



Three Important Female Voices of the Fin de Siècle American Literature

Florinda Boriçi

Universiteti "Aleksandër Moisiu",
Durrës, Albania

Received: 10 January 2022 / Accepted: 21 March 2022 / Published: 30 March 2022
© 2022 Florinda Boriçi

Doi: 10.56345/ijrdv9n1s101

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 used the genre of the short story very much as an efficient and accessible form of fiction for the new feminist ideas and themes of the decade such as female self-assertion, female sexuality, childbirth and divorce. 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 siècle¹ American Literature. They were very prolific and at the same time innovative short-story writers, but they also wrote poetry, novels, essays and articles for various national magazines.

The last decade of the nineteenth century, the 1890s is associated with the New Woman phenomenon. The New Women during this period were rejecting the traditional female roles and also trying to redefine female sexuality. They were also asking for their rights to higher education and access in many professions that used to be available only to men.

The New Woman phenomenon of course had a political base in the activism of women in the 1890s. The decade was filled with many American feminist organizations, such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton as its first president. The association demanded equal pay for women with men for equal work that they did. The suffrage movement in the 1890s was mainly asking for the right to vote for women but women of colour were also fighting against racism and demanding racial equality. Thus, black women started to create their own organizations such as The National League of Colored Women (1893) or the The national Association of Colored Women (1896).

¹ The French term for end of the century is usually used in literary criticism books to refer to the end of the nineteenth century. The use of the French term instead of the English version "end of the century" is because the period is associated with the French decadence, symbolism and naturalism. Thus to refer to a writer or his or her work as fin de siècle, is to emphasize its association with those artistic and moral features of that period.

Elaine Showalter in her study *A Jury of her Peers* (2010) remarks that New Women's attitudes towards the sexual double standard and female sexuality were also revolutionary. She claims that while most American New Women believed that men should be as sexually chaste as women, they also saw women's relative passionlessness as constructed rather than natural.²

The "New Woman" was also used as a label to refer to some female authors in the 1890s who through their writings were trying to transform the traditional genres in order to be able to better express their messages. New Women poets were trying to succeed in the marketplace with their frankness and passion. One important New Woman poet was undoubtedly, Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919) who with her *Poems of Passion* (1883) and *Poems of Pleasure* (1888) became almost as a spokesperson for female sexuality. Whereas the American theatre was not yet ready for innovative writing. There were nevertheless a few New Women writers who showed an interest in the prospects and possibilities of the stage. One well-known woman playwright of the 1890s decade was Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952) but even though she was born in America she chose England to develop her career as a playwright, actress and producer.

Elaine Showalter claims that "American women writers believed that the short story was the most authentic and open-ended American genre at the turn of the century, and that they were hastening its development."³ The many magazines of the time were offering a broad market for short story writers. The short story as a genre was probably more in line with the rhythm and intensity of modern life. In contrast with the previous decades which were dominated by the epic form of the novel with famous novelists such as George Elliot (the pen name for Mary Ann Evans), American women writers of the 1890s chose the short story as a more preferable form of fiction especially for its concentration and brevity, usually focusing on a single narrative voice. It seemed more adequate to explore the female psychology and female inner life.

Showalter also believes that the "male aesthetes and decadent artists of the art nouveau movement ... symbolised the 1890s with its credo of 'art for art's sake'." And even though "the New Women were shocked by Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)... he with his allegorical genres, and his themes of the repressed and secret self, the mask and the costly pursuit of pleasure, influenced American women's short stories from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" to Willa Cather's "Paul's Case."⁴

Literatures at the end of centuries usually tend to be concerned with either with the past or the future. Sometimes it can be pessimistic looking desperately towards the end of the world or other times it can be utopian, dreaming for new beginnings. And in the 1890s in the United States of America there were dozens of utopian novels published, mostly by women writers about women characters. These novels usually revolved around the themes such as sex roles, sexual arrangements and reproduction.⁵ So apparently, if women's aspirations for sexual and intellectual freedom were not possible to come true in this world, some women writers of the fin de siècle American Literature tried to realize them in utopian fiction.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prominent American feminist theorician and New Woman writer that wrote during the decade of 1890s and experimented with utopian fiction. Most of her stories involve the creation of an ideal or Utopian community which normally has women who are active agents, but men are not excluded from participation, with the exception of her novel *Herland* (1915). However, Gilman's most famous work is not a utopic one, "The Yellow Wallpaper"⁶ It is a first-person narrative from an unnamed woman narrator and is written in the form of a journal by the main character/narrator that covers a three-month period during which she has been taken by her physician-husband, John, to a secluded house in the country with the purpose of curing her from a nervous illness, a slight hysterical tendency that she has developed after the birth of her son. The house where the character/narrator is staying is isolated and far away from the town. It is also secluded with high hedges and locked gates. She is staying in a large room at the top of the house with barred windows and the walls of which are covered in a yellow patterned wallpaper. Although she shares the bedroom with her husband during the night, she is locked there alone all day long during daytime and this is the time when she writes

² Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, (Virago Press, 2010), p.245.

³ Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, (Virago Press, 2010), p.248.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250.

⁵ Nan Bawman Albinski, "Utopia Reconsidered: Women Novelists and Nineteenth-Century Utopian Visions," *Signs* 13 (1988), pp. 830-841. Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, (Virago Press, 2010), p.254.

⁶ For the definitive history of the story and its publication, see Julie Bates Dock, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the History of Its Publication and Reception* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

secretly in her diary. The subtext that we as readers get from reading the story is that she is most probably suffering from a postpartum depression, a very severe one that her husband and relatives fear that she might harm the baby or even herself. The narrator projects her suicidal thoughts and violent obsessions onto the yellow wallpaper where she believes she sees the figure of a woman behind the pattern of the wallpaper that looks to her as if she is trapped and is trying to escape, in a way projecting her situation and state. In the end the narrator completely insane rips off the whole wallpaper thinking she liberated the woman in the wallpaper that seems personified by her in the end. Unlike the character/narrator, the author did not destroy herself when going through a similar experience with such treatment for depression, the "rest cure". Believing that neurasthenic New Women were suffering from a resistance to female traditional roles, doctors by the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century would have them to undergo the "rest cure"- a state of dependence, weight gain and inertia. They would be removed from the family homes and confined to a clinic for several weeks and they were forbidden to do any intellectual work. They would be treated with rich diets and electric stimulation. Gilman herself used her writing to fight this cure of confinement. The scholar Elaine Showalter suggests that through her works "Gilman outlined her Darwinian agenda of sexual evolution and equality."⁷

During the greatest part of the nineteenth century, writers from New York and Boston had dominated the literary scene, but after the Civil War, New Orleans was also becoming a literary center. Louisiana had often been mythologized as a utopic American space which with its warm weather had become associated with a more pronounced sensuality. New Orleans with its predominant Creole culture, its European lifestyle had a reputation for a hedonistic and a more sensual way of life than anywhere else in the United States. In the decade of the 1890s the number of women that wrote fiction in Louisiana, increased. These women writers were even creating their own literary salons. Three groups of people were dominant in the population of New Orleans -the Creoles who were rich white descendants of the early French and Spanish settlers; the Acadians and Cajuns- descendants of French immigrants who had been expelled from Nova Scotia in Canada in the eighteenth century; and the African-Americans that were ex slaves. New Orleans was the most liberal place in the United States with regard to racial mixing. All this spirit of New Orleans was beautifully captured by the author Kate Chopin, who was born in St. Louis, Missouri but moved to New Orleans after her marriage to Oscar Chopin and it was precisely here when she started her literary career and where she set most of her writings. During the 1890s she published a novel and two books of short stories. Despite the fact that her stories were initially referred to as "local color" -the sub genre of realism in the late nineteenth century American Literature which emphasized the specific characteristics of a certain area, language, customs, charm etc. But Chopin found the label too restrictive because she would say "special problems, social environments, local color and the rest of it are not of themselves motives to ensure the survival of a writer who employs them."⁸ According to the Swedish scholar Per Seyersted "she disliked being compared to other local color women writers such as Grace King or Sarah Orne Jewett because unlike them she did not use an old woman as a narrator and because her interest was universal human nature rather than local color per se."⁹ Kate Chopin's vision went beyond the regional aspects of Louisiana and this can be easily observed in her strong, courageous and self-assertive heroines. She was probably the most daring American woman author of the 1890s that sought for free literary expression. Seyersted states that "what she really wanted to write about was the impulses which are found in men and women all over the globe, especially love and sexuality. Her particular ambition was to describe the woman, to give a true picture of the fundamentals of her existence."¹⁰ She is considered as a predecessor of the twentieth century feminism because of the many memorable, strong and unconventional female characters that Chopin has created throughout the career. Some of these are: Paula Von Stoltz from "Wiser than a God" who is a young talented concert pianist that when she gets a proposition for marriage, despite her love for her fiancé, chooses her career because music to her is "something dearer than life, than riches and even than love."¹¹ Whereas the character of Eleanor Gail from "A Point at Issue" is a woman who wants to be a man's equal. In another story "A Shameful Affair" Mildred Orme is the first heroine from Chopin's female characters who is awakened to a spiritual and sensuous emancipation. Later Chopin would treat openly and amorally the woman's sexual self-assertion in her novel *The Awakening* (1899) but this can also be noticed in the short story "A Respectable Woman". And the culmination would be without doubt the character of Calixta in "The Storm". Here Chopin disclosed even further

⁷ Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, (Virago Press, 2010), p.261.

⁸ Kate Chopin, "Crumbling Idols," *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p. 693.

⁹ Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p.83.

¹⁰ Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p.98.

¹¹ Kate Chopin, "Wiser than a God" in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p.46.

her skill to describe life uninhibited by conventional ethics and norms. According to Seyersted “the story was one of the boldest treatments in American Literature of the sensuous, independent woman”¹² But of course Chopin was aware that no magazine or editor in the puritan United States of the late nineteenth century, would accept it for publication so she did not even attempt to submit it anywhere. The story was discovered and published only in 1969 when the Swedish scholar Per Seyersted collected and published *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* in one volume for the first time.

As mentioned earlier in this article, women’s writing during the decade of 1890 had become more feminist or at least had taken a more feminist position regarding women’s rights and what they could do in literature, by the end of this decade and in the first decades of the twentieth century, other women writers started to refuse to be defined as women writers completely. Such was the case of Edith Wharton, because she wanted to go beyond the stereotypes and the expectations that are associated with the writings of women. Wharton openly criticised the literature produced by other American women, she particularly disliked the “feminine” sensibility and that is why she frequently chose to write from the point of view of men and not women. Wharton was a great novelist with a long career that started in the 1890s up to the 1930s and is the first woman writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel *The Age of Innocence* in 1921. Wharton started her career as a short story writer but later went on to publish many novels, novellas as well as poems, essays, travel writing, literary criticism and a memoir. She was a great writer and especially because of her commitment to her art that went beyond the limitation of gender. Wharton had the fortune to be born in a high society family in New York and later marrying again rich enabled her to travel and live for long periods in Europe and immerse herself in European art. Probably it is because of this that besides rejecting the category of “woman writer” Wharton also rejected the category of “American writer”. In her work as in her life she rejected the customs of her country and felt like “an exile in America”¹³ and made fun of American ways from abroad. Wharton initially was dismissive of using New England as a setting for her writings but ended up doing so in many of her works because she was immersed in the region and sought to take advantage of its potential and to expand the aesthetic possibilities that it offered. Edith Wharton through her works has become one of the most important founders of the twentieth century American Literature by combining really well as Showalter suggests, “a masculine and intellectual approach to fiction with a feminine attention to detail and feeling.”¹⁴ She explored in her works the evolving worlds of female characters and sometimes the limiting worlds of male characters and in so doing, she placed herself as an author in relation to both male and female literary traditions of the fin de siècle American literature.

Literary critics and literary histories often leave women writers in obscurity by emphasizing more the contributions of male authors but these women authors have left an indelible record with their works and their voices in American Literature and thus playing an important part in the American literary tradition. Their contribution and legacy needs to be cherished.

References

- Chopin, Kate, (2006), *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
Seyersted, Per, (1980), *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
Showalter, Elaine, (2010), *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, Virago Press.

¹² Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p.164.

¹³ Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.5 quoted in Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, (Virago Press, 2010), p.314.

¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, (Virago Press, 2010), p.313.