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A Look at Kate Chopin's Work Through the Eyes of Desire

Female desire was an unspoken topic in southern regional literature in the United States. However, female writer Kate Chopin changed the idea of female desire from being a taboo subject. Throughout Chopin's work, she writes female characters that struggle with balancing their marriages with their desires. In a research study conducted by Uci Nurhidayati Rosita and Wilugjeng Asih Purwani through the Universities of Billfath Lamongan, they found, "The most influential factor reflected in Chopin's writings is the social condition of women" (Rosita and Purwani 45). Chopin used many techniques to achieve this goal, but the main technique that seemed to link all of her work together is her descriptions of her characters, especially regarding the description of their eyes.

"At the 'Cadian Ball"

"At the 'Cadian Ball" is probably one of the most description-heavy stories of Chopin because of how the ball itself and the people at the ball are described. In the analysis done by Deborah L. Madsen, Madsen states, "Kate Chopin's work focuses upon...the structuring of feminine identity" (Madsen 108). Chopin shapes feminine identity mainly through her character and setting descriptions. This is true as in "At the 'Cadian Ball," Chopin describes Calixta as, "Her eyes, Bobint thought of her eyes, and weakened, the bluest, the drowsiest, most tantalizing that ever looked into a man's" (Chopin, "At the 'Cadian Ball"). Chopin describes Calixta's eyes

as something that's a tantalizing, unattainable object. A mark of Chopin's writing is the use of color symbolism as well. In this excerpt, Chopin uses the color blue to signify how Calixta's eyes stand out against the crowd since Chopin describes everyone else at the ball with having brown eyes, while Calixta, in addition being the belle of the ball (Chopin, "At the 'Cadian Ball'"), is the only character described with having blue eyes. Blue, because of how it reflects the color of the sky and ocean, is often associated with tranquility. However, this passage suggests the color represents the unrequited desire Bobint feels towards Calixta.

In the thesis by Mylene Dressler for Rice University, Dressler argues Chopin's work, although has a history of being viewed as women gaining sexual consciousness, is more so about the "trope for eye-opening" (Dressler 59). She also argues how Chopin uses "gaze" and "look" through her writings to assign ownership over female characters to the male characters (Dressler 62). In Chopin's work, Chopin does objectify women to some extent. In "At the 'Cadian Ball,'" Chopin describes the ways Bobint objectifies Calixta: "Bobint thought of them all as he plowed his rows of cane" (Chopin, "At the 'Cadian Ball'"). In this passage, Chopin could be referring to Bobnit's explicit sexual desire towards Calixta, objectifying Calixta to only what she is in the context of her beauty. Dressler argues that Chopin's use of light and gaze results in the spectacle of desire (Dressler 87). Chopin shows both the desires of men and women in her stories, but the real focus of her work is to show the desire in the context of female desire because during that period in time, female desire was often a taboo subject, especially in southern regional literature. Despite Chopin using language similar to language often used to objectify women, Chopin uses it to show male desire as a minor aspect of the story whereas the desires of the female characters are the focal points of the story.

Later in Chopin's "At the 'Cadian Ball," Bobint debates whether or not to go to the ball, but when he thinks of "a gleam from Calixta's eyes," he decides to go (Chopin, "At the 'Cadian Ball"). The gleam mirrors the image of the sun reflecting on the ocean, but in this case, Bobint sees the gleam as how his desire is the sun and her eyes reflect the image of his desire. Chopin reverses this idea of desire through the way Calixta views Alcee. Chopin writes, "...looking at him full in the eyes, without a quiver. Alcee's hands dropped and his glance wavered before the chill of her calm, clear eyes" (Chopin, "At the 'Cadian Ball"). Chopin still writes this excerpt through the lens of Calixta's eyes rather than Alcee's, so the narrative is completely centered around the female desire (or lack thereof) rather than focusing completely on the desires of the male characters. Calixta's eyes in this excerpt are "full without a quiver" because she desires Alcee fully without a notion of anything else. Chopin writes, "...chill of her calm, clear eyes," to show how Calixta's intentions are *clear*; in other words, obvious to the reader and to Alcee. In this excerpt, Chopin does define the color blue as being "calm," but the main focus of the eyes in Chopin's work is the idea that the eyes of the female characters show their truest desires.

This point is proven further at the end of the story after Alcee leaves with Clarisse. Chopin writes, "She turned her face, that was almost ugly after the night's dissipation, and looked steadily into his" (Chopin, "At the 'Cadian Ball"). The point that is notable in this excerpt is there is no mention of Calixta looking into Bobint's eyes, though it is implied as she looks into his face. However, since there are so many points in this story where Chopin writes about eyes specifically, it is noticeable when she leaves it out of a passage that's lacking in desire from Calixta. The subtext also reads that Calixta, looking into his face, is not meeting Bobint's eyes; therefore, doesn't she even want to know he's desires, rather is fixated on the unrequited desires of her own.

“The Storm”

Although one may argue identifying the use of eyes in one of Chopin’s many stories does not demonstrate how Chopin feels about female desire across her catalog as a whole, it does because she uses eyes to identify desire across many of her short stories. In “The Storm,” the sequel to “At the 'Cadian Ball,” Chopin refers to Calixta’s eyes in a similar way. She writes, “Her blue eyes still retained their melting quality” (Chopin, “The Storm”). Chopin mentions the color blue once again when identifying the color of her eyes, but what’s different about this description of her eyes is that they have a “melting quality.” Chopin doesn’t elaborate on what it means to have eyes that melt, but going off of the how Chopin described Calixta’s eyes as the “drowsiest eyes” in “At the 'Cadian Ball,” this could be that the melting quality of her eyes have to do with the tiredness she feels of not having her sexual desire attended to; therefore, foreshadowing the rest of the story as the arc of the story follows Calixta’s sexual desires finally being met.

The eyes in this story act as a plot marker since the beginning of the climax of the story starts with another description of Calixta. Chopin writes, “Calixta put her hands to her eyes, and with a cry, staggered backward” (Chopin, “The Storm”). The act of Calixta putting her hands over her eyes is the act of her trying to hide her desire from the reader and from Alcee. Later in the story, Chopin writes, “As she glanced up at him the fear in her liquid blue eyes had given place to a drowsy gleam that unconsciously betrayed a sensuous desire. He looked down into her eyes and there was nothing for him to do but to gather her lips in a kiss” (Chopin, “The Storm”). This passage represents the shift Calixta has from being afraid to having lust in her eyes towards Alcee and betraying her marriage. When Alcee then looks into her eyes, he also becomes possessed by the desire and the same betrayal Calixta was facing. The eyes in this part of the

story act as a reflection of desire, mirroring the desire and betrayal felt between the characters in this story.

In “The Storm,” Chopin also uses an interesting technique that expands upon the feminist challenges to psychoanalytic theories of childless women in accordance with Myra J. Hird of the *Feminist Review*. Hird claims that society should not force women to choose between two categories: having kids and not having kids (Hird 16). Hird believes that people should be able to cross mindsets and be able to have sexual desires with children and without children (Hird 16). Chopin demonstrates this mindset through the plot of “The Storm,” by having Calixta have her feminine desires met with Alcee despite having a child. Calixta’s character disagrees with the idea that having children rejects feminine desires because the child becomes the woman’s sole focus.

Chopin, through her descriptions and plots for female characters, makes her female characters more complex and dynamic than their static counterparts. In the critical essay written by Martha J. Cutter, she states, “Chopin suggests that feminine desire is an aspect of women's search for voice” (Cutter 87). This follows the idea that Chopin writes of her female characters daydreams of freedom through their desires. Cutter suggests that their desire comes from their search for voice, but it does not have much to do with voice because most of the female characters lack a clear internal and external dialogue. In “The Storm,” Calixta is not in search of a voice, she is in search of having her sexual desires met with Alcee. However, Cutter does make a solid argument as she writes, “Chopin's short fiction does not reflect a linear movement from silence to voice; rather, as her career progressed Chopin continued to test the ways women could--and could not--achieve articulation” (Cutter 92). Chopin does play with giving women stronger roles in her stories where traditionally in southern regional literature, men would be

given stronger roles. The majority of “The Storm,” follows Calixta’s sexual journey more than any of the male characters in the story.

“The Story of An Hour”

“The Story of An Hour” follows a different character’s narrative than the previous two stories, but this story still uses eyes in a similar way. Chopin describes Mrs. Mallard, after hearing of her husband’s sudden passing in a railroad disaster, “...there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought” (Chopin, “The Story of An Hour”). In this passage, Mrs. Mallard’s eyes are fixed with a dull stare, lacking in any emotion. However, what’s interesting about this passage is how her eyes are fixated on a point off in the distance “...patches of blue sky” (Chopin, “The Story of An Hour”). Throughout the story, Mrs. Mallard seems to associate the world through her window (the outside world) with freedom. Therefore, in “The Story of An Hour,” Mrs. Mallard’s eyes are used to describe Mrs. Mallard’s desire for freedom, which strays from the other two stories. This idea of Mrs. Mallard’s desire for freedom being represented through her eyes is also backed up by the passage, “The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright” (Chopin, “The Story of An Hour”). “Keen” and “bright” in this passage, represents the realization Mrs. Mallard has when she realizes that she could actually be free, rather than conforming to societal standards of being the stay-at-home housewife.

The moment before Mrs. Mallard finds out that her husband is still alive is also very important to note. Chopin writes, “There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of victory” (Chopin, “The Story of An Hour”). As addressed in

the beginning of the story, Mrs. Mallard has “heart trouble” (Chopin, “The Story of An Hour”), so the idea of her having “feverish triumph in her eyes” connects the idea that her heart and her eyes are connected through her need to fulfill her truest desire. At this point in the story, Mrs. Mallard’s truest desire is freedom. When her husband shows up at the front door, alive and well, Mrs. Mallard dies because of “...the joy that kills” (Chopin, “The Story of An Hour”). The joy in this case is her desire, and what kills is the vision of her husband at the door, blocking the window world with his frame in the doorway. He is the one who blocks her desire literally and metaphorically.

Chopin wrote this story to represent the feminist idea that marriage blocks female desire. In the study done by Rosita and Purwani, they found a common structure to Chopin’s short stories across five of her works, including “The Storm” and “The Story of An Hour.” This structure is based around feminist theory as the female protagonist in all of the stories is first described as a “obedient wife who loves her husband” (Rosita and Purwani 48), but as the story progresses, there is a turning point when the female protagonist realizes her truest desires. What’s interesting about Rosita and Purwani’s analysis is the excerpts they have identified as the turning points of each of the stories all mention the female protagonist’s eyes. These turning points all allow the reader to see the female protagonist’s desires, which are often to break from their oppressive marriages and become free in some way. In “The Storm,” after Calixta’s eyes are described, she has an affair with Alcee. This is a way of her breaking from her marriage to have her sexual desires met, which for her is a sense of freedom she gets because she wouldn’t be able to get that freedom from Bobint. In “The Story of An Hour,” Mrs. Mallard’s eyes are described as she looks out the window for the first time in the story and views the world beyond.

This signals to the reader that her truest desire is to leave her house and marriage duties behind to become an independent woman out in the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chopin uses eyes to show the deepest desires of the female characters in her short stories. In “At the ‘Cadian Ball” and “The Storm,” Calixta desires to be sexually awakened by Alcee. In “The Story of An Hour,” Mrs. Mallard's desire is to be free from her obligations of being a traditional housewife. Chopin showcases the desires of women to reject the notions of a patriarchal society and to cast women in roles greater than being a side character in male-dominated settings.

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