

Chopin's Sensual Sea and Cable's Ravished Land: Sexes, Signs, and Gender Narrative

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New Orleans . . . a courtesan . . . to whose charm the young must respond. And all who leave her, seeking the virgin's unbrown, ungold hair and her blanched and icy breast where no lover has died, return to her when she smiles across her languid fan . . . New Orleans.
William Faulkner, "The Tourist" (*New Orleans Sketches*, 1925)

Not less a writer than William Faulkner has described New Orleans as a decadent woman, a "courtesan" reclining "gracefully upon a dull brocaded chaise-loungue" and "smiling across her languid fan." "All" who attend her are male lovers, jaded paramours who have learned the chilling ways of the virgin. The womanly sensuousness and dangerous seductiveness of New Orleans and of the South are themes present in the extended fiction of late nineteenth century writers Kate Chopin and George W. Cable. In their post-Reconstruction novels, the visiting lover becomes a powerful white male builder, who restores economic health to the land and whose marriage to a southern woman mends the national fabric. Their fictional world explores the disruption and restoration of social order. However, the reconstruction and maintenance of society are inevitably interconnected with the differences that social constructions are designed to contain. Disruptive elements, literally and figuratively, rail against social hierarchies and institutions based on white male privilege. The disturbing presence of blacks and others standing outside the privileged structure are associated with the subversive power of fluidity.

While the social constructions and disruptive elements are equally present in the writings of Chopin and Cable, Chopin's fiction, particularly *The Awakening*, explores the effects of the sensuous Creole culture (Faulkner's "courtesan") on Edna, a woman whose sensuousness becomes more fully expressed as she rejects marriage, destroys her social self, and, through that destruction, becomes a new being. Conversely, Cable's fiction, particularly *The Grandissimes*, explores the beneficial transformation of southern decadence through marriage and breeding. The bright and honorable outsider Joseph and the enlightened Creole Honore will marry the impoverished yet distinguished Nancanou women. Together, they embody the best of the old and new ways. Their procreation is the future of the New South. As

these brief examples suggest, we will discover that the social conventions inscribed in the Chopin and Cable novels and, by extension, in late nineteenth century southern culture, are based on an unexpressed but commonly subscribed cultural narrative.

A comparative analysis of land and water signs in Chopin's *At Fault* and *The Awakening* and in Cable's *The Grandissimes* and *John March, Southerner* reveals what French feminist critic Helene Cixous alludes to as "sexes," constructed meanings in which the social moments of gender are revealed. To create the gender narratives, we interpret the gender signs which exist in metaphorical patterns and which reflect the artistic perceptions of the authors about cultural values, traditions, and circumstances.

To approach such a reading, I offer the following summary of the generative land and water signs. The summary will be more fully developed in the ensuing analyses of the Chopin and Cable novels. Water in Chopin's novels has potent energy and agency. It erodes the certainties of conventional landed society; its fluidity challenges land's structured roles and expectations. Water is strong and seductive; it demands, beckons, and claims a woman in each Chopin novel as its own. Thus, Chopin's women are at risk, enchanted yet endangered by the power of water. Cable's imagistic narratives in *The Grandissimes* and *John March, Southerner* emphasize the reconstruction of the land. Cable's white men must be in control. They must dominate and transform the land and must subjugate the water's power for their own purposes. They successfully contain or ignore the primitive, violent force represented by water.

On one crucial level, the land and water imagery in Chopin and Cable shares similar meaning. For both Chopin and Cable, the geographical circumstance of southern land represents the potential for man's social statement and action. The two authors also mirror an imaginative definition of water as a force alien to the hierarchical structure of social privilege. The hard fact of land makes it available for settlement, development, and change. For Cable land is metaphorically other: that which is readily available for male domination and control.² The landed man is the actor who exerts the control and who constructs social reality. For Chopin, the land represents the entrapping results of such social control.

Unlike the established certainty of land, water is formless and fluid. As ocean it is vast and mysterious; as river it is powerful. It is emblematic of other: that which is indeterminate, which refuses societal definition. Chopin's water woman moves outside social convention. She must be totally separated from human relationship. She is the actor who rejects social claims. For Cable, the water represents chaos, the potentially disastrous results of a disordered society. Water is the enabling force in Chopin; man, the enabling force in Cable.

As the preceding analysis implies, the method I propose is informed not only by a comparison of a female and male author, but also by my own cultural circumstances. Thus, the gender narrative may well become the critic's own gender reading. That is to say, I am reading the Chopin and Cable gender narrative to read culturally inscribed woman. Thus, I am, to paraphrase Cixous, writing myself, discovering my own body: "I write woman, declares Cixous, woman must write woman. And man, man" (281). To develop the reading is to pursue a specific theoretical premise, and I first invite you to consider the theoretical basis for such an intertextual study. Returning to Chopin and Cable, we will consider the intersections and divergences in their artistic careers. Finally, we will phrase the gender narrative by analyzing the pervasive land and water signs in their most significant novels: Chopin's *At Fault* and *The Awakening* and Cable's *The Grandissimes* and *John March, Southerner*.

1. Inscribing the Text: A Note on the Method and its Stance

Criticism of American fiction has long drawn sustenance from interpretations based on image patterns. Using a pantheon of male and, more recently, women authors as touchstones for one another, the critic has gathered evidence of repeated images which illumine some aspect of American culture. In *Lay of the Land*, for example, Annette Kolodny develops what we might consider a gender narrative through her exploration of land as metaphor in American male writers. Through close readings of a range of authors, Kolodny demonstrates the contradictory male praise and appropriation of "land-as-mother" (ix). More recently, Patricia Yaeger has drawn from metaphors of "absent or displaced vocality" in her intriguing analysis of Chopin's *The Awakening*.³ Yaeger's interpretation underscores the reader's agency in articulating the gender narrative. Using Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of *le differend*, Yaeger, as attentive reader, speaks what Edna Pontellier cannot speak, but what Chopin metaphors express. Through her understanding of these metaphorical signs, Yaeger "rearticulate[s] . . . [Edna's] relations to her own desire and to the social reality that thwarts this desire" (204). Although Yaeger does not address her own role as speaking agent, she recreates Chopin's signifying system by locating and by speaking a narrative of image patterns.

Joanne Dobson does not focus on metaphorical expression, but does address the presence of gender subtexts in her discussion of mid-nineteenth century sentimental and domestic novels by women writers. She uncovers, what she terms, "the hidden hand of feminine discontent."⁴ Dobson posits the existence of a conventional narrative and a subtext which subverts the main text by revealing "masculine tyranny" and by indicating the "strong, repressed anger at enforced

feminine powerlessness" (227). Dobson's subtext speaks the repressed gender message. Rather than relegating the subtext to a subordinate position, I propose the gender narrative as a corollary to what Dobson views as the main or conventional text.⁵

The theoretical approaches we have just considered are dedicated, for the most part, to texts by a single gender. Using what she calls "radical comparativism," Myra Jehlen pairs writings by men and women.⁶ In Jehlen's analytical approach, the critic views the terrain of women's writing from an overview and assumes the vantage point of a received and accepted male genre. Jehlen, for example, compares women's writing within a particular tradition (the sentimental novel) by using the touchstone of distinguished male novels which form Jehlen's "parent tradition" (84). The positioning of the critic is crucial to her method. She envisions the critic outside and the woman writer as entering the imaginative male topography; the critic's view is an exterior one. The woman's novel moves beyond the borders and margins through the literary permission of the male tradition.

As Jehlen's comparative method suggests, cultural perceptions appear to be powerfully arranged around binary oppositions. The critic, figuratively, stands on a mountain top and surveys the textual domains. Rather than achieving the critical distance that Jehlen's approach implies, the comparative process I suggest includes the reader as the primary agent and meaning maker. To break down the binary perceptions, the reader must depart from the critical mountaintop and engage in active interior interplay.

As Jehlen's method implies critical distance, Jehlen's principle of authorial selection is based on the prominence of the male writer and the conventions of his literary tradition. Rather than observing the text from the vantage point of its creating father, I suggest that the woman writer serve as the passageway. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a perfect candidate for such an exploration. Anthologized in its entirety in the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985), *The Awakening* is among the pivotal works of fiction by American women and has come to be viewed as an American classic. Finally, the genesis of Jehlen's comparison is the authors sharing an established literary genre. I, too, agree on the importance of shared textual form, but propose that the basis for selection rest on additional articulated moments of similarity shared by the woman writer and a male author. These shared moments may be historical, racial, ethnic, or ideological. They may emerge from social status or from any number of cultural circumstances. The essential requirement is that the moment, the circumstance, be articulated by the critic. The cultural circumstances shared by Kate Chopin and by George W. Cable, her companion in this analysis, are explored in the following section.

Helen Taylor in her study of Chopin, Grace King, and Ruth McEnery Stuart demonstrates admirably the importance of locating "a writer and text as accurately as possible in his/her place, time, and ideological context."⁷ Chopin and Cable share the common circumstances of milieu, region, class, race, and genre. They are white, late nineteenth century southern writers; they come from reasonably advantaged backgrounds; and their artistic histories are remarkably similar. On the other hand, their fiction springs from differing concepts of the artist and of artistic production. Cable's fiction is an instrument of male political discourse; it endorses institutional solutions: marriage and economic cooperatives. Vehicles for cultural transformation, his substantial novels attest to the familial heritage and elite vanguard of that transformation. Cable's southern gentleman heals through discovering the rich ore of ancestry. Chopin came to view her fiction as sensory impression, and her fiction eventually reflects woman's reclamation of individuality and separation from institutional solutions. Social conventions and the womanly South are "at fault" in her first novel of the same title. She originally entitled her last and final novel *The Solitary Soul*. Isolation and solitariness are juxtaposed with the Creole community. The economy claimed by her heroine Edna is the ownership of non-socially constructed body.

The early stories of Chopin and Cable are firmly entrenched within the popular "local color" genre. Their depiction of the dialect, customs, and characters of the South were presented to an enthusiastic northern reading public. Both enjoyed remarkable popular success with their collections of tales: Chopin's *Bayou Folk* and Cable's *Old Creole Days*. By presenting accurate portraits of people and of the South in times of transition, both attempted to transcend the short form of regional fiction and to transform the stereotypes of the romanticized plantation myth with its patient and loyal blacks, its floating plantation women, and its noble cavalier men. They both selected New Orleans as the setting for what have come to be viewed their most important novels: *The Awakening* and *The Grandissimes*. While their contemporaries lamented their "failures," twentieth-century critics have reclaimed their work.

The two authors also bear similarity in the forms and substance of their fiction. Both introduce main plots which present the necessary industrialization of the agrarian South. Chopin introduces a saw mill owner and a thriving lumber business in *At Fault*. Cable develops the imagined geography of Suez and its rich mineral deposits in *John March, Southerner*. Their fiction contains the tension between privileged southern conventions and the circumstances of those to whom such privilege is unavailable. To explore this tension, each

author uses either a parallel text or subtext as sites of alternative narratives. Within these alternative spaces, the social conventions of white southern privilege are challenged. Although the alternative narratives are characterized by cruelty, violence, and inhumanity, they exist, for the most part, in a sugar-coated sentimental framework. In *At Fault* the land is deforested; men are murdered; a father is burned to death; a woman is drowned in a raging river. The novel concludes, however, in a marriage of outsider and insider, of the enlightened North and the gentle South. Like Chopin in *At Fault*, Cable disguises the cruelties and injustices he perceives in the South through his uses of melodrama and sentimentality. The subplots of his *Grandissimes* portray racial conflict and cruelty with stark realism.

Both authors viewed their art as a mission, but their missions were quite different. Cable's mission is expressly political; he reveals the problems of the South. In an 1883 essay and throughout much of his career, Cable considers writing an "earthquake." He insists on the restorative power of literature; it first destroys and then rebuilds. "Literature," proclaims Cable, "is almost a religion. It must be free . . . to dissolve and sublimate and re-crystallize all that is best of old or new, to rectify thoughts, morals, manners, society, even though it shake the established order."⁸ As the title of her first novel *At Fault* suggests, Chopin, too, wishes to shake up the norm, to reveal the foolishness of social conventions. While Cable is committed to art as an instrument of social change, Chopin became committed to an art of spontaneous impression. Her reading of Guy de Maupassant points the way. Stirred by his stories, Chopin exclaims: "Here was a man who escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who, in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw. When a man does this, he gives us the best he can; something valuable, for it is genuine and spontaneous. He gives us his impressions."⁹ Chopin's last novel represents her effort to remove the "stage trapping" of sentimental melodrama, conventional social tensions, and artifice. *The Awakening* is a series of interrelated sensory impressions which lead to the final sensory expression, Edna's swimming on and on in the vast expanse of the sea.

While both authors stayed within the quaint realm of reminiscent charm, subordinating or disguising elements of social criticism, they were successful in the arena of popular fiction. Chopin's *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie* received extensive contemporary praise and *At Fault* was reasonably well received. When she chose to "strip the veil" of "ethical conventions and standards" in *The Awakening*, the short novel was denounced (6). Her hometown newspaper, *The St. Louis Republic*, proclaimed it "too strong drink for moral babes, and should be labeled 'poison!'"¹⁰ Following the mid-point of this century, male critics

reclaimed *The Awakening* and enthusiastically compared Chopin to D. H. Lawrence, Flaubert, and Hawthorne.¹² With the emergence of interest in what Jules Chametzky terms "Edna and the Woman Question"¹³ and of women-centered scholarship, *The Awakening* has become the major work by a woman author in the canon of American literature. Elaine Showalter, for example, views *The Awakening* as "a revolutionary book . . . generally recognized today as the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman."¹⁴

As Cable became increasingly persistent in his public comments on the need for the South to recognize its shortcomings and to provide equality for the Negro, he was criticized more and more strongly by the southern press. Later critics, including Jay B. Hubbell, also level the charge of inflated partisan feeling against Cable, particularly in *John March, Southerner*.¹⁵ In contrast, such critics as Richard M. Weaver, Newton Arvin, Arlin Turner, Jay Martin, Philip Butcher, and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., find that Cable's presentations of social and political situations, particularly in *The Grandissimes*, give his work lasting significance. Rubin insists, "What William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, and other writers of the twentieth-century South made into literary art of national and even international importance, George Washington Cable, however imperfectly, first sketched."¹⁶ We will begin our consideration with Cable's fiction and then turn to Chopin.

3. Of Buckets, Floods, and the Swanee:

The Grandissimes and *John March, Southerner*

The Grandissimes (1879) and *John March, Southerner* (1894) span the nineteenth-century history of the South. *The Grandissimes* opens in 1803. Napoleon has just ceded Louisiana to the United States. The old Creole ways will be challenged by the new American settlers. The first few chapters of the novel chronicle the ancestral heritage of the "best blood" families and the arrival of the outsider American, Joseph Frowenfeld.¹⁷ In *John March, Southerner* (1894), the novel Cable intended to be his greatest, Cable turns to his contemporary South.¹⁸ The historical distance in *The Grandissimes* is replaced in *John March* by the period following the Reconstruction when the South is fighting to reassert its identity socially, economically, and politically. As an immigrant and an American, the German-born Frowenfeld is Cable's representative of reason. Frowenfeld progresses from uninformed idealism to enlightened realism as he becomes increasingly acculturated. Frowenfeld, the outsider turned Creole, gives way, in Cable's later novel, to John March, the ideal southerner. Offered the opportunity to return to the North, John replies vehemently that his place is in the South. "You know this Suez soil isn't something I can

shake off in my shoes . . . I'm a part of it! . . . My place is here!"¹⁹ Frowenfeld embraces and is empowered by Creole aristocracy; John March is southern aristocracy. The "hope of Suez," March joins the noble ideals of a romantic past to the concrete changes needed for a new South. March is, as the sign outside his door proclaims, "John March—Gentleman" (207).

Both Cable heroes are catalysts for social and economic change. Frowenfeld is the purveyor of right-thinking for a decadent South. As the "ocean weary" Frowenfeld family sails through the swamp, Joseph's father is reminded of that "early time when the evenings and mornings were the first days of the half-built world" (9). The completion of this "half-built" world is crucial to Cable's fictional program for southern reconstruction.

The progress of John March, like the novel which bears his name, is from blindness to revealed truth, from racial intolerance to reconciliation, and from a defunct plantation system to an industrial economy that includes public as well as private interests. On the opening page of the novel, we are introduced to Suez, a port city, "in the State of Dixie . . . in the very heart of what was once the 'Southern Confederacy'" (1). Suez becomes Cable's fictional refinery for transforming the ore of the old South into a new metal: a changed South. March, figuratively and literally, is the developer who "marches" forward.

To accomplish change, these male builders must subdue the dangerous elements of society. The metaphoric containment, building, and construction throughout Cable's novels are intimately connected with the pervading dark signs of water as primeval and presence. As we engage in the following detailed discussions of each novel, we will encounter the danger inherent in uncontained fluidity. We will also discover Cable's resolution of cultural tensions through the services of white women. The themes of bondage and freedom, of possession and dispossession, and of forgiveness and vengeance are merged in the reconciliation of the main plots' white aristocratic marriages.

As its title implies, *The Grandissimes* is filled with the myriad names and the complex linkages that form the Grandissime familial and social heritage. Joseph complains to Charlie Keene, a physician who nurses him through the yellow fever which kills the rest of the Frowenfeld family, "I cannot distinguish between them—I can scarcely count them." Keene responds, "Take them in the mass—as you would shrimps" (29).

The reader accompanies Joseph as he struggles to read "this newly found book, *The Community of New Orleans*" (103). The entwined events, endless names, and historical legends reflect the density and power of the ancestral structure. At the center of the structure are the family's aging patriarch, Agricola, and its young savior,

appropriately named Honore. Agricola, with his emphatic harumph, believes fiercely in a plantation system undergirded by slavery and supported by white privilege. "H-my friend," says Agricola to Joseph, "when we say, 'we people,' we always mean we white people" (59). On his deathbed Agricola insists to Joseph, "Society has pyramids to build which make menials a necessity, and Nature furnishes the menials all in dark uniform. . . . You must remember—those people are—are not—white people" (327). Agricola's dying words are "Louisian-a-for-ever" (328). Honore, on the other hand, understands the devastating "shadow of the Ethiopian" (156). He has a dark counterpart, Honore, f.m.c., a freed man of color and his elder brother.

The shadows cast are not cast by the Ethiopians as Honore believes. The shadows are cast by Agricola's "pyramids," emblems of the white man's social constructions. The dark spaces and their inhabitants are a necessary corollary to white cultural privilege. Thus, solid land, mercantile establishments, even the decaying Grandissime mansion are sites of social safety. The "half lands" Joseph sees as he first sails toward New Orleans, the swamps and the surrounding water, are the spaces in which the dark and dispossessed others move. "A land hung in mourning, darkened by gigantic cypresses, submerged, a land of reptiles, silence, shadow, decay" (9).

The central subversive figure in these swamp spaces is the enslaved African prince Bras-Coupe. The Bras-Coupe story challenges the rational construction of the main plot. Anger, dissolution, despair, and death surge from the Bras-Coupe ancestry. The white Honore explains to Joseph the embedded allegiance to southern place and family: "a Louisianian—is a Louisianian; touch him not; when you touch him you touch all Louisian! So with us Grandissimes; we are legion, but we are one" (222). To be one in the white South, even in Cable's fiction written to promote racial justice, is to repress Bras-Coupe, his figurative descendants, and all things which threaten hierarchical privilege.

Captured in Africa and purchased by Agricola, the towering Jafoff chieftain takes the name Bras-Coupe, which means "the Arm Cut Off" (171). His name, suggests Cable, reflects the "truth that all Slavery is maiming" (171). His name also reflects his impotence as a black male in a white world. This Voodoo practitioner can produce a hurricane. He places and lifts a curse on his master's household, but on his wedding day he drinks alcohol for the first time, strikes his master in a drunken rage, and becomes a fugitive.

He escapes and lives a season in the "lifeless bayou" with its "bottomless ooze" and "turtles a century old" (181). Safe in the swamp, the fugitive slave stands "on a slight rise of ground hardly sixty feet in circumference and lifted scarce above the water in the inmost depths of the swamps" (181). When Bras-Coupe leaves the marginal swamp land, he loses his separate identity. Disguised, he dances drunkenly in

Congo Square and is recognized, lassoed, lashed, and brutally maimed; he dies from his wounds.

His beloved and intended wife is Palmyre Philosophe. Palmyre represents the mysterious, dangerous, violent other; she is a "barbaric beauty . . . a femininity without humanity . . . a creature that one would want to find chained" (71). She agrees to marriage with Bras-Coupe because she sees in the giant hero an instrument of vengeance. His drunken escape dashes those hopes.

Not surprisingly she and Agricola despise one another, but her life is inextricably linked with the Grandissimes. She secretly loves the white Honore, and the black Honore loves her. For Joseph, Palmyre is the seduction of darkness, the sexual shame, the "final unanswered white man's accuser" (134). Like the William Faulkner epigraph for this essay, Palmyre is an emblem of New Orleans and of its alluring, disturbingly dark sensuousness. Frowenfeld almost loses his reputation through two innocent yet sensual encounters with Palmyre. Stumbling from her home, Joseph remembers Palmyre reclining on her couch "among her pillows, in the act of making that uneasy movement of her fingers upon the collar button of her robe, which women make when they are uncertain about the perfection of their dishabille, and giving her inaudible adieu with the majesty of an empress" (136). Although Frowenfeld is a man of reason, an apothecary and a meteorologist, his white maleness, societal remedies and attempts to measure and record the human weather are challenged by the magic, angry secrets, and intense primitive passion of Palmyre and of New Orleans.

Palmyre is a "mutineer . . . with nothing to lose" (184). Her disciple Clemence is water itself (184). "To Clemence, we are told, the order of society was nothing. No upheaval could reach to the depth to which she was sunk" (251). Selling her rice cakes and singing her deceptive songs, she dances and traverses through the Spanish, American, and Creole segments of New Orleans. She manipulates the black stereotypes that whites hold. She explains, "White folks" need to "b'lieb we happy . . . fo dey own cyumfut" (250-51). In conspiracy with Palmyre, she terrorizes Agricola and is eventually captured in the jaws of steel trap. She is carrying a table-knife ground to a point and "a small black coffin . . . with the image in myrtle-wax . . . of a negro's bloody arm cut off near the shoulder—a Bras-Coupe—with a dirk grasped in its hand" (311). Unlike her mistress Palmyre, Clemence is unredeemed in Cables novel. She is not beautiful and is not in love with a white man. In a concluding chapter entitled Voodoo Cured, she is allowed to escape and then is shot in the back by Grandissime vigilantes.

The other victims of the white man's social construction are Honore, f.m.c., the gentle Aurora, and Clotilde DeGraption Nancanou. The Grandissimes and De Grapions are rivals, and the Nancanou women have been dispossessed of their lands by the Grandissimes. The black

Honore was given the bulk of his white father's fortune, but is estranged from his family and his younger white brother. As the sentimental main plot moves toward reconciliation, the black Honore is acknowledged by his white brother; they enter into business as "The Grandissime Brothers." However, white generosity cannot erase the white values on which its society is constructed. The black Honore is rejected bitterly by Agricola, who is horrified at the brotherly union, and he is unable to win Palmyre, who is steadfast in her love for his white brother. He has no place in a white society, and the white society has no way, however generous, of providing one.

Late in the novel, the same ship which had carried the Frowenfeld family into New Orleans carries the black Honore and Palmyre to Europe. They meet and talk together in Bordeaux for several weeks, but the black Honore is unsuccessful in pleading his case. Days later, a "haggard" Honore hands Palmyre what appears to be his will, kisses her hand, and leaves. His drowned body is found the next day "at the water's edge" (331).

The Nancanou women are white and of the land. They can participate in the white mans program because as wives and mothers they are essential to its social forms. The mother is an early follower of Palmyre and seeks her magic herbs and charms, but she and her daughter happily succumb to the romantic "charms" of Joseph and the white Honore.¹⁹

The destructive power of water and the essence of white male agency are captured in two early exchanges between the white Honore and Frowenfeld. The black Honore's suicide is foreshadowed not long after Josephs New Orleans arrival. The distraught Honore, f.m.c., attempts to jump from a flatboat into the Mississippi. The white Honore cautions Joseph who has rushed to the rescue, "do not follow him into the water . . . it is certain death; no power of man could keep you from going under it" (155). The levee contains the swift river just as social conventions shape and forestall fluid difference. The black Honore's resting place, finally, is water.

The other exchange between the white Honore and Joseph occurs as Honore insists his new friend must and will become acclimated to Creole customs. Honore exclaims: "My-de'-seh, the water must expect to take the shape of the bucket; eh?" Joseph responds, "One need not be water!" (37). Joseph, most certainly, is not water. While Cable firmly intended his novel to address the racial injustices of the South, his orphaned hero finds approbation, safety, and success in the bucket of Creole culture.

The bigoted patriarch of the Grandissime clan is dead. Honore's black brother has committed suicide. Clemence has been murdered by Creole vigilantes, but the narrator describes the gentle calm of New Orleans as the novel concludes. The masculine architecture is to be

decorated by Joseph's and Honore's marriage to the mother and daughter Nancanou. The marriage returns to the Nancanou the ancestral land taken from them by the Grandissimes. The Nancanou women, who cannot survive alone, are meant for breeding and for marriage. Their good blood, when mixed with Frowenfeld's and Honores, will be the genesis of familial foundations for a new South.

In the final chapter "All Right," the dangerous Mississippi has become a peaceful river. The novel ends with "dreamy quietude" (332). The land and its society are under control. The water is safely contained in the bucket.

The nobility of Bras-Coupe and the voluptuous magic of Palmyre Philosophie are replaced in John March by the sly, unscrupulous, and powerful black Cornelius Leggett and his silly love Daphne Jane. The pride and complexity of Agricola Fusilier becomes the desire for gain and prestige of Major Garnet. Garnet is first portrayed as a man deeply concerned over the careening social structure, but is eventually unmasked as a cowardly, lecherous, and acquisitive villain. Outsider Joseph becomes insider John.

Like *The Grandissimes*, *John March* has two landscapes. The first is the water site of damaged past. As the novel opens, Cable briefly mentions the drying stream of the "ravished," "bruised and torn" Turkey Creek battleground (11). The other site is the "Kingdom of Romance" (4). In this kingdom, the metaphorical healing of the land occurs in two ways: through the idealized union of John March and his beloved, and through the completion of the Great South railroad which will connect Suez to the industrial North.

The interplay of these metaphorical settings begins the novel. John's city Suez is located at the head of Turkey Creek, whose meager waters flow through a Confederate battlefield. Distinguished Judge March gazes on the battlefield and explains to his eight-year-old son John, "Ah, the kingdom of romance is at hand. It's always at hand when it's within us. I'll be glad when you can understand that, son" (4-5). A beautiful brown horse prancing skittishly near the battlefield can "smell" the recent "fighting"; the town's stores have been sacked and burned (12). But for the Judge, his son, and conceivably for Cable's northern readers, the romance of the South submerges the Civil War horrors. The diminutive stream reflects the invisible past of the Turkey Creek warrior dead.

As the novel progresses, John and Major Garnet ponder the power of water as the drying stream of the Confederate past becomes the contemporary emancipatory flood of blacks and of change. Much like David Hosmer in Chopin's *At Fault*, John March imagines the positive benefits of the raging water; it destroys the old southern economy and makes way for the new. "All the way down the Swane River, in spite of big levees of prevention and draining wheels of antiquated cure how

invincibly were the waters of a new order sweeping in upon the 'old plantation'" (235). For Major Garnet, like his Cable fictional predecessor Agricola, the flood threatens the aristocratic white culture: "Yea, on this deluge the whole Southern social world, with its two distinct divisions—the shining upper—the dark nether—was reeling and careening, threatening, each moment to turn once and forever wrong side up, a hope forsaken wreck. To avert this, to hold society on its keel, must be the first and constant duty of whoever saw, as he did, the fearful peril!" (40). While Garnet's motives are deplorable and March's are praiseworthy, both men harness water power and ravish the land to serve their versions of New South economy.

Through political control and demagoguery, Garnet attempts to save his figurative ship of society from the flooding forces of disorder. Cornelius Leggett, a conniving rascal, is a companion in Garnet's land acquisition schemes, but an adversary to Garnet's efforts to disenfranchise blacks.²⁰ Leggett acknowledges his personal corruption, but insists that his politics, which he describes "as pyro as the crystal fountain," will save him (95). Leggett understands Garnet's political dissembling; he knows Garnet's ship of State will be floated and filled at the expense of blacks. "Thass the diffunce twixt me and Gyarnitt. . . . Nobody reputes him to steal, and I don't say he do . . . but his politics—his politics, seh, they does the stealin'! An which it's the low-downdest kind o' stealin, for it's stealin' furn niggers. But thass the diff-ence; niggers steals with they claws, white men with they laws. The claws steals by the pound; the laws steal by the boatload!" (95).

Garnet and Leggett are crucial to March's plan to rebuild the three-county area surrounding Suez. They marshal political support and funds to develop the Widewood mineral properties and to channel the water for industrial gain. Garnet explains to the northerner Henry Fair, "There's enough wealth in Widewood alone to make Suez a Pittsburgh, and water power enough to make her a Minneapolis, and we're going to make her both, sir!" (19). An incognito John March listens with pride as a fellow railway passenger speaks glowingly of the new mines: "Lovers Leap coal mine . . . Bridal Veil Coal Mine . . . Sleeping Giant iron mine. . . Devil's Garden coke furnaces! They're putting up smelting works right, opposite the steamboat landing" (459).

Garnet's early interest in the Widewood mineral rights foreshadows the central narrative action: John March's commitment to invigorate the Suez economy through the use of the land. The March family for at least three generations has held in trust 160,000 acres of Widewood. March's grandfather had passed the land to his son with the admonition that it be filled with happy settlers. March metaphorically countenances the destruction of this beautiful and sprawling wide wood. At the suggestion of the well-intentioned Henry Fair and with the assistance of Leggett, March organizes the privately and legislatively funded Three Counties

Land and Improvement Company to mine the counties' minerals and to divide the area into parcels.

The dark tragedies lurking in the subplots of *The Grandissimes* are absent from *John March*, but the sentimental conclusion is the same. Garnet's perfidy is discovered; Leggett absconds; and March is betrothed to Garnet's daughter, Barbara. March's innocence and a year's absence in Europe has resulted in his being defrauded of the majority of the Widewood land, but Cable rewards his hero with the best 60 acres, the lovely Rosemont estate. Barbara discovers her father's and Leggett's awareness of a title error that makes Rosemont legal March land. As the novel closes, John and Barbara embrace.

The novel reveals and destroys the rottenness within Garnet and, by extension, within the pre-Civil War South. The unworthy are defeated; the worthy triumph. New families and new social constructions are beginning. John and Barbara's marriage herald the reconciliation of the Garnet and March family and the coming of the New South; Henry Fair's marriage to Barbara's close friend Fanny reflects the reconciliation of North and South.

The new Great South railroad is a symbol of these new connections. It will link Suez to North and West, and it will irrevocably alter the land. As the final Golden Spike is hammered, "guns flash . . . the earth shakes . . . and the true Southerners joyously sing 'Way Down upon the Swanee River'" (144). The trickling water of Turkey Creek glides "alive with sunlight, into that true Swanee River, not of the maps, but which flows forever" in song (231). How much more contained can water be?

4. Flawed Land and Water Self: At Fault and The Awakening

"But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumults!" (893). Chopin's authorial voice speaks these prophetic words in the opening chapters of *The Awakening*. They are immediately followed by the beckoning murmur of the sea. Like Cable's *Grandissimes* and *John March*, Chopin's novels move from a familial structure and resolution to the actions of a sensitive individual. John March discovers the rich deposits of heritage. Edna discovers her socially separate and fluid self. Chopin's emerging emphasis is not on economic or familial salvation, but on the causes, the agony, and the glory of perished social self which moves through memory outside marriage and history.

Chopin's first novel, *At Fault* (1888), contains the murky bayou, the dangerous river, and a financially troubled plantation. It presents the "saw mill" solution as salvation to the economic problems of the South, and the transformation of conventional morality as a solution to human

relationships. On a superficial level *At Fault* is a sentimental love story presenting the reconciliation of conventions and cultures. On another level, the novel addresses the sensitive subjects of divorce, racial prejudice, substance abuse, and sensuality; it reveals the cruelty and violence which undergird and make "civilized behavior" possible (32).

The beautiful plantation mistress Therese, recently widowed, falls in love with David Hosmer, a divorced Westerner who has come to build a saw mill and who, with her permission, deforests her land "rich in its exhaustless powers of reproduction" (742). As she is captivated by her sensuous response to David, so she is captivated by the almost phallic vision of the logs taken from the water. With David behind her, she stands "quite on the edge of the open platform that overthrowing the dam." She watches with "fascinated delight the great logs hauled dripping from the water, following each till it had changed to the clean symmetry of sawed planks. The unending work made her giddy" (747). Metaphorically, she easily rejects the need to maintain the integrity of the land and embraces the male potency of David and his saw mill. The saw mill fueled by water power is an emblem of reconstruction and David is its operator.

Therese is a woman of the land. Although charming, she controls her plantation and its inhabitants. Her metaphorical vantage point is one of overview; her perspective, disengaged. She loves "to walk the length of the wide verandas, armed with her field-glass, and to view her surrounding possessions with comfortable satisfaction" (742). Therese represents what Chopin considers wrong-headed social conventions. A Catholic, Therese (true to her last name: Lafirme) believes divorce to be fundamentally wrong. Her influence is inescapable; she enforces her rigorous social code by convincing David to remarry his former wife, Fanny.

Mellicent, David's sister, is also enchanted by a man who negotiates the water: Therese's nephew, the sensuous, flamboyant, and hot headed Creole, Gregoire Santien. Gregoire, however, does not chain the water to his purposes as does David; he glides over it in his cultural pirogue. Gregoire serves as an emblem of the different, violent, decadent South, and it is that South which calls to Mellicent. As Gregoire paddles Mellicent through the dusky bayou to the open waters of a lake, Mellicent fancies herself "an Indian maiden of the far past, fleeing and seeking with her dusky lover some wild and solitary retreat . . . which offered them no seeming foothold save such as they would hew themselves with axe or tomahawk" (750). Mellicent's subsequent rejection of Gregoire is her rejection of sensuality and difference.

She, like her brother, is an agent of rationale construction. The enlightened outsider controls the lives of the indigenous southerners. The Creoles and blacks are for Mellicent's adornment: Gregoire whose love she rejects; the black servant girl whom she demeans; and Morio, whose feathered fans she buys. While David brings industrial

capacity to the plantation and, eventually, becomes a part of the new society, Mellicent, as woman, is an unsettled traveler. She can acquire oddities such as Gregoire, but she has no lasting place. At the conclusion of the novel, we learn she is to take "a magnificent trip through the West" to collect specimens (875).

Gregoire is banished to the turbulent edges of the narrative. He is passionate and violent. He has no business sense; in fact, he is considered lazy. But he has wood and water sense. He protects the saw mill by killing Jocint who has set it on fire. He moves freely among the blacks in the novel and is friendly and understanding toward Fanny. He, like Cable's Bras-Coupe, is of the border land. He is competent in the half-land of the bayou and moves easily among those who, like him, live at its edges. He is emasculated by Mellicent and polite society. He contains the emotional energy represented by water. When the energy is unleashed, he is destructive.

David is the quintessential construction worker; he is the agent of reconstruction in the novel. He is involved, literally and figuratively, in "severing old ties" as the concluding chapter title of Part One suggests (787). In a lengthy and key philosophical conversation, David presents and defends the ideas of his friend Homeyer. His scholarly opponent in the debate, insists Homeyer "would deprive a clinging humanity of the supports about which she twines herself, and leave her helpless and sprawling upon the earth" (792). In response, David outlines Homeyer's belief "in an innate reserve force of accommodations. What we commonly call laws in nature, he styles accidents—in society, only arbitrary methods of expediency, which, when they outlive their usefulness to an advancing and exacting civilization, should be set aside. He is a little impatient to always wait for the inevitable natural adjustment" (793). As saw mill and eventual plantation owner, David participates in the "lopping off . . . of old traditions" as he conscientiously destroys the land and, indirectly, his wife (793).

Chopin arranges "inevitable natural adjustment" through the providential deaths of Gregoire and Fanny. Gregoire is killed in a Texas gunfight caused by his being called "Frenchy." Fanny, like Gregoire, falls prey to her socially maladaptive behavior. His is a passionate nature and quick temper.²¹ Hers is an innate powerlessness. Both are killed to advance southern social reconstruction. The flawed woman, the flawed Creole South, the flawed customs, and the flawed land must be destroyed to permit the southern economy to survive.

Therese's Catholic and outdated convictions are subsumed by David's logic. Her old conventions are "cut" away just as the land is deforested, but Therese—much like Adele Ratignolle and the "mother-women" of *The Awakening*—is safe within male structures. For Fanny, a woman outsider, the earth boundaries fail. Her departure from St.

Louis, her husband's frustrated love for Therese, and her self-abuse destroy "the supports about which she twines herself." She is the metaphorical victim imagined in David's earlier debate. She is left "helpless and sprawling upon the earth." Her death anticipates the plight of Chopin's next heroine Edna. The land, literally and symbolically, is "at fault." Fanny, standing in the doorway of a riverside cabin, plunges into the river. David, leaping into the water to rescue Fanny, moves between "detached pieces of timber from the ruined house" and, in horror, glimpses "something floating softly on the water: a woman's dress" (868). The water has eaten away the land. Fanny is swept to her death, her protective garment torn from her by the raging river.

Chopin's outsider and insider, David and Gregoire, acquiesce to their beloved women and to the power of love, as do Cables Joseph and Honore. Gregoire is doomed, as is the old South. His rash departure and subsequent actions are precipitated by Melicent's rejection. David Hosmer is singularly successful in winning a huge lumber contract and Therese's hand in marriage. Therese appears to be a shrewd and effective business woman, but she countenances the destruction of her own land.²² Melicent's latent sensuality suggests her as a distant sister of Edna in *The Awakening*, but Melicent remains a naive and irresponsible wanderer across land surfaces. Chopin's Therese and Melicent are trapped in outmoded behavior resulting from a flawed vision of marriage, of social conventions, and of human relationships.

Therese's field-glasses and Melicent's new eyeglasses may help them view the land and social structures more closely, but the women do not attempt to alter either the land or the structures. They conform to socially defined shapes. Fanny, of course, is absent from the novels to conclusion; she has been swept to her death. Chopin reveals the flaw in the social construction of reality, but provides no solution.

Water has vigorous power in *At Fault*. The river becomes the symbolic channel through which the violent actions to the land and to the victim woman occur. It carries the logs to the saw mill and, thus, is a partner in the rebuilding of the economy through the destruction of the land. The river causes Fanny's death and brings about the symbolic joining of old southern ways and new northern ideas through the marriage of Therese and David.

For Cable, man is the agent of change; he has the power to destroy and to build. For Chopin, the water of emotional self is the enabling agency of change, and in *At Fault* the water destroys. Fanny's fictional sister is Edna.

Per Seyersted, the major editor of Chopin materials, uses a delightfully fortunate image for Chopin's accomplishment in *The Awakening*. Not only is Chopin the first woman to make passion a subject, declares Seyersted, but she also "undertook to give the

unsparing truth about a woman's submerged life."²³ Indeed, *The Awakening* is literally about a woman's submerged life, about her relationship to water and fluidity. The beckoning, pervasive, "ceaseless" sea voice is loving, "inviting the soul . . . to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (893). The sea voice fills the novel and seduces Chopin's heroine, Edna.

The Awakening's rhythmic imagery and sensuous descriptions accompany the death of socially constructed woman and the emergence of a soul symbolically connected to fluidity, infinity, and formlessness. We are told that Edna understands the duality of life, "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (893). Edna does more than understand and question, however. She learns to swim. Metaphorically, she is learning to move beyond social boundaries.

The novel's settings suggest the interplay of solidity and fluidity.²⁴ The novel opens and closes on Grande Isle. Grande Isle provides Edna's first intimate experience with the monied, aristocratic, and extended family structure of Creole society. The "bridges" that connect the Grande Isle cottages to one another reflect the understood games, behaviors, and social codes that structure Creole society (881). These structures also include flirtations, dalliances, "accouchements" (889).

Grande Isle and Cheniere Caminada, another summer setting, are also half-lands, islands defined, on the one hand, by male constructions and, on the other, by the destructive power of the sea. Although the events in the novel occur earlier, the contemporary reader might know that Grande Isle was actually devastated by the hurricane of 1893 and Cheniere Caminada was destroyed. The historical context reminds us of the defining fluidity and of the vulnerability of social bulwarks.

The sea whose voice and presence pervades the novel consistently beckons to Edna. Her education as swimmer mirrors her awakening as independent being. As she grows individually, she begins to move slowly away from the safe foundation of family. She has been, after all, only a half-hearted mother and wife. Edna's confusion about her womanly roles is reflected in her uncertainty about water. She struggles to conquer her unreasonable fear and to move beyond her husband and the land he so firmly represents. One summer night, her husband Leonce stands watching on the shore as Edna goes swimming. Suddenly alone, Edna feels like "the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (908). She wants to swim far out "where no woman had swum before . . . she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (908). At first she is exhilarated, then terrified. Afterwards, the only person she tells of her fear is her husband: "I thought I should have perished out there alone." He responds, "You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you" (909). As Edna's sensual growth continues, she rejects the

protection of the male hand and the male view. She stomps on her wedding ring, smashes a vase, and abandons her "Tuesdays at home" (939). With the belated and unasked-for permission of her husband, she rents a small cottage, a "pigeon-house," which serves as a more pleasant, but no less domesticated cage (977).

The New Orleans cottage, literally and figuratively, is part of the Creole neighborhood. Not only is it juxtaposed with the elegant Pontellier Esplanade home from which Edna is moving, it is also quite different from Cheniere Caminada, the island to which Edna and Robert travel during the summer on Grande Isle. Cheniere Caminada is an island of romance, dreams, and legends. It is an extension of Edna's romantic fantasy in which young Robert Lebrun is a willing player.

Prior to their trip, Robert and Edna stand before a moonlit sea and Robert evokes the "Gulf spirit" rising from the sea to claim his beloved (910). When she goes with Robert to Cheniere Caminada, Edna feels her loosened "chains . . . snapped . . . when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose" (915). Edna hears the discussion of a risqué novel on Grande Isle; on Cheniere Caminada, she hears the "gathering legends of the Baratarians and the sea . . . the whispering voices of dead men and the click of muffled gold" (920). The island is the province of pirates, adventurers, and romantic rebels who challenge authority and take what they need.

Robert, it turns out, is only a fantasy.

Her romantic reverie is forcefully broken later when Robert abruptly departs for Mexico. Associating her loss of him with the loss of her childhood dreams, she acknowledges Robert's withdrawal as torture and the denial of "that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded" (927).

Edna's short voyage with Robert is transformed in the fantasy she creates at the dinner party given for her father. She tells a tale reminiscent of Melicent's in *At Fault*. Edna's tale is "of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back" (953). She is inventing her own romantic fiction, but Robert's unannounced return and final departure disabuse Edna of her dream. Unwilling to transgress social convention, he leaves a farewell message at her small cottage.

Edna's ability to construct fantasy is closely associated with her growing assertiveness. She develops her painting as a possible avenue for economic self-sufficiency. She, not Alcee Arabin, becomes the active partner in their liaison. Her forthrightness with Robert about her right to live an unconventional life reflects her increasing expression of unwomanly traits. Her excursion into the male role is curtailed abruptly when she encounters herself as mother and as woman. Standing at Madame Ratignolle's anguished, petulant side during childbirth, Edna is horrified at the "scene of torture" (994).

Ratignolle's childbearing is combined with Edna's own "ecstasy of pain" and with "an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being" (994). Witnessing the agonizing moment of birth, Edna is jolted awake from the illusory "stupor" which "had deadened sensation" in her own childbearing (994). She exclaims to Doctor Mandalet, "I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal of course when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others. . . . I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (996). The protection of those "little lives" is what deters Edna from becoming, finally, independent and from pursuing what others would view as a dissolute life. The scene of creation, however horrible, is an affirmation of life. Among the "little lives" which Edna wishes to avoid destroying is her own, and that is her final awakening.

An awakened Edna has limited options. She can destroy others to achieve her own ends, or she can conform by destroying her awakened self. While she might be able to construct a life in which she, like the artist Mademoiselle Reisz, defies the "plain of tradition and prejudice," she cannot destroy her illusions (966). She cannot model herself on the asexual artist, Mademoiselle Reisz, who, interestingly, avoids the water (929).

Her determination to consider the children "had driven into her soul like a death wound" (997). A death wound it is. She cannot exist in the social patterns she finds devoid of meaning. She cannot ignore her new consciousness. She must reject paternal domination just as she banished the "spirit of gloom" during the Kentucky summer day of her childhood (896). That long ago day, she wandered in the Kentucky grass. "I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it" (896).

The persistent voice of the sea calling Edna throughout the novel is first heard as a "mournful lullaby" (886). During her family's summer sojourn, she responds to the sea's "sonorous murmur" and its "loving but imperative entreaty" (p. 892). She learns to swim into fantasy under the tutelage of Robert, but her romantic dream cannot mask the reality of her own subsistence. The final section of the novel presents Edna's erotically and emotionally released new being.

Edna stands alone as three images of her socially constructed and freed selves merge. Edna as wife and mother. Edna as independent male. Edna as the beloved of the sea. Her domestic self is associated with the broken-winged bird beating "the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (999). She is most definitively not among the Creole mother-women, who like Adele Ratignolle, extend "protecting wings when any harm . . . threatened their precious brood" (888). She is entrapped, however, by that social responsibility (888). In contrast to artistic Mademoiselle

Reisz's strong-limbed bird, she is a "weaking" (966). She will "give up the unessential," but she will never "sacrifice herself for her children" (999).

Her male self and her related independence are connected in this closing passage to the vision evoked by an earlier Mademoiselle Reisz musical piece. Edna entitles the piece "Solitude," and she imagines "the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging in flight away from him" (906). She is resigned to her limited independence as she is aware of her strong sensuality. Open sexual assertiveness is denied her as a married woman. Unmarried, young, and wealthy, Robert is free to travel, just as his brother Victor is free to pursue an unconventional lifestyle on Grande Isle. Alcee can fund and form his endless affairs; he remains a popular companion. Edna cannot become the perpetual seducer. Her primary subsistence is based on her husband's income, and her husband whom everyone believes is "the best husband in the world" views her as "a valuable piece of property" (882).

Finally, she is for Robert and for other admiring men the voluptuous, love goddess whom Victor describes at her 29th birthday party as "Venus rising from the foam" (997). She is as much a part of their fantasies as they have been a part of hers. "To-day it is Arobin," Edna thinks. "To-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me" (999). She cares little for her impact on Leonce, but her children? She has only one choice and that is to become her own beloved, to merge in her own fluidity. Chopin reverses the love goddess action and commits her heroine to the tender embrace of the sea.²⁶

The raging river in *At Fault* tips Fanny's garment from her drowned body, but Edna casts her unpleasant, pricking garments aside and for the first time in her life stands naked in the open air. She feels like some "new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world it had never known" (1000). No horrible drowning, no ignored deaths exist in Chopin's final novel. Edna, a sensitive, isolated woman, joyously delivers herself to the ocean's baptism where land's heritage and family, city and society cannot touch her. In that delivery, Edna no longer exists. Socially constructed woman no longer exists. The novel closes as Edna's social body, her memories of familial presence, southern romance, and being a chained creature, are submerged in sensory natural sound, lingering scents, and the blank page of limitless sea.

5. Conclusion: Illusions and Reality

In the radical "sex," Chopin privileges water and flexibility while Cable privileges social hierarchy. In the fiction of both authors, woman's position in society is dependent upon male definition. She enables that

definition through her acquiescence to the social institution of marriage. The white man is the artisan of society. He constructs his domain by ravishing the land, by possessing women as essential to his continuing heritage, and by controlling water and all things which threaten his domination. His society is alien to women and to other outsiders.

The choices available to woman (the sign for the social other) are to submit to male power and embrace conventional structures, or to move beyond the structural boundaries. The woman may be happily or unhappily open to the male strength. If she is pleasingly coupled with man, she will be assured of an happily-ever-after ending. If she is displeasing to her man or if her man is displeasing to her, she will be seduced by her own illusions. She will become the victim of her own separate desires for fulfillment because she has been formulated by male social codes. She will be taken by or seduced by the formless water life. She must die in conventional society in order to free herself from man's socially constructed reality. This stark and disturbing gender narrative articulates the tragic inevitability of woman's cultural entrapment and man's irreversible domination.

In an 1897 essay published in *The St. Louis Criterion*, a young writer asks the Chopin narrator for an oration title. The narrator is fond of the young man, but disappointed in the emptiness of his oration. Asking him about the meaning of illusions, she explains, "We never know what illusions are till we have lost them. . . . [T]hey last till men and the world, life and the institutions come along" (708). Given the Chopin and Cable gender narrative of socially constructed southern women, she may be right.

Notes

I wish to acknowledge the many discussions years ago about Cable and southern fiction with my mentor Louis D. Rubin, Jr., then at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Those discussions, and other discussions with Carroll Hollis and with C. Hugh Holman, began my thinking about these materials.

1 Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *The Signs Reader*, ed. Elizabeth and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 289. Subsequent references with page references are cited parenthetically in the text.

2 Annette Kolodny does not include Cable in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975). However, Cable's use of land imagery is certainly aligned with the metaphorical male praise and land appropriation Kolodny explores. C. Hugh Holman in *The Roots Of Southern Writing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972) also comments extensively on "the soil" as a subject, almost a character, in southern writing.

3 Patricia S. Yaeger, "'A Language Which Nobody Understood': Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*," *Novel* 20 (Spring 1987): 204.

4 Joanne Dobson, "The Hidden Hand: Subversion of Cultural Ideology in Three Mid-Nineteenth Century American Women's Novels," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986): 227.

5 As the term "subtext" implies, Dobson's main text and subtext are interrelated. Although Dobson finds one to be subordinated by the other, the text and subtext comprise the expressed cultural conventions and the repressed responses to those conventions. In my reading, the *At Fault* text consists of narratives which mirror one another. The conventional ("Mistress") narrative, like Dobson's main text, moves toward resolution; the corollary ("Demoniac") narrative, dissolution. See Pamela Glenn Menke, "Fissure as Art in Kate Chopin's *At Fault*," *Louisiana Literature* 11 (Spring 1994): 44-58.

6 Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox Of Feminist Criticism," *The Signs Reader*, ed. Elizabeth and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 79. In her comparative method, Jehlen suggests that the critic view the "world of women" as "something like a long border. The confrontations along that border between, say, *Portrait of a Lady* and *House of Mirth*... can light up the outer and more encompassing parameters (perimeters) of both worlds" (7). This distant view enables the critic to focus "on the relations between situations rather than on the situations themselves" and "to generate the conceptual equivalent of getting off this world and seeing it from the outside" (7). Subsequent Jehlen quotations are cited parenthetically in text.

7 Helen Taylor, *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McENERY Stuart, and Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 205.

8 George W. Cable, *The Negro Question: A Selection of Writings on the Civil Rights in the South*, ed. Arlin Turner (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), 52.

9 *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 701. All subsequent Chopin quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

10 Qtd. Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932), 173. While he considers *The Awakening* a "daring novel," Rankin finds it "erotic in motivation" with a "mania for the exotic"; "the very atmosphere of the book is voluptuous" (175).

11 See Kenneth Eble, "A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Western Humanities Review* 10 (1956): 261-69; Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); Lewis Leary, *Southern Excursions: Essays on Mark Twain and Others* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 159-91.

12 Jules Chametzky, "Our Centralized Literature," *The Awakening*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976), 200.

13 Elaine Showalter, "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book," *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 34.

14 William Malone Baskerville, a late nineteenth-century critic, in *Southern Writers: Biographical and Critical Studies* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1897) laments Cable's abandoning the reminiscent charm of Old Creole Days. The political bias begun in *The Grandissimes*, according to Baskerville, was completed in *John March, Southerner*. Says Baskerville, "The man with a mission throttles the artist" (320). Jay B. Hubbell also insists in *The South and American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1954) that Cable "broke faith" with a valid tradition by introducing "alien material" (809). He continues, "Cable's best work was done before his attitude toward the Southern problem had hardened into a fixed creed" (820).

15 Louis D. Rubin, *George W. Cable* (New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1969), 277. Subsequent references are cited as *Cable*.

16 *The Grandissimes*, ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957), 15. Subsequent references are cited with page references in the text.

17 Rubin considers *John March* Cable's "most interesting" and "ambitious" work (Cable, 212). He discusses Cable's frustration with his northern editor and his intent "to describe the South as he knew it" (213). In a letter to his wife, Cable recognizes the evangelical tone of an early draft: "It is very sermon & pamphlet as yet, but I shall lick it into shape by and by." Qtd. Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable: A Biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1956), 20. In other correspondence, he assures his editor (who remained unconvinced), "If this is not the best book I ever wrote, it shall be before it is printed" (Qtd. Rubin, Cable, 222). He intended his novel be "a book with every page good prose, and each of its chapters, as a chapter, good poetry... a good novel." Qtd. Lucy Leffingwell Cable Bikle, *George W. Cable: His Life and Letters* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1928), 213-14.

18 *John March, Southerner* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1984), 482, 483. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically.

19 Anna Shannon Eifenbein in *Women on the Color Line: Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989) emphasizes the novel's central thematic concern with oppression and provides a useful discussion of Aurora De Grapion Nancanou, Clemence, and Palmyre as "three representative dispossessed women" (47). She points out the bonding among these women "form a counterpoint to... the treacherous behavior of white men toward the women dependent on them" (48).

20 Philip Butcher in *George W. Cable* (New York:wayne

Publishers Inc., 1962) describes Leggett as "comic relief in the minstrel tradition" (122). Conversely, Rubin in *Cable* insists that "Leggett is more than a comic black stereotype borrowed from the local color tradition and more than a rogue and a scoundrel. He is also . . . a skilled and devoted advocate of Negro advancement and a strong supporter of education" (229).

21 Helen Taylor in *Gender, Race, and Region* points out the social deconstruction of "border" characters Jocint and Gregoire. Through his burning of the saw mill, Jocint is "breaking codes both of the black and white communities" (170). Gregoire first attempts to "rupture . . . racial codes" when he invites blacks to drink with him and then "restores social and racial order" by killing Jocint. To continue Taylor's logic, then, Gregoire's death, like Jocint's, becomes part of the "inevitable natural adjustment" Chopin appears to espouse in *At Fault*.

22 Peggy Skaggs in *Kate Chopin* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985) dismisses Fanny and Melicent, but considers the fully developed Therese a "discrete individual in control of her own life" (87). Skaggs admires Therese's ability to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining the "old traditions and values that give dignity and beauty to life" (78). Helen Taylor in *Gender, Race, and Region* praises Therese as "a shrewd and capable businesswoman" (166). I find Therese's autonomy compromised and, eventually, subsumed by her comfortable existence in the male constructions.

23 Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (New York: Octagon Books, 1980), 32.

24 Helen Taylor in *Gender, Race, and Region* comments on the "Patriarchal houses—metaphoric as well as real . . . as embodiments of the constraints and taboos operating on Edna and the novel's movement in a series of denials and ruptures of those structures by movements into the only free spaces available—notably, adultery and the source of legend and destruction itself, the waters of the Gulf" (198).

25 Julia Kristeva presents *The Awakening's* ending as an act of social destruction and revolution. According to Kristeva, woman's challenge to phallic dominance lies in "assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured . . . loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. [This] places women on the side of the explosion of social codes, with revolutionary moments." "Oscillation between Power and Denial," *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York, 1981), 166.

26 Wendy Martin provides a useful summary of critics' responses to Edna's suicide (*New Essays*, 13-14). Martin's reading differs markedly from mine. She views Edna as passively avoiding her many emotional and social entanglements in "movement without purpose. . . . Hopelessly tangled in a web of cultural constraints and biological necessity," she is impelled to escape her binding domesticity. . . . Edna sinks into death, just as she drifts in life" (22).

De Mortuus Nil Nisi Bonum (Southern Style)

by Kathryn Gurkin

Azalea, the flower of southern womanhood, estimates that she has attended 3000 funerals in her 75 years. Let's see: that works out to 40 funerals a year, assuming that she started at the age of one month, which many southern women have been known to do, being breast-fed.

Scarcely a week goes by that Azalea doesn't have to carry a casserole to the house of some bereaved acquaintance, and of course once you're in for a casserole, you might as well attend the funeral. Azalea confided to me one day when we were drinking some Co-Cola on her porch: "That slow, sad organ music just goes all over me!"

Living as we do on the second-best residential street in town, you see, we don't get much excitement, and dolorous occasions are too few to provide us with those frissons of empathy we can allow ourselves to feel when someone not too near and dear manages to bite the dust before we do.

For mere acquaintances, according to the rules, you don't shed tears but may bake one (inexpensive) casserole or one easy/cheap dessert. For fellow members of a lodge, club (but not bridge club) or church, you have the option of a few tears shed publicly and fried chicken or a fancy poundcake, but not both—too tacky. For friends or neighbors that you speak to once a week or more you may weep openly or privately, and you are permitted to take a roast over for dinner on the day of the funeral. It is understood that you are too distraught to bake a cake. Mere acquaintances will bring desserts—remember this. For any relative closer than second cousin you are expected to weep, but you must not "break down" in public. Everybody and his brother will be "at the home" or at the funeral service to see whether or not you do. "Breaking down" (exhibiting the extremes of grief) is thought unseemly, even for a widow, and if someone seems about to "break down" the family physician will be summoned to administer a "shot" or at least a pill to see them through.

Azalea and her bridge club, having had so much practice, consider themselves connoisseurs of funerals. They count the "floral offerings," the number of cars in the procession to the cemetery, the number of people in the church and at the graveside (to see how many *don't* go from the church to the cemetery, and *who*), the number of people who feel close enough to the family to go back to the "home" afterward. All these things are of inestimable importance and must be weighed and sifted like fine gold to be sure that nobody violates the pecking order or makes too lavish a display.

"Fifteen thousand dollars for one funeral! Lord she must have hated him! I wonder who the other woman was?"