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### Maternal Influence and Children in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction

Kate Chopin's genuine feelings about motherhood and children are best illuminated in her comments about her own six children. Loving her youngsters immensely, she never wanted to shut them out or turn them away, even when she was very busy. She made no demands on her children and spoiled them with her constant availability and assistance. According to biographer Per Seyersted, all of her children loved and adored her (60). One reason Chopin loved children, along with her Natchitoches people, was because of their directness, their lack of sophistication, and their unconcern for status and wealth (96). With these two groups of people, she saw and experienced the genuineness that inspired her writing. In her work, she depicts children as affecting the lives of adults in many ways: they may pacify, heal, enlighten, comfort and love (Skaggs 27). Often, however, they restrict and impose, but even when they are mischievous, good often results. A theme to which Chopin returned throughout her career is the dilemma of desire versus duty, self-realization versus socially sanctioned self-sacrifice. Motherhood and children often serve to emphasize a woman's self-deprivation, but there are also cases where a woman can achieve self-actualization realization through motherhood and caring for children.

Some of Chopin's most famous works illustrate the writer's preoccupation with this

paradoxical phenomenon. In *The Awakening*, even though Edna realizes that Adele is a willing self-martyr, one of those “women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 8), she does not choose this life for herself, acknowledging that she would give her life for her own children, but not her “self.” One of Chopin’s less known short stories entitled “Two Portraits” examines the maternal influence on a young lady in determining what sort of person she will become. In addition, “The Godmother” deals with Tante Elodie’s frustration and misery over the unnatural relationship she has with a son of the man she loves. The maternal influence is so strong for Elodie that she is willing to commit and cover up murder to protect this boy. In “La Belle Zoraide,” for the first time, Chopin writes for publication about a childbirth scene in an ante-bellum Louisiana setting. Zoraide, a beautiful light-skinned Negro, falls in love with a black man and, because of the darkness of his skin, is forbidden to marry him. She does, however, give birth to his daughter, but is falsely told by her Creole mistress that the child is dead. Zoraide becomes demented, playing with a rag-doll and pretending her baby is alive. Chopin consistently presents motherhood as a “form of ideological entrapment that some women accept, along with the loss of self, and some do not” (Papke 65), but she always successfully depicts the female strength granted to mothers. The paradoxical nature of maternal influence and children is most evident in four short stories by Kate Chopin: in “A Pair of Silk Stockings” and “Désirée’s Baby,” the darker side of motherhood and children is explored, while “Athénaïse” and “Regret” demonstrate the rewards of maternity.

That the care of children can be not only a great joy but also a great limitation on a woman’s freedom is obvious in “A Pair of Silk Stockings.” Given a glimpse into the life of an

impoverished mother whose existence consists of struggling for the survival of others with no thought of herself, the reader recognizes one of the paradoxes of human existence. Mrs. Sommers' permanent obligation, her duty to her children, contrasts with her momentary freedom when she spends money on herself. Genteel but poor, seemingly without support and alone except for children, she experiences an awakening of her sensuous self during her shopping spree. At the beginning of the story, when Mrs. Sommers unexpectedly receives fifteen dollars, she calculates for days about how to spend the money, initially thinking only of her children, as is her habit. A little background information on this widow lets the reader know that Mrs. Sommers is a woman who was born into a better class than the one into which she married, but she is a genuine woman who neither shirks sacrifice for her family nor thinks of anything beyond her immediate life as a mother and a martyr. Having "no time . . . to devote to the past," she is "absorbed" by the "needs of the present." Mrs. Sommers' "future [,] like some dim, gaunt monster [,] sometimes appalled her, but luckily [she thinks] tomorrow never comes" (Chopin 239). On the designated shopping day, so busy with "getting the children fed and the place righted, and preparing herself for the shopping bout," she forgets to have lunch herself. Never thinking of herself and her own needs, she browses through a busy store, feeling weak from lack of nourishment. Perhaps because of this foible, she finds herself tempted by a pair of "soft, sheeny luxurious" stockings. As she "hold[s] them up to see them glisten, and to feel them glide serpent-like through her fingers" (240), the reader cannot help noticing the snake imagery of this temptation scene. Giving in, "the esthetic, sensitive self, which has been dormant within her for so long, suddenly springs alive as the spontaneous purchase of the stockings leads Mrs. Sommers to spend more and more of the money on herself" (Solomon xix).

A transformation takes place for Mrs. Sommers as she changes into her new black silk stockings. For a brief afternoon, Mrs. Sommers frees herself of others and their needs. She relishes “the touch of the raw silk to her flesh! She felt like lying back in the cushion chair and reveling for a while in the luxury of it” (Chopin 241). Mrs. Sommers possesses “inner delicacy of taste and quiet distinction about her” (Solomon xix), but in her current life, no space or time for this exists due to the demands of mothering and financial responsibilities. Feeling free, she now senses her own beauty, but can hardly recognize her foot and ankle as belonging to her since it was so long ago that she even observed or considered her body. The ease of her former life, before she married and had children, is reiterated when she buys two magazines like the ones she formerly read. Then, remembering her hunger and feeling weak, she decides to stop and have lunch at an elegant restaurant. Today, there will be no self-sacrificing, no getting by on what happens to be left after the children finish their meal; she savors every bite of her delicious lunch. Mrs. Sommers’ stateliness emerges when, as she leaves the restaurant, the waiter “bow[s] before her as before a princess of royal blood” (Chopin 242). Putting the finishing touch on her day of frills, she attends the theater, an exalting experience only made possible by Mrs. Sommers’ forgetting about her responsibilities to her children for one day. On her way home, she has “a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever” (243). Motherhood has deprived Mrs. Sommers of her true self, her identity.

In a very different story dealing with race and parturition, motherhood again deprives a woman of something, but this time it is more than the luxuries Mrs. Sommers misses; it is her life. Just as in “La Belle Zoraide” the birth of a child brings about a woman’s insanity, in “Désirée’s Baby,” the birth of a child causes hardship, then tragedy. Also set in ante-bellum

Louisiana, this story serves as Chopin's sole treatment of miscegenation. Irony is created early in the story with baby Desiree's entrance into the lives of her adoptive parents, Madame and Monsieur Valmondé. Since they have wanted a child for so long, they think divine providence has certainly intervened. The grown Desiree, now "beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere" (Chopin 173), marries Armand Aubigny, a highly respected and wealthy heir. However, Armand imposes strict rules on his household that bring misery to his Negro employees. But marriage and the birth of his son suddenly transform Armand; fatherhood softens the husband/master. Désirée tells her mother, after the baby is born, "he hasn't punished one of them [the Negroes]--not one of them--since the baby is born." Nevertheless, after the child is about three months old, things change; Désirée notices that "something [is] in the air menacing her peace"; she detects an "awful change in her husband's manner." Armand seems to be possessed by "the very spirit of Satan . . . in his dealings with the slaves" (175). Puzzled and miserable, the young mother realizes the problem lies with her son only when LaBlanche's quadroon son is fanning the baby and she notices the similarity in the boys' coloring. Frightened, she asks her husband what this means and he tells her: "It means . . . that the child is not white; it means that you are not white." In a frenzy to prove her "whiteness," Désirée hysterically shouts, "Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand" (176). This statement ironically illuminates her husband's dark skin color, and the clenching ending of the story clarifies the implications. No longer loved or wanted, Désirée leaves with the baby in her arms and disappears into the bayou, never to be seen again. Armand's shocking discovery occurs several weeks later while he is burning the belongings of his ex-wife and "ex-son" when he stumbles upon a letter written by his mother to his father; it reads: "I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his

mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (178). In this story, Désirée’s baby proves “death-dealing” because it has been darkened, both figuratively and literally by Armand (Papke 54). Désirée’s identity stemmed totally from her role as Armand’s wife and mother of his son; when he denies both her and the child, she loses personhood and therefore commits suicide and infanticide. Motherhood has destroyed everything in her life.

Just as the birth of Désirée’s son at first serves a healing purpose for Armand’s harsh ways, in another story, “Athénaïse,” a young wife’s pregnancy serves as the impetus for a reunion of husband and wife. Viewed by many critics as a story with direct application to Kate Chopin’s grandmother whose name was Mary Athenaise Charleville, the tale explores a woman’s enslavement by marriage, then her submission and celebration in motherhood. With the departure of Athénaïse from her husband Cazeau, the story begins an ongoing portrait of the husband, which at first appears disturbing, but which ameliorates as the tale progresses. Early in the story, Cazeau is described as “severe looking” with “coarse and stiff” hands and a manner that commands respect “and even fear sometimes.” So initially he appears harsh and demanding, and the reader may understand why his wife has left him. However, particular attention should be paid to the emphasis on his work ethic; he is a mature, responsible man living in the real world. When Athénaïse does not return home as expected, “his chief solicitude was manifestly for the pony she had ridden” (Chopin 208). Chopin connects Cazeau with slave-owners by mentioning “his spur, which he had not removed upon entering the house, jangl [ing] at every step,” a reminder of his power. One might conclude that this domination has driven Athénaïse away. But early in the story, Chopin offers a glimpse of the potential harmony of this relationship in

mentioning the sound of “a little Negro baby . . . crying lustily” (209). The same sound ends the story once Athénaïse and Cazeau are reunited, serving as the frame for a tale about the effects of motherhood and children.

Even though Cazeau recognizes a problem in his marriage, he still insists on the permanence of the situation. Feeling Athénaïse’s absence “like a dull, insistent pain” and envisioning his wife’s dropping lips and sullen and averted eyes” (Chopin 209), Cazeau decides that when she returns, he will “find means to keep her at home hereafter.” Meanwhile, he continues to work very hard, while Athénaïse, staying with her parents, enjoys her mother’s good cooking and the dances her parents often host. Still somewhat immature, Athénaïse wants life to be more fun, more like a party, whereas Cazeau, a “serious soul,” “despise[s] or neglect[s] “ such pleasures” as dances (210). On the third day of his young wife’s absence, Cazeau, constantly concerned with duty, goes to retrieve her out of a sense of responsibility. Athénaïse, however, will not feel any hint of responsibility until she is carrying a child. When Athénaïse’s brother tries unsuccessfully to extract from his sister some horror story about her treatment by her husband, she denies that her husband has abused her and says that she just hates being married and the sight of such unpleasant things as her husband’s “ugly bare feet” (213). She wants the pretty, easy side of life, not the side that involves the realities of facing the less agreeable aspects of one’s mate and partner. When asked by her father why she married Cazeau anyway, Athénaïse replies, “because she supposed it was customary for girls to marry when the right opportunity came” (212).

After Cazeau recovers Athénaïse from her parents’ home and returns home with her, Athénaïse wants him to scold and mistreat her so she will have a reason for her unhappiness, but Cazeau remains calm and tender. He tells her, when she badgers him about why he chose to

marry her rather than some other eligible young lady, “I married you because I loved you” (Chopin 218), but he admits to being a fool for believing he could make her happy. No amount of love or affection can make Athénaïse happy. Her continued misery culminates in her plan to escape with her brother. When Cazeau wakes in the morning to discover that his wife has left during the night “as if she had been a prisoner, and he the keeper of the dungeon” (221), the image of slavery becomes hideous to him; he will not play the part of slave-owner and have Athénaïse as slave. He wants an equal, someone with whom he can share his life.

Having deserted her husband and now living in New Orleans at a boarding house, Athénaïse relaxes and enjoys her freedom at first. Once she has become acquainted with Gouvernail, “a liberal-minded fellow” (Chopin 227), since he requires nothing of her, Athénaïse feels the “comforting, comfortable sense of not being married” (228), reminiscent of Louise Mallard in “The Story of an Hour” who, upon learning of her husband’s death, says over and over again, “free, free, free!” (199). After a few days in New Orleans, though, Athénaïse gradually becomes lonely and begins to “crave human sympathy and companionship,” and even Gouvernail “suspect[s] that she adore[s] Cazeau without being herself aware of it” (229). Athénaïse thrives on the attention of Gouvernail since Cazeau cannot give her his full concentration; he must work very hard to provide for their household. Again, Athénaïse’s desire for a fantasy life, one without commitment and responsibility, is evident. Prolonging her immaturity, Gouvernail enables Athénaïse to “[hold] out through the month” (232). He serves as a substitute for her brother but she cannot “fancy him [Gouvernail] loving anyone passionately, rudely, offensively, as Cazeau love[s] her” (233).

During the fourth week of her stay in New Orleans, Athénaïse, nauseous and weak, makes a

life-changing discovery when she must be told by the quadroon domestic that she is pregnant.

Chopin's description of her reaction to this news reveals the transformation she undergoes: "Her whole being was steeped in a wave of ecstasy . . . in the mirror, a face met hers which she seemed to see for the first time, so transfigured was it with wonder and rapture." Learning to view herself as a mother seems easier than seeing herself as a wife; with a "sensuous tremor," she thinks of Cazeau and whispers his name, suddenly "impatient to be with him" (Chopin 235).

Athénaïse's sensual awakening is caused by the discovery of her pregnancy, which leads to her reconciliation with her husband. Traveling home, now ready to accept the responsibility that is required of her, she thinks of nothing but Cazeau and their reunion. As Cazeau "clasp[s] her in his arms, he fe[els] the yielding of her whole body against him. He fe[els] her lips for the first time respond to the passion of his own" (Chopin 238). He has always felt this passion, but she has had to discover hers. As Peggy Skaggs points out, Athénaïse finds that perspective motherhood not only offers a role in which she feels comfortable, but also releases her pent-up love for Cazeau (38). Skaggs further argues that Athénaïse pays a price for attaining wifehood and motherhood: "she has sacrificed her name and more; she has sacrificed also her autonomy, her right to live as a discrete individual. Athénaïse Miche exists no longer" (38). Perhaps many years later this young wife and mother will resemble Mrs. Sommers in giving up all her longings to meet the needs of her family. Certainly nowhere can the paradoxical nature of motherhood be more clearly observed than in this story. While Anne Goodwyn Jones suggests that the anticipated baby is a "dues ex machina" and that the final note of the story is a "somber, possible ironic evocation of the parallel to slavery" (150), there seems to be stronger evidence that the framing device used at the beginning and end of the story suggests a harmony achieved through

motherhood and children. As Athénaïse and Cazeau embrace, they hear “A little Negro baby . . . crying somewhere” (Chopin 238), just as at the beginning, Cazeau had heard a baby “crying lustily” (209).

Motherhood as a prerequisite for a rich, full life emerges as a prominent theme in another short story in which a woman learns what she is missing by having made the decision many years ago to remain single. Quite the opposite of Mrs. Sommers who discovered the great limitation her children put on her freedom, Mamzelle Aurélie of “Regret” realizes that her life lacks something--the great joy induced by loving and caring for children. The truth of both women’s experiences is understood as they each discover a new, or lost, type of pleasure: Mamzelle Aurélie becomes aware of the satisfaction of a close connection to children; Mrs. Sommers rediscovers the delight of luxury which she cannot experience in her selfless existence. Both women are extremely determined at the beginnings of their respective stories, but their determination is quite different: Mrs. Sommers is firm in her devotion to her children; Aurélie is decisive in her independence and ability to manage the farm. She feels no remorse for her decision not to marry until she senses that her maternal instincts have indeed been alive under the surface all along. A woman’s need to feel maternal love, even if she is without child, is a common theme for Chopin. In “Polydore,” another short story, a spinster finds her only pleasure in life by caring for an orphaned boy. Unlike Aurélie of “Regret,” she is able to devote her very existence to this practice. Aurélie has only two weeks to experience motherhood.

Children are so foreign to Mamzelle Aurélie that when she sees a group of them, along with their mother, approaching, it seems as if they “might have fallen from the clouds, so unexpected and bewildering was their coming, and so unwelcome.” Even though they are “unwelcome,”

Chopin is perhaps suggesting their angelic nature in describing their approach with divine imagery. The paradox of motherhood is elucidated in Odile's (the mother's) face, described as being "red and disfigured from tears and excitement" (Chopin 201). The desperation of Odile's situation convinces Aurélie to take care of the children for her. Once alone with the four children, Aurélie first thinks only of performing her duty; as she looks at the children with a "critical eye," she plans to have no feelings for the children, just to fulfill her obligation. She soon discovers, however, that "children are not little pigs; they require and demand attentions which were wholly unexpected . . . and which she was ill prepared to give" (202). Therefore, for the first few days, until she finds out the idiosyncrasies of each child, she lacks the necessary understanding to care for the children.

Mamzelle Aurélie learns all the responsibilities that go with children, such as providing nightgowns, baths, bedtime stories, songs, and time in the rocking chair. She first tries ordering the children to bed "as she would have shooed the chickens into the hen-house" (Chopin 202), attempting to treat them like animals or slaves. Ironically (in light of her later realization), Aurélie tells Aunt Ruby, the cook, "I'd rather manage a dozen plantation' than fo' chil'ren"; with plantations, there is not so much personal investment. During the course of the children's two-week stay, Mamzelle Aurélie grows accustomed to "Ti Nomme's sticky fingers" and "moist kisses"; mending "torn slips and buttonless waists"; "the laughing, the crying, the chattering that echo through the house and around it all day long"; sleeping "with little Elodie's hot, plump body pressed close against her, and the little one's warm breath beating her cheek like the fanning of a bird's wing" (203). No longer does Mamzelle complain. Here, without sentimentality, Chopin uses understatement to exaggerate the warm feelings experienced by Aurélie.

These warm feelings quickly fade when Odile returns “unannounced and unexpected” and Mamzelle Aurélie is thrown “into a flutter that [is] almost agitation.” After the departure of the children, Aurélie observes, “How still it was when they were gone! . . . But she could still faintly hear the shrill, glad voices of the children”; they have left something with her. Entering the house, she notices all the work that needs to be done since “the children ha[ve] left a sad disorder behind them,” “sad” being the key word here. Aurélie, not her usual strong self, glances around the room “into which the evening shadows [are] creeping and deepening around her solitary figure.” Her aloneness and emptiness are emphasized when she bursts out crying; “Oh, but she cried! Not softly, as women often do. She cried like a man, with sobs that seemed to tear her very soul” (Chopin 204). Only now is this strong, independent woman weakened as her maternal instinct is awakened. Odile’s children have poignantly illustrated to Aurélie the tragedy of an unlived life.

Biographers relate that Kate Chopin enjoyed motherhood tremendously, but even her own maternal experience taught her that being a mother involves many contradictory feelings. As viewed in her short stories, children are indeed a blessing and fulfill a basic need for many women; on the other hand, they are extremely demanding and limiting for a woman. The four stories, “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” “Désirée’s Baby,” “Athénaïse,” and “Regret,” artfully illustrate the paradoxical nature of maternal influence and children.

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