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A Character Contest

In the short story “The Kiss” by Kate Chopin, a young woman, Nathalie, has an unspoken affair with her brother’s friend Harvy while she pursues Brantain, a wealthy and rather unattractive man. Nathalie and Brantain's relationship can be viewed as a character contest that intensifies when the affair between Nathalie and Harvy becomes exposed. Chopin’s physical positioning of the characters reveals the character contest. Character contests, as defined by sociologist Erving Goffman, are more than simple external conflicts. They involve how a character projects and refines themselves through and as a result of a confrontation. The outcome of the contest in “The Kiss”, dictated by Nathalie, indicates that she strongly cares about society’s perception of her and effectively uses her public person to manipulate Brantain in a way that his identity is outwardly presented differently than the societal norm for a man.

Although Chopin constructs much of the story of “The Kiss” as direct dialogue, she occasionally intermixes fruitful descriptions of the setting and positioning of the characters which create an effect of confrontation and subconsciously stage the character contest between Nathalie and Brantain. In the opening scene, Nathalie and Brantain are sitting in a fireplace room in Nathalie’s home. “Brantain sat in one of these shadows” while Nathalie “sat in the firelight” (Chopin²¹). The contrast of light and dark between the illuminated Nathalie and the concealed Brantain places these two characters in opposition, indicating a potential rising conflict between

them. Later in the same scene, Chopin continues to describe with intent the characters' positions as a result of Harvy's disruption. Chopin writes that "a stride or two brought him [Harvy] to her [Nathalie's] side" (21). Here, Harvy joins Nathalie in the firelight and now they both oppose Brantain's shadowed corner. This suggests that as the story progresses, Nathalie's intimacy with Harvy will be at odds with her relationship with Brantain. Yet, this clash is not necessarily inevitable as Nathalie may have had the intention of continuing the affair with Harvy throughout her future life with Brantain. Shortly after "Brantain slowly arose", "so did the girl [Nathalie] arise", "and the new-comer [Harvy] stood between them" (21). Chopin's placing of Harvy presents him as a pawn placed between Nathalie and Brantain in the chess match of Nathalie's love life - he emotionally and physically stands between Nathalie and Brantain's future together.

In the following scene of "The Kiss", Chopin presents Nathalie and Brantain alone, their meeting disconnected from the rest of the scene and other characters, to emphasize the one-on-one character contest. In paragraph twelve, Nathalie "walked away with him [Brantain], seeking a retired corner" to present to him her explanation and apology (22). Then, "they turned into a long, dim corridor ... [and] walked slowly to the very end of it" (22).

Nathalie's two desires are money and love/affection; as a result, she attempts to manipulate both Harvy and Brantain in order to satisfy her desires since neither of the men can fulfill both. "Brantain was enormously rich" but "rather insignificant and unattractive" (21). Nathalie's relationship with Harvy is much more intimate as they exchange kisses, but Harvy does not appear to be able to provide monetarily for Nathalie. Since Harvy's kiss in the presence of Brantain ruins the possibility for Nathalie to pursue both men at the same time, the tension rises in the character contest between Nathalie and Brantain. Their relationship is being contested in the confrontation where Brantain seeks Nathalie's society, and effectively wants from this

contest, to marry Nathalie. Brantain “loved her” and sought her “eagerly and persistently” (21). Nathalie's longing for love affection was fulfilled through Harvy and thus, her want from the contest with Brantain is solely wealth.

The character contest between Nathalie and Brantain ends with their marriage and Nathalie and Harvy parting ways. Nathalie decides to overlook Brantain's “insignificance” because she likes and requires, by societal standards, “the entourage which wealth could give her” (21). Nathalie assesses her desires – wealth and affection – and concludes that conformity with societal expectations for women, that is acquiring wealth, is most beneficial for her personal image. Nathalie's identity as a respectable woman is at stake in this contest, but she manages to seemingly maintain high external regard with the outcome that she generates.

The stereotype of society has men taking the leading role in a relationship and women playing the more reserved and needy. Nathalie's outward identity and manipulation of Brantain seems to reverse this. In the opening scene of the story, before Harvy enters and creates a state of fluster, Nathalie's control, composure, and power can be seen by her idly stroking “the satiny coat of the cat” creating an aura of reservation and indifference, her occasional “slow glance into the shadow where her companion sat”, and her centralized placement in the firelight (21). Brantain, who could not “conceal his feelings” for Nathalie, seems like a puppet hidden within the shadows whose actions are dictated by her (21). The manipulation of Brantain through Nathalie's detached attitude puts Brantain's dignity and pride at stake in the character contest. According to Goffman, “whenever individuals ask for or give excuses, proffer or receive compliments... a contest of self-control can result” (Goffman 27-28). In the second scene of the story, Nathalie offers to Brantain, ““but for my own sake I do want you to understand that Mr. Harvy is an intimate friend of long standing. Why, we have always been like cousins-like brother

and sister”” (Chopin 22). Nathalie’s excuse to Brantain for why Harvy kissed her is that her and Harvy are like siblings and the kiss was not romantic, contrary to what Brantain saw. Nathalie is lying to preserve her chances of acquiring Brantain’s wealth, which she needs in order to be perceived highly in society. Nathalie’s excuse-filled dialogue shows the extent to which she goes to control Brantain in order to have a good image for herself. Arguably, when one presents a stream of excuses, they usually are the least powerful in the relationship. However, in this case, Nathalie’s excuses – or rather, lies - seem to help her regain the power that she lost after Harvy exposed their relationship causing Brantain to question her honesty.

Seemingly, the outcome of the character contest resulted in a win for Nathalie – she successfully manipulated Brantain and fulfilled her desire for wealth and therefore conformity with societal norms. It seems to have been a positive, temporary at least, outcome for Brantain as well. At the close of the story, Brantain is content and in control since "he sent me [Harvy] over to kiss you [Nathalie]" (22). Brantain, fully satisfied with Nathalie’s explanation, now happily endorses the 'familial' affection between Harvy and his new wife with his pride fully restored. However, as Goffman says again, “the characterological outcome of the contest is quite independent of what might be seen as the manifest result of the fray” (Goffman 28). One, Brantain for example, may in the long run be negatively affected by the character contest even though he is unfazed now. Nathalie may continue to manipulate Brantain even though he does not recognize this now.

In summary, the character contest within Nathalie and Brantain’s relationship becomes evident through Chopin’s positioning of the characters and intensifies once Nathalie’s affair with Harvy becomes known. Nathalie’s decision to eventually marry Brantain, and choose his wealth over Harvy’s love and affection, shows that she is concerned with how society perceives her. In

attaining conformity and assertively determining her place in society, Nathalie manipulates Brantain and places his dignity at stake which seem rather unconventional for the public portrayal of a man.

Works Cited

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