

The Subverting Themes in Kate Chopin's Works -Subverting the Womanhood

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Abstract: Kate Chopin is an outstanding woman writer in the late 19th century America. Her fictions describe the women oppressed by men in 19th century in America. Women's awakening and subverting spirit run through all Chopin's works. The thesis analyzes *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, *Athénaïse* in *Athénaïse*, Edna and Reisz in *The Awakening* and Paula von Stolz in *Wiser than a God to show women's* awakening to marital confinement to search for selfhood.

1. Introduction

In the first half of the nineteenth century, America has fundamental social and economic changes due to industrialization. A new urban commercial and industrial society substituted for the traditional agriculture society. The traditional family life and the relationship of the home to economic production have been greatly changed by the emergence of this new capitalist and urbanized society. According to Rosemary R. Ruether, the basic economic processes of daily life had been traditionally centered on the home. Industrialization gradually separated economic production from the home. Male world "became increasingly disconnected with the home and was collectivized in a separate sphere. Women's role was reduced mainly to that of consumer, child-rearer, and domestic care-taker. Men traditionally viewed women as different and inferior creatures. Woman, through history, had been subjected to an insignificant and dependent existence. Nineteenth century industrialization discarded women's "productive functions that had been theirs in pre-industrial society! and confined them exclusively to the home. As a consequence, "a new type of family and a new definition of woman's place that had never existed before in so narrow a form came into being for the bourgeois woman."^[1]

In the nineteenth century men reassert traditional gender distinctions and developed complicated disciplines for women. They set down the Cult of True womanhood, which transformed the non productive women into "angels in the home." She was innocent, modest, and very satisfied with the warmth and security of the home. She was beautiful, elegant, and capable of amusing her husband, bringing up the children and managing the household.

True Womanhood was denied woman's autonomy as a human being, which was a patriarchal ideology that expected woman to be perfect in her virtues. Superficially it complimented her as an angel but actually limited her role narrowly to the home sphere as an obedient caretaker. The middle and upper class woman, who were bound by their socially dominated role, became idle and decorative. Some of them were undoubtedly accepted their socially regulated role and tried hard to carry out the ideals of true Womanhood, but others felt confined by their narrowly defined place and courageously resisted patriarchal oppression. When women found their traditionally secondary role then began to unite and fight together for equal rights and equal opportunities. At the Seneca fall convention in 1848, which officially marked the beginning of the women's right movement in the United States, Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared that the history of mankind had been "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman! and "called for woman's suffrage and her equal participation in various trades, professions, and commerce within the next four decades, numerous national and countless state and city organizations of women sprang up all over the country."^[2] Under the banners of these organizations, middle and upper class women of the late nineteenth century marched the streets, demonstrated their strength, demanded social reforms, and struggled for the improvement of their own status.

Refusing traditional gender distinctions and restrictions, the women's right activists advocated

rights for themselves. They were the New Woman of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. They were highly educated, mostly single, and economically autonomous. Women who cast away restrictions imposed upon them began to make an alternative self image on the issues of female intellectual power, self fulfillment, and non domestic roles. They asserted that gender distinctions must be changed, because they were unreal and man-made. They argued that women were not inferior to men in mind and therefore entitled to a career and to a public voice. They defied traditional proprieties and pioneered new roles for women.

Kate Chopin is one of the writers who took on one of the most important issues associated with the new woman: her right to self freedom, self gratification, and self fulfillment. Like many of her female contemporaries, Chopin resented and courageously took part in the fight against the patriarchal social oppression. She revolted against the ethos of True Womanhood and struggled to emancipate herself from the confinement of the traditional female sphere, and became a professional writer. She created a new identity for herself as an alternative to the captive lady of the leisure class, and lived the economically and socially autonomous life. More important, through her literary creation, Chopin studied woman's social and economic status in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America and constantly criticized society subjection of all woman knowing that the code of the perfect woman in the home functioned to deny and suppress female consciousness which was essential to woman's emancipation. She sought to subvert and challenge true womanhood ideology in her work and created alternative bases of conscious by not only emphasizing female subjectivity and female experience outside the domestic but also by allowing women to envision another way of being. Her works challenged the conventional view on female status, temperament, and created new images of women as strong and intelligent human beings outside of the domestic world. Indeed, Kate Chopin was a conscious rebel of the patriarchal social order, a significant New Woman writer at the turn of the century who portrayed in her fiction women with a new psychological complexity, having not only intellectual and physical desires an great sensitivity, but subverted the traditional women's roles as wife, mother and self.

2. Subverting the Traditional Motherhood

Motherhood in patriarchy is intensified as a social role instead of a physical one. Women do not have right to choose whether to be a mother or not. As a woman, no one can escape the trap of motherhood; no one can escape the fate of being a victim of the institution of motherhood. The religion of maternity proclaims that all mothers are saintly, but women sacrifice too much for it. Behind the holiness of motherhood, the true nature of maternity has been much concealed, such as the loss of one's self, sex enslavement, solitude and fragility. There are a great many mothers who are unhappy and unsatisfied. Sexually they are frigid or unsatisfied; socially they feel themselves inferior to men. Busy with washing, cooking, nursing, marketing, and entertaining guests, they are denied all activity in public affairs. Shut out of masculine careers, they lack self-affirmation as an individual. Therefore, the so-called great mother is, in fact, a discontented and helpless woman. To comfort woman, patriarchy lies to her by praising the lofty values of love, devotion, sacrifice and the gift of her, and even finds the excuse of the "sacred calling" or the "natural calling" to trap woman within the trap of motherhood. Indeed, all human life on the world is born of woman, but woman is not born to be mother.

Mother is a sacred appellation in all cultures. For the mother who was in 19th century, what she did was bearing and rearing children. That care of children can be not only a great joy but also a great limitation on women's freedom.

There are typically two mother images in Chopin's fiction, self-realization versus self-sacrifice. In *The Awakening*, the two kinds of mother can be found, Edna versus Adele. Adele is a willing, self-martyr and idolized her children. She does not have life for herself, admitting that she would like to sacrifice what she has for her own children. But Edna subverts the traditional image of kind mother. She is not a mother-woman. She dedicates much less time to her sons as other women would. She openly expresses that she is not willing to sacrifice herself for her children. Mrs. Sommers has all the qualities which Adele has. It does not mean that she keeps self-independent

besides keeping self-sacrifice to her children. What kind of mother does she like. Let's give a glimpse into the Mrs. Sommers's life in *A Pair of Silk Stockings*.

The story follows an afternoon in shopping of Mrs. Sommers. Differencing from much of Chopin's fiction, the story does not directly show the heroine's relationship to her husband or to romantic love. In fact, we do not even know whether Mr. Sommers living or not. In the beginning of the story, Mrs. Sommers unexpectedly possesses fifteen dollars which is the only center of the fiction. A poor woman with several children to provide for, She calculates day and night how to spend the money well. She wants to buy her four children new clothes at first. She will feel excited when she sees her children with new beautiful clothes. From these sentences, she is found a responsible and selfless mother, the typical woman image of 19th century.

A little background information lets us know that Mrs. Sommers is woman who was born into a better class before she married, but she is a "genuine! woman who is neither stingy sacrifice for her family nor thinks of any thing beyond her immediate life as a mother and a martyr. Mrs. Sommers's future like some dim, gaunt monster, sometimes appalls her, but luckily tomorrow never come. Taking the money, she once again enjoys the happiness that the money had given her like a young woman. This kind of feeling gives her magic power and impulse. Mrs. Sommers, the long-deprived woman turns her shopping trip for her children into a rare day of indulgence for herself in the end. She buys herself a pair of silk stockings and then, to complement them, one pair of costly shoes and gloves, next, she treats herself to two "high-priced magazines! browses through them while having a pleasant lunch in an upscale restaurant, and closes her day by attending the theater. She has enjoyed herself thoroughly. As Doris Davis sees it Mrs. Sommers has used her money "to nurture her sense of esthetics, an action that Chopin seems to suggest is important for this character's development.! Davis goes on to argue that "Mrs. Sommers has developed a feeling of independence and fulfillment in her judicious use of money, and might well serve as a model for Edna's Pontellier's emerging sense of autonomy.^[3] Similarly, Mary E. Papke comments that Mrs. Sommers, "physically and spiritually exhausted,! arrives "at moment of contemplation and action.! In choosing to buy the pair of silk stockings, she "experiences a sensuous moment! that reawakens her female self.^[4]

When she arrives at the department store she is faint and tiered, because of forgetting eating lunch. In order to "trying to gather strength and courage! she seats at a counter and feels an all-gone limp feeling has come over her and she rests her hand aimlessly up on the counter. These are the silk stockings that prompt her to the first of the purchases for herself. Transformation takes place for Mrs. Sommers as she charges her a pair of new black silk stockings. And then, she seems for the first time to be taking a rest from that laborious a fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directs her action and frees her from responsibility.

This freedom allows her to spend the rest of her money, free of guilty. Once her afternoon is over, however, Mrs. Sommers return the reality again. Although she has not drastically changed on the outside, she has changed inside. Motherhood has deprived Mrs. Sommers of her self and her identity. In the afternoon, she subverts the images made by her self and her contemporaries. Although Mrs. Sommers wins the deep compassion of readers, there is confusion about this. What makes the mother woman changes into so quickly? Her awakening, on the surface, is not going through any acute mental process or reasoning with herself. Actually, it is the fifteen dollars provokes her long deprivation feeling to seek her autonomy. In order to liberate themselves from bondage of social convention, women must have the power to earn their lives besides the preparation of independent thoughts. Mrs. Sommers realizes the enchantment of fiscal autonomy and the pleasures of meeting her needs and desires if only for one afternoon.

More importantly, however, she realizes that she is not merely a mother, but also a full-fledged woman with her own opinions and tastes. In *The Awakening* Edna will also come to realize that what she needs and desires conflicts with her role as a mother.

Edna Pontellier is not a mother-woman. She prefers to demand her own freedom and choose her life style. Her children are more intimate with the father than with the mother. When they see their father starting out, both want to follow him or tumble about and cling to his legs. However, if one of

the little Pontellier boys tumbles while at play, instead of rushing to his mother for comfort, he will be more likely to stand up himself, wipe tears clean, and go on playing, entirely neglecting their mother's existence. They will only come to their mother when she offers them some candies. Edna loves her children in an unsteady, impulsive way. Sometimes she would like to spoil them passionately from her heart, but sometimes she would ignore them completely. When her children spend their summer with their grandmother, Edna often likes it that her children are not around. It is nice not having to deal with them. She doesn't miss them except an occasional longing. She thinks that their absence is a kind of relief for her, although she doesn't want to admit. In Mr. Pontellier's eyes, Edna doesn't devote all her energy to their children so she is not a good mother, and a good mother should be "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary threatened their precious brood."^[5] He scolds his wife for her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children although it is difficult for him to define wherein his wife fails in her responsibility for their children. She expresses her disapproval of the belief that women are supposed to sacrifice everything for their children. For Edna, selfhood is more important role than motherhood.

3. Subverting the Traditional Wifehood

According to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, "Man is the Subject while woman is the Object. Man sees himself as a human being, and sees woman as 'the sex!!'."^[6] Her body is regarded as desirable. The male controls the female through her body first and then defines her role. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich says: "There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of the women's bodies by men!"^[7] The male confines the female in home in order to control her body. The home thus becomes a religious obsession for the female as she is supposed to concentrate herself on the comfort of the home. If she knows her place, which is in the home, she is a lovable, happy, childlike and loving creature. However, wives, in Chopin's fiction are courageous to subverting their traditional role.

The Story of an Hour, it is Chopin's most well-known and intense reading of wife's awakening to self-desire and freedom to a more fulfilling life. Per Seyersted considered this story to be Chopin's "most startling picture of female self-assertion!"^[8] Mrs. Mallard, a lady with heart disease, is shocked by the news of her husband's supposed death in a railway disaster. At beginning of the story, the heroine without her own name, she is Mrs. Mallard. We know that she is a wife, the Mr. Mallard's wife. She must be confined by the marriage and lost her identity. Her behavior as a wife should be approved not only by her husband but also the community. However, she resolves to go on struggling for subvert awkward situation. She keeps suffering until she hears of her husband's death in a railway disaster. She sits alone in her room crying and thinking and she gets a real power over her own life. Great changes have taken place in the bottom of her heart. The lines of her fair and calm face figures out repression and strength. She feels something approaching her. It is freedom over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!! Mrs. Mallard would cry again for her beloved husband's death, however, she is inter-contradictory in her mind. The possession of self-assertion counts more than her love towards her husband. She longs for freedom and self-assertion out of marital confinement. She opens her heart to welcome the long procession of time that would belong to her absolutely.

She has paid a high price to attain wifehood. Her name and autonomy have been both sacrificed and so has her right to live as a discrete individual. After the inner struggle, she recognizes the strongest impulse of her being "Free! Body and soul free!! She feels something unnamable coming to her through her senses. It is frightening because it is not of her true womanhood world; it reaches to her from the world outside and would at any moment "possess her!". In the middle of story when her sister knocked at her door, we heard Mrs. Mallard's name first time--Louise. The detail reveals that she is not Mrs. Mallard any more; the traditional role for her, the true woman, the negation, chaos, and death life is gone with her husband. She opens the door for her sister. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She accomplishes her awakening of possessing selfhood, although such an existence is just keep a short

time. At the moment of her joyous liberation, Mrs. Mallard happens to see her husband turned up alive so that she dies of shock and despair of the loss of awakened selfhood and freedom. A wife got happiness from the news of her husband's death, which was against social morality. The doctor, without knowing the true feeling of Mrs. Mallard's pursuing self-assertion, attributed her death to "a joy that kills!". Louise refuses to return to the self-destructive limits of wifedom. She is failure in her quest for a self, but just as clearly, she is victorious. She may lost her physical life, which is so absorbed by the desires and needs of others, but she has clearly won an inner victory of knowledge and of authenticity and the new identity she has chosen. This is a woman who has refused to abandon her newfound self and to settle quietly for a life of only partially fulfillment after seizing her own life and asserting her real nature. Her story posits individual freedom as the highest good, transcending all socially derived satisfaction and all moral considerations. She would live for herself.

Mrs. Mallard who receives the news of her husband's supposed death in a railway disaster goes into a state of ecstasy, which can be seen as the subverting the authority of her husband. Her behavior is secret. Contrary to it, Athénaïse, a valiant Louisiana bride, chose to run away from her husband after wedding. Athénaïse, the title character in *Athénaïse*, it was written in 1895-1896. Chopin introduces a heroine so strongly opposite to marriage. The content of the story is controversial; the tale is published in the distinguished *Atlantic Monthly*. The story is far-reaching with focusing on fighting against the institution of marriage and pursuing personal identify.

Athénaïse is a woman with childish, moody and impulsive characteristics: Her sensibilities are alive and keen and responsive. She "meets the pleasurable things of life with frank open appreciation, and against distasteful conditions she rebelled."^[9]

In her time, this character means that she will not be a dutiful wife, but her Creole husband, Cazeau, is a soft speaking and severe-looking widower. He is polite and attentive enough about some things but insistent and arrogant about others. He does not care more about his new bride at the beginning of marriage. When his wife runs away from home, he has expressed his solicitude about the pony which his wife had ridden. However, he is kind and generous enough to endure her indulgence, and makes life comfortable for her.

Athénaïse flees from home to her parents after the wedding and has a plan to live permanently, and announces that she came to stay, having no intention of returning under Cazeau's roof. She explains to her family that she doesn't dislike her husband or is abused by him, but simply dislikes the condition of being married. The statement reveals the life of married women in the Victorian Age. In the marriage, they sacrifice her name and more, their autonomy, their right to live as a discrete individual. Their eternal identity is somebody's wife. Beer suggests that "Chopin's apparently incidental references to the monstrous exigencies of the 'social and sacred institution' of marriage that would take a girl and put her in intimate contact with a grown man without due warning of the physical consequences."^[10]

What Athénaïse wants is the autonomy and identity when she was a single woman. Her thought and behavior is so subversive that her family and her friend can't understand, except her brother. Her parents are appalled and they hope that her husband Cazeau is the one who takes just such a steady hand to guide a disposition like Athénaïse, a master hand, a strong will that compels obedience. She also finds her friends hold a very different idea to marriage. On the way to freedom, she is a lonely predecessor and can't find the direction.

Cazeau comes to her parents' home after his wife three days absence. He enters her room with thrusting open the door after a hasty preliminary knock. He brings her back their home violently. After retrieving her from her parents' home, however, Cazeau reminds of his father tracking down the escaping black Gabe, one of slaves in his family. Some people will wonder that black Gabe must be abused by his wicked master. "In fact, Cazeau's father is a kind and considerate master, and every one had agreed at the time that Black Gabe is a fool, a great idiot indeed, for wanting to run away from him."^[11] Liberty is what black Gabe longing for. Unfortunately, black Gabe is recaptured in the meadow, retrieved like an animal. Although his father is not wick master, don't return the liberty to black Gabe. His father and the black slavery, like Cazeau and Athénaïse stands for master

and slaver. Why does Cazeau who is a kind hearted man still fetch her wife home by against her will? Athénaïse's behavior which searches for freedom is thought a fool like black Gabe. Chopin makes it an irony here that patriarchal is analogous to slavery. She also reveals the liberation of women depending on the extinction of patriarchal.

Athénaïse shows more rebellious spirit than black Gabe. When she is at home, she refuses to keep the bound of keys as the mistress of the family. Soon, she flees again from home to New Orleans with her brother's help. In her new environment, Athénaïse finds "it diverting to sit there on the front balcony watching people pass by, even though there was no one to talk to. And then the comforting, comfortable sense of not being married!!

Mrs. Mallard and Athénaïse, their behaviors are just individual. But in the dark ages, their subversion thoughts and actions enlighten intellectually and spiritually their successors.

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