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Recent Developments in Kate Chopin Studies

[Essay Review]

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When Kate Chopin died in 1904, she had all but ceased writing, her career in decline following publication of The Awakening in 1899. It was not until after 1964 when The Awakening was reissued that her reputation entered a period of revival and new appreciation. Today, no longer an obscure or marginalized author, Kate Chopin receives considerable scholarly attention. Two recent publications stand out as excellent examples of current Chopin scholarship: Barbara Ewell’s Kate Chopin (Ungar, 1986), and Thomas Bonner, Jr.’s The Kate Chopin Companion (Greenwood, 1988).

Ewell’s critical-biographical study provides a comprehensive and balanced handling of Chopin’s entire career. In her introduction, Ewell states her purpose: “to view the work of Kate Chopin in its entirety, so that her famous novel appears as an inescapable climax, but not the sum of her achievement as a writer” (13). Toward that end, Ewell proportionately distributes her one-hundred-and-eighty-three pages of text to a discussion of Chopin’s life and all of her works. In addition to insightful analysis of Chopin’s masterpiece, The Awakening, Ewell provides thorough and illuminating discussions of At Fault, Chopin’s first novel; her three collections of stories, Bayou Folk, A Night in Acadie, and A Vocation and a Voice; as well as treatment of her few stories and poems which followed The Awakening.

Ewell opens her study with a detailed chronology which orients the reader to the sequence of significant events in Chopin’s life and career. This feature is especially useful because Ewell opts not to follow a strict chronological order in her discussions of Chopin’s story collections. Ewell explains this decision of organization as an effort to prevent “obscur[ing] the relative integrity of [Chopin’s] three collections…” (3). Ewell chooses to look at the collections of stories, especially Bayou Folk, as whole units, “successful book[s]” rather than as series of stories because to do so demonstrates more effectively the impact and influence of successful publication on the rest of the author’s career.

Ewell condenses the life of Chopin into a brief first chapter, “St. Louis Woman, Louisianan Writer.” The selective biographical information, including several excerpts from Chopin’s journals, establishes Kate Chopin as an intelligent, reflective, and sensual
woman. Hers was a complex personality capable of independent daring and yet highly sensitive to public opinion and professional criticism. Ewell’s critical discussions of Chopin’s works are enriched by the biographical foundation which she lays in this first chapter.

In her analysis of *At Fault*, Chopin’s “fictional debut,” Ewell fulfills her objective of highlighting the achievements of each phase of Chopin’s career. Ewell acknowledges the novel’s flaws, labelling the chief weakness “its melodramatic resolution, which conveniently removes the principal obstacle” to a happy ending (32). Ewell goes on to insist, however, that the novel is not without merit: “Certainly,” she claims, “the novel represents a major event in Chopin’s career, articulating her serious concern for many pressing intellectual issues of her time [for example, significant social changes taking place in the post-Reconstruction South] even as it established the Louisiana settings that she soon learned to exploit more fully” (33).

Bridging the discussion of this earliest effort to an analysis of *Bayou Folk*, Chopin’s first collection of stories, Ewell writes that in *At Fault*, Chopin had found her favorite themes and interests. “What remained,” Ewell concludes, “was for [Chopin] to discover the element that would infuse life into her fiction. She found it in the bayou folk of Louisiana” (49). Ewell provides painstakingly researched and thorough studies of the stories of *Bayou Folk*, the collection which secured Chopin’s reputation as a highly talented local colorist in an era when local color fiction was extremely popular. Ewell, however, for perhaps the first time in Chopin scholarship, delves into the complexity of the author’s associations with the genre, what she calls Chopin’s “second thoughts about her own exploitation of [it]” (62). Ewell points out how Chopin progressed beyond creating local color as an end in itself. The discussions of the stories which make up *Bayou Folk* detail Chopin’s early treatment of social hypocrisies, double standards, and judgmentalism as well as her willingness to handle with startling frankness material dealing with sexuality.

Ewell devotes the longest chapter of her book to Chopin’s second collection of stories, *A Night in Acadie*. Again, Ewell’s discussions communicate her respect for the early evidence of Chopin’s talent, abilities which anticipate her most mature work, *The Awakening*, but which have tended to go under-appreciated because of the long shadow of her famous last book. Ewell notes the experimentation and ambition of *A Night in Acadie* and sees the book as another important turn in Chopin’s developing career. She praises this second collection, the final effect of which is one of “increasing subtlety and reach” (123). She, finally, observes that the book reflects a gathering of momentum
on Chopin’s part as she moved toward a more probing examination of life, “more honest than she, or many others, had yet dared” (123).

One of the book’s most interesting discussions, the chapter entitled “Realizations: A Vocation and a Voice,” describes and analyzes Chopin’s third collection of stories, a book which was never accepted for publication, but is, according to Ewell, “the culmination of Chopin’s talents as a writer of the short story” (126). Ewell delineates several important movements occurring in Chopin’s fiction which are manifested in this book, the most noteworthy of which is a “focus...on human interiority” (126). Ewell wraps up this discussion of A Vocation and a Voice by looking closely at one of the selections chosen for the volume, “An Egyptian Cigarette,” a bizarre tale of a dream vision, a story of female frustration and despair. She claims that the significance of this odd story lies in its clear anticipation of “the emotional nucleus” of Chopin’s masterpiece (140). Ewell sees the writing of “An Egyptian Cigarette” (and, by implication, the compiling of the collection which contains it) as a sort of initiation ritual which Chopin had to perform before she could begin her great novel.

In keeping with her purpose of examining Chopin’s entire career and holding up The Awakening as the climax of that career, Ewell discusses the novel as the culmination of Chopinesque impulses, beliefs, and concerns manifested early in her writing. Ewell begins her relatively brief treatment of The Awakening with references to the most notable of the analyses which preceded her own, focusing on the wide range of opinion concerning the novel’s “apparent lack of authorial comment” and the consequent debate over the significance of Edna Pontellier’s suicide (142). Ewell forthrightly provides her own view of this provocative novel: “In fact, the central issue of Chopin’s last novel is one she had addressed in her first: how does one (especially one female) achieve personal integrity in a world of conventional restraints” (142-3). Ewell’s discussion of The Awakening, therefore, reasserts her book’s underlying idea that Chopin’s best known work is best understood and appreciated when seen as part, unquestionably the most distinguished part, of an entire body of writing. Although critics of Chopin’s day shunned the book for its author’s refusal to judge Edna Pontellier’s appalling conduct, and more recent critics have grappled with the interpretative dilemma that the same omission presents, Ewell offers a logical and convincing reading of the novel’s ambiguities. She sees the lack of commentary as Chopin’s rendering of her perceptions with as much fidelity to realism as she had ever achieved. In Ewell’s view, Chopin subtly forces readers to arrive at their own resolutions.
Rounding out her critical-biographical study of Kate Chopin, Ewell discusses Chopin’s poetry and some late stories, again pointing out continuities in subject matter and theme and offering evidence of the detrimental effect on Chopin’s writing brought on by the rejection of *The Awakening*.

The final effect of Ewell’s book is a thorough account of Chopin’s literary life informed and enlivened by selective but sufficient details of her personal existence. Brisk and economical, it nevertheless offers a complete overview of a short-lived but superior career.

An excellent companion to Ewell’s study as well as to the whole of Chopin’s works is Thomas Bonner, Jr.’s *The Kate Chopin Companion*. Much more a reference tool than a readable prose account such as Ewell’s book, Bonner’s is a Chopin handbook, the parts of which can be consulted independently of one another. The volume is impressive for the extent and variety of its offerings. It includes a chronology (although Bonner defers to Ewell’s chart as the most thorough one available); a dictionary of characters, places, titles, terms, and people from Chopin’s life and works; eight of Chopin’s translations of tales by Guy de Maupassant and one of a story by Adrien Vely; period maps and photographs; and, extremely valuable to the student of Chopin, an exhaustive bibliographic essay.

In his introduction, Bonner establishes the rationale for his book. He claims that a “distinctly new phase of interpreting Chopin’s fiction has begun” (xii). The contents of Ewell’s and Bonner’s studies suggest that this new phase involves examining closely the entirety of Chopin’s works as well as relevant aspects of her life including her reading habits, her environment, and her social relationships. Beginning with “Aaron’s store,” one of the locations found in “The Woodchoppers” and ending with “Zoräide,” the young mulatto girl of “La Belle Zoräide,” Bonner’s remarkable dictionary should facilitate full readings of Chopin’s work because it provides relevant information about the extraordinary New Orleans and Cloutierville regions and about characters who appear in a number of Chopin’s works, sometimes in obscure pieces or in minor capacities. Because of this feature, Bonner’s book should go a long way toward resolving special problems and confusions which readers may encounter in Chopin’s highly allusive and interconnected fictions. Because this dictionary is available to clarify and expand readings of Chopin’s works, as Bonner asserts in his introduction, “readers from Bangor, Maine, or Tours, France, can concentrate on the forms, themes, and influences that dominate Chopin’s fiction” (xiv).
Bonner explains the inclusion of Chopin’s translations of Vely and Maupassant (the latter, a writer whom Chopin greatly admired for his faithful rendering of “life, not fiction”): “The translations of fiction, including Vely’s, all have strong psychological themes and distinct images that clearly relate to Chopin’s own fiction” (xii). He continues his explanation by pointing out that the titles of the translations provide “immediate clues” to Chopin’s own work, citing “Solitude,” an early title of The Awakening, as an example (xii). By themselves the translations are interesting pieces, but, finally, as Bonner states, “They are more important...for what they reveal about her own work than for what they reveal of Maupassant’s” (xii). The inclusion of these translations gives this reference book another highly distinguishing trait because five of them appear here in print for the first time.

Bonner’s book concludes with a twelve-page bibliographic essay conveniently divided into the following categories: editions of Chopin’s works; manuscripts and letters; biography; and criticism arranged according to scope and content with exclusive categories for At Fault, The Awakening, and the stories. Bonner’s authoritative annotations are direct and clear, making this bibliography the most useful feature of this companion.

Bonner’s book, which represents a long commitment to Chopin studies, offers much to the serious student of Chopin’s works. With its fascinating inclusions and up-to-date information, this reference volume teams up well with Ewell’s earlier interpretative and evaluative treatment to offer two significant contributions to the illumination of this very important writer.