

The Marriage of Nature and Culture in Kate Chopin's Short Stories

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1. Introduction

Critics have described both Kate Chopin's (1850 - 1904) interest in women's rights and the influence of Darwinism on her work. A link between these themes can be found in the way binary conceptions of nature and culture establish gender relations in her short stories. How the differences between nature and culture are presented and what effect this has on characterisation and the politics of marriage in the short stories is the topic of this paper. The degrees of difference between masculinity and femininity and between men and women can be related to this binary model. In order to explain why the literary genre within which her stories are categorised is relevant to the political efficaciousness of her work, I will follow Hubert Zapf's conception of forms of art¹ as being forms of knowledge.

Chopin's opinions on sexual politics and the natural sciences were not necessarily static, and while the development of her thought may be traced through her stories when viewed chronologically, I will instead take a synchronic approach, looking at four stories from roughly the same period. There is a general tendency in the short stories to discuss equality within marriage by placing female characters on a threshold between nature and culture.

As a first step, I will introduce the genres in which Chopin's work is typically placed, in order to see how her work is understood. Particular attention will be paid to the way she uses the tropes associated with local colour writing to further her agenda. I then summarise Bert Bender's analysis of the influence Charles Darwin's theories of evolution had on Chopin. Darwinian theory both informed and contrasted with Chopin's feminist stance, in so much as distinctions between men and women are taken to be neither purely natural, nor purely cultural, but the culmination of both. Choice or agency, in these stories, is curtailed by biological and environmental conditions, just as biology and nature are also understood as tools in the hands of humankind. Katherine Joslin takes Bender's approach and adds to it a study of how women's fashion is used by Chopin to critique Darwinism. I summarise her point in order to provide a precedent for the analysis of the nature/culture binary in Chopin's

¹ i.e. literary texts

stories, before moving on to describe Margaret Fuller's views on gender, which are consistent with a depiction of the nature/culture binary as flexible or pliable. Chapter 5 is a discussion of Hubert Zapf's concept of cyclicity in literature, and how literature can be understood to deliver knowledge in an ecological (i.e. reciprocal) relationship with a readership. I then begin to analyse four of Chopin's short stories that illustrate her conception of the apparent nature/culture divide, and consider the political use these structures afford. In doing this, I discover that the four stories all use parallel distinctions between inside and outside on one hand, and women and men on the other, to contemplate the social conditions in which women in late-nineteenth century America live. These conceptual pairs are also connected to the difference between nature and culture as well as that between body and mind, a fact which allows me to demonstrate how Chopin's short stories, understood as a form of knowledge, might have had a tangible effect on her readership.

2. Exceeding Genres: Naturalism, Realism and Local Colour Writing

There are grounds for including Chopin's works within the naturalist genre, given her interest in the Darwinistic principles that propelled contemporaneous conceptions of society. Indeed, just as Zola, a singular influence on her work, understood his own naturalistic practice as the recording of "how heredity and environment determine individual fate" in a quasi-scientific sense (Joslin 75), Chopin understood herself as a naturalist writer for whom accuracy of portrayal was key (Holman 258). Yet one might just as easily characterise her work as realist, given her interest in not only what might determine social structures, but also the immediate consequences of actions for her characters. For as George Eliot put it, realism intended to "exhibit men and things as they are" (Joslin 74). Be that as it may, her short stories are more often than not understood as regionalist, or, in the nomenclature of her time, as 'local color writing'.²

Local color writing was a literary phenomenon in 19th century America in which the particularities of a place and its inhabitants were accentuated. Crow defines it as "at the intersection of human culture and natural landscape" (Crow 3). The aim to distinguish a region was often furthered by the use of phonetic spelling which achieved a sense of the sounds and rhythms of speech, descriptions of geography, biology and also sometimes the use of eccentric characters, all of which could be relied upon to mark the specificity of people and place. Stephanie Foote argues that the "formal concern" of local color writing "with assigning to different kinds of people a place in relation to the standard, national culture demonstrates that regional writing was a powerful method of understanding not just the 'place' where certain people lived but also the 'place' they inhabited in a social hierarchy" (Foote 11). One such relation of place to social structure is evident in Chopin's use of the marriage theme, whereby the specificity of a place – outdoors and masculine – is contrasted with the generic nature of the home – indoors and feminine – which taken as the focal point of wedlock.

² I am using the original name of the genre in this paper even though in contemporary literary criticism the term Regionalism is more often than not employed, largely because of the adverse connotation that Local Color previously had in relation to the perceived scale of ambition.

Although an offshoot of realism, Holman notes that local color writing is not normally associated with the seriousness of intention that marks realist literature, emphasising “verisimilitude of detail without being concerned often enough about truth to the larger aspects of life or human nature” (Holman 249). This was, he argues, a result of it being produced for mass circulation in periodicals as short stories, which were focused foremost on sales rather than literary intent or critical reception. Chopin's stories do match this description, even down to the method of publication and perhaps the necessity of earning a remittance (Knights xiv). Yet they also exceed these limitations, which were perhaps only *seemingly* inherent to the genre. For one, Chopin's literary intentions were indeed serious, as evidenced by her own reflections on Zola's legacy³, not to mention the critical reflection that her work has rightfully provoked.⁴ Secondly, and more relevant to this study, is the way in which her stories engage with themes that reach far beyond the limited scope that the local color genre is assumed to provide. And while virtually no narrative can avoid commenting in some way upon human relationships if it is to carry any interest, the rumination on the nature of civilisation as it stood within her social milieu, and in relation to the science of the day, might be understood as making use of a genre that both gave her access to an audience *and* provided her with her material. When written by women, local color writing was often associated with sentimentalism and attracted a fair amount of derision. Yet as John Carlos Rowe points out, sentimental literature in nineteenth century America was politically efficacious (Rowe 26). One might consider sentimentality simply as affectivity by another name.⁵ Although taking wedlock as a theme might have restricted Chopin's audience to women her stories are not sentimental in the classical sense, for her use of contrasts between the public and the domestic, nature and culture and men and women are strategic. As Rowe notes, the “nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, the myth of the “angel in the house,” and the bourgeois commitment to “separate spheres” for men (public) and women (private) did

³ See for example, her commentary on Zola's *Lourdes*, in Seyersted.

⁴ See the online resource katechopin.org for a bibliography.

⁵ Rowe cites Harriet Beecher Stowe as the classic example of a female writer whose overtly sentimental work tipped the political balance.

not fully regulate the political influence of sentiment and feeling identified with women” (Rowe 26). The local color genre might be understood as enabling her political message rather than silencing it.

The stories I take as examples all demonstrate some of the traits of the genres defined above – geographic and social specificity, scientific determinism, and verisimilitude – but need not be strictly understood according to any of them. Ultimately the genre is only as relevant as the intention motivating its use: to reflect, and reflect upon, the ambiguous distinction between nature and culture, and how this might work to place women within a social hierarchy. The local colour genre gave Chopin access to an audience that might have directly felt the impact of her fiction, namely, women. By engaging effectively with this audience in subtly political ways, Chopin's work sustains Zapf's theory of literary ecology, which I will describe in chapter 3. Before I do however, I will introduce the work of Charles Darwin and Margaret Fuller, in order to further contextualise the short stories.

3. Charles Darwin

Bert Bender has identified the influence Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection had over Chopin's thought. First described in *The Origin of Species* (1859), natural selection is the process by which those organisms which have characteristics suitable to a given environment are more likely to survive there than those with other, less appropriate characteristics. Surviving organisms are then more likely to produce offspring that will, in turn, survive to produce offspring themselves. Darwin's treatise was followed by a subsequent one, *The Descent of Man* (1871), in which he described sexual selection as the preference shown by one sex for specific characteristics in potential mates. If some individual organisms are preferred, they will have a reproductive advantage over other members of their species. As Bender notes, Chopin "immediately saw from her writer's point of view that sexual selection was profoundly illuminating in her work with the age-old and all-important courtship plot" (Bender 100). He argues that Chopin generally accepted Darwin's theory, but questioned the role assigned to women in sexual selection, especially in relation to power and desire. Her stories of courtship and marriage are imbued with both a Darwinian perspective and with her resistance to the sexism inherent in a theory which suggests that the passivity and modesty apparent in women at the time was biologically determined, or 'natural'. In many of her stories, these traits are socially determined, or 'cultural', and are often struggled against or refused by female characters. Choice, or agency, is curtailed by biological and environmental conditions, just as biology and nature are also understood as tools in the hands of humankind. Bender however argues that Chopin's "meditation on these matters ended in her doubt that 'love' could claim a meaningful place in human courtship" (Bender 101). Love is not refused, so much as seen as outside of or irrelevant to the pairing of the sexes for reproduction, and therefore as potentially in conflict with 'nature', or at least subservient to it.

Bender understands Athénaïse, the protagonist in the eponymously titled short story, as a "natural woman" in so far as she, upon becoming a mother, surrenders to her instincts, embraces her new social and biological role and returns to her husband for whom she

suddenly rediscovers love (Bender 103). His analysis of racism in Chopin's work makes clear how Darwinism, albeit based on empirical study, is easily used to justify a range of political or ideological positions. For a twenty-first century readership, Chopin may not have sufficiently thought through the consequences of this in terms of race,⁶ though the short stories reflect very clearly how she struggled with Darwinian evolutionary theory in relation to the equality of the sexes. Biological necessity and socially constructed roles make uneasy bedfellows in several of her stories, with love often left stranded in between. Emotional experience is set against societal expectation, for in her depiction of individuals, she describes a "new biological reality of the [...] struggle to survive through natural and sexual selection" (Bender 105). Chopin sees the state of 'nature' as one which women can choose to struggle against, albeit with mixed results. In many stories love remains but an illusion; the reality being predicated upon acts of selection motivated by biological needs. Passion is biological, and love is but a misunderstanding over the nature of one's own passions (Bender 113). In Chopin's oeuvre as a whole, distinctions between men and women are taken to be neither purely natural (biologically determined), nor purely cultural (socially determined). The push and pull of these competing influences is evident in the characterisation Chopin employs, where female protagonists do not comply with the societal roles allowed to them.

Acknowledging that Chopin's work fits into both the categories of realism and naturalism, Katherine Joslin takes Bender's observation on the effects of Darwinism in the stories and applies it to Chopin's depiction of women's fashion. She sees clothing styles as an interface "between culture and nature" (Joslin 73) in so much as garments might have a practical, protective function (nature) but also clearly a social and economic one (culture). She points to the number of Chopin's female characters who "experiment with the limits of individual freedom to gratify ambitions, tastes, likings, even caprices" (78), and argues that Chopin may have seen the Darwinist emphasis on individual freedom as both a feature of civilised society and as exactly that which undoes women who seek it. Her characters are in

⁶ Some evidence of the use of Spencerian and Darwinian ideas to maintain the racial economy of the South could be found in the short stories studied here, and indeed brought into context with the nature/nurture divide, were it not beyond the remit of this paper.

search of freedom, but only those that appear to acknowledge its limits find happiness. In other words, for Chopin, thanks to civilisation, a woman can exercise power, but to do so carries the risk of going beyond the remit allowed for her by 'nature'. Culture – in this instance understood as personal freedom attained through education and social standing – is therefore bounded by nature. Agency is curtailed by biological and environmental conditions, just as biology and nature are simultaneously open to manipulation. Joslin's argument is essentially that "fashion lies at the boundary between the naturally appearing animal and the socially constructed lady" (Joslin 74). Dress codes, and the choices individuals make within the parameters set by such norms, can be empowering for women. Shopping for clothes in 'Athénaïse' and 'A Pair of Silk Stockings' is equated with freedom. Yet the freedom is limited not only by the protagonists' financial means, but also their societal role as women: they do not clothe themselves in the way Marianne does in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe", whose independence is signalled firstly by the masculinity of her attire, and only then more specifically through its association with Native Americans, a theme to which I shall return shortly. Similarly, the loosening of clothes in "The Storm" signals the loosening of social restraints, as Calixta discovers freedom and selfhood through sexual satisfaction (Chopin 342).⁷ The point here is that the freedom to do what one wants, to pursue gratification, should not solely be the province of men, and that this revelation comes through a Darwinian appreciation of selection: women can control their destiny through their choice of clothing, making themselves more or less desirable, or more or less seemingly independent, as they please. Women are therefore both natural and cultural. The point takes up Darwinian notions, but does not necessarily remain confined to the attitudes toward women prevalent even among progressives like Darwin, whose own beliefs did not move far beyond the racial and sexual prejudices of the day.

Both Bender and Joslin have demonstrated how Chopin was influenced by, and used, Darwinian theories of selection to think through the status of women in American society. Gender is performed by her characters (what they wear, how they behave) while sex is

⁷ All citations of Kate Chopin's stories refer to the Oxford World's Classics edition, edited by Pamela Knights.

expressed (biology exerts control over decision making). The result being that protagonists have their agency curtailed by their own biology and not just by circumstance. I now turn to Margaret Fuller to describe the context in which Chopin's views on women can be read, as well as to discover something of a justification for her interest in marriage plots in the face of the reputation that such plots have. For marriage plots were a key feature of writing for women published in periodicals of the day, and often associated with the local color genre.

4. Margaret Fuller

Margaret Fuller was an American literary critic in the early to mid nineteenth century who edited the *The Dial*, a short-lived magazine which published Thoreau's early work, editorial debates about the relative merits of realism, naturalism and local color writing,⁸ as well as parts of Fuller's own most well-known work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). In this treatise, Fuller outlines a position on the rights of women in American society. Of particular relevance is her refutation of the view that the differences that exist between masculinity and femininity are hard and fast:

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman. History jeers at the attempts of physiologists to bind great original laws by the forms which flow from them. They make a rule; they say from observation of what can and cannot be. In vain! Nature provides exceptions to every rule. (Fuller 44)

Fuller acknowledges difference in the tendency amongst men to classify, and among women to intuit, but posits these differences on a sliding scale. And because reality does not confine itself to the "great original laws" defined by "physiologists", she sees the emancipation of women as being in the best interests of society as a whole, for one because they are mutually dependent, but also because few men are purely masculine – the difference between sex and gender not being explicitly defined here. In particular, the institution of marriage needs to better reflect the needs of women to find and express their individuality. Fuller sees it, ideally, as a form of "intellectual companionship" (28), for "[u]nion is only possible to those who are units" (45). Were it not to predate the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by fourteen years,⁹ Fuller's snide remark about "physiologists" could be taken as a rebuke of Charles Darwin himself, for the attempt to build a scientific principle concerning the nature of evolution requires, as a first step, a belief that what we call nature does indeed adhere to laws; that there are fundamental and irrefutable oppositions in nature, such as male and female,

⁸ Cf. Donna Campbell, p.108.

⁹ Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, though he had been working on the central concept of the book since his voyage on the *Beagle* (1831-36). Nevertheless, the essentialist tendency in discussions of the 'naturalness' of societies was already visible in Herbert Spencer's work, which, given its fame at the time, is likely to have been known to Fuller, and which Joslin claims was most certainly read by Chopin.

upon which sexual selection in the process of reproduction is based. Nevertheless, it is not hard to imagine that Fuller might have had ideas on natural selection in mind when making clear her opinion that gender is not absolute, even though it exhibits the tendency to congregate toward the poles defined by the (also not entirely absolute) sex distinction. Fuller combines this with an emphasis on respect for the integrity of the individual, such that women might be understood not only as subjects in need of political and intellectual freedom, but also unique in their contributions to society. Freedom and respect for women are, in Fuller's view, essential for building functional marriages, and marriages are exactly that which women, lacking independence from men, need as a safeguard to their wellbeing. In her view, it would be better for a woman to withdraw from traditional forms of union entirely, than be subject to the monotony of a disempowering marriage. She argues that "many minds, deprived of the traditionary or instinctive means of passing a cheerful existence, must find help in self-impulse, or perish. It is therefore that, while any elevation, in the view of union, is to be hailed with joy, we shall not decline celibacy as the great fact of the time" (Fuller 45). The argument is embellished when she writes further:

It is therefore that I would have Woman lay aside all thought, such as she habitually cherishes, of being taught and led by men. I would have her, like the Indian girl, dedicate herself to the Sun, the Sun of Truth, and go nowhere if his beams did not make clear the path. I would have her free from compromise, from complaisance, from helplessness, because I would have her good enough and strong enough to love one and all beings, from the fulness, not the poverty of being" (Fuller 45).

Fuller's views were perhaps radical for her time, but not obscure.¹⁰ It seems likely that Chopin would have read Fuller given they were both immersed in the literary world of nineteenth century America, and given both Chopin's professionalism as a writer and her marked interest in the political fortunes of women, albeit not her total alignment with the women's suffrage movement. In light of this, we can safely say that within Chopin's oeuvre, the marriage plot might not only have been a device for improving sales. It was exactly that prism through which the lives of females were seen at the time. Outside of marriage, women

¹⁰ For a short biography of Fuller and the reception of her work, see the entry on transcendentalism in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy online.

had but a few career options, none of which would bring any real prosperity or stability. The near obsession with marriage and relationships in the fiction published in literary magazines for women in the nineteenth century was surely far more than the mere indulgence of romantic tendencies. I will present a clear example of this in chapter 6, when I discuss “The Maid of Saint Phillippe”, in which the young, female protagonist at the start of the story is described both as dressing and behaving in a way normally associated with masculinity, and whose decision not to marry is based on her fear of the confinement it would bring. But first it necessary to explain how literature functions as a part of a cultural ecology. The political efficacy of a text lies in its ability to find creative solutions through its autonomy that can then be inserted back into the community. This mechanism is the topic of the next chapter.

5. Cultural Ecology: Literature as a Form of Knowledge

The tendency to cast a conception of nature in opposition to culture has been a characteristic of ontological enquiry for millennia.¹¹ Twenty-first century ecocritical thought has produced a range of positions on the validity of the distinction, as well as many ideas on how best to encapsulate the critical tug-of-war generated by it. Descola (2005) summarises the more recent history of the debate as having achieved a level of significance for the paired terms “that is greatly increased by their conjunction” (Descola 39). In his view, culture (singular) is but an abstraction, one that lends itself to the opposition. Cultures (plural) however, “make sense only in relation to themselves”, and their relationship with a supposedly external nature is no more or less enlightening than that which they might have with culturally derived phenomena such as language (40). Nevertheless, Descola would have us understand dualism – the distinction between mind and matter credited foremost to Descartes – as being central to the development of those very natural sciences in the 18th and 19th centuries that was predicated on both ethnocentric and anthropocentric assumptions of teleological development, theories of evolution being no exception. Body/mind dualism is taken as the equivalent of the nature/culture distinction.¹² Descola wishes neither to support a Latourian debunking of dualism in which nature is absorbed into culture¹³ nor indulge in the reverse, whereby culture is understood as a manifestation of nature. He proposes instead a sliding scale through which we see the interrelatedness of nature and culture without sacrificing either of these widely used concepts. This is much like the “paradoxical double perspective” which Zapf sees as

¹¹ For a history of the distinction between the concept of nature and that of culture, see Glacken (1967), who begins with the Sumerian civilisation. A more recent overview of the concept of wilderness by Oelschlaeger (1991) places the origins of the nature/culture distinction in pre-history with the onset of the Neolithic era, when agricultural practices are thought to have begun, leading to the establishment of farming communities that could understand themselves as separate from and different to the surrounding uncultivated environment (Oelschlaeger 32).

¹² This is because Descola ignores the history of the nature/culture distinction entirely, instead crediting Humanism with its invention within a purely Western European context. Yet the association between the two binaries is not without reason – so to say. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes argues that, through the newly improved methods of scientific enquiry, humans are able to take control of nature (Descartes 41). Thus it follows that the unique capabilities of the human mind, which are, in Cartesian thought, held apart from the physical world, are what establishes a hierarchy of culture over nature.

¹³ “Political ecology alone is finally bringing the intrinsically political quality of the *natural order* into the foreground.” Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. p.28.

characterising recent work in the field of cultural ecology, based in turn upon Bateson's view of culture as simply a product of evolution, rather than a concept bound up in opposition to nature (Zapf 2016, cf. Bateson 1972). The mind is both a product of nature in its physicality and potentiality, and at once a product of cultural operations and communicative interaction. This position allows Zapf to argue that literature, as a product of mind, is capable of producing an "ecological dimension of discourse precisely on account of its semantic openness, imaginative intensity, and aesthetic complexity" (Zapf *Cultural Ecology*, 139). Literature, a creative mechanism – and thus a vehicle for cultural sustainability – is ecological in that it stages and explores "the manifold and complex interactivity between culture and nature in ever new scenarios" (140). This "aesthetic transformation of experience" from the natural world into a literary work is understood by Zapf as akin to an ecological force, albeit acting within the realm of culture:

From its archaic beginnings in mythical story-telling and oral narratives, in legends and fairy-tales, in the genres of pastoral and nature poetry, but also in modes of the comic, gothic, and grotesque, literature has symbolically expressed the fundamental interconnectedness between culture and nature in tales of human genesis, of metamorphosis, of symbiotic co-evolution and co-existence between different life forms. This attention to the life-sustaining significance of the mind/body and culture/nature interaction became especially prominent in the era of romanticism, but continues to be characteristic of literary stagings of human experience up to the present. (141)

The staging of experience, both observed and hypothetical, in literary texts is further characterised by Zapf, following Wolfgang Iser (1993), as allowing for the reintegration of ideas that have been taken out of lived experience and processed through literary discursivity. This is the 'ecological' cyclicity of literature. More than just a series of illustrations of ideas, literature is a form of knowledge with real world effects. The use of poetic language to reflect upon real world issues allows for the possibility of new perspectives to be fed back into the community through the distribution of literary texts. An ecocritical analysis of literature need not necessarily be limited to those texts that reflect overtly on the environment because strictly speaking, the model of cyclicity proposed here is one that could be applied to any text. But cultural ecology, from whence the model comes, is unsurprisingly wedded to those aesthetic works that use nature symbolism or reflect upon the dynamics of the nature/culture

divide. And it is here that we can see how Chopin, informed by her reading of the great advances in science of the day, and oriented toward an exploration of gender politics, might make use of nature as a counterpoint to culture, which we can subsequently read according to this cyclical model. The exploration of politics through aesthetic means generates original forms of “cultural-ecological knowledge” (144). At the very least, Chopin’s use of a nature/culture distinction in so many of her works, while not out of tune with the prevailing dualism of her time, can be read as more than the desire to read natural phenomena as metaphors for the human condition. The state of nature, into and out of which her characters often cross is at once set apart from *and* intertwined with their lives. Whilst the metaphoric use of nature might be most overtly illustrated by the passing of the storm in the eponymously titled story from 1898 – whereby passion is likened to natural, meteorological phenomena – I would prefer to focus on a range of other stories in which women’s domesticity, indeed their assumed evolutionary status, is questioned, and where the realms of nature and culture are depicted as distinct, but merging. In these passages, the workings of the forces of nature on social circumstances may be apprehended, and thus, one might argue, the production or testing of knowledge in literary texts underwrites the hypotheses of an ecological theory of literature, one in which culture – or a given cultural product – is embedded in nature.

6. Exiting and Entering Culture

In this section I analyse how Chopin uses the nature/culture dichotomy in her short stories. My focus is on the way some protagonists are depicted as either entering into culture, or retreating from it into nature, where nature is portrayed variously as wilderness, countryside, or simply out-of-doors. From the outset, the difference between nature and culture in 19th century America would have been understood according to the difference between the 'wild' and the tamed. The 'wild' was any space not yet occupied and altered by settlers, irrespective of how and by whom those spaces may have previously been used. Indigenous peoples were considered uncivilised because they were living in the 'wild' and objecting to the expansion of settler territory. By the 1890s when Chopin was writing, this frontier mentality had by no means exhausted itself, in spite of the completion of the westward expansion. Her use of the distinction between wild nature and civilisation was already well rehearsed. Indeed, the choice to leave what was commonly accepted as civilisation and/or to return to it was not an uncommon theme. Here I draw inspiration from Helen Felder's (2014) ecocritical approach to the Bildungsroman, which yields insight into the way narratives of an individual's progression can be built around their coming into culture, in so much as "the story of individual acculturation is always the story of culture - but it is... also the story of nature, of our knowledge of human animality and nonhuman agency or subjectivity" (Felder 19). In those mostly European texts she analyses, she finds protagonists who acquire a place in society from a position outside of it. They can therefore be understood as natural entities in the first place, and cultural entities in the second. In other words, mind is dependent upon body, and is a result of education, experience and semiosis, or absorption into the cultural norms.

The Maid of Saint Philippe

My first example from Chopin's stories is Marianne in "The Maid of Saint Philippe" (1891), in whom we see echoes of the primacy of body over mind, and of nature over culture. Marianne's "heart was as strong as oak and her nerves were like iron" (Chopin

160), and inasmuch she is an echo of the legend of Joan of Arc – The Maid of Orleans – where cross-dressing, brusque demeanour and bravery code as male traits and are used as a foil to the age and supposed innocence of the protagonist. For Marianne is described as carrying “a gun across her shoulder as easily as a soldier might.” The story describes the choices available to women at the time: either the comfort and confinement of marriage, or the “hardships” of freedom. Freedom in this story is aligned with a wholesale rejection society, both American and European. Marianne’s choice of independence come what may is echoed in her clothes and her resolute attitude. The story opens with the protagonist, in her buckskin hunting garb – signifying maleness and the outdoors – physically leaving nature in order to make a seemingly well-rehearsed transition back into culture:

Marianne was tall, supple, and strong. Dressed in her worn buckskin trappings she looked like a handsome boy rather than like the French girl of seventeen that she was. As she stepped from the woods the glimmer of the setting sun dazzled her. An instant she raised her hand—palm outward—to shield her eyes from the glare, then she continued to descend the gentle slope and make her way toward the little village of Saint Phillippe that lay before her.” (Chopin 156)

Marianne is depicted as being in control of her destiny, partly through her mode of attire (cultural), but foremost because of her physicality (natural). Stepping from the woods carries no hint of urgency or fear, nor does the descent of a gentle slope suggest anything but competency, while the village lies before her, as if within her grasp or command. She thus bridges the nature/culture divide.¹⁴ The difference between the states of nature (woods) and culture (village) is bridged not only by the gender confusion associated with Marianne’s clothing and self-possession, but also by the fact of her being French. Chopin often points to French culture generally, and Parisian fashion in particular, as signs of civilisation. This heralds the choices Marianne will have to make: whether to join with the abandonment of the town of her birth along with all its other residents, who are moving to Saint Louis; and the choice of whether or not to marry her suitor, who would have her join him in the move. Her French-ness makes the final, heroic retreat back into the woods so much more dramatic, for

¹⁴ Note also the similarity to Fuller’s optimistic description of the Indian girl. In both cases, a female is bathed in the positive, nurturing rays of the sun.

she would appear to be giving up so much. While her boyish attire and disposition work to both explain and rationalise the decision, it also troubles the easy assumption that women belong to hearth and home. From an evolutionary perspective, Marianne's exceptional status troubles the assumption that women are naturally fitted to the indoor realm of hearth, home and maternal care. Rather than a foregone fact provided by the workings of nature, her status is the result of a decision that she alone makes. She is a somewhat schematic example of exactly that which Fuller called for: a society in which neither men nor women are restricted to the polar extremes of gender difference, and an understanding of women as not limited to given societal roles, but empowered by them through the ability to exercise choice. In spite of numerous pleas from older male characters who represent the establishment, security and familial ties, Marianne literally walks off into the sunset to join the Cherokees. Indigenous Americans receive scant attention in Chopin's work, and here they are used wholly within a stereotypical and romanticised theme: They are not members of civilisation, but are considered noble nevertheless for their affinity with brute nature. Romantic relations and marriage between whites and American Indians had been a topic of literature throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in America.¹⁵ It revealed anxiety about the relative merits of 'civilisation' and the 'wilderness', the terms by which a cultural distinction between indigenous and settler lifestyles were understood (Kolodny 68-69). Reports of the choice of individuals – especially women – to exit what was understood as the civilised world in favour of Indian community and the wilds would have been particularly enthralling. The story of Eunice Williams, who was captured by Indians in Massachusetts in 1704, and who, upon having the opportunity to return to white society as an adult, chose not to, was widely circulated. Even if this particular story was not well known to Chopin and her readership, it and others like it inform the tenor of the American sense of the frontier that had become so firmly entrenched in the social imaginary. Such stories helped to generate the distinction between culture as white and town-based, and nature as Indian and in the wilderness –

¹⁵ See chapter 4 of Kolodny's history of women's experience of the frontier for a survey of this preoccupation (1984).

regardless of what that wilderness may have actually looked like by the late 19th century – that underlies the gap that Marianne bridges. The notional Indian can be associated with freedom from the restrictions placed on women by American society, irrespective of what their real lives may have been like. Their value to Chopin is purely in that they represent the idea of escape and self-sufficiency. The boldness of the protagonist's decision to reject marriage wholesale may have been a provocation at a time when the women's liberation movement's push against societal norms was inciting a conservative backlash, and an Indian thematic might have provided a useful smokescreen.

The Christ Light

In "The Christ Light" (1891), Abner Rydon is portrayed as a product of the outdoors and the hard work that comes from toiling the soil. The story is divided into two sections of roughly equal length. The first opens with the arrival of the mail train, which is heading south – from mind to body perhaps, or from culture to nature – and the movement of a group of men from out in the cold to warm themselves by a "red-hot" stove indoors. Abner arrives at the station with his rough and ready temperament. His marriage to Liza-Jane has failed, according to one of the "weazened, shivering men" (Chopin 151) that comment on his coming and going, because "thet gal was all fur readin'" (152). The difference between masculinity, associated with physical labour and the outdoors, and femininity, associated with mental work and indoors, might seem at first to buy into a traditional gender ideology, but that it subverts the Platonic hierarchy in which the realm of the mind (culture) is associated with men, and that of the body (nature) with women. By the warmth of the stove, Abner's emotions spill out when he is confronted by one of the men with the shame of having lost his wife:

Abner turned quickly upon the speaker, and with a sharp blow of his clenched fist sent him sprawling to the floor. He then continued towards the cart, mounted it, and drove rapidly away over the rough and frost-hardened road, and into the woods beyond. (151)

Both the cold outdoors and the overheated indoors in the first section are populated by men and characterised by lack of civility and rawness of emotion. The difference between the overly cold exterior and red-hot interior mirrors the emotional extremes within Abner, a steely exterior encrusting his rage within. Abner vacates the scene, receding into the “woods”; the very word reminding us that the otherness of the outdoors to civilisation is still greater than the difference between men, whether they be indoors or out.

The second section describes the return of Abner's wife, Liza-Jane, to his family homestead. Abner has hung the Christ Light out to swing in the wind on Christmas Eve, a signal to all that “the spirit of Christ dwelt within” (153). In this homely environment, with his mother beside him in the warmth, Abner is described as seeming “much less harsh”. Abner himself is reading when the forces of nature suddenly deliver Liza-Jane back to the home. The cold wind and sleet force her to find shelter, and unlike the furious heat of the waiting-room in the first section, it is the gentle warmth of charity and Christian forgiveness which Liza-Jane returns to:

The wind literally drove the woman into the room. Abner stayed there with his hand upon the latch, shaken at what seemed this apparition before him. Liza-Jane stood, like a haunted and hungry thing in the great glow of the fire-light, her big dark eyes greedily seizing upon every detail of homely and honest comfort that surrounded her. (155)

Abner is both a man of the outdoors/nature, and a man of Christian virtue, or culture. The narrator portrays Liza-Jane as a “young and foolish wife”, one for whom Abner is at first hesitant to show forgiveness. But at his mother's encouragement he accepts his wife's sorry return. It is the mother that first offers to take the wife's soaking shawl, for she recognises Liza-Jane's flight for what it was – an attempt to escape the shackles that bind women into domestic servility – and also acknowledges the conditions of her return – desperation caused by a lack of alternatives.¹⁶ Interestingly, the story appears to argue against the political position taken in “The Maid of Saint Phillippe”, in which a woman's desire for independence

¹⁶ This reading is similar to Knights', who argues that Liza-Jane could be understood as a victim of a system that offers her no real alternatives to domestic servility (Knights xxix).

is narrated as an heroic success, even though the two stories were written at the same time.¹⁷ In "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" marriage is rejected as a restraint on personal freedom, whereas in "The Christ Light" the wife is portrayed as both foolish and perhaps desperate to have left the security of a warm and genteel home for the cold wastelands of the outside world. Nature outperforms culture in the former, while the opposite is true of the latter. In both stories, however, the distinction is made and knowingly harnessed to gender stereotypes, allowing for the contemplation of what place marriage has as an institution in the American psyche, and indeed to what extent it might reflect a 'natural' state of affairs as perceived through a Darwinian lens.

In Sabine

Another interesting reversal of the culture/nature dichotomy appears in "In Sabine", written in 1893. Although Gregoire comes riding with his "rugged habits" out of the woods into a clearing that contains a "rude log cabin" (Chopin 246), it is he who signifies culture through his manners and bearing, while the cabin demonstrably lacks the homeliness that would hold it apart from the surrounding nature. The difference between Gregoire and his host, Bud Aiken, are characterised by the appearance of their horses, which are arguably to be taken as extensions of themselves. For as Gregoire dismounts, an "unkempt, vicious-looking little Texas pony stopped nibbling the stubble there to look maliciously at him and his fine sleek horse". Aiken is clearly an alcoholic, and perhaps too lazy to succeed farming the land. His wife, once admired throughout the district for her beauty and charm, has been reduced to a life of poverty and fear of her husband's temper. The forest setting underscores the debasement of 'Tite Reine and her unwilling withdrawal from Cajun society in Louisiana. What little culture there is here is precarious, and risks subsiding back into nature. Only the "old negro man chopping wood" stands between this couple and total collapse, for he chops voluntarily so that Aiken need not force his wife to take up the axe.

¹⁷ According to the explanatory notes provided by Knights in the Oxford World's Classics edition, both stories were written in the Spring of 1891.

Gregoire's role is that of an in-between. He mediates the difference between civilisation and the woods while inserting himself into the lives of this isolated couple. He chooses to remain overnight out of a sense of pity for the wife, and curiosity about her circumstances. Tellingly, 'Tite Reine offers him as bedding "an old patchwork quilt folded double and a moss pillow", which prove to be "not too uncomfortable" for Gregoire. The notion of Gregoire as an intermediary is invested into the quilt twofold: Both because it is a patchwork *and* because it is folded double for Gregoire to lie on, the quilt symbolises the stitching together of the nature/culture dichotomy. Further, the moss pillow is invested with both the concept of nature and its opposite in so much as a pillow is a sign of civilisation; the softness of moss as a material is perhaps even suggestive of the sympathetic turn that nature will soon take. Having resolved to help 'Tite Reine escape her miserable husband, Gregoire stays another night on the "gallery" – used here in the sense of a porch – itself an intermediary space between inside and out. Whereas previously the forest at night had been characterised as "black" and emitting "gruesome noises", it is now the "calm and beautiful" source of "the delicious odor of the scent of pines". Thus the perception of the nature/culture divide here is inverted, such that the forest becomes a source of comfort, and fear is associated with interior, domestic space. Again Chopin appears to be arguing that marriage and domesticity are a curtailment of women's freedom, but only after having established nature and culture as equally perilous, albeit without any serious challenge to the status quo, for 'Tite Reine's former role in society as a southern belle was based purely on her charms, while the pity she inspires in both "the old negro" and in Gregoire is based on the apparent inappropriateness of her having to do work considered fit for a man. Nevertheless, the reflexive relationship between the concepts of nature and culture as used in this story aligns with Wendy Wheeler's commentary on "natural and cultural creative evolution", in which she notes how "culture is emergent in nature, and mind is emergent in body/environment" (Wheeler 273). It is a view based upon a biosemiotic approach to literature whereby culture, or mind, is immanent in nature, because all forms in nature, both physical and mental, are a result of evolution and are thus "an elaboration of antecedent forms".

Similarly, Chopin appears to be acknowledging the intertwining of mind and body, nature and culture, perhaps suggesting that we are humbled by our physicality, which, as Darwin's theory of evolution reminds us, renders us a part of brute nature. Even culture must be understood, finally, as a part of the natural world, despite the fact that, through culture, the entropic tendency in nature can be effectively held at bay. "In Sabine" is also reminiscent of Fuller's account of marriage in that 'Tite Reine is in need of the security it provides, but is being crushed by the burden of being married to the wrong kind of man; one that does not elevate her.¹⁸ In the stories analysed so far, marriage is posited as less a natural state of affairs so much as a cultural tool which may or may not be advantageous to women. Understood in terms of ecology, Chopin's stories are taking up real-world problems and offering to her readership alternative ways of seeing them. Such a readership, aimed at through the use of the popular local colour genre and the poignant marriage theme, may have absorbed the message that 19th century feminists like Chopin and Fuller wanted to convey: that gender should not present an obstacle to an individual's goals and that marriage should be an enabling institution, for both men and women. The cyclicity of literature is in this sense a reasonable proposition.

Vagabonds

The last story I want to discuss is "Vagabonds", written in 1895.¹⁹ The title encompasses the possibility that more than one person in the story is associated with the outdoors, and as it turns out there are only two characters. The first is the narrator, who understands herself as cultivated in comparison to the man she is drawn outside to meet with, and whom she purportedly disdains: Valcour, her itinerant, alcoholic cousin. She justifies her assent to the request on the grounds that it "was the hour for [her] afternoon walk" anyway.

¹⁸ Chopin provides a model of what an ideal marriage might be like in her story "A Point at Issue!", in which the female protagonist is nurtured by her relationship. As he gets to know her, Eleanor's husband witnesses "the beautiful revelations of her mind that unfurled itself to his, like the curling petals of some hardy blossom that opens to the inviting warmth of the sun" (Chopin 140).

¹⁹ Only published in 1932.

And here a distinction between the two characters is already achieved through the kind of walking they do. In her case, it is perambulation, affected with an air of propriety, while Valcour wanders farther afield in search of work. Yet the distinction is blurred because the narrator's description of her own tattered clothing – a “shabby skirt” and “clumsy old boots” – actually precedes her haughty observations of Valcour's disheveled appearance:

His clothes, his battered hat, his skin, his straggling beard which he never shaved, were all of one color—the color of clay. He made but the faintest offer to rise at my approach; and I saved him the complete effort by seating myself at once beside him on the log. (324)

Following Joslin, we can see the ‘nature’ of the narrator's clothing chaffing against its ‘culture’, in that it does not do justice to her own sense of social status. Further, we might understand Valcour as representing nature as he is the colour of the environment and is at one with place in general, having no real need of any place in particular. Through his peregrinations his association with place becomes less fixed and thus perhaps less fragile than hers, in so much as her fortune appears to be tied to the productivity of a particular location. The narrator's uninhibited move of sitting directly with him brings Valcour into the fold of familiarity, and while she purports to be surprised by the fact that he makes for a pleasing conversation partner, she demonstrates how acknowledgment functions as a mediator between nature (Valcour) and culture (herself), the only potential obstacle being money.²⁰

“Vagabonds” is built around a contradiction. Namely, the narrator's repudiation of Valcour being undermined by the simultaneous admission of commonality. As the title suggests, she too is a vagabond, both through her association with him, and a similar freedom of spirit that has her unflustered by mud and poor company. Despite thinking him a waste of her time, she gets lost in conversation sitting on a “fallen trunk” amidst the mud of the river and unrefined nature at large. It is a tacit revelation of her own true colour. In claiming that she “long ago discovered that there is no need of wasting fine language on Valcour” for “[s]uch effort could only evince a pride and affectation from which I am happily free” (324), she displays the partialness of her own self-knowledge. She is not so proud as to avoid him,

²⁰ Valcon is not shy of displaying what money he has, though she certainly is, for fear of being obliged to share.

yet by no means free of the affectation that leads her to cast judgement. Valcour's indifference is contrasted with the narrator's self-concern. In the mould of the vagabond, Valcour may be poor, yet is a truly free man of the outdoors who, with "gun beside him", takes his sustenance from what the forest provides. The narrator, on the other hand is a woman subservient to the demands of social respectability. She possesses a measure of anxiety about money, status and class, and is envious of Valcour's self-sufficiency, as well as the dispensation he has granted himself to "get close to the black night and lose oneself in its silence and mystery" (326). The meaning of the title becomes entirely clear at the end when, in commenting on his indolence, she appears to miss the hypocrisy of admitting to her own "idleness". They are alike in that they both have time, but differentiated by the fact that only "a man could sleep anywhere that the mosquitoes would let him" (326). In this sense, her freedom is curtailed by her sex, yet no direct mention is made of marital status or offspring in this story. Within Chopin's oeuvre, this could signal a certain degree of freedom from the constraints that marriage might have entailed for the female narrator. Clear mention is made however of the limitations imposed by the necessity of fending for oneself, such as her anxiety over money and the state of her "cabins and fences".²¹ Arguably, she holds on to the conceit of being a member of the leisured classes, and is thus a victim of her own self-perception. Although for the purposes of this analysis the narrator can be comfortably cast as representative of culture – the restrictions on her as a woman are for the most part culturally derived – it is by no means a cut and dry distinction, given her ease in the mud and wet of the outdoors, and thus perhaps not far from Fuller's views on how the malleability of gender points to the inflexibility of societal roles. Lacking a distinct moral, it is clear nevertheless in this story that a woman who has

²¹ Perhaps the narrator is struggling to make ends meet without the slave labour that might have once guaranteed freedom from exertion. The civil war ended slavery in southern states like Louisiana in 1865. The cabins falling into disrepair might be those that previously housed slaves, and suggests that the narrator is struggling to cope with a change of lifestyle.

responsibilities to a farm – again out of doors – is already an atypical character for the local color genre, in which women would often be depicted in domestic settings.²²

²² It is worth noting the similarity of this story to Kate Chopin's own biography. The Chopin's were living in a small Louisiana village when her husband died in 1882, leaving her with debts. She paid these off by selling the majority of the plantation they had, and then continued to run a store and the remaining fields single-handedly. "Vagabonds" starts with mention of a store.

7. Conclusion

Each of the four stories studied here contains either a movement from nature – figured mostly as outdoors and/or the woods – into culture/civilisation – figured either as an interior or a village – or a movement in the opposite direction. Marianne in “The Maid of Saint Phillippe” moves from the woods into the village, and then leaves again. The narrator in “Vagabonds” moves from the store to the riverbank to meet Valcour. Gregoire in “In Sabine” arrives at the cabin in the woods and assists ‘Tite Reine to leave, for the cabin is in fact characterised as harbouring less civilisation than the forest. Abner in “The Christ Light” moves from the cold into the waiting-room only to leave again, and then accepts Liza-Jane back into the family home from which she has fled. All of the characters bridge this notional divide between culture and nature: Marianne, through her dress and demeanour, which assist her in assembling the power and independence normally reserved for men; the narrator of “Vagabonds”, through her contradictory stance in relation to her cousin; Gregoire, the mediator, through his decision to sleep on the gallery with a pillow of moss; ‘Tite Reine through escaping the collapsing culture of the log cabin; Abner, through the two sides to his personality – both cold and hard, and warm and soft; and finally Liza-Jane, through her bold decision to desert Abner, as well as her subsequent vulnerability upon returning. Each of the four female characters are either engaged in a quest for freedom from the constraints imposed upon them by an actual or prospective marriage, or, in the case of “Vagabonds”, unconsciously demonstrating captivity to societal norms. Freedom is mostly associated with the outdoors and nature, albeit not always straightforwardly. For Marianne, freedom is in the woods with the Cherokees. For the narrator of “Vagabonds”, hunting and moving into the night represent a degree of autonomy she can only imagine. Liza-Jane makes a run for freedom, and is relieved to have found acceptance when she discovers the naivety of her attempt. So too ‘Tite Reine, who in departing the woods presumably has no choice but to return to the familial fold of her parental home. While marriage is not an overt theme in all of the four stories, the right of women to self-determination is. The unresolved nature of the

debate over the extent to which women's status is formed by biological conditions, and how much independence from the constraints of nature women can expect to have, is visible both in the overview of Chopin's stories as a whole, and in those moments where a contradiction is apparent, such as in "Vagabonds", or where an inverse movement from culture to nature counters the primary movement from nature to culture. This paralleling of movements across the divide is evident in each of the other three stories discussed.

Throughout all of this, it is possible to see how Chopin takes issue with the conclusions drawn by Darwin and the scientific consensus about women's biological status. The forces of nature are at once set in opposition to those of culture, but not without reciprocity between the terms. The paired concepts male and female are in a dialogue with nature and culture, or mind and body, but not straightforwardly so. The portrayal of a relationship between these sets of ideas is the cultural knowledge that Chopin offers back to a community of readers. The "aesthetic transformation" of experience in the physical world is converted into a cultural modality which can be used with political effect, and this effect is echoed by the transformation nature into culture within the story worlds that Chopin creates.

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