SuperSummary™

A Respectable Woman

Kate Chopin

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ESSAY TOPICS

Summary

Summary: "A Respectable Woman"

"A Respectable Woman," by American author Kate Chopin, is a short story that utilizes literary Realism and an ambiguous ending to tackle themes of **The Search for Female Identity**, **Devotion Versus Desire**, **The Allure of the Unknown**, as well as marriage roles and sexual awakening. These are trademark elements in Chopin's work. First published on February 15, 1894, the story follows the perspective of Mrs. Baroda, the wife of a Louisiana planter who finds it increasingly difficult to understand her feelings toward her husband's visiting friend.

Chopin is best known for her groundbreaking novel, *The Awakening*, which shocked readers upon its 1899 publication. Even though this novel touches on many of the same themes as "A Respectable Woman" and several of Chopin's other short stories, including "At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892) and "The Storm" (1898), it does so in a way that was scandalous—and even detestable—to readers of the late 1800s. Today, however, many scholars consider *The Awakening* a seminal work of early feminist literature, and Chopin has earned the reputation of being ahead of her time in many ways. She wrote around 100 short stories and essays, and "A Respectable Woman" was one of 19 of these to be published in *Vogue* magazine.

This guide refers to the version of the text that is freely available on the Kate Chopin International Society website.

"A Respectable Woman" employs a third-person limited point of view, which primarily follows the thoughts and feelings of Mrs. Baroda. In the opening lines, Mrs. Baroda expresses displeasure that her husband, Gaston Baroda, has invited a friend to stay with them at their sugar plantation. Because they hosted many guests throughout the winter, Mrs. Baroda hoped to spend time alone with her husband at their home.

The visitor's name is Gouvernail. Though Mrs. Baroda has never met him, she knows that he attended college with her husband and currently works as a journalist, which conjures the idea of an academic, cynical man. She decides that she will not get along with him. However, when Gouvernail arrives, he is not at all how she envisioned; he is understated and quiet, though receptive to her hospitality.

Mrs. Baroda decides that she does like Gouvernail. However, her feelings perplex her, and she cannot "explain satisfactorily to herself" (Paragraph 4) why she has formed this new opinion. While Gouvernail is courteous, he makes "no appeal to her approval or even esteem" (Paragraph 4). Instead of talking, hunting, or fishing, the visitor seems content to sit on the plantation's portico, listen to the Barodas, and pet the dogs.

Over the next several days, Mrs. Baroda remains puzzled by the visitor's unreadable demeanor and by her reaction to him. Initially, she stays away and leaves him to her husband, but after realizing that he seems indifferent to her absence, she becomes annoyed and goes out of her way to spend time with him. She joins him on his walks and attempts to "penetrate the reserve in which he had unconsciously enveloped himself" (Paragraph 7).

Yet Mrs. Baroda's demeanor shifts quickly again. She asks Gaston when their guest will be leaving, saying, "[H]e tires me frightfully" (Paragraph 8). When her affectionate and caring husband does not understand her disposition, she responds that she finds their visitor to be less interesting than expected and that she is going to leave town the next day to stay at her aunt's house until Gouvernail is gone.

Later that evening, as Mrs. Baroda sits alone outside and attempts to sort through her emotions, she notices Gouvernail walking toward her. He brings her a white scarf from her husband and joins her on the bench. Though she sometimes wraps this scarf across her shoulders or head, she now only holds it in her lap and mumbles her thanks. Gouvernail then talks to her, reflecting on the night air, his college days with Gaston, and his past and present views of life. At one point, almost as though speaking to himself, he mutters a few lines of Walt Whitman: "Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! Still nodding night—" (Paragraph 21).

As Gouvernail sits next to her in the dark and speaks, the tension within Mrs. Baroda builds. She suddenly realizes that she wants to "reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips" and "whisper against his cheek —she did not care what—as she might have done if she was not a respectable woman" (Paragraph 26). Almost immediately upon this urge, however, she disengages and walks back to the house, leaving Gouvernail alone to his musings. Deciding to conceal her newly discovered feelings, she leaves for the city in the morning and does not return until Gouvernail has left the plantation.

In the summer, Mrs. Baroda rejects her husband's idea to invite Gouvernail to visit again. Several months later, however, she initiates the idea of him coming to stay. When Gaston expresses delight that she has "overcome" her dislike of his old friend, she exclaims, "I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him" (Paragraph 33). The story closes on these lines.

Background

Authorial Context: Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin (née O' Flannery) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 8, 1850. Her father was an Irishman, and her mother was from a French family. After her father died in an accident when she was five years old, Chopin was raised by a household of widowed women: her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. She was formally educated by nuns at Sacred Heart Academy, an academically sound Catholic school.

Chopin was nurtured by intelligent women who lived independently during an era of great restriction on women's choices and their ability to direct their own lives. In addition to shaping the author's early development, these female figures may have inspired her complex female characters, many of whom struggle for autonomy and agency amid Victorian constructs of womanhood, which were defined primarily through marriage and maternity. This conflict between external compliance and internal rebellion can be observed in some of Chopin's best-known characters, such as Mrs. Baroda in "A Respectable Woman," Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, and Louise Mallard in "The Story of an Hour."

Chopin's young adulthood was also shaped by the US Civil War (1861-1865). While St. Louis was a blend of both Union and Confederate supporters, Chopin's family was pro-Confederate. The reality of racial tension and national conflict would also influence Chopin's life and writing, and many of her stories' settings are contemporaneous with the Civil War. Among the most noteworthy of these is "Desiree's Baby," which examines American Southern racial tension with a level of nuance unusual for the author's era and locale.

The period of the author's life most influential to her writing was likely her 12 years of marriage to Oscar Chopin, who, like the character Gaston Baroda in "A Respectable Woman," was a Louisiana planter. The couple met in St. Louis, wed in 1870, and soon moved to Louisiana, living first in New Orleans and later on one of the family plantations. During this time, the couple seemed to have a very happy marriage and had six children. According to secondhand accounts, Chopin retained a sense of independence in terms of her lifestyle, sense of dress, witty humor, and spirited attitude. She also became a keen observer of Creole culture and New Orleans society, which later played a significant role in her writing.

It wasn't until after Chopin was widowed in 1882, at age 32, that she began to write seriously, taking inspiration from many of her life experiences to produce two novels, *At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* (1899), and approximately 100 short stories and essays. Though she returned to St. Louis after her husband's death, a significant portion of her writing highlights Louisiana and Creole culture, independently-minded women, and the complexities of marriage. "A Respectable Woman," written 12 years after the death of Oscar Chopin, contains all these elements.

Literary Context: Romanticism and Realism

Literary Realism, which reflected a greater trend throughout all the arts during the late 1800s, marked a turn from the previous century's Romanticism. Romantic works typically idealized the natural world and dramatize human experience, foregrounding aesthetic sublimity and individual passion, but Realism sought to depict life without sentiment or exaggeration. Where the Romantics exalted the imagination, Realists prized accuracy. The latter movement impacted American writing most notably after the Civil War—the same period when Chopin began her writing career—and much of Chopin's work portrays quotidian realities from a uniquely female perspective.

"A Respectable Woman" uses both Romantic and Realist elements to craft the protagonist's conflict as it relates to the two male characters. A quality of Realism primarily surrounds the character of Gaston and the married couple's interactions. For example, in the two instances of truly interactive dialogue, the conversation is between the couple and has a casual, intimate tone that conveys ease and tenderness. For example, their first conversation occurs while they are "making a bit of a toilet sociably together in Mrs. Baroda's dressing-room" (Paragraph 11)—they are chatting while they get ready for the day, an extremely ordinary marital occurrence that indicates closeness.

The Realism of the Barodas' marriage contrasts with the Romanticism of Gouvernail's character. Both literary movements focused on the "common man," but Romanticism emphasized the beauty of nature, independence, psychological interiority, and the special connection between the poet and the natural world. These are clear traits in Gouvernail's characterization, and some of them are apparent in Mrs. Baroda's as well. By juxtaposing Gaston's unadorned Realism against the visitor's Romantic allure, Chopin accentuates Mrs. Baroda's temptation to lose herself in the excitement of novelty and passion.

Story Analysis

Analysis: "A Respectable Woman"

Though **Devotion Versus Desire** is among its central themes, "A Respectable Woman" is not primarily a love story, at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, it concerns a woman's internal battle to understand and accept her authentic self. The central conflict occurs entirely within Mrs. Baroda's inner world. Her perceptions, though seldom fully revealed through the narration, are the principal organizing force in the narrative.

More than being torn between which man she will choose, Mrs. Baroda is conflicted over who she will become. The dilemma emerges upon her first impulse of passion for Gouvernail, when she longs to touch and speak to him sensually, "as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman" (Paragraph 26). This reference to the story's title indicates the main conflict: whether Mrs. Baroda will give into the desire that has been unconsciously building within her, or make the choice of a dutiful wife and "respectable woman." Judging by her prompt withdrawal from the interaction and her hasty departure for the city, she seems to choose her longstanding idea of respectability—but her disposition is protean throughout the story, and the narrative does not fully disclose her rationale or intentions. This ambiguity culminates in the story's ending, when Mrs. Baroda proposes reinviting Gouvernail and declares she has "overcome everything." These are the story's final lines, but their meaning—and, therefore, the story's ultimate interpretation—is left up to readers. Mrs. Baroda may mean that she has overcome her feelings for Gouvernail, but she also may mean that she has overcome her deference to society's expectations for "a respectable woman." While the former scenario would redound to her commitment and self-control, the latter path could involve her following these puzzling new desires and becoming a new, unknown, independent woman.

Calling upon techniques of both Realism and Romanticism, the narrative utilizes dialogue, symbolism, and juxtaposition to render the three characters and highlight the growing conflict within Mrs. Baroda. The way Gaston talks to his wife is Realistic in its use of dialect. He refers to her by affectionate French expressions, a detail that solidifies the Louisiana plantation setting while also adding to the portrait of a loving marriage. Their conversations' punctuation by physical interactions also adds to the portrait: While talking, Gaston "takes his

wife's pretty face between his hands" (Paragraph 11), and in their conversation at the end of the story, she "presses a long, tender kiss upon his lips" (Paragraph 33). Such Realism portrays the marriage with a certain warmth and intimacy.

However, Chopin uses symbolism to juxtapose this happy image against the constraints that come with that marriage, particularly for the woman. For example, Mrs. Baroda's first name is never given; she is known either by her married name or by the affectionate French names her husband gives her. This symbolizes her duty and devotion to her husband, but also the extent to which her identity is tied to being Mr. Baroda's wife. The white scarf, which Gouvernail presents to Mrs. Baroda at the request of her husband, is also a symbolic reminder of both the warmth and wrappings of her wifely role. This juxtaposition between a happy marriage and the strict confines of wifehood also features in Chopin's other writings, perhaps most notably in "The Story of the Hour." In this short story, Louise Mallard tries to reconcile her grief over her husband's death with a new sense of freedom that comes from no longer being a wife. By highlighting women's difficulties and constraints within marriage—even a peaceful marriage—Chopin illuminated a hidden struggle for the women of her era. This has contributed to her reputation as an early feminist author.

In stark contrast to the affectionate, grounded Gaston is his puzzling, reflective, poetically inclined friend. While Gaston is characterized by literary Realism, Gouvernail's characterization is more Romantic. Dialogue draws focus to his Romantic qualities, particularly his introspection and his relationship to nature and the physical world. Gouvernail's dialogue consistently involves a response to nature. He even quotes two lines from the Romantic poet Walt Whitman's 1855 poem "Song of Myself," which is famous for its individualism, sensuality, and celebration of the natural world.

During the climactic scene where Gouvernail is talking into the night and Mrs. Baroda realizes her attraction toward him, the quality of her internal narrative shifts, becoming more physically oriented and full of sensory detail:

> Her physical being was for the moment predominant. She was not thinking of his words, only drinking in the tones of his voice. She wanted to reach out her hand to him in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the lips or the face. She wanted to whisper against his cheek—she did not care what—as she might have done if she was not a respectable woman (Paragraph 25).

This stylistic change expresses individualism, physical desire, and emotion in a way that is unprecedented for Mrs. Baroda. This change is also prompted by Gouvernail and possibly by his Romantic qualities.

As the protagonist increasingly feels drawn by individualism and physical desire, she is confronted by **The Allure of the Unknown** and the possibility of becoming a different woman. While these themes align with the Romantic sensibility, the execution is different in a significant way: Romanticism typically highlighted the emotions and individuality of men, while treating women as idealized objects of desire. In "A Respectable Woman," Chopin reinterprets the Romantic vision through a female perspective. Further, she draws upon both Realism and Romanticism to do something atypical of either literary movement: to illustrate the reality of domestic life for women of the time while also suggesting that women might yearn for a different, more independent identity. Chopin's ability to simultaneously emulate and subvert various literary traditions is one reason she is so celebrated today.

Character Analysis

Mrs. Baroda

Mrs. Baroda is a dynamic protagonist whose character development and internal conflict propel the story. Aside from the inciting incident—Gouvernail's arrival—the story is entirely driven by Mrs. Baroda's changing feelings and her growing determination to understand them.

Within the span of a few short pages, Mrs. Baroda changes her mind several times about her husband's friend and is increasingly puzzled by her internal responses, and the narrative reaches its climax when she realizes her overwhelming physical desire for Gouvernail. The realization reflects the central conflict of the story: She longs for passionate release and individuality, but she must negotiate between this urge and her view of herself as a "respectable woman." The conflict is only magnified by Mrs. Baroda's intense self-awareness; her ability to recognize her feelings, and her willingness to dissect them, is critical to the underlying themes of **The Search for Female Identity**. Her efforts in self-examination reveal that she is conscientious and intelligent, and in addition to thinking of herself as a respectable woman, she considers herself to be "a sensible one" (Paragraph 28).

Mrs. Baroda's role as a loving wife is also a critical component of her character, and one that is vital to overarching themes of the story. In fact, Mrs. Baroda's status as Gaston's wife is so foundational to her character that Chopin never tells readers her first name. Furthermore, Mrs. Baroda's words and interactions with her husband are consistently tender, personal, and friendly. Though the text is nonspecific about Mrs. Baroda's appearance, it describes how her husband takes "his wife's pretty face between his hands" (Paragraph 11). She also believes her husband is "also her friend" (Paragraph 28). These textual clues indicate that her marriage and husband are important to her, which also clarifies that her attraction to Gouvernail is unrelated to marital dissatisfaction. This makes her inner conflict more complex.

Gaston Baroda

Like Chopin's own husband, Gaston is a planter living in post-Civil War Louisiana. Descriptions of the Barodas' lifestyle indicate wealth, and while Gaston's character receives no physical description, the text indicates that he is a social man, a good friend, and a loving

husband. He also possesses a “frank and wordy hospitality” (Paragraph 4).

Though Gaston’s character is secondary to Mrs. Baroda’s, they are both clearly defined by their relationship to one another. This is immediately evident from the beginning of the story, which introduces Gaston as Mrs. Baroda’s “husband” several times before using his name. In this way, he is a foil to Mrs. Baroda, emphasizing her identity as a wife.

Gaston is also characterized through dialogue and dialect. This short story is not dialogue-heavy, and the only truly interactional dialogue occurs between Mr. and Mrs. Baroda, which creates a sense of intimacy and partnership between them. He also uses local expressions that demonstrate his French Creole background. For example, he calls his wife “ma belle,” which means “my beauty,” and “chère amie,” which means “dear friend.” This terminology reflects his status as a fixture of his Louisiana home, but it also solidifies the impression that he deeply values his wife, both as a wife and as a friend.

Despite his affection toward Mrs. Baroda, Gaston does not fully understand his wife at times. Furthermore, he seems to accept this lack of understanding with natural ease. When Mrs. Baroda declares that she is tired of Gouvernail and wishes him to leave, Gaston responds, “‘Even I can never count on how you are going to act under given conditions.’ He kissed her and turned to fasten his cravat before the mirror” (Paragraph 12).

Gouvernail

Gouvernail is a secondary character who, though reflective and passive, nevertheless impacts the narrative by his presence on the Baroda plantation. He is described at various points as quiet, calm, and courteous, while at the same time lacking “those brilliant and promising traits” that Gaston initially described to Mrs. Baroda (Paragraph 4).

Less description is given to Gouvernail’s actual physical appearance than to how Mrs. Baroda initially imagines that appearance. She thinks he will be “tall, slim, cynical; with eye-glasses, and his hands in his pockets” (Paragraph 3). However, when he arrives, the only one of these descriptions that matches him is “slim enough.” This lack of physical description, compared to Mrs. Baroda’s more detailed imaginations, matches Gouvernail’s role throughout the rest of the story: Mrs. Baroda’s reactions to the idea of Gouvernail are often more dynamic than her interactions with the character himself.

Gouvernail is also characterized by a unique physicality, as the narrative includes more

sensory description and imagery when this character speaks directly. For example, the following comes shortly after his arrival to the plantation: "'This is what I call living,' he would utter with deep satisfaction, as the air that swept across the sugar field caressed him with its warm and scented velvety touch" (Paragraph 6). This sensuality of this line stands out among the rest of the narrative, which is more internally focused. The only other time that this character speaks directly, he makes an "apostrophe to the night," in which he quotes two lines by poet Walt Whitman: "Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! Still nodding night —" (Paragraph 21). This scene, presented through Mrs. Baroda's perspective, is also characterized by more sensory description, which indicates Gouvernail's influence over her as well as her reaction to him.

Themes

The Search for Female Identity

The search for female identity is a running theme throughout many of Chopin's works, and Mrs. Baroda's struggle to understand her preexisting identity in conjunction with a newly emerging, alternative one is the main struggle of "A Respectable Woman."

Women during the Victorian age (1837-1901), especially those of a higher social status like Mrs. Baroda, were expected to obtain, and excel in, the roles of wife and mother. (There were a handful of occupations deemed "respectable" for women of lower social standings, but they did not offer incentives in terms of lifestyle or advancement.) Overall, a prudent marriage was seen as the highest achievement a woman could obtain—but even women who did achieve this had very few individual rights. Throughout most of the 1800s, women had no right to own property or vote. Furthermore, society viewed women as subservient, whether in public or in the home. This began changing in the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s, as women petitioned for the right to vote and began to speak more openly about women's rights. (Even so, it was not until the 1965 Voting Rights Act that voting became a reality for Black American women.)

"A Respectable Woman" does not touch on women's political rights, but it does illustrate the social and mental confines that the role of wife may entail for the protagonist. Like Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening,* Mrs. Baroda is extremely fortunate in her status in life. By Victorian standards, she has achieved the womanly ideal. Not only is her husband well-to-do, but he also seems warm and caring. Mrs. Baroda's role as a good and devoted wife makes her a "respectable woman" by society's terms. Despite her ideal situation, however, Mrs. Baroda's identity is still largely tied to her husband. She is known only by her married title, and her life revolves around such duties as hosting her husband's guests.

When Gouvernail arrives, Mrs. Baroda's preconceptions about him are also shaped by what her husband has told her. However, as the visitor's stay continues, her ideas change, reflecting new, independent thoughts that her husband does not understand. She also makes the choice to go stay with her aunt until Gouvernail leaves, reflecting an independent action

that coincides with her new ideas. From this perspective, the possibility of an affair with Gouvernail could represent a nascent identity full of independent choices that would defy traditional conventions of a wife and respectable woman.

Devotion Versus Desire

Mrs. Baroda's inner conflict is more than an evolution of identity. It is also a matter of devotion versus desire. Her devotion to her husband involves her duty as his wife, but she also genuinely cares for him. Within the few pages of this short story, Chopin shows the steadiness of their relationship through words and actions. Their dynamic comes across as a consistently affectionate, mutual bond. Mrs. Baroda's desirous feelings toward Gouvernail, by contrast, are more spontaneous and erotic, whether that passion is physical or emotional. The attraction comes from inside of her, and it is not built on any mutual understanding or preexisting commitment.

Devotion involves affection and loyalty. Mrs. Baroda is bound to her husband not only through her identity as a wife and "respectable woman" but also through their mutual partnership. In addition to their conversations and brief moments of physical affection, the Barodas refer to their friendship at different points in the story: Gaston calls her "chère amie" (Paragraph 32), which translates to "dear friend," and Mrs. Baroda considers briefly considers telling Gaston about her feelings for Gouvernail because Gaston, while her husband, is "also her friend" (Paragraph 28).

Mrs. Baroda's desire for Gouvernail, as it holds no element of duty, is entirely different. Desire is associated with emotional and even physical intensity, and it becomes clear that Mrs. Baroda's reactions to Gouvernail involve desire more than logic. At first, she likes him, and then she does not, and then she finally understands that she desires him. Throughout this range of responses, Mrs. Baroda continues to puzzle over Gouvernail and the nature of her unfamiliar feelings. She refers to herself not just as "respectable" but as "sensible." She is unaccustomed to experiencing such a purely emotional urge.

The contrast between devotion and desire becomes clearer on the basis of two points. Firstly, the Barodas' marriage does not seem strained or difficult in any way. Secondly, Gouvernail does nothing to elicit Mrs. Baroda's amorous feelings; even when he sits next to her and talks, Mrs. Baroda knows that his comments are "not addressed to her" (Paragraph 22). These two distinctions make it clear that there truly is a mutual devotion between the married couple and that Mrs. Baroda's desire for Gouvernail is both unbidden and unprecedented.

The Allure of the Unknown

The allure of the unknown, a major theme in "A Respectable Woman," is tied to Mrs. Baroda's growing interest in the hard-to-know Gouvernail, her fascination with her unfamiliar emergent emotions, and the possibility of an unknown life, or identity, in the future. Particularly as it concerns the possibility of a different kind of existence, this theme typifies other works by Chopin (such as *The Awakening*) in which the protagonist yearns for a different life without knowing exactly what that might look like.

The allure of the unknown is initially tied to Mrs. Baroda's preconceptions about Gouvernail, as she forms "an image of him in her mind" (Paragraph 3) before meeting him. She is uninterested in his visit because she assumes that she knows what to expect—but after he arrives and flouts her expectations, she is drawn to him. This is seen first when his physical appearance surprises her, then when he does not respond to her absence as she would expect of a visitor. Gouvernail's deviation from expectation is what initially fascinates Mrs. Baroda.

Mrs. Baroda is also physically drawn out, or lured, by the mystery of her feelings. She joins Gouvernail on his walks to "penetrate the reserve in which he had unconsciously wrapped himself" (Paragraph 7) but also to satisfy her curiosity about him. Immediately before her climactic encounter with Gouvernail, she seeks physical solitude and sits alone to think because she has "never known her thoughts or intentions to be so confused" (Paragraph 18). When she recognizes her feelings later that night, it pushes her toward action yet again, and she leaves for her aunt's. While her departure may be a retreat from the unknown, the story's ambiguous ending leaves it open to interpretation.

Though it is unclear how Mrs. Baroda will act when Gouvernail next visits, it is clear that the possibility of a new, unknown life is tied to her action. Because that possibility is an alluring feature of the narrative, the theme even expresses itself through rhetorical technique: In ending the story ambiguously, Chopin allows readers to share in Mrs. Baroda's fascination with the unknown.

Symbols & Motifs

The White Scarf

The white scarf that Gouvernail brings to Mrs. Baroda at the request of her husband is a physical reminder of her marriage and her role within it. As an item that she typically wears over her head and shoulders, it visually recalls a bridal veil, making it a symbol for her status as a wife within this story.

The fact that this scarf is delivered by Gouvernail, amid Mrs. Baroda's attempt to sort through her thoughts and feelings, advances the theme of **Devotion Versus Desire**. This is further highlighted by Mrs. Baroda's response to the white scarf. Instead of automatically putting it on, as might be expected, Mrs. Baroda "let it lie in her lap" (Paragraph 20). This ambiguous action reflects that she has not yet made up her mind regarding the two men and her relationship to them. It also foreshadows the story's ambiguous ending.

Gouvernail's Name

"Gouvernail" is a French name that translates to "rudder," the device used for steering a boat. There is much speculation about this name and what it might symbolize in terms of this character's impact in the story.

While Gouvernail does nothing consciously or directly to steer Mrs. Baroda away from her role as a "respectable woman" and devoted wife, his presence does trigger the changes to her character. His way of connecting with the physical world differs from hers. This also impacts her way of experiencing the world as she recognizes the sensation of desire. The name could also symbolize what is to come after the story's ambiguous ending: There is the possibility that Gouvernail will steer Mrs. Baroda toward a new way of seeing the world, and perhaps even a new life altogether.

Poetry

The motif of poetry is associated with Gouvernail, the way he views and responds to the world, and his effect on Mrs. Baroda. Compared to traditional narrative writing, poetry is often unpredictable and full of sensory detail. Poetry of the Romantic era reflected a special connection between the poet, emotion, and the natural world. All of these features resonate

with Gouvernail's characterization. He is unpredictable from the beginning, deeply connected to nature, and evokes surprising emotions for Mrs. Baroda. As Gaston is to Gouvernail, so prose is to poetry.

In Gouvernail's "apostrophe to the night" (Paragraph 22), he briefly quotes Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! Still nodding night—" (Paragraph 21). The reference to Whitman, one of the foremost poets of the Romantic era, further associates this character with features of poetry and Romanticism. Even the narrative's description of his speech, calling it an "apostrophe," underlines the character's lyric quality. In rhetoric, an apostrophe is a part of a speech or poem addressed to a person or, in more poetic cases, an abstract personified entity ("the night").

Literary Devices

Ambiguous Ending

"A Respectable Woman" begins with an expectation, but it resolves without one. The story opens with Mrs. Baroda's presumptions about her husband's friend, while the ending wraps up by directly withholding her expectations or plans. In this regard, the ambiguous ending adds a symmetry to the narrative. Furthermore, instead of revealing exactly what Mrs. Baroda will do, the ambiguous ending invites readers to form their own expectations and make their own meaning out of the story. This literary device, therefore, has a rhetorical purpose, allowing the story to be more engaging by encouraging readers to enter more deeply into the imagined world and consider its many possibilities. When "A Respectable Woman" was first published in *Vogue* magazine in the 1890s, the primary readership likely would have been women with lives similar to Mrs. Baroda's, which would have made the ambiguous ending even more relevant and engaging.

Verisimilitude

Writers working within the Realist tradition sought to bring a "realness" to their writing via the characters, plot, and setting. Verisimilitude in fiction involves using specific details that give the story an appearance and feeling of reality.

Chopin creates verisimilitude for the Louisiana plantation setting through small, specific details, such as the "wide portico in the shade of one of the big Corinthian pillars" (Paragraph 5), "the scented, velvety touch" of the breeze coming off of a sugar field (Paragraph 6), and "the live oak tree at the end of the gravel walk" (Paragraph 17). There are elements of verisimilitude in the characters, as well. Gaston's character uses French expressions when talking to his wife, which would be true-to-life for a Louisiana planter of French ancestry. Gouvernail's cigar, and his quotation of Walt Whitman, are also authentic-seeming details that lend the story greater realness.

The injection of these descriptions within such a short story adds a sense of truth to the story, making it more immersive.

Juxtaposition

Chopin employs various forms of juxtaposition to compare and contrast elements of the text. **The Search for Female Identity** and **Devotion Versus Desire** are two central themes, both of which are developed through juxtaposition. Mrs. Baroda is torn between two very different, conflicting images of what kind of woman she is: a respectable woman or a rebellious and independent one. An adjacent juxtaposition involves which type of relationship she will pursue: one of duty and devotion or one of passion and desire. There are then the two male characters. Gaston is frank and talkative, while Gouvernail is mysterious and quiet. Gaston is tied more to everyday details of married life and the sugar plantation, whereas Gouvernail is an outsider and linked to broader concepts like nature and poetry.

Foil

While there is juxtaposition in the characterizations of Gaston and Gouvernail, the two characters both also function as foils for Mrs. Baroda, bringing out different aspects of her character.

Gaston highlights the qualities that Mrs. Baroda believes make her a respectable woman: her social standing as a planter's wife, her devotion to her husband, her sensible nature, and her duty to do what is expected. By contrast, Gouvernail highlights her other qualities, which become increasingly prominent. These include her curiosity, her sense of discovery, her feelings of desire, and her sense of independence. The two men's contrast with one another, and how they each emphasize aspects of the protagonist, make the story more dynamic and accentuate its major themes.

Important Quotes

1. “She rather liked him when he first presented himself. But why she liked him she could not explain satisfactorily to herself when she partly attempted to do so.”
(Paragraphs 3 - 4)

Mrs. Baroda reconciles Gouvernail’s actual personality—as well as her response to it—with her incorrect, preconceived notions. In addition to Gouvernail’s arrival, Mrs. Baroda’s puzzlement may also be the “inciting incident,” in which she begins to react to the visitor.

2. “‘This is what I call living,’ he would utter with deep satisfaction, as the air that swept across the sugar field caressed him with its warm and scented velvety touch.”
(Paragraph 6)

These lines represent a distinctive shift in the narrative tone toward more sensuality. The figurative use of the vaguely erotic “caress” and “velvety” helps create that tone, but the sensory-rich description also contributes. Gouvernail’s response to nature is also key to his characterization, which is reminiscent of a Romantic poet and thinker.

3. “After a few days, when she could understand him no better than at first, she gave over being puzzled and remained piqued.”
(Paragraph 7)

This passage reflects the story’s growing internal tension. Mrs. Baroda is interested in the new and unfamiliar: a man she cannot understand. As her curiosity begins to trouble her, this marks how much the visitor affects her despite having done nothing to her.

4. “She persistently sought to penetrate the reserve in which he had unconsciously enveloped himself.”
(Paragraph 7)

Mrs. Baroda joins Gouvernail on his previously solitary walks when she realizes that he has not minded her absence in the previous days. She does not understand why his indifference irks her, but her response indicates the beginning of a change in her character.

5. “Gaston took his wife’s pretty face between his hands and looked tenderly and laughingly into her troubled eyes. They were making a bit of a toilet sociably together in Mrs. Baroda’s dressing room.”
(Paragraph 11)

The small, realistic details of the Barodas’ interactions convey the nature of their relationship. The image of the couple chatting while getting ready for the day adds verisimilitude to the portrayal of married life.

6. “‘Here you are,’ he went on, ‘taking poor Gouvernail seriously and making a commotion over him, the last thing he would desire or expect.’”
(Paragraph 13)

When Gaston insists on his friend’s aversion to attention, it makes Gouvernail appear more mysterious—which, in turn, only makes him more alluring to the protagonist. Moreover, Gouvernail does nothing to deliberately provoke Mrs. Baroda, so her feelings for him—while triggered by his presence—are entirely her own.

7. “‘Your husband told me to bring this to you, Mrs. Baroda,’ he said, handing her a filmy, white scarf which she sometimes enveloped her head and shoulders. She accepted the scarf from him with a murmur of thanks, and let it lie in her lap.”
(Paragraph 20)

The white scarf sent by her husband symbolizes Mrs. Baroda’s status as his wife. However, the fact that she lays the scarf in her lap instead of donning it indicates her uncertainty, or at least her ambivalence, about that role.

8. “Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! Still nodding night—”
(Paragraph 21)

Gouvernail’s Whitman reference adds to his Romantic characterization. The poem in question is from the 1855 collection Leaves of Grass*, which is famously erotic—so much so that it stirred controversy in the late 19th century—so this characterization is particularly trenchant. The reference to a real-world author also adds verisimilitude to the text.*

9. “Gouvernail was in no sense a diffident man, for he was not a self-conscious one. His periods of reserve were not constitutional, but the result of moods.”
(Paragraph 23)

Gouvernail is somewhat unknowable to Mrs. Baroda (and to the reader) throughout this story. However, his retreat to the sugar plantation seems a particularly introspective time for him. Gaston also points out that their visitor is there because he has been overworked and is tired. These small details add depth to his character, indicating that there is more to him than what is shown in the story.

10. “Her mind only vaguely grasped what he was saying. Her physical being was for the moment predominant. She was not thinking of his words, only drinking in the tones of his voice.”
(Paragraph 25)

Mrs. Baroda’s sensible, analytical side—which has been dominant throughout the story—retreats. Her transition to a more physical, desirous state is the story’s climax.

11. “She wanted to draw close to him and whisper against his cheek—she did not care what—as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman.”
(Paragraph 25)

Even though Mrs. Baroda is aware of the intensity of her physical urges, her sense of duty prevails and allows her to stop before she acts. Her restraint reflects her chosen identity (“respectable”) at this point in the story.

12. “The stronger the impulse grew to bring herself near him, the further, in fact, did she draw away from him.”
(Paragraph 26)

Leading up to this scene, there has been a rising tension, which culminates in Mrs. Baroda recognizing her physical attraction to Gouvernail. Now, as she purposefully pulls away from him, that tension becomes more dynamic, showing the strength of both her desire and her self-control.

13. “Before she reached the house, Gouvernail had lighted a fresh cigar and ended his apostrophe to the night.”
(Paragraph 27)

Even during Mrs. Baroda’s surge of feelings for him, Gouvernail speaks less to her than to the night air. In fact, he seems completely unaware of her experience. Even when Mrs. Baroda gets up to leave, he continues to talk and smoke his cigar. This further emphasizes that her desire is completely unprompted by the visitor’s behavior.

14. “There was some talk of having him back during the summer that followed. That is, Gaston greatly desired it; but this desire yielded to his wife’s strenuous opposition. However, before the year ended, she proposed, wholly from herself, to have Gouvernail visit them again.”
(Paragraphs 30 - 31)

The passage of time and Mrs. Baroda’s shifting demeanor adds interest to the ambiguous ending. She initially stayed true to her “respectable” identity by removing herself from temptation until Gouvernail left, and her resistance to his return consists with this choice. Her change of mind may suggest that she wants the chance to prove her own sense of duty to herself. However, it also invites the possibility that she has changed her mind about her course of action.

15. “‘Oh,’ she told him, laughingly, after pressing a long, tender, kiss upon his lips, ‘I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him.’”
(Paragraph 33)

The closing line of “A Respectable Woman” leaves the interpretation to readers, who must decide whether Mrs. Baroda has “overcome” her temptation, or “overcome” her need to be “a respectable woman.” After kissing her husband tenderly, she says that she will “be very nice” to Gouvernail, which adds no clarity to the matter. The ambiguity allows readers to engage with the text by forming their own conclusions, but it also ensures plausible deniability: Chopin avoids having her protagonist overtly do anything that might have been seen as “wrong” by Victorian readers.

Essay Topics

1. Describe Mrs. Baroda's shifting emotional state throughout this short story. How do her feelings change, and how do those developments reflect changes in her character?

2. Gouvernail is also a major character in Chopin's 1896 short story "Athénaïse." Read that story and discuss how (or whether) its portrayal of Gouvernail indirectly illuminates "A Respectable Woman."

3. Chopin famously said that she was not a feminist, at least not as it was defined during her lifetime. Despite this, her writings are frequently considered early feminist fiction. Evaluate and discuss why this is the case.

4. What is the relationship like between Mr. and Mrs. Baroda? Discuss their interactions. What effect does this have on Mrs. Baroda's identity as "a respectable woman," and on the story as a whole?

5. Dialogue does not form a two-way conversation between Gouvernail and Mrs. Baroda. Even when Gouvernail speaks to her using dialogue, his words are almost more of a monologue, commenting on the world rather than engaging an interlocutor. How does this use of dialogue influence the dynamic between these two characters? Why do you think Chopin writes their interactions the way that she does?

6. If commitment to her husband makes Mrs. Baroda a "respectable woman," what would she be if she pursued her extramarital passion? An "unworthy" woman? An independent woman? A courageous one? Does Chopin imply a value judgment on this point, or is it just as ambiguous as the story's ending?

7. How would the story change if it were narrated by Mrs. Baroda in the first person? This would obviously alter the story's ambiguity, but how could it affect the themes and symbolism?

8. Is there an antagonist in “A Respectable Woman”? Why or why not?

9. Chopin has been praised for her use of literary elements from Realism, Romanticism, and Naturalism. Which of these literary movements is reflected most in “A Respectable Woman”? Cite textual examples.

10. How do you interpret the ambiguous ending? What do you think Mrs. Baroda means when she says she will be “very nice” to Gouvernail on his next visit? Support your reasoning with specific textual examples.