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Before PTSD: Combat Trauma in the Civil War Short Stories of Kate Chopin

By

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“The Civil War,” writes Robert Penn Warren, “is, for the American imagination, the single greatest event of our history” (3). Indeed, it has been estimated that the American imagination has been inspired to the tune of some 60,000 historical books on the subject (Lafantasia). Kate Chopin, probably best known for *The Awakening* and short stories like “The Story of an Hour,” spent her adolescence in a divided and tumultuous St. Louis during the Civil War. Like the women in her family with whom she lived, including her mother, grandmother, and two aunts, young Kate was a southern sympathizer (Ewell 7). She even committed her own minor act of rebellion, earning the moniker of St. Louis’s “Littlest Rebel” by tearing down and hiding a Union flag that soldiers had run up her family’s flagpole in celebration of the fall of Vicksburg; Union troops stormed into the house in search of the culprit (Toth, *Kate* 28).

As we near the 150th anniversary of Lee’s surrender at Appomatox in 1865, war and its consequences continue to be major topics of discourse, in and out of the classroom. Teachers search for ways to lead students to meaningful connections between literature and events in their lives - a unique challenge, as for most of our students, America has been at war in Iraq and Afghanistan for their entire lives. Kate Chopin provides an opportunity to make these valuable connections. While her name is familiar to most, her Civil War short stories - those stories illuminating America’s “single greatest event” - probably are not. Yet Chopin experienced war first-hand. Her characters demonstrate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder; her writing reflects an acute and perhaps ahead-of-its-time consciousness of the debilitating mental and emotional impact war has on combatants and non-combatants alike.

The war hit home for Kate in other ways, too. Her half-brother, George, likely swept up in the romantic heroism common early in the war, enlisted in the Confederate Missouri Mounted Infantry (Toth, *Unveiling* 24). During the war he was captured, fell ill with tuberculosis, and died at age 23 on February 17, 1863, shortly after being freed in a prisoner exchange (Benfey 230). His death seems to have affected Chopin deeply, and three years after his death, she wrote a school composition entitled “The Early Dead,” in which she asked, “How then express the grief with which we follow the young, the gifted, the beautiful to the silent tomb?” (Toth *Unveiling* 27).

Chopin also faced the sight of Confederate wounded after some of the bloodiest battles - a neighbor referred to them as “creatures looking as if they had been stolen out of a graveyard” (*Unveiling* 29). Toth equates Kate’s behavior during the later stages of the war with that of “adolescent victims of abuse” (31); Kate “withdrew and hid,” finding solace in the books of Sir Walter Scott. But these stories of romantic knighthood and chivalry seemed absurd, a “mockery to one who knew what war really involved” (32). They may help to explain, however, the sometimes strange mix of romantic and realistic elements in Chopin’s later Civil War stories.

Between 1891 and 1897, Chopin wrote six stories that can be categorized as being about the war or its physical and psychological consequences. Among these, three deal directly with the figure of the returning veteran: “After the Winter” (written in 1891), “A Wizard from Gettysburg” (1891), and “The Locket” (1897). The remaining three: “Beyond the Bayou” (1891), “Ma’ame Pélagie” (1892), and “The Return of Alcibiade” (1892) address the subject of those who have lost loved ones in the war and are trying to piece together their fractured lives. The war had left an entire generation of women - mothers, daughters, and wives - abandoned. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps describes them as “helpless;[and] unconsulted women; they whom war trampled down without a choice or protest; the

patient, limited, domestic women, who thought little, but loved much, and loving, had lost all” (qtd. In Fahs 1480).

Criticism of “Beyond the Bayou” has generally focused on its portrayal of race and the psychological complexity of the healing process experienced by La Folle when her love for the wounded Chéri compels her to overcome a deep-rooted, lifelong fear of crossing the bayou (See Bonner and Goodwin for discussions of race; Bush and Ewell for the psychology of healing.). Yet little examination to the cause of that fear has been made - ironically, given that it is the central conflict in the story. Skaggs notes the Civil War connection, observing that it is one of “the stories that examine the lingering effects of the Civil War that center on the theme of dislocation” (14).

Chopin’s narrator provides sparse details of a trauma that occurred on the bayou when La Folle was a little girl:

In childhood, she had been frightened literally “out of her senses,” and had never wholly regained them.

It was when there had been skirmishing and sharpshooting all day in the woods. Evening was near when P’tit Maître, black with powder and crimson with blood, had staggered into the cabin of Jacqueline’s mother, his pursuers close at his heels. The sight had stunned her childish reason. (216)

La Folle has subsequently drawn a line for herself across which she never sets foot. “This,” the narrator says, “was the form of her only mania.”

Like Chopin in St. Louis, La Folle experiences the trauma of war as a child when it brings the wounded and dying to her doorstep. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) did not exist as a diagnosis at that time - not even for the soldiers themselves, let alone civilian bystanders. But a recent study of

archival records from the period reveals that among the factors leading to a greater probability of a soldier reporting later mental or physical illnesses is the age of enlistment, which in the Civil War, could be as young as nine years old (Pizarro, et al 193); another factor was “being helpless to prevent others’ deaths” (198), which was the case for both Chopin and La Folle.

“The Return of Alcibiade” focuses on a male loved one who was left behind by the war. Monsieur Jean Ba’s son perished in the war many years ago, but every Christmas he holds out hope for his return. Critics note Chopin’s use of mental illness in this story, but usually disregard its symbolic and thematic significance for the ruined South. Monsieur Jean Ba’s mental illness also presents a disturbing interpretation, showing another ugly consequence of war:

Years ago, her [Esmée’s] uncle Alcibiade, in going away to the war, with the cheerful assurance of youth, had promised his father that he would return to eat Christmas dinner with him. He never returned. And now, of late years, since Monsieur Jean Ba had begun to fail in body and mind, that old, unspoken hope of long ago had come back to live anew in his heart. Every Christmas Day he watched for the coming of Alcibiade. (225-6)

Although Monsieur Jean Ba’s dementia is in part a product of old age, the war and the painful loss of his son have caused him to believe he still lives in the antebellum era. He denies even that the war ever happened, at one point telling his confused “son,” Fred Bartner, “If Robert McFarlane comes while I am sleeping, with more talk of wanting to buy Nég Sévérin, tell him I will sell none of my slaves, not the least little *négrillon*. Drive him from the place with the shot-gun” (229). Jean Ba’s mind has retreated to a safe antebellum place where the war never happened, his slaves still work his fields, and his son is still alive.

Jean Ba's mental trauma also fits the diagnosis for mental illness seen in veterans of the Civil War - or indeed, of any war. In the Civil War era, a veteran was classified as having signs of nervous disease if he was diagnosed with one or any combination of the following: paranoia, psychosis, hallucinations, illusions, insomnia, confusion, hysteria, memory problems, delusions, and violent behavior (Pizarro, et al 195). Jean Ba exhibits memory problems and confusion, and, in his fear for someone coming to buy slaves that he no longer owns, also shows mild paranoia. His advanced age may be a factor, yet Chopin casts a character with undeniable postwar mental illness.

Chopin does not just present mental problems in the characters of those who have lost loved ones to the war. She also provides them in her sketches of veteran figures themselves. The clearest example, perhaps, takes place in "A Wizard from Gettysburg," where a mysterious veteran appears many years after the war, having forgotten his own identity. Though, as Benfey notes, it is unclear whether the narration is focalized through Bertrand or through a narrator, we learn that:

On that field of battle [Gettysburg] this man had received a new and tragic birth. For all his existence that went before was a blank to him. There, in the black desolation of war, he was born again, without friends or kindred; without even a name he could have known was his own. Then he had gone forth a wanderer; living more than half the time in hospitals, toiling when he could, starving when he had to. (289)

War here strips one of identity, relationships, and even memory. It is indeed a "black desolation," and one whose effects linger on participants and non-participants alike. Chopin seems to identify a reality not seriously explored by psychiatric science until the early 21st century: that "substantial long-term health

effects of traumatic war experiences [existed] among Civil War soldiers” (Pizarro, et al 197). This fact makes the ending particularly dark, especially for a children’s tale; his failure to acknowledge any intimacy or former relationship with his wife only heightens the sense of trauma. He no longer has identity as husband or father, only as “an old soldier, wounded on the field of Gettysburg” (293). Gettysburg may also have held special and bitter significance for Chopin, since the Confederate retreat from that field coincided with the fall of Vicksburg that had led celebrating Union troops barging into her girlhood home when, as a girl, she’d hidden the flag they tied to her porch (Toth *Unveiling* 27).

Combining these two character types - the abandoned and the returning veteran, - “The Locket” blends them into a peculiar narrative. Unpublished in Chopin’s lifetime, critics disagree as to the reason for this rejection; Toth suggests it is too “grim” (*Unveiling* 32); another biographer proposes that its graphic depiction of battlefield corpses led to its rejections (Seyersted 77). Chopin makes the odd choice to focalize the story through a large black bird. This technique, a convention common to children’s tales, seems dramatically inconsistent with a story that has been criticized for being too graphic. Ewell makes the best attempt to defend this approach, claiming that Chopin describes the confusion of the bird in order to emphasize the paradox of romance and combat, but the story’s concocted, happy ending seems to undermine this reading - by the end, after a chain of unlikely events (the unnoticed theft of the locket, the priest finding the locket and discovering who is in the picture, etc.), it is a heavily romantic tale (136 -7).

Despite the clumsy ending - a joyous reunification of the loyal soldier with his lover - Chopin provides an ambiguous hint that Edmond has suffered lasting mental problems. After telling Octavie how the locket was stolen, she thinks “of the dead soldier with his face uplifted to the sky in an agony of supplication”; Edmond, however, “said nothing; but he thought of his messmate; the one who had lain far back in the shadow;

the one who had said nothing” (889). By also saying nothing, Edmond withdraws into an ominous sense of seclusion, reminiscent of the lonely wanderings of the “wizard.” That his final thoughts in the story are not of the beautiful lover with whom he has been reunited, but of a fallen (and thieving) comrade, raises interesting questions for students: Is Edmond disgustedly recalling the act of theft, a feeling of betrayal from a brother-in-arms? Or is Chopin intimating that his thoughts, even in this wonderful, romantic moment of reunification, have turned to his fallen friends? When coupled with the feeling of seclusion hinted at by his silence, the happy ending then becomes little more than a surface reading, with much more sinister implications about Edmond’s mental state after the war.

The two figures of Chopin’s Civil War stories, the returning veteran and the abandoned, exhibit signs of lasting mental health problems stemming from the war - signs that may be familiar to some of today’s students who have grown up in a lifetime of war. It may be instructive in the classroom to challenge students to compare Chopin’s portrayals with those of other writers about the Civil War, like Crane, Mitchell, or Shaara, or about other wars, like Vonnegut or Mason. Students can identify signs and symptoms of PTSD in both veteran characters and those who remained behind. These signs, often subtle, may be a result of Chopin’s own childhood experiences. If it is true, as one critic has argued, that Crane’s “dissection of courage” can be said to take the view that, “Men are different from animals [...] in their devotion to a code of bravery and loyalty” (Cummings x), then Chopin’s representation of the war’s aftermath can be said to show the lasting consequences of that code. Where Crane’s writing arguably portrays combat, as in the final scene of *The Red Badge of Courage* - a man experiencing a passing storm - Chopin views it as the source of lasting mental anguish - an almost biblical downpour from which there can be no escape.

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