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"The Price of an Inspiration" and Feminism

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“The Price of an Inspiration” and Feminism

Introduction

There is the saying, “Behind every great man is a great woman.” During the Victorian period, this saying could be considered the theme as women were supporting their husbands and children from within the home. Eventually though, women no longer wanted to be behind. Instead they wanted to be more involved with society by being alongside men. The short story “The Price of an Inspiration” by Ellen A. Smith published in *The Argosy* May 1900 volume demonstrates this eagerness through a woman named Kathleen Hayes alongside her classmate Carl Brenner. The two come to learn throughout the story that as society and women’s roles transitioned into the Modern period, women were fighting for the chance to demonstrate that they could expand their support in society by developing and sharing their talents.

Obtaining Individual Recognition

In the initial stages of this transition, women had to fight to be recognized as more than the Victorian ideal woman. The BBC.co.uk website defines the ideal Victorian woman as someone who “came to represent a kind of femininity which was centred on the family, motherhood and respectability.” Many women would be grouped into their families, fall into the background, and rarely receive individual recognition. In this story Kathleen is referred to by three names - by her real name Kathleen and her two

nicknames Katinka and Käszelein that Carl gives her. Using the Voyant tool, we find that Kathleen is referred to the most by “Katinka” for a total of ten times. This could be interpreted as evidence that Carl, or men of the Victorian era, had the dominant influence for how Victorian women were identified whether they liked it or not. Kathleen, though she tells Carl how she despises the name Katinka, spends the story being addressed by a nickname. When we plug “Katinka” into the Voyant trends tool, we see that “Katinka” is used only in the first half of the story. When we add in “Kathleen” into the trends graph, we see that her real name is mentioned in the middle and ending of the story. Seeing these two trends in line with each other show a change in the way Carl sees Kathleen. Prior to the beginning of this story, Carl and Kathleen knew each other very well. It seems to be established that Carl has often called Kathleen by “Katinka” despite her not liking this name. As Carl comes to learn of Kathleen’s value and grow in his appreciation for her throughout the story, the trends reveal that Carl becomes a supporter of Kathleen’s identity.

Source of Inspiration

Carl comes to appreciate Kathleen’s value and identity by learning how much she influences his work. During the story, both Kathleen and Carl are presented with golden opportunities to debut in their dream careers – a solo violin performance for Kathleen and a poetry contest for Carl. As Carl writes his poem, he struggles to finish it. “Genius does some times play these unhandsome tricks upon her children, and cannot always be relied upon to work to order (Smith 70).” The men were expected to take care of their wives and children. This could be viewed as their wives being the influence or the “genius” for men to be successful in their jobs. Carl even admits that he wishes to

win this poetry contest, so he can establish a married life with Kathleen. The “unhandsome tricks” could be interpreted as the manipulation games women would play to win a husband or trick their husbands into doing things they want. The Victorian women were expected to be a proper wife who were expected to behave in what was established as proper manners for them. However, women were/are not one-dimensional beings. Referring to “genius” as a female reflects how influential women are to men/society as well as their emotional depth. Due to these tricks, Carl eventually goes to Kathleen to ask for her help. He tells her that the poem is entitled “The Sacrifice of Love” but he struggles to capture this theme in its natural setting. He hates how “stiff” and “unliving” the poem is (Smith 72). After hearing what Carl is trying to capture, Kathleen plays her violin “with power” and she helps to stir “the very breath of life” into Carl (Smith 72). This power that Kathleen plays with comes from the sacrifices she made on Carl’s behalf. Prior to playing for Carl, she brings food from her dorm to feed Carl and ends up giving up performing at her concert to help Carl finish his poem for his contest. It is possible that Carl’s poem was “stiff” and “unliving” because he didn’t understand what the sacrifice of love meant. Kathleen understood because she had and was in the process of sacrificing for Carl. The concept of sacrificing for others is more often prominent in women over men. This is primarily because mothers help their children to receive their first breath of life and often sacrifice for their children’s happiness. Though Kathleen is not a mother, she has this ability to inspire Carl “to do better than [himself] (Smith 72).” Women’s ability to sacrifice on behalf of loved ones is a powerful source of influence that can enable all people to give their best in whatever they pursue.

Gradual Transition

Despite all the women have contributed to society through their sacrifices, the transition for their societal roles would still be a gradual one. While Kathleen plays her violin to assist Carl, he does not realize how much Kathleen has sacrificed for his behalf. Upon completing the poem, in the excitement Carl kisses Kathleen. Suddenly kissing a woman without her permission was “a common assault punishable by fine and imprisonment ... (Dickens 203).” The narrator seems to attempt to justify Carl’s actions saying, “Impulsive as the action was, he meant nothing but what was reverential, tender, and thanksgiving” but ultimately does not excuse it and says, “yet he made a grave mistake (Smith 73).” Kathleen feels that this kiss had “desecrated the white altar on which she had laid her sacrifice” and ultimately reflected his carelessness (Smith 73). Dickens says this type of crime would often be punished by the law, Carl does not receive one. His punishment is losing Kathleen for six years. Though he ended up winning the poetry contest and “made his name” he “always wrote sorrowfully, as one who had missed the best in life... (Smith 74).” Meanwhile because Kathleen sacrificed her debut, she lost all the support she had gained as a student and must fend for herself. “For six years she struggled on, neither failing nor succeeding, but just balancing the two... (Smith 74).” The reality was then, men had the better chance for success. Opportunities for women were limited and, if they were not taken, they would be eliminated quickly. Despite her lacking any help, Kathleen was able to manage taking care of herself. It was (and still today) not a guarantee that women will automatically succeed in whatever they choose to pursue, but by having Kathleen manage to get by demonstrates that women have a chance.

Look through another's eyes

Both Carl and Kathleen learn throughout the whole story but by primarily telling the story through Carl's perspective, it emphasizes the significance of the transition of women's presence in society. At first glance, it opens and ends in Kathleen's perspective. When I first read the story, this led me to believe that Kathleen is the story's protagonist. Even when you search for the frequency of Kathleen's and Carl's names through Voyant Tools, Kathleen is the one technically mentioned the most when you combine all the times one of her three names is mentioned in the story. However, when you consider that Kathleen's nicknames are only used when Carl is speaking, the overall context could be supporting that Carl is the story's true protagonist. Though the author is a woman and cannot completely capture the essence of a man's thoughts and actions, it helps to create a hypothetical perspective of a man to realize the significance of a women's capabilities.

Proving Women's Capabilities

As women fought to come from being behind men, they proved to society how capable they were. Let us take a quick look into the history of *The Argosy* periodical – The Editor, Mrs. Henry Wood, saved the periodical's reputation and quickly became a “strong advocate for women writers” (North). By turning the periodical's reputation around and publishing stories written by women, *The Argosy* demonstrates just how much women could contribute to society beyond the home. In the opening of the story, Carl is describing to Kathleen (or “Katinka” as he calls her) his ideal life with her as his wife, “But Katinka! she is of me the ideal—so good. She will cook me my meals... She is hausengel, mit all the kitchen graces at the ends of her fingers (Smith 67).” Carl is

representing society's Victorian mindset of what women were expected to do. Kathleen responds with, "How commonplace you are! ... Your Katinka will have no second idea beyond kartoffeln and pickled cabbages (Smith 67)!" She is exclaiming how much she desires to break away from that expected role. As a university student, Kathleen has been given opportunities to expand her knowledge and does not want to be crammed into a kitchen being left unfulfilled. Soon Kathleen and Carl are presented with their debut opportunities – Kathleen as a violinist and Carl as a poet. When Kathleen excitedly shares this news with Carl, the narrator shares:

It was no idle boasting, for she recognised her own power, and worked hard to perfect it. Nothing gives such confidence so much hard work. Moreover she was speaking to a fellow-student in an branch of art, one who himself had ambitions and eager hopes. understood each other, and his face reflected the light on hers. (Smith 68)

Just as men had to study and work hard to succeed in their work, women had to do the same. This shared experience strengthens Kathleen's and Carl's feelings and serves as a foundation for their supporting each other's efforts to succeed with their opportunities. While this allows women to have more opportunities in education, this can also be seen as a benefit to strengthen marriages by allowing husbands and wives to share more experiences with one another.

Conclusion

At the end of the story, Kathleen does not reach a point where she stands on equal ground as Carl does. Throughout the story though, she presents that there is a possibility for women to go beyond the Victorian ideal. Kathleen and Carl help to

demonstrate the powerful influence women already have, the possibilities of that influence growing with opportunities given, and how women do have the capabilities to grow from being figures that stand behind men to being supportive figures that can stand alongside men.

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