

Kate Chopin and the Female Realists

Mrs. Jeanneret
American Literature

Two Americas

- Rapid industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries created two polarized urban classes—the wealthy entrepreneurs and the poor European and Asian immigrants that worked for them cheaply.

Two Americas

- The rich built lavish mansions, while the poor lived in crowded apartments, battling disease, crime, violence, and fire.
- Enter the reformers and the muckrakers: people like Jane Addams (of Hull House fame) or Upton Sinclair (author of *The Jungle*) who exposed the quality of living in the working class.

Kate Chopin



Meet Kate Chopin

- Kate Chopin (1850-1904) was born Katherine O'Flaherty in St. Louis, MO in the late Victorian period.
- Chopin's father died when she was five, leaving her to grow up in a house of strong, independent women, thus shaping her as a writer.

A Pioneer

- The first female writer who truthfully and frankly portrayed female emotions—both passion and their discontentment with being confined to “traditional” roles.
- Because of this, she faced harsh criticism in her time.
- Chopin published more than 100 short stories, two story collections, and two novels, including *The Awakening*.

Her focus

- She focused on the roles of women, as well as capturing the *local color* of Louisiana, where she lived with her husband.
- Her work was considered controversial, and she often had difficulty finding magazines who would publish her.

Literary Criticism

“A literary critic is a person who finds meaning in literature that the author didn’t know was there.”- Unknown

What is literary criticism?

- *"Criticism asks what literature is, what it does, and what it is worth."*
Encyclopedia Britannica
- Literary criticism enables us to interpret literature and texts.
- **Literary theory** attempts to explain what the **nature of literature** is, what **functions** it has, what the **relation of text is to author, to reader, to language, to society, to history**.
- There are many approaches to literary theory. The most common are:
 - Feminist Criticism
 - Reader-Response Criticism
 - Psychoanalytical Criticism
 - Historical Criticism
 - Cultural Criticism
 - New Criticism

Feminist Criticism

“I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat, or a prostitute.” – Rebecca West, 1913

- What is Feminist Criticism? Feminist criticism critiques patriarchal language and literature by exposing how these reflect masculine ideology. It examines gender politics in works and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relative status, positionings, and marginalizations within works.
- Feminist criticism does not *just* focus on the representation of women. It focuses on the stereotypical representations of gender. In fact, feminism at the core focuses on equality for all, not just rights for women.

Reader-response Criticism

- In the reader-response critical approach, the primary focus falls on the reader and the process of reading rather than on the author or the text.
- Reader-response criticism has varying emphases—how readers interpret texts and how texts govern the reader.
- There is no one “correct meaning.” Literary meaning is constructed via a dialogue with the reader and the text

Psychoanalytic literary criticism

- Psychoanalytic criticism argues that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses
- The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behavior of the characters in the literary work.
- Psychoanalytic critics ask questions such as "What is Hamlet's problem?" or "Why can't Brontë seem to portray any positive mother figures?"

New Criticism

- Emphasizes close reading of the text itself
- Does not rely on historical or sociological influences
- New criticism examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it.