


Kate Chopin


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Kate Chopin



Kate Chopin in 1894

Born: February 8, 1850
St. Louis, Missouri,  USA

Died: August 22, 1904 (aged 54)
St. Louis, Missouri,  USA

Occupation: Novelist, short story writer

Kate Chopin (born **Katherine O'Flaherty** on February 8, 1850 – August 22, 1904), was an American author of short stories and novels, mostly of a Louisiana Creole background. She is now considered to have been a forerunner of feminist authors of the 20th century.

From 1889 to 1902, she wrote short stories for both children and adults which were published in such magazines as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Vogue*, the *Century*, and *Harper's Youth's Companion*. Her major works were two short story collections, *Bayou Folk* (1884) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Her important short stories included "Desiree's Baby", a tale of miscegenation in antebellum Louisiana; "The Story of an Hour" and "The Storm."

Chopin also wrote two novels: *At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* (1899), which is set in New Orleans and Grand Isle. The people in her stories are usually inhabitants of Louisiana. Many of her works are set about Natchitoches in north central Louisiana. In time, literary critics determined that Chopin addressed the concerns of women in all places and for all times in her literature.



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Childhood

Kate O'Flaherty was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was a successful businessman who had immigrated from Galway, Ireland. Her mother, Eliza Faris, was a well-connected member of the French community in St. Louis. Her maternal grandmother, Athena'ise Charleville, was of French Canadian descent. Some of her ancestors were among the first European inhabitants of Dauphin Island, Alabama.

[1]

Kate's father died in 1855, when Kate was only

four. As a founder of the Pacific Railroad, he was aboard the inaugural trip when a bridge across the Gasconade River collapsed. Mr. O'Flaherty was among the fatalities. That same year, Kate entered the St. Louis Catholic Academy of the Sacred Heart.

After her father's death, Kate developed a close relationship with both her mother and her great-grandmother. She also became an avid reader of fairy tales, poetry, and religious allegories, as well as classic and contemporary novels. Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens were among her favorite authors.

The year 1863 was a bad one for Kate's family: her great-grandmother died, as did her half-brother, George O'Flaherty. (Her father had been previously married, and his first wife, George's mother, had died. Kate's mother was much younger than her father.) George O'Flaherty was a Confederate soldier who died of swamp fever as a prisoner of war. Kate dropped out of regular schooling and became further engrossed in her world of books.

In 1865, she returned to Sacred Heart Academy, and began keeping a commonplace book. She

graduated from Sacred Heart Academy in 1868, but did not achieve any particular distinction — except as a master storyteller.

Early adulthood

In her late teens, Chopin became a high-society belle in St. Louis, where she was known for her wit and great devotion to music. On a trip to New Orleans, she met and was greatly influenced by an independent female singer and actress. Her experiences in New Orleans were the basis of "Emancipation: A Life Fable". During these years she began to question the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, especially in matters concerning gender roles: she felt that it held down women.

Kate married Oscar Chopin on June 9, 1870, in St. Louis. Chopin was a member of the St. Louis French Creole community. They honeymooned in Germany, Switzerland, and France, but returned to America early because of the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871.

For the next ten years, Kate and Oscar lived in New Orleans at 1413 Louisiana Avenue, where Oscar eventually entered the cotton business as a

"factor". During this period, she had five sons and one daughter and still remained active in the city social life. Summers were spent at Grand Isle, a resort community on the Gulf of Mexico. Kate's independence grew, including the unheard-of practice of walking unaccompanied throughout the city.

Difficult years

In 1879 Oscar's cotton brokerage failed, and the family moved to Cloutierville, south of Natchitoches, to manage several small plantations and a general store. They became active in the community, and Kate absorbed much material for her future writing, especially regarding the Creole culture of the area. Their home at 243 Highway 495 (built by Alexis Cloutier in the early part of the century) is now a national historic landmark and the home of the Bayou Folk Museum.

When Oscar died in 1882 of swamp fever (like her half-brother two decades earlier), he left Kate \$12,000 in debt (approximately \$229,360 in 2005 dollars) [2]. Kate attempted to manage the plantations and store alone but with little success. She engaged in a relationship with a married

farmer.

Her mother implored her to move back to St. Louis, and Kate and the children gradually settled into life in St. Louis, where finances were no longer a concern. The following year, Kate's mother died.

When Kate suffered a nervous breakdown, her doctor suggested she write as a way to calm herself. She took his advice, and soon re-discovered her natural story-telling.

The writing years

By the late 1890s, Kate was writing short stories, articles, and translations which appeared in periodicals, including *The Saint Louis Dispatch*. She became known as a regional local color writer, but her literary qualities were overlooked.

In 1899, her second novel, *The Awakening*, was published, and was criticised based on moral, rather than literary, standards. Her best-known work, it is the story of a dissatisfied wife who explores her sexuality. Out of print for several decades, it is now widely available and critically

acclaimed for its writing quality and importance as an early feminist work.

Kate, deeply discouraged by the criticism, turned to short story writing. In 1900 she wrote *The Gentleman from New Orleans*, and that same year was listed in the first edition of *Marquis Who's Who*. However, she never made much money from her writing and depended on investments in both Louisiana and St. Louis to sustain her.

While visiting the St. Louis World's Fair on August 20, 1904 Kate was felled by a brain hemorrhage and died two days later, at the age of fifty-four. She was interred in St. Louis.

Kate Chopin has been inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Works

Story Collections

- *Bayou Folk*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1894)
- *A Night in Acadie*, (Way and Williams, 1897)

Novels

- *At Fault*, (Nixon Jones Printing Co, [St. Louis], 1890)
- *The Awakening*, (H.S. Stone, 1899)

Recent Collection

- Sandra M. Gilbert, ed., *Kate Chopin: Complete Novels and Stories (At Fault, Bayou Folk, A Night in Acadie, The Awakening, Uncollected Stories)*, (Library of America, 2002) ISBN 978-1-93108221-1.

Resources

- "Kate O'Flaherty Chopin", *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography*, Vol. I (1988), p. 176

External links

- Chronology of her life, from a Public Broadcasting Service website
- Reproductions of selected late 19th century magazine articles by Chopin, from the Library of Congress
- Kate Chopin's House in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, also from the Library of Congress
- *The Awakening*
- "Regret" a short story at American Literature

- "Kate Chopin" at the American Authors site includes bibliographies, study questions, and links.
- "The Story of an Hour" at Wikisource
- Works by Kate Chopin at Project Gutenberg

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