Unraveling the Southern Pastoral Tradition:
A New Look at Kate Chopin’s
At Fault

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Nine years before Kate Chopin unveiled The Awakening (1899), she self-published her first novel, At Fault. The novel, considered by critics as a worthy piece of fiction, established Chopin as a new and talented writer. The story of a widow running a plantation in the Natchitoches Parish of Louisiana, At Fault reflects Chopin’s own life. After two years of widowhood and successfully running her husband’s business, Chopin left the Natchitoches Parish for St. Louis in mid-1884, partly because of her involvement with Albert Sampite, a married man. After a year in St. Louis and shortly after her mother’s death, Chopin began writing for publication. Like Thérèse in At Fault, Chopin faced a decision between love and traditional ethics in her relationship with Sampite. Because Sampite was a southern Catholic, he could not divorce. In Louisiana when a couple did divorce, civil law prohibited either partner from marrying a lover. Consequently, Chopin had reason to question what she called an old southern “code of righteousness” that prevented her as well as her female protagonist in At Fault from happiness.

At Fault (1890) exhibits the same genius and skill characteristic of all Kate Chopin’s writing. Yet, despite the revitalization of interest in Chopin’s works during the twentieth century, Chopin’s first novel has been, for the most part, forgotten in academic study. Still, At Fault is no exception to Chopin’s authorial skill through which she elegantly addresses society’s flaws. Since the plot of At Fault appears on the surface to be contrived or stereotypical, some scholars have dismissed the novel as a weak attempt by Chopin to gain recognition as a new writer. What is not immediately
apparent in *At Fault* is Chopin’s careful manipulation of nineteenth-century southern pastoral conventions in the novel to address flaws in southern society.

Southern pastoral, a genre addressing southern political issues, was popular during Reconstruction. Educated and well read, Chopin would have been familiar with the southern pastoral literary conventions of her time. Sidney Lanier, Thomas Nelson Page, and Joel Chandler Harris had all published southern pastoral fiction by the time Chopin completed *At Fault*. And like writers before her, Chopin provides enough information in *At Fault* for her reader to determine that the novel is southern pastoral. Like a traditional southern pastoral, *At Fault* opens with the rural and secluded setting of Place du Bois that contrasts to an urban world encroaching from the outside. Even in the opening chapters when Thérèse first assumes her husband’s role, change is implied at Place du Bois. For instance, a new railroad “squats” at the edge of the plantation (5). Moreover, the southern pastoral setting is altered throughout the novel until the setting is no longer traditionally pastoral.

Like the setting, characters in *At Fault* are also shaped in a pastoral mold. Yet the pastoral gender roles in *At Fault*, such as the pastoral love interest of the master of the plantation, invert when the female protagonist assumes the traditionally male pastoral role. Jane Hotchkiss, in her “Confusing the Issue: Who’s ‘At Fault’,” suggests the possibility of gender reversal in *At Fault* by applying Carol Gilligan’s study of gender-based ethics to Chopin’s characters. According to Hotchkiss, the male ethical character follows what Chopin described as a “code of righteousness” of what is right and wrong to “deal out judgements,” while the female ethical character observes the individual circumstances of each moral dilemma before making a conscientious decision (34). Hotchkiss asserts that Thérèse embodies a male ethical character while Hosmer personifies a female ethical character (34). What Hotchkiss does not consider is how her assertions are related to Chopin’s use of pastoral conventions. While Chopin associates male ethics with an old pastoral ideal, she relates female ethics to a contemporary or urban ideal in *At Fault*. By inverting the pastoral gender roles, Chopin emphasizes how old pastoral roles cannot function in a changing South.

The changes that occur within the novel are most evident in the character of Thérèse, as the master of the plantation. In the first sentence of *At Fault*, Thérèse assumes Jérôme Lafirme’s role of the patriarch: “When Jérôme Lafirm died, his neighbors awaited the results of his sudden tak-
ing off with indolent watchfulness. It was a matter of unusual interest to them that a plantation of four thousand acres had been left unincumbered to the disposal of a handsome, inconsolable, childless Creole widow of thirty” (3). The “bêtise” her neighbors expect never occurs. Instead, the widow “successfully follows the methods of her departed husband” (3). Yet as soon as Thérèse successfully transforms from the feminine role to the masculine role, other pastoral conventions at Place du Bois reflect that inversion. Influences from outside of Place du Bois perpetuate change in the setting and its characters after Thérèse assumes her husband’s position. Both the railroad and the timber industry enter Place Du Bois after Thérèse becomes master. While the typical southern pastoral asserts that changes to a traditional way of life are both negative and undesirable, in At Fault, changes are progressive and beneficial. At Fault is the story of what happens to the old southern pastoral when the traditional setting changes, when pastoral character roles are reversed, and when the old southern pastoral model is unraveled. Unlike traditional pastoral that is reflective of an old culture, At Fault is about change. At Fault deconstructs the conventional southern pastoral, revealing a progressive South of industry and social equality.

The society depicted in southern pastoral is an archetype with which Chopin declaims the archaisms of an Old South. The pastoral landscape in At Fault is fertile, pure, and removed from urban society, portraying a free and unhurried lifestyle that contrasts to the outside urban society that is confined, structured, and fast-paced. Lucinda MacKethan states in The Dream of Arcady that southern pastoral writers idealized and preserved in literature class distinctions, contempt for material values, freedom of a slow and leisurely rural environment, and an austere code of honor of an Old South (37). However, by preserving an Old South in literature, writers also preserved the inequalities, particularly strict racial and gender roles, represented in an idealized Old South. Chopin may use southern pastoral conventions, but she is not interested in preserving or in justifying the pre-Civil War ideal. At Fault is set during Reconstruction, not in an ideal past. And although Place du Bois is rural and removed from urban society, Chopin’s pastoral landscape benefits from urban encroachments. By placing At Fault during Reconstruction, Chopin does not directly address or justify race issues. Rather, the slave-like characters in At Fault are retired plantation workers, representative of an out-dated way of life.

The novel begins by establishing Place du Bois as a pastoral setting that seems safely removed from the outside world:
The short length of this Louisiana plantation stretched along Cane River, meeting the water when that stream was at its highest, with a thick growth of cotton-wood trees; save where a narrow convenient opening had been cut into their midst, and where further down the pine hills started in abrupt prominence from the water and the dead level of the land on either side of them. (4)

Place du Bois, a rural setting that appears naturally and safely secluded from the outside world, is separated from the outside world by deep forest and a river that is often too rough to cross (4). In traditional pastoral, the gentleness of springtime emphasizes the easy and ideal life of a golden age. By scanning the setting, Chopin establishes the pastoral springtime atmosphere of Place du Bois: “The negro quarters were scattered at wide intervals over the land, breaking with picturesque irregularity into systematic division of field to field; and in the early springtime gleaming in their new coat of whitewash against the tender green of the cotton and corn” (5). The fertility of Place du Bois, “rich in its exhaustless powers of reproduction,” reflects a golden age of easy life with its abundant yields of vegetation and “bursting cotton” (5, 52). Within the setting, nature provides for its inhabitants. For example, Hosmer stops to let his horse drink “at the side of the hill where the sparkling spring water came trickling from the moist rocks, and emptied into the long outscooped trunk of a cypress, that served as a trough” (31). The leisurely lifestyle of the pastoral’s inhabitants in a traditional pastoral is also reflected upon in At Fault. Thérèse observes that “beneath the spreading shade of an umbrella-China tree, lay burly Hector, but half awake” while “Betsy, a piece of youthful ebony in blue cottonade was crossing leisurely on her way to the poultry yard” (6). Casual and dreamy, the landscape of Place du Bois appears to be the ideal pastoral landscape.

Shortly after establishing that Place du Bois is a pastoral setting, Chopin details the changes to the plantation since the death of Jérôme Lafirme. As Thérèse leisurely surveys her land, her eye scans to the far edge of her land where “squatted a brown and ugly intruder within her fair domain,” a new railroad (6). As a symbol of movement and progress, the railroad at this point in the novel is an “ugly intruder” to the tranquil setting. By describing the railroad as “ugly” and the pastoral setting as “fair,” Chopin implies the traditional rural-beautiful/urban-ugly contrast (6). Changes after Lafirme’s death are of “questionable benefit” and part of what drives “Thérèse to seek another domicile,” abandoning her former homestead for a more secluded location. At the end of the first
Chopin foreshadows future changes to the pastoral setting when Thérèse enters the woods and “bades a tearful farewell to the silence” (8). The setting evolves even though Place du Bois is at first established as a traditional plantation.

As the novel continues, outside influences continue to affect the traditional pastoral setting. The two distinct barriers, the forest and the river, keep Place du Bois safe from the outside world. Yet as the novel progresses, these barriers erode. The first chapter concludes when an outsider introduces the timber industry to Place du Bois. Thérèse knows that Hosmer is “no Southerner” when he offers her the “privilege of cutting timber from her land for a given number of years” (8). According to Karen Cole, even though southern literature seized an idealized version of a pre-Civil War plantation, “the rawer landscape of the Great Pine Woods” stretching from the Mississippi region into Texas was “not particularly well suited for agriculture” (65). Cole continues, adding that “northern interests in timber bolstered a depressed, postwar southern economy” and that the pre-Civil War plantation was an oasis carved out of the woods by the hardship and toil of slavery (66, 67). Slave labor constructed the plantations of the Old South, separating the land from the outside world by woods. Whereas slaves construct boundaries in typical southern pastoral, in *At Fault* workers at the timber industry erode the pine boundaries.

The pines and other species of trees at Place du Bois are significant as representations of old and new ways of life. For instance, Hosmer and Thérèse embrace beneath a live oak tree. As a literary symbol, the oak is associated with strength and longevity. The oak cannot flourish within the confines of the dark pine forest because it needs open, well-lit spaces. In *At Fault*, these spaces exist only on the plantation. Because the oak tree grows specifically at the plantation, not in the pine forest, the oak is also associated with family and home. By diminishing the pine barrier, the timber industry enables the outside to influence the traditional homestead. Plantation outsiders who accompany the new timber industry influence Thérèse and other inhabitants at the plantation. As a result, inhabitants at the plantation can no longer maintain their former way of life by excluding themselves from an outside world. When an oak appears at the novel’s conclusion, it signifies that a new homestead has been established.

In contrast to the oak, the “great rose tree” beside the cabin of Thérèse’s old nurse, Marie-Louise, symbolizes the old Catholic ways of the plantation and blooms because “of a blessing from Père Antoine,” the parish priest (70). According to Cole, because Marie Louise is Thérèse’s
old nurse and Marie Louise’s cabin is surrounded by Catholic symbolism, the cabin is a refuge for old world attributes and is set deep in the pine woods: “Marie Louise represents both the refinements and responsibilities of the old order. She offers good coffee, eau sedative, and the link to Catholicism that reminds Thérèse of why she had meddled in David Hosmer’s marriage” (70). Marie Louise’s cabin with its blooming rose tree, a symbol of an old world, is surrounded and protected by the pines.

Representative of an old way of life, the pine woods of Place du Bois harbor many old southern symbols. Ole MacFarlane’s grave is nestled in the pine woods, and according to Grégoire, Thérèse’s nephew, “folks ‘round yere says he walks about o’ nights; can’t res’ in his grave fur the niggas he’s killed” (19). Plantation inhabitants also “say he’s the person that Mrs. Wa’at’s her name wrote about in Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (19). The past literally haunts the present at Place du Bois. However, when Melicent, Hosmer’s sister, is introduced to the legend of ole MacFarlane, her reason shatters the old superstition and the legend dies. Melicent informs Grégoire upon visiting the grave that she does not believe in ghosts or hell. Melicent reflects the reason of an outside world, which contrasts to the superstition of the old plantation. Outside influences exorcise Place du Bois of its old world ghosts.

A river also borders Place Du Bois. As a symbol of movement and change at Place du Bois, the river continually erodes its banks. The river is a consistent “worry to Thérèse, for when the water [is] high and rapid, the banks cave constantly, carrying away great sections from the land” (109). Place du Bois’ own natural border hastens progress as it erodes parts of the plantation. Marie Louise’s cabin, while nestled in the pine woods, sits perilously close to the river’s banks even though her cabin has been moved previously “away back in Dumont’s field” (113). When Thérèse suggests that the cabin be moved again, Marie Louise insists that she “will move no more; she’s too old” (113). Chopin foreshadows the cabin’s destruction when Marie Louise calls on the god from her old Catholic religion of the plantation to protect her, replying that “if the good God does not want to take care of me, then it’s time for me to go” (113). Marie Louise explains to Thérèse that she must be safe because Père Antoine, the local priest, has blessed her cabin: “I called him in, and he blessed the whole house inside and out, with holy water—notice how the roses have bloomed since then—and he gave me medals of the holy Virgin to hang about” (113). As important representations of an Old South, Marie Louise and her cabin are fated victims to the ongoing transformation of the plantation. Chopin provides the character of Marie
Louise with little depth beyond the stereotypical mammy character so that when the old nurse is washed into the river, the reader feels little sympathy for the character. Instead, because of the Catholic symbolism that surrounds the cabin and Marie Louise, when the cabin washes into the river, the sacrament of baptism is implied. Baptism, the Christian sacrament of cleansing and rebirth, washes away the influences of a past world when the river overwhelms Marie Louise’s cabin. The river, as a symbol of motion and change, cleanses Place du Bois of its Old South symbols.

Without its natural barriers, additional change influences Place Du Bois. By the novel’s conclusion, Place du Bois is no longer a traditional southern pastoral setting. As though it had undergone a hard winter, the plantation emerges at the height of spring: “the air was filled with the spring and all its promises” (201). Influences from the outside have turned Hosmer’s timber industry into a thriving business. Financiers to Hosmer’s business freely enter Place du Bois and examine the pine woods. Hosmer explains, “they didn’t leave a stick of timber unscrutinized”; moreover, as the financiers look at Place du Bois, they are “like ferrets into every cranny” as though the men examine every recess of the plantation to discover any remaining old world symbolism still hidden in the pine woods (209). Consequently, Place du Bois is no longer the traditional pastoral setting, free from industry and outside influence.

Characters at Place Du Bois are also influenced by change. Thérèse’s character, as Place du Bois’ pastoral master, best emphasizes those transitions. Introduced as the “Mistress of Place du Bois,” Thérèse is portrayed as an ideal, albeit feminine, pastoral model of a master. As a pastoral master of the plantation, Thérèse is also a stronghold against outside forces at Place du Bois. Like the traditional pastoral shepherd who protects his sheep, in the southern pastoral, the master protects his plantation. The first chapter of the novel relates how Thérèse fulfills the pastoral role when Hiram informs her that “things is a goin’ wrong” (4). After receiving the knowledge of things “goin’ wrong,” Thérèse is roused and moved to action, completely fulfilling her husband’s duties: “The wrong doing presented as a tangible abuse and defiance of authority, served to move her to action” (4).

Thérèse’s awakening to her role as master is where the novel begins. As the master of the plantation, Thérèse “bristles with objections” to future change and “in building, she avoids the temptations offered by modern architectural innovations” (5). Thérèse also fears “a visionary troop of evils coming in the wake of the railroad, which, in her eyes no conceivable
benefits could mitigate” (5). Furthermore, Thérèse “dreads an endless procession of intruders forcing themselves upon her privacy” (5). At the opening of *At Fault*, Thérèse is as secluded from the outside world as Place du Bois is.

Thérèse is no longer secluded when Hosmer and other outsiders arrive at Place du Bois. Each visitor brings to Place du Bois a different ethical code from the outside world that is different from the traditional moral code that Thérèse ascribes to. According to Hotchkiss, Melicent brings to Place du Bois “moral precepts” that are “mere platitudes” (37). Melicent “delivers the time worn aphorisms with the air and tone of a pretty sage, giving utterance to an inspired truth” (55). Fanny, on the other hand, brings with her a lack of conscience, exhibited by her alcoholism. After Fanny steals a flask of whiskey from Morico, Morico blames his son Jočint. Instead of confessing, Fanny turns away asking Grégoire, “Is it just this same old thing year in and year out, Grégoire? Don’t any one ever get up a dance, or a card party or anything?” (120). Fanny’s lack of morals is contrary to a sunken and stereotypical deserted wife. Instead, when Hosmer returns to St. Louis for his wife, he finds that she has coped rather well after the divorce. Hosmer discovers the home he had formerly shared with his ex-wife “much changed” with new rugs, wallpaper, and wall hangings (60). However, alcoholism and lack of conscience in Fanny’s character evoke little sympathy from Chopin’s readers, making Fanny a shallow character and easily expendable at the novel’s conclusion. Ethical decisions outside of Place du Bois are not hampered by out-dated rules from a lost past, so the solution to Hosmer’s ethical dilemma seems simple. Mrs. Dawson, from outside of Place du Bois, states the obviousness of Hosmer’s situation: “I thought he had more sense than to tie himself to that little gump again, after he’d had the luck to get rid of her” (81). By the end of the novel, Thérèse is no longer as secluded as she once was; Thérèse has traveled to Paris, rides a train, and wears stylish Parisian clothing.

In addition to protecting Place du Bois from change as the novel opens, Thérèse, as a male ethical character, protects the old southern “code of righteousness” (119). Thérèse “was little given to the consideration of abstract ideas” (40). When an early reviewer of *At Fault* claimed Fanny, Hosmer’s wife, was the character who was “at fault,” Chopin replied to the criticism in the 18 December 1890 issue of the *Natchitoches Enterprise*, in an effort to clear the reader’s misconception. According to Chopin, Thérèse was to blame because of her old world ethics:
Thérèse Lafirme, the heroine of the book is the one who was at fault—remotely, and immediately. Remotely—in her blind acceptance of an undistinguishing, therefore unintelligent code of righteousness by which to deal out judgements. Immediately—in this, that unknowing the individual needs of this man or this woman, she should yet constitute herself not only as mentor, but an instrument in reuniting them. (qtd in Toth 194)

Thérèse’s masculine and old southern ethics shape her character into an ideal plantation master of the traditional southern pastoral and emphasize the control she has over, and the responsibility she takes for, those at her plantation. According to the love-blinded Hosmer, “Thérèse was love’s prophet” while Melicent declares that “she’s positively a queen” (Chopin 61, 34). After Fanny has a difficult time riding Torpedo, a slow and stubborn horse, Thérèse says, “I can’t forgive myself for such a blunder” (122). Thérèse also advises Grégoire, “I hope that your heart is not too deep in this folly,” when she discovers his hopeless obsession with Melicent (100). Morico, the elderly father of Jocint and a retired plantation worker, is given special care by Thérèse when she supplies him with chickens and eggs. Yet the most explicit display of Thérèse’s control in *At Fault* is when she insists that Hosmer is a coward for divorcing his wife and should repair the relationship immediately: “‘You left her then as practically without moral support as you have certainly done now, in deserting her. It was the act of a coward.’ Thérèse spoke these last words with intensity” (47). Hosmer asks her what he should do, and Thérèse replies, “I would have you do what is right” (48). Apparently, what is “right” for Hosmer according to Thérèse’s old code of ethics is to “face the consequences of his own actions” by repairing relations with his ex-wife, regardless of the outcome (47).

Like the traditional object of the pastoral master’s love, in his relationship to Thérèse, Hosmer is submissive: Thérèse moves him “to a blind submission” (48). Transformation and self-denial is also a large part of Hosmer and Thérèse’s relationship. Harold Toliver explains in his *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* that what is expected of the pastoral lover/shepherd character “is a purification of his love through self-denial, and thus his transformation from one level of love to another” (21). The pastoral romance as described by Toliver is similar to what passes between Thérèse and Hosmer. After Chopin establishes Thérèse’s male characterization, it is also evident that, like the tortured love that is never acted upon in the
traditional pastoral, Thérèse also suffers from love that is never acted upon. Old world ethics and Thérèse’s position as a pastoral master prevent her from pursuing a relationship with the divorced David Hosmer. When Thérèse thinks of Hosmer’s divorce “with the prejudices of her Catholic education coloring her sentiment, she instinctively [shrinks] when the theme confront[s] her as one having even a remote reference to her own clean existence” (40). Thérèse’s character also resembles Toliver’s definition of a pastoral lover after Thérèse transforms because of her self-denial. When Thérèse denies herself a relationship with Hosmer, she is forced to see the consequences of her involvement as a pastoral master in Hosmer’s affairs. Thérèse arrives at Hosmer’s house to see Fanny drunk and incoherent: “Thérèse was so shocked that for awhile she could say nothing” (151). Thérèse is forced to ask herself “with a shudder ‘was I right—was I right?’” (158). She also questions her own actions: “When left alone, Thérèse at once relapses into the gloomy train of reflections that has occupied her since the day she had seen with her bodily eyes something of that wretched life that she had brought upon the man she loved” (158). Thérèse changes because she sees the error of her ways; furthermore, as a pastoral lover, Thérèse transforms from one level of love to another.

Like Thérèse, Hosmer also undergoes change. However, unlike Thérèse’s transformation, Hosmer’s change is both sudden and dramatic. When Fanny is swept into the river with Marie Louise and the cabin, Hosmer dives into the water to save his wife. For the first time in the novel and without Thérèse’s advice, Hosmer actively tries to help his wife. When she discovers that Hosmer is divorced, Thérèse claims that Hosmer was “deserting” Fanny by divorcing her. And before Hosmer reunites with Fanny, he tells Thérèse, “What ever I do, must be because you want it” (48). When Hosmer reunites with Fanny, he tells Thérèse, “I didn’t do it because I thought it was right, but because you thought it was right” (123). When Hosmer attempts to rescue his wife, it is the first time in the novel that he tries to do what is “right” for Fanny. By following for the first time what he thinks is “right,” Hosmer is no longer completely submissive to Thérèse. Chopin implies that Hosmer has been changed by the experience when Thérèse, finding him on the train a year later is “aware of some change in him which she had not the opportunity to define; but this firmness and fullness of the hand was part of it” (205). Thérèse “looks up into his face then, to find the same change there, together with a new content” (205).

As At Fault concludes, Chopin surrounds her characters with implica-
tions of change. The novel both begins and ends during spring. However, there is also the gap of exactly a year between when Thérèse and Hosmer first meet in the first chapter and the following chapter, as well as between Fanny’s death and Hosmer and Thérèse’s reunion. Four springs occur over the course of the novel: when the novel opens, when Hosmer and Thérèse realize their feelings, when Fanny’s dies, and finally when Hosmer and Thérèse reunite. Most of the story takes place during the second year in which Chopin details the passing of seasons and the relationships among Hosmer, Thérèse, and Fanny. During this time, the parlor within the house signifies the season change: “this was a room kept for most part closed during the summer days” (41). When Thérèse secludes herself within the parlor, the reader knows that it is summer. However, when the parlor has a fire blazing, the open room and the fire imply that it is winter.

At the conclusion of the novel, Place du Bois is experiencing springtime: “the air was filled with the spring and all its promises” (201). After establishing a gap of time and the springtime atmosphere, Chopin reunites Thérèse and Hosmer on the train. The train, a symbol of industry, movement, and progression, is no longer an “ugly intruder,” but a vehicle in which Thérèse and Hosmer are reunited (5). The novel concludes as the moon climbs “over the top of that live-oak” beside the house (212). The moon, used in many of Chopin’s works as a feminine symbol, such as in The Awakening, is significant as the last image of Place du Bois in the novel. Used in The Awakening as a symbol of Edna’s self-discovery, the climbing moon in At Fault suggests Thérèse’s achievement in transforming from the pastoral master role into a partner and wife. The fact that the moon climbs over a “live-oak,” a symbol of home in At Fault, indicates an accomplishment at the plantation itself. The oak promises a future to a new Place du Bois. The plantation successfully transforms from an old pastoral homestead into a contemporary setting. Consequently, the symbols at the conclusion of At Fault imply a positive change for the characters at Place du Bois.

With the marriage of Thérèse and Hosmer at the conclusion of At Fault, Chopin reinforces and promises a future for the South in the novel. Whereas Chopin utilizes the pastoral convention of marriage, their marriage ensures the demise of an old way of life. In At Fault, the marriage promises a future for a new way of life, not for a traditional pastoral lifestyle. The springtime atmosphere combined with Hosmer and Thérèse’s parenting-like role to Melicent at the conclusion of the novel implies the possibility of children in their future. By the novel’s end, Place du Bois is
no longer the pastoral setting it was, for the plantation and its inhabitants are no longer secluded from the outside world.

Melicent’s letter emphasizes that communication is open to the outside world from Place du Bois. However, perhaps more important than the letter’s arrival, is the letter’s content. As the last outside influence to Place du Bois that is mentioned in the novel, the letter details Melicent’s future travel and study with her new friend Mrs. Griesmann: “We’re going to take that magnificent trip through the West—Yosemite and so forth. It appears the flora of California is especially interesting” (210). Melicent’s letter promises future communication and information about places much farther away than the borders of Place du Bois. Because the letter mentions the flora of other regions, the letter also implies the existence of beauty and gardens outside of the traditional pastoral plantation. The letter also emphasizes that Thérèse’s resistance to the outside has changed into curiosity. Melicent’s letter details information about people in St. Louis. Although Hosmer assures Thérèse that it is “a piece of scandal concerning people you don’t know; that wouldn’t interest you,” Thérèse insists, “but it would interest me” (211). Thérèse has changed from the woman who “bristled with objections” with the appearance of a stranger to someone curious about strangers far removed from Place du Bois. Thérèse has also become adventurous outside of Place du Bois: Thérèse “had sailed from New Orleans for Paris, whither she had passed six months” (203).

Finally, when Hosmer and Thérèse do marry, neither Hosmer nor Thérèse assume the role of a pastoral master of the plantation. Instead, Hosmer and Thérèse create a compromise as to what their roles will be. Unlike traditional pastoral, neither Hosmer nor Thérèse will assume responsibility of the entire plantation as the plantation master. Hosmer asserts that he will not rob Thérèse of her occupation and will “put no bungling hand into” her concerns (209). Instead, the commerce at Place du Bois is separated into two halves. The timber industry run by Hosmer and the traditional cotton industry run by Thérèse coexist side by side at Place du Bois, as do Hosmer and Thérèse’s responsibilities. The marriage of Hosmer and Thérèse does not ensure or reinforce a future to the traditional pastoral. Instead, their marriage guarantees the demise of an old order and the future of a new one.

*At Fault* is perhaps more personal to Chopin’s experience than all her later works. Like Thérèse, Chopin underwent the “indolent watchfulness” of her neighbors after assuming her husband’s responsibilities (3). Chopin became involved in a relationship that was doomed because of
old ethics and rules, as did Thérèse. Unfortunately, Chopin was unable to reach the happy conclusion that Thérèse does in *At Fault*. Toth asserts that “if Kate Chopin had wanted to marry Albert Sampite, she could never do so, not so long as Loca Sampite was still alive” (174). Yet by writing *At Fault*, Chopin challenges the old “code of righteousness” that prohibited her from happiness. Chopin exposes the old ideals and morals as obsolete in a new South by manipulating the conventions of southern pastoral. The strict gender roles and the golden age islands carved into the pine landscapes of an Old South are exposed in *At Fault* as archaic ideals of a dysfunctional age. In *At Fault*, Chopin successfully deconstructs the pastoral conventions that represent an ideal Old South. In her subsequent works, such as *The Awakening* (1899) and *Bayou Folk* (1894), Chopin abandons literary stereotypes and her characters directly and consciously rebel against their roles in society. However, *At Fault* remains significant as an early novel by Chopin that addresses society’s flaws. Chopin was unable to reach the happy ending that Thérèse does in the novel. But by writing *At Fault*, Chopin was able to accomplish what she was unable to do in real life: expose the ideals of an Old South as outmoded and detrimental in a new South.

NOTES

1. Emily Toth explains that Chopin’s involvement with Sampite and her mother’s worsening illness were deciding factors in her returning to her mother in St. Louis (172).

2. After her mother’s death, and at the suggestion of family friend and obstetrician Dr. Fredrick Kolbenheyer, Chopin began channeling her grief by writing for publication. Chopin had considerable success with her early short stories from the time she wrote her first story for publication in 1888 to when she began *At Fault* on 5 July 1890 (Toth 178–179).

WORKS CITED


