

Courageous Souls: Kate Chopin's Women Artists

K. J. Weatherford

University of Copenhagen

From a contemporary point of view, Kate Chopin seems to have combined all the best qualities that a woman writer at the end of the nineteenth century might have possessed: as the mother of six children, she was a nationally recognized author who boldly explored the forbidden territory of female sexuality and consciousness, and managed, even in spite of the criticism she received after the publication of *The Awakening*, to retain her good humor, sociability and humanity. But upon close examination, Kate Chopin's works also disclose that she quietly struggled with many of the difficulties that other creative women experienced in her day as they sought equal status with male artists. Elizabeth Ammons points out that fictional characters embodying writers' own ambitions and struggles appear almost obsessively in works by women from around the turn of the century and that "creating themselves as artists—not just writers—was a central issue" for nearly all women writers of the time.¹ Chopin's first published story and her novel *The Awakening* deal

¹ Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford, 1991), pp. 121, 59. Ammons argues that women writers in America at the turn of the century were the first to define themselves as serious literary artists: "these writers present a picture of a group of women clearly breaking with the past ... serious women writers at the turn into the twentieth century were determined to invade the territory of high art" (pp. 4-5). While Ammons and other critics take a distinctly feminist approach to this phenomenon, Richard Brodhead in his book *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993) helpfully shows how women writers' assertion of their artistic seriousness was part of a larger movement in the late nineteenth century to define literature in terms of "high seriousness" and most importantly, in terms of self-conscious craft.

engagingly with female ambition and the roles artistic women might find available to them. Simultaneously, they reveal Chopin's own ambitions and the anxieties she suffered as she sought to find a place in the literary world.

Kate Chopin began her writing career strikingly with the creation of a triumphant woman artist—Paula von Stolz—a character who seems to be a projection of the author's own ambitions. "Wiser than a God," Chopin's first story accepted for publication, portrays the resolution of the woman artist with utter confidence.² The central conflict of the story involves the dilemma Paula faces when, after the death of her mother, she receives a marriage proposal from George Brainard, a wealthy, attractive man and must choose between a comfortable, conventional marriage and the career as a concert pianist for which she has spent her entire life preparing. George expects that Paula will be willing to give up her musical calling for "the labor of loving" (45) instead. He proposes to her, never fully comprehending her devotion to her art or realizing that it could conflict with her devotion to a man. Paula, who admires George and feels strongly attracted to him, is thrilled at his request but realizes that they must part. George suddenly and unexpectedly sees someone different from the girl he had known as Paula begins to talk about the purpose of her life with her "father's emotional nature aroused in her" (46). Paula makes a passionate defense of her art, something she knows he cannot understand:

'What do you know of my life,' she exclaimed passionately. 'What can you guess of it? Is music anything more to you than the pleasing distraction of any idle moment? Can't you feel that with me, it courses with the blood through my veins? That it's something dearer than life, than riches, even than love?' (46)

George's reply to this—"don't speak like a mad woman"—betrays his incomprehension and his belief that a woman who gives herself so passionately to artistic pursuit, particularly at the expense of a potential husband, must be insane. Until now he has known Paula only as the

² Except for "Emancipation," which Chopin wrote at the age of 19 or 20, "Wiser than a God" was the first short story Chopin composed that she did not destroy. It was published in the *Philadelphia Musical Journal* in December 1889. Toth's biography, *Kate Chopin* (New York: William Morrow, 1990) contains a list of Chopin's writings adapted and updated from Per Seyersted's bibliography in his edition, *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). All pages references to "Wiser Than a God" and *The Awakening* refer to Seyersted's edition.

"daughter of the undemonstrative American woman" (46). As Per Seyersted observes, George "represents the patriarchal view of women, and [Paula] the view of Margaret Fuller that women so inclined should be allowed to leave aside motherhood and domesticity and instead use their wings to soar toward the transcendence of a nonbiological career."³ The reader can hardly be surprised that Paula has wisely fled temptation when George returns a week later.

In this early story, Kate Chopin explores art as a kind of divine bondage, as suggested in the epigraph, "To love and be wise is scarcely granted even to a God." Paula does love and feels physically attracted to George but is wise in her decision not to marry him. She is an exceptional woman and has the wisdom to recognize that "the purpose of her life" (46) would be destroyed by marrying him. The story, rather than focusing on Paula's moment of public triumph, shows Paula beset with temptation in her most vulnerable moment.⁴ By choosing to become a concert pianist instead of George's wife, Paula satisfies both her own ambitions and her parents' and thus keeps a meaningful connection to them even in their death. Seyersted notes that "Wiser Than a God" has certain affinities with de Stael's *Corinne* in George's momentary belief that he can accept a wife who does not live solely for him and his family but that it also shows a pronounced difference in Chopin's heroine's ability to resist romantic temptation: "unlike the French heroine ... Paula tells her suitor that life is less important to her than the unhampered exertion of what she considers her authentic calling and her true self."⁵

Paula knows herself, and thus is able to avoid the trap that marriage to George would have become for her. Self-knowledge, Chopin implies, is the most important attribute of the woman artist. By listening to her own heart and instincts, Paula turns away an inappropriate mate and gains the possibility of union with a man who is talented in his own right and who

³ Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 105.

⁴ In focussing on Paula's private dilemma rather than on her public triumph, Chopin avoids one of the pitfalls common to women who write about female artists. In *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Garden City: Anchor, 1977), Ellen Moers discusses the propensity of women writers, particularly of the nineteenth century, for engaging their characters in scenes of public display: "Women writers who have attempted the literary portrait of genius have insisted more than men on showing it off at the moment of public acclaim; and that the literary result is more often raw fantasy than art. But the compulsion to write public triumphs, in the nineteenth century, surely resulted from the impossibility of ever having them in real life" (278).

⁵ Seyersted, *Kate Chopin*, p. 105.

is willing to let her pursue her career to its fullest. At the end of the story, Paula is resting "after an extended and remunerative concert tour," and Max Kunstler, her former harmony teacher, is still following her "with the ever persistent will—the dogged patience that so often wins in the end" (47). Only a man named Kunstler could be the proper husband for Paula von Stolz, and only a woman named Stolz could bring about a reversal of the typical male-female artistic relationship in which a male teacher dominates over the female student's talent and body.

"Wiser than a God" was a triumphant beginning to Chopin's publishing career. Never again did Chopin present the resolution and success of the woman artist so confidently and without compromise. Paula achieves fame, wealth and love. Particularly viewed in comparison to Mlle. Reisz of *The Awakening*, Paula seems a kind of fantasy for Chopin, an empowering wish-fulfillment, a visualization of what the woman with artistic ambitions might accomplish. This story shows the resolution of the woman artist as Chopin wishes it to be, and it implies that a woman might achieve success and fame without having to give up everything else.

"Wiser than a God" appears to have served a personal purpose for Kate Chopin. After her completion of this story, Chopin began a flurry of productive literary activity unprecedented in her life. Within a year she had completed several more short stories, all of which were to be published, as well as her first novel, *At Fault*, which she published at her own expense. Paula von Stolz appears to have been the kind of alter ego Chopin needed to incarnate her own artistic ambitions and get herself started. "Wiser than a God" is an example of what Julia Kristeva identifies as "an imaginary story through which she [the woman writer] constitutes an identity."⁶ This story about a female character who resists temptation and triumphs in the world of art seems to have been what Chopin needed to gather her creative forces and begin her literary career. And making Paula a musician rather than a writer was a wise strategic move: first, Chopin avoids the technical difficulties of making writing an appropriate subject for a novel,⁷ and second, she safely con-

⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Harvester, 1981), p. 166.

⁷ Moers writes that "as a novelist, Mme de Staël was perhaps the first to discover that book-writing is an anti-novelistic subject. Many a novelist after her, attempting to make heroism out of literary genius, has discovered that the best way to do it is to exchange his own art for another, one offering more colorful scenes

ceals her own literary ambition behind a character who triumphs in a discipline other than her own.⁸

"Wiser Than a God" is a simple story, centered around Paula's ability to resist inappropriate marriage—the classic temptation that torments nearly all women artist characters in late nineteenth-century American literature. Chopin allows none of her other women artist characters such success, however. As Chopin's career progressed she apparently came to learn first-hand of the complexity of the problems that could plague the woman artist. As charming as it is, there is something naive about "Wiser than a God" that betrays it as the creation of a writer at the beginning of her career who is not yet mature in her craft and vision.⁹

If "Wiser Than a God" shows Chopin's beginner's confidence, *The Awakening*, published nine years later, betrays in the complex and problematical treatment of Edna Pontellier, the fledgling painter, and Mlle. Reisz, the accomplished pianist, Chopin's ambivalence about the roles available to women artists. To analyze Chopin's treatment of the woman artist in *The Awakening* one must ask three questions: first, how seriously is the reader to take Edna's ambitions, second, to what extent does Mlle. Reisz stand for Chopin and her view of the woman artist, and third, why do Chopin's characterizations of Edna and Reisz seem to work at cross purposes?

The answers to the first two questions have been the matter of considerable critical debate. In 1977 Patricia Allen identified Edna's status as an

and costumes, more exciting apprenticeships and rivalries, more dramatic public response to turn to narrative purposes" (281).

⁸ Some critics have noted that Chopin apparently felt uneasy and ambivalent about her ambitions. In her article "A New Biographical Approach," in *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening*, ed. Bernard Koloski (New York: MLA, 1988), Emily Toth argues that Chopin felt keenly "the social pressures that make young women deny their intellectual achievements" (62). Gene Burchard maintains in "Kate Chopin's Problematical Womanliness: The Frontier of American Feminism," *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas* 15 (1984), pp. 35-45, that Chopin felt considerable ambivalence about her vocation as a woman writer and felt "a fear of too much seriousness" (37). In her introduction to Edith Wharton's 1900 novel *The Touchstone* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), Cynthia Griffin Wolff poignantly addresses the painful conflicts women have often felt between ambition and traditional notions of femininity. In its focus on turn-of-the-century ideas about women and literary culture, Wolff's discussion is useful for understanding the kinds of dilemmas Chopin would have faced as well.

⁹ In *Kate Chopin*, Seyerstedt rightly identifies "Wiser than a God" as an "apprenticeship" story, rather inept in style, authorial distance and characterization (115, 117-118, 130).

artist as a fundamental center of disagreement in Chopin criticism.¹⁰ She denounced the tendency of some critics, particularly male ones, to focus on Edna's "sexual activity" and "failures" as well as their refusal to take Edna's art seriously in their assumption that "Edna's art is nothing—a mere extension of the eternal sketching that genteel heroines have indulged in since Jane Austen's day."¹¹ Indeed, statements like "quite frankly the book is about sex"¹² seem to illustrate what Christiane Rochefort means when she says that some male critics tend to read the works of women writers "below the belt."¹³ Since 1977, many others have followed Allen's lead and upheld Edna's motives and argued for the seriousness and legitimacy of Edna's pursuits.¹⁴ Yet some critics continue to scorn Edna's efforts. Elizabeth Ammons, for example, still maintains that Edna is a mere dabbler and that Reisz represents the image of the woman artist for Kate Chopin.¹⁵ But whatever point of view they argue, most critics ignore the clues Chopin herself gives on the matter and instead tend to make general pronouncements about Edna and Mlle. Reisz that conform to some overall thesis of their own.

A close look at the details of the novel reveals, however, an inconsistency in the work that perhaps points toward an ambivalence in the author herself. Whether critics argue for Edna's legitimacy as an artist, or assert the supremacy of Reisz's views on Edna and thus dismiss Edna's painting as mere dabbling, seems to be a matter of how they interpret opposite and conflicting clues in the novel. Rather than taking one side or the other, it might prove profitable to examine Chopin's characterization of both characters and explore the contradictions for what they may disclose about Chopin's own dilemma as a woman artist.

10 Patricia Allen, "Old Critics and New: The Treatment of Chopin's *The Awakening*" in *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1977), pp. 224-238.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

12 Kenneth Eble quoted in *ibid.*, p. 225.

13 In "Are Women Writers Still Monsters?" in *New French Feminisms*, Christiane Rochefort complains that "In brief, we are read below the belt—men are at the glorious level of the brain" (184).

14 Linda Huf devotes an entire chapter to *The Awakening* in her book *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* (New York: Ungar, 1984), a study of the female *Künstlerroman*. Other discussions of Edna as artist include Horner's and Zlosnick's chapter on *The Awakening* in *Landscapes of Desire* (New York: Harvester, 1990), as well as Deborah Barker's "The Awakening of Female Artistry," and Lynda Boren's "Taming the Sirens: Self Possession and the Strategies of Art in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 61-79; 166-179.

15 Ammons, *Conflicting Stories*, pp. 73-74.

From the first scene in Chapter 5, Chopin offers evidence that Edna is right to follow her impulses to art. The narrator says of Edna's pleasure in painting, "She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her" (891). Chopin's choice of the word "employment" is important, as it is to her art that Edna turns in the course of her awakening as the "work" she feels she "ought" to be doing. Edna is moved to paint Adele "seated there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color," and although the portrait is disappointing to Adele since she does not think it resembles her, the narrator says "it was a fair enough piece of work, and in many respects satisfying" (891). This is clearly not Edna's own assessment since the next sentence makes clear that Edna "evidently did not think so. After surveying the sketch critically she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface, and crumpled the paper between her hands" (892). The positive judgment comes from the narrator, not from Edna, who is critical of her own work repeatedly throughout the novel. She is not satisfied with amateurish productions.

The morning after she tramples on her wedding ring following Leonce's temper fit at dinner, Edna spends "an hour or two looking over some of her old sketches" (936) and resolves to devote new energy to her painting. That Edna's decision follows this domestic spat is significant, for already in her reaction to Leonce's behavior Edna shows new resolve. In contrast to her usual attempts at appeasement or lapses into depression, Edna "finishe[s] her dinner alone, with forced deliberation" (934). Gathering together a few sketches "which she considered the least discreditable," she sets off to visit Adele, who she knows will give her encouragement in her resolve. Edna is fully aware that Adele is no informed critic of art, yet she simply wants to hear from Adele that her own decision is sensible—"she sought the works and praise and encouragement that would help her to put heart into her venture" (937). She tells Adele that she feels she "ought to work again" and that she wants "to be doing something" (937), and she naturally receives the encouragement she came seeking and gives Adele some of her sketches in gratitude.

In the next chapter, Leonce's protests make clear that Edna has begun devoting considerable time to her pursuit. He objects that it is "the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving

for the comfort of her family" (939). Edna, however is not discouraged and merely tells him that she "feels like painting." When Leonce insults her by saying that Adele is more of a musician than she is a painter, she says "She isn't a musician, and I'm not a painter" (939). Edna is not overly confident of her abilities and throughout assesses them realistically. As she says to Mlle. Reisz, she is "becoming an artist" (946).

Edna works with diligence. Undiscouraged by Leonce's belittlement of her artistic efforts, she "works with great energy and interest, without accomplishing anything, however, which satisfied her even in the smallest degree" (939). Edna enlists all members of the household except Leonce to sit for her as models. As she paints she sings the song Robert hummed to her and is filled with visions of her liberation at Grand Isle. Edna's resolve to begin painting seriously again is connected to the sensuality that has awakened within her. As she paints "a subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn" (940). Sensuality and creativity awaken simultaneously in Edna and are closely related. Already in 1899 Chopin was aware of what feminists only recently have come to articulate fully: the intimate connection between body and the unconscious activity that produces art. Once Edna discovers the promptings of her body, she is not willing to give them up and assume the sort of existence that Mlle. Reisz leads, and rightly so. She comes to realize that her awakening sensuality and her budding creativity are inextricably connected.

The first thing Edna does when her father visits is take him to her studio to make a sketch of him. Unlike Leonce, he takes her painting seriously and is impressed with her skill, though primarily because he feels that it reflects on him as her father. Once Edna is alone in the house, she works when the weather permits and tells Arobin that she cannot attend the races when the weather is good because she has to work (959). Already at this point Chopin suggests that Edna has made considerable progress: "She had reached a stage when she seemed to be no longer feeling her way, working, when in the humor, with sureness and ease. And being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work in itself" (956). This passage suggests that Edna is patiently acquiring the skills necessary to good painting; she is not overly eager for results.

But apparently she makes rapid progress, for at her next visit to Mademoiselle Reisz Edna says that not only has her teacher praised her

work but that she is also earning money from her painting: "I am beginning to sell my sketches. Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality. I cannot judge of that myself, but I feel that I have gained in ease and confidence. However, as I said, I have sold a good many things through Laidpore" (963).

Soon after, a picture dealer comes to Edna one day when she has been working "several hours with much spirit" to ask if she is going to study in Paris and to try to arrange for her to send "some Parisian studies to reach him in time for the holiday trade in December" (988). That a picture dealer actually contacts Edna and wants to commission work from her suggests that she has indeed begun to make a reputation for herself and that someone who makes his living from selling art has confidence in her. As Allen observes, "That fact alone in Business America makes her painting a serious act."¹⁶ That Edna goes from being a mere dabbler with aptitude to a painter whom dealers want to commission all within less than a year's time indicates that she has both ability and drive. All of these details suggest that Chopin means for the reader to see that Edna's ambitions are to be treated with seriousness and respect. Chopin daringly lets Edna's birth as a painter correspond to the nine months of Adele's pregnancy.¹⁷ Whether or not Edna has the talent to be a world class artist is beside the point. Allen rightly asserts that "the quality of her work is not relevant to her need and right to pursue her art. ... And for Edna, the impulse to create has all the greater social and public significance for the personal and private obstacles it must overcome. Unlike the drawing of Emma Woodhouse, Edna's drawing is a revolutionary act."¹⁸

Edna uses her painting as a way of discovering and expressing herself; for her, art is a way of manifesting the change that is occurring within her. The only other means Edna has of expressing the discovery of her own will and independent nature is through her affairs with Alcee and Robert that ultimately dissipate her energy and sense of self. Because painting is a nonverbal art form, Edna's art also allows her to go beyond

¹⁶ Allen, "Old Critics and New," p. 230.

¹⁷ In her introduction to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' 1877 novel, *The Story of Avrs* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1985), Carol Kessler observes that in the nineteenth century "the sexuality of woman was solely reproductive, this being her mode of creative self-expression" (xv). Chopin's use of the gestation period as a parallel to Edna's *artistic development* tacitly subverts the notion that women's creativity should be defined as the ability to produce children.

¹⁸ Allen, "Old Critics and New," pp. 230-231.

the limited linguistic boundaries that have defined her world until now.¹⁹ As Horner and Zlosnick argue, Edna's painting shows a "desire to express an alternative sense of self in a medium free from verbal inscriptions of ideology."²⁰ Painting also gives Edna considerable means of control. All members of the household, except Leonce, sit for Edna so that she can paint their portraits. Edna's painting of others is a way of asserting her own definitions and experiences of them. Neither Leonce nor Robert models for Edna—a detail that suggests that neither man will ever expose himself to definition by a woman and the control over him that this would imply. Most important, however, is the financial power Edna gains from her painting. She earns money for her work.

Critics who doubt the seriousness and suitability of Edna's artistic pursuits are perhaps partly influenced by the judgments of Leonce and Mlle. Reisz and partly by skepticism about whether a woman who has lived as Edna has can ever really accomplish anything. An important point to keep in mind, however, is the way Chopin herself began her career as an artist. Kate Chopin, in her relatively late start at writing, bore significant similarities to Edna, who also comes to realize her ambitions only after marriage and several years of motherhood. Those who would argue that Edna's "late start" at painting portends that she can never be anything more than a mere dabbler ought to remember Chopin's own beginning: she did not start writing short stories (except for one piece, "Emancipation: A Life Fable," written at the age of 19) until she was 38; her first published story appeared when she was 39.²¹ Moreover she was the mother of six children. It seems extremely unlikely that Chopin would have wanted Edna's late start or motherhood to be seen as a reason for not taking her painting seriously.

Leonce's derogatory remarks can easily enough be explained as the grumbling of a spoiled husband who feels neglected when his wife devotes herself to her own interests. But Reisz's skepticism is more difficult to discount. The narrator goes to great length to show Edna's ability and seriousness, but Reisz is unresponsive to Edna's ambition and even

19 In "A Language Which Nobody Understood: Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*." NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction 20 (3): 1987. [Rpt. in *Kate Chopin: The Awakening*, ed. Nancy Walker. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism (Boston: Bedford, 1993), pp. 270-296], Patricia Yaeger argues that "*The Awakening's* most radical awareness is that Edna inhabits a world of limited linguistic possibilities, of limited possibilities for interpreting and reorganizing her feelings, and therefore of limited possibilities for action" (274).

20 Horner and Zlosnick, *Landscapes of Desire*, p. 52.

21 See Toth's *Kate Chopin* for the details of Chopin's life.

mocks it. When Edna tells her that she is "becoming an artist," Reisz's reply immediately casts doubt upon Edna's ambitions: "Ah! an artist! You have pretensions, Madame" (946). Clearly Reisz does not believe that Edna can rightfully claim the title of artist. But, in fact, Edna does not say she "is" an artist, but rather "becoming" one. Horner and Zlosnick rightly point out that this process of becoming is what Chopin emphasizes: "The process is one of *becoming* rather than *being*; she has to find her proper subject matter and her proper milieu in order to practice effectively as an artist."²² Edna strives to find these, as well as her own individual style, throughout the rest of the book.

As Reisz expresses her misgivings about Edna's suitability, she simultaneously admits that she knows nothing about Edna's "talent" or "temperament" (946). When Edna asks why Reisz says she has "pretensions" and then goes on to inquire why Reisz does not think she can "become an artist," Reisz admits that she does "not know her well enough to say," but the lines loom in the text and in Edna's consciousness as a shadow over her determination to become an artist. They even figure in the final scene when Edna remembers Reisz's words as she walks into the sea: "How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies'" (1000). Edna does not fail as an artist, but she apparently feels that she has failed to measure up to Reisz's standards. At the critical moment, Edna is not sustained by Reisz's friendship but rather shamed by her definition of the artist.

Significantly, Reisz never once in the course of the novel sees any of Edna's art work. Reisz makes clear that, for her, being an artist has primarily to do with innate ability as well as personal courage and one's attitude toward life, not with what one creates: "To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts — absolute gifts — which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies". (946). These lines have frequently been quoted as a statement of Chopin's own view of what the woman artist must possess to be successful. This assumption seems valid enough, as works like *The Awakening* and "The Storm" show that the courageous, brave soul that

²² Horner and Zlosnick, *Landscapes of Desire*, p. 49.

dares and defies is an excellent description of the author herself. But the assumption that because Reisz makes some shrewd statements in the course of the novel, she necessarily stands for Chopin's view of the woman artist or that her skepticism about Edna's ambitions represents Chopin's own attitude needs further examination.

During Reisz's performance at Grand Isle, Edna is profoundly moved, and afterwards, the other characters praise Reisz profusely: "What passion! 'What an artist!' 'I've always said no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz!' 'That last prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!'" (906). Elsewhere, however, the descriptions of Reisz's behavior and appearance, both by characters who know her and by the narrator, are almost wholly negative. On first appearance Reisz is keeping a baby awake by dragging a chair in and out of her room and simultaneously objecting to the noise the child is making. The narrator's subsequent description makes clear that Reisz is generally unpleasant: "She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample on the rights of others" (905). Reisz's physical appearance coincides with her behavior. She is as malformed physically as she is socially: "She made an awkward, imperious little bow as she went in. She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair" (905). Elsewhere the narrator uses words like "venom[ous]" (930), "rude" (971) and "insulting" (971) to describe Reisz's behavior. Although Reisz may play the piano masterfully and passionately, Chopin does not otherwise present her as a heroine whose behavior is worthy of imitation.

Although Reisz's identity as an artist is confirmed by the other characters in the novel, she does not appear to have the artistic or personal stature of Paula von Stolz in Chopin's early story. Reisz teaches piano for a living and resides in a dingy garret. Chopin grants Reisz neither the public triumph nor the personal charm she gives to Paula, and Reisz's life seems neither glamorous nor enviable. Elaine Showalter points out that Reisz is a sister of the lonely artist characters in local color fiction: "Mademoiselle Reisz's story suggests that Edna will lose her beauty, her

youth, her husband, and children—everything, in short, but her art and her pride—and become a kind of New Orleans nun.”²³

Those critics who maintain that Reisz is a kind of heroine for Chopin miss the grotesque quality of Chopin’s portrayal of her. In fact Reisz clearly fits Sherwood Anderson’s definition of a grotesque character: a person who “took one of the [many] truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live by it.”²⁴ Reisz has taken the myth of the lonely, alienated artist for her single truth, and accordingly it has deformed her both socially and physically. In adopting such a narrow self-definition, Reisz seems to have locked herself into an artistic identity mythologized particularly by late nineteenth-century ways of viewing art and the artist. Richard Brodhead explains how the “self-designated high culture of the postbellum decades organizes the arts around the figure of the Great Artist. The hierarchizing and sacralizing tendencies of this scheme work to break a few artists—the great practitioners—out of the community of all who write and to elevate them into a region of supreme eminence and transcendent authority.”²⁵ Reisz sees herself as belonging to this company of Great Artists, but it is an identity that has proved limiting and harmful to her. In her adherence to this romantic and largely male definition of the artist, Reisz has become physically and socially deformed.²⁶

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of female companionship and collegial support for creative women especially during the nineteenth century.²⁷ Writing in 1845 of women’s ambitions in general, Margaret Fuller had argued for the importance of mutual female support and role models when she stated in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that she “would have Woman lay aside all thought, such as she habitually cherishes, of being taught and led by men.”²⁸ The idea that women must lead women is, of course, also a tenet of contemporary feminist theory.

23 Elaine Showalter, *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing* (New York: Oxford, 1991), p. 76. Showalter also argues that when Chopin began to write she took as her models local colorists like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E Wilkins, “who had not only mastered technique and construction but had also devoted themselves to telling the stories of female loneliness, isolation, and frustration” (70).

24 Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), p. 207.

25 Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, p. 164.

26 Reisz’s physical appearance illustrates the common nineteenth-century belief that inappropriate ambitions—intellectual or artistic—would cause physical and mental deterioration and deformity in women.

27 For a good discussion of this issue see Carol Farley Kessler’s introduction to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *The Story of Avis* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992).

28 Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 119.

Helene Cixous writes that "It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman."²⁹ When Edna reports to Reisz that she has not only been praised by her teacher but also that she has begun to sell her work, Reisz's only reply is her question about what Leonce thinks of Edna's move to the Pigeon House. As Patricia Yaeger argues, "Mademoiselle Reisz (who would seem, initially, to offer Edna another model for female selfhood) is surprisingly complicitous in limiting Edna's options."³⁰ One might expect Reisz to take the role of mentor over Edna's budding career, but she will hear nothing of it. In fact she never even sees any of Edna's artwork at all. The friendship between the two characters is based first on Mlle. Reisz's piano playing and second on her possession of Robert's letters. Upon her first visit to Reisz in New Orleans it is obvious that Edna is looking for something else as well: a companion with whom she can discuss her artistic ambitions. What Reisz gains out of Edna's visits is companionship and an enthusiastic appreciation of her art. What attracts Reisz to Edna from the beginning is her belief that Edna is the only person present who truly comprehends her music. Edna confirms and complements Reisz's view of herself as an artist. But Reisz does not return the favor or take Edna's artistic ambitions seriously. In fact, she never acknowledges the legitimacy of Edna's longings at all.

Reisz, who defines herself as "artist" and nothing else, misunderstands both Edna's ambitions and what Edna means by "artist." Edna never indicates that she is aiming for world fame as a Great Artist; in fact, she says in recounting Reisz's words that she is not thinking of "any extraordinary flights" (966). What Edna does strive for is control over her own life, and for her, art is a way of gaining that. In Edna's incipient artistry, Chopin shows the struggles of a married woman and mother who has the right inclinations to define and control her own life but who cannot carry her plans through because she has no examples to guide her and because she has been conditioned to find her sense of self in men and to project her own power onto them. Edna's painting is a serious attempt to manifest her new-found self in the world. Her striving to become an artist is appropriate and admirable; she has chosen a pursuit that is suitable both to her social position and natural talents. As Deborah

29 Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* (1976); Rpt. in *New French Feminisms*, p. 252.

30 Yaeger, "A Language Which Nobody Understood," p. 287.

Barker argues, "Even if Edna does not live up to Mlle. Reisz's ideal of the 'courageous soul' of the artist or the 'bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice [who] must have strong wings,' these are not Edna's definitions and do not seem to reflect her conception of the artist."³¹ When Reisz and Edna use the word "artist" they have two different things in mind: Reisz's use of the word is informed by the cult of the Great Artist and Master; Edna's use of the term has more modest and more personal implications.

Ammons suggests that Chopin believes that Reisz represents the only existence possible for women artists in her time.³² But Chopin makes very clear elsewhere that she does not believe that women artists have to live and behave as Reisz does. Her description of Ruth McEnery Stuart, a woman artist who maintains her femininity and charm, suggests that she disapproved strongly of personalities like Mlle. Reisz's. Chopin's comments about Stuart reveal what qualities she appreciates and values in creative women:

I might have known that a woman possessing so great an abundance of the saving grace—which is humor—was not going to take herself seriously.

Mrs. Stuart is not one whose work overshadows her personality.... Sympathy and insight are the qualities, I believe, which make her stories lovable, which make them linger in the memory like pleasant human experiences—happy realities that we are loath to part with. I fancy there are no sharp edges to this woman's soul, no unsheathed prejudices dwelling there- in wherewith to inflict wound, or prick, or stab upon her fellow-man or woman.

Mrs. Stuart, in fact, is a delightful womanly woman.³³

Reisz is a peerless example of a woman with "sharp edges" to her soul and a whole arsenal of "unsheathed prejudices ... wherewith to inflict wound, or prick, or stab upon her fellow-man or woman." She constantly complains and disparages others. In Chopin's comments about Ruth McEnery Stuart one can see what Chopin esteemed in other women artists. In reports of the way she conducted her own life, one recognizes immediately that she did not resort to Reisz-like behavior herself. One could be a brave soul and be daring and defiant without being obnoxious and vindictive as well. Chopin's attitude toward Reisz is highly ambivalent. She gives Reisz the all-important speech about what it takes

31 Barker, "The Awakening of Female Artistry," p. 73.

32 Ammons, *Conflicting Stories*, p. 73.

33 Seyersted, *Complete Works*, p. 712

to be an artist—a speech that Chopin herself must have agreed with—and yet at the same time she makes Reisz into an unattractive, self-absorbed character possessing qualities that she herself condemned.

But why does Chopin give to Reisz, a character of whom she must have disapproved, such words of wisdom, and why does she simultaneously devote so much energy to showing the legitimacy of Edna's pursuits, only to let Reisz then question their seriousness? The answer may lie in Chopin's own uncertainty about her artistic identity at a time in which women were, for the first time in America, attempting to claim serious literary status alongside their male colleagues. Chopin sympathized with both characters, the self-proclaimed Great Artist who has become deformed in her narrow adherence to one self-definition, and the upper-class mother and housewife full of talent and longing but without the psychological resources and strength of self to pursue her artistic ambitions fully. In having spent a large part of her life in the roles of wife and mother, Kate Chopin was similar to Edna, but in aiming for national recognition and high literary standards, she was akin to Reisz. But she could identify with neither character completely, and in the inconsistency of her portrayal, Chopin lays bare her own dilemma.

In many respects, Reisz resembles the "woman artist as monster" identified by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.³⁴ Given what we know about Chopin and about what she valued in Stuart, it is not surprising that she felt ambivalent toward Reisz. As Chopin's career progressed, she was forced to question her own identity as widow and mother and see that in the contemporary literary arena there were few, if any, serious writers of fiction in her own circumstances.³⁵ Chopin empathized deeply with Edna's longings, but she also had what Edna lacked: a strong sense of self and the ability to persevere and concentrate her energies in spite of disappointment. But Chopin's portrayal of her characters betrays a deep-seated anxiety about whether as a late starter she could find a place and artistic identity in the given paradigms of artistic expression. In her fiction, Chopin never resolved the dilemma; no

34 See chapter one in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale, 1979).

35 Chopin admired both Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett greatly but knew neither of them personally. Although they served as important American models for her, their personal circumstances were very different from Chopin's own. Both devoted themselves almost entirely to their careers. Neither had children. Jewett never married, and Freeman finally married at the age of 49.

truly successful woman artist appears in her work after her first story. To the modern reader, however, Chopin seems to be the consummate woman artist missing from her novel. Ironically, nearly one hundred years later, Chopin seems to have created in herself the character she failed to create in her fiction.