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Kate Chopin and the subject of childhood

[T]he national subject, – the child, the American child. It is possible to ‘converse’ with any American on that subject; every one of you has something to say on it; and every one of you will listen eagerly to what any other person says on it [. . .] It may be because you do so much for children, in America. They are always on your mind; they are hardly ever out of your sight.

Elizabeth McCracken, *The American Child* (1913)

Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!
(995)

The parting injunction made by Madame Ratignolle to Edna Pontellier at the close of *The Awakening* reverberated in the agitated conversations roused by Kate Chopin’s book. Just as reviewers deplored Edna’s neglect of her children, so references to the young and vulnerable featured in much of the lexicon of disapproval. *The Awakening* risked promoting ‘unholy imaginations and unclean desires’; even admirers agreed, it was ‘not for young people but for seasoned souls’.¹ Similar allusions appeared again, in the *New York Times*, in July 1902, in a fresh controversy, roused by the Evanston Library, Illinois, and pursued by the *Chicago Tribune*. Headed by *Jude the Obscure*, the Library Board’s list of books ‘retired’ from general circulation (or, in the words of the *New York Times*’s report, its ‘black list’, ‘relegated’ to ‘a dusty attic’) included *The Awakening* and a dozen others, ranging from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to Gertrude Atherton’s epistolary romance, *The Aristocrats* (1901). As with fears about the possible dangers of the Internet today, the safety of young people was quoted as of central importance on each side of the debate. The Library Board declared itself ‘compelled to protect the public’, in particular those parents ignorant of modern literature, who might inadvertently allow their son or daughter to encounter an ‘indelicate or immoral’ volume. The town’s mayor concurred: only ‘those of more mature mind’ should have permission to borrow from the list. Others opposed such censorship.

The Professor of English at Northwestern University suggested, 'it would be better to lead children into the right [with 'good books'] than to attempt to drive them from wrong'; and the librarian of the Chicago Public Library went further, avowing that the action of banning any book was 'silly' and that no library was 'justified in having a person stationed at the desk to pass upon the age of persons and their fitness to read certain books'.²

That any book by Kate Chopin should have come to feature in such a dispute must have seemed astonishing to many of her first readers. For a wide public in 1899, *The Awakening* seemed an aberration: not only had its heroine betrayed her womanly responsibilities but so had its author. Mrs Chopin, mother of six, had hitherto been respected as one who had gained her name as a contributor to family magazines and was known for her charming domestic narratives and delightful local-colour sketches. In such stories, Kate Chopin had, indeed, been seen to 'think of the children'. Her interest in the young, however, extended more broadly and, in spite of what her detractors implied, did not suddenly cease with *The Awakening*. Throughout her writings, young people feature as subjects in their own right, as metaphor and as the focus for far-reaching reflections on psychological, cultural or historical possibilities; *The Awakening* was no exception. Although there is no record that she added her comments to those of the librarians, professors and town governors in the Evanston debate, she had earlier taken a stance in an essay, published in the *St Louis Criterion*, March 1897. She saw no point, she stated, in prohibiting her own children, or others, from access to books such as *Jude the Obscure*; and she affirmed her faith in the general capacities of the young. The 'investigating spirit' was natural, and to ban a book was counterproductive: it could only provoke interest in a volume that youth might well find dull, or meretricious. Were a young reader actually to finish such a book, congratulations would be due on the achievement. Acknowledging the wider principles involved, she diplomatically passed over them: 'The question of how much or little knowledge of life should be withheld from the youthful mind is one which need only be touched upon here. It is a subject about which there exists a diversity of opinion with the conservative element no doubt, greatly in preponderance' (713). However, as mother, writer and reader, whether herself conservative or liberal, Chopin was caught up in such discussions; and their complications are played out in her work.

This chapter will attempt to draw out and contextualise some strands of her engagement. First, it will sketch some aspects of studies of childhood in the 1890s, to give a general sense of this vast 'diversity of opinion'; and of how it might be seen to enter constructions of children and young people in Chopin's texts. Then looking at *The Awakening*, and examples from across her work (including stories which Chopin targeted at family-oriented magazines), it

will take up some specific modes of discourse to suggest what they might bring out about her narratives and the often-conflicting perspectives they inscribe. The conclusion will return, briefly, to the child as reader – the audience for many of her own tales – though as an active, not endangered, subject. In the area of childhood, as in others, Chopin's texts are never univocal but, as we shall see, work with a rich, and often contradictory, range of such materials, taking up concerns of widespread contemporary interest.

Constructions of 'childhood' in the period drew on complex and multiple discourses, where literary tropes coincided or competed with empirical, scientific observations, philosophical theory or socio-political agendas. The figure of 'the child' (or the imagined essence of the child) was the meeting point for a range of cultural projections: from the sentimental (the angel, the flower bud), through the economic (the investment), to the biological (the specimen); and any one set of discourses could overflow and colour another. At the turn into the twentieth century, 'Child-Study' was a relatively new, but lively, discipline, where scientific, anthropological and sociological enquiries, such as W.T. Preyer's *The Mind of the Child* (1881; translated 1888), John Dewey's 'Psychology of Infant Language' (in the first issue of the *New York Psychology Review*, 1894), or J. Sully's *Studies of Childhood* (1896), were stimulating keen attention. The leader of the movement since the 1880s, and pre-eminent as a pioneer investigator of adolescence, Professor G. Stanley Hall had circulated his first questionnaires in child studies at Clark University in 1894 and would offer the first summer-school course on the subject there in 1903. This was an international field, where women's contributions were welcomed: Miss Fanny E. Wolff, of New York, for instance, had recently generated interest with 'A Boy's Dictionary' (published in *Child-Study Monthly*, 1897), a compilation of 215 definitions, completed by a seven-year-old; and the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* remarked as 'noteworthy' Miss M. Shinn's *Notes on the Development of a Child* (1893) and Mrs Louise E. Hogan's *Study of a Child* (1898). The individuality and method in these writings, commended by the *Encyclopaedia*, might seem equally to characterise Chopin's own observational style. Her sketch of 'little Dorothea', for example, in her 1894 diary, 'Impressions' – possibly, Emily Toth suggests, a fiction – carefully records a child's behaviour over two summers, before and after bereavement, drawing implications with restraint. Although Chopin herself, as an adult, finally oversteps the boundary, attempting (physical and emotional) intervention in Dorothea's narrative, she acknowledges the child's resistance:

"Will you let me be your mama now, Dorothea?" I asked her, lifting her mignonne face up to mine. She did not answer, but stared at me with that

unruffled, incomprehensible gaze of very little children. Then she wriggled from my clasp, slid down from the bench and pattered across the grass trailing her doll behind her. She sat herself squarely down on Mrs. Banhardt's door step and looked over at me mistrustfully, even a little defiantly, I thought.³

In stepping back, her short study accepts a three-year-old's autonomy and leaves open the question with which it started ('What will poor little Dorothea do now, I wonder'). Examples of similar detail and objectivity, and recognition of children's self-resolve and purpose, recur throughout her writings.

This outpouring of studies in the 1890s affirmed that the subject of childhood was key to social development. Conversations, however, buzzed far beyond academia. Then, as now, the nature of the child and the well-being of the child-mind were important to a wide constituency, ranging from parents, hygienists and educators to literary editors, artists and politicians – all concerned, at the arrival of a new century, about the society of the future. As the art critic, Harrison S. Morris, declared, opening his essay, 'American Portraiture of Children' in *Scribner's Magazine* (December 1901): 'The plant finds joy in its buds, the race lives anew in its offspring; and hence childhood, with its helpless little needs, its tiny mimicry, its confidence, and the simple purity of its conceptions, is the supreme human interest.'⁴ Charlotte Perkins Gilman made the point, in more clinical, eugenicist terms, introducing her book of the same year, *Concerning Children* (1901). Arguing that humanity still had power to improve the species, she reasoned: 'This brings us to the children. Individuals may improve more or less at any time, though most largely and easily in youth, but race improvement must be made in youth, to be transmitted. The real progress of man is born in him.'⁵ Fiction, that of Gilman and Chopin included, contributed to such discussions. While Chopin never shared Gilman's polemical impulses, her texts seem, broadly, to underwrite this kind of faith in children's potential; but they explore models of growth more complex than such mission statements perhaps suggest.

Many of Chopin's fictions follow young people's passage into adulthood and meditate upon the shaping of a self within a society; but, unlike Gilman's upbeat vision of cultural (and racial) advancement above, hint at less straightforward progress. Many of her texts that dwell, for example, on masculinity and femininity in the making, draw into their narratives the kind of larger questions and ambiguities about socialisation and society raised in Chopin's fictions more generally. So, even her briefest sketches can generate debate. 'Boulôt and Boulotte', for instance, published in *Harper's Young People* (1891), might be dismissed as a trifling regional cameo or as a piece of whimsy at the expense of the children – the equivalent of the colonising 'local-colour' fiction that patronised and reinforced the inferiority of quaint and socially less

powerful subjects; or, as Janet Beer has read it, it may represent, in miniature, the journey into gender. At the age of twelve, after their hitherto barefoot childhood, the 'little piny-wood twins' will step into their adult shoes: their differentiation into the male and female roles ahead. As Beer argues, for Boulotte, on the threshold of her destiny, her glossy high heels mark an end as well as a beginning: '[her] walk will never again be as free from restraint.'⁶ Or, yet again, another turn of perspective might bring out further possibilities: that the young are not confined so easily. Perhaps Boulotte, like Dorothea above, resists the adults' story, here, appropriating pre-given cultural materials, to construct her own identity? '[S]he was not one to be disconcerted or to look sheepish; far from it'; she 'was mistress of the situation' (152).

Other texts, too, offer glimpses of young people demonstrating the competence, judgement and articulacy more usually ascribed to adults. Marie Louise, in the 'The Lilies' (*Wide Awake*, 1893), 'had a keen instinct of right and justice for so young a little maid' (195) and finds fitting actions in recompense. (She shows equal poise and bravery in identifying the flaws in Mr Billy's cuisine.) Babette, in 'Ripe Figs' (*Vogue*, 1893), presents Maman-Nainaine with evidence, in a beautifully appropriate form, that the older woman's stern contract has worked its course. Such moments indirectly hint at the limits of nineteenth-century models of periodisation in human development. There might seem little of these individual children in, for example, Dr Sanford's model of 'The Psychological "Ages"', propounded at Clark University in a lecture, in 1899. Here, Stage 2 (three to fifteen years) is 'The age of social adjustment', when: 'The child begins to see the advantage of paying some attention to the rights of others, is less self-regardful, but reflective thought, persistency and will-quality are still weak.'⁷ Publishing her portrait of Marie Louise in *Wide Awake*, a Boston monthly for ten- to eighteen-year-olds, Chopin gives more credit to her intended readers.⁸ In her diary, the next year, pondering the fuss about birthdays, she exclaims: 'so meaningless. I have known rusé old ladies of 16 and giddy young girls of 35. I am younger today at 43 than I was at 23. What does it matter. Why this mathematical division of life into years?'⁹

Tales where the protagonist's development is at the centre bring debates about appropriate patterns of 'growth' into particular focus – as, notably, in Chopin's late story, *Charlie*, written in March 1900 and unpublished, after rejection by the *Youth's Companion*. Scenes of child-rearing enter this text in a broad set of references, from formal schoolroom settings and the governess's pronouncements to comments made, often lightly, in passing: 'He was her own child, so she enjoyed the privilege of dealing with him as harshly as the law allowed' (641). Like Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–9), a frequent point of critical comparison, Chopin's story presents a spectrum of

ways of being female. It offers almost a textbook cross-section for its case study: the seven Laborde daughters, aged six to nineteen (including a set of twins), their various older mentors, the gently bred young ladies at the Seminary and the glimpses of the lives of girls and women of other ethnicities: African American Blossom, 'Cadian Aurendeale, or Tinette, whose baby 'died o' the measles' (645). Whether in domestic, educational or social environments, Charlie, one of Jo March's most vigorous descendants, is, like her predecessor, the one who harmonises least in the Laborde family 'bouquet' (665). She challenges her teaching: 'What was the use of learning tasks one week only to forget them the next?' (644); and her character resists easy interpretation. Her father regards her 'with complicated interest' (644), and her development through 'revolution' rather than change renders helpless Julia, her more conventionally 'womanly' sister (656). After the series of experiences, experiments and accidents that sweep away her 'girlish' self and 'left her a woman' (667), for some readers, as in 'Boulôt and Boulotte', Charlie's arrival at maturity is also signalled as a closing down of freedom. After emphasising her energy, creativity and resistance to orthodoxy, the repeated images of mutilation perhaps suggest the daughter's circumscription in her self-sacrifice and devotion to adult responsibilities. But read from another viewpoint, Charlie escapes being brought 'within bounds' (656). Her announcement to her father – 'I've been climbing a high mountain, dad' (667) – rings with a sense of higher destinies. Having seen 'the new moon' (667), she affirms her own vision; and, as often, Chopin's text keeps possibilities open: Charlie, in spite of her status as daughter, and (it is hinted) wife, will be no passive dependent, but an actor on her own stage in the future.¹⁰

Even where a younger character's story is not the primary strand, thinking about the children can highlight dominant strands of the text – the discourses of race and region, sociology or natural science discussed in other chapters here. *The Awakening*, conspicuously, presents an extended sequence of arguments, explicit and implicit, about the role of the mother, the relationship of child and adult and the most appropriate way of raising the young. From Madame Ratignolle's 'impervious garment' for babies (888), to old Madame Pontellier's fear that her grandsons will become 'wholly "children of the pavement"' (953), the text keeps the subject in view. In the narrative economy, even the briefest glimpses have force. Chopin's dead-pan description of the 'little black girl' who works the treadle of Madame Lebrun's sewing machine and the ironic juxtaposition, 'The Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperilling her health' (901), open up, for most modern readers, the unspoken forms of racial exploitation that underpin this society. This image of a working African American child, an individual reduced to instrumentality, returns uneasily as we read of Edna's

strivings for freedom and disturbs simple celebratory readings of her quest. (It is this same child, now sweeping the vacation galleries, whom Edna deploys to awaken Robert for the fairytale day on the *Chênrière*.) Three pages later, another little girl, in 'black tulle and black silk', her hair 'like fluffy black plumes', appears as a strangely disturbing opposite – the emanation of leisure, not labour. Growing up into the privileged class, which the other girl's toil supports, she, too, raises disquiet, though of a different kind. The gulfs of race, class and wealth that separate them should not be underestimated, but here, again, a child seems an annex of an adult: the mother who watches her dance 'with greedy admiration'. The text allows for a more resistant, child-centred reading as this child, like Boulotte, is 'mistress of the situation' (904) and perhaps controls her own performance. But these two figures also seem to mark two poles of nineteenth-century American childhood, a phenomenon described by the modern sociologist, Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer: the 'useful' child – here, the utilitarian worker represented in extreme form by the African American girl – and 'the economically useless but emotionally priceless' child – as ornament and treasured object, displayed in Chopin's little dancer.¹¹ In Zelizer's historical analysis, the second child, from the 1870s to the 1930s, gradually displaces the first, across all classes; however, within the racial and ethnic dynamics of Creole society, as *The Awakening* presents them, it is hard to see any transformations for the African American child of the future.

In the gendered social patterns Chopin's texts explore, bifurcation begins in childhood. In contrast with the rendering of the little girls above as living tableaux, the sound of the 'bare, escaping feet' (932) of Edna's small sons, pursued by their 'quadron' attendant, conveys a freedom, even in earliest boyhood. They can play at work on the plantation or refuse to pose for their mother on discovering 'it was not a game arranged especially for their entertainment' (939). Shaking off fussing adults, taking on 'the other mother-tots', with 'doubled fists and uplifted voices', (887), they resemble the youthful protagonists of the 'bad boy' genre, popular in the last decades of the century. As with Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, the 'boy book's' most famous exemplars, the character of the mischievous youth is regarded fondly in some of Chopin's stories. Even the indolent Polydore in the story of that title (*Youth's Companion*, 1896) generates a kind of comic vitality well before his redemption; so, too, do the Santien boys, in 'A No-Account Creole' (1894) or Mamouche, in 'The Lilies' and in the *Youth's Companion* story (1894) that bears his name. For old Dr John-Luis, who will adopt him, Mamouche seems 'the incarnation of unspoken hopes; the realization of vague and fitful memories of the past' (274). Such projections were typical of the genre, which, as Marcia Jacobson explains, celebrated the

'notion of boyhood savagery' as a 'revitalizing' force, perceived as lacking in the present.¹² Writing in 1889, John T. Trowbridge, meditating upon mothers' and sisters' 'silent, cheerful sacrifices' to the 'headstrong selfishness' of 'the boy in the family', urged readers to rejoice in such energy, as an invigorating national resource:

There was never any better stuff in the world for the shaping of men than there is in the American boy of to-day [...] With all his failings, which are many and manifest, he has courage, gayety, endurance, readiness of wit and potency of will. Give direction to these forces, deepen his conscience and elevate his point of view, and the future of the American boy, the future of America itself, is secure.¹³

However, for the more critical vision of *The Awakening*, perhaps the novelist Frank Norris's comment on 'the boy' has more force: 'He is the average American business man before he grew up.'¹⁴ In a text full of images of dangerously congealed male adult power, Chopin's narrative carefully tracks Raoul and Etienne's passage into white masculine dominance. Within a single paragraph, for instance, at the start of Chapter IX, at the Grand Isle Saturday-evening gathering, they feature both within the category of 'the children' – 'permitted to sit up beyond their usual bedtime' – and among those exerting command, as they monitor other children's access to their comic papers – 'permitting them to do so, and making their authority felt' (903). Already alert to their culture's various systems of classification, they identify where true strength lies, reinforcing and reproducing traditional hierarchies through their own behaviour throughout the text. They engage in power play with their mother and their nurse, kept nameless in the text, and racially marked as 'the quadron', rejecting their influence, but, using all their available forms of expression, they fling themselves into their father's consciousness, 'tumbling about, clinging to his legs, imploring that numerous things be brought back to them' (887). Contrary to Trowbridge's vision of 'cheerful sacrifices', Edna struggles in conversations with Madame Ratignolle and Dr Mandelet and in dialogues with herself to define the limits of their entitlement – as children and as individuals. Such passages are among the most turbulent in the text, full of broken sentences, negations and retractions, intensifying with Edna's own journey away from fixed identities: "Nobody has any right – except children, perhaps – and even then, it seems to me – or it did seem –" She felt that her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts, and stopped abruptly' (995). In the unarticulated sequence of images that impel Edna's walk to the sea, the vision of the children's power looms, memorably, in its most extreme form: they appear as the 'antagonists' who 'sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days' (999).

If sociological discourses on 'childhood' lead into the heart of Chopin's texts, so too do those of natural science, adding further layers to discussion. To take but one set of examples: as most readers note, within the patriarchal families at Grand Isle, the wives and mothers are, themselves, positioned as dependants – children or pets, protected and patronised – a trope central to some of Chopin's sharpest feminist observations. Such images, often interchangeable, recur throughout her texts, from the 'girlish' Kitty, with her 'playful gambols of a graceful kitten', in 'A Point at Issue!' (1889) to the 'perhaps too childlike' Athénaïse, with 'a softness, a prettiness, a dewiness [...] that savored of immaturity' (432). However, it is worth reminding ourselves that what might seem now merely conventionalised metaphors were embedded in an established and scientific discourse of the period: the numerous nineteenth-century investigations, which had posited theories of 'resemblance',¹⁵ to classify humankind.

It would take a monumental volume, such as Alexander Chamberlain's *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man* (1900), to offer an overview of these theories, but even the briefest summary recalls the exhaustive array of data that gave them force. Chamberlain laid out for critical scrutiny, in chapter after chapter, parallels such as: 'The Child as Revealer of the Past' (an analogy with early peoples), 'The Child and the Savage' (comparisons with 'primitive' tribes and animals), or 'The Child and the Criminal' (similarities in illiteracy, idleness, moral weakness – Polydore comes to mind). Such theories, which also underpinned many pseudo-scientific endorsements of racial difference, generated an interlocking series of developmental hierarchies, that produced, in common, the white adult male as the evolutionary pinnacle. (Chamberlain cites Havelock Ellis's *Man and Woman* (1894) as the best of the 'many excellent authorities'.) For his own frontispiece, Chamberlain chose a photograph of that standard in the making: 'an American boy [...] the child-type in its most genial expression and form' (a cherubic, blond, ringletted, four-year-old). An illustrative comparative table of human characteristics, in the culminating chapter, 'The Child and the Woman', however, brings out how far the mature man outclasses even the finest lower-order specimens of his own kind. This chart aligns 'the child-type and the female type', highlighting features where they seem 'physically, physiologically, and psychologically' similar. In contrast with man, both types are by implication, frailer, morally backward, of lesser intellectual or vocal capability, histrionic and so closer to 'the primitive' or the animal. Typical terms included, for example: 'Cranial capacity ... Smaller (absolutely)'; 'Larynx ... Less developed'; 'Ligaments ... More delicate'; 'Erect posture ... Less removed from quadrupedal'; 'Muscular force ... Much less'; "'Breaking out" (destructive violence) ... More common'; 'Dreams ... Gluttony ... Pouting' – all 'More

common'; 'Emotionality ... Greater'; both 'Ruse' and 'Dissimulation ... More frequent'; 'Acting ... Greater ability more frequently displayed'; 'Individuality ... Less developed'; 'Logic ... Less'.¹⁶ Chopin's narrative teases out the cultural manifestations of such schemes, in particular their impact throughout her writings on those classified in this way. That these seemed, to many, 'natural' and unchangeable phenomena intensifies the degree of Charlie's or Edna's struggles for self-definition; and to encounter such a list with Léonce Pontellier's critical voice in mind rouses many echoes. Whether condescended to, sheltered or the object of his 'genuine consternation' (932), Edna challenges such labelling; and in her awakening, she moves into her own adult sphere, as a sensual, powerful woman, ruling her terrain.

However, in *The Awakening*, as in 'Charlie' and elsewhere, Chopin's text unsettles easy readings, even of the oppositional sort. Embedded in these nineteenth-century scientific descriptions is, clearly, a model of childhood as a deficient, or negative, state. However, the metaphors of a woman's growth, central to many modern readings of Edna's story, can unwittingly perpetuate such a model. To construct her narrative as one of emancipation (gaining autonomy, a voice, status and authority – or any of the other signs that code 'adulthood') suggests that she comes into her fullest being when she leaves behind her 'childlike' or even 'childish' condition. As Edna announces after swimming for the first time: 'Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!' (908) While such a journey remains a major strand of *The Awakening*, its final movement offers the alternative suggestion (a trope rooted in literary Romanticism) that it is childhood which is the superior state: that Edna's most intense experience, her sense of authenticity, lies in the past, in the child she once was. Alone, beside the sea, she glories in feeling 'like some new-born creature' (1000); and, in the final paragraphs, returns to the child's perspective, the endless blue-grass meadow,¹⁷ the scents and sounds of home and family. This image gains strength, as it gathers up Edna's memories from earlier in the text and reinforces previous narratorial comments which offer some of the most explicit (and most quoted) insights into her subjectivity: 'Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions' (893).

In her vivid evocations of this 'small life', Chopin subtly delivers the kind of effects, the representation of an actual child's viewpoint, that even America's then best-known novelist of childhood had described as elusive. Six years earlier, Frances Hodgson Burnett, the creator of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885), had attempted a memoir, *The One I Knew Best of All: A Memory of the Mind of a Child*, which provides a useful point of comparison. Published first as a serial in *Scribner's Magazine* from January to June

1893, this charted the growing up of a girl, known throughout as 'the Small Person', a literary experiment in which Burnett drew on her own recollections to represent the 'Story of *any* Child with an Imagination'. Like Edna, the Small Person revives for the older reader the child's perspective, the visions of the grass and the sky, 'springing, from little island to little island, across the depths of blue which seemed a sea'.¹⁸ In her preface, Burnett had discussed the difficulties of capturing, while seeing 'from the *outside*', the impressions and experiences of the very young: 'There must be so many thoughts for which child courage and child language have not the exact words.'¹⁹ Her solution was to write, as an adult, in the first person, looking back to the past, to recreate in the third person the perceptions and emotions of the 'little unit' of herself: 'the one child of whom I could write from the inside point of view'. Using free indirect discourse, Chopin creates a similar sense of both immediacy and objectivity, sharpness, along with the inarticulate and unformed: emotions, as Burnett expressed it, which 'her child-thoughts could give no shape to, and which were still feelings which deeply moved her'.²⁰

Such a mode, however, can often slide from the attempted reproduction of the child's view back to that of the adult who remembers. This kind of slippage will abruptly terminate any effect of youthful subjectivity and present the reader, instead, with childhood as a spiritualised repository for adult fantasies. Chopin keeps out of her writings any surrender to nostalgia, though it is visible in the effusions over children exhibited by various of her characters. Burnett's entire narrative, however, is permeated with such emotion. An extract from her preface will suffice to mark the contrast:

The Small Person is gone to that undiscoverable far-away land where other Small Persons have emigrated – the land to whose regretted countries there wandered, some years ago, two little fellows, with picture faces and golden love-locks, whom I have mourned and longed for ever since, and whose going – with my kisses on their little mouths – has left me forever a sadder woman, as all other mothers are sadder, whatsoever the dearness of the maturer creature left behind to bear the same name and smile with eyes not quite the same.²¹

In Burnett's representation, growing up and death are equivalences; she mourns for both her sons – one, in 1893, an adolescent, the other dead in 1890, at fifteen, of consumption. While her references are autobiographical, her sentimentalisation of childhood exemplifies a wider cultural construction of childhood, countering the scientific developmental models above, as a site of purity, plenitude and innocence, lost and longed for by adults. Such rhetoric, and the equally idealised vision of maternal devotion it produces, presumably contributes to Mr Pontellier's vague feelings that his wife was not one of the 'mother-women' (887–8). To be epitomised in J.M. Barrie's Never

Never Land, in his story of 'Peter Pan', staged first as a play in 1904, this image of the child as the elusive, voiceless object of adult wistfulness dominates much late-nineteenth-century literature. It is in the foreground, too, of influential modern critical discussions, such as Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) or James Kincaid's *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992). Edna's keen examination of the Lebrun family photographs, as she seeks Robert the man in the features of the baby, the child and the adolescent (927–8) might strike a reader as essentially similar.

Images of children as existing in a pure space prior to, beyond, or outside the social enter *The Awakening*, but, as with the mythic or fairytale strands of the text, Chopin always keeps other, realist, strands in view. In her diary, recalling, with intensity, the birth of her son Jean twenty-three years before, she emphasises the physical. Even the unique poignancy of first touching him, she felt, 'must be the pure animal sensation; nothing spiritual could be so real'.²² Edna's own liberatory vision of being new born follows closely on her witnessing the harrowing scene of Madame Ratignolle's confinement, rendered for the reader with the grittiness of Naturalism. The pervasive reminders of family dynamics are there: the often-comic caution against over-romanticising childhood, or regarding adults and young people as distinct groups of beings. At twenty-six, Robert can irritate Edna for speaking 'with as little reflection as we might expect from one of those children down there playing in the sand' (900). In the presence of the parent, grown-up siblings (the Lebrun brothers or Edna and her sisters) fall into old patterns of rivalry or affection; while, faced with the exasperating adults who colonise their territory, even the smallest children can make their influence felt: 'they stood there in a line, gazing upon the intruding lovers, still exchanging their vows and sighs. The lovers got up, with only a silent protest [...] The children possessed themselves of the tent' (899). The presentation of Edna's sons, as we have seen, could not be further from Burnett's evocation of her lost Lionel, or Vivian, the long-suffering, real-life, prototype of the velvet-clad Cedric Fauntleroy.

As the cultural critic David Rudd reminds us, emphases on children as the focus of adult yearnings, the 'precious child', have led (at least in literary criticism) 'to the neglect of the child as a social being, with a voice': the 'constructive' rather than the 'constructed' child.²³ There is little danger when reading any of Chopin's writings that one can forget that children are active individuals, or social beings, with a constructive part to play. Even in *The Awakening* ('A Solitary Soul'), vilified for asserting a mother's search for a separate sphere, the narrative focuses time and again on positive moments of interaction between adult and child: play, storytelling, letters.

Edna takes swimming lessons from the children; she soothes or stirs her sons with bedtime tales; Raoul requests bon-bons and describes the wonder of the little pigs in a 'delicious printed scrawl' (987); Robert and Old Celestine talk patois, the old language of childhood.²⁴ Similar moments occur throughout her fiction: the children in 'Regret' tutor their temporary foster-mother in the differences between rearing chickens and raising children; five-year-old Bibi in 'The Storm', the one who knows his mother's routine, talks on equal terms with his father; the six-year-old twins in 'Charlie' set down their marks 'with heavy emphasis' on the petition that dissuades their father from remarriage (644); the young siblings in 'Croque-Mitaine' demystify and control their nursemaid's threats of the bogey-man; thirteen-year-old Odalie (in 'Odalie Misses Mass') takes on the role of Paulette, long dead, to support Aunt Pinky's reminiscing. In her own 'Commonplace Book', at sixteen, Kate O'Flaherty interjected her own thoughts into the pages of copied-out, worthy, passages.²⁵ All these set up models of adult-child communication that suggest strong assumptions about the powers of understanding of even the youngest children. As we have seen, unlike her reviewers, Chopin declared herself against censoring young people's reading; and she never underestimated their capabilities in responding to, re-reading and taking command of fictions.

In the popular stories Chopin published for young audiences, from which many of the examples in this chapter have come, her texts held out to readers a constructive role in the narrative. Largely ignored during Kate Chopin's revival, or dismissed as a market expediency, this once-despised genre is now recognised as important, and writings for children ascribed a key place within nineteenth-century culture. In the then prestigious publications, read by the whole family, the USA made plain those values perceived as crucial to the national future.²⁶ As one of the longest lasting, the *Youth's Companion* (1827-1929) declaimed, in the words that opened its first issue: 'The human mind is becoming emancipated from the bondage of ignorance and superstition. Our children are born to higher destinies than their fathers; they will be actors in a far advanced period.'²⁷ However, in guiding its authors in how to shape these destinies, the *Companion*, as one contributor recalled, explained the principles for success: 'Don't experiment. Don't originate: repeat!'²⁸ Chopin followed something of this prescription, drawing on familiar nineteenth-century tropes – the child as redeemer, or the rhetoric of restoration – but she also engaged readers in the wider questions of her day. As the new century approached, what kinds of cultural identities would American parents offer their young? Madame Carambeau's words, from 'A Matter of Prejudice', published in *Youth's Companion* in 1895, resonated. 'Ah, those Americans! Do they deserve to have children?' (284). Who would

those children be and what kind of nation would they inherit? With their ambiguities, and uncertainties, most of Chopin's narratives, even the seemingly most conservative, allow room for discussion. Her texts take up and actualise a common conceit; as Samuel Osgood, in 'Books for Our Children', expressed it at the end of the Civil War: 'not of America-as-Child, but of the Child-as-America'.²⁹ In Chopin's subtle depictions of race, gender and region, both adult and child reader are given the materials to imagine – and perhaps even to construct – a twentieth century which may include all children, as agents of their own futures. In Chopin's translation, 'How to Make Manikins' (1891), a leaflet on creating paper cut-out figures, the final sentence leaves '[f]urther embellishment of these figures and groups [. . .] to the skill and fancy of the young people who may like to fashion them'.³⁰ In all her writings, Kate Chopin not only thought of the children but also recognised that they were subjects who could very well think for themselves.

NOTES

1. Reviews from *Providence Sunday Journal* (4 June 1899), 15; and Chopin's hometown newspaper, the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* (20 May 1899), 4; reprinted in Alice Hall Petry (ed.), *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 53–6.
2. 'Western Town Has Literary Census', *New York Times* (July 6 1902), 9.
3. 'Impressions' (1894), 44–7; in Emily Toth and Per Seyersted (eds.), *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998), 189–90.
4. Harrison S. Morris, 'American Portraiture of Children', *Scribner's Magazine*, XXX, 6, December 1901, 601.
5. Charlotte Perkins (Stetson) Gilman, *Concerning Children* (Boston, Mass.: Small, Maynard, 1901), 4.
6. Janet Beer, *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 83.
7. Recorded in Alexander Francis Chamberlain, *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man* (London: Walter Scott, 1900), 67.
8. Details in R. Gordon Kelly, *Mother Was a Lady: Self and Society in Selected American Periodicals, 1865–1890* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1974), 25.
9. Chopin, 'Impressions', 186.
10. For such a reading, proposing the likelihood that 'as plantation field manager', Charlie will maintain her power, see Bonnie James Shaker, *Coloring Locals: Racial Formation in Kate Chopin's Youth's Companion Stories* (Iowa City, Ia.: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 106.
11. Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 209.
12. Marcia Jacobson, *Being a Boy Again: Autobiography and the American Boy Book* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 14.
13. Jacobson draws attention to this essay: John T. Trowbridge, 'The American Boy', *North American Review* (February 1889), 225.
14. Frank Norris 'Child Stories for Adults' (1902); quoted Jacobson, *Being a Boy Again*, 2.

15. Chamberlain, *The Child*, Chapter 3.
16. These represent only a few items from Chamberlain's extensive list: *The Child*, 418–23.
17. The motif of the child in the grass, pervasive in autobiographical writings, gives its name to Richard N. Coe's discussion of childhood recollection as a distinct literary genre, well established by the end of the eighteenth century: *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), 1984.
18. Frances Hodgson Burnett, 'The One I Knew Best of All: A Memory of the Mind of a Child', *Scribner's Magazine*, XIII, 1, January 1893, 69.
19. Burnett, 'The One I Knew Best of All', 60.
20. Frances Hodgson Burnett, 'The One I Knew Best of All', *Scribner's Magazine*, XIII, 2, February 1893, 244.
21. Burnett, 'The One I Knew Best of All', 60.
22. Chopin, 'Impressions', *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, 183.
23. David Rudd, 'Theorising and Theories: The Conditions of Possibility of Children's Literature', in Peter Hunt (ed.), *International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature*, 2nd edn, Vol. I (London and New York: Routledge 2004), 30.
24. See 'Patois', in Pamela Knights, 'Louisiana Observed' (Appendix), in Pamela Knights (ed.), *Kate Chopin: The Awakening and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2000), 353–4.
25. See Toth's comments, Toth and Seystersted, *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, 9–12.
26. For a general overview, see Kelly, *Mother Was a Lady*, and Beverly Lyon Clark, *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). Knights, *Kate Chopin: The Awakening and Other Stories* reprints original magazine versions of stories more usually reproduced from Chopin's 'adult' collections and offers extensive commentary in the introduction and notes; Shaker, *Coloring Locals*, unfolds Chopin's subtle proselytising on the national scene on behalf of a spectrum of Louisiana's ethnic and social groups. Excellent analyses may also be found in: Barbara C. Ewell, *Kate Chopin* (New York: Ungar, 1986); Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of 'The Awakening'* (London: Century, 1990); Bernard Koloski, *Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne/Simon & Schuster, 1996); Beer, *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*.
27. Cited in Jerry Griswold, *Audacious Kids: Coming of Age in American Classic Children's Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 21.
28. Ray Stannard Baker, quoted in Kelly, *Mother Was a Lady*, 33.
29. Samuel Osgood, 'Books for Our Children', *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1865, 724.
30. Toth and Seystersted, *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, 241.