Shared Subjugation: Acadians and African Americans in Kate Chopin’s *Bayou Folk*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

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George Mason University, 2010

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Spring Semester 2010
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to David Alan Ryan, without whose support, encouragement, and love this project would never have been completed.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Tamara Harvey, Professor Eric Anderson, and Professor Samaine Lockwood for their diligent and dedicated insight and advising throughout this writing process. A special thanks to Tamara Harvey, whose course on Early American Women Writers inspired me to heed the value of the female voice in American literature.

I would also like to thank the many George Mason University English professors who have inspired me to continue to explore Kate Chopin and her works, particularly Professor Amelia Rutledge who pushed me to look past *The Awakening* to find out more about Chopin as a writer and to find a “hole” in the scholarship.
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In comparing the ways in which Kate Chopin depicts Acadian and African American characters in three of her Bayou Folk stories, this thesis presents a new way to examine her treatment of subjugated characters. Though other critics have often focused on Chopin’s female characters, this paper instead serves to introduce another distinct and often overlooked group of subjugated people: the lower-class, white Acadians (who were distinguished from socially “superior” Creoles) and the lower-class, racially discriminated African Americans. The stories examined closely include “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” “The Wizard from Gettysburg,” and “In Sabine.” While Chopin’s representations often place Acadians and African Americans in opposition to one another, this thesis argues that Chopin also portrays their shared poverty, disempowerment, and even their teamwork. Pitted against a late nineteenth-century society that tended to categorize and demean them, the Acadians and African Americans in Kate Chopin’s Bayou Folk emerge as more complex characters whose contradicting images reveal that Chopin did not merely understand the plight of women but that of other subjugated groups as well.
Introduction

Most contemporary readers find it nearly impossible to read Kate Chopin’s work without considering gender, ethnicity, and race. Many of Chopin’s critics focus on one of those three elements, sometimes in conjunction, and other times individually. Of the major lenses through which critics read Kate Chopin’s work, the one that seems to garner the least attention is her complex representation of lower-class characters who are either ethnically or racially subjugated. These depictions are especially important in Chopin’s first published collection of stories, *Bayou Folk*, which arguably includes the widest variety of disempowered characters in all of her work. Perhaps this collection calls attention to these lower class characters, more so than her later stories (collected and published in *A Night in Acadie* and published post-mortem in *A Vocation and a Voice*), because the characters in Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* all share a home in the rural Louisiana Bayou area. Unlike much of the country at the time, this region was almost entirely devoid of white, Anglo-Saxon Americans, and thus Chopin has captured the very unusual class distinctions that essentially comprised a one-of-a-kind caste system. There in the Louisiana Bayou, in this very contained, pastoral, Post-Reconstruction geographic setting, multiple cultures collide and overlap in intricate and meaningful ways.

Because, during Chopin’s era, the bayou society had long treated them as inferiors but for very different reasons, Acadians and African Americans comprise the two groups
whose dynamics seem most remarkably challenging, and yet contemporary criticism has neglected to consider these two groups in conjunction. In Chopin’s stories, these two groups’ lower-class status, due mostly to their ethnic and racial distinctions, place them in similarly compromising positions and yet their distinctions also seem to drive them apart. Because the Civil War’s effects could still be felt in this region during this era and also because of the rural nature of this specific area, most Bayou Folk characters are poor, but nineteenth-century historians suggest that these two groups both suffered substantially because of their ethnic and racial subjugation. When Chopin published this collection in 1894, both lower-class groups had endured many years of economic hardships as well as societal disempowerment in floundering post-Reconstruction-era Louisiana. This thesis seeks to address the shifting power dynamic between these similarly marginalized characters that Chopin paradoxically renders both sympathetically and stereotypically. Though much scholarship has attended to Chopin’s treatment of race and ethnicity, very few critics have ever considered these two subordinated groups conjointly and certainly not as more than a peripheral point. By focusing on both Acadians and African Americans, this thesis necessarily combines Chopin’s considerations of race, ethnicity, and class since these two groups were marginalized and subjugated according to their racial and ethnic distinctions.

1 These historians include Tim Hebert, who has researched the history of the mistreatment of Acadians from their exile from Canada up through their relocation, especially their relocation to Louisiana. Likewise, historians at the Louisiana State Museum and Louisiana History Online cite the prejudice and discrimination of freed slaves following the Civil War. Though rarely considered side-by-side, numerous sources on the recently-exiled Acadians and the recently-enslaved African Americans suggest that each group suffered substantially in the nineteenth-century due to ethnic, racial, and economic subjugation.
In order to assess more fully the way Chopin’s Acadians and African Americans are depicted alongside one another, I will consider her stories in terms of authorial attitudes, genre, and history. By evaluating the limited information we have on Chopin’s experiences with different races and cultures, this thesis will consider what part her own biases might play in the way she depicts these lower-class characters. The same will be true when I take into account the distinctions between local color, which is how Chopin’s contemporaries classified her, and regionalism, which is how more recent scholars tend to categorize her work. Likewise, by gathering historical information on the treatments of Acadians and African Americans, I hope to see how Chopin’s portrayals compare to the way late nineteenth-century society treated these two groups at the time of her writing.

Historically speaking, when Chopin was writing these stories in the late 1800s, free blacks and recently-exiled Acadians had only recently flip-flopped in status, due to a Reconstruction-era shift from a caste system based on ethnicity to one based on race. Almost immediately following the Civil War, anyone with black skin was considered lesser than anyone with white skin. This had not always been the case; in fact, many free blacks had enjoyed a sense of privilege and superiority in pre-Civil War Louisiana, particularly black Creoles whose ancestry almost always included privileged, respected white Creole men who had produced children with black women, sometimes slaves. \(^2\) Still, Creoles seem to have allowed or even encouraged all members of their very

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\(^2\) Marcia Gaudet cites one specific example of Marie Thereze Concoin (see “The Setting for Bayou Folk” section in this thesis). The Louisiana State University’s online exhibit, *The Louisiana Purchase: A Heritage Explored*, also cites numerous examples of sexual relations between Creole men and female slaves in its article “Slaves and Free People of Color.”
contained Louisiana society, even African Americans, free or not, to turn their noses up at the lower-class Acadians. Despite their shared French background, Creoles worked hard to clearly distinguished themselves from Acadians almost entirely because their ancestors had first immigrated to Canada (and then been exiled by the British colonists there) rather than straight to the United States. This Creole sense of superiority certainly confused outsiders, but those African Americans who had grown up with this very scrupulous set of social distinctions, even those who worked for white Creoles, might have felt mystified and even offended by the social rise of Acadians.

Nevertheless, at the time of Chopin’s publications, both groups occupied a lower status than their white Creole neighbors and than any American outsiders who might travel into the Louisiana Bayou region. Because of these shifting and complicated roles, Chopin’s portrayal of Acadians’ and African Americans’ shared societal inferiority at the end of the nineteenth century produces some of the most intriguing fictional relationships in American literature at this time.

While there is no singular way in which Chopin treats social distinctions, her own biases are suggested in her stories. The typical Chopin reader is probably most familiar with her famous novel, *The Awakening*, which depicts a female’s struggle to free herself from society’s limitations and who ultimately does so by committing suicide. Readers will not be surprised to find that Chopin’s other narratives typically treat females with sympathy, too, whether they are Acadian or Creole, Caucasian or African American. In the same vein, her works also suggest that the social expectations and limitations of the nineteenth-century are to blame for much of her characters’ suffering. However, her
seemingly objective narratives allow for a complex reading of those same characters, in terms of their relationships with one another and with society as a whole.

More specifically, Chopin’s lower-class characters seem, at times, to be rendered somewhat realistically with attention to specific cultural differences, which would signal a regionalist type of literature, and other times, the characters seem stereotypically servile or ignorant, which might point to Chopin’ contemporary genre of local color.³ Neither the Acadians nor the African Americans in her stories can read or write, but this does not stop Chopin from depicting them as clever or noble. While Chopin does not treat all of her lower-class characters in the same manner, she does seem to differentiate her depictions based on the characters’ actions, which in itself indicates a kind of sensitivity.

Then again, certain stereotypes do exist in her stories, and their perpetuation simultaneously suggests Chopin’s own biases. By looking at these kinds of historical, literary, and personal influences on Chopin’s stories, some of which she may not even have been aware, we should be able to more carefully synthesize her multiple approaches toward, and sometimes contradictory depictions of, these lower-class characters.

Since readers are often more familiar with Chopin’s female-centered stories, we might benefit from assessing her various methods of simultaneously sympathizing with and stereotyping her socially inferior characters by first looking at two of her female-

³ Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse suggest that Chopin’s classification as a local color writer overlooks her sensitive treatment of lower-class characters, and they move to group her instead with regionalists. Contemporary critics, like Fetterley and Pryse, argue that local color literature was, in some ways, exploitative and stereotypical in its one-dimensional depictions of particular cultures, whereas the broader classification of regionalism intends to account for the writers of the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century who depicted more expansive representations of lesser-known people and places.
centered *Bayou Folk* stories. Though this thesis will focus on her considerations of characters who are racially and ethnically subordinated, looking at how Chopin treats her similarly subordinated female characters will demonstrate some of the same kinds of ambiguity we see in her treatment of Acadians and African Americans. We will examine “A Visit to Avoyelles” and “In Sabine,” and their astoundingly similar storylines provide for an ample representation of the competing ways in which Chopin treats her disenfranchised women, particularly those who become poor as a result of their own mistakes. Though these characters become poor not because of their race or ethnicity but rather due to their dependence on the man they each marry, the way Chopin presents these two stories’ female protagonists, Mentine and ‘Tite Reine, seems to represent the complex balance of sensitivity and judgment with which Chopin treats her lower-class characters.

At the same time, both Mentine and ‘Tite Reine are, in fact, Acadians, and inherently this small-scale examination will also delve into my larger assessment of Chopin’s Acadian and African American characters. Though other critics have certainly assessed Chopin’s female characters in stories like, and including, these two pieces, I hope to pay particular attention to these two women in terms of their economic despair rather than their gender as a means of introducing my larger consideration of lower-class characters in *Bayou Folk* as a whole. Though I will re-examine “In Sabine” at the end of this thesis in order to compare Chopin’s presentations of Acadians and African Americans, I only intend in this introduction to compare the story to another very similar
story in order to illustrate the same kind of complex and contradictory representations, with regard to gender, that seem to exist in a number of Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* stories.

Interestingly, the following two stories offer such strikingly similar scenarios that it seems surprising that they were published in the same collection; their only significant distinction is in their conclusions, which do vary dramatically. In both “A Visit to Avoyelles” and “In Sabine,” Chopin tells the story of a man whose object of affection has married someone else who has subsequently driven her into poverty. However, in “A Visit to Avoyelles,” the protagonist realizes the woman does love her husband, in spite of his neglect, while in “In Sabine,” the protagonist actually rescues the disenfranchised woman from her abusive home. Whether or not Chopin meant to differentiate her treatment of her disenfranchised characters, these two stories present particular sympathy for women who marry beneath them and become poorer, though there is a simultaneous sense that these women are culpable for their poverty because they have married outsiders who both happens to be men of no means. Both stories are told in third-person limited narration, focused on a male protagonist who has come upon a woman he once knew and contrasts that memory of her to the now-married woman. Through distanced narration focused on the male protagonist, each story seems to point to the importance of women’s prudence when it comes to whom they marry, particularly in terms of financial security. Given Chopin’s careful attention to her impoverished characters, it makes sense that her stories might serve as warnings about how to avoid financial (and personal) disaster, particularly for female readers. This thesis will consider characters whose poverty mostly resulted from their subordinate social status, but with these two stories
Chopin seems to warn readers with financial means to make smart decisions in order to keep themselves comfortable and safe.

In “A Visit to Avoyelles,” the protagonist, a Natchitoches Parish resident, Doudouce, makes an excuse to visit the much-talked about Mentine and her husband, Jules Trodon, and their many children. The story begins by relaying gossip about Mentine’s new family, including Jules’s selfishness, their poverty, and their absence from church, and the narration goes on to explain that Doudouce “knew well enough Mentine would have married him seven years ago had not Jules Trodon come up from Avoyelles and captivated her with his handsome eyes and pleasant speech” (Koloski 122).

Apparently hoping to sweep Mentine away from her desperate situation, Doudouce makes an excuse to show up at Mentine’s home. Evidently, Doudouce hopes to rescue Mentine from her poverty and to run off with her, the way they might have seven years prior had Jules not shown up and ruined their plans.

Though Doudouce does discover that Mentine indeed lives beneath what he has imagined for her and that her looks have faded, he also realizes by the end of the story that Mentine is happy enough. The story ends with Doudouce looking back at Mentine as he is about to leave, only to see her face “turned away from him […] gazing after her husband” (125). At this point, Doudouce likely realizes that Mentine does not want to be rescued and that this life, despite its disadvantages, is the life she chooses. Chopin’s plain descriptions of these disadvantages, especially the neglect and poverty, indicate that Mentine’s ties to her life may actually exist because she feels stuck, though the story’s ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations of Mentine’s choices and feelings.
Contrastingly, “In Sabine” focuses on a familiar Chopin character, Grégoire Santien (one of Chopin’s regularly appearing Santien brothers), as he coincidentally travels through Sabine and subsequently rescues the desperate “Tite Reine from her violent Texan husband, Bud Aiken. Another Natchitoches Parish native, Grégoire, recalls the beauty and confidence of the “little queen” (the English translation of the French name “Tite Reine) just as Doudouce recalls the beauty of the woman he once planned to marry. One major difference is that Grégoire has no intention of rescuing “Tite Reine when he first arrives, but her desperation pushes him to do just that.

In each story, the protagonist could have, and presumably would have, provided for the woman much better than her own husband. Both protagonists also express that they had each at least found the now-married woman attractive, as in Grégoire’s case, or even wanted to marry her himself, as in Doudouce’s case, before she chose the other man. Yet, each of the women had chosen the “wrong” man despite their options, and each, in turn, had been forced to give up her dreams as well as her social and economic status before her marriage.

Importantly, Chopin seems to push readers to sympathize more with “Tite Reine than with Mentine, because though they both have married poor outsiders to the Natchitoches Parish community they called home, Mentine still desperately loves her neglectful husband while “Tite Reine bravely chooses to leave her abusive husband. “Tite Reine’s fall from grace, which I will discuss in more detail later in this thesis, is not permanent because she seizes the opportunity to implore the man who has stumbled upon her home to help her escape. Grégoire does so (with the help of Mortimer, an African
American man who has been helping ‘Tite Reine) because he nobly decides that it is the right thing to do. ‘Tite Reine’s mistake of running off with this Texan is thus rectified because she does leave and effectively saves herself from her abuse and neglect.

Though Jules does not physically abuse Mentine in “A Visit to Avoyelles,” the narration provides for the reader the impression that Jules is less than ideal as a husband and perhaps even neglectful or abusive. He does not act as if he truly loves Mentine or their children together; both Natchitoches Parish gossip and Doudouce’s own observations suggest that Jules “was not kind to anyone but himself” (122). Even Jules’s few words in the story “heartless[ly] impl[ly]” that he wishes he did not have “half a dozen mouth’ to feed” (124). Thus, the story indicates that Mentine was foolish to ride off with him because he was handsome and strong, just like ‘Tite Reine was with Bud Aiken, and yet Mentine chooses to stay, perhaps because she is still foolish or because she feels bound by their marriage and children, despite the neglect and poverty, even though she has a perfectly kind-hearted, devoted, and wealthy man like Doudouce who would gladly have married her instead.

Chopin’s choice to include both of these stories in Bayou Folk may signal a trend in her perception of women’s roles in their own economic situations, as well as the sacrifice that marriage can represent for many women. Furthermore, these two conflicting stories represent the kind of duality inherent in Chopin’s fiction. While the two female characters both seem to be held responsible for their mistake in marrying an outsider to Natchitoches Parish, and in doing so impulsively, Chopin’s accounts sympathize with the “little queen” who saves herself in “In Sabine,” with the help of the male protagonist,
while she presents a less-convincing compassion for Mentine’s reckless commitment to her husband and life in “A Visit to Avoyelles.” Chopin’s portrayal of Jules’s apparent neglect and the family’s descent into poverty seem almost rationalized by Mentine’s choice to stay. At the end of the story when Doudouce looks back at her, he finds her “gazing after her husband” (125) even as her husband looks away from her; in this last image, we see a woman looking away from a man who cares for her and toward a man who does not. At the same time, Chopin provides important distinctions, including the fact that Mentine has four children with Jules while ‘Tite Reine has none with Bud Aiken, which may indicate that a simplistic reading would unfairly neglect to take into account the women’s individual differences. Still, Chopin seems to suggest that both women are ultimately at fault for running off with an outsider since they both end up poor and neglected, but she also depicts one woman who is strong enough to leave and another woman who is strong enough to stay.

We cannot be certain, as readers, how Chopin intends for us to assess these two female characters, especially when she provides us with opposing conclusions. We see the same kind of ambiguity in Chopin’s Acadian and African American characters whose representations vary between seemingly objective and yet simultaneously either judgmental or sensitive renderings. In the same way that Chopin portrays the burden of marrying into poverty in these two stories, she also presents two Acadian protagonists whose decisions might make them objects of sympathy or judgment, just as she does with African American and other Acadian characters in Bayou Folk. At times, Chopin reinforces stereotypes about poverty and ethnic or racial distinctions, and other times she
fleshes out her lower-class characters, making them more complex and thus more realistic.

In terms of style rather than content, most of Chopin’s stories seem, at the outset, to be objective in form, following the tradition of Realist literature in their attempts to depict life as it was really lived. At the same time, the stories follow traditional narrative forms, usually presenting a clear beginning, middle, and end that are not dissimilar from fairy tales. (This is especially true with “In Sabine” in which the “little queen” is saved.) While her stories have often been classified as objective, realistic renderings rather than as traditional, fairy-tale-like narratives, we might see the benefit from considering both narrative forms. Chopin may have written her stories with the audience in mind, and mostly her audience comprised nineteenth-century women and children, which may explain the fairy-tale quality to them. Then again, her own experiences living in Natchitoches Parish may have illuminated for her a personal insight into the culture

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4 Patricia Penrose’s article on “American Realism” on the National Council of Teachers of English’s website defines it as the literary period between 1865 and 1910 when the upheaval following the Civil War spurred a national focus on the control mankind had over his destiny. She explains:

America was leaping into a new modern age and people feared that local folkways and traditions would be soon forgotten. Responding to these sentiments, realistic writers set their stories in specific American regions, rushing to capture the ‘local color’ before it was lost. They drew upon the sometimes grim realities of everyday life, showing the breakdown of traditional values and the growing plight of the new urban poor. American realists built their plots and characters around people's ordinary, everyday lives. Additionally, their works contained regional dialects and extensive dialogue which connected well with the public. As a result, readers were attracted to the realists because they saw their own struggles in print. (Penrose)

American Realism is often considered the umbrella term for regionalism, naturalism, and psychological realism. Some critics, like Penrose, even include the term “local color” in their definition, though Fetterley and Pryse argue that women regionalists, like Kate Chopin, should not be categorized as such because of local color’s limiting and stereotypical representations.
distinct to that part of the South. In the same way that these stories may be interpreted as either realistic or contrived, original or conventional, her marginalized characters do not categorize Chopin simplistically either.

Another important trait of these stories is that they seem to be sympathetic toward the poor and desolate characters, especially when they are female. The male in each of these two stories garners sympathy, too, perhaps in large part due to the fact that he cares deeply for the poor female character. Nevertheless, some of Chopin’s stock characters, like the cruel, abusive husband and the devoted, caring black neighbor, suggest that her story’s sympathy for the disenfranchised character does not necessarily indicate that her writing is enlightened; in fact, this sympathy might exist, in part, because the characters are stereotypical examples of the poor and unfortunate. Her stories may be over-determined in order to garner more chance at publication, thus adhering to some of the ethnic and racial stereotypes that were characteristic of her era and environment. For example, Chopin clearly states that ‘Tite Reine is Acadian, and we might assume the same about Mentine given the description of her looks and her dialect’. These two Acadian women may present enough of a foreignness that their dabbling with outsiders may be a symptom of their seemingly “inferior” status overall. Likewise, the helpful and

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5 Though Mentine’s ethnicity is unclear, her skin is described as “brown” (Koloski 123) and her dialect is less refined than most of Chopin’s Creole characters. For example, Mentine says, “Yere ‘s Doudoue f’om Natchitoches, Jules […] he stop’ to tell us howdy, en passant” (124). The same is true of Doudouce’s dialect. He says, “I got a li’le pony yonda home […] w’at ent no use to me” (124). Thus, the two characters may both be Acadian. Their dialect resembles that of Chopin’s Acadian characters, whereas Chopin’s Creole characters speak with more standard English grammar, even when switching back and forth between French and English. For example, the Creole Bertrand Delmánde in “A Wizard from Gettysburg” speaks in more standard, formal English when he says, “What father and mé-mère feel worst about is that I shall have to leave college now” (130).
loyal African American, Mortimer, in “In Sabine” and the proud, likely-Acadian, Doudouce, in “A Visit to Avoyelles” present ambiguously sensitive portrayals of lower-class characters, while still managing to be somewhat stereotypical. Furthermore, the stereotypes that we see play out in Chopin’s work may reflect some of her own limited understandings and sympathies of race and ethnicity. The limited information about Chopin’s upbringing and personal life points to the fact that she may indeed have held beliefs that contemporary readers would not consider to be fair or enlightened. This kind of ambiguity allows for Chopin’s work to be read in countless ways, as simultaneously sympathetic and objective, enlightened and biased. This thesis will explore the shifting power dynamic and social relationships between Acadians and African Americans and will suggest that Chopin intended to give these two groups a place and a voice in a society and region that had long overlooked them.

In most scholarship on Chopin’s depiction of ethnicity or class, critics have focused on either Chopin’s Acadian characters or her African American characters, and yet almost no one has considered the two groups together. Scholars have traced Chopin’s personal relationships with each group as well as each group’s history in the Louisiana bayou region, but they have not assessed their interconnectedness in both reality and in Chopin’s fiction other than as a peripheral point in a somewhat related analysis. As Janet Holtman writes in her 2004 article that focuses on “the more numerous and foregrounded Cajun characters and their relationships to other social groups,” very few critics have considered in particular “the less frequently appearing black characters.” In fact,
Holtman suggests that such an analysis “could be an important avenue for future study” (74).

When we consider Chopin’s depiction of both her Acadian and African American characters, some characters, at first glance, appear stereotypically servile or ignorant, but often with a closer reading, we can garner the sense that these characters occupy a more complicated space in Chopin’s world, one in which their individual personalities and experiences merit more attention. As Janet Goodwyn explains, “Chopin’s stories rise above and beyond the confines of her own culture, reflecting all its constituents as so much more than their socially ascribed roles” (11). Though Goodwyn’s work focuses primarily on African Americans in Chopin’s work, this assessment certainly still rings true for all of her “local color” characters. When her African American characters interact with her Acadian characters, the stories explode with intricacies and shifting hierarchies that mark their relationship as more deserving of attention than they have yet received.

Typically, when scholars have assessed Chopin’s Acadians and African Americans, their analysis has been cursory to their purpose. For example, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse address the complex relationship between the African American Aunt Dicey and the Acadian Martinette in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” but they do so in order to make a larger argument about Chopin’s classification as a Regionalist writer rather than as a local colorist. Likewise, Bonnie James Shaker makes some strong points about Chopin’s “designation of whiteness for specific groups of people” (xi), particularly for both French-speaking Creoles and French-speaking
Acadians, though she distinguishes the two groups according to class. In fact, this differentiation, according to critics like Bonnie James Shaker and Janet Holtman, renders Chopin’s Acadians as stereotypically “primitive and passionate.” Shaker and Holtman suggest that Chopin’s Acadians are often presented as ignorant, “lesser” whites, often associated with what Southerners would later deem “poor white trash” (Holtman 74). Like African Americans, Acadians suffered tremendously as social and ethnic inferiors, and many critics have perhaps neglected to see the simultaneously sympathetic and stereotypical ways in which Chopin characterizes lower-class individuals. Along with Fetterley and Pryse, what Shaker neglects to consider conjointly with her notion of “whiteness,” and the differentiation of Acadians and Creoles, is their African American counterparts.

Another very informative argument comes from Maria Hebert-Leiter, though she focuses entirely on Acadians. She argues that Chopin “discovered a place of literary freedom for herself” (87) in her Acadian characters and intentionally wrote about a social group which had yet to be coded into American society. As I will discuss in more detail later in this thesis, Hebert-Leiter suggests, along with Joyce Coyne Dyer, that Chopin did so in order to speak freely of “female sexual desire” without threatening the contemporary Victorian expectations of nineteenth-century women. We might even see this to be true in “A Visit to Avoyelles” and “In Sabine,” which both present tales of rebellious Acadian women who marry poor outsiders. Hebert-Leiter’s reading, however, neglects to consider her complex renderings of such lower-class characters when she is
not depicting any kind of female sexual desire at all, which is the case in the stories presented in this thesis.

Meanwhile, interpretations of Chopin’s African-American characters have been somewhat less fruitful. The biographer who revived the American appreciation for Chopin in 1969, Per Seyersted, has been said to have found Chopin to be “somewhat ambivalent toward [African Americans] because of the countervailing tendencies or liberalism and traditionalism in her life” (Potter 57). His work and that of his apprentice and contemporary leading biographer, Emily Toth, has concentrated most significantly on her female characters and her groundbreaking portrayal of female sexuality and desire. That said, issues of race and ethnicity have primarily been explored by critics who have benefitted from Seyersted and Toth’s revival of Chopin and research of her life and works. I intend to diverge, along with those more recent critics, from the focus on the feminist readings of Chopin’s characters in order to address more specifically how she treats characters marginalized by poverty and ethnic or racial distinctions rather than those marginalized by gender.

One of the first scholars to focus exclusively on Chopin’s African-Americans, Richard H. Potter recalls in his 1971 article “Negroes in the Fiction of Kate Chopin” that at the time of Chopin’s publications in the late nineteenth century, “Southern authors, in particular, tended to see the Negro as ‘villain or saint, depending on whether or not he actively asserted his rights as freeman’” and Northern authors, who “lack[ed] the personal insight of their Southern counterparts […] adopted this general Southern attitude toward their Negro characters and racial themes” (41). Potter claims that, at the time of
his writing of this article, Chopin’s multitudinous African American characters had been virtually ignored, and he argues that “what truly distinguishes Kate Chopin is her departure from the traditional stereotypes that her contemporaries utilized.” Instead, Potter writes that her characters are “essentially realistic and humanistic” (42). He goes on to say that Bayou Folk contains at least fifteen stories, out of a total of twenty-three, that have “identifiable Negro characters while three of the remaining eight have passing Negro personnel” (46). Potter explains in his conclusion:

Mrs. Chopin observed rather than instructed, demonstrated rather than judged.
And she observed many blacks who were proud, individualistic human beings.
Especially with those to whom she gave the greatest care and delineation, she went beyond race and found humanity. (58)

Potter’s assessment of Chopin’s humanization of African Americans certainly may also ring true for Acadians, but his argument does not include the similarly subjugated counterparts.

In the same kind of approach, Janet Goodwyn’s 1994 article “‘Dah you is, settin' down, lookin' jis' like w'ite folks!': Ethnicity Enacted in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction” proposes that Chopin’s stories present more complex portrayals of African Americans as part of a Louisiana that was culturally separate from the rest of the United States. Goodwyn suggests that Chopin’s Louisiana more specifically recalls post-colonialism than the post-bellum South, and in this post-colonial world, Chopin’s African Americans suffer as a result of their “inferior or predisposed status” (11). That suffering, according to Goodwyn, implies that Chopin intended for her subjugated characters to illuminate the
injustice of the social hierarchies imposed upon them, and not at all to expose their actual inferiority as individuals or as a group.

Meanwhile, Timothy K. Nixon’s 2003 article “Same Path, Different Purpose: Chopin’s La Folle and Welty’s Phoenix Jackson” instead proposes that while both Kate Chopin and Eudora Welty serve as two white female authors who attempted to “write black” (938), Chopin’s 1891 “Beyond the Bayou” reinforces the status quo and Welty’s 1941 “A Worn Path” criticizes “America’s racist climate.” Chopin’s black agoraphobic protagonist only leaves her home to save the life of her white master’s child, and her inferiority and seeming satisfaction with her status validate “unreconstructed views of the devoted darkey” whereas Welty’s story “illustrates the danger, the difficulties and the humiliation that racial Others must grapple with” (954).

In comparing Potter’s earlier analysis and Nixon’s more recent analysis, we may encounter shifting sympathies and criticisms for Chopin’s work according to societal contexts and societal changes among other things. For example, a writer from the 1970s might more readily see Chopin’s work as racially sympathetic or “realistic,” whereas a more contemporary critic might be more likely to find fault in her sometimes stereotypically devoted African American characters. Whatever the cause might be, Goodwyn’s 1994 piece may indicate a fluctuating trend in critics’ understanding of Chopin’s racial depictions. At the same time, few scholars have studied race exclusively in Chopin’s work, and it is likely that contemporary critics would still waver between praising her foresight and admonishing her stereotypes.
This thesis seeks to consider not just how Chopin portrays her African American characters, but how she portrays them alongside and interacting with her Acadian characters. By closely discerning Chopin’s portrayal of the complicated and shifting subjugation of both Acadians and African Americans in several of her *Bayou Folk* stories, I hope to suggest that her characters occupy an important ambiguous role in late nineteenth-century American literature. Though Chopin does not always deviate from stereotypical representations of her Acadian and African American characters, by focusing her literary attention on their experiences at all, she seems to be paving a way for their acceptance, or at least acknowledgment, as members of Louisiana society. Interestingly, her stories portray these two groups as simultaneously generous and contentious toward one another. These wavering relations demonstrate two groups whose roles require sometimes that they work together to maintain their pride and honor. At times, Acadian characters are presented as more ignorant but more kind, whereas African Americans are more perceptive and yet crueler. Still, Chopin displays members of both groups as decent and even heroic, and their occasional ignorance or insensitivity sometimes seems to be justified by their limiting social roles and desperate economic means.

Though these stories do not present an effort to elevate either group in class or status, by writing so consistently and conscientiously about them, Chopin works to give Acadians and African Americans a voice and thus, a place in society that is not simply stereotypical but something more complex. While there is no simple way to categorize Chopin's depictions and interrelationships, the complexities provide an intriguing and
new way to look at the *Bayou Folk* collection specifically and, more generally, at Chopin as a writer.
The Setting for *Bayou Folk*: Historical, Personal, and Literary Considerations

Prior to a closer analysis of some of Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* stories, I want to pay heed to all of the influences that may have shaped her depictions of Acadians and African Americans and their interrelationships. In this section, I intend to more specifically delve into the historical and social background of the region that Chopin portrays, as well as to examine her personal experience with ethnicity and race. Lastly, I will turn to literary classifications in order to assess what kinds of literary influences she may have incorporated into her representations of lower-class characters. Because Chopin neither entirely conforms to social standards of her day nor entirely transgresses from those norms, a wider breadth of background information will help to ground our assessment of her sometimes stereotypical and other times more nuanced depictions of Acadians and African Americans.

Most of Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* stories are set in or near Natchitoches Parish, located in the western central portion of Louisiana. Importantly, this part of the United States was unusual in its wide populace of French-speaking immigrants. Named after the Natchitoches group of American Indian tribes, the city of Natchitoches claims to be “the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase Territory.” During the beginnings of French settlement into the region in the early 1700s, the Natchitoches tribe worked together with French colonists to defeat the Natchez Indians who were fighting to claim
The Natchitoches territory. Following the victory over the Natchez, trade with the established American Indian tribes flourished to the north and west of Natchitoches. Toward the end of the eighteenth-century, the Natchitoches tribe had decreased in size and “parted with most of their lands to the French Creoles” (“Explore”). When Thomas Jefferson’s diplomats sealed the Louisiana Purchase deal with Napoleon Bonaparte in 1803, Natchitoches Parish suddenly became part of the United States. It was already a diverse region when the French Creoles, who made up much of the population, shared their new situation with neighboring Spanish Creoles, African slaves, and the newly-immigrated Acadians.

The first white settlers in Louisiana were French, many of them “the second sons of aristocrats” seeking adventure (“History of the Creoles”). Typically, because Creoles were New World- or American-born, their status rendered them superior to newer immigrants, particularly the more impoverished Acadians who later settled in Louisiana. Deported from Acadia, a former French colony in eastern Canada, starting in 1755, over 10,000 Acadians were forced into parts of the British colonies and even sent back to France, and many were even put in prison or killed (“Acadian History”). As a result of the vicious campaign led by British Governor Charles Lawrence, the Acadians had to find new homes in places friendly to the French-speaking exiles. One such place was Louisiana, which had long been a French colony and only recently become a Spanish colony when the Acadians began arriving in 1764. During a period of wavering relations with the Spanish government, Acadians were able to send for relatives and create a substantial settlement in Louisiana. Over the next few centuries, the term used to refer to
these exiled people adjusted to “Cajun,” which once signaled a rather pejorative name and now has modified to a more acceptable term used to refer specifically to the Louisiana Acadians (Hebert).

Kate Chopin was not the only nineteenth-century writer to portray Acadians. Pearl L. Brown claims that “Cajuns in nineteenth-century literary were frequently presented as either simple and gentle or rough and crude, given to drinking, fighting, and avenging wrongs” (127). Brown goes on to cite Glenn Conrad as commenting that “the Cajun has been depicted as either a savage, ‘an ignorant, therefore superstitious swamp-dweller living in squalor in a moss-draped, reptile-infested wilderness or as a creature of simple but solid virtue… inhabiting a timeless, changeless land of great natural beauty’” (qtd. in Pearl 127). Coincidentally, one of Chopin’s most well-known depictions of Acadians comes to us in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” in which the reader is actually introduced to the protagonist as he comes “out of the swamp, trying to sell a wild turkey” (Koloski 158). These competing representations of Acadians as lower-class savages or simpletons suggest that Chopin’s more complex portrayals were intended to overcome these stereotypes and perhaps even to add some substance to outsiders’ perceptions. Then again, in some ways her Acadian characters are not necessarily any more enlightened than some of these stereotypes suggest, since she often presents Acadians as noble and clever, despite their “simple” ways.

As discussed in the introduction, several of the Chopin critics who have focused on her Acadian characters have suggested that Chopin used her Acadian female characters, along with her Creole females, to explore female sexuality in a way that was
less confrontational for Northern publishers. While this may be true, this sort of reading does not explore the relationships between her Acadian and African American characters, and furthermore, it insinuates that Chopin’s main goal as a writer was to explore female sexuality. Often, critics like Per Seyersted and Emily Toth have focused on Chopin’s most famous work, *The Awakening*, and stories which mimic some of the same themes (like “The Story of an Hour” and even “Désirée’s Baby”) while neglecting the stories which have little to do with female sexuality or even female rights. Many of Chopin’s stories depict issues of ethnicity and race as they were being explored during the 1890s in the Post-Reconstruction era, and perhaps these same stories work to perpetuate some other kinds of social issues besides those of the female gender.

Two examples of critics who have suggested that Chopin may have intended to redefine ethnicity through her work are Bonnie James Shaker and Maria Hebert-Leiter, who both argue that Chopin worked to simultaneously Americanize Creoles and Acadians, as well as to render the two groups distinct from one another. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, “large numbers of wealthy, educated Anglo-Americans migrated to the state,” and in order to “strengthen its claim to landholding privileges against the newcomers, [the formerly hegemonic Spanish-and-French Louisiana populations] deployed the term ‘creole’ to mean any native-born Louisianan in order to emphasize its own ‘prior rights as Louisiana born-and-bred citizens’” (Shaker 29). Of course, this meant that the Acadians, who were “of French peasant stock” (Grover 30) and descendants of the exiled French-Canadian colonists, were not necessarily protected from, or even considered at all by, the Anglo-American newcomers to Louisiana. Shaker
and Hebert-Leiter each claim that the state of affairs following Reconstruction meant that Chopin had the opportunity to Americanize two groups that might otherwise be marginalized. At the same time, however, they maintain that she carefully delineates the differences between upper-class Creoles and lower-class Acadians. Meanwhile, Chopin’s treatment of her African American characters seems similarly complicated by the South’s traumatic experiences of the Civil War and Reconstruction and Southerners’ less sympathetic regard for freed slaves.

Throughout the Acadians’ years of exile and relocation, African slaves were being shipped to Louisiana, and most were enslaved for life. By 1860, Louisiana’s slave population topped 332,000, but still was less than half of the total state population. Most slaves worked on rural farms or plantations, many in cotton or sugar production. At the same time, “some of Louisiana’s most prosperous planters and farmers were free African Americans, the owners of more property than free blacks in any other state (“Antebellum Louisiana”). In 1860, Louisiana was home to 472 free blacks with an average of $10,000 in real estate holdings, while far behind Louisiana, the state with the second highest number of free blacks was South Carolina with 162 free blacks whose average real estate holding was less than $5,000 (“Antebellum Louisiana”).

One particularly important settlement of free blacks which almost certainly figures into Chopin’s work is a colony not far from Natchitoches Parish, “L’Isle des Mulatres,” now called Isle Brevelle, “an area on the western bank of Cane River” (Gaudet 46). Marcia Gaudet suggests that Chopin shows knowledge of this colony’s existence and its “Creoles of color,” who enjoyed more civil rights and privileges than
Acadians did prior to the Civil War. Isle Brevelle made up a thirty-by-five mile stretch of Natchitoches Parish, which means that its existence could not have been ignored by a writer seeking to write about this particular parish. Almost entirely made up of “Creoles of color,” the colony had been started in the late eighteenth-century by a former slave, Marie Thereze Concoin and her children, after Marie Thereze had been bought (and eventually freed) by a young Frenchman, Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, with whom she had a nineteen-year “liaison” (Gaudet 46-7). Interestingly, Marie Thereze and her children, some “pure Negro” and others considered “Creoles of color” (because they were fathered by Metoyer), owned “almost 12,000 acres and at least 99 slaves” (Gaudet 47). Research suggests that “in 1830, at the height of their affluence, the Metoyers owned more slaves than any other free black family in the United States” (Gaudet 47).

According to Gaudet, Marie Thereze’s offspring with Metoyer “were accepted and accorded equality in many ways by white planters,” and this privileged position only altered when the Civil War took away much of their wealth and status. Not long after the war, Louisiana law began to group these Creoles of color with the emancipated slaves and their rights diminished, though they still considered themselves superior to the former slaves (Gaudet 46).

Gaudet goes on to suggest that the Creoles of color from Isle Brevelle maintained their self-respect and “had pride in their heritage, their [shared Roman Catholic] religion, their abilities, and themselves” (48), and that Kate Chopin must have been fascinated by the legends of these Creoles of color and their founder, Marie Thereze. While there are no direct references in Chopin’s stories to Isle Brevelle or to Marie Thereze, it seems
unlikely that Chopin would have been able to ignore this particular settlement’s existence and its meaning for her contemporary Creoles, people of color, and her Cane River Creoles of color.

Furthermore, Marie Thereze’s situation was not entirely unusual. Though she owned a significant chunk of land near where many of Chopin’s stories are set, Chopin would also have been aware of the practices of “plaçage,” concubinage, and miscegenation” that had been rampant in Louisiana, particularly in New Orleans, for more than a century (“Slaves”). Visitors to New Orleans often wrote about “plaçage,” apparently astounded by the otherwise atypical practice (“Slaves”). Bennett Wall’s book, *Louisiana: A History*, suggests that this practice was native to Creoles in New Orleans. He explains:

> Under this system a young free black woman would be “placed” by her parents under the legal protection of a white man, usually a person of good economic and social standing. The man accepting the plaçage would provide a home for the young woman, often having an “unofficial” family with her in addition to a “legal” one that he might have elsewhere in the city. (qtd. in “Slaves”)

Wall also suggests that pro-slavery advocates either ignored “plaçage,” concubinage, and miscegenation, claiming that “race mixing would result in a weaker white race” (“Slaves”), or they suggested that the availability of slave women, who were powerless to resist the unwanted sexual advances of white men, helped guard white women from the lust of white men” (qtd. in “Slaves”). During this same era (and up to the Civil War), as
in much of the South, laws were in place that protected white women from rape, especially by a slave (who would subsequently be put to death), while black women had no such protection for rape by any man. While relationships between whites, free people of color, and former slaves were complex following the Civil War in many parts of the South, Louisiana seems to have had an especially diverse social system and hierarchy, which certainly complicates Chopin’s depiction of the Louisiana Bayou region.

Natchitoches Parish, in particular, comprised a complex cultural mixing bowl, one which had seen multiple groups interact and sometimes thrive together, but following the Civil War and Reconstruction, many of those same groups suffered alongside each other both economically and socially. During the decade of most of Chopin’s publications, the 1890s, “white vigilante violence, which most often took the form of black lynching, was at an all-time high” (Shaker 26). Some critics suggest that Chopin’s stories depict, instead of a compassion for the Creoles of color, a “soft position on race” which still managed to uphold racial subjugation. While her work in no way condones white vigilante violence, her texts may indeed reflect New Paternalism, “the ideals of white mastery wherein former slaveholders cared for their neighbors of color through the honor and duty of noblesse oblige,” as well as professing the notion that “free people of color prefer subservience to independence, so long as their masters/employers are of the kindly, new southern mind” (Shaker 26).

Chopin critics have often been at arms with one another over the question of race in her stories. Some critics, particularly the first to bring her stories to light (like Per Seyersted and Emily Toth), hold strong to the notion that Chopin effectively subverts her
transgressive depictions of female autonomy in her work by using “foreign” females whose rebellions seemed, therefore, less threatening to the status quo in the rest of America. That kind of reading, however, constitutes only one way to read Chopin’s use of ethnically and racially diverse characters. We may not be finished addressing the multitudinous portrayals of the feminine desire for independence in Chopin’s fiction, but more recent scholarship, which seems to have angered the first wave of scholars, Emily Toth included, has questioned Chopin’s racial and ethnic biases. Considering the contemporary readings of Chopin’s work, we must move to consider how her work simultaneously presents her lower-class characters with compassion and prejudice.

One of the best ways to discover from where sympathies and stereotypes might derive is to look into her personal experiences. From the time she was very young, Kate Chopin balanced a bilingual and bi-cultural lifestyle, moving comfortably in both English and French-speaking circles in St. Louis, New Orleans, and northwestern Louisiana. Especially as an adult, her social groups typically included sophisticated and wealthy people, though many of her stories, in Bayou Folk particularly, focus on the everyday

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Kate Chopin herself translated her social criticism. Because her local color characters were quaint, distant, and sometimes women of color as well, they were less threatening to mainstream audiences if they did unconventional things—such as indulging in sex outside marriage or criticizing patriarchal norms. This kind of masking, sometimes attributed to local color writers of the late nineteenth century, is actually much, much older: even Shakespeare and his contemporaries set thinly disguised portrayals of current chicanery in ancient Rome or Italy or Spain. Besides being prudent, these disguises gave certain audiences a pleasing sense that they were in the know—and Chopin’s readers, at least today, recognize the powerful feminist messages delivered in such seemingly quaint stories as “Désirée’s Baby” and “La Belle Zoraïde.” (“Introduction,” Louisiana Literature [Spring 1994] 14)
experiences of impoverished characters. Most of her short stories are set in the part of Louisiana where Oscar Chopin’s family had lived for several generations and where Kate O’Flaherty [her maiden name], formerly of St. Louis, joined him several years after they were married (Koloski “Introduction” xi).

Like Kate, Oscar Chopin was also an American-born Creole, and his supposedly abusive French father and submissive Louisiana-native mother, had instilled in him, too, a sense of biculturalism. He was raised “on the family plantations in Natchitoches Parish in northwest Louisiana” and “most of their neighbors in and around the village of Cloutierville were from France or descended from French immigrants” (Unveiling 51).

Similarly, Kate O’Flaherty had been surrounded by “genuine” Creoles, as her mother’s French family had been in the New World for two centuries. Her father, who died when she was five years old in a train accident, was Irish Catholic, and at the time of their 1844 St. Louis nuptials, marriages between “old money” French-speaking Creoles and hard-working Irish immigrants were not unusual (Unveiling 5). Biographers know little about Oscar and Kate’s courtship, but they were married on June 9, 1870. After an extended European honeymoon (some of which was spent in Paris, of course), they settled down in New Orleans until 1879 when they could no longer afford the city life. Kate was pregnant with their sixth child when they packed up their belongings and left for Oscar’s hometown, Cloutierville, Louisiana.

Emily Toth’s biography chronicles how Kate Chopin, who was related through her mother to many locals, including the grocery store owner and at least one merchant, stuck out to most of the Cloutierville natives as an outsider. In fact, during the tense
period of Reconstruction, Kate’s unusual ways and fashionable style made her seem quite “Yankee” to the Bayou folk (*Unveiling* 83). This sense of exclusion figures into her representations of Cloutierville folk; as neither insider nor outsider, she dabbles in what was known then as the “local color movement” while still understanding the degradation inherent in an outsider’s attempt at depicting a particular place and its people. Because Chopin chose to depict a world she inhabited as both an insider, as Oscar Chopin’s wife, and as an outsider, since she never quite felt at home there, her stories allow for a complex reading of these Louisiana lives.

Her stories employ a great deal of “detachment and irony, with an understanding that truth looks different within different cultures” (Koloski xxiii). Scholars have described her writing as “gentle” and “knowing”; Chopin herself described her work as an attempt to show “true life and true art,” “human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it” (Koloski xxiv). Harold Bloom describes Chopin’s writing as “more naturalistic than Romantic” and more allied with Whitman’s poetic style and “narcissistic and even autoerotic” perspective (Bloom 1).

As an outsider, Chopin’s portrayals of the Natchitoches region as well as the Acadians and African Americans, who would have been considered “beneath” her, may, in fact, be colored by a prejudiced understanding. When her characters are simple or even flatly represented, this may point to her own difficulty at representing someone so foreign to her; and yet when those same types of characters are rendered in a more complex fashion, we like to call her “knowing” and “gentle.” Based on the authorial
fallacy, we also cannot rely on what Chopin herself claimed to be creating. “True life and true art” means something different to each of us, particularly given our different backgrounds and experiences. The same “gentle” and “knowing” perspective presented in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be described by contemporary readers as demeaning and racially biased. In the same way, a Chopin reader would be mistaken to similarly categorize her depictions of Acadians and African Americans, when so many factors are at work both in Chopin’s era and her personal life.

Importantly, we must also consider Chopin’s experiences with race. Like many children growing up in the South in the mid-nineteenth-century, Kate herself was immersed in the trauma of the Civil War. When the war came to St. Louis, she was eleven years old. The school she attended, the Sacred Heart Academy for girls, closed temporarily, and Kate spent the rest of the Civil War in and out of school. According to the 1860 census, Kate’s family still owned six slaves, and though she likely never attended a slave auction, Kate was surrounded by slavery. After the St. Louis mayor declared martial law, children essentially were “prisoners in their own homes” (Unveiling 25). This did not stop the fiery, young Kate from tearing down a Union flag that had been tied to the O’Flaherty’s porch. After her subsequent arrest and brief detainment, Kate and her family resumed their attempts to protect themselves and their property.

Following the early loss of her father, Kate’s immediate family consisted almost entirely of women. Feeling especially vulnerable, the O’Flaherty family had to contend for some time with a Union headquarters just three doors down from their house. Emily Toth suggests that the O’Flaherty women may even have been terrorized with “sexual
violence and intimidation” (30), though no record directly substantiates such a hypothesis.

Of course, Reconstruction did not end the turmoil felt by much of the South following the Civil War, and for many decades after the War Between the States, the South continued to suffer tremendously. While the North ably moved forward with its economic expansion and the Industrial Revolution, the South still housed many people unsure of how they would put food on the table now that what many previously-privileged Southerners would call the glory days of plantation life had come and gone. Koloski calls this era “a time of traumatic social change,” one in which “the once-dominant Creoles have lost their economic—if not their social—power and sometimes work the fields alongside lower-class Acadians and blacks” (Koloski viii). Almost all people living along the bayou, no matter what their backgrounds may have been, were poor and many were illiterate.

As the country, especially the North, attempted to reconcile its differences and bring some sense of unification to a very economically and socially divided nation, young people in the South experienced major dissatisfaction at their squalid circumstances. Some youngsters depicted in Chopin’s stories are even “attracted to newly arrived outsiders who by their very presence suggest fresh options” (Koloski viii). While slavery had long been abolished, the South did not allow for equal treatment or status for African Americans, nor did it do so for American Indians. As one Chopin critic explains, “The ruined economy and social order are embodied in decaying plantation mansions with crumbling porticos” (Koloski viii).
Though most of Chopin’s stories do not explicitly confront the trauma of the Civil War, “The Wizard from Gettysburg,” which I will discuss in more detail later, and her novel *At Fault* both portray the prejudice and terror that lingered long after the war had. Interestingly, Grégoire Santien, one of the main characters in *At Fault* shows up again as the protagonist and hero in “In Sabine,” and his very different role in each story suggests that he serves to maintain the Old South order, in different ways depending on the story. In *At Fault*, he plays the reckless youth, and in “In Sabine” he is a thoughtful hero, but in both stories he tries to right a wrong that has been done. He avenges a violent act of arson by killing the African American who set the fire in *At Fault* and he rescues the abused Acadian wife in “In Sabine”; in each case, he is the decisive white man who takes charge and takes action. Both *At Fault* and “The Wizard from Gettysburg” directly assert just how much the Civil War influenced Kate Chopin’s stories, and the continued use of Grégoire Santien in her later story “In Sabine” suggests Chopin’s acknowledgment of the|

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7 Kate Chopin’s first published novel, *At Fault*, presents the often palpable sense of violence inherent in the poverty-stricken, fallen South. Set on the Place-du-Bois plantation on the Cane River in northwestern Louisiana, near Natchitoches, *At Fault* tells the story of a plantation and its owners and workers whose lives have been shattered by poverty, divorce, and death. Though the story focuses on the love affair between the widowed mistress of the plantation, Thérèse Lafirme, and David Hosmer, the new manager of the sawmill on the Place-du-Bois plantation, both Jocint, one of Hosmer’s sawmill employees, and Thérèse’s nephew, Grégoire Santien, demonstrate the destructive nature intrinsic to many young Southern men following the devastation of the Civil War. Jocint burns down the sawmill out of anger over being fired and Grégoire responds by killing him. David Russell has suggested that “Jocint represents the uncontained blackness that rejects the re-imposition of the Old South order. His ‘open revolt’ could potentially disrupt the reemerging political landscape of the South” (13). In turn, Grégoire’s violent response renders him the protector of that Old South order, one which dictates not only class and racial superiority, but which has never quite disappeared in spite of the economic devastation that followed the war. *At Fault* displays some of the same complex representations of the Old South and the New South, and how Acadians and African Americans fit into this new society, as in her *Bayou Folk* collection.
long process of healing war wounds for many people in the South, both fictional and actual.

Something we also must consider when addressing Chopin’s understandings of race and racial prejudice is the fact that her husband, Oscar Chopin, belonged to the Natchitoches White League. Though records suggest that this particular group “appears to have been a commercial requirement,” we cannot know exactly what either Oscar or Kate would have made of this association (Thomas 100). Since Oscar had not fought for the Confederacy and had married a woman who seemed like a Northerner to the Louisiana natives, his membership likely corroborated his loyalty to white supremacy that was necessary for his business to succeed. Even before leaving New Orleans, records confirm that Oscar advertised for his commission business in the Natchitoches’s Vindicator, whose motto on its masthead read “The Official Organ of the White Citizens of the Red River, Sabine, Winn and Natchitoches Parish” (Thomas 100). While the degree of Oscar’s loyalty, or Kate’s, cannot be certain, Oscar was indeed connected quite brazenly with white supremacy.

Scholars have long debated how closely connected Kate could have been to the White League and Reconstruction issues. None of her stories directly mention the White League, and most of her stories are not overtly political in nature. However, the commercial requirement of belonging to a white supremacy group seems tied to much of Chopin’s complex portrayal of poverty with regard to race and ethnicity. Thomas remarks that some of her Reconstruction stories “seemingly reinforce literary stereotypes of childish savages or loyal ex-slaves,” but others “disrupt formulaic models” (103). As
for her Post-Reconstruction era stories, scholars like Dorys Crow Grover argue that Chopin was not interested in “rescuing the past” and she neither “sanctions nor condemns” racial discrimination and class consciousness (33). She displays both the kindness and abuse of Creoles toward the Acadians and African Americans they considered to be inferior, and in doing so, she seems to disrupt the notion that she believed in white supremacy or even adhered to social norms of the Creole-dominated society. It seems unlikely that Chopin agreed with the society’s premises on race, given the way her stories vacillate between sensitive and stereotypical depictions of African Americans in her stories. Furthermore, since many of her stories focus on the plights of African American characters, Chopin certainly could not have felt entirely superior because her stories suggest that African Americans play a particularly important role in the South, even if that role is subordinate. As I will argue, some critics have suggested that Chopin’s depiction of race is complex, neither entirely stereotypical nor sympathetic, and the same is true for her depiction of the similarly subjugated Acadians. Even more interesting, perhaps, is the way in which Chopin portrays the two groups as they interact and interrelate in those stories.

Before we move onto the analysis of the Bayou Folk stories themselves, I would like to look at one last influence on Chopin’s writing: genre and literary classification. Critics have long considered Chopin a “local colorist,” but in recent years that distinction has come under fire. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines local color as “a kind of fiction that came to prominence in the U.S.A. in the late nineteenth century, and was devoted to capturing the unique customs, manners, speech, folklore, and
other qualities of a particular regional community, usually in humorous short stories” (Baldick). At least one renowned contemporary Chopin critic, Bernard Koloski, does not think twice before describing Chopin as a local color writer, explaining, “Realists and local color writers pictured ordinary people living ordinary lives” (x). Nowhere does Koloski’s definition nor the Oxford Dictionary’s definition utilize the term “exploitation,” but other critics have come to recognize a distinctive sense of superiority inherent in stories told from outsiders, or for outsiders, of the very regions they were attempting to depict.

Aware of the subtle criticism of local color inherent in one of Chopin’s Bayou Folk stories, “A Gentleman from Bayou Teche,” Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have re-categorized Chopin as a regionalist writer instead of a local colorist. In their book American Women Regionalists, Fetterley and Pryse explain local color in the following manner:

The phrase ‘local colorist’ (which implies a literary analog to painters of so-called ‘genre’ scenes) refers to numerous post-Civil War writers, including, for example, Sherwood Bonner, Alice Brown, George Washington Cable, Hamlin Garland, Bret Harte, Ruth McEnery Stuart, Mark Twain, and Constance Fenimore Woolson. These writers depicted ‘local’ scenes, often from regions more newly opened to settlement and statehood than New England, from the perspective of a narrator defined as superior to and outside of the region of fiction, and often to entertain and satisfy the curiosity of late-nineteenth-century urban readers in Boston and New York. (xi-xii)
Fetterley and Pryse consider these particular writers, and other lesser-known nineteenth-century American writers, and discover that “white men did not write the same kinds of regional texts that some white women or some members of minority groups did” (xi). Contending that the women writers they discuss likely would not have categorized themselves in this manner, Fetterley and Pryse set out to distinguish what connected these women and minority writers. One of the major distinctions Fetterley and Pryse suggest is that regionalist writers shared the desire “not to hold up regional characters to potential ridicule by eastern urban readers but rather to present regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader’s sympathy and identification” (xii). This conjecture seems to hold particularly true with “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” in which the Acadian protagonist is presumably saved from local color exploitation.

Furthermore, though these regionalist writers wrote poetry as well as non-fiction, Fetterley and Pryse argue that their tendency to use prose for regionalist ideals demonstrates that they were conscious of the possibilities inherent in prose for “articulating a particular perspective on American life” (xii). Intriguingly, many of the writers that Fetterley and Pryse consider to be “regionalist” communicated indirectly, and sometimes directly, with one another in a larger network than we might realize at first glance. For example, in most biographies of Kate Chopin, her influences are listed as Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, but Fetterley and Pryse cite Chopin as having stated that Mary Wilkins Freeman was a “great genius” and “that she knew of ‘no one better than Miss [Sarah Orne] Jewett to study for technique and nicety of construction’” (xiii). Of course, the American women regionalists share a historical context, too, during which
their values seem to have clashed with the dominant ideology of the “woman’s sphere” of motherhood and domesticity.

In their next book, *Writing out of Place*, Fetterley and Pryse charge that their hope in creating the category of “regionalism” (as opposed to “local color”) is to bring these writers “into visibility” and “locate regionalism alongside realism and naturalism as a parallel tradition written roughly in the second-half of the nineteenth century and at the turn into the twentieth century” (4). Likewise, they seem to disparage the relegation of these particular writers into the category of “local color” because of its more recent establishment as an exploitative genre.

During Chopin’s era, however, she was considered a local colorist. In fact, when *Bayou Folk* was published, most major magazines and newspapers provided some kind of review of the collection, and almost all of them “described Chopin’s twenty-three stories as local color tales from Louisiana” (*Unveiling* 149). Reviewers considered her book quaint and charming, and few remarked on Chopin’s characters as “colorfully primitive rural Southerners, plus a couple of New Orleanians” (*Unveiling* 150). Some of these reviews may have been based, too, on previous readings of Chopin’s stories. When Houghton-Mifflin published Kate Chopin’s first collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, on March 24, 1894, it was not the first time some of those stories had been by the general public. Chopin wrote most of her *Bayou Folk* pieces between 1891 and 1894 (Koloski ix), and prior to the collection’s publication, journals like *Youth’s Companion* had printed “A Wizard from Gettysburg” and *Vogue* had printed “A Visit to Avoyelles.” Chopin’s private journals are filled with meticulous notes on where she sent her stories, on what
dates they were received, and the responses from the publishers. Records indicate that “she earned $787 from these magazines [that printed her stories] ($750 from Youth’s Companion alone), a sum that makes up over one-third of her lifetime’s $2300 literary income” (Shaker 7). In short, Chopin’s categorization as a local colorist during her lifetime likely resulted from her placement in publications that enjoyed the “foreign” feel of many of her Natchitoches Parish and New Orleans stories.

One of the most important factors in Kate Chopin’s establishment as a writer was the appeal of her Southern stories to Northern periodical publishers. Bonnie James Shaker, one of the only other Chopin critics to delve into her literary classification, purports in her book on racial formation in Chopin’s Youth’s Companion stories that the 1890s saw an increase in Regionalist women’s writing in particular because of the publishers’ desire to create a clear divide between “American” and “un-American” behaviors. Shaker’s argument suggests that the labor unrest in the North spawned “the discursive antidote” of “class obedience to capital class guidance through Christian submission” (21). Based on the notion that working men practiced “religious indifference” which, in turn, fed their beastly rebellion, editors like Youth’s Companion’s own Daniel Sharp Ford turned to Christianity’s “euphemized passivity and peace” to overturn “organized labor’s active resistance” (21). Shaker cites several clear examples of Northern “genteel” publishers, as she calls them, associating labor “agitators” with “foreignness, or all things different from a standard, middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ‘American’ code of conduct” (21). This idea of using literary influence to
designate what constituted a “white American” certainly could be an important factor in Chopin’s work.

Shaker claims that Chopin does, in fact, work to create an elevation of her white characters, acting out in her texts what Shaker calls a “vehicle for social advancement for Louisiana peoples of European- or Canadian-French ancestry” (24). In this manner, the Louisiana Creole and Acadian characters, despite their different “coloration, dialect, and religion,” become “fundamentally like participants in northern white middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture” (24). Chopin may have felt an urgency to assimilate European- and Canadian-French people into the category of whiteness because of the motivating rights and privileges allowed for white Americans following the Civil War. Shaker argues that “the fragility of the category of ‘ethnicity’ and the irredeemability of the category ‘race’” (26) made assimilation possible, since ethnic “others” actually live “a very tenuous existence” (25) because their categorization is not fixed, whereas “race” is rooted in “essential difference” (26). Given the social upheaval and racial violence of the 1890s, Shaker’s supposition is based in solid reasoning; perhaps Chopin indeed intended to de-marginalize both Creoles and Acadians, while continuing to subjugate African Americans. Shaker claims that Chopin’s work exists as one of the catalysts for this nation-wide shift in ethnic understanding, but it is problematic to assume that this was Chopin’s intent.

Then again, Chopin may have simply intended to portray a community that had seen little representation, a community that happened to be filled with “American foreigners,” a region with racial and ethnic demographics that were different from any
other part of the nation. Shaker points out that during Chopin’s era, women writers often served as “mimetic ‘reporters’” or as “‘regional correspondents’ for a northern-based media,” sharing the “first-hand knowledge of life around them [that] outsiders lacked” (23). Chopin may have believed, and she certainly claimed so, that her work served as “true life and true art” (Koloski xxiv), a realistic rendering of Natchitoches Parish as she had understood it while she lived in Cloutierville. At the same time, as a non-native, her work almost necessarily subjugates because it is an outsider’s perspective sharing with outsiders a world that perhaps neither understands. Likewise, since Chopin was herself a Creole, and her husband’s family was part of the upper-class Creole society, her renderings of lower-class Acadians and African Americans can certainly not be free from prejudice and subordination, realized or not.

Along with these suppositions, Shaker reminds her readers that the Civil War had generated many other divisions in the United States and that Regionalism sought to “bring to the fore a presence from the various regions of the country, and southern texts were particularly valued by northern editors” (22). The North had long been trying to record its “success of combining the formerly barbarous, slave-holding Confederacy with the enlightened, racially tolerant Union” due to the necessity of unifying a country after a devastating war between its two halves.

As Steven K. Johnson puts it in his article on “post-Civil War memories,” “the sectional reconciliation of post-Civil War America asked North and South to ‘bury the hatchet,’ to intentionally forget aspects of past division in order to proceed amicably into a unified and prosperous national future.” Johnson and Shaker both attest to the role of
short fiction in the “reconciliation” during this period, but Johnson also accounts for scholars who have suggested that “the 1890s was a decade notable for reconsolidating post-war American white male power under a national rhetoric of sectional reconciliation.” Either way, “short fiction remained an influential venue of Civil War memory among white, literate classes.” Interestingly, Shaker suggests that female regionalist writers were at the heart of this intended reconciliation or re-consolidation, whichever we might call it, whereas Johnson’s post-Civil War discussion revolves around Ambrose Bierce and Kate Chopin, thus not limiting his discussion to female writers solely.

For their own part, Southern writers, males and females alike, were motivated to serve as the voices of their own stories, fueled by a desire to “set straight a record which, it was felt, had been left to the North to write” (22). Like Johnson, Shaker calls these Southern writers’ work “reconciliation texts” which sought to please both Northern readers, by asserting the South’s efforts at establishing a peaceful racial integration, and the Southern readers, by including hints of the Old South’s social order into the stories of the New South.

Chopin provides an important example of that kind of American duality in many of her Bayou Folk stories. Her characters often fall into Old South categories of “white” and “black,” while still proclaiming a different hierarchy than before the war. In fact, as I pointed out in an earlier discussion on Acadians and African Americans, Chopin’s stories display the reversal of hierarchies, wherein the lower-class Canadian-French “Cajuns” would have been considered inferior to Creoles of color (often the descendants of freed
slaves and white Creoles) prior to the war, but had since been elevated merely because of their whiteness.

The complexity of Chopin’s experiences and the era and regions in which she lived, along with the ambiguity of her personal opinions regarding class hierarchy and racial or ethnic categorization, make any attempt at distinguishing Chopin’s intentions and analyzing her depictions of Acadians and African Americans nearly impossible. Likewise, a simple explanation would not do Chopin or her work justice.

When we gather all of the information we have on her historical, personal, and literary influences, we see sufficient explanations for her simultaneously stereotypical and complex lower-class characters. Given her own experiences as a financially comfortable Creole woman who grew up during the Civil War, married a man associated with a white supremacy group, and later moved to the mixing bowl that was Natchitoches Parish, where she certainly felt like an outsider, we can see that Chopin certainly had reason to associate these lower-class characters with notions that others of her time would have shared, of racial and ethnic inferiority. At the same time, some of her stories indicate a rise above local color subjugation and exploitation, especially the first story I will assess, “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” and that move toward a more fair representation may suggest that Chopin had different intentions than people of her era, and even in her own family, might have had. While we cannot definitively declare her work either enlightened or formulaic, we can certainly discover nuances that distinguish the portrayals and relationships of Chopin’s Acadians and African Americans as
examples that are more complex and meaningful than most critics have given her credit for.
An Introduction to the Bayou Folk Collection

Chopin’s first published collection, *Bayou Folk*, includes twenty-three short stories. Bernard Koloski suggests that the collection reads almost like a novel because of its contained geographic setting and its repeating characters, including members of the Santien family, like the protagonist Grégoire Santien in “In Sabine.” Most of the stories take place in Natchitoches Parish, or at least this is where most characters meet or know one another, though the stories also take place in neighboring parishes like Caddo, Avoyelles, and Sabine (Koloski xi). Overall, the collection depicts a great number of Acadian and African American characters, along with the “upper-class” Creoles who are often disenfranchised, too. As I trace the complex relationship between Chopin’s Acadians and African Americans in the following three *Bayou Folk* stories, “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” “The Wizard from Gettysburg,” and “In Sabine,” I hope to show the dual sense of Chopin’s respect for and subordination of these similarly disempowered groups through her varied depiction of these ethnically and racially subjugated characters.
The Sublets’ Attempted Exploitation and Their Lower-Class Targets in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche”

According to Kate Chopin’s record books, she wrote “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” in November of 1893 and spent the following months trying to get it published. The *Atlantic* editor Horace E. Scudder rejected “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” as did the editor of *Youths Companion*, so Chopin eventually placed the piece in her *Bayou Folk* collection before its March 1894 release (*Kate Chopin’s Private Papers* 167). While scholars have often focused on the challenge this story poses for Kate Chopin’s classification as a local color writer, the story also portrays “the struggle for self-respect among the poor” (Ewell 144). The story depicts the three major classes evident in Chopin’s Louisiana stories, Creoles, Acadians, and African Americans, and it does so with careful attention to the subtlety and intricacies involved in differentiating each of these social groups.

Both the Acadians and the African Americans in this story are depicted as servile, subordinate, and poor, but they are also delineated as honorable and compassionate members of society who deserve more respect from outsiders than they often garner. When we differentiate between the lower-class characters in this story, we also see a more distinct sense of awareness in the African American characters whereas the Acadians tend to be more naïve and perhaps even ignorant. With their awareness comes
a subtle sense of superiority, and in this way Chopin almost seems to elevate the African Americans; however, their haughty and sometimes contentious reactions to Acadians may actually serve to make the “knowing” African Americans less likable than the more stereotypically unsophisticated Acadians. Likewise, the African American characters in this story play relatively minor roles, whereas the Acadians are at the heart of this story, and yet their characterization wavers between being complex and stereotypical. Though the story’s message does work to denounce the local color tendency to make spectacles of its subjects, the message focuses more on the Acadians’ experience of exploitation, as well as their heroism, rather than that of the African Americans.

“A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” tells the story of an Acadian man, Evariste, who feels flattered when Mr. Sublet, a man visiting the neighboring Hallet plantation, asks to draw a picture of him for a magazine in exchange for two dollars as an advance payment and more after the picture is drawn. Upon hearing about Mr. Sublet’s request, Evariste’s daughter, Martinette, tells him that he must dress nicely, to which Evariste replies, “He want’ me like I come out de swamp” (Koloski 158). Both father and daughter are confused about why the man would not want Evariste to dress up for the picture, so when Martinette goes on to visit the cabin of an African American neighbor called Aunt Dicey, she explains the unusual request. Aunt Dicey laughs and proclaims to Martinette’s horror, “I jis studyin’ how simple you an’ yo’ pa is. You is bof de simplest somebody I eva come ‘cros’” (159). Essentially, Aunt Dicey goes on to tell Martinette that she and her father are being exploited. Aunt Dicey explains that the day before, Mr. Sublet’s son, Archie, had barged into her cabin and asked Aunt Dicey if he could take her picture. She
explains that the boy offended her by suggesting that she stay dressed as she was and continue her ironing for the picture, and so she did not comply with his request. Martinette now realizes the condescension of the visitor’s request and tells her father that he should not have his picture taken because he will be characterized stereotypically.

The narration then moves to Mr. Hallet’s dining-room the next morning, where Martinette has come to return the man’s money for her father. As she is leaving, she runs into her father who has “in his arms the little boy, Archie Sublet” whom he has apparently just rescued from drowning in the lake. After Mr. Sublet “attempt[s] to find words with which to thank Evariste for this service which no treasure of words or gold could pay for,” he says to Evariste that he hopes Evariste will now allow him to take his picture. He declares, “I want to place [the picture] among things I hold most dear, and shall call it ‘A hero of Bayou Têche.’” Evariste replies humbly, “It ’s nuttin’ hero to take a li’le boy out de water” and still refuses to have his “picture took.” Then, Mr. Hallet says, “I tell you, Evariste, let Mr. Sublet draw your picture, and you yourself may call it whatever you want. I’m sure he’ll let you.” Evariste’s pleasure is “shy and child-like” when he agrees. Then, Evariste begins to “carefully trace on the tablecloth imaginary characters with an imaginary pen,” because he does not know how to write, and then says, “You will put on’neat’ de picture […] ‘Dis is one picture of Mista Evariste Anatole Bonamour, a gent’man of de Bayou Têche” (164). With this declaration, the narration ends.

One of Chopin’s only stories that directly refer to “local color,” “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” often presents for current scholars evidence that Kate Chopin wished to
distance herself from the local color movement. Likewise, the story demonstrates the very complicated relationship between Chopin’s lower-class white Acadians and lower-class blacks, particularly in the interactions between Evariste and Martinette, and Aunt Dicey and Wilkins. David Steiling suggests, too, that the story presents “a study of class relationships in the bayou community” as well as “a narrative of the artist’s relationship with the subject and a moral tale of the local colorist” (197). Because the Sublets target both the Acadians and the African Americans as subjects for their local color exploitation, their shared subjugation is especially clear in this story. Fetterley and Pryse write, “Chopin also differentiates between cultural encounter and exploitation and in the process creates a narrative of resistance to imperialism” (*Writing out of Place* 240). They describe Aunt Dicey’s objection to being photographed by Mr. Sublet’s son as evidence that “she and her ironing board exist as subjects for ‘local color,’ which she understands as cultural imperialism.” When she calls Archie Sublet’s invasive gesture “intrudement,” Fetterley and Pryse suggest that the intrusion is twofold, referring to both “the intrusion of exploitation by outsiders and the rudeness of his lack of respect for her personhood” (241).

The notion that Aunt Dicey does not mind being photographed as long as she would be allowed to dress for “meetin’” indicates to Fetterley and Pryse that Aunt Dicey senses “that cultural representation can construct a site of encounter between subject and potential viewer as long as the representation itself is based on respect” (241). However, if the boy were to take her photograph at the ironing board in her house clothes, the photograph “would confirm the stereotype of the Negro laundress for Northern viewers”
On the other hand, were she allowed to pose for the photograph in the clothing she chooses, she would be able to “signify by that dress that she remains the autonomous subject of her own universe and not merely a servant in someone else’s” (241). By not allowing the picture to be taken at all, Aunt Dicey remains in control of her representation.

By the end of the story, we have the sense that Sublet will allow Evariste to be represented the way he chooses, and yet, Fetterley and Pryse do suggest that “there is no guarantee that [Mr. Sublet] will honor Evariste’s desire to be represented as a ‘gentleman’ no matter what he wears for his picture since it is Sublet who finally controls the technology of representation” (287-8). Chopin herself, nevertheless, uses her access to publication “to critique those modes of representation that serve the ideology of local color, that reinforce and simplify class and race hierarchies, and that seek to fix people in their place” (288). Susan Castillo suggests that stories like this one demonstrate Chopin’s ability to appeal to editors who published local-color fiction and “were probably unaware of what is happening underneath the wealth of sentiment and picturesque local detail” (68). She purports that “Chopin was all too aware of the inclination of magazine editors who published local-color fiction toward material that treated Creole and Cajun characters as exotic exemplars of different species” (68). In this story, we might say that Chopin effectively satirizes the patronizing, objectifying tendencies of some local colorists, without their even realizing the patronization has been turned on them. By suggesting the disrespect inherent in the local color movement, Chopin simultaneously
portrays a sympathetic regard for her lower-class characters whose shared subjugation renders them partners, as well as competitors, in this particular world order.

Besides the complicated issues of local color inherent in the story, many scholars touch, too, on the complicated depiction of class in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche.” Bernard Koloski points out that Aunt Dicey clearly considers herself elevated in status, at least in intellect, over the Acadians, Evariste and Martinette. She goes so far as to call them “de simplest somebody I eva come ‘crost.” She also suggests that Evariste will be called “one of dem low-down ‘Cajuns o’ Bayeh Têche” (Koloski 159). Aunt Dicey’s forthrightness with Martinette may derive from several factors other than her own sense of hierarchy over Acadians. Fetterley and Pryse explain, “Although Martinette may occupy a higher social position than Aunt Dicey by virtue of her race, despite the latter’s better economic positon, and may feel herself superior to Aunt Dicey, Aunt Dicey knows herself to be superior to Martinette in understanding” (Writing out of Place 287). Their clear age difference may explain Aunt Dicey’s behavior; she is speaking to Martinette, who is clearly much younger than Aunt Dicey, who calls herself “a ole nigga ‘oman” (Koloski 160).

Likewise, Aunt Dicey’s no-nonsense response to Archie, according at least to how she relates the story to Martinette, suggests that she does not feel the need to bow down to him, saying, “I ‘lowed I gwine make a picture outen him wid dis heah flati’on, ef he don’ cl’ar hisse’f quick” (160). She recognizes in this boy, what Fetterley and Pryse call, a “sense of entitlement, the belief in the power and right to place that comes when male gender, white race, and superior class privilege are conjoined” (Writing out of Place
When she says the boy does not know “his place,” we might argue that he knows his place all too well. Though she says no to the boy’s request, Aunt Dicey is, like Evariste, “a picturesque subject in [her] way, and a tempting one to an artist looking for bits of ‘local color’ along the Têche” (Koloski 158). As examples of local color, both the Acadians and African Americans are not only subjugated because they are believed to be “inferior,” but the Sublets, and other local color artists, further that subjugation by treating their subjects like fascinatingly quaint savages. By illuminating this kind of subjugation, Chopin suggests her own respect for Acadians and African Americans, and anyone who might be unfairly subjected to study by privileged outsiders. The irony, of course, is that many of Chopin’s stories do just what she seems to criticize in this story; with that, we are forced to see in Chopin’s methods yet another contradiction. I have to point out, though, that Chopin’s narration leads her readers to sympathize with the local color subjects and to see their exploitation as unjust, and that message makes Chopin stand out in her more compassionate renderings of the lower-class.

Interestingly, Aunt Dicey, though she is at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the Bayou Têche, does not succumb to feeling or even being subordinated, especially by outsiders. Fetterley and Pryse explain, “In rejecting [Archie’s] request, Aunt Dicey insists upon her own right to be seen as occupying a respectable class position, superior perhaps to Martinette and Evariste, and refuses to be constructed as lower class simply because of her race” (Writing out of Place 287). Aunt Dicey recognizes that her economic superiority and even her intellect render her somewhat superior to Acadians like Evariste and Martinette, and in this manner, Chopin presents both groups as “local
color” subjects which have been disenfranchised, for different reasons, but who both deserve more respect and honor when they become part of an outsider’s understanding of the Bayou Têche.

While Fetterley and Pryse, along with Koloski, have taken the time to assess the intricacies present in Chopin’s depictions of the relationship between the Acadians (Evariste and Martinette) and African Americans (Aunt Dicey) in this story, they do so as part of larger analyses and they also neglect to consider the other African American in the story (Wilkins). They also do not pay specific attention to the economic incentives posed in this story, which may pose another important factor in the relationship between the Acadians and African Americans.

In this story, Chopin depicts the African American characters as more socially aware, but at the same time, they play relatively minor roles in the story especially in comparison with African American characters in some of her other Bayou Folk stories, like “Beyond the Bayou” and “La Belle Zoräide,” which focus on the experiences of African American women. In “The Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” Dicey and Wilkins seem useful in moving the plot forward, rather than in serving central roles, but their behavior certainly reveals the complicated relationship between Acadians and African Americans. For example, Aunt Dicey’s major role is as the conveyor of information for Martinette, and thus for Evariste, too. At first glance, Aunt Dicey seems to simply be sharing her social awareness with Martinette and Evariste, in order to awaken them to their own ignorance. Who else can we expect to inform them of their exploitation but someone from a similarly exploited demographic? Even though their subjugation
ultimately differs because of their skin color, Aunt Dicey’s particular blend of blatant honesty and warm compassion makes her an important character in both Martinette and Evariste’s understanding of their exploitation.

Aunt Dicey’s social awareness makes her seem almost cruel when she laughs at the Acadians’ ignorance, though we might argue that this is her own way of coping with subjugation. Both Acadians and African Americans suffered tremendously in post-Reconstruction era Louisiana, and Chopin may be simply exposing their shared and sometimes competitive sense of social subjugation. Aunt Dicey’s laugh does not come alone, though; she takes the time to explain to Martinette what Mr. Sublet is really asking of her father. By explaining to Martinette that this act may result in her father’s picture’s inscription calling him a “low-down ‘Cajun o’ Bayeh Têch,” Aunt Dicey allows the Acadians to have a chance at avoiding such a representation. Thus, Chopin depicts Aunt Dicey with more than just social awareness; she also displays compassion for the same people whose ignorance makes her laugh, and she helps them to avoid any further subjugation by educating Martinette on what this picture could really mean for her father.

The only other major African American character, Wilkins, works for Mr. Hallet. Most critics entirely overlook his role in the story because it is relatively minor, but if considered alongside Aunt Dicey, he, too, primarily serves to communicate information between the Acadians and the Creoles and in doing so, he propels the plot forward. The story first mentions him when Martinette is about to leave Aunt Dicey’s house, upset by what she has learned about her father’s impending exploitation. Aunt Dicey explains how she would have liked Archie Sublet to have requested to take her picture:
I want ‘im to come in heah an’ say: ‘Howdy, Aunt Dicey! will you be so kine and go put on yo’ noo calker dress an’ yo’ bonnit w’at you w’ars to meetin’, an’ stan’ ‘side f’om dat I’onin’-boa’d w’ilse I gwine take yo photygraph.’ Dat de way fo’ a boy to talk w’at had good raisin’.

Then, Martinette slowly gets ready to leave, turning “at the cabin door to observe tentatively” and says, “I reckon it ‘s Wilkins tells you how the folks they talk, yonda up to Mr. Hallet’s” (160). If we assume that Martinette’s supposition is correct, Chopin’s only other African American character in this story serves to convey information, too. In this case, Wilkins apparently communicates to Aunt Dicey the way the well-to-do Creoles speak, especially the way they speak when they are being respectful. Martinette, interestingly, assumes that Aunt Dicey’s awareness must derive from her communication with another black servant, though she may have herself observed the kind of respectful talk she would have liked to have heard from Archie Sublet.

The next time Wilkins appears in the story, he is serving at the Hallet’s breakfast table and once again he conveys information. This time, he informs Mr. Hallet that Martinette is outside on the gallery, waiting to be invited inside. He reports, “She ben standin’ dah sence mos’ sun-up; look like she studyin’ to take root to de gall’ry.” Mr. Hallet then orders Wilkins to “ask her what she wants” and to “tell her to come in to the fire” (161). We are not clued into Wilkins’ response to such demands until a few pages later when Evariste and Martinette have now both joined Mr. Hallet and Mr. Sublet in the dining room. The narration reads, “It was with visible reluctance and ill-disguised contempt that Wilkins served them” (163). Keeping in mind that Evariste has just saved
Archie Sublet, Mr. Hallet orders “hot coffee and a warm breakfast” for the father and daughter, and yet Wilkins’s response is intriguingly hostile.

If we gloss over this “ill-disguised contempt,” we might miss Chopin’s implication that Wilkins may miss the Old South hierarchies. Wilkins’s attitude indicates that he considers himself superior to Evariste and Martinette, and that to serve them is beneath him. The “reluctance” and “contempt” that he does not bother to truly conceal display his pride in, or at the very least acceptance of, his role as servant to upper-class whites, Creoles like Mr. Hallet and his upper-class friends, like Mr. Sublet, as opposed to his distaste for serving lower-class whites. Even after a child has been saved, Wilkins does not seem slightly impressed by, or even to sympathize with, Evariste, an Acadian.

Through Wilkins’s reaction, perhaps we may see where the inscription of “low-down ‘Cajun o’ Bayeh Têch” truly derives. Nowhere in the story do we ever hear from either Mr. Hallet or his son, Archie, that they intend to inscribe Evariste’s portrait with a derogatory name. Chopin conveys that “information,” which is actually only speculation, through Aunt Dicey. In this way, Aunt Dicey and Wilkins serve the white characters, the Acadians and Creoles, both as actual servants and as conveyors of information, but we cannot be sure whether Chopin intends for this to be truly considered fact or rather “information” that is perhaps skewed by their own sense of pride and hierarchy or sympathetic toward people who share their powerlessness.

When Chopin depicts Martinette’s assumption that Wilkins “tells you how they talk” up at Mr. Hallet’s this supposition suggests that Chopin suggests that Martinette believes Aunt Dicey because she has an ally who works in the Hallet home. This
“insider” information renders Aunt Dicey’s explanation as true to Martinette, as does her anecdote of her own close call with exploitation. However, if we are to look at these moments from another perspective, we might wonder whether Chopin actually portrays Aunt Dicey and Wilkins as having a shared alliance that places them in a more superior, perhaps even manipulative position. Instead of representing Aunt Dicey as helpful, perhaps Chopin meant to portray her as actually being conniving when she convinces Martinette that Mr. Sublet intends to exploit her. Of course, this kind of interpretation lacks as much evidence as the more sympathetic interpretation because it is almost entirely based on one minor phrase Chopin provides for the reader: Wilkins’s “ill-disguised contempt” (163). Even with that revealing phrase, we might consider why Chopin depicts Wilkins as the only one with any kind of contempt for the Acadians, because we do not see the same kind of description of Aunt Dicey. Wilkins’s “ill-disguised contempt” (163) may really only exist because Chopin presents him as the one African American who has actually been ordered to serve the Acadians in this story, which is where a character like Wilkins draws the line. Chopin shows us that sure, Wilkins will be polite and do his duty, but ultimately he feels “contempt” at having to serve people whom he considers inferior; that may be the only point of contention with Evariste and Martinette that Chopin means to depict.

Furthermore, Chopin provides us with no information on Aunt Dicey or Wilkins’s ancestry. If Chopin intended for either of them to have any trace of Creole blood, she certainly did not say so; however, had Chopin explicitly stated that their ancestry included Creole blood, Chopin would have provided the characters with a history of
feelings of superiority over Acadians like Evariste and Martinette. As Marcia Gaudet reminds us, with the history of Creoles of color, southern hierarchies prior to the Civil War would have easily moved black Creoles to snub Acadian immigrants. In that case, pride and honor would have superseded empathy, and Aunt Dicey’s informative lecture to Martinette would more have served as evidence of her own sense of arrogance. Even without a clear delineation of Aunt Dicey or Wilkins’s ancestry, the flip-flopping of status that had recently occurred between Creoles of color and Acadians would likely have spurred this same kind of competition, or at least complexity, in the relationship between blacks and Acadians. Chopin may have purposefully been illuminating this complexity by leaving the motivation for Aunt Dicey’s lecture as ambiguous. Really, that conversation includes only one clear indication that Aunt Dicey really does empathize with Martinette when Aunt Dicey shares her own close call with exploitation. Creole or not, in this regard, Aunt Dicey seems to be more aware of their shared powerlessness, and their need to look out for one another, than Wilkins is.

In terms of economic status, Chopin’s story makes it seem like the Acadian characters are more financially disadvantaged than the African American characters, which shows again that her focus on the Acadians presents them as more sympathetic. This distinction, however, does not elevate one group over the other because they both appear to be subjected ultimately to the will of their socially “superior” Creole neighbors. Chopin first introduces Evariste into the story as he is “trying to sell a wild turkey to the housekeeper” at the Hallet plantation; his work status seems less secure and his earnings perhaps more meager given that he was “trying” and not actually successful. Conversely,
Chopin suggests that both Aunt Dicey and Wilkins are employed, and though Wilkins’ profession is more clearly linked to the Hallets, Aunt Dicey’s ironing likely provides her with compensation from Creoles like Mr. Hallet, if not Mr. Hallet himself. In fact, Chopin may have intended to link Wilkins’s turned-up nose with his status as a house servant, since he is doing the same kind of work which he might have done prior to the Civil War, and yet now, he is forced to bow down to even the lowest-class whites. Chopin may have purposely differentiated Wilkins’s work from Aunt Dicey’s work, however, since her ironing allows for a kind of aloofness toward her Acadian neighbors, or even a sometimes friendly relationship, rather than being asked to physically cater to them in their home. Neither, however, is presented as financially desperate in the way that the Acadians are, and their steady work may actually serve to rationalize why readers should overlook their suffering and pay more attention to that of the Acadians.

If we look at the actual exchange of money in the story, Evariste and Martinette are clearly more desperate for money than Aunt Dicey is. There is no mention of an exchange of money when Aunt Dicey is solicited, though this may be because Mr. Sublet’s son asked her for the picture; likewise, Archie and Aunt Dicey many not discuss money at all because the memory of slavery may still allow whites, even children, to ask African Americans to work for them for free. Nevertheless, this lack of financial exchange (or talk thereof) itself may indicate that she cannot be “bought.” On the other hand, at first, both Evariste and Martinette are far too blinded by the financial incentive for posing for the photograph for them to even try to understand why the outsider wants a photograph at all, particularly a photograph of Evariste in his everyday, raggedy clothing.
Initially, those financial benefits outweigh their need to understand the purpose of his being a subject of Mr. Sublet’s art. When Evariste tells Martinette that Mr. Sublet wants him to pose “like I come out de swamp,” the narration explains, “They could not understand these eccentric wishes on the part of the strange gentleman, and made no effort to do so” (159). They are not just ignorant, but willfully so, likely due to the money they stand to make. Some might argue that their inaction proves that Chopin is indeed adhering to the stereotype of the lazy or ignorant Acadian, but we should not ignore the nature of the motivation which has made them complacent: money.

While Chopin’s contemporaries may have assumed this lack of understanding was stereotypical, today’s readers might be more likely to sympathize with Evariste and Martinette’s desperate need for those two silver dollars and the more expected to come. What readers of any time likely appreciate, however, is these characters’ sense of honor. When Martinette tries to explain to her father that he needs to return the money and to not get his picture taken, Evariste responds with what we may presume to be his two reasons to have the picture taken: “I promise ‘im; and he ‘s goin’ give me some mo’ money w’en he finish” (160). Evariste’s response shows that it is important to him to be both honorable in keeping promises, but it also shows that the financial incentive is very enticing. After all, Evariste met this man just as Evariste “came out of the swamp, trying to sell a wild turkey to the [Hallet] housekeeper” (158), so we can see how meager Evariste’s circumstances are.

Chopin likely meant for Evariste’s initial reaction to seem to be motivated primarily by Mr. Sublet’s bribe. Evariste eventually puts aside his financial desperation.
and willful ignorance in favor of honor and respect. Rather than being lured by an affluent outsider into serving as a subject for the outsiders’ benefit, Evariste heeds Aunt Dicey’s advice; however, when Evariste realizes the mistake of giving Mr. Sublet the benefit of the doubt, he tells his daughter to bring the money back to Mr. Sublet for him. We might interpret this to be due to his shame in not realizing the insult immediately or perhaps due to his shame in reneging on his word to pose for the photograph. Either way, Evariste likely feels ashamed that he was duped into exploitation and part of the explanation for that trickery lies in Evariste’s own dire circumstances and financial need. In the end, when Evariste finally poses for the photograph, Mr. Sublet does not mention payment. Evidently, Evariste has come to feel that an honorable and respectable portrait as a “gentleman” is priceless. Since the story ends before the portrait is actually taken, there is still the chance that money will be exchanged, though Mr. Sublet has already said that “no treasure of words or hold could pay for” Evariste’s heroism in rescuing Archie. In any case, the financial lure that the picture initially posed for Evariste has now been replaced by the desire for respect.

This story shows that beneath the “façade of the impoverished Cajun,” Chopin has portrayed her Acadian characters’ sense of pride and nobility that would otherwise be weakened by a stereotypical representation of their quaint poverty and illiteracy. David Steiling suggests that one of the more important oppositions in this story is that of Evariste’s household, “where pride and gentility are valued as highly as they are in the household of the landowner,” and “the rudeness, impetuousness, and thoughtlessness of Sublet and his son” (197). Not only does the Acadian act heroically in saving Sublet’s
son, but he also educates Sublet. Underneath the typical local color elements of this story, such as the plantation setting, the “chivalric noble savage,” and the use of dialect, Kate Chopin ironically suggests something much more complex with this story: the awareness of how local color subjects see themselves in what Steiling calls “that condescending, if well-intentioned, study” (197). In this way, Chopin manages to both appeal to a local color audience and represent her often-stereotyped subjects with pride and compassion. We might even say that she inadvertently works to educate her readers, just as Evariste educates Sublet when he saves his son.

Also, when Evariste finishes describing his heroic rescue of Archie Sublet, he advises Mr. Sublet, “He all right now, M’sieur; but you mus’n lef ‘im go no mo’ by hisse’f in one pirogue” (163). Evariste may be less wealthy and less fluent than Mr. Hallet and Mr. Sublet, but in this line he asserts that he knows the land. As David Steiling points out, the same swamp and lake that have rendered Evariste an ignorant subject for the Mr. Sublet’s “local color” picture have also rendered him knowledgeable and safe, and for the Sublets to attempt to venture into that land and its “local color” would mean that they have gone where they have no business going. Steiling comments on this same literary moment when he writes:

Sublet and his son betray an ignorance of custom and local manners that results in near tragic circumstances. The capsizing of the pirogue is an effective trope for the subtle balance required in navigating the cultural backwaters of the bayou, and tragedy is only averted by the knowledge, tolerance, and diplomacy of the locals. (197)
Evariste, of course, may not realize that he has just put Mr. Sublet in his place when he mandates that he “mus’n lef’ ‘im go no mo’ by hisse’f in one pirogue” (163), but in effect Evariste does just that by showing that in his land, in his lake, the Sublets’ status could not save them. Instead, Evariste is the hero whose know-how and compassion save the day.

We benefit, too, from looking at Chopin’s depiction of her lower-class characters’ education and literacy, since those are two ways in which subjugated people are often able to realize their situation and break free from their oppression. We know nothing of Aunt Dicey or Wilkins’s background, though Aunt Dicey does suggest what the inscription for the picture might read. This may indicate that she has some knowledge of the written word, though it could also be pure supposition. But when Mr. Hallet convinces Evariste to let Mr. Sublet draw his picture, he asks Evariste what he will call “the much talked-of picture,” and Evariste begins to “carefully trace on the tablecloth imaginary characters with an imaginary pen,” Chopin goes on to explain, “He could not have written the real characters with a real pen—he did not know how.” Evariste’s action and Chopin’s narration together indicate a sense that literacy is important in recognizing subordination and that this fact may have ultimately hindered him from interpreting his situation had Aunt Dicey not illuminated it for him.

When Evariste saves the life of Sublet’s son, he demonstrates a gallantry that he may feel would be diminished by his illiteracy, which may explain why he chooses to trace “carefully” words which he could just as easily have thought to himself. Perhaps the heroic act also enacted a sense of pride and honor that has him feeling as if he has
earned the power and the choice that Sublet, though well-intentioned perhaps, had taken
from him. Chopin’s story indirectly suggests that the picture could have been taken and
Evariste might never have known what the picture was called, and this literary
powerlessness has only been righted by a person who shares social subjugation with him:
Aunt Dicey. Chopin carefully links these two disempowered groups in this story,
whether intentionally or not, and illustrates their shared objectification at the hands of
local color artists.

Prior to this moment, language has also rendered Evariste particularly inferior to
Mr. Hallet and Mr. Sublet. When he tries to explain how he rescued Archie Sublet,
Chopin’s narration begins, “Evariste related in his uncertain, broken English how he had
been fishing for an hour or more in Carancro lake” (162). Importantly, we know that
Chopin’s background afforded her the luxury of speaking French and English in upper-
class Creole circles, but she also knew that French-speaking Louisianans had not yet been
assimilated into American culture. In this story, Chopin presents rather sympathetically
some of the more ignorant but well-intentioned French-speaking Acadians, perhaps in an
effort, as Bonnie James Shaker suggests, to not only incorporate them into the American
literary canon, but also into who was considered “American” at all. In this sense, she
may not only be trying to Americanize upper-class Creoles, but also lower-class
Acadians, an argument which certainly highlights her sensitivity and compassion for all
white, French-speaking Louisianans. However, we must also remember that she often
represents for her readers the clear distinctions between Creoles and Acadians, as she
does in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche.” Likely, her social, personal, or literary
influences all figured into this tendency for Chopin to present her white characters, both Creoles and Acadians, as American while simultaneously differentiating between these two French-speaking groups.

Meanwhile, Chopin’s African Americans in “A Gentleman of Bayou Tèche” maintain an ambiguous balance between being ambivalent, or even contemptuous, and compassionate and sympathetic toward the story’s Acadians. By placing Acadians at the center of this story, Chopin takes focus off of the same tendency to exploit African Americans; however, since she does suggest that both groups share the discrimination that comes with local color art, she has not neglected the African American perspective though it certainly does not garner the same kind of attention or sympathy. Additionally, the precarious nature of both the Creole-Acadian relationships and the African American-Acadian relationships suggests that Chopin intended to present the contradicting sense of hostility and compassion inherent in such a stratified environment. Though her story more efficiently directs our attention to the suffering of Acadians, she presents them as more naïve, whereas the story’s African Americans display knowledge and awareness that elevates them and yet manages to render them less sympathetic at the same time.
Economic Disenfranchisement in “A Wizard from Gettysburg”:
The Tramp and the Help

Given Kate Chopin’s experiences as a young child in St. Louis, she would naturally display sensitivity for families and individuals affected by the Civil War in a story depicting the South’s lingering trauma in the Reconstruction era. While we must be careful about assuming Chopin’s sympathies, we can trace in stories like “A Wizard from Gettysburg” her sense that the war that had ended decades before still resonated for many of her readers. The only one of Kate Chopin’s Bayou Folk stories that directly depicts the repercussions of the Civil War on a Louisiana family, “A Wizard from Gettysburg” tells the tale of a teenage Creole boy named Bertrand Delmandé who has been forced to leave school because his family’s finances have suddenly declined. As Bertrand is riding along a country road “upon a little Creole pony” (126), he stumbles upon what, at first, appears to be a bundle of rags, but turns out to be “a tramp.” Bertrand brings the old man back to his house, in part because he plans to be a physician some day, and when he eyes the man’s wounded heel, he figures that he “can’t begin to practice too early” (127). The old man tells Bertrand that he has been “in all of [the states] since Gettysburg” and then goes on to mention “the bullet in [his] head,” plainly referring to the Civil War battle of Gettysburg in which he was supposedly injured (127). When Bertrand gets the “tramp”
back to the house, the servants scold him for his carelessness and proudly ignore the miserable-looking old man who sits contentedly in the corner of the veranda.

During this time, Bertrand’s father, St. Ange Delmandé, and Bertrand’s grandmother, Madame Delmandé, return from doing business in town. Bertrand meanwhile tends to the old man on the veranda, bringing him coffee, and when the old man probes him about what they are discussing inside, Bertrand tells him “money” and confesses that he can no longer go to school on account of their financial troubles. Suddenly, the character who, to this point, has only been referred to as “the tramp” or “the old man” turns out to be much more connected to this family than anyone has realized. He whispers, “St. Ange, you must go to school!” which confuses Bertrand since that is his father’s name and not his, and then the old man proceeds to cross the yard, grab the necessary tools, and instruct Bertrand to dig up a tin box full of gold pieces. At this point, Bertrand begins thinking of the once-tramp as a “wizard,” wondering, “Who could this wizard be that had come to him in the guise of a tramp […]?” (131). The big finish comes when Madame Delmandé first lays eyes on the man and proclaims that he is her long-presumed dead husband. Sadly, the old man does not recognize his wife and has mistaken his grandson, Bertrand, for his son, St. Ange, and the story ends with his imploring his wife, “Madame, an old soldier, wounded on the field of Gettysburg, craves for himself and his two little children your kind hospitality” (133). In this way, the tramp-turned-wizard turns out to be Bertrand’s brain-injured, long-lost grandfather, who has just inadvertently saved his family from financial ruin.
This story portrays the same kind of complex hierarchy inherent in “A Gentleman of Bayou Tèche,” though this piece is clearly set in Reconstruction-era Louisiana while the setting for “A Gentleman of Bayou Tèche” may be in Chopin’s contemporary period of post-Reconstruction. Also different is the fact that this story focuses on Creoles, rather than Acadians; however, because the white, seemingly lower-class “tramp” in this story would likely be considered Acadian, we see similarities in the way he is treated before his real identity is revealed and the way Acadians are treated in Chopin’s other stories. When we pay close attention to the “tramp” and the African American servants in the Delmandé home, we can see the same kinds of social, racial, and ethnic hierarchies present in the stories that present Acadian characters, and because this is a Reconstruction story, the interactions between the socially subjugated characters is even more tense. The African American servants fear repercussions for actions they have not even committed (as would certainly have been the case before abolition), and thus they do not trust the “tramp” or even Bertrand for allowing him to come into the Delmandé home. Conversely, when the “tramp” remembers where he has buried family treasure (and reveals himself to be the long-lost patriarch), he exhibits concern that the black servants might find out where they are headed. Their mutual distrust reveals a predicament that does not allow them the same kind of relationship depicted in “A Gentleman of Bayou Tèche”; instead, the characters in this story are suspicious and wary of one another. At the same time, because the African American characters are once again minor and the lower-class whites are actually central to both plots, Chopin establishes a pattern of
directing her attention (and the reader’s empathy) to the hardships of Acadians and “tramps” rather than those of African Americans.

The story’s main complication is financial: the Creole Delmandé family, which would normally be considered upper- or at least middle-class in Natchitoches Parish, is actually facing economic burdens that require Bertrand to drop out of school. This kind of financial strain was not unusual for anyone in the South following the Civil War; nevertheless, the Delmandés’ situation renders their power potentially less potent.

Then, there are the servants for the Delmandé family, including a “big, black woman” who, upon seeing the old man, tells Bertrand, “Fu’ a boy w’at goes to school like you does—whar’s yo’ sense?” If the Creole family who employs these servants is suffering financially, then they are even more at risk as their well-being and livelihood depends on the Delmandés. Likewise, they have likely only become free servants following the Civil War, and their dependence on a plantation family may very well conjure up feelings of resentment and frustration. When the “big, black woman” asks Bertrand “whar’s yo’ sense?” Chopin describes this character, who we may assume is the character later named ‘Cindy, as displaying “a fine show of indignation” (127). This particular reaction recalls Wilkins’s “ill-disguised contempt” at serving Evariste in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche.” In the same way that Wilkins reveals “contempt” when Mr. Hallet tells him to serve an Acadian, ‘Cindy displays “indignation” when Bertrand brings a tramp home with him. Chopin similarly portrays both Wilkins and ‘Cindy’s arrogance, which readers might mistake as stemming from a simple sense of superiority, when Chopin perhaps meant to display these two characters’ far more complicated feelings
about Acadians or tramps. I will argue that ‘Cindy’s “indignation” derives from her fear and frustration at her lack of control, rather than the kind of superiority Wilkins seems to display.

One aspect of their situation brings to mind passages from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, both of which discuss slaves’ competing hierarchies among themselves, depending on who their masters were. Stripped of rights and privileges of their own, slaves in both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Douglass’s texts describe their feelings of superiority or inferiority depending on the wealth and status of their owners. This trend suggests that, long after the Civil War, the element of competition between slaves may have been passed down to generations of free people of color, whose feelings of superiority may have transferred from deriving status from that of their masters to deriving status from that of their bosses. Chopin may be demonstrating for her readers this same sense of pride in Wilkins and ‘Cindy for serving the Hallets and the Delmandés because they are privileged, upper-class white folk, whereas serving Acadians, or allowing tramps in their homes, might jeopardize that sense of superiority and thus cause in them feelings of “contempt” or “indignation.”

Chopin may have witnessed this sense of pride, both before the Civil War and afterwards, and in writing about these particular characters’ responses to what they consider unfair white privilege—unfair because it is allowed for people they consider to be inferior—Chopin may very well have been presenting to her readers this complex and dueling hierarchy because it was one which fascinated her as it does some of her readers.
We might also consider that Chopin meant to portray the threat some African American servants felt when faced with this kind of compassion from their white employers for a mere stranger, because many African American servants would not have experienced this same kind of compassion themselves from their own employers. In representing this somewhat misguided or misdirected compassion, Chopin again seems to reveal her own awareness of, and perhaps even sensitivity to, the mistreatment of the socially and racially underprivileged.

In “The Wizard from Gettysburg,” ‘Cindy seems to be joined by other servants who share her concern for Bertrand’s judgment in bringing home a “tramp,” and the narration reads, “The servants showed high disapproval” (128). Another factor which may contribute more distinctly to the concerns of these servants, as opposed to the servants in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” is the worry that the African Americans will face certain blame if the tramp steals from the Delmandé family. ‘Cindy states, “W’en de silva be missin’, ‘tain’ you w’at gwine get blame, it’s me” (128). In this kind of Southern family, ‘Cindy knows her place and realizes that her employment, or at least the trust her employer has in her, is tenuous and often relies on factors outside her control. For example, though she does not choose to bring in the tramp, she knows that Bertrand will not be blamed for his poor decision, even though it is his decision, merely because she should stop him from doing it, and yet she cannot stop him. Therein lies her dilemma.

Like in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” the hierarchies place children like Bertrand and Archie Sublet ahead of black servants, and this fact, along with the children’s behavior, seems to particularly offend and concern the servants who work for
their fathers. Just as Archie Sublet’s interaction with Aunt Dicey rubs her the wrong way because she does not want to be exploited, Bertrand’s decision to take in a “tramp” causes anxiety for ‘Cindy. ‘Cindy’s fears may very well be correct and Bertrand’s “mistakes” may likely be taken out on her. Either way, despite their minor roles in these stories, Chopin does make a point to portray both Aunt Dicey and ‘Cindy’s reactions to the whites who make decisions that affect their well-being. These portrayals alone suggest that Chopin recognized the suffering of African Americans, though she does not take the time in these stories to make that suffering central to the plot.

Not only are the black servants economically dependent in both “The Gentleman of Bayou Têche” and “The Wizard of Gettysburg,” they are also likely still accustomed to, or even invested in, Old South hierarchies, where free people of color would have been considered superior to lower-class whites. Though slavery had ended, the New South of the Reconstruction- and Post-Reconstruction-era, in turn, subjugated according to skin color more definitively than the Old South had, and in so doing created color distinctions where there before had been class distinctions. This story depicts African Americans who now work as servants rather than as slaves on the crumbling Delmandé plantation, but there is still the sense that they live and work on this plantation as they would have prior to the war. Bertrand looks out at his family plantation and sees “little negroes in scanty garments, darting here and there, and kicking up dust” (129), which indicates that entire African American families still call this plantation their home. In this way, Chopin may depict both Wilkins and ‘Cindy as experiencing lingering feelings of resentment over the abolition of slavery which may have done little to alleviate their
burden, as well as their recent regression in status below all whites, even lower-class 
tramps or Acadians. Their hope for a new life and the reality of having perhaps even less 
potential may not have been sudden or clear to them, let alone most Southerners, and so a 
confused and angry reaction seems entirely understandable.

This class confusion may explain why Wilkins and ‘Cindy may not have the same 
kind of compassion for the “white” characters in distress, Evariste and Monsieur 
Delmandé, because they have their own status to concern them. When Mr. Hallet invites 
Evariste and Martinette to dine with them following Archie’s rescue, he is reaching out to 
someone he considers inferior, and in some sense, he likely feels he is doing a good 
thing. At the same time, he demands that Wilkins serve these “inferior” Acadians, and 
Wilkins does not share this same compassion because, instead of offering a helping hand 
to an “inferior,” he is being forced to treat these lower-class Acadians as if they are 
superior to him. Mr. Hallet probably has not considered the complex and dueling 
hierarchies between Acadians and African Americans, and in this sense, does not realize 
what he is asking of Wilkins. This does not mean that Mr. Hallet respects Wilkins and 
Evariste equally, but more likely that he realizes that they are both inferior to him and 
that he has the right (and the luxury) of ordering one of them to serve the other.

We can see this same complex sense of concern when ‘Cindy and the other 
servants express dismay at Bertrand going out of his way to help the lowly, ragged-
looking tramp. When Bertrand tries to explain to ‘Cindy that the man is “out of his 
head,” she responds, “No mo’ outen his head ‘an I is” (128), as if to suggest that he is 
feigning confusion. Still, by comparing herself to the “tramp,” ‘Cindy reminds the reader
that they share economic powerlessness and thus she claims a kind of social knowledge about the kinds of tricks a man like him might pull to try to make a dime. By including this comparison, Chopin may be suggesting, indirectly, that ‘Cindy is the kind of person that cannot be trusted; she knows what kinds of dishonesty and thievery might occur, and this may be because the people with whom she associates, or even ‘Cindy herself, might engage in that kind of behavior. Another take might be that ‘Cindy’s response indicates that she is unfairly assuming about the tramp what she thinks her white employer unfairly assumes about her; in this way, she is projecting the same prejudice she feels enacted against her, onto someone she considers inferior or perhaps equally untrustworthy.

As one critic puts it, “‘Cindy’s reasoning regarding the tramp’s role in determining her own security of position is sound. As a lucid, homeless wanderer in need of resources, the tramp is not to be trusted; as a madman, he’s not to be trusted either” (Shaker 46). Interestingly, this critic’s point illustrates the same kind of prejudice against the homeless or the mentally ill that African Americans experience. Though our instincts might rightfully tell us to be guarded when we are in the company of people without homes or without their senses, we must also realize that those instincts derive from generalizations we make about certain groups of people. ‘Cindy’s concern, intriguingly, projects the same prejudice of which she is a victim onto, ironically, the man of the house who probably once discriminated against her.

As ‘Cindy makes her case, she appeals to Bertrand’s “identity as a young scholar to rectify his betrayal of the ‘common sense’ of family hierarchy” (Shaker 46), though Bertrand’s racial ideology and privilege allow him to gloss over her plea, when she says,
“Fu’ a boy w’at goes to school like you does—whar’s yo’ sense?” (127). In Bonnie James Shaker’s analysis of this story, she writes, “Cindy’s worry that she is the one made vulnerable by white class reformation is justified when she articulates just how fragile her superior footing of family position is when laid against the backdrop of racial prejudice” (46). In short, ‘Cindy’s blackness can still brand her as a thief and criminal, even when she has proven herself to be trustworthy. In fact, when the “wizard”-grandfather leads Bertrand to the buried gold, Monsieur Delmandé whispers, “Come. Don’t let them hear you. Don’t let the negroes see us” (130). This dialogue indicates that the same kind of distrust that ‘Cindy felt for the “tramp” is felt by the “tramp” for servants like her. “Once himself a thievish threat, grandfather Delmandé, the bearer of fortune, now justifiably fears the thievery of black Others” (Shaker 47). Then again, as far as anyone on the Delmandé plantation can tell, the “tramp” is not trustworthy until the revelation at the end of the story.

In fact, this kind of knowing African American character recalls Aunt Dicey in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” who points out to Martinette, another child not unlike Bertrand in her naiveté, that Mr. Sublet may actually want to exploit her father. When ‘Cindy says, “No mo’ outen his head ‘an I is” (128), she displays a kind of social sophistication that Bertrand does not have. In the real world, the chances that this “tramp” is actually a man of privilege and class are not high, and yet, in this fairy-tale-like story, ‘Cindy turns out to be wrong. Aunt Dicey and ‘Cindy are probably used to assessing the deeds of the people in charge of them because, as ‘Cindy indicates, the blame often falls on them. Likewise, they are probably skeptical because they are used to
having to fend for themselves and to anticipate the kinds of repercussions that might befall them for any misstep they, or others, make. Especially in the post-bellum South, these black servants pay careful attention to the whites they serve, often more than the whites pay attention to themselves, because they are, perhaps even more so, considered inferior and thus culpable for much more than they deserve.

Given the Delmandés’ financial situation, all of the characters in “The Wizard of Gettysburg” are disenfranchised people who are struggling to survive, and the one person who comes to solve their problems happens to be the one who seems the most impoverished: the “tramp” who turns out to be the family’s patriarch, Monsieur Delmandé. Interestingly, the dynamic will have to change entirely once this fact is revealed (though the narration stops just after the revelation itself); the servants who dismissed this “tramp” will come to realize they were disparaging their own master, and Bertrand, who thought he was simply helping out an old, bereft man, will see that he has unknowingly helped to bring together his family and rescue them from their economic strain. However, chances are that the mentally-diminished patriarch will be allowed to maintain his sense of superiority and distrust of the black servants, and thus the black servants will have to revert to an even more necessary “respect” for this revived master.

While “A Wizard from Gettysburg” works to depict a bereft family of privileged Creoles who are saved by a “tramp” they might normally have ignored, other Bayou Folk stories like “Boulôt and Boulotte” work more directly to depict a lower-class family of Acadians as hard-working, loving, and unified. Both stories, however, closely examine some of the more redeeming qualities of that lower-class whites, and in doing so suggest
that Acadians and others like them deserve more respect. “Boulôt and Boulotte” tells the story of Acadian twins who finally have worked hard enough for the family to allow them to buy their first pairs of shoes, only for them to come home carrying the shoes rather than wearing them because they do not want to ruin them. The Acadian family in this *Bayou Folk* story exhibits particularly democratic and honorable behavior in taking care of its members, and these twins display their own regard for the work they do and the few possessions they have. Meanwhile, in “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” Chopin depicts the honorable and kind ways of the more naïve son, Bertrand, who could easily have turned his nose up, as the Delmandé servants do, at the sight of a homeless man, but instead he happens to take the man home, despite the servants’ warnings and St. Ange and Madame Delmandé’s “indifference” (128). Bertrand’s compassion ultimately leads him to his own rescue and in the process reveals to him that the person he initially called a “tramp,” and later a “wizard,” is actually his grandfather. Most of the *Bayou Folk* stories characterize the Creole community as the “upper crust” of Louisiana society, and yet a few poor Creoles do enter into the stories, like this mistaken patriarch, and find they do not belong in this society because they are disenfranchised. Typically, the lower-class characters are Acadian, like the family in “Boulôt and Boulotte,” or African American, and sometimes they are even outsiders to the community; in this way, “A Wizard from Gettysburg” presents an unusual bridge between a lower-class “outsider” who might normally be grouped with poor, white Acadians, and an upper crust white Creole family.

The third-person limited narration in “A Wizard from Gettysburg” centers on Bertrand’s experience in particular and thus Chopin’s choice to use the term “tramp” to
refer to the long-unnamed character for most of the story is likely meant to characterize Bertrand’s thoughts. This diction coincides with Bertrand’s understanding of his companion and continues until Bertrand considers that this man might in fact be a “wizard” when he digs up the tin box of gold. The narration never again refers to the man as a tramp, but instead the narration switches to calling him simply “the man.”

During Chopin’s era, the word “tramp” signified a vagrant or a person who travels from place to place on foot (The Oxford English Dictionary Online). While this definition certainly fits what Monsieur Delmandé has actually been doing (as he has apparently wandered all the way home from Gettysburg), the characters call him a “tramp” simply to indicate that he is homeless. Ironically, the moment the “tramp” meets Bertrand, he is no longer “homeless” at all; instead, he has returned to his long-lost home. The switch from calling the character “the tramp” to calling him “the man” occurs when it becomes clear to Bertrand that the man is not simply some random lower-class vagrant, but someone who has some kind of serious connection to his family. At this point, the grandfather regains his status as a Creole father and husband; he now belongs to this plantation, in fact owns the plantation, and all of the concern over his lower-class, poor appearance disappear.

Curiously, we never learn the grandfather’s first name; Bertrand, the only character interested in getting to know the man at all, never directly asks him for his name, and even when Madame Delmandé recognizes her husband, she just says he is St. Ange’s father and calls him “husband.” This namelessness seems to indicate a sort of anonymity which is allowed for many of society’s neglected vagrants, both then and now.
In this case, the anonymity is necessary for the progression of the story because, had his name been St. Ange, Sr., for example, that would have given away the ending far earlier. Likewise, the namelessness recalls the lack of identity and personal (or even societal) connections for a homeless person. Of course, it turns out that the grandfather has indeed walked far on foot, all the way from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania down to Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. The impressive fact that he was able to travel so far by himself is compounded by his brain injury, which has obviously left him partially mentally disabled. Like many misunderstood vagrants who lack mental faculties, Chopin has depicted this particular homeless man as both honorable and as a man of much higher social status than people presume by looking at him.

One factor that adds to the empathetic portrayal of a homeless person is the importance of the Civil War to this story. In a society very much ruled by status and hierarchy, one historical event which may very well have united the Louisiana characters in sympathy would have been the Civil War, since many Southerners felt wronged by what they sometimes called “Northern aggression.” Moreover, since this story was published by Northern printers like the magazine Youth’s Companion and the book printer Houghton-Mifflin, we might say that the sympathy would even unite its readers, both Northern and Southern, who had all experienced the loss and sorrow of the Civil War. While many people might have scoffed at the sight of a “tramp,” this story suggests that readers ought to think twice before doing so because many of those homeless people are actually honorable men who have suffered tremendously. By setting this story in the South and by publishing it in the North, Chopin suggests, too, that even Northerners
might be sympathetic to “tramps” like Monsieur Delmandé who fought honorably to protect their families and to defend the Confederacy and who suffered substantially as a result.

As the language used to refer to the homeless man alters, the reader traces the way Bertrand comes to realize the truth about this tramp. At first the narration begins with the rather disparaging term “tramp” only to turn into the awe-struck idea of a “wizard.” Likewise, the character himself turns out to be the most senior member of the family, which is coincidentally the opposite of what any of the Creole Delmandé or even the Delmandé servants thought he was. The conflict between illusion and reality works to challenge the characters’ and the readers’ preconceptions of homelessness and economic despair. As the characters in the story must confront their own understanding of who this man really is and what he represents, the reader, too, realizes the extent to which the story is set up to challenge notions of hierarchy implicit in the South and in the country as a whole at the time of this story’s publication.

In this way, “A Wizard from Gettysburg” recalls another Bayou Folk Story, “Désirée’s Baby,” in which Désirée’s husband must confront his own African American heritage after having made an unfair assumption and hurling unsubstantiated accusations against his wife, which have led to her death (and that of their child). Structurally similar, the two stories both finish with the revelation of a contradiction between what the characters believe to be true and what is actually true, and in both cases, these revelations come after some characters display a great deal of prejudice or indifference. Just as Armand Aubigny cannot believe he could be the reason for his child’s dark complexion,
the Delmandé family servants cannot fathom the status of the “tramp” Bertrand has brought home. With these two stories, the distinction between racial prejudice and economic prejudice are blurred, and both blacks and whites disparage those they believe to be socially beneath them. Meanwhile, Chopin works to elucidate for the reader just how mistaken those disparaging words and behavior are, suggesting that she intends for readers to sympathize with these victims, provided they are the right kind of victims: the ones who turn out to be even less “deserving” of ridicule because they are not definitively black or poor at all. Likewise, by demonstrating just how much of a victim each of these characters have been, Chopin emphasizes the destructiveness of that kind of social subjugation.

In both stories, Chopin’s tales indicate sensitivity to quick and unfair judgment, especially on the part of those with privilege and status. While there are no Acadians portrayed in this story, the economic demise of the Delmandés, coupled with the comments of their African American servants, render this story relevant to a consideration of class relations. Both “A Wizard from Gettysburg” and “Désirée’s Baby” finish with an ironic twist: the very thing which everyone has believed to be true, that Armand’s privileged background renders him entirely white which means that Désirée must be the parent with African American lineage, and that the Delmandé patriarch is dead and their economic situation is failing, actually turns out to be quite the opposite. While Armand’s story ends terribly unfortunately, with the unnecessary death of his wife and child, the Delmandé family story ends joyfully. In “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” the family’s economic problems, along with the old man’s seeming poverty, are immensely
important to the story’s finale, whereas racism and racial prejudice are much more relevant in “Désirée’s Baby,” though both do confront social prejudices against people and groups considered inferior. And in both cases, Chopin creates sympathetic victims who do not deserve the mistreatment or mistrust they have received.

Like Wilkins’s “ill-disguised contempt” in “A Gentleman from Bayou Têche,” ‘Cindy responds to Bertrand with “a disdainful shrug” (128). For both characters, their “contempt” and “disdain” is ultimately quieted because they are not the ones to make decisions. Both must listen to the Creoles who employ them, which interestingly does not make them unlike Evariste and Martinette or the “tramp.” While Evariste and the “tramp” apparently have the wherewithal to stand up for themselves or to speak for themselves, they must do so with respect and appreciation for the Creoles who have courteously received them. Even though Evariste saves Archie Sublet, he must behave gratefully in turn when he is invited to dine with the prestigious Mr. Hallet for what seems to be the first time. Likewise, when the “tramp” is courteously rescued, it is because a teenaged Creole boy intends “to be a physician some day” and he “can’t begin to practice too early” (127). Chopin even says that “Bertrand had no maudlin consideration for tramps as a species; he had only that morning driven from the place one who was making himself unpleasant at the kitchen window” (126). This background information certainly suggests that Bertrand considers himself well above this kind of desperation, though his family is in economic peril.

It is certainly difficult to consider Chopin’s intentions in all of these complex relationships. What are we to make of characters like Aunt Dicey and ‘Cindy, who both
knowingly advise white children who do not end up heeding their wisdom? Likewise, how are we to consider Acadians like Evariste and Martinette and misnamed “tramps” like Monsieur Delmandé, who are displayed as simple, but also as noble? Finally, what about the white upperclass characters (often Creoles), like Mr. Sublet and the Delmandés, who seem to feel they are doing good for people who, in turn, are actually doing good for them?

In many ways, “The Wizard from Gettysburg” points to an understanding of the impoverished as being more complex in their characterization than a typical local color story might portray. While it eventually turns out the “tramp” is indeed a Creole, his characterization prior to the big revelation might lead a reader to assume he is a lower-class Acadian. He is described as “a bundle of rags” (Kолосki 26) who is “old and feeble” with a long beard “as white as new-ginned cotton” (27), which is of course meant to recall the long-romanticized Southern plantation while simultaneously portraying the desolation and old age of this particular vagrant. Without any more information, this kind of description sounds more like that of the poor, ragged description of Evariste in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” than any of Chopin’s other Creole characters.

Certainly, the story could not have worked, however, had the “tramp” turned out to be a long-lost Acadian rather than a long-lost Creole. This change would have diminished the romance involved in this story, the fairy-tale element, which seems only to work because the “tramp” turns out to be one of the upper-class characters who deserve a grand reception rather than a dismissive glance. Were he an Acadian, the story would not even be worth reading for Chopin’s contemporaries, because during this era,
Acadians had, for many years, been treated as if they were “tramps.” There would be no irony, or even much of a surprise, in the story’s conclusion because readers would not have scoffed at dismissing a “tramp” any more than an Acadian. This element alone reveals the distinction between Chopin’s upper-class, white Creoles and lower-class, white Acadians in this particular region; nevertheless, in the post-bellum South, the fact that they were all white rendered them unequivocally superior.

If we are to reconsider Bonnie James Shaker’s conjecture that Chopin worked to Americanize the French-speaking whites of Louisiana, this story particularly adheres to that kind of Americanization hypothesis by displaying the Old South order being upheld by a plantation-owning Creole family whose financial struggles mimic those of other Southern whites of that era. Though her Northern readers might not have felt inclined to sympathize with the economic burdens of Southern whites, they still might have begun to group Creoles with other Southern whites after realizing their shared predicament. Furthermore, by depicting a poor “tramp” who deserves better treatment, Chopin may be inadvertently jockeying for the combined Americanization for lower-class Acadians. By incorporating a more friendly depiction of Acadians into her stories, Chopin opened up all French-speaking Louisianans to assimilation into the rest of America. Steven K. Johnson writes, “Whether published first in popular literary journals or bound collections, short fiction remained an influential venue of Civil War memory among white, literate classes.” With this influence in mind, Shaker suggests that “A Wizard from Gettysburg” presents:

a fictionalized scenario of a bourgeois white Creole helping the disempowered
white tramp [which] performs yet another important task: It imagines the
dissolution of economic class stratification among whites, a move that both
encourages solidarity among whites and inevitably excludes blacks. (43)

Shaker goes on to argue that this “white class solidarity” was essentially a myth “only
deployed by the (white) middle class when it suited their immediate interests,” whereas
the poorer Southern whites “had reason to doubt the serviceability of the color line.
Often struggling in a net of mortgages, agricultural ignorance, and erratic prices, they had
no guarantee of a lasting advantage over anyone” (Shaker 43). Acadians, thus, like
Evariste and Martinette who live and work along “the swamp” and seeming “tramps” like
Monsieur Delmandé, generally did not experience this sense of white superiority.

In the same way that southern African Americans jockeyed for the superior
position that some of them had previously had over Acadians, Shaker suggests that
economically disempowered southern whites, “even with the privilege of being white,
were usually unable to participate in the myth of upward mobility and lift themselves
above the dredges of a stereotypical black economic, social, and material lifestyle”
(Shaker 44). If we are to assume that Chopin intended to empower her southern whites,
particularly the disempowered Acadians, then she was working against a generally
intolerant public. In “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” she certainly seems to challenge
notions of how Americans viewed impoverished whites, even the unusual subsect of
French-speaking “whites” in Louisiana, but the same cannot be said in this particular
story for perpetuating a more tolerant approach to African Americans in Louisiana.
In fact, because the plantation-owning Delmandés are suffering financially in this story, Chopin likely means for readers to sympathize with a struggling Reconstruction-era family that can no longer send their son to school. At the same time, though this family has been economically ravaged by the Civil War and the supposed loss of their patriarch, they also have managed to maintain some of the Old Southern order. Steven K. Johnson presents this kind of argument in his article when he identifies a number of ways that “A Wizard from Gettysburg” suggests “that very little has changed in the social structures from which the elder Bertrand departed at the beginning of the war.” From the way young Bertrand treats the servants as inferior to the titles of “Ma’am” and “Marse,” “a vernacular practice in the Louisiana of the 1890s held over from slavery,” and even in the fact that the locale is still called “a plantation,” Johnson posits that the “uncanny exhumation of the Delmandé’s buried treasure remembers this repressed discourse.”

Johnson reminds us that this “buried fortune” likely exists only because of the work of former slaves, presumably like ‘Cindy and other who are now servants of the Delmandé family. In unearthing this treasure, the “wizard” did not use magic at all, but rather recovered “hoarded surplus value earned through the plantation’s system of slave labor.” (The “wizard,” as Shaker points out, buries gold and not the paper money which would have lost value following the Civil War. His “treasure” retains value because of this smart move, but it exists at all because of slave labor.) Thus, while the story does not seem to be about race-relations at all, we can see that the revelation of the “wizard” and the unearthing of the “treasure” may actually work to unconsciously remind readers of a system better-forgotten. Through a complex description of “metis” and the literary
revelations of buried knowledge in both Chopin and Bierce’s work, Johnson proposes that Chopin actually meant to “draw out memories of a past intentionally forgotten” and “question the adequacy of the dominant fictions” of what he calls “reconciled white domination.” In short, Johnson prompts Chopin readers to reconsider what may have seemed to her contemporaries like a romanticized vision of the Old South as something much more complex and disingenuous.

In a similar move, Bonnie James Shaker argues that at the same time “A Wizard of Gettysburg” illustrates that “the legacy of white supremacy can endure,” it also serves as “an unforgiving reminder of the irreversible spoils of war” (47). In the end of the story, Monsieur Delmandé still suffers from dementia, and in this sense, Chopin shows us the “grand, dying generation of southern patriarchs [who] provided well enough for their off-spring that the new generation can triumph in spite of the North’s damage to the southern body politic” (Shaker 47).

While it is difficult to distinguish between Chopin’s perhaps romanticized depiction of plantation life and a more sordid representation of that long-lost system, the same complexities exist in her representation of lower-class whites and southern blacks. In moves she may not have intended to make, Chopin’s Bayou Folk stories certainly portray a Louisiana that has been ravaged by war and its aftermath, but which reveals a mixing bowl of French-speaking whites, both Acadians and Creoles, and free people of color, many of them former slaves or descendants of formers slaves, in a multifarious society that no other part of the country shared. Furthermore, since the story’s grand finale involves a magical restoration of pre-Civil War wealth, Chopin does not clearly
distinguish for the reader who most deserves our sympathy, though the story does
celebrate a return of that southern grandeur to a somewhat disempowered Creole family.
At the same time, her African American characters once again play a relatively small role
in the story as a whole, while the seemingly lower-class white plays a central role.
Chopin seems to provide readers with an ambiguous sense of relief for the now-
financially stable family and the return of the long-lost plantation owner, while
simultaneously suggesting that the racial stratification that still exists has yet to be turned
on its head and will not likely change because of longstanding ideas of superiority and
privilege.
An Acadian Damsel in Distress and Her Unsung Black Hero “In Sabine”

Unlike “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” and “The Wizard from Gettysburg,” “In Sabine” more clearly aligns with some of Chopin’s more famous, female-centered pieces like *The Awakening*, “The Story of an Hour,” and “Desirée’s Baby,” in which Chopin sympathetically depicts female protagonists who are up against an unrelenting society. “In Sabine” certainly sympathizes with a female in need of rescue, and the fact that she is Acadian and her unsung hero is African American makes this story especially relevant to my argument. Though the man to ultimately rescue the victim of domestic violence is Creole, the man who has worked day in, day out to protect her and save her life is another minor African American character, named Mortimer. Most readings of this story have overlooked his important role in the woman’s rescue, and I will argue that Chopin means for us to pay attention to Mortimer’s heroism in a way she does not with her other African American characters in her other *Bayou Folk* stories.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, this story is about a victim of domestic violence, then called “wife abuse,” which Emily Toth explains was “a topic mostly ignored by men, but always written about by women” (*Unveiling* 152). Toth argues that Chopin’s treatment of domestic violence is unique in this story because the battered woman actually escapes and the story has a happy ending, whereas writers like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote stories in which “the husband
wins, and the wife goes off to starve or die,” which Toth claims was “true to life” in Chopin’s era (*Unveiling* 152).

“In Sabine” is, however, not simply a story about domestic violence, but also a story that portrays the economic disenfranchisement and squalor that Chopin knew many women, particularly those subjugated according to racial or ethnic distinctions, faced when they married the “wrong man.” In this case, that man comes in the form of a violent and drunk outsider to Natchitoches Parish, who has shamed and physically abused his wife so much that she fears for her life. On top of those very legitimate and life-threatening fears, the female in this relationship has also married a man who cannot (or will not) provide for her and so she must do everything she can to make sure that she will simply survive. She works the fields picking cotton and scrounges up food for meals; she is not merely a victim of abuse, but also a terribly burdened character whose only hope for escape from her impoverished, abusive existence comes in the form of an old acquaintance, Grégoire Santien.

Grégoire, the protagonist of this story, is a familiar male character in *Bayou Folk* who appears in several of the stories. At the beginning of “In Sabine,” Gregoire has just traveled to Sabine where he inadvertently encounters a woman he used to know, ‘Tite Reine, and her Texan husband, Bud Aiken. Actually, Santien really stumbles on their home; first, he encounters an “old Negro man,” whom he automatically calls “Uncle” (much like Chopin’s consistent reference to “Aunt” Dicey in “A Gentleman from Bayou Têche”) and whom he assumes has been hired by Bud Aiken to chop wood. Mortimer
replies that Mr. Aiken cannot afford to hire a man to chop wood, but all the same, Mortimer does the chopping so that Bud’s wife will not have to do it herself.

Prior to the Creole Grégoire Santien’s swooping in to save the day, we hear of countless ways in which Mortimer has helped ‘Tite Reine to survive. His character certainly calls to mind stereotypes of the kind and devoted black servant, and yet his role also exemplifies a rebellious servant who selflessly and honorably defends what is right. Interestingly, we never quite know how Mortimer has come to know the Aikens, and thus we do not know whether he was a hired servant at one point, who now does not get paid, or whether he is simply a neighbor lending a hand. The origin of Mortimer’s relationship with ‘Tite Reine is ambiguous, and yet she has certainly come to count on him. Both Mortimer and ‘Tite Reine seem mired in poverty and desperation, and we might say that they are each mistreated, one because of his race and the other because of her gender (though in this case ‘Tite Reine is less autonomous and suffers more direct abuse).

Chopin presents both of the Aikens and Mortimer as impoverished, but her narration seems to work especially hard to show the shared social and economic subjugation that an African American male and white female, particularly an Acadian female experience.

Besides Grégoire’s ultimate role in saving ‘Tite Reine in the story’s last heroic act in which he gallops off with her to Natchitoches Parish, we also see the day-in, day-out help ‘Tite Reine has received from a gracious and similarly heroic Mortimer. First, the initially unnamed, and seemingly unimportant, Mortimer explains to the visiting Grégoire Santien, “I say dat dis Mas’ Bud Aiken don’t hires me to chop ‘ood. Ef I don’t chop dis heah, his wife got it to do. Dat w’ y I chops ‘ood, suh” (44). Very simply, Mortimer
informs both Grégoire and the reader that he serves ‘Tite Reine and not Bud Aiken. The reason he has explained this at all stems from Grégoire’s assumption that no person would do this kind of work for free, which is clear when he says, “Well, if Mr. Bud Aiken c’n affo’d to hire a man to chop his wood, I reckon he won’t grudge me a bite o’ suppa an’ a couple hours’ res’ on his gall’ry” (44). To this, Mortimer replies that he chops wood to help ‘Tite Reine and then ushers Grégoire in the right direction: “Go right ‘long in, suh; you g’ine fine Mas’ Bud some’eres roun’, ef he ain’t drunk an’ gone to bed” (44). Mortimer could easily have indicated that Bud Aiken would be no host to Grégoire, and though he does indicate that he may be drunk, he effectively sets in motion ‘Tite Reine’s ultimate escape. Likewise, with this portion of his response, we see that Mortimer still uses the language of plantation days, calling Mr. Aiken, “Mas’ Bud,” though he does not officially work for him. Intriguingly, Mortimer calls him “Mas’ Bud” rather than “Mas’ Aiken,” using his first name rather than his last name, which may actually demonstrate that Mortimer feels Bud Aiken is no master, or even boss, to him at all.

Besides his southern courtesy in using a colloquial version of the term “master,” or shall we call it acknowledgement of his maintained subjugation despite the abolition of slavery, Mortimer also establishes with this response that Bud Aiken is likely to be drunk. Unfortunately, this does not immediately clue Grégoire into the fact that Bud Aiken is, therefore, a perpetual drunk; Grégoire seems slow to draw this conclusion. Instead, as he dismounts his horse and walks by the angry Texan stallion that Aiken owns, he wonders why he knows the name Bud Aiken. Finally, when he sees Bud Aiken standing in the
“small doorway” of his “cabin” or “hut,” Grégoire remembers that this is the “disreputable so-called ‘Texan’ who a year ago had run away with and married Baptiste Choupic’s pretty daughter, ‘Tite Reine, yonder on Bayou Pierre, in Natchitoches parish.’” He goes on to recall “her piquant face with its saucy black coquettish eyes” and “her little exacting, imperious ways that had obtained for her the nickname of ‘Tite Reine, little queen’” (45). With these descriptions, the entire narrative unfolds for us. ‘Tite Reine’s “queenly” ways have been sullied by the “disreputable so-called ‘Texan’” who carried off one of Natchitoches parish’s own young beauties.

In the same paragraph, we learn that ‘Tite Reine is likely Acadian, since Grégoire admits that he “had known her at the ‘Cadian balls that he sometimes had the hardihood to attend.” Interestingly, Grégoire is distinguished from the lower-class ‘Tite Reine, and when he has felt compelled to spend time with her and other Acadians, he seems to feel it was good of him to do so. His feelings of superiority, in some way, mimic those of Bud Aiken, though Grégorie is no brute in this story. However, if we recall his role in At Fault, he certainly acts violently and impulsively when he kills Joçint, and when we make that connection, it is difficult not to see the similarities between him and Bud. Their status as white, Southern males links them, despite the fact that one is the abuser and one is the rescuer, because they both see themselves as superior.

As for Grégoire’s continued recollections of the Acadian ‘Tite Reine, Grégoire’s memories inspire in him a “warmth,” which certainly indicates that he feels lustful, or at least romantic, about the “coquettish” ways of ‘Tite Reine. In this way, before we even meet ‘Tite Reine, she has been effectively characterized as what nineteenth-century
society would likely have deemed a “worthwhile” heroine, one whose beauty and fragility inspire her ultimate rescue. At the same time, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, her “coquettish” ways may be just what got her into trouble in the first place.

Another curious power play occurs before we even meet ‘Tite Reine: Bud Aiken commands Mortimer as if he is Mortimer’s master. After Grégoire and Bud introduce themselves to one another, or re-acquaint themselves as it happens that they have met before, Bud calls out to Mortimer. The narration reads that when he yells, he “call[s] in ringing chest tones worthy a commander at the head of his troop.” The use of the word “commander” calls to mind the arrogance of this poor, abusive man whose feelings of superiority justify, for him, the way he treats those around him; he acts as if he is a military commander, when in fact he is just an abusive drunk. Bud commands, “Mortimer, come along here an’ take my frien’ Mr. Sachun’s hoss. Git a move thar, git a move!” (46). Chopin does not fill us in on how Mortimer responds to Bud, but the command itself is rather peculiar, considering that Mortimer has just explained that he does not work for Bud. Of course, we have to take into account the subjugation forced on any African American in the South. All African Americans, not just those who were employed by whites, were compelled, either by nineteenth-century social norms or their own survival instincts, to obey whites who ordered them to perform a task for them. Later, the narration explains that Mortimer has “never feared” Bud, which may suggest that Mortimer performs his tasks almost entirely to make life easier for ‘Tite Reine, who does, in fact, fear Bud (52).
Interestingly, Chopin depicts Mortimer as having a mind of his own, and he clearly delineates for the visiting stranger that he chops wood for ‘Tite Reine and not for Bud Aiken. Thus, Bud’s demand seems intriguing because it further complicates our sense of Mortimer’s role for this family. The story’s ambiguity leaves us wondering just how good Mortimer is and how much he has stepped out of his role as subordinate in order to protect this woman. The narration later explains that Bud and Mortimer “worked the crop on shares” (50), which may indicate an economic equality but not a social or racial equality. Likewise, this brief explanation certainly does not elucidate the nature of Mortimer’s devotion to ‘Tite Reine and his particular relationship with Bud. We also do not know whether Mortimer has only worked for ‘Tite Reine in Sabine, or if he had known her when she and Bud lived in Grant, Winn, or Caddo. Chopin leaves the nature and history of Mortimer’s relationship with ‘Tite Reine and Bud rather ambiguous. Likewise, since we do not know whether he obeys Bud or not, he may actually be disobedient or insubordinate to Bud prior to the conclusion of the story. Perhaps he simply ignores Bud and sticks around just to help out Bud’s poor wife. Whatever the case may be, Mortimer’s ambiguous role in Bud and ‘Tite Reine’s life certainly calls to mind both the generalized concept of devoted black servants (devoted to ‘Tite Reine anyway) and the unfair subjugation of such devotees.

Again, before we even meet ‘Tite Reine, we know that there has been someone protecting her, serving more as the husband and provider she deserves, and that this protector is none other than this older black man, Mortimer, rather than the “big-bod[ied]” and apparently handsome Bud Aiken with whom she ran off and got married.
Despite the very typical southern concern for black males lusting after white females, this story distinctly does not insinuate any kind of sexual motivation for Mortimer’s devotion; rather, he seems to be presented as a man of integrity who shares with ‘Tite Reine the burden of this drunk Texan as well as the burden of social subjugation. Thus, Chopin lays out for the reader Mortimer’s honorable and heroic intentions in this story, in direct opposition to the horror and abuse enacted by Bud. Even Grégoire is not characterized as entirely kind or selfless because the story begins with Grégoire’s recollected attraction for ‘Tite Reine, though once he sees her again that lust turns to pity.

As soon as ‘Tite Reine comes into the story, it is evident that she has lost her “exacting, imperious ways” that Grégoire recalled in her. Instead, she is simultaneously terrified of her husband and anxious to please him. When Bud yells for her, in the same demanding way he yells for Mortimer, she calls back as she runs toward him and “breathlessly” asks what he wants. Then, when Grégoire first sees her, he notices that she has “changed a good deal” and that she is “thinner.” More importantly, he immediately notices in her now “larger” eyes “an alert, uneasy look” which he mistakes as her surprise at his being there. A reader with a more perceptive eye than Grégoire would quickly note that the alertness and uneasiness, along with the breathlessness, all add up to a woman living in fear.

Upon seeing Grégoire, ‘Tite Reine is clearly embarrassed, too, as well as flushed and teary-eyed, full of “ill-concealed excitement.” This “ill-concealed excitement” may indicate either her own previous attraction to Grégoire or more likely her hope that she will now be able to escape her peril, or some combination of the two. As for her
embarrassment and teary eyes, she likely feels shame that she has succumbed to a life of squalor and neglect. Grégoire also observes that “her shoes were in shreds.” Rather than reveal exactly what she says to Grégoire, Chopin’s narration explains that she “uttered only a low, smothered exclamation” (46), which may serve as a reflection of her life being “smothered” by her violent husband. At this point, Bud chastises her, saying, “Well, is that all you got to say to my frien’ Mr. Sanchun?” (46). Then, he presumably turns to Grégoire and explains, “That’s the way with them Cajuns […] ain’t got sense enough to know a white man when they see one” (46). With the use of the pejorative term “Cajun,” which Chopin otherwise does not include in this story (though she does use ‘Cadian in this story and frequently throughout her short stories), Chopin essentially portrays Bud Aiken as a bigot. Not only does he use the insulting term for Acadian to refer to his own wife, but he also explains her behavior as evidence of the inability of all Acadians to recognize “a white man,” importantly differentiating Acadians from being “white” themselves.

Interestingly, Chopin works to dismiss Bud’s bigotry as that of a villain by portraying the kind of man who would say something that prejudiced as being simultaneously a drunk, abusive outsider (a “Texan”) who is generally despicable. Chopin’s “bad guy” is the one to speak ill of Acadians; not only does he disparage his Acadian wife, he also beats her, terrifies her, and forces her into a life of submission and poverty. In many of Chopin’s stories, the bad guy is the outsider who misunderstands, exploits, or even abuses the disempowered Acadians. That assumption certainly would connect our readings of “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” and “In Sabine,” since both
stories render the outsiders as exploitative or abusive characters deserving of judgment, rather than the Acadians whom they victimize.

Another way in which Bud Aiken has victimized ‘Tite Reine is by forcing her into a life of drifting and poverty. We learn of this nomadic lifestyle when, in order to divert attention from ‘Tite Reine’s complex reaction to seeing him, Grégoire asks Bud about where they have previously lived, to which Bud replies that they have lived in a number of places, but none of them were good places “to make a livin’ in.” He claims he’s “fixin’ to sell out an’ try Vernon” (47), at which point the narration directs the reader’s attention to the particular squalor of the current Aiken “hut.” The following description, more than any of the other stories, depicts domestic impoverishment:

Bud Aiken’s household belongings surely would not count for much in the contemplated ‘selling out.’ The one room that constituted his home was extremely bare of furnishing,—a cheap bed, a pine table, and a few chairs, that was all. On a rough shelf were some paper parcels representing the larder. The mud daubing had fallen out here and there from between the logs of the cabin; and into the largest of these apertures had been thrust pieces of ragged bagging and wisps of cotton. A tin basin outside on the gallery offered the only bathing facilities to be seen. (47)

Along with the descriptions of the food ‘Tite Reine manages to scrounge together for the next few meals, this visual portrayal of the Aiken home drives home the desperation into which ‘Tite Reine has fallen. Later, Grégoire explains that “he could no longer recognize the imperious ‘Tite Reine, whose will had been the law in her father’s household” (48),
because now she has been desperately broken down and that confidence has been beaten out of her. In some ways, her character is reminiscent of Kate in William Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* in the way that Bud Aiken ultimately has tamed her, though Chopin certainly characterizes ‘Tite Reine’s queenliness as being innocent and sweet-natured, whereas Shakespeare seems to suggest that Kate’s behavior actually calls for “taming.” Then again, Shakespeare may have accepted this kind of physical “taming” of a woman, but Chopin would not have advocated beating the confidence out of a woman, an action which Bud Aiken seems to consider perfectly permissible. Still, given the questions ‘Tite Reine later asks Grégoire about her family’s cotton crop and her favorite cow, “Putty Girl” and the general status of Acadians in Natchitoches Parish, her former life certainly could not have been truly “queenly.” Nevertheless, Chopin makes a point to explain that ‘Tite Reine had formerly lived in a household where she was allowed to behave “exacting” and “imperious,” which certainly demonstrates the total reversal she has experienced in this new life where she is the household victim rather than the household sovereign.

Despite the desperate accommodations, Grégoire asks if he can spend the night, in part because of the “heartbroken entreaty” in ‘Tite Reine’s eyes. He sleeps on “an old patchwork quilt folded double and a moss pillow” (47), only to be awoken during the night by ‘Tite Reine’s questions about life back home. She misses the life she once had, and Grégoire, though he “knew no more of the Baptiste Choupic family than the post beside him” (48), goes along with her questioning and pretends to know that everything and everyone is all right.
This line of questioning suggests that ‘Tite Reine’s life as an Acadian in Natchitoches Parish was mostly congenial, and her having run off with Bud Aiken was entirely a mistake. We might consider this line of questioning, then, an indication from Chopin that Acadian life more generally allowed for female autonomy (since ‘Tite Reine was known to have behaved “queenly”). In this way, Chopin again seems to dismiss stereotyping Acadians, and rather, as critics like Maria Hebert-Leiter and Joyce Coyne Dyer suggest, she uses the foreign-ness of Acadian life in order to display female independence (and in other stories, female sexuality) in a way that she could not do with other, perhaps more familiar, or even more Northern female characters.

Maria Hebert-Leiter explains, “By first clarifying her ‘Cadian characters’ ambiguity in relation to American social and racial norms, Chopin establishes her means of voicing personal disagreement with Victorian notions of American womanhood” (92). In other Chopin stories like “The Storm,” Hebert-Leiter argues that Chopin used popular nineteenth-century American notions of Acadian identity “as a tool for addressing female desire” (92) in a way which seemed less immediate or offensive to “the genteel publishers of her time” (87). In her article, “Techniques in Distancing in the Fiction of Kate Chopin,” Joyce Coyne Dyer suggests the same kind of “distancing” in “ascribing strong sexual desire—a trait we know she thought universal—to Indians, gypsies, madwomen, Negroes, and social outcasts” (69). Dyer focuses on pieces like “Mrs. Mobry’s Reason,” “La Belle Zoräide” (which is included in Bayou Folk), and “Juanita,” all of which demonstrate “the uncivilized or insane” behaving in “course, wild, and
‘unnatural’” (69) ways. Hebert-Leiter and Dyer propose that Chopin intended to demonstrate in her stories, above all, female sexual desire.

By using “foreign” characters who would be less relatable to the genteel, Victorian readers of the late 19th-century, Chopin does certainly distance her message in a way that is less threatening, but what both Hebert-Leiter and Dyer neglect to consider is that she does not do so only to promote or depict sexual desire. Instead, Chopin likely uses less culturally familiar characters in order to deal with a number of problematic or bold topics other than just sexual desire. In fact, many of her stories have little to do with desire; for instance, “The Gentleman of Bayou Têche” and “The Wizard of Gettysburg” depict complex relations between these “foreigners,” particularly “Creoles” or “Acadians” who were commonly grouped together as “French,” but who Chopin certainly wants to differentiate for an outside audience. Likewise, her “foreign” characters are subject to conflicting power dynamics, particularly the Acadians and African Americans who sometimes work alongside one another and other times work against each other. In stories like these, the plots reveal no underlying sexual desire, but rather the complex and intricate interrelations between “foreigners” and African Americans, none of whom are yet considered by the general readership to be “American.” Thus, both Hebert-Leiter and Dyer rightfully call attention to the powerful use of Chopin’s “foreign” characters, but they do not pay heed to some of the other implications in focusing on this particular mixing bowl.

Chopin essentially works to Americanize her white, French-speaking characters, or even to make them “white” at all, perhaps at the expense of African Americans, both
in her stories and in reality. Though her African American characters are made more complex and challenge long-held stereotypes, they also are not included in this Americanization movement that Chopin may in fact have purposely been working toward.

While Hebert-Leiter and Dyer both neglect to consider that the same kind of “safety” or “distancing” implicit in using an Acadian character to relate stories other than those perpetuating “female desire,” we can see the same benefit of using an Acadian female character like ‘Tite Reine in one of the first stories of escape from domestic violence. (That said, she was only able to publish this story by slipping it into her Bayou Folk collection at the last minute; it was rejected prior to Bayou Folk by The Atlantic and before encountering other objections, Chopin acted to include it in her first collection.) Northern, genteel publishers might have scoffed at the idea of “wife abuse,” but Chopin carefully chose to depict an Acadian victim of abuse whose situation might seem less threatening to an American audience because her American-ness is still being disputed and thus her predicament, too, might seem more foreign to an American reader. At the same time, by characterizing Bud as the bigot who differentiates between the “whiteness” of Creoles and the “foreign-ness” of Acadians, Chopin simultaneously works to dispute such ethnic classifications. Likewise, by characterizing ‘Tite Reine as sympathetic, beautiful, and even, at one point, “queenly,” the author seems to suggest a newer, more compassionate inclusion of Acadians into American society.

This role of Acadian female in particular is not especially important in either “The Wizard of Gettysburg,” in which we have no Acadian females, or in “A Gentleman of
Bayou Têche,” in which Martinette is the only Acadian female and her primary role is as Evariste’s daughter. However, in “In Sabine,” ‘Tite Reine’s sexual attractiveness is immediately laid out for the reader in the way that Grégoire remembers her. In this way, ‘Tite Reine may, in fact, fulfill this kind of “female desire” that would be rendered unacceptable if the character were a typical Victorian-era American female, as Hebert-Leiter suggests. At the same time, some readers might skirt over the story’s important messages about class and desire, suggesting that ‘Tite Reine merely represents a worthy nineteenth-century heroine whose beauty makes Grégoire’s rescue of her that much more heroic.

Interestingly, ‘Tite Reine has only recently run off with a Texan, and through her negative experience, there seems to be an inherent message for female readers: do not fall prey to handsome outsiders. More specifically, like “A Visit to Avoyelles,” which I discussed in my introduction, Chopin seems to convey the message that women ought to be very cautious about whom they marry. The sexual frivolity or carelessness that occurs here may be unfairly linked to the fact that ‘Tite Reine is Acadian, but the message for all females hoping to follow their heart’s desire seems linked to the necessity of caution when exercising that longed-for freedom. Chopin especially seems wary of community outsiders whose background, family, and personality are less knowable, and thus more dangerous, than community insiders. She also may be portraying the close-knit society of Natchitoches Parish as being particularly closed-off and suspicious since she herself felt like an outsider during her experience living there. Of course, the idea of marrying
into the unknown was a nineteenth-century faux pas as it was, so this message may necessarily support a generally-understood social more.

In any case, Chopin seems to work more carefully in this particular piece to free the female Acadian victim from her “self-perpetuated” burden of marrying the wrong kind of man, while Chopin’s one African American character, Mortimer, seems to bear the brunt of the work and gets no apparent thanks for doing so. At the same time, the story’s “outsider,” Bud Aiken, plays the most stereotypically confining role as the abusive, neglectful husband who has tried his best to ruin this Natchitoches Parish girl. Only the Acadian, “Tite Reine, and the Creole, Grégoire, seem to garner the most complexity, at least at first glance.

Following her careless departure from home with a Texan she barely knew, “Tite Reine has suffered great hardship and, to make matters worse, she has had no way to communicate with her family how desperate her situation has become. This fact presents another important connection between the Acadians in this story and “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche”: the issue of literacy. During her night-time confession to Grégoire Santien, “Tite Reine explains that because she cannot read and write, she has not been able to write to her father to ask for help, so she is hopeful that Grégoire will take her away. She says, “If I would know how to read an’ write, an’ had some pencil an’ paper, it ’s long ’go I would wrote to my popa. But it ’s no pos’ office, it ’s no relroad,-- nothin’ in Sabine.” She goes on to say that Bud says he is going to “carry [her] yonda to Vernon, an’ fu’ther off yet,-- ‘way yonda’, an’ he ’s goin’ turn [her] loose” (49). Her inability to read and write recalls the same illiteracy in another of Chopin’s Acadian characters,
Evariste, who pretends to scrawl imaginary characters on a tablecloth in an ambiguous move. “Tite Reine feels no shame in her illiteracy, but it has rendered her even more powerless than her poverty has, for without the ability to write, she essentially has no way out. She cannot be heard at all. Evariste likely feels that same kind of powerlessness when he knows he will not be able to read the caption on Mr. Sublet’s picture, but his powerlessness will not end his life; it may only serve to humiliate him. In order to combat his humiliation, Evariste pretends to be able to write and this seems to feed his pride, but ‘Tite Reine’s situation is so desperate that no make-believe will ease the helplessness associated with her illiteracy. ‘Tite Reine’s illiteracy, as well as her physical isolation from the people she loves, has essentially kept her in danger and in fear for at least a year. Had Grégoire not happened upon her home, she would never have been able to communicate to anyone outside her immediate surroundings that her life had become so terrifying. And, as in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” although Chopin depicts an African American character who is both capable and helpful, she does not indicate whether either Dicey or Mortimer are literate. Perhaps Mortimer’s illiteracy can be assumed, but ‘Tite Reine’s is explicitly mentioned, further illustrating her hopelessness.

During their nighttime conversation, ‘Tite Reine also reveals to Grégoire the role that Mortimer has played in her life up until now. She explains how frightened she is of Bud, saying, “Bud’s killin’ me” and that “nobody don’ know, ‘cep’ Unc’ Mort’mer” that he beats her, particularly on her arms and back, likely because those are places where people are less likely to see the bruises. At this point, it becomes even clearer just how
essential Mortimer has been to her survival. While it seems that both ‘Tite Reine and Mortimer lack the resources to help her escape, they have worked together to help her survive. She has learned to behave submissively, given that we do not see any evidence of her formerly “imperious” ways, and Mortimer has become accustomed to doing things like chopping wood for her, picking cotton with her, and presenting her with chickens “at various times” (50). Furthermore, ‘Tite Reine recounts to Grégoire that at one point, Mortimer actually saved her life: “He would ‘a’ choke’ me to death one day w’en he was drunk, if Unc’ Mort’mer had ‘n make ‘im lef go- with his axe ov’ his head” (49). Though Chopin never explicitly delineates for the reader the vital role Mortimer has played in keeping ‘Tite Reine alive, this momentary mention of his saving her life suggests just how much honor and strength this particular character possesses.

At the end of the story, Mortimer comes to pick up that same axe “which was his own property” (51) and which perhaps serves to make him feel more comfortable when he openly defies Bud Aiken. When Bud wakes up to find ‘Tite Reine and Grégoire gone, Mortimer is the one to inform him that the two have ridden off on both Grégoire’s horse and Bud’s horse, and that they have long escaped to Natchitoches Parish. At this point, Chopin’s narration shows Mortimer at his least stereotypical. He is openly defiant and unafraid; he is rebellious and yet he is not rude. Chopin writes, “Uncle Mortimer never had feared Bud Aiken; and with his trusty axe upon his shoulder, he felt a double hardihood in the man’s presence. The old fellow passed the back of his black, knotty hand unctuously over his lips, as though he relished in advance the words that were about to pass them” (52). Then, in what we can only imagine is a calm and collected voice, he
explains that “Miss Reine” and “Mr. Sanchun” rode off. When Bud responds by ordering Mortimer to saddle up his horse, he replies, in the last line of the story, “Yas, Mas’ Bud, but you see, Mr. Sanchun, he done cross the Sabine befo’ sun-up on Buckeye” (52). In a classic Chopin move, the story ends with a powerful revelation for both Bud and the reader: Bud cannot victimize ‘Tite Reine any longer.

Intriguingly, Mortimer’s role in “In Sabine” certainly seems at first to be rather minor, but in close reading we see Chopin’s moves to render him more than just honorable, but also defiant in his role in saving the life of ‘Tite Reine. It is almost frustrating that Grégoire is ultimately the one to rescue Tite Reine from her desolate poverty and abuse, the one who will likely reap the rewards and feel like the knight in shining armor to have saved the day. This is not to discount his heroic act, but in post-Reconstruction era Louisiana, even though Mortimer’s actions are just as courageous and just as honorable, because he is black, he can do less to ultimately help her and he receives less thanks for what he does. In part, Chopin seems to discourage the audience from viewing Mortimer as ‘Tite Reine’s hero, and yet she chooses to end the story with Mortimer proudly telling the story’s antagonist that he has been duped. Perhaps this is yet another coy tactic from Chopin to subtly and safely portray a typically-subjugated character as being the story’s hero. In the same way that she characterizes the Acadians who have just “come out of the swamp” in “A Gentleman from Bayou Têche” and the “tramp” from “A Wizard from Gettysburg” as deserving more honor than they are typically allowed, perhaps “In Sabine” also serves to subtly display not just the honor of
this particular character, but more generally unveil the unsung heroes of the American South.

Though Mortimer gets less explicit thanks in Chopin’s story, part of the integrity Chopin displays for us in the character of Mortimer comes from the fact that he does not seem to need thanks. We see his pride and honor when he “relish[e] in advance the words that were about to pass them” before he tells Bud that his wife has finally escaped, and this alone seems to be worthwhile to him (52). As one of the first to praise Chopin for her sensitive portrayal of African American character, critic Richard Potter writes of Mortimer in his 1971 article:

A black man protecting a white woman is a far cry from the stereotype of the brute Negro ravishing white woman; yet here it is in a story of the 1890s. ‘Tite Reine has been saved by a black man, and with Grégoire’s help she is finally able to escape, leaving her horseless husband fuming and helpless. (47)

Potter goes on to remind the reader, “We never learn if Uncle Mortimer suffers any retribution […] but it is obvious from what we are told that Uncle Mortimer assumes a role which, even to this day, is relatively unique in fiction” (47-8). Chopin’s choice to present what Potter calls “white brutality” (48) with the character of Bud Aiken certainly is juxtaposed with the compassionate black character who ultimately serves, alongside a kind Creole (also considered an outsider or non-white at the time), as ‘Tite Reine’s savior. Mortimer’s heroic and defiant role in ‘Tite Reine’s escape throws a wrench in the argument that Chopin’s portrayals of African Americans are stereotypical.
In comparison with Dicey, Wilkins, and ‘Cindy from the first two *Bayou Folk* stories covered in this thesis, Mortimer seems equally aware of his place and his means, but he seems to physically work harder, not to mention place himself in danger, than any of the other African American characters to take care of a white person in need. In part, this is because no characters’ lives really seem to need saving in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” and “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” except perhaps Archie Sublet but Evariste has that covered. However, Mortimer seems to actively engage in helping an Acadian woman, rather than harboring any kind of “contempt” or “disdain” for her condition. Then again, a victim of abuse certainly garners more sympathy than an impoverished person, despite the fact that suffering cannot be quantified or compared. And we may interpret Dicey’s explication to Martinette as warm and compassionate, something she shares because they are both equally disempowered by what Bonnie James Shaker calls “the myth of white class solidarity.” But there is no question that what Mortimer does for ‘Tite Reine, he does selflessly and courageously. Imagining the old, knotty-knuckled Mortimer holding up his “trusty axe” over the big-bodied drunk certainly conjures up trust in both his bravery and his integrity.

Mortimer also stands out among the African American characters we have discussed so far in *Bayou Folk* in his devotion to an Acadian in particular. Unlike Dicey, Wilkins, or ‘Cindy, who scoff at the Acadians to whom they seem to feel superior, Mortimer is entirely committed to helping an Acadian woman in need. This is not to discount that his devotion derives almost entirely from the need of this particularly desperate Acadian woman, especially since such need does not exist for Evariste or
Martinette in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche” or the “tramp” who turns out to be Monsieur Delmandé in “A Wizard from Gettysburg.” However, Mortimer certainly steps up to serve as ‘Tite Reine’s protector, until a Creole man comes along to save her, because no one else will. Mortimer’s actions demonstrate heroism and nurture for the very group of whites with whom Dicey, Wilkins, and ‘Cindy do not ultimately sympathize. While Dicey, Wilkins, and ‘Cindy do not seem to consider themselves equal to, let alone socially inferior to, the Acadians in their respective stories, Mortimer’s relationship with ‘Tite Reine actually demonstrates his own power in saving her. His position more clearly presents that he retains more power than ‘Tite Reine, since he stands up for her more than she seems to stand up for herself. Nevertheless, Mortimer’s behavior does not indicate that he feels superior to ‘Tite Reine; rather, he cares deeply for her and wants to help to rescue her from this desperation.

In the Bayou Folk stories discussed in this thesis, Dicey is the only other African American character whose behavior indicates that she wants to help an Acadian in trouble, but even her help comes in the form of a somewhat disparaging lecture. We see none of that kind of condescension from Mortimer, only his compassion and selflessness. Thus, Chopin depicts him as simultaneously stereotypical and original. On the one hand, Mortimer is a stereotypically devoted African American servant-type, and

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8 The only other character in Bayou Folk to serve this same kind of dually stereotypical and original role is La Folle in “Beyond the Bayou” who overcomes her agoraphobia only to save the young son of her former master when he accidentally shoots himself. This kind of devotion to a white woman or white child, Acadian or not, serves to both compartmentalize African Americans as necessarily dutiful and also as particularly caring. Both La Folle and Mortimer rescue a white child or a white woman in need, when it seems that no white characters can or will do the same.
on the other hand, he is a mindful, caring, and independent African American who has stood up to a no-good abuser and helped to rescue a woman in trouble. With a closer examination, we see that Mortimer’s characterization renders him the constant hero, whereas Grégoire’s act shows him to be the hero of the moment.

Chopin certainly may not have intended to characterize Mortimer as the hero of “In Sabine,” and yet the story ends with Mortimer’s declaration to Bud Aiken that he has been defeated and ‘Tite Reine has escaped. In fact, Chopin almost seems to sandwich ‘Tite Reine’s story between Mortimer’s dialogue. He introduces Grégoire to the Aikens before Grégoire meets them himself, and before the reader meets them, and then he concludes the story with his pronouncement of freedom. Certainly, Grégoire’s entrance into the story, and his exit with ‘Tite Reine and Bud’s horse Buckeye, signal his role as the Creole hero, but Chopin also seems to subtly point out for the reader the everyday heroism in an unassuming African American character like Mortimer who helps keep ‘Tite Reine alive and then relishes the insubordination inherent in informing her abuser of her escape.

In addition to Mortimer’s heroism, we also benefit from seeing the way Chopin pairs these two subjugated characters in a story about regaining power and dignity. Mortimer and ‘Tite Reine’s shared plight renders them, at once, equals and partners in their quest to save her, and when Grégoire comes along, they seize the opportunity to make use of his privilege and power. Chopin’s depictions of these particular characters complicate any kind of simplistic reading of Chopin.
Conclusion

Certainly, Chopin’s stories present dueling images of her lower-class characters, which creates a dilemma for readers who try to deduce her intentions and biases and which may explain why no critics have really spent much time considering these two particular classes in conjunction until now. That said, certain tendencies do seem to come up in many of her Bayou Folk stories which simultaneously perpetuate and chip away at stereotypical renderings of Acadians or African Americans. While Chopin places Acadians or lower-class whites at the center of many of her stories, she manages to simultaneously depict the subjugation and injustice enacted against both lower-class whites and blacks. Besides presenting sometimes very sympathetic characterizations of individuals, Chopin also distinguishes between the often-more-perceptive African Americans and relatively ignorant Acadians. At the same time, her African American characters can sometimes reveal feelings of contention for Acadians, and in turn present their shared subjugation as a source of conflict rather than solidarity. Other times, lower-class whites and lower-class blacks work together to avoid further humiliation or even abuse.

In “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” Evariste and Martinette are presented as ignorant (or at least oblivious) to exploitation and at the same time as being proud. Despite their poverty, their pride prohibits them from accepting the terms for Mr.
Sublet’s “picture” until Mr. Sublet demonstrates that he will treat Evariste with the
dignity he feels he deserves. Concurrently, Martinette and Evariste seem entirely
oblivious as to why Mr. Sublet would want to take a picture of Evariste at all. They do
not seem to make the connection, and in fact drop the subject when it comes up, which
certainly indicates a lack of perceptiveness. However, Chopin couples this naïveté with
Evariste’s heroism in rescuing Archie Sublet as well as his and Martinette’s sense of
pride in accepting money for something that will not represent Evariste fairly.

Though there are no actual Acadians in “The Wizard from Gettysburg,” the
“tramp” is treated similarly to how Acadians would have been treated at the time; in fact,
Evariste comes “out of the swamp” at the beginning of “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche”
so his life seems somewhat nomadic or at least primitive, similar to that of this “tramp.”
In the same way that Chopin depicts Evariste and Martinette with sensitivity as well as a
bit of patronization, Chopin portrays the “tramp” as being much more important than
anyone realizes at first, which works to both destroy as well as reinforce stereotypes
about the homeless and lower-class white people more generally.

Of course, ‘Tite Reine’s role seems central to the story “In Sabine,” but as far as
female Chopin characters go, her character is rather simplistic. An “imperious” and
“pretty” Acadian who has made the mistake of running off with and marrying a Texan,
‘Tite Reine has succumbed to a life of poverty, violence, and fear, and she ultimately
leaves with the help of Mortimer and Grégoire Santien. Perhaps her behavior would be
both condemned and understood by readers unfamiliar with Acadians because following
her heart into a foolish future could be attributed more readily to a “foreigner,” but the
fact that she ultimately escapes, in part because she asks for help, may also present the autonomy and wisdom that would not normally be equated with Acadian women. Having been described as previously “queen-like” and independent, her character’s desperate fall into a life of squalor and abuse seems to indicate, in some ways, a punishment for that decadence. At the same time, she is one of the first fictional victims of domestic violence to escape, and so her story represents the possibility of salvage and a return to that life of independence. Thus, this Acadian presents an intricate and powerful image of a victim-turned-survivor, and like Chopin’s other Acadians, her predicament and her naïveté are not permanent and her situation inspires sympathy from the reader.

Furthermore, all of these Acadian or lower-class white characters seem to experience a move upwards in society. Evariste finally gets to enjoy the respect he feels he deserves when Mr. Sublet agrees to name the picture “A Gentleman of Bayou Tèche.” The “tramp” turns out to be the Delmandé family’s long-lost patriarch, returned from the Civil War, and though he has lost some of his mental capacities, he has recovered important treasure and rescued his family from economic despair. Likewise, ‘Tite Reine escapes her desperate life and violent husband, and she seems likely to return to a life of normalcy and independence. This kind of upward trend for Acadians may point to Chopin’s own hopes for their Americanization, along with Creoles, though certainly not as equals.

Meanwhile, there is no upward trend, at least not an obvious one, in Chopin’s stories for her African Americans. However, these three stories all present African
American characters in a more complex manner than was typical in late nineteenth-century literature.⁹ That in itself may actually indicate an upward trend in how African Americans ought to be perceived. Not only are many of Chopin’s black characters wise, but they are also aware of their subjugation, and for the most part more aware and more wise than their Acadian counterparts. For example, Dicey realizes, before her Acadian counterparts do, that the Sublets may, in fact, intend to exploit them. Not only does she realize this before they do, she shares her insight with Martinette, and in this sense she realizes it for them as well. Without Dicey’s insight, Evariste and Martinette would likely have enjoyed the pay-off without having realized the condescension. Essentially, they would have remained ignorant without Dicey. In the same way, we see ‘Cindy suggest to young, naïve Bertrand Delmandé that bringing in a strange, homeless man may not be smart. While ‘Cindy ends up being wrong because this man is actually the long-lost patriarch, her instincts are simultaneously prejudiced and astute. Bertrand, meanwhile, does not seem to mistrust strangers, which might have proven difficult for him had the unlikely circumstances been any different. Lastly, Mortimer’s compassionate care for ‘Tite Reine and his consistent efforts to help keep her alive indicate that he is aware of the role that only he can play in her rescue. After helping ‘Tite Reine daily with her back-breaking chores and even saving her life, at the end of the story he retorts cleverly and proudly that she has finally escaped; he even gets to deliver the final punch to Bud

⁹ Of course, there are exceptions to typical representations of African Americans in late nineteenth-century literature, like in the writing of Pauline Hopkins and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Otherwise, few white female authors presented complex renderings of African American characters; even Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous Uncle Tom’s Cabin works to reinforce stereotypes of the devoted African American slave and consequently the rebellious, dangerous slave.
Aiken that ‘Tite Reine and Grégoire took off with his beloved horse. Mortimer’s wisdom is certainly coupled with much more compassion than we see from Dicey and ‘Cindy, but it is wisdom and honor that nevertheless help him to keep ‘Tite Reine safe.

At the same time, Chopin’s African American characters are often minor characters in these stories. The main characters in all three of these Bayou Folk pieces are Creoles and/or Acadians, while the African Americans tend to play relatively minor roles. (Even Dicey and Mortimer seem, at first glance, to merely help to propel the plot forward, though upon closer inspection, their roles are pivotal.) The African American characters also use subordinate language like “Mas” for “master” and work as servants for the whites in all of these stories. None of them have been freed from their servile positions in society, despite the abolition of slavery, and some of them likely feel as if society has propelled them further downward in social position below the Acadians now that the Civil War perpetuated the color line.

Still, some critics argue that her characters are stereotypically devoted. While Mortimer may prove that to be true because he is entirely loyal to ‘Tite Reine, he is also a hero in the same way that La Folle is a hero in “Beyond the Bayou.” Despite these two characters’ undying loyalty to their white superiors, Mortimer and La Folle also figure in these two stories as the hero or heroine who ultimately rescues a woman who might be considered a social superior. We might argue that in rescuing a white victim, the rescuer attains a bit of superiority. Their power derides from their ability or position to rescue a white person in peril.
We must also consider the more complicated renderings of Chopin’s African American characters. For example, Wilkins, a very minor character in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” displays “ill-disguised contempt” for the Acadians when he has to serve them. In the same story, Dicey shares her wisdom about the intended exploitation in a simultaneously compassionate and condescending lecture. She laughs at Martinette and her father for being so ignorant, and yet by sharing what she knows, she helps the two of them to avoid being manipulated. In “The Wizard from Gettysburg,” Cindy’s concerns are wise and, as I mentioned before, somewhat prejudicial against nomads, in the same way that Dicey is sympathetic and yet also insensitive to Martinette. Lastly, Mortimer’s behavior may be perceived by some as servile, but it may also be perceived as heroic. In these complex characters, Chopin portrays African Americans in a more powerful and involved manner than she is sometimes given credit for.

Though this thesis certainly does not address all of the stories in which Kate Chopin depicts subjugated characters, the trends discussed here certainly are true in some of her other Louisiana stories. While it would be unfair to say that Chopin portrays these characters entirely sympathetically, it would also do Chopin an injustice to overlook the complex and often very powerful ways in which she characterizes the lower-class Acadians and African Americans in Louisiana. Following the Civil War and her own experiences in Natchitoches Parish during her marriage and following the death of her husband, Chopin certainly experienced racial and ethnic tensions in a way many of her contemporaries never had. Her unique life experiences and her careful attention to detail and subtlety in her writing certainly create an unparalleled representation of two of the
most subjugated groups in American society at the time. Though we cannot count on a
fictional writer to depict without bias or influence, Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* collection
creates for the reader an experience with a diverse society whose fascinating
interrelationships comprise a world in and of themselves.
Works Cited


Curriculum Vitae

Susanna Emerson graduated from The College of William and Mary in 2004 with a degree in English and her secondary education teaching certification. Since then, she has worked in Fairfax County Public Schools, teaching a variety of courses in English including regular and honors courses, as well AP English Literature and Composition and Creative Writing. Following her completion of this degree, she hopes to continue teaching and reading great books well into her old age.