



# **Kate Chopin's "Lilacs" and the Separation of Body and Soul**

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Kate Chopin's short story "Lilacs" is the tale of a worldly Parisian actress, Adrienne Farival, who is inspired every spring by the scent of the first lilac blossoms to visit the convent where she spent her youth. The nuns look forward to her visit, until one fateful spring when Adrienne arrives as usual only to be rebuffed at the convent door and told she is no longer welcome. Somehow, the Mother Superior has discovered the extent of Adrienne's worldliness and bans Adrienne forever from

visiting the convent. Chopin includes references to the suppression inherent in religious life and juxtaposes them with the freedoms that are found in the natural world. "Lilacs" is based in part on Chopin's own Catholic upbringing, and her knowledge of convent life stems from having had a good friend choose the life of a Catholic nun. "Lilacs" illustrates Chopin's conflicting views about the Catholic faith and her belief that though the line between the secular life and the religious life may be briefly crossed, it will always remain clearly delineated.

Kate Chopin was born Katherine O'Flaherty to Eliza Faris and Thomas O'Flaherty, a devout Irish Catholic émigré, in St. Louis, Missouri on February 8, 1850 (Toth 24). At the age of five, Chopin began school as a boarder at the Sacred Heart Academy, "a tall gray brick convent building with its brick walk and its tall lilac bushes..."(84). It was there that she met Catherine "Kitty" Garesche, with whom she shared passions for reading, gossip and climbing trees, and who became her lifelong friend (43). Kitty Garesche remained at the Sacred Heart Academy to become a nun (238), while Kate O'Flaherty married Oscar Chopin and bore him six children. However, Kate Chopin "refused to be a conventional wife and mother. She smoked Cuban cigarettes, promenaded in her extravagantly fashionable clothes, lifted her skirts too high when she crossed the street, and scandalized the neighbors..."(20). The divergence of the paths these two women had chosen in life was likely the inspiration for Chopin's story "Lilacs."

In "Lilacs," Chopin focuses on religion's division of women into two categories: the pure and the impure, which is shown in the contrast between the Catholic belief in Mary's perpetual virginity and the reality of Adrienne's self-indulgent and sensual Paris life. References to the Virgin Mary abound in "Lilacs": Sister Agathe twice encourages Adrienne to turn to "our Blessed Mother in Heaven" during her times of distress (Chopin 4), and the one prayer that is mentioned in the story is the angelus, a prayer whose theme is Mary's Immaculate Conception (4). In Jacqueline Olson Padgett's essay "Kate Chopin's 'Lilacs' and the Story of the Annunciation," the author asserts that the religious "tradition prizing virginity and separating the cloistered from the secular" divides women "internally into spiritual and physical selves" and results in a "sorrow born of religious restraint and condemnation" (1). The nuns, through their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, seek to emulate the Virgin Mary, but Adrienne Farival, like Chopin herself, wants "the kind of reality an earthly lover could provide" (Toth 239).

Images of division are strewn liberally throughout "Lilacs." There is the separation between the openness of nature and the rigid repression of convent life: Mother Nature versus Mother Superior. The nature imagery is sensual: the "sweet odor of lilac blossoms" and "the humming of insects" (3), while the description of the convent building suggests sterility with its "imposing entrance," "white, bare boards" on the floor, and "stiff wooden chairs, standing in rows" (1). Adrienne's reception from the "large, uncompromising, unbending" (2) Mother Superior is dull and "without warmth" (2) unlike the enfolding "earth [which] responded to her [Adrienne's] light footfall with some subtle impulse all its own" (4). When

the time came for Adrienne to leave the convent after her visit, "Sister Agathe was not satisfied to say good-bye at the portal as the others did. She walked down the drive...and then she stood – it was as far as she might go – at the edge of the road, waving good-bye" (5). These borders symbolize the divided existences of Adrienne and Sister Agathe. Each sees in the other what is missing from her own life (Skaggs 41). Though she focuses on the separation between the two worlds, "again and again, Chopin insists that borders be challenged and crossed" (Padgett 5).

In "Lilacs," images of crossing, ascending and descending are used often. When the nuns first see Adrienne "crossing the beautiful lawn that sloped up to the convent," Sister Agathe "descended the steps and flew across the grass




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to meet her" (1). The positioning of the convent on a higher physical plane indicates its corresponding existence on a higher religious

plane. By meeting Adrienne halfway, Sister Agathe shows herself to be not only the most "daring and impulsive" (1) of the nuns, but also the warmest and most accepting. These up-and-down and crosswise movements of the characters allude to the central symbol of Christianity: the cross of Jesus Christ, sign of the unconditional love and forgiveness which Adrienne should find at the convent, but does not.

While the nuns live close to nature, delighting in the beauty of spring, keeping a poultry yard and a vegetable garden, and in fact themselves echoing the appearance of flowers with their similar "white-capped heads" (1), they fail to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that the lushness of spring is a direct result of sexual reproduction. Adrienne, "clad all in brown, like one of the birds that come with the spring" (1) represents the fecundity of nature. These cloistered nuns, taught to prize virginity above all else, fail to understand "the naturalness of sex and the fact that it, like other aspects of nature, exerts a force so vast, complex and mysterious as to defy comprehension, much less control, by human creatures" (Skaggs 40).

The narrowness of the stream which "divided the convent grounds from the meadow beyond" (4) alludes to the narrow path which Catholics are expected to walk; however, the affection that Adrienne and Sister Agathe feel for each other transcends religious tenets. When the two women walk together "hand in hand" and linger "long upon the foot-bridge that spanned the narrow stream," (4) they are themselves bridging the gap between the secular and the sacred. This "limpid stream" (4) running along the edge of the nuns' land also suggests the flow of life of which they are not a part. The nuns in their convent are constrained and

stagnant, while Adrienne is free to explore the woods from which the stream flows, and the meadow beyond. But Adrienne's explorations go beyond what her religion deems proper.

In Paris, Adrienne lives a sexually free life, a life she knows must remain a secret from the nuns. But Adrienne's Paris life is not portrayed in a positive light, nor is it shown as a better lifestyle choice than that offered by the convent. Chopin reveals it as equally artificial, but in its own particular way. Adrienne is shown as a lazy, petulant, immature woman who, when angry with her maid, Sophie, resorts to "pelting her with hot-house roses" (6). These artificially grown flowers are contrasted with the naturalness of the lilacs which draw her to "complacency and content" (8). Inside Adrienne's home "in a large gilded cage near a window perched a clumsy green parrot" (6). The gilded cage represents the outwardly glamorous façade of life as an actress, while the bird inside that "blinked stupidly" when spoken to illustrates the vapidness and meaninglessness of such a life. In "Lilacs," "Chopin mocks the surface details of women's lives when lived without acknowledgement of desire, both spiritual and physical, whether inside or outside the convent" (Padgett 4).

When Adrienne is drawn back to the convent the following year, the blossoming lilacs are again the impetus. Expecting the usual effusive welcome from the nuns, Adrienne is instead ascending the convent steps alone, and instead of a door flung wide-open, Adrienne is received only through a "narrow opening" (9) by a lay sister who has the task of conveying a "bitter reproachful" letter from the Mother Superior which "banished her forever" from the convent (9). Adrienne descends the steps and looks back at the convent, hoping to see "a familiar face, or a hand, even, giving a faint token that she was still cherished by some one faithful heart" (9). Adrienne cannot see that her beloved Sister Agathe, constrained by her vows to obey the Mother Superior's cruel injunction, weeps with "sobs that convulsed her frame" (9). Adrienne sees "only the polished windows looking down at her like so many cold and reproachful eyes" (9). Instead of finding Christian forgiveness, Adrienne finds herself shunned. Because of the Mother Superior's coldness, "Adrienne and Sister Agathe both suffer greatly. Each needs that brief but nourishing contact with the other's world to fill a bit of the void that exists inside herself" (Skaggs 42).

Adrienne finds that the divisions are no longer traversable after the Mother Superior discovers the impropriety of Adrienne's life in Paris. While she was perceived as a virtuous widow, Adrienne was accepted at the convent, and allowed to spend a fortnight each year among the wholesome nuns. Through the Mother Superior's rejection of Adrienne on the basis of her sexual impurity, Chopin illustrates "the rigid morality of Catholicism which will not permit, which will not tolerate the juxtaposition of innocence and physicality, and sensuality" and which emphasizes "that you have to be innocent or you have to be sexual. You can't be both" (Ewell 3).

Like Adrienne Farival, Kate Chopin was a widow who took lovers, straying from the teachings of Catholicism (Toth 20). Since "the worlds of the

sensual and the spiritual are not compatible" (Padgett 5), Chopin and the character she created in "Lilacs" are forced to choose, and both choose the sensual. It is not an easy choice, nor is it one that should have to be made. Integration of body and spirit and of the sensual and the sexual is the ideal that Kate Chopin advocates in her short story "Lilacs."

When Kate Chopin died, at the young age of 54, she had not been a practicing Catholic for many years, though she kept a slight connection to the church: she continued to pay dues to St. Louis Children of Mary Sodality, an organization she became part of during her Sacred Heart education (Toth 74). Because she had been seen leaving a St. Louis church shortly before her death, it was assumed that Chopin had gone to confession with the intent of rejoining the church, so she was allowed burial in Calvary Catholic Cemetery, where her beloved parents and husband had been laid to rest many years before (Chopin "Re-Awakening" 1). At her grave, Kate Chopin's children planted a bush of their mother's favorite flower: lilacs (Toth 396).

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