



Kate Chopin as Feminist: Subverting the French Androcentric Influence

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Kate Chopin is best known in the literary world of today as author of the novel *The Awakening*. Highly controversial in its time, *The Awakening* deals with the condition of the nineteenth century woman in marriage, and has been more recently rediscovered and recognised as an overtly feminist text for these same reasons. This novel, however, represents only the climax of a literary career spent almost exclusively in the composition of short fiction. It was the 'mastering'[1] of the short story genre that allowed Chopin to complete her final masterpiece, to develop a style best suited to her thematic concerns. This development did not of course occur in isolation. All writers have their predecessors and in Chopin's case it appears that one man in particular was highly influential, French short story writer Guy de Maupassant, who took the literary world by storm in 1880 with pieces "...marked by an impeccable concise prose, carefully chosen expressive details and solidly realistic characters" (Ewell, *Kate Chopin* p. 19).

That Chopin in some way 'bought into' the French male literary tradition which presented itself to her in the form of Maupassant's short fiction is undeniable. It is a fact alluded to repeatedly in the criticism surrounding her work, in that of recent years and also in the words of her contemporary reviewers. Maupassant has indeed been identified by one critic as Chopin's greatest literary "mentor" (Taylor p.159). But the most direct assertion of his impact comes from Chopin herself in an unpublished essay entitled "Confidences" (1896). Here she expresses obvious admiration for the French 'master' as she recalls her reaction to "stumbl[ing] upon" a volume of his tales eight years earlier:

"...I read his stories and marvelled at them. Here was life, not fiction; for where were the plots, the old fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinking way I had fancied were essential to the art of story making. Here was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who, in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw..."(p.700-701).

Chopin's fictional writing in the short story form can be seen to stand as further testimony to this high regard, albeit more implicitly. Perhaps most obvious is her adoption of Maupassantian form, the very aspect of writing which is seen to have most concerned the French man himself (Dugan p.130-131). Her imitation of the structure of his short fiction is striking and is developed at length by Richard Fusco in his *Maupassant and the American Short Story*. But areas of her writing style are also telling of his great impact: Chopin's objective psychological realism, her emphasis on character rather than plot, her striving for economy and unity, and her distinct amorality. Clear parallels link French man and American woman.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is what lies beyond the realms of these clear parallels in terms of Chopin's short fiction - her originality - for her art is in no way simple imitation. Chopin has, as Per Seyersted suggests in his critical biography, "...a daring and a vision all her own..." (p.199). Maupassant undoubtedly provided inspiration for her own creative spirit, his themes and techniques being clearly evident in her work but "...with her independent spirit and her personal views she stood entirely on her own" (p.129). Chopin's uniqueness as a woman writer, at its best, speaks out well beyond the French influence and it is a voice which is strikingly female. The French male form and style she adopts from Maupassant are adapted to suit her own purpose, to explore a position unique to woman. She exerts literary individuality and originality and, ultimately, speaks in a truly feminist voice.

This very 'gendered' originality is best seen in Chopin's treatment of male-female relationships. Her innovation lies not so much in the theme itself, because in these terms Chopin's work can indeed be seen as a response to European works in general - works which focused predominantly on gender and which, as Helen Taylor proposes, "...shared her concerns with questions of sexuality, bourgeois marriage and woman's role (p.157). And Maupassant, as one of the leading creators of such works, explored these issues at length, not only acknowledging the existence of eros, but also helping extend the limits of literary treatment of sex. He was frank about such things, and as Seyersted suggests, this is perhaps why he spoke so deeply to Chopin ("Introduction" *Complete Works* /it>[2]p. 24). Her literary individuality and originality, then, lies rather in the daring with which she treats these relations

and the female perspective she lends to them.

As Mary Donaldson-Evans reveals in her *A Woman's Revenge*, Maupassant treats his heroines as objects:

"...women are objects of erotic delight, intended for the pleasure and adornment of the male, and their physical beauty is paramount...The pleasure that the possession of a beautiful woman affords is entirely physical and is coupled by an absolute disdain for her 'being'" (p.14).

The male protagonists central to his stories are "...bitter about women and love, and are suffused by a general misanthropy and more specific misogyny" (Taylor p.160). His perspective is clearly androcentric and it is precisely this male vision of the world that Chopin writes against, shifting women from object to subject. She explores and articulates what she saw in life for women, and in doing so, subverts the very male French tradition from within which she herself writes, feminist-ising rather than simply feminising the model of male form and style.

Chopin's simultaneous, and seemingly paradoxical, adherence to and subversion of the androcentric French influence is clearly apparent in a story which appears to have suffered much neglect from critics on the whole, a 1894 piece entitled "Her Letters" [3]. The story was written at a time during which Maupassant's influence on Chopin was reaching new heights - the time of her translation of several of the French man's works into English. Chopin translated eight Maupassant stories in all between 1894 and 1898 and the process of doing so greatly influenced her own writing, in terms of both structure and subject matter. It was at this time that Chopin made a move away from the local colour tradition which had previously shaped her work, shifting her interest from regional Southern issues and experimenting with more complex forms, as charted by Fusco. Ultimately, the 'flavour' of Chopin's writing was becoming increasingly Maupassantian. It would seem that she was, as Taylor propounds, "...through the discipline and challenge of translation...rethinking her mentor in terms of her own work" (p.160). But at the same time Chopin was becoming more deeply involved in a subject which placed her in direct opposition to her French mentor - the subject of woman and her struggle to assert an individual identity beyond the bounds of that inscribed by the dictators of patriarchy. This subject is central to "Her Letters", and serves to make this story an excellent example of the way in which Chopin uses a male form and conforms to male convention only to subvert it, and cleverly so, from within its own bounds, exposing and, further, exploiting the patriarchal domain.

If "Her Letters" shows clear elements of Chopin's Maupassantian imitation, this imitation was undoubtedly coloured by her parallel practice of translation. Chopin intended to bring together in publication the first six of her Maupassant translations and the proposed title for this collection is very telling in terms of where her interests lay at the time. They were to be labelled "Mad Stories", dealing as they do with man's [4] insanity and the descent into madness, and Chopin carries this theme quite definitely over into her own work with "Her Letters" focusing on a male protagonist falling victim to this sad decline. The way in which Chopin charts this decline is similarly drawn directly from Maupassant's tales of madness, specifically in terms of form, a subject on which Fusco has much to say. He identifies Chopin's translations as sharing not only thematic concerns but also a structural element, all being examples of what he names the 'descending helical', a chronologically structured form which traces, step by step, the protagonist's descent into insanity, "...each successive sentence portray[ing] a situation more desperate, a narrator acting more frenzied, a mind one step farther removed from normality" (p.50). Through the process of completing these translations Chopin apparently gained insight into this form as an alternative way of shaping a story, eventually absorbing it into her own work.

A case can be made then - in writing "Her Letters" Chopin undoubtedly borrowed a great deal from the French 'master', engaging herself in a degree of imitation. Even the opening of the story, which centres not on the male protagonist but on his wife, is reminiscent of Maupassant's frequent use of the technique of narrative framing, beginning his stories as he does, Edward Sullivan explains, with preliminary discussions or scenes which serve to introduce the main action (p.12). Further to this, the wife is established as providing motivation for his madness. Her actions drive him into the state of insanity which ends, ultimately, in self-annihilation, and nothing could be more Maupassantian in terms of treatment of women than such portrayal of the feminine threat to man. Donaldson-Evans further elaborates this point, exposing the way in which Maupassant continually constructs his heroes' involvement with sensual women as terrifying experiences, resulting even in death; in Maupassant's androcentric world women become the cause of male demise (p.16).

But what must be recognised is that these elements of Maupassant's influence provide only the surface structure of Chopin's "Her Letters". She undoubtedly adopts Maupassant's devices in portraying insanity, but as Fusco recognises, she reduces their prominence in favour of other themes - in particular, sexual themes (p.160). With this in mind, further exploration of the story sheds light on a very different perspective, one which stands as a dramatically oppositional force to the French man's very androcentric world, one which indeed shows Chopin at her best - her feminist best, moving well beyond imitation into the realm of unorthodox and revolutionary originality.

The story opens with our being introduced to a woman who has obviously been engaged in a passionate love affair and is reliving precious moments shared with her lover through all that remains of their relationship, "...a thick bundle of letters..." (p.398). But the story which these letters have to tell is now "...all one and past..." (p.399), the woman has another man in her life, a husband in fact. And so it is revealed that the affair so dear to her still was an adulterous one. The woman fully acknowledges what discovery of these words of unfaithfulness would do to her partner in marriage "...to that other one whom they would stab more cruelly than keen knife blades" (p.399), but, facing death, she makes a startling decision that seems to deny this acknowledgement; she decides that she will not destroy the evidence of her love leaving the letters instead to her husband's care "...with perfect faith in his loyalty and his love..." (p.400) that he will himself destroy them. This seems a cruel request to make of the man

whom she has betrayed, the man "...whose tenderness and years of devotion had made him, in a manner, dear to her" (p.399), and thus, a typically patriarchal base is laid for the story. It is with the man, with the male protagonist, that our sympathy lies. Chopin, it seems, is conforming to male convention - here is the very portrayal of woman as monster established by her literary forefather: woman as killer of man, the key to his demise.

In turning back to this opening 'frame' after reading the remainder of the story, however - after registering the meaning of her husband's reaction to the letters after her death - we gain a strikingly different perspective and our own initial reactions to the woman are reversed. It is with her that we find Chopin's true sympathies to lie. Other than confirming patriarchal notions of womanhood, Chopin's story, and more specifically the letters that lie therein, actually subvert these constructions. It is through these letters that Chopin speaks out against the condition of the nineteenth century woman, creating through them what Martha J. Cutter has identified as a "voice covert ...a voice which attempts to undermine a patriarchal discourse through mimicry and through hollowing out the patriarchy from within its own structures" (p.17). Through the letters the woman is able to speak out from within the paradigms of patriarchy; she is given a voice, an autonomous identity; she is made subject, even in death. And at the same time, in creating this subversive voice, Chopin too undermines patriarchy from within its own form - that which mimics Maupassant. She speaks out from within this form with a voice that is truly her own.

The husband's initial reaction to the letters is one of disbelief. Their existence suggests that his wife has kept something from him, and this, in his mind, is an impossibility: "...She had never seemed in her lifetime to have had a secret from him. He knew her to be cold and passionless, but true, and watchful of his comfort and happiness..." (p.401). Immediately we are aware that this is a man who, it seems, did not know his wife as well as he thought. Her own reaction to the letters in the story's opening 'frame' suggests that she is far from "cold and passionless" in nature. It is in no way an emotionally restrained woman that devours their contents with such animalistic fervour:

"... [it] stirred her still to-day, as it had done a hundred times before when she had thought of it. She crushed it between her palms when she found it. She kissed it again and again. With her sharp white teeth she tore the far corner from the letter, where the name was written; she bit the torn scrap and tasted it between her lips and upon her tongue like some god-given morsel " (p.309).

Yet this sensual side to her nature is one that her husband has clearly not seen, or has chosen not to see. He has seen her only in the roles which she is expected to fulfil in marriage, roles of service to him, roles true to nineteenth century ideals of womanhood. He has inscribed this identity upon her. Here enters the subversive power of the letters - through them her patriarchal identity is shattered.

The woman's husband becomes hounded by questions: if his wife was not what he supposed her to be, not the ideal of womanhood, then what was she? What secret did she hold? He can see only one possible answer, an answer which reveals his absolute immersion in the conventions of patriarchy. If not the ideal woman he thought her to be, his wife must have been unfaithful. There are no other possibilities - the woman is either angel or monster - those very same extreme images which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see male authors as having generated for women (p.17). Any suggestion of having a positive autonomous being is denied her. Furthermore, the husband's reaction to this sole possibility as the key to his wife's secret indicates in itself why this possibility is so horrific - it threatens his ownership of her: "...As quickly as the suggestion came to his mind, so swiftly did the man-instinct of possession stir in his blood" (p.401 emphasis mine). His wife is to him an object, something to be possessed, both physically and mentally. Her secret stands in the way of this possession.

Chopin's male protagonist has exposed himself, or rather, has exposed the workings of patriarchy. For it is the workings of this society which Chopin sets out to critique, not the individual; the workings of a world in which, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex*, "...humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being", a world in which man is subject and the absolute - Woman is but "Other" (p.16). But at no point in her work does Chopin show, Seyersted claims, any direct antagonism toward men (Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography p.183). She refuses to simply reverse Maupassant's view, to make men the central target of her heroines' despair in direct opposition to his image of woman as man-killer. As Taylor suggests, Chopin's interests lie rather in the institutions and social frameworks within which both man and woman are trapped (p.161). It is this "man-instinct of possession", a term that in itself suggests the trait as being in no way unique to him as an individual, that has created the situation in which the male protagonist finds himself. A rereading of the apparent opening 'frame' is thus required, further exploration of alternative meanings it may hold.

In this undertaking it becomes clearly apparent that the woman of the story is unhappy in her marriage, a fact reflected in the elements of the outside world - the "leaden sky in which there [is] no gleam, no rift, no promise" (p.398). In such a world she is destined to become cold and passionless. Marriage comes to represent death, a death of the true independent self. Through marriage, woman's erotic life is suppressed; she becomes nothing but her husband's "Other" half (Beauvoir p.455, 487). This woman has been sustained only by the letters, for it is only through these that she can reach her true self - her passionate inner being. As Peggy Skaggs suggests, the woman has been living a "double life" (p.42), a socially acceptable outer life as the ideal woman, and that life which has been forced underground by marriage and patriarchal convention and which is symbolised in the letters. For these letters, Barbara C. Ewell claims "...substantiate a hidden, sensual life - her real life- and she prefers the memory of that life to the empty reality of her marriage" (Kate Chopin p.106). The death of marriage has forced this woman to find herself, and autonomous fulfilment, outside of its bounds.

Perhaps more startling than this situation itself, however, is this woman's reaction against it, a reaction which is embodied in her decision not to destroy the letters. In making this decision, the woman takes control of her destiny, or, at least, the destiny of her identity, and ultimately becomes subject, subverting the patriarchal world

which attempts to objectify her. To destroy the letters would be to destroy the only remaining portion of her inner being, to give into the self constructed for her by her husband, the patriarchal agent. Instead, in keeping them alive she allows for escape into the world of her true self, escape from the oppressive world of marriage:

"It was not sealed; only a bit of string held the wrapper, which she could remove and replace at will whenever the humor came to her to pass an hour in some intoxicating dream of the days when she felt she had lived "(p.400).

Through the letters she is able to relive the passion which marriage attempts to conceal beneath the superficiality of patriarchal convention, to become once more that hidden self which represents "...the reality that conventions and superficial perceptions only conceal or distort" (Ewell, Kate Chopin p.106) - the true identity which only she possesses.

Living on even after her death, the letters become truly subversive. The woman's husband claims knowledge of their meaning, but out of "his loyalty and his love" he casts them into the river without truly knowing, and in doing so destroys all possibility of ever truly knowing. The letters live on in his mind and uncertainty feeds on them. His wife becomes a mystery to him, becomes the unidentifiable and the unknown. He cannot possess her - male ownership of women is subverted. As Cutter proposes, the letters undermine his sense of knowledge (p.27). What once seemed to him to represent truth is now questioned. He can find only evidence to suggest that his wife was indeed what she appeared to be; the ideal, true and loyal. Nothing speaks against this...but the letters. They suggest otherwise, suggest that his wife had another life, one that eluded him through their marriage and that continues to elude him after her death. His role as man is thus challenged, as Mary Papke sees it, he is emasculated by his inability to know (p.67). He is forced to question his "monolithic perception" of his wife (Cutter p.27), to acknowledge the possibility that she had an identity beyond that which he and other men ascribed to her, an identity beyond his knowledge, his possession, and therefore his control.

This inability to know and inability, therefore, to possess her eventually drives the woman's husband into insanity. The suspected actions of his wife are not themselves the catalyst for this decline, but rather the possibility that she may indeed have acted for herself, against and beyond the bounds of his knowledge, his power. As suggested by Ewell, the subversive force of the letters to cause this male decline springs not from the woman's decision to leave them to her husband's care, but from a weakness within their relationship (Kate Chopin p.106), a weakness founded in his "man-instinct of possession". He has become utterly obsessed by the need to own his wife, to fully and absolutely define her. He cannot live without her truth being his own, without ownership of her entire being, and is eventually, in his madness, drawn back to the river in the belief that within its waters lies the mystery he seeks to unravel:

"Only the river knew. It babbled, and he listened to it, and it told him nothing, but it promised all. He could hear it promising him with caressing voice, peace and sweet repose. He could hear the sweep, the song of the water inviting him "(p.305).

His manhood has been claimed with the letters - it being dependent on his possessing absolute control and possession of his wife - and he can see no option but to join them in the dark depths. He cannot live on unknowing, his own passion for possession, a passion enflamed by patriarchal convention, ultimately killing him, leading, as Papke suggests, to self-death rather than self-fulfilment (p.67).

It seems apt at this point to quote from a Maupassant story, one which Chopin translated, in saying "That which we love too violently ends by killing us" [5]. Here Chopin explores this very notion, but at the same time brings to it a new perspective. She seems to suggest that it is not the "that" which is loved which is the killer, but the act of loving itself, at least in terms of the way in which man is destined to love under patriarchal lore: violently - obsessively and possessively. Trapped within this state of passion, the male protagonist of the story is deluded by the belief that to join the sunken letters will mean joining his wife and her secret. In reality, knowledge of her secret would not bridge the gap between them - it would only widen the rift between husband and wife - for she has broken the codes of patriarchal society, has asserted an individual self separate from that deigned for her by man; against society's decree for selflessness and being only for others, being, as Ewell writes, an object of male desire and a receptacle of male possession and passion ("Kate Chopin and the Dream of Female Selfhood" p.161-162).

Chopin has exposed the workings of a world that kills individuality - in both women and men - by forcing them to subscribe to the ideal, she has, as Ewell propounds, made an "...austere comment on the conflicts engendered by social and sexual roles" (Kate Chopin p.106). Masculine possessiveness has been revealed as the pivotal problem with husband, wife, and marriage (Skaggs 42). But not only does Chopin make this revelation, expose this world - additionally she subverts and overturns it. Chopin has made woman the subject of what is supposedly a male-centred world. As Cutter suggests, Chopin undermines patriarchy by endowing the Other, the woman, with an individual identity and a sense of self, a sense of self to which the letters she leaves behind give voice. The "official version" of her life, that constructed by the men around her, is challenged and overthrown by the woman of the story and the letters which represent her - the "master-plot" of the patriarchal story is undone (p.27).

And so too is Maupassant as one of the "master-plotters". Chopin subverts the androcentric world of his canon from within its very own structures; she has reappropriated the male form. She writes from within the bounds of traditional literary conventions that Maupassant can be seen to represent, but the resultant text, at least as seen in "Her Letters", stands as an assertion of difference from these conventions, and a challenge to them, just as Papke suggests every "feminist" text should (p.6). The challenge is made, of course, against the male-centred world, and it is made through assertion of a difference - taking the traditionally marginalised woman and giving her experience centrality. Chopin "...reveals what is rarely seen in hegemonic discourse - woman as self-informing

subject" (Papke p.2). She refuses to work within Maupassant's androcentric boundaries, choosing instead to pull them right out of line, to transcend them and speak with her own unique and original voice. The risk of mimicry is defied, the possibility that conformity to male form will result in endorsement of patriarchal norms is overcome; Chopin succeeds in not only mimicking male form to female purpose, but in disrupting this form and the patriarchy it represents "...from within its own discursive parameters" (Cutter p.18). Maupassant's example has been exploited to obtain feminist ends. Chopin has moved beyond the French androcentric influence; she has, in the words of Fusco "...blaze[d] her own path" - the path of feminism, that path which led, ultimately, to *The Awakening*.

References

- [1] Note that I use this term advisedly with full recognition of the feminist theory surrounding it, theory which the specific focus of the paper prevents me from discussing at length.
- [2] *The Complete Works of Kate chopin* Ed. Per Seyersted. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1969
- [3] All quotations from the story refer to the version as cited above.
- [4] Note that I do not use this term generically - Maupassant's world as portrayed in these tales is unarguably a male one.
- [5] Maupassant, Guy de. "Night" trans Kate Chopin. *The Kate chopin companion: With Chopin's Translations from French Fiction*. Thomas Bonner, Jr. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. pp199-202

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