

Gender-role conflict in the works of kate chopin essay



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This paper will be discussing the revolutionary author, Kate Chopin, and how her writings capture her characters battles with social norms and gender inequality.

These issues are the cause of sadness and despair for many people who are born into roles that they would rather not fulfill. Particularly, women have many roles that are thrust upon them throughout a normal existence and are simultaneously at a disadvantage in the work force and economically. This can result in a lot of stress for some people, and if one is convinced they will never live up to their many roles, it can cause damaged self esteem and result in overall unhappiness. Women, historically and currently, often are expected to fulfill many roles: primary caregiver to children, housekeeper, career woman, and wife. These numerous roles can result in feelings of inadequacy, especially when women are often treated as the inferior gender. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ways in which gender inequality and role conflict affect women.

“ One in eight women will experience depression in their lifetime; twice the rate of men, regardless of race or ethnic background” (NAMI, 2008). It is apparent that there is a connection between the many roles that women face and their overall happiness. Female authors have often expressed despair over their fates at the hands of society. Kate Chopin, in particular, wrote of the imprisoned feelings that can result from being born the fairer gender. There is a resonant theme in many of Chopin’s stories that delve into this issue. She approaches this topic without judgment, and was often the subject of criticism for this.

Her works were not even fully appreciated until after her death, at which time they were revisited with more of an open mind. She is known for her unconventional and unabashed female characters. Kate Chopin was seen as an innovative and sometimes scandalous author of her time. She wrote about women who had ambition and desires, and wasn't apologetic or judgmental towards her female characters (Rubenstein, 2002). In her short story, "The Story of an Hour", the female character, Mrs. Mallard, learns of the death of her husband.

She had apparently been in a rather loveless marriage and was burdened by the will of her husband and the other roles in her life. When she hears of his passing there is instant grief, but after that the dominant feeling is that of freedom, relief and even joy. She was reveling in her new found identity and autonomy when her husband returns home; apparently a mistake had been made.

She has a preexisting heart condition and dies on the spot. This story is an illustration as to the prison-like institution that marriage was to many women of earlier days. Women were required to obey, without question, and remained "economically dependent and legally inferior, whatever their social class." (Craig, et al., 2006). There was no legal recourse for most situations when a woman desired to end an unhappy marriage.

It seems as if Mrs. Mallard must've been living in a desperate condition for a very long time to have such a reaction to the passing of her husband. It is left to assumption that she felt stifled, captive, and probably desperate for a voice of her own. The expectations that she was required to uphold had been

lessened, and this felt like relief to her. Kate Chopin was great at describing the innermost thoughts and feelings of women. Many of these topics were taboo, and hadn't been written about before.

She writes of feelings that result from being held captive by roles in which we were born. We are all sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers. For some people these roles do not come naturally or comfortably, and are therefore burdensome. This was one of the topics that she touched on in *The Awakening*. The main character, Edna, was discontent in her roles and sought to escape in different ways.

Her escapes were not socially acceptable and therefore she was never able to accept herself for who she was. She and her husband were in a position of power in the community and she was surrounded by judgmental eyes. I think Kate Chopin was trying to describe the magnitude of emotions that result when someone is expected to be a "lady". Edna came to a point of realization that she was no longer happy to conform to her roles, and this was her "awakening".

This awakening took place in the sea, which is where she eventually chose to end her life rather than go on with an existence that killed her internally.

Chopin also wrote openly and unabashedly about female sexuality.

Historically, females were supposedly the passive recipients of their husband's advances. In *The Awakening*, Edna became aware of the power of her sexuality, which led to her to withhold sex from her husband and engage in affairs with other men.

This was a scandalous topic at the time and Kate Chopin was criticized frequently for failing to judge the morality of her characters. The works of Kate Chopin are a direct reflection of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when women were facing many obstacles in their everyday lives, simply because of their gender. They had frustrations and sadness that many times couldn't be talked about out loud. They were denied equal education, employment opportunities, and legal rights.

Many of her writings were a direct reflection of their day to day reality. She was able to give women a voice through her art, however, and give us a greater understanding of what it meant to be a victim of gender inequality. During the time that Kate Chopin was writing, it was particularly difficult for women, but some of these issues have carried over to present day. Gender inequality must be addressed at different levels and forums in order to prevent further role conflicts. Statistically, women doing the exact same job as men are making less income. This makes it especially difficult for single mothers and women in general to have the quality of life that a man would have for the same work.

Economic dependence is one reason that women sometimes feel trapped and unable to pursue more. Also, women traditionally take most of the responsibility for the parenting of the children. This can result in the inability to pursue interests beyond the household and sometimes lead to isolation and depression. " Gender inequality appears to be a cause of depressive symptoms in women," according to Harvard University public health researchers (Obesity, Fitness & Wellness Week, 2005). If the interests of the children were more evenly looked after by both parents it would free more

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women to feel like more complete people. Women can become entrenched in the ideologies that perpetuate their existence.

Mothers and wives are expected to give much of their selves, and this is often at the expense of their identity. If there is also a career in the mix then she is stretched even thinner. “ Working mothers suffer from intrapsychic conflict, including symptoms of depression and feelings of stress, guilt, shame, aggression, and envy and work-family conflicts, including unequal division of labor in the home and unequal work environments” (Simon, 2002). In the stereotypical roles that society would have them play, it would mean absolute commitment to others. Furthermore, when there are psychological repercussions from overextending oneself, some types of therapy may hurt rather than help. “ Psychotherapy may unwittingly collude with gender expectations that perpetuate traditional gender socialization and teach women to perform multiple roles, negotiate these roles alone, and internalize self-blame for failures in adequately performing these roles” (Simon, 2002).

Since psychological professionals are often reflective of the societies in which they reside, they further contribute to destructive and unachievable standards. I have a friend named Sarah who has a demanding career, two small children, and a marriage and a house to maintain. Her youngest child had serious medical conditions in the first year of his life, which caused her to miss a lot of work. There was no other option. Her husband was relatively new at his job and would be fired for missing, but she had been at her job for five years and was successful and established.

Over the course of that year she constantly feared for her son's wellbeing and all that she had worked for at her job. Eventually, her absences took their toll and she was demoted, which cut her income. This was during a time when medical bills were piling up. In the meantime, she developed anxiety and depression as a result of dealing with all that was on her plate. She had to be put on medication just to make it through a day without crying or having an anxiety attack.

Sarah, like many women, just cracked under the pressure of her many roles that demanded her to stretch herself so thin. She never feels like she is a good enough or present enough as a mother, and the same can be said for her feelings towards her career. Hopefully as the children grow these tribulations will lessen, but with more support medication wouldn't be vital to her mental survival. In the past a wife was supposed to be a subordinate position.

It often meant giving completely of oneself and fulfilling the wants and expectations of the husband regardless of personal sacrifice. Things have changed over the years to the benefit of women, but there are still some old fashioned values lingering. There are some possible worldwide solutions that have worked in other countries, like Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, for example. There are also cultural and religious traditions that result in gender inequality, and therefore create increase the prevalence of role conflict in women. There is much that can be done to educate and open the discussion forum on this topic. In Finland there is much effort to eliminate gender inequalities and even out household and child rearing duties.

Men are expecting to equaling participate in children's medical appointments, parent -teacher conferences, and other every day parenting tasks. They even try to eliminate gender from their vocabulary as much as possible. The word for her and him is the same in Finland. “.

.. women in Finland, who have had the right to vote since 1906, are politically active and are socially privileged — they get 105 paid days of maternity leave, for example” (Ashenmacher, 2008). When society as a whole is supportive of the role of motherhood, as is the case in the Nordic countries, it makes a big difference. Women who choose motherhood as their profession are much happier because of that support.

Although there is no more important job than raising children, it is not valued as it should be, and therefore there is a stigma attached. Especially now when there are a lot of two income households, a stay at home mother is seen as a leisurely existence. In reality, caring for children and a household is more than a full time job. There is also a level of general acceptance that plays a part in women and their identities and self esteem. To accept people for who they are without expecting them to live up to a stereotypical image of who they should be affects overall happiness.

“ For women, however, both partner acceptance and remembered paternal acceptance were uniquely and independently associated with psychological adjustment (Khaleque, 2008). It seems in Finland people are allowed to just be people, without gender restrictions and this leads to happier healthier women, regardless of socioeconomic status. Although the Nordic countries have been accused of being welfare havens for single mothers, it has shown

that the government support from welfare programs have benefitted both the children and mothers in single parent households. Since it is often just a fact of life that both parents can't or won't always be present, it just makes sense to lessen the blow to the family unit. This results in less of an economical divide and less of a lower class.

It also means that children don't pay the price for one parent's lack of responsibility or presence. There is much that can be done to bring awareness to gender-role conflict in order to minimize its impact and give women more freedom to achieve without guilt. Politically there is a lot of room for improvement. Laws that require men to have paternity leave from work would let them be more active in their role as fathers and reduce the stress in the household for the mother.

Also, incentives for companies who are flexible with fathers and allow for attendance at school events, doctors appointments, and family sick days would even out the impact that parenthood has the mother's career. Women should be especially conscientious to make sure that they vote and educate themselves as to where all of the candidates stand on issues that affect women. Since women are the majority of the population, this could make a huge difference if a movement were to get started. This could allow more women to pursue their dreams outside of the home if this is what they wish to do.

Another remedy to alleviate some of the stress of multiple roles would be for more companies to have a system to help their employees who have medical or family issues. Maybe a mother caring for a sick child could be allowed to

work from home or the hospital via the internet as much as possible and have phone calls forwarded to her cell phone if she has a position that would allow for this. There should also be a law in place, similar to maternity leave, which protects parents from losing their jobs in times of medical or personal hardship. Even if the time off isn't paid, it would alleviate a lot of stress to be assured that your job is still there when you return. Finally, there is a lot of importance to be placed on programs that teach girls to respect their self worth and sovereignty.

These are tools that are greatly needed to allow women to cope with all that is asked of them in life. They need to know that they have a voice, and they can use it and still be a " lady". If they love and respect themselves they will require that of those around them, and hopefully not be so hard on themselves. There will be times when there is more required than is humanly possible to keep up with, and if they have the courage to ask for help or throw up their hands without shame, this could make the difference in their mental state.

Ultimately, self esteem growth programs directed at girls would make better mothers, wives, and members of society, which would benefit everyone. Kate Chopin was one of the first women with the courage to scream of injustice and have the valor to point out that women are multi-dimensional beings who feel stifled by role restrictions. These topics are real issues that many women still face to this day. There are examples of how we could do better for women battling to keep up with all that is expected, and these steps should be taken to reduce depression and improve the overall happiness of women.

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