



## Three Important Female Voices of the Fin de Siècle American Literature

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to emphasize the importance of three women writers in the fin de siècle American Literature, specifically Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Women writers in the 1890s made great use of the short story as a suitable form for the new feminist themes of the decade such as the assertion of female sexuality and fantasy, the development of a woman's voice and the critique of male aestheticism. Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman were prolific and innovative short-story writers experimenting during the decade and beyond with both subject and technique. While Kate Chopin wrote about female sexuality and desire with a frankness rarely seen before, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton tried to renew the subject and structure of fiction in order to reflect the wider cultural dislocations of the fin de siècle. All three writers felt the constraints of what was considered acceptable by the magazine editors of the late nineteenth century and they tried to find ways and means to work with the restrictions while still remaining in control of their own art.

**Keywords:** Important, Female Voices, Fin de Siècle, American Literature

### 1. Introduction

Kate Chopin (1850-1904), Edith Wharton (1862-1937) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), were three very important women writers in the *fin de siècle*<sup>1</sup> American Literature. They were very prolific and innovative short-story writers, but also wrote poetry, novels, essays and articles for various national magazines. Wharton wrote travel books and Gilman had a long and distinguished career as a sociologist, lecturing and writing outside the academic establishment to a wide range of different audiences. In this study we will refer only to their short fiction though.

In an article published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in June 1995, Elaine Showalter makes the point that in the 1890s 'the best work of the decade was in the short story not in the novel .... Women writers in the 1890s found the short story a suitable form for the new feminist themes of the decade: the exploration of female sexuality and fantasy, the development of a woman's language, and the critique of male aestheticism<sup>2</sup>. This is certainly true for Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, all experimenting during the decade and beyond with both subject and technique in the genre of the short story. Whilst Kate Chopin wrote of sexuality and desire in the lives of both men and women with a

<sup>1</sup> In its simplest definition, "fin de siècle" refers to the end of a century, yet at the end of the 19th century in Britain or America, the term did not just refer to a set of dates, but rather a whole set of artistic, moral, and social concerns. To describe something as a fin de siècle phenomenon invokes a sense of the old order ending and new, radical departures. The adoption of the French term, rather than the use of the English "end of the century," helps to trace this particular critical content: it was, and continues to be, associated with those writers and artists whose work displayed a debt to French decadent, symbolist, or naturalist writers and artists.

<sup>2</sup> Showalter, Elaine 'Smoking Room', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 June 1995, p. 12.

frankness rarely seen before, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton sought to change and renew the subject and the structure of fiction to reflect the wider cultural dislocations of the *fin de siècle*, and, especially, the implications of social and technological change for women. Gilman never desisted from critiquing that which she termed 'The Man-Made World'<sup>3</sup> seeking to impress upon her readers the pervasive and destructive nature of existing divisions into gendered lives, whilst Wharton, in all her works of fiction and non-fiction, undertook the task of establishing herself as a writer with her own distinct voice, subject and artistic ambition, despite the criticisms of those who would dismiss her as a 'Literary Aristocrat'<sup>4</sup>

A common experience for the three authors, especially for Chopin and Gilman, was the frequent rejection of their daring stories by the editors of magazines in the late nineteenth century.

For example, stories which treat the topic of the effects of sexually transmitted diseases. Chopin's

'Mrs Mobry's Reason' became in 1891, as Emily Toth tells us in her biography, *Kate Chopin*, the writer's 'most rejected story'<sup>5</sup>. Unlike Gilman and Wharton, Chopin was already a well-established writer in 1891, but this did not stop editors throughout the magazine publishing world from refusing this particular piece. The story eventually saw the light of day in the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* in April 1893, two years after it was written, and such a delay between writing and publication is actually not exceptional in the publication history of Chopin's work. In 1892 Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was published in the *New England Magazine*, but only after its now famous rejection by Horace Scudder, the over-scrupulously sensitive editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Charlotte Perkins Gilman would even go on publishing her stories in her own magazine, *The Forerunner*, between 1909 and 1916. As she details in her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, published posthumously in 1935, there were a modest number of editors who were willing to publish her writing, especially early in her career, but she was not willing to compromise her principles by complying to the prevailing tastes of magazine editors in the late nineteenth century and she defiantly refused offers from William Randolph Hearst to write for *Good Housekeeping* or *Cosmopolitan*. Her sense of purpose was always more powerful than her desire for either financial or critical success:

As years passed and continuous writing and speaking developed the various lines of thought I was following, my work grew in importance but lost in market value. Social philosophy, however ingeniously presented, does not command wide popular interest. I wrote more and sold less.

Theodore Dreiser, then on the *Delineator*, as I remember, looked gloomily at me over his desk, and said, 'You should consider more what the editors want.' Of course I should have, if I had been a competent professional writer. There are those who write as artists, real ones; they often find it difficult to consider what the editor wants. There are those who write to earn a living, they, if they succeed, must please the editor. The editor, having his living to earn, must please his purchasers, the public, so we have this great trade of literary catering. But if one writes to express important truths, needed yet unpopular, the market is necessarily limited.

As all my principal topics were in direct contravention of established views, beliefs and emotions, it is a wonder that so many editors took so much of my work for so long.<sup>6</sup>

All three writers felt the constraints of what was considered acceptable by the magazine editors and sought to find ways and means to accommodate the censorship of those in charge at the journals and publishing houses while still remaining in control of their own art.

Despite the apparent unanimity of the editorial establishment as regarding appropriate themes and subjects for the magazine audience<sup>7</sup>, all three writers knew that there were differences between editors and exploited these in so far as they could by submitting and resubmitting stories to different journals. Chopin, the writer most affected by the apparently arbitrary power of the editors, offers the following commentary in her essay series, 'As You Like It':

But editors are really a singular class of men; they have such strange and incomprehensible ways with them. I once submitted a story to a prominent New York editor, who returned it promptly with the observation that 'the public is getting very tired of that sort of thing.' I felt very sorry for the public; but I wasn't willing to take one man's word for it, so I clapped

<sup>3</sup> Actually the title of a book by Gilman, *The Man-Made World*; or, *Dur Androcentric Culture* (New York: Charlton Co., 1911).

<sup>4</sup> From the title of an essay, 'Our Literary Aristocrat' by Vernon L Parrington, *Pacific Review*, June 1921.

<sup>5</sup> Toth, Emily, *Kate Chopin* (London: Century, 1990), p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> Gilman Perkins Charlotte, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1935* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 303-4.

<sup>7</sup> See Larzer Ziff's discussion of the ideological imperatives of those in charge at the literary magazines at the turn of the century in his *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), pp. 123-4.

the offensive document into an envelope and sent it away again - this time to a well-known Boston editor.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the radical ideological differences between Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman - Chopin's total, self-declared abjuration of any moral intent for her fiction and Gilman's refusal to write anything which did not have the express intention of reform - they both had a clear sense of artistic purpose, as did Edith Wharton. All three writers stretched and manipulated generic conventions and boundaries in order to disrupt expected contiguities of structure and theme and they variously contracted and expanded the limits of the short story to accommodate their particular themes. Each writer made different responses to the requirements of the moral and pecuniary marketplace as well as to the dictates of their own imperatives as creative artists.

Kate Chopin wrote to earn a living; she kept records of submissions, transactions and monies earned; her account book details all payments received for published writing and tells us, for instance, that 'Mrs Mobry's Reason' earned her \$5.<sup>9</sup> Gilman lived for much of her professional life on the earnings she made from her lectures and writings, her fiction did not provide her with a steady or lucrative income and, as she says in her autobiography, she 'never got a cent for [The Yellow Wallpaper] till later publishers brought it out in book form, and very little then'<sup>10</sup> Edith Wharton lived on a very much grander scale than Chopin or Gilman, but, like them, she earned her own living and made shrewd financial decisions and advantageous deals with her publishers.

All three women wrote because they wanted to write, felt the imperative to create, to leave their mark on the world of letters, they had distinctive positions as to their purposes as writers. Chopin absolutely refused any insinuations of moral intent to her fiction, but both Gilman and Wharton expressed opinions to the effect that to have any value - aesthetic or otherwise - fiction must have a moral purpose. For both these writers the shared morality or indeed, in Gilman's case, the actual act of sharing a new and radical morality with her readers, was an intrinsic part of the design and point of the fiction. In a letter written in December 1905 to Dr Morgan Dix, the rector of Trinity Church in New York, Wharton says:

I could not do anything if I did not think seriously of my trade; and the more I have considered it, the more it has seemed to me valuable & interesting only in so far as it is "a criticism of life." - It almost seems to me that bad and good fiction (using the words in their ethical sense) might be defined as the kind which treats of life trivially and superficially, and that which probes deep enough to get at the relation with the eternal laws; and the novelist who has this feeling is so often discouraged by the comments of readers and critics who think a book "unpleasant" because it deals with unpleasant conditions, that it is a high solace and encouragement to come upon the recognition of one's motive. No novel worth anything can be anything but a novel "with a purpose," & if anyone who cared for the moral issue did not see in my work that I care for it, I should have no one to blame but myself - or at least my inadequate means of rendering my effects.<sup>11</sup>

Wharton's background and income gave her access to the kind of international culture of letters unavailable to Chopin, primarily for reasons of money and location. Whilst Kate Chopin's personal and professional network was therefore naturally more restricted than Wharton's, she did actively avoid participation in the kind of 'literary set' which St Louis had to offer. Chopin was always vigilant in defending herself against any charges of literary preciousness; both in her public and private writings she established a persona for herself which pretended to humility whilst actually ironizing the pretensions of those people who belonged to the kind of improvement 'Clubs' which were proliferating in the 1890s. An essay Chopin wrote for the Century magazine, entitled 'In the Confidence of a Story-Writer', published in 1899 without the author's name, makes plain her disdain for any intellectual or artistic affectation: 'I hurried to enroll myself among the thinkers and dispensers of knowledge, and propounders of questions. And very much out of place did I feel in these intellectual gatherings. I escaped by some pretext, and regained my corner, where no "questions" and no fine language can reach me.'<sup>12</sup>

In terms of her family background and education Kate Chopin was heir to a world set aside from Anglo-Saxon pruderies, its character significantly different from the childhood worlds of Wharton and Gilman, both so full of New England or Old New York interdictions and inhibitions. Warner Berthoff in an essay which introduced an edition of *The Awakening* in 1970 and which is reprinted in his *American Trajectories: Authors and Readings 1790- 1970*, expresses her difference thus: "Except for a scattering of immigrant sojourners like Crèvecoeur in the late colonial period or Lafcadio Hearn a century later, Kate Chopin is the first consequential figure in American writing whose birthright consciousness and literary taste

<sup>8</sup> Chopin Kate, (2006) "As you like it", *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted, (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, f. 717.

<sup>9</sup> Chopin, Kate *Account Book*, *Kate Chopin Papers*, Missouri Historical Society, St Louis, Mo.

<sup>10</sup> *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, pp. 98-9.

<sup>12</sup> Chopin, Kate *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p.704.

were formed outside the Protestant, Anglo-Scottish matrix of our older cultural history. We have, really, to look no further for the outward sources of those qualities in her work - the casually secure freedom of mind and feeling, the easy grace of form, the relative indifference to Grundyite prohibitions - that set her apart from the capable run of dialect-writers and local-color realists filling the magazines in her day.<sup>13</sup> Berthoffs estimation of her as capacious rather than narrowly focused, cosmopolitan rather than provincial, sophisticated rather than naive in terms of form, re-orientates our reading of her work in the broader context of European as well as American literature, establishing her in a relationship with French culture. Chopin went beyond the limits of her age in the depiction of race relations just as she transcended her age in the portrayal of sexual relations.

Kate Chopin is a complex and skilful technician in the medium of the short story and perhaps nothing is more worthy of close critical attention than her refusal to support the dominant social mores and morality even whilst exploiting a tradition, that of local color, whose conventions apparently support the status quo. Clearly the regional tale has been used by a number of writers, in Michael Davitt Bell's words: 'as a subset of American realism'<sup>14</sup> which is particularly concerned with the depiction of women's lives; but in the case both of Chopin and Wharton the shape and content of local color was modified, made to serve the distinct purpose of expressing the otherwise inexpressible through the regional. In Edith Wharton's work local color really only comes to life in the ghost story, tales of real or imagined terrors which haunt the landscape of New England, whereas Chopin's total immersion in Louisiana meant that the topography of her fiction is at once more mundane and more subversive in its use of the quietly dissenting voice.

Gilman was the author, as Ann J. Lane reports, of 490 poems and 186 pieces of fiction,<sup>15</sup> but her claims for her work were always modest in terms of their artistic merit; she was interested only in their potential to change her readers' perceptions of their everyday world. It is often repeated, indeed, has been until recently almost a critical truism, that the only 'real' work of art Charlotte Perkins Gilman produced is 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. The didactic intent, inscribed as it is in the structure, language and theme of all the short stories she wrote, actually show Gilman to be an expert manipulator of generic convention and form. She was concerned above all things to estrange her audience from the usual subjects and style of fiction in order to make them think anew about the culture in which they lived. Gilman was more usually to be found in a settlement house than a literary salon; her sense of her purpose and high duty to the improvement of the human race kept her out of literary circles.

The work of Chopin, Wharton and Gilman in the short story is perhaps more highly esteemed in contemporary critical opinion than ever before, a re-orientation that can substantially be attributed to the influence of feminist revisions of literary history. The three of them made a unique, innovatory contribution to the tradition of the short story.

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<sup>13</sup> Berthoff, Wamer *American Trajectories: Authors and Readings 1790-1970* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1994), p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Bell, Michael Davitt *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Lane, Ann J. *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York, Meridian, 1991), p. 289.