

Yutong Guo (Sarah)

Professor Patterson

WRT101.04

Spring 04.2015

The Awakening of Self-consciousness of Women

Women had been deemed inferior to men and objectified as men's property for a long time. Women were seen as "angels in the house" who were conditioned to the household. What women were educated to do and asked to do was to satisfy men's needs. For example, they did the chores, met husbands' sexual desires and bear children. They were not allowed to voice opinions in politics, sexuality or whatsoever. However, the feminist movement following the anti-slavery movement made a huge progress after the civil war and reached its first peak in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Most of Kate Chopin's works are concentrated on this theme, presenting how women awakened from the oppression, and began to fight for their rights. In "Désirée's Baby," Kate Chopin employs irony to demonstrate how the women suffer from dual burdens, patriarchy and racism. In "Hills like White Elephants," Hemingway utilizes symbolism and dialogue to reveal how the women are oppressed by patriarchy. The two women's story differ, but both stories reflect the old society's properties.

Set in Louisiana during the antebellum period, "Désirée's Baby" is a story about miscegenation between Désirée and Armand, who is actually half-black. However, Armand is a fanatical racist who blames his wife for giving birth to their black son. Worse, due to his patriarchal thought, he insists that Désirée is the one with black blood and pushes her away,

which directly brings about Désirée's suicide. In this story, Chopin complicates feminism by mingling it with racism, displaying how these two conspire with each other and torture women at that time.

"Hills like White Elephants" is about a dialogue between the American and a girl, from which it can be inferred that they are irresponsible. The dialogue is an operation. It is implicit that the operation is an abortion. The American insists that the girl should have an abortion, but she is unwilling to. Unlike Désirée, the girl fights back to some degree. Hemingway endeavors to show that patriarchy still pervades at that time but women have the increasing awareness to fight for their rights.

The most striking feature in "Désirée's Baby" is irony. "The primary definition of irony is 'a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used' (Gerrad)." Irony is found in the names in this story. In French, Désirée means to desire. Désirée longed for love and cared very much and thought that Armand would fulfill those needs. However, Armand brutally abandoned her because he mistakenly believed that she was with black blood. Thus Désirée's hope for love was shattered. Another verbal irony is called "the residence, L'Abri." It refers to shelter in French. However, from what is depicted in the story L'Abri "was a sad looking place" (69); "the roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoes house" (69), this bleak and desolate scene is in stark contrast with the meaning of L'Abri. Another kind of irony is situation irony, which is presented, in specific scenes. When Armand first met Désirée, he fell in love with her and decided to marry her even though "he was reminded that she was nameless"

(69). He seemed to love her so much that he did not care about her obscure origin. Yet when he found out the baby was not white, he put away his love immediately and drove her out of the house callously. The love at first sight is shown to no longer exist when patriarchy and racism are involved. At the beginning of the story, Armand is portrayed as a racist, very harsh on his slaves---“his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master’s easy-going and indulgent lifetime” (69). After his son was born, his attitude towards Negroes appeared to be softened. However, this makeover did not last long that when the baby turned out to be black. This startling comparison proves nothing but that racism is deeply embedded in Armand. The third kind of irony is dramatic irony in which the author means to mock something through intentional plot arrangement. The most ironic is the ending. Armand blamed Désirée for the baby’s being black, which caused her death. He even tried to burn all letters that Désirée sent to him, among which he found one letter from his mother stating that he is black. The story comes to halt and the truth is discovered. This unexpected and ironic ending is suffocating and makes a mockery of Armand’s arrogant patriarchal thought and racial prejudice.

One motif embedded in this story is that women were the objects of men and oppressed miserably. Armand did not love Désirée actually. He wished to possess her beauty by marrying her and giving her his name. She was disposable if he liked. For Désirée, “She loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God” (70). She poured all her life and misery into Armand, only to find bubbles burst. She was once meek and submissive, pleasing Armand as much as possible. However, the story came to a climax when Désirée could not tolerate the unreasonable

accusation and laughed hysterically “look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand” (71). Those words actually are a type of rebellion against patriarchy. Unfortunately, due to the unshakeable power of patriarchy, Armand did not care about what Désirée thought at all and Désirée resorted to suicide as another form of rebellion.

As for Hemingway’s “Hills like White Elephants” it sticks to his dialogue that he employs symbolism and sharp dialogue to present the story. At first glance, it is hard to figure out the meaning of that story. However, if probe into these symbols and the dialogue, the hidden meanings will be found. First of all, the white elephant is a symbol with implied meaning. White elephants are regarded as sacred in ancient India and it takes a lot of time, money and efforts to take care of them. Therefore, they are burdensome in that sense. In the story, for the American, the unexpected baby is the white elephant that bugs him so much that he is anxious to get rid of it. Meanwhile, to the girl, the white elephant refers to the operation that await for her. In addition, beer is another symbol representing irresponsible attitude towards life. They are the lost generation, indulged in wine in order to emerge from reality. The man drinks beer to conceal his worries while the girl also takes drinks regardless of her pregnancy. Moreover, labels on the bags “from all the hotels where they had spent nights” (105) symbolize their hedonic and reckless lifestyle. They do not have any plan for the future and wallow in sensual pleasures, which may be the reason for causing the present plight. Another meaningful symbol is the station. “On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain” (106). The station therefore means to change. One side is bleak hopelessness, while the other

side is promising and vigorous. The girl could either choose to maintain her status quo or choose to lead her own life.

Although the themes for both stories are similar, they are expressed in different ways. In “Hills Like White Elephants,” the theme is mainly expressed through dialogue. The beginning of their conversation is insignificant and irrelevant by talking about wine. Then the man brings up that touchy topic by saying “it’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig. It’s not really an operation at all” (105). The girl answered in silence at first. However, the man puts forward the topic again and again, attempting to coerce her into consent. Whenever the girl endeavors to switch the subject of the conversation the man always brings it back. This unwavering desire to take control of conversation is a reflection of the man’s patriarchal thought that he wants the girl to be submissive and do what she is asked to do. Meanwhile, the girl’s fight against the man is also presented in her efforts to grab the chance to talk. She starts their conversation at first and tries to modify the topic whenever she feels uncomfortable. When their conversation progresses, Jig “Demonstrates an increasing awareness not only of the gravity of the situation, but also of the man’s self-centered and insecure motivation for pursuing the abortion (Rankin),” she interrupts the conversation by stating “would you please please please please stop talking”(106) and “I’ll scream.” Unlike Désirée, Jig has the awareness to fight all the time and her fight works to some extent because the man “did not say a word.” This can be interpreted as progress in women’s fight for their rights.

These two stories both reflect the oppression of women in a patriarchal society but they employ different techniques to present this motif. “Désirée’s baby” uses irony while “Hills like

White Elephants” utilizes symbolism and dialogue. Moreover, the endings of these two heroines are utterly separate. Although both rise to fight against inequality, Désirée ends up with suicide while Jig is likely to get what she wants. This difference in individuals may be the results of the result of changed times.

Work Cited

Chopin Kate. "Desiree's Baby" *Love and Light: Readings for Analysis*. Ed. Hugh Patterson. 1st

ed. Bedford/St. Martin's: 2014. 68. Print.

Ernest Hemingway. "Hills Like White Elephants" *Love and Light: Readings for Analysis*. Ed.

Hugh Patterson. 1st ed. Bedford/St. Martin's: 2014. 104. Print.

Gerrard, Christine. "Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies." *Jstor*. Philip

Allan, 2000. Web. 20 April 2015.

Rankin. R. Susan. "Dr. Susan R. Rankin." *Campus pride*. Charlotte. 8.SEP.2005. Web. 20 April

2015.