

Self-assertive Female Characters in Kate Chopin's Fiction

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Abstract:

The late nineteenth century American novelist and short story writer, Kate Chopin is well-known for her compelling portraiture of women in her fiction. Quite often, editors would turn down many of her short stories because her female characters were considered too emancipated and passionate for her time. They were often, daring women who lived out their strong impulses and tried to challenge the conventions of the nineteenth century. They were self-assertive and courageous women who wanted to decide over their own lives. Kate Chopin herself was a daring and self-assertive writer. She wrote about some taboo topics in the nineteenth century, such as female sexuality, childbirth and pregnancy. Chopin is considered the first woman writer in America to accept passion as a legitimate subject for serious fiction. Kate Chopin saw and understood all aspects of the female psyche and her particular interest was woman's awakening to her true nature, whether traditional, emancipated or a mixture of the two. Of particular interest for this paper are a number of these self-assertive female characters in Kate Chopin's fiction.

Keywords: *self-assertive, female sexuality, passion, daring*

Introduction

The late nineteenth century American author Kate Chopin is well-known for her portraiture of women in her short stories and novels. She was a very daring author for her time especially in her ever-increasing openness in describing woman's spiritual and sexual self-assertion. Her heroines usually live out their strong impulses, while some devote their lives to maternal and wifely duties, many others insist on freedom from tradition and limitations. The aim of this paper is to analyze some of these self-assertive characters in Kate Chopin's fiction.

Kate Chopin's first story accepted for publication “Wiser than a God”, shows the dilemma that Paula Von Stoltz, a young woman, who works hard

to become a concert pianist, faces when, after the death of her mother, she receives a marriage proposal from George Brainard, a wealthy, attractive man and must choose between a comfortable, conventional marriage and the career as a concert pianist for which she has spent her entire life preparing. George expects that Paula will be willing to give up her musical calling for "the labor of loving". (Chopin, 2006, p.45) He proposes to her, never fully comprehending her devotion to her art or realizing that it could conflict with her devotion to a man. Paula, who admires George and feels strongly attracted to him, is thrilled at his request but realizes that they must part because music to her is "something dearer than life, than riches, even than love" (Chopin, 2006, p. 46)

George's reply to this-"don't speak like a mad woman"-betrays his incomprehension and his belief that a woman who gives herself so passionately to artistic pursuit, particularly at the expense of a potential husband, must be insane. As Per Seyersted observes, George "represents the patriarchal view of women, and [Paula] the view of Margaret Fuller that women so inclined should be allowed to leave aside motherhood and domesticity and instead use their wings to soar toward the transcendence of a non biological career."(Seyersted, 2010, p. 105)

Paula tells her suitor that "life is less important to her than the unhampered exertion of what she considers her authentic calling and her true self." (Chopin, 2006, p. 46) Paula knows herself, and thus is able to avoid the trap that marriage to George would have become for her.

In the short story "The story of an hour" Chopin has given a startling picture of female self-assertion. It is a remarkable tale about a subdued wife's vision and hope of living only for herself when she receives the shocking news of the reported death of her husband in a train accident. She "wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment"; then "when the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone and when she abandoned herself, a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free! Body and soul free" (Chopin, 2006, 354) She is filled with "monstrous joy" that she is now free and can plan a future life thanks to her victorious independence which allows her to live for herself and "there would be no powerful will bending hers" (Chopin, 2006, 354) . We understand that Mrs Mallard has lived in the shadow of her husband for a long time and even if the oppression had been unintentional it was still there. After having this revelation in her own private sphere she comes down like "a goddess of victory" clasping her sister's waist but her new found self is over soon when she receives another shock, a reversal, which proves lethal. To her

surprise she sees her husband on the door step and alive, instantly she collapses and doctors ironically attribute her death of heart attack. They call an attack “of joy that kills”. (Chopin, 2006, 354) In this short story Chopin implicitly questions the suppressive nature of marriage in late nineteenth century society. Mrs. Mallard’s fatal heart stop is not because of her overwhelming happiness at seeing her husband alive but ironically it is due to the ending of the joy of her new selfhood and return of old self who has to keep conforming. It was within that one hour of dreamy thought that she had the chance to discover her true self that was hidden under the constraint of marriage. Even though she knows that her husband loved her, she realizes that his kind intentions were nonetheless cruel because they restricted her independence and identity.

In another story entitled “A Pair of Silk Stockings” Chopin tells the story of another widow, the poor Mrs. Sommers, who unexpectedly found herself possessor of fifteen dollars. Initially Mrs. Sommers thinks of her children as her habit and it seems that she is the woman who adheres to the codes of motherly self-sacrifice. Mrs. Sommers is extremely happy and obsessed with the calculation and speculation of investing this large amount of money to outfit her four children in new clothes. But on a whim Mrs. Sommers unexpectedly changed her direction and begins buying things for herself. She experiences an awakening need to treat herself and on a shopping spree. She spends the entire money on frivolous items and personal luxuries such as a pair of silk stockings, stylish boot, luxurious gloves, two expensive magazines and having lunch in a fine restaurant and the final leisure she can afford is to watch a matinee theatrical performance where she can see herself on a par with upper class women who are free from domestic burden and motherly worries.

Through the purchasing of the stockings, Mrs. Sommers is able to put away her thoughts and responsibilities for a moment and indulge her own desires by buying the things she used to have before her married life. But the self-fulfillment and pleasure of buying material goods soon gets over as she remembers her speculations and motherly obligations. Mrs. Sommers’s epiphany about the reality of self-possession is the moment she is returning home on cable car. She is seized on her way home by a “poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever” (Chopin, 2006, p.504). Her poignant wish indicates that her attempt for self-fulfillment was transitory and she does not desire to return to the reality of her life, but she wishes the freedom, happiness, and leisure she felt on the day of her shopping time could continue into the future.

“A Pair of Silk Stockings” shows that the care of children can be of great joy for mothers but also reveals a great limitation on a woman’s freedom and self-fulfillment. It emphasizes the extent to which a woman must empty herself of personal preferences and desires in order to care for her children.

And finally in her novel which is considered Chopin's masterpiece the novel *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin gives the most profound treatment of female self-assertion. The novel's main character Edna Pontellier leads a seemingly traditional life until she awakens to needs and desires that are in conflict with socially acceptable behavior. She comes to reject domesticity and chooses to live a more active social life. Realizing that she has lived a life of self-denial in the service of her husband and children, she is determined to live a new life of self-fulfillment, which includes a small house of her own, artistic creation, and most importantly, the fulfillment of her physical desire. Though within the novel Edna’s quest for a new life is short-lived and her love for her young friend Robert Lebrun is never consummated, she however shows a new revolutionary female consciousness that seriously undermines the institution of marriage and the patriarchal social order. In fact, she opens up a whole new territory in which women begin to claim the sexual freedom that has been denied to them for centuries. Edna confronts the limitations the nineteenth century New Orleans Creole society imposes upon her because of her gender, and commits suicide at the end. Her suicide stands as a final proof of her independence, and self-assertion.

When, midway through *The Awakening*, Edna announces, “I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself,” (Chopin, 2006, 929) the American female hero has defied the socially constructed voices of the epoch. And later in the novel she tells Robert “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions. I give myself where I choose” (Chopin, 2006, p. 992)

The Awakening broke new thematic ground at a time when few women writers dared to explore female’s sexual desire and aspiration for independence. The Victorian etiquette expected mothers to sacrifice themselves for their husbands and children. These patriarchal expectations become the barrier for Chopin’s women who wish to assert their selfhood apart from institution of marriage and wife’s domestic duties.

Kate Chopin grew up in a house surrounded by smart, independent and single women. Her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother all of them were widows. She also studied at the Academy of the Sacred Heart, where the nuns were famous for their intelligence. Living in such a family

must have influenced her view on women and made her very sensible to women's thoughts and desires. Later in her writings Chopin brought together her lifelong observations of women's dreams and desires. She had a wide knowledge on the feminine psyche and a very personal view of woman's existence and she wrote openly about its various aspects.

In her short stories and novels Kate Chopin proclaims women's right to assert themselves, to live and love without regard to conventions and moral rules. This is why today Kate Chopin is considered as a forerunner of the twentieth century feminist fiction.

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