

English 297
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Marital Relations

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century American authors explored many relationships. One theme that can be found in the writing of a diversity of authors (Mary Austin, Charles Chesnutt, Charles Eastman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Susan Glaspell, and John Oskison) is the relationship between men and women and marriage. In some cases, this is the main theme; in others, it is secondary but its influence on the writer is still evident. In these texts, marriage is presented as the source of many problems. This paper will examine the profound impact of the institution of marriage and its influence on the relationship between spouses on the writing and lives of Americans living in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's vision of male-female relationships is dark and oppressive. For example, the narrator in "The Yellow Wall-paper," who suffers from post-partum depression, is confined to a small room by her oppressive husband. She longs to take strolls outside in the beautiful world and its delicious gardens (Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-paper" 833) that she can see from her window. However, as her husband, a doctor, refuses to allow her even the most basic pleasures of life, she goes insane. While Gilman wrote the story to "save people from being driven crazy" (Gilman, "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wall-paper" 845), she makes it clear that many marriages were unhappy because they revolved around an oppressive man who could impose his will on the woman. Other writers in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century describe similarly oppressive marriages.

Susan Glaspell, for instance, in the play “Trifles” (and its short-story version, “A Jury of Her Peers”) tells the story of a woman, once “one of the town girls singing in the choir” (Glaspell, “Trifles” 1207), “real sweet and pretty” (1210) whose incompatible husband slowly killed her joyful singing spirit. After twenty years of marriage to a “hard man” who was like “a raw wind that gets to the bone” (1209), Mrs. Wright killed her husband. While the story begins after the killing, (and therefore does not show the acts of oppression) it is clear that the relationship was not happy and that the man allowed no freedom in his wife’s life. The women in the story talk with each other, nervously, about their husbands’ overly demanding expectations of them, yet none is willing to defy her husband. Both through Mrs. Wright’s courageous act to destroy the oppressive force in her life and through the hushed discussion among the other women, Glaspell makes a powerful comment on the state of many marriages in the early part of the twentieth century.

While the main theme of Charles W. Chesnutt’s “The Wife of His Youth” is the relationships between different classes of black people, an underlying theme is marriage and loyalty within the framework of the post-Civil War era. The story takes place in the aftermath of a society where relationships were hard to maintain. In this case, it is not an oppressive individual making the situation difficult; rather, it is the changing American system. Mr. Ryder and Liza Jane had been married as slaves, but they never had been allowed to live together and eventually they were permanently separated. After the war, they were unable to validate the marriage since they were lost to each other. Mr. Ryder did everything he could to elevate himself and became a wealthy, educated black man with opportunities...including eventually the possibility of marrying a wealthy, nearly white woman—a trophy wife—who was not only “a superior person” (Chesnutt 790) but also “whiter than he, and better educated” (790). This

second marriage is a social and political move only. When his first wife reappears on the very evening he plans on proposing to Mrs. Dixon, Mr. Ryder makes the bold choice to keep his wife who “has retained her affection for and her faith in a man she has not seen or heard of” (795) in 25 years. His honor and reputation as a respectable middle-class black man are placed in jeopardy, yet his old loyalty triumphs. Chesnut seems to be saying that not every part of pre-war life should be abandoned and that the institution of marriage as a human commitment is more important than the new social system.

The problem of having to choose between two wives and two sets of values is not unique to the rising class of freed slaves. Native Americans commonly had more than one wife; this presented a problem for Native Americans as they were converted to Christianity and expected to conform to the rules of American society. Charles Eastman encountered this in his work for the U.S. Government:

I was directed not to recognize a plurality of wives, such as still existed among a few of the older men. Old White Bull was a fine example of the old type, and I well remember his answer when I reluctantly informed him that each man must choose one wife who should bear his name. ‘What!’ he exclaimed, ‘these two women are sisters, both of whom have been my wives for over half a century.... We are now living together as brother and sisters. All the people know that we have been happy together, and nothing but death can separate us (Eastman 184-185).

Although the government would not honor such a marriage, they were emotionally and economically binding for the spouses. As “brothers and sisters” (185), Old White Bull and his

wives took care of each other and would until death: the only difference between this marriage and a traditional Western marriage is the number of spouses. While Americans did not recognize this, this sort of relationship and this notion of marriage was commonplace among Native Americans and was a continuing source of conflict.

In “The Problem of Old Harjo,” John Oskison, another Native American, addresses this issue. Harjo, like Old White Bull, has two wives. While this is the tale of conflict between Christianity and native traditions, it still offers tremendous insight into the emotional bond of marriage, even when more than two people are involved. Oskison builds credibility for the institution by first portraying the missionaries as superficially religious but not concerned with Harjo’s well-being—they are representatives of a church of “scandalized missionaries” (Oskison 967). While the missionaries are sarcastic with one another and worry only about sin, ignorance, bigamy, and moral rehabilitation, Harjo is sincere in his acceptance of Jesus (ironically, the only truly crucial part of the missionaries’ teachings) and is sincere in his love and responsibility for both of his wives. Oskison does not present Harjo as the sinner the missionaries see him as; rather he presents Harjo as a man with “simple dignity” (968) whose marriage is more profound than anything the young missionaries could possibly understand. And while “The Problem of Old Harjo” was probably written to alert readers to the damaging effects of the westernization of Native Americans, it paints an honorable picture of one possibility of married life in turn-of-the-century America. As in “The Wife of His Youth,” these marriages are not themselves flawed or incompatible, yet society causes intense conflict.

While many texts discuss the problems and expectations of traditional marriages, few provide real solutions. In “The Wife of His Youth,” Chesnut shows a troubled world in which traditional marriages are difficult; Eastman and Oskison show the problems of polygamous

marriages in a world where monogamous marriages are the expectation. Gilman and Glaspell show oppressive husbands. Because these authors lived in a society where marriage was practically mandatory, this cross-section would suggest that turn-of-the-century authors are saying that marriage (and all meaningful relationships with the opposite sex) in itself can be a source of trouble and misery. However, Mary Austin offers an interesting solution. In “Walking Woman,” Mrs. Walker lives as a free spirit with the respect of the men and the woman around her. She abandons the traditional American life and wanders the land and eventually spends part of her life working as an equal to her companion, a man. They do not stay together for a long period of time, and when she becomes pregnant, she leaves. While this notion does not fit in with traditional western values, it offers one woman the opportunity to live on her own terms, not those of society or of a husband.

America’s diverse population at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century had a wide variety of problems. People from many backgrounds wrote about one issue, marriage and close relationships, which affected writers from all backgrounds. While each author wrote about a different situation, conflict, and solution, it is clear that the institution of marriage and its influence on the relationship between spouses had a profound impact on the writing—and the lives—of Americans living at the turn-of-the-century.

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