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### **Athenaïse, Calixta, and Creole Constraints: An In Depth Look at Chopin's Portrayal of Women**

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ATHENAÏSE, CALIXTA, AND CREOLE CONSTRAINTS; AN IN DEPTH LOOK  
AT CHOPIN'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

(TITLE)

BY

NICOLE REICHERT

**UNDERGRADUATE THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF

**UNDERGRADUATE DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, ALONG WITH  
THE HONORS COLLEGE,  
EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2012

YEAR

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## Introduction

Kate Chopin was an author in the late 1800's who was truly ahead of her time. Her stories focused on the lives of women, including their struggles with emotion, race, and their rights. The majority of these stories took place in Louisiana and involved Creoles, a complex term which will be explored in this thesis. The two stories focused on in this paper, "Athenaïse" and "At the 'Cadian Ball," mostly concentrate on women who are from a lower class and of different ethnic backgrounds than the men they are involved with. The fact that the women have these differences from the men makes their lives uncomfortable and unhappy. Athenaïse gets married to an upper class white man, but is unhappy being married. Calixta from "The 'Cadian Ball" cannot be with the man she is attracted to because he is upper class white and she is lower class French and Spanish.

I believe that the difference in race and class is the cause of unhappiness, and when analyzing Chopin's stories this claim is well supported. One of the most important elements in Chopin's writings is the choice she makes in the characters' dialogues. The way she gives accents and uses French for some of the characters, but not others, both separates and unites people. There is also a defined gap between how the different sexes behave and interact with one another in these stories. Women are pressured to act lady like, quiet, and obedient, while men are expected to be the strong, logical ones. Last, but not least, racial ties are hugely important in both of these stories. The racial differences give new boundaries to the characters, guiding them in who they can talk to, how they can talk to them, and

what kind of relationship they will have, whether it can bud into a romance, or whether it must stay casual.

## **Literature Review on the term “Creole”**

To understand the issues of the time period, the word “Creole” must be defined. It has had many definitions throughout history. Not only has the term evolved with time, but it also has different meanings depending on who is using the word. Many authors have opinions of when and how the term should be used. Because my topic focuses so intently on Creole culture and people in Louisiana, it is important to define what Creole means in context to this thesis.

In the article “Identities in Crisis: Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s New Orleans Fiction,” by Jordan Stouck, one of the first paragraphs starts with saying that the term “Creole” has a very long and contested history, especially in southern states (269). At one point Stouck cites Virginia Domínguez saying, “Louisiana Creole’ denotes a person of French descent born in the Americas” (270). But then Stouck goes on to say that this definition changed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later in the essay Stouck claims, “‘creole’ was defined either as meaning people of colour or as meaning whites of European ancestry, both with long family histories in New Orleans” (270). These two definitions may seem very similar to each other, but they have vast differences. The first definition applies to a very small group of French people, but only those born in America. The second definition applies to a much larger range of people. They could have ancestors from any European country, but as long as they had a history in America, they could be called Creole. The definition

for African Americans is a little hazy still. Finally Stouck cites Domínguez as saying that there are two categories of Creole, those who are legally white, and those that are legally colored, and never the two should acknowledge the other (270).

In contrast to Stouck's focus on race, Shirley Thompson, author of "The Long View from the Levee," states, "When New Orleanians or any other Creole people say, 'I am Creole of this place,' they call attention to deep and unshakeable claims on the territory itself, a sense of entitlement imbued with the sacred aura of birth- right" (2). She is tying the Creole culture to the land itself, meaning that Louisiana raised the Creoles, they didn't just show up. Thompson later cites Charles Gayarré's definition of the word: "the noun form of 'Creole' was to be used solely for those 'of European extraction, whose origin was known and whose superior Caucasian blood was never to be assimilated to the baser liquid that ran in the veins of the Indian and the African native'" (8). This takes the African American branch of Creole out of the picture entirely, but is that really a possibility when African Americans can consider themselves Creole and a part of the Creole culture? Thompson addresses this issue by saying; "the notion that a Creole identity necessarily conveys 'fluidity' circulates widely through understandings of New Orleans' culture and literature. 'Creolization' has served to organize ideas about racial and moral ambiguity, and the Creole character of New Orleans unfixes social classification and rationalizes behavior considered inappropriate elsewhere" (11). Thompson winds through possibilities of Creole being connected to the land, whites only, then mixed races, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusion to what Creole is.

Shirley Thompson does focus more on skin color in another article, "Ah

Toucoutou, ye conin vous': History and Memory in Creole New Orleans," which discusses how black Creoles used slave labor, and warned plantation owners not to confuse them with the "population of plantation slaves flooding the city" (235). In one part of the article, Thompson speaks of Edward Laroque Tinker, a cultural historian who wrote about Toucoutou. Toucoutou was a woman who looked white but had black ancestors. She was married to a white man, but when the truth of her ancestry surfaced, she was no longer legally married to him. Thompson says that Tinker describes Creoles in depth to his readers:

First, he clarified for his readers the definition of the word Creole, emphatically denying that the word implies a mixture of 'white and negro blood.' While the adjective Creole could apply to anything 'produced in Louisiana' including mules, eggs, and Negroes, the proper noun 'Creole . . . can mean only one thing and that is a pure white person born of European parents in Spanish or French colonies.' (248-249)

Tinker sets the stage for his readers to understand exactly who he's talking about, and from his definition Toucoutou isn't Creole, but a mixed woman.

A biographical approach to the question of Chopin's Creole is in Dagmar Pegues' "Fear and Desire: Regional Aesthetics and Colonial Desire in Kate Chopin's Portrayals of the Tragic Mulatta Stereotype," which is focused on Kate Chopin and how her life experiences affected her writing. One of the more important details highlighted by Pegues is, "Chopin witnessed Creole power and integration into the community, not as second-class citizens but as equal members of the community"

(3). Because there were so many free people of color where she lived, it seemed appropriate to write about them. Other white people were not as comfortable with people of color as Chopin was because “while other southern states during slavery enacted segregation and anti-miscegenation laws, in Louisiana blacks and whites mixed freely in the Catholic Church, in the street, and at quadroon balls” (7). Chopin was constantly around a variety of people, making it easy for her to incorporate many different racial backgrounds in her stories. She used race to explore ideas about sexuality and sensuality to represent in the stories what was frowned upon in everyday life, like have a mulatta marry a white man, or a young Creole woman run away from home to make friends with a white man.

Amy R. Sumpter explains a new type of relationship, called *plaçage*, in “Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans”. Free women of color and white men would engage in a formal mistress arrangement in lieu of a marriage that would be illegal. The practice began with the French and continued when the Spanish came to control Louisiana (22). The white men would purchase and set up home for their mistresses, usually in Creole areas of the city. Sumpter says, “The American Municipality differed in very significant ways from the Creole Municipalities. First, there was a significant income gap between the American and Creole residents in the city, which increased with the division of the city into the different Municipalities” (24). There were many differences between white, Creole, black, and free black, and the city remained segregated in that manner. Free African Americans, however, often lived in the Creole sectors of the city. Some argue they lived there to maintain their culture and

language, while others claim that the hostile legislation against them wasn't as strictly enforced in those sectors (31). This caused Creole and free African Americans to mix, which would make Creoles all the more undesirable to the white people.

In this paper, I use Thompson's definition, designating people of European, particularly Spanish and French, backgrounds as Creole. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit the category to mostly white people who live in Louisiana. I will also consider Acadian a synonym. Sumpter helps to separate Creoles even further from other racial groups by defining them as different from black, free black, and white. Just as these categories are different races, I will consider Creole to be a distinct racial category.

### **Analysis of "Athenaïse"**

The short story "Athenaïse" is about a newly wed husband and wife in Louisiana. In the beginning the husband, Cazeau, has to go to the house of the family of his wife, Athenaïse. He takes her home with him after having left her with her family for three days. The reader learns that Athenaïse doesn't hate Cazeau, nor is she being abused, she just hates being married. When asked about it she says, "no, I don't hate him... It's jus' being married that I destes' an' despise. I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an' would want to be Athenaïse Miché again" (431). Because they have no reason to deny Cazeau his wife, her family lets her go back to him. Athenaïse's brother, Montéclin, isn't fond of Cazeau and offers Athenaïse an escape to New Orleans. Athenaïse likes the city and watching the people go by. She even makes a friend of a

fellow tenant named Gouvernail. Athenaïse is in New Orleans for almost a month before becoming aware that she is pregnant. This changes Athenaïse's perspective immediately and she is ready to return home.

All in all, the story is one about tension between a husband and wife, and how the tension is eventually resolved. I believe that the reason for the tension is because Athenaïse is a white-Creole woman and Cazeau is a white man. As a Creole, Athenaïse is never really at home in the house with her husband, but constantly feels like an outsider. As a white man, Cazeau has a set of expectations for Athenaïse that she isn't used to. The differences in race affect the way they speak to each other, treat each other, and even talk about each other. Athenaïse is always obedient to Cazeau, even when she doesn't want to be, and Cazeau is constantly cautious around Athenaïse. When going to collect Athenaïse from her parents' house, Cazeau doesn't yell or rant. "Athenaïse, you are not ready?" he ask[s] in his quiet tones. "It's getting late; we havn't any time to lose" (431).

In the story Athenaïse is described as "not one to accept the inevitable with patient resignation" (Chopin 433). She is not made to sit back and watch life come to her, nor will she allow it to leave her dissatisfied. Athenaïse doesn't know how to fake being happy, she only knows how to rebel against inauthenticity, much to the anxiety of her parents. In the beginning of the story, it is generally believed that Athenaïse doesn't know her own mind. How could she know her own mind when she is being expected to behave in contrasting manners? Athenaïse is a complicated young lady because of the stereotypes she is expected to follow and the discord between them. As a Creole, Athenaïse is expected to have a difficult attitude and be

somewhat uncontrollable. A young person of non-American background isn't supposed to be genteel and well behaved; however, Athenaïse is also a woman. As such she is expected to be quiet and respectful to her elders, which includes her husband. It isn't considered proper to run away from your husband.

There is unexplained tension in the story "Athenaïse" between Athenaïse's husband and her family. The family, except for Montéclin, shows Cazeau respect and deference. This could be because Americans and Creoles came from different financial backgrounds as well as cultural. Americans, as a rule, had more money than Creoles did (Sumpter 24) and this likelihood is supported by the fact that Montéclin had asked to borrow money from Cazeau, but Cazeau refused him (Chopin 429). Immediately this makes Cazeau a villain to Montéclin. As opposed to owning a farm like Cazeau, Athenaïse's parents are "'running' [the old Gotrain place] for a merchant in Alexandria" (428). They don't have land of their own, but are farming rented land. This is another indicator of their economic situation being less desirable than Cazeau's. Plus, the Miché's crops are described as "a patchy straggling stand of cotton and corn" (428). Cazeau, as a white man, is very well off with his crops and he has "excellent standing with the city merchants" (429), which only adds to the disparity between he and his wife.

There is also a racial factor to consider. Most free people of color lived in Creole municipalities of Louisiana because they received better treatment there than in white municipalities (Sumpter 31). This means that Athenaïse would have been comfortable with black people for most of her life, erasing some of the difference in race that Cazeau sees between Athenaïse and blacks. Just as Cazeau

patronizes Athenaïse like he does to his servant Félicité. Cazeau speaks to Félicité in a calm, smooth manner while insulting her. When Athenaïse acts childish and complains about Cazeau's choice of bride, he believes, "her complaint was pathetic, and at the same time so amusing that Cazeau was forced to smile" (435). If Cazeau respected her as an equal, he would try to take her seriously. Because he categorizes her with black people, he is able to brush off her brusque comments and correct her without a problem.

Other than Montéclin, the rest of the family seems to revere Cazeau, and Athenaïse's father is very happy when she agrees to marry him. Mr. Miché says to his wife "Cazeau is the one! It takes just such a steady hand to guide a disposition like Athenaïse's, a master hand" (Chopin 434). When Mr. Miché hears about Cazeau's coming to collect Athenaïse, he just chuckles and agrees with his earlier opinion that Cazeau was the right man to tame her. Patricia Hill Collins addresses the expected family construct in her article "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation," saying, "families are expected to socialize their members into an appropriate set of 'family values' that simultaneously reinforce and lay the foundation for many social hierarchies" (64). Athenaïse's parents don't do this for her, but instead allow her brother to be the largest influence in her life. Her father's scorn is unfair to Athenaïse because her brother enabled her behavior from the beginning of her rebellious period, and her parents never really tried to teach her the "proper" way to act, even though it is their job as assigned by society. Collins says, "Individuals typically learn their assigned place in hierarchies of race, gender, ethnicity... and social class in their families of origin" (64). How can they expect

their child to behave properly when they left her to the care of her brother, who doesn't seem to care about good behavior or social norms at all?

One of the most obvious differences between Cazeau and Athenaïse's family is the pattern of speech. Cazeau obviously has an accent with the way his dialogue is written, but it isn't nearly as harsh as Athenaïse's or Montéclin's. He also never includes any French words in his speech. Both the quadroon in the story and Félicité the servant use French as does Athenaïse. Even Montéclin calls Cazeau a "sacré cochon," when he comes to collect his wife from her father's house (Chopin 429). This suggests that the Miché family is Creole, which makes them closer to people of color, as they never broke the habit of including French words into their sentences. This would be another point of anxiety for Athenaïse. She knows that she should behave differently as the wife of a white man, but she has been raised in a certain way. This way is to be as Creole as she wants, including the stereotype of not taking responsibility for her household and generally behaving contrarily to Cazeau's expectations of her. When Cazeau gives her the keys to the house, she flings them on the ground for Félicité to take. Cazeau returns them to her and says, "it was not the custom on Cane river for the negro servants to carry the keys, when there was a mistress at the head of the household" (437), annoying Athenaïse to no end.

Not only are the languages used in different ways, but also Cazeau has a more careful, moderate tone than anyone else in the story. He calls his servant a fool, but "it sounded like a compliment in his modulated, caressing voice" (427). He is also calm when going to collect Athenaïse, talking to her in much the same way he spoke to the servant. I believe this to be more concrete evidence of Athenaïse's mixed, or

Creole, pedigree. When Cazeau comes to take Athenaïse home, she knows there is nothing she can do about it, so she goes to get dressed and ride home. This could be because of the racial differences between her and her husband, or because she is accepting that the role of the wife is to follow her husband when she has no reason not to.

At the point in the story when Cazeau goes to the Miché's home to collect Athenaïse, she puts up no argument. When they are riding back to his farm, Athenaïse and Cazeau pass a large oak, which causes Cazeau to have a flashback to his childhood. He and his father had to recapture a slave who had run away from the plantation. The fact that he draws a connection to this episode and to Athenaïse is very telling. The whole remembrance of the episode "was hideous to him" (Chopin 432) and he rode away, but the comparison between the two stories of runaways shows Cazeau seeing Athenaïse as almost slave-like. This is easy for Cazeau since she is Creole and therefore different from him. This explains why Athenaïse follows him quietly as well. If she feels like a slave being recaptured, she would have no option but to follow. In one article it is explained that passing under the same oak as where his father allowed Black Gabe to catch his breath causes Cazeau to make an association between Gabe and Athenaïse. "Athenaïse and Gabe are not so far apart in terms of caste status. Cazeau, a white man, enjoys privileges over those given to both white women and slaves. While it is true that white women enjoy a higher status than slaves, it is not to any great degree, when compared to the white man" (Goodspeed 57). If Cazeau would have a higher status than that of white women, his status is even higher above that of a Creole woman. This adds a new layer into the

hierarchy placing Creole women between white women and black women, making Athenaïse that much closer to being black.

Another reason comparing Athenaïse to a black man may be frightening for Cazeau is because of the expectations he has for blacks. The stereotypes of the time painted black people as “intellectually underdeveloped, uncivilized children that require parallel ideas that construct Whites as intellectually mature, civilized adults” (Collins 65). We see these stereotypes in Cazeau’s treatment of Félicité the servant when he calls her a fool, but says it in such a way that it sounds like a compliment. It’s almost as though Cazeau doesn’t expect her to understand his words, so he keeps his tone soothing and insults her as he does.

Athenaïse feels alone in her world, trapped with a husband she discovers that she doesn’t want. Her parents don’t understand her running away without first being abused, and Montéclin doesn’t understand how someone can be disinclined to marriage and not the man. Athenaïse tries to talk to her friends, but they don’t understand either, and “refuse to take seriously the hints which she threw out” (436), leaving Athenaïse to turn solely to her brother. As a woman and a Creole Athenaïse feels powerless, but Montéclin is a man who can save her from her unhappiness. Montéclin urges Athenaïse to do all the things that her parents tried to teach her not to. Montéclin helps her run away, inappropriate for any woman, and encourages her sass, the supposed instinctual behavior of a Creole. Montéclin’s opposition to Cazeau’s collectiong Athenaïse is the first time the reader really sees him encourage her subordination. Montéclin says, “[i]f you don’t wan’ to go, you

know w'at you got to do "Thenaise" (432) and tells her while he's living, she won't be made to do anything.

The instant Athenaise leaves her family and husband behind she starts to act even less as is expected of her. She decides to find a job in order to make some money, and she strikes up a friendship with a gentleman, Gouvernail. These are two inappropriate ventures. Athenaise should be a lady, keeping to herself and not trying to earn her own money, but now she has no one to disapprove of her actions, which gives her the space and time to sort out her own feelings.

Everything is going well for Athenaise, until her attitude changes when dining out with Gouvernail and the waiter calls them "monsieur et madame" (Chopin 447). This slip of the tongue causes Athenaise to become very tired and lifeless. At this point Athenaise is slowly becoming more accustomed to the idea of having a husband, but still finds it somewhat disagreeable. The thing that really changes her mind and allows her to combine herself into the perfect mixture of woman and Creole is the fact that she is pregnant at the end of the story. A new sort of passion is awakened in her, and this passion is completely acceptable by society because it's passion for her husband.

Athenaise couldn't reconcile herself to the expectations her family and husband had until she could move past her gender and race. As a woman, she struggled to live her life with a man and be silent about her discomfort. As a Creole she fought against being the quiet young woman she was supposed to be in the first place. Becoming pregnant gives Athenaise a new identity above being a woman and Creole. She is now a mother. Because of this change she learns her own mind and

knows what she wants. After Athenaïse finds out about her pregnancy, she has a “look of pride and satisfaction” (452) on her face and her “whole passionate nature was aroused as if by a miracle” (451).

### **Analysis of “At the ‘Cadian Ball”**

“At the ‘Cadian Ball” is another story of complex relationships. The two main characters in this story are Calixta and Alcée Laballière, Calixta being a young woman with Spanish and French blood, and Alcée being a wealthier, white farmer. The two had a relationship in the past, but meet again at a ball being held by an Acadian. Alcée is entirely entranced by Calixta until his mother’s goddaughter, Clarisse, comes to take him home. Alcée even has to be reminded by Clarisse to say goodbye to Calixta as they leave. After Alcée leaves, Calixta walks home with a man named Bobinôt and tells him that she will marry him after all.

The two women in this story are very different from one another. Calixta has French and Spanish blood, and she is accepted as partially Acadian by other Acadians, though she may not necessarily be one because of her mixtures of nationality. When Bobinôt first talks about Calixta in the story, he says, “Spanish was in her blood... For that reason the prairie people forgave her much that they would not have overlooked in their own daughters or sisters” (Chopin 219). Clarisse is an upper class French woman, who lives with her godmother. She is a part of high society and is respected as a white woman. When describing the traits of Clarisse, it is said guests come to visit Clarisse and, “She was worth going a good deal farther

than that to see" (220). These traits are what make Clarisse more attractive to Alcée than Calixta.

Calixta, although white, is an Acadian with some Spanish blood. Calixta's heritage is apparent when Calixta "swore roundly in fine 'Cadian French and with true Spanish spirit, and slapped Fronie's face"(219) after Fronie and she get into an argument. Calixta's life is going to be different from the other women at the ball because different things are expected from a woman with Spanish blood. There is a lot of emphasis on her blood and roots, being both French and Spanish. She is described as having "a voice like a rich contralto song, with cadences in it that must have been taught by Satan, for there was no one else to teach her tricks on that 'Cadian prairie" (219). Because Calixta is different from the other Acadians, her voice has tricks rather than a natural way of speaking. The other Acadians also expect her behavior to be somewhat scandalous. When rumors fly about her involvement in a disreputable instance in Assumption (which the reader never learns the details of) the people dismiss the rumors because of who she is, "'C'est Espagnol, ça,' most [people] said with lenient shoulder-shrugs" (119).

Another great difference between Calixta and white women is that she looks much different than them. She is described by saying she has blue eyes and "flaxen hair" and is a "little Spanish vixen" (Chopin 219). Though she has blonde hair and blue eyes, Calixta has a "small brown ear." This is confusing when looking at the description of Calixta when she is compared to a mulatto. It is said, "that her hair kinked worse than a mulatto's close to her head" (219). If she is compared to a mulatto she cannot be one, yet she is someone who can be involved in a fling with

Alcée, not considered for marriage. If she wants to marry, she must stay within her own class. Clarisse is described much differently from Calixta. Because Clarisse is pure French, white, and upper class, her description is focused on her skin color. At one point in the story a servant says, "I was n' sho it was a ghos' o' w'at, stan'in' up dah" (221), meaning he confused her with a white ghost. Later in the same conversation with the servant, it is mentioned that the mosquitoes "were indeed attacking Clarisse's white feet savagely" (222). She is considered "dainty as a lily; hardy as a sunflower... cold and kind and cruel by turn" (220). Clarisse can afford to be cruel because she is both white and upper class. She will be married, not a mistress, to a rich white man.

Because of her Spanish roots, Calixta is allowed to act in ways the Acadians would deem inappropriate for anyone else. She hoards attention while at the ball by smiling, teasing, and flirting. Calixta teases Bobinôt mercilessly, which makes him happy just to be noticed by her. She compares him to "ole Ma'ame Tina's cow in the bog" (Chopin 224). Most people would be offended, but Bobinôt thinks, "It was better to receive even such notice as that from Calixta than none at all" (224). Because Calixta has Spanish blood and a lesser responsibility with her lower class standing, she can act with "animation, abandon, and flashes of wit" (223), and she can flirt with everyone, calling attention to herself without being ushered out of the ball. This is what she is doing when she calls out to tease Bobinôt. She is on a pedestal in the community, at least according to the young men, as is evident by "all the young men agree[ing] that she was at her best to-night" (223). The women, however, do not appreciate her behavior. Madame Suzonne says to a neighbor, "if

Ozéina were to conduct herself in a like manner, she should immediately be taken out to the mule-cart and driven home" (224).

When around Alcée, Calixta changes entirely. She becomes coy and quiet, and "her boisterousness was all gone. They talked low, and laughed softly, as lovers do" (225). Alcée and Calixta are sitting on a bench on the gallery when Bobinôt walks out to look for her, then gives up and goes back inside. Alcée says to Calixta, "You are going to set poor Bobinôt crazy. You'll marry him someday; *hein*, Calixta?" She answers without saying yes or no, by saying, "I don't say no, me" (224). While this implies that she will say yes if Bobinôt asks, it also implies that she might say yes to Alcée if he asks her to do something, like go to Assumption with him, which he has been trying to convince her to do as they sit together. At one point Calixta asks "W'at you goin' do, yonda'" and he replies with "drown myself in the lake, maybe; unless you go down to visit your uncle." (225). Calixta seems incredibly close to going with Alcée to Assumption, until Clarisse recaptures Alcée's attention.

Calixta allows Alcée to act silly with her, like when "he attempted to take a little gold ring from her finger; just for the fun of it, for there was nothing he could have done with the ring but replace it again" (224). She also lets him play "with her earring, a thin crescent of gold hanging from her small brown ear. He caught a wisp of the kinky hair that had escaped its fastening and rubbed the ends of it against his shaven cheek" (224). Later, when walking home with Bobinôt, Calixta says, "You been sayin' all along you want to marry me, Bobinôt. Well, if you want, yet, I don' care, me" (226). He's so happy that it doesn't bother him when she refuses to kiss him by telling him, "I don' want to kiss you, Bobinôt...not to-day. Some other time.

*Bonté divine!* ent you satisfy, yet?" (227). Any other man would think of this as a red flag. Calixta realizes that she doesn't want to settle for Bobinôt, but she's upset by Alcée's forgetting her for Clarisse. She demonstrates her displeasure before telling Bobinôt she'll marry him. When Alcée "offer[ed] his hand to press through the railing[, s]he pretended not to see it" (226).

Language is another factor that separates Calixta from those outside her class. Just like in "Athenaïse," the accents given to each character distinguish who they are. Alcée is the only character in the story who speaks straightforward non-accented English. He only uses one French word and it is a minor expression. In reference to a trip when Alcée and Calixta encountered each other, Alcée says, "Because you were in Assumption, and I happened to go to Assumption, they must have it that we went together. But it was nice—*hein*, Calixta?—in Assumption?" (Chopin 224). *Hein* means "huh, or an exclamation of dislike or disbelief" (Dictionary.com). All the other characters who speak French use full sentences. Although Alcée and Clarisse are of a higher class, Clarisse speaks French more than anyone else in the story. It is said in the story that Alcée and Calixta "belonged to the younger generation, so preferred to speak English" (224). Clarisse is of the younger generation, but in her class and as a woman, she is mostly exposed to older members of society, like her godmother. When Clarisse does speak English, she speaks without colloquialisms, but with a French accent. When she finds out that Alcée is going to the Acadian ball, Clarisse says, "Humph! *Par exemple!* Nice conduc' for a Laballière" (222). This defines a difference between Clarisse and Calixta, who has a very strong accent, and occasionally mixes French and English. Calixta also uses slang when she talks, saying

things like “Betta make has’e, then; it’s mos’ day” (225). Bobinôt is from the same class and racial background, meaning he speaks in the same manner. When Calixta finally agrees to marry Bobinôt, he responds to her by saying, “*Bon Dieu!* You know that makes me crazy, w’at you sayin’. You mean that, Calixta? You ent goin’ turn roun’ agin?” (226). In this one phrase Bobinôt mixes his French and his colloquialisms.

Unfortunately because of Calixta’s mixed blood and lower class status, she will not end up being married to Alcée. Alcée and Calixta are attracted to each other, which is made obvious through their playing together, and when Calixta’s senses are reeling as “she felt Alcée’s lips brush her ear like the touch of a rose” (225). This makes it somewhat surprising that Alcée would leave Calixta to go with Clarisse. I believe that Alcée goes so willingly with Clarisse because she is white and higher class, as is he. Clarisse’s class and attitude is apparent when she is described receiving declarations of love from Alcée; “*Par exemple!*” she muttered disdainfully, as she turned from him, deftly adjusting the toilette that he had so brutally disarrayed” (221).

To understand the story, the ball itself must be understood. Relationships between white men and non-white, or not purely white, women were complex. It closely resembles something called a “quadroon ball,” where men and women of different races would meet to find a plaçage relationship. When talking about the ball in the story, it is said that “[a]nyone who is white may go to a ‘Cadian ball, but he must pay for his lemonade, his coffee and chicken gumbo. And he must behave himself like a ‘Cadian” (Chopin 223), referencing the “[v]ibrant mixture [a]s one of

its hallmarks and... dynamic traditions such as gumbo and jazz” (Thompson 2). Alcée must have a good attitude and not cause a disturbance like one “that was caused by American railroaders, who were not in touch with their surroundings and had no business there” (Chopin 223). Plaçage was “a key social practice in the blending of African and European ancestry and the building of the free population of color” (Sumpter 22). Plaçage is important because it shows the difficult relationships between white men and women who aren’t their equals. Alcée was on the cusp of starting a plaçage relationship with Calixta before Clarisse came to collect him. It is known that Alcée isn’t necessarily looking for a marriage because his servant tells Clarisse that Alcée said he “wants a li’le fling” (Chopin 222). This is a perfect reason for Alcée to go to the ball.

When he is compared to the Acadian men, he is obviously the more desirable choice as a mate. When Bobinôt is observing Alcée, he says that “he discerned a gleam of it in Alcée’s handsome eyes,” the “it” in the quote referring to his mood for “ugly things,” or to flirt with Calixta. When Bobinôt compares himself to Alcée, he calls himself “dull-looking and clumsy”(Chopin 223). Alcée has more earning potential and more respect in the community. Everyone observing him knows that “the Laballières were rich—that there were resources East, and more again in the city” (223). Alcée goes to the ball already knowing he wants to let loose by flirting and dancing, and perhaps even carrying on a plaçage relationship.

The way Clarisse and Calixta treat each other is distinct because of class differences as well. Clarisse calls Calixta “mon enfant” and then must remind Alcée to say goodbye to her. Calixta treats Clarisse like a much-respected elder, calling her

“mam’zelle”(Chopin 226) referencing her class by showing her respect. When Alcée remembers to say goodbye and reaches for Calixta’s hand, she pretends not to see it. She won’t touch him because she has been slighted. Alcée treats Clarisse differently as well. After initially “clasp[ing] Clarisse by the arms and pant[ing] a volley of hot, blistering love words in her face” (220), he treats Clarisse with great respect, proven by when Clarisse comes to get him from the ball, her voice was one “that went through his body like an electric shock, bringing him to his feet” (225). This is why he drops everything to follow her when she comes to get him from the ‘Cadian ball. And on the way home Clarisse admits her love for him. Clarisse has her face hidden when she tells Alcée she “got wild” (227), captivating and shocking Alcée even more. Alcée’s reaction is revealing to the reader:

and when she told him, he thought the face of the Universe was changed— just like Bobinôt. Was it last week the cyclone had well-nigh ruined him? The cyclone seemed a huge joke, now. It was he, then, who, an hour ago was kissing little Calixta’s ear and whispering nonsense into it. Calixta was like a myth, now. The one, only, great reality in the world was Clarisse standing before him, telling him that she loved him (227).

Alcée is so taken aback by Clarisse’s confession that he forgets Calixta is a real person. Clarisse is the one he can have a marriage, and children, with because she is both white and of his class. Both women act coy and shy, but only one is truly successful, the woman with the same racial and social background as Alcée.

## **Conclusion**

As Chopin's literature shows, relationships are never simple; in the late 1800s they were even less so than today. Through the hardships of the stories, there are consistent problems that the characters must cope with—being different from one another in gender and in race being the most prominent. Athenaise struggles to find herself in a culture where she is expected to act in such different ways. As a Creole, she is expected not to be genteel, but as a woman she must be refined. Calixta's struggles are born from her bloodlines. She is of mixed race, Spanish and French, and she is lower class, meaning that she will never have the opportunity to attract Alcée like Clarisse can. These women must fight against the constraints of their gender, class, and race, and Chopin does a stunning job of highlighting their struggles.

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