"Revealing the Essential Self": Sartrean Existentialism in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and "A Pair of Silk Stockings"

Heidi Podlasli-Labrenz

The portrayal of strong, courageous women was a prominent feature of Kate Chopin's fiction. Often, these heroines were also quite unusual in that they were women who dared, defied, and tried to create lives of their own. They made choices that counteracted the expectations of the society they were living in, especially when consequences of wifehood and motherhood had already anchored their social positions. This female condition, portrayed by Chopin as an existential, human condition, emerges as one of the primary concerns of her writings. In that vein, it has been noted by numerous of her critics that Kate Chopin was striving more towards universality of theme rather than limiting her craft to the subjects and techniques of a local colorist, which she was primarily known for in the 1890s. Per Seyersted, her second biographer, points out: “Though the local color of Kate Chopin's Louisiana stories is unmistakable, they could be set almost anywhere. Her interest was universal human character rather than the local per se.”1 Chopin herself emphasizes in her response to Hamlin Garland's “Crumbling Idols”:

Human impulses do not change and can not so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began . . . social problems, social environments, local color and the rest of it are not of themselves motives to insure the survival of a writer who employs them.2

In another essay addressed to “The Western Association of Writers,” she maintains that it is her intention to show “human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it.”3 Focusing on this theme in her literary work in more detail, Bernard Koloski explains: “Kate Chopin understands 'human existence,' one of her favorite phrases, as driven by a yearning for
something she calls ‘rights of existence’—a chance for harmony and balance, rich social and cultural possibilities, and physical and material freedom and fulfillment.”

Kate Chopin’s fiction testifies to her deep concern with human beings and their relations to the principal existential subjects freedom, authenticity, and choice. And although she could not have read Jean Paul Sartre, her inquiry into and ultimate understanding of human existence anticipates Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism. Both Chopin and the French philosopher seem to argue that these subjects make up the essential self of the human condition. Commenting on the indissoluble relation between existence and freedom, Sartre affirms: “This constantly renewed act [i.e., the fundamental act of freedom] is not distinct from my being; it is a choice of myself in the world and by the same token it is a discovery of the world.” It is the fundamental human urge towards freedom that manifests itself in their actions, a necessity that compels individuals to engage in new choices towards their being. The choices that humans make create their essence, establish their identities, their authentic being. These choices also become part of their past, since humans create, or as Sartre says make their essence as they live.

Kate Chopin’s concern with freedom and choice as an existential human condition testifies to her growing maturity as a writer. In her short stories “Wiser Than a God” (June, 1889) and “The Maid of Saint Phillippe” (April, 1891), she focuses on authenticity of choice, meaning the attempts and final triumphs of the heroines to fulfill what they perceive as their true personalities while insisting on their personal freedom. Both female protagonists realize that their existence gives them the right to make of themselves what they want to be, that they can choose a life of their own. The refusal to renounce this right makes Chopin appear more aggressive, refusing to please the contemporary audience with rather conventional endings. In “The Story of an Hour” (1894) and “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (1896), Chopin seems to be indicating that the meaning of freedom and the choices that lead to freedom are substantially conditioned by individual circumstances, though the yearning for freedom creates a basic, essential part of each woman's being. Hence, a close reading of “The Story of an Hour” and “A Pair of Silk Stockings” based on Sartrean existentialism will trace the existential dilemmas and subsequent struggles both women are faced with. It will also emphasize that the heroines, reflecting Kate Chopin’s advocated “rights of existence,” make choices which are both unavoidable and irrevocable. Mrs. Mallard and Mrs. Sommers cannot but choose themselves (my emphasis) to be authentic human beings.
"The Story of an Hour," first published in *Vogue* as "The Dream of an Hour" on December 6, 1894, is known as one of Kate Chopin’s most famous short stories. This is partially so because it is, as Seyersted calls it, “a most remarkable account of a woman who exclaims: ‘Free! free! free!’ when she hears of her husband’s sudden death.” The story, however, is much more than a small piece of literature, ending with a surprising twist that needed to be disturbing to the contemporary audience. Mary Papke calls it a story that "details a very ordinary reality and conscientiously analyzes that moment in a woman's life when the boundaries of the accepted everyday world are suddenly shattered and the process of self-consciousness begins." Hiroko Arima notes that "one of the issues [Chopin] often treats in her stories is the enormity of the psychological impact on women caused by the lack of economic independence. As a writer, Chopin is more capable of illustrating complex psychological conflicts of women than writers of what Welty calls "inflammatory tracts." Indeed, Kate Chopin turns "The Story of an Hour" into a literary work dealing with the existential struggle of a woman who experiences, for the first time in her life, unconditional physical and spiritual freedom.

The Mallards have been married for some years. Brently Mallard’s professional success provides for economic security, allowing him and his wife to enjoy every possible comfort that this situation can provide. Louise Mallard is still young but, as friends knew, was “afflicted with a heart trouble,” a condition which seemed to derive from her personal situation in her marriage. It appears as if Louise, whose [facial] “lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength,” feels suffocated by the omnipresence of her husband. She is acknowledging him as “a powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature.” Her personal identity, expressed through her own wishes, desires, and choices made in life, her strength of character and willpower are apparently mostly controlled and absorbed by Brently Mallard’s well-meaned but forceful dominance. In existential terminology, Brently Mallard has turned his wife into ‘the Other,’ transforming Louise into an impersonalized object which can be disposed of, rather than a human being with an individual personality. Simone de Beauvoir explains this conflict in more detail: "We find in human consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object."

Their life as a married couple changes dramatically when the news of Brently Mallard’s sudden death in a railroad accident reaches his wife. Louise, though, is not paralyzed by deep agony and despair. She succumbs
immediately to the deep sorrow she feels about her husband’s loss. Just a few moments later, however, she begs to be left alone. Retreating to her own room, she sinks into an armchair, numb with exhaustion. Arima asserts here quite justly: “Mrs. Louise Mallard’s physical withdrawal into isolation at this point in the story marks her departure on her existential pursuit of freedom.” While the critic does not pursue her insightful argument any further, Sartrean terminology provides the key to explaining this “existential pursuit.” It is precisely at the moment when Louise Mallard gives in to her physical and emotional exhaustion “that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul” that she is faced, in Sartre’s terms, with her own nothingness, the “nihilating power . . . which arises in the heart of consciousness:” “[N]ow 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.” Louise slowly begins to understand that her human reality has changed, and that this change is setting her free towards becoming an individual being, her own authentic self. The French philosopher focuses on this existential ‘dilemma’ by emphasizing: “The being which is what it is cannot be free. Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be.”

Similarly, Louise Mallard becomes aware that by establishing her own relations to the world, she is finally able to compensate for the oppression she felt in the relationship with her husband. It would be insufficient then to describe these initial stages of awareness as “merely letting impressions of the inner and outer worlds wash over her,” as Papke has argued in her reading. While looking through the open window, it is she (my emphasis), Louise Mallard, who becomes conscious of signs of life, of rebirth: “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.” Together with the realization of a full life that is still out there, awaiting her, comes Mrs. Mallard’s abandonment to and recognition of absolute freedom. Proving Sartre’s principal dictum, “I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free,” she starts to comprehend that nothing can deter her now from becoming what she considers her true self.

In Sartrean existential philosophy, freedom announces itself through anguish because human beings are essentially apprehensive when confronted with their infinite possibilities in life. Referring to this concept, the French philosopher explains the feeling which Papke calls “frightening because it is
not of her true womanhood world; it reaches to her from the larger world outside and would 'possess' her.”

Asserts Sartre: “Anguish, abandonment, responsibility, whether muted or full strength, constitute the quality of our consciousness in so far as this is pure and simple freedom.” Louise’s reactions reflect these stages of existential anguish: “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.”

Desperately trying to resist her new life at first, just as Sartre argues that each human being is “trying to hide its freedom from itself,” Louise experiences a deeply felt struggle: “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.” And Sartre continues to explain: “These abortive attempts to stifle freedom under the weight of being... collapse with the sudden upsurge of anguish before freedom.”

Reading Louise’s behavior from the Sartrean existentialist point of view clearly negates that she could have been “possessed” by an unknown power, as Daniel P. Denem is trying to argue. The critic writes: “Clearly what occurs is some type of sexual experience, one that at first seems, except for the anticipation, like a terrifying rape, but one that evolves into something sensually stimulating and relaxing, and, of course, spiritually illuminating.”

Since Louise cannot deny her existential freedom because it constitutes part of her consciousness, she is also far from being an “immature and shallow egotist,” as she has been denounced by Lawrence Berkove. Instead, it should be pointed out again that freedom is a challenge for Louise because it confronts her with the need to make her own choices, choices which establish and define her identity as a human being. Seyersted reminds us at this point: “If the process of existential individuation is taxing on a man and freedom is a lonely and threatening thing to him, it is doubly so for a woman who attempts to emancipate herself from the state of immanence to which our patriarchal world has assigned her for millenniums.”

And he continues to emphasize:

The old role is of course in many ways convenient for the woman; she is materially provided for, and also metaphysically — as Simone de Beauvoir has emphasized — in the sense that she does not need to justify her existence as a wife and mother and that she can largely leave the responsibility for her fate to the man. But the moment she feels it more important to be an individual than to be a woman... she is in deep water: Unassisted, she has to create her own
role and status and define her aims.\textsuperscript{30} Referring to the foundations of ‘existential individuation,’\textsuperscript{31} Sartre asserts in this context: ‘[F]or human-reality, to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept. Without any help whatsoever, it is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be – down to the slightest detail.’\textsuperscript{32} Forced by this existential necessity, Louise Mallard finally cannot escape the contingencies of her personal freedom: “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!’”\textsuperscript{33}

Commenting on Mrs. Mallard’s ongoing transformation, Papke observes that “Louise embraces this new consciousness, her sense of personal and spiritual freedom in a new world.”\textsuperscript{34} Here, it needs to be pointed out again that Louise does not undergo so much of a radical change, nor has she been transplanted into a “new world” and received a “new” consciousness. Instead, it was the overbearing dominance of Brently Mallard who had obstructed his wife’s consciousness in its genuine capabilities, namely conscious decision-making and defining her own identity. Louise herself acknowledges this fact when pondering over the mixed feelings she has had for her husband: “And yet she had loved him – sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter!”\textsuperscript{35} At the same time, however, she also admits to her genuinely felt grief about Brently Mallard’s sudden demise when conceding: “She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead.”\textsuperscript{36} Now, however, Louise’s “old consciousness” is able to reveal itself in its true capacity. Consequently, she finally begins viewing and assessing the world around her on her own terms, anticipating with joy the years that are yet to come: “She saw . . . a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely . . . would be her own. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.”\textsuperscript{37}

Emotionally and physically strengthened by this existential quest, Louise emerges at its very end as a complete human being who has become aware of her personal and spiritual capabilities: “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.”\textsuperscript{38} She leaves her room with a “feverish triumph in her eyes,”\textsuperscript{39} choosing, in Seyersted’s words, to “fight society’s opposition as well as her own feelings of insecurity and guilt.”\textsuperscript{40} After “drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window,”\textsuperscript{41} she would no longer allow anyone to impose on her personal
freedom and dominate her unique personality. From now on, she would insist on being her own authentic self. Just at that moment someone opens the front door. Brently Mallard enters, alive, not even having been close to the scene of the railroad disaster. Louise immediately dies of a heart attack — "of joy that kills," as the doctor's diagnosis will have it.

Chopin closes the story with the same ironic touch which had introduced Mrs. Mallard as suffering from heart trouble. It is obvious, however, that she is more poignant in the description of Louise's death. Commenting on the ambivalence of the story's ending, Papke emphasizes: "[O]nly Louise and we the readers perceived the earlier ‘death’ of Mrs. Mallard and the true womanhood and that what murdered her was, indeed, a monstrous joy – the birth of individual self – and the erasure of that joy when her husband and, necessarily her old self returned." It has already been stated that Sartre’s existentialism denies the "birth of individual self." The philosopher keeps reiterating that the essential self is always born free and might only subsequently be suppressed by others. Along these same lines, Seyersted sounds as if he were discussing the significance of Louise Mallard’s death when he concludes about Edna Pontellier: "[Chopin’s] attitude illustrated by Mrs. Pontellier comes close to that of existentialism. She seems to say that Edna has a real existence only when she follows her own laws, and through conscious choice, becomes her own creation with an autonomous self." Clearly, by describing a developmental, existential process, Mrs. Mallard's personal situation anticipates the conflict of Edna Pontellier in The Awakening.

I would like to argue that Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” illustrates a paradigm of existential struggle. It draws as much on Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that relationships suffer from the desire of one partner to dominate the other as on Sartre’s postulate that men and women cannot but acknowledge their own individual freedom, the freedom which constitutes the basis for human existence. Mrs. Mallard’s example explicitly conveys two important concepts about life: it is very difficult for human beings to adjust to their personal freedom and the sense of responsibility it implies. Once they have discovered it, however, they recognize it as an essential and irrevocable condition of their human existence, which, if denied again, makes life not worth living.

Not very often anthologized and therefore not as well-known as some of her other short stories, “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” first published in Vogue on September 16, 1897, has of late received more critical attention by Chopin critics. Calling it a “small masterpiece,” Barbara C. Ewell calls this piece

-68-
Chopin's contribution to "social criticism" and emphasizes that "[T]he power of money to enhance self-esteem and confidence is the core of this poignant tale." Allen Stein also acknowledges that it is a story which is "too rarely discussed at length." He contends, however, that "Chopin presents a woman who tries a different expedient to escape the difficulties imposed by her marriage, a brief foray into the realm of consumerism" and continues by asserting that "Chopin shows that the value society places on having money can foster the insidious and misguided self-esteem that arises merely from believing one has acquired status in the eyes of others."

Deviating from these two critical comments, I would like to suggest that this short story neither deserves its masquerade of a woman who falls prey to the lure of consumerism and her disillusionment thereafter, nor its acclaim as a work of social criticism. Here, as in "The Story of an Hour" Kate Chopin is instead concerned with the heroine's authenticity of being and her freedom to regain and ensure that authenticity, whilst emphasizing a different kind of freedom and a different kind of choice. Indeed, an existentialist reading of Mrs. Sommers' transformation will explain Ewell's point in more detail when she claims that "the changes in Mrs. Sommers possess an impenetrable interiority." It will reveal how a woman's materialistic transcendence eventually leads to spiritual transcendence, to the complete harmony between inner and outer being.

Mrs. Sommers is a small woman who has gone through better days in her life. Now, however, she is raising her five children alone on a very small budget, seemingly without ever making ends meet. One day, though, good luck provides a small fortune when the quite unexpected sum of $15 is at her disposal. It is, for once, money which can be spent randomly, without the necessity of covering any urgent needs. She immediately thinks of her children and starts making plans. Which purchases would benefit them the most? She rejoices in this opportunity of being able to provide for them in a better way: "The vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives excited her and made her restless and wakeful with anticipation."

With specific ideas in mind in regards to her calculated expenditures, Mrs. Sommers sets out on her shopping trip. When she arrives at the store, however, she suddenly feels spiritually and physically exhausted. Her tireless efforts to provide for the children and the excitement of the unexpected trip have taken up all of her energy. Trying to collect herself by gathering some strength in one of the less crowded areas of the store, she rests her exhausted body on one of the counters nearby. It is at this moment of abandonment, this moment of individual freedom where family responsibilities do not reach her,
that Mrs. Sommers’ hands touch upon an object which elicits faint memories from her past: a pair of fine silk stockings.

Ewell identifies this moment of personal retreat as one in which Mrs. Sommers is challenged by “the subtler struggles with self-indulgence.” From Sartre’s existentialist point of view, however, it is obvious that Mrs. Sommers’ surrender to her physical abandonment reflects the beginning of an existential quest. The French philosopher explains more specifically that “[t]his way of yielding to fatigue and of letting myself fall down . . . expresses a certain initial stiffening against my body and the inanimate in-itself . . . This does not imply that I must necessarily stop but merely that I can refuse to stop only by a radical conversion of my being-in-the-world; that is by an abrupt metamorphosis of my initial project – i.e., by another choice of myself and of my ends.”

Similarly, Mrs. Sommers hesitantly begins to realize at this moment that neither outward social pressures nor inner doubts could deter her from changing her original plans. Even her current life, where the dismal situation of her family would not allow her to think of her own needs and desires, could hinder her from making another choice, a choice that would be much different from her original shopping intentions. Documenting her existential struggle upon this sudden recognition, it is quite obvious that Mrs. Sommers’ physical reactions testify to the anguish that she is going through when “two hectic blotches came suddenly into her pale cheeks.”

Sartre emphasizes in this respect:

The anguish which, when this possibility is revealed, manifests our freedom to our consciousness, is witness of this perpetual modifiability of our initial project. In anguish we do not simply apprehend the fact that the possibles which we project are perpetually eaten away by our freedom-to-come, in addition we apprehend our choice – i.e. ourselves – as unjustifiable. . . Thus we are perpetually threatened by the nihilation of our actual choice and perpetually threatened with choosing ourselves – and consequently with becoming – other than we are.

In other words, this choice, as challenging as it would be to make, would still be part of Mrs. Sommers’ authentic self and just emphasize a different aspect of her personality – even if it be expressed through as “simple” an adornment as a pair of silk stockings.

Consequently, Mrs. Sommers answers the offer of the salesgirl to examine their hosiery with a smile “just as if she had been asked to inspect a tiara of diamonds with the ultimate view of purchasing it.” She is still
uncertain, though, knowing that her present living circumstances do not allow for luxury. Besides, so she keeps musing as a caring mother, if there were a little extra money, should it not better be spent on the children? While intensely preoccupied with these thoughts, “Mrs. Sommers selected a black pair and looked at them very long and closely. She pretended to be examining their texture, which the clerk assured her was excellent.”

The ponderings and worries that Mrs. Sommers is engaged in show that she is going through another existential process: she is challenged by ‘bad faith’ or, as Walter Kaufman calls it “self-deception.” ‘Bad faith’ might prevent individuals from exerting their absolute freedom by an unwillingness to acknowledge the continual necessity to make themselves, to be constantly engaged in a new original choice towards Being. Sartre explains this process in more detail: “To the extent that the for-itself wishes to hide its own nothingness from itself and to incorporate the in-itself as its true mode of being, it is trying also to hide its freedom from itself.”

The denial, however, of the existential necessity to make a choice results in the loss of one’s authenticity.

When discussing the prime significance of the silk stockings, Katherine Joslin points out that they “remind us that garments, too, [are] a stimulating sign of our physical being.” All the same, Mrs. Sommers cannot move away from these alluring objects which are quite tempting to her: “[She] went on feeling the soft, sheeny luxurious things – with both hands now, holding them up, to see them glisten, and to feel them glide serpent-like through her fingers.” It is quite obvious that this simple act of examining the hosiery constitutes a genuine expression of her individual freedom in that she is putting her personal interests above those of her children. It turns, as a matter of fact, into a moment of autonomous individual creation. Finally admitting to herself then that there is no obstacle which hinders her from making a choice which expresses her own authentic being, Mrs. Sommers continues by asking the salesgirl for her size. A nice pair is quickly found, and the small woman walks away with her new purchase. She rushes further to the waiting-rooms for ladies on the upper floor – far away from the stocks of reduced sales which she had initially planned to investigate. Here, she trades the old cotton stockings for the new silk ones, marveling a little at her new appearance, but deriving a deep-felt satisfaction from it. Incidentally, all of Mrs. Sommers’ actions abound in echoes of Seyersted, who asserts that “developmental freedom may strengthen the self.” And Ewell cannot but conclude: “Her luxurious, youthful past and the self it defined, which she has so long resisted, finally erupts.” Consequently, just after a few minutes, Mrs. Sommers is on her way to the shoe department.
In Sartre’s existential philosophy, freedom does not only mean having to make choices which define one’s identity. A human being can also seek freedom by giving in to material desires, trying to, as Sartre calls it, “recover the totality of the non-conscious – that is, the whole universe as the ensemble of material things” in a kind of “quasi-pantheistic synthesis.” Mrs. Sommers, then, who is detecting, or rather rediscovering, the hidden self of her physical being as well as witnessing the obvious transformation in her outward appearance, tells the young salesperson that she “wanted an excellent and stylish fit.” After her demands had been complied with, it is again Sartre’s dictum of “a choice of myself” and “discovery of the world” that is evoked as Mrs. Sommers initially “could not realize that [the boots] belonged to her and were a part of herself.” And even though this union can only reach temporary status, it is typically existential since it implies the continuous need of the existentialists to be in touch with the concrete.

Clearly, rather than embodying a “driven being . . . manipulated by those who shape the ideology and practice of consumerism” as she has been denounced by Allen Stein, it is evident that Mrs. Sommers has become aware of an aspect that is essential to human existence: the freedom of choice. Robert Amer aptly concedes: “Her choices on that day . . . favor the sensuous, the aesthetic, and the pleasurable, all of them antithetical to the repressive national culture that was in the process of fading into the past . . . they are to this degree quite liberating choices not available in her domestic environment or within her domestic identity.” However, Amer’s assessment of Mrs. Sommers’ choices as “liberating” sounds quite contradictory when the critic had explained earlier:

What befalls Mrs. Sommers during her fateful excursion . . . is exactly what the male managerial system had intended should happen, not particularly to her as an individual but to her as an invented class of people, female shoppers, within the world that May and Macy and Wannamaker were in the process of creating. It is a situation that Mrs. Sommers herself dimly senses (and that Kate Chopin explicitly identifies) when she believes herself under the control of some “mechanical power” that simultaneously urges her on to keep spending money while absolving her of guilt and responsibility of her actions.

Could this be considered an accurate description of Mrs. Sommers’ ongoing transformation? How else can her sudden change of behavior be accounted for? Amer’s previous classification of Mrs. Sommers’ choices as “liberating” remains the key to comprehending her actions. Having been faced
with the existential need to make a choice when her hands had touched upon
the silk stockings, Mrs. Sommers had become aware that she was, independent
of her motherly responsibilities towards her children, free to make a new
“liberating” choice towards her own authentic being in the world. Says Sartre:
“A choice is said to be free if it is such that it could have been other than what
it is.” In other words, Mrs. Sommers had recognized and eventually accepted
her existential freedom. This crucial moment of illumination also explains her
subsequent behavior: “She was not thinking at all. She seemed for the time to
be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have
abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and
freed her of responsibility.”

Indeed, this “mechanical impulse” or “mechanical power” as Arner
calls it but which he fails to clearly identify as an upsurge of Mrs. Sommers’
existential freedom, is derived from this moment of abandonment to her
exhaustion and fatigue, a moment which has freed the small woman to make
her own, authentic choices. Consequently, when she feels a little hungry, she
does not even consider going home to prepare a little inexpensive lunch for
herself. Instead, her being-in-the-world is reflected in “the impulse that was
guiding her [and that] would not suffer her to entertain any such thought.”
Her yearning to create her authentic being has, after all, taken complete
possession of her. As Sartre emphasizes: “The one who realizes in anguish
[her] condition as being thrown into a responsibility which extends to [her] very
abandonment has no longer either remorse or regret or excuse; [s]he is no
longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being
resides in this very revelation.” And he continues to underline: “But as we
pointed out... most of the time we flee anguish in bad faith.”

It remains to say that Mrs. Sommers did not flee in anguish from this
revelation of her personal freedom. Instead, she is embracing this existential
right, making choices which strengthen her personal identity and emphasize
her authenticity of being. This obvious transformation finally shows when she
treats herself to a little matinée. As the omniscient narrator observes: “It is
safe to say there was no one present who bore quite the attitude which Mrs.
Sommers did to her surroundings.” Papke describes Mrs. Sommers’
demeanor well when she comments: “She feels, she is sensuously alive, she
begins to be her old self made new by her greater enjoyment of self-
fulfillment.” Or, to say it with Sartre’s words: “Human reality can not
receive its ends... either from outside or from a so-called inner ‘nature.’ It
chooses them and by this very choice confers upon them a transcendent
existence as the external limit of its projects... It is therefore the positing of
my ultimate ends which characterizes my being and which is identical with the

-73-
sudden thrust of the freedom which is mine." By choosing to fulfill her physical and emotional needs, by engaging again in the social and cultural life which is surrounding her, Mrs. Sommers has expressed her authentic personality and eventually laid claims to Kate Chopin’s advocated “rights of existence.”

What conclusions are to be drawn from this story? The children, even though they are Mrs. Sommers’ own, represent in a different form de Beauvoir’s concept of ‘the other.’ In all of her passionate endeavors to provide for them, Mrs. Sommers has forgotten about her own individual needs and suffers from physical but also spiritual exhaustion. Should Chopin’s story then be considered a passionate pamphlet against motherhood? Kate Chopin’s own life as a caring and attentive mother and stories like “Mamzelle Aurélie,” which imply the rewards of motherhood, do not allow for such superficial conclusions. It seems, rather, that Kate Chopin admonishes a society that takes the self-sacrifice of women, who have chosen to become mothers, for granted. She calls for more freedom and more possibilities towards self-fulfillment, be it even on the smallest materialistic level. Only when Mrs. Sommers derives satisfaction from her outer being and acknowledges a conscious feeling of “being-in-the-world” is she able to arrive at harmony with her innermost being. And, independent of her responsibilities as a mother, Mrs. Sommers must not forget about the responsibilities towards herself – as a woman and as an authentic human being.

The universal, existential aspect that emerges from Kate Chopin’s fiction is her focus on individuals who live up to their true capacities and remain true to their personalities, rather than making decisions that would take away from their authenticity by renouncing their right to make choices in life. Here, Chopin reflects Sartre’s belief that humans should not engage in bad faith, or self-deception, for choices as such would rob them not only of their freedom but also their true personality and even their humanity. As authenticity remains the only true virtue in existentialism, so it maintains this significance in Kate Chopin’s fiction. Only when the heroines insist on what they perceive as their true selves, do they appear as authentic and complete human beings.

-74-
Notes:
3. Ibid., 691.
6. Chopin, Complete Works, 25
8. Hiroko Arima, Beyond and Alone! The Theme of Isolation in Selected Short Fiction of Kate Chopin, Katherine Anne Porter, and Eudora Welty (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 45.
10. Ibid., 353
11. Ibid.
13. Arima, Beyond and Alone, 55
15. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 125.
17. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 568.
20. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 567.
22. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 597.
26. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 568.
29. Seyersted, Critical Biography, 106.
30. Ibid., 107.
31. Ibid., 106.
32. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 569.
33. Chopin, Complete Works, 353.
35. Chopin, Complete Works, 353
36. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 353.
39. Ibid., 354.
41. Chopin, Complete Works, 354.
42. Ibid.
44. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 567
45. Ibid., 567, 710.
46. Seyersted, Critical Biography, 147.
47. Ewell, Kate Chopin, 118.
48. Ibid., 119.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 360.
52. Ewell, Kate Chopin, 120.
54. Ewell, Kate Chopin, 19.
55. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 597-98.
57. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 598.
59. Ibid.
61. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 567.
63. Chopin, Complete Works, 501.
64. Seyersted, Critical Biography, 147.
65. Ewell, Kate Chopin, 119.
66. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 588.
68. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 124.
72. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 584.
73. Chopin, Complete Works, 502.
74. Ibid.
75. Arner, “Kate and Ernest and ‘A Pair of Silk Stockings,’” 124.
76. Cf. Sartre: “To choose is to effect the upsurge along with my engagement of a certain finite extension of concrete and continuous duration,” Being and Nothingness, 599.
77. Chopin, Complete Works, 503.
78. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 711.
79. Ibid.
80. Chopin, Complete Works, 504.
82. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 572.

Bibliography:


Arner, Robert D. “On First Looking (and Looking Once Again) into Chopin’s Fiction: Kate and Ernest and ‘A Pair of Silk Stockings.’” In Approaches to Teaching Chopin’s The Awakening, 112-130. Edited by Bernard Koloski. New York: MLA, 1988


