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Helen Taylor

Walking through New Orleans: Kate Chopin and the Female Flâneur

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Walking through New Orleans: Kate Chopin and the Female Flâneur

Kate Chopin is not usually regarded as an urban writer or critic. Since most of her short fiction and her first novel are focused on the northwestern Louisiana Natchitoches Parish around the Cane River, and her most renowned novel *The Awakening* is set partly on the remote Gulf island in the Gulf of Mexico, Grand Isle, she is predominantly discussed as a regionalist, albeit a significant realist writer who drew on rural material to offer incisive and ironic commentary on late nineteenth-century women's lives. Scant attention has been paid to her contribution to that burgeoning literature of urban life that characterizes late Victorian European and American letters.

It is no coincidence that the city featuring most in her work is one which has also attracted little notice in urban scholarship on either side of the Atlantic.¹ Unlike Protestant, English-speaking Chicago, New York and Boston, New Orleans—a relatively isolated, Catholic, French-speaking entrepôt outside the heartland of urban industrial America—has been neglected until recently by academic inquiry. None of the major urban historians of the modern and postmodern city (such as Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, Marshall Berman and Mike Davis) has given more than a paragraph or footnote to southern cities. Even that 'capital of the New South', Atlanta, has attracted only one definitive study.² To date there has been no sustained comprehensive study of the socio-economic history and character of New Orleans.

It is, however, a city well documented in other ways. Writers and artists of many kinds have been drawn to the city for many of the same reasons as the tourists who have flocked there since the early nineteenth century. European visitors have

¹ Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, ed., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1992), x–xi.

² Charles Ruetheiser's *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (London: Verso, 1996).