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## Feminism In Writings Of Kate Chopin And Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Throughout the early history of writing, primarily men were authors and would depict women in the grasp of authority. In the nineteenth century, feminism began to rise: "Since the beginning of the women's movement, there has been a strong rise in the amount of literature that is self-consciously feminist in tone, clearly espousing the ideals of female equality (Amico 1)." Feminism is the women's movement that empowers women by striving for equality. Feminist writing expresses the woman's point of view about their own lives. Women began to involve community and nature into their writings, as well as develop their characters more in-depth than men. Studies have shown that women's writings tend to have common themes, which tend to revolve around feminism (Amico 1). Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are two female authors that have promoted feminism through their short stories.

Katherine O'Flaherty, better known as Kate Chopin, was born on February 8, 1851, in St. Louis, Missouri. She wrote short stories about women's struggles against society's restrictions. Chopin had strong French and English heritage. Her mother was the daughter of a French family and her father was an Irish merchant. Thomas O'Flaherty, Chopin's father, was killed in 1855 by a train accident. She grew up in a female based household with her grandmother's teachings to reject hypocrisy and pursue unconventional behavior. Sacred Heart Academy began Chopin's formal education. The teachings were based on preparing women to become housewives and mothers but to also think independently. As the Civil War was in action, Chopin spent much time at home. As she returned back to school, she was encouraged to write by her English teacher. For three years, she kept a "commonplace book," in which she kept her thoughts and observations about her readings and studies. At eighteen-years-old, she was known for her beauty, but her diary exposed her emotions of being subject to social pressures. At age twenty, she married Oscar Chopin and had five sons and one daughter within the first ten years of marriage. In 1879, Oscar Chopin's business declined, so he and the family moved to Cloutierville, Louisiana, where he owned a general store. Kate Chopin's style and mannerisms stirred up gossip in the small town, and in 1882, Oscar Chopin passed away, leaving Kate with \$12,000 of debt and six children to tend to on her own. She decided to manage the business and have an intimate relationship with a married man. Shortly after, she decided to move back to St. Louis and stay with her mother. The year after she moved back, her mother passed away. Kate Chopin had suffered two enormous losses within a small gap of time, but eventually labeled the difficult time as a period of "growth." She recognized that her loneliness offered an opportunity of freedom, which was unavailable to a majority of women. She began her first short story in 1888 and became a published author in 1889. Her early works demonstrate her questioning of traditional romances. In 1894, Kate Chopin published one of her most powerful short stories, "The Story of An Hour." On August 22, 1904, she passed away. After Chopin's death, her reputation faded but reemerged during the 1960s due to the feminism in her works: "Her writing beautifully illustrates a variety of feminist concerns: the clash between individual freedom and social duty, the stifling quality of unequal marriage, the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard, and women's desire for creativity and independence (Jones 1)."

"The Story of An Hour" is considered one of Kate Chopin's most powerful short stories. The plot of the story revolves around the psychological state of the protagonist. To begin the short

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story, it is made known that the protagonist, Louise Mallard, suffers from a heart condition, which foreshadows the story's ending. Her husband, Mr. Mallard, has seemingly lost his life due to a tragic railroad accident. Mr. Mallard's friend, Mr. Richard, travels with Josephine, Mrs. Mallard's sister, to deliver the horrid news to Mrs. Mallard. Josephine tells her the news, and Mrs. Mallard collapses out of devastation into her sister's arms crying. Mrs. Mallard makes her way to her bedroom upstairs and shuts the door. With her sister pleading to be let in the room to provide comfort, Mrs. Mallard sits in a chair beside a window. "She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life," is an example of imagery written by Chopin implying the new views of a life that was now available to Mrs. Mallard since the news of her husband's passing (Chopin 1). "There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself," is a feminist statement meaning that Mrs. Mallard would no longer have to be submissive to a man (Chopin 2). Mrs. Mallard now yearned for a long life with the realization she no longer had to fulfill the societal role of meeting every wish and need for her husband. She eventually walks from her chair rejoining her sister, Josephine, outside the door to her bedroom. They both walk downstairs to rejoin Mr. Richards. As they reach the bottom of the staircase, Mr. Mallard walks through the door. Mr. Richards attempts to cover him from Mrs. Mallard to avoid her going into shock, but she saw him. Mrs. Mallard screams and falls dead. "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease--of the joy that kills," is quite ironic because the readers can infer many other conclusions as to why she died (Chopin 3). "For instance, Mark Cunningham argues that Louise's death occurs not because of Brentley's return but rather because of Louise's realization that her autonomy cannot last: even if Brentley were dead, her freedom would be constricted by Brentley's will and society, resulting in a loss of any place for her in male-dominated society," is one opinion on why Mrs. Mallard died (Diederich 117). One may also believe she died out of disappointment. Considering Kate Chopin's childhood, this story may have been written due to her imagination of how her father's death may have impacted her mother's perspective on life. The theme of this short story may be that all marriages are somewhat oppressive, or it may be that freedom is only fulfilled when alone.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born on July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut. Through her writings, she addressed women's contemporary status, as well as the social and economic changes necessary to adjust and improve the status. She was the daughter of an intellectual father, yet her mother was a stereotypical wife for the time. Her father struggled finding work; therefore, her childhood was unstable. Unpaid debts, frequent moves, dependence on relatives and friends, and a tense emotional environment all inhibited Gilman's childhood. In 1873, when divorce was frowned upon, her mother, Mary, divorced her father, Frederick, so he could remarry. With all of the chaos throughout her childhood, Gilman did receive a rich intellectual environment. She had family ties through her father with Harriet Beecher Stowe, a well-known author. Gilman's mother did not approve of her writing as a teen because she thought Gilman was emotionally unstable. She would write to her father for reading lists, in which she would apply herself diligently. At twenty-one-years-old, she was supporting herself with a career of being a commercial artist after studying art at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1884, she hesitantly married Charles Walter Stetson, who proposed to her after three weeks of first meeting her. In 1885, their only child, Katharine, was born. Gilman fell into depression, so she took a long vacation away from her husband and daughter. She improved, but amongst her return, her condition began to decline. During a "rest cure," she almost lost her sanity. In 1887, she and Stetson divorced, and she and Katharine moved to Pasadena, California, where she focused on her writing (Wladaver-Morgan 1).

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In 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published "The Yellow Wallpaper." Just as Chopin's short story, "The Story of An Hour," reflected on her personal past, Gilman's short story does the same. "Her short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" describes a woman's descent into madness during a medical treatment and the disastrous effects of stifled sexual and verbal expression, enforced passivity, and externally imposed roles on women (Wladaver-Morgan 1)." The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," an unnamed woman, recently has given birth and suffers from what today would be considered as postpartum depression. Her husband, John, is a doctor and prescribes her the "rest cure," which was the same as what Gilman's doctor prescribed her. John takes his wife to be in a more isolated home out in the country. He tells her she may not write or perform any sort of work and have very limited interaction. Alone in a room for a majority of the time, the narrator begins writing, believing that it was the only way to help herself. As she remains in the room with her mental health deteriorating, she stares at the yellow wallpaper on the walls and begins to see a woman trapped behind the wallpaper. "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will," is proof of the narrator's mental health declining (Gilman 20). "And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here!" exposes the narrator's hallucinations and psychological state (Gilman 20). As she knows that the "rest cure" is indeed not helping her, she says, "It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so (Gilman 21)." Women could not speak out for themselves. They were under the control of men. The conflict in this short story is the narrator's inability to communicate with her husband and having to accept her powerlessness over her mental health. Eventually, the narrator reaches the point of losing her sanity. She has stripped off all of the yellow wallpaper in the room and begins crawling around the floor as her husband enters the room. John, stunned by the state of insanity he finds his wife in, faints, and she continues to crawl around. "Earlier readings of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' provide valuable insight into the ways in which Gilman's story chronicles how women have been socially, historically, and medically constructed as not only weak, but sick beings (Suess 80)." This story exposes the harm that men caused women by undervaluing their voice. With the lack of attention, men ultimately helped women reach insanity.

Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are fictional short story authors, who both emphasized feminism throughout their works. "The Story of An Hour" and "The Yellow Wallpaper" both had ties to their author's previous experiences. In "The Story of An Hour," a woman lost her life due to the disappointment of not being as free as she thought she was- all because her husband walked through the door. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," a woman was driven to insanity by her husband's "knowledge" on how to cure a woman's illness. Chopin and Gilman were both influential feminist authors.

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