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Reading In Vogue: The Function of Fashion in Three Chopin Short Stories

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Reading In *Vogue*:
The Function of Fashion in Three Chopin Short Stories

by

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A Thesis

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Master of Arts

in

Department of English

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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mary Balkun", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Mary Balkun
Thesis Mentor

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John Wargacki", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. John Wargacki
Second Reader

When *Vogue* was founded in 1892, its topics of society and social decorum pervaded every page. Daniel Hill observes that the upscale tastes of *Vogue*'s readers originally were reflected in the magazine's reviews of the season's latest plays, art, exhibits, and books. The fashion articles provided clothing advice for social events rather than the reporting on couture trends. Two recurring columns were "Of Interest to Her" and "As Seen by Him," which detailed what was appropriate to wear and when (8). In the infant years of the magazine, revenue from advertisements was not a high priority, so ads for couture fashions were run alongside those for basic long johns (Hill 8). This layout evolved within a few years as the advertisements began to reflect the readership of the magazine; thus, the audience for *Vogue* was not only to society women but also to women who were trying to become a part of that life. By the early 1900's, fashion and advertisements for the elite and elite aspirants took center stage in the magazine (Hill 9). This targeted readership was perfect for author Kate Chopin, since this meant the editors at *Vogue* did not expect her fiction to comply with the typical female roles of domesticity and tranquil self-sacrifice. Additionally, Chopin published her fiction in *Vogue* while the magazine was still a hybrid between social gazette and fashion magazine. Bonnie James Shaker takes note of this particular readership: "it is not surprising that Chopin found the most accepting forum for her bold themes of female autonomy and sexual desire in a magazine edited by another woman. Josephine Redding, the editor in chief of the ladies' fashion magazine, *Vogue*, printed the largest number of short stories published by any single periodical in Chopin's lifetime" (84). From 1893-1900, Chopin published nineteen stories in *Vogue*.

Chopin's short stories speak to the evolving female unhappiness with constricted domestic roles of the time, which *Vogue* was also pointing out. *Vogue* addressed this discontent

through articles, fiction selections, and even comical drawings (see figure 1). For example, the January 11, 1894, issue presented an image that warned women of the dangers of marriage:

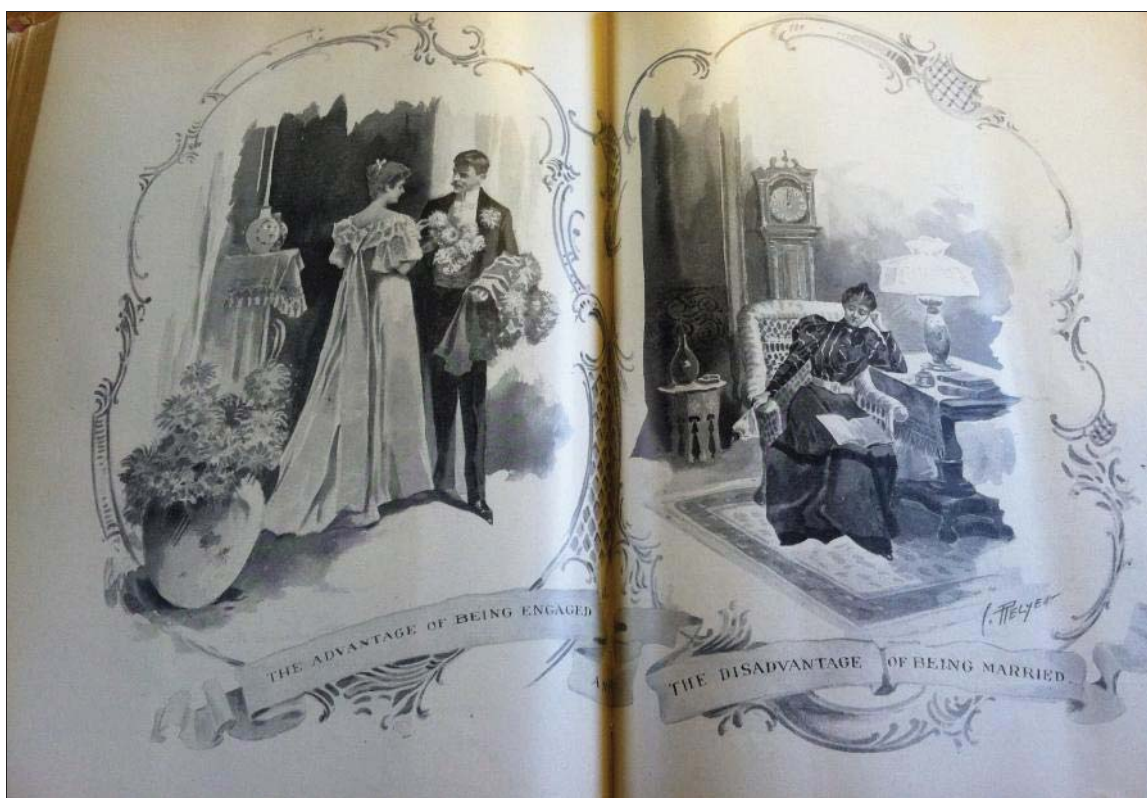


Figure 1. Jan 11 1894. Vogue Archive, 1894. New York: New York Public Library.

This image displays a perfectly attractive woman ignored by her husband after the marital vows have been taken. The depiction supports the intention of the magazine to push against the confining roles of women at this time with its ironic mockery of marriage. *Vogue's* attention to the changing female role within society serves as a microcosm for the growing national discontent of women in the late nineteenth century; this larger conversation about women's unhappiness with their confinement can be "heard" throughout *Vogue* as well as through Chopin's fiction. Chopin thus became part of a larger conversation about women's roles through her short stories published in *Vogue*.

Kate Chopin's most examined feminist work may be her novel *The Awakening*, but her short stories, and where she chose to publish them, further pressed against the limitations imposed upon women at the time. Throughout her writing career, from 1889 to 1902, Chopin wrote nearly one hundred short stories and published in a variety of venues. She found success at prestigious national magazines, such as *Century*, which also published Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; these more conservative magazines were quite lucrative venues for Chopin to publish her "charming" stories of local color; for example, "No Account Creole" was published in *Century* for one hundred dollars in 1889 (Toth *Private Papers* 139). And yet her most prolific publications embellished the pages of *Vogue* (Koloski 5). Her private papers, compiled by Emily Toth, show that Chopin adapted where she sent her stories (140-9). Chopin knew that more conventional venues would not accept the risqué stories that *Vogue* would go on to publish. The choice of where Chopin published provides an interesting facet to the themes of her stories. Shaker reinforces the fact that Chopin understood where her stories would be well received. She also observes, "Unlike more prestigious 'literary' periodicals, *Vogue* – a ladies' fashion magazine – was not known for its fiction. Outside of New York circles, it attracted a relatively small readership, so it was not a direct route to literary acclaim; and as an added disincentive, it paid relatively little for fiction" (85). The drawbacks to publishing in *Vogue* suggest that Chopin pursued that venue for reasons other than literary acclaim and compensation. It can be inferred that Chopin valued her part in the national conversation surrounding gender roles at this time.

Chopin's participation in discussions about the unhappiness of women has become a large part of the criticism surrounding her work. Critics such as Emily Toth, Michael Worton, and Allen F. Stein address the ways in which Chopin's fiction presses against the barriers

imposed upon women. Specifically, they highlight Chopin's fixation upon the theme of female autonomy. Stein points out, "Chopin's own profound awareness of just how difficult it is for one, particularly a woman, to achieve autonomy and just how tenuous one's grip on it can be once one has achieved it. And it is an awareness that informs the portrayal of her most significant and troubling figures" (5). Chopin's most famous troubled figures include Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening*, Calixta from "The Storm," and Mrs. Mallard from "The Story of an Hour." However, Chopin's theme of female autonomy is present in many more of her stories. While critics such as Kate Joslin focus on Chopin's naturalistic writing style as a way to interpret her theme of female autonomy, there is another stylistic choice to take note of.

Chopin specifically uses fashion and clothing in her short stories as a vehicle for meaning. In "Fashion, Class, and Labor: Clothing in American Women's Fiction, 1840-1913," Cheryl Lynn Cavanaugh argues that fashion is a powerful symbolic tool for female writers. The ability to fictionally manipulate clothing not only offers the means to define characters' personal expression but also mirrors the gender and class restrictions they embody (Cavanaugh 9). For instance, in "At the 'Cadian Ball'" and "The Storm" she uses Calixta's worn shoes and comely white dress to reinforce her lower social class and her inability to marry as she desires. Chopin uses fashion in her short fiction to represent these class and gender discrepancies

Fashion historians and theorists such as Roland Barthes, Anne Hollander, and Malcolm Barnard have written about clothing functioning as a means of communication in *The Fashion System*, *Seeing Through Clothes*, and *Fashion as Communication*, respectively. Through their studies, one can see the power of using fashion as a vehicle for meaning. Barthes' theory on the manipulation of fashion linguistics by the elite is significant for a discussion of Chopin. He states, "In the Fashion system, the sign ... is (relatively) arbitrary: it is elaborated each year..."

by an exclusive authority, i.e., the editors of the magazine; of course, the Fashion sign, like all signs produced within what is called mass culture...is simultaneously imposed and demanded” (Barthes 215). Barthes illuminates the fabrication of the words and images in fashion by revealing the power structures involved behind the scenes. By discussing the language of fashion as a signifier that defines what is fashionable, Barthes shows that there is no essential meaning in these words. Similarly, Barnard writes about the influence of fashion on the wearer and the power in fashion, as well as the power of fashion. He states that fashion is used in society to define personal identity but also to affirm membership in various cultural and social groups (40). As Barnard explains, there is another world of meaning about numerous identities and ideologies present in fashion (40).

These theories are applicable to Chopin’s fiction in that the clothing in her stories reveals a manipulation of power and meaning. She uses fashion to portray the consequences of restricting female autonomy. Chopin’s stories “La Belle Zoïrade,” “A Respectable Woman,” and “A Pair of Silk Stockings” all utilize clothing as a vehicle for revealing women’s unhappiness. These three stories, with their particular concentration on clothing, as well as their context in *Vogue* when they were published, evidence that Chopin strategically uses the language of fashion to engage in the national conversation about women’s lack of autonomy.

“La Belle Zoïrade” was originally published in *Bayou Folk* and appeared in the January 4, 1894 issue of *Vogue* with the subtitle “A Tragedy of the Old Regime,” (see figure 2). Robert C. Evans remarks that “La Belle Zoïrade” was a relatively unknown Chopin story that is now quickly gaining attention, comparable to “The Storm” and “Story of an Hour” (339). It is a narrative reflective of the local-color genre for which Chopin was initially known.

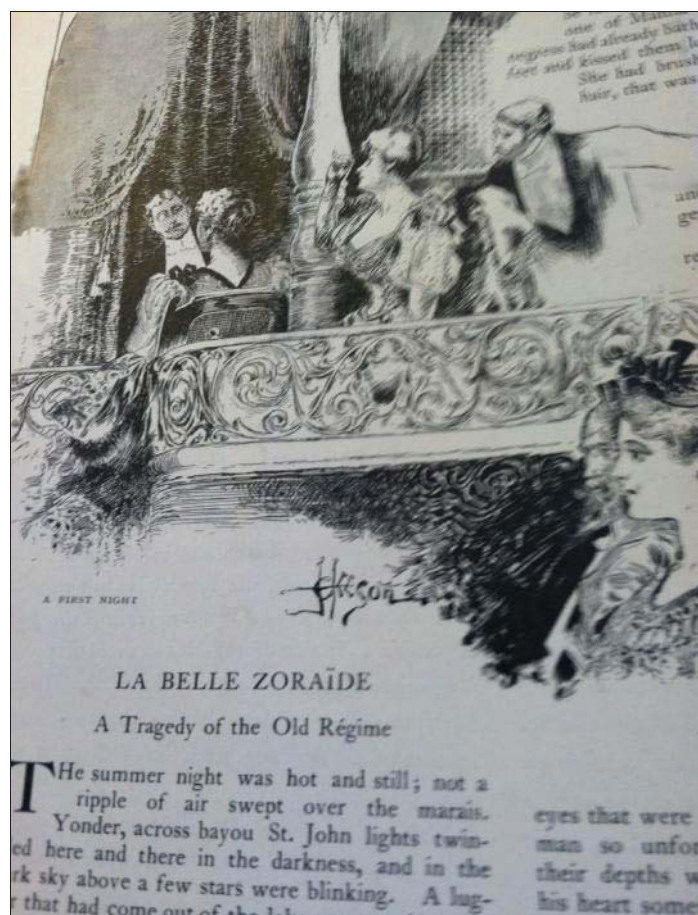


Figure 2. Jan 04 1894. Vogue Archive, 1894. New York: New York Public Library.

Dagmar Pegues discusses the bold representation of sexuality in the tale in “Fear And Desire: Regional Aesthetics And Colonial Desire In Kate Chopin's Portrayals Of The Tragic Mulatta Stereotype.” Pegues’ argument about the tragic mulatta and the virgin/whore dichotomy it deconstructs speaks to the story’s audacious theme of female autonomy and its questioning of the social construction of class. Pegues’ identification of these daring topics in Chopin’s story helps to illuminate why *Vogue* might have accepted the story as opposed to other traditional literary magazines, such as *Century*. “La Belle Zoirade” was also a slightly more lucrative story for Chopin when compared to her other *Vogue* stories, garnering her twenty-three dollars (Toth *Private Papers* 140-8).

The story opens with Manna-Loulou telling her mistress the story of La Belle Zoïrade, the servant of the wealthy Madame Delarivière. Zoïrade is raised like a daughter to Delarivière, so when it comes time for her to marry, the mistress chooses the servant of a prestigious doctor: the mulatto, Ambroise. Zoïrade, however, only has eyes for the dark field worker, Mèzor. Delarivière is furious at this attraction and forbids the two from seeing one another, a ruling that goes unheeded. Zoïrade becomes pregnant and Mèzor is sent away; Delarivière, discovering Zoïrade's blatant indiscretion, sends the child to be raised elsewhere while telling the mother that it has died. This news causes Zoïrade to go insane, treating a bundle of rags as her own child.

The details of the tale show Chopin's reputation for her local color stories. For instance, Manna-Loulou tells the account to her Madame in Creole patois, since no English words can properly convey the love story. However, the old song is "a lover's lament for the loss of his mistress" (Chopin 312). Early in the story, the conventional versions of love are challenged in that the subject of the love song is the loss of a mistress rather than a wife or a girlfriend. The song sets the stage for a more radical subject matter, and the note of illicit passion also foreshadows the coming relation between Zoïrade and Mèzor. Manna Loulou begins her tale with a sultry exposition of Zoïrade's beauty. She states that Zoïrade's eyes could "make any man who gazed into their depths...lose his head" (Chopin 312-3). The fact that her beauty could lure any man reveals that race and class are not factors for those who fall in love with Zoïrade. The phrase "lose his head" here seems merely an exaggeration, yet in retrospect it implies death and Zoïrade's figurative loss of her head at the end of the story. The concentration on her eyes is yet another symbolic feature as the story unfolds. Perhaps most notably, Chopin details her beauty in terms of any other lady. Pegues notes that, "Nineteenth-century readers could more easily relate to the tragic mulatta heroine and pity her if she closely resembled them in her visage

and behavior” (4). Manna Loulou also describes Zoïrade’s manners as equal to Delarivière’s and that even the ladies who visit Delarivière are envious of Zoïrade. Through this characterization of Zoïrade, with beauty equal to that of the other privileged ladies, the boundaries of race and class are suspended.

The strategic emphasis on Zoïrade’s upbringing leads flawlessly into Delarivière’s account of a proper wedding for her. She insists that Zoïrade’s wedding be true to her character and be held in a Cathedral, with all things being the best--including her wedding gown. That Delarivière’s first direct dialogue with Zoïrade begins with the word “remember” haunts Zoïrade’s eventual loss of memory and identity (Chopin 313). It also insinuates that this conversation is not the first time Delarivière has instructed her on the manner of marriage. Her full statement also articulates her power and minimizes Zoïrade’s freedom of choice. “When you are ready to marry” implies some element of choice and love, but then this is quickly undercut by the clause “it must be in a way to do honor...” (Chopin 313). It is the obligation of Zoïrade to honor her upbringing with her wedding, therefore denying her a sense of autonomy.

Delarivière’s attention to the importance of a proper wedding dress is our first indication of the importance placed on garments in this story. Wedding dresses are historically iconic for all that they represent. Their white hue symbolizes purity, and their traditionally high costs denote the importance of the day. The veil hides the bride until she is brought to the altar, and the act of the father lifting the veil represents the economics that typically occurred between families. Malcolm Barnard notes that “Fashion and clothing may be understood as weapons and defenses used by the different groups that go to make up social order, a social hierarchy, in achieving, challenging or sustaining positions of dominance and supremacy” (41). Wedding dresses are representative of the patriarchy that keeps women in their restricted roles as wives.

In the case of Zoïrade, Delarivière uses the garment as a weapon to defend her social status. She tells Zoïrade, “Your wedding gown, your *corbeille*, all will be of the best; I shall see to that myself” (Chopin 313). Delarivière’s insistence upon Zoïrade’s dress being the best is a tactic by which she maintains her dominance over her slave and yet also preserves her reflection of wealth to the community. The proclamation that the wedding is to be held specifically at the Cathedral marks that the ceremony will be a public event. Delarivière must ensure that her social status is not compromised. Through Barnard’s explanations of fashion as a weapon of power, one may see Zoïrade as a subordinate. Barnard explains that the ruling class decides what is fashionable and, through this power, class relations are revealed (42). Delarivière’s claim that she will ensure the finest quality shows her to be in the higher class.

Beneath Delarivière’s authority is the revelation of Zoïrade’s attempt at female autonomy. The mistress’s insistence upon dressing her slave as almost an equal is another foreshadowing of her eventual betrayal. Delarivière is not only dictating Zoïrade’s husband and wedding but she also will strip her of her child. Shane and Graham White explain in their article on slave clothing that in the New World there were quite rigid ideas about the appropriateness of garments for varying social groups (178). They observe that slaves had a determination not to be limited by laws that prohibited them from partaking in white fashion: they were limited to only being able to purchase the “cast-off fine clothes of the white people” (White 178). In Zoïrade’s case, there is nothing cast-off about her impending wedding garment. So while Delarivière may be viewed as the ruling class dictating what her subservient can wear, by elevating Zoïrade’s status through clothing she is also challenging race relations. Barnard points out that “it is the lot of human communication to use one thing to stand for another thing, then dressing one thing up as something else seems to be the definition of communication” (31). Through Delarivière’s

declaration about Zoïrade's needing the proper dress, one can see Barnard's claims about fashion-as-communication come to life. Delarivière is trying to dress her beautiful slave up as something else for a day via the tool of a wedding gown. The garment thus becomes a vehicle for Delarivière's power; she is able to dress her slave up to a class that defies social norms and gives Zoïrade a false sense of her place. In turn, Delarivière is able to deprive Zoïrade of any sense of autonomy.

Zoïrade desires the independence to marry her love, Mèzor, over Delarivière's insistence that she marry Ambroise. Avoiding direct confrontation, Zoïrade proclaims that she would like to wait to be married despite Delarivière's warnings that a woman's charms are fleeting. Zoïrade's attempts at autonomy grow through descriptions of her actions, fueled by a passion for Mézor, who is introduced as so proud-looking that he looked like a king. Of the many differences between Mézor and Ambroise, the first is that Mézor lacks the "M'sieur" before his name, starkly denoting his lesser class status. Although the two men work for the same master, Mèzor spends his time in the fields while Ambroise is a house servant like Zoïrade. Mézor is also characterized by dancing in the Congo Square, which associates him with black Africa and thus contrasts him with the half-white Ambroise. Most notable, however, is the description of Mézor's body: "bare to the waist, [it] was like a column of ebony it glistened like oil" (Chopin 313). As Anne Hollander writes in *Seeing Through Clothes*, significance is added to the absence of clothing when such emphasis is given to them (83). With the importance of Zoïrade's wedding gown appearing just sentences before the description of Mézor's half naked body, the relation between them is brought to the forefront. This lack of clothing functions as a vehicle for Chopin's theme of autonomy. Zoïrade is not free to pursue Mèzor through the restriction of the proper wedding gown, and Mézor's lack of clothing underscores the fact that, perhaps due to his

gender, he is free from the confines of the social norms. He is not expected to perform within the boundaries of a higher class.

Mèzor is also depicted as working barefoot and half naked in the fields. Echoed in this relation is the idea of the “naked savage.” Hollander states that the original motives for wearing clothes were modesty and protection (83). Mézor’s lack of clothing associates him with sexuality. Chopin plays with the standard male and female stereotypes of slaves being controlled only by their passions. This reading is reinforced by the story’s continued emphasis on a society that places so much importance on superficial physical appearances. Mézor and Zoïrade’s descriptions subtly mirror one another’s so that one can see that the attraction between the two rises above just sexual desire. Mézor’s column-like stature denotes a strength that mirrors his comparison to a king. His strength and ability to dance lead suggest that he and Zoïrade are a perfect match; even the alliteration of the ‘z’ sound in both their names reinforces their destiny to be a pair. The allure that stems from the growing feelings between Mézor and Zoïrade supersedes boundaries of race and class, and speaks to Pegues’ argument that nineteenth-century readers would be able to empathize with their love. The genuine love that Mèzor and Zoïrade share breaks the boundaries of stereotypical slave behavior for the time, but it is not long lived.

Zoïrade voices her desire for Mèzor to Delarivière. The narrator describes the confrontation: “One day, when Zoïrade kneeled before her mistress, drawing on Madame's silken stockings that were of the finest” (314). The kneeling indicates her position beneath Delarivière. The detail of the beautiful stockings reinforces Delarivière’s social standing and power once again, but also underscores the ugliness that is about to come out of her. These facets of characterization further expose the superficial side of a society that marginalizes people according to physical appearance. The association of silk with economic wealth reveals the

powerful function of garments within the story; Barthes remarks that fashion hides itself in the manner of a god and he compares its ability to signify race as an omnipotent force (283).

Zoïrade's posture, kneeling before her mistress, seems to suggest that she accepts this natural power structure. However, her assertive tone in her declaration that she wants to marry Mézor presents a contrast to her lowered posture when she tells—not asks—Delarivière that she will marry her love.

Her next act, which is to lower her head, rightly anticipates the wrath that will spew from her mistress, still wearing the beautiful silk. Racial tensions become the prominent theme for the argument, beginning when Delarivière refers to Mézor as “that Negro!” (Chopin 314). Zoïrade, responding by questioning her own whiteness, prompts Delarivière to exclaim that she is not better than the rest of the slaves. By being “grouped” in with the rest Zoïrade is able to highlight that, while Ambroise's master, Doctor Langlé, wants to give her a slave to marry, he would never give her his own son. Logically, it would not matter which slave she married if she is just lumped into the marginalization of all slaves. Her reply also speaks to the clouded sense of identity that Zoïrade has from the beginning of the story: she does not cleanly fit into the labels of black or white, and Delarivière is trying to dress her for a status that she will never possess, even with the proper wedding dress.

Delarivière's authority is further highlighted by her animalistic description of Doctor Langlé. While as masters the two should be relatively equal, Langlé's desire to marry Delarivière is so powerful that he is said to have been willing to walk on all fours through the noon heat of the fields (Chopin 315). This contrast of a “civilized” master as nothing more than a lovesick animal complicates the conventions of racial and gender stereotypes. While we see the mistress in silk stockings, Langlé's clothing is never spoken of. In “Kate Chopin on Fashion

in a Darwinian World,” Katherine Joslin looks at fashion as the border between nature and culture. Similar to Barnard, Joslin looks to dress as a kind of hieroglyphic in the way that it both reveals and conceals social constructs (73). She discusses the role of fashion as the distinction between natural animal and refined society (79). This lack of distinction speaks to Joslin’s claim that fashion elevates the animalistic to the civilized.

Langlé does not waste a moment in selling Mèzor in order to make Delarivière happy. Zoïrade’s only comfort is the knowledge that she will soon birth the child they have produced. As maternity presses closer, Zoïrade is portrayed as sorrowful and suffering, with only the coming precious baby as her salvation. Her hopes are for naught, though, as Delarivière strips her of her baby immediately. She has the nurses inform Zoïrade that it was a stillborn. The passive way in which the removal of the child is described --that it “was removed”-- suggests a lack of blame and accountability (315). Manna Loulou observes that the falsehood is so wicked it must cause the “angels in heaven to weep” (315). In actuality, the baby is in good health-- living, well, and strong yet condemned to a life of slavery, as the child has been sent to another of the mistress’s plantations. Although Zoïrade does not question the validity of the claim, she does turn towards the wall. This suggests her inability to move past the loss of her child.

Chopin writes, “La belle Zoïrade was no more” (316). For the remainder of the story, she is no longer referred to with “la belle” in front of her name. Although she is physically present, she is no longer the same person. In this change, one can see Stein’s indication of Chopin’s profound awareness of the difficulties involved with pursuing female autonomy. Zoïrade “submits” to a marriage with Ambroise, releasing the little power and freedom she once did have. Chopin explains that he did not care if it is a happy or a sad wife, so long as it is Zoïrade (315). Ambroise still wants to claim her as some type of trophy wife. Her submission to the

world around her, and her inability to care for anything, foreshadow her breakdown and also highlight the lack of care she has received. The maternal and caregiving figures in the story all abandon her.

As a result, Zoïrade creates a world in which she can survive on her own terms. She takes a bundle of rags and treats it as if it is her lost child. She lays it on the bed, wrapping the bug net around it, while she sews. Even the act of sewing suggests a certain passivity in her character, and her mechanical movements allow her to focus entirely on her work while her “child” sleeps (Chopin 315). Zoïrade resists the life that Ambroise and her mistress have planned for her by acting as if she has a child to care for. Chopin writes that she remains “demented,” and therefore unfit for work and marriage. The bundle of rags evidences Zoïrade’s refusal to accept the society that denied her a say in her marriage and maternity; in pretending that the material is her child, she creates a world in which she can finally make her own choices. She even begins to personify the bundle of rags. It goes from being described as “it” to “her” and the bundle evolves to be described as a “doll” (314-5).

The use of clothing and rags indicates a power struggle between Delarivière and Zoïrade. Initially, Delarivière tries to force Zoïrade into a proper marriage, which was shown through the wedding gown. Zoïrade resists this constraint with her actions and continues her resistance with the rags. She imposes the identity of her lost child into the bundle, making it something it is not. Chopin insinuates that Zoïrade’s “breakdown” is not all negative, however. She gains a certain level of freedom in her insanity. She does not have to work or subscribe to any more of Delarivière’s confining roles for her. Zoïrade realizes that she will never be able to make her own decisions, and her choice is to refuse it all.

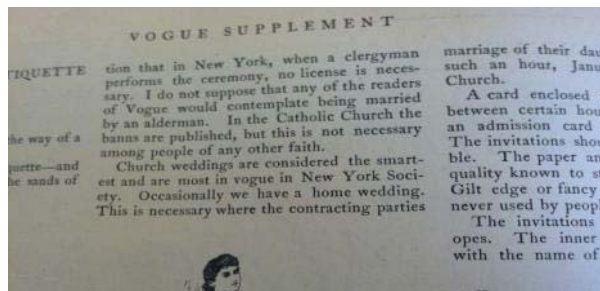
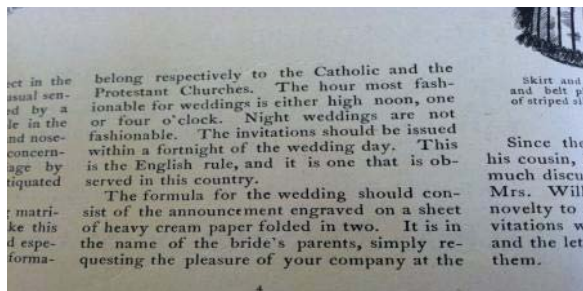
Chopin complicates the conclusion with Zoïrade's rejection of her real child. Delarivière is finally overcome by guilt, consults with Doctor Langlé, and decides to bring the real child back to Zoïrade-- but it is too late. Zoïrade sits lifeless on a stone while her mistress brings her child, nestled in the shadows made by the palm trees. Delarivière tells Zoïrade, "no one will ever take her from you again," thereby absolving herself from initially removing the child (316). However, by giving the child back, Delarivière would still have held the reins in her relationship to Zoïrade. The child that once was an abstraction is now flesh, blood, beauty, and movement. Her being able to "toddle" about highlights the length of time it took for Delarivière to reverse her decision and she is also described as a "griffe" girl (Chopin 316). "Griffe" is a term used for children born of a black and a mulatto, which shows the extent to which society considered even the smallest racial differences and ensures that Zoïrade's daughter would have even less freedom than her mother had enjoyed (Evans 415).

Zoïrade, believing that her child is dead, is suspicious of the offering. She does not want to take a false substitution from her manipulative mistress. While she uses one hand to push away her own child, she clutches what she believes to be her authentic child in the other—the bundle of rags. It is no surprise that Zoïrade is apprehensive about accepting this child as her own considering what she has had to endure: she has lost her love, her child, and her autonomy at the hands of her mistress. By accepting the child Delarivière presents, Zoïrade would have to re-enter the world of work and confinement. By rejecting the child, Zoïrade chooses to remain in the world she has created for herself, which enables her to have autonomy.

The end of the story brings us back to Manna Loulou and her mistress. Madame Delisle, who is sleeping alone, which suggests that she is either without a husband or her husband has his own bed, exclaims that the child would have been "better off dead" (317). Madame Delisle's

statement may be in reference to the child growing up without parents. It also insinuates her understanding of the confines of slaves at the time. Madame Delisle is able to recognize that though the child survived, she will live a life that is not her own—much like Zoïrade. One can see why she might sympathetically relate to the tale of Zoïrade. The story’s focus on love and loss may have resonated with Madame Delisle in a way that Manna Loulou seems less affected by. Manna Loulou, as a slave, does not know a life of autonomy as her Madame presumably does. Madame Delisle is able to recognize what Zoïrade and her child were denied in a way that Manna Loulou cannot. Chopin lapses into Creole dialect in this last section, bringing the opening song full circle. Despite Manna Loulou and Madame Delisle’s class and race differences, they possess a language with which they “really” talk to each other with—a connection formed through womanhood (317).

As Pegues suggests, the portrayal of Zoïrade would certainly have tugged at the heartstrings of the widely female readership of *Vogue*. The wedding dress, the ball of rags, and Mézor’s lack of clothing would also serve as vehicles for Chopin’s themes of female autonomy and problematic racial relations. Furthermore, the context of the January 4, 1894 issue of *Vogue* in which “La Belle Zoïrade” was published speaks to Chopin’s themes. For instance, one article in the issue addresses a proper wedding (see figures 3 and 4):



Figures 3 and 4. Jan 04 1894. Vogue Archive, 1894. New York: New York Public Library.

According to this article, weddings were to be held at a church and during the day. The most fashionable hours were noon, one, and four. These instructions on appropriate wedding etiquette speak to Delarivière's insistence that Zoïrade have a proper church ceremony. Also in this issue of *Vogue* was a drawing of a beautiful bride (see figure 5). However, rather than being on her way to the ceremony, the caption reveals that she was on her way to the photographer.



Figure 5. Jan 04 1894. Vogue Archive, 1894. New York: New York Public Library.

This suggests the recognition of the public display of weddings. Rather than the clothing and ceremony being for the bride and groom, the article and illustration show that weddings also display social status. As with Delarivière's insistence on Zoïrade wearing the proper gown and Barnard's theory about the power in garments, *Vogue* shows how a wedding dress can be more representative of who is giving the bride away. This representation can extend to the bride's lack of autonomy in the selection of her husband, as with Zoïrade. The wedding dresses in the story and the magazine both function as symbols for the loss of autonomy in marriage. Considering the image that follows in the next issue of *Vogue*, with the neglected wife facing the downside of

marriage, it can be inferred that the magazine is condemning the constraints of marriage that women faced at this time.

As well as critiquing the limitations imposed by marriage, *Vogue* examined the falseness behind appearances. These appraisals can be seen in the February 15, 1894, issue, which scrutinized the performative nature of the Lenten season in its cover, drawings, and fiction. It is in this issue that another of Chopin's stories appears. "A Respectable Woman" also speaks about the difficulties surrounding female autonomy, and, more specifically, about unhappiness in marriage. Anna Shannon Elfenbein notes that Mrs. Baroda, as a white protagonist, is less victimized than Chopin's colored protagonists, such as Zoïrade. Emily Toth notes that "A Respectable Woman" more definitively addresses the female character's inward transformation. Toth also notes that this story is exemplary of Chopin writing about a woman's sexual temptation outside of marriage.

This sexual temptation can be seen in the character of Mrs. Baroda. In "A Respectable Woman," Mr. Baroda invites his friend, Gouvernail, to spend some time on their plantation. Mrs. Baroda is not delighted with the prospect, as she does not know Gouvernail. However, she quickly grows attracted to him without any reasonable explanation. Unable to reconcile her feelings, she intends to flee to the city to stay with her Aunt. Before she leaves, Gouvernail sits next to her on a bench offering her a scarf. Mrs. Baroda still leaves in the morning, but later in the year suggests to her husband that they invite Gouvernail to their home again, and exclaims that she has "overcome everything" (510). Although no adultery is detailed, such as that seen in "The Storm," Chopin does subtly imply in "A Respectable Woman" that Mrs. Baroda desires someone other than her husband. These desires alone are radical for Chopin's time as women's sexual urges were not discussed; rather, they were contained within virginity or marriage. Our

first look inside the impending challenge of morals is the ironic title. For a woman to have sexual urges outside of her marriage is certainly not respectable.

Typical of Chopin's local color stories, "A Respectable Woman" opens on a plantation of which Mr. and Mrs. Baroda are the owners. It is explained that the two entertain much in the winter and Mrs. Baroda is part of a higher social class that can spend its time on leisure and entertainment. This lifestyle would have mirrored that of many of *Vogue's* wealthier readers, and therefore establishes Mrs. Baroda as a relatable character. Through its high-society female character, "A Respectable Woman" blends well with the tone of the magazine itself. The story hinges upon defining what a respectable woman is and should be, but Chopin pushes the boundaries of that definition through Mrs. Baroda's thoughts and the story's vague conclusion. For example, Mrs. Baroda is described as "want[ing] to draw close to [Gouvernail] and whisper against his cheek--she did not care what--as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman" (Chopin 509).

The story is set in motion by Mr. Baroda's invitation to Gouvernail to spend time at their plantation, an invitation that irks Mrs. Baroda as she was looking forward to time to rest. The arrival of a guest means that she now has to work to ready the house. She also was looking forward to time alone with her husband. Her reasoning may suggest that Mrs. Baroda does not want to have to do the work of hosting. It also insinuates that Mrs. Baroda does not have much intimate time with her husband, and her feelings of neglect manifest themselves in annoyance their guest that will be staying "a week or two" (506). Either way, Mrs. Baroda is presented as a character that intrinsically is aware of her feelings.

Mrs. Baroda articulates a clear picture in her mind as to who she thinks is coming, yet upon his arrival she sees that Gouvernail is not like thing she had imagined. She "rather likes

him” upon first presentation, but cannot understand the reason behind this fancy (506). Chopin establishes Gouvernail as a foil to Mr. Baroda: his quiet contemplation on their porch seems even more muted as Mr. Baroda indulges in “wordy hospitality” (506). Gouvernail is content to enjoy the view of the plantation, and declines to engage in various activities with his host, such as killing grosbeaks (507). Latent in the discrepancies between the two males is Mrs. Baroda’s growing attraction for her guest. Gouvernail is representative of the qualities lacking in Mr. Baroda, such as his quiet demeanor and appreciation for their plantation. Mrs. Baroda is “piqued” by his presence, and refers to him as “a lovable, inoffensive fellow” (507). Unable to reconcile these feelings, she does the respectable thing and excuses herself from his company. Perhaps slightly hurt by Gouvernail taking “no manner of exception to her action,” Mrs. Baroda decides to “impose her society” on him and begins accompanying him on strolls (507).

Mrs. Baroda does strive to remain respectable, wanting to remove herself to her Aunt’s for a week. She does not know what to make of her feelings for Gouvernail. Her husband even notes that she is making a “commotion” over their guest when Gouvernail desires only rest (507). Tellingly, Mr. and Mrs. Baroda have this discussion in her dressing chambers while they are “making a bit of toilet sociably together” (507). In this scene Mr. Baroda laughs off his wife’s concerns as mere fancy, and Gouvernail’s desire for rest takes precedence over her concerns. Mr. Baroda remarks that he “can never count upon” how his wife will act, and turns to continue his dressing (507). He is described as tenderly looking at his wife, yet Mr. Baroda does not acknowledge his wife’s concerns. Barnard notes that “when men are engaged in cultural production, it is more likely to be referred to and valued as transcendence and revelation, and when women are engaged in cultural production, it is more likely to be dismissed as mere fancy” (26). In Mr. Baroda’s dismissal of his wife’s concerns, we can see Barnard’s theory on cultural

production to an extent. Because of her gender, her husband brushes off Mrs. Baroda. With no one left to talk to, Mrs. Baroda goes forth with her plans to visit her Aunt Octavie in order to avoid a situation that would compromise her respectability.

The night before she leaves, Mrs. Baroda sits upon a bench with Gouvernail; her white gown reveals her to him as Mrs. Baroda is sitting in the dark. The color of the gown connotes purity and innocence. Hollander remarks that the visual elements of dress may outweigh the practical and thus naturally have symbolic meanings as well as formal properties (312). Here, the white gown cannot function as disguise in the dark night. Rather, it formally allows Mrs. Baroda to stand out against the night while also symbolically conveying respectable purity. While it is not stated that Mrs. Baroda was looking to be found that night, one can reasonably assume that her clothing choice suggests such a longing. Her thoughts are described as confused, except for the intention to “quit her home” (508). Mrs. Baroda is struggling with her new desires and remaining a respectable woman. Chopin uses the white gown to suggest Mrs. Baroda’s purity, and perhaps to assure all women that sexual urges are natural. Despite Mrs. Baroda’s conflict, she is still respectable in that she does not, to our knowledge, pursue an affair.

Gouvernail approaches, recognizable by the cigar he is puffing, as her husband does not smoke. Mrs. Baroda does not move. He comes with a scarf that he claims her husband asked him to bring to her. The scarf is described as usually being used to “envelop her head and shoulders,” but this time she only allows it to “lie in her lap” (508). This parallels the description of Mrs. Baroda’s mind as “only vaguely grasp[ing] what he [is] saying. His physical being [is] for the moment predominant” (509). Since the scarf is normally worn on Mrs. Baroda’s head, which is now only vaguely grasping the conversation, the garment parallels the wearer’s mental state by lying unused in her lap. It becomes clear that the scarf also underscores her

respectability. Recalling Barthes, Hollander, and Barnard on the various connotations of fashion, one can better understand Mrs. Baroda's willingness to indulge her private yearnings through the placement of the scarf. This garment serves as a signifier for Chopin's larger theme of women having to reconcile sexual urges with respectability. The scarf suggests that her sexual desires for Gouvernail are growing. Evans notes that Gouvernail is reciting the most erotic portions of Whitman's "Song of Myself" after he hands Mrs. Baroda the scarf (246). He recalls the lines "Press close bare-bosomed night—press close magnetic nourishing night! / Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! / Still nodding night—mad naked summer night" (qtd. in Chopin 508). Chopin's prose becomes sensual as well, with Gouvernail's silence "melting" and his speech becoming "intimate" (508). Mrs. Baroda is described as wanting "to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him ... She want[s] to draw close to him and whisper against his cheek—she [does] not care what—as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman" (509). Rather than responding with her head, which the scarf usually surrounds, she wants to act upon the impulses of her lap- where the scarf now lies.

The scarf is also as white as the gown she wears, reinforcing the respectability of purity. Barthes notes the power of fashion to create identity, observing, "Fashion is simultaneously what the reader is and what she dreams of being" (261). As reflected in her decision to flee the situation, Mrs. Baroda desires to be the respectable woman that both the white scarf and white gown connote. She leaves the next morning and does not tell her husband what has happened. This withholding of information is described in the text as resisting a temptation, as if telling Mr. Baroda of her longings would be as unrespectable as an affair (509). Staying faithful to her husband and quiet about her erotic feelings maintains also Mrs. Baroda's standing as a respectable woman in her society, a status that can be read through the vague conclusion. The

story ends with Mrs. Baroda proposing to have Gouvernail for another visit. Her husband, unaware of Mrs. Baroda's desires, remarks that he is glad his wife has overcome her dislike for him. Mrs. Baroda exclaims that she has "overcome everything!" which points to her reconciliation of her urges (510). Her statement that "this time [she will] be very nice to him" suggests that she has in some way learned to cope with her desires (510).

Robert C. Evans notes that Mrs. Baroda does not realize how constrained she is by her marriage until Gouvernail's arrival, which causes her to question her existence (247). Her initial distancing of herself from the situation reveals her insecurities about having to do so, but his self-assurance provides a pillar upon which she is "able to overcome everything" (509). These last words of the story are unclear, but do suggest that Mrs. Baroda has grown to accept that having sexual desires does not negate her respectability. Only in pursuing the affair would she have become unrespectable. At the same time, Mrs. Baroda's growth underscores the importance of women not being ashamed of their desires. The cover of the February 15, 1894, *Vogue* issue in which the story appeared also speaks to the theme of respectability (see figure 6). The issue was published at the beginning of Lenten season, when men and women were supposed to sacrifice indulgences for spiritual concerns. The cover portrays a woman looking off into the distance, with the caption, "Adieu to the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. (To herself) I will meet them later, but it must be sub rosa":

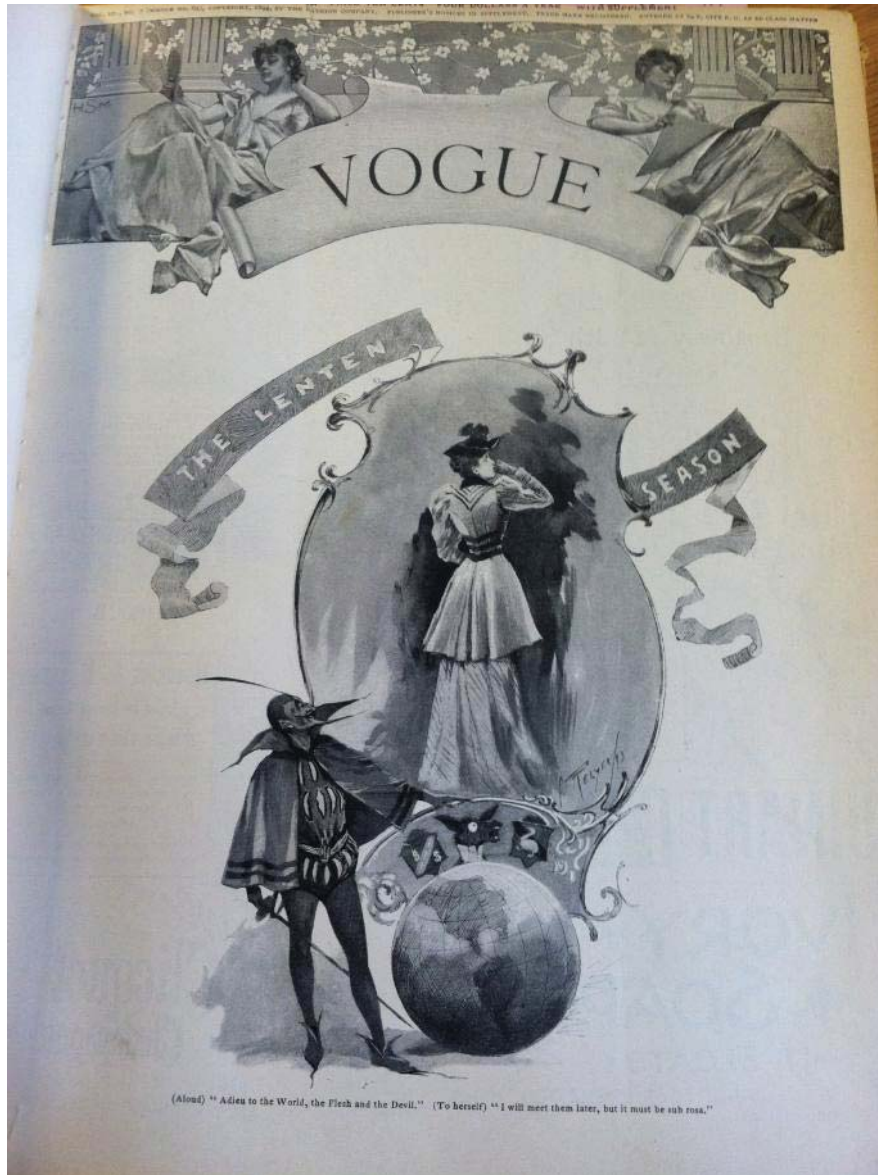
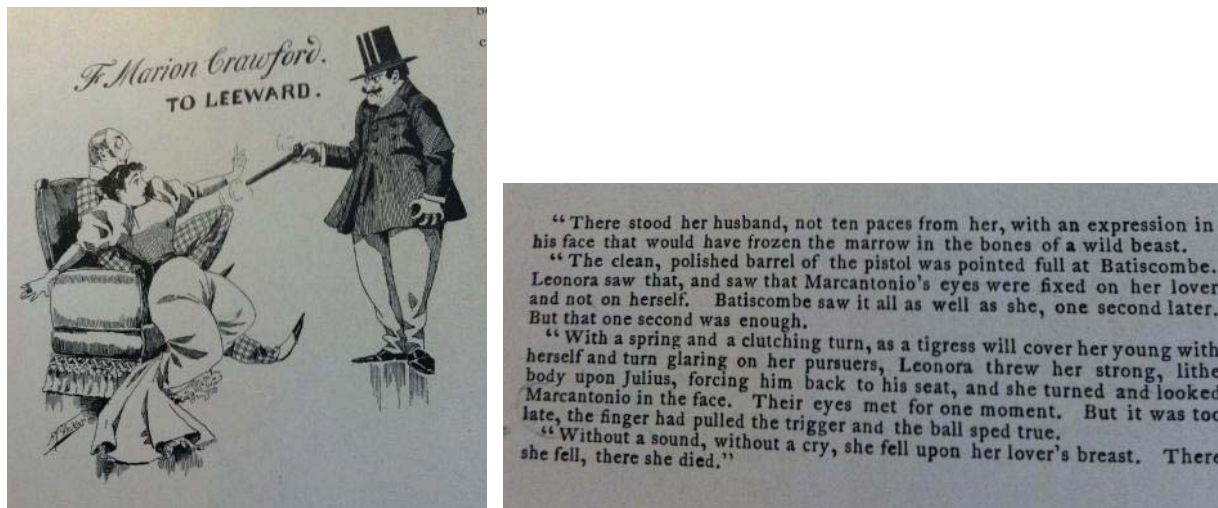


Figure 6. Feb 15 1894. Vogue Archive, 1894. New York: New York Public Library.

The caption speaks to giving into temptations “under the rose” or in secret. This notion of maintaining the appearance of respectability in public while indulging desire secretly parallels Chopin’s short story. Mrs. Baroda is representative of this duality in her longing for Gouvernail. Her character would have been relatable to many *Vogue* readers in terms of her class and situation, and so Chopin effectively joins the national conversation about women having to reconcile their natural desires with appearances in a time when it was taboo to have the former.

The illustration that accompanied “A Respectable Woman” in *Vogue* warned readers about the dangers of fulfilling their desires through extramarital affairs (see figures 7 and 8). The drawing complements Chopin’s own distinct struggle with female autonomy. Her story and the picture seem to romanticize indulgence, yet also warn against taking them too far. For instance, the drawing shows a husband threatening his wife with a pistol as she lays strewn across her lover to protect him from the shot.



Figures 7 and 8. Feb 15 1894. Vogue Archive, 1894. New York: New York Public Library.

Beneath the drawing is printed “the pistol was pointed...Leonora saw that Marcantonio's eyes were fixed on her lover and not on herself...Leonora threw her strong, lithe body upon Julius...without a sound, without a cry, she fell upon her lover's breast. There she fell, there she died” (68). Here readers can see the tragedy in the affair. While romanticizing death for one’s lover, *Vogue* is sure to remind women of the consequences of pursuing desires outside of marriage. The drawing and Chopin’s “A Respectable Woman” serve as cautionary tales about lust, advancing the theme of female unhappiness in constricted roles. Rather than women being only wives, Chopin suggests that their desires be recognized as real and normal. She is not

suggesting that women act on them, only that they be brought to light so that they may learn to deal with them.

Chopin's ability to delicately discuss the constraints placed on women through ambiguous endings can also be seen in "A Pair of Silk Stockings." Allen Stein and Emily Toth both speak to the role of the silk stockings in Chopin's story in terms of consumerism. In "Kate Chopin's 'A Pair of Silk Stockings': The Marital Burden and Lure of Consumerism," Stein posits that the protagonist's sudden shopping spree is a way to escape the afflictions of her home life. He regards her decision to spend all of the money on herself as an attempt at female autonomy that is lost within the ideology of consumerism (357). Stein highlights Chopin's criticism of society's glorification of wealth. He also points to consumerism's dangerous effect on women's self-esteem. This assertion, that a woman's image and place is contingent upon fashion, echoes Joslin's claims that fashion functions as the division between nature and culture. Toth similarly writes about the use of fashion in this story when she argues that Chopin, through "A Pair of Silk Stockings," was challenging the importance of consumerism to *Vogue's* readers.

Published in the September 16, 1897, issue of *Vogue*, "A Pair of Silk Stockings" is another of Chopin's short stories that examines female unhappiness through an unfulfilled protagonist. Perhaps the most obvious display of Chopin's use of fashion, this narrative utilizes a variety of garments to speak to female autonomy and fulfillment. Through a shopping spree, Chopin uses clothing in order to convey Mrs. Sommers' struggle to manage her own needs and the demands of her household. The tale opens with Mrs. Sommers becoming the "unexpected possessor of fifteen dollars" (816). This is a large sum of money for her, as the narrator details her financial troubles and daily absorption with domestic duties.

Mrs. Sommers is introduced as being “little” (816), and Barthes notes about this word that, “through its denotative meaning, ‘little’ belongs to the terminological level...but by its different values, it also belongs to the rhetorical level; it then takes on a more diffuse meaning, made of economical (not expensive), aesthetic (simple), and caritative (what one likes) nuances” (228). Mrs. Sommers is thus not only small in size but also simple and inexpensive. By symbolically setting her upon a low stage in the beginning, Chopin allows Mrs. Sommers to grow throughout the remainder of the story. Her stature is also contrasted against a wealthier past, as seen in the statement “the neighbors sometimes talked of certain 'better days' that little Mrs. Sommers had known before she had even thought of being Mrs. Sommers” (816). This quote implies that Mrs. Sommers’ marriage, rather than providing her with financial security, actually lowered her socioeconomic class. This implies that she married for love over financial standing. Within the story, Mr. Sommers is never mentioned. Through this omission, his character may no longer be present in the marriage or he may have to work so many hours that it is as if he is not there. Either way his absence suggests that Mrs. Sommers is, in many ways, lonely. Evans remarks that the story would also have helped the readership of *Vogue* to comprehend the experiences of the less fortunate (227). Mrs. Sommers is now consumed with the needs of her children and house, as she only knows money in the sense of how to stretch it.

In the opening of the short story, when she first comes into the money, Mrs. Sommers is shown as walking around in a “dream-like state” with the thought of how to properly spend the money consuming her night and day (816). She does not wish to act “hastily” in order to avoid any regrets of improper planning and is consumed by anticipation, only finding comfort in fixed planning (816). Mrs. Sommers’ unease is described as follows: “it was during the still hours of the night when she lay awake revolving plans in her mind that she seemed to see her way clearly

toward a proper and judicious use of the money” (816). The opening of “A Pair of Silk Stockings” shows Mrs. Sommers only finding comfort in the stability of properly spending her new sum, which is synonymous with the comforts that come with security. She is a representative of women in general staying comfortable within the systems they know: marriage, maternity, motherhood. Yet these systems are grossly neglected as professions, and complicate women’s ability to feel fulfilled in their positions. Barnard points out those societies do not recognize homemaking as a profession, thus leaving women no clear status in the economic structure (65). He writes, “there is, therefore, no form of dress that could correspond to that status and women’s fashions are, therefore, for the most part ambiguous with regard to economic or occupation status” (65). Mrs. Sommers does not know her own identity outside of her duties, and, as Barnard shows, housework is not validated by society as a clear profession and is not marked by any particular “fashion.”

Mrs. Sommers copes with this lack of identity by *not* thinking about it. She refuses to look towards the past or the future, which demonstrates that her life has only one meaning: the present. Chopin writes that “she indulged in no such morbid retrospection” and that “a vision of the future like some dim gaunt monster sometimes appalled her” (816). These descriptions show that Mrs. Sommers is, in a sense, avoiding her own sense of emptiness. She uses her duties and financial constraints as a means to absorb her whole being. This neglect foreshadows the revelation that will come when she does finally spend time on herself. The day that she goes to spend her “little sum of money” begins not with bargaining, but with dining (816). She realizes that she has not eaten lunch and she seats herself on a “revolving” stool, feeling “limp” (817). Just when Mrs. Sommers is at her lowest point, she rests her hands on the counter and aimlessly lands upon the fine silk stockings.

Mrs. Sommers is only able to feel the stockings because her hands are bare. The lack of gloves upon her hands reinforces her low economic status, but she is nonetheless drawn to the fashionable indulgence. Joslin's ideas about fashion can explain Mrs. Sommers' response: "fashion lies at the boundary between the naturally appearing animal and the socially constructed lady" (79). Mrs. Sommers is more animalistic than she is a socially acceptable lady. Rather than partaking in the fashions that define femininity, she has been reduced to someone who works only to survive and rear her young. But the stockings will allow her to become more ladylike. Joslin goes on to argue that garments are signs of our physical being and fashion is a hieroglyph for social status (74). Fashion is used as a tool to clearly define who is included and who is excluded from classes of society. By buying and wearing the fine silk stockings, Mrs. Sommers can return to a higher social class.

The stockings themselves are described as "very soothing to the touch" (817). Stockings have a particular erotic signification, as explored by Cristina Giorcelli in her essay "Sheer Luxury." Giorcelli states that stockings are a symbol for women, since legs penetrate into them. Therefore, stockings are also accessories by which women can seduce others, personalize their appearances, and declare their identities (57). Giorcelli details the history of fabrics popular for stockings of the time. In the late nineteenth century, most women wore stockings of cotton or wool. Silk was viewed as a luxury that only the wealthy could indulge in. Anne Hollander explains the exploiting of lady's undergarments in the 1880's and 1890's stemming out of the suggestive black lace appearing in "underwear obsessed" popular art. This helps to explain the strong erotic connection of the garments (134). Therefore, purchasing full-length silk stockings carried erotic connotations. Mrs. Sommers is reaching for her sexual identity through the purchase of the stockings.

Ironically, Mrs. Sommers begins to construct an individual identity for herself from stockings that have been reduced in price. The sale makes the stockings more alluring to women from all classes, but also alludes to her inability to afford the pure, unadulterated version of the identity that she is searching for. Silk stockings were expensive and not often worn by the lower and middle classes, but these had been reduced “from two dollars and fifty cents to one dollar and ninety-eight” (817). Seeing the economic deal behind the indulgence, Mrs. Sommers grasps the hosiery with both hands and the stockings are described as gliding like a “serpent” (817). Identifying the stockings as a serpent symbolizes the temptation in the purchase, much like the apple in Eden. Once Mrs. Sommers does, metaphorically, bite it awakens an intrinsic void deep within her. The description of the stockings as something moving and difficult to hold on to suggests the instability of identities constructed by fashion. Mrs. Sommers in this context is reaching towards an upper tier of society that she is not a part of, an identity that, despite her numerous purchases, she will not be able to uphold. The purchases do allow her, however, to spend time and money on herself. Therefore, while Mrs. Sommers will comment on the small size of the purchase, what is evident is her internal growth in recognizing a need for time for herself.

Mrs. Sommers reflects on the hardship of constructing an identity when she explains, “What a very small parcel it [the pair of stockings] was! It seemed lost in the depths of her shaggy old shopping-bag” (818). Again, Barthes’ explanation of the word “little” resonates with the description of her purchase, minimizing its meaning and substance. Trying to hold on to the initial rush she felt at the time of purchase, Mrs. Sommers puts them on before continuing her shopping spree. Chopin describes her as “not going through any acute mental process or reasoning with herself, nor [is] she striving to explain to her satisfaction the motive of her action.

She [is] not thinking at all. She seem[s] for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function ...” (818). Mrs. Sommers’ first purchase is more than just a new pair of stockings; it is the first time that she spends time and money on herself in years. Through the initial purchase, she seems to recognize that something is missing from her life and she then tries to fill this void by spending the rest of her money. She now bypasses the bargain counters, and returns to a sense of her earlier self, which would not have had to look for sales. This new outlook on where to spend her sum is a drastic change from her initial characterization. Paying full price for the articles she buys suggests a level of class authenticity; no longer looking for bargains, Mrs. Sommers is able to more fully reach for a higher class and a more holistic sense of self-satisfaction through the purchases.

Mrs. Sommers continues her shopping spree with the purchase of boots. At this time, she is bordering on different social spheres, and it is highlighted that the shoe clerk who next assists her cannot reconcile the silk stockings with her older shoes (818). She no longer cares about the extra money required for a stylish fit. This shift in her outlook on finances shows that Mrs. Sommers is looking for more than just good boots. She is also becoming disconnected from her old self: “her foot and ankle look very pretty. She could not realize that they belonged to her and were a part of herself” (819). Mrs. Sommers then goes on to buy a pair of gloves. She had not been properly fitted for a pair in some time, so this purchase allows her to see her hands more clearly. She even contemplates the “little symmetry” of her gloved hand (819). In this scene, Mrs. Sommers is beginning to see herself precisely as she is no longer hidden in ill-fitting gloves. Fashion has now become the vehicle through which she searches for and finds her identity. The woman of fashion is exactly what Mrs. Sommers’ purchases. According to Barthes, the woman of fashion is a collection of “tiny, separate essences rather analogous to the

character parts played by actors in classical theater” (254). The stockings, boots, and gloves are small attributes of Mrs. Sommers, but they begin to totally absorb her, taking the place of the domestic duties that not long ago consumed her thoughts. Rather than being known for her home life, Mrs. Sommers can be identified through her new items of clothing. Her new garments do reflect consumerism, as pointed out by Stein and Toth, but they also show recognition of her own needs.

Before Mrs. Sommers embarks on her train ride home, she manages to escape from reality for a little while longer. She purchases expensive magazines before giving into her hunger at a local restaurant. At this point, Mrs. Sommers is described as not being able to even “entertain any such thought” of returning home for lunch (818). She had never entered this place before and fears that her arrival might create “consternation” because of her lower class status (818). She dines alone while reading her new magazines. Even though she has a “sense of belonging to the well-dressed multitude,” the other diners in the restaurant do not pay her any mind: “There were quiet ladies and gentlemen, who did not notice her, lunching at the small tables like her own” (819). In this restaurant scene, Mrs. Sommers’ purchases have allowed her to slip unnoticed into the upper class. She is dressed properly and has the money to dine in this restaurant; the other patrons do not notice her as being an “other.” She has altered her identity in order to assimilate into the shops, restaurant, and eventually the show.

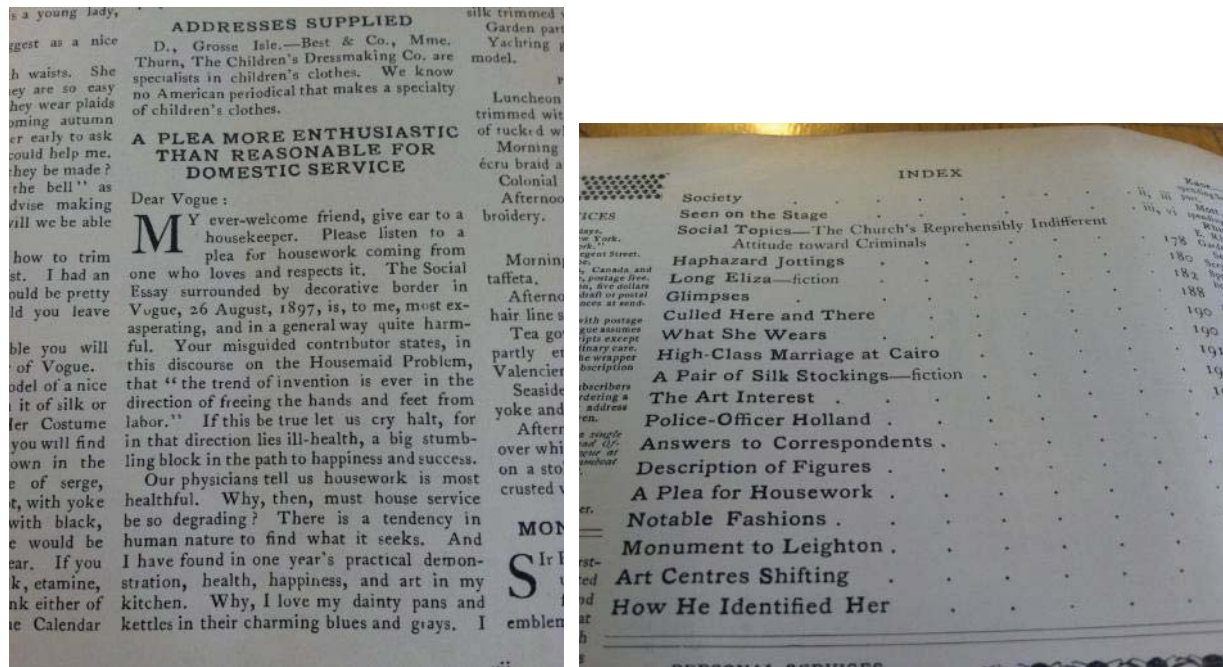
Mrs. Sommers’ final indulgence is in a matinee, where she allows herself to escape her domestic duties for a little while longer. Brilliantly dressed women, leisurely enjoying the show, surround her. But while Mrs. Sommers spends the day in the world of luxury, she is noticeably kept separate from it. The narrator explains that, “it is safe to say there was no one present who bore quite the attitude Mrs. Sommers did to her surroundings” (820). This comment suggests

that she appreciates this indulgence more than those around her because she does not often have the opportunity to do so. This comment also parallels Toth's assertions that, throughout this story, Chopin reminds *Vogue* readers how the "other half" lives (*Unveiling* 172). Mrs. Sommers engages in a day where her reality is suspended, which keeps her from ever truly assimilating into the luxurious lifestyle she takes on for the day. Barthes theorizes that fashion gives the human person a double; clothes function as a mask (255). Mrs. Sommers' purchases can be seen as a mask in that they are a way for her to escape the void that is her life. They also allow her to "dress up" and take part in aspects of society, like the café, that she would not normally have access to. However, we are again left again with a vague conclusion.

Having to return to her life of domestic duties, Mrs. Sommers steps into the cable car to return home. A man observes her features to no avail: "her small, pale face" seems to reveal nothing to onlookers (820). This detail represents Mrs. Sommers' own inability to reconcile the day's events. Rather than closing the story with Mrs. Sommers' return to her family, Chopin leaves it open to her readers. The story concludes with Mrs. Sommers' wishing the car would not stop; she feels a "poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever" (820). There, she would not have to be consumed by her domestic duties. Mrs. Sommers' shopping spree allows her to recognize that something is missing in her life. She is left with the material items she purchased, but her longing suggests that she has not found fulfillment. Thus, the story concludes without indicating where Mrs. Sommers is headed or if she ever finds happiness.

In *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, Toth states that writing about a poor woman is an odd topic for *Vogue* (172). However, through letters to the editor, it is shown that readers of *Vogue* also recognized this discrepancy over not recognizing the work of housewives, and wrote to the

magazine expressing their desire for a stronger representation of this facet of the female self. “A Pair of Silk Stockings” was published alongside a variety of domestically-themed items about the female role as homemaker (see figure 9). The index lists pieces such as “A Plea for Housework,” which discusses the discontent of readers who believed *Vogue* belittled home responsibilities and a “What She Wears” article that discusses the expectations for a woman’s role in the home (see figure 10):



Figures 9 and 10. Sept 16 1897. *Vogue* Archive, 1897. New York: New York Public Library.

As previously mentioned, *Vogue's* readers were not only of the elite; they were also women who wished to become part of that class (Hill 9). The tale of Mrs. Sommers' shopping spree would have been understood by readers of the magazine who were trying to become part of the elite; *Vogue* often published articles geared toward this audience, like the short piece entitled “Smart Fashions for Limited Income” that parallels Mrs. Sommers' find of half-price stockings. These articles, particularly “A Plea for Housework,” show how conscious readers were about *Vogue's* more holistically representing women's roles. This message is also evident in Chopin's

protagonist, Mrs. Sommers. Her character came from money, thus she is relatable to the readers who are still in a higher class. Her fall from wealth and into frugality allows her to connect with an audience in a similar situation. Yet, these tensions presented between social classes only make up one sentence in the opening of the story. Chopin seems to guide readers away from the importance of social standing and more towards the themes of female identity and fulfillment. “A Pair of Silk Stockings” speaks to the lack of recognition given to homemaking as a significant profession, which denies women a clear identity. The story also uses omissions of Mr. Sommers and the extended family to show Mrs. Sommers’ loneliness. It is clear that at home, no one pays attention to her. Through the shopping spree, she is able to interact with clerks and salesmen. The day to herself, rather than glorifying consumerism, reveals what is missing from Mrs. Sommers’ life and a need for fulfillment. Also, despite the potential financial gaps between the protagonist and *Vogue* readers, Mrs. Sommers embodies the conflict of familial duties and personal wants and desires.

Published alongside “A Pair of Silk Stockings” was a piece critiquing “Rules for A Wife” by Lady Burton (see figure 11). In the article, the old-fashioned ideas of wives as mere “appendages” of their husbands are criticized.

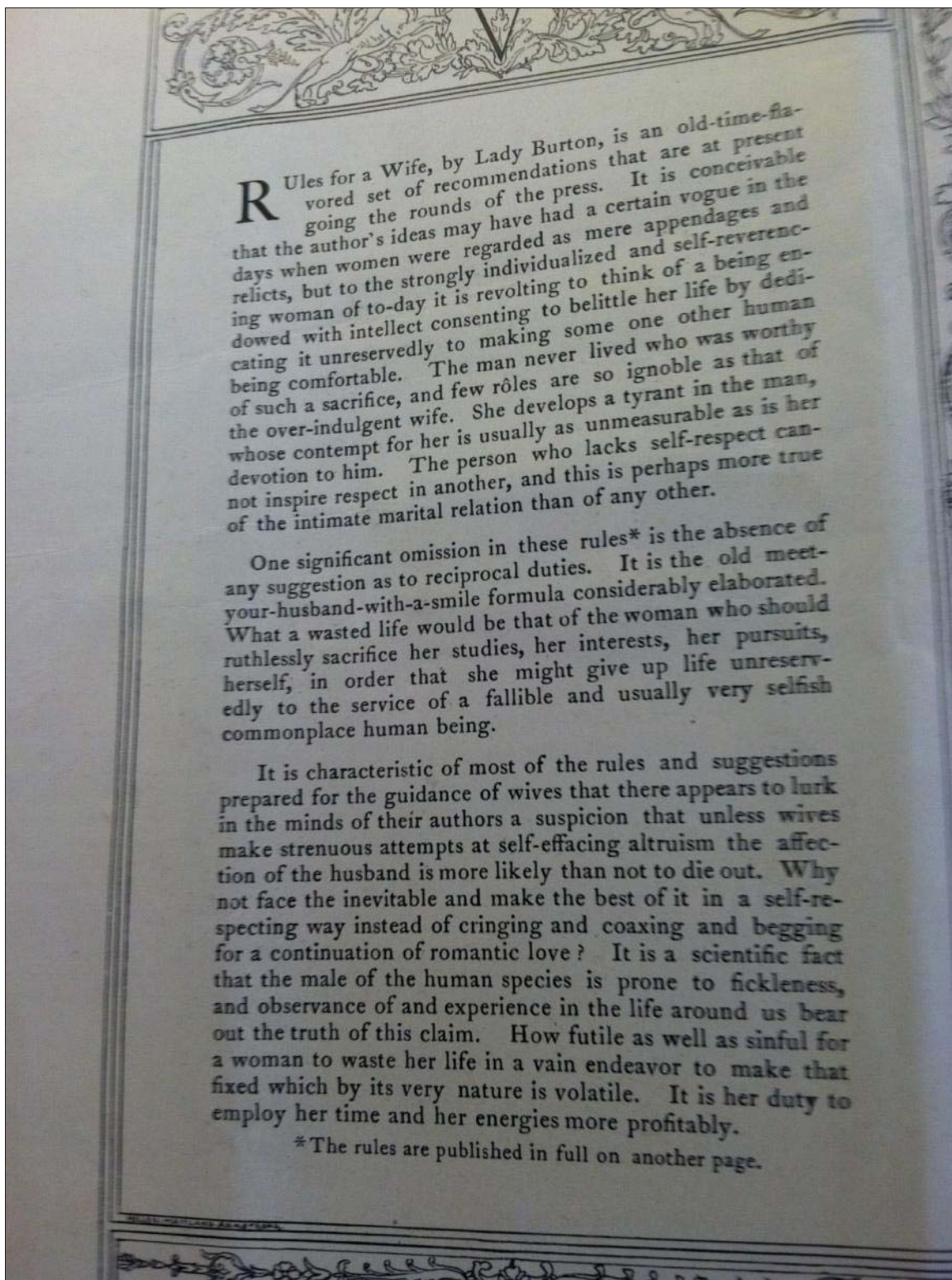


Figure 11. Sept 16 1897. Vogue Archive, 1897. New York: New York Public Library

The author urges women to employ their time and energies not only on their husbands but also on themselves. It warns against wives over-indulging their husbands, because it will help to prevent men from becoming “tyrants” in their marriages. The piece, quite brazenly and bluntly, speaks to the larger issue of women having their own identities. This article, along with readers’ demand that *Vogue* give more credit to domestic duties, merges perfectly with Chopin’s story. Mrs. Sommers’ internal conflict with her own responsibilities and lack of fulfilment can be read through the story, as well as the issue of *Vogue* in which it appeared. Neither the tale nor the context offer women a clear solution to these issues, however. “A Pair of Silk Stockings” concludes with recognition of the problem, but only an ambiguous longing as resolution. *Vogue*’s surrounding context also identifies the confinements of marriage and belittlement of domestic duties, yet does not offer instructions to women on how to fulfill themselves as well as their households.

Chopin’s stories and *Vogue* magazine both recognize the constraints imposed upon women at the time and engage the conversation about female unhappiness. Interestingly, Chopin’s fiction often seems to speak specifically to the context of the *Vogue* issue in which it was published. “La Belle Zoïrade” mirrors the discussion on proper weddings, “A Respectable Woman” parallels the critique on having to perform respectability, and “A Pair of Silk Stockings” intensifies the plea for women having their own identities. In each of these stories, Chopin uses fashion as a vehicle for her progressive ideas. This relationship between *Vogue* and the stories is significant because, for the time, these themes were radical. The discussion of female autonomy taken up by Chopin in “La Belle Zoïrade” is startling for its time because it looks closely at the consequences that come from denying women their right to choose love. Delarivière’s power over Zoïrade is intensified through her insistence on her wearing a proper

wedding gown. Chopin uses this garment as a vehicle for discussing the constraints imposed upon Zoirade and all women. Zoirade's insistence that the rags are her child may suggest a mental breakdown, but also may be her own way of escaping a life of work and slavery. The discussion of respectability and female sexuality in "A Respectable Woman" was also a provocative theme for its time. Women's physical yearnings were supposed to be contained by marriage, but Chopin shows that sexual desire is natural. Mrs. Baroda has to struggle internally, and alone, with how to reconcile her feelings for Gouvernail. The imagery of sexual tension is intensified through Chopin's use of a white night gown and white scarf, in that they both represent purity. Mrs. Baroda's ability to "overcome everything" suggests that she is able to resolve her feelings without acting on them. Though there is no definitive conclusion on Mrs. Baroda's intentions to pursue her feelings or not, her proclamation does show that she has grown as a character. In this tale, Chopin illuminates a taboo subject and allows readers to see a perfectly respectable woman who was able to develop on her own. The discussion of female fulfilment in "A Pair of Silk Stockings" begins with Mrs. Sommers being consumed by domestic duties and a limited income. Mrs. Sommers' shopping spree allows her to recognize that something is missing in her life. Chopin uses stockings, boots, and gloves to show that Mrs. Sommers' is trying to fill this void. Though the purchases do not provide complete fulfilment, Mrs. Sommers' ability to realize that something is lacking in her life is groundbreaking for this time. Her need to spend time on herself, despite the ever-growing demands of her family, is applicable to readers of all social classes.

The ambiguous conclusions in these three stories indicate that Chopin did not necessarily have all the answers for women's happiness at this time. While typical feminist readings of her stories are warranted, Chopin does not know how to reconcile the autonomous women she

creates with the world of the late nineteenth century. However, her engaging in this discussion was enabled by *Vogue*. The relationship between her fiction and *Vogue* is also important because it reveals that Chopin understood where her work would be published. Her decision to send certain stories to *Vogue* over other, often more lucrative, magazines suggests that she knew what venues would support her radical themes. Furthermore, her choice to publish for more than compensation proves that she valued her inclusion in *Vogue*. The placement of her stories in the magazine allowed her to become part of a larger conversation that challenged the roles of women.

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