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WOMAN'S QUEST FOR SELF-FULFILLMENT:
A MAJOR THEME IN KATE CHOPIN'S WRITINGS

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by

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Kate Chopin wrote nearly a hundred stories and three novels during her ten-year literary career. She was generally regarded as a local colorist, a label which displeased Chopin, since she considered her work to be universal in both its characterizations and its themes: most of her works portray ordinary women exploring their human need for self-determination and self-fulfillment.

Chopin's works display an economy of character and setting and a precision of style that were greatly admired in the 1890s. Nineteenth century critics unanimously praised the flawless art of the third novel, The Awakening, which was advanced in theme and technique over novels of its day. Its theme, however, was too advanced for Puritan America; Chopin's treatment of the awakening of a respectable woman to her true nature offended conventional morality because of its sympathetic narrative stance. Through masterful use of archetypal symbolism and imagery she develops a character for whom conventional morality has no value.

The works of Kate Chopin are important to the student of American literature because she was the country's first female author to treat feminine passion and its profound repercussions as a subject for serious fiction; her works are important to students of American history because they describe life in the South from a unique Continental-Catholic point of view; they are, finally, important to the student of feminist history because Chopin dared to ignore contemporary literary bans in order to depict honestly the lives and emotions of ordinary women. In her universal characterizations and themes which show that women as well as men feel the human need for self-determination and self-fulfillment, Chopin provided a long overdue service to American women. She gave them, from a feminine point of view, a vast assortment of believable female characters with whom they could identify. Her complex characterizations refute the popular stereotypes applied to women in nineteenth century literature and show women actually making their own life choices.