

CHOPIN'S CHOICES AND CHALLENGES: LANGUAGE AND LIMITS IN "A POINT AT ISSUE"

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ABSTRACT

The choice of a critical perspective inevitably influences both the elements of analysis and the conclusions reached. The following article approaches a little-known short story by Kate Chopin from a focus which combines feminism and sociolinguistics and leads to results which are as unexpected as they are promising.

Among the literary works which have been "rescued" from obscurity or anonymity as a result of the efforts of feminist critics and readers since the 1960s, the writing of Kate Chopin is extraordinary both because of its impact and its content. Although Chopin's publishing career was relatively short, covering little more than a decade, the quantity, quality, and circumstances surrounding her publications justify and, indeed, demand increased critical attention. She wrote poetry, essays, sketches, nearly one hundred short stories, and two novels; however, the bulk of literary criticism dealing with Chopin's writing centers around her short novel *The Awakening*. While its "revolutionary" content and rich imagery make that critical inclination understandable, there is a wealth of unexplored material in the short stories which invites critical contemplation. Not only do these stories have critical merit in themselves, but also they chronicle the development of Chopin's ideas and stylistic experimentation, thus providing a fuller portrait of Chopin, both as a person and as an author. I have chosen "A Point at Issue" for the following analysis precisely because it is one of Chopin's earliest stories (published August, 1889), as well as an excellent example of her major concerns and narrative techniques.

The crux of Chopin's writing is her exploration of "the woman question," although she herself would probably have denied any political agenda. Over and over Chopin delves into the issues of women's potential, personal development, relationships with others and with themselves, social expectations and limitations, needs and desires. Perhaps because her writing addresses issues of sexuality and gender considered taboo for her time and place, previous criticism has somewhat insistently centered on the erotic elements present in her works, while tending to ignore larger social implications of her writing. Rather than moralizing or prescribing, Chopin examines the realities of her times and possible alternatives. Because of this emphasis on the feminine social self, especially the "tension between individual autonomy and social conformity,"¹ there is much to be gained by pursuing recent critical trends which incorporate sociological and linguistic concepts and techniques in exploring literary production.

According to Bakhtin, language is inherently "dialogic" because it acquires meaning only within a "linguistic community;" "meaning" necessarily extends beyond the limits of the individual by implying some degree of reciprocity in the form of a listener

or reader and by implicating a larger group in the formulation, valuation, and articulation of one's thoughts.² By acknowledging the social component of language and its inevitable cultural arbitrariness, a writing, like a reading, is seen as a social (and therefore) political act, as McLaughlin and Lentricchia so eloquently explain.³ It is a way of "negotiating experience," culturally conditioned because beyond the mechanics of language are the assumptions and norms that regulate its use. This clarification refutes the traditional sense of authorship as unique, and transforms it into an individual rendition of a shared reality. Because language by definition cannot be unique to an individual, it provides a basis for discovering cultural assumptions, prejudices, and concerns, as well as for analyzing the individual priorities and interests (whether implicit or explicit) of the author.

The field of sociolinguistics is particularly useful in providing concepts and techniques for analyzing the relationships between language and literature, especially from a feminist perspective. Language and communication imply a social context, and sociolinguistics provides a logical framework from which to investigate the relevance, significance, and function of gender in literature. Elements of sociolinguistics serve to identify and clarify gender issues of perception, status, power, usage strategies, social roles, and identity. Language is the prime means of communicating, and as such, participates in the organization, prioritization, and development of our perceptions as well. Language determines to a large degree our options for articulating perceptions. Language norms regulate the conditions of most communicative situations: under what conditions we may speak, the vocabulary we employ, acceptable tone and volume, the grammatical structures we use, and the significance of silence, among others. As we acquire language, we simultaneously acquire the cultural conditioning for its usage.

In essence, sociolinguistics is based on the assertion that language is a part of social reality. In examining the practical implications of that assertion, linguists interested in the connection between gender and language have searched for evidence of gender-related

differences of speech and language use. As elaborated by Cheri Kramarae in her extraordinary discussion of gender research entitled *Women and Men Speaking*, studies increasingly show that "probably few, if any, of the language usages discussed...are particular to either females or males. However, the usages are performed or experienced or evaluated in different ways."⁴ Robin Lakoff, for example, found that women's spontaneous speech tends to be characterized by the use of tag questions, compound requests, and questioning patterns in otherwise declarative sentences, as well as hesitation and apology or disparagement of one's own remarks.⁵ Henley demonstrates how the "micropolitics" of nonverbal communication tend to differentiate power and status and contribute to the status quo.⁶ Nichols asserts that the concept of "women's language" is a myth; rather, women use language in ways that reflect the options available to them within their particular speech communities.⁷ Fishman warns against confusing gender activity with gender identity (which sees a given aspect as "natural").⁸ Analysis of Chopin's short story in the light of the above considerations illuminates how the language use of both Chopin as author and her characters reveals that the "point at issue" in this story is basically a feminist preoccupation with the relationship of self and society.

An initial reading of "A Point at Issue" lends itself to the inference that the issue at hand is the classic juxtaposition of reason and emotion within the social institution of marriage. The story opens with a description of Eleanor Gail's determination to pursue her intellectual inclinations and aspirations in spite of their social consequences. The latter include "the questionable distinction of being relegated to a place amid that large and ill-assorted family of 'cranks' [and] and discomfit [sic] and attending opprobrium" endemic to choosing to stray from the "beaten walks."⁹ It is in so doing that she attracts the attention of her future husband, Charles Faraday, who is captivated by the "free masonry of intellect" in her eyes and "the beautiful revelations of her mind." Their courtship revolves around their intellectual ventures: "Together they went looking for the good things of life, knocking at the closed doors of philosophy; venturing into the open fields of

science" (50). Their "oneness of thought" finally leads Faraday to propose, and they decide to marry, on the condition that their union "be governed by no precedential methods," but rather preserve the individual rights of each:

And the element that was to make possible such a union was trust in each other's love, honor, courtesy, tempered by the reserving clause of readiness to meet the consequences of reciprocal liberty.... Marriage, which marks too often the closing period of a woman's intellectual existence, was to be in her case the open portal through which she might seek the embellishments that her strong, graceful mentality deserved. (50)

To that end, Eleanor remains in Paris after their honeymoon to learn French, while Faraday returns to his university teaching, with plans to reunite the following summer. This is the situation Chopin sets up to explore potential ramifications of a marriage based on reason.

Both the power of reason and the strength of their marriage are severely tested. During the months of separation, the two exchange letters in which "[t]hey told such details of their daily lives as they thought worth the telling," sharing readings, newspaper cuttings, and opinions "bearing upon questions that interested them... Nothing was so large that they dared not look at it" (52). However, one day Faraday, with "cold-blooded impartiality," comments at length upon the "interesting" emotions aroused in him by the charming young daughter of a colleague, assigning it "about equal reference" to his university class and his love for Eleanor. Eleanor is understandably dismayed. She first delays responding, then responds rather coldly, and finally overwhelms Faraday with a "very deluge" of letters that "shook him with their unusual ardor" (54). In the meantime, however, Eleanor struggles against a "misery of the heart" which she intends to vanquish "by the unaided force of reason." Back in Paris, Faraday is forced to confront a similarly disturbing situation in which his wife goes out alone, only to be later seen by him in the company of another man. Their initial reactions to these incidents are similar: although both attempt to react rationally, their emotions dominate their initial reactions. In Eleanor's case, "[r]eason did good work and stood its ground bravely, but against it were

the too great odds of a woman's heart" (55). Faraday fares even less well: he is consumed by a desire "to tear the scoundrel from his seat and paint the boulevard with his villainous blood" (56). The final results are the opposite, however. Eleanor's reason is unable to triumph, leading her to conclude "there are certain things which a woman can't philosophize about" (58), but Faraday's "better self and better senses came quickly back to him" (57). They mutually clear the air and give each other "speechless assurance of a love that could never more take a second place" (58). A catastrophic ending is barely averted.

The classic positive resolution of Chopin's story appears to suggest that while love has its place in marriage, reason is superior, since the conflicts are caused by extremes of feeling and resolved by reason. One might also infer that no matter how laudable the motives which lead to change in traditional customs and norms, such experimentation is risky at best, potentially devastating at worst. From the perspective of plot, Chopin appears to be supporting the status quo, calling upon women to "keep their place" and follow the wise leadership of the men in their lives. Details of characterization support that stance: Eleanor's "earnestness and intensity" are labelled "extreme," but are "happily" tempered by Faraday's "humorous instincts, and an optimism that saved it from a too monotonous sombreness." Eleanor ventures into the world of the intellect "with uncertain steps, made steady by his help... Whithersoever he led she followed..." (50). After all, Faraday was a magnanimous man who "appreciated the need of offering to his wife advantages for culture which had been of impossible attainment during her girlhood" (50). In the light of these comments, Faraday is clearly more suited to leadership, given his steadfastness, tolerance, and integrity. These same traits make the separation "acceptable by its involving a principle which he felt it incumbent upon him to uphold" (50). The "principle" is never made explicit, but we are led to infer that Chopin refers to the ideal of mutual respect in their marriage. That ideal, however, does not include the component of equality because of Charles' "stronger man-nature." While Eleanor bursts into a

veritable "storm of sobs and tears...the signal of surrender," Charles adamantly refuses to renege on his good intentions: "Here was the first test, and should he be the one to cry out, 'I cannot endure it' " (57). Eleanor bends to his will, as is only "natural." The conclusions appear to be that the man is the natural head of the family because of his superiority of character and intellect, and the woman should accept her subordinate place.

This position is actively supported by the unofficial statutes of Plymddaledom. In spite of the university environment which one might expect to be somewhat more amenable to innovation than the rest of society, Plymddale proves to be a bastion of conservatism. Eleanor sees her tiny marriage announcement in the ironically named Plymddale *Promulgator* as a concession to "proprieties," one which she fervently hoped would be the last of her "trials." Alas, since she decided to marry "without the paraphernalia of accessories so dear to a curious public...the disappointed public cheated of its entertainment, was forced to seek such compensation for the loss as was offered in reflections that while condemning her present, were unsparing of her past, and full with damning prognostic of her future"(49). This public's position on their modern marriage arrangement is as clear as it is unshakeable: they reacted with "indignant astonishment at the effrontery of the situation...That two young people should presume to introduce such innovations into matrimony...was uncalled for...improper...indecent" (51). They speculate that he "must have already tired of her idiosyncrasies, since he had left her...[and] in Paris...of all places" (51). Clearly Plymddale does not condone the flaunting of its traditions and collective wisdom; just as there are prescribed steps for the wedding itself, there are clear expectations for the couple once married.

Chopin's account of the town's reaction provides a clue to the underlying content of the story. The issue at hand is neither the primacy of reason nor the sacred traditions of marriage; rather, Chopin's concern is with Eleanor, her relationship to her husband, her community, and her self-image. The blame for blasphemous behavior is centered on Eleanor, who is the one who insists on stepping out of bounds. Charles suffers no social consequences for their

decision. After all, "Faraday's life was full with occupation and his brief moments of leisure were too precious to give to heeding the idle gossip that floated to his hearing and away again without holding his thoughts an instant"(51-2). Eleanor "endured long and patiently the trials that beset her path when she chose to diverge from the beaten walks of female Plymddaledom"(48). We begin to see that gender inequality colors the judgments in the story. Faraday is permitted "the casual pleasure" which Kitty's shining eyes and velvet cheeks stir within him, since "[i]t is idle to suppose that even the most exemplary men go through life with their eyes closed to woman's beauty and their senses steeled against its charm" (53). Plymddaledom obviously adheres to the classic double standard which both condones and promotes masculine freedom of action while concomitantly blaming available females for any improprieties, problems, and undesirable deviations from acceptable social norms. In the case of Eleanor, those expectations include the surrender of intellectual aspirations, as well as unquestioning conformity to local standards ("And since when was Mme. Belaire's French, as it had been taught to select generations of Plymddalions, considered insufficient for the practical needs of existence as related by that foreign tongue?"). Above all, it requires that she surrender her privacy so the community can peruse her life at will and subsequently judge. Charles is implicated as an accessory in permitting and abetting Eleanor's reprehensible behavior, but the polemic revolves around Eleanor.

In Plymddale as in U.S. society in general, women are expected to expose their lives freely and totally. As Henley points out in her essay on the relationship among power, sex, and nonverbal communication (10), the amount and type of information one offers to others tends to flow opposite to the flow of authority, which helps explain why Eleanor's life is public while Charles's is not. The community feels it has the right to her life, but Charles is given authority over his own, unpopular as his decisions may be upon exercising that authority. This is reinforced by the information Chopin includes about the Beatons, Kitty's family. In this family, the father

"formed the nucleus around which the family gathered," supported by Mrs. Beaton, "a woman whose aspirations went not further than the desire for her family's good" (52). Their two daughters serve as foils to Eleanor. The eldest, Margaret, is seen by the community as "slightly erratic, owing to a timid leaning in the direction of Woman's Suffrage" (52). Chopin gently satirizes her by explaining that such inclinations were undermined by "the fashioning and donning of garments of mysterious shape, which, while stamping their wearer with the distinction of a quasi-emancipation, defeated the ultimate purpose of their construction by inflicting a personal discomfort that extended beyond the powers of long endurance" (53). She is made to look even more foolish and ineffective in contrast to her sister Kitty, who is much more practical: "while clamoring for no privileges doubtful of attainment and of remote and questionable benefit, with a Napoleonic grip, possessed herself of such rights as were at hand and exercised them in keeping the household under her capricious command"(53). Naturally it is Kitty who captivates Faraday with her "girlish charms." He approves of her with that "casual pleasure that one follows the playful gambols of a graceful kitten"(53). Clearly, the society expects its women to be decorative, sociable, available, and predictable. Not only are they expected to display themselves for public observation, but what is observed must meet expectations. Eleanor is problematic both because she craves privacy and because what she reveals does not conform to norms.

That being the situation in Plymduledom, Chopin seems to invite the reader to speculate upon Charles's attraction to Eleanor. First, although we are given no hints of a description of Charles other than the mention of his age, Eleanor is pictured through Faraday's eyes: "in the beginning he had found her extremely good to look at, with her combination of graceful womanly charms" (49). Equally attractive is her lack of "self-conscious mannerisms that was as rare as it was engaging. He falls in love with her mind:

clear intellect: sharp in its reasoning, strong and unprejudiced in its outlook. She was that *rara avis*, a logical woman...[and] he felt safe in doubting that the

hedges of the future would grow logical women for him, more than they had such prodigies in the past.(49)

But having clearly established Eleanor as exception in Charles's eyes, Chopin reveals the real essence of the attraction Eleanor holds for Faraday: "none remotely approached the position which Eleanor held... She was pre-eminent. She was himself"(52). No wonder she "rather surpassed that ideal, which had of necessity been but an adorned picture of woman as he had known her"; for Charles, the greatest merit a woman could possess was to faithfully mirror his own greatness, to serve as an ego extension. Subtly but relentlessly it becomes apparent that Faraday's interest is much more physical and egocentric than altruistic. His priority is, ultimately, personal aggrandizement.

One begins to understand why Eleanor in Paris was "supremely satisfied in her new and attractive surroundings" while Charles "felt more keenly the discomfit of giving up a companionship" (51). For the first time in her life, Eleanor is autonomous and anonymous. Although Chopin gives no details of her protagonist's daily life abroad, it clearly agrees with her. Upon returning to Paris, Faraday perceives "how much more beautiful she had grown; with a richness of coloring and fullness of health that Plymdale had never been able to bestow" (55). There are other changes as well, however, that do not meet with Charles's approval. When his wife refuses to identify the "very striking looking gentleman" with whom he found her conversing, he "assumed indifference...only indulging the reflection that Eleanor was losing something of her frankness" (56). This unwillingness to reveal herself disconcerts him, a reaction which is exacerbated when she begs his leave for an afternoon, causing him "to wonder if there might not be modifications to this marital liberty of which he was so staunch an advocate" (56). Charles appears to advocate such liberty as long as his wife does not exercise it, while Eleanor appears to have no difficulty accepting full responsibility for herself and to thrive in the process.

Appearance is a key element in Chopin's story. Charles appears to be open-minded and equitable in his treatment of his wife, but close analysis reveals otherwise. Eleanor appears to

have successfully overcome the limitations of her society's gender expectations, but examination of Chopin's use of dialogue suggests otherwise. In spite of this being an uncharacteristically long story, Chopin's use of dialogue is severely limited. Until the final page, there are only two brief instances of direct quotations in the narration. The first appears when it occurs to Faraday, "like a revelation from the unknown," to suggest marriage to Eleanor. Coming as this does in the aftermath of Chopin's extensive discussion of the mental harmony the couple shares, the astute reader might speculate that anything which is not arrived at through a process of reasoning but rather appears as intuitive leap is indeed "unknown" to Charles. He is totally ignorant of the power and potential of his emotions. Eleanor's response is a question (Faraday "speaks" rather than "asks"): "Why not?" This would appear to be a clear example of acquiescence rather than choice or affirmation, even though "[s]he had thought of it long ago." She also tempers her response by replying "laughingly"; one might wonder if in relief, embarrassment, or simply joy. The second quotation seems only slightly less insecure. When Charles happens upon his wife conversing with the artist, she "had the appearance of wanting to run away; to do any thing but meet her husband's glance" (55). Since in U.S. society, failure to meet the look of another, or refusal to look directly at another, is perceived as guilt, submission, or deviousness, Eleanor appears to accept her husband's "right" to knowledge of her activities and her corresponding duty to provide an explanation. She complies by answering as noncommittally as possible: "Oh, no one special." The "oh" is a verbal attempt to appear unconcerned and to diminish the importance of her response, while the use of the negative "no one" is also intended to detract significance. Eleanor's autonomy of the past months is apparent in the independence of her actions, but faced once again with her husband's presence, she appears to find it difficult to sustain, to the point that her response is described as a "hopeless attempt" to be casual. At this point there appears to be no question that neither Charles nor Eleanor is truly able to surpass the gender expectations of

their society: Charles expects control, and Eleanor seems to be willing to rescind her personal gains and submit to his stronger will.

Chopin's final burst of dialogue at the story's end demands minute examination to determine Eleanor's position and status. There is a power struggle brewing which goes beyond Eleanor and Charles themselves to encompass larger issues of gender, and even cultural, differences. Although it begins with Eleanor firmly instructing her husband that he "shall take it [her portrait] home with [him]," her self-assurance appears to deteriorate rapidly. Her next words are a simple question, her last unencumbered, straightforward speech act. Eleanor sits at his knee in a classic posture of submission; just as his portrait on the wall was "looking always down at her," Charles himself now assumes his position in person. She speaks accordingly, as she probes her husband's assessment of their situation: "Charlie, I think--I mean, don't you think..." (58). What only a moment before had at least been expressed as a statement ("I'm sure I don't know") is now a verbal deferment to his opinion, as she presumably relinquishes her right to her own thoughts. When Charles assures her that she has made great progress in French, she responds with two pleas for reassurance, one verbal and one nonverbal: "Yes?" she rejoined, with a little squeeze of the hand." This is followed by further acknowledgment of his supposedly greater wisdom: "I mayn't be right...I believe...don't you think-hadn't you better..." (58). In the brief conversation that follows about his letter about Kitty, Eleanor "flushed, and hesitated, but finally answered him bravely." This culminates in the total self-effacement of her declaration that "I think nothing," reinforced by her closing her eyes and "with a little shudder drawing closer to him" (58). This final dialogue effectively demonstrates the impact of Charles's presence upon his wife and the consequences of the "far-reaching heredity," Chopin's cryptic explanation for Eleanor's behavior. Chopin either prudently refrains from openly challenging her society's gender prejudices or assumes her phrase will be readily understood as a reference to what we now call cultural conditioning.

Eleanor's verbal and nonverbal behavior unequivocally communicate the powerful hold of gender conditioning on our lives, whether conscious or otherwise. It appears from the progressive details of conversation and behavior that Eleanor is unable to sustain her self-confidence, to say nothing of her autonomy, in her husband's presence. Their social conventions require that she interact with Charles in clearly submissive patterns. Not only is she expected to defer to her husband's opinions or desires--or even thoughts--of her own. The hesitancy and non-assertiveness of her speech is a reflection of the social role she is expected to play. However, these appearances should not be naively accepted at face value; linguistic features such as those manifested by Eleanor can be interpreted as "a means for the socially powerless to assert some kind of control." " Given Eleanor's options, it is conceivable she employs "women's language" as a strategy, a possibility which gains strength upon examining other elements of Chopin's narrative.

Chopin conscientiously attempts to break through gender limitations in writing this story. This is immediately apparent in her choice of content; although she chooses to deal with traditional issues of love and marriage, she does not do so in a traditional manner. First there is the obvious experimentation with an alternative concept of marriage, one in which freedom, growth, and intellect are key elements. The final failure of this rather extreme experiment does not detract from Chopin's innovative perspective on the importance of personal development and possible options for self-fulfillment. From the first page, Eleanor is decidedly willing to suffer the social consequences of the "satisfying consciousness of roaming the heights of free thought, and tasting the sweets of a spiritual emancipation." However, she is unwilling to alienate the man she loves through unorthodox behavior, which is why she reverts to culturally conditioned "female" behavior at the end of the story. Rather than a surrender to social expectations, her behavior suggests a conscious decision to embrace certain social conventions in the best interests of maintaining and fomenting her relationship with her

husband. Having perceived that her husband's return to their old social environment contrasts sharply with her own liberating experience abroad, Eleanor prudently retreats in contemplation of future strategies for greater success, given her "large comprehensiveness." After all, even Charles found Eleanor "ready to take broad views of life and humanity; able to grasp a question and anticipate conclusions by a quick intuition which he himself reached by the slower, consecutive steps of reason" (49). Eleanor is willing to bide her time and proceed cautiously as she leads her husband by small steps through the uncharted world of intuition and human potential.

Chopin's experimentation goes beyond plot, theme, and characterization to narrative techniques. By beginning her story with a one-line announcement from a newspaper, Chopin also announces her intention to maintain narrative distance and objectivity. Her judicious use of limited omniscient viewpoint allows her to "report" from different angles--those of Eleanor, Charles, and the society--without depriving her of the opportunity to intrude as narrator. It also provides some degree of protection in that it is occasionally ambiguous whose viewpoint she is presenting, as when she comments on the idleness of harboring unreasonable expectations of men's reactions to women. It allows her to introduce elements of doubt by articulating ideas as rhetorical questions rather than as statements, for example when she says "Did it not enter into the scheme of their lives, to keep free from prejudices that hold their sway over the masses?" It allows her to claim a degree of authorial ignorance and therefore refrain from giving information or making judgments. The foremost example of this is when Eleanor "burst into a storm of sobs and tears...the signal of surrender." Chopin follows this with an assertion of autonomy:

It is a gratifying privilege to be permitted to ignore the reason of such unusual disturbance in a woman of Eleanor's high qualifications. The cause of that abandonment of grief will never be learned unless she chooses to disclose it herself. (55)

In so doing, Chopin the author gently chides the reader and the society for finding it difficult to allow Eleanor the same respect

and privacy. The initial lack of dialogue also responds to her intention to maintain distance, while giving added importance to the dialogue she does include. By presenting the conclusion through conversation, she makes the situation more immediate and real, while allowing the characters to reveal themselves as they choose. It also underscores the discrepancies between what the characters purport to be, or aspire to be, and what they are. It may also respond to an ironic (unconscious or otherwise) subjective involvement on the part of the author while attempting to decrease her authorial responsibility.

However, Chopin's narrative style unsuspectingly reveals important information about the author and her time. For example, having once given Charles's full name, the author only refers to him by name as Faraday, while Eleanor is always simply Eleanor. As Henley points out, forms of address reveal subtle status and power differences, as well as differing degrees of assumed or desired intimacy; using Charles's last name confers greater importance upon him. Mrs. Beaton is not even given a name of her own; like her role, she is defined through her husband and family. Chopin also tends to follow gender expectations in vocabulary choices. For example, in Paris Eleanor is ensconced in a "pretty" room with a "fanciful little desk" and a "heart full of sweet memories," while Charles simply returns to his "duties" at the university and resumes his "bachelor existence." She suffers the "pang of parting" which lends "sharp zest" to possible fulfillment of a "cherished purpose," while he suffers "discomfit" made acceptable by the "principle" involved. She responds to frustration "like an incipient cyclone," while he has a "disturbed appearance." Although Chopin experiments with giving Eleanor traditionally "male" intellect, the linguistic repertoire of both Chopin and her protagonist is unavoidably influenced by the gender conditioning of their particular time and place. The crucial question remains, however, whether Chopin's language usage, like Eleanor's, is linguistic "proof" of recapitulation, or rather, a narrative strategy employed to disguise a message as powerfully subversive as it is socially unacceptable.

While Chopin's awareness of the crucial role that social conditioning plays in our lives is clearly expressed, her rejection of its inevitability is also undeniably present. The fact that she does not end her story with the couple's mutual expressions of undying love, but rather insistently returns to the nature of their misunderstandings and reactions to them, is silent testimony that Chopin's "point at issue" goes beyond traditional themes of love and marriage. For within this story, marriage is simply a manifestation of how social norms regulate our lives. Faraday may end the discussion by kissing his wife with "passionate fondness," but he is simultaneously (and ironically) thinking that "his" Nellie is "only a woman, after all," although he generously "lovels] her none the less for it" (58)! Obviously, in spite of his laudable intentions to the contrary, Charles is unable to overcome the cultural conditioning which supports male fantasies of superiority, appropriation of others' rights, and stereotyping of women as decorative, emotional, pleasant, but innately irrational at best, mindless at worst. But Chopin does not allow his egocentric comments to close the story. Rather, she claims the last word by undermining that male complacency: "With man's usual inconsistency, he had quite forgotten the episode of the portrait." Chopin makes it clear that Charles's primary concern is his position of control; once his ego is assuaged and he feels sure his dominance is reasserted, he is content and considers the matter closed. But with this conclusion, Chopin reinforces her own concern: just as the story is not really about love and marriage, so Charles is not really able to control Eleanor, appearances to the contrary. For Eleanor accomplishes her objectives. Not only does she get her time abroad, with all its rewards, but also she is able to convince Charles to see things her way by making it appear that he is in charge. Eleanor's "linguistic deterioration" is thus shown to be a strategy designed to achieve her own objectives by superficially conforming to expectations.

Chopin's story thus becomes an exploration of the limitations, alternatives, and choices of a nineteenth century woman. It is Faraday who remains essentially static,

unwilling or unable to change in practice what he embraces in theory. Eleanor triumphs in her ability to conceive of new options, explore possibilities in her own life, and ultimately and creatively take command of herself by making her own decisions. Chopin is equally successful in using her writing as a socially acceptable vehicle for her own explorations of selfhood and gender.

Notes

1. Wendy Martin, ed., "Introduction," *New Essays on The Awakening* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 7.
2. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 117.
3. Thomas McLaughlin, "Introduction," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 7.
4. Cheris Kramarae, *Women and Men Speaking: Frameworks for Analysis* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1981), pp. vi-vii.
5. Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West, "Sex Roles, Interruptions, and Silences in Conversation," in *Language and Sex: Difference and Domination*, eds. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1975), p. 106.
6. Nancy Henley, "Power, Sex, and Nonverbal Communication," in *Language and Sex*, p. 184.
7. Patricia C. Nichols, "Linguistic Options and Choices for Black Women in the Rural South," in *Language, Gender, and Society*, eds. B. Thorne, C. Kramarae, and N. Henley (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1983), p. 54.
8. Pamela Fishman, "Interaction: The Work Women Do," in *Language, Gender, and Society*, p. 100.
9. Kate Chopin, "A Point at Issue," in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyerstad (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 48. All further references to this text will be indicated by page number only in parentheses.
10. Henley, p. 190.
11. Deborah Cameron, ed., "Introduction," *The Feminist Critique of Language* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 24.

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