Patriarchy & Feminism in the Early 20th Century: Finding Middle Ground Through Kate Chopin

In the decades leading up to women’s suffrage in the United States, feminism began to surge across the nation. With the influence and support of authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the feminist movement picked up steam and began to clash sharply with society’s traditional roles and expectations for women. While many feminist writers overtly called for an abandon of female gender roles, not all were as polarizing. One of those more covert authors was Kate Chopin. Although she is best known for *The Awakening*, Chopin has numerous short stories that touch on feminism, traditional gender roles, and other contemporary themes.

Chopin’s writing emerged in an era when there didn’t seem to be much middle ground on women’s rights: citizens either seemed to be for or against them. However, Chopin’s work takes an interesting stance, in that it focuses on feminist topics while being couched in societal norms and paradigms. Instead of creating stories that were blatantly driven by feminist ideals, Chopin maintains the *status quo* by adhering to the traditional ideals, values, and beliefs of her time. By crafting female characters that are shaped and influenced by their society’s standards (instead of wholly rejecting them), Chopin is able to create a more poignant and effective commentary on gender roles at the time. This paper will analyze three of her short stories and their focus on how the patriarchal society limits independence, creates unrealistic standards for an “ideal woman,” and stigmatizes women who fight against the system. By bringing these problems to the forefront, Chopin shows her readers that these issues need to improve, by finding a solution between traditionalism and feminism, or else women will continue to suffer in their marriages.

Context and Background

Before delving into what changes Chopin desired to see in society, we must first understand what it was like around the turn of the twentieth century. Speaking on the social
options that women of the time had, Susan Cruea, a professor at Bowling Green State University, said, “Women's choices were limited to marriage and motherhood, or spinsterhood. Both choices resulted in domestic dependency” (187). Rarely were women engaged in work outside of the home and, if they were, they were almost never seen as equals. When it came to what a woman could appropriately do within early twentieth century society, there were very few options. In fact, these social expectations were reinforced through the Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True Womanhood. In this value system, a “true woman” was one who put domesticity and subservience above all else: above self-identification, above independence, above all. She took care of her husband, took care of the kids, took care of the home, and neither wished to do nor did anything else. At the time Chopin started writing (and being published), the vast majority of society saw women’s roles as solely mother and wife. Nothing more and nothing less.

However, a few radicals had started to challenge this idea. Feminism began to enter the social sphere, although it was often labeled as heresy. Whether coming from social reformers like Susan B. Anthony or feminist writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, women’s rights began to permeate social and political dialogue. Since about 1850, “society had been engaged in a struggle over social ideologies and equal rights issues. As a result of this struggle, women as a whole had, to a certain extent, already experienced mobilization and emancipation from their socioeconomic fetters” (Sprinkle). Once women had tasted of this freedom, they would be hard-pressed to give it back up. Although it may have started small and quiet, by the 1900s, the women’s movement had gained significant ground and was, in most cases, unashamedly questioning and even attacking gender roles and expectations of the time.

Arguably, this is one of the main distinctions between Chopin and her feminist contemporaries: where other authors had their characters throwing off the shackles of patriarchy,
Chopin decided to work *within* that framework. In fact, many have argued that Chopin didn’t consider herself a feminist at all. In the documentary *Kate Chopin: A Re-Awakening*, feminist American historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese said the following:

Kate was neither a feminist nor a suffragist, she said so. She was nonetheless a woman who took women extremely seriously. She never doubted women's ability to be strong. . . . Her lack of interest in feminism and suffrage did not have to do with a lack of confidence in women nor did it to have to do with a lack of any desire for freedom. She simply had a different understanding of freedom.”

While other feminist authors seemed to write about freedom outside the patriarchal society, freedom that comprised of rejecting traditional roles and expectations for women, Chopin felt no such need. Her stories consisted of women functioning within the dominant society who, because of certain faults of the system, found themselves in some sort of danger or gloom. Chopin, in essence, did not write about what she (or anyone else) believed women *should* do or *should* become, but rather wrote “with an uncompromising honesty and no trace of sensationalism . . . to give the unsparing truth about woman’s submerged life” (Seyersted 198). Chopin’s purpose in her writing, then, was not to portray a society that she believed should exist, but instead simply created a mirror which readers could use to reflect upon their own lives and on society as a whole. This type of writing, that was without a radical feminist agenda, had the ability to resonate with people across all different political and social beliefs. By accurately representing what many American women were feeling at the time, while simultaneously presenting a middle ground solution between traditional and feminist values, Chopin’s work contained a unique voice that could not be ignored. And this is especially seen in her short stories.

“The Story of an Hour”
In “The Story of an Hour,” Mr. and Mrs. Mallard seem to have a perfect relationship. So, when news of Mr. Mallard’s death is confirmed, their friends and family take special care in notifying Mrs. Mallard. She has a weak heart, and they don’t want the news to push her too far. When they tell her, she weeps “with sudden, wild abandon,” and locks herself in her room to reflect and mourn alone (Chopin, “The Story” 203). However, instead of feeling a crushing weight of loneliness and depression, Mrs. Mallard feels free as she realizes her future holds “a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome” (204). Mrs. Mallard, now free “to live for herself,” becomes excited for life without a “powerful will bending hers” (204).

It is through these self-reflections and personal thoughts that the reader sees a prominent aspect of the patriarchal society: dependence and subservience of the wife to the husband. Mr. Mallard had never treated his wife poorly (she says so, herself), and she had even loved him, at times. However, his death brings her to the realization that she was not living for herself; she was not a free and independent woman. Whether she loved her husband was not important; all she could focus on was the “possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being” (Chopin 204). Mrs. Mallard had not realized how bound she was until she was no longer restricted in her marriage. Just when Mrs. Mallard is excited for her new independence, just when she’s ready to accept a long life, her husband comes home, unintentionally resulting in her death. The moment Mrs. Mallard begins to exert even an ounce of independence, she dies. This was not an inconsequential plot point; Chopin wanted to call attention to the negative consequences that arise from the unrealistic expectation that wives should be completely dependent on and subservient to their husbands. These expectations can stunt and cripple women, just like they killed Mrs. Mallard.
In this story, it is important to note that Mr. and Mrs. Mallard did nothing wrong. She didn’t kill her husband or run away; he didn’t cheat on her or abuse her. They were simply fulfilling their roles as husband and wife in the way society expected of them. In this manner, Chopin is able to expertly craft her commentary on society at the time: neither husband nor wife was acting out of the ordinary, yet it still resulted in Mrs. Mallard’s death. If the Mallards, who seemed to be your average twentieth century couple, could suffer such a devastating experience, then surely it could happen to anyone. By using such accessible and relatable characters, Chopin is able to comment on society and “subvert it. . . from within its own bounds, exposing and . . . exploiting the patriarchal domain” (Le Marquand). By fitting her social commentary into the cultural ideals of the time, Chopin successfully highlights the fact that, in the way the system currently is, women cannot express independence without being punished in some form. She wants to show that this needs to change in order for women to more happily engage in their roles as wife, mother, etc. Until this change is made, until wives can operate with the same level of independence as their husbands, women can never be truly happy and truly independent; they are either happy in their dependence or punished for their independence.

“Désirée’s Baby”

While independence may be a key factor in creating a happy relationship for women, Chopin believed more needed to change within the patriarchal society of the early twentieth century. Before the complexities of a marital relationship even began, women were bombarded with characteristics of the “ideal woman.” Although the list was virtually endless, it could be summarized in four main categories: “Piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Welter 21). With each of these traits came the culturally engrained aspects of “whiteness,” virginity, housekeeping, child-rearing, etc., all to create a true woman who “was designated as the
symbolic keeper of morality and decency within the home” (Cruea 188). At the turn of the twentieth century, there was no end to how the perfect woman should act, speak, think, and behave.

This patriarchal ideal is overtly reflected in “Désirée’s Baby.” Although her origins are a mystery, Désirée “grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere”—all aspects that fall perfectly into society’s expectations of women at the time (Chopin, “Désirée’s” 199). Furthermore, when Armand rides by her one day, he falls “in love with her. . . . The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles” (199). We can assume that it is both Désirée’s outside beauty as well as her “feminine” qualities that so strongly attract Armand and cause him to marry her so quickly. Then, as expected of a true woman, she quickly bears Armand a child, slipping seamlessly into her new roles as wife and mother. It is only when the baby is born that Armand has “a strange, an awful change in [his] manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. . . . Désirée was miserable enough to die” (200-201). The characters soon realize that the child is black and that is why Armand has been so evasive with Désirée and the baby. Although he had fallen in love with her, he now “no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name” (202). Because Armand thinks Désirée is not white, because he believes she failed to meet one criterion of a true woman, he loses all love for her. The moment Armand thinks Désirée no longer meets the standards of a true woman is the moment he rejects her, even though it has no bearing on her ability to be his wife and their child’s mother.
By choosing such an arbitrary feature to be the breaking point for which Armand rejects Désirée, Chopin is highlighting the absurdity of the patriarchal idea of an ideal woman. Chopin wants the reader to realize that, even if Désirée were black, she would still be the same woman Armand fell in love with. She hadn’t lied to him about her origins (for “Armand looked into her eyes and did not care”), yet he was still unjustly angry at the thought that she wasn’t what he expected her to be (Chopin 199). Chopin’s purpose in “Désirée’s Baby” is to help the readers realize that a woman can still be a perfectly good wife, mother, homemaker, etc., without checking off all the boxes on an impossible list of requirements. Furthermore, she is showing the reader that these checklists are detrimental to women. When Armand fully rejects Désirée, when he tells her openly that he wants her to leave, it leads to her presumed death. Once Armand deems her unworthy to be his wife because of one unfilled criterion, Désirée “disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again” (202). She is not able to return to her old life; she is not able to move on. His rejection kills her. But it would never have happened if Armand did not adhere to an unrealistic idea of how a wife should be. They could have lived happily together, with Désirée being the perfect wife and mother, if Armand had only been able to let go of society’s arbitrary standards for the ideal woman.

“Madame Célestin’s Divorce”

Reading just the previous stories, one could conclude that Chopin is implying that any unhappiness is ultimately the fault of the woman. With both Mrs. Mallard and Désirée, the two characters are passive, not active: Mrs. Mallard reacts to her husband’s death and Désirée reacts to her husband’s rejection. It could be argued that if Mrs. Mallard had simply left her husband or demanded independence, or if Désirée had simply ignored her husband’s rejection and gone to
live with her family until another man came along, then both characters would have lived happy and fulfilling lives. However, because Chopin wants to highlight that it is not just the woman who needs to change but also the patriarchal system, “Madame Célestin’s Divorce” is a perfect complement to complete this commentary.

Unlike the previous two stories, “Madame Célestin’s Divorce” focuses on a couple whose relationship is blatantly unhappy and unhealthy. Where Mr. Mallard loved Mrs. Mallard, Célestin is an alcoholic who abandons his wife for weeks on end. Where Désirée longed to be a wife and mother, Madame Célestin openly talks about wanting a divorce. Chopin uses the characters in “Madame Célestin’s Divorce” to show that the solution is not as simple as the wife making whatever decision she deems best for herself; she is bound by social expectations, stigmas, and pressures that keep her in an unhealthy relationship. From the story, we learn that Lawyer Paxton urges Madame Célestin to separate from her husband, and Madame Célestin repeatedly assures him that she will. However, when it comes down to it, she ultimately decides not to. Dissuaded by her friends, family, and local bishop, Madame Célestin stays in her unhappy marriage with a promise from her husband that “he's going to turn ova a new leaf” (Chopin, “Madame” 169). Madame Célestin obviously wants to leave her husband, but the pressures within the patriarchal society are too strong for her to overcome.

It is important to include “Madame Célestin’s Divorce” in this type of analytical paper because it brings forth a point that the other short stories don’t: no matter how hard a woman tries, if the society she is in rejects her needs and desires, then it will eventually crush her. Just like Madame Célestin’s urge to get a divorce was eventually beaten out of her because of how people feared it was a danger, “scandal,” and “temptation,” so did women in real life eventually settle for unhappy marriages because society told them that’s all they could expect (Chopin 166,
167). By showing what happens when a woman’s desires are ignored by the larger community, Chopin is commenting that women will never be able to reach a safe and happy place within society until that changes. She wants the reader to see that it isn’t just a single wife and a single husband who need to change; it’s the whole societal landscape: family, friends, religions, etc. Until a woman can feel free to express justified emotions (like wanting to divorce a negligent and alcoholic husband) without being ostracized by the community, women cannot be truly free and equal to men.

Conclusion

In all of these stories, Chopin never seems to explicitly choose sides; she does not create perfect characters that represent traditional or feminist ideals. She simply writes stories that bring the conflict between these viewpoints to the surface. When read and analyzed alone, these stories may even seem as though Chopin has a bleak outlook for the future of women: her female characters all die or are miserable. However, when taken as a whole, these stories become a commentary on what cultural changes need to be made. Through her stories, Chopin shows what happens when a patriarchal society forces women into the box of True Womanhood without taking into consideration how the woman wants to fulfill that role. Focused on how women were struggling with their desire to be good mothers and wives while still maintaining a respectable sense of self, Chopin creates characters that accurately reflect twentieth century life. Without a doubt, there were women who could identify with Mrs. Mallard; women who felt as though their husbands’ absences gave them a guilty breath of independence. In a more general sense, many women surely knew how Désirée felt when her husband rejected her for such an inconsequential characteristic. And although perhaps not vocal about it, some female readers could undoubtedly understand how Madame Célestin felt when her closest confidantes dismissed and abhorred her
desire to leave a crippling relationship. This accurate reflection of what so many women were going through at the time resounded deeply with the nation. But, beyond just portraying the hidden yet shared parts of female life, Chopin’s stories work from within the context of the times. She does not demand a revolution against motherhood, marriage, and femininity, but rather calls for a reevaluation of the patriarchal society: a reevaluation that would allow women to fulfill their roles but within the framework and capacity with which they desired and felt comfortable. In a time where sharp conflicts arose about the women’s movement and feminism, Chopin attempts to open up a space for dialogue so that both sides can reach a resolution that they support. Through her short stories, Chopin calls for both sides, feminist and traditionalist, to see what the other has to offer and to find a middle-ground solution.
Works Cited


Cruea, Susan M. “Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement.” *General Studies Writing Faculty Publications,* 2005, pp. 187-204.


