



**Unit 1**

*Kate Chopin* (1851–1904)



## Guided Reading

Kate Chopin is well-known for her “controversial” novel *The Awakening*. Actually, she has established her reputation as a writer much earlier before the publication of *The Awakening* in 1899. The short stories she has written were widely reviewed and praised; she had numerous admirers and the salons she held had attracted some of the city’s best-known writers and artists. However, after the publication of *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin was not only attacked by the flood of negative reviews of the novel, but also shunned by the social and literary circle. The significance of *The Awakening* was not recognized until the 1950s because of women’s movement. Afterwards, Kate Chopin’s reputation as a writer has been revived.

Katherine O’ Flaherty Chopin was born in 1851. Her father, Thomas O’ Flaherty, who was an Irishman had come to America in 1823, and after a few years in New York, he moved the family to St. Louis. Kate’s father was killed during the train accident in 1855 when Kate was nearly four years old. Then her mother moved the whole family to live with Kate’s maternal grandmother and great-grandmother, who had influenced Kate’s speaking of French and story-telling.

Later, Kate became a popular young lady, attending fashionable events, playing music, learning to smoke in New Orleans, but above all she read voraciously. She read not only Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters but also Dante, Cervantes, Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, Goethe, etc. In particular, she liked French literature. In 1890, at the age of thirty-nine, Kate married Oscar Chopin, a French-Creole businessman. In October, the couple moved to New Orleans.

In New Orleans, Kate encountered different groups of people: aristocratic Creoles, unpretentious Cajuns (or Acadians: French pioneers who in 1755 had chosen to leave Nova Scotia rather than live under the British), Redbones (part Indian, part white), “free mulattos”, blacks, and a cosmopolitan assortment of Germans, Italians, Irishmen and Americans. Besides, she was rather fascinated with roaming the city and observing the city life.

By the time she was twenty-eight, Kate had given birth to five sons and later one daughter Lelia. The family continued to live in comfort and style till 1882 when Oscar Chopin died of a severe case of swamp fever. Kate took over Oscar’s business for more than a year, managing the Chopin plantations and dealing with cotton factors in New Orleans. In 1884, she moved to St. Louis to join her mother, but one year later, Mrs. O’ Flaherty died, and Kate was left once again to mourn her loss of family members.

During this period of great personal sorrow, Kate Chopin turned increasingly to Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, who encouraged her to explore the new studies of science, for instance, writings by Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer. At the same time, Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer also helped Kate to recognize her literary merits. With such earnest promptings, Kate Chopin finally took up writing when she was thirty-eight years old as a mother of six.

In 1890, Chopin published her first novel, *At Fault*, which drew a great deal of attention. By 1894, Chopin was a familiar figure in the nation's most prestigious literary magazines, and in March of that year, her first collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, was published, which had received positive reviews. Chopin was luxuriating in her literary success. In 1897, her second collection of short stories *A Night in Acadie* was published, which was also a success.

Then in 1899, *The Awakening* faced the public. In this novel, the female protagonist Edna Pontellier begins the story as a wife and mother, who is living a comfortable life but ends up leaving her husband and children to live in a house of her own. When Kate Chopin wrote *The Awakening*, feminism was emerging as a vital force in American public life. By 1890, the “New Woman” was not an unfamiliar phenomenon. Upper-class women gained visibility by attending college, entering the professions, and demanding the vote. Lower-class women made themselves heard by unionizing and combating unfavorable working conditions. In spite of these efforts, however, gender inequality remained a glaring fact at the turn of the century. In New Orleans, for instance, the Napoleonic Code still formed the basis for the marriage contract. The wife and all her “accumulations” after marriage were the property of her husband, and she was legally bound to live with him and to follow him wherever he chose to go. Kate Chopin was undoubtedly sensitive to “the woman question”, but she was neither an activist nor an advocate. Nevertheless, the issue she tried to reveal in *The Awakening* was not accepted by the public.

The harsh reception and banning of *The Awakening* affected Kate unconsciously. Afterwards, she wrote very little and her health began to fail, even though she was only in her fifties. Besides, she had trouble publishing her work. Fortunately, her large and supportive family sustained her spirits. She suffered a stroke while visiting the St. Louis World's Fair, and died soon afterward, on 22 August 1904.

After her death, Kate Chopin's work was virtually forgotten. The major reinterpretation of her work did not begin until 1952. Cyrille Arnavon in France translated *The Awakening* into French in 1953 and considered it as a neglected masterpiece. Until then, American critics came to the same conclusion. In 1959, Kenneth Eble published “A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*”, an important reappraisal, and in 1969, the Norwegian scholar Per Seyersted published a critical biography of Kate Chopin as well as a two-volume collection of her completed works. Half a century after her death, Kate Chopin was finally admitted into the literary canon. The 1970s and 1980s saw something of “a Chopin revival”—a revival to which many influential critics contributed—and *The Awakening* increasingly appeared as an

indispensable choice in reading courses. Fortunately, Kate Chopin and her writings have been granted a second life.

Source Information: Showalter, Elaine, et al. (Eds.). (1991). *Modern American Women Writers: Profiles of Their Lives and Works—From the 1870s to the Present*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.



## Selected Reading

### “Desiree’s Baby”

As the day was pleasant, Madame Valmonde drove over to L’Abri to see Desiree and the baby.

It made her laugh to think of Desiree with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Desiree was little more than a baby herself; when Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmonde had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar.

The little one awoke in his arms and began to cry for “Dada”. That was as much as she could do or say. Some people thought she might have strayed there of her own accord, for she was of the toddling age. The prevailing belief was that she had been purposely left by a party of Texans, whose canvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry that Coton Mais kept, just below the plantation. In time Madame Valmonde abandoned every speculation but the one that Desiree had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence<sup>1</sup> to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere—the idol of Valmonde.

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder was that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there. The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

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<sup>1</sup> providence: 天意

Monsieur Valmonde grew practical and wanted things well considered: that is, the girl's obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? He ordered the corbeille<sup>1</sup> from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived; then they were married.

Madame Valmonde had not seen Desiree and the baby for four weeks. When she reached L'Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place, which for many years had not known the gentle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever to leave it. The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall. Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime.

The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch. The baby was beside her, upon her arm, where he had fallen asleep, at her breast. The yellow nurse woman sat beside a window fanning herself.

Madame Valmonde bent her portly figure over Desiree and kissed her, holding her an instant tenderly in her arms. Then she turned to the child.

"This is not the baby!" she exclaimed, in startled tones. French was the language spoken at Valmonde in those days.

"I knew you would be astonished," laughed Desiree, "at the way he has grown. The little cochon de lait<sup>2</sup>! Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and fingernails—real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning. Isn't it true, Zandrine?"

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, "Mais si<sup>3</sup>, Madame."

"And the way he cries," went on Desiree, "is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin."

Madame Valmonde had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields.

"Yes, the child has grown, has changed," said Madame Valmonde, slowly, as she replaced it beside its mother. "What does Armand say?"

Desiree's face became suffused with a glow that was happiness itself.

1 corbeille: [ 法语 ] 花篮装饰

2 cochon de lait: [ 法语 ] 小猪, 小坏蛋

3 mais si: [ 法语 ] 就像是

“Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not—that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn't true. I know he says that to please me. And mamma,” she added, drawing Madame Valmonde's head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, “he hasn't punished one of them—not one of them—since baby is born. Even Negrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work—he only laughed, and said Negrillon was a great scamp<sup>1</sup>. Oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me.”

What Desiree said was true. Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Desiree so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned, she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. But Armand's dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her.

When the baby was about three months old, Desiree awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace. It was at first too subtle to grasp. It had only been a disquieting suggestion; an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming. Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Desiree was miserable enough to die.

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her peignoir<sup>2</sup>, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche's little quadroon<sup>3</sup> boys—half naked too—stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Desiree's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. “Ah!” It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

1 scamp: 顽皮的家伙

2 peignoir: 女式睡衣

3 quadroon: 黑人血统占四分之一的混血儿

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright.

Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

“Armand,” she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. “Armand,” she said again. Then she rose and tottered towards him. “Armand,” she panted once more, clutching his arm, “look at our child. What does it mean? Tell me.”

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. “Tell me what it means!” she cried despairingly.

“It means,” he answered lightly, “that the child is not white; it means that you are not white.”

A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted<sup>1</sup> courage to deny it. “It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair,” seizing his wrist. “Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,” she laughed hysterically.

“As white as La Blanche’s,” he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child.

When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmonde.

“My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God’s sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live.”

The answer that came was brief:

“My own Desiree: Come home to Valmonde; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child.”

When the letter reached Desiree she went with it to her husband’s study, and laid it open upon the desk before which he sat. She was like a stone image: silent, white, motionless after she placed it there.

In silence he ran his cold eyes over the written words.

He said nothing. “Shall I go, Armand?” she asked in tones sharp with agonized suspense.

“Yes, go.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“Yes, I want you to go.”

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife’s soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.

She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back.

“Good-bye, Armand,” she moaned.

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1 unwonted: 不寻常的

He did not answer her. That was his last blow at fate.

Desiree went in search of her child. Zandrine was pacing the sombre gallery with it. She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches.

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

Desiree had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmonde. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou<sup>1</sup>; and she did not come back again.

Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L'Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze.

A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furnishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless layette<sup>2</sup>. Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the corbeille had been of rare quality.

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Desiree had sent to him during the days of their espousal<sup>3</sup>. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not Desiree's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love:—

“But above all,” she wrote, “night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.”

### *After-reading Activities*

1. How do you interpret Desiree's choice not to go back to her mother at Valmonde? What happens to her at the end of the story?

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1 bayou: 支流

2 layette: 婴儿的全套服装

3 espousal: 婚礼

2. How does the writer Kate Chopin develop this story? What literary techniques does she apply?
3. Based on the story, imagine and discuss black slaves' life in Armand's plantation. Then do some research about plantation life in the 1900s.
4. Armand at the very beginning claims that he deeply falls in love with Desiree despite her obscurity. He loves her more when she gives birth to a boy. But does he really love Desiree? How does the writer Kate Chopin portray his changes? How do you interpret his love?
5. What does Desiree's story tell us about women's existence in the 1900s? Write a sequel to "Desiree's Baby": what will happen when Desiree's husband Armand finds out his own identity?

## 2 "The Story of an Hour"

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences, veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence<sup>1</sup> of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed". He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep

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1 intelligence: 信息, 消息

continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: “Free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked safe with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending her in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion, which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven’s sake open the door.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in a very elixir<sup>1</sup> of life through that open window.

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1 elixir: 灵丹妙药

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities<sup>1</sup>. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey<sup>2</sup>. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack<sup>3</sup> and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of the joy that kills.

### *After-reading Activities*

1. What is Mrs. Mallard's reaction toward the news of her husband's death? What do you think of such reaction?
2. What is the implied meaning of the window view when she is in her room by herself?
3. Do you think Mrs. Mallard dies of heart disease—"of the joy that kills"?
4. How will you interpret the husband-and-wife relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Mallard?
5. What do you think of Mrs. Mallard as a wife and a woman?
6. Why does the writer Kate Chopin develop the story in this way? What do you think of the tone of this story—pessimistic, feminist, or else?
7. Suppose you are Mr. Mallard, what is your response toward your wife's reaction? What do you think of yourself as a husband and your marriage?
8. Write a prequel for "The Story of an Hour": what happens between the Mallards before the news of death?

1 importunity: 烦扰

2 latchkey: (尤指住所前门的) 门锁) 钥匙

3 grip-sack: 手提包



## Resource Section

### *Works by Kate Chopin*

- Chopin, Kate. (1894). *Bayou Folk*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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- Kolosiki, Bernard. (Ed.). (1988). *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening*. New York: Modern Language Association.
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**Unit 2**

*Mary E. Wilkins  
Freeman* (1852–1930)



## Guided Reading

Most readers are familiar with two short stories by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “A New England Nun” and “The Revolt of ‘Mother’”, which are collected in her early publications—*A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (1887) and *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891). In fact, Mary wrote prolifically throughout her adult life, publishing fourteen collections of stories, thirteen novels, eight children’s books, several works in collaboration with other writers, a play, several articles, poems for children and adults, and dozens of uncollected stories. Nevertheless, it seems that among these merely her early short-story collections—*A Humble Romance and Other Stories* and *A New England Nun and Other Stories* and a novel *Pembroke* (1894), are considered to be the finest works and demonstrate Mary’s power as a writer. What has happened to her potential revealed in the early works? In a letter to literary historian Fred Lewis Pattee, Mary wrote: “I have never bothered to analyze myself, and fear I cannot. I will, however, state one thing. I do know, and have always known, my accomplished work is the best work of which I am capable, but it is too late now.”

As for this phenomenon, there are two factors helping readers to understand: the influences from the family history and the dilemma facing a woman’s choice of spinsterhood or marriage, which may perhaps explain why she so rarely realized her power as a writer. Yet even in her early fiction, in which she often portrays the lives of unmarried women, Mary implicitly questions whether a woman who remains unmarried may also develop as a person—and as a writer—or whether a woman must take on a “family” role in order to achieve her developmental potential.

Mary E. Wilkins was born in 1852 in Randolph, Massachusetts. She was the second child in the Wilkins family. During Mary’s childhood, loss shadowed her family: her brother and sisters died successively, and the family’s financial situation continued to deteriorate. Then the family moved into the home of the Tylers, where Mary’s mother Eleanor became a housekeeper. However, Eleanor died in 1880, which ended their residence with the Tylers, and left Mary at the age of twenty-eight with a pressing need to support herself. Mary’s father suddenly died in 1883, which made Mary the sole survivor of her family at the age of thirty-one. She managed to graduate from high school in Brattleboro and finished one year at Mount Holyoke College. Later, she taught music for a while, and then turned to writing as a potential source of income.

Mary interprets the impact of her losses in *By the Light of the Soul*, the novel that is regarded as the author’s spiritual autobiography. In this novel, the main character, Maria Edgham, experiences the early death of her mother, followed by the death of her father. Mary wrote about

this experience: “For some unexplained cause, the sorrow which Maria had passed through had seemed to stop her own emotional development.” The word of “stopped” emotional development appealed to Mary in her fictional exploration of the impact of losses similar to her own. And although she herself never “analyzed” her failure to accomplish more of her own “best work”, we may infer from her treatment of Maria Edgham that she believed she herself had experienced arrested development, both in her life and in her art.

Shortly after she began to publish in *Harper’s Bazaar*, Mary moved back to Randolph, Massachusetts, where members of her extended family still lived, and where she began to reside, in 1884, with her childhood friend, Mary John Wales and her family. Over the years, cousins on both sides of the family would continue to be important connections for Mary Wilkins. Yet it was not relatives but close friends—Mary Wales, and her editor at *Harper’s Bazaar*, Mary Louise Booth—who became the most significant people in her life after her loss of her family members.

During the years she lived with Mary Wales and her family in Randolph (1884–1990), Mary Wilkins began to establish herself as a writer. At the beginning, she wrote for children and her best stories are collected in *The Pot of Gold and Other Stories* (1892). However, Mary Wilkins began fully to reveal her originality and her power in the short stories she wrote for *Harper’s Bazaar* during the 1880s, collected in *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* and *A New England Nun and Other Stories*.

Mary Louise Booth was twenty-one years older than Mary Wilkins, and their friendship began in the years immediately following the death of Mary’s mother, and during the 1880s, when she was publishing her fiction in *Harper’s Bazaar*. Without the editorial courage of Booth, readers today might not have the stories collected in *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* and *A New England Nun and Other Stories*. Significantly, most of these stories focus on spinsters or older women, often women living together or for whom women’s friendship rather than marriage provides emotional sustenance. For Booth, Mary Wilkins’s stories about old women and women’s friendship would remain “gold”, and through her personal as well as editorial commitment to Mary Wilkins, she helped inspire Mary’s best work. As an editor, a personal friend, and even a mother surrogate, Booth gave Mary Wilkins the strength to overcome her fear of deviance—and provided for her a sense that she was “normal”, not “stopped”, in her development as a writer and as an adult woman.

Unfortunately, Mary Louise Booth died in 1889. Without Booth’s courageous support, Mary Wilkins could not resolve the contradictions society creates for women interested in personal development. On the one hand, she recognized and applauded a woman’s right to personhood; but she also accepted the conventional idea that marriage provides the single path to female development, unable to accept for herself the single state she had earlier so vividly defended for her female characters.

After Booth’s death, Mary Wilkins’s literary choices and her decision to marry reflected her

inability, without Booth's support, to risk remaining a writer of short fiction and to fight against the social stigma of spinsterhood. Yet marriage did not offer Mary Wilkins a path to personal development; rather, it restricted her imagination and heightened her sense of insecurity. Her literary career following *Pembroke* demonstrates her turn to conventionality. And in moving toward the conventional definition of female development, she abandoned her "vein of gold". As a result, very few of the short stories she wrote during the 1890s and later rank with the best of her early work in the genre.

The forty-nine-year-old woman whom the *New York Telegraph* unkindly termed "the literary old maid" finally married, moved in with her husband's mother and his unmarried sisters, and apparently attempted to become "unstuck" in her own development. Perhaps here she sought once again to re-create the sense of family she had lost more than twenty years before; perhaps she equally hoped that marriage would reinspire her writing and produce a new "vein of gold".

Literary evidence suggests, however, that Mary Wilkins Freeman's choice did not promote her development as a writer. Far from discovering a second "vein of gold" as the result of her marriage even in her New England fiction after *Pembroke*, she created melodramatic and unbelievable plots. Her biographers unanimously judge all of these novels failures. As nearly as the 1890s she had begun to work in a variety of genres, which suggests increasing lack of direction in her writing. Mary continued this pattern of experimentation. She demonstrated her ability to try new forms, yet her work failed to develop in any particular direction or to demonstrate consistent power.

If the early years of Mary's marriage were happy enough, by 1906, with the publication of *By the Light of the Soul*, she had evidently begun a serious reconsideration of her life and her marriage. Like the fictional Ida, Mary became preoccupied with household furnishings following her marriage. Mary appears to base her enjoyment of marriage on the house rather than on the emotional relationship. In 1909, she hospitalized Charles for alcoholism and the marriage had begun to deteriorate; by the time of Charles's death in 1923, the Freemans were legally separated and living apart. Mary Wilkins Freeman poignantly conveys her own lack of emotional connection to her marriage, motivated in large part by her desire to save her "reputation" and cease to be the New England spinster.

In her own way, Mary Wilkins Freeman hoped to create social change for women. Perhaps she believed that her renewed defense of single women finally repaired her sense of broken connections, that "the shadow family" had become "the whole family" and that she herself had earned a place among the leading literary figures of her time. She continued to sell her work to the end of her life, and in 1926, she received the William Dean Howells Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Later that year, she and Edith Wharton were among the first women to be elected to membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters. And

after her death of a heart attack at home in Metuchen in 1930, fourteen years after the death of her best friend Mary Wales and seven years after the death of her ex-husband Charles, Mary Wilkins Freeman continued to receive popular acclaim. In 1938, the American Academy of Arts and Letters installed bronze doors at the entrance of its building on West 155th Street in New York City that read, to this day, “Dedicated to the Memory of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Women Writers of America”.

Although the inscription has outlasted her reputation, Mary Wilkins Freeman continues to interest readers, both for the unsurpassed quality of her finest early work in the genre of regionalism and for the lifelong conflict between her emotional connections to women and her desire for acceptance as a married woman. Whether or not she ultimately believed it had been a mistake to choose conventionality, she definitely struggled for a lifetime with the issue.

However, by bringing her dilemma about status and choice into the public view, Mary Wilkins Freeman identified the common social ground on which women find themselves facing the dilemma of single life versus marriage, and all must rebel against marriage, accommodate to it, or find the courage to define their own alternative path to adult female development and emotional fulfillment.

When a female reader at modern or contemporary times reads Mary’s finest stories and discovers her own affinities with Mary and sympathizes with her conflict, she will acknowledge kinship with the writer from Randolph in the nineteenth century. And thus, Mary Wilkins Freeman finds her “whole family” at last.

Source Information: Showalter, Elaine, et al. (Eds.). (1991). *Modern American Women Writers: Profiles of Their Lives and Works—From the 1870s to the Present*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.



## Selected Reading

### “A New England Nun”

It was late in the afternoon, and the light was waning. There was a difference in the look of the tree shadows out in the yard. Somewhere in the distance cows were lowing and a little bell was tinkling; now and then a farm-wagon tilted by, and the dust flew; some blue-shirted laborers with shovels over their shoulders plodded past; little swarms of flies were dancing up and down

before the peoples' faces in the soft air. There seemed to be a gentle stir arising over everything for the mere sake of subsidence<sup>1</sup>—a very premonition<sup>2</sup> of rest and hush and night.

This soft diurnal<sup>3</sup> commotion was over Louisa Ellis also. She had been peacefully sewing at her sitting-room window all the afternoon. Now she quilted her needle carefully into her work, which she folded precisely, and laid in a basket with her thimble and thread and scissors. Louisa Ellis could not remember that ever in her life she had mislaid one of these little feminine appurtenances<sup>4</sup>, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality.

Louisa tied a green apron round her waist, and got out a flat straw hat with a green ribbon. Then she went into the garden with a little blue crockery bowl, to pick some currants<sup>5</sup> for her tea. After the currants were picked she sat on the back door-step and stemmed them, collecting the stems carefully in her apron, and afterwards throwing them into the hen-coop. She looked sharply at the grass beside the step to see if any had fallen there.

Louisa was slow and still in her movements; it took her a long time to prepare her tea; but when ready it was set forth with as much grace as if she had been a veritable<sup>6</sup> guest to her own self. The little square table stood exactly in the centre of the kitchen, and was covered with a starched linen cloth whose border pattern of flowers glistened. Louisa had a damask napkin on her tea-tray, where were arranged a cut-glass tumbler full of teaspoons, a silver cream-pitcher, a china sugar-bowl, and one pink china cup and saucer. Louisa used china every day—something which none of her neighbors did. They whispered about it among themselves. Their daily tables were laid with common crockery, their sets of best china stayed in the parlor closet, and Louisa Ellis was no richer nor better bred than they. Still she would use the china. She had for her supper a glass dish full of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light white biscuits. Also a leaf or two of lettuce, which she cut up daintily. Louisa was very fond of lettuce, which she raised to perfection in her little garden. She ate quite heartily, though in a delicate, pecking way; it seemed almost surprising that any considerable bulk of the food should vanish.

After tea she filled a plate with nicely baked thin corn-cakes, and carried them out into the back-yard.

“Caesar!” she called. “Caesar! Caesar!”

There was a little rush, and the clank of a chain, and a large yellow-and-white dog appeared at the door of his tiny hut, which was half hidden among the tall grasses and flowers. Louisa

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1 subsidence: 平息

2 premonition: 预感

3 diurnal: 白昼的

4 appurtenance: 附属物

5 currant: 醋栗

6 veritable: 名副其实的

patted him and gave him the corn-cakes. Then she returned to the house and washed the tea-things, polishing the china carefully. The twilight had deepened; the chorus of the frogs floated in at the open window wonderfully loud and shrill, and once in a while a long sharp drone from a tree-toad pierced it. Louisa took off her green gingham apron, disclosing a shorter one of pink and white print. She lighted her lamp, and sat down again with her sewing.

In about half an hour Joe Dagget came. She heard his heavy step on the walk, and rose and took off her pink-and-white apron. Under that was still another—white linen with a little cambric edging on the bottom; that was Louisa's company apron. She never wore it without her calico sewing apron over it unless she had a guest. She had barely folded the pink and white one with methodical haste and laid it in a table-drawer when the door opened and Joe Dagget entered.

He seemed to fill up the whole room. A little yellow canary that had been asleep in his green cage at the south window woke up and fluttered wildly, beating his little yellow wings against the wires. He always did so when Joe Dagget came into the room.

“Good-evening,” said Louisa. She extended her hand with a kind of solemn cordiality<sup>1</sup>.

“Good-evening, Louisa,” returned the man, in a loud voice.

She placed a chair for him, and they sat facing each other, with the table between them. He sat bolt-upright, toeing out his heavy feet squarely, glancing with a good-humored uneasiness around the room. She sat gently erect, folding her slender hands in her white-linen lap.

“Been a pleasant day,” remarked Dagget.

“Real pleasant,” Louisa assented, softly.

“Have you been haying?” she asked, after a little while.

“Yes, I've been haying all day, down in the ten-acre lot. Pretty hot work.”

“It must be.”

“Yes, it's pretty hot work in the sun.”

“Is your mother well to-day?”

“Yes, mother's pretty well.”

“I suppose Lily Dyer's with her now?”

Dagget colored. “Yes, she's with her,” he answered, slowly.

He was not very young, but there was a boyish look about his large face. Louisa was not quite as old as he, her face was fairer and smoother, but she gave people the impression of being older.

“I suppose she's a good deal of help to your mother,” she said, further.

“I guess she is; I don't know how mother'd get along without her,” said Dagget, with a sort of embarrassed warmth.

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1 cordiality: 热忱, 诚挚

“She looks like a real capable girl. She’s pretty-looking too,” remarked Louisa.

“Yes, she is pretty fair looking.”

Presently Dagget began fingering the books on the table. There was a square red autograph<sup>1</sup> album, and a Young Lady’s Gift-Book which had belonged to Louisa’s mother. He took them up one after the other and opened them; then laid them down again, the album on the Gift-Book.

Louisa kept eying them with mild uneasiness. Finally she rose and changed the position of the books, putting the album underneath. That was the way they had been arranged in the first place.

Dagget gave an awkward little laugh. “Now what difference did it make which book was on top?” said he.

Louisa looked at him with a deprecating<sup>2</sup> smile. “I always keep them that way,” murmured she.

“You do beat everything,” said Dagget, trying to laugh again. His large face was flushed.

He remained about an hour longer, then rose to take leave. Going out, he stumbled over a rug, and trying to recover himself, hit Louisa’s work-basket on the table, and knocked it on the floor.

He looked at Louisa, then at the rolling spools; he ducked himself awkwardly toward them, but she stopped him. “Never mind,” said she; “I’ll pick them up after you’re gone.”

She spoke with a mild stiffness. Either she was a little disturbed, or his nervousness affected her, and made her seem constrained in her effort to reassure him.

When Joe Dagget was outside he drew in the sweet evening air with a sigh, and felt much as an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear might after his exit from a china shop.

Louisa, on her part, felt much as the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have done after the exit of the bear.

She tied on the pink, then the green apron, picked up all the scattered treasures and replaced them in her work-basket, and straightened the rug. Then she set the lamp on the floor, and began sharply examining the carpet. She even rubbed her fingers over it, and looked at them.

“He’s tracked in a good deal of dust,” she murmured. “I thought he must have.”

Louisa got a dust-pan and brush, and swept Joe Dagget’s track carefully.

If he could have known it, it would have increased his perplexity and uneasiness, although it would not have disturbed his loyalty in the least. He came twice a week to see Louisa Ellis, and every time, sitting there in her delicately sweet room, he felt as if surrounded by a hedge of lace. He was afraid to stir lest he should put a clumsy foot or hand through the fairy web, and he had always the consciousness that Louisa was watching fearfully lest he should.

1 autograph: (名人的) 亲笔签名

2 deprecating: 反对的