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Women's Lives in Post-Confederate Louisiana**

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**Lens on Stages in Women's Lives: How Kate Chopin Shaped
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ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin re-examined facets of women's lives in three short stories in her anthology, *A Night In Acadie*, in 1897. From the coming-of-age of Babette in *Ripe Figs* in 1893 to a lower-class woman's early death in *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* in 1893 to Mrs. Baroda's evasion of temptation in *A Respectable Woman* in 1894, Chopin cautions women to consider well risks taken and not taken in life and love during America's Gilded Age. In her book *Kate Chopin* in 1986, Barbara Ewell, an Southern Women's literature expert, praised "Chopin's most skillful blending of...gender, power, and class" (76). Kate Chopin successfully published stories, serialized in *Vogue*, about white, upper-class women who sought agency over their own lives in the 1890s. Despite difficulties in selling her more complex stories of unruly women in Post-Reconstruction Louisiana, the challenges her heroines faced to actualize their dreams of artistry and sensuality shed light on lives of some women from diverse social classes. Yet, in Martha J. Cutter's article, "Search for the Feminine Voice in Chopin" in the anthology *Unruly Tongue: Identity and Voice in American Women's Writing* in 1999, she cautioned "Chopin's short fiction does not reflect a linear movement from silence to voice, rather, as her career progressed Chopin continued to test the ways women could—and could not—achieve articulation" (98)". Literary criticism of Chopin's stories, nineteenth-century structuralism, and feminism contextualize screenings of excerpts of the films *Ripe Figs* (2017), *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* (2017), and *A Respectable Woman* (2010), entitled *Inachevé*, based on her stories, to underscore Chopin's patient and tenacious heroines as they weather emotional storms.

Keywords:

Introduction

Kate Chopin's fascination with sensation and feeling corresponded with the advent of physiological psychology in the late nineteenth century. In his seminal work, *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, German physiological psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1873) proposed observation of the results of these sensations and feelings. This founder of experimental psychology associated sensory stimuli, emotions, will, and ideas and with holistic patterns. Further, Wundt advocated for introspection to analyze the impact of sensations and feelings on consciousness. Coincidentally, as Kate Chopin reached her zenith as a writer in the 1890s, Edward B. Titchener systematized Wundt's approach to physiological phenomenon (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2019). Titchener's attention to introspection as a gateway into understanding and describing expression mirrored public interest in consciousness. Kate Chopin's intricate details about the exterior manifestation of woman's internal reactions to events explored the gap between desire and realization of goals.

As Chopin explored the roles women play in determining how events unfold in their lives, interest in physiological psychology fueled the literary impact of experience on the character's actions and reactions. In the "The Story of the Hour," written in 1894, Chopin revealed Mrs. Mallard's joy at her sudden widowhood through physiological reactions: "Her bosom rose and fell tumultuously...Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body" (Chopin.org). Yet, in a stylistic analysis of "The Story of the Hour" in Sabbagh and Sagnaie's "Conjured-Up reality Shattered: Examining the 'Uncertain' Ideology Underlying Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour,'" they observed, "the dominated sense of passivity is conveyed through such uses of the transitivity pattern" (300). Transitivity reflects who is acting or receiving the action. When Josephine, Mrs. Mallard's sister, doled out news of Mr. Mallard's supposed death, she took great care because of her sister's heart condition. Yet, Mrs. Mallard's joy defied the reader's expectation of her anticipated grief. This experiential focus on what was happening with and to a heroine mentally and physically allowed readers to interpret her emotional state based on her feelings and physiological responses. By concentrating on the fine points in human action, Kate Chopin connected with the burgeoning Modernist movement that differentiated humans from machines in the dawn of the Industrial Age.

Kate Chopin's short stories further built upon Henry James' Psychological Realism in his narratives. More than a decade before Chopin's most prolific period of writing, James revealed Isabel Archer's mental and emotional processes of her choices in his serialized stories in *The Atlantic* in 1880, and publication of *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881. Roger Luckhurst, editor of the recent edition of *The Oxford University Press of The Portrait of a Lady*, described "interior states of consciousness as well as the individual's place in society" as one of Henry James' literary contributions. Like James' Victorian female protagonist, reactions of Chopin's women called Old South mores into question and tested social conventions.

The contrast between the colloquial contexts of New Orleans and rural Louisiana allowed Chopin's female characters greater latitude to experience the consequences of their progressive modes of living. According to Teresa Gibert in her article, "The Role of Implicatures in Kate Chopin's Louisiana Short Stories" in 2003, Chopin's stories "accurately depicted the everyday life of ordinary people in an area that seemed particularly exotic to the rest of America," capturing "how people in Louisiana dealt with universal issues in agreement with the specific values prevalent in their environment" (70). Yet, the values of the Old South, and the Jim Crow laws that codified segregation in the 1890s, collided with Chopin's approach to women's emotional, physical, and personal freedom. Accordingly, as Chopin's stories raised the value placed on women's experience of marriage, motherhood, and unmarried states of being, she advocated for female agency and its attendant the life and death consequences of choice.

Kate Chopin's Short Stories and Modern Film Adaptations

Figure 1. *Babette (Keota Picou) and Louis (Roche Washington) in Ripe Figs (2017).*



Photo credit: Patrick McGinley

Ripe Figs (2017)

In a classic coming-of-age story, Chopin detailed anticipation of growing up in the rural South in Louisiana. Maman-Nainaine, Babette's godmother, suggests that she might visit Bayou-Boeuf, the sugar cane region where her Tante Frosine lives with her cousins. Babette dances near the hard, green figs in spring. As soon as the figs ripen in midsummer, Babette brings a platter to

her godmother. Maman-Nainaine comments, “Ah, how early the figs have ripened this year!”, to which Babette retorts, “Oh, I think they have ripened very late” (1893). Maman-Nainaine relents, bidding Babette to “carry [her] love to them all down on Bayou-Boeuf” and asking Babette to invite her aunt to visit after the chrysanthemums bloom on Toussaint (All’s Saint’s Day) (1893). The ensuing conflict reflects Maman-Nainaine’s reluctance to accept Babette’s maturity. In the film, Rachel Grissom’s coda to Kate Chopin’s story, Madam Nainaine is seen bearing flowers to a graveyard, implying that Babette and/or Babette and Louis’ baby predeceased her godmother. Babette and Maman Nainaine wielding influence through soft power in a delicate balance characteristic of Chopin’s incisive writing.

Figure 2. *Maman-Nainaine (Donna Duplantier) in Ripe Figs (2017)*

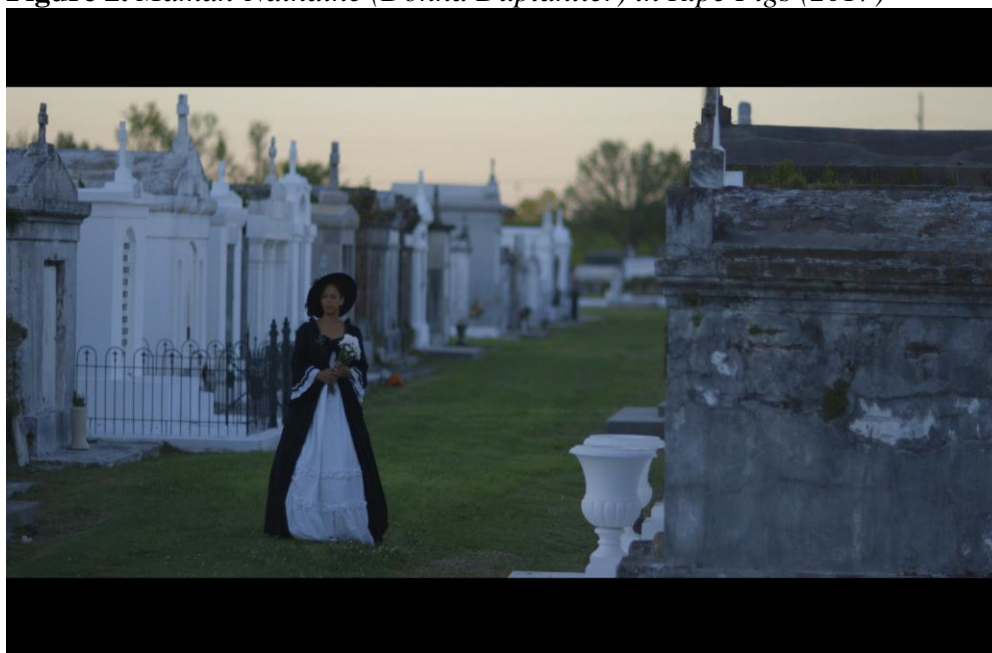


Photo credit: Patrick McGinley

The film adaptation of *Ripe Figs* incorporated issues of race and class that Kate Chopin attempted to address in the Jim Crow era. The French names in *Ripe Figs* indicated that Maman-Nainaine and Babette in Chopin’s story were Cajun French. However, as Holtman observed in her article, “Failing Fictions: The Conflicting and Shifting Social Emphases of Kate Chopin’s ‘Local Color’ Stories,” in 2004, “In Chopin’s short fiction, Acadians appear often as a sort of penultimate white class” second only to the “Texans of *In Sabine*” (74). Therefore, the elegance of a “dainty porcelain platter” that Babette offered to Maman-Nainaine who cut the plumpest fig with a “pointed silver fruit-knife” challenged the notion of low class of Cajun French in her late nineteenth-century story (1893). Additionally, in the film *Ripe Figs*, Maman-Nainaine and Babette were cast as Creole women of color. The location of that the shoot at the Haydel-Jones House, featured in Richard Sexton’s *Vestiges of Grandeur: Plantation of Louisiana’s River Road* (1999), elevated the status of these ladies.

Finally, Louis, a love interest for Babette, further juxtaposed Maman-Nainaine's "Madone"-like patience and Babette's "disconsolation" at the slow ripening of the figs in 1893. In Nikki Brown's article, "Jim Crow & Segregation", she described how Homer Plessy attempted to sit in first class on the "whites only" car on a train in New Orleans (2019). Kate Chopin wrote *Ripe Figs* in the year after Plessy's Civil Right sit-in. By situating a Creole family of color on a picaresque plantation, the film *Ripe Figs* extended the reach of Chopin's narrative commentary in a tribute to the free people of color who had thrived in New Orleans since the late eighteenth century.

Doctor Chevalier's Lie (2017)

Figure 3. *Doctor Chevalier* (Anthony Michael Frederick) and *Babette* (Keota Picou) in *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* (2017)

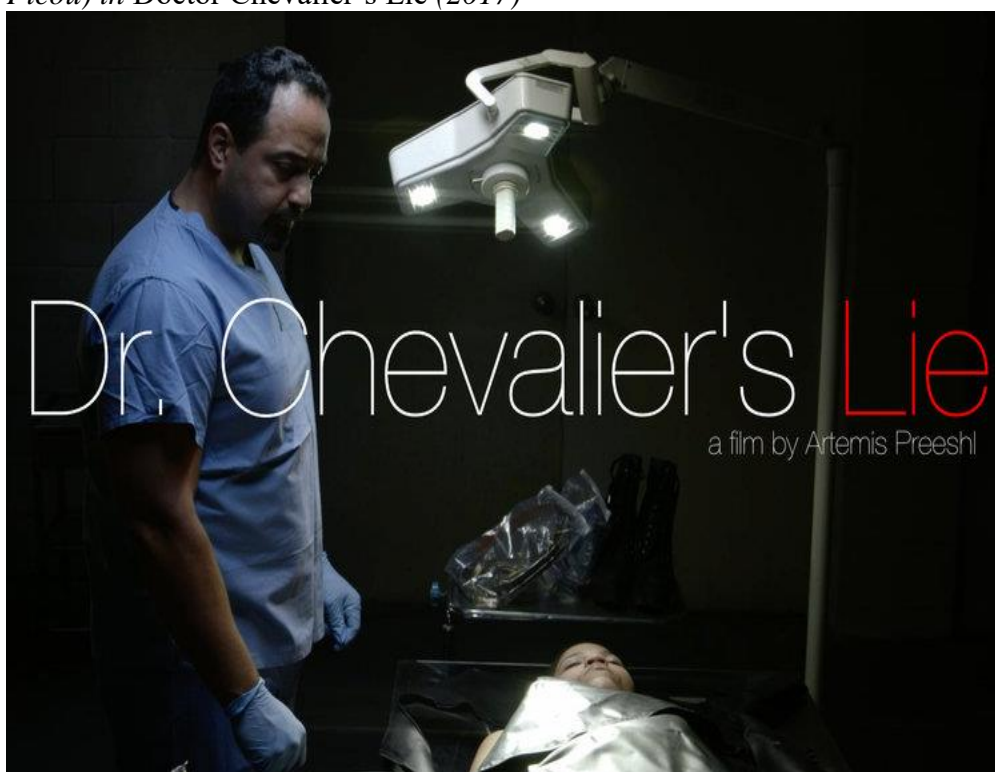


Photo credit: Patrick McGinley

When Kate Chopin wrote her story, *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* in 1892, she opens dramatically: "The quick report of a pistol rang through the quiet autumn night." In a clipping of *Doctor Chevalier's Lie*, published in *Vogue* in 1893, a hail of bullets that takes the woman's life occurs within earshot of Dr. Chevalier's office in an "unsavory quarter" near the old cathedral where he frequently treats "tawdy, frightened women" (*Wikimedia Commons.com*). In Emily Toth's book chapter entitled, "What We Do and Don't Know About Chopin's Life" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin* in 2008, Kate Chopin's doctor was "a worldly and kind obstetrician, much like her own Dr.

Charles Jean Faget in *Doctor Chevalier's Lie*" (17). Doctor Chevalier's dilemma arises when the recently deceased woman seems familiar to him. While Doctor Chevalier recalls how he met the dead woman as a young Arkansas girl in a rural cabin who sought her fortune, presumably in Storyville, the red light district of New Orleans. According to the handwritten note on the newspaper clipping of Chopin's story, *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* was based on "an actual incident...in the life of a physician [sic] in New Orleans, was sketched for *Vogue* (printed it)...October 5, 1893" (Italics mine) (*Wikimedia Commons.com*). Chopin alludes to this real event in her ending:

[I]t was noised about that Doctor Chevalier had cared for the remains of a woman of doubtful repute. Shoulders were shrugged. Society thought about cutting him. Society did not, for some reason or other, so the affair blew over. The stark difference between societal forgiveness granted to the Doctor for his affair with the bullet that took the "tawdry" woman's life pointed up gender bias in sexual matters.

Figure 4. *Babette* (Keota Picou) in *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* (2017)



Photo credit: Patrick McGinley

In the film *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* (2017), Doctor Chevalier's clinical autopsy is contrasted with the colorful life of a vibrant young woman. Screenwriter Rachel Grissom named the woman Babette to correspond with the young girl in this film's companion piece, *Ripe Figs*; Keota Picou made her film debut as Babette in both roles. Further, Grissom wrote Babette as a "bipolar" woman with "schizoaffective disorder" tattooed on her wrist. Moreover, Grissom wrote three characterizations of Babette: a young professional, a flashy party goer, and avid runner. Whereas Chopin's story

suggested homicide as the cause of death, Doctor Chevalier agonized over how best to portray Babette. Finally, Grissom offered two versions of Babette's death. In one scenario, a New Orleans officer pursued and shot Babette at close range. In the other scenario, Babette shot herself in the temple. This discrepancy confounded Doctor Chevalier's report: Was her death as a suicide or a homicide? In the film adaptation, Doctor Chevalier paints Babette in a respectable light and rules her death a homicide. This update of Chopin's story examined police violence and murder rate in New Orleans.

Inachevé (2010), based on *A Respectable Woman*

Of these three films, Kate Chopin's *A Respectable Woman* most closely mirrors her known experience. According to Emily Toth, after Oscar Chopin passed away, Kate Chopin "had a scandalous romance with a local planter, Albert Sampite" (14). Similarly, in *A Respectable Woman*, Mrs. Baroda initially takes exception to the visit of Mr. Baroda's former classmate. Like Chopin's heroines in longer and later stories, she argues with her husband, "hotly resent[ing]" his sympathy for Gouvernail. In the film adaptation entitled *Inachevé*, when Gouvernail claims to bring her white scarf to her at her husband's behest, she laid the scarf in her lap and listened with interest. In *Inachevé*, Mrs. Baroda said, "Thank you," but in *A Respectable Woman*, Mrs. Baroda never spoke to Gouvernail. Whereas in the film *Inachevé*, Mrs. Baroda nearly kissed Gouvernail, at the end of Chopin's story, she tenderly kisses Mr. Baroda and laughs as she exclaims, "I have overcome everything! you will see. This time I shall be very nice to him" (Kate Chopin.org). Finally, Gouvernail's quotation, "Night of south winds-night of the large few stars! Still nodding night!" from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, became a voiceover that underscores his imaginary caresses of Mrs. Baroda in *Inachevé*. Omission of the Baroda's argument and reconciliation, and implicature of a potential affair with his college friend Gouvernail, intensify the drama in Rachel Grissom's cinematic adaptation of Kate Chopin's *A Respectable Woman*.

Conclusion

Kate Chopin's detailed depictions of the reactions of female protagonists clue the reader into the interplay of gender and class in her short stories. In Barbara Ewell and Pamela Glenn Menke's article, "*The Awakening* and the Great October Storm of 1893" in 2010, they illuminated Chopin's "understanding of how narratives can harness even forces as destructive as hurricanes or as inscrutable as the future, intensifying through metaphor and allusion the significance of otherwise merely human choices" (10). Kate Chopin's female characters in *Ripe Figs* (1893), *Doctor Chevalier's Lie* (1893), and *A Respectable Woman* (1894) echoed some choices of women of means in the late nineteenth century; some choices promoted stability and life; others led

to early death by natural or unnatural causes. Marriage to a wealthy man seemed to be safer than working, but not always. The variable success of the attempt of Chopin's women to achieve agency over their lives influenced Molly Hildebrand's exception to the moniker "heroine" in Chopin's *The Awakening* in 1899 in her article, "The Masculine Sea- Gender, Art and Suicide in Chopin's *Awakening*" in 2016:

Far from a feminist heroine, Edna is in fact a cautionary vision of what it means to buy into a concept of complete and utter personal freedom—including artistic freedom — that is at its core male-defined and life-denying. (206)

Kate Chopin's influential women did not always survive the hands that the Post-Reconstruction society dealt or circumstances they created based on possible choices. In her examination Chopin's treatment of women in her novels and stories, Cutter noted:

Chopin frequently depicts silent, passive women—women who seem incapable of expressing themselves or their desires...[and] Anglo American and African American women who attempt to enunciate their desires and experiences through a voice of overt resistance that is quickly labeled as meaningless or 'insane.' (98)

Whereas Babette neither in *Ripe Figs* nor *Doctor Chevalier's Lie*, Mrs. Baroda either reconciles herself to her husband's viewpoint on his friend Gouvernail or anticipates an affair with Gouvernail on his return the following summer. Marriage may increase, but does not guarantee, the chances of a women's survival.

Place plays an intricate role in these heroines' ability to withstand and overcome the forces impacting her life. In Louisiana, because a women's property becomes the possession of her husband, her choices were circumscribed. Consequently, Barbara Ewell, in her book review of *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin* in 1989, underscored how Helen Taylor "locate[d] a writer and text as accurately as possible in his/her place, time, and ideological context and consider the ways in which those determinants are both...countered and challenged" (701). Yet, Chopin's female characters, Mrs. Baroda and the two Babettes, summoned up the courage to try to influence men and women in their lives to achieve their dreams to the greatest degree possible within, and beyond, their limited means. About Edna's impossible dream in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Barbara Ewell observed in her article, "Chopin and the Dream of Female Selfhood" in 1992:

[I]n Edna's triumph, Chopin suggests the hope of a self that is also selfless, one not wholly defined by others or wholly careless of the responsibility of others, neither wholly object nor subject of desire. In that ambivalent triumph, then, lies a revolutionary image of the dream of female selfhood. (165)

Yet, even in the twenty-first century, Kate Chopin's provocative heroines reveal how they have withstood the test of time and live on in our imaginations to inform the choices of contemporary women.

Disclosure

Barbara Ewell, renown critic of Kate Chopin, writer and director Rachel Grissom, and director and actor Artemis Preeshl collaborate on, adapt, and co-produce Kate Chopin's short stories for film through the Ripe Figs LLC. Artemis Preeshl directed Rachel Grissom's adaptation of *A Respectable Woman* in 2010. In 2017, the Ripe Figs LLC co-produced *Ripe Figs* and *Dr. Chevalier's Lie*, adaptation for screen by Rachel Grissom and directed by Artemis Preeshl. In 2018, Rachel Grissom wrote and directed a contemporary adaptation of *Regret*, in which Artemis Preeshl plays Mamzelle, which will debut on the international film festival circuit in 2019.

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