THE RESTIVE BRUTE: THE SYMBOLIC PRESENTATION OF REPRESSION AND SUBLIMATION IN KATE CHOPIN'S "FEDORA"

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Though brief, "Fedora" is one of Kate Chopin's most vivid and startling explorations of inner life. Chopin's method of characterization in "Fedora" lets us know the protagonist well in only three pages, only seventeen paragraphs. Although Chopin does tell us something about Fedora's buried life through direct narration (Fedora, Chopin observes, was experiencing "a swift, fierce encounter betwixt thought and feeling"), she relies primarily on dramatizing Fedora's emotional confusion through symbolic action. The technique is ideal. It enhances and supplements our understanding of Fedora's psyche in a way that neither authorial analysis nor interior monologue might. For example, it best permits Chopin to capture both the "swiftness" and the "fierceness" of Fedora's struggle: extensive explanations by the author would slow down the narrative's tempo and necessarily lessen the suddenness of Fedora's experience; direct commentary would not be able to present the brutal intensity of Fedora's passion in a way acceptable to the moral sensibilities of her publishers or to the artistic sensibility of Chopin herself. With its use, Chopin can also gain character accuracy: Fedora, to remain believable as a bewildered, overwhelmingly repressed woman, must not be able to articulate her confusion through interior monologue. Chopin's technique helps to make Fedora one of the most astonishing fictional figures of the late nineteenth century and her story one of Chopin's most careful.

Before Fedora is violently awakened by Young Malthers' good looks and manliness, she leads a quiet, well-ordered life governed by rationality and good sense. Fedora has long assumed that she is superior in years and wisdom to her younger brothers and sisters and their friends. She enjoys taking care of them while her mother is away because of the authority the occasion permits her. She looks after the health of the young

people and plans games and entertainment for their warm afternoons. And Fedora does not seem to need social contact other than that such "mothering" provides. She certainly does not need men. She has long ago formed a theory about men that now guides her dealings with them: men, quite simply, are not worth the time. She has measured them and found them lacking. Fedora's appearance reflects both her attitude of superiority and her coldness: "Fedora was tall and slim, and carried her head loftily, and wore eye-glasses and a severe expression" (p. 467). Fedora is thirty. Some of the youngsters imagine that she must be at least a hundred years old.

But although Chopin spends a careful paragraph telling us what Fedora is like before she confronts Young Malthers, the author hurries to recall the incident that begins to disrupt the neat patterns Fedora has established for herself. One day Fedora begins to answer a question asked by Young Malthers—a "boy" who is twenty-three but Fedora remembers as a lad of fifteen—and realizes that she, tall and superior, is looking up at him. He has matured. Suddenly, Fedora realizes "he was a man—in voice, in attitude, in bearing, in every sense—a man" (p. 468). He begins to exist for her in a way her other acquaintances never have. She memorizes the details of his countenance: the eyes are blue and troubled, the face brown and smooth, the lips strong, firm and clean. "She kept thinking of his face, and every trick of it after he passed on" (p. 468), notes Chopin.

After this encounter, Chopin offers a brief, purposely vague narrative comment about the new sensations Fedora feels after the meeting with Young Malthers. "There was uneasiness, restlessness, expectation when he was not there within sight or sound. There was redoubled uneasiness when he was by—there was inward revolt, astonishment, rapture, self-contumely; a swift, fierce encounter betwixt thought and feeling" (p. 468). Chopin does not return to this technique, however. She withdraws as active commentator. She lets Fedora's actions symbolically dramatize her character's tumultuous inner world.

We begin to see the desperate and pathetic nature of Fedora's conflict as we watch her fondle Young Malthers' clothes. Driven by impulse, she frequently passes by the hall pegs to see if perhaps his hat is hanging upon one. If it is, she eagerly touches it. On one occasion, she discovers a discarded coat of his hanging there as well. She approaches the coat, at first pretending to straighten its folds and pleats. But after she carefully determines that no one is watching, Fedora buries her face in the folds for one rapturous moment. Fedora's need for human contact is so great that even a man's hat and coat offer pleasure. Indeed, we can fully appreciate the pleasure his discarded clothing brings Fedora only after we understand that Fedora's fear of social disapproval and of her own impulses at this time (before the arrival of the sister) will prohibit any
contact closer than this. For Fedora, contact with Young Malthers’ clothing must substitute for direct sexual contact.

At the same time Fedora feels driven to touch Young Malthers’ garments, she develops an urgent and “unaccountable” desire to pick up his sister at the local train station. Fedora, of course, “could hardly explain to her own satisfaction why she wanted to go herself to the station for Young Malthers’ sister” (p. 468). But as we follow her there and back, we begin to understand her motives.

Standing at the train station, Fedora responds to the setting in a way that further clarifies our understanding of her confusion. This scene psychologically illuminates the central scene with Miss Malthers that follows. The station is located in a very sensuous nook at the foot of a tree-studded hill. The scene is lovely, inviting to the reader. Nature and natural impulse seem good and right.

It was in a pretty nook, green and fragrant, set down at the foot of a wooded hill. Off in a clearing there was a field of yellow grain, upon which the sinking sunlight fell in slanting, broken beams. Far down the track there were some men at work, and the even ring of their hammers was the only sound that broke upon the stillness.

Fedora at first responds as it seems right that she should: “Fedora loved it all—sky and woods and sunlight; sounds and smells” (p. 468). Her emotions overpower her for a moment. But she refuses to relax for long. Her reason returns, weakens her emotion, and reinstates rigid control. As we watch her, we observe, with regret and sympathy, that “her bearing—elegant, composed, reserved—betrayed nothing emotional as she tramped the narrow platform” (p. 468).

However, not until Fedora drives Miss Malthers home from the station do we fully realize how severely Fedora’s repression and prudent rationality have damaged her emotional and sexual health. Fedora is not at all interested in Miss Malthers’ personal traits. Although poor Miss Malthers does not realize it, Fedora is interested only in Miss Malthers’ resemblances to her brother. Fedora is strangely, oddly touched and moved by the likenesses between brother and sister: “there was the coloring; there were the blue, earnest eyes; there, above all, was the firm, full curve of the lips; the same setting of the white, even teeth. There was the subtle play of feature, the elusive trick of expression, which she had thought peculiar and individual in the one, presenting themselves as family traits” (p. 469).

Through Fedora’s actions that follow, we begin to understand that she senses—probably half-consciously—that the sister who reminds Fedora so much of Young Malthers himself can somehow provide a socially
acceptable release for Fedora's passions. She begins to assert herself as a mother figure. In an "elderly fashion," in a hundred-years-old tone, she makes her only speech in the entire story: "You know, dear child . . . I want you to feel completely at home with us . . . . Come to me freely and without reserve—with all your wants; with any complaint. I feel that I shall be quite fond of you" (p. 469). And then, sensing she has established the "proper" relationship, Fedora does a "proper" thing with improper enthusiasm and zest: she encircles Miss Malthers' shoulders, bends over, and presses "a long, penetrating kiss upon her mouth" (p. 469). The kiss, startling, unexpected, and erotic, demonstrates the very unhealthy nature of both Fedora's emotional life and the social code by which she lives.2

Fedora's treatment of her horse throughout this scene continues to suggest that her reason will direct her actions and make them increasingly perverse. Fedora takes great care to control her horse with her whip. Symbolically, she tries to overpower her wildness (represented by the horse's wildness) with her reason (represented by the ability of the whip to control the horse). Fedora drives to the station by herself because she thinks no young person can manage her horse; no young person, in other words, can discipline the passion she feels. "The brute is restive," she explains, "and shouldn't be trusted to the handling of the young people" (p. 467). Significantly, Fedora always clutches a whip or reins in her hand when she rides or prepares to ride. She walks along the station platform "whip in hand" (p. 468). After Fedora meets Miss Malthers at the station, the author cleverly mentions that Fedora drives "handling whip and rein with accomplished skill" (p. 469). And when Fedora leans over to kiss Miss Malthers, she is sure to gather the reins tightly in one hand.

2. The gesture is, admittedly, ambiguous. In Robert Arner's dissertation, he calls "Fedora" "a tale with strong overtones of sexual decadence manifested in the reticent lesbianism of Fedora" ("Music from a Farther Room: A Study of the Fiction of Kate Chopin," Diss. The Pennsylvania State University 1970). And, indeed, there are suggestions of Fedora's Sapphic tendencies in addition to the kiss: her clothes fetish might make some readers wonder if what she truly desires is to become male and assume a man's sexual role; Fedora's obsession with her whip hints at the sexual dominance conventionally attributed to the male in a heterosexual relationship; even her unusual name itself, a word that commonly refers to a man's soft, felt hat, might be meant to provide some indication of her male proclivities. However, as I've attempted to show, there seems to be perhaps even more substantial evidence to suggest that Fedora is transferring her emotion for Young Malthers to Miss Malthers—an inappropriate displacement, certainly, but, nevertheless, a transference Fedora, in all her rigidity and repression, can find socially acceptable. Chopin works hard and carefully to stress Fedora's intense attraction to Young Malthers' masculinity—his voice, his attitude, his bearing, his face and form. And she works with equal intensity to help us understand that it is Miss Malthers' physical similarity to Young Malthers that attracts Fedora, not the girl herself.
Chopin ends her story with a technically brilliant sentence that, yet another time, shows Fedora resolutely holding the reins. After the kiss that leaves Miss Malthers astonished and not at all pleased, "Fedora, with seemingly unruffled composure, gathered the reins, and for the rest of the way stared steadily ahead of her between the horses' ears" (p. 469). Fedora will continue to repress and discipline her sexual passion, to hold a whip and reins in her hand. In very private moments, she may try to caress the clothing of Young Malthers (or other men) and to press desperate kisses on the mouths of acceptable surrogates, but in public she will forever stare steadily ahead—"unruffled."

As we watch Fedora, we see a perverse, pathetic, desperate woman, a woman who, like Sardou's Fédora of 1882, experiences the severe turmoil of contending emotions, a woman who is capable of strong feeling but will never experience full emotional release or sexual satisfaction. Although Seyersted does not even index "Fedora" in his biography of Chopin, and James E. Rocks refers to the story in only a perfunctory way, this 1897 piece is one of Chopin's finest symbolic studies of repression and sublimation: its title character most certainly deserves to be mentioned in the same breath with Mildred Orme ("A Shameful Affair"), the storekeeper ("Vagabonds"), and Mrs. Baroda ("A Respectable Woman").
