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Introduction to Literature

Oral Presentation

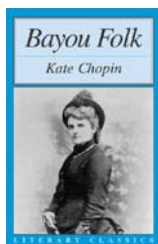
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	<p style="text-align: center;">Kate Chopin 1851-1904</p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer; than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s Life.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">“[I write about] human existence in its subtle, complex true meaning, stripped of the veil of convention.”</p>
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On February 8, 1851, Katherine O’Flaherty was born in St. Louis Missouri into a well-established, well-off family. Kate was raised Catholic in a primarily female household. She married New Orleans native Oscar Chopin and in 1878 moved to Cloutierville, Louisiana where her husband opened a mercantile store. Kate’s marriage was very modern. Oscar encouraged her to be independent, wear trousers, smoke cigars, and their home was the center of social life in the area. Her ability to speak on a variety of subjects, as well as her musical talents and tact, made her very popular with a lot of people, though some were shocked by her more modern mannerisms.



In 1883, Oscar died. Though Kate successfully ran the store for another year and paid off all of their debt, she eventually moved back to St. Louis. Some people speculate that she did so because of an affair she had with Albert Sampite, a married man in the Cloutierville area. Others attribute it to her mother’s persuasion, wanting Kate back home. She suffered great depression and began seeing a therapist who suggested she use writing as a means to equalize her moods. She began writing short stories based on her observations of the people in the bayou of Louisiana. Her stories, called local color because they make heavy use of Creole and Cajun culture, were very popular, and she produced two volumes of stores: Bayou Folk (1894) and A Night in Acadie



(1897). Some of the more famous short stories from her collections are: “Desiree’s Baby,” “At Cheniere Caminade,” “The Story of an Hour,” and “The Silk Stockings.”

In 1899, she published her most famous novel, The Awakening. The story is about a married woman, Edna Pontellier, who is dissatisfied with her life and begins to explore her more personal, sexual, and creative side. She begins several affairs, separates herself from her husband and two sons, and eventually kills herself when she realizes that she must either choose between being a wife and mother or being herself. Before this novel, Kate Chopin was considered a darling of the literary set in St. Louis and was making a name for herself. However, America at the turn of the century found Edna Pontellier either too shocking or too different to really connect with, and the book never took off until decades later. In 1904, she died from a brain hemorrhage. Sadly, she never knew the acclaim her writing would achieve. Today she is considered one of America’s greatest authors.

In the short story in our book, “Story of an Hour,” Chopin focuses on a common theme in her writing: the issues of sexual equality and marital oppression. Chopin obviously believed that no one had the right to oppress another, and that one of the social institutions primary in oppressing women was marriage. Chopin’s own marriage was opposite the marriages we often see in her stories, so clearly she is not anti-marriage, just anti-domination by men. The twist at the end of this story is another common aspect of Chopin’s work – a surprise that makes readers reevaluate what they think they know about the characters and plot.

Internet Sites about Kate Chopin

- <http://www.katechopin.org/Home.html>
- http://web.uccs.edu/english339/grimes_contribution.htm
- http://www.literarytraveler.com/literary_articles/kate_chopin_coutierville.aspx
- <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/chopin.htm>
- <http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/chopin1.htm>
- http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/eng384/Kate_c.htm
- <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/eng384/katebio.htm>
- <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/eng384/hourweb.htm>
- <http://www.pbs.org/katechopin/>
- <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/chopin.htm>
- <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/naal7/contents/C/authors/chopin.asp>