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A Story of Untold Details

In the short story “The Kiss” by Kate Chopin, a girl, Nathalie, has an unspoken affair with her brother’s friend Harvy while she pursues Brantain, a wealthy and rather unattractive man. Chopin uses a minimal, focused writing style which omits background information and excludes supporting characters. These structural features have the effect of shielding the reader from unnecessary information, placing Nathalie’s ‘gameplay’ alone at the center of the story. As a result, the writing strategy highlights solely and boldly the protagonist female, her power, and its limits as dictated by societal expectations.

Structural elements are the underlying ‘rules’ and literary conventions of an author. In the case of “The Kiss”, most prominent structural features are the omission of backstory about the only three characters present and the abrupt shifts of scene which create a feeling that Chopin keeps information to herself. Evidence of these features all at once can be observed in paragraph fifteen where Chopin writes, “Harvy was among the guests at the wedding” (22). This is the first time that Harvy’s name is mentioned in the story and it may not be immediately evident that this “Harvy” is the same man who caused the disruption by kissing Nathalie in the opening scene of the text – no backstory of Harvy is presented. Even more, Chopin mentions a wedding in this line. There is no indication at that point that this is in fact Nathalie’s own marriage – with Brantain.

Chopin leaves much as a mystery, teasing the reader with the little information she provides, almost exclusively about Nathalie and her love triangle. Chopin is known to write frequently about powerful females and their sexuality and it seems that she is doing just this in “The Kiss”. A strong woman, Nathalie, knows her worth and is in control of her life, especially in her romances. In the opening scene of the story, Nathalie’s control, composure, and confidence become evident, communicating that she is a woman worthy of a Chopin narrative that will soon be trapped between her desires and societal expectations. In paragraph three, Nathalie is presented as “quite composed as she idly stroked the satiny coat of the cat” (21) creating an aura of reservation and indifference emanating from her. Lack of peripheral information in the story leads to laser-sharp focus on the details actually shared and leaves room for personal inference and interpretation. Once again, when Nathalie “occasionally sent a slow glance into the shadow where her companion sat” (21), the omissions of physical description emphasize the actions, word choice, and mannerisms of the three story characters. The contrast of light and dark between the illuminated Nathalie and the concealed Brantain places Nathalie as the governing personality in their relationship as “for two weeks past he [Brantain] had sought her society eagerly and persistently” (21). The predominant Nathalie confidently waits for him to declare himself (21).

Sudden changes in the plot without background information drive Chopin’s portrayal of Nathalie. With the first entrance of Harvy in paragraph four, Nathalie’s true desires are displayed, for the first time, as we observe her feelings toward the two men. Brantain, “rather insignificant and unattractive” (21), was “enormously rich and she liked and required the entourage which wealth could give her” (21). Thus, one of Nathalie’s desires is wealth. Further, Nathalie’s description of Brantain infers longing for beauty, meaning, and connectedness with

her partner, one that Harvy fulfills. Harvy's kiss to Nathalie creates fluster and sets up the trap between desire and societal expectations. The structural feature of withholding non-central information about the characters keeps focus on Nathalie's perceived inner conflict throughout the story. Supporting information is not given by Chopin, per usual, to confirm of Nathalie's internal tussle, so the reader must gather hints from the characters' demeanor.

The sudden scene and plot shifts emphasize not only Nathalie's constant confinement within a woman's implicit code of manners, but also the gaining and losing of her powerful, governing personality. As the story progresses, it becomes evident to the reader that a powerful female is limited by society. The Nathalie that the reader meets at the start of the story slowly begins to disappear. Once again, in the outset Nathalie is portrayed as in control and "confident" (21). With the initiation of the first conflict in the story, Harvy's kiss, Nathalie loses some of her cool and angrily yells "don't touch me; don't come near me" (21). In this scene, one may gather from Nathalie's emotional response that her confidence plummets, "she could not have trusted herself to speak" (21). The next major change in the story brings the reader to a reception event. Here, Nathalie musters up some courage and regains a bit of self-confidence to talk with Brantain. The lack of a smooth transition and blanks in the story actually help the reader recognize the regaining of power in Nathalie. If there were events bridging the gap between Nathalie's angry eruption and her attempt to apologize, her fluctuating self-belief and poise would not be so distinctly evident. In the concluding scene, Nathalie seems to have regained some of her previous power and confidence. However, she caves into the comfort of societal expectation by taking Brantain's hand in marriage and fulfilling the duty of marrying, and marrying wealthily, rather than pursuing her true desires. Chopin closes the story by writing from the perspective of society as a whole; "a person can't have everything in this world; and it was a

little unreasonable of her to expect it” (23). Society’s norms have helped re-empower Nathalie to some degree, but they also drastically limit her aspirations and true happiness.

In summary, the focused writing of Kate Chopin places emphasis on the actions of the protagonist – Nathalie. The broken storyline allows for an easy recognition of Nathalie’s fluctuating confidence and power as a female figure. As a result, the story shows that society itself is one of the causes of suppression of desire and power in women.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Kiss." *Text Book: Writing Through Literature*, edited by Robert Scholes,
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