

19th Century Wives - A Round of Readings

This week we read three works which feature 19th Century women, who also happen to be wives. By now you've watched the short video on the Cult of Domesticity, so you should have a clear idea about the societal expectations for middle-class women at this time in history. But the stories and poem from this week give a much more intimate look at women from this era, shedding light on the unspoken yearnings of three particular women.

You'll notice that I've accompanied this lecture with some paintings by 19th Century artists to give a sense of visual context. I hope you enjoy viewing the artwork as much as I enjoyed selecting it.

Part I "The Necklace" by Guy DeMaupassant

Let's take a closer look at the readings. First, we'll turn to the short story "The Necklace" written in 1884 by the master French storyteller Guy De Maupassant.

Most readers feel sympathy for Monsieur Loisel, the "little clerk" his beautiful wife Mathilde "allowed herself to be married to." They feel sorry for him first of all because she doesn't particularly love him. She certainly isn't very proud to be his wife. We also feel for Monsieur Loisel because Mathilde is so spoiled and demanding and doesn't appreciate the sacrifices he makes for her. No matter how much he gives, Mathilde always seems to want more.

I have to admit that Mme. Loisel is not my favorite character. Were she alive today, she would probably spend her days watching *The Real Wives of Beverly Hills* and stalking the rich and famous on the internet. Mathilde feels that she is the victim of a terrible cosmic accident and has been robbed of her true destiny by being born into the middle class instead of into the aristocracy, where she feels she would have shone like the brightest jewel. She is not poor, however. Readers note that she has a maid who does her housework. And her husband has what seems to be a secure government job. Yet Her longing for what she does *not* have is like a constant thorn in her heart. This painting is by Eduard Manet.

We view Mathilde as shallow, selfish, petulant, manipulative, dream-plagued, ungrateful, and spoiled. In other words, she possesses many of the more negative traits of a child. I might add to that list that she is empty-headed and trite and spends much of her time indulging in somewhat clichéd fantasies. In Mathilde's defense, however, I suggest that maybe she behaves like a child because she is treated like one.

Like all middle-class wives of the 19th Century, Mathilde is under the thumb of her husband and is not regarded as fully adult. Her husband controls the finances and

makes all the important decisions in their life, as we see in the story. The only way Mathilde *can* wield any power is by manipulating her husband very much the way basically powerless children manipulate their parents. She pouts, cries and throws little tantrums when she does not get what she wants. She also makes her husband feel guilty for not giving her what other husbands can afford to give their wives. And, like many unchecked children, the more she gets, the more she wants.

But let's look a little more closely at her husband, "the little clerk." At first glance, he seems very indulgent to his beautiful wife. For example, he gives her a relatively large amount of money to have a gown made for the ball to which he has snagged a coveted invitation. But where does he get the money for that expenditure? Well, we learn that he has been putting funds aside to buy a gun so he can take a trip to the country with some of his "buddies" to shoot birds—not, that is, to take a vacation to the countryside with wife. Maybe he is not quite as selfless as we first thought.

A little later in the story when Mathilde begins whimpering about her lack of jewels to wear with her new dress, what is her husband's response? First he calls her stupid, and then he suggests that she borrow some jewels from her wealthy friend, Mme. Forestiere. Yes, it is he—the husband—who sets off the whole terrible train of events.

Then, when the jewels are found to be missing, who conceives of the idea to lie about the situation? Again, it is M. Loisel, "the little clerk." He even dictates to his wife the letter that she will send to her friend saying that the clasp of the necklace broke and was being repaired. Modern-day readers usually end up asking with some frustration, "Why didn't just he tell his wife to be honest with her friend?"

Maybe M. Loisel is actually just as concerned about appearances as his shallow and pretty wife. Nineteenth Century French society was extremely class conscious. It was near impossible to rise from the class into which you were born, so for middle-class people known, as the *bourgeoisie*, great effort was devoted to remaining securely in that class or, if possible, rising to the top of it by virtue of reputation.

What might people say if they heard that Mathilde had lost the borrowed necklace? Might they think the couple had stolen it? Might they view the Loisels as careless and irresponsible, not the kind of people to whom you could lend anything of value? Wasn't M. Loisel just as constrained, in his own male way, by the expectations of society as his wife was? But really, we ask, again with some incredulity—is maintaining one's stellar reputation worth losing one's home and having to slave away night and day for ten years?

The Loisels apparently think so. Readers are struck, in fact, by how diligently they throw themselves into their task of reparation, emerging at the end, proud of their hard work. "Proud" is the operative word here. What a powerful and self-destructive force pride can come to be.

At the end of the story, Mme. Loisel spots her old friend in the park one day and rushes over to her. Years of hard work and struggle have taken their toll, and she is unrecognizable to her still young and lovely looking friend. One might think that Mme. Loisel would not want to be seen in her altered state, but she feels the need to tell her friend what happened all those years ago. She is pleased when she learns that Mme. Forestiere was unaware that her necklace had been replaced by another.

“Yes, you never noticed it, then!” cries Mme. Loisel. “They were very like.” Then, we read that she smiles “with a joy, which was both proud and naïve at once.”

Ironically, she is proud that her eye for jewels is so keen and discriminating that her wealthy friend did not notice the difference between the original necklace and the replacement. The truth, of course, is that Mme. Loisel cannot tell the difference between real and fake diamonds. She could not tell on the day she chose the most glittering and ostentatious of Mme. Forestiere’s offerings, and she cannot tell the difference now.

Then in the ultimate of ironies, Mme. Forestiere, genuinely moved by Mathilde’s story of hardship, reveals that the borrowed jewels were paste and hardly worth anything at all.

We do not see what happens next as the story ends on that shattering note. But it seems clear, at least to me, that until that stunning revelation, Mme. Loisel has not changed, despite the ten years of servitude. Mathilde Loisel has had no epiphany, and overweening, self-destructive pride is likely to rule her life and that of her husband, “the little clerk” to the end of their days. That, at least, is my contention.

Part II

“The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin

Now let’s turn our attention to Kate Chopin’s remarkable short, short narrative “The Story of an Hour,” published in 1894.

In this story we get another glimpse into the psyche of a 19th Century wife. And again, we meet a woman who does not seem very happy in her marriage. In fact, when Louise Mallard, the protagonist, learns from her sister that her husband has been killed in a train accident, her response is anything but sad. Oh yes, Louise cries with abandon when she first hears the news. But then we follow her as she retreats to her room, where she sits in a chair facing a wide window.

As Louise gazes through the window, the narrator tells us: “She could see in the open square before her house the tops of the trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was

singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.” Notice how each of her five senses has come vividly awake.

Discerning readers will see the symbolism of this wide open vista with its view of blue sky. As Louise sits there, a strong and irrepressible feeling begins to approach her. She tries, but is powerless to ward off the encroaching feeling. Suddenly the words escape from her mouth: “Free! Free! Free!”

Some readers are shocked by this utterance of “Free! Free! Free!” . Many begin to wonder if her husband had been violent or abusive, which might warrant her elation at her emancipation. But we quickly learn that Mr. Mallard was not that way at all. “She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and grey and dead.” Yes, she reflects, she had loved him—sometimes. But what is love, Louise then asks herself, measured against this intense and sudden feeling of self-assertion “which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being.”

“Free! Body and soul free!”

All at once, Mrs. Mallard, who is afflicted with a heart condition, hopes that her life will be long when only yesterday that same possibility caused her to shudder. It is significant that it is her heart that is ill, the heart being the pulsing center of human emotion and desire.

Readers who assume that this story is about the negative effects of marriage on women should read the narrator’s words closely, I think. Louise Mallard, contemplating her future of freedom, reflects on how in marriage—both women *and* men—are bent by the will of their spouse. It does not matter whether the intention of the spouse to control the other’s behavior is kind or cruel—it is still the imposition of some else’s “private will upon another creature.”

Whenever I read this passage, I think of a concerned wife or mother urging a husband or son to take an umbrella on a cloudy day. He does not want to. Umbrellas hinder his movement. He does not like umbrellas. But the woman insists that he will need it and it is the right thing to do. Her intention is kind, but he does not want to take an umbrella.

Louise foresees a future where no one will tell her what to do. Exhilaration fills her when she contemplates those days ahead of her. “Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own.”

And so, when at the end of the story, her husband, who was actually not on the doomed train, walks through the door, the sight is too much for her. The doctor says, in a stunning example of verbal irony, that she has “died of heart disease—of joy that kills.” But readers, who have spent the last hour on the roller coast of

emotions with Louise Mallard, know that, in fact, she has died of something more like horror.

It seems that Louise Mallard cannot be truly alive unless her husband is dead. And if her husband is alive, Louise Mallard is figuratively—and now, literally—dead. Before we accuse her of the most extreme selfishness, as some literary critics do, consider how you yourself might feel if you were forced into life in which you could not be your true self and were made, in essence, to live a lie. Men might also be forced into roles unsuited to their psyches. However, women of this time, could not opt out of marriage unless they were willing to be the objects of either scorn or intense pity. Not all human beings in this world are fit for marriage. Many people—both women and men—have yearnings and aptitudes for other vocations.

In this story, Louise, like most 19th Century women, was forced into a domestic role for which she was not constitutionally suited, even though she could never have expressed this fact—and perhaps did not even realize it until she the prospect of liberation seemed within her grasp. And this suppression of her very heart and soul is the death of her.

And now let's move on to the week's other reading —the poem by Emily Dickinson entitled "The Wife."

Though never married, Dickinson wrote numerous poems about marriage and being a wife. I find this one particularly poignant and relevant to the two 19th Century stories we have read.

Before we look at the poem, let's just be sure we understand all the words, some of which are archaic and no longer used in our language.

"Aught" in the poem means "anything," which you could probably surmise from the context.

"Amplitude," of course, resembles the word "ample" and means largness or expansiveness.

In the word "Prospective" you see the smaller word "prospect," a reference to future and potential.

"Fathoms" is a term used to measure the depth of the sea. One fathom equals six feet.

And "abide" in this sense means to reside.

And now let's turn to the poem again.

"She rose to his requirement, dropped

*The playthings of her life
To take the honorable work
Of woman and of wife."*

The first four lines are quite straightforward, and tell of a young woman leaving behind her childhood and its playthings to become a woman and a wife. There is the suggestion in this phrasing that unless you are a wife, you will never quite become a woman—an adult. Her new role is characterized as “honorable work.” She is doing something valuable and worthy, perhaps even sacrificial, in becoming someone’s wife.

*"If aught she missed in this new day —
of amplitude or awe
"Or first prospective or the gold
in using wore away . . ."*

These next few lines are a bit more enigmatic. Metaphorical language is used here, and questions are raised about what the woman has relinquished in her “new day” as a wife? The largeness of the wider world, the sense of wonder she once had, her untapped potential and possibility? As for the gold wearing away, we all know how the glitter of a relationship can dim with time, familiarity and grind of daily life.

*"If aught she missed in her new day
Of amplitude, or awe,
Or first prospective, or the gold
In using wore away,*

*It lay unmentioned, as the sea
Develops pearl and weed,
But only to himself is known
The fathoms they abide."*

The final lines answer the “if” questions raised in the previous lines. If in her new day as a wife the woman has relinquished expansiveness, wonder, and potential—and if the gold in the romance has worn away—it is not spoken of. It lies unmentioned in a place as deep as the deepest ocean where pearls form in the heart of oysters and is known only to her.

This same unspoken discontent certainly runs through "The Story of an Hour." A woman who was not happy in her marriage at this time in history would certainly not speak of it. Her feelings would lie deep inside her like the pearl and weed at the bottom of the ocean.

