A Point at Issue! Study Guide

A Point at Issue! by Kate Chopin

Contents

Introduction

Kate Chopin's "A Point at Issue!" appeared, along with "Wiser than a God," in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* on October 27, 1889. Its publication marked the beginning of a decade of literary work by the author that culminates in her controversial masterpiece *The Awakening.* "A Point at Issue!," which now can be found in her *Collected Works,* announces Chopin's interest in the dynamics of male female relationships, a subject she would explore in various ways throughout the body of her work.

The relationship at the heart of "A Point at Issue!" is that of Charles and Eleanor Faraday, who pride themselves on their progressive attitude toward marriage. Determined to maintain their independence, they embark on a test of their resolve, which involves a long period of separation. While they are able to withstand the social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, they ultimately cannot ignore the dictates of their own hearts. Charles and Eleanor's developing relationship illuminates the human desires that inevitably complicate the quest for freedom.

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Author Biography

Katherine O'Flaherty was born on February 8, 1851, in St. Louis, Missouri to Thomas and Eliza (Faris) O'Flaherty. Her mother introduced the family to the prominent French-Creole community in St. Louis, a group that would appear later as characters in her daughter's fiction. Her father's successful business ventures as a merchant granted their inclusion in the city's high society. When Katherine was four, her idyllic childhood came to an end after her beloved father's sudden death in a train accident. Thereafter, she was raised by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, whose storytelling enthralled Katherine.

Katherine was an avid reader during her school years. After she graduated in 1868, she was caught up in the social life of St. Louis but maintained her independent streak, which eventually prompted her to question the position of women in her society and time. In 1870, she married businessman Oscar Chopin with whom she would have six children. She and Oscar, whose background was French-Creole, moved to New Orleans, where they gained entrance into the city's social community. Oscar's business collapsed, however, forcing the family's relocation to Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, which would become the fictional backdrop for many of Chopin's short stories. After her husband died in 1883 of swamp fever, Chopin moved back to St. Louis and began writing in an effort to cope with the loss.

Chopin's first published work, a poem titled "If It Might Be," appeared in the Chicago periodical *America* in 1889. After being introduced to the work of French author Guy de Maupassant, she published two short stories: "Wiser than a God" and "A Point at Issue!" These works established the subject matter that would dominate her fiction— an examination of the intricacies of male-female relationships. In 1890, her first novel, *At Fault,* was published with mixed reviews.

During the next few years, she wrote over three dozen stories and sketches, many of which were published in magazines like *Youth's Companion, Harper's Young People,* and *Vogue.* In 1894, a collection of twenty-three of her stories appeared under the title *Bayou Folk,* which earned her a reputation as an important writer about local color. Her short story collection *A Night in Acadie* also received strong reviews when it appeared in 1897.

Her most famous and most celebrated work, *The Awakening,* produced a public outcry after its publication in 1899. Readers claimed the novel's focus on the sexual awakening of a young married woman was pornographic and immoral. The negative response, coupled with her inability to publish another collection of short stories due to their controversial subject matter, tarnished her reputation and effectively ended her literary career, although she continued to write. In 1904, she began to have health problems, and on August 22 of that year, she died in St. Louis of a cerebral hemorrhage. Since her death, her literary reputation has grown considerably. She is now considered to be one of the most important American realists.

Plot Summary

"A Point at Issue!" begins with the wedding announcement of Eleanor Gail and Charles Faraday, as printed in the Plymdale *Promulgator,* the couple's local newspaper. Eleanor is not happy with the announcement because she considers it to be "an indelicate thrusting of herself upon the public notice." She had agreed to the announcement as a concession to social rules, hoping that she would not have to make such concessions in the future.

Her new husband, Charles, regards her as the ideal woman; he is happy that she is "logical" and will study subjects with him such as philosophy and science. When Eleanor declares that she wants to learn to speak French fluently, the two decide that she will study in Paris while he spends most of the year in America. After their European honeymoon, Eleanor rents rooms in Paris and Charles returns to Plymdale, planning to spend the following summer with her. The couple's behavior outrages Plymdale society, which is indignant at the idea that "two young people should presume to introduce such innovations into matrimony." The two write each other regularly.

Charles begins spending his free time with the Beatons, a local family, finding them "all clever people, bright and interesting." Mr. Beaton is a colleague at the university where Charles teaches. Charles thoroughly enjoys the company of this happy family, especially that of their blissful and self-absorbed youngest daughter, Kitty. Charles writes to Eleanor expressing his admiration for the young girl, dismissing as illogical the possibility that his wife would be jealous, but Eleanor does not send back a response with her usual promptness. When a letter finally does arrive, it expresses an "inexplicable coldness" in tone. However, he soon receives several letters from his wife "that shook him with their unusual ardor."

After a winter apart from his wife, Charles leaves for Paris to see her. Before he arrives, there is a description of Eleanor pacing her rooms, obviously disturbed, fighting "a misery of the heart, against which her reason was in armed rebellion." The narrator does not reveal the nature of the misery that causes Eleanor to collapse in "a storm of sobs and tears."

When Charles arrives, he sees only his familiar, idealized vision of his wife, but then notices that she has become more beautiful. As they converse, a housemaid appears, eyeing Eleanor "with the glance of a fellow conspirator" and holding a card in her hand. Eleanor hastily thrusts the card in her pocket and turns toward Charles "a little flustered."

A few days later, Charles interrupts a conversation between Eleanor and a handsome man in her parlor. The narrator notes that "they were both disconcerted" and that Eleanor "had the appearance of wanting to run away, to do any thing but meet her husband's glance." Charles accepts his wife's assertion that her visitor was "no one special." A few days later, however, when Eleanor tells him vaguely that she has an urgent appointment, he begins to question his wife's fidelity.

Unable to rid his mind of "ugly thoughts," Charles walks around Paris. While sitting at a café, he sees Eleanor riding in a carriage with the same man who had come to see her. Both appear in high spirits. Charles's initial reaction is to "tear the scoundrel from his seat and paint the boulevard red with his villainous blood."

When Charles returns to their apartment, he finds Eleanor waiting impatiently for him. She leads him excitedly into the parlor where he meets the handsome stranger. Eleanor presents him to Charles as an artist who has just completed a portrait of her, intended as a surprise for Charles's arrival. She notes that its completion had been delayed, hence the necessity, Charles understands, for their meetings.

As Charles begins his plans to return home, Eleanor asks him whether he believes that she has gained a good command of French, and he answers in the affirmative. She then suggests he book a passage home for two, which fills him with happiness. Then, he inquires about the coldness of the letter she had sent him a few months ago, and Eleanor admits that it was written in response to his declaration of his feelings for Kitty. Eleanor reveals her failure to suppress jealous emotions but insists that she believes that her husband has remained faithful. Astonished at her admitted jealousy, Charles concludes to himself, "but my Nellie is only a woman after all." The narrator closes the story noting the fact that Charles has conveniently forgotten his own jealousy.

Summary

"A Point at Issue!" is Kate Chopin's short story of Charles and Eleanor Faraday, a newly married couple living in America at the end of the nineteenth century. The personalities of two independent intellectuals tentatively find their way in a marriage on the cusp of the women's rights movement.

As the story begins, Eleanor reads the announcement of her marriage to Charles Faraday in the local newspaper. Eleanor is not the typical new bride and had eschewed many of the festivities and accoutrements of a wedding in which most young women revel. This stark notice, situated among vendor advertisements, is appalling to Eleanor. It seems as if her marriage is thrust upon the newspaper's readers, who could not possibly be interested in this bit of news. Eleanor has acquiesced to the announcement in the hopes that any future social obligations may be lessened.

Eleanor's new husband, Charles, is a mathematics professor at the local university and considers Eleanor to be the perfect woman for her intellect and ability to reason, qualities he had not encountered in any other young women up to this point in his life.

Before the couple marries, they spend a year getting to know each other and delight in long conversations of philosophy, science, and other logical pursuits. Suddenly, one day, Charles realizes that Eleanor embodies all the characteristics of a good wife, as well as an intellectual match. He proposes. Eleanor casually accepts, having considered the potential of a proposal long ago.

The couple's shared objective is to continue their individual pursuits in academic and cultural areas. When it is suggested that Eleanor reside alone in Paris to learn French after their three-month honeymoon in Europe, both bride and groom think it a perfect plan.

The first year of the marriage is carried on via written correspondence. Both Eleanor and Frank enjoy their respective endeavors with the plan being that Frank will rejoin Eleanor in Paris at the beginning of the summer. This unconventional relationship, especially so early in the marriage, baffles their home community that wonders at the veracity of such an arrangement.

Charles is too preoccupied with his own work to worry about gossip in the social sector and never mentions the scandal to Eleanor in Paris. There is one family in town with whom Charles socializes, that of Mr. and Mrs. Beaton and their daughters, Margaret and Kitty. Charles is particularly taken with Kitty, who has just finished boarding school, and finds himself stirred to kiss her cheek.

Unwittingly, Charles mentions Kitty's feminine charms in a letter to Eleanor and is met with a few weeks of no return letters from his wife. Finally, Eleanor sends a letter to Charles. However, the tone is so cold that he cannot imagine what has possessed her, because jealousy is not a logical thing. Just as surprisingly to Charles, he soon receives a string of letters from Eleanor, brimming with ardor.

Finally, it is time for Charles to make the trip to Paris to see Eleanor. As the moment of their reunion approaches, Eleanor paces nervously in her room and eventually collapses in tears with no explanation of her distress.

Charles delights in seeing Eleanor again and finds that Paris life agrees with her, as she looks exceedingly healthy and happy. As the couple has dinner in Eleanor's room that night, a maid interrupts with the news of a male visitor that Eleanor dismisses to another time. Charles asks no questions, and Eleanor offers no explanations about the man.

One day, Charles stumbles onto a meeting between Eleanor and a strange man, which obviously unnerves Eleanor. Charles questions his wife about the man, but she declares that he is no one special. Not long after, Eleanor tells Charles that she must go out for the afternoon without him. He takes a walk through the streets of Paris to clear his mind of any thoughts that Eleanor is being unfaithful.

While sitting in a cafy, Charles sees Eleanor in a carriage accompanied by the man whom he had seen at Eleanor's apartment a few days before. Charles is shocked to see the pair laughing and enjoying each other's company. His instinct is to throw himself at the carriage and attack the man.

Charles weighs his options and considers returning home to America without a word to Eleanor. However, he decides to return to Eleanor's apartment, where Eleanor is waiting anxiously. Eleanor leads Charles into a drawing room, where she reveals a portrait of herself recently completed by the man with whom she has been seen recently.

The portrait wasn't completed in time for presentation at Charles' arrival, so Eleanor had to schedule a few more meetings with the artist, accounting for her recent, unexplained behavior.

Eleanor asks Charles if he thinks her French is good enough that she might return home with him to America, and he confirms that it is. With plans to return home together, Charles asks Eleanor about the cool tone of the letter she had sent him a while ago, and she replies that she had been jealous of his descriptions of Kitty Beaton.

Charles smiles to himself, realizing that Eleanor is only a woman. He forgets the events surrounding the portrait.

Analysis

The story is told from the third person perspective, which means that the reader is not privy to the thoughts or feelings of the characters, and views the plot as the events reveal themselves. This point of view is effective for this story, because of the almost clinical relationship between Eleanor and Charles. Their intellectual pursuits definitely take priority over passion, so it is fitting that the reader sees only facts and not emotions.

The time period in which the story takes place, the late nineteenth century, was an important one for the burgeoning women's rights issues in America. Eleanor is a contemporary woman for the time, well aware of her own worth. She marries Charles for companionship and mutual intellectual pursuits. At the beginning of the story, the author makes it very clear that Eleanor is uncomfortable with the wedding announcement in the newspaper and that she's has deflected all the normal festivities associated with weddings. Eleanor desires a union, where she is considered an equal and finds that in Charles.

The author points out the classic struggle of connection versus freedom in every intimate relationship, and Charles and Eleanor fall victim to jealousy in spite of their best intentions to keep their marriage at a higher level. True commitment and surrender to another person in marriage demands more than casual interests and pursuits. Charles and Eleanor learn this by the end of the story.

At the end, the author switches point of view, so that the reader knows that Charles thinks that Eleanor, after all that's happened, reacts as any woman would, based on her jealousy. Charles, in his self-important mode, has forgotten the rage he experienced just a short while ago, when seeing Eleanor with the strange man. Ironically, Charles, who considers himself to be above such illogical thought, suffers the same pangs of jealousy as Eleanor, which may be the element that cements the relationship after all.

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Characters

Monsieur l' Artiste

This is the name the narrator gives to the artist who paints Eleanor's portrait as a surprise gift for Charles. Eleanor's actions suggest that she had some romantic feelings for the artist, who is described as quite handsome. He fades, however, into the background when the portrait is completed and Eleanor decides to return home with Charles.

Kitty Beaton

Kitty, the youngest Beaton daughter, has just returned from boarding school when Charles begins his relationship with her family. She is a headstrong young woman, "with a Napoleonic grip . . . keeping the household under her capricious command," described as self-centered. "Her girlish charms" however, coupled with the "soft shining light of her eyes" touch Charles to such a degree that he admits his desire to kiss her. Yet, while nothing in the story suggests that he ever acts on this desire, his acknowledgement of his feelings toward the young woman stirs Eleanor's jealousy and perhaps her own attention to Monsieur l'Artiste.

Margaret Beaton

Margaret, the eldest Beaton daughter, becomes a representative feminist in the story. Her community views her as "slightly erratic" for her participation in the Woman's Suffrage movement, which includes the wearing of "mysterious" clothes as a statement of solidarity with her sisters and freedom from constraining social custom. The narrator critiques her actions, noting that her clothes produced "the distinction of a quasi-emancipation," which, "defeated the ultimate purpose" of her cause.

Mr. Beaton

Mr. Beaton is a fellow professor at the university where Charles teaches. He is an older man but retains a youthful vitality, which "formed the nucleus around which [his] family gathered, drawing the light of their own cheerfulness." Charles enjoys the company of Beaton and his family in Eleanor's absence.

Mrs. Beaton

Mrs. Beaton, Mr. Beaton's wife, represents the traditional wife and mother. Her "aspirations went not further than the desire for her family's good, and her bearing announced in its every feature, the satisfaction of completed hopes."

Charles Faraday

Charles, a professor of mathematics at Plymdale University, originally falls in love with Eleanor Gail because of her beauty. Later, her logical mind makes her what Charles considers his "ideal woman." Charles creates an ideal vision of marriage, insisting that he and his wife will reject the traditional restrictions on individuality that are typical of the institution. His convictions are strong enough to endure public condemnation, although the critics appear to be harsher in their assessment of Eleanor's behavior than of his.

Charles tempers his wife's earnestness with humor and optimism that prevents their explorations into the ideas of the times from acquiring "a too monotonous sombreness." He has an outgoing and friendly nature that "invited companionship from his fellow beings."

Charles has an active mind and prides himself on his careful thought processes. He comes to conclusions by the slow "consecutive steps of reason." Concluding that Eleanor should have the opportunity to fulfill her desires, he adapts himself quite readily to the long separation from her, resuming his "bachelor existence as quietly as though it had been interrupted but by the interval of a day."

His optimistic vision of his wife and their unconventional marriage, however, blinds him to the realities of human nature. He does not see the danger in his affections for Kitty, nor does he understand that sharing those feelings with Eleanor will cause a very human, jealous response. He also fails to recognize that same fault in his own character when he becomes enraged over his suspicions that Eleanor is having an affair with the handsome Frenchman he sees in her company. Ironically, he quickly falls back into ascribing stereotypes when he faults his wife's jealously, noting that really, she is "only a woman after all" while forgetting his own display of that same emotion.

Eleanor Faraday

Eleanor Faraday enters into a non-traditional marriage with Charles, both respecting the other's sense of individuality and needs. Eleanor is Charles's "ideal woman," intelligent and intellectually curious. She becomes the perfect companion for Charles as the two engage in various programs of study. Although she has a logical mind, "sharp in its reasoning, strong and unprejudiced in its outlook," she also displays a quick intuition, a nice counter to Charles's slower, more methodical thought processes. Her earnestness and intensity are balanced by Charles gentle humor. He also appreciates her confidence, "unmarred by self-conscious mannerisms."

Eleanor has a history of diverging "from the beaten walks of female Plymdaledom," a tendency she exhibits from the start of the story when she complains about having to put her marriage announcement in the local newspaper. This type of public recognition disturbs her and she has previously avoided it. Her refusal to go against her nature and to make expected social concessions has resulted in her being branded a "crank." When she refused to have a pre-announcement of the wedding published, the public "while condemning her present, were unsparing of her past, and full with damning prognostic of her future." Yet, Eleanor stands "stoically enough" in the face of public criticism. For her, "the satisfying consciousness of roaming the heights of free thought, and tasting the sweets of a spiritual emancipation" far outweighed the slights.

Eleanor, like her husband, takes pride in her independence and her sense of reason. Yet, again as is the case with her husband, both qualities are tested during the course of the story and found wanting. Her immediate reaction to Charles's declaration of his feelings for Kitty is jealousy, and perhaps, the narrator hints, an urge to take a lover. Her utter despondency before Charles arrives suggests that she may have entered into a relationship with Monsieur l'Artiste. The narrator never makes the relationship clear and avoids any insight into her motivation, but her actions suggest that she has difficulty accepting Charles's independence and honesty when it concerns his attention to another woman.

Eleanor, however, is able to quickly restore her relationship with Charles when she explains her business relationship with Monsieur l'Artiste and declares that she wants to return to America. Ironically, her honesty in admitting her jealousy over Kitty prompts her husband to regard her in a traditional light, as an emotionally flawed woman.

Themes

Freedom

The story begins with Charles and Eleanor determined to retain their freedom within their marriage, which they insist will not "touch the individuality of either; that was to be preserved intact." Priding themselves on their progressive attitudes, they make an unconventional decision to separate for most of the year while Eleanor pursues her desire to study French. After they part, each feels the pang of separation, but they are confident in the rightness of "a situation that offered the fulfillment of a cherished purpose."

Jealousy

Soon, however, jealousy interferes with the couple's determination to maintain their personal freedom. Charles's loneliness prompts him to seek out the company of the Beatons, especially their young, attractive daughter Kitty. Assuming that reason will temper any other emotion, he tells Eleanor of his attraction to the girl. Naturally, Eleanor cannot contain her jealousy and delays her customary letter to Charles. When the letter finally arrives, it contains "an inexplicable coldness."

Charles experiences his own bout with jealousy when he arrives in Paris. After he comes across a handsome Parisian in the company of his wife, he becomes uneasy. His mood affects his vision of the beautiful city as he finds "the inadequacy of every thing that is offered to his contemplation or entertainment."

His jealousy "drove him to ugly thoughts," which are compounded when he sees Eleanor and the Frenchman in high spirits, riding in a carriage. Incensed, Charles contemplates tearing "the scoundrel from his seat and paint the boulevard red with his villainous blood." He is eventually able to temper his emotions with reason. Yet, the incident prompts him to reevaluate his insistence on freedom in marriage. He admits, "here was the first test, and should he be the one to cry out, 'I cannot endure it.'"

Repression

By the end of the story, the dynamic of Charles and Eleanor's relationship shifts from freedom to repression. Both have already experienced emotions that, they determine, need to be repressed because they are illogical. Yet Charles's suspicions of Eleanor's potential infidelity prompt him "to wonder if there might not be modifications to this marital liberty of which he was so staunch an advocate."

Eleanor also comes to the conclusion that absolute freedom of expression is not appropriate in a successful relationship. When Charles is stunned by her admission of jealousy in response to his feelings for Kitty, she admits, "I have found that there are certain things which a woman can't philosophize about, any more than she can about death when it touches that which is near to her." Ultimately, her desire to strengthen her relationship with her husband supersedes her desire for independence, and she decides to return home with Charles.

Style

Impressionism

In her article for *Modern American Women Writers,* Wai-chee Dimock notes Chopin's impressionistic style in many of her works including *The Awakening.* She argues that "things are transitory in her writings—nothing is fixed, irrevocable, or predetermined." As a result, Dimock insists, "there is no last word in Chopin. Light and shadows play in her fiction; moods come and go. Nothing stands still, and everything could have been otherwise." Chopin uses this technique in "A Point at Issue!" when she focuses on Eleanor's experiences in Paris. The impressionistic vision she supplies never allows the reader to determine the causes of Eleanor's despair or what motivates her to leave Paris. Her relationship with the artist who paints her portrait is also left vague. As a result, readers are unable to judge her actions, which was most likely Chopin's intention. Chopin's narrators rarely comment on characters' behavior, which effectively redirects the readers' attention not to motivation, but to consequences. This stylistic device becomes an appropriate method to employ in her investigations of how morality can become merely a social, not ethical, construct.

Symbolism

Chopin symbolizes the conflicts Charles and Eleanor will face in their marriage when, at the beginning of the story, she describes their wedding announcement in the local paper. The announcement is "modestly wedged in between" an offer to mail the paper to subscribers who will be "leaving home for the summer months" and "an equally somber-clad notice" of a local company's "large and varied assortment of marble and granite monuments." Charles, in fact, will be one of the subscribers who will be out of town when he visits his wife in Paris during the summer months. The reference to gravestones suggests the inevitable death of independence that Eleanor will face by the end of the story.

The Beaton family becomes another important symbol in the story. Mr. and Mrs. Beaton typify the traditional marriage: he holds an important teaching position at a university, engaging his mind and his talents while his wife concerns herself exclusively with the operations of the household. While her sister Margaret has joined a radical feminist movement, Kitty Beaton turns her attentions to more conventional activities, "keeping the household under her capricious command." Her combination of youthful vigor and traditional role-playing obviously attracts Charles, whose conservative slant emerges more noticeably by the end of the story.

Historical Context

Realism

Realism became a popular form of painting, especially in works by Gustave Courbet, and literature in the mid nineteenth century. Writers involved in this movement, such as Gustave Flaubert, turned away from what they considered the artificiality of romanticism to a focus on the occurrences of everyday, contemporary life. They rejected the idealism and celebration of the imagination typical of romantic novels and instead took a serious look at believable characters and their often problematic interactions with society. To accomplish this goal, realist novelists focused on the commonplace and eliminated the unlikely coincidences and excessive emotionalism of romantic novelists.

The realist movement in America included a conscious turning away from the structure and content of the works of the American Renaissance. Writers like Samuel Clemens discarded the traditional optimism and idealism of Thoreau and Emerson and the romantic forms and subject matter of Hawthorne and Poe. Instead, they chronicled the strengths and weaknesses of ordinary people confronting difficult social problems, like the restrictive conventions under which nineteenth-century women suffered. Writers who embraced realism used settings and plot details that reflected their characters' daily lives and realistic dialogue that replicates natural speech patterns.

Naturalism

Naturalism is a literary movement that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in France, America, and England. Writers included in this group, like Stephen Crane, Emile Zola, and Theodore Dreiser, expressed in their works a biological and/or environmental determinism that prevented their characters from exercising their free will and controlling their fates. Crane often focused on the social and economic factors that overpowered his characters. Zola's and Dreiser's work include this type of environmental determinism coupled with an exploration of the influences of heredity in their portraits of the animalistic nature of men and women engaged in the endless and brutal struggle for survival.

Literary critics have found elements of realism and naturalism in Kate Chopin's depiction of the difficult struggle women at the turn of the last century faced as they tried to establish a clear sense of self. The realistic struggles in her fiction raise complex questions about how much influence women have over their destinies.

The New Woman

At the close of the nineteenth century, feminist thinkers began to engage in a rigorous investigation of female identity as it related to all aspects of a woman's life. Any woman who questioned traditional female roles was tagged a "New Woman," a term attributed to novelist Sarah Grand, whose 1894 article in the *North American Review* identified an emergent group of women, influenced by J. S. Mill and other champions of individualism, who supported and campaigned for women's rights. A dialogue resulted among these women that incorporated radical as well as conservative points of view.

The most radical thinkers in this group declared the institution of marriage to be a form of slavery and demanded its abolition. They rejected the notion that motherhood should be the ultimate goal of all women. The more conservative feminists of this age considered marriage and motherhood acceptable roles only if guidelines were set in order to prevent a woman from assuming an inferior position to her husband in any area of their life together. This group felt that a woman granted equality in marriage would serve as an exemplary role model for her children by encouraging the development of an independent spirit. Chopin's works enter into this dialogue, exploring a woman's place in traditional and nontraditional marital unions.

Critical Overview

Per Seyersted, in his biography on Chopin, noted that after her first two short stories "A Point at Issue!" and "Wiser than a God" had been published in 1889, editors told Chopin that her stories would continue to be published if she could create more traditional female characters. Luckily, Chopin did not listen. Over the next decade, her works would focus on women who struggled to break away from conventional standards. As a result, the public often found Chopin's work shocking. After the publication of her masterful novel *The Awakening* in 1899, in which Chopin made her boldest statement on the necessity for personal expression, public outrage eventually resulted in the end of her literary career.

During the ten years between the publication of her first short stories and her novel, Chopin earned a reputation as an important local writer. Her short story collections *Bayou Folk,* published in 1894, and *A Night in Acadie,* which appeared in 1897, gained solid reviews that praised her accurate portraits of bayou life and her concise style. Chopin collected her more radical stories of male-female relationships previously rejected for publication into a third collection, *A Vocation and a Voice,* but she was unable to find a publisher.

The response to *The Awakening* was overwhelmingly negative. Many reviewers attacked the character of Edna Pontiellier, including one in *Public Opinion* who was "well satisfied" by Edna's fate, and another in the *Nation* who complained of the "unpleasantness" of his response to the main character. The book was subsequently banned from many libraries due to its controversial and subversive subject matter. One of the few positive reviews, from a critic for the *New York Times Book Review,* praised Chopin's artistry in the novel and responded to Edna with "pity for the most unfortunate of her sex."

The public's anger over the novel effectively ended Chopin's literary career. As Tonnette Bond Inge notes in her article on Chopin in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Chopin "passed from the literary scene almost entirely unappreciated for her pioneering contributions to American fiction." Yet in the 1930s, a new generation of readers began to appreciate her short stories, and she again earned praise as a describer of local color. In the 1950s, *The Awakening* began to be recognized as an important literary work. Robert Cantwell, for example, wrote in the *Georgia Review* of Chopin's "heightened sensuous awareness" and insisted that the work was "a great novel."

In the 1960s, scholars heralded the complex psychological portraits and sociological themes in Chopin's fiction. Their reviews, coupled with Per Seyersted's definitive biography and edited collection of her complete works, established her reputation as one of the twentieth century's most important authors.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an instructor of American literature and film. In this essay, Perkins analyzes Chopin's exploration of the difficulties inherent in the establishment of a nonconventional marriage.

A recurring theme in much of Kate Chopin's work is women's difficult struggle for emancipation. In her article for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Tonette Bond Inge notes that as Chopin explores this theme, she does not avoid "showing the sacrifices and suffering associated with the journey to self-realization." This struggle becomes the main focus of Chopin's masterpiece *The Awakening* as it documents Edna Pontillier's journey from the restrictions of marriage to a discovery of self that affords her a sense, albeit an ironic one, of freedom. As it traces Edna's difficult process of awakening to selfhood, the novel reflects society's determination to force women to conform to expected roles.

As in *The Awakening,* most of Chopin's fiction chronicles the movement of her characters from bondage to freedom, outlining the social obstacles that impede this journey. Yet Chopin's earliest work is not reflective of this pattern. "A Point at Issue!," one of her first published short stories, begins with the main character already emancipated. At the beginning of the story, Eleanor, a strong woman with a clear sense of her own desires, has entered into an unconventional marriage with Charles Faraday that affords her the opportunity to express her individuality outside the traditional boundaries of this union. However, while she has been able to withstand social pressure to conform to delineated female roles, she ultimately cannot ignore the dictates of her own heart. As a result, by the end of the story, she has moved from freedom to the bondage of a traditional marriage. In her depiction of Eleanor's journey, Chopin exemplifies the human as well as social limitations that impede the quest for freedom.

Chopin created Eleanor as a reflection of the growing women's movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when an increasing number of women questioned traditional notions of marriage and motherhood. As a "new woman" Eleanor clearly rejects the primacy of social judgments of behavior, developing her own sense of her identity. At the beginning of the story, she has agreed to enter into a marriage with Charles Faraday, but only because they have both determined that their union will not restrict either partner's individuality. They idealistically view marriage, as noted by Barbara H. Solomon in her introduction to *The Awakening and Selected Stories,* as "an unfinished, incompletely defined institution," where husband and wife are continually making "new decisions" and not playing "mechanical roles."

The first new decision Eleanor makes is to not publish an engagement announcement in the local paper. Eleanor had "endured long and patiently the trials that beset her path when she chose to diverge from the beaten walks of female Plymdaledom." Her overwhelming need to roam "the heights of free thought, and taste the sweets of a spiritual emancipation" had given her the strength to endure social condemnation.

Charles appreciates Eleanor's "clear intellect" and "the beautiful revelations of her mind" and so he encourages her to engage with him in the study of the world around them. They seem well suited to each other, each complimenting and balancing the other's qualities. Her intellectual curiosity piques his own while his humor and optimism temper her earnestness and intensity. She is to him an ideal woman, one who will not reshape her identity into the traditional role of wife. They decide "to be governed by no precedential methods. Marriage was to be a form, that while fixing legally their relation to each other, was in no wise to touch the individuality of either." As a result, marriage becomes for her "the open portal through which she might seek the embellishments that her strong, graceful mentality deserved."

Per Seyersted, in his biography on Chopin, writes that Eleanor is not a reflection of the more radical tenets of the emerging women's movement. He notes that Eleanor will enter into marriage with Charles only on an equal footing, but she accomplishes this by cooperating with him "without any of the antagonism often attributed to her emancipationist sister." Seyersted argues that the story promotes real emancipation, "not the 'quasiemancipation' [Chopin] authorially attributes to women showing their protest by wearing strange clothes, but the true, inner kind of growth and independence." Eleanor and Charles's union, as the narrator notes, is based on "trust in each other's love, honor, courtesy." Chopin, however, did not ignore the complexities of such a union, especially when human nature intervenes.

As Chopin traces the complications that arise in the couple's marriage, she illustrates her point that the ideal of freedom that Charles and Eleanor envision can never be obtained in any kind of meaningful relationship. When the two are separated by their individual desires for fulfillment, Chopin suggests that human nature will inevitably impede this type of modern redefinition of love and marriage.

Neither Charles nor Eleanor is influenced by social dictates. The couple stoically face up to the public outcry when they decide that Eleanor will study in Paris and that Charles will continue his teaching at home. The society of Plymdale suffers "indignant astonishment at the effrontery of the situation. . . . that two young people should presume to introduce such innovations into matrimony!" The gossips incorrectly conclude that "he must have already tired of her idiosyncrasies, since he had left her in Paris." Yet when they question the prudence of Eleanor living alone in Paris ("of all places. . . . Why not at once in Hades?"), they illustrate the possibility of complications that could arise in this ideal marriage, complications that the couple have refused to acknowledge. As a result, the two ignore the gossip and write each other frequent, long letters after they are separated.

Neither, however, had considered the impact of the loneliness and subsequent need for companionship that would result from such a separation. Charles's genial nature prompt him to seek out the company of the Beaton family, who welcomed him frequently into their home. Chopin inserts a note of irony into Charles's relationship with the Beatons, who enjoy a traditional family dynamic, with Mr. Beaton teaching at the nearby university while Mrs. Beaton's "aspirations went not further than the desire for her family's good, and her bearing announced in its every feature, the satisfaction of completed hopes."

The comfort Charles finds in their company suggests that his nature is more conventional than he realizes.

His appreciation of the Beaton family extends to their daughter Kitty, whose "girlish charms" and "soft shining light of her eyes" sexually attract Charles. Determined to promote honesty in his marriage, Charles writes Eleanor of his attraction to the girl, apparently convinced that his wife's progressive thinking and logical sensibility will override any feelings of jealousy. Charles, however, miscalculates, ignoring the strength of this very human emotion.

Chopin suggests that Eleanor responds with jealousy to Charles's attentions to Kitty, as evidenced by her late and cold letter to him. Her subsequent actions, however, are not as clearly drawn. Not long before Charles's arrival in Paris, Eleanor is overcome with "a misery of the heart, against which her reason was in armed rebellion." Eventually she crumbles "into a storm of sobs and tears," a "signal of surrender."

The narrator refuses to interpret the scene, explaining that the reason for Eleanor's despondency "will never be learned unless she chooses to disclose it herself." Chopin only hints at the possibilities: Eleanor may have entered into a romantic relationship with the artist who is painting her portrait and is coming to the painful decision to give him up; or she recognizes that she cannot bear to be separated from her husband and so has decided to give up Paris and return home with him. Either explanation for her outburst involves a very human response. Eleanor could have decided to turn to another in her loneliness, suspecting that her husband was doing the same. Or perhaps she could have come to the realization that her love for Charles was more important than her need for independence, and thus to ensure that Charles would no longer depend on the Beatons for company, she would give up Paris. The only clue Chopin will allow reflects the emergence of Eleanor's humanness during her breakdown: "Reason did good work and stood its ground bravely, but against it were the too great odds of a woman's heart, backed by the soft prejudices of a far-reaching heredity."

As is the case with many of Chopin's heroines, Eleanor finds the obstacles to her independence overwhelming. She has been able to withstand social pressures to conform to traditional notions of a woman's role, but she cannot hold up against the demands of her own nature. By the end of the story, Eleanor retains a small degree of freedom; she, not Charles, makes the decision for the two of them to return home. Yet, Charles's final response to her suggests that their union will deteriorate into a conventional relationship. When she admits that his attentions to Kitty stirred her jealousy, he forces her back into a stereotype, insisting "I love her none the less for it, but my Nellie is only a woman after all." Chopin adds a nice touch of irony in response, noting that "with man's usual inconsistency," Charles had forgotten his own bout of jealousy.

By the end of the story, Eleanor and Charles have given up their idealistic vision of the efficacy of the modern marriage, and Eleanor has relinquished a good measure of her independence. In this bittersweet story, Chopin illustrates a woman's journey from freedom to repression, suggesting that the requirements of the human heart complicate the best of intentions.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "A Point at Issue!," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

DeFrees is a published writer and an editor with a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia and a law degree from the University of Texas. In the following essay, DeFrees discusses the early feminist tendencies of fiction writer Kate Chopin.

Can women and men be equal? The question appears prosaic and even simplistic. But it elicits a larger question: what is equality? Is it something that exists in nature, or does it spring from the machinations of society? How Kate Chopin answers that question in her short story, "A Point at Issue!," is a manifestation of both her liberal mindset—especially by mid-nineteenth century standards, which was when the story was written—and of the blossoming of that mindset from within the confines of a society holding fast to the notion that a woman's position in the hierarchy of the household was strictly beneath her husband. Chopin produces a sly retelling of the happy-ever-after wedding tale and sets up for her readers a revolutionary theory of equality within the union of marriage. The ending does not promise that the vows of equality and mutual respect will be lasting, but it does something more: it turns the tables on what were then perceived as conventional patterns of thought about marriage.

In some ways, the story reads like a sitcom: a couple meets; the man and woman fall in love and attempt to set up an arrangement wherein they share their lives as equals; the two separate temporarily to pursue their individual interests; misunderstandings ensue, but all is gilded with a happy ending. On the surface, it is almost a tale of manners, a comedy of errors. It is easy to envision any number of television stars—dependant upon the generation of the reader, of course—starring in the televised version of the story, or to imagine a laugh track when Charles trips over his chair as he starts to chase down his wife, who is riding in a carriage with another man. But what Chopin is doing in "A Point at Issue!" is far subtler than the broad comedic gestures of a sitcom. In the span of a short tale, Chopin lays down the tenets of her vision of women's liberation—to be seen as an intellectual equal, and to be given the same opportunities for cerebral advance as men—then layers those desires with societal expectations, exposing the hurdles that stand, even today, in the way of men and women being able to operate on an equal plane. This is a common topic today, but at the time Chopin wrote "A Point at Issue!," the thoughts were revolutionary— so much so that Chopin's early work, such as this story, contains outlines of her later stories that loudly decry the inequality between husband and wife.

The story begins with shame. Eleanor Gail shudders at the sight of her name in the local newspaper's small notice proclaiming: "MARRIED —On Tuesday, May 11, Eleanor Gail to Charles Faraday." Although the notice is inobtrusive— "modestly wedged"—to Eleanor, it is an invitation for the rest of society to scorn at her. Eleanor has previously refused to hold a fancy wedding including members of the community and has made a conscious choice to step away from the expected paths of other young ladies. The narrator explains that Eleanor sees the marriage announcement as "an indelicate thrusting of herself upon the public notice" and that when she sees the notice, "she was plunged in regret at having made to the proprieties the concession of permitting it."

Eleanor chose to "diverge from the beaten walks of Plymdaledom," with "Plymdaledom" representing a marriage to someone in one's own social and economic status. From the first paragraph, the reader knows that Eleanor is different, that she is not afraid of going against societal norms.

In fact, Eleanor knowingly accepts the appearance of being "relegated to a place amid that large and ill-assorted family of 'cranks.'" For, regardless of "the disappointed public" she is an "ideal woman" in the eyes of her husband. She expresses regret only for having given any concessions to societal norms at all. The private life she has chosen affords her an equality that cannot be weighted in public terms. While the ladies of Plymdale were "condemning her present . . . unsparing of her past, and full with damning prognostic of her future," Charles Faraday "had caught a look from her eyes into his that he recognized at once as a free masonry of intellect," a woman "able to grasp a question and anticipate conclusions by a quick intuition." Charles and Eleanor's courtship lasted for over a year, and in that time, rather than consider how many children to have or where they should live, they "knocked at the closed doors of philosophy—a field of study not normally open to women. Rather than court each other with family histories and idle chatter, Eleanor and Charles "went looking for the good things of life."

Charles's admiration for Eleanor's intellect did not flag upon the end of their courtship; in marriage, they vowed that "each was to remain a free integral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws." As Chopin expounds on the agreement between Eleanor and Charles regarding their relationship, the reader begins to see the full thrust of Chopin's opinions regarding a woman's right to think for herself, whether married or single. The couple scoffed at tradition and decided, in their marriage, to be "governed by no precedential methods." Chopin created a new marriage contract through Charles and Eleanor, one that, according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff's review in American Writers, closely emulated Chopin's own marriage. Individuality was to remain intact, made possible through "trust in each other's love, honor, courtesy, tempered by the reserving clause of readiness to meet the consequences of reciprocal liberty."

It is the final statement in that train of thought, with its "reserving clause," that opens the door to the plot, and the ultimate point, of Chopin's story, and foreshadows that there will, indeed, be repercussions to their novel model of marriage. Despite the young couple's pre-planned, rational approach toward their relationship, when matters of the fidelity impinge upon "reciprocal liberty," it is instinct that takes root as intellect takes flight. A test of marital fidelity reaches the bounds of rational thought, and the reader sees doubt take over even the most idealistic minds. Suspicion takes hold, and the "new marriage contract" is tested by the harshest of judges: the jealous heart.

After a long honeymoon, Charles ironically leaves Eleanor in Paris—the city of love—to follow her intellectual interests while he returns to the Unites States to run his business. Though they miss each other when apart, all is well between them while this arrangement ensues, and they carry on their intellectual relationship through letters. They are redoubtable in their powers of rationality and adherence to their modern arrangement, unfettered by envy or uncertainty. But Charles and Eleanor fall prey to the seduction of doubt.

It would seem, accordingly to the plot, that Eleanor is the first to fall jealous. But this line is blurred by Chopin's word choices, which hint at the disdain she feels toward a man so callous as to expect his wife to be always above the caste of jealous society. Regarding the letter that Charles writes to his wife, the narrator explains that "with the cold-blooded impartiality of choosing a subject which he thought of neither more nor less prominent than the next, he descanted at some length upon the interesting emotions which Miss Kitty's pretty femininity aroused in him." What woman would not question the effusive praise and admitted sexual attraction related by her husband about another woman? As the narrator explains: "Reason did good work and stood its ground bravely, but against it were the too great odds of a woman's heart, backed by the soft prejudices of a far-reaching heredity." Here Chopin seems to indicate that a woman is, by her nature, the weaker sex, prone to fits of jealousy. But the events that follow indicate something more profound: when Chopin refers to "far-reaching heredity," it is the heredity of mankind, not just of women. It is the eternal condition of man to be jealous, to want to possess another, and to be certain of one's place in the world. Charles does not think twice about the words of praise he has related to his wife about another woman because he is faithful, but his fidelity does not make him immune to his own jealousy.

Charles comes to Paris after a long absence, and one day he sees his wife in a carriage, gaily conversing with another man. Charles immediately thinks the worst, but just as he considers leaping from his seat to "follow and demand an explanation," his "better self and better senses [come] quickly back to him." But are these really his better senses and his better self? Had he leapt from where he sat in the Parisian café, bounded to the horse carriage and bellowed in anger at the sight of his beloved carrying on with another man, might not that have been the more honest presentation of his feelings for Eleanor? The reader is left to ponder these questions, for the event never comes to pass. Charles reasons himself out of his state of vengeful anger, and Eleanor never learns that Charles experienced his jealous rage.

Both husband and wife fall prey to the same natural weakness, but the way that they relate their feelings to each other in this regard hints at a rupture in their union that is likely to create a permanent emotional divide. By the end of the story, it could be interpreted that, because Eleanor asks her husband to take her back to the states with him, she has somehow given the power in the relationship to her husband. But it may just as easily be interpreted that, in fact, by evidencing her desire to be with him, and in admitting her jealousy, she has opened her heart, and her soul, to the possibility of true intimacy and equality. When he responds with shock at her belief that he "cared" for another woman, she believes him heartily, and says, "there are certain things which a woman can't philosophize about, any more than she can about death when it touches that which is near to her." Eleanor has brought her humanity to bear on the misunderstandings she and her husband have shared, and it brings out the best in her. Charles, on the other hand, says nothing to Eleanor about his doubts, and instead reduces Eleanor from her status as "pre-eminent" and "his ideal woman" to that of "only a woman," like any other. The reader might at this point agree with Charles that Eleanor has a woman's frailty and that Charles is the stronger of the two, but for the final sentence of the story: "With man's usual inconsistency, he had quite forgotten the episode of the portrait." Charles, in seeing his wife's weakness exposed so clearly, stands tall in his righteousness, forgetting his own identical imperfection.

Chopin seems to be winking at the reader, offering an irony to those sympathetic to her views. Hers is a tentative leaning to the possibility of the intellectual emancipation of women, and a precursor to her most acclaimed work, The Awakening, in which she more openly calls for the emancipation of women from the stifling confines of marriage, to which her society clung so tightly. It is unclear whether it was Chopin's deliberate choice to speak subtly about the infidelities of a man's mind in regard to his wife, or the result of a young writer still timid about bearing her beliefs about equality to a public unaccustomed to the notion of a wife as the equal of her husband. In either case, the end result is a delightfully subtle and slyly political reproach of men's refusal to recognize the full potential of their wives. In "A Point at Issue!," Charles may think he has pegged his wife as "only a woman," hypocritically forgiving her for her petty jealousy, but it is actually Eleanor who truly understands the nature of the relationship between man and wife. And, it was Chopin who saw that, for all the whispers of equality in the nineteenth century, women remained placed behind their men.

Source: Allison DeFrees, Critical Essay on "A Point at Issue!," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Seyersted examines Chopin's take on feminist issues in her first three stories (as well as a "A Point at Issue!") within the context of Chopin's idea of a modern female.

Kate Chopin was never a feminist in the dictionary sense of the term, that is, she never joined or supported any of the organizations through which women fought to get "political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men." Not only did she shy away from societies and issues in general, but she probably regarded the New World feminists as unrealistic when they so closely allied themselves with efforts to elevate men to their own supposedly very high level of purity; she undoubtedly concurred with the early George Sand, who felt that woman largely had the same drives as man and therefore also should have his "rights."

Though American literary permissiveness was slowly being somewhat extended in matters connected with the senses—we might point to the fact that R. W. Gilder published Whitman and that Reedy's *Mirror* gave space to sex-scientists like Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis—the feminists turned their back on a novel like Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* because the author dared to combine her plea for a single standard with a discreet mention of male promiscuity and its results. As usual, Kate Chopin was a detached observer, a skeptic who could not share any easy optimism. When a friend praised Mrs. Grand's book, in which there is much talk about women's rights, but no suggestion that females as well as men have sexual urges, she exclaimed in her diary: "She thinks 'the Heavenly Twin' a book calculated to do incalculable good in the world: by helping young girls to a fuller comprehension of truth in the marriage relation! Truth is certainly concealed in a well for most of us."

Just as Mrs. Chopin saw that the problems confronting her sex were too complicated to admit of easy solutions, she was also well acquainted with the manifold tendencies in the women themselves. It seems more than an accident that her three earliest extant stories are each in turn devoted to one of what we might call the three main types of women: the "feminine," the "emancipated," and the "modern" (to use the terminology of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*), and that the tension between the two leading components of this triad was to reverberate through her whole *oeuvre.*

"Euphrasie," Kate Chopin's first tale from 1888, is the story of a feminine or traditional heroine, that is, a woman of the kind who accepts the patriarchal view of her role very pointedly expressed, for example, in the marriage sermon of Father Beaulieu of Cloutierville: "Madame, be submissive to your husband . . . You no longer belong to yourself."

In a society where man makes the rules, woman is often kept in a state of tutelage and regarded as property or as a servant. Her "lack of self assertion" is equated with "the perfection of womanliness," as Mrs. Chopin later expressed it in a story. The female's capital is her body and her innocence, and she should be attractive and playful enough for the man to want her, while showing a reticence and resistance which can gratify his sense of conquest, or "the main-instinct of possession," as the author termed it in another tale. What man wishes, writes Simone de Beauvoir, "is that this struggle remain a game for him, while for woman it involves . . . [a recognition of] him as her destiny." In the man's world, woman should accept a special standard for the "more expansive" sex, and for herself, she should eagerly welcome the "sanctity of motherhood." As Mme. de Staël's Corinne is told: Whatever extraordinary gifts she may have, her duty and "her proper destiny is to devote herself to her husband and to the raising of her children."

Euphrasie is a dutiful daughter, and also a loyal fiancée as she tries to hide even from herself that she has suddenly fallen in love with someone else than the man she is engaged to. In the tradition of the feminine woman, she accepts the role of the passive, self-obliterating object as she makes no attempt to influence her fate, and she is willing to break her heart and proceed with the marriage, even though she considers it immoral to kiss her fiancé when she does not love him. (It is interesting to note that the author, in her very first story, on this point echoes George Sand; she does not openly offend by saying in so many words that Euphrasie should have kissed the other man when it becomes evident that they are mutually attracted, but that is what she implies.) As behooves a feminine woman, she lets the men decide her destiny: When her fiancé learns the truth by accident, he sets her free, thus—in Euphrasie's words—saving her from the sin a marriage to him would have meant to her.

As has been noted before, Kate Chopin put this story aside for a few years and destroyed the next two she wrote. The original draft of "Euphrasie" is lost, and we do not know why she titled the tale after the girl's fiancé when she later revised and shortened it. Nor do we know anything about the two other stories, except that the first was set on Grand Isle, and that the second, "A Poor Girl," was offensive to editorial eyes, perhaps because the author already here was too open about untraditional urges in women.

The next of Kate Chopin's tales which has come down to us is "Wiser than a God." It is the story of Paula Von Stoltz, a young woman who works hard to become a concert pianist. She loves the rich George Brainard, but when he asks her to follow a calling that asks "only for the labor of loving," she replies that marriage does not enter into the "purpose of [her] life." George insists that he does not ask her to give up anything; she tells him, however, that music to her is "something dearer than life, than riches, even than love." This is too contrary to George's idea of woman's role; calling Paula mad, he lectures her and declares that even if the one who loved him had taken the vows as a nun, she would owe it to herself, to him, and to God to be his wife. But Fräulein Von Stoltz leaves to become an internationally renowned pianist, and her later constant companion is a composer who is wise enough not to make any emotional demands on her.

Paula largely answers to Simone de Beauvoir's definition of the emancipated woman that is, a female who "wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her"; who insists on the active transcendence of a subject, the *pour soi,* rather than the passive immanence of an object, the *en soi;* and who attempts to achieve an existentialist authenticity through making a conscious choice, giving her own laws, realizing her essence, and making herself her own destiny.

The pride indicated in Paula's family name does not manifest itself in a haughty attitude toward her admirer; she is soft-spoken compared to the impetuous, youthful George who insists that she is throwing him into "a gulf . . . of everlasting misery." But she speaks up when she realizes they are in two different worlds, that he represents the patriarchal view of woman, and she the view of Margaret Fuller that women so inclined should be allowed to leave aside motherhood and domesticity and instead use their wings to soar toward the transcendence of a nonbiological career. "Wiser than a God" has something of Mme. de Staël's *Corinne* in that George for a moment believes he can accept a wife who lives not solely for him and his children; unlike the French heroine, however, Paula tells her suitor that life is less important to her than the unhampered exertion of what she considers her authentic calling and her true self.

The self-sacrifice represented by Corinne's suicide to set Oswald free is unthinkable in the Kate Chopin heroines who are awakened to unusual gifts or impulses in themselves and to self-assertion. "Euphrasie" proves that it is not female submission as such which the author leaves out in her writings, but only the concessions to sentimentality and conventionality, the violations of the logic in the various types of heroines. The author combines in these two tales a detachment and objectivity with a tender understanding and respect for both the feminine and the emancipated young lady.

In the third story we have from Mrs. Chopin, "A Point at Issue,"—she turns to modern woman, that is, the female who insists on being a subject and man's equal, but who cooperates with the male rather than fighting him, without any of the antagonism often attributed to her emancipationist sister. Such modern women were not uncommon at the time, and when they married, some decided not to take their husband's name, that sign of ownership, but to keep their own. In 1895, for example, the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* printed the statements which such a woman and her husband had made when they entered their "advanced matrimony." She not only kept her maiden name, but also declared that she and her suitor entered marriage with the understanding that both should preserve their individuality and that he should not "let this marriage interfere with the life work she had chosen."

Unlike Paula of the previous story, Eleanor Gail of "A Point at Issue" does wed her suitor, Charles Faraday; they decide, however:

. . . to be governed by no precedential methods. Marriage was to be a form, that while fixing legally their relation to each other, was in no wise to touch the individuality of either; that was to be preserved intact. Each was to remain a free integral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws. And the element that was to make possible such a union was trust in each other's love, honor, courtesy, tempered by the reserving clause of readiness to meet the consequences of reciprocal liberty.

The Latin proverb which Kate Chopin gave as a motto for the previous story: "To love and be wise is scarcely granted even to a god," should more appropriately have been put at the head of "A Point at Issue." While Euphrasie disregards the conflict between love and reason because she has been indoctrinated with the idea of leaving the responsibility for her life to a man, and Paula avoids it by devoting herself to art and making her own decisions, Eleanor is the one really to be put to the test, as she, like her husband, believes that she can both love and be wise as they share a life in "Plymdale" as equals.

The two progressive lovers seem well fitted for their venture. Eleanor, who combines her "graceful womanly charms" with a lack of self-consciousness, has chosen to "diverge from the beaten walks of female Plymdaledom . . . [and taste] the sweets of a spiritual emancipation." This strange person is, like her mathematician husband, "possessed of a clear intellect: sharp in its reasoning, strong and unprejudiced in its outlook. She was that *rara avis,* a logical woman." The two are ready to take broad views of life and humanity as they live in the harmony of a united purpose and "a free masonry of intellect." Being more learned, Charles leads the way when they, for example, study science, but with her "oftentimes in her eagerness taking the lead."

Faraday agrees with his wife that she shall spend a year or two alone in Paris learning French. Once he tells her in a letter how a girl had momentarily charmed him, feeling no qualms in doing so as he saw it as unimportant, and, besides, "Was not Eleanor's large comprehensiveness far above the littleness of ordinary women?" While he thinks no more of the matter, Eleanor cannot escape old fashioned jealousy; nor can Charles when he joins her in Paris for the summer and one day sees her with another man, who later turns out to be a painter doing her portrait. For a moment he wants to kill the "villain," but reason takes over, even before he learns that his jealousy was unfounded.

As a result of these incidents, both retreat one step from their advanced stand. Eleanor rejoins her husband in America, and, being unable to forget how jealousy made her suffer like a "distressed goddess," she has gained insight into her own nature and knows that, as she tells Charles, "there are certain things which a woman can't philosophize about." He has learned nothing from his agony, however, while Eleanor's affliction causes him to slip into the traditional attitude of the male when he patronizingly concludes: "I love her none the less for it, but my Nellie is only a woman, after all." And the author adds: "With a man's usual inconsistency, he had quite forgotten the episode of the portrait."

In her first two stories, Kate Chopin had betrayed a possible involvement with marriage only when she in "Wiser than a God," with what looks like mild irony, speaks of "the serious offices of wifehood and matrimony" which constitute all of life to the woman Brainard eventually marries. When there is a somewhat more pronounced suggestion of an engagement in the third tale, it is again on the issue of woman and matrimony. The author by no means makes it clear that she speaks only for Eleanor when she writes: "Marriage, which marks too often the closing period of a woman's intellectual existence, was to be in her case the open portal through which she might seek the embellishments that her strong, graceful mentality deserved." It is interesting to note the surprising juxtaposition of marriage and death with which the story opens when it informs us that the wedding announcement of the Faradays was printed side by side with a "somber-clad" advertisement for "marble and granite monuments."

The impression we are left with by this tale is that Kate Chopin sympathizes with Eleanor even more than with Euphrasie and Paula and that she wishes the Faradays success in their venture to live as perfect equals. She appears to favor female emancipation, not the "quasi-emancipation" she authorially attributes to women showing their protest by wearing strange clothes, but the true, inner kind of growth and independence. She also seems to favor the couple's lack of preconceptions as they attempt to make "innovations into matrimony" by introducing a marital liberty. But Mrs. Chopin saw the complexities of this point at issue: "Reason did good work," she observes in connection with Eleanor's fight with jealousy, "but against it were the too great odds of a woman's heart, backed by the soft prejudices of a far-reaching heredity." Among the inherited factors imposing themselves upon even a modern woman and a modern man are fundamental impulses, such as jealousy, and notions, such as that of male supremacy.

The idea of man's superiority is emphasized as Charles falls back into the age-old concept that his wife is "only a woman." It is perhaps a little surprising to find inconsistency attributed to him, a quality which traditionally typifies the so-called changeable women; how ever, it serves to stress his male overevaluation of himself: As a female, Eleanor is not expected to know much; therefore she can allow herself to feel that "she knew nothing," and at the same time be open for learning. Charles, on the other hand, is a man, thus a superior being, and as such he does not need to be taught anything.

With her three first stories, Kate Chopin had stated her major theme: woman's spiritual emancipation —or her "being set free from servitude, bondage, or restraint," as the term has been defined— in connection with her men and her career. The sensuous is not touched upon in these tales, except in the case of Faraday. His "stronger man nature" may refer to expressions of eroticism, and we are told, apropos of the matter dealt with in his letter, that "it is idle to suppose that even the most exemplary men go through life with their eyes closed to woman's beauty and their senses steeled against its charm." The modest success of *At Fault* gave the author a certain encouragement and selfconfidence, and seemingly as a result of this, she began, as she entered the second stage of her career, to deal with woman's emancipation also in the field of the senses.

Source: Per Seyersted, "A More Powerful Female Realism," in *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography,* Louisiana State University Press, 1969, pp. 99-115.

Adaptations

Penguin Audiobooks has published an excellent cassette tape of *The Awakening and Selected Stories* (June 1996), performed by Joanna Adler, which includes readings of "The Storm" and "Story of an Hour," two of Chopin's most anthologized stories.

Topics for Further Study

Read over the passage where Eleanor has an emotional breakdown before Charles arrives in Paris. Chopin never provides enough information for readers to understand what causes this outburst. Rewrite the ending of the story, providing a clear explanation of Eleanor's despair and how it affects the outcome. How does the story's meaning change?

Compare and contrast the subject of marriage in Chopin's *The Awakening* and "A Point at Issue!" How do the women deal with their positions similarly and differently?

Create a storyboard outlining each scene for a cinematic version of the story.

Investigate the women's movement at the end of the nineteenth century. How did it influence American society? What kind of opposition did it face? Was it successful?

Compare and Contrast

Late Nineteenth Century: In 1888, the International Council of Women is founded to mobilize support for the woman's suffrage movement.

Today: Women have made major gains in their fight for equality. Discrimination against women is now against the law.

Late Nineteenth Century: A new term, the "New Woman" comes to describe women who challenge traditional notions of a woman's place, especially the privileged role of wife and mother. These challenges are seen as a threat to the fabric of the American family.

Today: Women have the opportunity to work inside or outside the home or both. However, those who choose to have children and a career face difficult time management choices due to inflexible work and promotion schedules.

Late Nineteenth Century: Feminist Victoria Woodhull embarks on a lecture tour in 1871, espousing a free love philosophy, which reflects the women's movement's growing willingness to discuss sexual issues.

Today: Women have the freedom to engage in premarital sex and to have children out of wedlock. The issue of single parenting caused a furor in the early 1990s when then Vice President Dan Quayle criticized the television character Murphy Brown for deciding not to marry her baby's father. Today, however, single parenting has become more widely accepted.

What Do I Read Next?

The Columbia Guide to American Women in the Nineteenth Century (2000) presents a comprehensive history of the conditions of American women in the nineteenth century.

The Awakening, published in 1899, is Chopin's masterful novel about a young woman who struggles to find self-knowledge and inevitably suffers the consequences of trying to establish herself as an independent spirit.

In his play *A Doll's House* (1879), Henrik Ibsen examines a woman's restricted role in the nineteenth century and the disastrous effects of these limitations on her marriage.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) studies the history and dynamics of feminism.

"Wiser than a God," published along with "A Point at Issue!" in 1889, presents a different view of an unconventional woman who tries to determine her own life and destiny. It is available in Chopin's *Collected Works.*

Further Study

de Saussure Davis, Sara, "Kate Chopin," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 12: *American Realists and Naturalists,* edited by Donald Pizer, Gale Research, 1982, pp. 59-71.

Davis places Chopin in the realist tradition and discusses how the "unconventional" heroine in "A Point at Issue!" relates to those in her other works.

Rocks, James E., "Kate Chopin's Ironic Vision," in *Louisiana Review,* Vol. 1, No. 2, 1972, pp. 110-20.

Rocks analyzes Chopin's use of irony in several of her works.

Skaggs, Peggy, "Chapter 6: 'Miscellaneous Works,'" in *Kate Chopin,* Twayne's United States Author Series Online, G. K. Hall, 1999.

Skaggs compares "A Point at Issue!" to "Wiser than a God."

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin, "Kate Chopin," in *American Writers,* Supplement I, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979, pp. 200-26.

Wolff provides an overview of Chopin's work, including a negative assessment of "A Point at Issue!," claiming the story to be "too neatly constructed, symmetrical, and sterile."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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