguese word *crioulo*, meaning a slave of African descent born in the new world. Despite its origins, in the United States, during Kate Chopin's life, the term carried (and continues to carry) classificatory and political significance. Very possibly due to extensive miscegenation in former French territories, prior to the 1830's the term could have multiple applications. An individual could claim to be Creole and if he/she appeared to be white then Caucasian racial purity was assumed. On the other hand, if the same individual appeared to be black then his/her ancestry was not confirmed, but rather place of birth was established. These terms were understood among the Creole community. However, as Virginia R. Dominguez illustrates in *White by Definition*, when Americans began to take control of the former French areas

[s]uspensions multiplied about Creole's racial ancestry. Genteel, perhaps aristocratic, but totally impoverished white Creoles saw themselves on the brink of losing what little social status they had managed to salvage just before, during, and after the Civil War. Northern newcomers to the city and other non-Creoles began to insinuate...that all Creoles had at least 'a touch of the tarbrush.' (141)

The overwhelming backlash from these insinuations was nothing other than immediate and complete. Members of the Creole establishment had enjoyed immense social and political power under French and earlier Spanish law, but were now faced with the realization that numerous business partners, friends, lovers, and family members "belonged" to the tainted and powerless black race that threatened to engulf the entire community. For fear of being too closely associated with these disenfranchised individuals, white Creoles, which made up a large percentage of the population of the

formerly French area, responded with harsh anti-miscegenation laws. The repercussions of these severe measures were still being felt almost a century later. Louisiana repealed its antimiscegenation laws in 1983. It was the last state to do so.

Much of the white Creole reaction can also be linked to the implications made by George Washington Cable, an early contemporary of Kate Chopin, whose white Creole characters often dealt with issues such as claims upon inheritance made by mixed blood relatives and sexual encounters with blacks and mulattoes. Additionally, Cable's Creoles were highly defensive about their claims to pure French and Spanish ancestries (Dominguez 142). Notably in *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884), Cable clearly defines a Creole as one who is white. He writes that "[Creole] implied a certain excellence of origin, and so came early to include any native, of French or Spanish descent by either parent, whose non-alliance with the slave race entitled him to social rank" (41). However, Cable's depictions hit a little too close to home for the white Creole population, which had succumbed to the American racial polarization and felt that his characters exposed the debauched state of Creole society. Daniel Aaron notes in "The 'Inky curse': Miscegenation in the White American Literary Imagination", that "[e]ventually, Cable's views caused such a hullabaloo that he was virtually driven out of the South" (176). Chopin, like Cable, insisted in her literature upon the whiteness of the Creole establishment as is seen in her character Thérèse Lafirme in *At Fault* as well as in the snap-shot she provides of Creole culture in *The Awakening*.

Chopin, following closely on the footsteps of her literary predecessor, threatened (perhaps unintentionally) in her fiction the exposition of intricate Creole racial affiliations, which was clearly an issue throughout her childhood in St. Louis, in her early

years of marriage in New Orleans, and especially during the last few years of her married life in Cloutierville, Louisiana. Cloutierville, then a small village located in the northwest portion of the state, was the childhood home of Chopin's husband, Oscar. Much of Chopin's literature is based in the small town, which happened to be in close proximity to Isle Brevelle, the home of one of the largest and most politically and economically influential establishments of *gens de couleur libre* (free people of color) in the United States. Although a racially heterogeneous population, an 1810 court document clearly defines a "free person of color" as "'descended from Indians on both sides, from a white parent or mulatto parents in possession of their freedom'" (Mills 85). Further, under the designation *gens de couleur libre*, free, part-black Creoles were accorded special privileges, opportunities, and citizenship not granted to part-Negroes in other states.

The *gens de couleur libre* of Isle Brevelle had been well established since the late eighteenth century. Through generations of "selective breeding" (the members of this settlement only married other individuals of mixed race) a great majority of the members of the community had more typically white phenotypic features than black. Therefore, when miscegenation laws and revised racial classifications took hold in the former French territories, the *gens de couleur libre*, who considered themselves above the slave population, both genetically and socially, suffered immensely. Immediately, the citizenship of the *gens de couleur libre* was revoked and their close associations with the white establishment renegotiated and greatly curtailed. In response, the once close-knit society of Isle Brevelle began to splinter. In order to maintain social standing, many of those individuals who were able to "pass" into the white race relocated and were forced to

sever ties with their darker relations. The *gens de couleur libre* who could not "pass" were lumped into the race "cursed with the brand of slavery" with which they felt no connection ("Désirée's Baby" 158). The political restructuring, which took place around Cloutierville, provides invaluable clues to the understanding of Chopin's fiction for as literary critic Helen Taylor points out in her discussion of the writings of three Louisiana women authors: "[Chopin] could hardly have been oblivious to the many class and race tensions in the area, or to the considerable shifts in economic and social power and influence (especially away from the mulatto community in favor of the wealthy [white] creoles)"(145). Nor could Chopin have overlooked the social threat these persons of mixed blood posed to individuals, such as herself, who dwelt precariously on the margins of whiteness.

Chopin had long been exposed to such political shifting and (re)defining of whiteness, for the author began life as an O'Flaherty at a time when the Irish population was just beginning its ascendancy into "whitehood." Chopin's father came to America on the leading edge of the second wave of Irish immigration, which took place during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Thomas O'Flaherty, along with an inordinately large population of dispossessed Irish Catholics, was fleeing his homeland in search of both religious freedom and economic opportunity. The rationale behind the immediate non-white classification of Irish Catholics is thoroughly discussed in Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*. In his groundbreaking work, Ignatiev explains that "[t]he majority of Irish immigrants to America in the eighteenth century and for the first third of the nineteenth were Presbyterians, descendants of Scots who had been settled in Ireland beginning with Cromwell and carrying on through William and Mary" (39). As a rule

these early Irish arrivals to America were both Protestant (members of a favored "race") and economically more well off (they could hold property under the English Penal Codes) than their fellow countrymen who arrived later. Due to the "racial" status of the Irish Catholics as well as their economic powerlessness, they were grouped both in the workplace and in neighborhoods with blacks. As a result fierce competition ensued between the two oppressed groups, especially in the labor market. Indeed in the southern slave states, the Irish Catholics rather than the black slaves were chosen to perform the most perilous tasks, because if the Irish workers died or became injured the slave owners did not have to be reimbursed; no "property" was damaged.

While Ignatiev goes to great lengths to discuss the early fraternal association between these two groups, citing evidence of large percentages of offspring of mixed ancestry which were born in the areas where both Irish and blacks resided, the communal environment did not last long. In the shadow of the looming Civil War and forthcoming emancipation of the slaves, the Irish Catholic population quickly aligned itself with those forces that railed against abolition. Fearing increased competition from newly freed slaves; the Irish Catholics went about distinguishing themselves socially from the black population.

In moving west to St. Louis, Thomas O'Flaherty, for the most part, escaped the tension of Irish Catholic and African-American economic competition. In St. Louis, where racial categories were not as fixed, O'Flaherty was able to prosper financially and eventually to align himself (through both marriages) with aristocratic Creole families. Ironically, the Creole establishment considered O'Flaherty *too* American, and later Chopin's father-in-law, the very embodiment of French Creole society, considered his

son's wife's ancestry distasteful (Toth 122). As Toth notes in her biography of Chopin, "In the eyes of the old French of St. Louis including [Madame Charleville], ...Thomas was an upstart, without background. He was an Irish at a time when Irishmen were widely assumed to be drunkards, thieves, loafers and rowdies" (26). Although O'Flaherty had prospered financially, he was the exception to the rule for the Irish Catholic in this period of American history. The majority of Irish Catholics in St. Louis lived in a section of the city known as "Kerry Patch," the Irish ghetto, where the greater part of the inhabitants provided labor or domestic service to the wealthier white families. In addition, due to the rebellious nature of slaves during the years prior to emancipation, many whites had replaced them with Irish servants (Toth 57).

Despite his Irish Catholic background, Thomas O'Flaherty proved to be a conscientious, successful social climber. He became involved in numerous community and civic organizations and sent his children to the best Catholic schools. He lived well away from the Irish Catholic area of St. Louis and just as his Creole neighbors, he owned slaves. O'Flaherty thoroughly insulated himself from any companionable association between his family and the base elements (other Irish and African-Americans) of American society through well-calculated decisions. Noticeably, Chopin's lifelong association with her Creole heritage is diametrically contrasted to her disconnectedness to her Irish legacy. Although much of Chopin's disassociation can easily be attributed to her father's untimely death, it also seems quite possible that the social status of the Irish-American population in the nineteenth century caused the author much trepidation.

The author's repugnance for "Americans" became compounded upon her marriage to Aurelian Roselius "Oscar" Chopin on June 9, 1870. Oscar, the son of a French-born

physician, belonged completely to the old French-Creole culture of Louisiana and was raised on his family's plantation in Natchitoches Parish. His father was a slave owner renowned for his ill treatment of his slaves "who had always hated everything American" and took the Chopin family to France to live during the Civil War (Toth 92). Oscar Chopin's father, by the time of his son's marriage, was headquartered in New Orleans. The members of the Chopin family were undeniably Creole, "who prided themselves on their pure French and Spanish descent[s]...Oscar Chopin's people—still spoke more French than English" (Toth 95). After a lengthy honeymoon in Europe, Kate and Oscar returned to a home just outside the French Quarter in New Orleans. During the period of Reconstruction in the South, due to increased concern over what the white establishment felt was the government's attempt to empower the blacks at the expense of the whites, the Crescent City White League—a white supremacist organization—was formed, of which Oscar became a member. Although there is no evidence that Chopin shared her husband's political ideologies, she must have nevertheless been exposed to and thus affected by his beliefs.

The Chopin family stayed in New Orleans until 1879 when, to save money, they returned to Oscar's family plantation in Cloutierville. Three years later, Oscar died of malaria leaving Chopin a thirty-two-year-old widow with six children and very much in debt. After returning with her children to her mother's home in St. Louis, Chopin began her literary career. As a means of reflection upon her adopted home state, most of her fiction is based on her years in Louisiana and incorporates representations of the situations and individuals she encountered during her married life.

In relating the socio-political forces which shaped Kate Chopin's literary career, I am by no means insinuating the author's subscription to any racist ideologies *per se*. On the contrary, her fiction deals with the non-white presence and the exposure of the permeability of the boundaries of whiteness in exactly the way one would expect it to be treated by a Southern woman who, depending on the social situation during a tumultuous period of American history, may not be considered white herself. Precisely because of her seemingly unconscious transmission and transference of whiteness, Kate Chopin's work provides an exemplary starting point from which to launch an examination of the formation of the rhetoric of whiteness in American fiction.

Chapter Two (Re)presenting Whiteness

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell like it is but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed.

bell hooks, *Black Looks*

It should be implicit that essential to the understanding of any work of fiction is the comprehension that the characters, despite their *assumed* resemblance to persons living or dead, are not "(re)presentations," but rather "creations" which spring full grown from the author's mind. As Toni Morrison points out when she writes that it was as a writer rather than a reader that she began to note the significance of the Africanist presence in American fiction; this presence is at once seminal and shaped, menacing and threatened. It is imperative to remember that Kate Chopin, while having contact with the non-white Other throughout her life, created characters based on her perceptions of their thoughts and aspirations, assigning these individuals attributes which she had first witnessed and then filtered through her own subjective lens—a lens, which had been fashioned by her experiences, personal desires, and fears; the lens of a Southern, white woman living in a tumultuous period of American history. In doing so, Chopin made familiar that which she did not "know" and attempted to gain jurisdiction over the uncontrollable. Her determination led Chopin to create non-white characters and imbue them with the qualities she both believed and desired them to possess. These fictive creations were meant to reinforce the immutability of white power, authority, and concepts of civilization. What they ultimately do, however, is wrest away control of the texts and expose the instability of white rhetoric.

At Fault

Despite a blossoming literary career in short stories and juvenile fiction, Chopin was unable to get a publisher to accept her initial novel, *At Fault* (1890). She resorted to shouldering the expense of its publication herself and, shortly after receiving the copies from the printer, sent approximately a thousand of them out for distribution and review. With a few notable exceptions, primarily from personal acquaintances in the literary establishment, the criticism was far from favorable. Local critics were of mixed opinion. While some praised her for the "authentic" representations of Louisiana life, others condemned her for her less than flattering portrayals of St. Louis women. National recognition came in the form of one review, which appeared in *The Nation* on October 1, 1891, nearly a year after the book's authorial circulation. The reviewer penned a mocking response to the novel yet ended on a positive note classifying Chopin as a talented "local-color" writer (Toth 192-93). Although the book had gained the author some attention, Chopin's first novel was essentially a failure.¹

The reason for the literary "failure" of the novel, while having much to do with the immature storyline and surprisingly simplistic writing style employed, is due in part to the inability of its readers to follow the plot line from which the title is taken and meant to be an indicator. The very issue of uncertainty is precisely the point of contention raised by the reviewer of *The Nation* in her criticism of the novel, as well as the literary critic of the *Natchitoches Enterprise*. "It is not quite clear who is cast in the title-rôle in *At Fault*," writes *The Nation's* reviewer, "since all the characters have valid

¹ The novel was not reprinted until The Green Street Press picked it up in 1957 after which it once again went out of print until the mid-1980's. However, in the light of recent feminist scholarship, of which Kate Chopin has been a focus (due primarily to her later novel *The Awakening*), the University of Tennessee Press will release a critical edition of *At Fault* in May of 2001.

pretensions to the part." *The Nation* further argues that, "It may not be amiss in deciding who is 'At Fault' to consider as well the claims of the author, the publisher, and the reader" (quoted in Toth 192-93). However, it was the review in the *Natchitoches Enterprise*, which cited the alcoholic Fanny Hosmer as the heroine who is "At Fault" that prompted Chopin to take action to clear up the matter. Chopin's rebuttal appeared in the *Enterprise*, under the headline AT FAULT. A CORRECTION:

Thérèse Lafirme, the heroine of the book is the one who was at fault—remotely, and immediately. Remotely—in her blind acceptance of an undistinguishing, therefore unintelligent code of righteousness by which to deal out judgments. Immediately—in this, that unknowing of the individual needs of this man and this woman, she should yet constitute herself not only as mentor, but an instrument in reuniting them. (qtd. in Toth 194)

Clearly, Chopin had created the novel with Thérèse Lafirme, the Creole woman, as both heroine and symbol of authority. With the one exception of Fanny's ill-fated reunion with her miller (ex)husband David Hosmer, for which the intended protagonist accepts blame only at the very end of the novel, the author highlights correct white authority. A mistake in judgment on the part of the heroine, according to Chopin, is significant enough to give rise to the novel's title. The narrative is patterned in such a manner that at every turn Thérèse doles out her control in the form of caring advice and reprimands; without fail, when the advice goes unheeded disaster strikes and the white woman's irreproachable values are reinforced. In effect, the book evolves into little more than an exploration and exercise in the buttressing of white female authority. Thus, as George

Washington Cable before her, Chopin makes a valiant attempt to confirm the unsullied "whiteness" of the Creole establishment, which was intended to serve as the unifying theme and the motivational force within the text.

The ways by which the structuring of authoritative whiteness is enacted deserves detailed observation; for the enactment takes place at the expense (both physical and psychological) of the Africanist or non-white presence. Indeed, the reader learns that Thérèse has only recently assumed her role as authority figure following the death of her husband, Jerome. It is upon learning from the "Uncle Tom" character Hiram that the precious cotton seed is being stolen from the plantation that "the handsome, inconsolable, childless Creole widow of thirty...[is moved] to action [by the] tangible abuse and defiance of authority" (4-5). The "authority" to which Chopin refers is unquestionably the omnipotent white authority; following the death of Jerome Lafirme, there is no authority figure to be defied. Up until the widow appoints herself as master of the plantation, she has held no authoritative position other than that of a white woman. However, her decision to accept the sacred trust "brought consolation and awakened unsuspected powers of doing" (5). From this point forward in the text, Thérèse moves among the other characters dispensing her irreproachable judgment in regards to morality, manners and acceptable personal behavior.

As a means of highlighting Thérèse's authority, Chopin enlists a cast of non-white characters to reinforce the Creole widows white dominion. In a paraphrase of Aldon Lynn Nielson's main conclusions in *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse of the Twentieth Century*, AnnLouise Keating comments:

In the numerous racist stereotypes [Nielson] describes, representations of 'blackness' take a variety of sometimes contradictory forms yet have one thing in common: in each instance, they exist to affirm the validity and power of 'whiteness.' By depicting people of African descent as lazy, carefree, unsophisticated, and primitive...many...writers locate 'blackness' outside the western cultural traditions. ...this racist stereotyping serves an important role by reinforcing already existing beliefs in the superiority of 'white' aesthetics. (89)

While Nielson's study focused on poets of the twentieth century, the same charge can be made against Chopin. For without fail she uses the very same stereotypes later employed by her literary successors to establish the indisputable authority of the plantation mistress.

A case in point is the author's inclusion of the mulatto character Joçint who, early in the text, becomes the recipient of Thérèse's newfound authority. As Naomi Zack notes in her work *Race and Mixed Race*, "[b]oth black and white nineteenth-century literature employed the tragedy of the mulatto, a stereotype of situations as well as individuals" (129). Creatively, Chopin presents the reader with a twist, for her tragic mulatto Joçint is the offspring of a black Creole father and an Indian mother. With the one exception of Joçint's heritage in place, seemingly of the common belief that "mixed blood combines the worst traits of both races" (Berzon 59), the author goes on to depict the mulatto just as many of her white literary contemporaries would have done, as a menace to the society to which he belongs. As Judith R. Berzon notes in *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*, almost universally, "[t]he tragic mulatto character [in nineteenth century literature] is an outcast, a wanderer, one alone. He is the fictional

symbol of marginality. Rejected out of fear and hatred by the dominant group, he is often rejected out of envy and hatred by the lower caste as well" (100).

Chopin represents Joçint as the doomed mulatto, destined to perpetrate violence against his fellow man. Physically, the young mulatto is described as having an "ugly countenance" with "coarse black hair [that] hung in a heavy mop over his low retreating forehead, almost meeting the ill-defined line of eyebrow that straggled above small dusky black eyes" (29). As Chopin synchronizes the character's simian appearance with his disagreeable temperament, there is no surprise for the reader when he commits what is presented as the most *heinous* crime against society of the novel; the author has laid the groundwork for just such a fall. In the earliest description of Joçint's demeanor he is described as "an unruly subject, inclined to the surreptitious defiance of authority. Repeatedly [sic] had been given work on the plantation and as many times dismissed for various causes" (25). Conjuring up the history of slave parent-child relationships, where the slave master's authority subjugates the family bonds and the slave parents are natally dead to their offspring, Joçint early on is estranged from his father Morico, who has surrendered his paternal rights to the "gentle influence" of his mistress.² Morico laments, "Joçint is a bad son, madame [Thérèse], when *even you* have been able to do nothing with him" (emphasis mine 27). In his suspicion of the boy, Morico accuses his son of stealing liquor, which has been left sitting on the table, not believing that Fanny, who was also present, could have performed such an act. Even Joçint's eating habits are noted as

² In her discussion of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in *Playing in the Dark* Morrison notes that slaves are not parents, with no obligations to their offspring and thus "natally dead." In Cather's novel Nancy's mother Till in her loyalty to her mistress, Sapphira, is unable to provide maternal protection and instruction to her daughter. Till, like Morico, has relinquished her parental rights to her mistress.

indiscriminating, further developing the *savage* nature of the sole mulatto. Chopin provides the following graphic description:

He cut a wedge from the round loaf heavy soggy cornbread...added a layer of fat pork, and proceeded to devour the unpalatable morsel with a hungry relish...He swallowed the water regardless of the 'wiggles' whose presence was plainly visible. (28)

The vulgar choice of the mulatto to drink the water despite the presence of larvae serves as a testament to his disposition.

Numerous characters, both black and white, express their concerns regarding the "unmanageable" mulatto, viewing him as a challenge to authority and a menace to the "civilized" community. In direct opposition to the superstitious beliefs held by the plantation's black population, Joçint, presented as evil incarnate, ventures out on *Tous-saint' eve* (All Saint's Eve/Halloween) "feeling a close fellowship with [the] spirits of the night and darkness with no more fear in his heart than the unheeded serpent crossing his path" to perform his wicked act of defiance, mill burning. (128) Apparently, due to his sub-human nature, the miscegenated Joçint "... wanted no daylight to guide him. Had his eyes been blinded he would have no doubt have bent his body close to the earth and scented his way along like the human hound that he was" (128). In one of the most troubling scenes within the novel Joçint, on his journey to destroy the mill and afraid of being heard, performs a horrifying lynching of his dog, further establishing his primal nature:

Joçint's...hand glided quickly into his pocket, from which he drew forth a coil of thin rope that he flung deftly over the animal's head, drawing it

close and tight about the homely, shaggy throat. So quickly was the action done, that no sound was uttered, and Joçint continued his way untroubled by his old and faithful friend, whom he left hanging to the limb of a tree.

(128)

Arriving at the mill and fearing that someone is lying in ambush, the mulatto waits "with the patience of a savage" for over an hour before entering. Eventually, Joçint sets fire to the mill, a symbol of the white power structure and industrialization—an essential ingredient to the evolutionary progress of civilization—and, as he attempts to flee, is shot by Grégoire, the nephew of the plantation's matriarch. The mill, a tangible symbol of intrusive industry, Northern industrialism, and the encroachment of civilization upon nature, is ultimately the recipient of Joçint's "open revolt." A poignant scene follows when Morico, who at the last possible moment accedes to his paternal role and struggles to pull his dead son's body away from the burning building, accuses the white establishment of murdering Joçint and then collapses and dies. The crime against property solved and both son and father dead, the next chapter opens with the following comment about the shooting of Joçint: "[I]t was thought in a measure justified by the heinousness of his offense, and beyond dispute, a benefit to the community" (135).

To confirm the white characters' response to the incident, the Negro community, to which the mulatto never truly belongs,

...was a good deal of one opinion in regard to Joçint having been properly served in getting 'w'at he done ben lookin' fu' dis long time.' Grégoire was rather looked upon as a clever instrument in the Lord's service; and the occurrence pointed a moral which they were not likely to forget. (136)

The "moral," not needing further elaboration, is not to challenge the white establishment and/or its concept of civilization or be prepared to pay the ultimate penalty.

And thus ends the all too predictable saga of the tragic mulatto in Chopin's earliest novel, in which the character himself has fewer than a dozen lines. He has served his function of proving the unerring supremacy of all-powerful, all-conquering whiteness and is discarded. Through her presentation, the author's conventional opinion regarding the character of mixed race is discernable. Whether the progeny of white and black or black Creole and Indian, miscegenation to Chopin clearly produces "bad" blood.

Throughout the novel Joçint's shooter, Grégoire, is presented as the foil to the uncivilized character of mixed blood. The young Creole boy's desire "to do what he liked" is viewed with a literary shake of the head as nothing more than the "reckless fashion peculiar to Southern youth" (5). However, Joçint's similar yearning to be free from the demands from work on the plantation and at the mill is unambiguously a sign of his rebellious nature and lazy attitude. Further in direct contrast to the death of Joçint, when the hotheaded Grégoire is shot and killed while attempting to integrate a nearby tavern as a means of showing his superiority over the white men in attendance (despite the protestations of both the black and white recruits), "none could remember but sweetness and kindness of him" (176). Once again, Chopin seizes the opportunity to speak for the Negro community when she elaborates that "[e]ven [the Negro servant] Nathan, who had been one day felled to earth by a crowbar in Grégoire's hand, had come to look at the deed as not altogether blamable in the light of the provocation that had called it forth" (176). The latter, obligatory elaboration on the part of Chopin, which establishes Nathan not as the victim, but rather at fault in the confrontation between

himself and Grégoire, is clearly the author's attempt to dispel any concern that the death of the "reckless Southern youth" could be anything other than a tragedy that greatly affected the *entire* community. Indeed, even Hosmer's sister and Grégoire's sweetheart, the fair Millicent who is traumatized by the shooting of Joçint, becomes indifferent to the event when she learns of Grégoire's untimely death.

Chopin's initial treatment of the retired, black Creole servant Marie Louise is a significant improvement upon that of the mulatto character Joçint, and yet here, too, the author reiterates the stereotypes of the late nineteenth century. Having accompanied Thérèse to the Lafirme plantation, Place-du-Bois, from New Orleans on the occasion of her wedding, Marie Louise, affectionately referred to as *Grosse Tante*, has been with her mistress since the latter was an infant.³ Nevertheless, Chopin's choice of vocabulary in regards to the woman leave no doubt that racial awareness underlies all interactions between these two characters. The author makes the social differentiation apparent in both her racialized description of the old woman as well as the physical positioning of the characters within the scene. An overwrought Thérèse visits Marie Louise's cabin, knowing that she will be comforted. The young mistress takes a seat and immediately "with her big soft hands [the black servant began] stroking [Thérèse's] head as gently as if those hands had been the whitest and most delicate" (112). The previous description of Marie Louise is just one of many occasions in the texts when the servants are referred to in metonymical terms. Chopin employs the use of "the hands" not only in reference to Marie Louise, but also when she is earlier surveying her vast possessions. The focus on the black woman's hands is significant, for "hands" are later equated with the labor force.

³ "Fat aunt." A commonly used French term of endearment.

The author reduces Negroes in the field picking cotton to their nimble fingers; "no machine having yet been found to surpass the sufficiency of five human fingers for wrenching cotton from its tenacious hold" (52). Through Chopin's reductive measures, the black characters are subhumanized, rendering their humanity invisible to whites and thus easily replaceable. Indeed, by the end of the novel, even the black characters formerly named in the text have been reduced in the eyes of Thérèse to nothing more than a "troublesome body of blacks" (203).

The author also finds it important to mention that despite the fact that Thérèse, in a display of all her white power, has intruded into the black woman's cabin, when the two are enjoying their coffee, the younger woman is seated at the table, but "*Grosse tante* [sic] also drinking her cup—[is] seated apart" (112). Ever the devoted servant to the white establishment, Marie Louise's next cameo appearance in the novel occurs when Fanny, the alcoholic wife of Thérèse's true love, David Hosmer, needs a place to escape to following an argument with her husband. Marie Louise's part is short-lived, for immediately thereafter she and the inebriated Fanny are swept into the river, shrouded in the old servant's cabin. Chopin once again exerts the superior intellect of Thérèse when the fateful event is foreshadowed in the earlier meeting between mistress and servant. The concerned Thérèse advises the black woman to move back to the plantation or have her cabin relocated away from the banks of the river. The resolute Marie Louise, in her complete disregard of the warning, ultimately pays the price for questioning the astute judgment of her mistress and thus assumes the fault for her own demise.

The attempted rescue and eventual death of Fanny provokes a significant stir, yet Marie Louise is sent to her watery grave with the following passing comment: "Of Marie

Louise there was no sign" (198). At this point the old servant ceases to exist both as a character and as a memory, for a palpable silence ensues. Despite the closeness felt between Marie Louise and Thérèse Lafirme, the latter never asks about the fate of the her dear old *Grosse Tante*. Indeed, when the young mistress reflects back upon the incident she remembers it as, "[t]he picture of that one terrible day of *Fanny's* death" (emphasis mine 203). Marie Louise has served her purpose as the caretaker of the white women in the novel and is simply dismissed. The characters of Marie Louise and Joçint have followed the pattern mentioned earlier: they receive authorial advice, ignore it, and pay the ultimate consequence for their defiance. Had the author allowed the characters to go unpunished in their noncompliance of Thérèse's instruction, the white establishment and claims to superiority would have been undermined, exposing the rectitude of white civilization.

For the most part, the remainder of the non-white characters in the text are meant to function as framing to the whites around whom the story is meant to revolve. They serve as comic relief and as mere features of the textual landscape, essentially remaining "unseen" by the white characters. Just as black characters are essentially invisible to the white characters, whites assume they are similarly invisible to non-whites. Through the control of the black gaze, whites select when they wish to be seen. When the servant Sampson rolls "his big black eyeballs towards Fanny," (94) it is understood that boy has committed a blunder, for the gaze of a black man should never rest upon the countenance of a white woman. bell hooks points out in *Black Looks* that

[a]n effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered around white control of the black gaze. Black

slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, or appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe or see. (168)⁴

As evidenced in an exchange between Fanny and Sampson, which is later recalled as his "insinuating advances of friendliness" (148), Chopin's desire to control the black gaze is apparent. The author allows Fanny, the weaker character, to be the recipient of the uncontrolled black gaze, in order to establish further Thérèse's unquestioned authority.

In appearance, Fanny is of typical Nordic ancestry, and thus is originally assumed to possess the innocence associated with whiteness. As Thomas Ross points out in his essay "White Innocence, Black Abstraction", "[t]he argument for the white person's innocence in matters of race connects with cultural ideas of innocence and defilement. The very contrast between the colors black and white, is often a symbol for the contrast between innocence and defilement" (263). However, by Creole standards the "American" Fanny is morally corrupt and is quickly aligned with the black establishment. Fanny's association with the black servants hinges upon her alcoholism. It is Morico who offers the recovering alcoholic her first drop of whiskey and it becomes the black community that is complicit in providing the evil substance to her. In effect the "insinuating" Sampson becomes Fanny's enabler: the two have worked out a scheme by which Fanny clandestinely (from the white community at least) receives her desired dosage of liquor: "[Sampson] drew something from his rather capacious coat pocket, and satisfying himself that Hosmer slept, thrust it in the bottom of the basket.... Fanny

⁴ As Morrison comments in *Playing in the Dark*, in regards to appearance of black characters in the novels of white authors, "Africans and their descendants were not, in any sense that matters, *there*; and when they were there, they were decorative—displays of the agile writer's technical expertise" (16).

hastened to the hanging basket, and fumbling in its depths, found what the complaisant Sampson had left for her" (150). While the secret exchange must be kept from the whites in the narrative the seemingly immoral black community contributes to the undoing of the alcoholic.

Additionally, through the assignment of animal-like qualities to the servants, describing Sampson as possessing an "ape-like body" (94) and Major's "little black paws" (186), coupled with the numerous references to the servants African origins which produced a "savage instinct as past generations had left there in dormant survival" (26), the author's essentialist views regarding the black population can be discerned. The subhuman status of the black person provided the rationale behind the American voting population's "choices first to enslave and thereafter to segregate blacks. Slavery became legally coherent when the subject was not human" (Ross 264-65). By means of these representations Chopin attempts to widen the chasm between the "white" Creole population and what she treats as the bestial black *species*.

Through the exchange of alcohol for clothing, Sampson becomes complicit in Fanny's abuse of alcohol. While Chopin presents Fanny's alcoholism as an illness the white characters are determined to help her overcome, the black servants Sampson and Morico, in making the alcohol available to the substance abuser, become equally guilty parties. Although Grégoire offers to take Fanny to a tavern in a nearby town, he never does so thereby absolving him of responsibility for her downfall. In designating the black characters as Fanny's "partners in crime", Chopin successfully maintains the opposition between the innocence of whiteness and the guilt of blackness and further buttresses the belief in an overly homogenized "American" population.

"Désirée's Baby"

In the short story "Désirée's Baby," also set in the Cane River country of Northwestern Louisiana, Chopin addresses the issues of miscegenation, which preoccupied many writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the question of racial purity through unknown identity. In the story, Désirée, seemingly the apotheosis of white wifedom and motherhood, discovers that the son she has borne her slaveholding husband, Armand Aubigny, is of mixed race. Through her explanation of Désirée's questionable origins, Chopin places doubt in the reader's mind of her character's racial composition. Once again, however, the author subversively includes stereotypical hints as to which of the characters is the product of miscegenation. Looking closely at the descriptions provided in the text, one is able to deduce that the darkness resides both figuratively and literally in Armand. All things associated with this character are dark and foreboding: "The roof [of the Aubigny plantation home, L'Abri] came down steep and *black like a cowl*, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big *solemn oaks* grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far reaching branches *shadowed it like a pall*" (emphases mine 638). Although very ingenious in her presentation, Chopin employs the use of dark images, which not only establish the mulatto nature of Armand, but also attempt to establish the contrasting "whiteness" of Désirée. According to Naomi Zack in her discussion of "Mulattoes in Fiction," "[m]ixed race male heroes were...variously doomed, noble, and menacing, depending on the ideology of the writer" (130).

The demeanor of the mixed-raced Armand is also presented as something akin to evil. Originally, noted as a strict slave-master, under whom "his negroes had forgotten to

be gay," Armand is later accused of possessing "the very spirit of Satan," (638-39). Even in his courtship of Désirée, his destructive obsession is what rules: "The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles" (638). Similar description accompanies his banishment of Désirée and their baby from L'Abri and his life. After the initial confrontation between the two regarding the baby's obvious dual ancestry, Désirée asks her husband if she should return to her mother's home and take the child. The following exchange takes place:

"Yes, go."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes, I want you to go."

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul. (640)

Shortly after their departure, Armand, in a fit of vengeful rage, has a bonfire built to burn the entirety of his wife and son's belongings. The horrific scene of the fiery destruction of the baby's "graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings," along with Désirée's "silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones," (640-41) immediately before he discovers the letter which reveals his parents' secret regarding the race of his mother, leads to the correlation that it is Armand's dual-ancestry which causes him to act irrationally. Like Chopin's earlier mulatto, Joçint, Armand acts as the embodiment of fiendishness. Both are the instruments of their own downfall, and both are seen last in the light of a blazing inferno. Armand's slaves further complement their master's

demonic disposition as they fiendishly attend the blazing pyre burning all semblances of whiteness.

Through her ambiguity regarding Désirée's origins, Chopin purposely confuses the reader by enlisting commonly held assumptions held by the white American population. Armand's genealogy is difficult for the white reader to question since he possesses "one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana" (638). Although initially there is no mention made of his mother's racial classification, the mere fact that Armand's father, "old Monsieur Aubigny...married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well to ever leave it" (638), highlights the commonly held notion that European ancestry and/or nationality can be equated with whiteness. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek explain in "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," that "...the vision of whiteness is bounded by national borders and recenters whiteness," thereby conflating nationality and race and empowering whiteness (300).

Taking a different approach, Anna Shannon Elfenbein suggests that Armand is aware of his dual ancestry prior to the discovery of the letter:

In marrying Désirée, so visibly white, and in fathering a baby also apparently white, at least for three months, Armand may have assuaged his secret subconscious racial fears. A dark-skinned aristocrat who may vaguely remember his racially mixed mother (he was eight years old when he left Paris, where his parents lived together), Armand is the only racially obsessed character in Chopin's story. (126)⁵

⁵ Although this argument is plausible given the wording of the text, Elfenbein makes two assumptions which lack solid evidence. (1) Although, we do know that Armand's mother does have some black blood, there is no indication as to what percentage. Essentially, she may be fully black and not "racially mixed" at

Chopin intentionally leaves the question of Armand's level of awareness regarding his mother's race, as well as numerous others, unanswered. Her ambiguity increases the tension and heightens the fears of miscegenation. For as Daniel Aaron points out in his essay "The 'Inky Curse': Miscegenation in the White American Literary Imagination," "[does] not the impossibility of determining precisely when a person could be declared white or black undermine the American social structure?" (179).

At the close of the story, the reader has learned that Armand, the "white" aristocrat, whose family has been in Louisiana for several generations, is a mulatto, both through the revealing letter and through Chopin's stereotypical descriptions. However, the ancestry of Désirée, is still undisclosed as well as exactly what she saw in the little quadroon boy that clued her in to her own child's mixed blood. Is the skin color of the two boys similar or do they both have typical African phenotypic traits? Both of these possibilities exist. If it is the latter, then blackness has been defamiliarized in whiteness. Furthermore, Armand compares Désirée's skin color to that of the mulatto woman La Blanche, and rather conspicuously it is mentioned earlier that, "Armand heard [the baby's cry]...as far away as La Blanche's cabin" (638), further suggesting that the two may have had a sexual liaison and he may be the father of her quadroon boys. Chopin's vagueness in these matters functions in just the manner intended. The white American reader concludes the text with the disquieting thought that it is impossible to tell one's racial make-up, and that anyone in this "melting pot," despite his/her position on the social matrix may actually be the product of miscegenation. Thus, while seemingly Chopin's

all. (2) Désirée's racial make-up is also left undisclosed at the end of the story. She may in actuality be of mixed blood.

intention is to reverse racial stereotype, she in fact reinforces it through her vilification of blackness.

The Awakening

In what has become her most celebrated work and final novel, *The Awakening* (1895), Kate Chopin's ability to manipulate language as a means of calling into question white America's social identity is masterfully put to use. Once again her typecasting of the black characters is clichéd; however, it is through the multitude of other essentially "non-white" characters that Chopin locates the aforementioned "Africanist" presence. Within her last text the non-white characters unequivocally fall into the margins.

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of the work, is strategically positioned as an outsider in relation to the Creole society of New Orleans into which she has married. The story centers on her, "solitary rebellion against bourgeois marriage and motherhood and against the paralyzing aimlessness and alienation she experiences as a privileged *white* woman" (Elfenbein 142). To clarify the character's rather difficult position, Edna is seen as an Other by the Victorian Creole society of New Orleans, yet she of course is not ranked among the "non-white" characters in the novel. Essentially, the story is multi-layered in that the primary Other (Edna), along with the (Creole) characters, participates in the Othering of the "non-white" characters. It is through the genius on the part of Chopin that this complicated system of stratification emerges.

Like the character of Armand Aubigny in "Désirée's Baby," Edna is descended from an old southern family: "[She] talked about her father's Mississippi plantation and her girlhood in the old Kentucky blue-grass country. She was an American woman, with

a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution" (6). Thus, in her designation as American, simply by the negation of her European heritage, Edna is immediately figuratively removed from Creole society, which prides itself on the purity of its French and Spanish lineage. In contrast to the far from glowing description of Edna is the essentialist approach the author takes when describing the Creole people. Chopin in her praise of them writes:

A characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable. (11)

If the reader is unable to determine the apparent Othering of Edna, Chopin drives the point home in a warning from the heroine's Creole friend Madame Adèle Ratignolle to Edna's future lover Robert Lebrun, in response to his flirtation with Edna. "She is not one of us; she is not like us" proclaims Mrs. Ratignolle, "She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (21). Thus Chopin has firmly established Edna's position as Creole outsider in the text. As a diluted "American" Edna is ultimately unable to "know" herself. The plot of the story involves the character's revelation that she cannot live up to the standards "white" society has set for her. Through comparisons of her own beliefs with those of the Creole women Edna learns that she is unwilling to sacrifice herself for her sons, Etienne and Raoul. She tells Madame Ratignolle, "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (48). After falling in love with the younger Robert, who

ultimately refuses to be with her after she separates from her husband Léonce Pontellier, Edna finally realizes that he and her sons would be scandalized and continue to suffer if she were to live her life by the dictates of her desires. In the end Edna swims out to sea committing suicide.

Typical of the Victorian bourgeois society in which the story is set, Edna Pontellier's sons are cared for by a quadroon nurse. Chopin enforces silence in regard to the woman who essentially serves as a surrogate mother to Edna's offspring. Although often mentioned by her racial designation, the narrative never discloses the "quadroon's" name. Chopin presents the quadroon nurse as a "huge encumbrance" (9), who follows the Pontellier boys like a pet, "at the respectful distance which they required her to observe" (13). Indeed, when the children go to their paternal grandmother's to stay while the Pontellier house is remodeled, "their quadroon" is "carried off" with them (72). One deduces that although the proto-feminist Edna is unable to make the sacrifice of giving herself completely to her children, the same need for freedom does not cross racial boundaries and apply itself to the "quadroon" nurse as well. Like the nurse, racial classification "names" virtually all of the black characters. The notable exception is the "respectable family of mulattoes" that Edna encounters on her search for her musician friend Mademoiselle Reisz; apparently, Chopin employs the adjective "respectable" to describe the racially mixed Pouppone family in order to deter the reader from assuming otherwise. Chopin's treatment of her non-white characters is predictable: she has done little more than firmly delineate between the members of society to which her story of personal female freedom applies and to those it most definitely does not.

The author's creative ability is most noticeable in the descriptions of characters that fit neither of these two racial categories. Sensuality marks Mariequita, the young "Spanish" girl with whom Robert has had a liaison. Her physical attributes are those of a sly, devious being. It is apparent that the girl's morals are far removed from those of the Creole women; Robert and his younger brother Victor have both claimed the girl as his own at one time or another. In similar fashion both Robert and Edna's earlier lover Alcéé Arobin discuss the *generosity* (both material and sexual) of the girls in Vera Cruz upon the former's return from Mexico, where he retreats to distance himself physically and emotionally from Edna. Speaking of a Mexican woman who gave him a handmade pouch, Robert remarks that, "[s]he was very ordinary. She wasn't of the slightest importance. I knew her well enough" (100). Throughout the text these non-white characters are assigned the common stereotypes designating both their "inferior" racial classification as well as their subordinate class position, thereby, serving as a screen onto which Chopin's white fears, and possibly desires, are projected.

Chopin's noticeable differentiation between those who can benefit from self-discovery and those who must remain in their assigned place on the social ladder highlights her obvious embrace of the concept of white privilege. In having the protagonist inhabit a marginalized space and failing to prosper, Chopin has merely widened the gap between the "white," Eurocentric culture and the bastardized American culture to which Edna belongs. Edna's inability to succeed as a wife and mother because of her competing desires can be read as a condemnation of the heterogeneity of American society; it can be inferred that were she of undiluted European blood and not so unlike the

Creole population, she may possibly have "never made the unfortunate blunder of taking [Robert's attention] seriously" (21).

As Nakayama and Krizek point out in their co-authored essay, historically speaking, "white means not having any other 'blood lines' to make it impure. Unlike other categories, one can only be white by not being anything else" (299). Through the fear of miscegenation within her own family, an early distaste and distrust for all things American and the need to support the whiteness of the Creole population, Chopin ultimately delivers a warning to the "white" population of America. Fully realizing the correlation between the institution of slavery and the mixing of blood among the nation's inhabitants, Chopin plays on the population's fears of miscegenation by effectively highlighting the possibility of indeterminable ancestry and the fusion of bloodlines into one homogenous race. In doing so she establishes her idea of "whiteness" and the privileges that accompany that designation. For the Creole Thérèse Lafirme, her pure ancestry and moral conviction is rewarded with a man of upstanding character, while the morally weak, "American" Fanny comes to an untimely end. Armand Aubigny, along with Désirée and his son, is punished for his father's sin of falling in love with and marrying a woman with African ancestry, while similarly Edna Pontellier loses her life because she is unable to embrace her life as a "white" woman and is incapable of surviving her *awakening* as the diluted "American" Other.

Chapter Three (Un)whitening Through Whiteness

The great majority of recent scholarship surrounding the literary accomplishments of Kate Chopin (of which *The Awakening* has received the lion's share) has been feminist interpretations focusing primarily upon the author's unorthodox treatment of Victorian women's social positions in Southern society. Few interpretations, however, have provided more than passing comments on the ways in which the Africanist or non-white presence functions in her work, thereby largely disregarding the intersectionality of race and gender and all of the resulting implications.¹ Anna Shannon Elfenbein and Helen Taylor each supply notable exceptions. In *Women on the Color Line*, Elfenbein devotes an enlightening chapter to Kate Chopin's utilization of the racial Other in her exploration of the sexual evolution of the author's female characters and Helen Taylor provides a superior discussion of the roles racial classification and geographic location play in the literary works of three Louisiana women writers in *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin*. While both scholars are incredibly thorough in their examinations, neither notes the ways in which Chopin, in her ability to question and challenge the existing social situation in regards to women, enforces notions of "whiteness" and white privilege through the vilification of "blackness." Indeed, both Elfenbein and Taylor view Chopin's major writing flaw as her refusal to allow her white female characters their full awakening to and identification with the non-white individuals—or as Toni Morrison terms them—the Africanist

¹ Here, I use the terms "Africanist presence" and "non-white" interchangeably as a means of referring to all individuals and the corresponding stereotypic characteristics of those who are not classified as "white." The concept of the Africanist presence, as I use it, originated with Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, where she explains that the African population more so than any other non-white population, provided a easily identifiable, oppressed Other by which white America defined itself in establishing an ideology of freedom, morality, privilege, and inalienable rights.

presences of the narratives. A deeper evaluation reveals that it is the white female characters' *overidentification* with these non-white individuals and their resulting self-degradation that leads to the women's individual destructions. What Chopin ultimately accomplishes is the "defamiliarization" of her heroines by assigning them racialized characteristics and personality flaws and vices which are not commonly associated with whiteness in general and with white women in particular. The author thereby unconsciously destabilizes the ideology of whiteness as it existed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The concept of "defamiliarization" as explained by its originator the Formalist theoretician Victor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Technique," is a method of presentation in which the author makes the familiar—in this instance blackness—appear unfamiliar by cloaking it in the guise of white womanhood, thereby complicating previously held associations and rote responses (18). Chopin effectively defamiliarizes her white heroines by highlighting their "white" exteriors while simultaneously emphasizing their "blackened" inner selves. In doing so she destabilizes previously held notions about the connections between white individuals and whiteness and closes the "racial" gap between "whites" and "Others". Concurrently, she reinforces associations between morality and whiteness and immorality and the non-white.

For Elfenbein, Taylor, and myself, the female characters' struggle to discover and/or redefine their feminine autonomous identities within male dominated Victorian society is at the forefront of much of Chopin's writing. But unlike Elfenbein and Taylor, who perceive the characters' developments as independent from their relationships to the non-white presences, I contend that they occur in direct response to and attempted

disassociation from the Africanist Others. In both of Chopin's novels, *At Fault* and *The Awakening*, as well as in her short story "Désirée's Baby," it is the white female characters' fall from the grace of whiteness into the realm of the non-white—a realm they neither understand nor are willing to inhabit and their resulting unwhitening—that necessitates their deaths. Moreover, throughout these three texts, the vices with which the female characters are identified are qualities Chopin links to the non-white characters, leading to a direct correlation between the Africanist presence and immorality while simultaneously reestablishing the moral superiority of whiteness.

The demise of the white female protagonist transpires in all three of the aforementioned literary works. In addition, the deaths of Fanny, (arguably a more unifying character than Thérèse Lafirme), Edna, and Désirée, respectively, follow each character's psychological "unwhitening" and (mis)alignment with the non-white Other.² Despite the inner unwhitenings the women experience, Chopin reminds the reader that all three remain pointedly physically white, highlighting the incongruity of their inner and outer selves and the incompatibility of their physical and moral profiles.

When *At Fault* was first published, Chopin was condemned by contemporary critics for addressing the taboo literary topics of divorce and female alcoholism. Her premiere novel clearly foreshadowed the author's later challenges to the social and literary boundaries of propriety in polite fiction that led to her ostracism by the scholarly

² Although Chopin vehemently argued that Thérèse Lafirme was the protagonist of *At Fault*, I tend to agree with the critic of *The Nation* who in an 1891 review of the novel identified Fanny Hosmer as such. Fanny's story is the unifying theme of the work uniting St. Louis and Place-du-Bois and their respective inhabitants. Further, Fanny is instrumental in all of the deaths that take place in the narrative, either directly or indirectly. It is after she steals the liquor from Morico, that he and Joçint have their final disagreement before Joçint slips into the night to commit his crime against humanity. By extension it is after Joçint has set the mill on fire that Grégoire kills him, which leads to his rebuff by Millicent, leading to his death. Likewise, it is Fanny who is taking refuge from a storm in Marie Louise's dwelling when the cabin is swept into the river

community of the late nineteenth century. While the author undoubtedly defamiliarizes the female protagonist Fanny by positioning her outside of the accepted bonds of marriage as a divorcée, her freedom is presented not as liberating but rather as debilitating and occurring as a direct result of her alcoholism. The very same vice that first secured the character her feminine freedom ultimately leads to the erosion of the woman's morality and physical erasure from the text.

When Fanny makes her entrance into the narrative, she has already experienced her fall from grace. However, the reader learns through an exchange between her former and future husband David Hosmer and his beloved, the Creole widow Thérèse Lafirme, that prior to her marriage Fanny "was a pretty little thing, not more than twenty, all pink and *white* and merry blue eyes and stylish clothes" (emphasis mine 45). However, shortly after becoming Mrs. Hosmer, Fanny began her downward spiral. Hosmer laments over the "society" his wife attempted to "draw [him] into," which is made up of what he considers individuals who "were not of the best social rank by any means" (45). The couple produced a son, who served as their only means of unity, but the boy died when he was three years old, severing the solitary remaining tie between husband and wife. In his recounting of past woes, Hosmer reveals Fanny's alcoholism as the chief cause of the failure of their marriage (and possibly the death of their son), a disease which was obviously in its nascent stages prior to the loss of their child. He had "now and again marked a peculiarity of manner about [Fanny] that troubled [him]" (46). Belle Worthington, Fanny's friend from St. Louis, later provides information during an exchange with Thérèse, attesting to the fact that the substance-addicted woman was unable to fulfill her role as a mother. "It's a blessing that boy of Fanny's died. ...[S]he

couldn't any more look after a youngster than she could after a baby elephant" (157).

According to Belle Worthington, Fanny, unlike herself, was unable to maintain maternal authority, a lack of authority that Chopin further extends to all areas of Fanny's life.

Unable to control her man, her drinking, and the non-white characters in the text, the morally weak Fanny is directly juxtaposed with the morally upright white characters in the novel. Through Chopin's literary maneuvers, Fanny develops into a pawn in the game of love and respect that Hosmer and Thérèse play, and she further becomes aligned with the sullied and sullyng non-white characters through her alcoholism.

Reprimanded by the self-sacrificing Thérèse for abandoning his wife in her time of need, Hosmer remarries Fanny and brings her to live on the Lafirme plantation, Place-du-Bois, where the black servant Sampson immediately singles her out when he brazenly rolls "his big black eyeballs towards [her]" (94), thereby "insinuating advances of friendliness" (148). Notably, Fanny is the only white individual with whom a non-white character takes such liberties. It is Sampson who later becomes Fanny's clandestine procurer of alcohol. Furthermore, prior to Sampson ascending to the role of alcohol supplier (for which Fanny apparels him in "comfortable clothing"), it is the old black servant Morico who first reintroduces the teetotaling woman to her vice, resulting in her fall from sobriety. Fanny's relapse into alcoholism serves to increase the tension between herself and the other white characters, while aligning her with the socially and morally inferior non-whites. After she resumes drinking, Fanny becomes more comfortable and talkative with the non-white characters while experiencing paranoia, episodes of confrontation and disorder in the company of the white characters. Fanny—socially and emotionally distanced from Hosmer's young sister Millicent, the widow Thérèse, and the

other white women—is the sole white female to partake of alcohol and is the only white individual who becomes admittedly desperately dependent upon and thereby associated with the non-white characters.

In her penultimate scene, the intoxicated Fanny flees from her husband in search of Sampson, her liquor supplier and after acquiring the spirits ensconces herself in the cabin of the retired black creole servant Marie Louise. When Hosmer locates her he sees "at a glance that her dominant passion had been leading and now controlled her" (193). Fanny, a physically white woman, becomes through her flaws and misdeeds, both metaphorically and bodily identified with the darker immoral elements within the text and undergoes an unwhitening. She, therefore, can no longer exist; thus, Chopin pens the character's demise in the raging river. Despite her husband Hosmer's attempt to rescue the intoxicated and dissipated Fanny from the swollen waters, she drowns. Notably, both Désirée Aubigny and Edna Pontellier meet similar watery fates, which will lead presently to my speculation as to Chopin's fascination with the issue of death by drowning.

Chopin implements the destruction of the white female character through her identification with the Africanist presence again in "Désirée's Baby." Although the author is intentionally ambiguous about Désirée's birth origins, the character, a foundling, begins life with the designation of "white" and all of the privileges associated with white femininity. She is aptly described as "beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere, the idol of Valmondé [the plantation of her childhood]" (148). Additionally, as is her due as a white woman, she marries the local (presumably white) southern aristocrat Armand Aubigny, who proudly boasts of having "one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana" (148). It is only after her marriage and later the birth of their son that

Désirée's metaphorical unwhitening ensues. The baby that she and Armand produce appears to be white upon his birth, but unnoticed by Désirée alone, later develops "black" features, which bring about changes in Armand's manner, "...an air of mystery among the blacks [and] unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming" (152). Shocked and utterly speechless when she awakens to the phenotypic and/or skin pigment similarities between her son and a quadroon boy, the child of the slave La Blanche, "[Désirée's] blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face" (153).

Immediately after the new mother's shock, Armand enters the room and she confronts him with her alarming epiphany. "'Armand,' she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, *if he was human* ...'look at our child. What does it mean? tell me'" (emphasis mine 154). Armand answers the somewhat ambiguous question in a way that brings forth the woman's psychological and later physical unwhitening. "'It means', he answered lightly, 'that the child is not white; it means that you are not white'" (154). His assertion is met with Désirée's denial of the charge and a cataloging of the features which attest to her whiteness. "'Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair,' ...'Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,' she laughed hysterically" (154). However, Armand defeats her argument with a comparison between the color of Désirée's hand and that of La Blanche, who, as her name indicates, is also fair-complected.

Désirée, who "'cannot be so unhappy, and live,'" writes to her adopted mother, Madame Valmondé and begs her to testify to the young woman's whiteness (155). Instead of obeying her daughter's request, Madame Valmondé instructs Désirée to return

"to the mother who loves [her]" (155). Désirée presents her mother's letter to Armand and waits "like a stone image: silent, *white*, and motionless," for his response (emphasis mine 155). He tells her to leave and she takes their son and does so, but she does not return to Valmondé. The imagery used to describe her departure is ethereal, further attesting to the character's physical whiteness:

Désirée had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes ...She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds ...She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again. (156-57)

In the course of the narrative, Chopin later reveals that it is Armand who is of mixed heritage through the discovery of a letter from his mother to his father in which she "thank[s] the good God for having so arranged [their] lives that [their] dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (158).

The ironic revelation comes too late to save the "darkened" Désirée and her son. She has already become psychologically unwhitened and physically *overidentified* with and tainted by an Africanist presence. Chopin leaves no escape for Désirée, however, for the mixed blood of either she or her husband dooms her. As Elfenbein points out, "If Armand is black, Désirée may be vindicated by the discovery that she is not responsible for the racial characteristics of their child, but she will be forever stigmatized socially by

the fact that she has been possessed by a black man and has borne his son" (127).

Clearly, for both Elfenbein and Chopin, Désirée's interracial coupling is a stigma that would be less desirable to the white woman than death. Ultimately, Désirée dies as a result of being metaphorically "raped" of her whiteness through her sexual union with Armand.³

Armand's comparison between Désirée and La Blanche, coupled with the like similarities between Désirée's baby and La Blanche's quadroon son, is pregnant with significance. Earlier, Désirée has confided to her mother that Armand has heard the baby's cry "'as far away as La Blanche's cabin,'" leaving the reader to conjecture as to the nature of the relationship between Armand and his female slave (150). Elfenbein argues that "[t]he possibility that [La Blanche] may be Désirée's predecessor, sent to the slave quarters for having given birth to a mulatto son, is implied by the dark parallel Armand draws when he compares the two women" (128). Moreover, through the "loaded" remark from daughter to mother confirming Armand's presence near the slave woman's cabin, Chopin calls forth the presumed sexual ardency of non-white women, and Désirée later becomes guilty by association of sexual licentiousness when compared to La Blanche. Désirée has descended from the white "mother-woman" subject to unwhitened sexual object, to become the counterpart of her metaphorical mirror image, La Blanche. Unable to justify the incongruity between her physical whiteness and her newly constructed

³ The opinion regarding the fate of Désirée is exemplified in Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* in which Buckley, the legal prosecutor of the protagonist Bigger Thomas, declares that the black defendant killed his white victim, Mary Dalton, because he raped her. He continues, "[m]ind you, Your Honor, the central crime here is *rape!* (emphasis original 377). The prosecutor has earlier pointed out, "[t]hat the treacherous beast must have known that if the marks of his teeth were ever seen on the innocent white flesh of her breasts, he would not have been accorded the high honor of sitting here in this court of law" (376). Essentially, the murder of the white woman was secondary to the rape by a black man. Likewise, the defilement of Désirée is of greater importance than her subsequent death.

social "blackness," Désirée chooses to wander off and end her life, we are led to believe, along with that of her son in the nearby bayou.

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, similar to Désirée Aubigny in many ways, descends from whiteness through her sexual awakening which aligns her with the non-white female presence in the narrative. As Elfenbein cites in *Women on the Color Line*, "Chopin's attack on the 'moral conventionalities' about marriage, motherhood, and sex made her an exception in American literature of the turn of the century. But only in her treatments of women already stigmatized in the American racist's imagination is her treatment of sex unrestrained" (123). The lack of restraint on the part of Chopin in regards to the marginalized, non-white women in her texts, coupled with the process of sexual awakening of her white female characters just before their demise, links the non-white presence with immorality and licentiousness. Elfenbein later provides an explanation for Chopin's varied treatment of female sexuality when she writes that "Page Smith's examination of the erotophobic record of Chopin's period ... observes that 'virtually all of the women who wrote, even in the most elliptical terms, of sex and sexuality, viewed it as a blight or illness which must somehow be suppressed or cured. It was a disease peculiar to men and a few depraved women'" (123). Nevertheless, the nexus between non-white women and sexuality and thus depravity is common in much late nineteenth-century fiction, and Chopin correlates the two repeatedly in her final novel.

Like Désirée, Edna is juxtaposed against a non-white Other in the character of the "sly," "bad," "Spanish" girl Mariequita, who has "ugly brown toes" of which she is not ashamed and whom both Robert and Victor Lebrun have at one time called their own

(34).⁴ In addition to her alignment with Mariequita, Edna becomes associated through her sexual stirring with the Vera Cruz women, with whom Alcéé Arobin, her illicit lover, and Robert, with whom she briefly spiritually connects and who awakens in her feelings of desire, have had "intimate" relations while traveling in Mexico. These women have "treated" them well and yet "[have left] impressions not so lasting as the imprint of an oar upon the water" (100). In contrast to these "dark" women, Chopin presents the females of Creole descent as maintaining impeccable morality: "Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to [Edna], though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (11).

Although Edna is from old Kentucky stock and has married well into the respected Creole establishment, from the beginning of the text she does not belong with the latter group. The revelation of "...not [being] thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles" by the protagonist foreshadows her further distancing through vice from Creole women whom Chopin presents as the very embodiment of whiteness (11). Unlike Edna's friend Adèle Ratignolle, who is the "heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams...[with] spun gold hair...blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires...[and] lips ...that were so red one could only think of cherries" (10), Edna's eyes are "a yellowish brown, about the color of her hair...She was rather handsome than beautiful" (5). Edna's apparel also distinguishes her as "racial" outsider. Unlike Adèle who wears a dress of pure white and is the embodiment of whiteness, Edna's white dress has a brown

⁴ Chopin uses the word Spanish as an adjective to describe Mariquita in reference to the earliest colonizers of the Gulf States. Her working class background (which explains the color of her skin) rather than her racial difference distinguishes the character from the Creole people.

stripe. Thus the protagonist's tainted and taintable position on the margins of whiteness is symbolically established.

In further contrast to the Creole women, Edna is "not a mother woman" which links her historically with the non-white females in the text (10). In addition to being the sexual property of white men, under the system of slavery black women were considered natively dead. Having no claims to their offspring, being chattel themselves, black women while oftentimes being mother figures to the white family members they served, were seen as having little or no maternal connection to their own children. Edna, like Fanny and Désirée before her, is unable to be a mother to her sons, Etienne and Raoul. As noted previously, Fanny's son, whom she cannot nurture, dies. Désirée's baby, who is the living symbol of her contamination, "disappears" with his mother into the bayou. Edna, whose boys "appeared to her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days," are the very individuals she escapes from when she takes her own life (113). In fact, it is immediately after Edna attends Madame Ratignolle's birthing and the latter entreats her to "Think of the children! ... Remember them," that the protagonist decides she can no longer remain in the land of "illusions...a decoy to secure mothers for the race" (109-10). In response to her overwhelming realization, Edna returns to the water where she first found freedom and, "[t]he foamy wavelets curled up to her *white* feet" and "she lifted her *white* body and reached out with a long sweeping stroke" to swim out into the Gulf alone (emphases mine 113). Chopin allows the reader to experience Edna's drowning along with the character. In the final scene, the heroine, unwhitened through her sexual awakening, embarks upon a metaphorical return journey of redemption to the innocence of her childhood in

Kentucky. Before succumbing to the unyielding power of the sea, "Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (114).

Her unwhitening of the female protagonists in the texts, in concert with the women's oddly similar means of death, leads to the possible assessment that through her literature Chopin unburdens herself of her repressed desires. The renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud assigned these repressed desires to the unconscious segment of the human mind designated as the id, the reservoir of libido. In, "The Anatomy of the Mental Personality," Freud emphasizes that the "laws of logic—above all, the law of contradiction—do not hold for processes of the id. Contradictory impulses exist side by side without neutralizing each other or drawing apart... Naturally, the id knows no values, no good and evil, no morality (104-05). Freud further points out that the id, if left to its own devices, would lead individuals to any lengths to pursue their desires—even to self-destruction. Hosmer identifies Fanny's id as "her dominant passion," which leads the woman to her downfall. It is Désirée's contamination by her sexual liaison with Armand and the resulting alignment with La Blanche, whose libidinous nature is historically established (to which Chopin cedes), that leads to her ruin. Additionally, the heroines resulting relentless pursuit of whiteness brings about her demise in the bayou. Similarly, Edna's inability to corral her sexual desires, forces her "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" and commit suicide (28). For all

three heroines, the "contradictory impulses" of whiteness and immorality exist side by side and cannot be negotiated; therefore they each, in turn, self-destruct.

The three female protagonists are all additionally linked by their loss of white "invisibility" to the non-white Other. The black servant Sampson in *At Fault* and the Spanish girl Mariequita in *The Awakening* are both observers of the white establishment. Sampson "sees" Fanny as one who does not dwell fully in the realm of whiteness, giving him license to look her in the eyes. Similarly, even before the two lovers, Edna and Robert, have admitted their feelings for one another, Mariequita perceives their future romantic relationship. The blacks at L'Abri are aware of the Aubigny baby's mixed blood and their mistress' "contamination" before Désirée becomes cognizant of the injurious situation. Through the non-white gaze, these marginally white women are no longer the subjects of the controlling "look," but rather have become its objects, further attesting to their unwhitening and loss of control. Their objectified position illustrates bell hooks claim in *Black Looks* that, "[t]o be fully an object then [is] to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality" (168).

Fanny in her alcoholism, Désirée by psychological and/or sexual tainting, and Edna through her sexual awakening become unwhitened and *overidentified* with the non-white presence. Through their identification all lose the privileges of invisibility and motherhood which lie within the domain of whiteness and each moves into the realm of the non-white. However, in all three cases the physical whiteness of the women is firmly established by Chopin, thus highlighting the incongruence between the inner and outer selves and inability for these women to embrace their newfound positions.

Additional notable comparisons exist in the correlation between the descent and death of the heroines with the discontinuity of the feminine in their lives; a continuity Chopin herself experienced fully at her mother's home in St. Louis, in the form of five generations of women dwelling under one roof. All three characters, Fanny, Désirée, and Edna are motherless as Chopin points out in the narrative. The women, having no maternal guidance, are unable to be mother figures to their own offspring—a situation that once again echoes the slave mother-child relationship. The fact that the children of all three women are male extends the pattern of female discontinuity.

To extend the analogy, all three heroines meet their deaths in the metaphorical womb of the life-giving and life-taking maternal water. The motherless Fanny returns to the maternal in the raging river, which cures her of alcoholism and returns her to grace. The "deep, sluggish bayou" saves the fallen and socially stigmatized Désirée from a life of oppression, like that of La Blanche. And it is the sensuous sea which "enfold[s] [Edna's] body in its soft, close embrace," delivering her from the sexually aware, non-white realm she is unable to inhabit while being both wife and mother and metaphorically returning her to her childhood of innocence.

The patternistic fall and demise of all three of the female characters, coupled with their alignment with the stereotypic vices associated with the non-white Other, is too apparent to escape notice. While the gender of these characters, as is argued by both Elfenbein and Taylor, undeniably plays a significant role in the oppression and lack of alternatives available to them, their indisputable *overidentification* with the Africanist presence leads one to conjecture about the racist ideology of the period and more specifically that of their creator, Chopin. The unwhitened Fanny Hosmer, Désirée

Aubigny, and Edna Pontellier are directly realigned and redefined in response to the vices and stigmatized status of the non-white. Ultimately, through their inability to accept and understand their new identification with peoples oppressed and controlled by the white establishment to which they no longer belong, the characters self-destruct.

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Vita

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