

Constructing Fragile Manhood: Manifestations of Male Crisis in Kate Chopin's Selected Short Stories via Connell's Model

Abduladheem Khalaf Jasim¹, Prof. N. Solomon Benny²

¹Research scholar, Department of English, College of Arts & Commerce, Andhra University, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Arts & Commerce, Andhra University, India.

Corresponding Author: abdiraq665@gmail.com

Received: 18 Aug 2026; Received in revised form: 14 Sep 2026; Accepted: 19 Sep 2026; Available online: 25 Sep 2026

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Abstract— Kate Chopin's nineteenth-century local color short fiction has long been celebrated for its pioneering critique of patriarchal structures and its unflinching psychological portraits of female entrapment and liberation. Meanwhile, a critical gap persists concerning how Chopin's realist canvas simultaneously exposes the structural vulnerability, internal anxieties, and emotional paralysis of her male characters. This paper examines the representation of masculinity in selected short stories by Kate Chopin—specifically "Desirée's Baby" (1893), "Fedora" (1897), and "At the 'Cadian Ball'" (1892)—through the sociological lens of R.W. Connell's groundbreaking theory of multiple masculinities, particularly the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, marginalization, and crisis tendencies. Applying Connell's framework reveals that Chopin's male figures do not merely operate as static enforcers of patriarchal oppression; rather, they are trapped within an unforgiving normative architecture that demands absolute authority while rendering them emotionally illiterate and psychologically brittle. When confronted with shifts in racial purity, female autonomy, or unrequited desire, these characters experience acute crises of manhood, exposing the systemic fragility inherent in nineteenth-century American hegemonic ideals.

Keywords— Kate Chopin, R.W. Connell, Hegemonic Masculinity, Male Crisis, Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Gender Studies.



I. INTRODUCTION: DE-CENTERING THE PATRIARCHAL MONOLITH

Although Kate Chopin's scholarship environment has been largely feminist, the focus has been on her female protagonists, including Louise Mallard in *The Story of an Hour* and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, who are all perceived as early feminists fighting against a restrictive social apparatus (Toth, 1999; Elfenbein, 2004). But to consider Chopin only as a dissector of women's anguish is to miss the complex interplay that she sets up between feminine awakening and masculine anguish. Chopin's imaginary world does not permit men to be impervious to the strong forces of his society; it is a world of men who are active players in and victims of a tightly scripted and heavily-rewarded, male-dominated socio-economic system

that requires emotional repression, racial domination and uncompromising economic control.

This study will use the sociological model of masculinities of R.W. Connell to unpack this complex dynamic. Connell's theory (1987, 1995, 2005) is well developed in his work on gender and power and on masculinities, and suggests that masculinity is not a fixed and universal biological condition but is a historically dynamic, relational pattern of gender practices. In Connell's theory, society creates a hierarchy of masculinities that is grounded in what is culturally idealized, hegemonic masculinity, which legitimates global patriarchy over women and men who are subdominant in their masculinity. But hegemonic masculinity is also emotional distancing, economic dominance and structural power which always

produces systemic crisis tendencies. When these foundations are disturbed by the external world, or by the world of the emotions within, the illusion of total control shatters and leads to the male crisis and the exposure of weak manhood, as Connell describes it.

Connell's work is sociological, but his insights into nineteenth-century American literature have great value in understanding performance, contestation, and destabilization of late-Victorian conceptions of manhood. This article maintains that Kate Chopin's short stories are early literary experiments in the exploration of these crisis tendencies. This study examines the lives of the male characters in the three texts under discussion ("Desirée's Baby," "Fedora," and "At the 'Cadian Ball"—his name is never even mentioned—) as they confront crises of masculinity when their enactment of hegemonic masculinity meets uncontrollable female desires, shifting racial perspectives, and human emotions.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: R.W. CONNELL AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF MASCULINITY

R.W. Connell's theory of masculinities offers a powerful diagnostic framework around which literature can be analyzed since it offers a framework beyond biological essentialism and sees gender as a social practice, continuously accomplished and negotiated. Connell distinguishes four basic structural interconnections between masculine and feminine within the gender order:

Hegemonic Masculinity: The culturally privileged form of masculinity in a particular time and space which ensures a dominant social position for men and a subordinate one for women. This ideal was a combination of white racial superiority, capitalist control, emotional composure, and unconditional male authority of the household (Bederman, 1995).

Men who do not conform to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity and are therefore devalued culturally, e.g., homosexual men, men who express obvious feelings of emotional vulnerability, passivity, and physical weakness.

Complicit Masculinity: The place of the vast majority of men who are not living up to the "peak" ideals of hegemonic masculinity, but who are nonetheless implicitly enjoying the benefits of the male-favored "patriarchal dividend" (or structural advantages).

Marginalised Masculinity: Masculinities that are formed through the interaction of gender with a racial, class or ethnic minority group. In the plantation economy of the American South, as described by Chopin, there is a truncated relation to hegemonic power for minority men or the lower class men.

Most important, in terms of this study, Connell argues that there is an inherent instability in the gender order. Hegemonic masculinity has internal contradictions, or what Connell calls 'crisis tendencies', due to the super-human requirements it imposes for control, invulnerability and supremacy. These are the crisis of authority (institutional power over women and subordinates becomes problematic), the crisis of sexuality (between normative heterosexuality and emotional or erotic desires), and the crisis of interest (between personal welfare and patriarchal call to action).

In Chopin's Louisiana local color fiction, Connell's model reveals how men seem to be the ones with absolute power, but are always at risk of psychological breakdown. They are not strong but rather are defensive strategies that stem from structural and personal fragility.

III. RACIAL PURITY, PATERNAL AUTHORITY, AND THE COLLAPSE OF ARMAND AUBIGNY IN "DESIRÉE'S BABY"

Chopin's 1893 piece "Desirée's Baby" is one of his most biting critiques of the nexus of white supremacy, patriarchal entitlement and fragility of manhood in the antebellum American South, which was published in *Vogue*. Armand Aubigny, a rich plantation owner in Louisiana, is passionately in love with Desirée, a foundling of unknown ancestry. Armand's life is the epitome of Southern hegemonic masculinity in the beginning, he has large tracts of land, is absolutely in charge of the enslaved population, and represents the aristocratic white planter class.

In Connell's system, Armand's identity is completely dependent on two poles of the nineteenth-century South's hegemony: pristine white racial purity and unchecked patriarchal authority over his family and home. Armand's world, and his delicate conception of masculinity, collapses when his child inherits the signs of mixed-race and grows up to accept them as his own.

Chopin carefully charts Armand's descent into madness in the context of male crisis. Instead of empathy, or introspective doubt, Armand withdraws into cold, tyrannical withdrawal:

He was silent and oppressive; he avoided her, whose eyes looked at him with mute and pleading prayer; he no longer loved her because of the degradation she had brought upon him. (Chopin, 1893)

Connell's crisis of authority and identity is seen in Armand's reaction. His sense of manhood is so entwined with racial supremacy and the ideal of a flawless family that the very presence of a mixed child comes with a threat to his social standing. He is unable to deal with ambiguity

and/or emotional complexities; his manhood is a binary realm. Accordingly, he will send away Desirée and her child, and eliminate his family so he can maintain his cast-iron reputation.

The depth of the irony and eventual humiliation of Armand's weakness are realized in the conclusion of the story. After the tragic disappearance and death of Desirée, Armand finds a letter from his deceased mother to his father, revealing he (Armand) has some African blood through his mother. Hegemonic master who condemns and exiles his wife is structurally involved in the very racial "taint" that he condemns.

Armand's absolute authority rested on a tremendous lie, in Connell's words. If he's not some kind of superior breed, he's a man. This leaves him psychologically emptied, exposing him as a victim of what is now the ideology he used as a weapon. This is where Chopin invites the reader to the awareness that the fragility of a manhood based on subjugating and erasing other people is exposed.

IV. EMOTIONAL REPRESSION AND THE SUITOR'S PARALYSIS IN "*FEDORA*"

Desirée's Baby talks about the collapse of the male and the racial authority, while Chopin's short story of 1897, "Fedora," explores the psychological consequences of emotional repression and unfulfilled desire, tracing the internal rips and tears in manly fortitude. The characters of the male around Fedora, especially the determined and loyal yet socially unagile suitors, deal with the strictures of late-Victorian codes of manliness and the boundaries of emotions.

In the Victorian gender system, there was a definite rule that a man should not be vulnerable, or feel grief or be over-emotional that he must be effeminate or weak (Rotundo, 1993). In the public sphere, men were meant to be rational and stoic, with romance either as a victory or as a secondary interest, a conquest that was clearly subordinate to their social and professional achievements.

The male characters are ensnared by this emotional interdiction in "Fedora. The guys who want to marry her have a knack for not being able to talk about realheartedness. Their methods are socially conventional, polite detachment, and formal posturing. These suitors suffer from what Connell calls the crisis of interest and emotional paralysis of hegemonic socialization when Fedora is emotionally unavailable.

In Chopin's portrayal, the need for stoicism takes away from men the very language they use to connect with one another as people. The male roles in "Fedora" can't cross the divide between performance and feeling, otherwise they risk losing the privilege of being rational and

dominant males. Their manhood is felt as an emotional straitjacket, rather than a way to be freed. In *Fedora*, Chopin condemns a social structure which teaches men to rule empires and homes, yet renders them utterly powerless in the realm of the heart.

V. CLASS, COURTSHIP, AND THE FRAGILITY OF CADIAN MANHOOD IN "*AT THE 'CADIAN BALL*"

Chopin's geographical and social focus in "At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892) moves from the plantation rich to the working class Acadian (Cajun) community of Louisiana. In this, and later, in other novels, such as *The Awakening*, we meet other young people in the region, including Alcée Laballière, who reappear in later novels, and the social manners of rural courtship, dance, and class distinction.

Alcée Laballière is a less stridently plantation tyrant than antebellum fiction, a more rural-ready version of masculinity. Is handsome, athletic and social. If, however, one takes into account Connell's theories of marginalized and hegemonic masculinities, one can see that Alcée's masculinity is a subject of constant flux and instability between internalised class expectations and the limits of desire.

Alcée's crisis is sparked by the conflict between proper class expectations and passionate, transgressive instincts. Initially, he is interested in the fiery, sensual, independent Cajun woman Calixta, whose sexuality is at odds with the passive Victorian womanhood he was taught to espouse. But, tightly constrained by the unwritten class divisions of his community, Alcée is reluctant to wholeheartedly involve himself in a woman whose rank in society doesn't match with his aspirations for elite familial status. This hesitation results in Calixta's rejection of the man, triggering a crisis of male pride and agency.

Later, when Alcée meets Calixta at the 'Cadian ball, he is unable to maintain his composure and the façade of his manhood is stripped away. As Chopin comes to understand that he cannot control his fate, he writes of his inner conflict.

Alcée was beside himself: "The music seemed to run in his very blood, and when he saw Calixta dancing with another, all the resolutions that reason had suggested were driven from his mind. (Chopin, 1892)

Alcée's collapse into disarray is the archetype of a crisis of sexuality and control, in Connell's model. The hegemonic manhood requires that men keep their desires and their social environment in rational control. As Alcée's love gets lost in a rejection from a woman and a drunkenness from her presence, his masculinity comes into disarray. He must face the fact that a charmed life and popularity cannot win the heart of the woman he wants to win.

The characters of Cajun men in this story put an end to any easy dichotomy of 'strong men versus weak women'. Rather, she shows that there are contradictions among working-class and rural masculinity. Rural manhood—an idealized image of stoic, unfettered masculinity—is exposed as being highly fragile when exposed to female agency and emotional authenticity.

VI. COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS: THE SPECTRUM OF MALE CRISIS IN CHOPIN'S FICTION

The patterns that emerge across "Desirée's Baby," "Fedora," and "At the 'Cadian Ball" are coherent and create a critical trajectory in Kate Chopin's exploration of gender. Her short fiction does not present the stereotypical men with flat characters, nor does she present the one dimensional man; on the contrary, Chopin presents psychological anguish for her male subjects as directly a result of the impossible expectations of the patriarchy in which they reside. Across Kate Chopin's short fiction, male crises consistently unfold through the lens of R.W. Connell's masculinity framework, exposing the fragility of Southern patriarchal dominance. In "Desirée's Baby" (1893), Armand Aubigny embodies the planter-elite variant of hegemonic masculinity, deriving his authority from undisputed racial purity, strict paternal control, and unbroken lineage; this dominance violently unravels when the child reveals signs of mixed ancestry, culminating in Armand's psychological collapse, the destruction of his household, and a crushing reckoning when a recovered letter proves that the Black heritage he reviled was his own. By contrast, the peripheral male suitors in "Fedora" (1897) operate under complicity, Victorian bourgeois masculinity, where adherence to emotional suppression and rigid social decorum inhibits genuine intimacy, ultimately trapping them in emotional paralysis and persistent romantic detachment. Finally, "At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892) presents Alcée Laballière as a figure of agrarian hegemonic authority whose crisis stems from the friction between aristocratic class expectations and transgressive desire; his pursuit across class boundaries shatters his aristocratic composure, forcing him into an abrupt confrontation with female agency and emotional destabilization.

VII. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POST-PATRIARCHAL RE-READING OF CHOPIN

Kate Chopin's short stories are still deserving of careful theoretic reconsideration. This paper has illustrated that Chopin's literary criticism is not just a one-sided argument for female autonomy, but rather a sociological perspective of masculinities as proposed by R.W. Connell.

She is a shrewd observer of the male situation in the repressive American social structure of the nineteenth century.

In the characters of the Suitors, who are cold, unemotional men in "Fedora," and of Alcée Laballière in Chopin, the author shows that hegemonic masculinity is a two-sided sword. It provides opportunities for male privilege in the institutional and social world, but it also confines men to the realm of emotional ignorance, narrow racial fears, and an impossible expectation of total control. But when these demands are juxtaposed with the complexity of human beings and the agency of women, the inevitable crisis of manhood emerges.

Finally, Chopin's fiction implies that the liberation of men and women is not something that can be attained simply by flipping the switch in an oppressive gender dichotomy. Chopin exposes the artificial fragility of male power, and encourages the reader to bring the construct down as well: a world without women or men being trampled underfoot by the heavy patriarchal feet of the nineteenth century.

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