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ENGL 305: Revision 2

2 December 2019

“Why All This Talk About Women?”: The New Woman in Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour”

“[Man] narrowed [women’s] outlook on life so that our mistaken impression of it proved us to be senseless creatures... He cramped our minds so that there was no room for reason in them, and then made merry at our want of logic” (Grand 272). As this quote by Sarah Grand, an Irish feminist writer, depicts, life in the 1800s was difficult for women who did not want men to have power over them anymore. Most women did not question their position, but the few who did questioned loudly. One of these women who questioned loudly was Margaret Fuller, a Victorian feminist who was one of the first to bring women’s issues out into the public. She writes that women had started to consider “within themselves what they need that they have not, and what they can have if they find they need it” (Fuller 30). The search for equality began, and in the late 1800s, a new term was coined by Sarah Grand: The New Woman. The New Woman began to shape literature and the kinds of stories that were being written. Kate Chopin, a rebel herself, was no exception. Her most famous work, *The Awakening*, is a direct critique of society’s treatment of women in the late 1800s, and her short story, “The Storm” is all about women’s sexuality. Her work was shaped by the changing society around her. Louise Mallard of Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894) is representative of the New Woman of the late nineteenth century, a woman who tried to break free from the binds of marriage and desires freedom from the patriarchy above all else. Louise’s desire for autonomy aligns closely with the

desires of other women at the time, a driving force of the feminist movement. However, because Louis dies at the end of the story, Chopin ultimately paints a bleak picture of feminism at the time, suggesting that men will not give in to these new ideals easily.

Women of the late 1800s were very limited in what they were able to strive for and accomplish. They were mainly kept to the domestic sphere, and from a very young age girls “learned to keep house and use the needle, partly in the social circle, where her manners may be formed..., and [a] husband found who shall give her the domestic sphere for which she is exclusively to be prepared” (Fuller 218). Women were not given a choice on the matter; they were to be wives and mothers, essentially becoming property to their husbands. Separations and divorces were incredibly rare because of the social implications for both the wife and the husband, but if a separation were to occur, a wife “needed [the husband’s] permission to live apart from him. She needed him to promise not to advertise her as a runaway, so that merchants and others would trust her and grant her credit. She needed him to promise to allow her to keep custody of their children” (Hartog 108-109). There were so many strict expectations that many women lived unhappily in unsatisfying marriages with no hope of escape or freedom. During the mid-1800s, the idea of the “angel in the house” was born, further repressing women into the domestic sphere. Brought to light by Coventry Patmore in his poem “The Wife’s Tragedy” (1866), the angel in the house is meant to please her husband because “to please / Is woman’s pleasure” (Patmore 48). She is supposed to take the blame for her husband’s sins as if they are her own, looking at him with “pardon in her pitying eyes” (Patmore 49). It is her duty to love “with love that cannot tire” (Patmore 49). She is supposed to be gentle and meek, quiet and reserved. This ideal was directly challenged in the late 1800s, bringing a new kind of woman into the forefront.

The term “New Woman” was first used in an article written by Sarah Grand in 1894. Many of her novels depict the New Woman as someone who calls out double standards and does not stand idly by while she is treated unequally. Grand writes in the 1894 article “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” that the “new woman is a little above [the Bawling Brotherhood], and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy” (Grand 271). The New Woman was a term used to describe independent women who were seeking radical change. Women who were aspiring for a life outside of the sphere of domesticity were getting fed up with the patriarchal ideals of their world. However, there were calls for change long before 1894. In what is often referred to as first major feminist work in America, Margaret Fuller’s *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) lays the groundwork for what the New Woman became. In a radical statement for 1845, Fuller argues that “what a woman needs... is to live freely and unimpeded” (Fuller 38). Women wanted to be seen as equals among men during this time period, and they wanted autonomy in marriage instead of being subsumed by their husbands. As some women started trying to break out of the prison that was the domestic sphere, men grew increasingly wary. However, Sarah Grand urged women to push forward by writing, “There is that in ourselves which forces us out of our apathy; we have no choice in the matter” (Grand 274). To her, women had no choice but to rebel and to fight for their freedom. This New Woman was to be outspoken and resilient. Grand provokes women’s emotions by explaining that man “deprived us of all proper education, and then jeered at us because we had no knowledge... he set himself up as a sort of god and required us to worship him, and, to our eternal shame be it said, we did so” (272). She does not make women blameless,

explaining that they have been complacent for too long, and wants them to rise above their situations. This first instance of the New Woman set forth a long tradition of women fighting for their rights and fighting against the deep-rooted patriarchal ideas of the time. Kate Chopin, the author of “The Story of an Hour,” was writing her most influential works during this time of the New Woman and was undoubtedly influenced.

Kate Chopin’s childhood was different from that of a normal girl of the late 1800s. After her father passed away in 1855, early on in her life, “Kate was surrounded by the voices of women” (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 11). She grew up gossiping about other women with her great-grandmother, becoming interested and involved in the inner workings of women’s lives. Chopin was raised by French women and was not being trained to be a wife from an early age, unlike the American traditions of the time. Because she was able to get an education, Chopin did not get stuck into the submissive cycle that most girls did very early on. Instead, she “was coming of age in a mostly female world – one that nurtured her creative spirit, and encouraged her generosity and her dreams” (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 22). Chopin was not silenced and therefore was able to question many social norms. However, this changed during the Civil War when she lost many people close to her, the world robbing her of her innocence. Still, Chopin found ways to rebel and make her voice heard, stealing a Union flag and getting arrested while soldiers took over the deep south (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 26). Chopin was married for twelve years until her husband passed away, and she never remarried. Even though she was not directly involved with the women’s suffrage movement, “she belonged to a liberal, almost pink-red group of intellectuals, people who believed in freedom and often expressed their independence by wearing eccentric clothing” (112). In her later life, Chopin spoke out about the different perceptions of men and women. She was asked in an interview about rising suicide

rates in women. Her answer “was, of course, critical of a double standard of the tendency to attribute psychological problems to women and not to men” (Toth, “Kate Chopin on Divine Love...” 120). Chopin’s answer is as followed:

Business men commit suicide every day, yet we do not say that suicide is epidemic in the business world. Why should we say the feeling is rife among society women, because half a dozen unfortunates, widely separated, take their own lives?... But do not men do the same thing every day? Why all this talk about women? (Toth, *Kate Chopin’s Private Papers* 222)

Chopin was very involved with the welfare of women throughout her life, and her ideals seeped into her work, especially her later work. “The Story of an Hour,” published in 1894, is an example of one such work that deals directly with the hardships that women faced at the time.

Louise Mallard of Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894) is an example of the New Woman in the late 1800s. At the time, many women, as Sarah Grand remarks, “were awaking from their long apathy, and, as they awoke, like healthy hungry children unable to articulate, they began to whimper for they knew not what” (Grand 271). Chopin’s story describes this exact idea in Louise Mallard, only Louise has to be alone to be awakened, to realize the nature of her freedom: “There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? she did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. but she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air” (Chopin 49). Even though Louise cannot describe this feeling coming toward her, she can sense its power by the way it cuts through her senses. There is importance in her isolation at this moment. She allows herself to become Louise, rather than Mrs. Mallard; in the company of others in her social circle, she is only ever known as Mrs. Mallard, but when she is alone, her identity changes. Her

thoughts are her own. and she is afraid of the elusive unknown creeping toward her. However, she ultimately embraces her newfound autonomy when she realizes what it means, that “there would be no one to live for her during those coming years: she would live for herself” (Chopin 49). However, this story is not about an abusive marriage; Louise is not excited that her husband is dead because he treated her badly. No, she “had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter!” (Chopin 49). The search for autonomy was not conditional, not just for bad marriages. Whether Louise loves her husband or not, whether her husband treats her well or not, does not matter. What Chopin suggests here is that there is no such thing as a good marriage at this time because there is always a loss of will. Women always lose, and in this passage, Louise is realizing that. She realizes that it does not matter if she loved her husband because “What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!” (Chopin 49). Despite this revelation, Louise dies at the end of the story. Chopin’s decision to kill Louise at the end of “The Story of an Hour” suggests that “the female self will have gained autonomy only to find that she has no life to lead” (Cunningham 53).

Louise’s death is symbolic of the struggles the New Woman faced in the late 1800s as well as the struggles Kate Chopin faced. Emily Toth writes that in order to make her story publishable, “Kate Chopin had to disguise reality. She had to have her heroine die. A story in which an unhappy wife is suddenly widowed, becomes rich, and lives happily ever after... would have been much too radical, far too threatening, in the 1890s” (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 10). Just as Kate Chopin was not able to find a place for the story she really wanted to write in the patriarchal society, Louise Mallard is also unable to find a place for herself. As soon as she understands the happiness of freedom and how she has been repressed, she loses place in society.

Chopin paints the position of women in the late nineteenth-century “as so bleak that the attempt to break free from the life-denying limitations of patriarchal society is itself self-destructive” (Cunningham 49). This is a strong critique of American society that exemplifies the struggle for the New Woman during this time period. Although the idea of the New Woman was freeing for some women, embodying that idea was much more difficult because of the powerful male-dominated society.

Louise Mallard is representative of the rise of the New Woman in the late nineteenth century, a time where women were expected to be submissive and tied down to their husbands. Louise finds freedom in her husband’s passing, becoming ecstatic that she can now live for herself. Only, when she realizes this, she loses her place in society, showing the struggles that the New Woman had to go through in order to have her voice heard. In “The Story of an Hour,” Kate Chopin shows how entrenched American society was in patriarchal ideals during this time and how much more dangerous those ideals were than the New Woman. Sarah Grand explains that women will be horrified at what they discover when their eyes are opened to the truth of their situation, but “women do not care to see life any longer in a glass darkly. Let there be light” (Grand 276).

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