



EPIPHANIC EROS IN KATE CHOPIN'S UNCOLLECTED SHORT STORIES

Paula Asensi Camarasa
Universidad de Alicante

Kate Chopin employs the theme of epiphany in her most famous novel: *The Awakening* (1899). Nevertheless, this topic keeps repeating throughout her literary production, as Chopin's writings approach the epiphany from different perspectives: spiritual, sexual, religious, or physical revelations. This paper explores those of her uncollected stories that deal with the sexual "awakening", specifically "The Storm" (1898) and "A Shameful Affair" (1892). Chopin's uncollected stories are not usually in the spotlight in literary criticism, but this paper aims to highlight its importance as feminist epiphanies. After clarifying the concept of epiphany, both stories are analyzed as erotic epiphanies. These stories work in opposition in the treatment of sexuality, but they also share many points in common. While "The Storm" embraces the discovery of sexuality, "A Shameful Affair" reflects the fear of women to accept their erotic feelings. As a similitude, the stories share the topic of religion, though in different forms, and the ambiguity of the endings. Despite this ambiguity, Chopin accurately represents the situation of women in the American South at the end of the 19th century, as the stories under discussion depict women's limitations in their sexual decisions.

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1. Epiphanic Background

Edna Pontellier, the tragic heroine of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, evolves in the same manner as Calixta, the protagonist of "The Storm". Two married women dissatisfied with their marital life begin to "loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped [them]" (Chopin 2018, 16) by discovering their sexuality. However, this is not the only case throughout Chopin's production in which the reader encounters a similar comparison. The list of parallelisms between Edna's awakening and the development of the protagonists in Chopin's stories is endless.

As in the rest of her works, her characters are products of the bilingual and bicultural environment in which Chopin herself lived, her mother being from French ancestry. Even though her private life may seem conventional, having married at an early age and being the mother of six children, her literary credo departs from traditionalism. She was a writer ahead of her time, introducing such controversial topics in her fiction that led to the banning of *The Awakening*, dealing explicitly and daringly with adultery. In her short stories, the North American writer traces the process of development of many individuals, mainly women, in different situations. She explores the revelations that her characters have, which are sexual, spiritual, religious, or physical.

This paper focuses on two of Chopin's uncollected short stories, "The Storm" (1898) and "A Shameful Affair" (1892), as both comply with the sexual awakening—or epiphanic—archetype. Chopin's uncollected stories do not receive much critical attention (apart from "The Storm", a much-praised work) but, in this case, both stories function to give an accurate example of the erotic epiphany. This paper not only seeks to develop the topic of the erotic awakening in these stories, but also to shed light on other less well-known stories of the so-called Louisiana writer. Stories such as "A Shameful Affair" raise intriguing questions if analyzed as feminist epiphanies. Both "The Storm" and "A Shameful Affair", although working in opposition in the treatment of sexuality, reunite many points in common.

The “awakening stories” share a common sequence of events: the protagonists face a turning point in their lives, an incident that constitutes a major change, which implies that everything they thought they knew about life suddenly disintegrates. Consequently, the characters find themselves trying to solve a puzzle whose pieces do not fit together. But, at a certain point, they manage to connect the dots and their lives recover the meaning they had lost. These awakening stories, although varied in topic, share a common epiphanic vision, at least to a certain extent. Originally coined in the first manuscript of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen, the protagonist of James Joyce’s novel, defines epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation” (quoted in Kim 2012, 1). This revelatory process entails a new and radically different view of an already-familiar world. Nevertheless, Joyce does not have the tendency to depict epiphanies explicitly, but only on rare occasions does he use words denoting these revelations (Kim 2012, 4). Unlike Joyce, Chopin is quite explicit in her epiphanic moments. For that purpose, she tends to use the word “awakening”, which appears several times in her stories, although she also employs other implicit words for these revealing moments, as we will see.

One of the problems of applying the term “epiphany” to Chopin’s stories lies in the chronological distance between both authors. Joyce, the coiner of the epiphany, is a Modernist writer, but Chopin’s production is placed in the last decades of the 19th century, as *The Awakening*, her most famous novel, is published just at the turn of the century. In fact, epiphany is a concept which Robert Langbaum considers “distinctively modern” (qtd. in Kim 2012, 5). But given the little chronological distance between both authors and considering the fact that Chopin’s fiction points to the changes that literature was undergoing (Fluck 1982, 157), it is safe to consider that Joyce’s and Chopin’s concept of epiphany was not so different from one another, simply received different names.

Another feature of the modern epiphany lies in its “mundane” quality (Kim 2012, 16). There are no divine or supernatural manifestations, but rather a “slap to awareness or attention,” as Thomas Ryba argues (qtd. in Kim 2012, 8). As a local color writer, Chopin places these epiphanic instances in an ordinary

and concrete setting: with a few exceptions, her stories depict typical situations of the American south, similarly to Joyce with Dublin. These epiphanic scenes do not imply a sudden change in the identity of those who experience the epiphany, but the characters simply acknowledge their own deep, hidden set of values (Kim 2012, 16). For instance, sexual passion is inherent in women; although considered a sin or repressed in Chopin's context, Calixta, the protagonist of "The Storm", simply becomes acquainted with it, embraces it. By introducing epiphanies in her fiction, Chopin is "freeing its subjects from the confines of the expected ending and illuminating that alternative locality" (Beer 1997, 63).

The role of *quidditas* is equally important in the conceptualization of epiphany. Sharon Kim defines it as "the pure 'whatness' of the object" (2012, 1). In other words, it is the essence of the revealed epiphany. Kim later classifies the *quidditas* according to the final effect that the epiphany has on characters, "determining if the change is development, completion, or destruction" (2012, 18). Following this criterion, "The Storm" and "A Shameful Affair" are examples of completion and destruction epiphanies, respectively.

2. Sexual Epiphany in "The Storm" and "A Shameful Affair"

In the case of "The Storm", Calixta and her lover Alcée already know each other. The reader must remember that "The Storm" is the sequel to "At the 'Cadian Ball'", which depicts the first steps of their relationship. In the prequel, the lovers are forced to marry other people but, five years later, in "The Storm", Alcée seeks refuge in Calixta's house. The feelings that they felt for each other had been repressed, but the storm creates this perfect setting in which their own fantasies can come true. Thus, the sexual awakening does not begin in "The Storm", but in its prequel. The encounter was delayed because of the different paths that their lives took. It is in "The Storm" when their sexual awakening materializes, bearing connotations of a completion *quidditas*, as their passion is finally consummated. During the encounter, Calixta experiences a "revelation," as she was "knowing for the first time its birthright" (Chopin 2002, 929). The awakening does not only occur to Calixta,

since Alcée claims that her caresses “found response in depths of his own sensuous nature that had never yet been reached” (*ibid*). As Per Seyersted notices, “the two lovers are for the first time fully sexually awakened” (1996, 145).

Yet these epiphanistic views are only possible because of the meteorological phenomenon that names the story. Like Bernard Koloski suggests, “‘The Storm’ emphasizes the power of nature” (1996, 76). Indeed, the story begins by highlighting the “sinister intention” of the weather and its “threatening roar” (Chopin 2002, 926). The storm not only helps the lovers to make their encounter possible, but also mimics the repression and release of their sexual tension: the “sombre clouds” (*ibid*) had been accumulating while the lovers were repressing the feelings for each other; when the storm bursts, their feelings are released as “the big rain drops began to fall” (Chopin 2002, 927).

The climatic conditions enforce the passion between them, as Calixta feels “stiflingly hot” (2002, 928) when Alcée enters the house. When he touches her, “the old-time infatuation and desire” (*ibid*) becomes evident in both parts. For, as Seyersted posits, “sex in this story is a force as strong, inevitable, and natural as the Louisiana storm which ignites it” (1996, 145). The stars (or, literally, the clouds) seem to align to allow the lovers the passionate encounter they were waiting for years.

During the sexual encounter, Chopin’s descriptions resemble Walt Whitman’s poetic language. Chopin is clearly influenced by the American Bard in his erotic explicitness (Puckett 2019, 69). However, one must bear in mind that “The Storm” was not meant for publication (Koloski 1996, 73) and that is why she presents sexuality in a more open way, without censoring any detail. The influence of Whitman’s appeal to the senses, along with his use of synesthesia, reaches its peak during the lover’s encounter: “Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world” (Chopin 2002, 929).

Generally, women who go through erotic epiphanies are punished for their immoral acts (Pratt et al. 1981, 24). But Chopin’s

writing is not judgmental (Seyersted 1996, 145; Beer 1997, 8). She simply presents the facts without any consequent punishment for the characters. Surprisingly, once the storm has passed, everything returns to its normal state; the last line of the story encapsulates a feeling of closure (but also irony): “so the storm passed and every one was happy” (Chopin 2002, 931). Rather than condemning the adulterous affair between Calixta and Alcée, Chopin presents it as something “happy” (Seyersted 1996, 145), without noticing the possible effects that the encounter may have on Calixta and Alcée’s partners.

The Louisiana writer normalizes sexual behaviors while illustrating an inversion of gender roles, as men usually possessed the freedom to exploit their sexuality while, for women, eros was repressed. In the story, Bibi, Calixta’s husband, portrays the female connotations of motherhood, for he is taking care of their child, whereas Calixta is presented as an independent figure inside her own house, having a sexual encounter with her lover. Only when her husband is outside the dominion of the house, and she adopts the male roles can Calixta accomplish her deepest desires. Another important man in the story is the Alcée figure, quite common in Chopin’s *oeuvre*. This character also appears in *The Awakening* and fulfills the same function: he is part of Edna’s sexual awakening. As Chopin’s biographer, Emily Toth, poses, he is based on the writer’s real lover, Albert Sampite (Toth 1999, 96). In Toth’s words, “the Alcée character awakens a woman to sexual passion she has never known before” (1999, 98).

On the other side of the coin, the protagonist of “A Shameful Affair” prefers to escape from the erotic epiphany, as she considers it a source of evil. Mildred Orme, a young, educated girl, is spending the summer in the Kraummer farmhouse to “follow exalted lines of thought” (Chopin 2002, 721). Presented as “a girl” (Chopin 2002, 719), and seen by Mrs. Kraummer as “a baby” (Chopin 2002, 720), Mildred is reading a book in “her agreeable corner” (Chopin 2002, 719). From the beginning of the story, her attitude is that of a naïve girl who does not wish to go out of her comfort zone. Her sexual awakening begins when she notices one of the “farmhands” (*ibid*), a robust man who immediately calls her attention. After watching him closely for many days, Mildred

decides to ask Mrs. Kraummer if the farmhand could take her to church on Sunday. He refuses to do so, as he will be fishing. Not happy with his rejection, Mildred goes after him in the lake, where he kisses her. After chasing him for so long, the normal response would have been to, at least, celebrate it. Instead, she describes the episode as “the beginning of the shameful affair” (Chopin 2002, 720). Mildred tortures herself with the event because she does not embrace her new sexual instincts. Although his kiss was “the most delicious thing she had known in twenty years of life” (Chopin 2002, 723), still she considers it “a hateful burden” (*ibid*). As in “The Storm”, the awakening occurs on both sides, for Fred Evelyn, the farmhand, also notices “a sudden, quick wave” (Chopin 2002, 720) when the meaning of Mildred’s words becomes clear.

In the *fin de siècle*, tension increased over the role of women: whether to maintain the role of the traditional wife, whose job was mainly regarded to the domestic sphere, or adopting the New Woman role, which embodied the new feminist values. Mildred represents “the attempt to reconcile the impulse toward transgression with the role of the respectable Victorian woman” (Fluck 1982, 161). “A Shameful Affair”, as Winfried Fluck argues, “involves the gradual ‘awakening’ of a clever but slightly condescending young woman” (*ibid*).

While Calixta is eager to explore her sexuality, Mildred tries to learn how to suppress this impulse. In Fluck’s (1982, 168) words, this “self-control implies the suppression and denial of ‘disruptive’ aspects of the self”. Mildred not only escapes from the attitudes that do not comply with the traditional feminine ideals, but also those that are considered a sin. Her strict religious conviction is evident from the beginning of the story. In “The Storm”, the awakening is triggered by external events: the storm itself. But, in “A Shameful Affair”, the awakening would not have happened “if Satan had not intervened” (Chopin 2002, 720). After the kiss, Mildred condemns her lover by calling him “the Offender” (Chopin 2002, 723). In this case, “the hero of this fiction is [...] a victim of both external, societal structures and self-flagellation” (Pratt et al. 1981, 75). In the end, she will only be free when she “shall have forgiven [herself]” (Chopin 2002, 724).

It is a common feature in Chopin's production to equate religion and sexuality, and stories like "Two Portraits" attest to it in a more explicit manner (Horner 2008, 138; Wehner 2011, 163). The story presents the portraits of "The Wanton" and "The Nun", following the stereotypical "Fallen Woman"/ "Angel of the House" dichotomy. But this equation of terms is also noticeable in the stories under discussion, especially because of the close relationship between spirituality and epiphany. Calixta represents the wanton, whereas Mildred embodies the nun.

"The Storm" clearly combines religious and sexual elements (Beer 1997, 60). The sexual awakening between Alcée and Calixta begins in the religious holiday of Assumption, and the sexual encounter starts when they recall that day in the past, as "he had kissed her and kissed her" (Chopin 2002, 928). Back then, Alcée thought of Calixta as "an immaculate dove" (929), the sign of the Holy Spirit in Christian iconology, which also highlights Calixta's purity. David Z. Wehner illustrates that Puritanism condemns nature for its sinful essence (2011, 163). But "this story situates the lovers directly in nature" (*ibid*). In so doing, Chopin aims "to take sin out of nature" (*ibid*). Mildred, instead, condemns Satan for introducing sin in her life. Again, both stories work in opposition: "The Storm" presents a harmonious connection between religion and sexuality, whereas "A Shameful Affair" highlights the constraints that religion imposes on women's sexual behaviors.

The stories work similarly in their endings, both ambiguous. Scholars such as Janet Beer distinguish the importance of the middle of the stories rather than the endings in Chopin's works (1997, 62). Following this idea, the focus lies on the acceptance or rejection of the sexual awakening and the subsequent epiphanic *quidditas*. How the characters deal with their sexuality throughout the story provides the reader with sufficient clues about how they will cope with it in time. Although it is not clear that Alcée and Calixta will continue the affair, Calixta is now satisfied, unlike Mildred, who will be regretting her kiss with the farmhand. Nevertheless, these inferences are not definite for, as Beer highlights, "the ambiguities of Chopin's language may prevent the reader from drawing any simple or straightforward conclusion from the narrative" (1997, 67).

3. Conclusion

This study has proven to be fruitful in exploring the erotic epiphany, but Chopin's work does not limit to this: physical, spiritual, and religious revelations are an essential part of her stories, which deserve further research. Chopin's mastery of language and awareness of literary trends set the basis for the Modernists in the following century, already foreshadowing what the great James Joyce would call epiphany years later.

Acclaimed by the critics, Koloski (1996, 77) proclaims that "The Storm" is "America's first great twentieth-century short story". Chopin illustrates the erotic epiphany in modern terms: introducing multiple points of view and employing a daring and explicit language. "The Storm" is a "celebration of physical and even spiritual fulfillment" (Beer 1997, 59). Instead, "A Shameful Affair" tackles the tension between the emergence of new sexual instincts and their repression to comply to the accepted feminine roles.

By presenting these two extreme views towards female sexuality, Chopin highlights women's limitations in sexual matters. Calixta, though embracing her desires, must keep it a secret from others. She was forced to marry someone she did not want to in the first place, and her marriage did not allow her to fulfill her sexual urges. "The Storm" ends with the claim that "every one was happy" (Chopin 2002, 931), but the ironic tone of the sentence makes us question the extent of Calixta's happiness. Likewise, Mildred escapes from the temptation that has appeared in her life for fear that her purity is in danger.

In short, Chopin presents a wide variety of women, along with the different decisions they make, and accepting their validity. As a realist and local color writer, she depicts society in its different forms and nuances: the different lifestyle and choices that women in her environment made. She fictionalizes the existence of women who transcend the predetermined feminine roles (Calixta), and those (Mildred) who were not ready to embrace those new opportunities that were springing for women. But the Louisiana writer goes further to criticize how these two extreme attitudes towards sexuality are inadequate and, like the images in "Two Portraits",

“both women, in being forced to the margins come to inhabit a sort of nether-world” (Beer 1997, 59).

Chopin brings an important issue to the fore: these two opposing poles in the treatment of sexuality are not beneficial for either side, as these prototypical models oppress women one way or another. But one of the conclusions that emerges from Chopin’s ambiguous language is the fact that a new model must appear: a woman who challenges the established roles without having to consider the consequences of her acts. Neither Calixta nor Mildred will fulfill Chopin’s expectations. In depicting in such an accurate manner the deficiencies of the system, Chopin forces her readers to open their eyes to the situation, creating in them a moment of epiphany.

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